The last time he checked, Nico di Angelo was a demigod on the run, not some geek working in a comic book shop in downtown Manhattan, and he definitely wasn’t best friends with Jason Grace. The last time Jason Grace checked, Nico di Angelo was in love with Percy Jackson, not with him. Since when were they even close friends? Something’s wrong. But will they want to fix this?

Well, I started writing this in early September, before 'Blood of Olympus' came out, and by the time I’d finally read BoO I was far too deep into this fic to rewrite some of the plot points to make it compliant. As a result, it doesn't line up with all the events of BoO. So this is a slight divergence story, which follows canon up through HoH but then veers off on the premise (spoilers for BoO here, stop reading this note if you don’t want to see them) that Nico didn't confess to Percy after the war, get to know Will Solace, and stay at camp but instead
took off alone like he'd originally planned. Also he still has his jacket. Anything that happened in BoO that isn't directly contradicted by what I've written you can assume still happened.
A Wrong Turn

He must have taken a wrong turn somewhere in the Nether. The hair on Nico's arms stood on end as he stepped out of the shadows. Something was *wrong*.

Something was very very wrong.

It didn't take very long to figure out what. It's kind of hard to miss an entire camp disappearing.

Nico rubbed his eyes and peered at the empty hill, wondering if somehow the Mist was affecting him, and he simply couldn't *see* Camp Half-Blood.

But no. Nico tested out his powers, effortlessly drawing scattered bones up from the ground and casually reanimating them. He could see that just fine. It wasn't the Mist.

Camp Half-Blood was simply *gone*.

Thalia's tree was still there. But it was, just as far as Nico could tell, a completely ordinary tree. He ran his fingers over the bark, trying to feel for some sort of echo of Thalia or any of the other campers. The bark began to flake off in brittle fragments where his fingers touched and Nico abruptly pulled away, not wanting to hurt it. His fingers were sticky with resinous sap and he tried in futility to wipe it off on his jeans.

It was easier to focus on the inconvenience of having sticky hands than the building panic of *where did Camp Half-Blood go*.

Trying to remain calm Nico took a steadying breath and reached out with his powers, looking for a trace of the other demigods.

It's not like he especially wanted to see any of them or anything, he told himself. He just needed to solve this mystery and verify they were all alive.

Percy was easy to find. He wasn't far away, probably in Manhattan. Annabeth was there too. Jason was not much removed from them, somewhere in Brooklyn maybe. Piper, Hazel and Frank were on the West Coast. Leo? Nico couldn't find Leo. But then, he didn't really expect to.

Okay. So everyone who ought to be was alive. That's all that mattered. Nothing more to see here folks. Nico could go on with his business, who cared if Camp Half-Blood had dissolved into nothingness?

He didn't care, he was just curious. Yeah, that was all. He'd get on his way just as soon as he found out what happened.

Not because he cared. The information simply might be important. That was *all*.

It definitely wasn't because he was worried about his displaced (but not dead) acquaintances. Nope.

It would have been easier to go to Manhattan via the shadows, but Nico didn't entirely trust them just now. He couldn't shake the suspicion that they somehow had something to do with the wrongness of his current surroundings. So Nico walked until he could find some public transportation and then managed to slink onto a bus without bothering to pay the fare. He was really good at not being noticed by people and used that to his advantage.
His trace on Percy led him unsurprisingly to Percy's mom's apartment.

He ignored that familiar knot of nervousness that formed as he prepared to face his friend and former crush. He hadn't seen Percy in a long time. He'd been avoiding everyone since the last war ended and hadn't intended to ever rescind on his vow to stay away. He really shouldn't even be doing this now but...well. The sense of off-ness that nagged at him was too strong to ignore. He just wouldn't stay long after checking, that's all.

Nico wasn't quite sure what kind of reaction he expected when the door to the apartment flung open but it definitely wasn't Percy's wide-eyed exclamation of, "Dude, why do you have a sword?"

He wasn't entirely sure how to respond to that. "I always have a sword," he said cautiously.

Percy looked at him as if he'd grown a second head. "Is this some sort of prank?"

"No," said Nico.

"You're in one of my classes, right?" asked Percy, brow furrowing. "Nick or something? You definitely don't usually have a sword. That would never get through the school security. You're not here to like, rob us or something, are you?"

The suspicion in Percy's voice was alarming. But not half as alarming as the revelation that Percy didn't know him.


Nico hadn't let himself be scared until this point. He was pretty freaked now though. He searched Percy’s face for some sort of hint that maybe he was messing around. There was no recognition there.

"You think my name is Nick?" he asked, slightly hurt.

"Isn't it?" asked Percy, still suspiciously eyeing Nico's sword.

"No," said Nico. "It's Nico. No one calls me 'Nick'." He unconsciously made a face as he said the undesired nickname.

"Huh," said Percy, shrugging. "I could of sworn that's what the teacher called you. Eh, oh well. What'd you want?" He was regarding Nico as if he might attack him any moment.

"To talk to you? Can I..." Nico tried to look past Percy in the door and see if anyone else was home. "...Can I come in?"

Perhaps it was Nico's obvious nervousness but Percy seemed to be letting his guard down marginally. He clearly still didn't trust him though. "No," said Percy, frowning. "But we can go talk at a coffee shop or something if you want."

That kind of hurt a little, but Nico didn't blame him. If Percy really didn't know him it would have been pretty idiotic of him to invite a stranger with a sword into his apartment. Taking him somewhere public made sense.

It still hurt though.

"Okay," sighed Nico. "You can pick where."

He followed Percy for a few blocks and into a hip looking coffee shop. A few people gave him wary
looks as he passed by but no one actually said anything. They all quickly averted their eyes and went back to their cell phones and laptops. A teenager with a sword was probably not the strangest thing any of them had seen in New York by a long shot.

"Want anything?" asked Percy. He seemed to be visibly relaxing even more now that they had lots of witnesses.

"Uh..." Nico had meant to say 'no' because geeze, this was kind of an emergency situation and he really ought to get down to brass tacks with Percy and start sorting out what was going on. But he accidently found himself going "Yeah, sure. I'll have whatever you're having."

Percy wandered over to the counter as if there was nothing weird about him buying Nico coffee. And Nico sat down on an industrial galvanized stool and tried not to stare at Percy like an idiot.

He was in a coffee shop. With Percy. Alone. And Percy was buying him coffee as if it were totally a normal thing to do. What the Hades.

He needed to remember that this was another glaring sign that something was wrong and that he shouldn't enjoy it.

Because this was definitely a sign that something was wrong.

Percy came back with two cups and a brown bag full of what turned out to be sugar cookies with blue icing (a good sign, at least things weren't quite so wrong that Percy had different eating habits.)

"Hope you like sugar," said Percy, thrusting one of the cups at Nico. He couldn't really tell what was in the cup by looking because the beverage was completely buried in a mountain of whipped cream. Nico took that as promising.

"Yeah. Thanks," said Nico, taking the cup from Percy.

"Sooo," Percy gave Nico a questioning look and broke one of the cookies in half. "What gives? Are you trying to recruit me for drama club or something? That's not really my sort of thing."

"Drama...club?"

"Yeah. The sword? Looks like you might be on your way to rehearsal or something?"

"No." Nico watched Percy carefully, trying to figure out if he really was as clueless as he seemed or if it was an act.

"Then what's the deal? You're being totally weird. Is this like an Internet prank? You're filming me, aren't you?" Percy rolled his eyes.

"You really don't know me?" Nico couldn't help asking.

Percy shrugged. "I mean I've seen you in class. You're usually lurking at the back of the room though, so I don't think you've ever talked to me before. Hey, how'd you know where I lived, anyway?" A bit of the suspicion crept back into Percy's features.

"Does the name 'Riptide' mean anything to you?" Nico asked, ignoring Percy's question.

"Well, sure," said Percy. "That's the name of my sailboat. Which I also don't see how you should know about. Are you a stalker?"

Yes, admitted Nico's mind truthfully.
"No," is what he said aloud. "But I've got a problem and I'm not sure how to explain it to you without sounding totally crazy."

"So sound crazy." Percy shrugged. "I want to know what's going on. No offense, but you're being kind of creepy."

Nico bristled at that, and it was only with an extreme amount of self-control that he managed to restrain himself from his knee-jerk reaction of shadow traveling right out of there.

"What would you say if I were to tell you that your dad's a god and you ought to already know me because we've spent years fighting monsters together?" Nico deadpanned.

Percy's eyes narrowed. "I'd say that joking about my dad is super not cool," his voice held a warning tone.

"I'm not joking," said Nico seriously.

"And neither am I," replied Percy. "My dad's been dead for years and it's kind of a touchy subject. Guess you're not much of a stalker or you'd know that already."

Nico sighed in frustration. "Look," he said, trying not to rile Percy up more. "I'm sorry about that. I, uh, didn't know. Something really weird is going on. I'm not lying when I say you ought to know me. Pretty well, even. Everything's gone different suddenly and I don't know what's going on. Maybe I should try talking to Annabeth, she's usually good at figuring things out."

"Annabeth?" Percy parroted back at him.

Nico gritted his teeth. This was really getting annoying. "Yeah, Annabeth. You know, your girlfriend?"

"Wow, you really are crazy," Percy snorted at him. "Are you high or something? I don't have a girlfriend."

It was as if all the background noise in the cafe suddenly ground to a halt. It didn't actually, but Nico's attention narrowed and stilled. He couldn't possibly have heard that right.

"What? Of course you do," he said disbelievingly. "You and Annabeth have been together forever."

"Are you talking about Annabeth Chase?" Percy asked skeptically. "That Annabeth?"

Were there actually any other Annabeths that could be confused with her? He certainly had never met any others. Nico nodded.


Nico just stared at Percy in slack jawed astonishment. "You're...single?" His voice came out kind of strangled.

"Yeah, rub it in why don't you." Percy looked kind of annoyed.

"Ah. Sorry. That's just...unexpected."

Nico's mind started racing. Percy didn't seem to know anything about being a demigod. If no one here knew anything about demigods then Luke wouldn't have had a reason to turn psychopathic. Or die. And if Luke was alive but not evil then it made perfect sense Annabeth would be with him.
Holy Styx. This was going to take a while to process.

"Um." Nico was still speechless.

"Dude, are you okay?" Percy's annoyance quickly shifted to concern. "You seem really out of it. Maybe we should swing by the emergency room and get you checked out."

Nico shook his head. "No. No, that's okay. I don't think that would help with my problem. Uh."

Percy was looking at him expectantly.

"Er, you said I'm in one of your classes?"

Percy nodded.

"Do you have like...a school directory or something?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you be able to help me figure out where I live?"

Now it was Percy's turn to stare at Nico in disbelief. "You don't know where you live?"

Nico shook his head.

"Are you sure you don't want to see a doctor?" asked Percy. "Not knowing where you live is kind of serious."

"Oh there is definitely something serious going on," Nico nodded in agreement. "I just don't think it's me. Will you help or not?"

"Yeah, sure, I guess," said Percy. He pulled out a cell phone. Seeing Percy with an electronic device was totally weird and disconcerting. "What's your last name again?" he asked.

"di Angelo."

Percy spent a few moments tapping on the keyboard and scrolling. He finally handed the screen to Nico. A totally unrecognizable address was displayed under his name.

"Is that nearby?"

"No," said Percy. "That's downtown. We'll have to take the subway, but I can show you."

Percy led him to an unimpressive apartment building a few subway stops away. "This is it," he said, waving at the dingy brick facade as he took a sip of his coffee.

Nico stared at it with zero recognition.

"Got a key?" Percy asked.

Nico checked his pockets, even though he knew they'd be empty. "No." He pressed the buzzer that corresponded to his apartment number.

"Think someone will be home?" asked Percy, obviously curious.

"I hope not," muttered Nico. He was slightly worried that he was about to come face to face with
another version of himself. Aside from the fact that that would be incredibly awkward, he couldn't help slightly worrying that it might cause the laws of time and space to go haywire and possibly incinerate him in an explosive paradox.

"You're locked out but you hope no one is home?" asked Percy. "Dude, you are seriously weird."

"I get that a lot," said Nico. Normally a statement like that would have put his hackles up and possibly caused him to hit Percy or at least run away. But he felt so utterly off-kilter right now that he couldn't really be offended in the way he should have been.

Nico pressed the buzzer several times but got no answer. When it seemed certain that no one was coming he went around the side of the building and jumped on top of a garbage bin.

"What are you doing?" asked Percy. "You live on the third floor! You're going to hurt yourself!"

Nico ignored him and grabbed a hold of a window ledge. It wasn't very hard for him to scale the side of the building and break a window with the hilt of his sword. He climbed in and found a light switch, and then the button that buzzed open the front door for Percy.

"Oh my god," said Percy in disbelief as he finally came through the door. "You're not just crazy. You're like psycho crazy. You're a crazy psycho ninja."

"Does that bother you?" asked Nico tiredly. He was really getting overwhelmed by the day's confusing events. He was glad to have a place to crash at least, even if he didn't recognize it whatsoever.

"Are you kidding?" said Percy, staring at the broken glass littering the floor. "This is awesome. We should have hung out sooner."

"We did hang out sooner," sighed Nico. "I told you we're already..." he usually avoided using the appropriate word, because he never really thought it was completely true. Especially considering he'd said goodbye to all that when he'd cut out of town. But what the hell. "...Friends."

"Huh," said Percy. "If you say so. Hey, wow, you have a lot of action figures."

Nico stopped and for the first time really observed the room they were standing in. There were a lot of action figures. Every Mythomagic figure he'd ever owned (and destroyed) in the past were here, intact on a bookshelf. And they weren't alone. A plethora of unrecognizable figures of various other mythological creatures and monsters surrounded them, with a colorful backsplash of comic books and game boxes. To the left of the bookcase was a selection of framed holofoil cards. Over the couch were some horror movie posters predominately featuring skeletons and zombies. The overall décor effect was embarrassingly juvenile.

Okay so there wasn't really any question about whether or not he'd found the right apartment. This definitely looked like an ensemble some other version of himself might have put together... unfortunately it was not a version of himself he especially wanted to advertise to Percy. How mortifying. He probably should have looked around first before letting Percy in.

"Uh. Yeeeeeah." Nico cringed. "I was just about to redecorate."

Percy didn't seem to hear him. He was distracted staring at something on Nico’s bookshelf. He pulled out a DVD box and inspected it, grinning. "Sweet!" he said, holding up the box. "I love the original Clash of the Titans. Wouldn't have pegged you for a fan of this stuff from class. We should totally watch it some time."
Nico blinked.

“Watch it together?” he asked, pretty sure he must be misunderstanding. There was no way Percy was inviting him to watch movies with him. That’s not that sort of thing that would happen to Nico di Angelo.

“Yeah?” Percy said. He seemed confused by Nico’s response. “Is it not cool I touched your stuff? Sorry.” He hastily shoved the DVD back onto the bookshelf. “I get kind of excited when I find out other people are into mythology stuff. I’m especially a fan of Perseus stories.” He grinned sheepishly.

“No it’s cool,” said Nico quickly. “Totally cool. You can touch my stuff.” He mentally smacked himself. That had sounded way wrong. “I mean, I’d love to watch it with you. You should come over some time.”

Percy beamed at him. “Awesome.” He fished around for a piece of paper and scribbled a phone number and email address on it and then handed it to Nico. “Hit me up after class some day.”

“Yeah.” Nico frowned. “What day do we have class?”

Percy looked at him funny. “Wednesday and Friday.”

“And…what day is it today?”

“Seriously?” Percy’s face turned concerned again. “Are you sure you don’t want to go stop by the emergency room?”

“No, I’m fine. Just remind me what day it is.”

“Dude, it’s Monday.”

It had been Monday last time Nico had been aware as well, but you could never be too sure when the entire universe seemed completely twisted around and upside down.

“Ah, right.”

“I should probably get going,” said Percy. “I didn’t tell my mom I was going out. You sure you’re okay?”


“Cool. See you around, Nico.” Percy showed himself out of the apartment, leaving Nico alone and utterly bemused.

He stood for a long time simply trying to process his situation. Had he gone crazy? Maybe he was hallucinating all this. Maybe he’d been captured by some villainous something-or-other and was caught right now in a delirious trap.

Or maybe he’d been crazy his entire life and just finally snapped out of it? The thought made him very uncomfortable. His life had hardly been pleasant or desirable so far, but it was still all he knew. Everything being fake wasn’t acceptable to him.

But no. He’d still been able to use his powers. That meant his memories couldn’t be wrong. Something had changed. Everything had changed except for him.

Nico narrowed his assumptions down to two possibilities: perhaps the nether held passages to more places than just the world he’d been used to traveling through. He might have accidently taken his
shadow travel to a new level and entered a parallel reality. Or maybe he was still in the same world but it had been altered by magic. He might have been spared the effects due to being in the nether when it happened.

He could probably test his theories by shadow traveling again, but he still felt hesitant to do so.

What if he was in a different reality, but shadow traveling again didn’t lead him back to the first one? What if he just kept going forward and ended up somewhere much worse than here? The current situation was weird but so far not bad.

If he were honest with himself it was better than not bad. It was kind of sort of awesome. Percy was single and wanted to hang out with him. That was ten kinds of amazing.

Amazing, but not a good reason to stay, Nico tried to reason with himself. Just because this reality had the potential of being better than the one he knew, didn’t mean he shouldn’t put things back the way they belonged if he could figure out how. He couldn’t articulate a real reason but deep down he felt like he ought to make sure things went back to normal. Like he had a responsibility or something.

He would try to fix this.

…Eventually.

Surely it wouldn’t hurt to just scope things out a little more thoroughly first though?

It wouldn’t matter if he took his time setting things right so long as he did it eventually…right?

Yeah. He’d just take a few days to investigate and then he’d worry about sorting everything out later.

Nico felt a bit better having rationalized a plan. He swept up the broken glass on the floor and then started searching the apartment for clues.

Luckily the other version of himself who had allegedly been living here wasn’t a neat freak. There were plenty of papers and messily opened envelopes scattered on the kitchen table. Nico managed to find a class schedule and some pay stubs that indicated that he apparently had a job…at some comic book store, from the looks of it. That was somewhat of a relief; he hadn’t been sure how he was going to pay for this apartment if he found himself stuck here.

Even more helpful was the discovery of a laptop and cell phone. Neither of which were things he’d spent a lot of time using before, due to their incompatibility with his demigod qualities, but he had vague memories of interacting with a few when he’d been at Westover Hall. And anyway, they were pretty easy to figure out. He immediately started scouring them for information.

Hazel and Jason both appeared in the contact list on his phone.

Bianca did not.

He hadn’t even realized he was hoping she’d be here until he felt the sudden sharp stab of proof that she wasn’t.

He swallowed the thick lump that hadn’t been in his throat a second ago.

Focus on the positive. Hazel would know who he was at least; he wouldn’t have to suffer through a repeat of Percy’s blank lack of recognition. That would have been unbearable with Hazel.

He wanted to call her right away just to confirm that she’d know him, but he hesitated. He wouldn’t
be able to see her immediately if he didn’t shadow travel. If he didn’t get his bearings first, talking to her might alarm her and he wouldn’t be able to rush over and smooth things out in person. He should probably hold off and find out a little more about this second life of his. It’s not like he’d been in contact with her in the old reality anyway. He could wait a little longer.

He called Jason instead. He seemed a safer bet for facts gathering since he was probably in visiting range.

“Yo.” Jason immediately picked up. “‘Sup?”

“Jason?” Nico hated the uncertainty in his voice.

“Uh yeah,” said Jason. “Who were you expecting? Dr. Frank N. Furter?”

“Who?”

“What, seriously?” said Jason. “Are you kidding me? I hate that movie. You are not allowed to force me to watch that movie every single Halloween and then not laugh at my stupid reference. You owe me a laugh at that.”

“What movie?” asked Nico, confused.

“What, seriously?” Jason’s voice had turned even more incredulous. “Hey, Nico, are you okay?”

“No, not really,” said Nico. “Do you know where I live?”

“Is this some sort of trick question?” Jason sounded worried for real now.

“No.”

“Of course I know where you live. I was over there on Thursday.”

“Oh good,” said Nico. “Would you mind coming over now?”

“Right this second?”

“Yeah?”

“Um, okay. Sure. I’ll be there in forty.”

Nico hung up and replayed the conversation in his mind. Jason had acted really familiar. Way more familiar than the version of Jason he was used to would have. Apparently they were friends. Not hey-lets-go-on-a-quest-together-and-watch-each-other’s-backs-because-I’d-be-kind-of-sorry-if-you-died friends, which is all he’d ever really had before. No, Jason had just talked to him like an actual friend-friend. The kind that hangs out with you not just because you need to save the world and has inside jokes and stuff.

Nico had never had one of those before. Not since he’d lost Bianca, anyway.

How weird.

He suddenly felt nervous. This Jason might have been friends with that other Nico, but maybe he wouldn’t like the current model. Had he just been thrust into this place to wreck havoc and ruin his doppelganger’s life?

What had happened to the other Nico, anyway?
Had they traded places?

He tried to imagine a clueless and powerless version of himself dropped into the middle of some monster mayhem and immediately felt sick. This wasn’t good.

Maybe other Nico wouldn’t have to worry about monsters. He might not attract them if he didn’t have demigod powers. He could only hope.

The door buzzed and Nico let Jason in.

“Dude, you are totally freaking me out,” said Jason the second he entered. “What the heck is up? Hey it’s kind of breezy in here—” his eyes drifted to the window. “—Oh *no way*. Did you have a break in?”

“Sort of,” said Nico. “I’m the one who broke in.”

“What?” Jason looked at Nico disbelievingly. “*How*? This is the third floor. If you got locked out couldn’t you have just called your landlord?”

“My phone was inside,” said Nico, ignoring the other part of the question.

“You seem really jumpy,” said Jason. “What’s going on?”

“Do I seem different?” asked Nico.

“Well, yeah. As I said, you seem jumpy.”

“Is that all?” asked Nico.

“Did you get a haircut or something? I never notice stuff like that.” Jason shrugged.


“Uh, yeah. That’s a pretty weird question. Why are you grilling me?”

“How well do you know me?” Nico continued to question.

“What kind of question is that?”

“I’ll explain later. Just answer my questions.”

“Er…okay Captain Cryptic.” Jason was staring at him really strangely now. “We’ve known each other since middle school. I’d say that’s a pretty long time, I guess I know you pretty well.”

“So I met you at school?” Nico asked.

“No,” said Jason. “Through our sisters. They were bffs and did all those sports together, remember?”

Nico almost stopped breathing. “You know my sister?”

Jason blanched. The expression on his face was not a good one. “Oh, Nico,” he said in a low voice. “Are you having a nervous breakdown? You *know* she’s….”

“She’s dead, isn’t she?” Nico spared Jason having to say it.

“Well, *yeah*. Why are you acting like you don’t know that?”
“How’d she die?” He knew he’d probably be better off not delving too deep into this particular subject matter, but he just couldn’t seem to stop himself.

Jason frowned. “Nico, you’re kind of freaking me out. You know what happened. She was in a car accident with your mom.”

“And mom died too, huh?” he asked with a sigh.

“Yeah.”

Nico sat down on the couch and buried his face in his hands. It shouldn’t bother him so much; he’d come to terms with her death quite a while ago. But it felt like getting the bad news all over again. That void lodged in his chest that never really went away began to throb.

“Argh, what’s the point?” he lamented. “What’s the damn point of everything being different except for that? What is the point of all this even if Bianca’s still dead?!?”

“…Nico?”

Nico didn’t respond. He was trying not to fall apart. The stress of it all was catching up to him. He felt the couch dip as Jason sat down next to him and put a solid hand on his shoulder. He didn’t say anything for a while.

“Did you hit your head?” Jason finally broke the silence with a question.

“Maybe,” Nico mumbled.

“Are you missing your memories?” Jason asked.

Nico snorted. “Only the ones from before I was ten.”

“What?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it,” said Nico.

“You’re making me pretty worried,” retorted Jason.

“You probably should be worried,” agreed Nico. “The Nico you were friends with is gone. I don’t know what happened to him. I’m a different Nico.”

“…What?”

“I’m from a parallel reality. Or something. Haven’t worked out the details yet.”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“No, seriously Nico. This is totally not funny.”

“I’m serious as the grave.”

“Okay,” said Jason in a voice that indicated he didn’t believe one word of it, “okay then. Prove it somehow.”

“Sure, no problem. Let’s go outside.”
He led Jason outside and into the alley. Then thought better of it and found a different alley a few blocks away. He didn’t want to leave too obvious of a trail right back to his apartment.

“Watch this.” With a flick of his wrist Nico tore a hole in the center of the alleyway. Dozens of rat skeletons poured out of its black depths and ran in circles before scattering back into inanimate bones.

“What…” Jason was gaping like a fish. “What…”

“Believe me now?” asked Nico, basking a bit in Jason’s stupefaction.

“What…” Jason looked slightly sick. “What the hell?”

“I’m guessing you can’t do anything along those lines, right?” Nico asked. “The Jason I know could summon lightning and stuff. Can you do that?”

“Of course I can’t do anything like that.”

“So,” Nico shrugged. “Only conclusion I can draw is that I’m in the wrong place and you’re looking at the wrong Nico.”

Jason took another look at the hole in the ground and bones everywhere.

“…Huh.” Was all he seemed capable of saying.

“You probably shouldn’t tell anyone about this,” added Nico.

“If you don’t want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn’t have made a giant hole in the middle of a public walkway,” said Jason. “People are going to notice this.”

“Hm, good point.” Nico caused the bones to sink back into the hole before closing it back up again. All that remained of his demonstration were some cracks in the asphalt.

“Jesus Christ,” muttered Jason. “Jesus H. Christ I did not just see you do what I think I just saw you do.”

“I’m kind of freaked out too,” Nico agreed. “Just for a different reason.”

“So now what?”

“Let’s go back inside.”


Nico promptly sat back down on the couch and sighed. He was afraid to look at Jason. He’d probably just alienated the one person who was actually his real friend here. Stupid move, but he hadn’t known how else to prove he was telling the truth. And he’d needed to tell someone.

“You don’t have to stick around if you don’t want to,” Nico offered dejectedly. “I won’t blame you if that scares you off.”

“Pfft.”

Nico’s head snapped up to look at Jason as he heard him stifle a laugh.

“Dude, do you have any idea how many horror movies you’ve forced me to sit through?” asked
Jason. “Well I guess you wouldn’t know, huh? The answer is a lot. It’s gonna take more than a hole and a bunch of dancing bones to scare Jason Grace. Nice try.”

Nico blinked.

“I mean, you’re not planning on going all Exorcist or Norman Bates on me, right?” he asked, his smile wavering faintly.

Nico shook his head.

“Good. We’re cool then.”

“You… you believe me?”

Jason shrugged. “I’m… not sure. I don’t not believe you. That was some pretty intense shit you just showed me.”

“I’m going to need your help blending in. I don’t think I should tell anyone else about this.”

“No,” agreed Jason. “I suspect telling lots of people would be a good way to get yourself thrown in an institution or something.”


“Eh, I don’t freak out easily,” said Jason. “Besides, you’re always trying to shock people with random weird and creepy statements. It’s kind of your thing. I’m used to it.”

“I deliberately freak people out?” Nico was surprised by that. He was used to people’s discomfort around him being out of his control.

“Well, you got kind of morbid after…” Jason looked at Nico warily, obviously trying to decide if mentioning his sister was too taboo or not. “…Bianca and your mom died. You started reading lots of books on death and you got really obsessed with skulls and stuff. It made people uncomfortable. And you resented them for acting like you ought to being getting over it instead of feeling sorry for your loss. So you started flaunting it to get back at them. Eventually I think it stopped being about Bianca and just turned into a you-thing. Your idea of an ice-breaker at parties is fact-dropping how many hours it takes for rigor mortis to set in, or like exactly what force of impact it takes for someone’s brain to liquefy. It doesn’t usually go over all that well.”

“Figures,” said Nico unhappily. With the realization that Jason was actually his friend here, Nico had briefly let himself hope that maybe he wasn’t a creepy outcast anymore. But no. Apparently even without a godly parent to blame he couldn’t escape his freakish nature. He again caught himself thinking what’s the point of this then.

“So you’re probably my only friend here, huh?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Uh, well.” Jason didn’t seem sure how to answer that. “I’m not sure? You talk to people on the Internet a lot. I don’t know how close you are to any of them. But offline you’re kind of a loner.”

“Why do you put up with me then?” He couldn’t help asking.

“What the hell kind of question is that?” Jason looked offended. “I don’t drop my friends just because they go through a goth phase. Especially not after watching them go through extreme trauma. I totally get it, dude. You’re still the same Nico.” Jason’s brow furrowed. “Er, you were the same Nico. Now you’re not? This is confusing.”
“Yeah,” agreed Nico. “Tell me about it.” He felt kind of warm though after hearing Jason fervently defend their friendship. That was…nice.

“Aren’t you friends with the other Jason?” Jason asked. “The one with lightning powers and stuff?”

“Almost,” Nico admitted. “But not exactly. We weren’t close.”

“Oh.” Jason frowned.

“The potential was there, I guess. It just didn’t happen.”

“That’s too bad,” said Jason sincerely.

“Yeah.” For the first in a long time, Nico smiled. “It really is.”

Jason stayed for most of the night; filling Nico in on anything he knew which might help him get along undetected. He learned that his dad was still alive and living in Washington DC, although they weren’t exactly close. Hazel he was pretty close to, but she’d moved to California to work on a ranch. It was normal for them to call each other a lot, although recently she’d met someone (surprise surprise, it was Frank) so he didn’t hear from her quite as often as he’d used to (a topic he sometimes complained to Jason about, although somewhat good-naturedly.) He was currently majoring in Classical Civilization and minoring in Game Design. Apparently one of his inside jokes with Jason was about how unemployable he expected to be once he graduated.

Jason didn’t bring up the topic of Nico having any romantic interests and Nico was too afraid to ask how much he knew. He suspected Jason must know something in that regard, but the very fact that he didn’t bring it up made Nico suspect that that other Nico wasn’t very different from him in that department either. It was probably a touchy subject that Jason knew to avoid.

After some extensive searching they even managed to find the key to the apartment. Jason drew him some rough maps to show where his school and his job were.

When Jason had exhausted everything he could think to explain to Nico he turned the tables and began a barrage of questions.

“So, does everyone have superpowers where you come from?”

“No,” said Nico. “Most don’t. We were kind of special.”

“That’s so cool.”

“It sounds cool. I thought it was really cool at first. But it also means that monsters attack you all the time. It gets sort of tiring.”

“Monsters?” Jason’s eyes widened.

“Yeah. Monsters. Like manticores and chimeras and minotaurs and stuff. We attract them.”

“You attract monsters.”

“Yep.”

“I feel like I shouldn’t believe you,” said Jason slowly. “But apparently I kind of do because you just made me slightly worried. Are monsters going to start showing up here?”
“I don’t know,” said Nico. “That’s one of the things I haven’t figured out yet. I hope not.”

“Is the Nico that I know getting eaten by a monster right this second?” Jason’s eyes widened even more.

“I hope not,” was all that Nico could say.

“Uh, what do you usually do when you get attacked by monsters?”

“Kill them with my sword.”

“Oh shit,” said Jason. “He’s totally doomed.”

“They might not attack him,” Nico tried to reassure Jason. “If he doesn’t have my abilities he might be invisible to them.”

“I hope so. My Nico has never so much as held a sword. He’s never even taken a self-defense class. He’d get shredded.”

“If he’s ended up where I came from, hopefully he’ll run into the other demigods before he runs into any monsters. They’ll protect him once they realize what’s going on.”

“Demigods?”

“Yeah, that’s what we are,” Nico confirmed. “Demigods. You too.”

“That’s insane. I think that is the most insane out of all the insane things you’ve just told me. How can you even say that with a straight face?”


“No way.”

“Don’t get too excited about it. Jupiter’s kind of an asshole.”

Jason snorted. “Well that’s hardly any change. So is my real dad. He skipped town before I was even born. I’ve never even met him.”

“Where I’m from Jason has barely met Jupiter either. But I’d say that’s a good thing. It’s probably how you turned out nice.” He cracked a half smile.

“Which god is your parent?” Jason asked.

Nico’s half smile quickly dropped away. “Hades,” he said with a resigned tone, bracing himself for the negative reaction he always got at that disclosure.

“Cool.”

Nico regarded Jason suspiciously. “You think that’s cool?”

“It’s very you. I should have guessed.”

“‘Very me’ is pretty much the opposite of cool.” Nico rolled his eyes.

“Not in my opinion,” said Jason easily.

Nico felt himself blushing faintly. “Shut up,” he muttered.
“Are you trying to tell me I have bad taste in friends?” Jason asked with a grin.

“Your taste is very questionable.” In spite of himself, his smile began to reform. It was weird how quickly Jason was putting him at ease. He was feeling more comfortable talking to this Jason than he’d ever felt around anyone back home. It was almost as if they’d actually been friends for years, and Nico wasn’t just stepping in to take someone else’s place.

“It’s getting late,” announced Jason with a yawn. “If I don’t go soon the trains are going to slow down and it’ll take me forever to get home. Are you going to be okay?”

Nico nodded. “I think I’ve got a better handle on things now.”

“Good.” Jason smiled. “How about I keep you company during your shift at Midtown tomorrow? I’m hardly an expert on comics but I might be able to help grease the wheels if things get sticky.”

“That would be awesome.” Nico was genuinely grateful.

“Alright, see you tomorrow then.” Jason slapped him on the back as he got up.

“Yeah. See you tomorrow Jason.”

Nico hadn’t been to school since his brief stint at Westover Hall, and any schooling he’d had before that had been purged from his memory, so he was mildly nervous about showing up blind to college classes. It wasn’t too bad though. The teachers didn’t call on you unless you actually wanted to be called on, so all Nico had to do was keep his head down and take notes and no one paid attention to him. He also already knew a lot of the information being taught. He suspected he was probably more of a mythology expert than any of his teachers. After all, he’d actually had conversations with the ghosts of many of the historical figures they were teaching about. If anything, he was going to have to be careful not to screw up his double’s grades due to the fact that some of the information in the history books was wrong. He’d need to be mindful not to override what the curriculum expected with his own superior knowledge.

Going to work was another matter.

If his job had consisted only of being a Mythomagic know-it-all, he would have been golden.

Unfortunately, Mythomagic expertise was only about 0.01% of what was expected of him. Nico hadn’t read a comic book since he was 10 years old. He was utterly clueless.

He’d barely walked in the door before one of his coworkers jumped him. “Oh I’m so glad you’re here!” said a girl with blue streaks in her hair. “That Josh guy is here again. The one who always wants really obscure back issues. You’re better at finding them than me.”

He’d barely walked in the door before one of his coworkers jumped him. “Oh I’m so glad you’re here!” said a girl with blue streaks in her hair. “That Josh guy is here again. The one who always wants really obscure back issues. You’re better at finding them than me.”

Nico had barely managed to go “Uh…” before she’d shoved him halfway across the room and he found himself face to face with a tall guy with a beard and massive ear gauges.

“Hi?” said Nico.

“Nico, man, glad to see you. Having an epic emergency here. Like ep—ic. The nephew went and spilled apple juice on my 1993 retcon of Metal Men. I’m freaking out like woah. Like no kidding dude I’m about to flip my responsometer if you know what I mean. Get it? Ha ha ha. But seriously dude, can you help a bro out?”

“Um. Maybe? Let me check.” Nico turned and walked to the back of the store, hoping he looked
like he knew what he was doing. He ducked behind a display case and pulled out his phone, frantically typing in what he’d thought the guy had asked for. He found an image of what the comics looked like online. Okay. Good. He knew what he was looking for. Too bad he didn’t even know where the back issues was kept, let alone how the filing system here worked.

He found a door to a back room and spent a few minutes thumbing through long narrow boxes. There was no way he was going to find anything. He waited a few minutes to make sure it seemed like he’d spent enough time looking and then walked back to Josh. “I’m afraid we don’t have those issues in stock,” he said apologetically. “We’ll have to special order them for you.”

“Bummer,” sighed Josh.

He followed Nico up to the counter and waited patiently while Nico awkwardly tried to make sense of the store’s computer system. Eventually Nico figured out how to put in the order.

Josh had barely left when a middle school girl poked his arm. “My friend lent me her copies of Runaways,” she said brightly. “I really liked it. What would you recommend I read next?”

“Um,” said Nico. He nervously glanced around, scanning the nearby shelves for ideas. He’d never heard of Runaways. His eyes landed on one with a giant glowing eyeball on the cover. He had no idea what that was either but he thought it looked cool. “Here try this,” he said, handing her the comic.

She looked at it skeptically. “This is like Runaways?” she asked incredulously.

“It’s really good,” said Nico, dodging the question.

“Are you sure?” she asked, looking a bit distastefully at the vacantly electrified eye.

“It’s epic,” promised Nico, taking a cue from the Josh customer.

“Oookaaay,” she said. “If you say so.” She bought the comic book and walked out.

“Philosophical question,” said a twenty-something-year-old leaning against the counter. “Would you rather live on Earth-Two or Earth-616?”

“Um. That’s…too hard to choose.”

“Seriously?”

Nico was getting really tired of people asking him that particular question.

“You like Mythomagic?” he asked, hoping to distract him.

“Nah man, that game’s for nerds.”

“You’re an idiot,” snapped Nico. A few days ago he probably would have said the same thing, trying to distance himself from what he perceived to be a very immature past. But now he was feeling increasingly irritated, and besides, someone hanging out in this store had no ground to stand on flinging around labels like that.

The customer narrowed his eyes. He apparently was already familiar with Nico and had been expecting amicable banter.

“So, what’cha think of Thor’s sister?” he said, changing tactics. He had a look like it was a loaded question and he expected to make Nico uncomfortable.
“Thor’s sister?” Nico asked dumbly. He tried to think of what he knew about Norse mythology. It wasn’t exactly his realm of expertise. He didn’t remember Thor having a sister, but he wouldn’t really know.

“Yeah, Angela?” The guy prodded, looking surprised that Nico hadn’t immediately known what he was talking about. “From the Tenth Realm? Pretty hot, right?”

There was definitely a hint of malice in that guy’s voice. Like he suspected he knew Nico’s preferences and was baiting him.

Nico followed the guy’s pointing finger to a poster behind the counter. A busty redhead wearing a laughably scant amount of armor towered over them in almost-naked glory.

“Shoulda made her boobs bigger, amirite?” The irritating guy winked.

“She’d last about five seconds in battle before she’d be dead,” said Nico flatly.

"Dude, who cares about that?” said the guy with a sneer. "They still shoulda made her boobs bigger."

"To make her even more of a death trap?” asked Nico disapprovingly. "Her contoured chest armor would guide a glancing blade to slide straight into her heart. Dead in three seconds."

The guy (Nico had mentally tagged him as 'The douchebag') gave him a disgusted look. "Are you fucking kidding me?" He shook his head and started to wander away. Nico caught him muttering under his breath, "What’d I expect from a loser who'd rather fuck Thor?"

Nico's brain didn't really give him a chance to stop and think. Before he knew what he was doing he’d snatched a resin sword model off the wall, sprung over the counter, grabbed the guy by his shirt, spun him around and slammed the hilt of the sword into his face. There was a very satisfying crunching sound as the sword connected with his nose.

(A display case shattered, but after the fact no one could figure out what had happened. Replaying the store's security cameras showed that Nico and the customer had been nowhere near the glass.)

"Nico! What—?!” The blue haired girl's voice rang out through the suddenly silent store.

"WHAG DA FUGH." Douchebag doubled over and clamped his hands to his face, blood spreading out beneath his fingers.

Nico didn't wait to see how anyone else would react. He just dropped the fake sword and ran.

He ran for fifteen blocks before he slowed down. "Styx," he hissed to himself under scrunched up eyes. "Oh Styx. Styx. Styx." He was hyperventilating.

His phone rang. He didn't answer it.

Whoever was calling kept trying.

"Styx,” he muttered again, finally resigning himself to answering the phone. His hands shook as he pulled it out of his pocket.

"Sooo," Jason's voice was obnoxiously calm and nonchalant. "I'm at the comic book store right now. Kinda noticing that you're not."

"I think I just lost Nico his job," said Nico.
"Is that why there's blood on the floor?" Jason sounded *amused*. What the Hera.

"You think this is a *joke*?" Nico practically yelled into the phone. "Are you even really his friend? I'm fucking up your friend's life and you think it's funny?!"

"Woah woah woah, calm down there compadre. Everything's gonna be fine. Where are you?"

"I don't think we share the same definition of 'fine','" muttered Nico.

"Where are you?" Jason calmly repeated.

"I don't know! Somewhere in Chinatown from the looks of it. Broadway and something-or-other. I don't know. Who cares, I'm far away from you. Leave me alone."

"Okay," said Jason. "Tell you what. Why don't you find a restaurant and get yourself a bowl of soup or something. I'll catch up."

"Don't bother," said Nico.

"Don't go anywhere," Jason countered authoritatively.

"Don't tell me what—"

Jason hung up.

"Arrgh," gritted Nico, glaring at his phone.

He considered ducking into the nearest subway stop and just going home. But what was the point? Jason would just find him there eventually.

Home? Did he seriously just think of that apartment as home already? That wasn't his home. It was someone else's. He didn't belong here. If there had ever been any doubt of that he'd just proved it spectacularly.

Although now thanks to his lack of thinking, that other him wasn't going to have his home much longer.

He couldn't even last 24 hours pretending to be a normal functional person.

He slumped against the side of a building and sank down to the sidewalk. Jason showed up quicker than Nico expected.

"Go away," he muttered, although he didn't fully mean it.


Nico sighed in exasperation and let Jason drag him to his feet. Then he let Jason drag him into a restaurant and order him food.

"So what happened?" asked Jason, taking a bite of lo mien.

"I'm lousy at customer service," muttered Nico.

"I suspect there's a bit more to it than that."

"One of the customers was being a tool," Nico elaborated. "It pissed me off."
"So you broke his face?"

"He deserved it. You already know what happened? Why are you bothering me?"

"Well, Jessica went a bit hysterical when I came in and asked where you were. But I'd like to hear your side of the story. What'd he say?"

"I don't remember," lied Nico. "Who's Jessica?"

"Your manager," explained Jason. "Er, ex-manager, I guess."

"So I am fired," Nico sighed.

"Yeah, you're pretty fired."

"Great. Now I don't have a job. I'm not going to be able to pay the rent, so whenever I manage to set things right your Nico is going to be homeless. You can start hating me any minute now, you won't be the first."

"Dude, chill. No one's going to be homeless."

"Uh, last time I checked that's what happens to people who can't hold down jobs."

"Nico, your dad is loaded. He'd not going to let you lose your apartment."

"I'm not going to beg him for money."

"I'm pretty sure he's already paying for your apartment," Jason elaborated. "You didn't really think you were managing to fund an apartment in the Village on a part-time retail salary without a roommate did you?"

"How should I know?" Nico snapped. "I don't have to deal with this sort of stuff where I come from!"

"You're fine." Jason repeated. "If you want a job I'll help you find another one, it won't be that hard. But you seriously don't have to worry about it right now. Nico mainly worked there because he liked the comic book store."

"He's going to hate me when he gets back."

"I think you're already doing that job for him. He'll probably understand."

"If he's anything like me, he'll understand that he shouldn't have had higher expectations," Nico continued to gripe.

"Cut it out. Nico liked working at the comic book store. But you know what? There are other comic book stores. And I'm pretty sure that today you just turned him into a freaking legend at that one. He's going to love that. You just upped his attack points five thousand percent."

Nico snorted and rolled his eyes at Jason's attempt at a Mythomagic reference. "Like that took any effort. That jerkwad had the reflexes of a slug. Anyone could have done what I did. I just lost my temper."

"I'm pretty sure that's not true."

"Oh, I definitely lost my temper."
“Obviously. I meant it’s not true anyone could have done that. Jessica described you jumping over the counter like, I quote, ‘a highly caffeinated cat on steroids’.”

“I was really mad.”

“Wish I’d seen it.”

“You probably wouldn’t want to hang around me anymore if you had.”

“I doubt that.”

"Would your Nico have done something like that?"

Jason laughed. "No, that's pretty hard to picture. He would have silently fumed about it for hours then posted a scathing rant to the Internet that probably would have gone viral. I'd say your customer probably got off lucky. Physical injuries actually go away eventually. His reputation will probably recover."

"He's just lucky I didn't have a real sword on hand," Nico muttered.

The good-natured smile on Jason's face sobered. "Have...you killed people?" He asked like the thought hadn't even crossed his mind until now.

Nico looked up from the eggroll he'd been systematically shredding with his chopsticks. Seeing Jason looking at him like that—not quite scared per se, but definitely concerned—made him feel kind of awful. Which was weird, because he was used to people looking at him with fear in their eyes. Even the Jason he was familiar with had clearly been on edge around him more than a few times. This was nothing new.

Except it felt horribly wrong coming from this Jason. Nico regretted not keeping his mouth shut.

"Not regular people," he said, hoping Jason would actually believe him. "Not mortal humans. Only monsters and Titans and stuff."

Jason nodded but he still looked slightly more uncomfortable than he had when the conversation started.

"So," he said, trying to distract Jason from whatever uncomplimentary thoughts he was probably now harboring towards his sort-of-friend. "What do you do around here, anyway? You must have tons of free time without all the monsters interrupting."

Jason shrugged, although his expression lightened considerably. "Nothing too exciting. Games. Homework. Marathon TV shows on Netflix instead of doing said homework."

"Sounds tolerable."

"It's more than tolerable. I bet you haven't seen any of my Nico's favorite shows yet, have you?"

"I haven't really watched much TV since I was a kid," Nico admitted. "There's not very good reception in the Underworld."

"Well that needs to be remedied," announced Jason, grin reinstated. "Have any plans tonight?"

"I guess I do now."
A Motherflippin' Gryphon!

It was supposed to have just been a regular quest. 'Quest' was possibly even too grand a term. Micro-quest maybe. The problem should have been solved within an hour or two. It was just a small gryphon infestation; more of a pest issue than full-blown monster conflict really. They didn't even need a full team to deal with it.

Jason and Leo were distractedly chatting as they made their way through Washington Square Park. There had been a rather amusing spectacle that morning involving Mr. D and a beverage mix-up that still had them sporadically snorting into bursts of laughter.

"Did you see his face?" Leo's own face was red from laughing so hard. "Did you see his face when he mistook Coach Hedge's prune jui—" he didn't manage to finish his sentence before breaking out in another fit of snickers.

"He deserved it." Jason was grinning. "He definitely had that coming." He twirled his gladius casually as they walked along the tree-lined path. "He was lucky it wasn't filled with lead filings or something—"

A rustling caused Jason to still. He and Leo simultaneously looked up to see flapping wings on top of the park's stone arch.

"Gotcha," said Jason, keeping his eye trained on their target. The joking banter evaporated from both of their minds as their attention narrowed to the quest.

"You distract it," said Leo. "I'll toast it when it attacks."

Jason signaled agreement and backed up to a less crowded part of the walkway. He swung his gladius in a high arc, expecting the glinting metal to attract the attention of the predatory beast. As he worked he absent-mindedly wondered just what the Mist was causing this scene to look like to the surrounding pedestrians. They probably thought he was a street performer.

The gryphon went for the bait, gracefully leaping off the arch and rocketing straight at its prey. Jason held his blade ready, just in case Leo’s fireball missed.

"Jason!"

He turned; the surprise of hearing a distressed voice that definitely wasn’t Leo’s overrode Jason’s training to stay focused on his target.

The very last person Jason would have expected to see was barreling straight at him—or straight at the gryphon, more accurately.

Nico di Angelo—wide-eyed in uncharacteristic terror—was swinging a broken section of a drainpipe and running in wide uneven strides towards them.

“What—?” Jason didn’t get a chance to finish his question. Sharp talons slashed his shoulder, causing him to double forward from the impact.

“Styx!” he heard Leo yell. “He distracted me! Hang on—” A burst of flames narrowly missed Jason’s ear. He heard Leo mutter another curse.

“Run!” Nico was screaming. “Oh my god do you have any idea what that is I can’t believe there’s a
freaking GRYPHON in New York City what the freaking HELL Jason oh my god why aren’t you running get the hell out of here what the hell where did you get a SWORD since when do you do things with swords what the hell is going on I—” his panicked tirade bled into a shriek as the gryphon swooped, narrowly missing Nico’s head.

“Nico? What are you doing?” Jason cringed and prodded at his shoulder, tentatively testing to see how deep the wound was. His skin burned as he felt poison seeping into his bloodstream. He hastily pulled out a square of ambrosia and choked it down before the poison could spread far enough to cripple him.

The ambrosia kicked in immediately and almost as soon as it had started the fiery burn began to ebb. He snapped his attention back to the skirmish, tracking the gryphon’s movement with one eye, but keeping the other one trained on Nico.

Nico was still swinging the drainpipe in frantic uncoordinated circles. He was doing more to impede Jason and Leo than he was effectively threatening the gryphon. What was he thinking?

“Nico, get out of the way! We’re taking care of it!” Jason yelled. “It’s just a gryphon. We’re on it already.”

“Just a gryphon?” Nico’s sudden laughter was sharp and manic. “Just a gryphon. Why aren’t you running? You’re going to die!”

“Only if you keep getting in the way!” Jason snapped back irritably. Any other time he would have actually been sincerely glad to see that his long lost teammate had decided to reappear from his self-imposed exile, but his timing quite frankly sucked. And his erratic hysteria was worryingly un-Nico-like but Jason didn’t have time to dwell on that part yet.

“You get the gryphon,” he muttered to Leo. “I’ll remove the impediment.” Leo nodded and poised to release another burst of fire.

Jason tackled Nico, easily ripping the drainpipe out of his shaking fingers. He braced himself, expecting Nico to violently retaliate. Nico didn’t fight back as Jason dragged him out of the gryphon’s path.

“Oh my god,” Nico kept repeating like a broken record. “Oh my god did you see that? A gryphon. We just almost got turned into roadkill by a goddamned gryphon!” Nico’s fingers were painfully digging into his arm and Jason couldn’t tell if he was laughing or crying. “What the fucking hell, that’s so fucking cool.”

A strangled squawk rang out and the scent of charred fur and feathers wafted through the square.

“What the Hades, di Angelo!” Leo was fuming as he stalked towards Jason and Nico, gryphon efficiently dispatched. “Is that your idea of some sort of joke? Cause let me tell you, I’m the expert on jokes and that one sucked. What in the everlovin’ Underworld were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I didn’t want to watch you guys get turned into cat food!” Nico was significantly calmer now that the gryphon had been vaporized. “Why are you yelling at me? I’m not the one that made it attack!”

“Stop playing dumb di Angelo,” said Leo in annoyance.

“Who are you anyway?” Nico asked Leo.
“Are you kidding me?” Leo threw up his arms in exasperation.

Now that the stress of a botched gryphon cleanup had subsided, Jason was having time to grow worried about Nico’s confusing behavior. There was something very off about him. True, it had been quite a long time since they’d seen each other, but the change in demeanor was far too drastic to be excused merely by the time aspect of Nico’s absence. “Nico?” he asked more tentatively. “Are you okay?”

“Okay?” Nico started laughing again but there was a crazed quality to the peals. “Okay? I’m having the most fucked up day ever. Like, Jesus, Jason, you’re not even going to believe how fucked up things have gotten.”

Jason raised an eyebrow, since when did Nico talk to him like that?

“Ohay so get this,” Nico was still babbling. “I swear I was in my apartment this morning. Just making toast, okay? Getting ready for class. And the next thing I know I’m freaking outside six blocks away. A homeless dude grabbed the bread right out of my hands. The hell? And of course my keys and phone are still sitting on my freaking dresser. Like, how did I manage to wander out without them and not even remember? I thought I might have had a stroke or something. I know what you’re thinking, right, I’m too young to have a stroke but you’d be wrong did you know that one in four strokes occurs in people under the age of 65? Yeah that’s right and that shit cuts off your oxygen, you can just get brain damage without even feeling it, hey I could have been having them for weeks without even knowing that my head was a time bomb of death or something. But anyway, yeah, seemed like a good theory until I went back to my apartment and you know what happened? Some strange lady opened the door and said that she lived there and when I looked in the door all my stuff was gone! Gone. I haven’t even figured out how she possibly could have switched everything so fast. It was definitely the right apartment, the door even had that scratch on it from the time I got locked out and you helped me jimmy the lock. So. I don’t know what to do so I start walking towards school because where else would I even go? And that monster bird-cat came swooping down out of nowhere. I couldn’t freaking believe it! So I did the only logical thing, I followed it of course.”

“Uh.” Jason was having trouble following Nico’s rushed account.

“I can’t believe I don’t have my phone,” Nico continued, arms flailing in frustration. “That’s like the worst luck of all, I could have gotten video!”

“Since when do you use phones?” Jason finally asked. It was only the tip of the iceberg of questions he wanted to ask Nico. Nothing he had just said made any sense.

“Since when do you use swords?” Nico countered. “You’ve totally been holding out on me if you’ve been like a closet LARPer this whole time. Not cool, dude. But anyway, am I ever glad to see you. Can I crash at your place till I figure out what the hell is going on with my apartment?”

Jason looked at Nico in utter bafflement. Then he looked at Leo. Leo was silently twirling his finger in a circle next to his head in a wordless statement of Nico’s gone to crazy town.

“Can I see your sword?” Nico continued, utterly oblivious to how disturbed Jason and Leo were at his reactions. He tugged at Jason’s sword arm. “Sweet, a gladius! I’ve never seen one of those in person before, no wait, yes I have, they had one on loan at the Walters Gallery—I like to go there when I’m visiting dad, their medieval weapons display is seriously kickass—hey you should go with me some time, I didn’t know you liked that stuff. We can go to the Smithsonian too, have you ever been there? I love the Air and Space Museum they have all these sweet planes from World War II. Have you ever seen a real P-51 Mustang? You’re actually allowed to touch them—er, okay, you’re
probably not actually supposed to but no one caught me—It’s so cool, you should check it out with me, dad wouldn’t mind a guest.”

“Huh?” said Jason, seriously overwhelmed. He had definitely never heard Nico talk this much at once before. “Nico, I can’t go with you to visit the Underworld, I’m not allowed.”

“Hahaha, the Underworld? I’ve never heard the South referred to as that before, good one.” Nico snorted. “DC’s not that far south though, you should save that name for Florida or something. Although all the evil politicians and lawyers live in DC, I guess. It’s probably appropriate.” He laughed again.

“Something is wrong with Nico.” Jason stated the obvious.

“Brainwashed,” agreed Leo with a nod.

“I haven’t been brainwashed!” Nico leveled an irritated gaze at Leo. “Damn straight something’s wrong with me, I just saw a motherfippin’ gryphon in Washington Square Park! That’s kinda a biggie! Why aren’t you guys freaking out? Did you even get that? A G-R-I-…” He paused, his attempt to dramatically spell out the monster’s name thwarted by his dyslexia. “…G-I-R? No. G-R-I…F…P” He frowned, struggling with arranging the letters. But then his brow furrowed. “No, wait. Is that right? There should be a ‘Y’ somewhere in there. It’s g-r…y…p-h-o-n? There’s more than one way to spell that? But that’s right, they spelled it with a ‘Y’ in Mythomagic. Damn, I wish I could get into my apartment to look up their stats. Never memorized that card because it’s not very valuable—unless of course it’s a golden gryphon from the expansion. Those are rad; they do something like 700 damage while the regular kind are only a lame 200. This one wasn’t one of those though, right? Nah, it was black. Besides the rare ones live in Africa. I can’t believe I missed getting a photo. Hey can I borrow your phone? I need to tell my conspiracy message board about what just happened!”

The question was directed at Jason.

“What? I don’t have a phone.”

“Don’t be stupid of course you do. Your ringtone is the opening theme from 300 you freaking dork.”

“Nico, I don’t have a phone, and last I checked you don’t either.”

Nico gave Jason a puzzled look. “Dude, of course you do. You call me all the time. And don’t think I didn’t notice you switched your ring for me to This is Halloween.’ Ha ha, very funny, smartass. I demand you put it back to normal. If there were something wrong with anyone I’d say it’s you. I’m sorry I’m spazzing out but you don’t exactly see a damn mythological beast crashing through the city every day, do you? You’re the one acting weird. You should be freaking out too.”

He frowned and suddenly looked around. “Hey, why isn’t anyone else freaking out? Is everyone crazy but me? What’s wrong with everyone? What’s wrong with you?”

"Nothing's wrong with us," said Leo. "You are definitely the one who's flipped their lid." He turned to Jason. "We need to take him back to camp and get him checked out."

Jason nodded in agreement.

"I don't need to get checked out, I am totally fine," insisted Nico. "I took my meds this morning and everything. Not that I needed them, it's total BS they make me take them. I don't need anti-depressants if you ask me. I mean seriously, who wouldn't be depressed after what happened? Do drugs bring people back from the dead? Noooo. I keep saying that but does anyone listen? Even my
psychiatrist will tell you there's nothing wrong with me. He says my coping mechanisms are perfectly valid." Nico rolled his eyes and made air quotes with his fingers as he said the words 'coping mechanisms.'

"That's probably too much information," he said as he took in Jason and Leo's increasingly shocked expressions. "Am I over sharing? I do that sometimes when I get too wound up. It's the ADHD. My brain just won't stop firing in ten thousand directions. But christ, can you blame me? There was a gryphon. It almost killed us. I've never had a near death experience before."

"He's mad as a hatter," muttered Leo, shaking his head in bewilderment. "I wonder what the heck happened to him?"

"Something major from the sound of it," said Jason, worriedly staring at Nico. "I wonder if this is the real reason we haven't seen him in so long?"

"Jason? What are you talking about? You saw me three days ago. We got falafel at Mamoun's after class on Friday."

"No we didn't," said Jason in confusion. "What class?"

"What do you mean what class?" said Nico. "The one you have in that building." He pointed directly across the street.

"Nico," said Jason, concern growing. "I have never taken any class outside of Camp Jupiter or Camp Half-Blood. I've certainly never set foot in that building. Something has messed up your memories."

"Do you think he took a dip in the River Lethe?" asked Leo, scratching his head. "I mean how else could he forget someone as memorable as me?"

"I fell into the Gowanus once," supplied Nico helpfully. "Not recommended, by the way."

"That couldn't be it," said Jason, ignoring Nico's comment. "He knows who I am. The Lethe would have turned him into a blank slate, right? His memories don't seem to be gone, just screwed up."

"We need to bring him to Chiron," said Leo.

"Who?"

"Don't worry about it," said Leo, patting Nico on the shoulder. "We'll get you fixed."

Nico swatted his hand away. "Don't touch me! I hate when strangers touch me! Who the hell are you anyway? Jason, since when do you hang out with people without introducing us? I thought I knew all your friends."

Jason was utterly baffled by the injured look that accompanied Nico's offended question. Since when did Nico give a damn about Jason or whom he was friends with? And what on earth would erase Leo from Nico's memory but not him? Sure, Nico and Leo had never been on the friendliest terms but they still knew each other.

"We should go back as fast as possible." Jason sighed. "Leo, hold on." Jason held out his arm and Leo grabbed it knowingly. "Sorry about this," he apologized, looping his other arm around Nico's waist. "I know you hate flying but this is an emergency."

"What—?"
The rest of Nico's objection was cut off by the rush of wind as Jason went airborne.

Nico's eyes were as big as dinner plates.

"I knew it," he kept muttering under his breath. "I knew this stuff was real."

Chiron was carefully examining the clearly overwhelmed young man.

"Hmm," said Chiron, rubbing his chin. "This is very peculiar."

"Now that's an understatement," muttered Leo.

"Can you figure out what's wrong?" asked Jason. "Did someone do something to him? Are there any monsters that make people go insane? Do you think maybe he's possessed?"

Chiron was slowly shaking his head. "The problem isn't just his mind," he explained in an awestruck voice. "It's his whole body. He isn't a demigod."

"What?" Jason and Leo's disbelief was simultaneous.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Jason, looking at Nico carefully. There was not a single detail about the guy that didn't match his memory of the last time they'd met. The person sitting in the chair before him had the same tousled hair, same dark untrusting eyes, same morose style of clothes as the Nico di Angelo he remembered. This had to be Nico. "Don't try to tell me that isn't Nico di Angelo," he objected. "That is very clearly Nico di Angelo. He has to be a demigod."

"Duh," said Nico. "That's my name."

"I by no means said he isn't Nico di Angelo," Chiron corrected. "Clearly this is Nico di Angelo."

"Does it count for nothing that I said I'm Nico di Angelo?" Nico muttered.

"How can he be Nico and not a demigod?" asked Jason.

"That's a very good question," agreed Chiron.

"...And the answer is...?" interjected Leo.

"I have no idea," Chiron announced regretfully. "But his energy is completely different than it was the last time he was present at camp. He smells different too."

"Hey, I took a shower this morning," said Nico.

"You smell hopelessly mortal," Chiron clarified.

"But he was able to see the gryphon," Jason pointed out.

"As you know, some mortals can see through the Mist. Apparently Nico is one of them. Perhaps because he retains some trace of his former self."

"Did one of the gods do this to him?" Jason continued to ask. "Is that something they'd do? I guess they could if they wanted to, I mean if they can turn mortals into gods then they can probably transform a demigod either way as well. Would they do that?"

"Possibly," said Chiron thoughtfully. "Although I would imagine that if such were the answer he
would have retained his memories of his life as a demigod. It is also rather difficult to imagine what purpose such a transformation would serve. Although the gods are often mysterious in their will. It is certainly not unfathomable and it would not hurt to ask. I’ll put out an inquiry on Olympus.”

“What’s all this talk about demigods?” asked Nico, looking kind of wary and kind of excited at the same time.

“It’s what everyone at this camp is,” explained Leo. “Like us.” He pointed at himself and Jason. “And you’re supposed to be too but apparently you’re not.”

“Are you sure?” Nico still looked cautiously excited.

“Quite certain,” said Chiron. “You are one hundred percent mortal human.”

Nico’s face fell. “Rats,” he muttered. “That would have been awesome.” The unhappy set to his face deepened. He looked up at Jason suspiciously. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” asked Jason, thrown for a loop.

“All this time? All this time you were a freaking demigod? And you never told me? You knew how much I’m into that stuff. You’ve been my best friend for years but this whole time you didn’t trust me at all. I wouldn’t have told anyone.” His words were bitter.

“Best…friend?” Jason was dumbstruck.

“Oh so I’m not even that anymore am I?” Nico sprang up. There was a scary look on his face, and for the first time that day he somewhat resembled the air of the Nico Jason remembered. “Fuck you, Jason Grace!” He swiped clumsily at his eyes and then tore out of the room.

“What the Hades just happened?” said Leo. He turned a disbelieving look at Jason. “Since when are you two all buddy-buddy? Did I miss something?”

“Whatever memo you missed, I didn’t get it either,” said Jason in confusion. “Last time I checked he just barely tolerated me.”

“It would be unwise to allow him to leave camp in this state,” said Chiron. “I would advise following him.”

“I guess that somehow just became my job,” Jason announced with a sigh.

From the air it wasn’t difficult to track Nico. Especially considering that he didn’t seem to have any idea where he was going. Jason was able to overtake him in minutes.

“Don’t even!” Nico spat, trying to back away from Jason’s approach. “Don’t think you can fix this! I can see through you now you big fake! You can’t fix this! I want to go home!”

“Nico…” Jason put his hands out in an attempt to placate him. “Nico, I think you’re confused.”

“I am not confused!” He yelled. “I have never been less confused in my life! I get it now. Are you happy? I GET IT. I’ve just been a big joke to you all this time haven’t I? How could I be so stupid. How could I go that long thinking that someone as popular and cool as you actually likes ME. Stupid, stupid me, huh? All this time you’ve been a fucking superhero, and ignorant me’s just been your stupid comic relief sidekick! You’ve been laughing at me for years I guess. I deserved it, letting you trick me into thinking there was one thing in my life that didn’t completely and utterly suck. That
should have been a big red flag!"

"Nico—"

"When did this start, huh?" Nico continued to rave. "When? Was it before Bianca or after? How long have you been fucking with me? Did someone put you up to it?"

"Nico—"

"Was it that fire guy? How long have you been friends with him? Has he been your real best friend this whole time? When were you going to drop the bombshell, huh? At my eightieth birthday party?"

"Nico, no, you don't—"

"Shit!" Nico bawled his hands into fists and pressed them against his eyes. "Shit shit shit, I can’t believe this! I’ve told you so much stuff! Do you have any idea how much I trusted you? Do you have any idea how much I don’t trust anyone else? It was just you! How could you do this to me?"

"Nico, I haven’t—"

"Just forget it!" Nico screamed. "Leave me alone!"

There had been plenty of times in the past where Jason would have been grateful for the opportunity to leave Nico alone. Nico was intimidating when upset. It was usually a relief to be given an excuse to stay out of his way. Right now he had never wanted to leave someone alone less in his life. No one had ever looked at him with such sharp hurt and betrayal splayed across their features before. Each venomous word Nico flung at him burrowed into his chest and painfully lodged there, making him ache sympathetically for this guy who he’d wanted to have as a friend but whose friendship had never solidified, and who now seemed to be shattering for that very lack.

It made no sense. He knew he hadn’t done any of the things Nico was accusing him of but he felt awful anyway. As if he still deserved the acidity for lack of trying. He could have made more of an effort to be friends with Nico before. Heck, the guy had disappeared for ages and he hadn’t even gone and looked for him. He probably could have prevented all this somehow.

"Nico, listen to me!" he pleaded. "Just stop for a second and listen!"

"Why, so you can lie to me some more?"

He stepped forward and grabbed Nico by his forearms. Nico predictably struggled, but he didn’t seem as strong as Jason remembered. Jason looked down at Nico’s arms in confusion. He had definitely lost a lot of muscle mass since when he’d last seen him during the war. That didn’t seem like something Nico would have let happen. He might have witnessed Nico declining in those last weeks before he’d vanished, but he had also noticed that Nico’s withdrawal from his friends had gone in hand with an obsessive focus on training. He’d been getting stronger, not weaker. This Nico felt like an entirely different person in Jason’s grip.

He yanked Nico's arms closer to eye level.

"What are you doing?" yelled Nico. "Leggo of me!"

Jason's eyes trailed over the pale appendages in his grasp. They weren't just weaker. They were unblemished. The washed out expanses of skin were flawlessly unscathed.

"You don't have any scars," Jason observed.
"Of course I don't!" Nico snapped. "I'm not *that* depressed!"

"No, that's not what I meant," said Jason, still staring intently at Nico's thin wrists and undefined biceps. "You should have battle scars. The Nico I knew was in two wars. He had battle scars. We all do."

Jason released his grip on one of the arms to point at a groove in the side of his head where the hair had never grown back due to scar tissue.

"Like this," said Jason.

Nico stilled. "You didn't have that last week," he said. Some of the vitriol had left his voice. He stared at Jason hard, tracking his features with his eyes. "You shouldn't have any scars except the one on your lip."

"That one's not a battle scar," said Jason.

"I know," said Nico quickly. "I know how you got that. Thalia teases you."

Jason raised an eyebrow at that. He didn't see Thalia much. They definitely didn't have the sort of sibling relationship that would involve casual teasing.

"Is that so?" he asked. He held up his own arm to Nico. It was crisscrossed with a faint tracery of pale lines. Nothing too noticeable or ghastly—but his lifetime of skirmishes had not left him completely unmarked.

Nico tentatively ran his finger down one of the scars. Then he blushed and quickly jerked his hand away.

"That's weird," he said, biting his lip. "It's almost like you're—"

"Nico!" Percy's voice cut through whatever Nico had been about to say. They both turned to see the black-haired boy enthusiastically approaching. "You came back! I knew you'd eventually come back!"

Nico's eyes widened as Percy pulled him into a hug. "This is so great, everyone's going to be so glad to see you!"

Jason stepped back, expecting Nico to react badly. He waited for Nico to shove Percy off and lash out in red-faced embarrassment.

Nico did extract himself from Percy's embrace but the only expression he held was one of confusion. "No touchy," he muttered awkwardly. "And since when do *you* give me the time of day?"

"Nico?" Percy's face twisted in concern. "What—? Did something happen? I know things were getting kind of weird between us when you left, but I didn't *want* you to leave. We all missed you!"

Jason looked at Percy, then back to Nico. Then back to Percy before settling on Nico. Nico was looking at Percy with complete indifference. There was no heartache swimming in his eyes as there'd been the last time he'd seen the two interact. There wasn't even a hint of nostalgia. Nico was acting like he barely knew Percy.

A suspicion that had been slowly niggling at Jason for the last hour or so finally solidified.

"Don't take it personally, Percy," he said, all remaining doubt fleeing his mind. "That isn't Nico."
"Of course I am!" Nico immediately interjected. "I already told you I'm Nico!"

"You are but you aren't," said Jason. "You're a different person than the Nico we knew."

"But—"

"And I'm a different person than the Jason you knew. I think there's been a switch or a mix-up of some sort."

Nico froze, mouth open mid-objection. He clamped it shut and frowned. "You are different," he said slowly. "And—my apartment..." his frown deepened. "There was a gryphon. You expected me to be a demigod..." he seemed to be talking to himself more than to Jason.

Suddenly he looked up, a mixture of panic and excitement on his face. "I'm in the wrong place!" He said breathlessly. "I don't belong here!"

"No," agreed Jason. "I don't think you do."

"What?" Percy was now looking back and forth between Jason and Nico in a similarly confused way. "I am seriously missing something here."

Nico frowned again and took a step backwards. He was eyeing both Jason and Percy even more suspiciously than before.

"We should go back to Chiron," Jason said. "We need to discuss what we should do about this."

"I'd rather not," said Nico crisply. "May I leave?"

"What? No, you can't leave. We need to sort out what's going on. Don't you want to go back home?"

"So you're holding me against my will?" asked Nico, voice raising.

"What? No. We're not forcing you, I just think you should consider—"

"I knew it!" Nico pointed a trembling finger at Jason and then swung it around to point at Percy. "I knew it! Evil doppelgangers! Mirror worlds on TV are always filled with evil doppelgangers! Don't think you can fool me just because you haven't got a goatee!"

"What?" said Jason and Percy at the same time.

Nico crossed his arms and scowled. "I refuse to become a nefarious super villain. You're going to have to kill me."

"He's gone crazy," whispered Percy.

"No," sighed Jason. "He hasn't. We've already covered this. I'll fill you in later." To Nico he said, "Nico, we're definitely not evil. We're the good guys."

"Bad guys always think that they're actually the good guys," Nico muttered. "But you killed that poor gryphon!"

"It was attacking you!"

"Not until after you provoked it. I was just peacefully watching it until you showed up! It wasn't bothering anyone!"
"We provoked it because it's a menace to have gryphons in New York City. We were protecting people," Jason attempted to patiently explain.

"It was probably endangered," said Nico stubbornly. "There's probably a nest somewhere filled with orphaned baby gryphons. I bet they're really cute. And now they'll all die too 'cause you killed their mom. How do you guys live with yourselves?"

Jason rubbed his temples. He was starting to get a headache. "Gryphons are most certainly not endangered, Nico. And we didn't really kill it. You can't truly destroy monsters. It just got sent back to Tartarus."

"Oh fabulous." Nico threw his hands up in the air. "Now you're trying to tell me Tartarus is real too? Is that what you're planning to do to me? Send me down there with all the innocent gryphons you slaughter? I don't think I can take much more of this. My head is going to freaking explode."

Percy flinched and paled slightly at the mention of his least favorite place. Nico didn't notice. He'd shut his eyes and was pressing his hands against the sides of his head as if he could mentally will everything to go back to normal.

"Of course not! You've already been there, anyway. We'd never do that to you."

"I've actually been to Tartarus?" Nico asked, cracking open an eye.

Jason and Percy both nodded.

His distressed frown softened. Nico silently considered this revelation for a moment.

"Well that's pretty metal, isn't it?" he mumbled, half to himself. His unstable mood moderately perked up. "I must be badass. Who'd you say my god-parent was again?"

"We didn't say." Jason and Percy exchanged a wary glance. Nico's godly lineage was often a touchy subject.

"It's Hades," Percy announced.

They watched Nico expectantly for a reaction. A wide grin slowly crept across his face.

"Now that," he said, rubbing his hands together, "is seriously the coolest thing anyone has ever told me. Where's the demigod orientation? I'm ready to sign up. When do I get a sword?"

Nico was significantly calmer by the time they made it back to the Big House. Unfortunately, not everyone else echoed his demeanor.

"He can't stay here!" Clarisse was having a fit in the center of the counselor meeting that had been called. "He's not a demigod! Camp Half-Blood is for half-bloods. That's the whole point of this place! We can't let it get all filled up with normals."

"I'm not a demigod," Rachel Dare calmly pointed out.

"Oh don't even get me started on you," Clarisse snapped, making a face. "You're still a freak, anyway."

"In high school someone wrote the word 'freak' on my locker at least twice a week," Nico reluctantly offered. "I'm qualified."
"You're qualified to shut up," replied Clarisse angrily. "You don't get to make the decisions."

"Neither do you!" Percy jumped up and glared hard at Clarisse. "Chiron said he could stay! He's staying. He's still Nico. He's family whether he's a demigod or not."

"No, actually," Clarisse retorted. "Actually him not being a demigod means he isn't family. He's just some creepy loser that has nothing to do with us."

Percy actually looked like he was about to start a physical fight with Clarisse. Jason glanced worriedly at Nico, expecting him to be upset. The Nico he was used to was fairly sensitive about people's negative opinions of him. The old Nico would have been the one chomping at the bit to fight Clarisse instead of letting Percy beat him to it.

Instead of lashing out he seemed to be withdrawing into himself. Nico had slouched significantly lower in his chair and his arms were crossed tightly across his chest. The fingers of his right hand left deep indentations in his upper arm where he kept gripping himself in aggravation.

"Can't we just like...find a radioactive god and have it bite me or something?" Nico asked through gritted teeth.

All eyes turned on Nico.

"That has got to be the stupidest thing I have ever heard anyone ever say," complained Clarisse.

"We can't just get you turned into a demigod," said Annabeth gently.

"Why not?" Nico asked. "I mean these are actual gods we're dealing with, right? Can't they do pretty much anything?"

"Well...yes. They can do a lot," Annabeth conceded. "But they don't usually take requests."

"You'd probably have to save the world for them a couple of times before they'd offer a favor like that," agreed Percy. He looked apologetic as he said so.

"Technically he already has," said Jason. "Maybe they'd grant a retroactive favor."

"Yeah and maybe Mr. D will become a teetotaler and Zeus will win a 'Family Man of the Year' award," muttered Leo. "Don't hold your breath."

"It wasn't him that saved anyone," huffed Clarisse. "Stop acting like they're the same person. This is just a useless copy."

Nico glared daggers at her but didn't rise to the bait. Jason was impressed by how calm he was remaining throughout this. Maybe he'd simply burned himself out on overreacting to the gryphon. Jason kept expecting any minute for one of Clarisse's verbal barbs to result in jagged stone spikes rising up through the floorboards or some other dramatic display of Nico's powers. He had to keep reminding himself that this Nico couldn't do that. It really was pretty hard to wrap his mind around that. Without extremely close scrutinizing, they just seemed so similar.

“I could totally save the world,” muttered Nico under his breath. “Train me,” he added more audibly. “If you think I’m not good enough to be here, then show me how to be good enough.”

"Don't you want to go back to where you came from?" Jason asked. “We should probably be putting our energy into solving that problem.”
Nico’s scowl intensified at the mention of the word *problem*. "Are you anxious to get rid of me?"
That hurt that had been shining in his eyes as he’d exploded in Chiron’s office was back. He looked at Jason as though he’d just betrayed him.

"Of course not," replied Jason. "You’re welcome here. I was just thinking that there might be people you left behind that you’d miss.” He refrained from also adding, *and I’m kind of worried about the other Nico. No one seems very focused on what happened to him.*

Nico held Jason’s stare for a long time. “Yeah,” he finally said. “One or two.” His eyes dropped away and he frowned. “Doubt they’ll miss me too much,” he muttered under his breath. Then he jerked a little and looked up again. “Oh!” he said, suddenly remembering something.

“What?”

“You’re in both places,” Nico said, pointing at Jason. “And so are you.” He pointed at Percy. “There’s doubles of everyone? I need to find my sister!”

The room went silent. Nico couldn’t have missed the uncomfortable looks people were exchanging.

Percy broke the silence first. “Nico,” he said, guilt written all over his features. “I’m really sorry. Really, really sorry. Your sister died.”

Nico looked sick. He wrapped his arms around his stomach and leaned forward until his hair fell across his eyes. “No,” he said hollowly. “No. I can’t go through that again. Hazel’s dead here?”

“Oh!” Percy immediately started backtracking. He frantically waved his hands. “No! No no no no. Hazel’s fine! I thought you meant—”

“Hazel’s at Camp Jupiter with Frank.” Jason cut Percy off before he could say the name that would probably trigger Nico into getting more upset.


“Another demigod group,” Annabeth explained. “On the West Coast.”

“Oh. So I guess I can’t see her then,” Nico sighed. “Nothing’s changed there then.” He looked disappointed.

“Sure you can see her,” said Percy. “You can just shad—oh. No, I guess you can’t. But never mind, Hazel can. Let’s call her.”

With so many people present it didn’t take long to scrounge up a drachma and a prism. Within a few minutes Hazel’s image was summoned. Her eyes had barely focused on the group before the pleasant smile she’d been wearing dropped off her face. “What’s wrong?” she asked anxiously. “I can tell something’s wrong. What’s going on? Nico?” Her eyes lit up at the sight of her brother. “Nico? You came back?!”

“Can you shadow travel here?” asked Jason. “It would probably be better to tell you in person.”

Hazel didn’t even take time to answer. In seconds she had joined them in the room.

“N-Nico?” She didn’t come up and hug Nico like she normally would have. Her brief happiness was gone again. Hazel looked scared. “You’re *not* Nico, are you? Your life force feels different.”
“I’m Nico, but I’m not your Nico,” he said. Jason could tell by his demeanor that Hazel’s aborted hug had hurt him. His posture slumped even more.

They took turns quickly describing to Hazel what had happened. A range of emotions flickered across her face as they talked. She was quiet for a moment once they finished, then she briskly strode across the room and kissed Nico on the cheek.

“I haven’t seen my brother in a very long time,” she said, looping her arm around Nico’s shoulders. “Please excuse us, we need some time to catch up.”

Nico was weakly smiling as Hazel lead him out the door.

“So this is where you stay when you’re here.”

Jason had volunteered to be the one to show Nico around since he seemed to be the person this Nico was most comfortable with. Although saying he was ‘comfortable’ was a bit of a stretch. A silent tension also stretched between them, born of unmet expectations. Nico had still seemed glad though when Jason had offered.

“Awesome,” said Nico, taking in the black obsidian walls and the eternally flickering torches. “I love it. You say the other me doesn’t actually stay here much? I can’t imagine why. I would want to stay.” He left the silent I do want to stay unsaid.

“There’s a lot of reasons for that,” said Jason. “Not all of which I even know.”

“But you know some of them,” said Nico.

“Yes.”

“You know stuff about me. So you’re not not friends with me then,” Nico clarified.

“No, we’re not not friends. We’re friends.” Jason paused. “Sort of.”

“But we’re not friends either,” said Nico, placing meaningful emphasis on the word ‘friends.’

“Not really,” Jason admitted. “You didn’t stick around enough for that.”

“Well this is awkward then,” Nico sighed and flopped down on one of the identical vampiric beds. His face looked significantly less happy than it had when he’d first stepped into the cabin. “I’ll try not to bother you then.”

“You can bother me,” said Jason quickly. “I told the other you that you could bother me. I never said I didn’t want to be friends. I did want to, actually.”

“So it’s my fault we’re not?”

“I wouldn’t necessarily use the word ‘fault’,” said Jason diplomatically. Even though in his mind that was exactly the case. He had tried pretty hard there towards the end to reach out to the younger demigod. Nico had pushed him away. “There were a lot of very complicated things going on. You had reasons.”

“Care to fill me in?”

“Well….” He paused, thinking things over. “The biggest reason is something I promised to never tell anyone. I’m not sure if telling you counts as breaking that promise or not.”
“Well now I definitely want to know,” said Nico, looking at Jason anxiously. “It’s probably pretty important I know, right?”

Jason let the memory of Nico’s confrontation with Cupid run through his head: the agony on Nico’s face as his confession had been forcibly extracted; his unhappiness that Jason had witnessed that; his desperation that Jason never repeat what had happened. He was fairly certain that his Nico would not want him to tell, even if it was just telling himself. He wouldn’t want his other self burdened by something that had caused him so much angst.

“No. I don’t think I should tell you,” Jason said apologetically. “I don’t think the other you would want you to know. You’re better off not knowing.”


“It’s not relevant to you,” Jason said. “No one else knows. If you don’t know then it’s something that won’t matter. Don’t worry about it.”


“Well don’t. It’s really not important.”

“It must have been pretty important if it caused me to make you promise not to tell anyone and then run away.”

“It was very important to him. But you’re not exactly the same. So it won’t affect you.”

“Maybe we are the same enough that it would. Maybe it’s something I should know about.”

Jason sighed. He didn’t blame this Nico for being so curious. He would be too. “It had to do with your feelings for someone. They were unrequited. You needed distance to deal with it.”

“Oh.” Nico looked somewhat horrified as he took in Jason’s statement. “You…know…about that?” he asked shakily.

“Um. I know about that in regards to my Nico.”

“I can’t believe he told you,” mumbled Nico, no longer making eye contact. He tugged awkwardly on the hem of his shirt.

“He didn’t tell me,” Jason explained. “I found out under circumstances out of his control.”

“Oh.” Nico was busily looking at just about every object in the room except for Jason. He was growing visibly more distressed. “This is more awkward than I realized,” he said. “You don’t have to hang around any longer. You can leave. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Were you not listening when I said I wanted to be friends?” said Jason. “I already knew Nico’s secret when I said that. It’s a non-issue.”

Nico very slowly looked up and suspiciously regarded Jason. “I find that kind of hard to believe,” he said quietly.
“Why?” asked Jason. “Is the other me a jerk?”

Nico snorted. “As if. You’re so nice it borders on annoying.”

“Then I can’t image why you’re so hung up on thinking I’d mind.”

“Because—” Nico studied Jason’s face and his eyes narrowed. “Wait. Who were my feelings for here?”

“I can’t tell you that,” said Jason. “But if you tell me who you’re thinking of, I’ll let you know if it’s the same person.”

“No,” said Nico quickly. “I’m not talking about that. I am never ever talking about that.” He crossed his arms over his chest defensively and stared at the floor.

“Well that’s one thing you have in common with the old Nico,” Jason said good-naturedly.

“I probably seem really lame compared to him,” Nico sighed. “I’m sure he could do all sorts of awesome stuff that I can’t. You should tell me more about him.”

“Well he had the same unjustifiably low self-esteem,” said Jason. “But he’s one of the most powerful demigods I ever met. He could control and communicate with the dead. And manipulate earth and stone. He could call shadows to himself and use them to travel pretty much anywhere. He was a pretty formidable foe in battle. I’m glad I never had to fight him. He probably would have kicked my ass.”

Nico’s eyes grew wider and wider as Jason talked. He uncrossed his arms and turned his palms up, looking down at his hands and frowned. “Well if I didn’t have an inferiority complex before I sure do now,” he muttered.

“You shouldn’t,” Jason assured him. “You really shouldn’t. You seem better off than the Nico I knew.”

Nico let out a humorless laugh. “That’s a bit hard to believe. I’m totally pathetic.”

“First of all, you’re not,” countered Jason. “Second of all, you seem happier than him.”

“Me,” said Nico flatly. “Happy? Those two things do not belong in the same sentence. Now I pretty much know not to believe anything you tell me.”

“I didn’t say ‘happy’ I said ‘happier’,’ said Jason. “You seem more…” he’d been about to say ‘stable’ but then questioned his word choice, remembering the way this Nico’s mood had been boomeranging all over the place when they’d first run into each other. In retrospect a lot of that seemed to have been due to shock, as once Nico figured out what was going on he’d significantly sobered. So far he’d also not gotten the impression that this Nico was likely to physically lash out due to emotional distress. Being able to broach the topic of ‘unrequited feelings’ in his presence without giant fissures springing up in the ground was a testament to that. But still, ‘stable’ didn’t seem quite right. It was difficult for Jason to articulate his impression. “You seem more…anchored, I guess? I don’t know, it’s hard to explain. My Nico was so unhappy that you could stand next to him and palpably feel the misery rolling off him in waves. It was heartbreaking to watch. You don’t project that same sort of aura.”

“Huh.” Nico chewed on his lip. “That’s hard to believe. He sounds so much better off than me. I wish that I could talk to the dead. I’d...give anything to be able to do that.”
Jason watched as Nico’s eyes glazed over and went distant, a sadness settling over his features that could have rivaled the other Nico. He immediately regretted sharing what he’d just told him.

“Hey,” he said, alarmed that he had worsened the other boy’s mood. “Hey, I didn’t tell you that as a challenge to try and match him. His powers were a burden to him as much as an advantage. They made people nervous. You’re going to have an easier time making friends than he did. I think you’re better off.”

“Yeah right. I don’t make friends easily,” Nico muttered.

“Really? I find that hard to believe. You just made one now, didn’t you?”

Nico tilted his head and looked at Jason skeptically. Jason flashed him a smile that he hoped came off as sincere.

“I guess you’re not an evil doppelganger,” was all Nico said. One side of his mouth quirked up though, betraying a hint of a smile.
Against his better judgment, Nico allowed Jason to drag him back to his apartment in Brooklyn after leaving the restaurant. The acquiescence was mostly due to curiosity—the chance to gain a bit more insight into both that other Nico and this Jason. He almost immediately regretted it.

Jason's apartment was tiny and his room so small that Nico suspected that it actually qualified as a closet rather than a habitable living space. Its contents consisted of Jason's bed and a desk and about three feet of visible floor. Because Jason had a roommate he herded Nico into the inhospitably cramped space and shut the door.

Jason set up his laptop and sprawled on the bed.

Nico stood awkwardly in front of the door, seriously questioning his sanity in having agreed. He wouldn't have if he'd realized he'd end up getting stuck in such a confined space with Jason (or anyone for that matter.) There wasn't anywhere he could sit without joining Jason on the bed. He'd expected chairs when he'd agreed to this. His fight or flight instincts were already rearing up.

Jason looked at him expectantly and patted the mattress next to him. Nico ignored him and sat at the desk. It put him at entirely the wrong angle to actually see Jason's laptop, but oh well, it wasn't as if Nico expected to enjoy anything they were going to watch anyway. He'd lost his ability to appreciate trivial entertainment like that years ago. How was he supposed to emotionally invest in fictional characters when real people's lives were getting toyed with by gods and monsters on a daily basis? Reality gave him way too much to dwell on to leave any mental space for stuff like TV. He was burned out. He wasn’t capable of caring about manufactured drama.

Except none of those concerns were relevant here. Here he didn't have to worry about people he knew getting eaten or transformed or recruited into evil armies. Here the only way he was going to see giants or Titans were through camera special effects. The him that belonged here could watch fictional monsters and be entertained, instead of having to choke back the nausea of fear that everyone he cared about were moments away from a gruesome death.

Other Nico might not have escaped the painful losses he’d had, but he did get a lot more peace of mind. It was obvious in the way he’d managed to hang on to having actual enthusiasms. Nico wasn’t sure yet if he was jealous or resentful of that.

Jason was critically eyeing him. “Dude, I don’t have cooties.”

“I know,” said Nico. He didn’t move.

“You usually sit right here,” said Jason, pointing at the unacceptably small spot he’d left on the bed.

Nico shrugged. “You shouldn’t expect me to be exactly like him. I’m fine here.”

Jason frowned at the reminder that his actual friend had been replaced. “I don’t,” he said, his eyes still intensely trained on Nico. They were scrutinizing him, measuring him up against his other self. “But you can’t see this from over there,” he continued, gesturing at his laptop.

“Yes I can,” Nico lied.

“No, you can’t,” Jason argued. “Look, if you come over here I’ll move to the floor or something.”

“I don’t want you to do that.” Nico stayed put.
“The whole point of this was to cheer you up, not for me to force you to awkwardly ostracize yourself in an uncomfortable chair and give yourself neck pain trying to watch a screen at a ninety degree angle.” Jason got up and wedged himself into the narrow corridor between the bed and the wall.

Nico refused to move. “I don’t need to be cheered up.”

“You always need to be cheered up,” sighed Jason, again defaulting his assumptions to his experience with someone else.

They watched two entire episodes like that, the comfortable expanse of bed completely vacant while the room’s occupants stubbornly stayed put in their impractical seating arrangements.

Nico had no idea what they were watching, but he didn’t care. He was actually watching Jason, not the screen. Jason seemed nervous. He was obviously trying to be nonchalant, but when something allegedly funny would happen he’d laugh just a little too hard. He was staring at the screen a little too intently for someone who already knew what was going to happen. He kept almost turning in Nico’s direction and then catching himself, abruptly turning back towards the laptop.

“You love this part,” he said at one point.

Nico craned a little harder to see what was going on. There was a battle with a dragon on the screen. He shrugged, not particularly impressed.

“You don’t like dragons?” Jason prodded.

“I have a healthy distrust of dragons,” said Nico. “Though that’s a fairly poor portrayal of one. Dragons are usually copper colored, not green. And that one’s wings are jutting out at entirely the wrong angles to be realistic.”

“You’ve seen real dragons?”

“Well, yeah.” Nico shrugged again. “A few. One lived at the camp I sometimes spent time at.”

Jason turned around and leaned on the edge of the mattress so that he could hold Nico’s gaze more easily. “Have you killed a dragon?”

*There it was. Another question about Nico’s propensity for violence. Jason was gauging him.*

“No,” said Nico. “One never attacked me. That’s not the sort of thing you mess around with unless you have to.”

“Crazy,” said Jason. “The other you would be flipping out to hear that. He loves dragons. Will watch pretty much any show or movie that has them in it.”

“He’d be less excited about them if he met one for real. Most of them are pretty nasty. Many can spit poison.”

There was a bit of an awkward silence before Jason said, “I’m worried about him.”

“Yeah.” It was all he could say. He didn’t want to give Jason even more reason to worry than he already had, and if he said anything at length he’d surely alarm him. He couldn’t assure Jason of other Nico’s probable safety with any authentic conviction.

“Do you think you’ll be able to switch back?” Jason tentatively asked.
"I don't know," said Nico. "I...have a theory about what might have happened. But I've been hesitant to test it. I'm worried that there might be more than just two universes. It might cause a chain reaction instead of a back-and-forth. We could potentially both get thrown somewhere worse than the current situation. I've been trying to figure out how to run some sort of test. I'm not sure what to do."

He didn’t voice aloud his other reason for dragging his feet on testing that theory—that he was afraid he’d end up wrong. If shadow traveling wasn’t the way back then Nico had no answer. With no gods to go to for help, there was no back-up plan. He might simply be stuck here forever. He wasn’t quite ready to swallow a truth like that yet.

Or maybe he was afraid of the opposite. Maybe finding out he was stuck here would be a relief. Maybe what he was really dreading was the feeling of obligation to set things right, to go back to the monsters and to avoiding Percy. He could start over here. He could have friends.

"If that's the case, maybe my Nico isn't where you came from. Maybe he's already someplace worse."

Nico's stomach twisted uneasily. That was a logical possibility that he hadn't really landed on. He immediately felt guilty for stalling. Jason looked grim.

"Hopefully not," said Nico. "And it could possibly be someplace better, too."

"What do you think happened?" asked Jason. He didn't seem particularly reassured by the suggestion that other Nico might be in an improved universe.

"I was shadow traveling when I ended up here," Nico explained. "There’s...this camp where I come from, where most of the demigods stay because it’s safer, and they train there and stuff. I don’t actually go there anymore, but I stop by the perimeter every so often just to check up on things—make sure everyone’s all right. I was just passing by on a routine stop but when I came out of the shadows the entire camp was gone and I found myself here. So...I suspect something got screwed up in my shadow traveling. I overstepped or something, I guess. I’m just not sure if it’s something I can replicate. And if I can replicate it, I’m not sure if I’d manage to go back the right way. As I said, I’m afraid of going forward instead of back—this is out of my depth of experience. And if I was where I belonged I’d be able to ask one of the gods for advice or something, but here there isn’t anyone else that knows about this stuff—at least as far as I can tell so far. I don’t know where to start trying to figure out what to do."

“So you could try to go back at any time,” Jason asked. “But instead of getting my Nico back there’s a chance you’d both simply disappear forever.”

“Yeah, that’s one possibility,” said Nico. “Or maybe it simply wouldn’t work at all. You might just be stuck with me no matter what I do.”

Jason frowned.

Of course he’d be disappointed by that, thought Nico. Who’d want to be burdened by me when they could have a version that actually knows how to have fun?

“Or maybe it’s just a matter of back-tracking and I’m wasting time by being overly cautious.” Nico sighed. “I wish I knew more about this sort of thing.”

“What exactly do you mean by ‘shadow traveling,’ anyway?” Jason asked.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” said Nico. “I can travel anywhere by using shadows. I step into one and come out through another. They’re connected by the nether. It’s sort of a shortcut through space.
Only I think maybe there’s more dimensions to that space than I assumed. I took a different short-cut than I expected.”

“Like a wormhole?” Jason asked.


“That’s really cool,” said Jason. He was still frowning.

“Look, I was planning on trying to go back in a day or two,” said Nico defensively. “I just needed some time to get my bearings first. For one it takes a lot of energy to make a long jump like that. It wasn’t even an option to just try immediately after it happened, I wouldn’t have been able to do it. And secondly I was really hoping I could get some more insight into what happened before I tried. I don’t especially want to accidently throw myself into some dimension where the air is made out of poisonous gas instead of oxygen or something.”

Jason nodded. “I wouldn’t want you to do that either.”

“I can feel you judging me for not trying yet.”

“I’m not,” said Jason seriously. “I’m just worried about my Nico. But I’m not especially keen on the idea of losing both versions of you either. I’m not sure what you should do.”

Nico stared down at his knees. “You don’t have to pretend to be my friend just because you’re friends with the other version,” he mumbled. “I get it that you want the other one back. I’ll get out of your way soon.”

“I’m not pretending,” said Jason. “I am your friend.”

Nico didn’t have anything to say to that. It was a predictable Jason-ish sort of answer. He didn’t really believe it.

“…I just miss him,” Jason continued. “We were pretty close. And he was comfortable around me. I’m getting the impression you don’t especially like me.”

“That’s not true.”

“You don’t seem like you want to be my friend,” said Jason.

Nico took a long time to answer. “I don’t know how to have friends.”

"That's sad," said Jason simply.

Nico could feel Jason's eyes burning into him, his gaze simultaneously sympathetic and disapproving. He hated the feeling it gave him.

He wasn't as good as the other Nico. The other Nico was missed. Someone cared if he was around or not. Did anyone care if he was gone? No one had bothered about him leaving camp after the war. They probably wouldn't even notice the difference that he'd been switched. Since when had the other demigods found him worth keeping around? He was just a third wheel they'd probably been glad to be rid of. He had nothing to look forward to if he managed to go back where he came from. But he wasn't welcome to stay here either. He didn't belong anywhere, not even in a different universe.

"Hey hey hey," Jason's distressed voice cut through Nico's internal depression spiral. He must not have been doing a very good job of keeping his emotions to himself. Or maybe this Jason just knew
him that well that he could read his face so effortlessly. "Snap out of it." Jason got up off the floor and bridged the short distance to Nico. "You've already got a friend whether you want one or not, you got that? I'm not giving you a say in the matter. You're stuck with me, not the other way round. Got it?"

"Just...don't," sighed Nico, not meeting Jason's eyes. "You don't have to bother. Stop forcing it. I'm fine. I'll get your proper Nico back."

"The only thing that needs to be forced is the truth through your thick skull." Jason knocked on the top of Nico's head. "The other you is stubborn too, but you're worse."

"Yes, it's already been established that I'm a downgrade," Nico snapped.

"That's not what I meant," retorted Jason.

Nico just snorted and went back to glaring at the floor.

"I don't want you to try switching back if you don't know how to do it properly yet," Jason cautiously continued. "I'm not willing to lose both of you."

Don't listen, Nico told himself. Block it out. Saying things like that comes easy to someone like him. It doesn't mean anything. Believing him will just make it hurt more. I'm leaving anyway. What's the point of making friends when it's not going to last?

“I don’t think there is a way to know how to do it properly. I’ve just been stalling because I’m scared,” Nico admitted truthfully. He ignored the other part of what Jason said.

“But there might be. Have you tried doing any research yet?”

“No. I highly doubt I can just waltz into the library and ask for a guidebook on multidimensional displacement and get handed step-by-step instructions.”

“Maybe not at the library, but have you tried the Internet?”

Nico considered that for a moment. The idea hadn’t even crossed his mind. Anything that had to do with demigod powers just seemed so starkly incompatible with electronic devices that it hadn’t even occurred to him that a tool like that might be relevant in a situation like this.

Now he felt like an idiot. He slowly shook his head. “…No.”

“Well what are we waiting for?” said Jason. He walked back to the bed and sat down, plopping his laptop onto his lap. “We’ll rain check the marathon.”

For the next twenty minutes Nico simply sat there and awkwardly stared at Jason as he went back and forth between furiously typing and squinting at the computer screen.

“Having any luck?” Nico finally asked.

Jason sighed. “I…don’t know. I don’t think I’m smart enough to help you with this. I can’t even tell if I’ve found anything useful. This is all quantum mechanics and talk about string theory and bubble universes and I’m pretty freaking lost right now.”

“Unless it involves massive knowledge on the Greek pantheon, I doubt I’ll be able to make heads or tails of it either,” admitted Nico. He finally conceded to joining Jason on the bed, so that he could see the computer screen. Some insipid TV program might not have been enough to persuade him to let
his personal space be invaded, but this was more pressing.

“You can close that tab on astral projection,” Nico said immediately. “I kind of need to take my body with me when I go home.”

“See you are smarter at this,” said Jason.

Nico shrugged. There were plenty of things about Jason he admired (not that he would ever admit that out loud) but he wasn’t exactly the first person Nico would have gone to over academic matters. Jason was more of an I-want-you-to-cover-my-back-while-we-fight-off-this-horde-of-rampaging-monsters type of friend than a hey-could-you-help-me-with-my-homework-or-possibly-explain-black-hole-cosmology-to-me type of friend.

All theoretically speaking of course, assuming Jason was his friend. Which Nico was still convinced he was not.

Jason scooted closer to him and slid the laptop half onto Nico’s lap.

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” said Nico, looking at the keyboard distrustfully.

“That makes two of us,” said Jason. “But I think you have a better chance of figuring it out.”

“And you have a better chance of not frying the laptop,” said Nico. “I don’t have the best track record with electronics.”

“Well then,” said Jason. “Tell me what to look up.”

Nico stared at the search engine page Jason already had open and tentatively pointed at one of the listings. Jason obediently clicked it and they both read for a while, Nico occasionally pointing to links within the article and Jason clicking through.

They hardly noticed as the clock crept up from 11 PM to 3 AM. Nico barely noticed as the gap between them shrank and Jason’s arm kept bumping into him as he typed in a way that may-or-may not have been accidental. And he definitely failed to notice the point where his eyes got too heavy for him to actually manage to keep them open, let alone get home on his own. What they were doing was way too important and interesting for trivial things to register like that.

Nico nearly missed his first class on Wednesday.

He awoke, totally disorientated, to the hideous screeching of Jason’s alarm clock. He was assaulted with a moment of panic, not knowing where he was, which quickly morphed into paralyzing mortification as he realized exactly where he was: on Jason’s bed, five inches away from Jason.

At least they were still on top of the covers and in all their clothes.

Not that that was a huge comfort.

He nearly kicked Jason’s laptop off the bed in his frantic attempt to scramble away.

Jason—damn him—was utterly unperturbed. He hit the snooze button and dropped right back onto the mattress. He apparently couldn’t care less if he had company on the bed so long as he wasn’t forced to actually wake up.

That actually threw Nico enough to pause him mid panic and cause him to stare. He expected someone like Jason to practically spring out of bed, perfectly disciplined and alert and ready to do a
million practical, responsible things. The Jason he was used to probably would have been up at the crack of dawn (never mind that they were barely falling asleep at the actual crack of dawn) and doing calisthenics before cooking a full breakfast and leaving for school with probably an hour to spare. That would have been Roman-bred Jason. This Jason though, was Jason with all the Roman-ness and military training stripped away.

This was *casual* Jason. This Jason was...well. More like *Percy*.

Nico squashed down that thought as quickly as it had entered his mind and spun around, so that he couldn't see Jason. Because looking at Jason all sleepy sprawled out like that was definitely screwing with his mind and causing him to think weird and wholly unacceptable thoughts.

Thoughts like *I never really paid much attention to how attractive Jason is, and I wonder if he really didn’t mind me being there or if he was just too tired to notice.*

Utterly unacceptable. He gritted his teeth and deliberately strode out the door, repressing the obnoxiously strong urge to glance back one last time and resume staring at his sleeping friend.

*Not-friend*, Nico mentally corrected himself. *Just a person I know.*

It didn't help his luck that Jason's apartment was significantly farther away from campus than his own. It took him an hour to get downtown by the subway. He wasn't used to having to factor travel time into his schedules; he got everywhere nearly instantly by shadow travel. He wasn't willing to risk the consequences of an accidental inter-dimensional jump though, so Nico took the slow way to school, running between subway stops.

Walking into class ten minutes late earned him a reproachful glare from the teacher, but apparently this wasn't regular behavior for him so a big deal wasn't made of it. He slouched into an empty seat at the back of the room and proceeded with his struggle to keep his eyes open for the next fifty minutes. He failed.

Nico jumped awake to find Percy Jackson grinning down at him.

"You might want to leave before the next class gets started," he said, voice amused. "Just a tip."

Nico looked around, surprised to find himself alone in the room with Percy. The last he'd noticed it was only halfway through the lecture.

"Oh. Yeah. Um. Thanks for waking me up." Nico was utterly flustered.

"No problem," said Percy. "Late night breaking and entering?"

It took a moment for Nico to understand what he was referring to. He shook his head. "No," he said quickly. "I found my key. No more breaking windows. I was just up too late."

"You were asleep for most of the class," Percy commented. "Need help making up notes?"

Now that offer caught Nico off-guard. Percy had been sitting several seats in front of him, as Nico had sat in the back row. No one should have noticed he wasn't paying attention except for maybe the teacher. Had Percy been deliberately watching him?

"Oh," said Nico. His flustered problem was not going away. "Oh, um, yeah actually. That would be really nice of you. Um, yeah. Definitely."
Percy smiled at him. It wasn't a cautious or guilty smile like Nico was used to getting from him. It was one of Percy's regular smiles; the warm radiant type that he usually directed at Annabeth or Piper or Leo or Jason or pretty much anyone but him.

"Cool," said Percy. He wasn't acting like this was even remotely awkward. "Should we meet at the library? Or I could just stop by your place again. Do you like pizza? Homework is always better with pizza. I'll bring one."

Nico nodded. "I...love pizza. Um. Yes. You can stop by. And we can...um pizza. Yeah."

"Sweet." Percy smiled again as if Nico had just granted him a favor by allowing his notes to be copied and pizza procured. Surely any minute now someone was going to dump cold water on his head and he'd wake up to find he'd only dreamed being woken up by Percy. "What time are you free?"

Nico had to dig in his backpack and find his schedule to answer that question. He hadn't memorized it yet.

"Um...5:00?" Nico really wished he could manage to say even one thing to Percy that didn't come out sounding like a question or the mumblings of someone half brain-dead.

"Cool. Send me a text to let me know what to order. I'm good with pretty much anything. Just no anchovies. I don't eat fish."

*I know*, thought Nico. He dumbly nodded.

"You still have my number, right?" Percy asked. Was Nico imagining things or did he actually have a twinge of nervousness in his voice? Probably a figment of Nico's imagination.

Nico nodded again. "Yeah."

"Cool cool. Well then, gotta get to my next class. Catch ya later this evening." Percy waved and strode confidently out the door.

Nico just sat there watching and tried not to gape.

If I had any doubts about being in a completely different universe, that just proved it, Nico thought. *I can't believe a universe even exists where Percy wants to hang out with me.*

The rest of the day felt like it took years. He had no more success paying attention to his other classes than he had in his first. He actually managed to stay more or less awake for the others, but the ratio of skull doodles in his notebooks to actual coherent notes was not something Nico would be proud of. (Flipping back through other-Nico's notebook though showed that this was hardly a unique occurrence.)

Around lunchtime his phone buzzed. Nico looked at it expecting it to be from Percy (momentarily forgetting that he hadn't actually given Percy his number.) The text message was from Jason.

**Jason: Yo. Don't forget you owe me a rain check. There's still 50 episodes of inaccurate dragon battling for you to get through, when we're not nerding it up over multiverse theories. Pick back up where we left off tonight? [12:05 PM]**

Nico stared at the dim glow of his screen in astonishment. Jason already wanted to hang out again? He'd rather assumed Jason would be getting pretty sick of him pretty fast. He certainly hadn't expected him to want to see him again for at least a couple of days after an unplanned all-nighter of a
sleepover like that. He was sure he'd overstayed his welcome and Jason would be ready for him to get the hell out of Dodge, even if it did come with the risk of the other Nico not coming back.

Suddenly he had more than one person vying for his time. Is this what being popular felt like? How bizarre.

He frowned at the phone before responding, feeling mildly guilty for having to turn Jason down.

Nico: Sorry I can't tonight. I already made plans. Tomorrow? [12:07 PM]

Jason: ORLY. [12:07 PM]

Nico: Excuse me? [12:08 PM]

Jason: Oh. Sorry. Forgot. That means 'Oh Really?' I'm intrigued. [12:09 PM]

Nico: Oh. Yes, I do. [12:09 PM]

Jason: Hot date? ;-) [12:10 PM]

Nico was glad that Jason couldn't actually see him, because he was probably blushing.

Nico: No. Catching up on school stuff. [12:12 PM]

Jason: Catching up on school stuff with someone cute? ;-) [12:12 PM]

Nico scowled and glared at the screen. That question was a trap. Answering truthfully was definitely out of the question. Unfortunately, Nico wasn’t a big fan of lying either. That left him only one option: he turned off the phone and aggressively shoved it into his backpack.

Had Jason already forgotten that he wasn’t talking to the same guy he was used to being friends with? (As if he could forget after all those hours of awkwardness the night before.) Was that other Nico actually okay with that sort of teasing? Was Jason expecting him to just joke back?

Nico found it pretty impossible to imagine any version of himself being comfortable with that. Jason probably knew he was making him uncomfortable.

Which brought him to the next question…how much did Jason know?

Did he know that to Nico, ‘someone cute’ wouldn’t include anyone female? Did he, like Nico's original Jason, know specifically about Nico’s crush on Percy? Did that other Nico even have a crush on Percy? They didn’t seem to know each other very well here. Maybe other-Nico was as oblivious to other-Percy as other-Percy had been to him. In that case who did other-Nico like instead?

Nico really wanted to know which of these things Jason had insight to, but there was no way to find out without asking. And if Jason didn’t already know these things, then asking him would plant ideas in his head that Nico didn’t especially want to allow to grow unchecked. Not an option.

Unfortunately he had no choice but to eventually turn his phone back on if he actually wanted to follow through on his plans with Percy. He’d agreed to send him a text. He waited three hours to make sure he didn’t seem too eager in responding. Powering on his phone revealed a backlog of unread messages from Jason.

Jason: Nico? [12:16 PM]
Jason: *Dude, chill. I was just joking.* [12:20 PM]

Jason: *I'm sorry, ok?* [1:00 PM]

Jason: *Nico?* [1:15 PM]

Jason: *I swear, if you shadow traveled into a planet full of toxic volcanoes just because I made a bad joke I'm going to change my major to science and become an expert on quantum mechanics just so I can figure out how to follow you there and drag you back.* [1:35 PM]

Jason: *(That's your cue to call my bluff. I suck at science.)* [1:39 PM]

Jason: *You have to talk to me eventually; you left your jacket in my room this morning.* [2:15 PM]

Jason: *If you don't come claim it soon I'm going to let my roommate borrow it.* [2:25 PM]

Jason: *I'm not sure when was the last time he showered.* [2:28 PM]

Jason: *(Hint: It wasn’t this week.)* [2:28 PM]

Jason: *Don’t try to pretend you don’t care. You’re practically married to that jacket.* [2:30 PM]

Jason: *I’m kind of shocked you left it here actually. What’s up with that?* [2:31 PM]

Jason: *Ok, so I'm just gonna assume we're on for tomorrow.* [2:36 PM]

Jason: *Your place?* [2:36 PM]

Jason: *I have to work tomorrow. I'll just show up at your place after work.* [2:38 PM]

Jason: *If you don't write back I'm bringing 'A Nymphoid Barbarian in Dinosaur Hell' and you're not allowed to talk about inter-dimensional theories until the end credits.* [2:40 PM]

Jason: *You've been warned.* [2:43 PM]

Jason: *Have fun on your homework date ;-p* [2:45 PM]

Nico's scowl grew more and more pronounced as he scrolled through the messages. Especially as he reached the word 'date' at the end of the last one. It was as if Jason knew.

It was as if he somehow magically knew exactly who Nico’s plans were with. Not just ‘someone cute’ but THE ‘someone.’ The someone who Nico wanted to have a date with.

Except his plans weren’t an actual date. He really was just copying Percy’s notes. That’s probably why he felt so touchy about Jason’s teasing. What he’d said was fairly minor, but it was rubbing salt in one of Nico’s biggest wounds.

He tried to think of a biting reply to respond with but couldn’t come up with anything. He decided instead to continue giving Jason the silent treatment. Maybe he wouldn’t even be home tomorrow night when Jason showed up. That would show him.

Why did Jason care so much if Nico answered, anyway? The Jason he’d left behind had plenty of other friends. Nico was sure that he had plenty of other friends here too. He didn’t need to be paying so much attention to Nico.
He was shaken out of his silent stewing by the phone buzzing again. He almost turned it off again instead of checking the message.

The new message was not from Jason.

**Hazel:** Hey, is everything ok? You haven’t called in a while. [2:48 PM]

A crippling wave of guilt crashed over Nico. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t talked to Hazel yet—he’d procrastinated out of fear. He was afraid he wouldn’t be able to pass as the brother she expected. He was afraid that if she figured out the truth she’d be disappointed by the replacement. He was used to not meeting people’s expectations, but he couldn’t handle Hazel being disappointed in him. She was the one person who made his life bearable.

Or at least had. Before he’d run away from everyone, including her.

That was the other reason he hadn’t called her yet. He didn’t feel like he deserved to talk to her. He’d abandoned his Hazel. He’d forfeited his right to look to her for comfort or stability. Never mind that this version of Hazel had no idea about any of that. He still didn’t deserve her.

Swallowing back a lump of nerves he clicked on her message and hit ‘call.’

“Nico?”

It was as if there hadn’t been months (years? He’d lost track of how long it had been since he ran away) and universes between now and the last time he’d heard her voice. Hazel hadn’t changed. He hadn’t even realized how much he was afraid she might have until he felt the knot of dread uncoiling in his stomach at the soothing tone of her voice. Gods he’d missed her. He hadn’t even realized how much. Hazel was one of those things that he forced himself not to think about, because doing so was painful and made him second-guess his life choices.

“H-hey,” he said.

“Everything okay?” Her voice was uncertain.

“Yeah. Everything’s cool. I’ve just been busy with school.” Nico hoped that was the sort of thing the other him would have said.

"Don't overdo it," she chided him, the worried tone in her voice relaxing slightly but not fully going away. "You sound tired. I don't want you to burn yourself out."

"I won't," he assured her, feeling guilty as he said it. It wasn't a promise he expected to be able to keep. He didn't have a very good track record when it came to self-care.

"I can't have you overworking yourself so bad that you're too tired to come visit," Hazel continued. "Because you owe me one of those. When's your next break from school?"

"Um." Nico had no idea. "I'm not sure?"

"Really?" she asked. "Usually you're ready to give me a minute-by-minute countdown."

"Um," he continued to flounder. "My classes are really interesting this time, so, um. I forgot to check."

"Well that's good," said Hazel cheerfully. "You had me a bit worried at the start of the semester. It sounded like you weren't hitting it off with all of your teachers. I'm glad it's going better."
“Yeah.”

“Are you sure everything’s okay?” Hazel probed. “You’re not very chatty today.”

“I’m just tired,” he said. At least that was the honest truth anyway. “And it’s just really nice to hear your voice. I’d rather listen to you talk.”

Hazel was silent for a long stretch. “Aw, Nico,” she finally said. “That’s very sweet of you. And here I was thinking you were mad at me since you hadn’t called.”

“I could never be mad at you,” he said automatically. He meant it too. It was easier for Nico to imagine being mad at a basket of kittens or a day with nice weather than Hazel. Hazel was pretty much goodness personified as far as he was concerned.

*Unlike you,* his mind unhelpfully interjected.

“I’m going to remember you said that and remind you the next time you fall off one of my horses,” she said with a laugh.

Him? Riding Hazel’s horses? That was a hard scene for Nico to picture. He’d never met a horse that liked him, and he wasn’t exactly the biggest fan of horses back. He was not likely to volunteer for recreational horseback riding, although if anyone could talk him into such a thing it probably would be Hazel. Did his other self get along with animals? No essence of death clung to the Nico that belonged here. What a strange thing to imagine.

And here Hazel was free to fully concentrate on her horses. No monsters getting in the way. No one trying to kill her. He wanted to see that. At the same time, his heart ached for the Hazel he’d left behind. *She* deserved to be able to live like that too.

Hazel went on to talk about how her horses were doing which led into the ranch in general which inevitably led to talking about *Frank.* And that was kind of weird since Nico suspected he knew Frank better than the Nico that belonged here must. He had to pretend that everything she was telling him was news (although some of it was, as this Frank had some inconsistencies with the one he’d known.) He promised that he would visit very soon (mentally torn between hoping it would actually happen—he was curious to get to see Hazel being so utterly happy—and hoping he’d set this right before it came to pass so that Hazel would never know how close she’d come to losing her proper brother.)

By the time their conversation ended Nico had almost forgotten why he’d pulled out his phone. He hastily sent Percy a text telling him to get a cheese pizza. He was in the process of putting the phone away when it already buzzed.

*Percy:* *Sounds good. See you soon!* [3:21 PM]

“Wow, that was fast,” Nico mumbled. It was as if Percy had had his phone out and was just waiting to hear from him.

Had to be a coincidence. People who didn’t have monster attraction problems seemed to be pretty glued to their phones. He probably just had it out already anyway.

Yeah, that had to be it.

"Wow, you took a lot of notes," mumbled Nico as he flipped through Percy's notebook.
"I have to," said Percy with a shrug. "Most of what the teacher says goes straight over my head. Philosophy's not really my thing, right? It makes way less sense than mythology. So I just write down as much as I possibly can so I can puzzle over it later at a slower pace."

"Mythology definitely makes more sense," agreed Nico seriously. *Because it's actually true*, he added to himself.

"I find it more interesting, at least," Percy agreed. "Except for that Thales dude. I can totally get behind his theories."

Nico searched his memory, trying to recall if he'd ever heard of the guy. He hadn't gotten very far into pursuing philosophy. He'd given it a try a while ago, he'd started reading *Plato's Symposium*, but it had largely just pissed him off so he'd quit, writing all that off as a waste of time.

Percy apparently noticed his confusion. "One of the pre-Socratics?" he prompted. "You know, along with Heraclitus and that gang?"

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but it didn't fall in Nico's realm of expertise.

"Wow, you really haven't been paying attention in class." Percy laughed, although it wasn't an especially mean laugh. "Thales thought that everything in existence was made out of water. That's the main principle we were talking about in class today. I sort of dig that."

*Of course you would*, thought Nico.

"That can't be true," Nico said without thinking. "Your powers would be pretty much infinite if that were the case. You'd practically be a god. We would have noticed."

"What?" Percy was looking at him uncomprehendingly as if he'd just started speaking in Swahili.

"Uh..." Nico froze, horrified that he'd slipped up and forgotten that he wasn't talking to regular Percy. This Percy didn't have powers. How could he be so careless? "Um...I was just..." Nico floundered, trying to think of a way to make what he'd just said make sense. "...I was just thinking about a, um, *story* I was working on. For my, uh, final project. For game design. I'm minoring in game design, did you know?" He nodded his head enthusiastically. "I'm...making a game about people who can uh, control the elements. If everything was made out of water that would make the water controller guy pretty powerful, huh? Sorry, I just got distracted because you were giving me ideas. I think about that class a lot."

Percy's eyes went wide. "That's so cool!"

"Uh, thanks," said Nico awkwardly.

"I want to play it when you're done!" Percy said excitedly. "Can I?"

"I've barely started it," Nico lied. "It probably won't be ready for a long time." *A long time being never.*

Percy looked disappointed. "Oh," he said. "Well it sounds really neat. Whenever you do finish it I'd really like to see. I didn't know you did game design."

Nico shrugged. He gestured vaguely at the room around them. "Yeah," he said, feeling somewhat embarrassed. "If it's not obvious I really like games."

Percy glanced around at their surroundings, even though he'd already pretty thoroughly inspected the
room a few days earlier. “I’ve never played those types,” he said, his eyes running over the Mythomagic figurines. “I’m more of a Smash Brothers kind of guy. You should show me how to play sometime.”

Nico had to make a conscious effort to shut his mouth and stop gaping. Percy wanted him to teach him Mythomagic. It was like a freaking dream come true. Or at least would have been a dream come true for him in the past, before Bianca’s death had tainted his enjoyment of that game. Was this even really happening?

“Oh…sure,” he said. “Yeah, we could play some time.”

Percy beamed, and Nico didn’t know what to make of it so he just sat down and started copying the notes.

It was hard to focus on them though. The room grew uncomfortably quiet while he wrote and Nico felt like he was being watched. He glanced up to find he was being watched.

“I don’t really have anything to do,” said Percy, not seeming particularly embarrassed to have been caught staring.

“You can use my computer,” Nico offered. “Or help yourself to anything on the bookshelf if you’d like something to read.”

“I’m good,” said Percy. He took a bite of pizza and then settled back into watching Nico.

Nico sped up his copying. When he was finished he awkwardly shoved Percy's notebook across the table.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

The objective met, Nico waited for Percy to pack up his backpack and announce he was leaving. He didn't. Percy reached for another piece of pizza and leaned back in his chair.

"So how long have you been into fencing?" he asked.

Nico opened his mouth, about to automatically say 'it's not fencing' only to stop himself with the realization that he didn't even know what to call exactly what he did with his sword. He hadn't been at Camp Half-Blood for very long stretches at a time and hadn't had the same sort of organized training from specialists like Chiron that the other demigods did. He'd picked up his skills in a hodgepodge of brief encounters with the skeletons and ghosts of various dead soldiers he'd met in the Underworld. His mentors had been from a myriad of different cultural backgrounds and time periods. What's more, he rarely used his sword in the traditional slashing and stabbing and parrying sort of way. His sword was far more useful to him as a conductor for his Underworld powers. If he were pressed to put a name to his fighting style he probably would have just said 'staying alive while killing monsters.'

"Since I was about ten or eleven," he said.

"Wow, your parents let you use swords at that age?"

Nico flinched. His discomfort at the question was not lost on Percy.

"Oh, sorry man. Didn't mean to ask something touchy." Percy put his hands up apologetically.
"It's...okay." Nico sighed. The other Percy already knew these things about him; there was no reason not to trust this version (not that the other Percy had found out any of those things due to Nico choosing to confide in him.) "My mom died before then," he explained. "And my dad approves of martial training."

“I’m sorry.” Percy’s strikingly green eyes were filled with sympathy. “That’s rough. I know what losing a parent is like.”

Nico just nodded stiffly. The Percy he was used to didn’t know what losing a parent was like. It was hard to imagine him coming anywhere close to understanding Nico’s tumultuous emotions about family and loss.

“My dad was lost at sea,” Percy continued. “That’s why I started taking sailing lessons. My mom didn’t want to let me at first, but she eventually gave in. It’s weird, you’d think I’d hate the sea but I feel better when I’m out there.”

Nico nodded again, still not sure what to say.

“Do you ever go sailing?” Percy asked.

Nico shook his head.

“You should come with me some time!” said Percy. “I like to go up to Long Island Sound. It’s beautiful up there. And there are some really cool islands on the Connecticut side. I think you’d like it!”

Nico very nearly let his mouth drop open. Did Percy seriously just invite to take him sailing? That sounded…that sound like an extremely date-ish sort of activity. He cautiously scanned Percy’s face. Percy’s mouth was stretched wide in a grin that was friendly and open. If he had intentions beyond friendship Nico couldn’t read it.

There was probably nothing there to read though. He was probably letting his own wishful thinking influence his assumptions. Surely going out sailing was a totally normal thing for friends to do together. He was sure lots of bros with no romantic inclinations whatsoever went out sailing all the time. It was definitely not just a date sort of thing. In fact it was probably usually not a date sort of thing. What was wrong with him that his mind always strayed right into that territory?

*Hopeless crush is what was wrong with him.*

He shouldn’t even let his mind go there for a second. Not just because he probably wouldn’t stand a chance with Percy, but also because he couldn’t afford to stand a chance.

Dating Percy was not an option.

No exceptions.

He was going to *leave.*

He should have left already. Really, the clock had been ticking down to him disappearing from the second he’d stepped into this place.

That this seemed like a universe where Nico might actually hold a glimmer of hope that he might be able to date Percy was just plain cruel. Letting himself get romantically involved with anyone here was a guarantee for broken hearts all around.
Nico wasn’t willing to let that happen to him and he wasn’t willing to let that happen to Percy either. He needed to distance himself. Starting immediately. It would be damage control to protect everyone’s best interests.

“I’d love to go sailing with you.”

Okay, so apparently Nico’s brain and Nico’s mouth weren’t on the same page yet. He mentally smacked himself.

He almost rescinded the statement, but couldn’t quite bring himself to do it. Percy looked so excited at the agreement. How was it possible that he could be so exuberant over Nico? Saying no now would feel like he was crushing something precious and beautiful. Nico couldn’t do it.

Oh well, it’s not like it was actually offered as a date anyway, Nico thought to make himself feel better. I’ll just have to make sure to keep things appropriately professional. I can do that. No problem.

“Great!” Percy exclaimed in genuine happiness. “Are you free next weekend? We should go soon before the weather gets too cold. It can get pretty brisk out on the water, especially with the wind.”

We should go soon before Nico takes the Shadow Express back to Demigod Central, you mean, Nico mentally corrected.

“What kind of food do you like?” Percy asked. “We’ll be out all day, it’s better to not stop until night, otherwise we won’t really get very far. It’s better to have a couple of days than just a weekend. If we had more time we could sail all the way to Montauk. Have you ever been there? I love Montauk. Maybe we should wait until fall break. It will be colder but we’d have several days.”

“Uh…” Percy had rendered Nico completely speechless. Several days? Percy didn’t just want to take him sailing—an already suspiciously date-like activity—but he wanted to take him sailing for an entire school break? Alone? Not just alone, but out on the water, where they’d be completely and utterly isolated, in a small confined space where there’d be no choice but to constantly interact one-on-one. Was this normal? Did Percy suggest outings like that to all of his friends? Ye gods, this version of Percy barely knew him at all. It would have been a surprising proposition from the other Percy—the one that actually had years of friendship between them. This was just weird.

“Um…” Nico stuttered.

Yes! Screamed his heart. Yes, yes, yes. This is everything you ever wanted. What’s taking you so long to answer?

“Um…” He locked eyes on Percy’s happily expectant expression. Percy was always attractive, but he looked even better when he was excited like this. His teal-green eyes shone luminously, alight with that energetic spark that Nico had never really seen in anyone else. And he was excited like that because of him. He was all lit up at the prospect of taking a trip alone with Nico. Mind-boggling, is what it was. How much more excited would he look if Nico said yes? Was he excited about the sailing or excited at the idea of being with Nico? Where did his general enthusiasm end and an interest in Nico begin? It was impossible for Nico to tell.

Bad idea!! Bad, bad idea, chanted Nico’s brain. Don’t make this harder than it is already. You’ll both regret it. It’s too messy.

No! Insisted his contradictory heart. What you’ll really regret are lost opportunities. You’ll spend the rest of your life wondering what you’d missed out on. This is probably your only chance to be with
Percy.

I’m not supposed to be with Percy, Nico reminded himself. I’m not supposed to be with anyone.

I don’t belong here.

“Well?” Percy’s grin wavered as he waited for a reply too long coming.

“Um…well…I think I’m probably spending fall break with my dad and my sister,” he improvised. It was probably true, anyway. “They don’t live in New York so I don’t see them all that often.”

“Oh, right. Right, of course.” Percy smiled awkwardly and scratched the back of his head. “I never think of things like that. I still live with my mom, you know. And I don’t have any other relatives. Aside from my step-dad I mean, but he lives with us too. Obviously. I never have anyone to visit.”

“I’m sorry,” Nico said. He hadn’t known anything about Percy’s extended family (or in this case the lack of one.) It seemed very unfortunate that that was the case. Percy was so loyal and social. He seemed like someone who would have thrived in a large family.

Percy shrugged. “They all died before I was born,” he supplied. “I never met my grandparents or my great uncle, so I can’t really miss them, I guess. I just wish for my mom’s sake they hadn’t died.”

Nico nodded. “Your mom is really great though. I bet she makes up for not having other relatives.”

Percy began to nod in agreement but then he froze, his brow furrowing in confusion. “You know my mom?”

Styx! He’d screwed up again! Why couldn’t he go five minutes without accidentally saying things that give him away!

“Uh…” he fumbled. “I mean, I think I do? She uh…works at that candy store at the train station, right? I go there sometimes. She’s really nice to me.”

“Oh.” Percy seemed to accept that explanation easily enough. He smiled. “Yeah she is really great. I’m a lucky guy.”

“Yeah,” said Nico sincerely. “You are.”


Nico gulped. He might have managed to scrounge up the willpower to turn down a nautical vacation with Percy, but he didn’t think he had it in him to shoot down repeated invitations. Just going for a weekend was probably okay though, right? That was an acceptable compromise compared to an entire week of sailing.

“I’m not sure about this weekend,” he stalled. “I might have plans already? Maybe next weekend?”

If all went well, Nico wouldn’t still be here next weekend. He’d be back in his proper universe [alone,] and the Nico that belonged here could go sailing with Percy instead. And if Percy were intending the outing to turn into a date, well, the other Nico would have no reason to hold back. Everyone could be happy if he just set things right first.

Everyone but himself, it seemed.

“Yeah, next weekend would work!” Percy said enthusiastically. “That’ll be great. I know you’ll love sailing!”
“Maybe,” said Nico vaguely.

“No, I know you will!” insisted Percy. “The shoreline is so beautiful! And some of the inlets are really peaceful. And when you get out on the Atlantic side the water just goes on forever and ever and there’s so much blue. It’s just really amazing. And I can go pretty fast in good weather, it’s really fun. You’ll love it.”

“Sounds great.” And it did sound great. Nico was already regretting that he’d postponed it so that he probably wouldn’t be going. He really, really wanted to go.

“Make sure to pack warm clothes,” said Percy. “And let me know what sort of food to bring. It’ll be great.”

“Okay,” said Nico. “Yeah. I’ll think about that and let you know.”

“Awesome,” said Percy happily.

There was a stretch of silence for a few minutes.

“Well…I’m done with your notes.” Nico stated the obvious.

“So you are.”

It had been the perfect opening for Percy to excuse himself if he were ready to leave. He didn’t. Percy stretched and eyed the pizza box.

“Wanna watch a movie?” He asked.

Nico glanced at the clock in surprise. Percy had already been over for an entire hour and a half. If they started a movie he’d be camping out at least another two hours. Did Percy really want to spend that much time with him?

“Sure…if you want.”

“Sweet!” Percy sprang up and snatched a DVD box off of Nico’s bookshelf. He tossed Clash of the Titans into Nico’s hands.

Nico looked down at the lightweight plastic box now clasped in his fingers. Then up at Percy’s contented grin.

Okay. Apparently Percy did.
Okay, so wow guys, thanks so much for all the fantastic comments! I've really never gotten such detailed and thoughtful feedback in such a large quantity on any other fic before. I've been totally floored, you're all amazing. <3

I'd also like to thank my awesome awesome beta, genuinelies. Without her insightful feedback this story (and all my others too) would have been a lot different and not as good. <3 <3

Jason couldn’t help himself from going to check on Nico first thing in the morning. He was worried about the guy. Getting yanked out of everything familiar in your world and finding yourself tangled up with demigods and monsters had to be pretty overwhelming. Sure, Jason was probably the last person at camp to be able to understand what it felt like to go from “normal” mortal life into the world of demigods, but he had experienced being uprooted from Camp Jupiter and feeling like everything you knew had been turned upside down. It was scary. And Cabin 13 was a pretty dreary place to spend the night all alone. Nico must be feeling very overwhelmed.

“Morning!” he announced cheerfully, only knocking on the door briefly before letting himself in.

It’s not like he’d actually expected an equally cheerful reply back, but he had anticipated some sort of answer.

The room was as empty as it was silent. Jason scanned the expanse of deserted beds, each one neatly made and lacking any trace of an occupant. He couldn’t even tell which one Nico had slept in.

Assuming he’d slept in one at all.

A cold anxious tightness settled in Jason’s stomach.

Nico had run away.

Why was he even surprised? He should have expected this. Jason cursed himself for not anticipating such a turn of events. The original Nico had run away more times than he could even count. Of course this Nico would run away too. He was such an idiot for not expecting that!

He’d thought this Nico needed them. He was in the wrong plane of existence. If anyone had a chance at helping him set things right, it would be someone at Camp Half-Blood….right? Why would Nico run away when his best chance for help was right here?

Except that Nico wasn’t really a “getting help” kind of guy. Not under good circumstances. He was a chronic loner. And the current circumstances happened to include Clarisse flat out rubbing in his face that he was an outcast. Why on earth would he stay after that? Of course Nico left.

He was going to flatten Clarisse.

Jason bolted out of the cabin and immediately took to the sky. He didn’t feel overly confident his search was going to yield results though. Nico might have been gone for hours. If he’d fled the
previous night he’d have had way more of a head start than Jason would be likely to catch up to. Nico was an expert at disappearing.

*Why is this even bothering you so much*, he wondered as he scanned the ground for a trace of Nico’s distinctively dark hair. *If he’s gone then nothing much has changed from 24 hours ago. It’s not like you had any idea where he was yesterday morning either. His absence was hardly keeping you awake at night before.*

*Yesterday morning you also had no idea that you were important to Nico. You hadn’t seen that look of betrayal in his eyes. You had no idea how deep it would cut to see him look at you like that.*

More than anything he wanted to fix that. He wanted—needed—to repair the breach of friendship.

Never mind that it was actually an entirely different person that Nico cared about. It wasn’t actually *him* that was Nico’s best friend. It was just some other person with the same name and same face but an entirely different life, and unfathomably different memories.

Memories that probably solidly belonged to him.

He bet that other Jason wasn’t always questioning himself and his decisions and wondering how much of his personality was genuine and how much had simply been molded by Mist and divine meddling.

Sure he had a lot of friends. He even had a best friend. He wasn’t about to take Leo for granted: Leo was awesome. But if he let himself think too hard about it he could never quite feel certain that they would have been such good friends without Juno’s intervention. He couldn’t even remember meeting Leo for real. The start of their friendship had been fake, and then when the deception was discovered they’d already built up enough real memories together that they’d just sort of kept going with it. Yeah, his friendship with Leo was real *now*…but it was also constructed on a forced foundation. And thinking too hard about the technicalities of it made Jason feel uncomfortable. Sort of like what happened when he let himself start analyzing his relationship with Piper. It was very hard to tell where his feelings (which were substantial, don’t get him wrong) ended and other people’s intentions began. He was *pretty* sure he knew how he felt and what he wanted. But not 100% sure. He would never be able to be 100% sure.

He *hated* that he couldn’t be 100% sure.

Jason envied people who could see the details of their own lives in black and white and not a million indistinct layers of grayness. Everything looked so grey toned to Jason that sometimes he felt like the insides of his head were actually filled with mist and fog.

He envied that other Jason.

There had been nothing disputable about the bond between him and Nico. It took a lot of trust to generate the kind of hurt he’d seen in Nico when the trust broke. The friendship between them had been very clearly solid. They were friends in an intense and authentic sort of way that he’d never really experienced himself.

…and at least they were until he’d messed it up.

He *had* to fix it.

He owed it to his other self. He owed it to Nico. Both of them—the one he’d actively hurt through their misunderstanding and the one he’d hurt less directly, in the round-about way of failing to step-up his friendship game in the first place.
He had to find Nico. Not finding him wasn’t an option. He’d already allowed him to disappear once before. He wasn’t going to make that mistake again.

There was no trace of the younger teen near any of the cabins. Jason widened the loops of his airborne circles, slowly expanding out towards the perimeter of camp.

He caught sight of him by the strawberry fields. Nico was running.

Jason sped up, fully expecting that he was about to engage in some sort of high-speed chase. He had the advantage of course, but that didn't mean Nico couldn't give him a run for his money on foot.

As Jason caught up and Nico noticed his pursuer, he slowed down to a jog.

Jason sighed in relief. Nico might still be running but it looked like he was willing to at least hear Jason out. He landed on the ground and took up a light jog next to Nico.

"Don't go," he said immediately.

"What?" Nico was breathing really hard.

"You shouldn't leave," Jason repeated. "I think it would be a mistake."

"Who's leaving?" Nico panted.

"Uh...it looked like you were?" said Jason. "Isn't that why you're way out here running?"

"I'm training," said Nico, picking up his pace again. "Do you know how big these fields are?" he asked between heavy breaths. "Like in perimeter mileage? I've done ten laps."

Jason scanned the expansive planes of red speckled green. The strawberry fields covered a lot of ground. "I have no idea how big they are," he confessed. "But they're pretty big. Wow. That's a lot of running."

Nico nodded but didn't say anything else. He seemed like he was trying to conserve his air.

"So you're not leaving," Jason repeated, just for solid clarification. Nico had already said as much but he wanted it spelled out to ease his nerves. The misconception that Nico was on the run again had shaken him way more than he would have expected.

"No way," said Nico. "I'm training so I can stay."

"You don't have to do that," said Jason. "You shouldn't listen to Clarisse. You can stay no matter what. You don't have to prove anything to anyone."

Nico shook his head. "I don't just want to stay," he said. "I want to be worthy of staying. I want to be like you." He managed to shoot Jason a meaningful look in spite of the fact that his head was jerking erratically from the impact of his feet hitting earth.

Nico's words filled Jason with a weird thick warmth. He smiled goofily.

Nico smiled back. "You’re going to help me train though, right?" he asked, somewhat anxiously. "I can’t teach myself how to use a sword. I’m totally going to need one of those. I mean, considering I don’t have any powers, having a sword will be kind of critical, you know?" The look of anticipation in his eyes gave Jason the impression he was expecting to get refuted, or maybe even laughed at.

“Chiron’s actually who you should go to for that sort of training,” replied Jason. “But, yeah. I can
give you a few pointers.”

“Awesome.” Nico slowed his jog down until he was walking rather than running. “Shoulda timed it,” he muttered to himself. To Jason he said, “Can we start now?”

Jason was about to say, “Sure,” when he noticed that Nico was swaying a little on his feet. On instinct he reached out to steady him, only remembering too late how much Nico hated physical contact. He expected to have his hand swatted away or for Nico to jerk backwards, but to his surprise Nico didn’t react.

*Guess that’s something this Nico doesn’t have in common with the other one,* he mentally observed.

But then he remembered the way Nico had quickly wormed his way out of Percy’s hug the day before. He’d even made a ‘hands off’ sort of comment as he did so. He wasn’t that different from Nico-One in that regard after all.

*Huh.*

That is...*interesting.*

He was so lost in thought over the anomaly of Nico’s behavior that he completely forgot to go through with removing his hand.

“Trying to invent an excuse to get out of teaching a newbie swordplay?” Nico’s voice broke through Jason’s confused thoughts.

He yanked his hand off Nico’s arm with unnecessary force. “No!” he said quickly. “Just…” he was about to say ‘noticing you seem a bit faint’ but then thought that might make Nico feel attacked and defensive. “Just...have you eaten today yet?”

“I had a banana,” said Nico, as if that were actually an acceptable answer.

“That’s it?” asked Jason incredulously. No wonder Nico had looked so unsteady.

“Yeah.”

"Nico, you can't just eat a banana and nothing else and then almost kill yourself exercising."

"You're not supposed to exercise on a full stomach," Nico retorted defensively.

"You're also not supposed to starve yourself," lectured Jason. “We’ll get something to eat. *Then* I’ll show you some swordplay tricks.”

Nico rolled his eyes but then broke back into a smile. "Okay." He nodded.

"So..." Jason waved around at the rows of tables. "Normally you'd have to sit at a table designated by who your godly parent was. But that won't apply to you. So you can sit with me at the Zeus table."

Nico frowned. "I know that I'm not actually a demigod. But since the other me was, shouldn't I sit at the table where he belonged? Where's the Hades table?"

"There is no Hades table."

Nico's frown deepened. "Why not? There's a Hades cabin."
"There wasn't always a Hades cabin," Jason explained. "You were actually the one to take charge of building it. From what I've been told, anyway. I wasn't here at this camp until after that happened. No one expected Hades to have kids until you showed up. And you've never stayed at camp for long enough intervals to really make Hades-designated things terribly necessary. You usually just sit next to Chiron at the head table when you're here. You could sit there instead if you'd rather than sit with me."

"No, I'd rather sit with you," Nico said quickly. "I just don't see why there isn't a Hades table when there are so many others. I thought Hades was important."

"He is important," Jason agreed. "But he's not much of a team player and hasn't been terribly involved in camp affairs. He probably would have gotten a table if you'd stuck around after the cabin was built. But you didn't." Jason shrugged.

Nico didn't say anything to that but his expression was darkly pensive.

"Being the only one sitting at an empty table sucks though," Jason added. "I wouldn't want my own if I wasn't already stuck with one. It's really boring. I wish they'd do away with that particular rule. I'm glad you can sit at mine."

"Yeah, that's a stupid rule," Nico agreed as he sat down.

“So, you can have whatever you want to drink. Just tell the glass what you want and it will fill itself.”

“Really?” Nico inspected the goblet on the table curiously.

“Yeah,” said Jason. “Pretty cool, right?”

Nico looked intensely into the currently empty glass. “Coke,” he announced. His eyes widened as the vessel slowly filled with dark carbonated liquid. He took a tentative sip and then broke into a grin. “That is awesome,” he proclaimed. “Do I get to do the same thing with my food?”

Jason shook his head. “Afraid not. We’re at the mercy of whatever the nymphs feel like serving us. It’s usually good though.”

“Rats,” said Nico. “I totally could have gone for an egg McMuffin.”

“Why am I not surprised.” Jason snorted.

A serving nymph came over and presented them each with a plate of an omelet and toast.

Nico poked at his omelet a bit, pushing a piece of broccoli around on his plate before finally digging in.

“Okay?” asked Jason.

Nico’s face was unimpressed. “Eh, it’s alright,” said Nico. “Though the ratio of vegetables to egg and cheese is obscene. This is supposed to be breakfast.”

“Says the guy who just chugged a glass of coke at eight A.M.”

“You’re supposed to drink caffeine in the mornings. That’s totally normal. No one in their right mind wants to have a virtual salad for breakfast.”

“Sorry,” said Jason, laughing as he helped himself to his own omelet. “They’re really into healthy
food here. You’re going to have to hold out until we leave camp to get your junk food fixes. Although I hear the Stoll brothers have some black market goods to barter with if you get really desperate.”

“Man.” Nico sighed and took another veggie-loaded bite.

They ate in companionable silence for a while. Jason shoved aside about a quarter of his food and after he was done with the rest of it brought the remainder to the brazier and tipped it into the fire.

“What was that about?” asked Nico. “Don’t they have garbage disposals here?”

“That was an offering to my dad,” Jason explained. “It’s customary to burn part of every meal to your godly parent.”

“You should have told me!” Nico exclaimed. “I would have eaten less.” He looked in dismay at his nearly empty plate.

“I don’t think you have to do that,” said Jason. “You’re not a demigod.”

“Yeah, but if the other me was here he’d be expected to do that, right? I don’t want to put him on Hades’ bad side or anything.”

“I don’t really think you need to worry about that….”

“I want to do things as right as possible,” insisted Nico. He jumped up and scraped the end of his breakfast into the fire.

“There. Was that okay?”

Jason nodded.

“Good,” said Nico, taking another swig of his bottomless coke. “I don’t want to go pissing Hades off or anything. I want to meet him. Do you think I can?”

“Uh… I have no idea,” said Jason. “The gods don’t really appear on demand. They usually have their own agenda. And I’m afraid that Hades is one of the more anti-social ones. He tends to stick to his own territory most of the time.”

“I really want to meet him,” Nico repeated. “I feel like it’s important.”

“I guess you could try writing a note and burning it with your next meal?” suggested Jason. “I have no idea if it would get to him that way or not, but it wouldn’t hurt to try.”

“Hey, that’s an idea. I will try that.” Nico nodded and looked marginally more content.

“Don’t take it personally though if you don’t hear from him,” Jason warned. “My dad has never given me the time of day. A lot of the kids here have barely ever been acknowledged by their parents. Its pretty standard for the gods to ignore us.”

“His real son is missing. I’d think he’d want to hear about that at the very least,” Nico rationed.

Jason was about to say ‘Yeah but my dad didn’t give a damn when I went missing,’ but stopped himself. He didn’t really want to turn the entire morning into burdening Nico with his own sob stories. Especially not when he’d seemed in a largely better mood today. It was true too that Hades and Jupiter weren’t exactly alike. Nico had always seemed to have a marginally closer relationship with his dad than most of the other demigods. The thing was though that he wasn’t actually this
Nico’s dad. Jason had no idea how much of a difference that would make to the Lord of the Underworld.

“Well, you can certainly try,” said Jason.

“I’m going to.”

Jason led Nico over to the armory.

“As you can see we have a pretty wide range of weapons available here,” said Jason, gesturing at the rows of swords and spears and daggers and other various ammunitions. “You’re not limited to just a sword if you see something else you think you’d feel more comfortable using.”

Nico barely even bothered to look around. “What did Nico use?” he asked immediately. “I want whatever he had.”

“Oh.” The question caught Jason off-guard. He’d sort of expected Nico to be impressed and interested in looking at all of his options to choose from. He glanced around, not expecting to see anything like the original Nico’s dark iron blade. As expected, there wasn’t a single glimpse of Stygian iron to be found anywhere.

“I’m afraid we don’t have anything like his sword around here,” Jason said apologetically. “Nico’s sword was made in the Underworld. He was the only demigod I ever saw to have a weapon made out of Stygian iron. It’s not easy to come by unless you actually have business in the Underworld. Camp Half-Blood doesn’t really get access to the stuff it was made from.”

“His sword was made out of iron?” asked Nico in disbelief. “That must have weighed a freaking ton.”

Jason blinked and considered that. He’d never really put much thought into the difference in attributes of the various magical metals that were used in the realm of the gods. Nico was right though. Iron was noticeably heavier than gold or bronze. Why had that never occurred to him before? Nico had always made swinging his sword around look effortless. Jason had never really appreciated how strong he must be.

“It probably did,” Jason agreed. “Can’t say I ever actually picked it up though.”

“Can I get one like his if I go to the Underworld?” Nico asked eagerly.

“Woah, slow down there.” Jason put his hands up and waved them in front of Nico’s face. “You are getting way ahead of yourself.”

“But Nico—” Nico began to argue.

“Probably didn’t start out with any sword at all,” Jason interrupted him. “You need to slow down. A lot.”

“But—”

“No buts. You shouldn’t start thinking about stuff like going to the Underworld. That would be a horrible mistake. The only reason that Nico could get away with traveling there is because his dad is Hades. We don’t know yet if Hades is going to acknowledge you or not. Maybe he will. But maybe he’ll just see you as some random mortal. And random mortals who go to the Underworld don’t get to come back. Going down there blindly is suicidal.”
“But—” Nico tried again.

“Furthermore,” Jason cut him off. “If you’re suicidal enough to go down there then it would be
doubly suicidal to go down there untrained. You wouldn’t stand a chance without already having
fighting skills and another weapon. You need to learn how to use a sword, period, before you get
quite that particular about which sword you’re using.”

Nico scowled and let out a long sigh. “Fi—ine,” he acquiesced. “I guess you’re right.” He glanced
around, still looking disappointed. “Can I have one like yours then?”

“Uh…” Jason took a second look around. Nearly everything in sight was made out of Celestial
bronze. Not only was there a distinctive lack of Imperial gold options but the place wasn’t exactly
 teaming with Roman style weaponry either. “My sword came from Juno—that’s the Roman aspect
of Hera,” Jason found himself apologizing again. “I don’t think they have anything like that here.
Camp Half-Blood is very Greek-orientated.”

“I know who Juno is,” Nico muttered. “Just because I’m not a demigod doesn’t mean I don’t know
stuff.”

“I know,” Jason said defensively. “But I’m not going to assume I shouldn’t explain things either.”

Nico wandered down the rows of munitions, observing the available weapons. He carefully picked
up one or two of the swords and tested out their heft and weight. Jason watched as he examined the
elaborately engraved pommels and fancy swirling hilts on some of the more decorative pieces. He
passed all of them over eventually settling on a very plain looking xiphos.

“Nice pick,” said Jason, giving Nico a thumbs up.

Jason could tell Nico was trying to come across as very serious but the corner of his mouth betrayed
the faintest hint of a smile as he stared intensely at the weapon in his hands.

“Ready to spar?” Jason asked, pulling out his gladius.

“Oh heck yeah.” Nico grinned.

They spent the next two hours in the arena, Jason showing Nico the best way to hold his sword and
how to stand and other basic entry level moves. It was extremely strange to see Nico as such a
novice in the realm of defense and battle, but he absorbed every word Jason offered with rapt
attention. It was clear to Jason that he was going to learn fast and had the potential to live up to the
other Nico’s shadow.

In the meantime though, he could totally kick Nico’s ass, and that just felt bizarre.

Nico wasn’t discouraged though, not even after the fortieth or so time Jason had effortlessly blocked
his offensive thrust.

“I almost had it that time,” Nico declared confidently. “Just let me try again.”

“Actually, I think it’s time we took a break,” Jason countered. Nico was definitely pushing himself a
little too hard, too fast. The amount of practice they’d powered through would have been tiring for a
seasoned demigod. He wasn’t sure how Nico was even still standing after that amount of exertion
with no previous background of physical training. He was probably running on pure stubbornness at
this point. They both needed a break, and Nico probably needed some more food and a nap as well.
Nico did look tired, but he was still grinning broadly. “What’s the matter Jayjay?” He taunted. “Did I wear you out? Afraid you’re finally going to lose?”

Jason stopped and let Nico’s words soak into his brain.

“Excuse me?” he asked in disbelief. “Did you just call me Jayjay?” He wasn’t able to stop the twist of distaste pulling up his lip as he stared at Nico in horror.

“Yeah.” Nico bounced lightly in place, shifting his sword back and forth between his hands with far more energy than he ought to have had. “What, does no one call you that here?” he asked innocently.

“No.” Jason hoped his reply was forceful enough to convey to Nico that no one should ever start calling him that here either. Eugh. He suddenly felt very sorry for his other self.

“Really?” Nico continued. “Because where I come from everyone calls you Jayjay.”

“That’s…unfortunate,” said Jason.

“Well it’s not as bad as your other nickname which—” Nico made the mistake of looking up and locking eyes with Jason. There was a moment of silence as the corner of Nico’s mouth twitched. Then Nico broke into a fit of snickers.

“Oh man,” Nico muttered, rubbing his eye. “I can’t keep that up with a straight face. You totally bought it.”

Jason was not amused. “No one calls me Jayjay,” he stated.

“Nah.” Nico was still snickering. “I just made that up like two seconds ago, it seemed like a good taunt. I didn’t expect you to take it so seriously—like dude—you should have seen your face just now. That was hilarious. Maybe I should actually start calling you—”

“No.”

“But—”

Nico’s (most likely obnoxious) retort was cut off by the sound of Piper’s voice. “Hey Sparky!” she called out from across the arena, waving enthusiastically.

“Sparky?” Now it was Nico’s voice laced with disbelief. “Did I seriously just hear her right?” He asked gleefully. “She just called you Sparky. How the hell is Sparky better than—”

Jason slammed his hand over Nico’s mouth before he could utter ‘Jayjay’ within hearing range of Piper. The very last thing he needed was Piper deciding that name was cute and permanently saddling him with it.

He immediately felt Nico go rigid beneath his fingers. He pulled his hand off and looked at his friend worriedly. That had probably been a very big line he’d just accidentally crossed.

Nico didn’t say anything. He was staring at the ground now, breathing a bit heavier than he had a moment before. His cheeks were stained with a noticeable blush.

Jason self-consciously wiped his hand off on his jeans.

“Hey guys,” Piper said cheerfully as she caught up to them. “You two looked like you were having a good time. What’s so funny?”
“Nothing!” Jason said abruptly.

“Yeah, nothing,” Nico echoed, still not looking at Jason.

Piper eyed them suspiciously.

“I was just showing Nico some basic sword moves,” Jason added, hoping to change the subject.

Nico nodded silently.

“That’s cool,” said Piper. She looked at Nico with interest. “This is totally weird, but I guess you don’t know me, huh?” she asked.

Nico shook his head.

“Sorry I didn’t get a chance to say hi at the meeting yesterday.” She stuck out her hand for Nico to shake and he tentatively accepted it. “I’m Piper McLean. Jason’s girlfriend.”

Nico had been vaguely nodding in acknowledgement of her introduction. He froze at the end of her words. His head snapped up, fixing Jason with a wide-eyed surprised stare.

“You…have a girlfriend?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jason confirmed. “Pipes is my girlfriend.”

“Oh.”

An uncomfortable pause stretched out after Nico’s exclamation. He regarded Piper carefully, and then looked off into the distance, his eyes darting nervously as if searching for something else to talk about.

“Well that’s cool,” he finally said to break the awkward silence. “You guys probably have stuff to do then, huh? I’m pretty beat. Was training all morning, you know? Totally exhausted. Think I’ll go crash in my cabin for a while. Er, yeah. Catch ya later.”

“Wait, you don’t have to—”

Nico took off before Jason could finish objecting.

“Well that was weird,” said Jason. He frowned and crossed his arms, watching Nico’s rapidly retreating form disappear into the cabin grounds.

“Hm.” Piper looked thoughtful as she also watched Nico dash off.

“He was being pretty chatty earlier,” Jason explained. “He did a complete one-eighty just now.”

“He likes you,” Piper observed.

“Well, yeah, apparently I’m his best friend or whatever back where he—”

“No,” Piper cut him off. “Not like that. He likes you.”

“W-what?”

Piper shrugged. “It’s pretty obvious. He just ran off because I’m here.”

Jason realized he was gaping and forced himself to shut his mouth. “No way.”
Piper nodded. “Did you see how distressed he got when he heard the word ‘girlfriend’?”

He wanted to scoff and roll his eyes, but he almost immediately realized that Piper was right. The look on Nico’s face just then... it had been eerily similar to the expression the other Nico had worn while watching Percy and Annabeth’s reunion from Tartarus. And the way Nico had seemed so alarmed when he’d thought Jason knew who he had feelings for—of course he’d think Jason knowing would be a bad thing if Jason was the person his feelings were actually for. There had been dozens of small tells since the second Nico had shown up.

“‘Well... dang.’ Jason had no idea what to say to that. He felt very weird at the revelation. He was going to need some time to process it. He was especially going to need some time to process it away from Piper. With her just standing there next to him he felt uncomfortably guilty about the whole thing. Which made no sense at all. He hadn’t done anything to cause Nico’s feelings. This wasn’t his fault whatsoever. There was definitely no reason for Piper to feel bad about it. She was still Jason’s girlfriend and nothing had changed.

Well nothing had changed except that Jason now felt extremely uncomfortable.

...Just like Nico had assumed he would.

Man, he felt like a tool.

He wanted to go after Nico but suspected that would just make everything worse—both with Nico and with Piper.

“‘Well, hm. This...is, uh. Going to be awkward.’

Piper shrugged. “It’ll probably be fine if you don’t make a big deal about it. Just be nice to him and act normal. He probably won’t ever bring it up now that he knows you have a girlfriend.”

Jason frowned. That seemed like decent advice on the surface... but Piper hadn’t witnessed the other Nico’s memories. She had only a superficial idea of how deep his insecurities and hurt ran. She wasn’t tuned in to the emotional damage Nico had nursed while Percy just ‘acted normal’ around him. Simply acting normal around Nico would be fairly insensitive and cruel, now that Jason knew the whole picture. He didn’t want to hurt Nico the way Percy unwittingly had.

But... what else could he do?

It’s not like he could fix things for Nico by giving him what he wanted. There were so many reasons that couldn’t work out.

Most importantly—duh—he was already in a relationship.

Not to mention the fact that he wasn’t even the correct Jason. Nico’s feelings were for the Jason that he’d left behind in whatever strange dimension he’d come from. Nico might have seemed upset at the idea of him having a girlfriend, but it shouldn’t have even mattered because he wasn’t the same person. They barely even knew each other yet. For all he knew within a few days Nico might decide that he’s nothing like the other Jason and the problem of his feelings might simply go away on their own.

For some reason though the idea of Nico deciding that he wasn’t as likeable as the other Jason wasn’t as comforting as it should have been.

He wanted to talk to Nico about it, but knew that wasn’t going to help. What could he even say? ‘I’m sorry you’re into me, but your assumptions are correct: you don’t stand a chance. I’m totally
cool with your unrequited feelings though.’ Yeah, that would be pretty harsh.

This sucked.

“Jason?”

Jason jumped as Piper poked him in the arm. “Yeah?” he asked.

“Did you even hear any of that?” Piper asked. “You just majorly zoned out on me.”

“Uh…” Jason grinned sheepishly. “No. What were you saying?”

“I was saying that it’s about an hour till lunchtime,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I thought it might be nice to go out on the lake for a bit before we eat?”

“Oh…” said Jason, still finding it hard to fully focus on the question. His mind felt completely scattered. “Um…lake? Yeah, sure. The lake is cool. I totally dig the lake. Canoes. Yes. Okay.”

“Well we don’t have to if you don’t want,” Piper amended, picking up on Jason’s weird mood. “It was just an idea.”

“No no, it’s an awesome idea,” Jason said quickly. “I’m totally on board. Ha. On board. Get it? We’re going on a boat. Yeah.”

Now Piper was looking at him funny. “Are you feeling okay?”

Jason gave her a thumbs up. “Yeah, totally super.”

He was sure she could tell he was lying though. Jason definitely didn’t feel super. He felt confused.

Okay, so apparently if you have a lot on your mind, going out into the middle of a lake isn’t the best way to get away from it.

Due to the weather controls placed upon Camp Half-Blood, the water of the lake was always perfectly calm and serene. It was beautiful and peaceful, ridiculously pastoral. And thus offered absolutely no distractions from Jason’s rapidly whirling internal dialogue.

Jason kept thinking things like: Nico looked upset. Maybe he will run away after all.

And, I probably should have gone and talked to him. Maybe the only thing stopping him from leaving would have been me going after him. But I didn’t. Instead I’m just chilling and enjoying the beautiful weather with my beautiful girlfriend while he’s alone and probably feeling like he deserves to be alone.

And, I am probably blowing this way out of proportion. He didn’t even say anything. Of course I should be with my girlfriend right now. I’m being totally crazy that I’m even bothered by this.

But I’m bothered by this.

Just the realization that he was bothered by the whole thing bothered him.

It shouldn’t bother him, right?

He’d made such a point of trying to hammer it into Nico that he wasn’t bothered by the knowledge that he liked Percy. He’d made such a big deal of trying to prove that it was totally okay that Nico
liked guys. He had been okay with that. Sure, it had surprised him at first, but once the shock wore off it really hadn’t bothered him. He’d thought he was being sincere when he told Nico he was cool with it.

He was cool with the idea of Nico liking Percy. He was cool with the idea of Nico liking any number of other guys.

So why did he feel just about anything but cool with the idea Nico liking him? Was he really that much of a hypocrite? Did the prospect of his own image being dragged into things really change how he perceived stuff? Were gay people only okay when they had nothing to do with him?

He didn’t think that he felt that way. He really didn’t.

So why did this make him feel so uncomfortable?

He felt horribly flustered. And couldn’t stop thinking about it.

_You’re just bothered because you don’t want to hurt him_, he told himself. _He’s a good friend and you care about him. You just feel bad about hurting him._

Reyna had also been a good friend that he’d cared about though. And she’d been hurt by his rejection. He hadn’t felt like this then. He’d felt guilty about it, yeah. But not shaken up and unsettled like this.

What the Hades was wrong with him?

“What the Hades is wrong with you?”

He started at the sound of Piper’s voice. She was frowning at him from across he canoe.

“Sorry,” he hastily apologized. “I’m really sorry, Pipes.” He didn’t even bother to give her an excuse; he didn’t have one. He ought to be able to be in the moment right now and focus on her. The fact that he couldn’t seem to do that just added to the growing mountain of nagging thoughts weighing on his mind.

“You’re worrying me,” she said, her look of annoyance melting into a softer one of concern. “I haven’t seen you this distant since we were still fighting the Giant War.”

“I guess…I’m not actually feeling all that well,” he said lamely. At least it wasn’t really a lie.
Eighty-Two Minutes of Claymation Purgatory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He’d planned on pretending to not be home. He might have had a surprisingly nice time the night before—one that might have even felt suspiciously close to Jason’s prediction that his ‘homework session’ was actually a ‘homework date’—but the revealed truth to Jason’s teasing hadn’t been enough to completely erase Nico’s irritation at having been teased. It was a sensitive subject and this Jason was supposed to be his best (albeit admittedly only) friend. He should know better than to egg Nico about something like that. Or was he over inflating the importance of their friendship? Being ‘best’ out of a list comprising of just one person didn’t really guarantee any type of quality. He had probably already idealized whatever his other self and this Jason had. Just because the Jason he knew wouldn’t ever deliberately make him uncomfortable about the topic of his sexuality and romantic inclinations didn’t mean that this Jason would be the same.

The thought of the Jason from his proper reality brought a surprising pang of nostalgia to Nico. He might not have ever allowed him to actually get close, but nonetheless he’d been a really good friend. Nico had been too tangled up in his own problems to appreciate it at the time, let alone reciprocate. The horrors of Tartarus were too fresh in his memory, the fear of what might happen with Gaea too consuming, the pain of watching Percy and Annabeth go in the span of a few months from ‘a pretty good couple’ to ‘inseparable soul mates’ too sharp and biting. His sanity didn’t have room for things like someone who he didn’t really think could understand him inserting himself into his life. It was taking too much of his composure just to hold himself together enough to complete his duties for the war without succumbing to a complete emotional breakdown.

He’d had reasons for pushing Jason away. And Jason understood. The fact that Jason understood only underscored the fact that they should have been friends. But he hadn’t let it happen. Now there’d been enough time and distance for a lot of Nico’s sharper pains to have faded until they were more of a familiar dull ache. It still hurt that the original Percy was unattainable; the thought of other people knowing about his sexual orientation and judging him for it still filled him with almost paralyzing anxiety; and the knowledge that he was never going to fit in anywhere still depressed him. But he no longer felt gripped with unmanageable rage over the injustices he’d been dealt. He could look back on his problems from a resigned and detached state rather than overwhelming anger and grief.

And from his calmer and more collected perspective, Nico had the self-awareness to admit (even if only to himself) that he was lonely. He missed Hazel and Jason and Percy and Reyna and the very small handful of people who’d been decent to him over the years. He still felt that leaving them behind had been the right thing to do, but that hadn’t made it easy.

He had his fair share of regrets. And not letting Jason be more of his friend was slowly creeping up the list.

So really, it wasn’t because he’d forgiven this Jason that he accidently found himself swinging the door open within seconds of the buzzer ringing. It was the persistent memory of the other Jason (he couldn’t help thinking of him as ‘his Jason’ in his head) that propelled him towards the door. He missed Jason. If this perplexingly similar yet dissimilar Jason was the best he could do, he didn’t seem to have it in him to shut the door in his face.

A familiar aviator jacket was slung over one of Jason’s arms, and the scuffed up sleeve of an ancient VHS tape was clutched in his hand. From the expression on his face it was clear that he hadn’t been
any more certain that he’d get let in than Nico had been sure he’d let him. He looked vaguely relieved.

“So,” he said, awkwardly tossing the jacket onto the back of a chair, “glad to see you didn’t get vaporized by rampaging shadow beasts or whatever. I’m gonna go out on a limb and assume you didn’t lose your phone. So I guess apologies are in order.”

“That might be a good place to start,” said Nico with narrowed eyes.

“For what it’s worth I didn’t mean to piss you off,” Jason added. “You’re a bit touchier than him. I didn’t expect to upset you. He’s used to me giving him a hard time about, you know. Well. He’s obviously had a crush on someone for ages but he’ll never tell me anything about it. So I bug him about it ‘cause it’s the only thing he’s ever secretive about. He usually just tells me off. But he doesn’t act like he really minds. And when he gets all defensive about it it’s kind of cu—er. Never mind. It’s just a thing we do and I’m sorry for forgetting that you’re not the same.”

“We’re not the same,” Nico reiterated, arms crossed.

“Yeah, I’m definitely getting that,” said Jason. “Won’t make that mistake again.”

“Good,” said Nico. He didn’t move from his stance next to the door.

Jason nervously flipped the VHS in his hand a few times. “So…” he said, his cerulean eyes fixed steadily on Nico, “I might be sorry for giving you a hard time but I still meant my threat about not getting back to me. Hope you’re ready for 82 minutes of Claymation purgatory.” He grinned evilly as he held up the tape. “Got any popcorn?”

“No,” said Nico.

“No popcorn?”

“No to whatever you’re plotting. I have no idea if there’s any popcorn. I didn’t buy the groceries.”

“Nico always has popcorn,” Jason announced, pointedly ignoring everything else Nico had said. He pushed past him and started rummaging around in the kitchen. In very little time he’d produced several boxes. “See? He has like four kinds. Popcorn’s a staple around here. Do you want cheese flavored or extra butter?”

“Ew.” Nico made a face at Jason’s suggestions.

“Okay, kettle corn it is then,” Jason tossed a package into the microwave.

“I don’t want to watch your stupid movie,” Nico complained.

“Of course you don’t,” agreed Jason. “No sane person would.”

“Then why on earth are you trying to make me watch it? Why do you even own it?” asked Nico in exasperation.

“I bought it because the title is hilarious,” explained Jason. “And Nico and I have had a running competition for years to subject each other to the most terrible movie. It took him a really long time to outdo me on this one. It’s my classic revenge flick. Which is why it’s crucial I make you watch it. That way next time you’re thinking about scaring me you’ll take my threats more seriously.”

“Scaring you?”
“Yeah.” Jason’s face sobered. “You scared me when you went all radio silence. I thought you might have left. I was afraid you were gone, and the other you might still be gone too and I wouldn’t even get to say goodbye or anything.”

“I wouldn’t do that without saying goodbye.”

Jason skeptically raised an eyebrow.

Nico fidgeted. “Okay, I might have done that,” he admitted.

Jason’s stony expression didn’t change.

“Fine, I probably would have,” Nico conceded. “That’s exactly what I would have done, if I was leaving. But I didn’t.”

“Promise you won’t,” said Jason.

“I can’t,” said Nico. “There might be circumstances where I have no control over leaving. I didn’t come here on purpose, you know.”

“Yeah, but promise you won’t leave on purpose without telling me.”

Nico was all set to refuse. What right did Jason have making demands of him? Jason was the one that had been an insensitive jerk. He owed Nico, not the other way around. But Jason was looking at him with sincere worry on his face. It was clear that he had actually been scared that Nico had left.

“What does it matter to you anyway?” As per usual, Nico’s instincts pushed him into being abrasively defensive. “I’m not the Nico you want to be hanging out with. If I leave you get back the guy who won’t get pissed off at your text messages.”

“Maybe. Or maybe I get no Nicos. I’m totally not cool with that. Just promise you’ll tell me when you do it, okay?”

Jason held his gaze and the air suddenly seemed very thick between them.

“Um,” Nico gulped. The way Jason was looking at him made it very easy to fall for the idea that he actually cared about him and not just his counterpart. Nico was blindsided by how much he suddenly wanted that to be true.

Which is stupid, he reprimanded himself. This is temporary. He doesn’t matter; none of this matters. You were mad at him, remember? Hold on to that. It will make everything easier.

“Fine, I won’t—”

The microwave dinged, breaking the weird tension in the room.

“I promise,” he finished hastily.

“Good.” Jason actually seemed satisfied by that. He grabbed the popcorn out of the microwave. “In that case it’s futuristic mutant dinosaur time.”

Nico made a point of sighing loudly as he followed Jason into the living room.

“I can’t believe he even has a VHS player,” Nico complained as Jason busied himself inserting the tape into a chunky box stacked amidst several other various entertainment systems. “Who even uses those anymore? I mean, I was born in the freaking thirties and even I think that’s pathetically
“Some of the really bad movies never got transferred onto DVD,” Jason explained. “Having a VHS player is totally crucial to our movie competition. In this case I just got the VHS because it was cheaper and—hey, wait. You just said you were born when?” Jason whipped his head around and fixed Nico with a bugged-eyed stare.

_Oops._ Nico laughed nervously. “Oh, um. Right. I’m guessing your Nico wasn’t born in 1932 and displaced in time, huh? Yeah, that’s probably news to you. You know, if you didn’t already find me weird enough, there’s that.”

“Are you being serious?”

Nico nodded. “Hey, I’d be glad to tell you all about it instead of watching that movie.”

“Nice try,” said Jason. “You are definitely going to tell me about that. But you’re going to do it _after_ the movie. You’re not getting out of this.”


“It’s part of my charm.” Jason grinned as he joined Nico on the couch.

For the record, it was a big couch. Jason might have lived in a shoebox sized economy apartment, but Nico’s place had a decent amount of room, and thus, conventionally sized furniture in it. The couch could easily have sat three or four people on it.

In other words, with all the plentiful space there was absolutely no good reason for Jason to park himself onto that couch with only about three inches separating him from Nico. No reason at all.

Nico considered complaining but held his tongue. He thought it might actually make things worse if he drew attention to it.

He wasn’t able to keep holding his tongue though as the garishly huge title _A Nymphoid Barbarian in Dinosaur Hell_ bounced across the screen.

“This had better not be porn,” he complained accusingly, his eyes fixed on the word ‘nymphoid.’ “I swear Jason, if you’re trying to trick me into watching porn with you you’re going to find yourself outside. Courtesy of the window exit.”

Jason laughed. “Don’t worry. The other you already sat through this and he wouldn’t have tolerated that either. This is totally tame, the title is misleading.”

Nico turned and suspiciously regarded Jason. For some reason his answer gave him the impression that he was speaking from trial and error experience.

_He didn’t want to know._

“Popcorn?” asked Jason innocently, offering the greasy paper bag to Nico.

Nico accepted it because the popcorn was a good distraction from the movie he had no interest in watching and the weird signals he was picking up from Jason. Yes, staring at a sea of popcorn was way safer than watching a nymphoid (who was not actually nymphoidic) or his confusing friend. Popcorn was awesome. So long as he didn’t let himself think too hard about where it comes from and his unfortunately intimate experience with the agricultural process.
Jason made it very difficult to ignore the movie though. Not that that meant Nico came any closer to actually hearing what it was about—Jason was talking over most of the lines. Granted his impromptu dialogue dub-overs were probably an improvement over the original script. Nico was occasionally cracking up in spite of himself.

He tried very hard not to. He wanted to make a point that forcing him to sit through inanely bad cinema was a waste of everyone’s time. But the harder he tried to tune out Jason’s MST3K-ing, the harder Jason seemed to work to make him laugh. And the harder it got to effectively ignore him.

As Jason’s comedic commentary got more blown out of proportion he began to accentuate it with physical gestures. And perhaps it was accidental or perhaps it was on purpose, but somewhere in the midst of his moving around the three inches that had remained between him and Nico seemed to disappear. Jason’s side was flush against him now.

Nico kept waiting for Jason to notice and slide back over again.

Jason didn’t seem to notice.

Was he really just oblivious or was he pointedly not noticing?

What little attention Nico had for the movie evaporated. He started counting the minutes until Jason realized and moved.

Five.

Seven.

Thirteen.

Eighteen.

Jason wasn’t moving.

Nico coughed. “Um, Jason,” he finally said.

“Yeah?” Jason didn’t even turn. He apparently was genuinely enraptured by the stop motion dinosaurs.

“There’s a lot of room on the couch,” Nico said awkwardly. “You could move over a bit if you wanted.”

“Oh,” said Jason distractedly. “I’d rather not. It’s kind of cold in here. You should really look into getting that window fixed.” He gestured at the broken window that Nico had dealt with by simply taping a trash bag over the glassless hole and then forgetting about it.

“Oh, right. That’s on my to-do list.” (It wasn’t actually. He couldn’t care less about having a broken window.) “Want me to get you a blanket?” Nico offered.

“Nah, I’m good,” said Jason. He didn’t move.

“Are…um, are you sure?” Nico squirmed uncomfortably. This was way more physical contact than he was used to letting people get away with. In fact he wasn’t quite sure why he was letting Jason get away with it. He probably should have just shoved Jason when he’d failed to move on his own. Why hadn’t he?

“Yeah, you’re nice and warm,” said Jason, eyes still riveted to the TV screen. “I’m comfortable right
now. That okay?"

“What?” Nico didn’t believe that for one second. Him? Warm? No one ever thought that Nico di Angelo was ‘warm’.

‘Cold’ was a more common descriptor.

Clammy.

*Death-like.*

Nico held the back of his hand against his forehead as confirmation that Jason was lying. Of course, his skin felt completely normal to him. He couldn’t ever tell that he was cold. He was used to his body temperature, unusual or not. Other people just felt unnaturally hot to him.

Kind of like Jason right now. It was like sitting next to a hot water bottle.

A very athletic, very attractive hot water bottle.

*Styx. Where were thoughts like that even coming from?*

“Hm?” Jason finally glanced away from the movie and shot Nico a quizzical look. “What do you mean, ‘what’? Did you want me to move?”

“What do you mean that I’m warm?” asked Nico.

“Er, exactly what it sounds like?”

“I’m not warm,” Nico countered.

“Well you’re warmer than the air coming in from outside,” said Jason. “My right side is still a bit chilled but the side next to you is totally comfortable. Are you cold?”

“No,” said Nico. All the time he’d spent in the frigidity of the nether had made him fairly impervious to low temperatures. He barely even noticed when other people claimed it was cold out.

“Good,” said Jason, turning back to the movie. “Guess everything’s cool then.” He snickered to himself, probably from having used the word ‘cool’ after the context of their conversation. It didn’t matter which reality he was in, Jason was apparently a bit of a dork in any incarnation.

“I shouldn’t be warm though,” said Nico, still bothered by the incongruity. “That’s not normal for me.”

“What is normal for you?” asked Jason.

“People usually complain when they touch me,” Nico admitted. He didn’t know why he was suddenly sharing so much, especially confessing unflattering things about himself. It suddenly seemed important to let Jason know though. Maybe if Jason knew the truth he wouldn’t be so blasé about invading Nico’s personal space. And that lack of personal space problem would go away without Nico having to assert himself—because for some reason he kept failing to take the initiative to make Jason back off. And he really should get Jason to back off, shouldn’t he? “They say I’m cold as a corpse.”

That elicited a raised eyebrow from Jason. He grabbed Nico’s hand and wrapped his fingers around Nico’s palm. Nico stiffened at the heightened intimacy of their contact. Jason didn’t seem to notice his elevated discomfort.
“Well I can’t say I’ve been closely acquainted with any corpses,” said Jason, “but you feel pretty normal to me. I mean, you’re not exactly a furnace or anything but you don’t feel much different than the other Nico.”

*How do you know that, were you in the regular habit of holding the other Nico’s hand?*

Jason’s thumb was resting on the inside of his wrist. Could he feel the way Nico’s pulse was speeding up?

He hated that his pulse was speeding up.

*It’s just panic, he told himself. You hate being touched. This is invasive. It’s normal for your heart rate to go up when you’re agitated. I’m just stressed.*

Why wasn’t Jason moving it? He’d already succeeded in testing Nico’s temperature. He had no reason not to let go now.

An unpleasantly slick sheen of sweat began breaking out on Nico’s palm. He couldn’t tell if it was because of Jason’s warmth or from pure nervousness.

He jerked his hand away.

*He’s Nico’s best friend. They’ve been friends for years. They’re just comfortable with each other. It means nothing. Why would I even think that meant anything? Stop reading deeper meanings into everything.*

*What is wrong with me?*

He looked askance at Jason, trying not to be too obvious that he wasn’t watching the movie.

*He isn’t even your real friend,* Nico reminded himself as his line of sight swept over Jason’s strong jawline and Nordic coloring. He pointedly ignored the soft look of concern in his ridiculously crystalline eyes. How was Jason even just a regular college student, anyway? He looked like he belonged in a magazine ad. Or a movie poster maybe (he was certainly better looking than anyone in the current movie playing, that was for sure.) The Jason he’d known had been a leader twice over. His nickname of *Superman* hadn’t been a joke. It didn’t seem possible that there could exist a universe where Jason was anything short of remarkable.

But here he was acting as if he were completely ordinary, and as if Nico were the most important person in the world. And that seriously wasn’t fair. Not considering that Nico was really just a stand-in for Jason’s *real* friend. And whatever feelings Jason was currently feeling, be it just the affection of a close bro or something more—no, there is definitely no ‘something more,’ why would he even think there might be something more? Why did his brain always push things in that impossible direction? That was just his self-destructive side edging in—it was all misplaced anyway. It was a different Nico that those feelings belonged to and none of it was relevant to him. And that was fine because Nico didn’t care. He definitely didn’t care because Jason was never his friend anyway. He didn’t have any friends and he didn’t need any. He had enough to deal with just managing his stupid crush on stupid Percy. The very last thing he needed were friends with blurry boundaries who would just fill his life with more headaches and confused feelings and probably break his heart.

He should have never broken that stupid window.

He should have never done a lot of things.

Jason laughed as a particularly lumpy dinosaur trundled across the screen. How was Jason able to be
so utterly at ease while Nico was sitting there, his mind torturing him in eternal agonizing circles of what ifs and probably nots. Couldn’t he feel the tension?

“So this will probably sound like a really weird question,” Nico began, wanting to test out an idea that had suddenly occurred to him, “but what do I smell like?”

“Is this the lead in to some grown-up version of a ‘pull my finger’ prank?” Jason asked with a suspicious edge to his voice.

“No, I’m asking seriously,” said Nico. “And be honest. Don’t worry about trying not to hurt my feelings or anything.”

“Okay now that really sounds like a trick question.” Jason obliged though and grabbed Nico’s arm back, holding it up close to his nose. Nico could feel the warm tickle of Jason’s breath on his skin. It put a tight knot in his stomach.

“You smell like Nico’s frou-frou specialty soap,” he announced, lowering Nico’s arm away from his face. “So good news, that means you’ve showered since you got here. I approve.”

“Just soap?” asked Nico. “That’s it?”

“Well, not just any soap,” said Jason rolling his eyes. “Nico’s like, stupid particular about his soap. It’s French or Italian or something, he gets it from some import shop. And it’s made out of rich people stuff like bergamot or neroli or unicorn tears or whatever. Don’t ever let him catch you calling it ‘just soap’.” He snorted. “If you don’t like it I’ve got an extra bar of Dial you can have.”

“No the soap is fine,” said Nico. “It’s just…you can’t smell anything else?”

Jason leaned in uncomfortably close again and this time inhaled next to Nico’s shoulder. “Fabric softener?” he questioned.

“Huh,” said Nico.

“Were you expecting a different answer?” asked Jason.

“Yeah,” said Nico, not immediately offering up the answer.

“Which would be…?”

“Death,” said Nico bluntly.

“Oh.”

Nico shrugged.

“Yeah, I’m, definitely not getting any eau de death,” continued Jason. “Not unless murdering a cup of Earl Grey for it’s bergamot essence counts.”

“Interesting,” said Nico.

Was Jason lying? He wondered. Jason had seemed legitimately surprised by Nico’s answer. He suspected he hadn’t just been saying that to make him feel better. So what did that mean?

Had Nico actually changed since coming here? He didn’t think so. All of his abilities seemed to have remained intact. He doubted that would be the case if his body were actually physically changing. Were mortals simply unable to detect things like the stench of the Underworld that clung to him?
Probably. Jason was probably simply unable to sense Nico’s true nature due to not being a demigod.

That was a little more depressing than the thought of actually being free of that burden, but still. Given the fact that he was fairly certain he was the only demigod around, that meant that no one could tell. He was less of a freak here.

How refreshing.

“I’m starting to suspect that your entire motive behind this conversation was just to distract me into talking so you wouldn’t have to watch the movie,” Jason accused. “Nice try getting out of my cinematic masterpiece experience, but it’s only half over. Pay attention.”

“Yes, mom,” said Nico mockingly. He felt Jason immediately go rigid at his remark.

_Oh, that’s right. Jason’s mom is dead where I come from,_ Nico suddenly remembered. _Given that my mom and Bianca are both still dead here…that means that this Jason’s mom is probably no more alive than the other Jason’s._

It had been easy to assume that since in this world Jason was leading such a typical college student sort of life that he was as average and unburdened as other normal college students. He seemed too upbeat to be carrying around any real baggage. But on a closer look the fact that he was living in an apartment that was smaller, shabbier, and significantly farther from the school than a dorm room would have been was fairly telling. Jason was probably supporting himself entirely on his own, without parents…and not making a big deal out of it whatsoever. Nico felt like a jerk for not even thinking to ask Jason more about his background in this mortal world.

“Sorry,” he apologized.

“S’fine,” said Jason a little stiffly.

“You should tell me more about yourself,” said Nico. “So I don’t say anything stupidly insensitive like that.”

“Maybe after the movie,” Jason mumbled, not turning away from the screen. He still felt very tense.

Nico internally sighed and resigned himself to trying to pay attention to the plot.

It was futile. Jason’s mood had sobered significantly and so he was making less effort to pepper the dialogue with impromptu voice-overs. Without his comedic contributions the movie was intolerably boring. Nico was asleep within 15 minutes.

He awoke, very confused, to the sound of static. His neck hurt from being bent unnaturally, and there was something angular poking into his shoulder.

The angular thing shifted and his head along with it.

He sprang away as the realization struck him that he’d been sleeping on Jason.

“Sorry about the noise,” said Jason offhandedly. “I couldn’t get up to rewind the tape without waking you up.”

“You should have woken me up!” Nico exclaimed. “How long was I asleep? How long has the movie been over?”

“I don’t know. It’s been over 20 minutes, maybe.”
“20 minutes? You’ve just been sitting here and watching static for 20 minutes?” While I drooled on your shoulder. He left that last revelation unsaid.

Jason shrugged. “You seemed tired. Didn’t want to disturb you.”

“You should have woken me up. You could have gone home.”

“Actually I was hoping I could just crash here,” said Jason. “It’d be super late by the time I could get back to Brooklyn. I usually just borrow your couch when we have movie nights.”

“Oh. Um, that’s…”

_not a good idea._ Nico thought. _That would be horribly awkward and not at all appropriate. We shouldn’t be sleeping in any kind of proximity to each other. It will just lead to…problems._

_Bad, bad idea._

“…That’s fine,” he said without meaning to. “Whatever works.”

“Cool, cool.” Jason jumped up and headed uninvited towards Nico’s bedroom. “You don’t have to bother with anything, I know where the extra blankets are.”

_of course he does._

The sight of Jason charging through Nico’s things as if they actually lived together sent another uneasy twist through Nico’s stomach.

They were so familiar and easy around each other. Nico had never had anyone like that. Probably never would have anyone like that. And yet, would Jason be so easy around him if he really knew him as well as he seemed to think he did? Would he still feel so comfortable staying the night if he knew Nico was…

…was…

…Well, _not normal._

Probably not. He probably ought to tell Jason that detail about himself. The other Jason knew. He really ought to let this Jason know how…deviant…he was before he made the mistake of getting into the habit of having sleepovers. He’d probably be really uncomfortable if he found out later.

Unfortunately, the thought of coming out to anyone, even someone like Jason—who he’d already been through the experience with—still made him feel like he wanted to throw up. He just couldn’t do it. Not to mention the fact that he couldn’t do something like coming out without simultaneously outing his other self. He didn’t even know if the other version of himself was gay, but the chances seemed likely. It wasn’t fair to him to give Jason that sort of information without his permission. He certainly wouldn’t want that happening back in the world he’d come from with an imposter in his place. He needed to be discreet for the other Nico’s sake if not his own.

Jason returned with an armful of blankets and a spare pillow and began arranging them on the couch. He plopped himself down into the nest of bedding and smiled at Nico, oblivious to his friend’s discomfort and inner turmoil.

“I daresay your couch is actually more comfortable than my real bed,” he announced. “I wish I had your dad as a shopping buddy, you guys tricked this place out.”
“I guess,” said Nico, not sure how to respond, since it hadn’t actually been him that had anything to do with the apartment’s furnishings. The couch hadn’t struck him as particularly special either.

“So anyway,” said Jason, stretching out on his blanket pile. “Movie’s over. Of course you didn’t actually fill your end of the bargain and watch the entire thing. Jury’s still out on whether or not a rescreening is in order to remedy that. We’ll worry about that later, you’re off the hook for tonight.”

“You’d have to physically restrain me to get me to sit through that again.”

“That can be arranged if necessary,” said Jason with a laugh.

Nico flushed and broke eye contact. That had sounded kind of suggestive, although Jason obviously hadn’t meant it that way. It wouldn’t have even occurred to Jason to mean it that way, and the very fact that such a thought had occurred to Nico only accentuated the truth that there was something wrong with him and he hated himself for being like that.

“You should tell me about your mom,” said Nico in a desperate attempt to change the subject. It was something he really needed to be briefed on in order to avoid saying anything grossly insensitive to Jason again.

Jason’s cheerful grin melted off his face like quicksilver.

“We don’t ever talk about my mom,” he said quickly. “She’s gone, that’s all that you really need to know. We don’t bring her up.”

Nico turned and leaned against the couch arm that was opposite the one Jason was using as a headboard. An empty segment remained between them and the expanse of couch suddenly felt vaster than an ocean. Jason might as well have been in a different state he seemed so distant from the conversation change.

Nico watched him silently. He knew he was the last person on earth who had any right to demand anyone to spill their secrets. He ought to respect Jason’s desire for space. Demanding an explanation would make him the biggest hypocrite in the world.

Except Jason not explaining really bothered him. The Jason Nico was used to was very open, at least when prompted to be. He might not share information about himself unprovoked, but he was usually receptive to sharing when asked. He was perpetually honest and easy going.

Or maybe not. Maybe it just seemed that way because he was so good at hiding his secrets that one wasn’t even aware he had any to hide. Nico remembered his words as they’d been leaving Split, what he’d said after Nico had been forced to spill his own biggest secret.

I’ve seen a lot of brave things. But what you just did? That was maybe the bravest.

Was it his own fear of secrets that had led him to say that?

“I’m sorry,” was all Nico could think to say to fill the heavy silence. He knew better than anyone how cheap and meaningless that phrase sounded when offered in compensation for loss. But there really wasn’t a better option. Especially not without knowing what had actually happened.

“Don’t be sorry,” said Jason. “Don’t you ever be sorry. I’m…I’m the one who is sorry. For you.”

Nico’s brow wrinkled in confusion. Why was Jason offering condolences to him over his own mother’s absence?
Jason let out a weary sigh and ran his hand through his hair. “You might not like me so much anymore after I explain,” he said tiredly. “I mean, I’m really not sure why the other you still wants anything to do with me after what happened. Still don’t get that. One of life’s great mysteries I guess.” He let out a hollow chuckle.

Nico remained silent, giving Jason room to explain at his own pace, or not at all if he chose to abort whatever he was about to say.

“My mom died in a car accident,” he confessed. “That’s something we have in common.”

Nico nodded. He still didn’t understand why that fact would cause Jason’s change in demeanor. Hadn’t Jason’s mom been in a car wreck where he’d come from too? Jason had never talked about it to him but it had been in the news, given his mom’s former celebrity status. Every now and then the tabloids would find some scandalous excuse to revive the story.

Jason sighed again. “Here,” he said, grabbing his phone off of the coffee table. “It’ll just be easier if you read the news story.”

He typed something into the browser and then handed the phone to Nico. The flat device trembled faintly in his fingers.

Nico glanced down at a sensationalistic headline.

**Music Mogul’s Wife and Daughter Tragically Slain in Fatal Collision**

*Dante di Angelo, CEO of D.O.A. Records’ Family is D.O.A. – Washed up starlet to blame*

Nico frowned at the screen. Dante di Angelo? Was that his dad’s name here? He hadn’t really thought about it, but his dad couldn’t actually be a god in this universe. Which meant it was highly unlikely that he went by the moniker of Hades or Pluto. It hadn’t even occurred to him to wonder how his dad must differ here from the one he knew. Weird.

He was so thrown by the headline being unexpectedly about his family instead of Jason’s that it took a moment for the significance of that fact to sink in.

*Oh.*

He kept reading.

*The downward spiral of Beryl Grace (star of the classic eighties sitcom hits ‘All Around The Ackermans’ and ‘What About Beryl’) culminated in a tragic crescendo on Wednesday at 2:47 PM (EST) when her car veered across an intersection and straight into oncoming traffic. Grace’s car struck an SUV containing the wife and daughter of Dante di Angelo, founder of the coincidently named D.O.A. Records, an offshoot of Underground Production Studios. All occupants of the vehicles involved were killed by the impact. Investigation revealed that Grace was heavily intoxicated at the time of the crash. This follows several DUI arrests over the past several years and Grace had been in and out of rehab to no avail. Di Angelo has declined to comment on the tragedy, however a memorial scholarship fund has been set up in honor of his late daughter, Bianca di Angelo. An outpouring of cards and flowers has been left at the scene of the accident….*

Nico couldn’t continue. The small and grainy photographs of his mom and sister made his throat constrict painfully. His vision swam as tears threatened to overwhelm him.

“Oh,” he said stupidly.
“Yeah,” said Jason, no more articulately.

Nico handed the phone back to Jason. He couldn’t bear to keep looking at the clinical way his mom’s and sister’s deaths had been reported. More interest seemed to be placed on his dad (apparently a well known public figure) than his significantly less publicized but more relevant deceased family members. The sensationalism sickened him.

“We don’t talk about my mom,” Jason restated.

Nico nodded.

They sat in silence for a while as Nico processed this revelation. Jason looked increasingly distressed as Nico failed to say anything.

“Maybe…maybe I should go, actually.” Jason clumsily stumbled off the couch and started grabbing the blankets back up, apparently with the intent to return them to Nico’s room. “Sorry for imposing. That was totally uncool of me. I—”

“Don’t even think about it, Grace.” Nico caught Jason’s arm as he attempted to squeeze by with the blanket pile. “What’s uncool is leaving me alone after dumping that kind of heavy news on me. You’re staying.”

“But…how could you want to be around me after learning that?” Jason stuttered.

“Last time I checked your name wasn’t Beryl,” said Nico. “So what happened doesn’t have anything to do with you. Why would I blame you for it?”

“Because my mom killed your mom and sister?” He asked. His eyes were wide and glassy. “My mom wrecked your family. It’s her fault you’re so miserable.”

“Not deliberately. Anyway, that’s not as shocking as you’d think it is. Where I came from it was actually your dad that killed my mom. And he did it on purpose.”

Jason’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“He meant to kill me and Bianca too,” Nico elaborated. “But my dad managed to intervene. Not that that did a lot of good for Bianca. She didn’t live to get much older than that. And it was actually sort of my fault she died.”

“What?” repeated Jason in shock.

“Now that’s what’s hard to live with. Knowing that without me she’d still be around. What happened here is better, believe it or not. It was an accident and there’s no one living to blame.”

“…Better.”


Jason sat down on the edge of the sofa cushion. “I still feel like I could have done something or said something that might have stopped her. She was my mom. I should have…”

“Beryl Grace wasn’t savable,” Nico insisted. “Some deaths can’t be prevented,” he said, suddenly remembering a painful truth his dad had imbued to him in one of his rare moments of father-son bonding. “And some aren’t meant to be prevented. She died the same way where I came from; there just weren’t any additional victims. There is nothing you could have done to stop her from self-
destructing. It’s just lucky you weren’t in the car with her.”

Jason flopped backwards into the overstuffed sofa back. “I still feel like I could have…well, sometimes I just wish it had been m—”

Nico socked Jason in the shoulder.

“Ow.”

“If I ever hear you say what I think you were just about to say I swear I’ll hit you harder than that,” scolded Nico. “Death is not something to be flippant about. And it is definitely not something you should ever wish for.”

“It’s just so unfair what happened to your family,” said Jason. “They didn’t deserve it.”

“You wouldn’t have deserved it either.”

“It would have been more fair. The tragedy would have stayed in one family. She’s my mom. I have her blood in me. I could end up like her.”

“You absolutely will never end up like her. No chance.”

“I might.”

“Jason,” said Nico seriously. “You are one of the most selfless and dedicated people I’ve ever met. You have all the willpower and self control that your mom lacked and then some to spare. You’re nothing like her and never will be.”

“How did this discussion turn into you dumping compliments on me?” Jason asked bemusedly.

“How did someone as perfect as you develop an inferiority complex, thought Nico, but he didn’t voice that aloud.

“Because you’re acting like an idiot,” he said instead.

“Well that at least sounds like something the other you would have said.” Jason weakly attempted a smile.

“Yeah, well. Believe it. I’ve already tried blaming Bianca’s death on someone else who didn’t deserve it. It didn’t help and it didn’t change anything. I’m way past that now and the last thing I need you to do is try to talk me into regressing. I don’t blame you for anything, and I’m pretty sure the other Nico doesn’t either. In fact, I’d bet money that you’ve been the only thing keeping him sane, and he knows it.”

“Oh, I doubt that, really,” Jason mumbled. “If anything it’s the other way ‘round. By letting me hang around so much it’s almost like still having a family, you know? Your dad is pretty tolerant and lets me and Thalia be a third and fourth wheel with you guys at holidays and stuff. We don’t have any close relatives. I mean, I don’t think your dad actually likes us or anything, don’t get me wrong. He just does it to be nice to you. He got a lot more involved in your life after the accident.”

“Huh,” said Nico, pondering that. “It’s very hard for me to imagine what my dad must be like here. He was literally the Lord of the Underworld last time I saw him. I’m having a pretty impossible time trying to picture him as a normal mortal.”

“I’d hardly describe him as ‘normal’,“ snorted Jason. “He’s pretty much Lord of Underground
Production Studios. He’s very rich, moderately famous, and makes or breaks a lot of people’s careers. Everyone treats him like new age royalty, so he’s probably not as different as you’d think.”

“I bet he’s never worn a robe made out of eternally damned souls,” observed Nico.

Jason blanched. “Uh…no. No, I can’t say I’ve ever noticed one of those in his wardrobe.”

Nico grinned.

“You…weren’t joking just now, were you?” Jason ventured.

“Nope.”

“Uh…wow.”

“They’re probably a bit different,” Nico decided.

“Yeah. Maybe a bit,” Jason agreed. “He does have a ‘wall of shame’ of all the worst demo tapes he’s been given over the years though,” he added. “He likes to play them at parties so people can laugh at them. That’s…kind of damning.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yeah, kinda. Anyway, it probably won’t be long until you meet him. One of his studios is here in New York, so he travels up here for business a lot. He’ll expect you to meet him for dinner when he’s in town.”

“That sounds like a disaster waiting to happen.”

“I can come along to help smooth things over,” Jason offered. “He’s used to me tagging along a lot so that wouldn’t be too weird.”

“Thanks.”

“No prob.” Jason smiled at him. “So what was that you were saying about being born in the thirties? You owe me details.”

“Well, it’s pretty much exactly what it sounds like.” Nico shrugged. “Bianca and I were both born in the thirties. When I was about ten my dad put us in this magical casino place where time didn’t affect us. Right after…my mom died. About 70 years passed without us even noticing. He wiped our memories first though, so not only did we not notice the time passing but we couldn’t even remember what had happened before we got there. It was pretty confusing. Took a while for me to sort out what had happened, and even now I can’t remember everything from my childhood. Kinda sucks.”

He sighed and rolled his eyes. “Most things about my past can be followed up with ‘kinda sucks’.”

Jason fidgeted uncomfortably at the mention of ‘mom died.’

“How is it possible for you to be born in the thirties where you come from but born in the nineties here?” Jason asked.

Nico shrugged. “Damned if I know. How is it possible for someone to be immortal and thousands of years old in one place but just a regular guy in the other? I think our lives will be easier if we don’t question so much. I guess this is the time period I belong in, and one way or another the universe conspires to put me here.”

“That’s so weird. If I hadn’t seen the things you’d shown me, I wouldn’t be able to begin to accept
any of this,” said Jason. “I’d be assuming I watched one too many bad sci-fi movies.”

“You’ve watched a lot more than one too many bad sci-fi movies.”

Jason laughed. “If you stick around very long you’ll soon be able to say the same thing. I’ll be making sure of that.”

Nico smiled but it felt bittersweet. The more time he spent here the more he wanted to stay. The temptation to just trade in for a new life was becoming overwhelming. It was so much easier here. He’d never known what it felt like to have unconditional friends and acceptance like this. To not feel like a freak at all. It wasn’t fair that he was being given a taste of how much better his life could have been only to have to walk away from it. And Jason wasn’t making it easier on him.

“Yeah, well we’ll see about that.” Nico threw a pillow at Jason. “You’re sure to drive me away faster if you keep lobbing threats like that.”

He was getting better at lying.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to any die-hard Troma fans I may have offended with this chapter...though not that sorry.
A Mental Experiment

Chapter Notes

Well, it was brought to my attention that I neglected to explain the noteworthy fact that Human!Nico managed to get through Camp Half-Blood's magical barrier that's supposed to repel non-demigods from entering. That was a bit sloppy of me, so I apologize! Basically, what I was thinking when writing was that the magic barrier hasn't had the most consistent track record for barring all mortals, as shown by the fact that Rachel Dare and Mary Castellan both were allowed into camp. No explanation at all was given for Ms. Castellan, but Rachel got in by Blackjack flying her over Peleus and 'through the barrier.' Human!Nico was brought to camp by Jason flying him in, so I rather imagined that whatever worked for Rachel flying in probably worked for Nico as well. I really ought have worked that into the actually story content, I just sort of took for granted that that would make sense. My bad!

And I've already said it before but I have to say it again because holy cow you guys, the comments some of you've been leaving me are literally knocking me over. I'm really astonished by the thoughtfulness of them and I can't say thank you enough!! (I'm tempted to say it's left me speechless, but that would obviously be a lie since I'll readily talk everyone's ear off in the comment replies, eh heh ^_^;;)

Jason didn’t get any sleep at all that night. Every time he closed his eyes all he could see was Nico. Memories of Nico in Croatia—the looks of horror and fear and bone-deep weary resignation that had progressively crossed his face as Cupid had tormented him. The pain that had danced in his eyes each time they’d locked on Percy and Annabeth. The way that pain had sharpened and magnified each time Percy reached out and tried to include him—oblivious to how he was just driving a knife deeper into Nico’s already damaged heart. Nico had been through Hell—both literally and figuratively—and he was really the last person to deserve it. It might not be obvious to people from a surface glance, but as he’d gotten to know him better Jason had discovered that Nico was one of the bravest, most loyal, and kindest demigods he had ever met. The instinct to intervene and help him and protect Nico from some of that unfair pain had been almost instantaneous. But had he succeeded? No, apparently now he was the prime cause of that very pain.

Never mind that this Nico hadn’t been through any of the same things that haunted the other Nico. It just meant that that painful journey was only just beginning. And Jason was going to have to watch the whole agonizing progression all over again, this time with the knowledge that he was causing it.

Was there anything he could do to stop this? To lessen the sting at least? Was there something Percy could have done to ease the original Nico’s suffering if he’d only known?

Where was the original Nico, anyway?

The fact that the proper Nico was utterly unaccounted for made Jason feel as uncomfortable as his newly discovered role in Nico the second’s feelings.

Was he where the other Nico came from?

Somewhere else entirely?
Was he still here somewhere, wandering about, completely unaware that he had a doppelganger trying to take his place at camp?

How would Nico be coping, trapped in a world with no magic and demigods?

He tried to picture that and the results weren’t pretty. Nico would probably feel like the ultimate freak in a setting like that. He’d be even more alienated than he was when surrounded by demigods.

Imaging Nico completely alone and isolated like that made Jason downright panicky with distress. *This wasn’t good. It’s not fair. Is it permanent? There must be some way to fix it.*

Was there anything he could do to help set things back to normal?

Would one of the gods be able to fix it?

Hades would have the most invested interest in getting Nico back, wouldn’t he? Nico-two was already planning on contacting him. Maybe he could slip in a conversation with the Lord of the Underworld as well.

Or maybe Hecate was a better bet? Travel between different realities sounded more like her realm of expertise. Hazel might be able to help with talking to her. Jason made a mental note to investigate that possibility.

Or Juno? Juno had been responsible for the shenanigans of Jason and Percy getting displaced from where they belonged before. This sort of situation sort of had her signature on it, didn’t it? He probably ought to try having a word with her as well.

He grimaced as he thought of just how carefully he’d have to tread pursuing that lead. It would be all too easy to accidently offend her and end up making matters a hundred times worse.

And speaking of worse, there was the problem of the fact that the new Nico didn’t seem very keen on the idea of leaving. If he found out Jason was conspiring to switch him back how betrayed would he feel? To get romantically rejected by Jason only to have him turn around and then try to banish him to another universe would be pretty devastating; if he was trying to ease the bite of hurting Nico’s feelings that would be the absolute worst thing to do.

Or would it?

Nico might feel differently about going back now than he had a few hours ago.

He’d seemed surprised by Piper, like the Jason he knew didn’t have a girlfriend. And if the other Jason were single then maybe Nico would be eager to get back to him. He might actually have a chance with *that* Jason.

Now where exactly had *that* thought come from?

Jason bit his lip as he laid in the dark. Was he only thinking that thought as a projection of how Nico might see things? Or did he just think that because he really thought Nico *might* have a chance with the other Jason?

Just how similar was the other Jason to him, anyway?

Would Nico stand a chance with *him* if he were single?

It was such a weird thought. And it was a thought that probably should have been followed with an
immediate reaction. But the predictable ‘no way’ that he would have expected wasn’t instantly forthcoming.

He delved a little deeper into that line of thinking.

He was straight…wasn’t he? He’d always considered himself straight. But was that more of an assumption than a fact? I like girls: therefore I must be straight. He hadn’t ever really spared a thought to considering boys in that capacity. Why would he? It had never even occurred to him…not until he’d witnessed Nico’s confession anyway. But at that point he was already with Piper and (mostly) happy with her. He’d taken in Nico’s revelation with empathy but it hadn’t really caused him to think any harder about what dating boys might be like. It hadn’t seemed relevant to him.

But what if it could be?

He tried to imagine what that would be like, conjuring an image of himself kissing some generic unspecified guy.

He didn’t feel grossed out. He didn’t feel much of anything. He wasn’t especially interested in kissing people he didn’t have any connection to, so focusing on a nameless example wasn’t particularly helpful. He needed to think about this in terms of someone who actually meant something to him.

Nico definitely meant something to him. Just theoretically, if he were to be interested in another guy —just for the sake of ‘what ifs’—Nico was the one guy he’d probably be interested in. He was interesting, and really smart. He seemed to see the world from a different angle than most people and Jason enjoyed getting insight to his perspective. He was quietly thoughtful in a subtle way that clearly demonstrated that it came from a place of genuine goodness and not just for the sake of appearances. And speaking of appearances, Nico wasn’t lacking in that department either. He didn’t exactly fit the conventional standards of attractiveness, but that too was part of his appeal. Nico gave off a dark and rugged aura that was exotic and intriguing. If it weren’t for the cloud of misery he kept perpetually draped around him, Jason wouldn’t doubt that Nico would have drawn a lot of positive attention from other campers. Instead though his unapproachability had done the opposite, and driven others away. Nico was utterly oblivious to just how desirable he had the potential to be.

Jason tried his mental experiment again, imagining Nico instead.

It was easier to imagine than he would have expected. Nico’s face came to his mind effortlessly, every subtle detail in sharp definition. He hadn’t realized he had Nico’s physical characteristics quite so minutely memorized. And it wasn’t just generically Nico he could visualize so well. He could picture the very subtle differences between the two different ones. The tiny facial ticks and faded unnoticeable markings that varied between them. The way the dark circles were slightly more pronounced beneath the old Nico’s eyes, and the color of his skin everywhere else was just a fraction more washed out. The way the new Nico had slightly sharper angles from his lack of muscle. The way he looked gaunter even though he had probably actually been the more regular eater of the two. He hadn’t even seen the old Nico in months (or was it years by this point? It really had been quite a while) yet the time and distance hadn’t affected his memory one bit. Nico was apparently very prominently etched into his mind.

Imagining himself kissing the new Nico made him feel weird. It felt wrong—but more in an ‘I barely know you, why are we doing this’ sort of way than an ‘ew you disgust me’ sort of way.

But then he tried picturing the original Nico and….

Oh Styx.
Okay, he was definitely feeling something. And that ‘something’ was not revulsion. It was definitely closer to that tingly flip-flop feeling that he’d only ever associated with Piper until now.

He was suddenly very glad to be the only inhabitant of Cabin One, because his face was probably beet red right now. Never mind that the lights were off. His embarrassment was probably glowing in the dark.

So he had feelings for Nico?

Should that be as surprising as it was? Nico had a ton of really good qualities. He’d invested quite a lot of time in trying to convince Nico to believe in that fact. Nico had repeatedly impressed him, and evoked more of an emotional response in him than any other demigod he’d known. He’d brushed it off as empathy and admiration, but maybe there was more to it than that.

But what did this even mean then? Rather than clearing up his confusion, Jason only felt worse. How could he have feelings for Nico when he already had feelings for Piper? He felt uncomfortable, like he’d cheated on her just by thinking about it.

Well, he already had the problem that there were a lot of things he’d been unable to feel 100% certain about. He could now add ‘his own heterosexuality’ to that compounding list. Fantastic.

And would this new knowledge help anything? Not really. His tentative feelings were for the wrong Nico: for the one that was hung up on Percy, not the one that had fallen for him. This did nothing except complicate everything further and help no one get what they wanted.

Except it did help answer his original question of whether or not Nico had a chance with the other Jason, the one he’d left behind. If that Jason was anything like him, then…yes. Nico probably had a pretty good chance with him after all. That Jason probably had no idea how Nico felt, and Nico probably had no idea he had a shot if he let Jason know. Clearly his instincts were right that the Nicos needed to be switched back. It would be better for everyone.

The only problem was getting Nico to believe that.

He half expected Nico to be a no-show at their training session. He was very nearly a no-show himself. His lack of rest from tossing and turning all night while dwelling on his Nico problem had caused him to sleep right through his alarm. He was ten minutes late when he finally made it to the arena, and breakfast was long over.

Nico was violently trouncing a straw dummy with his sword and didn’t immediately notice Jason’s appearance. When he finally did a flicker of surprise flashed across his face.

“Oh, you came,” he said tonelessly.

“Yeah. Sorry about that. I overslept.”

Nico shrugged, and his eyes went back to the straw target.

“You don’t have to bother if you’re busy,” Nico said. “I’m not trying to monopolize all your time.”

“Are you kidding?” Jason forced his voice to stay lighter and more cheerful than he felt. “I’m supposed to be in Arts and Crafts right now. Do you have any idea how bad I am at that? For our last project I was supposed to make a papier-mâché model of the Parthenon. It came out looking more like Godzilla with a peg leg. Trust me, I’m grateful for the excuse to train you instead. I totally owe you, dude.”
Nico looked at him skeptically but nodded.

Without much more exchange they fell back into the training routine that Jason had laid out the previous day. Nico’s focus was as sharp and dedicated as it had been before. Unfortunately, Jason’s was not.

He kept finding his eyes involuntarily drifting to Nico’s face, when they ought to have been watching the movements of his hands and feet.

It had always been unsettling how two people could seem so utterly identical—near carbon copies of one another—and yet also be so distinctly separate. He’d been struggling a bit with the situation already, trying to reconcile his memories and associations of one friend with someone who appeared to be the same person but was not, not to mention the tug between his loyalty to the one that was missing and his instinct to help this current one in the obvious need he had for support. Was he betraying the old Nico by trying to be this new Nico’s friend? Was he doing the new Nico a disservice by constantly thinking of the other one? All of this had been bad enough. Now adding to his layers of confusion were some very dangerous revelations. He wouldn’t have known how to deal with the shock of his newly realized feelings under normal circumstances. It was complicated enough just with his preexisting feelings for Piper and Nico’s for Percy being in the equation. But swapping out the subject of his confused feelings with an imposter just made the problem seem laughably insurmountable.

What was he supposed to do about this? He felt like he was going crazy and really needed to talk to someone about it. But he couldn’t go to the current Nico. It would only hurt him since their feelings did not match up. Piper would be the best person to help him detangle this problem—but he couldn’t talk to her about it either; his feelings were a betrayal to her. And he certainly couldn’t go to Percy. It wasn’t his place to talk to Percy about Nico’s feelings. And anyway, Percy was sort of the worst person to go to for that sort of advice. Emotional intelligence wasn’t exactly Percy’s shining talent.

What Jason figured he really needed was to talk to the real Nico. He didn’t fool himself into thinking that he’d have any more solid answers for what Jason should do—but it would at least make Jason feel better. He wanted to talk to him desperately, and he hadn’t realized until now just how badly he’d been missing him.

And yet—it could be so easy to forget that the real Nico was out of reach. The resemblance was uncanny. With the distance of a sword between them, the minute inconsistencies faded away. Jason was looking at a mirror image of the guy he urgently wanted to see. It would be so easy to slip up and accidently say too much in a thoughtless oversight.

“I know what you’re doing.”

Nico’s voice broke through Jason’s jumbled thoughts.

“Huh? What am I doing?” Panic surged as he assumed that Nico had somehow read his mind and knew what sort of things he’d been accidently thinking.

“You’re letting me win on purpose,” Nico complained. His previously contemplative expression was now marred with a deep scowl. “Stop it. I’m not some little kid who needs their ego fed. Don’t give me special treatment to make me feel better. I won’t improve if you pander to me.”

“I wasn’t—I’m not—”

“You are. You were fighting way better yesterday. I know this isn’t your best. Just cut it out,” Nico snapped.
Jason sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t get any sleep at all last night. My reaction time’s just down because I’m so tired.” That was mostly the truth, at least.

“Well, I told you that you didn’t have to practice with me right now.” Nico’s scowl softened a little, his accusing look fading into one more of concern and guilt. “If you’re too tired we can stop. I’ll—I’ll go practice climbing the lava wall or something.”

Nico’s eyes slid toward the rock climbing wall as he said that, opening a little wider as they connected with the shifting plates of stone and rivers of molten rock. Jason didn’t blame his nervousness; the lava wall was formidable even for a demigod.

“No, no,” he insisted. “I want to do this. I’ll pull it together.”

“Are you sure? You don’t—”

“I’m sure.” Jason used his long unused Praetor voice to stamp out any doubt of his intentions.

Nico gave him a weak smile and they went back to sparring.

“So…don’t you have…you know. Stuff to do?”

Nico and Jason were absently sitting around in Cabin Thirteen. Nico had automatically headed there after finishing dinner and Jason had just sort of instinctively followed him. They’d spent almost the entire day practicing various forms of training, with the exception of a brief hiatus in the middle of the morning where Nico had disappeared without explanation; although Jason had noticed him stealthily slipping a folded up piece of paper into the brazier along with his half eaten barbeque sandwich during lunch, so he could guess what Nico had been up to. Afterwards they’d seamlessly gone back to sparring without a word between them, and it didn’t even occur to Jason that now the martial arts were done he had no real obligation to keep shadowing the younger camper.

“But really.” Jason shrugged.

“I mean…shouldn’t you be maybe hanging out with…” Nico squirmed and looked down at the bedspread he was sitting on. “…Piper?”

“She’s probably busy.” Jason didn’t actually know if Piper was busy or not, but it was a reasonable assumption. “We’re both counselors here. The difference though is that she actually has other campers to supervise in her cabin. Being head of a cabin with only myself in it sort of leaves me with fewer responsibilities, you know?” Never mind the fact that he probably ought to have actually checked on Piper before writing off his evening as free. His gut instinct had simply been that at this moment Nico needed him more than her and so he’d followed it. He tried not to think too hard about what sort of things that implied.

“This place seems to have some efficiency problems,” Nico muttered, but he also looked a bit relieved to have been refuted.

“You’re telling me.” Jason grinned at him. Then he glanced around the room searching for something for them to do. Nico’s cabin was fairly austere and didn’t offer a lot in the way of distractions. “So what do you want to do? I could probably find a deck of cards or something if I ran back to my cabin for a moment.”

Nico brightened at the mention of ‘cards.’

“Do you play Mythomagic?” he asked enthusiastically.
Jason shook his head. “Uh…no. Can’t say I ever learned it. It always looked really complicated. I’ve watched Frank play once or twice, that’s about the most I can say about it.”

“It’s not complicated!” said Nico, sensing an opportunity in Jason’s lack of a negative reaction towards the game. “It’s really easy once you’re familiar with it! I can teach you! There’s different difficulty levels, you’ll totally get it fast if we start out in beginner mode!”

“Uh…” said Jason.

“Where does Nico keep his stuff like that?” asked Nico. He dropped down to the floor and started peering underneath the beds. “He’s totally got to have a set around here somewhere.”

“I…don’t think he does,” said Jason. “I think…” he frowned, calling on his memories. What he knew about Nico was sort of delicate territory, as Nico had never actually personally told him much about himself. Yet he did know quite a lot of personal information about his friend, given that he’d been given a direct view into many of his most emotionally charged memories. It made him feel like he knew Nico very intimately, when in fact none of that insight had been voluntarily offered to him and he knew he didn’t actually have the right to be so familiar. He was never sure how much of what he knew about Nico was off limits to talk about.

“I think he used to play it a lot but I’ve got a feeling he doesn’t anymore,” he said vaguely. “I don’t think he keeps the cards or game pieces around.”

Nico’s mouth dropped open in shock. “What? No, you’ve got to be wrong. He must have some cards somewhere.” He went back to rummaging around.

“No. No, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t,” Jason insisted.

“Impossible. Mythomagic isn’t something you just move on from,” said Nico indignantly. “It’s not just a game, it’s a lifestyle. Why back where—”

“I knew something was amiss when I suddenly started receiving offerings.”

Nico and Jason both started at the sudden voice booming behind them in the previously unoccupied space. Nico jumped up and spun around, narrowly missing banging his head on the edge of the bunk bed.

Hades stood at the far side of the room, draped in foreboding black robes that only accentuated his towering presence. It was the first time Jason had actually laid eyes on the God of the Underworld, and he was quite an imposing sight. He knew he’d technically fought alongside him in the Giant War, but Hades had not been terribly visible in the action and he’d personally been too busy staying alive to get a chance to really scope out each and every one of his divine fighting companions. Jason was used to the gods adopting a ‘normal’ appearance that allowed them to blend into modern society when they graced the mortal realm. Hades apparently didn’t feel like bothering. Or maybe he was just trying to make a strong first impression on his sort-of-but-not-really son. Jason wasn’t about to start guessing at how the gods’ inner thought processes worked. That sort of thing only ever resulted in headaches.

Nico’s eyes went wide and he immediately dropped to his knees, effectively overwhelmed by Hade’s godly aura. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but it froze half open. They’d failed to discuss exactly what would be an appropriate way for him to address the god. It was probably a little too soon to jump into calling him “dad.”

Hades smirked. “Well, well, a groveling Nico. Will wonders never cease.”
“Your…excellency—” Nico tentatively began.

“Yes, whatever. Enough of that.” Hades waved off the formal address and gestured for Nico to stand up. “Amusing as all this is I’d rather get down to business. I received your most interesting letter. Although let me assure you it was rather unnecessary. The differences are quite obvious.”

Nico’s face fell. He had obviously been hoping to be met with open arms and welcomed into the Underworld family as an indistinguishable replacement for his other self.

“Nico doesn’t send you offerings?” he asked, apparently offended that his counterpart had set a disrespectful precedence.

“No, thank Elysium,” replied Hades. “The last thing I need is to get pummeled on a daily basis with dollar menu hamburgers.” He made a face as if the very thought gave him indigestion. “Where that boy got his appetite from is beyond me. Clearly not from my side of the family. He does however occasionally send me down some pignolis from this one particularly fine bakery in Venice any time he’s in town. It’s not frequent but they’re appreciated. You should take note.”

“Um, I’m afraid he can’t shadow travel.” Jason reluctantly cut in. “So it’s not terribly likely that he’s going to be in Venice any time soon.”

Hades frowned. “Ah, yes, of course. More’s the pity.”

There was an awkward silence as Hades simply stood there, scoping Nico out and generally ignoring Jason’s existence. He tapped his foot and sighed. “Well, get on with it. I don’t usually make in-person calls. What do you want?”

“Well…we just thought you should know. What happened, I mean,” Nico replied tentatively.

“I noticed,” said Hades. “You’re obviously not my son—unfortunate happenings, yes. But what do you expect me to do about it?”

“You can’t fix it?” asked Jason.

Nico gave him a small kick.

“No, but you’re a god. You have magic and stuff.”

“Ah yes. ‘Magic and stuff.’ Very astute of you to notice.” Hades made air quotes with his fingers and rolled his eyes. “Well I hate to disillusion you, but my powers do not consist of an unlimited smorgasbord of whatever happens to be convenient. They are very specifically targeted to my job. Which happens to be keeping order in the Land of the Dead. If you require an army of reanimated undead warriors I might be able to help you out. But I’m afraid dimension jumping is off the table.”

He crossed his arms and snorted. “Hmm, who am I kidding, I love disillusioning people. Good times, that.”

Nico looked as if he were about to say something like ‘yeah I could totally use an army of undead warriors can I give that a test drive?’ Jason jumped in and cut him off before he had the chance. “But isn’t there something you can do to help?”

“Help.” Hades gave a dramatic sigh. “That’s always what you half-bloods are after, isn’t it? Constantly harassing us for boons. Do you have any idea what state the world would be in if we actually took the time to personally address every request and prayer that gets lobbed at us? The
plants would not grow. The sun would never move across the sky. Why, you wouldn’t be able
breathe right now, your precious air space would be smothered beneath ten feet of unprocessed dead
people if I didn’t take my work so seriously and ignore all your bratty requests. Is that what you’d
like? To drown in corpses just so I have a little extra free time to hand out favors?”

Jason quickly shook his head.

“That’s what I thought. Did you even stop to really consider why I’d bother to take time out of my
relentless and thankless schedule to respond to your little note? Did it not even occur to you for a
moment that I might need help?”

“You—?” Nico was too surprised to get his question out.

“Yes, me,” Hades snapped. “I’m the one missing a son, am I not? And might I remind you that
thanks to the pressure of my worthless oath breaking younger brothers,” he leveled a pointed glare at
Jason, “I haven’t got any extra ones to spare as replacements. Nico was it and I don’t appreciate
having him vanish into thin air.”

“So he’s really gone.” Jason’s mouth felt drier than it had a moment ago.

“I could sense his life force anywhere, be it in the mortal realm or below in my kingdom. I could
track his every movement, even in the depths of Tartarus.” Hades’ lip twitched in the tiniest flinch.
“Even when he’d repressed his vitals to a death trance I could still feel his life’s aura. I know he has
not died, for if he had I would have felt that clearly. I would know exactly where he was. No, a few
days ago his aura simply snuffed out, as if Nico had evaporated. That is not the sort of thing a father
enjoys experiencing. Now you have come to me with a ridiculous story to rival those silly fantasy
games he used to indulge in. Clearly you know more about the situation than I do. So what are you
going to do about it?”

Nico visibly bristled at Hades’ dismissive opinion of his games. “You do have a replacement,” he
said indignantly. “You have me.”

“A laughable proposition.”

“Hey!”

“I’ll admit, the physical resemblance is uncanny,” Hades said, completely ignoring Nico’s offended
objection. He took a few steps around the scrawny teenager, inspecting him like a piece of livestock.
“You could easily fool one with a less invested connection.”


“I don’t see how that is possible. Your life force is different. You do not embody any of my divine
attributes. You’re clearly unsuitable. You can’t possibly be my son.”

“No kidding,” Nico muttered. “My real dad is less of a pompous jerk.”

“Nico!” Jason’s mouth dropped open in shock as Nico recklessly insulted a very powerful and
temperamental god. “He didn’t mean that!” he said desperately to Hades. “He’s still adjusting to the
change and he’s been under a lot of stress!”

Hades ignored both of them. He stroked his neatly trimmed beard as he continued to scrutinize Nico.
“You claim to originate from some duplicate copy of this world,” he said slowly.

“Who’s the duplicate?” Nico said testily. “You guys are the duplicates.”
“So I exist there,” Hades continued.

“Well you do look a lot like my dad,” Nico admitted. “A lot taller though. Dad’s only like, six feet.”

Hades considered this. He snapped his fingers and in the blink of an eye shrank about a foot.

“Yeah, like that!” Nico pointed at Hades and looked impressed. “Now you totally look like him. Except for the duds. He’s more of a jeans and blazers kind of guy.”

Hades grimaced but waved his hand. His pooling robes retreated until he was left wearing a pair of extremely dark wash jeans and a black sports coat. He glanced down at himself and shook his head.

“This duplicate world is clearly an abomination,” he complained. “I look like I’ve just escaped from a nineties sitcom.”

“No you don’t, what you look like is my dad,” exclaimed Nico. “It’s so weird, you’re like identical now.”

“But your father is mortal,” Hades clarified.

“Last time I checked,” Nico confirmed. “I’m pretty sure he didn’t simply forget to mention being a god or anything like that.”

“So the resemblance must merely be coincidental. We cannot possibly be one and the same. I have been on this earth for millennia. I do not belong in any single epoch. I most certainly do not belong in a fragile and pathetic mortal body. This simply does not make sense.” He waved his hand and reverted his appearance back to one of towering darkness.

“From where I’m standing, it’s one dude being able to hang around for millennia without aging that doesn’t make sense. If anything’s weird it’s this place—Awesome of course—” he quickly interjected. “Totally awesome. But weird.”

“My correct Nico has long since outgrown his distasteful habit of referring to me as dude,” Hades sniffed. “I would recommend you strive to emulate that quality.”

Nico rolled his eyes. Jason noticed uncomfortably just how much he resembled Hades in the action.

“I do not like your proposed idea of godless worlds,” Hades said sternly. “I like even less the idea of my son being trapped in one. Whatever has caused it, it must be reversed of course.”

“That’s why we came to you,” said Jason.

“So you are trying to get rid of me!” hissed Nico.

Jason could just vaguely shake his head. Verbally denying that fact would undermine his progress with Hades.

“I do not have the key to change what fate has wrought,” said Hades with a frown. “This is the sort of thing that we gods must rely on mortals to solve. So I ask you again, what do you plan to do about it?”

“We don’t know!” said Jason in exasperation. “Can’t you at least give us some sort of magical device to help us? Or a prophecy for guidance?”

“Here’s a prophecy for you,” said Hades with a slightly malicious smile. “You’re both going to die. I give that prophecy to everyone, you know. And it always comes true. Sooner or later.”
“Not appreciated,” mumbled Jason irritably.

“There will be a rush of new Underworld occupants surrounding the upcoming holidays,” Hades continued. “It always happens. I could really use Nico’s help in keeping order during the influx. Unlike some people, my Nico is extremely talented and helpful. See to it that you have him home by then.”

“But—” Jason tried to object but didn’t get the chance. A shadow surged up from beneath the nearest bed and seemed to suck Hades into it’s swirling depths. He vanished in a flamboyant twist of darkness.

“Ugh,” said Nico immediately. “No wonder the other me got the hell out of Dodge. He’s awful.”

“He’s kind of surly,” Jason admitted. “But you two had been getting along pretty well lately from what I’d gathered. I think it’s just the stress of the situation that put him in a bad mood.”

“No excuse for being a jerk,” Nico muttered.

“Be careful what you say!” Jason tried to shush him. “The gods can hear you, you know. And they don’t take criticism very well. He could have incinerated you!”

“He wouldn’t have—”

“He really might have. Still might. Don’t ever openly insult the gods. Any of them.”

Nico frowned but didn’t argue farther. “This is messed up.”

“It makes you miss your real dad, doesn’t it?” Jason asked, hoping to steer Nico towards actually wanting to return home.

“Hardly,” Nico scoffed. “My dad’s only less of a jerk because he’s hardly ever around to be a jerk in the first place. At least that version has the excuse that his job is actually important. My real dad brushes me off over a bunch of stupid insipid celebrities. I’m sure he hasn’t even noticed I’m missing.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Oh its hella true,” Nico insisted.

“Well, I can say on good authority that the other Jason definitely misses you.”

Nico looked startled for a moment but his eyes then narrowed suspiciously. “Yeah, sure. He misses me so much that his counterpart is literally chomping at the bit to get rid of me.”

“I’m not—”

“Don’t bother. I don’t need to hear excuses. I get it.”

“No you don’t. Listen, Nico—”

“I’m pretty tired actually,” Nico announced. “We trained really hard today. You should probably go.”

“But it’s only eight O’clock—”

“Goodnight Jason.”
Jason found himself outside the cabin with a door in his face.

“You don’t get it at all,” Jason mumbled under his breath at the door.
When his phone started ringing Nico expected it to be Jason or Percy. Until he realized it was playing a ringtone he hadn’t heard before. The jarringly obnoxious tune of *They’re Coming To Take Me Away Ha-Haaa!* broke through the peaceful silence. Nico was pretty certain he didn’t want to answer it.

The name DR. COSTAS blazed on the screen.

“Oh no,” he muttered to himself. This was definitely not something he wanted to deal with. He was tempted to simply not answer. But then, if a doctor was unable to reach him they might resort to calling emergency contacts. The last thing he wanted was his dad being alerted that something was wrong.

He steeled himself and answered the phone. “Hello?”

“This is Dr. Costas’s office,” said a cheery receptionist’s voice. “You missed your appointment this morning and we wanted to check and make sure you were okay.”

“Oh…sorry. Yes, I’m fine. I ah, overslept.”

“Ah, I see. Well, he had a cancellation this afternoon,” continued the receptionist. “We could reschedule you for four thirty. Could you make that?”

“No, thought Nico. No, no no, oh Styx no. “…Yeah,” he sighed. “That would work.”

“Very good,” said the receptionist cheerfully. “We’ll see you this afternoon.”

He immediately did an Internet search for “Dr. Costas.” He was not even remotely surprised when the search revealed that he was a psychiatrist. Nico quickly jotted down the office’s address.

He’d barely put his phone away when it started ringing again.

“Oh for the love of Zeus,” he muttered, pulling it back out again. The name on the screen was no more of a welcome sight than the last call. It was as if his train of thought from a minute before had somehow summoned the very person he was worrying about.

“Hi…dad,” he said tentatively.

“No,” His dad’s voice was businesslike and alert. “I’ll be in town tonight for a client interview. I’ve made a reservation at La Grenouille for Eight O’clock. Dress appropriately.”

“Did it occur to you that I might already have plans?” Nico couldn’t help asking in irritation. He knew he ought to be trying to blend in as much as possible and avoid saying anything that might tip his dad off that he wasn’t his normal son…but he really didn’t appreciate being treated like a child.
“If by ‘plans’ you mean you were intending to watch marathons of *The Outer Limits* reruns with Jason until your brains run out your ears, then yes, I did take that into consideration,” came his dad’s terse reply. “The reservation is for three. You’ll have plenty of time for mindless TV after dinner.”

Nico scowled at the phone, simultaneously annoyed and impressed. Okay, so apparently his dad knew him pretty well.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll tell Jason. He’s coming.”

“Very good,” said Mr. di Angelo. “I’ll see you tonight.”

Nico closed his eyes and rubbed his temple after shutting off his phone. Today was going to be a train wreck.

Four thirty came all too soon. Nico stepped into the office waiting room in resignation. There were several large potted plants scattered among the chairs in the narrow corridor. The song *Margaritaville* wafted through the room from some hidden intercom system. Nico grimaced.

Luckily (or unluckily, he wasn’t quite sure yet,) the assault on his ears was short lived as the receptionist almost immediately called his name and waved him through the door towards the doctor’s office.

He wasn’t sure what he was expecting to find in the office, but he certainly wasn’t expecting it to be anything familiar.

“Chiron?!” he asked in shock as a very recognizable face swiveled to meet him.

The Chiron look-a-like raised an eyebrow. He certainly had the same face as Chiron. His legs and torso were strikingly human however. And there was no sign of a wheelchair anywhere. “It’s Kieron,” he corrected. “May I ask what has brought about this sudden desire to address me on a first name basis?”

“Oh…uh…um…” Nico’s mind raced for an excuse. Nothing was forthcoming. “You just seemed really familiar,” he said lamely.

“Well, I should certainly hope I seem familiar,” said Not-Chiron good-naturedly. “You’ve been my patient for several years now.”

“Right. *Of course*,” Nico said. “Of course. I know that.”

“You’re welcome to call me Kieron if it will make you more comfortable,” Dr. Costas continued.

“Okay,” said Nico, not sure what else to say to that. It most certainly did not make him feel more comfortable. If anything it had the opposite effect, since he would have to remember a name that was disconcertingly close to the correct one he knew, yet not quite the same. It was going to be incredibly easy to mess up and say ‘Chiron’ again by accident.

“Are you going to sit down?” prompted the doctor.

Nico hadn’t even realized he was still frozen in the doorway. He nodded and sat down on the overstuffed leather sofa across from Dr. Costas’s desk.

“So how have you been since last week’s appointment?”

“Um, pretty good.”
“Has anything happened that you would like to talk about?”


Dr. Costas gave him a scrutinizing look that clearly conveyed that he didn’t buy it. He didn’t press the issue though. Instead he asked, “How have things been with your father?”

“He’s bossy,” Nico immediately complained.

“Elaborate,” said Kieron-not-Chiron.

“Well,” said Nico, “Just this morning he called and told me with no warning whatsoever that he’s going to be in town and that I had to meet him for dinner. He didn’t even bother to ask how I was doing or anything, it was just like a command memo. He can’t even fathom that I might have other obligations and can’t just drop everything whenever he wants me to snap to attention.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I said I’d go but I was bringing someone with me.”

“Why did you agree to go?” asked the doctor.

Nico blinked. He wasn’t used to adults questioning other adult’s authority like that.

“Because I felt like I had to,” he confessed. “He’s my dad. And I don’t see him a lot.”

“Did you feel happy about agreeing to go?”

“Not particularly.”

“You are allowed to say no to your father,” Dr. Costas stated gently.

“Am I?” Nico asked in genuine surprise.

It wasn’t that Nico didn’t ever tell people like his father ‘no.’ But where he came from any act of defiance usually went in hand with absolute terror over what sort of divine retribution that defiance might incur. Getting smitten just because one of the gods was in a bad mood was a legitimate threat. Disagreements with Hades were certainly not something to engage in lightly. He generally saved his arguments for issues more important than dinner reservations. You know…more like saving your crush from being eternally incarcerated or the looming threat of an apocalypse.

“We’ve already established that your father has boundary issues,” explained Dr. Costas. “It is doubtlessly the result of having lost your mother and sister. Many people respond to such losses by attempting to tighten their control over their remaining loved ones. That does not however mean that you have to allow it. Although you share a common tragedy you are not responsible for your father’s feelings. You do not have to allow him to impinge upon your well being for the sake of his own happiness. Your first responsibility is to you. If you work at reestablishing those boundaries he will eventually learn to respect them and your relationship will only improve for it.”

“Oh. Um. Okay,” said Nico.

“If you do not feel comfortable outright refusing him, don’t forget that you can always stall,” said Dr. Costas. “You can make excuses that will give you enough time to think of a better way to refute him. Would you like to practice?”
“No, I…think I’m okay,” said Nico. “I think I’ll be okay telling him ‘no’.”

“Good,” said Dr. Costas. “I am of course not encouraging you to refuse him simply for the sake of being contrary. But you do need to take charge of your own life as you want to live it. Standing up to his controlling tendencies will be empowering.”

He opened up a manila folder that was on his desk and jotted down some notes.

“So,” he continued, his eyes casually scanning the file. “Have you made any progress with confessing to Jason?”

“Wha—what?” Nico choked.

“I’ll take that as a no,” said Dr. Costas lightly.

Nico didn’t say anything. He felt like he’d just stepped into a minefield.

So…the other him had a crush on Jason then, not Percy. He had already suspected as much. How could he not? Jason was obviously the center of Nico’s social life, his biggest source of emotional support, and just all around awesome to him. It was a natural progression. But suspecting was an entirely different matter from hearing it so bluntly stated by an utterly unexpected source. He would never, ever, ever have told Chiron that sort of thing. Had Nico really willingly shared all of his secrets with Dr. Costas?

Apparently yes.

His immediate instinct was to deny everything, but that would have been suspicious. So far the doctor hadn’t seemed to notice that Nico was different. He needed to keep that up.

“Did you even try to broach the topic, or did you avoid it entirely?”


Dr. Costas frowned minutely and tapped his folder with a pencil. “Of course you don’t have to do anything you do not want to do,” he said. “But I thought we had arrived at an agreement that you would benefit to work on confronting your anxieties.”

“It would just cause me more anxiety,” Nico said honestly. “Jason is straight. I don’t see any point in making things awkward by telling him something that he can’t do anything about.” He could as easily have been talking about Percy as Jason. Nico wasn’t even sure which one of them he was really talking about. Was he speaking for himself or for the Nico who had originally made this appointment? Did it even matter which one of them? His feelings were getting disconcertingly mixed up.

“From what you’ve told me about him, Jason seems like a very open minded and understanding individual,” said Dr. Costas. “I don’t think that being honest with him would result in a negative reaction or unnecessary tension. I think it would in fact reduce a great deal of the tension you have been dealing with.”

Nico tried to picture confessing to Jason. It was weird because he’d sort of already done so. But Jason had just been a third party observer at the time; he wasn’t the subject of the confession. He had taken the revelation of Nico’s secret surprisingly well. Would he have reacted different if it had been his own name Nico had spilled instead of Percy’s?

Just even thinking about it made his stomach twist into impossibly tight knots.
“It would make him feel bad,” Nico insisted. “He’d feel bad about making me feel bad, even though it’s not his fault that I like him that way and he can’t like me back. He’d probably start trying to set me up with people because he’d feel responsible for my happiness or some stupid noble idea like that. It wouldn’t be good.”

Nico cringed. He’d never considered this hypothetical situation until now but it was a little too easy to imagine once he let his mind stray down that path. He could just picture the guilty looks Jason would shoot him whenever he thought he wasn’t looking. All the awkward introductions he’d make, trying desperately to somehow ‘fix’ the problem of Nico’s feelings. He could see their friendship slowly corroding under the strain. No, absolutely nothing good would come from Jason knowing that sort of thing. He was already burdened enough by the guilt he carried over their mothers’ deaths. He immediately felt sorry for his other self. He didn’t blame him for staying in the closet.

“Has Jason actually explicitly told you that he’s straight?” Dr. Costas asked.

“Well, no, but—” Nico managed to catch himself before he could say ‘he has a girlfriend.’ The Jason he was hypothetically discussing didn’t. At least, Nico was pretty sure he didn’t. He hadn’t mentioned one, and Nico had been able to tell that Piper wasn’t even on this side of the country. He doubted they had ever met each other. If he’d had some other girlfriend, Nico was pretty sure Jason wouldn’t have had quite so much time available to spend on him. But he could hardly tell the doctor that he knew Jason was straight because a nearly identical duplicate of him in another universe was going steady with a girl that was miles beyond Nico’s league. “—I just know he is,” he finished pathetically. “I can tell he’s straight. He likes girls.”

“Not that I’m trying to generate false hope,” said Dr. Costas thoughtfully. “But it’s never a good idea to make assumptions about people. Liking girls is not necessarily an exclusive interest. I think it would benefit you both to have a very frank discussion about where you both stand. Coming out to him would be a healthy step, and one that does not necessarily need to involve a confession about specific feelings.”

Nico stared at Dr. Costas disbelievingly. Did he actually just suggest that Jason might want to go out with him? Was that feedback generic or based on an actual hunch? How much did he know? Had he actually met Jason? His heart was suddenly thudding uncomfortably. Why was it doing that? This whole discussion didn’t really concern him. It was the other Nico that had feelings for Jason. Not him.

Not him.

“I’ll think about it,” he answered vaguely.

“Please do,” encouraged Dr. Costas. “I know this issue has been causing you a lot of angst for a long time. I think it would be very good for you mentally to clear the air.”

Maybe, thought Nico in frustration. Except you’re telling this to the wrong Nico. I can’t just go around revealing all his secrets when he’s not around. And even on the ridiculously unlikely chance Jason was interested, it’s not me he’s interested in. What’s the point in clearing the air with someone who I’m just going to be leaving anyway?

It seemed kind of ironic to be trapped in a psychiatrist’s office like this. He felt like he could actually use one. But not for any of the topics that Dr. Costas was pressing him to talk about. Family problems were really just about the last thing on his mind. And he didn’t need someone pressuring him to come out to anyone. Especially not someone he’d essentially already come out to. It’s not like that would do him any good, would it? No, what he really needed advice on was his reality swap predicament. He wanted to confess how much he wanted to just let things be and not try to get back
to where he belonged. He needed to talk about the guilt he was feeling over his constant temptation to screw over that other Nico and abandon him to an unknown and likely violent fate…just because he was enjoying his new status as Jason’s best bro a little too much. Just because Percy’s unprecedented interest in him was a little too close to a dream come true. He wasn’t struggling with his anxiety right now so much as his own moral compass.

But he didn’t really need to talk to Dr. Costas about those things to know what he would say. What would Chiron have said? Chiron would have told him to ‘do the right thing.’ Chiron would have given him some speech about how heroes have to make sacrifices. Chiron would have said the exact opposite of what he wanted to hear, yet phrased it in such an inspirationally stimulating way that Nico would have been temporarily convinced that he actually wanted to take his advice.

“Nico?” Concern laced Dr. Costas’s voice.

“Uh, yeah?”

“Would you like to tell me exactly what you were thinking about just now?” asked the observant doctor. “You suddenly looked rather stricken.”


“Yes it is one of the more painful human experiences,” agreed Dr. Costas sympathetically. “Perhaps we should run through some stress management exercises.”

Nico did not particularly like the sound of that suggestion, but he nodded in agreement anyway.

“Close your eyes and picture yourself in a tunnel. It is dark and confining. But you are walking through it and as you emerge you find yourself in a place that makes you calm and happy.”

Nico closed his eyes and tried to follow the instruction but found himself at a complete loss.

He tried picturing Camp Half-Blood. It was arguably his favorite place he’d ever been. It had held so much promise and excitement when he’d first been brought there. But now painful memories of having to go on without his sister and of other campers making him feel freakish and excluded overshadowed much of the warmth he’d felt towards it. He tried instead to lock on to one of the rare fractured memories he’d reclaimed from his erased childhood. He attempted to picture himself in the house they’d left behind in Italy, or the hotel in Washington DC. Neither place could be called on without an immediate tsunami of sadness. It was impossible to extricate the happy parts of those memories without dredging up the losses they reminded him of as well…. Perhaps at one point his family trip to Split might have been a happy memory, but that had certainly been ruined by his more recent pilgrimage there…. The Lotus Hotel had been fun but it had robbed him of too much to qualify as a positive experience…. Maine had held no happiness for him…. While Hazel and Reyna were a highlight to visiting Camp Jupiter, the Camp itself wasn’t even close to his favorite place. It was hard to forget the way some of those campers had followed Octavian’s rally to execute him as a traitor.

By mere process of elimination, Nico was left picturing the Underworld. The Underworld was very far from being someplace Nico considered “happy.” It simply happened to have the advantage of not being loaded with tons of negative associations. He felt neutral about the Land of the Dead and in contrast to the rest of his memories that happened to come as a soothing relief.

*I don’t have a ‘happy place,’* Nico realized in shock. *How pathetic is that, I’ve been all over the world, yet the closest I can come to a ‘happy place’ is death.*
“Are you having difficulty?” asked Dr. Costas. “Your distress seems to have worsened instead of eased.”

Nico nodded. “I’m having trouble thinking of a place,” he admitted.

“It doesn’t have to be an actual place that you’ve been to,” advised Dr. Costas. “It could be somewhere imaginary. Perhaps just picture a beautiful meadow filled with wildflowers. Or imagine that you’re standing on a beach. That is a popular choice for people—the sensory cues that go with a beach are very relaxing. Picture the gentle motions of the waves lapping up against the shore. Imagine how the sand would feel between your toes. Take slow deep breaths and imagine the smell of the salt in the air.”

Nico didn’t actually try to follow Dr. Costas’ guides. But it was hard not to imagine the things he said as he vividly described them. Against his better judgment Nico pictured himself standing on a beach.

*Beaches reminded him of Percy.*

*Waves reminded him of Percy.*

*It was utterly impossible for him to smell saltwater and not think of Percy.*

He thought about how disappointed the original Percy would be in him for running away and hiding in this life he’d stolen from the other him. He thought about how he was stringing along the new Percy by pretending to be someone else.

The beach in his imagination turned stormy and violent.

*Storms reminded him of Jason.*

He began to feel ill.

“I can’t do this,” he said tensely, opening his eyes.

“Have you been taking your medication?” asked the doctor suspiciously.

“Uuhh…” He paused a little too long in answering. He should have just said ‘yes’ but the question caught him off-guard. He hadn’t known the other Nico was on medication.

“Nico,” said Dr. Costas. “I must remind you that any disruptions in a medical regimen will severely compromise its benefits to you. What’s more, it is not safe to simply stop taking medication of this nature cold turkey. You are at risk to serious side effects if we do not gradually reduce the doses before taking you off of it. I must urge you to follow your prescription and discuss with me first if you wish to stop taking your antidepressants.”

Nico just nodded. He had nothing to say to that considering the fact that he didn’t even know the name of the drug that he was allegedly taking. Side effects weren’t exactly something he had to worry about, considering that he had never actually taken any medications in the first place. But he could hardly say that to the doctor.

“Is there something else bothering you?” Dr. Costas pressed. “You seem…."

*Like an entirely different person?*

“…Well, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you this distant.”
“No.” Nico hoped he’d managed to be convincing. “I’m fine.”

Dr. Costas frowned.

Crud, thought Nico. *Shouldn’t have said that. ‘Fine’ is exactly what people say when they’re anything but fine. I’m not fooling anybody.*

“You do know that you can tell me absolutely *anything* and I will not judge you?” Dr. Costas continued. “This is a safe space.”

*Oh you will judge. You will judge me utterly crazy,* Nico’s brain nagged.

“I know,” Nico assured him. “But there’s nothing wrong. Probably just stress from school getting to me. I really am fine.”

“Well, I’m going to give you another copy of your prescription,” said Dr. Costas, scribbling on a pad. “Do be sure to take it regularly, per the instructions. And Nico,” he said glancing up and fixing Nico with a very sincere look. “Don’t hesitate to call me if you find yourself needing someone to talk to. Any time of day, do not worry if it is after office hours. If I am with a patient I will call you back.”

“Thank you…Kieron.” Nico took the prescription and shoved it in his pocket without even bothering to read it.

“I’ll see you next week then,” said Dr. Costas. “Same time as usual.”

“Yeah. Definitely.” Nico forced himself to walk calmly until he was on the other side of the office door. Then he practically ran out of the building.

“You weren’t actually planning on wearing *that,* were you?”

Jason stood at the door, his question accentuated by his own very sharp appearance. He had on a charcoal grey suit and a tie that was almost the exact same electric blue of his eyes. Nico had never seen him looking so groomed and formal before. He looked *good*—not that Jason didn’t usually look good—but right now he looked *striking.* Nico accidentally stared.

“But…we’re just going out for dinner,” he said, confused. “It’s not even a special occasion or anything.”

He hadn’t entirely disregarded his dad’s instructions to “dress appropriately.” He’d chosen a solid black t-shirt instead of one of the ones covered in macabre graphics. And he’d been careful to choose a pair of jeans that fit him well and didn’t have any holes in them. He’d even bothered to run a comb through his hair a couple of times. He’d thought he looked fairly respectable…until seeing Jason.

“The special occasion is the place your dad picked, it’s super swanky. They’re not going to let you into the restaurant like that,” explained Jason. “You’re required to wear a jacket at the very least.”

“I was going to wear my jacket,” said Nico, reaching for the comforting form of his well-worn leather jacket. “I just hadn’t put it on yet.”

“No way,” said Jason, diverting his grasp and steering him towards Nico’s bedroom. “That one’s not gonna fly.” There was moment of silence before he choked out a snicker. “Oh man, I didn’t even plan that one,” he said. “*Fly.* It’s an *aviator* jacket. Ha ha ha!”
“You’re such a dork,” complained Nico, too stressed about the looming and much fancier than expected dinner plans to appreciate lame puns.

“I know. That’s why you like me.”

Nico’s face immediately colored at Jason’s flippant retort.

*Does he know?* He wondered. *Does he know how Nico felt? Does he think I feel the same way? Is he thinking about that every time we hang out?*

Jason remained oblivious to Nico’s sudden flood of awkwardness. He began going through Nico’s closet without so much as a glance back, as if that were a perfectly normal thing for him to do.

“Here, you usually wear something like this,” said Jason, tossing Nico a pair of black slacks, a white button down shirt, and a black jacket. He switched to rummaging through his chest of drawers and pulled out a black tie covered in cartoon skull motifs.

Nico reluctantly changed and then glanced in the mirror. He hated having to wear things like button down shirts and slacks. The jacket had a military style to it though that he found he didn’t hate half as much as he expected. It looked a bit like his aviator jacket had been upgraded to an officer’s uniform. It wasn’t hard to see himself picking out the outfit. He felt inclined to complain anyway though, just on principal.

“I look like I’m going to a funeral,” he whined.

“No, you wear black shirts to funerals,” Jason said immediately. Then he winced, like he hadn’t meant to say that. “You look good,” he quickly tacked on, obviously trying to change the subject.

Nico felt himself blushing again. Hoping he wouldn’t notice, he turned away from Jason, pretending to notice some lint on his sleeve.

“You look better,” he mumbled, still staring at the non-existent spot on his jacket.

“Hardly,” Jason scoffed.

There was a long awkward silence.

“Right, so,” Jason finally said. “We’d better head over. This dinner’s probably going to cost twice what I spend on a whole week’s worth of food. It wouldn’t do to make your dad wait on us.”

“Lead the way to the firing squad,” Nico sighed.

Nico had never seen so many flowers in a restaurant before. Of course, he was fairly sure he’d never been to a restaurant with a dress code before, either. His past restaurant experience was sort of embarrassingly skewed towards burger and fries joints—and McDonald’s wasn’t exactly in the habit of strewing roses throughout their establishments. He fixed his gaze on the cluster of bouquets in the center of the table to avoid excessively staring at his dad.

The flowers on the table were out of season, he noticed. They shouldn’t have even been available from a florist. It must have cost a lot to stock the restaurant with them….

*How do I even know that,* he wondered.

*Probably Persephone’s influence.*
Hang on…is Persephone here? It suddenly occurred to Nico that he had no idea if he had a stepmom in this reality. Why hadn’t it occurred to him to ask Jason about that? That oversight had the potential of tripping him up badly in front of his dad.

Nervously he glanced up at The-Man-Who-Was-Not-Hades. It was really, really weird seeing him so out of context. He looked a lot like Hades. His voice sounded a lot like Hades. He even shared some of Hades’ mannerisms. But while the man sitting across the table from him was clearly very secure in his wealth and power, there was nothing divine or godly to his aura. Nico’s dad here was just a regular guy.

“So how is school,” the regular guy asked before taking a bite of his snapper tartare. (Nico had no idea what snapper tartare even was. But it definitely didn’t sound like something he’d willingly choose over a hamburger.)

“Fine,” said Nico. “Everything’s been the same as usual.”

“Job going well?”

Nico blanched. “Well…actually….”

Jason came to his rescue. “Nico decided to take a break from his job so he could focus more on studying.”

“Hmmm.”

Nico couldn’t tell if Mr. di Angelo’s ‘Hmmm’ was a thoughtful type of ‘Hmmm’ or the bad ‘I’m silently judging you’ type of ‘Hmmm.’ Considering that his dad was going to have to make up the difference in his lost finances, he was inclined to assume the latter.

“Perhaps you should consider an internship at one of my studios as an alternative. You would certainly learn more from it than from a retail position. I could make room for you in the Manhattan office.”

“Yeah, that might be cool,” Nico said automatically. The answer came easily because first of all he didn’t really expect to actually be sticking around long enough to have to go through with any plans discussed. Second of all, directly helping out his dad was what he was used to doing back where he came from. If his dad had a need for him in his business then it seemed like the natural order of things that they’d work together. Working at a recording studio certainly sounded easier than assisting in the Underworld, anyway.

Glancing to Jason and his dad though revealed that he’d apparently given the wrong answer. Jason was doing a poor job of hiding a cringe and Mr. di Angelo’s mouth had quirked up in bemused triumph.

“Well that is certainly an unexpected change of heart,” he announced. “I’ll get the paperwork ready before returning to DC.”

“Oh, um, okay,” said Nico, because he was unsure of how to back out of it now.

“It’s going to look excellent on your resume,” he continued. “And you’ll be exposed to a lot of very prestigious clients. The potential connections you’ll make will be invaluable.”

“Yeah,” agreed Nico unenthusiastically. “That’s, um. What I was thinking.”

“Speaking of which, Elsie Noel signed a contract with us today,” his dad said in a meaningful tone.
“She’ll be recording from our Manhattan studio starting next week.”

“That’s…cool.” Nico didn’t have the faintest clue who Elsie Noel was. She must have been someone already famous though for his dad to think this was worth mentioning.

“She commented on the photo of you I have on my desk,” he continued with a pointed smile. “She thinks you’re cute.”

“Oh.” Nico was at a complete loss for what to say. He did not like the direction this was going. He sank down in his seat an inch or two as if that would shield him from his dad’s attention.

“You should invite her to lunch when you start working there,” his dad said. “She’s just moved here from LA and isn’t familiar with New York yet. I’m sure she would love it if you showed her around.”

“We’ll see.” Nico attempted to dodge the matter. The thought of having to schmooze with celebrities sounded awful to him. The thought of his dad trying to set him up on dates with celebrities was a genuine nightmare.

He felt Jason suddenly grab his hand underneath the table and dropped his fork in surprise. The utensil crashed into his cheese soufflé with an embarrassingly loud clang.

Holy Hephaestus. Jason was holding his hand.

Why was Jason holding his hand? Did Mr. di Angelo’s suggestion make him jealous? Was there actually more between them than Jason had let on? Had the other Nico actually told him about his feelings before he’d disappeared?

He broke out into a sweat. Nico really, really wanted to look at Jason’s face and get a better read on what was going on. But he also didn’t want to draw his dad’s attention that something was up. Luckily if he didn’t act odd there would be no reason for him to notice. Thank goodness for the tablecloth.

Jason’s grip shifted and there was a tickling sensation on Nico’s palm. Slowly it dawned on him what Jason was doing. He hadn’t grabbed Nico’s hand to hold it. He was tracing letters onto it.

S-U-S-P-I-C-I-O-U-S Jason spelled out.

Nico tried to ignore the annoying twinge of disappointment he felt on the realization of his mistake.

I-K-N-O-W he traced back on Jason’s hand.

“What do you think Jason?” continued Mr. di Angelo. “That would certainly be something if Nico snagged a pop star for his first girlfriend, wouldn’t it?”

Jason looked at Nico with a deer-caught-in-headlights expression and then nervously looked to Mr. di Angelo. “Oh. Um…that would certainly be very…unexpected,” he stuttered. He glanced back at Nico with a very guilty look.

“You don’t think he could manage?”


Mr. di Angelo quirked an eyebrow. “Elsie Noel is a multi-million dollar A-List celebrity with three
songs currently on the top ten charts. Her last album went triple platinum. You don’t think she’s
good enough for my son?”

“Honestly? No.”

“Hmmm,” said Mr. di Angelo.

Nico prayed that he’d let the conversation drop there.

Jason proved that he completely lacked psychic ability though and plowed ahead. “I mean, she’s
probably a total diva and would expect all the attention to be on her all the time. I bet she’s really
high maintenance. Nico deserves to be with someone who would actually focus on him and not just
be self-absorbed.”

No, thought Nico in a panic. Jason, shut up. Why are you encouraging him to keep talking about
this?!

“Not all celebrities are high maintenance,” retorted Nico’s dad. “Granted, the down-to-earth ones are
in the minority, but they do exist. Elsie Noel has a reputation for being pleasant.”

“Maybe,” said Jason in an I-don’t-buy-it tone. “But she still just doesn’t seem like a good match. I
don’t think she’s Nico’s type.”

S-T-O-P Nico desperately scrawled onto Jason’s palm.

“Oh?” There was a glint in his dad’s eye that set off all kind of warning bells in Nico’s head. “I’d be
very interested in hearing your opinion on what you think Nico’s ‘type’ is. He tends to be quite tight-
lipped on the matter.”

N-O-S-T-O-P-S-T-O-P-S-T-O-P Nico was getting frantic.

Jason closed his fingers around Nico’s hand and squeezed tight, effectively stopping the frenzied
spelling.

“Uh,” he gulped. “I don’t—I don’t really know. I just meant that Nico’s—” he snuck another guilt-
laced glance at Nico and received a glare for his trouble, “—a very private person, you know? So I
don’t think a celebrity would be very suitable for him. No one famous would really be his type. Even
though, yeah, he could totally nab one if he wanted.”

“A fair assessment.” Mr. di Angelo smiled smugly.

“I wouldn’t want to date a celebrity,” Jason added. “It sounds like Hell.”

“And who would you prefer?” pried Mr. di Angelo, his smile widening.

Please, just let an asteroid hit this building, Nico internally pleaded. I can’t deal with this
conversation.

“I—uh—I—um—uh—” Jason shot Nico a strange look, then looked at his dad, and then back at
Nico. Then he riveted his eyes to his barely touched plate of food. “IHaveNoIdea,” he muttered to
his dinner.

“Interesting,” said Mr. di Angelo in a voice that was almost as smug as his smile. “I would think that
by your age you’d have at least an inkling of what you were looking for. But then, you do work very
hard for a boy your age. It’s very admirable how you manage to support yourself and still go to
college as well. Very admirable. I’m not surprised you don’t have time to dwell on that sort of thing. At least, not after all the time you dedicate to work and that you spend with Nico.”

An almost deafening silence fell over the table.

Jason nodded vaguely but didn’t break eye contact with his haricot vert. He still had Nico’s hand in a death-grip under the table. Nico wasn’t sure if the prolonged contact was for emotional support or because he was afraid that Nico would start silently cursing him out in letters the moment he released him.

“Well,” Mr. di Angelo broke the silence. “If you are looking for another supplemental job I can pull some strings to get you an internship as well. Just let me know if you’re interested.”

Jason looked up suddenly. “Thank you,” he said. “That’s very generous of you. I’ll definitely think about that.”

“You and Nico could work together,” said Mr. di Angelo. “I imagine you boys would like that.”

“Yes,” agreed Jason. “That would be pretty cool.”

“—Assuming Nico actually intends on following through with his internship,” continued his dad. “Which, quite frankly, I rather doubt he will. I find his sudden agreement highly suspect. Feel free to clue me in on whatever’s going on any moment now.”

Nico choked on his mineral water. “Nothing’s going on!” he spluttered.

“Yeah, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jason quickly added.

“Don’t take me for a fool,” said Mr. di Angelo with a sigh. “I might not be around much, but I can certainly tell when my own child is hiding something. What’s the problem? You’re not failing are you?”

“No, of course not!”

“You don’t have to lie to me if you are,” pressed Mr. di Angelo. “Grades can be fixed. We’ll get you a tutor.”

“School is fine!” Nico helplessly repeated. “I’m definitely not failing!”

“No,” agreed Jason. “His grades are higher than mine.”

“Well I certainly hope it’s not drugs,” his dad mercilessly continued. “Because I’ll be a lot less understanding if you’re getting involved in something like that. I have zero tolerance for recklessly dangerous behavior.”

“I’m not doing drugs!”

“He’s not!” Jason nodded vigorously to back Nico up.

“Hmmm.” Mr. di Angelo tapped his fork against the rim of his plate. “Well the only other thing I could guess this might possibly be about wasn’t much of a secret in the first place, so I’m not sure why you’re even attempting to bother with a charade. Really, I’m kind of dismayed that you seem to think I’d care. Do you really find me that judgmental? You should know that I have a ton of clients who are openly—”

Jason jumped up so fast he accidentally shoved the table. “HEY NICO,” he said in a voice that was
way too loud for the restaurant’s chic ambience. Nico noticed several customers turning to stare at them as the room quieted significantly. It made him want to melt into the floor. “I THINK THE FISH GAVE ME FOOD POISONING. CAN YOU SHOW ME WHERE THE RESTROOM IS?”

“Yes!” Nico joined him in jumping up a little too enthusiastically. “Right this way.” He began to walk away from the table. Jason quickly grabbed his arm and steered him in the opposite direction.

The restroom had a doorman who shot them a suspicious look as they entered together.

“Oh shit oh shit oh shit!” Jason leaned against the counter and scrunched his eyes shut. “This is a disaster!”

“You think?” Nico wasn’t sure whether to be more upset with his ‘dad’ for being so manipulative with his leading questions or at Jason for engaging him. “Just what the Hades was that anyway? What were you thinking?!”

“I’m sorry!”

“I didn’t ask if you were sorry! I asked just what the Hades were you thinking? Why would you encourage him like that?”

“I wasn’t trying to encourage him!” Jason exclaimed. “I was trying to discourage him!”

“Talking to him about it at all is encouraging him! You should have let the whole thing drop!”

“But he was trying to set you up! You didn’t actually want to go out with Elsie Noel, did you?”

“I don’t even know who the Hera Elsie Noel is! Of course I don’t want to go out with her!”

“I didn’t think so! I was just trying to put a lid on it before he could get too many ideas!”

“You were definitely feeding him ideas,” said Nico accusingly. “And they weren’t about Elsie Noel. Oh Styx did you see the look on his face? That was scarier than anything I’ve ever done with my real dad. And Hades has a Helm of Darkness that radiates terror.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jason miserably. His face had gone pale and even had a slightly greenish tinge to it. His invented excuse of food poisoning was almost believable. “This is all my fault.”

Nico sighed. Seeing Jason so distraught wasn’t exactly making him feel any better about the situation. “It’s not completely your fault,” he capitulated. “It was my fault he got suspicious in the first place. I shouldn’t have agreed to that internship thing so readily. I didn’t know Nico wouldn’t have wanted to do it. I was just trying to smooth things over by agreeing with everything he said, but that obviously backfired.”

“No, he was already suspicious,” Jason countered. “This is in fact totally my fault. He’s been on to me for a while.”

“What?”

“He should have just talked to me though,” Jason continued. “He shouldn’t have put you on the spot like that. And he definitely shouldn’t have tried to psyche you out in the middle of a restaurant. That was a seriously dick move. He’s not usually that bad. He should have just talked to me.”

“Talked to you about what?” Nico asked in exasperation.
Jason scrunched his eyes shut and pressed his hands against them. “Oh my god I can’t believe we’re doing this now. I can’t believe we’re doing it in a freaking bathroom. Oh shit. This is not how this was supposed to go.”

Nico’s nerves tightened in agitation. He’d never seen Jason (either Jason) this strung out before. It was extremely unsettling…and even more unsettling to know that whatever he was freaking out about had something to do with him. He’d watched his own Jason chug a goblet of poison with calmer reserve than this Jason was dealing with a botched dinner. What exactly was he about to tell him?

“Jason,” he said, attempting to not sound panicked. “What is ‘this’?”

“I should have told the other you first,” Jason continued to babble. “I’m sorry to dump this on you when I haven’t even told the Nico that should be hearing it. But now I don’t even know if I’m going to ever get the chance to tell him. And fuck does that suck. But maybe it’s for the best anyway, because now he won’t have to deal with this and—” he crossed his arms, fidgeted, and then uncrossed them. He clumsily slapped his hand down on the edge of the sink and began erratically tapping his fingers. He didn’t even seem to be aware he was doing it. “—Oh shit, here goes. Right. So. I sort of really like you? I mean, a lot. Like, more than is appropriate for friends. And I know you get totally weird about that sort of thing, so uh, please don’t freak out.”

Nico felt his mouth drop open but couldn’t seem to get it to a state capable of forming words. His chest felt tight and the room definitely seemed to have gotten several degrees warmer.

“What?”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry,” Jason frantically apologized. “This shouldn’t be your problem. I was going to wait and tell Nico as soon as he got back. I really was. I just didn’t want things to get ruined by awkwardness. But him disappearing really made me realize what a mistake it was I hadn’t talked to him. I should have. Considering even your dad’s been able to see through me for ages. I can’t believe he had to pick now to call me out on it.”

“Wait. Wait, are you serious.” Nico continued to gape. Jason liked him?!

Jason liked him more than a friend.

His stomach suddenly felt like he’s swallowed a bucket of live frogs.

“Yeah.” Jason was having trouble making eye contact with him. “I hope we can stay friends and stuff. I promise I won’t do anything.”

“Di immortales!” Nico dragged both his hands through his hair. “What the Hades am I doing screwing around here? I have to go. I have to switch us back.”

“Look, I wasn’t trying to chase you off.” Jason’s voice was dripping with hurt. “I’ll stay away from you if you want. I’m sorry—”

“I don’t want you to stay away from me!” Nico cut him off in a panic. “Why would I want that? Don’t you even think about avoiding me! You need to talk to the other me. Promise me you’ll tell your Nico what you just told me. I’ve messed everything up by being here. Gods, I’ve been so selfish—”

“You’re not upset?” Jason asked tentatively.

“I’m upset about a lot of things, but not what you just told me.”
“Wait, does that mean you—”

Like you? Nico’s heart thudded painfully. Did he like Jason?

How could he not like Jason. Jason was the most perfect person Nico had ever met. He’d always thought that. But before the perfection had seemed superficial. He’d seemed perfect in an on-a-pedestal way. But boy had he ever been wrong. Jason was actually perfect in a perfectly supportive, I-totally-get-you, your-day-is-instantly-better-because-we’re-hanging-out sort of way. While Percy had seemed perfect from a distance, the shine lessened the better Nico got to know him. But Jason only got better the closer he got. He was perfectly what Nico wanted and perfectly unattainable.

Because this Jason wasn’t meant for him.

“Don’t ask me that,” Nico cut Jason off. “Things are too complicated. It’ll only make it worse if you ask me that. Just swear you’ll talk to your Nico.”

Jason nodded.

“We’re not going to figure anything out trying to research the reality switch thing,” Nico admitted. “I need to stop wasting time and just try shadow traveling. I think the way home is somewhere in the nether. I just need to try to find it and hope that your Nico will show up when I do.”

“So you’re going to…?”

“Probably tonight. We should finish dinner though. It’s better if my dad isn’t involved in case it doesn’t work.”

Jason began to look ill again. “I know you can do it,” he said with more confidence than he looked. “You’ll figure it out and put both of you back where you belong.”

Nico tried to echo Jason’s confidence but felt a lot less certain about it. “Yeah,” he said shakily. “I’ll set things right.”

And by right, he really meant wrong. Because he’d be sending himself back to a world where he didn’t have a best friend, let alone a best friend with a crush on him. He’d never wanted to switch back less.

But it was the right thing to do.

He was always screwing himself over by doing the right thing. What else was new?

“Maybe we’ll watch a movie first though,” Nico added. “Just one last one.”

Jason’s smile was bright and genuine, and dripping with relief. “Yeah,” he confirmed. “That would be nice.”

The rest of dinner was extremely tense. Mr. di Angelo didn’t try to press the issue of secrets again, but he suspiciously watched every move Nico and Jason made.

The tension didn’t break with his dad’s departure either. A heavy silence clung to them as they made their way back to Nico’s apartment.

Nico changed back into the clothes he’d arrived in and got out his sword, although he left it on the coffee table instead of fastening it to his belt. He’d wait until he was actually leaving to do that. While Jason was picking out a movie he scribbled a quick note to his other self.
Hi.

Sorry about your job and the window. Jason has something IMPORTANT to tell you. Make sure he tells you. Seriously. Don’t let him pretend like everything’s normal. Percy Jackson from philosophy class invited you sailing. His number is in your phone. He’s been helping you study so act like you know him. You might want to turn his invitation down after you talk to Jason though. Just sayin’.

Good luck.

-Nico

P.S. Your dad is suspicious.

P.P.S. You should burn that dinosaur movie.

He frowned at the note, feeling like he might have left something important out. But he couldn’t concentrate. He had only a few hours left to spend with Jason and he didn’t want to waste any more time. He left the note on Nico’s bed and joined Jason on the couch.

He had no idea what movie Jason had put in, and frankly didn’t care. He was barely able to hear the dialogue over the internal static of his circling thoughts and pounding heart. This time when Jason sat inappropriately close he didn’t bother to shift away or ask him to move. He leaned into the comforting warmth of his friend and just tried to enjoy the closeness. Which was a new experience for Nico. Physical contact from most people made his skin crawl. But as he’d grown more familiar with Jason his comfort zone had shifted and expanded. He found that now he not only didn’t mind Jason’s touch, but it was something he actively wanted. The urge to wrap his arms around Jason nagged and tempted him, but Nico restrained himself. He couldn’t cross that line. Things were way too complicated already. He was leaving tonight and Jason belonged to the Nico that belonged here. He wasn’t going to let himself muddle that up.

No matter how tempting that might be.

He suspected that Jason was struggling with his own confused temptations, as the blond kept fidgeting and making spontaneous comments that didn’t seem to have anything to do with the movie (or anything else for that matter.)

The movie was over far too fast. They spent another hour or two making nervous small talk. Finally though, the time became noticeably late and they ran out of excuses to stall.

Nico anxiously ran his fingers over the hilt of his sword. It’s once familiar Stygian weight now felt foreign against his side after days of leaving it behind while he went to school and pretended to be a normal mortal.

“Thanks for helping me so much,” he said awkwardly.

“Of course.” Jason shrugged. “It’s nothing any friend wouldn’t have done. Thanks for…putting up with me.” He laughed uncomfortably.

“You’re an idiot if you think I was just putting up with you,” Nico snorted.

“Wouldn’t be the first time you’ve called me one,” Jason smiled.

“That I don’t doubt.”

“So…”
“Yeah.” Nico shrugged and glanced at the floor. “Guess I better get going.”

“…Yeah.”

Neither moved or said anything for a moment.

“Um…”

Nico looked up. “Yeah?”

“Um, well.” Jason pulled his hands out of his pockets and held them out, vaguely waving them around. “Would you mind if I…?”

“Uh, sure.” Nico didn’t move.

Jason was forced to take the initiative to clumsily close the distance between them. He threw his arms around Nico in a bruising hug. Nico closed his eyes and buried his face into Jason’s shoulder, his fingers digging into Jason’s shirt. It was simultaneously the best and worst feeling he’d ever had.

“You’ll find the way,” Jason mumbled as he finally broke away.

The loss of contact with Jason heightened Nico’s awareness of the brisk air still seeping in from the window. For the first time it bothered him. He felt more alone and lost than he had when he’d first discovered himself here.

“Guess—guess I’ll be seeing you around,” he choked. “Some version, anyway.” He nodded and turned before he could change his mind. The coat closet door hung open in front of him, a dark cluster of shadows lurking within its shallow depth. Nico plunged forward.

The chill of his living room was soon forgotten, sliced away by the biting cold of genuine nothingness. The air was thinner here and the darkness all-encompassing. Nico stumbled before finding his stride and forging ahead.

He felt a faint tug subtly drawing him through the obscured wasteland. His powers were working and he followed the pull. He could trust his instincts to lead him in the right direction through the shadows when he concentrated. In only a matter of steps he felt the draw strengthen and he emerged from the nether.

He blinked, his eyes adjusting. The room he was in was dark, although not as dark as the place he’d just exited. The sickly glow of a street lamp filtered in through a dirty window.

There were no street lamps at Camp Half-Blood.

Nico looked around frantically, already knowing from the sick pit in his stomach what he’d see. There before him was a note in his own handwriting, lying on an all too familiar bed. The note he’d written to himself a mere three hours ago.

It hadn’t worked.

He was trapped.
This chapter also has a sort of forced coming out situation (although not quite as forced as the previous chapter.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hm,” Lou Ellen frowned at Jason’s request. “You want to summon Hecate?”

Jason nodded. He knew his coming to Lou Ellen had probably seemed like it had come out of left field to her. They didn’t exactly know each other very well, and hardly any sane person would risk disturbing the Goddess of Magic on purpose.

“That’s dangerous, you know. She’s a bit more unpredictable than a lot of the other gods. I’m not sure she’ll take well to being bothered.”

“I know,” Jason agreed with a sigh. “But I think she’s the best person to talk to about the Nico problem.”

Lou Ellen considered that. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” She scratched her head and looked thoughtful. “Weeell,” she said, “She spends a lot of time in the Underworld. So that would be a good place to look for her. Or if you want to take your chances on trying to get her to come to you instead you could maybe try making her an offering at a crossroad or something. That’s my best guess anyway. I don’t really see mom a whole lot, she likes her seclusion.”

“I just talked to Hades last night and he wasn’t in a very good mood,” mused Jason. “He probably wouldn’t be thrilled to find me tramping through his kingdom so soon. Maybe I’ll try the crossroads suggestion first.”

“Good luck!” Lou Ellen grinned nervously at him. Jason could tell she was probably wondering if she’d just sent him off to his doom.

He supposed he could have tried with any intersection on Long Island, but Jason wanted to be really sure that Hecate listened to him. So he summoned Tempest and had his trusty steed fly him to Grand Central Terminal. If this wasn’t a crossroad, he didn’t know what was.

It was going to be much harder to get away with burning an offering in such a crowded public space, but then Jason hoped that the difficulty of the situation would help capture her attention.

He hid and waited until the early hours of the morning, when the trains and buses had stopped running and the swarming crowds had trickled down to nothing. The wide concourse was dark and spooky in its deserted state. And the guilt he felt for coming here without Nico’s knowledge only amplified his unease.

You’re trying to get rid of me. Nico’s accusation echoed in his head.

Jason positioned himself close to one of the massive stone columns on the concourse. He wasn’t sure if there would be any security guards here, but he wanted to take whatever feeble protection he could
get from potentially getting noticed.

“I’m just asking for trouble,” he muttered to himself as he pulled out a can of Sterno and lit the portable fuel canister. He gradually dropped several items he’d filched from the kitchen onto the small, contained flame.

“You most certainly are.”

A voice startled him before he’d even had a chance to begin reciting a prayer to summon the temperamental goddess. Jason nearly burned his fingers as he jumped in surprise.

“Hecate!” he gasped. A women in dark inky robes stood behind him, her pale alabaster skin faintly glowing from the light of the torches she carried.

“You were expecting someone else?”

“No! No, of course not. You just startled me because I hadn’t actually called for you yet.”

“You needn’t have bothered.” Hecate’s lip curled up in a barely-there smile. “As if I could resist such a lost soul at such a significant crossroads.”

“I thought it would be good to go to the largest one I could find,” Jason explained.

“I wasn’t talking about the terminal.”

“Oh.” Jason’s unease swelled and twisted.

Hecate paced around him, her animal companions zigzagging behind and effectively penning Jason in. He turned in a slow circle, trying not to let Hecate out of his sight. He didn’t trust her a single inch. She may have been an ally in the Giant War, but he didn’t doubt that her loyalties would turn on a dime if it suited her.

“So. Many. Decisions.” Hecate’s voice was sharp and clipped and her gaze was even sharper. Jason felt like a field mouse being eyed by a hawk.

“Actually, what I really have is a problem,” said Jason carefully. “I was hoping you’d be able to help me with it. I would be extremely appreciative.”

“You do realize that a problem as large as a war that threatens the very existence of all the gods is barely enough to sway me into participation?” Hecate reminded him. “And yet you expect me to be concerned over a single missing demigod. You certainly have nerve summoning me, young son of Jupiter.”

Jason gulped. “So you already know why I wanted to talk to you.”

“Among magic and other specializations, I’m also the goddess of necromancy,” she remarked. “And I hold Persephone in very high esteem, and so by extension Hades and his ilk. Aside from my own, children of the Underworld catch my notice more effectively then the rest of you prolific crossbreeds. Nico di Angelo has not escaped my attention.”

“And you know where he is?”

“Yes. I can see what has happened. And the many gateways to futures that could spiral out from it.”

“Is he in the world where the other Nico came from?”
“Yes.” She offered no further elaboration.

“Can you bring him back?”

“You assume that he wishes to return,” she said with an unkind smile.

“He doesn’t?” A cold stone formed in Jason’s stomach. All this time he’d just assumed that Nico would want the displacement to be fixed. But why would he assume that? The other Nico didn’t want to return. And his Nico had run away in the first place. Jason realized how much he’d been projecting his own feelings into his assumptions.

“Yes and no,” she said. “But mostly no. He’s found happiness there that he believes is out of reach in this existence. The thought of returning pains him greatly.”

Percy. A bite of jealousy underlay Jason’s immediate thought. He did not voice that aloud though. It did not matter that Hecate was probably already privy to Nico’s secrets. Jason still wasn’t going to betray them.

“Hades wants him to return,” Jason stated.

“Naturally,” replied Hecate. “But it is not Hades’ life that is at stake.”

Guilt lanced through him at that obvious truth. He was so desperate to get Nico back that he was trying to justify going against his wishes by sheer number of opposing feelings. But Nico’s feelings were all that should matter right now. He wasn’t being a very good friend.

“So…I guess I should just let him be then,” Jason said miserably. “I’m sorry for wasting your time.”

“What one wants and what one needs are not always congruent,” Hecate countered. “Nico’s desired path is not the utopia he assumes. Nor is it the choice that he consciously made.”

“Wait—” a spark of hope alighted in Jason, “—you mean he chose to come back?”

“He chose to try,” she stated. “His internal desires are undermining his ability to find his way back. He is caged by his own lack of conviction.”

“But you can fix that,” Jason said hopefully. “You can bring him back. Can’t you?”

Hecate’s form flickered and for a moment Jason thought he’d gotten double vision. He took off his glasses and hastily rubbed the lens on his shirt, hoping that would help. When he put them back on his double vision had split into a third wavering form. But in another second they’d slid back together and she appeared as solid as the stone column.

“It’s my nature to exist on more than one plane at once. As such, I may go where the other gods may not. I alone have the ability to reach Nico di Angelo. But—” Hecate built up Jason’s fragile hope only to shatter it, “without mortal cooperation I cannot simply intervene. My hands are tied by the laws of the gods.”

“But Nico doesn’t want to leave, so you just came to tell me that it’s hopeless,” said Jason.

“I came to tell you that you have some choices to make,” she corrected. “I was called here by the crossroads: you must choose which path you wish to take. You must choose what you are going to do once you take it.”

“But I’ve already done that!” exclaimed Jason in frustration. “I chose Camp Half-Blood. I chose to
spend time at both camps, but my heart and allegiance is with the Greeks. It’s where I belong.”

“Alas, if only each person only required a single major decision,” scoffed Hecate. “How simple life would be.”

A ring of translucent green doors oozed up from the circle Hecate had paced around Jason. He eyed them warily.

“Decisions are infinite and the future holds many possibilities,” she stated. “These are but a few of the more likely outcomes.”

Jason tentatively opened the door nearest him. Beyond it he saw Piper. She was in a room he hadn’t seen before, but it looked like one she would have personally assembled. There were touches everywhere that matched both Piper’s and his personality. It looked very much how he’d imagined their future home might be were they to stay together and get married. Piper was smiling, although she wasn’t looking at Jason. A shimmering green apparition of him sat behind her on a sofa, utterly absorbed in reading something. The scene was inviting yet simultaneously unnerved him. There was something just slightly off about their expressions. A disconnect.

Jason backed away and shut the door.

Behind the next door was a strikingly similar scene except all of the tranquility was gone. Jason and Piper were bickering over something. There were tears running down her face.

Jason shut that door even quicker.

The next door contained an even more disturbing tableau. Nico was sprawled on the ground, a chimera hunched over his prostrate body, a sword uselessly clutched in his limp fingers. Blood poured from an open gash across his torso. The beast leaned down and tore a gory chunk out of the streaming wound. Jason watched in horror as a phantasm of himself came running and cleaved the monster into dust. He dropped down next to Nico, frantically trying to staunch the bleeding, but the efforts were hopeless, Nico had clearly been dead before he arrived on the scene. That it appeared to be the other Nico, not his original one, did little to lessen Jason’s dread.

He felt nauseous as he shut out the vision.

Jason braced himself for another alarming scene of destruction. He felt thrown off when instead he was met again with a peaceful room. He sat on a sofa next to Nico. His arm was casually draped around the smaller boy’s shoulders and Nico was leaning against him, apparently fighting to stay awake. His heart clenched as he watched this Jason glance down and smile affectionately at the boy in his arms. He reached over and threaded their fingers together.

I want that.

The thought sprang into Jason’s mind unbidden. It was immediately followed by a lambast of guilt.

I can’t have that.

What about Piper.

That would hurt Piper. I don’t want to hurt her.

A heavy realization settled over Jason as he let that thought sink in.

Not wanting to hurt someone is different than actually wanting them.
Oh Styx.

I have to hurt Piper. I'm not being fair to her. I'll hurt her more if I keep this up.

Jason wrapped his arms around his torso, trying to contain the roiling of his insides at his awareness.

“I have to break up with Piper,” he whispered to himself. “I’ve been stringing her along because I’m too afraid to hurt her. But my feelings aren’t strong enough to justify staying with her.”

“Remember that these doors are only possibilities, not guarantees. I cannot promise to you any of the outcomes you have just observed. They are merely warnings,” advised Hecate.

In other words, breaking up with Piper doesn't mean I'll necessarily ever see Nico again, thought Jason numbly. And it doesn’t mean he’d want me like that. But it’s still something I need to do. He nodded.

“Like the Mist, reality is fluid and there is an ebb and flow between the worlds,” the goddess continued. “Right now Nico is fighting the current. If I am to help I need a mortal to change the tide.”

“How would I do that?” Jason asked.

“You simply must tip the balance by wanting his return more strongly than Nico’s own desire to stay.”

“That’s…it?” Jason was flabbergasted. “That’s all I have to do? I just have to want him to come back?”

“Do not trivialize the task young half-blood. Nico di Angelo’s passions run deep. It’s a very strong tide you must turn.”

Memories of the flood of emotions he’d absorbed from his friend when Cupid had exposed Nico’s secrets ran through Jason’s mind. He’d never felt emotions as simultaneously fiery and bleak as those that had radiated off the son of Hades. But that knowledge didn’t dissuade him.

“I think I’m up to it,” he assured her.

“We shall see. I’ll be watching,” said Hecate.

“How will I know if it’s worked?” asked Jason.

“Nico will return, obviously,” retorted Hecate. “I should think that would be blatant.”

“Yes. Of course,” agreed Jason. He was somewhat dismayed that there was no bar to mark if he’d failed. He’d apparently just end up waiting forever. “Thank you so, so much,” he added.

“I’m not doing this for you,” Hecate clarified. “I’m doing it for Hazel. Don’t expect me to so readily offer favors in the future. This was a one time deal.”

“Right,” agreed Jason. “Absolutely.”

A glimmer caught Jason’s attention and drew his gaze upwards to the ceiling of the concourse, which was covered by a mural of constellations. It was usually an impressive sight but right now the painted stars were glowing like the real thing. A shower of shimmering gold dust began to fall as the magically animated decorations dissolved into starlight. It was beautiful and unexpected and Jason couldn’t stop himself from gawking. When he turned his gaze back Hecate and her entourage were
gone. The only light left in the empty hall was the pathetically small flame of his portable campfire.

Jason was ashamed by how tempted he was to stall on going through with his decision. Walking to the Aphrodite cabin was scarier than any preparation he’d ever made for war. The look of distress he expected to see on Piper’s face would be more painful than any battle wound. Hurting her was the very last thing he wanted to do.

And yet right down to his core he knew that the longer he put this off, the more deeply she’d get hurt. His decision to end this might feel sudden, but it was a truth he’d been struggling with for a while now. He’d been pushing his insecurities about their relationship to the side, doggedly ignoring the gnaw of uncertainty that never quite went away, and trying his hardest to focus on the good things about being with Piper so that he could ignore the rest.

Because there were a lot of good things about being with Piper. Piper was quite frankly amazing and he knew anyone looking in from the outside would tell him he was utterly crazy. He honestly wasn’t convinced that he wasn’t crazy. But crazy or not he couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling of being manipulated that their relationship gave him. And he knew that if he kept trying to pretend that wasn’t a problem it was just going to poison things between them until there wasn’t anything good left.

It’s not you, it’s me. Jason bitterly let the cliché line run through his mind. It had never seemed more applicable. He would never actually say something so tired and impersonal to her, but it was the truth.

Why can’t I just let go of what Juno did? He asked himself for the thousandth time. Only the beginning was fake. Why can’t I move past that and live in the present?

Why couldn’t I have met Piper without Juno’s intervention?

Why has my life revolved completely around what other people want me to do?

…Why can’t I stop thinking about Nico.

He stood on the doorstep to Piper’s cabin for a good fifteen minutes before he dared to knock.

Lacy opened the door. “Hi Jason!” she greeted brightly. “Hey Piper! Jason’s here to see you!”

Piper’s smile was as unburdened and bright as Lacy’s…for about three seconds. The moment she made eye contact with Jason it slid off her face and her expression schooled into a stone wall. She could clearly sense what was coming. But she wasn’t about to make things easier for him by saying anything first.

“Hey…Pipes,” he said nervously.

“Hey.” There was an almost indiscernible tremble to her voice.

“We…well…I mean, I need to talk to you.”

She nodded but didn’t move. Her knuckles were white as she clenched the doorframe. The viciously pink décor of the cabin behind her was a cruel contrast to her desolate features.

Jason’s heart began to splinter. He hated himself for doing this to her. However he’d hate himself even more if he didn’t. He’d seen their potential future together. At the best they’d coexist but it would feel strained and artificial. At worst they’d end up hating each other. He didn’t want that and
he knew Piper wouldn’t either.

“Could we maybe…take a walk somewhere?”

“I’d rather not,” said Piper tersely.

“Oh. Okay…then. Right.” He fidgeted. “Right, so, um, Pipes—”

“Please don’t call me that,” she cut him off. “If this is going where it sounds like it’s going I’d rather you not call me that.”

“Oh. S-sorry. Piper.”

She stared at him with hardened expectation and his mind went completely blank.

“Yes?” she prompted.

“Erm, right. I just—I mean, I’ve been having some…emotional…issues lately. And—”

“Are you breaking up with me?” she cut to the chase.

“…Yeah.” He nodded lamely.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment, trying to stay composed. “Why?” she finally asked.

“Well…you’re really wonderful Piper. I mean it. And you’re really important to me. You really are. And—”

“If you really meant that I don’t think you’d be saying any of this to me,” she said quietly.

“But I do mean that. You’re crazy important to me, Piper. That’s why this is so hard. My feelings just, they aren’t quite right to keep up—” he gestured helplessly at the air between them. “—This. Believe me, it’s not your fault.”

“Is this because of Nico?” She rubbed at her eye.

“No—well—not exactly. Sort of—but no. I mean, he’s more of a catalyst than the reason. The thing with him made me examine some things that had already been bothering me. It’s because of Juno, really. She’s always been a problem. And I’ve been trying really hard to move past that. I really have. But I can’t.”

“Why not?” Piper’s calm reserve started to break. Her eyes were visibly wet now. “We’ve been together way longer than the fake time she tricked us with. Most of our memories are real. Why isn’t that enough?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t. I wish I could trust my feelings as solidly as you can. But I can’t. I’m sorry. You deserve someone who can love you more completely than I can.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’ve got that right.”

“I’m sorry,” he just repeated pathetically.

“Me too,” said Piper shakily.

“I know it’s not fair of me to ask this, but I’d really like to stay friends with you. Do you think—”
“I don’t know.”

“…Okay.” He nodded, trying to ignore the sharp stab in his heart. “That’s valid.”

Piper wrapped her arms around her middle. “I think maybe you should go.”

“Yeah.” His throat felt tight. Seeing her so distraught made him want to hug her, but he wasn’t allowed to do that anymore. This sucked more than anything he’d ever done. He took a clumsy step backwards and nearly fell off the steps.

He watched her quickly close the door and then walked away, barely even aware of his surroundings.

He felt weird. How was it possible to be simultaneously devastated and utterly relieved? It was as if he’d deliberately stabbed himself in the chest, but in doing so had released some horrible toxic poison that he hadn’t even realized had been building up inside him.

He hurt. And he felt guilty that he’d caused Piper to hurt. But above all he felt lighter and calmer and more in charge of his own life than he’d felt in years.

Without realizing where he was going he walked right past his own cabin and kept going to the edge of camp where Thalia’s tree towered over the magic boundary. He flew to an uppermost branch and sat down. His head felt clearer when he was up high and it was easier to think.

He had a lot to think about.

He’d just ensured that two of the futures that Hecate had shown him wouldn’t come to pass. Did that now make the remaining two more likely?

…Had he just increased the odds that Nico would die?

Neither of those possible futures had made sense. Why would the mortal Nico be fighting a chimera? He wasn’t a half-blood so he wouldn’t have to worry about attracting monsters. And he also wouldn’t get sent on a quest. Had Jason just seen the vision wrong? Maybe it was actually the demigod Nico instead. But that Nico was far too powerful to get taken out by something like a chimera. Jason couldn’t picture that happening—he didn’t want to picture that happening.

And then there was the other vision. Perhaps he’d gotten confused, but he had been fairly certain it was demigod Nico who’d been sitting on the couch with him, not the Nico who was actually interested in him. And that made no sense because that Nico had already made it very clear that he wasn’t interested in even being friends, let alone getting closer than that. And demigod Nico most definitely had feelings for someone else. Had he merely seen what he’d wanted to see?

Anyway, what would his original Nico do if he got switched back? It didn’t seem terribly likely that he’d want to hang around. He’d probably bolt the second his feet hit the ground, and Jason would be lucky to so much as catch a glimpse of him before he anonymously slipped away.

Could he be okay with that?

…Not so much.

He hadn’t been very okay with that before the switch. It had always bothered him that Nico had exiled himself. But he’d allowed Nico to do that. He’d taken his friend’s claims of wanting to leave at face value. Now he was less sure Nico had really meant it. Obviously he hadn’t actually been happy since leaving Camp Half-Blood or else he wouldn’t want so desperately to stay in the mortal
reality. And he wasn’t willing to let Nico disappear without getting real confirmation. If Nico left without talking to him, Jason would do whatever he could to find him. He needed to talk to him.

But would talking to him only make everything worse? Would Nico hate him if he realized that Jason was the one who dragged him away from the world that was making him happy?

His confidence flagged again and Jason questioned himself. Maybe his entire purpose was just to hurt people. First Piper, then Nico.

Was he doing the wrong thing, trying to get Nico back?

Why was he even trying so hard to switch them?

He tried to convince himself that it was because it’s important that the universe stay in balance. He tried to remind himself that according to Hecate, Nico himself felt that coming home was the correct choice. He tried to remember that Hades had outright said he needed Nico. That losing her original brother must be incredibly painful for Hazel. There were lots of rational and noble reasons that Nico needed to return home.

The problem was, those weren’t Jason’s reasons. Not if he were brutally honest with himself. Going right to the root of the matter, Jason simply missed him. He’d been missing him all along, but he’d managed to convince himself that everything was okay because Nico was doing what he wanted and he was determined to respect that. He’d felt a connection to Nico after getting that unexpected glimpse in Croatia into what had felt like his very soul. He’d wanted to see more and get to know him more and instead he’d barely even gotten a goodbye. He’d managed to push thoughts of Nico out of his consciousness and not think about how much it had hurt that he’d left. Out of sight, out of mind had become a lifestyle. But Nico wasn’t out of sight anymore and it was as if his mind were determined to make up for all the lost time.

It had taken an imperfect facsimile of what he’d lost to really galvanize his awareness of the void.

He missed Nico. And he didn’t only miss what he’d had before Nico had left. He missed what they hadn’t had. He missed the potential of Nico being more than just his friend. He wanted Nico not just to be back, but to be around all the time. He wanted Nico to want him the way he wanted Percy. He just plain wanted.

Did he even have a chance at any of that if Nico returned?

It was hard for Jason to picture. And yet, at the same time it was a little too easy to picture. It was easy to imagine only because he wanted it so much. What was harder to picture was it realistically happening.

More likely, Nico would greet him with an accusing glare that said silently why are you ruining my life?

More likely, he wouldn’t even get a chance to see that glare because Nico would melt into a shadow before Jason even knew he’d returned.

More likely, the hollow throbbing in his chest would just continue to worsen instead of getting better.

He wondered just what it was about the other reality that was making Nico so happy.

Did it have to do with Percy, like he’d instinctually suspected?

Or maybe he’d met someone else, someone who had nothing to do with Jason’s familiar worlds of
Camp Half-Blood and Camp Jupiter.

What type of person would Nico go for if he gave up on Percy?

Jason had no idea.

But it probably wasn’t hard for Nico to find someone. He was pretty amazing by half-blood standards. To a normal mortal he’d probably be intimidatingly cool. Jason could picture Nico with a whole fan club of new friends and admirers. He wanted to be happy for Nico by the thought, but really it just sent pangs of jealousy through him.

Or maybe it was simply the lack of interference by gods and monsters? It was hard to picture Nico existing without those. He was so good at fighting them. His finesse in battle and survival was a defining part of his identity…even the Nico who had grown up without that seemed overeager to jump into the fray of adventuring and battling monsters. Nico had the personality of a hero, whether there were monsters and quests around him or not. He seemed like he should be happier in a world that let him fulfill his heroic potential, rather than one where he just melted into a sea of mundane normality.

But maybe that mundane life really was more enjoyable than Jason suspected. He really wouldn’t know. Most demigods had a few years worth of living like regular mortals before the monsters started noticing them and they were forced to retreat to the protections of a demigod camp. Jason had been too young when he’d left home to have any memories of a life like that. The demigod struggle for survival was all he knew.

Well whatever it was, Hecate had made it clear that Nico was happier. If he really cared about Nico as much as he thought he did he probably shouldn’t interfere.

Except, the problem was, Hecate hadn’t told him he needed intention to bring Nico back. She’d said he needed to want him. No matter how much Jason convinced himself that leaving Nico alone was the right thing to do, that didn’t change his own feelings. He wasn’t going to sway his heart by logic. No matter how much he intended to leave Nico alone, he was still going to want him back. It wasn’t something he could so easily flip a switch on.

He felt like he ought to be able to do that. It seemed like the Roman thing to do. His disciplinary training of all those years at Camp Jupiter should have given him a better control of his emotions and desires. But then, there was a reason he’d turned his back on Roman life. He just wasn’t cut out for that kind or repression.

Whether Nico got his own wish or Jason’s was completely at the mercy of their feelings. And right now Jason felt no more in control of his own than a man fighting to escape a maelstrom in the middle of the ocean.

All he could really do is hope that whatever happened Nico might forgive him.

Jason wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed when he returned to camp and found the mortal Nico still there waiting for him.

It was harder now to be around him. Jason felt guilty that he’d snuck around behind his back trying to send him home when he didn’t want to go. He felt uncomfortable that Nico was so hell-bent to become a hero when he’d seen a vision of a future where his heroics had failed with deadly consequences. He continued to train Nico, but he was careful to never encourage him too much.

Several days went by. He fell into a routine of helping Nico practice in between his camp
obligations. This kept him pretty busy, and he did his best to stay even busier when free time sprang up. He was clinging to Leo a good deal more than usual in an attempt to stay distracted. Jason wanted to avoid having time to himself at all costs. When his mind got a chance to wander there was only one place it would go. And that place was painful and dwelling there only increased the chances of Nico getting sent where he didn’t want to go.

“Dude, you’ve got to snap out of it.”

Jason started to find Leo waving his hand in front of his face.

“Huh?”

“I know break-ups are rough,” said Leo, frowning, “but you’ve completely checked out to la-la-land. I want my bro back. What can I do? We need to get you over this. Wanna cruise for babes? I make a primo wingman. You’re pretty much guaranteed a date with the Leomiester in tow.”

“Oh, um, no thanks. It’s not the break-up that’s bothering me,” said Jason sheepishly. “I mean, I feel bad about it and all. But it’s not what’s been on my mind.”

“Really?” Leo’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “That’s not how it looks over here. You’ve been looking like you’re suffering from a first rate case of the Calypso blues. I know heartsick when I see it.”

Jason just shrugged and tried not to make eye contact.

“I find your lack of denial extremely interesting,” said Leo, now only a few inches from Jason’s face. “There’s already someone else, isn’t there? You’re totally moping over someone.”

“I’m not moping.”

“Sure you aren’t. And the sky isn’t blue, and I’m not awesome. Nice try.” Leo refused to back off. “Who is it? I can’t believe you haven’t told me! I’m so hurt, man.”

“You didn’t tell me about Calypso right away,” Jason quickly pointed out. “You have no ground to stand on there.”

“Well yeah,” scoffed Leo. “That’s because the thing with Calypso was super complicated. I mean, first off she was a goddess. Then there was the whole problem with her being trapped on an island that I wasn’t supposed to be able to find again. Not to mention the fact that she used to have the hots for Percy. I had to do some major sorting things out before it seemed like a good idea to advertise.”

Jason winced as Leo mentioned have the hots for Percy. That was something the object of their affections had in common.

Leo misinterpreted his reaction.

“Oh maaaan. You didn’t fall for a goddess did you?” exclaimed Leo. “That is just asking for trouble. It’s not Artemis is it? Please tell me it’s not Artemis. That’s a one way trip to miseryville right there dude, nothing good is gonna come of that.”

“Ew, gods no,” Jason said immediately. Aside from the fact that all of the gods and goddesses had an entitlement problem that majorly turned him off, Artemis looked like she was about 12—the disparity between her age and appearance made him extremely uncomfortable. Her habit of hating men wasn’t much of a turn on either. But then he realized how dangerous it was to have said that aloud. If Artemis were listening she would have taken that as an insult. The last thing Jason needed right now
was to make any gods or goddesses angry with him. “I mean, she’s definitely lovely, don’t get me wrong,” he quickly added. “But goddesses aren’t my type.”

“Then who is your type?” Leo continued to press. “You seem to like Aphrodite kids. It better not be Drew though. I swear, if you dumped Piper for Drew I’ll be morally obligated to kick your ass for her.”

“Seriously, what do you take me for?” Jason asked in dismay. “I’m offended that you would even think to ask that.”

“I take you for someone who isn’t going to dish with me unless I assume the worst and force you to defend yourself,” said Leo with a grin. “Who is it? I wanna knowoow.”

“I didn’t dump Piper for anyone,” Jason muttered. “I broke up with her because I didn’t see us having a happy future together. I still care about Piper. It just wasn’t working for me.”

“Whatever dude, you’re still moping over someone,” complained Leo. “I bet Piper knows. Maybe I should go ask her—”

“Don’t.” Jason panicked and grabbed Leo by the collar. “I already hurt her enough, don’t make this worse.”

Leo put his hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay, you make a fair point.”

“Look…I’m not moping over anyone,” Jason reiterated. “I’m just stressed out, okay? The Nico-thing is getting to me. I don’t think it’s good that they switched places, you know? I think they should go back where they belong.”

Leo’s mouth dropped open. “You’re moping over Nico?”

“I’m not moping!” Jason exclaimed in exasperation.

“Wow, talk about hitting the ball out into left field,” Leo rambled. “I sure didn’t see that coming.”

“There’s nothing to see,” Jason lied. “You’re reading way too much into this.”

“Uh, you might be fooling yourself,” said Leo, rolling his eyes, “but you can’t fool the love guru. It’s written all over your face in capital letters. Like seriously dude, you’re so smitten it’s painful to look at. I’ve been trying to ignore it but it’s getting annoying.”

Jason gave up arguing and silently banged his head against the table. It’s not like Leo was wrong. He just didn’t want to talk about it. What was the point when his situation seemed so impossible?

“Seriously, man?” When Jason finally looked up Leo was gaping. “You did not try nearly hard enough to refute that. Is it opposite day or something? Surely you’re yanking my chain.”

“Nothings going on,” Jason lamely retorted. He didn’t have the energy to make it convincing though. Lying wasn’t really his style: especially not to his friends.

“Oh duuuuuude,” Leo breathed. “You’re flippin’ serious. It is Nico, isn’t it? You have the hots for Death Boy? What the holy Hera, man! Since when are you gay?”

“I’m not,” Jason said weakly.

“So you’re not obsessively moping over Nico?” Leo asked incredulously.
“It’s…complicated.”

“Sounds pretty gay to me,” Leo announced.


“It wasn’t working because you have the hots for Death Boy,” Leo repeated far too loudly.

“Could you please stop saying ‘have the hots for’?” Jason pleaded. “It’s not like that. You’re creeping me out.”

“You’re the one creeped out?” Leo scoffed. “You’re not the one whose best friend just dropped the g-bomb on. Dude, have you been checking me out all these years?”

“No, gross!” Jason scowled at Leo.

“Aw, really? That hurts, man.” Leo slapped his hand over his heart and pouted. “Why not? I’m like, way cuter than Mr. Bones. Don’t deny it.”

Jason fought the temptation to start banging his head against the table again. He hadn’t really been aware of his feelings long enough to put much thought into what the experience of coming out would be like. But if this was a typical reaction, he didn’t really blame Nico for being so reluctant to tell anyone.

“It wasn’t working because you have the hots for Death Boy,” Leo repeated far too loudly.

“Could you please stop saying ‘have the hots for’?” Jason pleaded. “It’s not like that. You’re creeping me out.”

“You’re the one creeped out?” Leo scoffed. “You’re not the one whose best friend just dropped the g-bomb on. Dude, have you been checking me out all these years?”

“No, gross!” Jason scowled at Leo.

“Aw, really? That hurts, man.” Leo slapped his hand over his heart and pouted. “Why not? I’m like, way cuter than Mr. Bones. Don’t deny it.”

Jason fought the temptation to start banging his head against the table again. He hadn’t really been aware of his feelings long enough to put much thought into what the experience of coming out would be like. But if this was a typical reaction, he didn’t really blame Nico for being so reluctant to tell anyone.

“Can’t say I blame you for switching teams though,” Leo continued to blab. “I mean, considering Calypso’s already off the market, why even bother with girls? You already missed out, ha ha ha.”

“I’ve got something to do in my cabin,” Jason muttered, shoving his chair aside with the intention to get up.

“No, wait.” The smirk slid off Leo’s face. “I’m just messing with you. It’s cool. I’m cool. Can’t you see I’m cool with it? Cooler than a room full of Khiones.”

“You’re not cool with it.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Well, okay, yeah. I’m kind of majorly weirded out,” Leo admitted. “But dude, it’s been like five minutes. You kind of need to give me more than five minutes to absorb a bombshell like that. I will be cool with it.”

“I didn’t even want to tell you,” Jason complained. “You just had to drag it out of me and then make me feel bad about it. You think I don’t already feel bad? I’m like majorly confused here. And feel like the world’s biggest scumbucket for hurting Piper.”

“Poor Piper,” Leo agreed.


Leo shrugged. “Sorry bro. Can’t help it. I was sort of like majorly jealous of what you had with her for like, forever, man. And you do know that technically she was my friend first, right? I know it doesn’t seem that way, what with all the fake memories and stuff. But technically she outranks you on the bro-ladder. I can’t not feel for her, yanno?”

“Just keep rubbing it in, I’ve got all day.”
“I’m done.” Leo put his hands up in surrender. “I know you wouldn’t hurt her on purpose. It’s just… yeah. Still kind in shock. This is mega-weird, dude.”

“It’s not that weird.”

“It’s only weird because it’s you. Totally not the image you’ve been projecting all this time.”

“I wasn’t trying to project an image this whole time!” Jason said in exasperation. “Why can’t I ever get away from that? Why is everyone so obsessed with fitting me into boxes and on pedestals? I’m so sick of it. You don’t usually jump on that bandwagon.”

“The Leomeister doesn’t do bandwags.”

“You just did.”

“Sorry bro.” Leo shrugged. “That’s kind of a hard one not to get sucked onto. You’re sort of intimidatingly awesome, right? It makes an impression.” He coughed. “I said that off the record of course.”

“Everything sucks,” Jason muttered.

“I’m sure that’s an exaggeration,” said Leo, patting Jason on the shoulder. “So? Are you going to ask him out or what?”

“What? No.” Jason looked up in alarm. “Of course not!”

“Why the heck not?”

“Because for one, the correct Nico is probably trapped in another dimension. I hardly think he’d be able to get an Iris-message, let alone a face-to-face confrontation. Second of all, I’m like 130% sure that the second I mention my feelings to him he’ll take off like greased lightning and we’ll never see his face at camp again.”

“Legit risks. But you do want to go out with him, am I right?”


“Then what do you have to lose?” Leo egged. “It’s not like we were seeing much of his face at camp before all this happened anyway. He’s probably going to vanish whether you spill your guts or not. Might as well take a chance, huh?”

“You make it sound easy.”

“Because it is, dude. Do you have any idea how many girls have shot me down? A freaking lot. It’s not the end of the world. It’s worse not knowing if they would have said yes.”

But Nico isn’t a bunch of random girls, Jason thought. Nico is really really important. And fragile. I don’t want to add to the thing that makes him the most uncomfortable. I could totally alienate him. I couldn’t handle that.

He couldn’t even properly explain that though. Not without outing Nico’s secrets to Leo. Obviously not an option.

“It’s all a moot point, anyway,” Jason muttered. “The one I want to ask out isn’t here. I know the other one has an uncanny resemblance but he’s not the same person.”
“Yeah, I guess that’s true.” Leo shrugged. “But he is getting more and more like the real Nico every
day, don’tcha think? He’s really improved a lot since you’ve been training him. He totally seemed
like a hopeless case when he first showed up. But he’s getting pretty good. I’m not surprised he’s
questing already.”

Jason’s head snapped up. “Questing? What are you talking about? Nico isn’t questing.”

“That’s not what it sounded like to me.” Leo shrugged. “About an hour or two ago I overheard one
of the Hermes guys talking about a quest they were about to leave for. Nico was with him.”

“What?” Jason’s blood turned to ice.

“He had his sword with him,” Leo continued. “And a backpack. I don’t know if it was authorized
for him to go but it sure looked like he was going somewhere.”

Jason jumped up, kicking his chair over in the process. “Oh my gods,” he said in despair. “Oh gods
it’s happening.”

“What’s happening?” asked Leo in confusion.

“The wrong future! Where were they going?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t say that much.”

“I have to go.” Jason ran out of the room before Leo could object.

What should he do? Chiron would probably know where they were going. But Jason didn’t think he
could afford to waste the time it would take to find him. The second Nico crossed the camp’s borders
his life was in danger; especially if he were traveling with demigods, a.k.a. people who would smell
like an all-you-can-eat-buffet-for-monsters.

Nico wasn’t anywhere close to being ready to fight anything dangerous. He might have made a lot of
progress in his training, but he was still an amateur—an amateur without powers. Why would he be
so stupidly suicidal?

Jason took to the air, scanning the ground for any trace of Nico.

He saw the chimera first.

Jason’s heart leapt into his throat.

No, no, no, this can’t be happening.

He rocketed towards the ground, his pulse on overdrive and his blood rushing in his ears. The
chimera was in a crouching position, ready to pounce. He could see Nico a few feet away, his back
to the danger.

Please don’t let this happen. The inside of Jason’s head was a frantic tirade. Oh gods, please stop
this.

“Nico!” Jason screamed. He pulled out his sword but in his gut he knew he wouldn’t be able to
strike fast enough.

Time seemed to slow down as the beast sprang. Jason watched in horror as it arced towards his
unsuspecting friend.
Or maybe not so unsuspecting. Nico swiveled and thrust upward. His sword went out before the monster had a chance to redirect. The chimera sank onto the blade, effectively impaling itself before exploding into dust. All that was left of the horrific encounter was the gold spangled black metal.

Not bronze.

_The sword in Nico’s hand was black._

Jason hit the ground so hard he nearly teetered right into the outstretched weapon. Nico hastily stepped backwards, his eyes widening as recognition dawned.

“Jason?” he asked in surprise.

He could see Nico processing his change in scenery as his eyes swept over Jason. His eyes, which held the traces of all those experiences that Nico was _supposed_ to have had. Jason didn’t need the Stygian blade to know he was looking at the original Nico di Angelo. He could tell the difference instantly.

If he hadn’t just been terrified out of his mind and had taken a moment to stop and think, Jason probably wouldn’t have grabbed Nico and crushed him in a hug. He definitely would have been more careful and diplomatic in how he approached him, considering they hadn’t spoken in months if not years. Considering how stand-offish Nico had been when he’d left. Jason definitely would have taken a more tactical approach, designed to avoid scaring Nico away.

But right now Jason wasn’t capable of any thoughts except, _thank the gods, he’s alive._

“Jason?” Nico asked again. “What gives? It was only a chimera.”

He felt Nico’s sword slip out of his grasp and clatter to the ground.

_I should probably let go, thought Jason. Nico doesn’t like physical contact. He’s probably hating this. I definitely should let go._

Jason’s muscles wouldn’t obey his intentions.

“Sorry,” he choked out, his voice caught halfway between a laugh and a sob. “I’m sorry. I’ll let go in a sec. I will. I’m sorry. I just—”

He felt arms (strong ones, arms that had spent years wielding a sword and not just days) tentatively wrap around him and hug him back.

“—I _missed_ you.”

Chapter End Notes

Out of necessity, I’m going to have to change my pattern of POVs for the following chapters. You can expect a new perspective coming up. :-)
The Midtown Psychoboy

Chapter Notes

This fic now has art!! The super talented Caduceum drew this awesome picture of the awkward dinner scene in chapter 7. So cool. This seriously made me so happy. :-D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tourists were staring.

Nico jumped, almost as startled as the alarmed bystanders. One second he’d been standing next to a quiet farm road, and the next his senses were overwhelmed by the sounds of traffic and the flashing lights of dozens of billboards.

Times Square was not his favorite place under usual circumstances. Right this moment it was the very last place he wanted to be. How had he gotten here?

“That guy has a sword!” yelled a voice in the crowd.

Nico swung his head around frantically looking for a way to escape attention.

There were people everywhere.

A shrill whistle cut through the roar of noise. A policeman was heading right towards him.

Nico didn’t know if it was illegal to carry a sword in New York. Quite frankly, he didn’t want to find out. So he ran.

Times Square is not an easy place to run. Nico wove in and out, barely managing to avoid colliding into people. Creepy mascots blocked his path and he just missed getting caught by a giant purple bear wearing a sandwich board advertising cell phones. He didn’t know where he was going. He was too far from his apartment to run there. He didn’t have any money for the subway. He didn’t have a phone….

I’m so screwed, he thought.

But then a very familiar storefront caught his attention. A building with bright superhero posters lining its windows came into view: Midtown Comics was just down the street. It wasn’t the branch he worked at, but he knew several of the people who worked here anyway. There would definitely be someone inside who’d be willing to help him out. Or if not, they’d probably be willing to call his manager and she’d help him.

Nico ducked inside and ran up the stairs. He was not met with the warm reception he’d been hoping for.

“Woah, we don’t want any trouble!” A guy named Brian—someone Nico had known for years—went wide-eyed and put his hands up, backing away from where Nico stood by the door.

Nico frowned. He’d gotten the impression by the way he’d jumped locations that he must have been sent back to his own reality. But Brian was acting like he didn’t know him. What was going on?
“Dude, Brian, it’s just me,” said Nico nervously.

“Yeah—not reassuring.” Brian didn’t put his hands down. His eyes were anxiously riveted to the sword hanging at Nico’s waist. “What do you want? Dan isn’t here. He didn’t press charges, so everything’s cool. You already got even, and no one’s upset. I didn’t have anything to do with you getting fired, either. No need for more drama.”

“What are you **talking** about?” Fired? He’d been fired? Well wasn’t that great. How long had he been gone? Hardly a week.

Brian regarded him suspiciously. Several of the store’s customers had started staring.

Nico put his own hands up to put Brian more at ease. “I’m not looking for trouble,” he said carefully. “Would you mind reminding me what happened?”

“What’s up with the sword?” Brian asked, still suspicious.

“It’s just a cosplay prop,” Nico lied.

“So was the sword you broke Dan’s face with,” said Brian, “and I’m not keen on learning what that feels like. You should go.”

“Broke…Dan’s…face? What? Are you serious?” Nico was too shocked to try and play that off.

“Dude, if you think you’re going to convince anyone that that wasn’t you by acting like you don’t remember, nice try. A customer recorded it on their cell phone. You’re on freaking youtube. People who don’t even live in New York remember you doing that.”

“Seriously?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Oh..um. Oookay. Is Dan alright?”

“He has a broken nose and massive bruising. He looks like he got punched by a gorilla. If that’s your definition of ‘alright’.”

“Well…dang.” Nico wasn’t sure how to process that information. He was rather dismayed to hear that ‘he’ had done that…but not entirely as sorry as he could have been. Dan *was* his most annoying regular customer. Well, make that ex-customer. He was more sorry to learn he’d lost his job.

He set his sword down on the floor to put Brian more at ease. “Um, look. I’ve been having some, uh, issues this past week? But everything’s cool now. You don’t have to worry about what happened to Dan happening again.”

“Yeah, I won’t because you’re going to **leave**,” instructed Brian.

“Totally.” agreed Nico. “I will totally get the heck out of here. I just…um. Could you lend me a shopping bag and some subway fare? I’m kind of stranded.”

Now it was Brian who went, “** Seriously?**”

“Well I can’t walk that many blocks while open carrying a sword,” explained Nico apologetically.

“I thought you said it was just a prop.”
“Yeah…but it looks very realistic. Like you said, I don’t want any trouble, I just want to go home.”

“I can’t believe you have the nerve to come in here and ask for money,” complained Brian. “Didn’t you see what they called you on the Internet? You’re freaking ‘Midtown Psychoboy’ now. That shit’s bad for business. And you’re not content to just scare off our customers, you’re asking for freaking handouts?”

Brian’s reluctance to help him wasn’t as disheartening as it should have been. The fact that he was willing to argue with Nico meant he wasn’t as scared of him as he’d initially let on; that came as somewhat of a relief.

“Dude, it’s just $3.75. I’ll pay you back double that,” whined Nico.

“Ugh, fine,” complained Brian. “Fine, whatever.” He dug in his pocket and pulled out a wallet held together mostly by duct tape and made a show of extracting four crumpled dollars. “Just take it. You don’t have to pay me back. Just remember my extreme generosity the next time you go all Super Saiyan Psychoboy, ’kay?”

“Yeah, sure thing.”

“That’s your cue to leave,” said Brian.

“I still need a shopping bag,” said Nico, pointing to his sword on the ground. “So I can get that through the subway unnoticed.”

Brian rolled his eyes but went back behind the counter and tossed Nico a large bag. “Scram.”

Nico picked his sword back up and carefully wrapped it thoroughly in the shopping bag. He took longer than necessary just to make a point that he didn’t appreciate Brian’s unfriendly bossing. Which wasn’t something he would have had the nerve to do a week ago, he realized.

“Laters,” he said, waving to Brian as he left.

He heard a mumbled “Not if I can help it,” in his wake.

Nico had been taking the New York subway for years, but he rarely paid any attention to the experience. He usually did his best to keep his head down and not get in anyone’s way or catch anyone’s attention. After a week spent in a camp surrounded by nothing but utterly remarkable demigods, Nico was seeing everything in a new light. He watched the diverse swarms of people as they filed past him on the platform and rushed into the cars. Did any of them have any clue that there were whole other realities out there? Did a single one of those businessmen or hipster teenagers or hurried tourists have any idea that magic was real? Had anyone else here actually seen the things that Nico had seen?

Had.

Past tense now. He was definitely back. He was never going to become a demigod or a hero. He was never going to have a chance to be as cool or interesting as any of the people he’d met at Camp Half-Blood. He was never going to prove himself by battling a monster or going on a quest. The disappointment ran so deep it physically ached.

And yet….

He’d be lying if he didn’t admit he was also a little bit relieved. It had been scary to get ripped away from his home and everything he knew. What he’d gotten in exchange had seemed so amazing that
he thought the trade was worth it…but some of the losses had been things that weren’t replaceable. And he hadn’t realized how much he’d miss those things until they were taken away.

Like having a real best friend. That other Jason had been nice. At first Nico had thought that maybe he could seamlessly pick up his friendship where he’d left off with his original Jason—that delusion had been quickly dispelled. Jason’s double might have been nice, but he’d treated Nico like he had to walk on eggshells around him. There was an underlying current of nervousness and agitation whenever they’d interacted. Nico had hated that. He’d hated it even more than he’d hated the fact that Jason had a girlfriend. As if it wasn’t bad enough that he had to rub it in Nico’s face that Nico would never be what Jason wanted, but apparently he wasn’t even good enough to let his guard down around and comfortably hang out with.

Would his own Jason end up like that someday? He knew it was just a matter of time until Jason met some girl who would start taking his time away from Nico. Really, Nico was a bit baffled as to why that hadn’t happened already. Would he start acting differently when he had a girlfriend? Would he already be acting differently now? How had the switch around affected him?

Had Jason even noticed the difference?

Nico was scared of the answer. He was scared that Jason hadn’t noticed. He was scared that he had noticed and liked the new Nico better. It was so easy to imagine him preferring the replacement. Nico-the-demigod was about a millions times cooler than Nico-the-now-jobless-student could dream of being in a kajillion years. What did he have to offer in place of a guy with superpowers?

He was so lost in thought that he nearly missed his stop; the trip home had passed quickly. Nico knocked on his landlady’s door.

A middle-aged woman wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt and cut-off jeans opened it.

“You’d better be knocking to invite me to a party and not to tell me you’re having more issues with the plumbing,” she said good-naturedly.

“Uh…neither,” said Nico. “Sorry to bother you Ms. McGuin, but I accidentally locked myself out. Could you let me into my apartment?”

“Sure thing, hon.” She disappeared inside for a moment and then returned holding a ring of keys.

Nico followed her up the stairs, hoping she didn’t ask about the odd shaped package he was carrying. Some days his landlady could get invasively chatty.

She opened the door. He waited for her to turn around and leave. She didn’t turn around.

“The window’s broken!” she shrieked in dismay.

“It’s—what now?” Nico tried to peer around her and see inside. It hadn’t even occurred to him that his apartment wouldn’t be exactly the same as he’d left it. Which in retrospect he realized was naïve. His job certainly hadn’t stayed in the state he’d left it. Why would he expect his home to remain intact?

Why would he expect his friendship with Jason?

He gulped, afraid of what else he’d find once he stepped inside.

“You should call me immediately when something like this happens!” Ms. McGuin was lecturing. “How long has it been broken? This is a safety hazard for the entire building! I certainly hope you weren’t planning on trying to replace it yourself without me noticing. There are regulation standards I
have to follow!”

“Oh. Uh. Sorry! Sorry, sorry, it just happened. I was definitely planning on telling you. I just, um forgot, in my panic about getting locked out.”

“You can add the bill for the repairs to your next rent check,” she said sternly. “I’ll call for a repairman in the morning.”

“Yes, Ms. McGuin. Sorry again. Thanks for letting me in.”

“Kids these days,” she muttered, shaking her head as she trudged back down the stairs.

Nico went inside, bracing himself for some other unexpected disaster, but the rest of his apartment appeared to be in its usual order. He carefully went through each room, checking his shelves and cabinets. Nothing was missing. Nothing else was broken. The only evidence beside the window that someone had been here was the fuller state of his laundry basket and the emptier state of his fridge. To Nico’s even greater relief, his phone and wallet and keys all remained exactly where he’d left them on his dresser the day he’d been pulled away. He picked up his phone, his immediate instinct being that he should call Jason and tell him he was back.

Something stopped him before he could hit send on Jason’s number.

Would Jason be happy at the news?

Would he be disappointed that Nico was his old self again?

Would he be scared of Nico now, like Brian had been?

Seeing Brian react to him so fearfully had been unnerving. Nico had never been close to Brian—he was more of an acquaintance than a friend—so the change in attitude was hardly devastating to Nico. It wasn’t exactly a good feeling, but overall he hardly cared what Brian thought about him. But what if Jason looked at him that way too? It would crush him.

Nico set his phone down and picked up his laptop instead, doing a search for ‘midtown psychoboy.’

The video was a little too easy to find, and the number of views it had was downright alarming. Nico watched in wide-eyed amazement as his double virtually defied gravity while attacking his target. It had hundreds of comments, many from people he actually knew.

“Well, shit,” he muttered to himself and flopped backwards on his bed. “How am I supposed to measure up to that?”

It was weird to think that another version of himself had been living in his apartment this whole time. And trying to blend into Nico’s life (apparently with poor success as shown by the video.) Was that Nico now back at Camp Half-Blood being frustrated by the things that he’d done while he’d been staying in his place? Was that Jason terribly relieved now to be rid of him?

He figured he probably ought to check his email. He probably had hundreds of messages to sort through and deal with. He probably had a scary amount of missed school assignments he needed to get started on. He didn’t feel like dealing with any of that yet though. He didn’t want to trade in sword training for email and homework just yet. He didn’t want to feel like his amazing experience hadn’t really happened.

His phone buzzed.
Nico’s heart sped up as he reached to check his messages. He already knew who it would be from: only one person texted him regularly.

**Jason:** Hey, my shift’s going to end early and I’m starving. Want to hit up that new diner around the corner from you? [7:42 PM]

It wasn’t the only message. Scrolling back, Nico could see that Jason had been texting him constantly the entire time he’d been gone. He seemed to be clued in about what had happened.

*Just now Jason thought he was inviting the other Nico.*

He forced down a lump of jealousy.

_Stop it,* he chastised himself. *This is good. It means he won’t think you’re crazy. It means he wasn’t so freaked out that he wants to avoid you. This is good.*

What should he do? He wanted to say yes. He wanted to see Jason *really* badly. He wanted to tell Jason about all the crazy things he’d seen. He wanted reassurance that his entire life wasn’t just going to be a long slide downhill now that the coolest thing that had ever happened to him was over.

But telling someone about all the crazy things he’d seen would be officially accepting that they _were_ over.

And what if he walked into the diner and saw disappointment flash across Jason’s face as he recognized which Nico he was?

As if saying no was even an option though. Nico wasn’t capable of saying no to Jason. Not when Jason was paying attention to him. He would probably agree to hike all the way to California without any shoes on if Jason asked him to.

**Nico:** That would be cool [7:45 PM]

The response was almost instantaneous.

**Jason:** Awesome! I’ll be there at 8:30. [7:45 PM]

**Nico:** K. See you soon. [7:46 PM]

Nico got up and started fussing around his room again. He decided to change his clothes. If there was any possibility that Jason might consider him a downgrade, then the least he could do was make sure he softened the blow by looking good. Except he discovered that all of his favorite clothes were now in his dirty laundry pile. Other-Nico might be a first rate superhero, but his superpowers apparently did not include doing laundry. Nico scowled. “Gee, thanks, self.”

He decided to keep the jeans he was already wearing and settled on what could only be described as his seventh favorite shirt. He combed his hair and briefly considered taking a shower, but then decided he didn’t have enough time. He did have enough time to brush his teeth though.

*Why am I doing this?* He asked himself as he brushed. *I’m just going to eat something and render this pointless. Why aren’t I capable of seeing Jason without brushing my damn teeth? Why can’t I let go of the stupid hope that someday he’ll give me a reason to have brushed them? You finally got definitive proof that he’s straight. It’s never going to happen, Nico. Stop trying so hard.*

He took a deep breath and forced himself to step away from his mirror and get ready to go. He felt nauseous from emotional overload. Too much excitement mixed with disappointment mixed with
anticipation mixed with fear. The last thing he wanted to do right now was to eat something.

It took ten minutes to walk to the diner. Jason wasn’t there yet. Nico sat down at an empty booth and tried to focus on the menu. He couldn’t concentrate though, every five seconds his head jerked up, checking to see if Jason was walking through the door yet.

_Had Nico given himself away in the way he’d worded his text? Had Jason figured out it was him? Was he stalling because he wasn’t the Nico he’d intended to have dinner with?_

“Stop being stupid,” Nico said to himself.

“Who’s being stupid?”

Jason had somehow managed to slip in when Nico wasn’t looking. He jerked his head up at the painfully familiar sound of his voice.

“Nothing!” he squeaked.

Jason was grinning, but his grin faltered as his eyes connected with Nico’s. “Nico?” there was a catch to his voice.

Nico’s stomach sank. _Here goes. He’s unhappy it’s me._ “Uh—yeah. Nico here. That’s me. The old me, that is.” He let out a strained laugh.

Jason hadn’t moved. His eyes were raking all over Nico’s body. “Oh my god, Nico, it’s actually you,” he breathed.

“Um, yep,” he confirmed awkwardly. “I guess…I guess you probably noticed that I was…um, different the past few days. Huh?”

Jason answered by all but diving into Nico’s booth and strangling him in a hug. “I was afraid you were dead!”

The reaction caught Nico entirely off-guard. He’d been bracing himself to get pushed away or at best treated with cool indifference. But instead Jason was hugging him so tight it was hard to breathe. Distantly Nico’s mind took note of the fact that they were in a very public place and the publicity of this display of affection ought to be bothering him. But having Jason’s arms wrapped around him felt way too right for him to manage to care. He closed his eyes and breathed in the familiar scent of Jason’s body wash and shampoo. For the first time he wasn’t sorry to be back.

“Oh my gosh,” Jason was rambling. “Oh my gosh you’re actually here. Nico tried to go back but he couldn’t. We thought you were stuck. I can’t believe you made it back. I’m so glad you’re okay. I was afraid you got eaten by a monster!”

“You might not want to say that so loudly,” Nico mumbled, amused in spite of himself.

“Like I care what anyone thinks,” dismissed Jason. “They can think I’m nuts if they want. I’m too relieved to give a damn.”

He was also apparently too relieved to give a damn about what people were probably thinking at the sight of two guys sharing a very intense embrace in the middle of a diner. It had definitely gone on much longer than could pass for a heteronormative greeting. Nico kept waiting for Jason to break it off but he didn’t. Well, he didn’t until a waitress walked over to their booth. Then Jason sprang backwards as if Nico’s skin had turned into hot coals.
Nico awkwardly ordered a hamburger without even bothering to check the menu. Jason asked for the same thing, avoiding Nico’s eyes.

“Sorry if that was weird,” Jason apologized.

The light giddy feeling the hug had given Nico wavered. Jason thought that was weird? Was he already regretting doing that?

“No, it’s cool,” said Nico.

He waited for Jason to get up and slide over to the other side of the booth. He stayed put.

“So, how did you get back?” Jason asked. “How long have you been here?”

“I have no idea!” Nico exclaimed. “I had sort of just sneaked out—I was going to follow some demigods—” he glanced at Jason, gauging his reaction. He had no idea how much he knew or if the demigod thing had been explained to him. Jason didn’t look surprised by the statement. “—on a quest. And I was just standing there by the edge of the camp, and suddenly I went from being in Long Island to being in the middle of Times Square. It happened a few hours ago.”

Jason’s mouth twitched downwards as Nico finished his explanation. Nico could practically read what he was thinking: *A few hours? Why didn’t you call me?*

“And you didn’t do anything at all to cause that?” Jason said instead.

“Not that I’m aware of,” said Nico. “I mean I hadn’t done anything the first time either. I was just making breakfast…I kind of doubt my toaster acquired magical teleportation abilities all of the sudden.”

Jason laughed. “Well, it probably wasn’t you. The other Nico had thought that he’d caused it. He could do this thing where he used shadows to travel places—he thought that was the source of the issue. But then he was less sure when he tried to replicate it and it didn’t work. He said he was going to keep trying though. Maybe it finally worked.”

“He must have been pretty…cool,” said Nico, frowning at the reminder of all the unbelievable stuff that the demigod version of him could do that he couldn’t.

“He was very interesting,” Jason agreed.

“Are you sorry he’s gone?”

Jason’s eyes were on him and his expression more guarded than Nico was used to seeing. He sort of regretted asking that. Although not really, because the question was eating him up too much.

“Not exactly,” Jason stated. “I mean, I liked him and I am sorry he’s gone. He was cool. But if he hadn’t left, I wouldn’t have you back. And I really wanted you to come back.”

Nico could feel an almost physical weight dissolving from his shoulders. But he was hesitant to put too much stock in Jason’s words. He was sort of obligated to say something like that, wasn’t he? Just because he said that didn’t mean it was how he really felt.

“He was cooler than me though,” Nico protested.

“Not really, he was just different. He could do cool stuff but his sense of humor was kind of broken. You’re more fun.”
“Yeah, the other Jason was kind of the same way too.”

Jason leaned closer to him. “What was he like? The other me? I heard he had lightning powers.”

“I think he did!” said Nico, regaining some of his excitement to tell Jason all about his experience. “Although I didn’t see him use them. He was mostly using his sword to fight—which he was totally amazing with. And he could fly! I got to fly! He just scooped me up like I didn’t weigh anything at all and flew me all the way from the city to the demigod camp. It was so. Cool.”

“Uh, wow. That’s—”

He was interrupted by the waitress returning with their food. Jason immediately closed his mouth and leaned back away from Nico until she walked away again.

“That’s pretty crazy,” he finished. “Although for the record, you don’t weigh hardly anything.” He gave Nico a concerned once over.

Nico shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny. “That’s not true. I think you’d be surprised by how much I weigh if you actually tried to pick me up.” He made a show of shoving an entire handful of French fries in his mouth. It’s not like he didn’t eat. It wasn’t his fault he had a high metabolism.

For a moment there Jason actually looked like he might rise to the bait, and Nico questioned how smart it had been of him to issue such a challenge in the middle of a diner. It would be pretty embarrassingly awkward if Jason tried to prove him wrong right now. But Jason didn’t get up. He just shrugged and said, “Hm, maybe. Tell me more about everything.”

“You had tattoos,” Nico added, enjoying the look of surprise on Jason’s face. “And you were kind of ripped.” Nico felt his own grin waver a little as he disclosed what was probably a little too much information. That made it sound like he was in the habit of checking Jason out (which he totally was, but he thought he’d been pretty successfully discreet about it till now.) Had he made Jason uncomfortable? Jason totally looked kind of uncomfortable now. Damnit, why did his stupid brain let him say things like that?

“What kind of tattoos?” Jason asked, pointedly not commenting on the other half of Nico’s disclosure.

“Well, your background was Roman, even though the place I went was full of Greek demigods,” Nico explained. “So your tattoos were like a Roman thing. There was an eagle and the letters SPQR. And a bunch of stripes, it wasn’t explained to me what they meant. But I think it had to do with the Roman stuff too.”

“What was I doing at a Greek camp if I was Roman?” Jason asked curiously.

“I—I don’t know, actually.” Nico frowned. “You didn’t tell me. Maybe because your girlfriend was Greek?”

“Girlfriend?”

Nico internally winced. He was being a complete masochist by bringing that up. Maybe it would make Jason start thinking harder about the fact that he didn’t have one, and how easy it would be to fix that. Was he deliberately trying to sabotage himself?

“Uh, yeah. You had a girlfriend. She was pretty much the prettiest girl at camp.”

Jason’s expression turned thoughtful. Nico waited for him to ask for lots of details about her.
‘Prettiest girl at camp’ was kind of vague. He’d probably want an actual physical description. Not to mention to know what her name was and what her personality was like.

All Jason actually said was, “Huh. Weird.”

Nico wanted to say ‘How is that possibly weird? Of course you were dating the prettiest girl around. What’s weird is that you don’t have a knockout girlfriend now. I’ve never understood that. You’re the most desirable guy in the entire state of New York, it makes no sense at all that you’re single.’ But encouraging the topic was also the very last thing he wanted to do. So in his self-interest he bit his tongue and took a bite of hamburger to fill the silence.

“So are you sorry to be back?” Jason finally asked after a long span of awkward chewing.

“Yes and no,” he answered honestly. “I wish I could have stayed there longer. I was learning really cool stuff. You were teaching me to use a sword and how to fight. I wish I could have learned more of that. And I saw a gryphon and wow, that was awesome—you killed it by the way! After it attacked you and took a huge chunk out of your arm, it was so badass—but I didn’t get to see much else like that. I was hoping to get to see a dragon or something else amazing! There was one of those at the camp even! But they wouldn’t let me anywhere near it because its job was to eat people like me. And that would have sucked. Although I heard there were also things like manticores and stuff, which would have been cool to see too! But—” he chewed on his lip, unsure how to say what he wanted. “—But I’m really glad to see you again. So it’s also a relief to be back.”

Jason smiled and the warm expression only reinforced what he was feeling.

“Even though I’d probably get eaten if a gryphon attacked me?” Jason laughed like he found the idea funny, but Nico could tell that he felt slightly insecure at the comparison to his demigod doppelganger.

“Don’t worry, I have a sword now, I’d fend it off,” Nico joked. “But, uh, yeah. Totally. You’re way preferable. The other Jason…well, his eyes were really sad. And he seemed stressed out all the time. And most of all, I think I made him uncomfortable. I bet he’s really glad to be rid of me now.”

“If that’s true, he’s crazy,” said Jason with a frown.

“No, he’s totally sane. I’m sure it was really annoying to have a defenseless newbie tagging along and needing to be taught everything. He had to be pretty patient with me. And I took up time he could have been spending with—well, with someone else. You know.”

“Well his loss is my gain,” announced Jason. He fixed Nico with an intense stare. “Nico,” he finally said. “Um, Nico I—” his mouth hung open for a moment, as though he’d lost his train of thought. He stabbed at a French fry with is fork, but then didn’t bother to eat it.

“Yeah?” Nico wasn’t sure why he suddenly felt really nervous. He wasn’t used to Jason looking at him quite this seriously. Usually when they hung out they were joking around, or mutually griping about things.

“Oh, um.” Jason pulled his fork against the side of his plate, dislodging the speared French fry only to impale it a second time. “I was just thinking…” He trailed off again, staring at some fixed point behind Nico’s head.

Now Nico felt tight with anxiety. Jason was visibly distressed, and Nico had no idea why. What had he said to cause the shift in demeanor? Had he offended him somehow?

“Yeah?” he pressed again.
“Oh. I was just thinking that…um, it’s only like, 9:10. We could totally fit in an *Evil Dead* movie or two tonight. If you wanted to.”

His words came out rushed and nervous sounding, and Nico got the distinct impression that it hadn’t been what Jason had meant to say. He felt vaguely disappointed at the anticlimactic response. But at the same time fairly grateful for the quick return to normalcy. Watching movies with Jason was definitely one of the good sides to being back.

“Only two?” Nico challenged. “I bet we could make it through at least three if we have enough soda to keep us caffeinated.”

“You’re on.”

In retrospect, staying up until nearly 3 AM on his first night back, when he was already way behind in his classes from absenteeism probably wasn’t the best idea. Nico would have been struggling to keep up even if he was well rested. As it was, not only was it completely hopeless to follow anything going on but he could barely so much as keep his eyes open enough to fake paying attention.

It had totally been worth it though. Hanging out with Jason all night had felt really great. His fears that what had happened might have damaged their relationship were mostly assuaged. There were still some moments that had gotten sort of weird, but they’d been in the minority. For the most part Jason had acted as if nothing had happened and Nico was grateful for it.

He was also grateful to find that his notebooks were filled with an impressive addition of notes that hadn’t been there when Nico had left. Apparently his double hadn’t thrown him under the bus as badly as Nico had thought. He’d expected to be farther behind in his classes than he actually was.

“Hey Nico.”

In his foggy and sleep-deprived state Nico was caught completely off-guard by a figure apparently waiting for him as he exited his class. He looked up in surprise to find someone who he’d barely even been aware of until a few days ago.

“Oh…hi…Percy.” He might not have even remembered his name if Percy hadn’t acted so familiar and defensive of him at Camp Half-Blood. Why was Percy waiting for him here though? He’d never even spoken to this version of him before.

“So I was just wondering what kind of deli meat you like,” Percy said brightly. “I’m trying to plan out what type of sandwiches to pack for our trip. You don’t have any food allergies do you?”


“Yeah, I was just going to do something basic like turkey or ham or something, but then I remembered when I was a kid I had this friend that thought turkey was totally gross and wouldn’t sit next to me in the cafeteria whenever I had that for lunch so I thought maybe you might have some extreme aversion and I should probably ask. Or maybe you’d just prefer something else, like, I don’t know. Salami maybe? Or olive loaf. Have you ever even had olive loaf? I haven’t, it looks weird. Though not as weird as this one time when my mom got a ham for Easter and dyed it blue. You should have seen that, it was awesome, ha ha.”

“Uh—what?” Nico just dumbly repeated. He was totally lost. Why was Percy offering to make him sandwiches and rambling as if they talked all the time? Had he suddenly fallen into another reality again?
“I could just make peanut butter,” Percy offered, the confidence in his voice wavering. Apparently Nico hadn’t given him the reaction he’d expected.

“Um, I’m fine with anything. But um—what’s this for?”

Percy’s face fell. “Going sailing? To Montauk? I thought you said you wanted to go this weekend? It’s—it’s okay if you changed your mind. That’s cool.”

Percy’s face didn’t look like he found that idea very cool at all. In fact he’d suddenly transformed from beaming cheerfulness to a picture of anxiety.

“Oh. Uh, no, that still sounds fun,” Nico quickly recovered, feeling guilty for upsetting someone he barely even knew yet was being so friendly to him. “I didn’t change my mind. I just stayed up really late last night and my brains a bit…fuzzy right now. My memory gets kind of bad when I’m tired.”

Percy nodded knowingly. “Yeah, I kind of got that. You must have pulled a couple of all nighters last week in order to forget where you lived.”

Well. Now Nico knew how his other self had managed to find his apartment.

“Yeah,” said Nico, playing along. “I’ve totally been overworking myself lately. I apologize in advance if I forget anything else. You should probably give me all the details again.”

“Well, a sailing trip is totally what you need then,” announced Percy. “It’ll be super restful. I’ll text you the directions to the dock later. Or you could just meet me at my place and we can go together.”

“Okay,” agreed Nico. He had no idea where Percy lived, but figured he could probably figure that out easily enough with the Internet.

“Sweet,” said Percy. “I gotta get to my next class. But feel free to hit me up for studying again if you want!”

“Okay,” echoed Nico. Studying? Just how much had Nico been hanging out with Percy in his absence?

“See you this weekend!” shouted Percy, waving as he trotted off.

Nico pulled out his phone and discovered Percy’s number was already added to his address book. He apparently had a new friend now that he hadn’t actually made himself. Maybe Jason knew something about it. He decided to text him and ask.

Nico: Dude, the weirdest thing just happened. [10:11 AM]

Jason: Yeah? Do tell. [10:15 AM]

Nico: Do you know a guy named Percy Jackson? [10:15 AM]

Jason: I think so. He was in my freshman writing class maybe? [10:16 AM]

Nico: Well he was waiting for me after class and claims I’m going sailing with him to Montauk this weekend. Did you know about that? [10:17 AM]

Jason: No. [10:17 AM]

Nico: Kind of came out of nowhere. I didn’t think he knew I existed. [10:17 AM]
**Jason:** Are you going to go? [10:18 AM]

**Nico:** Well the other Nico apparently made plans with him. I think it would be weird if I went back on them. He seemed really disappointed when I got confused about it. [10:19 AM]

**Jason:** Of course. [10:19 AM]

**Jason:** So... [10:19 AM]

**Jason:** It's Percy Jackson, huh? [10:19 AM]

**Nico:** It's Percy Jackson what? [10:20 AM]

**Jason:** Nothing. Don't worry about it. [10:20 AM]

**Nico:** Jason? [10:21 AM]

**Jason:** For the record, I know from class that he's miserable at poetry. I hope he doesn’t recite any to you. [10:25 AM]

**Nico:** What? Why would he?? o__0 [10:25 AM]

**Jason:** No reason. Just sayin’ [10:30 AM]

**Nico:** You’re being kind of weird. Is something wrong? [10:30 AM]

**Jason:** No. Hey, I need to go into the subway. Will lose reception. Cya. [10:31 AM]

Nico stared at his phone in utter confusion. What the hell was that about? Jason had sounded annoyed. Why would he be annoyed over Nico going sailing with someone he hardly knew? Had he already made plans with Nico for the weekend? If he had he would have told him about that the night before though, right?

Did Jason hate Percy? No, he’d never mentioned him before. If Jason and Percy had some kind of feud going on Nico couldn’t imagine that he would have been unaware. He was pretty sure he knew all of the things that upset Jason, and he’d never even once mentioned Percy before. Anyway, it was hard to imagine Jason actively hating anyone. It just seemed against his very nature. Nico was the one with a weakness for grudges, not him.

So then...just what the hell had that been about?

Had he simply imagined that Jason was being tetchy? Was he just overanalyzing things? Nico reread the exchange a few times. He was definitely not imagining things. Jason was being super weird.

He was tempted to text back asking yet again what was wrong, but decided against it. He didn’t think it would help his situation any by being too needy. He’d probably just annoy Jason and put him in an even worse mood. Maybe if he gave him some space the whole thing would blow over and things would be back to normal the next time he saw him.

Okay, so apparently ‘giving Jason space’ was a lot easier as a theory than as a resolution Nico could actually stick to.

He’d meant to leave Jason alone for at least the rest of the day. That shouldn’t have been too hard,
right? He’d gone lots of days without seeing Jason. He’d certainly had more Jasonless days in his life than days with his best friend (and hopeless crush—not that he’d admit the latter out loud even under pain of death) considering that they hadn’t even met until he was what? Ten or eleven? If he could survive eleven years without Jason Grace then he could certainly leave the guy alone for a single afternoon. It shouldn’t even be hard.

…But those eleven years hadn’t been on the tail of a cryptic message from Jason that obviously implied that he was upset about something. Nico had been practically unraveling with relief just a few hours before at the fact that Jason was treating him as if nothing had happened. Now it was clear that something had happened. And he couldn’t even tell if the source of Jason’s weirdness stemmed from himself or from the other Nico. The only thing that was clear was that things had changed between them, just as Nico had been afraid. And until he figured out just how bad the damage was, Nico wasn’t going to be able to concentrate on anything.

He kept replaying the previous night in his mind, searching for some clue to what might be wrong. Jason had seemed so happy to see him though. Had that been fake?

Nico didn’t believe that Jason could fake the happiness that had been shining in his eyes when they’d locked gazes in the diner. It had seemed too genuine. And Nico was definitely not mistaken about that. He’d replayed the moment in his head at least eighty bazillion times; it was seared into his memory. He couldn’t so much as close his eyes without seeing Jason’s radiant expression of affection boring into him. He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about how it had felt to have Jason clinging to him as if he were afraid to let go. Oh god, just remembering it made him feel embarrassingly gooey. Jason hugging him like that was easily one of the best moments of his life.

But then Jason had apologized and implied it had been weird.

Was that what this was about?

Was Jason on to him? Had he found out his secrets from the other Nico? Did being around him now make him uncomfortable because he knew Nico was gay?

He hadn’t wanted Jason to find out from someone else. He’d meant to tell him eventually, he really had. But it was just so goddamned scary. Jason meant so much to him. He couldn’t have stood it if coming out to him had ruined their friendship. And now it seemed that his fears had been valid.

He needed to figure out how bad the damage was. He wasn’t going to be able to sleep until he knew.

And so, against his better judgment, Nico found himself loitering outside Jason’s Social Justice seminar.

Jason looked startled to see him. For half a second Nico actually thought he might run away. Jason didn’t, although his arms went up, folding protectively across his chest like some sort of barrier against Nico-cooties.

“Hey,” said Nico awkwardly.

“Hi.”

“So…” said Nico, hardly daring to look Jason directly in the face. “I was thinking it might be cool to hit up the IFC tonight. I heard they have an Australian flick about zombies playing. It sounds kind of awesome. You game?”
Jason fidgeted. "Um, sorry. I have to work until 11 tonight."

"Oh." Nico struggled to not let his disappointment show. "Well. We could just go grab some coffee or something before you head home."

"I—I can’t," said Jason. "I really have to catch up on my homework. I’ve been getting a little bit behind."

"Oh. Um, sure. That’s fine." He very nearly added ‘Hey we can study together’ but caught himself before the words escaped. He knew what Jason’s answer would have been, because this wasn’t about studying. He was making excuses to avoid him. He could see it in Jason’s uncomfortable and guilty expression.

The realization felt like a punch to the gut.

"I have to get to my next class," said Jason.

"Of course," said Nico hollowly. "I don’t want to hold you up."

"Sorry," Jason just mumbled. He turned and walked off, not even bothering with a ‘cya’ this time.

Nico waited for Jason to retreat from view before slumping against the wall and slowly sliding down to the floor.

*Jason was avoiding him.*

What had he done wrong? What had changed since just the previous night? Why had Jason acted so normal—no, not simply normal, but warmer and more affectionate than normal—only to take it all back and give him the cold shoulder?

A sharp gnawing pain took root in his chest.

*This couldn’t be happening.* He hadn’t wanted to come back. He’d known there was no point. He’d been sure that anyone here he’d miss more then they’d miss him back. His gut had told him that he was better off just letting go of all this and moving on to a life where he could be cool enough and self-sufficient enough that he wouldn’t need anyone. His instincts had been right. There was nothing for him to come back to here except for pain. Why had he been sent back? What had been the point of showing him a better life if he was only going to get thrown back into a downgraded version of the one he’d left behind? Was it all some cruel joke?

The corners of his eyes felt hot. Nico pushed himself off the floor and stumbled out of the building. He didn’t want anyone to see him cry so he began to run.

He still had two classes that afternoon, but never mind them. There was no way he was going to be able to stand staying at school. He needed to get away from his classes. He needed to get away from people. He needed to get as far away as possible from *Jason.*

He ran the entire nine blocks back to his apartment, although he hesitated before sprinting up the steps. It suddenly occurred to him that his landlady might still be there with a repairman. The last thing he wanted to do was have a complete emotional breakdown in front of Mrs. McGuin and a random glazier. And a complete emotional breakdown was definitely coming. He was just barely holding himself together by a thread and it was only a matter of minutes until his grasp on it broke.

A glance at the busy street made him change his mind. Falling to pieces in front of Mrs. McGuin was probably preferable to falling apart in front of some twenty strangers. He was better off taking his
chances.

Luckily, his fears were unnecessary. His apartment was blessedly empty. A brand new window was solidly in place and no trace was left of the people who’d installed it. Nico collapsed on the couch and stared blankly up at the ceiling.

Jason is avoiding you.

The poisonous thought ricocheted in his head, relentlessly tormenting him.

Your only real friend doesn’t want to be your friend anymore.

You have nothing now.

No friends. No job. No special abilities.

You’re worthless.

The tears were flowing freely now. Nico messily rubbed his eyes, trying to get them to stop. He hated it when he cried. It wasn’t something that happened much anymore. He’d thought he’d used up his ability to cry when his mom and Bianca had died. He’d cried oceans during the months that had followed the bad news. And then he’d just stopped. Nothing else seemed worth getting that upset over. Nothing could really compare to the agonizing pain of a loved one’s death.

Until now.

Because losing a best friend felt like a death. The expansive emptiness unraveling inside him was all too familiar. Only before he’d at least had Jason to cry on. All he had now was an empty apartment.

Jason had been a lot more to Nico than just his best friend. Nico had been in love with him for years. He could barely even remember a time when he wasn’t. The intense feelings of longing he had for his friend had certainly predated the accident—everything of significance in Nico’s life was measured by means of before the accident and after the accident—but instead of being damaged by the tragedy, that horrific event had only cemented them further. Even though he’d been hurting too, Jason had really stepped up and been there for him. He’d let Nico cry on him endlessly. He’d trusted Nico enough to break down in front of him too. They’d been bonded together by that incident, it giving them an understanding of each other that no one else could ever hope to measure up to. Nico had naively thought that their friendship was unbreakable. And he’d been trying really hard to be satisfied with that. It’s not like he was ever so deluded as to think he actually stood a chance that Jason would return his feelings. He wasn’t expecting anything from him. All he’d wanted was for their friendship to stay strong and not get weird, no matter what happened.

And it had gotten weird.

Oh god, it had gotten so weird, so fast.

It wasn’t fair. He’d thought he was learning things that would make him stronger and more competent like that other Nico. He’d thought things could only get better. Instead he’s reduced to a blubbering mess on a sofa that was way too big for one person, being taunted by the vast empty space all around him.

“Snap out of it, Nico,” he chided himself. “Just because you’re stuck here doesn’t mean you can’t still act like a hero-in-training. You can keep training. You can still get better. You will get better. You don’t need Jason. Either of them.”
And with that he stood up and stormed across the room, yanking his sword up from where he’d left it leaning against the wall. The metal was cool and solid in his fingers and made Nico feel more grounded. He gave it an experimental swing, carefully recalling in his mind some of the moves the other Jason had taught him.

Slowly he began to practice. The physical exertion sapped the energy out of his tears. As he focused on the blade his mind quieted and cleared. He felt a little bit better.

_This is what I’m supposed to be doing_, he thought, _this feels right. I can still have a purpose._

Unfortunately his mind may have cleared but it did not settle down completely. Try as he might, he couldn’t dislodge the image of Jason’s vibrant blue eyes looking at him, or the patient smile he’d worn while teaching him. The radiant warmth he’d rewarded Nico with just the night before. He was being haunted by not one but _two_ Jasons. And both of them had tricked him into thinking that they cared.

Nico swung his sword harder. He darted from room to room, jumping over furniture and pivoting to sneak attack doors. He funneled all his attention into his muscles, hoping that if he could make them ache enough he wouldn’t have the ability left to feel anything else.

After darting into his bedroom he threw an overenthusiastic jab towards his dresser, which resulted in knocking over a mason jar he’d kept filled with gaming die. Nico cursed as broken glass and multifaceted pieces of plastic scattered everywhere and rendered the floor too hazardous to train on.

He begrudgingly dropped down to his knees and began picking the mess up. The glass was cleaned up and half the die retrieved when he reached under the bed and took a blind grab for any that had rolled beneath it. Instead of coming away with a dice, Nico’s fingers connected with paper. He closed them around the unexpected item and drew it out.

His breath caught in surprise. The dusty piece of notebook paper was covered in his handwriting. But the words were foreign to him; he hadn’t been the one to pen it.

He was holding a letter directed to him, written by his alternate.

_Hi._

_Sorry about your job and the window. Jason has something IMPORTANT to tell you. Make sure he tells you. Seriously. Don’t let him pretend like everything’s normal. Percy Jackson from philosophy class invited you sailing. His number is in your phone. He’s been helping you study so act like you know him. You might want to turn his invitation down after you talk to Jason though. Just sayin’._

_Good luck._

_-Nico_

_P.S. Your dad is suspicious._

_P.P.S. You should burn that dinosaur movie._

Nico’s brow crinkled as he stared at the message. Jason had something important to tell him? He’d seen Jason twice since returning and he hadn’t mentioned anything. Which meant it was probably something bad that he didn’t want to tell. Had the other Nico realized that Jason didn’t want to be his friend anymore? Why hadn’t he just outright said so? What was the note doing under the bed? This would have been so much more useful the night before. He certainly could have used this information before running into Percy. And what the heck! Nico had seemed to predict that his plans
with Percy would cause some sort of problem with Jason. Why had he made them then? Why had he
left them for someone else to cancel? What the heck was going on?

He sat on the floor, the remaining mess completely forgotten. Hundreds of different scenarios
spooled through his head. *Maybe Jason got some bad news while you were gone,* he thought. *Maybe
he’s acting weird because he’s sick with some terminal disease and doesn’t know how to deal with
it. Maybe he’s in financial trouble. Maybe he’s pushing me away because he doesn’t want me to
worry. Maybe it has to do with my dad. Maybe dad knows how I feel and warned Jason to stay
away. Would dad do that? I wouldn’t have thought so, but he’s unpredictable. Why else would Nico
warn me that he was suspicious?*

...*Maybe the other Nico gave him a reason to be suspicious.*

...*Maybe the other Nico tried to do something with Jason.*

*Maybe Jason can’t stand to be around me anymore because looking at me reminds him of
something horrible the other Nico did to him.*

The more theories Nico thought of, the more panicked he felt. There were endless possibilities for the
source of Jason’s weirdness. And the only thing they all had in common was that something bad had
probably happened. And whatever bad thing it was, it was important he know about it. And Jason,
the only person he really trusted completely had neglected to tell him.

He needed to see Jason. He needed to see Jason *right now.*

Unfortunately Jason was still in class. And if he’d been telling the truth he’d be working for hours
after he got out. There was no way Nico could possibly sit tight until 11:00.

He had no intention of trying. Jason worked two jobs, one in a café in the East Village, the other at a
clothing store in Brooklyn. Nico could guess that he’d probably be at the restaurant today since he
was working so late. If he took his time walking he could probably get to the restaurant after Jason
arrived. He’d walk slowly and take the scenic route.

The notepaper trembled slightly in his fingers as Nico folded it up and shoved it in his pocket.

Jason had a lot of explaining to do.

He’d been by Jason’s work enough times that he didn’t even need to ask the hostess to seat him in
Jason’s designated area. She gave him a friendly smile and immediately escorted him to one of the
tables Jason would be waiting on.

It was still too early for most people to be eating dinner so the restaurant was not very busy yet. Nico
didn’t have to wait long before Jason emerged from the kitchen holding a water pitcher. He watched
the smile fade from Jason’s face as he locked his gaze on the table and recognized the customer
waiting for him.

Jason quickly recovered and his professional persona slid back into place, his smile reappearing like
a light switch had been flipped. He strode over and began filling Nico’s glass with water.

“What can I get you?” he said in his perfectly calm and amicable waiter voice.

Nico whipped the now creased letter out of his pocket and waved it in front of Jason’s face. “An
explanation,” he said darkly.
He watched in satisfaction as Jason’s composure crumpled all over again.

“Can we not.” Jason leaned forward, lowering his voice. There was panic all over his face. “Can we please not do this right here or right now? I’m working.”

Nico refused to let Jason manipulate him into feeling sorry for him (something that was generally a little too easy for Jason to accomplish, due to the fact that he had an uncanny resemblance to a puppy when he so chose to channel that likeness.)

“No,” he said, standing his ground. “We cannot ‘not.’ Because someone had a perfectly good chance to tell me just what the heck was going on last night but somehow managed to forget to mention anything. And then that same someone had a second chance this afternoon and blew it again. And if I don’t get some answers immediately I’m just going to assume the worst and I really don’t have it in me right now to deal with that. Sit down,” he said, pointing at the empty chair across from him. “And start talking.”

“I can’t,” said Jason, a little more desperately. “I’m on the clock! I can’t just sit down and chat in the middle of my shift!”

“You do it all the time when I’m here for things that aren’t important,” complained Nico. “You only have like two other customers, no one’s going to care.”

Jason looked around, clearly hoping that one of his other customers would make eye contact with him and signal they wanted service. No one looked up. The few restaurant patrons were all heavily absorbed in eating their meals and chatting with their dinner companions. Jason sighed and sat down on the edge of the chair. He looked like he was ready to bolt at any moment.

“I wouldn’t have had to resort to this if you weren’t avoiding me,” Nico pointed out. “But you made it pretty clear that the only way I was going to get to see you was if I paid for the privilege.”

“I wasn’t avoiding you!” Jason weakly objected.

“Yes you were,” said Nico. “You did a complete one-eighty overnight, going from being all happy to see me to acting like I have yellow fever or something. What did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything! There’s nothing to tell!”

“That’s not what this says.” Nico jabbed his finger down on the incriminating note.

“Look,” mumbled Jason, leaning even closer to Nico and lowering his voice. “I was going to tell you the thing that note’s talking about. I just needed some time, okay? I wasn’t ready. I was going to tell you when I was ready. Can we please talk about it later?”

“No,” said Nico petulantly. “If you want to dump me as your friend I’d really rather hear it right away. Bad news just gets worse when you drag it out.”

“What?” Jason looked dumbfounded. “You think that…?”

Nico just regarded him with cool eyes and didn’t say anything. He was rather proud of himself for not crying again.

“I don’t want to dump you,” Jason insisted, wincing at Nico’s word choice. “That’s the last thing I want to do.”

“You sure have a funny way of showing it.”
“I was just trying to give you some space so things could work out with Percy!”


“So I don’t cramp your style. You know.” Jason gesticulated vaguely with his hands in some way that was apparently meant to finish his sentence, except it didn’t actually make an ounce of sense to Nico.

“Huh?” Nico glanced down at himself, taking in the way he was dressed. “I don’t know Percy very well, but I kind of doubt that he’s into the whole ‘mortician-chic’ look. I don’t think my style is very relevant.”

“Oh for crissakes, are you being obtuse on purpose?” hissed Jason in frustration.

“No, are you being weird on purpose?” Nico retorted.

Jason scrunched his eyes shut and took a deep breath. There was resignation in them when he opened them again. “I’m not being weird, I’m being jealous,” he admitted. “I was giving you space so I could get over it instead of taking it out on you. Like you’re forcing me to do currently.”

Nico stared at him blankly. What Jason had just said didn’t compute. Why on earth would he have any reason to be jealous? Jason was practically Nico’s whole world. He barely even knew Percy.

“What?” He just stupidly asked.

“I think you heard me,” Jason muttered.

“Yeah, I heard you. But it made about as much sense as a two-headed moose in rollerblades. Why the hell would you be jealous?”

Jason ran a hand through his hair and glanced around, clearly looking for an escape. “You’re really going to make me spell it out for you, aren’t you?” he sighed. “What is it with you cornering me into confessions in restaurants?”

“What? When else have I done this?”

“Look, I’ll explain that later,” Jason mumbled. “It’s just— He gave Nico a fearful glance. “—I sort of maybe have a bit of a crush on you? So I’m jealous you like Percy. That’s all. I’ll get over it. I just need some space to deal and I promise I’ll get over it and not be weird, okay? I’m sorry. I was going to tell you soon, but then when I figured out who it was you’ve liked this whole time…I didn’t want to ruin that for you. I’m happy for you, really.”

Nico’s eyes went wide as he absorbed the explanation and his heart nearly jumped into his throat. “Wait. You—you like me? Like—? He was about to say ‘like I like you?’ but one of Jason’s coworkers caught Jason’s attention and signaled they needed him. Before Nico could finish Jason jumped up.

“Sorry, I have to go,” he mumbled apologetically.

“Wait, Jason,” Nico objected.

“Sorry,” he just repeated before darting off.

Nico watched in shell-shocked astonishment as Jason disappeared into the kitchen.

*Oh my god,* he thought in awe. *Jason likes me. Jason likes me the way I like him. Jason likes me*
enough to be jealous. That means we could...yeah we could totally...oh my freaking god. How is this even happening?

Jason took an agonizingly long time to come back and Nico was pretty sure he was stalling on purpose. He followed Jason around the room with his eyes, watching him as he refilled people’s drinks and jotted down new orders. He joked and chatted with his customers effortlessly. Nico had never understood how he could be so friendly and outgoing with an endless stream of strangers. Not for the first time he felt a dull ache as he watched Jason smiling at attractive customers. Although for the first time his jealousy was tempered by the revelation that he didn’t have to feel threatened by them. Because he was the one Jason really wanted. It seemed too good to be true.

He was a little afraid it might be. What if he’d screwed everything up already? Jason didn’t even know yet that his feelings were returned. What if he actually wanted to get over his crush? What if he wasn’t comfortable with the fact that he’d fallen for a guy? What if he wanted to pretend nothing had ever happened and was already moving on? What if he wouldn’t be receptive to being with Nico, even after he found out that Nico wanted him too? It might be too late. It might have never even been an option, in spite of Jason’s feelings. Nico couldn’t afford to assume anything.

Jason finally returned carrying a plate of nachos. Nico hadn’t gotten a chance to place an order, but it was something he frequently got here and he couldn’t help feeling warm at the fact that Jason knew him well enough to order for him. Too bad that by the time he brought them out Nico felt so nauseous from nervousness that he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to stomach eating them.

“Thanks,” he said, awkwardly accepting the plate.

Jason was having trouble making eye contact. “Look,” he said, glancing at nearly every angle of the room except for directly at the table in front of him. “The dinner rush is picking up so I really can’t hang right—"

Nico panicked, afraid that Jason was going to run off again before he got a chance to set him straight. He latched his fingers around Jason’s wrist. His skin felt unnaturally hot.

"WILL YOU BE MY BOYFRIEND?" he blurted out, not stopping to think about what he was going to say first, or realizing how well volume could carry in the small dining room. He immediately slapped his hand over his mouth in horror at the bluntness of his outburst. He hadn’t meant to be so direct. He hadn’t meant to be so loud. Oh god, he’d said that really loud, hadn’t he?

The people at the next table had all turned around and were staring at him now.

Jason gaped at him and then abruptly sat down. His eyes dropped down to where Nico was still gripping his wrist, then back up to Nico’s face.

“Wait, do you really mean that?” he whispered. “You actually want to…”

Nico nodded so vigorously his hair banged into his eyes. “Hell yes!”

A slow smile began to spread across Jason’s face. Then it caught and turned down again. “What about Percy though?”

“I’ve only even talked to Percy like once,” said Nico in exasperation. “Why would I have a thing for him? He’s practically a stranger!”

“But the other you was spending a lot of time with someone and being really secretive about it just like you get when—"

“Jason,” Nico cut him off. “You do remember that he’s a completely different person than me,
“Yeah, but—he was also a lot like you. Like, it was freaky how much he was like you. So I thought that if he liked—you know—you probably felt the same way and—”

“The Jason I met in his place was in love with a girl named Piper,” said Nico. “I don’t suppose I should start assuming the same thing about you then, huh?”

“I don’t even know anyone named Piper,” said Jason, shaking his head.

“Exactly,” agreed Nico, feeling a bit relieved that Jason had seemed utterly uninterested in learning more about the girl he’d fallen for in another universe. “See what I mean? We’re different.”

“…Yeah.” Jason’s grin was reforming. He tugged his arm back so that Nico’s hand slipped over his wrist and into his fingers. “I’m definitely in love with someone else.”

Nico felt his own face break into a smile so wide his muscles hurt. He tightened his grip on Jason’s hand. “Me too,” he agreed. “Totally.”

They lapsed into a silence that Nico thought probably should have been awkward, but wasn’t. But then, he and Jason had always been able to go for long silences without things feeling weird.

“Hey Captain Heartthrob,” taunted one of Jason’s coworker’s. “You had seriously better stop slacking off or the boss’ll get pissed. I’m not covering your tables.”

“One sec,” muttered Jason, cheeks going red at the outside attention. “Will you stay a while?” he asked, turning back to Nico. “I’ve changed my mind about getting coffee after if the offer’s still good.”

“Obviously,” agreed Nico. “I’d love that. It’s—” he couldn’t help his eyes nervously darting about to check just how many people were listening in. He’d never been this open about his feelings before and it was nerve wracking. “It’s a date.”

Jason beamed at him and quickly kissed Nico’s hand before letting go of it.

Nico spent the next ten minutes just staring giddily at the back of his hand. If Jason hadn’t been working… if Jason hadn’t been working then that kiss probably would have been somewhere else. And…when he finally got off the clock then they’d get a chance to have some privacy and then Jason probably would kiss him somewhere else. Just imagining it sent swarms of phantom butterflies into hyperactive loops in his stomach. And while Nico had been fantasizing about that for several years now he didn’t have any experience whatsoever to go on and oh crap, what if he was horrible at it? What if Jason realized he hated kissing him? What if this whole thing blew up in his face? The whole reason he’d been so reluctant to let Jason know how he felt was because he hadn’t wanted to mess up their friendship. But if they started dating and it went badly would they be able to stay friends? Things would never be the same again. They’d already crossed over a line where things could never be the same. He glanced up, his heart beating a staccato rhythm of panic.

Jason caught his gaze from across the room and smiled broadly at him. Nico felt his uncertainty begin to melt. It’s going to be okay, he realized with a surge of confidence. Even if this new relationship didn’t last, he and Jason would always be okay.
Don't worry, that's not the last you'll see of mortal Jason and mortal Nico. They still have one more chapter. And there will be at least two (probably three) more demigod chapters. Since there's more demigod story left to tell it will no longer automatically go back and forth between each reality per chapter. You can expect at least two consecutive demigod chapters following.
Don't Look Back

Chapter Notes

Check it out, there's another awesome piece of art for this story!! Alluka drew this fantastic picture of Nico fighting the chimera from the end of chapter 8! I love it!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’d never especially loved Cabin Thirteen. At the time he’d started building it he’d been a bit caught up in the excitement of having won the Titan war. For the first time ever he’d felt accepted by his dad and proud of his godly heritage. He’d gotten a bit carried away in celebrating the Hades-ness of the Hades Cabin though and might have possibly gone overboard in his attempt to make it match the ambience of the Underworld. That alone wasn’t the real problem though; he’d run out of steam on the project mid construction. The initial friendliness of the other campers towards him since the war ended slowly began to taper off. Expressions of gratitude and appreciation inevitably slid back into the more familiar ones of fear and nervousness. Nico quickly realized that he might have been hasty in assuming that he was welcome at camp as a result of his help in the battle. The truth of the matter was that he was welcome when there was an emergency he might be able to assist with, but he’d obviously overstayed that welcome by naïvely assuming he should permanently live there. And so he’d decided that building a Hades Cabin was a mistake and bailed without finishing.

To his surprise, the next time he visited Camp Half-Blood he found that someone else had picked up where he’d left off and completed building it. Which was unfortunate, as apparently whoever had taken the initiative hadn’t had the faintest clue what either Hades or the Underworld was like. Nico’s beginning at a Hades tribute had been transformed into a hideous caricature of over-the-top morbid stereotypes. Instead of making him feel included, being in Cabin Thirteen only served as an inescapable reminder that none of the other demigods would ever understand him.

Or so he’d thought. He was less certain about that now.

Which is probably why he was still sitting around in Cabin Thirteen, when really, he ought to have been clear across the country by now.

Why was he still here?

He hadn’t meant to return to Camp Half-Blood. He’d only meant to return to the reality where Camp Half-Blood existed. He’d just meant to check and make sure everything was back to normal. Then he was going to go right back to what was normal for him: running away.

Yet here he was. Sitting in a depressingly dark and gothic room, all by himself, staring at the rows of tackily decorated empty beds. He could hear the sound of other campers laughing and talking right outside. The familiar longing to go out and join them flared up.

But no, he knew better than to bother trying. The moment he stepped outside the buzz of conversation would have hushed. The crowd would have parted around him like he was carrying an infectious disease. What was the point?

Why was he wasting time hanging around? He knew from experience that it’s less painful to simply leave under his own volition than to subject himself to constant shunning.
But...he just couldn’t seem to make himself move.

The memory of Jason’s arms wrapping around him and hanging on like Nico was some sort of essential lifeline wouldn’t leave his head.

It scared him how good that had felt.

It scared him how much he had wanted it.

It scared him that it probably hadn’t meant very much.

Jason had apparently thought he was the other Nico. He’d thought he’d been about to get killed. He was just relieved. That’s all it had been about. Relief. Jason was a good person. He didn’t want anyone to die; of course he’d act so happy to see him.

He had to be careful not to get the two Jasons confused. Just because the human Jason had had feelings for the human Nico didn’t mean anything at all for this Jason. This Jason was used to Nico not being around. This Jason didn’t know much about him beyond that unfortunate incident in Croatia. This Jason had Piper.

Too bad it was hard to remember that in light of the fact that this Jason still had all the friendliness, kindness, and caring qualities of the other Jason. He wasn’t less desirable than the human Jason, simply less attainable. And he could add to that the fact that he shared all of the admirably heroic aspects that had lead to Nico’s earlier crush on Percy.

An earlier crush that he was realizing he’d finally gotten over.

He’d tried to convince himself he’d been over it before. He hadn’t been completely lying when he’d told Jason he didn’t like Percy like that anymore. He’d been mostly over it. 80% maybe. It was hard to let go of something that had so strongly influenced and shaped him. Accepting the fact that the crush was never going to go anywhere was one thing, getting your heart to stay still every time you saw that person was entirely another. Getting over Percy was a slow progress, but he’d been working on it. The uncontrollability of his emotions was beginning to ebb.

Suddenly though, he found that he didn’t have to work at it.

Suddenly Percy wasn’t the person who made his pulse pick up and his breath catch whenever he was near. Percy was no longer the person constantly invading his thoughts. When Nico saw a crowd of people he found he was no longer scanning it for a flash of black hair: he was scanning it for blond.

The last remnants of his crush on Percy had finally dissipated...because he didn’t have room for them anymore. He had a crush on someone else.

How had that happened? How had he fallen for Jason so fast? And hard? What had he done to himself?

He knew better than to have let this happen.

His heart was so screwed.

He knew the real reason he was sitting here in his cabin instead of trekking across the country: leaving Jason was going to hurt.

The problem though was that sticking around Jason was probably going to hurt even more. He
already knew the drill. His infatuation and false hopes would build with every little interaction. And those hopes would get ground to dust on a daily basis as he watched the object of his desires be with someone else: someone who was more outgoing and more attractive and definitely more female. He knew he wouldn’t be able to compete. And each second he’d have to watch Jason and Piper being happy together was going to feel like swallowing broken glass. And he’d hate himself for resenting them for being so happy together. He’d hate himself for not being able to control his feelings. He’d hate himself for not being good enough to find anyone who liked him like that too.

Well, it’s not like he was a stranger to hating himself. He already had plenty of practice.

No big deal.

He wouldn’t stick around long…just a few days to get used to being back. Like rehab. Quitting Jason would be too difficult to do cold turkey. He’d stagger the doses, seeing him a little less each day until he could stomach leaving for good. That’s what Dr. Costas had insisted was necessary for stopping drugs, hadn’t he? Jason had turned into Nico’s drug of choice. He was going to have to do a Jason detox.

For his own sanity’s sake though he needed to keep the doses small. Which is why he was currently ensconced in his cabin instead of being outside and actually interacting with the other campers.

He’d see them at dinner, he supposed. That ought to be enough.

Apparently the other campers disagreed. A loud knock disrupted him from his brooding.

Maybe it’s Jason. The thought enthusiastically sprang up before Nico could squash it down.

He wasn’t sure whether to be disappointed or relieved when he opened the door to find Percy standing there instead.

“Hey,” said Percy, his face lighting up as his eyes connected with Nico’s. “Wasn’t sure you’d still be around!”

Nico shrugged. “I won’t be for long.”

Percy’s face fell. “Oh. Well, you should reconsider that.”

Nico just shrugged again.

“I just sort of got the impression that you might have been mad at me before you left,” continued Percy. “I mean, not that I really blame you, I know we had some major issues in the past. But I’d sort of thought you’d forgiven me? But then you started acting like you were mad again, and I was afraid
Nico stared at Percy, somewhat taken aback. He hadn’t really thought that Percy was paying close enough attention to him to have noticed anything like that. Percy seemed so oblivious most of the time. And he’d assumed if anything that Percy was relieved to not have to deal with him. But now Percy was looking at him with sincere worry and he felt unexpectedly guilty.

“I haven’t been mad at you in years,” Nico admitted. “You haven’t done anything. We’re cool.”

Percy’s tense frown relaxed. “Oh good,” he said. “That’s been bothering me for a while. I really hated thinking I’d done something to offend you. You’re like a brother to me, you know?”

Nico didn’t flinch as Percy said the damning words: like a brother. Such a well intended statement with so much potential to wreck havoc on his heart. He waited for the expected stab of pain at the reminder that Percy was unattainable; that he’d never ever look at Nico the way Nico saw him.

He felt nothing.

Percy was standing before him, just as attractive and friendly and appealing as he’d ever been, and Nico found that he felt completely indifferent.

Well, indifferent wasn’t entirely accurate. He was relieved to hear that Percy cared about him. He found that he even believed him. It was really nice actually, having Percy seek him out and wanting to make sure they were okay. He didn’t have to force the smile that began to form on his lips.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Me too.”

“Good,” said Percy, “I’m glad.” He stuck his hands in his pockets. “So, we’re about to start a game of capture the flag. I thought maybe you might want to join?”

“Okay…” said Nico. “Well…I don’t know. I think maybe I’ll sit it out this time.”

Capture the flag. Nico wasn’t sure if he was ready to interact with more than one or two campers at a time. Capture the flag would involve nearly the entire camp. He’d have to face down dozens of people, many of whom he would have never met before: people who would immediately judge him on his unwelcoming and morose appearance. Playing capture the flag sounded like an out and out nightmare.

“We could really use your help,” Percy pressed. “It seriously isn’t the same without you. Our team would have a huge advantage if you joined. It would pretty much guarantee that we’d win.”

Percy was leveling him with a ridiculous puppy dog stare.


“Sweet!” Percy raised his hand to give Nico a high five. Nico was a little slow on the uptake and left Percy hanging in mid-air for several awkward seconds.

“I’ll meet you by the arena in a few minutes,” Nico said.

“Awesome.” Percy flashed Nico one of his dazzlingly perfect grins as he left the cabin.

Nico stood in place for several minutes after he left, anxiety beginning to claw at his insides. Why had he just agreed to that? This was going to be awful. He was going to have to be around so many
people and they were all going to be judging him and comparing him to some other version of himself that he’d never even met. Had they liked the other Nico better? Were they just pretending to be glad he was back? They’d all be having a good time and reminding Nico of how little he fit in. The sentiment of Percy wanting to include him was certainly nice, but Percy hardly spoke for everyone.

He stared at himself in a mirror (it had a ridiculous jet black frame of elaborate baroque curls—seriously, just who the Hades had been allowed to decorate in here) and ran his fingers through his hair several times. Then he changed his shirt. Then he admonished himself for changing his shirt…he was about to play a game that would involve scrambling around in the woods for crying out loud. He was probably about to get completely filthy and sweaty, why would he change into a clean shirt? He managed to convince himself that he was only concerned about his appearance because of all the campers who didn’t know him well and might judge him for being a son of Hades. It absolutely wasn’t because he wanted to look nice for Jason.

Nope nope nope.

He failed to convince himself.

“I’m pathetic,” he muttered, shaking his head (which undid all his efforts of finger combing his hair into place.)

Of course Jason would be on his team. Of course. Had someone planned that on purpose? Had Jason planned that on purpose? Why would Jason have planned that? Jason didn’t know how he felt. Jason was probably just on his team because of Percy. Jason and Percy were pals, and Percy had asked Nico to play with them. That’s all that was. It was just a coincidence.

He could totally handle this.

Jason caught his eye and shot him a mega-watt smile and Nico felt his bones start to liquefy. He could totally not handle this.

He volunteered for the front lines, plunging into the enemy territory right away while it was still swarming with the opposing team members. He didn’t especially care if he got tagged immediately and sent out of the game. All he cared about was that his own teammates were behind him. Where he wouldn’t see them and have to get distracted by a certain someone’s lean muscular body as they sprinted around with the light shining off their sun-bleached hair and their meltingly warm and open expressions every time they made eye contact with—oh Styx he was doing a lousy job of not getting distracted, wasn’t he?

He took off at a mad run, dodging trees and campers. It wasn’t hard for him to avoid getting tagged, he had more practice running than most of the people here. In fact, maybe he should just keep up with it, maybe if he reached the flag he shouldn’t bring it back to his team. He could just grab it and keep going…. Too bad he was on an Island right now; Percy would thwart him with the water if he didn’t shadow travel. Otherwise he could have just run right into Connecticut. He could have kept going straight to Canada. Or why even stop there? The Arctic Circle was somewhere he hadn’t been yet. Why was he wasting his time on a meaningless game like this? Running was good. The clean burn of his muscles made it harder to think about things like….

“Watch out!”

A strong grip clamped around Nico’s arm and jerked him to an unpleasantly abrupt stop. He thudded
to a halt right before a large pile of leaves—a somewhat suspicious pile of leaves, come to think of it.

“Booby trap,” said an excruciatingly familiar voice.

Nico didn’t have to turn around to know that the very person he’d been running away from had caught him. Jason caused a light wind to unsettle the leaves and revealed a deep pit that had been dug in the forest floor. If Jason hadn’t stopped him he would have fallen into it.

“I was trying to get an aerial view of the flag when I noticed you heading for that,” Jason explained unnecessarily. His fingers were still tightly clamped on Nico’s arm, and Nico glared at where the offending digits were trespassing. Jason immediately noticed and released his grip. “Sorry!” he apologized, taking a step backward. “Sorry, I know—the touching thing. Didn’t mean to! I just didn’t want you to fall.”

Nico glared harder, trying to mentally convey, no, you idiot. It’s not the touching that I mind. Not from you. It’s that it doesn’t mean anything to you and that hurts too much. Give me space so I don’t lose my mind.

Jason didn’t get the message.

“So, maybe we should team up?” Jason was offering. “If you run ahead I can fly above and use wind to divert anyone who tries to grab you.”

“No,” said Nico quickly. “I already had a solo plan.”

“Oh.” The casual smile Jason had been wearing slid off, surprised hurt freezing on his face. “Um, okay.” He seemed at a loss for how to react, which was kind of a weird experience. Nico was used to Jason being collected and in-charge. Had he really disarmed him that easily?

He couldn’t afford to dwell on it.

“If you keep standing there you’re gonna get tagged.” Nico stated the obvious and took off in a blind run.

Don’t look back, he told himself.

Whatever you do, don’t look back.

Don’t think about how he just looked at you.

Don’t look back.

Nico looked back.

Jason was still standing where he’d left him. His arms were crossed and he was frowning heavily. A Demeter kid was barreling right at him, and he was utterly oblivious to the fact that he was mere seconds away from sitting out of the game. Nico considered running back or maybe causing a rift in the ground to thwart the opponent. Or maybe he should—

The entire word turned to static.

“—ico?”

His head was splitting.
And Jason’s head was seriously invading his personal space.

“Ow,” said Nico.

“Can you hear me?” Worry laced Jason’s voice. He held a finger out in front of Nico’s face and began moving it back and forth. “Track my finger,” Jason instructed.

Nico followed Jason’s erratically moving finger, not because he’d been told to, but because it was hard to ignore something being waved four inches from your eyes.

“Okay, good, I don’t think you’re concussed.” Jason smiled in relief, apparently satisfied by Nico’s ability to focus.

“Did I just run into a tree?” asked Nico, already suspicious of the answer.

“Yep.”

“Figures.”

Nico sighed and tried to get up. Jason stopped him.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“To get the flag,” said Nico automatically.

‘Don’t even think about it,” said Jason. “The only place you’re going is your cabin. Or the infirmary. Take your pick.”

“I’m fine,” insisted Nico.

“Your face is bleeding.” Jason reached out and swiped his thumb across Nico’s forehead. His touch was light but the action caused Nico to wince. There was a raw spot there that he hadn’t noticed and the slight movement caused it to sting angrily. Jason’s finger was sticky and red when he pulled away.

“That tree must have really pissed you off to cause you to head-butt it like that.” Jason gave a weak laugh.

Nico ignored the pale attempt at humor and tried to shove off the arm Jason was holding him down with. Jason’s grip held fast. “Lemme up,” he complained.

“I’m going to take you to the infirmary,” Jason instructed. “You hit that tree really hard.”

“You are not taking me to the infirmary!” Nico snapped. “Let me go! I’ve gotten gored by monsters and not bothered with the stupid infirmary! So have you! I’m fine!”

“You completely knocked yourself out,” said Jason calmly. “You just need to sit somewhere quiet and have a bit of nectar or something. I’m not dragging you to the E.R., chill.”

“I’m fine,” Nico insisted again.

“I know.”

There was concern in Jason’s eyes though that belied his assurance.

“I’ll just go back to my cabin,” Nico muttered, partly to shut Jason up and partly because he actually
wanted to go there. He couldn’t handle much more of everyone staring at him, especially Jason with his obnoxiously caring and sympathetic expression. It made his stomach feel weird.

Jason tentatively released his grip on Nico’s arm. Nico pulled himself up and stalked out of the woods.

It didn’t take long for him to notice he was being followed.

“What are you doing?” he said in exasperation, spinning around.

“Coming with you,” said Jason with a shrug.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” said Nico harshly.

“No,” Jason agreed. “But I just got thrown out of the game so I could use some company for a bit.”

Nico opened his mouth, an unkind retort ready on his lips. He met Jason’s eyes and his memory skipped back to a few days ago. How warm and solid his body had been pressing against him as they’d watched that movie. How disconcertingly comfortable he’d felt with that. How easy Jason had been to talk to and how desperately he’d wanted that time with him to stretch on forever. How much he’d regretted not letting Jason get close to him sooner.

And what was he doing now? Pushing him away just like he always had, as if he hadn’t learned a damn thing from his experience.

Except he had learned something: he’d learned that his heart—which he’d thought irreparably damaged—was apparently intact enough that it was poised to get shattered all over again.

Shielding himself from that kind of trauma was the smart thing to do.

Too bad all intelligent thoughts completely fled his capacity when Jason was looking at him with that impossibly fond and hopeful expression.

He was sunk.

“Okay,” said Nico with a sigh. “I guess that won’t kill me.”

*Probably a lie.*

“My company’s only lethal to monsters,” Jason quipped. “I’d say you’re safe.”

Nico suppressed the urge to make a self-deprecating jab about how that didn’t guarantee his safety at all and just silently trudged back to his cabin.

“Sorry about the décor,” he muttered as he herded Jason in. “I had nothing to do with it.”

Jason snorted. “Hey at least you have actual furniture. And you know, the lack of an eternal thunderstorm is pretty nice too. I’d trade with you any day. It’s ridiculously hard to get any sleep in my cabin.”

“I’m not sure that having coffins for beds is a real improvement over no furniture,” Nico griped.

“Have you ever tried sleeping on a marble floor?” Jason asked incredulously.

“Yes.” With all the time Nico had spent on the run, he’d tried sleeping on just about every surface known to man. Having beds was a fairly novel experience for him.
“Oh.” Jason clearly hadn’t expected that answer and frowned. Nico could see his demeanor sobering as he started thinking harder about the time Nico had spent away from camp.

“I don’t envy your giant hippy dad sentinel though,” Nico quickly added, hoping to derail Jason from the obvious worry-about-Nico train he’d been embarking on.

The diversion was successful. “Oh yeah, I know, right?” Jason immediately agreed. “It’s super creepy, isn’t it? Talk about a mood killer.” His face suddenly reddened. “I mean, not that there’s any kind of mood to kill or anything—er—ha ha, that, um, sounded awkward.” He coughed. “So, erm, you got any nectar in here?”

Nico quickly looked away. He didn’t want to think about any sort of moods Jason might have been disrupted from while in his room. He especially didn’t want to think about whom he’d likely been with when those moods where thrown off. Like Nico, Jason usually had his cabin to himself. Which meant he’d probably spent a lot of time in there with Piper enjoying the guaranteed privacy. And….

Well. Being jealous of Piper was now a new thing he was going to have to deal with. He didn’t especially like the feeling. He’d never had anything personally against her before. Feeling uncontrollably resentful towards Annabeth had been bad enough, he already felt plenty guilty about that. Now he was going to have yet another reason to feel like a terrible person.

“Over there,” Nico mumbled, neither looking in the direction he was pointing nor at Jason. “In the cabinet that looks like it was acquired from Dracula’s garage sale.”

Creaking hinges signaled that Jason had had no trouble finding it. It was followed by a tearing sound and the clomp of Jason’s approaching footsteps.

Nico held out his hand for the nectar but Jason bypassed him and began dabbing at Nico’s forehead with a nectar dampened paper towel. Nico’s skin immediately began to tingle. He couldn’t tell if that was the affect of the nectar working its magic or of Jason touching him.

“I can do that!” he immediately objected.

“Of course you can,” said Jason, not halting his ministrations. “But I can do it better since I don’t need a mirror to see what I’m doing.”

“This is just a waste of nectar,” Nico continued to complain. “That was barely a scratch. We didn’t need to do anything for it.”

“If you hadn’t done anything to it, it probably would have gotten infected,” Jason lectured. “A head infection could go straight to your brain. Do you really want to have survived dozens of monsters and two wars, only to get taken out by a tree?”

“You’re being melodramatic.”

“It’s necessary to get through to you.”

“Ugh.” Nico sighed. “You sound just like the other version of you.”

Jason stilled, his hand still pressing gently against Nico’s forehead. All of Nico’s senses funneled into that small spot above his eyes. He could feel his blood pulsing just below his skin, the dulling sting of the abrasion and the ghosting warmth of Jason’s fingertips around the edges of the paper towel. He wanted those fingers to move over and touch him somewhere that wasn’t raw and sore. He wanted to be able to block out that particular desire. He couldn’t effectively shut his mind off enough to ignore it. His nerves suddenly felt taut as a bowstring.
“You should tell me about the stuff you saw while you were gone,” Jason said, his voice slightly distant and distracted. “I’ll admit, I’ve been pretty curious.”

Nico pried Jason’s hand off his forehead. He didn’t especially want to, but he needed to break the contact if he was going to be able to think clearly. “I think that’s good enough,” he said. “I can feel it starting to heal already.”

Jason reluctantly complied and backed up to sit on the bed across from the one Nico had sat down on. “So tell me about it,” he prodded again.

“It was pretty quiet,” Nico mumbled, staring past Jason and at an obsidian wall. “I mostly just saw a lot of Nico’s school. He had a nice apartment. Life was pretty easy there.” He let his gaze flit over to Jason just for a moment. Jason was perched stiffly on the edge of the bed and was biting his lip, looking like he wanted to ask something. No words came out.

“I saw a lot of you,” Nico continued, kind of feeling like he was confessing a dirty secret or something. “You have terrible taste in movies, by the way.”

“No I don’t!” Jason immediately retorted.

Nico skeptically raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything.

“I don’t even watch a lot of movies,” Jason amended.

“A blessing, given the types I now know you’d gravitate to if you did.” Nico smirked.

“Yeah?” Jason challenged. “Like what? Tell me about them.”

“They’re beyond description. Too terrible for words. You’d have to see them.”

“Ohay,” said Jason. “Let’s do it.”

“Wait, what?”

“Let’s watch them,” Jason announced.

“I didn’t mean seriously when I said you’d have to see them,” Nico backtracked.

“You just challenged my good taste,” said Jason, crossing his arms over his chest. “I demand to see your evidence so I may duly defend myself.”

“I wasn’t really insulting your taste,” Nico corrected. “I was criticizing the other Jason. Not you specifically.”

“Is he preferable to me?” Jason suddenly asked.

“What?” Nico practically sputtered.

Preferable? Was the other Jason preferable? The other Jason had been pretty awesome. He’d made Nico feel at ease in a way that no one had in his life since finding out he was a demigod. He’d been supportive of Nico in a way he’d never experienced…ever. Even Bianca (and admitting this—even just silently inside his own head—made him feel like he was betraying her) hadn’t made Nico feel as included and accepted as Jason had. Although if he were honest with himself, Nico knew that this Jason would be like that too if Nico would just let him. And this Jason could understand him in a way that the other one never could. No amount of supportiveness could substitute for really knowing what someone had been through and how they felt. The human Jason would always be wondering
about the demigod part of Nico’s life, it had shown in his occasional nervousness when Nico alluded
to the fighting he’d done in his past. For all of the positive aspects of their relationship, there would
always have been some underlying tension. But this Jason got him. He’d been through nearly as
many hellish trials as Nico had. He’d seen a lot of the same horrors that haunted Nico. This Jason
wasn’t just supportive, but he understood what he was supporting. Nico had liked the human version
quite a lot. But really, the only thing about him that was genuinely preferable was his feelings for
Nico.

“No, of course not,” he added. “Why would you ask that?”

“Because you just said you saw a lot of him,” Jason explained. “Yet I have to practically twist your
arm backwards to get you to hang out with me. But apparently you liked hanging out with him
enough to even sit through watching stuff you hated.”

“I didn’t have much choice,” Nico argued.

“Now that’s a lie if ever I heard one,” Jason scoffed. “The freaking gods can’t make you do
something if you don’t really want to. I don’t believe for a second that some mortal version of me
could force you to do anything.”

“I was trying to not disrupt Nico’s life any more than necessary,” Nico explained. “He wasn’t
forcing me. I just didn’t want to mess everything up for them by acting too different than the Nico
who belonged there.”

“So hanging out with me is just an obligation you were sucking up.” Jason stated it as if that were a
fact rather than a question.

“What? No. Stop putting words in my mouth. It wasn’t like that.”

Hanging out with Jason had been a lifeline. But he couldn’t admit that. It would seem too weird and
needy.

“Well, that’s how it seems to me,” Jason continued. “Because you never once bothered to come back
and visit. I mean, I get you not wanting to hang around. But you could have at least just stopped by
now and again and said ‘hi.’ You could have let us know you were still alive and stuff.”

I did stop by, Nico thought to himself. You just didn’t see me.

“I wasn’t aware anyone cared.”

“People cared,” Jason said predictably. “I cared.”

“Whatever.” Nico waved the assurance off. As if there had been any chance Jason would have said
anything else. He wasn’t about to let himself believe that it meant anything. “We can watch the
movies if you want to that badly.”

“Good.” Jason visibly brightened. “I’m holding you to that. Don’t you dare leave camp until we’ve
watched them.”

“You’re going to be sorry,” said Nico, deliberately dodging the matter of when he might leave camp.
He wasn’t ready to make any promises about when his need to bolt might manifest. “I wasn’t
exaggerating. Ten minutes in, you’ll rue the day you decided to subject yourself to this.”

“Did you seriously just say ‘you’ll rue the day’?” Jason’s eyebrows shot up ridiculously high. “Who
even talks like that? Real people don’t actually say that, it’s like a comic book villain catchphrase.
Are you sure you’re really my Nico? You just sounded like the other one.”

Nico tried to ignore the way his heart jumped at Jason’s emphasis on ‘my Nico.’

“See?” he said in exasperation. “I’ve been brain damaged by too much bad television. Look what
you’re doing to me.”

Jason stared at Nico blankly for a moment and then slowly began to snicker. In a matter of seconds it
had escalated to full blown laughter.

Nico tried to look irritated but the sight of Jason laughing so hard made it difficult to stay focused on
his irritation. The corner of his mouth began to tick upwards in spite of himself. Pretty soon he was
snickering helplessly too.

Somehow Jason had managed to talk him into going to the campfire.

He must have gone temporarily insane.

“Man, this is just awesome,” said Percy, looking around at the surrounding campers with a pleased
expression. Although it actually came out more like ‘An, is es jaus ahsham’ as he currently had about
five marshmallows in his mouth and hadn’t bothered to swallow them first.

Nico tried not to make a face. Had Percy always been that disgusting with his food? He’d somehow
failed to notice before.

“It’s so great to have the whole gang back together again,” he continued, a bit more articulately.
There was a long string of melted marshmallow goo hanging off of one of his fingers. When Percy
noticed he promptly started licking if off, causing a bit of an awkward pause before he finished with,
“We should get Frank and Hazel to come visit so it can be a proper reunion.”

Nico meant to say ‘Don’t plan anything yet, I’m not sure I’m staying long enough for you to bother.’
But instead he accidently replied with, “Don’t forget Reyna.”

“Well yeah, of course!” Percy perked up even more at the suggestion. “How could we forget Reyna?
We’ll definitely invite her. Hey, we should have a party.”

“No. Let’s…not.”

Apparently no one was listening to Nico though, because his objection was completely ignored in
favor of the others excitedly commenting on Percy’s idea.

“I’ll bring my tin can casserole!” volunteered Grover. “And enchiladas! We can’t have a party
without enchiladas!”

“I’ll DJ!” exclaimed Leo. “It’ll be the perfect opportunity to test out my Leomeister Funkmatron
4000 mixing machine! I just programmed an algorithm for it that calculates the perfect song
combinations to put the highest ratio of listeners in an amorous mood. No one will be single by the
end of the party, guaranteed!”

“I vote Travis DJs,” said Calypso immediately.

“Seconded,” agreed Annabeth. “All in favor of Travis for the party’s DJ raise your hand.”

Every hand around the campfire went up with the exception of Leo’s and Nico’s (because raising his
hand would be acknowledging the fact that there would be a party at all, and Nico was still strongly
opposed to the idea.)

“Sweeeeeeet,” said Travis. He and Connor high fived each other.

“Well if Travis is the DJ then I guess it’s up to me to bring the booze,” said Connor with an exaggerated wink.

“Don’t even think of bringing any booze,” Will Solace immediately interjected. “That is so irresponsible.”

“I’ll bring the booze for everyone except for Will,” Connor mock whispered, making an ‘okay’ symbol with his fingers and winking at Will.

Will gave him the evil eye but didn’t object further, sensing it was futile trying to stop either of the Stoll brothers if they wanted to do something. “Enjoy your hangovers,” he muttered. “I’m not doing a dang thing to help you guys when you’re all sick as dogs.”

“Man, you guys are seriously going to miss out,” Leo joined in muttering. “Don’t come crying to me when no one wants to dance with any of you.”

“I don’t need a fancy schmancy machine to get people to dance with me,” Percy announced, cheerfully slinging his arm around Annabeth. “I’ve already got that covered.”

Annabeth carefully pried his arm off and forced Percy to wipe his fingers on his jeans before allowing him to return his hand to her shoulder. Nico watched the whole thing, marveling at how completely unaffected by jealousy he was. Just a few months ago seeing that casual interaction would have shot a sharp pain through his chest.

Not that he was immune from that pain now of course. It just wasn’t Percy or Annabeth that were likely to deliver it. Any moment now he was surely going to be subjected to some affectionate display between Jason and Piper. He’d been bracing himself all day for it to start.

It was kind of weird that hadn’t happened yet, come to think of it. Piper and Jason weren’t sitting together. Jason was currently wedged between him and Percy. Piper was sitting on the dead opposite side of the campfire, quietly talking to Lacy and Juniper. She’d barely even looked their way the entire evening…very weird. Nico supposed she was giving Jason space because he was trying so hard to get Nico to stay at camp. He’d probably told her he needed some time with his friends tonight. That seemed like the sort of thing he might have done.

Nico zoned out a bit, ignoring the conversation in favor of staring at the fire. The fire was hypnotic and staring at it was strangely calming. More importantly, it prevented him from turning his head and staring at Jason. And not staring at Jason was key. He was going to act normal and nonchalant if it killed him.

Too bad Jason wasn’t going to let him do that.

“Here,” said Jason, thrusting something warm and sticky into his hands.

Nico looked down to find a s’more clutched in his fingers.

“I’m not that hungr—” he began to say, but Jason cut him off with a stern look. Nico gave up objecting and crammed the messy concoction into his mouth.

S’mores were one of the many things that he hadn’t touched since he was ten years old. He sort of remembered liking them, but they were one of those foods that only appeared at social events like
campfires. And until tonight he’d shunned all group campfires since Bianca’s death. He didn’t feel welcome at them and it wasn’t worth putting up with the other campers just to score some junk food snacks.

The s’more currently in his mouth tasted even better than he remembered. He wasn’t sure if it was the s’more itself or the fact that Jason had made it for him.

It was probably Jason. He’d never been patient enough to get his marshmallows to consistently melt all the way through before jamming them between the chocolate and graham crackers. Jason was definitely better at it than he’d ever been.

Was Jason always this good at making them, or had he put extra effort into this one because he was making it for Nico?

*You are putting way too much thought into this,* Nico chastised himself. *It has nothing to do with you. Jason goes to all the campfires. He just has more practice at making them than you ever got.*

Jason was smiling triumphantly as he watched Nico eat it.

“I’ll make you another one?” he offered.

Nico began to nod, because his willpower was weak and dang, that *had* been delicious, and the fact that *Jason* was making it made him feel dangerously giddy…but then his eyes drifted across the fire again and landed on Piper. He thought he caught her staring at him, but when he focused on her her attention darted back to Lacy. She wasn’t smiling. The lump of marshmallow goop he’d just swallowed suddenly felt heavier sliding down into his stomach.

“How is sticking an entire chocolate bar directly into the fire ever a good idea?” he asked.

“Ack! You are not touching me until you’ve taken a shower.” Annabeth rolled her eyes. “In your dreams Seaweed Brain.”}

All eyes turned to where Percy sat, rivers of chocolate streaming down both his arms.

“Aw, come on,” Percy whined, waving his arms around and threatening to hug her. “I know you love chocolate.”

“How did you manage to shun all the campfires when you’re clearly a chocolate addict?”

“Percy, no!” Annabeth’s dismayed cry cut Jason off from whatever he’d been about to say.
“Shoulda asked me for help,” Leo announced. He had a marshmallow skewered on every finger of his right hand and was systematically toasting them with small controlled blasts of flames from his left. “I can melt stuff with precision.”

“Yeah but that removes all the challenge from it,” Percy retorted. “What’s the fun in having a perfect s’more if I didn’t make it myself?” He sloppily started licking the liquefied chocolate off of one of his arms.

“It’s actually better if someone else makes it.”

Nico felt his cheeks heat up as nearly everyone in the circle turned and looked at him. He hadn’t thought he’d said that loud enough for anyone else to hear. He certainly hadn’t meant to say that loud enough for anyone else to hear. He hadn’t meant to say that at all, actually.

He started to get up, his instincts screaming at him to run away and get out of the limelight. A strong hand clamped onto his leg.

“You can’t go yet, this one is for you.” Jason gestured towards the marshmallow at the end of the stick in his other hand (the hand not firmly gripping Nico.)

Now everyone was definitely staring at him. Piper’s stare was the most intense of all and Nico felt like she was reading his thoughts with her eyes. Did she know how he felt? She was a child of Aphrodite after all, was this the sort of thing that they could just detect without being told? He’d never heard anyone mention Piper having abilities like that. But then, people didn’t really make an effort to talk to him a whole lot. He was sure there were lots of facts about the other demigods he wasn’t aware of. Was she mad at him? Her expression didn’t seem mad per se. Just...intense. It redoubled his desire to get very far away from the campfire.

Jason wasn’t letting go though. Nico would just make a bigger spectacle of himself if he struggled to get free of his grip.

Did he care?

He probably shouldn’t care. There was definitely a time before when he wouldn’t have. He would have just prioritized getting away from everyone. What did it matter how he looked to them or what they thought? It’s not like their preexisting opinions of him were flattering to start with. What did it even matter if he made them worse? All that mattered was getting away.

But if he bolted now it wouldn’t look like he was running away from everyone. It would look like he was running away from Jason. And for some reason he hated the idea of everyone assuming that.

He hated the idea of Jason assuming that.

He was stuck between two hard spaces.

He made the mistake of glancing at Jason. The expression in Jason’s eyes was almost as intense as Piper’s. There was something different about the way he was looking at him though. There was an entirely different edge to it.

Maybe it was just the firelight reflecting off his glasses.

Nico lifted his arms up and pretended that he had just moved to stretch. After a theatrically long bout of extending his muscles he slowly sat back down again, all the while mentally willing everyone to stop staring at him.
“Hey so did you guys hear about the incident with the lost Anemoi Thuellai that got stuck in the stables last week?” Percy’s voice loudly broke everyone’s attention, and the many eyes trained on Nico quickly diverted. Several people commented and Percy launched into an animated story that Nico couldn’t quite manage to pay attention to, despite his gratefulness for the distraction.

Deep shadows enveloped most of the circle, held at bay by only the smallest ring of light from the fire. The temptation to simply shift a few inches and dive right into one of them was constant. It would be so easy to escape.

And yet…not. Although Nico had managed to get back, he still couldn’t shake his mistrust of shadow traveling. Was he playing Russian roulette every time he used the shadows now? Would one of his journeys inevitably send him into an entirely different world again? Would it be the same one as before or somewhere else? What would he do if that happened?

It was weird. He hadn’t wanted to leave the other Nico’s world. And yet, despite that he didn’t want to go through the experience again either. He was as relieved to be back as he was disappointed. He didn’t know what to make of things. He just knew that the shadows now made him more nervous than they used to, and it was probably stupid of him to keep using them for things that weren’t actually important. He’d have to have a talk with his dad about it soon.

“He’s neglecting to mention that it was actually Blackjack who chased off the Venti, not him.” Nico started to find Jason leaning way closer to him than he had been a second ago. His skin was dancing with warm oranges and yellows from the glow of the fire and Nico was hit with an inexplicable urge to reach out and run his fingers across Jason’s cheek to see if he really felt as invitingly warm as he looked. Nico was mortified at the thought and pulled the sleeves of his jacket down over his fingers, clenching the cuffs tightly.

His damage control was short lived though because Jason then handed him another s’more, which he had no choice but to let go of his jacket to accept.

Jason’s fingers brushed against his as he passed it, sending a mild jolt through Nico’s skin.

“Thanks.” He could barely manage a hoarse whisper. He glanced down at his still tingling fingers and then back up at Jason. Jason was smiling contentedly but Nico couldn’t tell if that meant he’d felt what Nico just had. He might have just been smiling because he was having a good time, or perhaps he was relieved that Nico was eating. It was probably stupid of him to assume that touching him had been anything but an unremarkable accident to Jason. He probably hadn’t felt anything out of the ordinary. He probably hadn’t even noticed it had happened.

Nico shot another guilty glance in Piper’s direction before bending over to focus on eating his s’more. He ate it more carefully than the first one, this time taking a moment to appreciate the fact that it had been made especially for him. Noticing how his marshmallow was perfectly browned and not even a little bit burnt. The outside was crisp and the inside uniformly molten. The graham cracker had been broken in half with precision, leaving no jagged or uneven sides to either half. The ideal amount of chocolate had been used. It was, quite frankly, perfect.

But then, how else would he expect anything made by Jason to be?

“You’re really good at those,” he mumbled, licking the crumbs off his fingers.

“You’d be good at them too if you came to more campfires,” Jason retorted.

“Hmm.” Nico couldn’t bring himself to actually agree with that. Although the outright refusal he intended to give also failed to happen.
“Seriously, you really ought to come more, I’d…I’d really like that.”

Nico stole another glance at Jason. He was still smiling, although not as strongly as before. There was a nervous tilt to his lips.

“Maybe,” Nico finally conceded. “We’ll see.”

Jason grinned.

Chapter End Notes

Well...I'm afraid that this is the last chapter that's totally done. So I can no longer promise clockwork weekly updates. Chapter 11 will probably be mostly on time-ish because it's close to finished already. But chapters 12 and 13 will probably take longer than a week for me to post. I promise I won't make you guys wait for months for them though, I'm working on this almost every single day. But unfortunately my writing speed is a bit slower than a chapter per week. I'll do my best to write as fast as I can! If I seem like I'm taking too long feel free to swing by tumblr and poke me for status updates. ^__^;; (And note that I'm actually 'brokengrackle' over there. Didn't join tumblr fast enough to be able to keep this name for my url, meh.)
Idiotic Risks Are What We Do

Jason wasn’t proud of what he was doing.

Nico had promised, hadn’t he? He’d made Nico promise. At least, he thought he’d made Nico promise. He had promised hadn’t he? Sure, he knew that it would be utterly naïve to assume that Nico was actually staying, but he had at least given Nico criteria he’d agreed to fill before he left. And several days had already gone by and not a single mention of the movies had been made. Jason was very conflicted about this. It was probably a good thing, right? If he’d made Nico promise not to leave until they’d watched some movies, then Nico stalling on watching them should be a good thing. It meant he was staying longer.

…Right?

Or maybe it just meant that Nico was hoping he’d forget about it and he wouldn’t have to. Maybe Nico had just said whatever he’d expected Jason had wanted to hear to simply get out of arguing but had no intention of following through.

No, Nico wouldn’t do that.

…Right?

No. Jason was pretty sure he wouldn’t. Of course he wouldn’t. Nico had promised. He trusted him.

Well, he mostly trusted him.

Jason would trust Nico with his life in a heartbeat, without even blinking. But trusting Nico to stick around? Well. He was struggling a little bit there, apparently.

He was working on it though. He was pretty sure he trusted Nico not to bail on him…. Which meant that he had absolutely no business trailing around and keeping an eye on Nico like the creepy stalker he was currently being.

He tried to convince himself that he was just checking up on him to make sure he was doing okay. It had absolutely nothing to do with his nagging fear of getting ditched.

Nothing at all.

“You realize that he’s totally aware that you’ve been following him, right?”

Jason jumped. Not so much because he’d been startled by an unexpected voice (though he had been) but because of whom the voice belonged to.

He hadn’t expected Piper to start talking to him again so soon.

Especially not about that.

He was afraid to turn around. He’d hated that Piper was avoiding him. He hated not seeing her and talking to her. He hated how it was his fault she wasn’t talking to him. While he still felt like he had done what was best for him and didn’t regret breaking up…he did regret the loss of her friendship. He wanted that back. He’d desperately wanted to be able to go back to talking to her.

…Just not about that.

“An intervention.”

Her face was expressionless. Jason couldn’t read her at all and that unnerved him even further.

“I thought someone ought to stop you from further embarrassing yourself in front of your new crush,” she continued.

“He’s not my—”

“Please don’t rub salt in the wound by insulting my intelligence.” Piper cut him off.

“I wasn’t following him, I mean not like how it looks, I was just—I mean—I don’t know. Why are you bothering, wouldn’t it be better for you if I did embarrass myself?”

Her stony façade cracked. “Is that how you think I am?” Piper’s brow creased in horrified disbelief. “Is that why you dumped me? Because you think I’m some petty, vindictive—?”

“No!” He frantically waved his hands in denial, wishing he could trade in all his sky powers for the simple ability to take back the stupid things he apparently couldn’t stop himself from saying. “No, gods no! Not in a million years, Piper! I don’t know why I just said that. Of course I don’t think you’re like that! I don’t know why I’d say something that awful; it’s the guilt talking. I feel horrible about…everything. And really confused. And apparently my brain wants to punish me by making everything even worse. I’m being a first class jerk.”

“Yeah,” said Piper grimly. “You kind of are.”

He looked at her pleadingly. “I’m sorry,” he repeated pathetically.

“I know.”

“No, I’m really sorry,” Jason continued. “The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you. I wish I could change my feelings.”

“No, you don’t,” said Piper tiredly. “You don’t really. If you really did you know that you could have asked me to do that. I have the power to change your feelings. But you didn’t ask me to do that because you know that I wouldn’t do that. Because that’s not what either of us want. So don’t even go there. You’re just hurting me more by saying that.”

“Gods, I just keep screwing up worse, don’t I?” Jason mumbled.

Piper shrugged.

“I’m so confused.”

“You’re not half as confused as you think you are,” said Piper. “You know what you want. If you didn’t you wouldn’t be out here and I wouldn’t have been morally obligated to come prevent you from screwing that up too.”

Jason didn’t confirm or deny that. Piper was right, of course. He knew exactly what he wanted. He just felt wracked with guilt over the whole thing. And utterly terrified of what would happen once Nico found out. Disappear to never be heard from again, probably. Piper probably had just prevented that from happening. He owed her. He didn’t even deserve for her to be talking to him,
and yet here she was doing him favors that were against her own best interests. Because Piper was wonderful and he would be the first person to point that out. Any outsider looking at this would certainly tell Jason that he was utterly insane for giving her up. He probably was insane.

And yet, finally being free from that underlying doubt and insecurity that Juno had burdened him with had actually left him feeling like he was finally sane for the first time in years.

He suspected Piper understood.

“T’m really that obvious?” he asked.

Piper rolled her eyes. “You’re so obvious I suspect even Clovis has noticed.”

“Ouch.” Jason winced.

“Yeah,” agreed Piper. “You really ought to either tone it down or talk to him about it. You’re… painful to watch.”

More guilt. He opened his mouth to start apologizing but Piper held up her hand to stop him.

“Look, I am seriously not happy about this,” she said. “I can’t help that. But it’s not like it came out of thin air either. I knew that the Juno thing was still bothering you. I kept hoping you’d get over it, I kept thinking that if I just held on to you tight enough you’d change your mind. But that obviously didn’t work and I’m not entirely surprised. So you don’t have to keep groveling. Just don’t flaunt the Nico thing in my face unnecessarily and we’ll probably be cool…eventually. I’m going to be honest and say we’re not cool right now. But if you give me some time and space we can probably stay friends later.”

Jason practically melted with relief. We can probably stay friends was the best thing he’d ever heard her say. “I’d really like that!” he said a little too eagerly. Then added, “and don’t worry about that…other thing. I um, don’t think there is going to be any ‘thing’ with Nico for me to flaunt.”

Piper raised an eyebrow and leveled him with a look that very clearly said ‘Really? Who do you think you’re fooling?’

“Wait, do you know something that I don’t?” Jason couldn’t help asking. Had Nico told her something? Did she know how he felt? The certainty in her voice made it sound like she knew.

“You’re pressing your luck if you think I’m going to play Cupid for you,” she said with a frown. “You’re on your own there, Sparky. If you want to know what Nico thinks you’re going to have to ask him.”

Jason couldn’t help smiling despite her refusal to disclose information he suspected she had. That she’d reverted to his nickname meant that things really were going to be okay between them. “Cupid is actually the last person I’d ever go to for help in the romance department,” he said with a snort. “But yeah, you’re right. I know I should talk to him.”

Piper nodded but didn’t say anything more. She wrapped her arms around her sides in a subconsciously protective gesture. Jason’s guilt flared up again. It wasn’t the sort of body language he was used to her having around him.

“So…” he didn’t want her to leave but now wasn’t sure what would be safe to talk about. His mind had been obsessively focused on a single topic lately: Nico. He suspected Piper wouldn’t appreciate him continuing to dwell on that in front of her. Not so much.
“Yeah….,” Piper apparently wasn’t any more inspired for a conversation topic.

“Thanks for stopping me from making an ass out of myself,” Jason offered.

“It’s what a friend would do,” she said pointedly.

“Well. I’m really glad you still think of me as one. I know that’s better than I deserve.”

“Yeah. Well, I did want you to know. Last time…I was too upset to be sure we could. But I’ve had some time to think and I know I’d rather be able to be around you than not. So…please don’t make that too hard for me.”

Jason nodded. “I won’t,” he promised.

Piper nodded back and smiled weakly. “Well then. I guess I should get going. I’ve got…stuff to do. I guess I’ll be seeing you around though.”

“Yeah,” agreed Jason. “Definitely. Let me know when you’re ready to hang. I’ll be around.”

Piper nodded again and briskly walked off, leaving Jason alone by the edge of the forest where he remained a long time, lost in thought.

It was one thing to say in a hypothetical context that you should talk to Nico di Angelo about your feelings and the remote possibility that they might be mutual. It was an entirely other matter to actually follow through and talk to him.

The closer he got to Nico’s cabin, the less certain Jason was that he actually had the nerve to do it. In fact he was definitely becoming more and more certain that he didn’t.

He was absolutely going to chicken out.

No question.

He forced himself to knock in spite of that conviction.

He wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or dismayed or just simply surprised when Nico actually opened the door.

Relieved, he reminded himself. You are definitely relieved. Well, mostly.

Nico’s hair was sticking out in half a dozen different directions, implying that he’d been asleep, which wasn’t an uncommon way to find him. Nico napped more than anyone Jason knew, barring the residents of the Hypnos Cabin. Jason had seen him looking all sleepy and mussed like this more times than he could count.

What was new though was the unexpected desire to reach out and smooth his hair down for him. Or maybe not smooth it out so much as simply thread his fingers through it—because wow, he really hadn’t noticed before but Nico’s hair was appealing. He wanted to touch it.

It was probably a safe bet that Nico wouldn’t appreciate it if Jason acted on his urges. Nico is not a cat, he chastised himself. Or your boyfriend. Don’t do anything stupid you’ll regret. He stuck his hands in his pockets to curb the compulsion.

“Yeah?” Nico asked groggily.
“You busy?” Jason asked.

Nico glanced around, as if checking for an excuse. “…No,” he finally admitted with a yawn. “I guess not.”

“Cool,” Jason rocked back on his heels, jiggling a bit from nervous energy as he weighed in his mind what to say next. Nico was just standing there still, not inviting him in. Not doing anything really. Was he annoyed that Jason had woken him up? “I was just thinking…” He began.

…About you.

Messy bangs hung in Nico’s face, making it difficult to read his expression. Jason had always suspected that that was in fact the very reason Nico always let his hair get so long. He liked it on Nico—not all guys could pull off hair of that length and shagginess (he certainly couldn’t have) and Nico kind of rocked the look—he didn’t think he should cut it. But sometimes that physical shield to Nico’s features really drove him crazy. Being able to read people was kind of important when trying to decide how much of your heart to dump on the table.

…That I like you a lot.

He was wearing a t-shirt with a grinning Día de los Muertos motif. The elaborate decorations on the skull were vividly colored, and Jason had never seen Nico wearing anything quite that bright before (never mind that the fabric of the shirt itself was still Nico’s signature black.) Did Nico only wear stuff like that to sleep in? Or did it signify some shift in his demeanor?

…That I know this probably seems kind of sudden and crazy but I think there’s a chance we could be pretty great together if you’re willing to give me a chance.

Nico rubbed at his forehead, momentarily brushing his bangs out of his eyes. He gave Jason a questioning look that clearly said ‘Well? What’s the deal? Spill it or I’m going back to bed.’

“…That it would be a good day for movies,” Jason finished. “Uh, if you’re free that long, I mean.”


Jason frowned. Since when had Nico been so easily thwarted from doing or acquiring anything? He had the ability to go pretty much anywhere, shouldn’t getting the movies (or even something to watch them with) be a relatively minor problem?

“Did you need money for them?” Jason asked awkwardly.

Nico looked startled at the question.

“No, money isn’t the issue,” he said quickly. “It’s just…finding them. I wouldn’t even know where to look? It was you who had them all, not me. And I’d have to leave camp to get them, which…” he suddenly looked embarrassed and turned to look off towards something in the cabin out of Jason’s view. “…I didn’t get the impression you wanted me to do?”

Did…did Nico just admit that he was actually staying because of Jason? That he was staying because Jason wanted him to? Jason felt a stupid grin start to form on his face.

“I didn’t want you to leave for good,” Jason explained. “But it’s okay if you have to go out and get
something. I trust you to come back.”

“Well that’s all well and good,” Nico mumbled, still not looking at him. “But I don’t.”

The surge of happiness Jason had felt at Nico’s question was quickly squelched.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Well don’t you come inside?” Nico said. “I don’t really want to talk about this in the doorway.”

Well that sounded serious. Jason’s mood tanked further. He stepped across the threshold, not being nearly as pleased to be invited onto Nico’s home turf as he usually would have been.

Nico gestured for him to sit down, but didn’t follow. He leaned against the frame of a bunk bed, his arms crossed tightly in front of him.

He fixed Jason with his espresso colored eyes. They looked melancholy. “How were you expecting me to leave camp?”

The question caught Jason off-guard. He’d been expecting Nico to immediately go into a spiel about how he felt like he didn’t belong here and wouldn’t be able to bear coming back once he’d exposed himself to the freedom of the world beyond.

“By…shadow traveling?” he asked. It felt like a trick question, wasn’t shadow travel pretty much always the way Nico got around, regardless of the distance or purpose?

“Exactly,” said Nico, giving a small nod. “I don’t have proof, but I’ve suspected all along that it was my shadow travel that caused the switch-up.”

“Oh.” Jason considered that. “I had just been assuming that one of the gods did it to mess with us.”

“I considered that too, but I just couldn’t think of any reason they would have had for doing it,” said Nico with a nod. “I mean…there was a reason that Hera switched you with Percy. But this whole thing just seemed so pointless?”

It wasn’t pointless, Jason thought. It made me realize some stuff. A lot of really important stuff. He knew he should probably actually share that particular thought….but he couldn’t seem to get the words out.

“Anyway, I was shadow traveling when it first happened,” Nico continued. “And I didn’t really notice it at the time, but when I thought about it afterwards the nether had felt a little different right before…like the atmosphere was thinning or something. The first time, anyway. The second time I wasn’t shadow traveling but the shadows just sort of reached out and grabbed me. Like I’d been stuck on a rubber band being stretched and it suddenly snapped me back in place.”

“Huh,” said Jason.

“And…I’m probably being stupid, but…” Nico paused, frowning. “Wait, don’t mention this to anyone else, okay?”

The words did seem to have their intended effect on Nico though, and his shoulders relaxed a little. “Thanks,” he said. “I just don’t especially like the idea of the whole camp knowing that I’m afraid to shadow travel.”

“You’re afraid?”

“Well, ‘afraid’ might sound a bit extreme,” Nico explained. “But I’m afraid that if I do it I’ll end up in the wrong place again. I guess you could say I don’t trust it any more. It seems like a bad idea to do it a lot.”

“That’s…definitely a problem,” Jason agreed.

“Yeah.” Nico sighed. “It’s really limiting. I’ve gotten so used to taking shadow travel for granted. I’m just…not sure what to do. Sooner or later I’m going to have to try doing it. I just didn’t really feel like getting some crummy movies was a good enough reason to risk banishing myself into another dimension.”

Jason was tempted to say ‘But I thought you liked it better there, wouldn’t that be a win-win situation for you?’ He bit his tongue. It certainly wouldn’t have been a win for him.

“Maybe it’s better to practice though,” Jason suggested. “If something is wrong with your shadow traveling, wouldn’t it be better to sort it out over something unimportant, rather than tempting fate in the middle of a quest or something? Maybe whatever is wrong with it is something you can conquer.”

Nico was looking at him funny. Jason realized that that probably had sounded like he had no regard whatsoever for Nico’s safety, and cared more about the stupid errand than if Nico was able to stick around. Nico didn’t know that Hecate had told him that Nico had the ability to navigate the realities if he wanted to. And Jason hadn’t yet figured out how to explain that without letting Nico know that he’d been conspiring to bring him back. He wasn’t sure if Nico would be very happy to know that, given how much he had wanted to stay behind.

“You know, all the rest of us get along just fine without shadow traveling,” Jason amended. “You don’t actually have to do it. You could just stop. But I was just thinking—well—if you think it’s something you’ll want to do, and giving it up isn’t an option, then it’s better to sort it out sooner rather than later so you won’t be worrying about it. Why don’t you make sure you don’t travel alone until you’re sure it’s working normally? That would help, right?”

“Hazel has too many responsibilities at Camp Jupiter,” Nico said with a frown. “I can’t ask her to leave that behind just to escort me around every time I want to shadow travel.”

It hurt a little bit that he wasn’t Nico’s first choice for company. Jason knew that Hazel was the logical option for this sort of thing…but it still felt a little bit like Nico had just kicked him.

“I’m available.” He tried his best to sound casual about it.

Nico’s eyebrows shot up. “But you can’t shadow travel.” He stated the obvious. “If it goes wrong we’ll just both be stuck wherever the shadows decide to take us.”

Jason shrugged. “It’d be better to get stuck with someone else than all alone though, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, but…it would be better for you not to get stuck at all. I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t ask me. I offered.”
“But…” Nico furrowed his brow. “It would be bad if you disappeared. You’re kind of important around here? And what about…” He glanced up at the ceiling. “…Piper? I don’t think she’d be too happy about you getting stuck in another dimension.”

And there it was: one of the elephants in the room that Jason had been avoiding. He’d meant to tell Nico about his breakup right away. But he just couldn’t seem to find the right opening to do it. And the more time that went by without saying anything, the more awkward the task of mentioning it seemed to get. Announcing it out of nowhere would have been weird, wouldn’t it? Why would he assume that Nico would even care about that information? It would probably be obvious that Jason was telling him for a reason. Would Nico be able to figure him out that quickly? Would he then feel really uncomfortable and everything would get awkward?

He had an opening now though. He had to tell Nico. If he kept avoiding it Nico would probably find out later and then things would be guaranteed to turn even more awkward.

Jason shrugged in a way that he hoped came off as easygoing and unconcerned. “Piper and I broke up.”

Nico’s head snapped back to stare at him. “What?”

“We broke up,” Jason repeated. “And she said she was going to need some space from me, so I don’t think it would really be a huge hardship to her if I disappeared for a while.” He shrugged again. “It would probably make things easier, honestly.”

“Oh. Uh…dude. I’m…really sorry.” Nico stumbled over the words. “That’s…um. That’s pretty brutal.”

Jason shrugged again. “It’s not that bad, actually. It kind of sucks but I think it’s for the best.”

Nico was still staring at him, shocked puzzlement frozen on his face. He began to open his mouth, then paused, shutting it. Then he started over again. “What happened?” he asked. “I don’t want to be nosy but…well. That’s just really surprising.”

Now there was a question he had to tread carefully with. Nico probably wouldn’t take it too smoothly if he answered with his immediate thought: You. You’re what happened.

“I was just thinking a lot about our um, future,” Jason explained. “And I realized that things weren’t really going in, um, the direction I wanted. I mean…do you remember what Cupid said to me in Split?”

Nico’s expression immediately darkened. “No,” he said. “I was a bit too focused on what he was taunting me about to really notice anything else he was saying.”

Jason had sort of expected that answer. “He asked if I still doubted myself,” he said. “And I realized that the answer was yes, and I wasn’t any closer to getting over that. It really wouldn’t be fair to Piper to stay with her when I feel that way.”

Nico raised an eyebrow. “It’s kind of hard to picture you doubting yourself.”

Jason snorted. “Why on earth would that be?”

Nico looked at him skeptically and gestured vaguely at Jason’s whole figure. “Um, have you looked in a mirror recently? You’re kind of like the poster boy for competence. Sheesh, if you’re doubting yourself I hate to think what the rest of us lowly peons ought to be doing.”
“Hey now, I’d think that you of all people wouldn’t be judging based on impressions.”

“Fair point.”

Nico fell silent and went back to staring vacantly at things—which-were-not-Jason.

“So, I guess you’d just prefer someone else to go with you then?” Jason ventured, bracing himself to be disappointed.

“Hm? No. I would like you to go. I just don’t think it’s a great idea. I don’t want to burden anyone.”

“It wouldn’t be a burden,” Jason reassured him. “Either everything goes fine and I get to watch the movies I’m after, or things go awry and I get to have an interesting adventure. I’d say I win either way. And really, if the movies are as terrible as you’re claiming maybe we’ll both be relieved if the traveling screws up, yeah?” He chuckled, hoping that Nico couldn’t tell that it had been forced.

Nico barely acknowledged that Jason had talked. He briefly made eye contact before his gaze drifted down to Jason’s arm, fixing around the point where his tattoo was. He absently twisted his silver skull ring while silently staring.

“So…?” Jason prompted.

Nico started as if he’d already forgotten that Jason was waiting for him to respond. “Oh! Um, sorry,” he mumbled. “Sorry—I spaced out. I—I just can’t believe you and Piper actually broke up. I thought you two were like Percy and Annabeth.”

“Yeah, I guess everyone thought that,” Jason agreed. “We were trying. But it was never quite like that. Not really.”

“I just always assumed you two would get married and have like the worlds most attractive children ever,” Nico continued, shaking his head.

Jason laughed and this time he didn’t have to force it. “Oh gods,” he said. “Can you imagine having to take care of four year olds who can charm speak? I think I might have dodged a bullet there.”

Nico looked up and cracked a smile. “I certainly wouldn’t envy that,” he said. Then the smile twitched and began to drop. Jason didn’t need to ask why, he could practically see Nico’s thoughts etched on his face: Nico did envy that. Not the theoretical problem kids, but the concept of being loved and having a family. Watching the fleeting mirth in Nico’s eyes fade back to sadness made Jason’s heart ache.

He wanted to say or do something to encourage him, but what could he say? Nico was clearly thinking of his impossible feelings for Percy. Nothing Jason could say would change the fact that Percy and Annabeth were as good as married already.

“So, I can totally hear the video store calling,” Jason said. “If you’re willing to risk getting stuck somewhere with only a Son of Jupiter to back you up?”

“Yeah, okay.” A little bit of Nico’s lost smile began to reform. He held out his hand. “If you feel like taking idiotic risks I’m not going to talk you out of it.”

Jason closed his fingers around Nico’s. “I’m a half-blood,” he scoffed. “Idiotic risks are what we do.”

He only caught a hint of Nico’s laughter before all sound was drowned out by the rush of freezing
He was probably gripping Nico’s fingers tighter than necessary. He figured that Nico would brush that fact off as him being nervous that they’d get separated in the nether. In truth, he wasn’t particularly worried about that at all, really he was just reveling in the rare privilege of being allowed to hold Nico’s hand (he could probably count on one hand all the times he’d witnessed Nico allowing something like that.) He hoped this would take a while because he didn’t want to let go. He wanted to keep their fingers twined together long past arriving at the video store. He wanted to stay like this all the way back and through the movie. He wanted to be allowed to do it every day.

_Oh Juno_, he thought, _how did I end up like this so fast?_

Except, the more he thought about it, the less fast he realized it was. The things he was feeling weren’t new. Just newly unburied. His Roman training had made him a lot better at repressing emotions than he’d given himself credit for.

He couldn’t see anything; even Nico was almost completely obscured by the shadows. The lack of visual stimulation only made Jason more aware of Nico’s fingers enmeshed in his. They were much slighter than his own, yet Nico’s grip was reassuringly strong. At least, it had started out as strong. At one point the comforting pressure against Jason’s skin began to slacken. At first Jason thought that Nico was letting go and tightened his own grip, but found that didn’t help. Nico’s fingers weren’t slipping _out_ of his grasp: they were slipping _through_. Nico was losing substance. He panicked and grabbed Nico’s arm with his other hand, and when that failed to be more solid than Nico’s fingers he threw his arm completely around Nico’s waist. For a terrifying second he thought that Nico was going to completely dissolve out from under him and leave him trapped with no way to navigate out of the nether. _That_ certainly hadn’t been a risk he’d considered when pitching his reckless idea. But the increased contact seemed to do the trick and Nico’s weight gradually reformed in his arms.

They emerged from the shadows hopelessly tangled in the back corner of a convenience store. Nico’s fingers were digging into Jason’s arm so hard that he suspected he was going to have bruises. Which was fine by him because he had a similarly vise-like grip on Nico’s ribs.

Nico’s ribs.

His fingers were on Nico’s ribs because his arms were completely wrapped around Nico’s body. There was an undeniably embrace-like quality to their current position.

_Shoot_, Jason thought. _Need to let go of him A.S.A.P._

Letting go of Nico though required Nico letting go of him as well. And Nico’s fingers had not released their death-grip on Jason. He could feel the erratic rise and fall of Nico’s chest pressed against him.

He stood stock still, not sure what to do.

Well, not entirely sure what to do. He was at least pretty sure of what _not_ to do. Which included acting on the almost overwhelming desire he currently had to run his hand across Nico’s back and maybe nuzzle his face into the top of Nico’s head.

_Yeah, that would probably not go over too well._ Standing still was a pretty good compromise, all things considered.

“These weird guys are blocking the Slurpee machine,” whined a nearby high-pitched voice.
As if he’d been shocked, Nico immediately released Jason and scrambled backwards, panic written all over his face.

Jason stepped backwards too, allowing a surly seven-year-old access to the beverage dispenser. Once they were out of her way, the kid didn’t spare them a second glance. Apparently two guys materializing out of thin air in a hug wasn’t especially noteworthy beyond interfering with her sugar rush.

“I’m guessing this isn’t where you were planning on taking us,” Jason said, hoping to break the awkward tension.

Nico shook his head; his eyes still wide and freaked out looking.

“Are you okay?” Jason asked.

Nico nodded and glanced down at his arm. He poked it gingerly. “For a second there I thought I was…dissolving,” he said shakily. “But I don’t’ think that’s it. I think I was getting pulled toward the other reality. But you pulled me back before I could cross all the way over.”

“That’s what it seemed like was happening to me,” Jason agreed. “Man, you nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Me too.” Nico nodded again. “Sorry—sorry for dropping us in the wrong place. I panicked and wanted to get out of the nether before something went wrong again.”

“I think that was a good idea,” said Jason. “It’s no big deal. We can take a taxi or something.”

They stepped out into the street, and Jason was surprised to find that they weren’t very far from Washington Square Park. “Huh, Weird,” he said, scratching his head.

“What?”

“Well, this is just a block or so away from where I ran into the other you the first time,” Jason said. “You weren’t actually trying to come here, right?”

“No,” said Nico. “I was aiming for the Upper East side, near Percy’s mom’s place. I’ve,” he coughed, “um, spent a bit more time in that neighborhood than down here. I know where the closest video store is there.” He looked kind of embarrassed.

Jason pointedly ignored the twist in his stomach as he thought about Nico pining over Percy.

“Well, that’s definitely pretty out of the way now, I’m sure there’s a closer one.”

Before Nico could reply Jason stepped aside and asked a college student for directions.

“There’s one about six blocks away,” he said cheerfully when he’d rejoined Nico. “C’mon, it’s this way.”

If Jason had been as familiar with New York as he was with California, he wouldn’t have so eagerly taken the college student’s advice. He definitely would have asked for a second option.

But Jason wasn’t really all that familiar with New York. He spent most of his time specifically in Long Island, carefully stowed away within Camp Half-Blood’s magical barrier. When he left camp it was usually to go on quests, which more frequently than not were fairly far reaching. That short errand to clean up the gryphon problem had been an anomaly. And certainly hadn’t included
allocations for casual sightseeing of the city. Jason didn’t really know Manhattan much better than your average tourist.

Which is to say, he’d never heard of Christopher St, or it’s reputation.

Nico was going to kill him.

He almost turned around when he started noticing the frequency of which the storefronts they passed sported rainbow flags and decals in their windows. In fact, the only reason he didn’t was because if he did it would be rather obvious *why* and he was afraid that drawing attention to them would make Nico even more uncomfortable than their mere presence.

He glanced nervously at Nico, whose gaze was steadfastly fixed in front of them and pointedly *not looking* at any of the passing buildings. He was walking much more stiffly than he had been when they’d left the convenience store.

Jason wanted to smack himself.

Maybe they *should* turn around. Nico’s relief to get away from this might overpower his discomfort at Jason acknowledging his discomfort.

Or maybe not. Because acknowledging that he knew Nico would be uncomfortable here meant acknowledging *why* Nico was uncomfortable here. And they had a silent understanding that Nico’s secret was something to never be discussed or even hinted at. Jason rather suspected that Nico would prefer to soldier on through his uneasiness over risking reminding Jason about *that day* and the revelations about his orientation that it had revealed.

So Jason tried to play it off like everything was cool (even though things were not even remotely cool,) all the while shooting Nico anxious glances every couple of steps.

And it *really* didn’t help that some of the window displays they were passing were filled with stuff risqué enough to make him blush. He honestly would have felt awkward here even if he weren’t so worried about Nico’s comfort level. Sex shops definitely weren’t his scene.

He practically sighed with relief when the video store finally came into view, all but jumping inside.

The video store wasn’t quite the haven he’d hoped it to be though. While it did have some of the regular conventional movie fodder he expected, the store’s selection was definitely skewed towards less mainstream tastes. They had to walk past a lot of shelves of blatantly gay films to even get to the science fiction section.

Jason’s eyes trailed over the rows of boxes, lingering maybe a little too long on some of the rom coms. He couldn’t help wondering what it would be like to watch *that* type of movie with Nico.

It was nearly impossible to imagine. Trying to picture Nico not being so tightly wound up over the topic of his sexuality was a bit too much of a stretch. Trying to picture Nico actually *enjoying* anything openly homosexual seemed outright absurd. Which was too bad really, because Jason was pretty curious. He would have really liked giving a few of these movies a try. Especially if it meant watching them with his arm wrapped around his viewing companion. He wished that scenario weren’t so far from the realm of possibility.

Oh well though, he wasn’t exactly about to complain. The fact that Nico had agreed to watch *any* movies with Jason was enough to make him pretty happy. And Nico was tolerating a pretty high level of stress to achieve that objective. Jason was extremely grateful.
Now they were standing in front of a shelf labeled “cult classics” where imagery like space ships and bloody chainsaws seemed to dominate the box covers instead of buff dudes sans clothing. Nico visibly relaxed.

“They probably won’t have it,” he muttered, scanning the selection. “It was too old and stupid. I’m sure that no one ever rents—oh.” Jason watched him reach out and pull a box off the shelf.

Nico grimaced as he looked at the cover, which sported a picture of a lady in a shredded bikini who looked like she was jogging.

“Wow. So, okay. I guess it’s here too. I’ll admit I was kind of hoping this was like a weird alternate reality thing that couldn’t possibly exist in both places.”

“That T-Rex looks really surprised,” Jason observed, looking at the cover gripped in Nico’s hands. Nico was right. It did look terrible.

“He’s surprised anyone is renting this.” Nico snorted.

“Well, obviously, why would we pick this one when we could be spending our money on *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* instead?” Jason pointed at a different box on the shelf.

“Oh my gods, what is wrong with people?” Nico muttered. “Someone actually pitched that idea to a producer. And then someone with money thought it was actually a good enough idea to make.”

“No, actually, I was kind of serious,” said Jason sheepishly. “Can we get that one too?”

Nico stared at him in disbelief. “You are doing a horrible job at defending your good taste,” he pointed out.

“Hey, I never said it looks like a good movie. It looks awful. But it also looks like a very unique cultural experience. I grew up without a TV, okay? Lupa didn’t exactly host ‘movie nights with the pack.’ I missed out on a lot of stuff. I can’t help being curious.”

“It’s not ‘missing out’, it’s being spared,” said Nico. But he grabbed the second movie anyway.

He added a few other selections to the growing collection, some were ones he’d apparently already seen with the other Jason, others that Jason picked out as their absurd titles and cover imagery grabbed his attention. Each time Jason pointed to one he expected Nico to shoot it down. But Nico continued to be surprisingly agreeable, only making quiet token objections while still adding them to their stack. Soon they had about seven movies to watch.

“We’re going to go catatonic before we’re even half-way through these,” Nico complained. “I can feel my intelligence dropping just by holding them.”

“And yet you’re still holding them.”

“I’m proving a point,” he retorted.

“Admit it,” Jason taunted. “You’re secretly really excited to watch them. You were just looking for an excuse.”

“Dude, as if,” Nico muttered. But his posture tensed and he suddenly looked away.

Jason wanted to smack his forehead. He’d let himself get a little too comfortable with the banter.

Nico was finally seeming to relax a little around him and for the first time ever allowing him to joke
around like he usually did with Leo. He couldn’t afford to forget though that Nico was not like Leo. Even when he seemed to be in an easy going mood, that good humor could turn on a dime. He didn’t want to drive Nico away by crossing any lines and acting overly familiar. Much as he wanted to be, they weren’t quite to that point yet and he could still easily screw everything up.

“Right, so. This is probably enough,” Jason mumbled, making a point to stare at the stack of movies instead of Nico.

“I should hope so,” said Nico.

“Yeah. Should keep us busy for a while.”

“Or, you know, put us to sleep.”

The mental image of Nico sleeping anywhere near his vicinity made Jason’s stomach do that annoying flip-floppy thing and he got embarrassingly flustered. He turned and started walking towards the checkout counter, hoping Nico hadn’t noticed.

“Membership card?” asked the guy at the counter.

“Oh. Um.” Jason glanced at Nico, even though he knew there was no reason that Nico would have one. Nico shook his head. “We don’t have one.”

The clerk pulled out a clipboard with some forms on it and slid it across the counter.

Jason immediately took it. There was no way he was going to try to force Nico to put his name down on any sort of membership in any way tied to New York’s gay district. He could only imagine how much that would traumatize his friend. He quickly filled out the paperwork and handed it back. He gave Nico a sideways glance and noted the look of relief on his face.

“Man, these are classics,” commented the clerk as he began running the DVDs through the scanner. “Gotta say, don’t see the stuff from this section get too much action here. This isn’t really the place people come for that sorta thing, if ya know what I mean.” He winked at them.

The clerk was met with deafening silence as both Nico and Jason chose not to comment on the implication of what sort of videos got more frequently checked out.

“Big date night?” The relentless video employee asked cheerfully.

“No.” Both Nico and Jason reacted so fast, Jason couldn’t even tell which one of them had answered first.

“We’re not—” Jason began to object.

“It’s not like that—” Nico interrupted.

“Not anything like that,” Jason hastily agreed.

The video clerk raised an eyebrow and made an ‘mhmm’ noise but didn’t say anything more as he dropped their DVD boxes into a plastic bag.

For a moment Jason really thought Nico was going to bolt. He panicked a little, wondering if he stood a chance of stopping him, or if it would just chase Nico away worse if he followed. Luckily he didn’t have to decide. After a brief deer-in-headlights look flashed across his face, Nico’s features slid into a stony impenetrable façade. Jason was simultaneously relieved that Nico wasn’t freaking
out and somewhat horrified to watch the Son of Hades so thoroughly shut down. It gave him a particularly sinking feeling to know that Nico was shutting down like that over the suggestion that he was in a relationship with Jason. It wasn’t as if Jason had really thought he stood a particularly great chance at Nico ever seeing him like that, but it sucked quite a bit getting such definitive proof that he had no chance in Hades. He was no longer certain Nico would actually be up for sticking to their plan to actually watch the movies. He wasn’t certain if Nico would be hanging around at all after they made it back to camp.

Neither said a word as the transaction was completed and they walked out of the store. Nico stayed rigidly morose, regardless of how much distance they put between themselves and Christopher St. Jason began wondering just how the heck they were going to get back at this rate. He was afraid to ask Nico to try shadow traveling them again. He was sort of afraid to ask Nico anything. He had the nerve-wracking feeling that Nico was a too tightly strung bowstring and would snap at the slightest disturbance.

Gradually though, Nico’s measured footsteps began to slow. He eventually stopped at the edge of an intersection and turned around to face Jason.

“I don’t—” Nico met his eyes but didn’t hold the contact long enough for Jason to get any sort of read off him. “—Think that shadow traveling is the best idea. Not right now.”

Jason nodded agreeably, massively relieved that Nico was finally talking to him.

“I could summon Tempest,” he immediately offered.

“I don’t think that’s a great idea either,” Nico countered. “I’m not very good with flying. Or with animals.”

“Don’t let Tempest catch you calling him an animal,” said Jason. “He’d probably bite you.”

“And prove my point that summoning him is a terrible idea,” Nico complained. “We’ll summon he other Tempest.”

Before Jason had a chance to ask ‘what other Tempest?’ Nico had tossed a drachma into the road and raised his hand in a cab-hailing sort of gesture.

"Stêthi, Ô hárma diabolês!"

He was almost immediately rewarded with the screech of wheels hitting a brake.

A cab had literally appeared out of thin air. Jason looked in astonishment at the words Gray Sisters Taxi painted on the car’s smoky exterior.

“What?” Jason stuttered. “Where’d that come from? What did you just say?”

“I said, ‘stop, Chariot of Damnation’,,” Nico explained, hopping into the cab.

“Okay, wow, that does not make me feel better,” said Jason, following him in.

He continued to not feel better as he laid eyes on the cab’s driver-ers. Drivers. All three of them turned and stared at him at once. Although perhaps ‘stared’ was not the right description, as only one of the six eye sockets locked on him actually had an eyeball in it.

Jason unwittingly flinched as he took in the hollow dark holes in the wrinkled old faces. The one with the eye gave him a gummy smile.
“Oh my, what a surprise,” she announced. “You should be dead.”

It was like having horrible déjà vu. Jason’s blood ran cold as he took in the all too familiar statement. A lot of bad things had happened to him shortly after the last time those words had been said to him….

“Oh! You’re right! Well lookit that! It’s Jason!” She announced gleefully. “We haven’t seen you in millennia. Hm, she’s right you know, you should be dead.”

“We need you to take us to Camp Half-Blood,” said Nico calmly, completely disregarding the cab drivers’ antics. He didn’t seem particularly perturbed that they were driving without looking at the road.

“Let me see!” shrieked the third lady. Her arm lunged at the current holder of the eye. The car lurched and narrowly swerved around a mini-van. “It’s not fair! I want to see too!”

“I don’t have it! Wasp has it!” insisted the one who did in fact have it.

“Lies!” Shrieked the other. “Liiiiies!”

“I need it to drive!” demanded the one who was apparently driving.

Jason was growing increasingly horrified. The fact that they seemed to think he should be dead had quickly become the least concerning thing his about his current predicament. He was beginning to suspect that he very soon would be dead. Courtesy of this cab service.

“You’re not driving!” yelled the one who had the eye. “I am!”

“No, I am!”

Jason’s head whipped back as the cab swerved again, this time to dodge a tree; in spite of his terror, he was kind of impressed. It took talent to find a tree to nearly hit in New York City.

The disturbing orb eventually exchanged hands again, and the third face began eyeing him up.

“How disappointing,” sighed the first lady. “That Jason was quite the catch.”

“Yes, very much,” agreed the other, grabbing the eye back and causing one side of the cab to run up on the sidewalk for a moment before dropping back onto the road with an alarming thump. “What a downgrade.”

“He’s not a downgrade.”
Jason was caught utterly off-guard by Nico’s unexpected contribution to the conversation.

“I’ve met the other Jason,” Nico added, halfway under his breath. “In the Underworld. He’s totally overrated.”

Jason turned and looked at Nico in surprise. Nico was staring at the pile of DVDs in his lap, pretending to read the back of one of the movies.

Jason had spent a lot of his life hearing himself get compared to ‘The Jason.’ It was one of those topics that always made him internally wince and think ‘here we go again.’ But for once he wasn’t being told he had to somehow measure up. For the first time ever someone was saying that he was already just as good. In fact, it had sort of sounded like Nico might think that he was better.

Jason smiled gratefully at Nico, but didn’t think Nico could actually see. His eyes were still determinedly riveted to the DVD box.

He kind of wanted to reach over and take Nico’s hand, but knew that would go over about as well as setting the car on fire.

Five seconds later Jason wanted to reach over and grab Nico again. Not because he was feeling sentimental, more like he needed someone to hang on to for dear life because the cab had side-swiped an SUV in the middle of the Williamsburg Bridge and spun around 180 degrees. It continued to go without losing any acceleration at all. Backwards.

Setting the car on fire might have actually been preferable.

Nico had been fairly calm up until this point, completely unflinching as the car bumped and swerved. But now he was actually staring out the window with wide alert eyes and his hand darted up to clutch the back of the seat.

“How exactly is this better than flying?” Jason hissed through teeth clenched in terror.

“Um,” said Nico, still stiffly staring out the window. “Um, well. I was going to point out that there’s no risk of falling involved. But…that might no longer be entirely accurate.”

“You think?”

Apparently the traffic on the bridge wasn’t moving fast enough for the Gray Sisters. They darted and zigzagged, at one point actually driving straight over another car (Jason had no idea how they managed that without crushing the unfortunate impedimentary vehicle. But somehow both cars emerged intact.)

“I am never letting you pick how to go anywhere ever again,” Jason muttered.

“We’ll go by zombie next time,” Nico assured. “I just thought this would be faster.”

“It’s a faster way to turn us into zombies,” Jason complained. “What part of ‘I’m never letting you pick how to go anywhere ever again’ did you not understand?”

“The part where you thought to yourself that we’d be flying instead,” Nico argued.

“Because we will be flying next time,” Jason confirmed.

“In your dreams.” Nico scowled.

“Yes, exactly!” said Jason. “That sounds like a very nice dre—” he snapped his mouth shut realizing
how that might sound. “Whatever,” he quickly muttered. “We are so flying next time.”

Nico didn’t counter that—although it might have just been because the cab came dangerously close to careening into the guardrail. Jason watched as Nico closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. The reaction pretty much summed up exactly how Jason was feeling himself.

Although barring shadow travel it was the fastest way to get to Camp Half-Blood, the rest of the car ride felt like an eternity. Jason very nearly kissed the ground when he finally escaped the cab. Nico definitely looked a little bit green.

“Never again,” Jason muttered.

Nico nodded. “Hm, yeah. I have to admit it sounded like a much better idea when Percy was just telling me about it. He might have glossed over a few details.”

“Like the fact that you nearly die every five-to-ten seconds.”

“Well. We made it back. We didn’t get sucked into another dimension. And we didn’t get trapped in a flaming car wreckage. And we found the movies. Though I’m not sure whether we should actually count that last one as a plus.”

“Only one way to find out!” Jason grinned, his good mood coming back a bit now that his adrenaline rush was calming down. “Ready to watch them?”

“What, now?”

…And Jason’s good mood promptly took another hit. “Is now bad?” he asked. “When were you planning on watching them with me?”

“Well, I still wasn’t sure how we were going to watch them,” Nico clarified. “I still don’t have a TV, remember?”

“Oh…you’re right.”

“I mean…the only TV at camp is the one in the Big House that Chiron uses for the orientation films, right?” Nico said, frowning. “I didn’t really think he’d let campers use it for personal reasons. I was assuming we’d have to sneak in in the middle of the night or something.”

Jason pondered that. It was true that the access to TV was extremely limited here. That had never bothered him though since he’d never gotten a chance to develop a TV watching habit in the first place. Most of the TV he’d seen in recent years had happened at Piper’s dad’s place when he’d gone home with her for visits. Neither he nor Nico had a mortal parent to fall back on for that sort of thing. Hmm….

“Wait!” he said as an idea struck. “I don’t think we’ll need to resort to that. The Big House isn’t the only place with a TV at camp.”

“It’s not?” Nico looked confused.

“Nope,” said Jason. “But the other option will require some plea bargaining. Why don’t you go find something to do for an hour or so and then meet me at Cabin Nine?”

Nico looked at him skeptically, but then shrugged and nodded. “Sure,” he said. “I guess I’ll go take a nap. Come get me if I take too long.”
Leo looked mildly surprised to find Jason waiting outside his door for him. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

Leo glanced back into the cabin and then stepped outside, shutting the door behind him.

“I’m glad you’re here actually,” Leo said. “I’d sort of been meaning to talk to you.”

“Good,” said Jason. “Because that’s why I’m here. I totally need to talk to you.”

“Yeah…of course you do.” Leo winced and rubbed the back of his neck. “I figured.”

“So…” Jason said, watching Leo as he fidgeted. “Wanna go first?”

“…Yeah. Okay. Sure.”

Jason waited.

“Right,” Leo finally continued. “So…you know the thing about Hephaestus kids, right?”

“What thing about Hephaestus kids?”

“Well we understand mechanical stuff really well,” said Leo.

Jason nodded. That was an obvious given.

“We get stuff like machines. Completely. Things that aren’t mechanical though? Living stuff? Well, not so much.”

“You usually seem to do okay with that.”

“I’ve gotten good at faking it,” Leo confessed. “But when I get nervous I start saying stupid stuff to try to lighten the mood. And, um. Sometimes I sort of…miscalculate how funny it will come off.”

“Spectacularly,” Jason agreed.

Leo sighed. “Yeah. So, I’m sorry for being a complete toolbag to you the other day.”

“You were a complete toolbag,” Jason confirmed.

“I know.”

“And your timing really sucked,” Jason continued. “I was already feeling pretty lousy about myself over it.”

“I know,” Leo repeated. “I mean, I figured that out after. A little too late of course.”

“The way I started avoiding you was probably a pretty good clue.”

“Yeah that definitely tipped me off.”

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“Well, anyway. I don’t think it’s creepy,” Leo finally said. “I was just saying stupid crap because I was so surprised. I am totally cool with it.”

“Yeah?” Jason asked. “Because my feelings haven’t changed. I really like Nico.”
“I can tell,” said Leo. “I mean, once you pointed it out to me and I started paying attention, I could
tell. It’s pretty obvious when you know what to look for.”

“It is?” Jason didn’t know how to feel about that piece of information. He didn’t especially want
anyone else noticing and cluing Nico in before he was ready to talk to Nico himself.

“Yes,” said Leo. “The way you look at him now and stuff. It was especially obvious at the
campfire the other night. Do you think you guys are actually going to get together?”

Jason shrugged. “I wouldn’t exactly recommend betting on my odds.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” said Leo. “I doubt many people would have bet on my odds with
Calypso, either.”

“They were still probably better. But I’m not giving up.”

“Good,” said Leo. “You shouldn’t.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.” Jason broke into a smile. “Because I want to take you up on your offer
to be my wingman.”

Leo had been beginning to smile as well, but it froze only half formed. “Wait—you want me to be
your wingman with Nico?” he asked.

Jason nodded.

“Dude, I’m not sure that’s such a hot idea.”

“Why?” Jason asked, folding his arms across his chest. “You’re only willing to help me out with
girls?”

“No, it’s not that,” explained Leo. “It’s just that Nico and I don’t exactly operate on the same
wavelength, if you know what I mean. I’m pretty sure the guy hates me. I think getting me involved
would hurt your chances with him more than help.”

“He doesn’t hate you,” said Jason. “But you can’t exactly blame him for being on edge around you.
You’ve said some pretty harsh stuff about him.”

“I’ve said some pretty harsh stuff about everybody,” Leo objected. “He shouldn’t take it personally.”

“He can’t help but take it personally when you’re echoing the same harsh stuff that the entire camp
has been saying to him for years.”

“How was I supposed to know that?”

“Uh, common sense?”

Leo pointed to himself. “Uh, Hephaestus kid over here, remember? All my common sense is
relegated to gears.”

“Stop making excuses and help me out, okay?” said Jason. “Are you still my best friend, or what?”

Leo straightened. “Heck yeah, bro. Of course I am.”

“So you want me to be happy, right?” Jason probed.
“Obviously.”

“Great. So you’ll totally let me and Nico use your TV then, yeah?”

“Woah, woah, woah. Back up there,” said Leo. “I must not have heard you correctly.”

“I need to borrow your TV for a few hours.”

“Yeah, um, that’s what I thought you said. Slight problem there, though. My TV is in the Leo Cave,” said Leo. “No one goes in the Leo Cave except for Leos.”

“The Leo Cave is due for some rezoning.”

“No way dude,” complained Leo. “It’s like a serious no-can-do to bring non-Hephaestus kids down into Cabin Nine’s subterranean quarters. It’s top secret.”

“So top secret that you’ve told me about it at least eleven times.”

“Hey, telling and going are two completely different matters.”

“Dude, come on,” Jason complained.

“No, seriously,” Leo complained right back. “I’m head of the cabin! It’ll set a really bad precedent if I start letting outsiders down into the off-limits parts of our turf.”

“Look, Nico just totally risked his life to get some movies for us to watch together. This is really important.”

“He risked his life just for some movies?” Leo asked skeptically.

“Yeah,” Jason confirmed. “I can’t really go into all the details, but he seriously did.”

“And where exactly are you getting this opinion that your chances with him aren’t that great?” asked Leo.

“Just…a hunch,” said Jason. There was no way for him to explain without giving away Nico’s secrets.

“Huh, well that’s funny,” said Leo. “Because I’m getting a hunch that he’s totally apeshit for you. No one risks their life like that if they’re not.”

“I’m pretty sure he just sees me as a friend so far,” Jason countered. “You’ve risked your life for your friends dozens of times.”

“Yeah, on quests,” said Leo. “Over important stuff. I only do idiotically reckless stuff when I’m blinded by love.”

“Whatever,” Jason scoffed. “You do idiotically reckless stuff all the time.”

“Well what can I say, I have a lot of love to go around,” Leo argued.

Jason rolled his eyes. “So you’re just going to leave me hanging out to dry then?”

“Dude, go ask Chiron to use the camp’s TV.” Leo whined.

“First of all, I’m pretty sure he’ll say ‘no’ and I bet you know that too,” Jason countered. “Second of
all, we’d have no privacy so my chances of getting anywhere with him would remain at nil.”

Leo raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t look at me like that,” said Jason. “You know that as far as Nico is involved ‘getting somewhere with him’ actually just means getting him to have a conversation that consists of more than two sentences.”

“Talk about having the world’s most boring wingman job ever,” Leo sighed. “What the heck even movies are you planning on watching?”

Jason told him.

“Hey hey hey hey. Put on the brakes. Why didn’t you mention that nymphomaniacs were involved at the beginning of this whole discussion?” said Leo. “That changes everything. I’m totally in.”

“Well I’m not sure that there are actually—”

“You must both swear an oath of secrecy and never breathe a word to anyone that you have entered the sacred grounds of the Leo Cave,” Leo said solemnly. “The cabin must be otherwise vacant when you enter and you will agree to wear blindfolds so that the sacred secrecy is preserved.”

“But it’s just under your bed, isn’t it?” Jason asked, confused.

“Do you want to talk me out of this, or what?” complained Leo.

Jason shook his head.

“Okay, right. So, I’m sure I can cook up some group activity that will clear out the cabin. Come back in like twenty minutes. Bring snacks.”

“But—”

“Lots of snacks.”
Watch Out for Monsters

“I think time moves at only half the usual rate in that place,” Nico complained as Jason finally broke free of his obligation and joined him outside the restaurant.

“I know, right?” He smiled nervously. “I could have sworn it took about a hundred hours to get to 11 o’clock, huh? Longest day ever.”

“Seriously.”

“So…” Jason stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels, looking at Nico expectantly.

“…Yeah?” Nico stared back, an equally expectant look on his face. He wasn’t sure what to say. Their earlier conversation had been prematurely interrupted. Jason had not even outright answered Nico’s question about being his boyfriend. His intent had been pretty much implied by his actions, but still. Whatever had started between them tonight still felt tenuous and fragile. Should he start talking again? Start walking so they could talk somewhere else? Did more even need to be said? Nico had no idea where their boundaries stood anymore. He’d spent so long edging around their friendship and trying not to cross any lines. It felt surreal to realize that he didn’t have to worry about that now. But had the lines completely disappeared, or had they just moved?

“So, um, coffee, right?” Jason asked.

“Yeah,” Nico confirmed. “But I was thinking we could get it to go? And maybe drink it at my place?” He felt himself blushing at the suggestion and felt stupid for being so nervous. What was the big deal about asking Jason to come back to his apartment? Jason practically lived at his apartment. He’d spent the previous night there for crying out loud.

Last night Jason wasn’t your boyfriend, he reminded himself.

“That’d be cool.” Jason took a step closer and shot Nico a cautious glance before throwing his arm around Nico’s shoulders.

Nico tensed briefly, because they were out in the open and people could see them and until tonight he had barely even been able to admit to himself what his sexual orientation was, let alone share that with others. It was somewhat terrifying to be so quickly advertising it to complete strangers. But Jason’s arm was warm and familiar and Nico found it impossible to stay tense under its comforting weight. And as more and more people walked past without giving them a second glance, Nico’s anxiety abated. He shifted closer and leaned into Jason’s side as they walked.

It took three tries to find a coffee shop that was still open. Under normal circumstances Nico would have just suggested they give up on the first attempt and go home. Coffee really wasn’t his top drink choice anyway, and it was probably not the best idea to be drinking it at eleven o’clock at night. But they both stubbornly persevered; because this was their first date and a silent agreement seemed to hang between them that they weren’t going to easily give up on it. Never mind that Nico had a perfectly good coffee maker sitting on his kitchen counter—it just wasn’t the same.

Jason managed to stealthily pay for Nico’s latte when he wasn’t looking, to Nico’s dismay.

“Absolutely not,” objected Nico, trying to force a crumpled $10 bill into Jason’s tightly clenched hand. “Take this! I’m so not letting you pay for my coffee.”
“I thought you said it was a date,” Jason taunted cheerfully.

“Duh,” Nico snapped. “But I was going to pay for both of us.”

“Too slow,” Jason announced.

“No, seriously.” Nico didn’t relent from trying to shove the money into Jason’s unyielding fist. “You need to save your money! I’m not letting you work two jobs just so you can throw away your tuition on me.”

“Says the guy who’s unemployed.”

“You know I won’t be for long,” Nico argued. “And you also know that I don’t have to worry about money. Stop being ridiculous.”

“I’ll let you pay,” Jason relented. “For our next date. How’s that?” He gave Nico a nervous grin.

The fight drained out of him as Nico got distracted staring into Jason’s eyes. Next date. Jason was serious about this. He was already thinking about them as a future them. How had he gotten this lucky all of the sudden?


“You’ve got a deal.”

Jason wrapped his arm around Nico again as they exited the shop. Nico took advantage of their proximity and crammed his $10 bill into Jason’s pocket.

“Trying to get into my pants already?” Jason’s tone was teasing. But Nico could feel his eyes on him, gauging whether he’d overstepped with that joke. Which Jason apparently immediately decided that he had, as Nico’s body involuntarily stiffened and his face heated up at the insinuation. “Dude, sorry. That was totally uncool,” he immediately backtracked.

He felt Jason’s grip tighten on his shoulder marginally, like he was afraid Nico was going to run away.

Nico elbowed him lightly in the side. “Idiot,” he muttered. He was mildly surprised at the fact that his own fight-or-flight instincts hadn’t kicked in and caused him to bolt. That was a first. Usually even the slightest hint of that particular topic—joking or in earnest—was enough to throw him into a mortified and defensive scrabble to divert attention from himself. It was strange to realize that his years of fear over what Jason would think of him if he ever found out didn’t matter any more. Jason might have been laughing but he wasn’t making fun of him. He wasn’t judging him and he wasn’t going to. Jason thought it was okay. In fact, Jason thought it was more than okay. It was going to take Nico a while to get used to being able to leave his guard down.

Before long they were standing in his living room.

“So…” Nico said for what must have been the thirty-seventh time that night. He was having a lot more trouble than usual thinking of things to say. And it didn’t help that Jason had grown a lot quieter after his attempt at humor had gone south. Nico wished he’d say something to break the tension; Jason usually had no shortage of things to talk about. But then again, he usually didn’t either. All of his usual conversation topics felt pathetically vapid in lieu of what had happened though. As if Jason wanted to talk about graphic novel releases or Mythomagic stats. Nothing really seemed very noteworthy in comparison to the sudden change in their relationship. But talking about that still felt scary. Nico had no idea what to say.
He wasn’t entirely sure what to do with himself either. Should they sit at the table to drink their coffee? That seemed kind of stiff and awkward. On the couch? If they sat on the couch would they even want to bother with the coffee? Maybe they’d just skip right to doing other things. When was Jason going to kiss him, anyway? Maybe he wouldn’t. Maybe they should take things really slow. Maybe Jason would change his mind. Maybe that would be for the best. Maybe he’d totally freak out if Jason kissed him. Maybe he’d screw everything up. Maybe….

“You okay?” Jason’s voice broke through Nico’s anxiety attack.

“Yes!” Nico answered. His voice had an unrecognizable forced cheerfulness to it. He thought he sounded completely manic.

In contrast Jason looked completely calm and confident. How did he even do that? His ease was catching though. Nico felt some of his apprehension ebb as he looked into Jason’s eyes. There was blatant affection showing in them. The giddiness that had beset him in the restaurant began to creep back into Nico’s stomach, replacing the anxiety.

“This is good coffee,” he said to fill the silence.

“Yeah, it’s not bad,” Jason agreed. “It’s very…coffee-ish. And stuff.”

Nico snorted as Jason ruined his illusion of poise by opening his mouth and reminding him that he was in fact a complete and utter dork half the time. Which was something Nico happened to love about him. Especially since at first glance Jason seemed impossibly cool and Nico knew that he was one of a small minority that got to see Jason’s dorky side.

Jason flopped down on the couch, very nearly spilling his drink and gestured for Nico to join him. Nico followed but didn’t sit as close to Jason as he wanted to; he made sure he was on a completely separate couch cushion. Then he wondered why he had done that. He could have sat closer to Jason if he’d wanted to. He was probably allowed. But it was too late to move now without it being obvious and weird. He glared at the offending cushion crack between them.

“So…is it weird to have me back?” he broke down and asked.

“It’s great to have you back,” Jason repeated. “What was weird was you not being here. And what was weird was having someone else here that looked like you and sounded like you but didn’t completely act like you. It was weird getting to know him and like him yet at the same time hoping he’d go away because I wanted you back. It was a really strange week.”

“Yeah,” Nico agreed nodding. “Strangest week ever.”

“So,” Jason repeated. “Your turn. Is it weird to be here?”

“Yeah,” Nico shrugged. “It feels pretty odd. I mean, I was seeing some pretty crazy stuff there. There was magic and all these creatures that I thought only existed in books and I was learning amazing stuff. There was so much cool stuff to experience and I only saw the tip of the iceberg. It feels weird to be back here already when I felt like I wasn’t done there yet.”

Jason’s expression was serious and not entirely as happy looking as it had been a few moments ago. “So you’re sorry to be back?”
“Not sorry to be back. Just sorry to be back so soon. I don’t think I would have wanted to stay there permanently, but I did want some more time. But I’m starting to change my mind on that, you know?” He gave Jason what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “It turns out there’s some stuff here that I wouldn’t have wanted to miss out on either.”

Jason returned the smile, but there was a cautious edge to it, like he didn’t actually believe that Nico was sincere about being glad to be back.

Jason’s wariness made Nico feel guilty and nervous. And so he did what he always did when he got nervous: he began to babble. “I wish you could have been there though!” he exclaimed. “It was so cool, you would have loved it! Did you know I met Hades? You know, the Hades. Crazy, right? He wasn’t as cool as you would have expected though. He was kind of whiny, actually. He totally didn’t like me. But who cares, you could fly! And did I mention the gryphon?” (He had totally already mentioned the gryphon. Inevitably the gryphon would get mentioned some twenty-eight additional times.) “It looked just like the illustration on the Mythomagic card! But cooler! Its fur was sort of metallic, like a starling’s. And its claws were like meat hooks! It looked super lethal. But the other you was so unfazed. And this dude who could shoot fire out of his hands toasted it. And bam! It just exploded like a piñata! And there was sparkly gold dust everywhere, it was like being in a video game. I wish you could have seen it all! If you’d been there—I mean you—you—I really wouldn’t have wanted to leave!”

Somewhere in his excited rambling Nico had grabbed onto Jason’s hands. When the action finally registered he got flustered and his instincts said to pull away. But Jason wasn’t pulling away, and the realization that he didn’t have to pull away slowly caught up to him. So he didn’t.

“It does sound awesome.” Jason was smiling, his eyes intently on Nico’s. His gaze briefly dropped down, flickering over Nico’s lips, then back to his eyes. He was leaning forward slightly, not close enough to be in Nico’s space yet, but certainly edging that way. “I really wish I could have been there with you.”

“Yeah.” Nico’s brain was having trouble being coherent now. His capacity for conversation had been replaced by the racing thought, Oh my god, this is actually happening. If I just lean forward this is probably going to happen. I need to lean forward.

He was temporarily paralyzed in the moment though. Jason’s eyes were just so freaking blue. Like azure glass or shards of arctic ice. How could such a vibrantly cold color have so much warmth in it? How could they be looking like that at him?

“So…um. Can I…?” Jason began to ask. The question jumpstarted Nico’s brain back into action and he didn’t wait for Jason to finish. He dug his fingers into Jason’s shirt and pulled him in.

Their lips were hesitant at first. Nico had to remind himself that as much as Jason seemed like he ought to be some sort of expert in this field, he hadn’t really dated anyone before either. They were both testing the waters with comparable uncertainty. Nico’s uncertainty didn’t last long though. Any fears he’d had that this would feel wrong or weird quickly dropped away. There was absolutely nothing weird about Jason’s mouth. Kissing Jason felt as natural as talking to or hanging out with him. Now that they had finally gotten here, it seemed like the most obvious progression in the world; it felt like they should have been doing this forever. Nico had an urge to make up for all the lost time.

When they broke apart Jason was mirroring the stupidly wide grin he could feel stretched across his face. In spite of himself, Nico giggled.

Jason’s grin wavered. “What’s so funny?”
“Me,” said Nico, still snickering. “I’m so stupid.”

“No, you’re not,” said Jason seriously.

“I’m an idiot,” Nico countered. “I am seriously the world’s biggest idiot.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve wanted to do that for years.”

Jason brightened. “Me too.”


“At least three years anyway,” Jason confirmed. “Since we did that project together for the debate team in high school. You got so ridiculously worked up over the topic of NASA funding and extraterrestrial research. It was kind of adorable. Remember how I totally flaked out in the middle of the debate? I completely forgot my argument about the allocations of government spending. All I could think about was how much I suddenly wanted to kiss you. It kind of caught me off guard.”

“Oh geeze.” Nico buried his face against Jason’s neck. “I’m so freaking dumb. I can’t believe we could have started this that long ago. And all this time I’ve just been so worried about what you would think if you knew.”

“I think it’s the best thing that could possibly happen to me,” said Jason. He scooted closer, sliding an arm around Nico’s back. “When did you…decide that…you know.”

Nico nodded, not moving away from Jason’s shoulder. He wasn’t sure he wanted to see the expression on Jason’s face. “Does that freak you out?” he mumbled.

“No,” Jason said quickly. “No. It’s just…surprising. I mean, man, I wasn’t even interested in any girls yet back then.”

“Well, to be fair, neither was I.”

Jason stuttered into laughter and tightened his grip around Nico. “And that is awesome. I wish you’d told me.”

“I wish you’d told me,” Nico echoed.

“So do I,” Jason agreed. “I was afraid you’d freak out and we wouldn’t be friends anymore.”

“Ditto,” said Nico.

“We’re both idiots,” Jason said cheerfully.


“So, um, that was alright for you, right?” Jason asked, a hint of nervousness creeping into his voice.
Nico marveled at how Jason could even remotely doubt himself. That had been the best sixty seconds of Nico’s entire life, no question.

“That was the best,” Nico assured him. “The absolute best. My only critique is that it didn’t last nearly long enough.”

“Oh,” said Jason. “I can definitely fix that.” He leaned forward and kissed Nico again, this time with a lot less hesitation.

Nico closed his eyes, letting his awareness narrow down to just the feel of Jason’s lips sliding against his. He threw his own arm around Jason and leaned backwards, pulling Jason down on top of him. Jason momentarily broke the kiss so he could adjust his weight and more comfortably lie on top of Nico. As soon as he’d improved their position he went back in full force. The feeling of Jason’s body so thoroughly pressed against his was almost as amazing as the feel of his mouth. It was the most of Jason he’d ever gotten to touch, and yet still didn’t seem like enough. He dragged his hand up Jason’s neck and tangled it in his hair, which was a lot shorter than his own but still had just enough length to it to fit nicely between his fingers. Jason let out an appreciative gasp and without really thinking Nico took advantage of his opening lips to slip his tongue inside Jason’s mouth. The gasp transformed into a choked grunt and Jason’s fingers clenched against his back as he swept his own tongue against Nico’s, deepening the kiss and driving all capacity for rational thought out of Nico’s mind. Jason’s kissing had grown forceful now, the movement of his tongue almost frantic. The hand he’d been gripping Nico’s back with loosened and slid down, running across Nico’s ribs to rest at his waist, where his fingers paused momentarily before slipping just their very tips beneath the waistband of his jeans. It wasn’t very far at all, barely a few millimeters, but the promised intimacy of it sent waves of heat through Nico’s insides. He jerked against Jason, drawing his leg up to wrap around him and press them even closer together. He completely lost track of how long they were making out. When they drew apart again they were both breathing heavily and Jason’s eyes were dilated. It was the hottest thing Nico had ever seen.

“This is fucking amazing,” Jason said breathily.

Nico nodded. It was too hard to try to talk. His mouth felt broken from grinning so hard.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” Jason added before dipping in for another kiss. “So glad. Don’t ever go anywhere like that again, okay? I’d lose my frickin’ mind.”


Nico fidgeted as he sat at the laminate cafeteria table he’d chosen along the edge of the dining hall, his phone anxiously clasped in his hand. He couldn’t stop checking it every five seconds. He felt like a complete tool texting Percy a vague ‘We need to talk’ message, but he really didn’t know how else to handle this. There was clearly some sort of misunderstanding going on, and the conversation they’d have to have to clear things up certainly wasn’t one he’d want to have over text messages.

It wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have at all, really. But his counterpart had obnoxiously roped him into it.

“Hey,” said Percy, sliding into a seat next to Nico. “Got your text.” His voice was cheerful, but his face looked mildly worried.

“Cool,” said Nico. He wasn’t sure how to lead into this.

“So, um, something wrong?” Percy prodded when Nico failed to actually say anything more.

“Well that sounds ominous.”

“No, it’s not really. I mean, I just need to tell you something.”

“I’m listening.” Percy’s voice was cautious.

“I…” Nico swallowed back a huge lump of anxiety. *Geeze* this was hard. He’d never said anything like this out loud to anyone except his therapist, and now (only within the last 24 hours, certainly not enough time for it to seem normal yet) Jason. It felt like he was preparing to jump into a swimming pool filled with sharks: super judgmental, hypercritical sharks. He focused his eyes on a point on the wall behind Percy’s head to keep himself from completely freezing up from nerves. “I just thought you should know. I sort of kind of have a boyfriend,” he stuttered out.

Nervously he let his eyes dart back to Percy’s face to gauge his reaction. Percy’s face was completely blank.

Nico wasn’t sure what that meant.

“Okay,” said Percy finally.

Percy’s answer didn’t bring him any closer to figuring out what that meant. Was that a real okay, as in things were actually okay? Or was that one of those loaded ‘okay’s’ that people said just to get you to back off because they didn’t really want to explain just how not-fine they were? Well, at least Percy didn’t look horrified and wasn’t laughing at him. That was something, at least.

“Okay?” Nico asked.

“Uh, yeah?” Percy cocked an eyebrow. “Why, should that not be okay? Is there some kind of problem?”

“I don’t know,” said Nico. “The whole reason I’m telling you is to find out if there is a problem.”

“Um…why exactly would that be a problem?”

“Because you want to take me sailing.”

“I’m not quite following what that has to do with anything.” Percy frowned. “Does your boyfriend hate me or something?”

“No!” Nico said quickly. “No, nothing like that. It’s just—you sounded like—I mean I sort of got the impression that your invitation was sort of—” he looked at Percy, waiting for realization to dawn.

Not a flicker of understanding lit on Percy’s features.

“I wasn’t sure if you meant the sailing to be, like, a date or something,” he mumbled.

“Wait—*what*?” Percy was gaping.

Nico wanted to sink into the floor. “Guess not, huh?”

“Wait, you thought that I—with you—and you know—wait, what?” Percy’s face had definitely lost its vacancy and now looked like Nico had just handed him a complex algebra equation and asked him to solve it rather than given him a simple heads up about his relationship status.
“Well, this is awkward,” Nico muttered. “I should probably go.”

“Wait, don’t go!” that seemed to snap Percy out of his confused daze.

“Um, clearly there’s been some miscommunication here,” said Nico, still trying to back away. “Sorry for assuming...that. Let’s just forget the whole thing.”

“Wait, so you don’t want to go then?” asked Percy, his voice notably disappointed.

“Wait, you still want me to?” Nico asked back.

Percy nodded.

“Even though I’m—and you’re not—and I thought—?”

Percy nodded again. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong idea? You just seemed really cool. And both of my best friends moved away recently, so I’ve been kinda lonely so I guess maybe I came on a little, um, intense? I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I just really like sailing. I thought you’d think it was fun.”

Nico wasn’t even sure how to react to that. He hadn’t actually been the person Percy had been interacting with. He didn’t know how Percy had come off beyond the fact that his other self had definitely seemed to get the wrong idea.

“I’m not as cool as you think I am.” It was best to get that out of the way before Percy started expecting him to be capable of defying gravity and whipping out crazy martial arts moves. Because there was no way he’d be able to keep up the guise of being like his double. (At least not right now. He’d already decided that he was going to sign up for some classes. Maybe he’d take kendo or iaido or jiu-jitsu. Or maybe all three. He could totally see mixed martial arts in his immediate future. He had more ambitious goals now than he had a week ago.)

“I seriously doubt that,” said Percy with unreasonable confidence. “And I think you’d really hit it off with Grover and Leo. It totally sucks that they ditched me so you can’t meet them. I mean, well, Grover didn’t really ditch me. It’s not his fault that there is better environmental science programs upstate than in the city. I’m just bummed out ’cause I don’t think he’ll be coming back after college. I’m sure he’ll find some sweet job in a state park or something like that and I’ll keep only seeing him on holidays and stuff. And Leo was only supposed to be gone for one semester, right? He’s doing an exchange program in Florence. But then he just had to go and take a weekend trip to Malta where he just had to meet some chick and go totally insane over her. He’s already extended his study abroad another semester and I’m pretty sure he’s looking into transferring. I think the chances of him coming back are even slimmer than Grover. Which mega sucks, ’cause at least I can drive to Syracuse, right? Europe is kinda out of my road trip range. Sucks.”

“Uh, wow, that does suck.” Nico was a bit overwhelmed by how much Percy was suddenly sharing with him, as if they were already well into the good friends zone. Just how chummy had the other Nico gotten with him? He hadn’t really been here long enough to really get to know Percy that well, had he?

And yet...there was a sort of familiar pull to Percy. Was it just because he’d met the demigod version, and that guy had also treated him like they were already friends? Or was it something else? Was Percy acting this familiar because he could feel it too?

Totally weird.

“Hmm, maybe I could sail to Italy,” Percy pondered aloud, rubbing his chin. “That would be
cheaper than a plane ticket.”

“That sounds really dangerous.”

Percy sighed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Major bummer. Guess I’ll have to stick with Montauk. So are you still coming?”

“Oh…um.” Nico wasn’t sure how to answer. He’d never been sailing before; he had to admit it sounded kind of cool. And it was also kind of nice having someone be so eager to be friends with him. Jason was really the only good friend he had. And now that Jason had been upgraded to ‘more than friends’ that left him with exactly zero friends of the normal variety.

But on the other hand, Jason had been kind of jealous over the whole sailing thing. Sure they’d cleared that whole misunderstanding up…but Nico didn’t really feel super comfortable about going now. At least, not when their relationship was so new. He really ought to be spending most of his time with Jason.

“I’m not so sure that’s a great idea,” said Nico. “I think it might be kind of weird for me to go on a trip without my boyfriend.”

“Oh, he can come too,” said Percy immediately. “Would he want to come? My boat’s definitely big enough for three.”

“Seriously?” asked Nico in surprise. “You wouldn’t mind? You don’t even really know him.”

“He’s not a homicidal maniac or anything, right?” Percy laughed.

“No, definitely not.”

“Then I think it would be awesome if he came. Two friends are better than one, right?”

Nico looked at Percy, trying to figure out how sincere he was. His smile was infectious. Nico couldn’t help returning it.

“Yeah, totally,” he agreed. “That would be awesome.”

“Should I be concerned that my sandwich is blue?” Jason stared suspiciously at the artificially vibrant slices of bread in his hands. They were sitting on the deck of Percy’s sailboat and having a picnic lunch in the middle of the Sound.

“Only if you’re allergic to food coloring,” replied Percy cheerfully.

Jason took a bite. “This is the best blue sandwich I’ve ever had,” he declared.

“I’m willing to bet it’s the only blue sandwich you’ve ever had,” said Percy.

“Got that right.”

“Well I accept your utterly meaningless compliment,” said Percy with a grin.

Nico smiled as he watched Jason and Percy banter. They were hitting it off even better than he’d hoped. He’d had some reservations about this whole thing, worrying that it would be incredibly awkward. But so far he was having fun and it really did feel like they’d all already known each other a long time.
“Make sure to watch out for monsters when we’re close to the coast,” Percy announced suddenly.

Nico nearly choked on his blue salami.

“Monsters?” he squeaked. He looked at Percy suspiciously. Had he gotten thrown into another reality again? Did Percy know what had happened? Had the demigod Percy followed him back? Why would anyone here suddenly be talking about monsters?

Jason was looking at him uneasily, clearly having the same sorts of thoughts as Nico.

Percy didn’t pick up on their anxiety.

“Yeah,” he said excitedly, pulling a pair of binoculars out of his pocket. “Didn’t you hear about the Montauk Monster? A few years ago a freaky dead creature washed up on the shore here. It was never really identified. I mean, sure the scientists were all like, ‘Oh it’s probably just a drowned raccoon.’ But they didn’t prove it. I like to think it was actually a monster. Makes things more interesting, right? Not that my favorite place needed anything to make it cooler, but you gotta admit it’s pretty awesome to have your own signature monster.”

“Oh,” said Nico, letting out a sigh of relief. Now that Percy mentioned it, he did vaguely remember some sort of media kerfuffle about that. He hadn’t really paid much attention to it at the time. “Yeah, I agree with you. It probably was a real monster.”

Percy beamed. “I know, right? It’s so boring when people just try to explain everything away and never really consider how much more could be out there.”

Nico and Jason exchanged a knowing look.

“There’s definitely a lot more out there,” said Jason, nudging Nico in the side.

“Yeah, big time,” Nico agreed.

“See, that’s what I thought,” said Percy. He tossed the binoculars to Nico. “I totally knew you guys would be on the same page.”

“Yep,” said Jason. “Bet I’ll see one first even.”

“No way,” countered Percy. “I know this shore like the back of my hand. I’ll definitely spot one before anyone else.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Nico. “I’m kind of an expert on monsters.”

“Wanna bet?” taunted Percy. “How about whoever doesn’t see a monster first buys lunch for the one who does.”

Nico looked out at the lapping bottle green waves. Masses of brown kelp battered up against the side of the boat as they cut through the water. The seascape was beautiful—and refreshingly foreign. Really anything could he hiding in the opaque water they were cutting through.

“You are so on,” he said with a grin.

“Stop staring at the skeletons,” Nico said for the third time.

“I can’t help it,” Jason grinned. “They’re hilarious. I love this place. When I used to try to picture what my first date would be like I totally didn’t expect skeletons in sailor hats hanging upside down
from the ceiling.”

“We’ve been here before,” Nico pointed out. “Together.”

“Yeah, but we weren’t on a date before,” said Jason. “Were we? It’s different!”

Nico flushed. How was Jason able to so easily announce things like ‘We’re on a date’ without any hint of self-consciousness or embarrassment? He was working on being less uptight about the whole matter of his sexuality and relationship status, but he still had a long way to go before he could so casually flaunt it. Just the fact that he was openly holding Jason’s hand across the table filled him with as much anxiety as it did reassurance. He was enjoying it for sure—immensely—but he couldn’t shake his instinct of tensing up a little every time a stranger walked by their booth. Each time that happened Jason gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Should we have gone somewhere—fancier?” asked Nico worriedly.

“No way man. This is perfect. This place is so us.” Jason swept a hand around, gesturing at the spooky (and by spooky what he really meant was campy) interior of the Jekyll and Hyde Club. “Perfect idea!”

Nico warmed at Jason’s declaration of it being ‘so us.’ He’d honestly always regarded the horror movie obsession as being ‘so him.’ He’d usually had the nagging suspicion that Jason only went along with the movie thing to humor him.

Apparently not.

Either that, or Jason’s brain had just been melted into compliance by over-exposure.

“This isn’t our first date,” Nico said, still feeling like everything might blow up in his face if he let himself get too complacently happy. “We did the coffee thing already.”

“This is our first official date-date,” Jason clarified. “Doing it properly with dinner and a movie and all that. The coffee was a thing and all but we mostly drank it at your place. It wasn’t really going out.”

“We’re going to see ‘Death Bell’,” said Nico. “I’m not sure if that should count so much as a proper date.”

“Are you kidding? It doesn’t get more date-y than that. You do realize I’m probably going to have my head buried against your shoulder for at least half of the movie, right? It sounds disturbing.”

“You’ve sat through way worse movies than that,” Nico pointed out. “You don’t even usually look away at the gory parts.”

“Only because I had to. I didn’t think burying my head against your shoulder was an option.” His broad smile flickered. “Uh, it is an option, right?”

Nico lightly bumped Jason’s leg under the table with his own. “Of course it is, idiot.”

“Oh good.” Jason’s grin returned to its previous full voltage. “Just checking.”

Nico took a bite of his Frankenstein burger to stop himself from saying something embarrassingly sappy like ‘I’ve always wanted you to do that.’

“I vote we don’t take Percy here though,” Jason continued. “I don’t think he’d appreciate the style of
theatrical genius that goes into this. It’s definitely more of an us place.”

“Who cares if it’s he’d appreciate it or not?” Nico immediately retorted. “I vote we don’t take him here because I’m not willing to buy him a lunch that costs more than a happy meal. He totally cheated.”

“That’s debatable.”

“He just saw a common harbor seal,” Nico complained. “It wasn’t even a weird looking harbor seal. Like, the least he could have done was point out one with an extra set of flippers or something.”

“Well, we can’t prove it was just a harbor seal,” said Jason with a shrug. “He had a good point that it could have been a selkie. We couldn’t prove it wasn’t.”

“But he couldn’t prove it was one either. I call cheating.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you but your jackalope sighting wasn’t exactly more believable.”

“You’re just saying that because you didn’t see it. It was so a jackalope.”

“Uh huh,” said Jason in a flat ‘I definitely don’t believe you’ tone. “Sure it was.”

“It was magnificent,” Nico continued, struggling to keep his own voice serious. “A ten pointer at least.”

“You saw a bunny standing in front of a dead bush,” Jason insisted.

“Man, so early in our relationship and we’re already having trust issues.” Nico wiped a pretend tear from his eye.

“Aren’t you kidding? Our relationship goes way back before we were dating. Which is why I can totally tell when you’re lying, smartass. You saw a bunny.”

“Didn’t you learn anything from Monty Python and the Holy Grail?” Nico deadpanned back. “Some of the worst monsters are bunnies.”

Jason laughed. “Okay, fine, you win. We’ll have to take Percy up on his offer of a rematch. That was a pretty fun weekend.”

“Yeah,” Nico agreed. “Percy was right that sailing is pretty cool. Percy is pretty cool too. It was nice to get out of the city like that.”

“Totally,” said Jason. “We should do that again, but just to two of us, too.”

“What, go sailing?”

“No, just go somewhere, out of the city.”

Nico felt a grin slowly spread across his face. “Yeah, that would be awesome. I’d love it. I bet my dad would lend us a car and driver for that.”

“Sweet!” Jason let go of Nico’s hand so he could fist bump him, which made Nico grin wider. “I’ll see when I can next clear a weekend from work. It might be a month or two before I can take that much time off though.”

“No problem,” Said Nico. “I was going to look into starting a martial arts class or something, so I’ll
probably be busy for a few weekends too. We can go whenever you have time. Maybe we can find
someplace haunted to stay.” He snickered. “I’ll start researching haunted B&Bs.”

“Wow, that is so romantic,” said Jason dryly.

“I know, right?”

“Horrifyingly.”

“Speaking of horrifying, we should probably head over to the IFC,” said Nico glancing at his phone
to check the time. “We want to make sure we get good seats.”

“And by ‘good seats’ I hope you mean the back row,” said Jason with a smirk. “Where people are
less likely to notice us.”

“No, by ‘good seats’ I mean the front row, where we won’t miss a single second of gruesome special
effects,” Nico clarified.

“I hope you realize that that only increases my requirement of clinging to you for most of the movie,”
said Jason. “Just F.Y.I.”

“I was counting on it.”

“Excellent.” Jason stood up and held out his hand to Nico. “Ready then to totally scar ourselves with
things that can’t be unseen?”

Jason’s fingers were familiar and reassuring in his grip. Their steady warmth seeped into him, like a
missing piece that had finally been fused back in place. Nico had waited for years to be able to
interlock his own with them like this. It still felt surreal that he’d actually gotten something he’d
wanted so much. Jason’s eyes were even warmer than his fingers.

He looks like that because he’s looking at me, Nico thought in wonder.

He let Jason tug him up, and gave him an authentic smile in return.

“Always.”
Hey, so sorry this chapter took so much longer to post than the others. An unforeseen very stressful incident threw a huge wrench in my writing schedule and I got much further behind than I could have possibly expected. This chapter is extra long though, and it was supposed to be the last but it turns out there will now be a chapter 14 (it will probably be shorter and more like an epilogue though.)

Nico was fairly certain he must of somehow accidently developed a streak of masochism. That was clearly the only explanation for how he could have agreed to any of this.

“Mooooovie Niiiiight!” proclaimed Leo enthusiastically. “How rad is this, right? You guys so owe me.”

Nico didn’t respond. As far as he was concerned, the only thing he owed Leo was revenge for enabling his masochistic tendencies. Luckily, the movies themselves would be a pretty efficient vehicle of that revenge. Leo had no idea what he’d just signed up for.

But Nico did. Just why exactly had he agreed to this again?

“Hm, maybe I should go get Calypso,” Leo continued to chatter. “That would be cool, right? We could totally make it a double d—”

Jason kicked Leo and Leo shut up. “Never mind, I think she’s busy tonight.”

Nico glanced around the small underground room that Leo had dubbed ‘The Leo Cave.’ It was clearly designed for a single person so the space was rather cramped. There was a large complicated looking armchair with lots of panels covered in buttons and dials installed in the arm rests, and a beanbag chair made out of fabric covered in a print of tiny hammers and wrenches. That was it for seating options. Leo predictably bounced into the armchair.

It felt like that first night he’d spent in the other Jason’s apartment all over again. But at least then he’d had a desk to sit at. And only one person to contend with.

“You sit there,” said Jason (predictably) pointing at the beanbag chair.

“No, I’m good,” Nico insisted.

“No, seriously,” Jason insisted back. “I don’t like beanbags, I’ll sit on the floor.”

“I’d actually prefer to sit on the floor,” said Nico, promptly sitting down. He was getting a very serious case of déjà vu. It made him suddenly feel surprisingly nostalgic for the other Jason. Had the other Nico gotten back too? Were they watching movies together right now also? If so, things were probably a whole lot less awkward between them. They probably weren’t fighting about where to sit and acting like the other had cooties. It must be nice to feel that comfortable around someone.

“Dude, that thing is freaking huge,” Leo objected. “Stop acting like idiots and share the beanbag.
You guys seriously don’t want to know what sort of stuff has been on that floor. The cleaning
harpies don’t come down here to check, if you know what I mean.”

Nico promptly stood back up again and regarded his hands suspiciously. He didn’t want to think
about what sort of stuff Leo was implying. But it was too late. His imagination was eagerly
supplying him with a myriad of disgusting suggestions.

Ew.

Ew.

Ew.

Nico sat on the beanbag chair. But only the very edge of it. If you could call any part of a beanbag
chair an 'edge.'

Jason frowned and very cautiously sat down too, obviously doing his best to avoid invading Nico’s
space. The expression on his face reminded Nico of someone who was trying to avoid disturbing a
sleeping cat.

Nico sighed. “It’s fine,” he assured Jason. He didn’t really feel like it was fine, of course. But he felt
bad that Jason was so on edge because of him.

“Sorry.” Jason apologized anyway.

“Bring on the nymphos,” Leo cheerfully proclaimed. He hit a button that caused a mechanical arm to
descend from the ceiling, open up the DVD’s plastic clamshell case and insert the disc into a slot
beneath the huge flat screen TV that was bolted to the wall.

“You built a robot just to avoid having to open the DVD box yourself?” Nico couldn’t help asking.
It was one of the most gratuitous inventions he’d ever seen. And after all the time he’d spent trapped
on the Argo II with Leo, he’d seen quite a lot of seemingly unnecessary inventions.

“Well, yeah,” said Leo. “Of course I did. I just hate having to get up between movies to change the
discs. Total bummer, man.”

“I usually have to get up anyway,” Jason absently commented. “For a bathroom break or whatever.”

“Oh, I have an invention to deal with that too,” Leo enthusiastically announced. “Just watch what
happens when I pull this—”

“I don’t want to know,” said both Nico and Jason at the same time.

“Killjoys,” complained Leo. “You two totally deserve each other—ow.”

The beanbag shifted as Jason turned around and punched Leo in the knee.

“Let’s get this party started,” Leo quickly finished, pressing play for the movie.

Leo’s attention span lasted approximately 12 minutes. Which Nico actually found somewhat
impressive, all things considered. No one was forcing Leo to participate in this cinematic fiasco. In
fact, Nico wasn’t even sure why Leo was down here watching the movies with them. Had Jason told
Leo that they were actually going to be watching good movies?

“When does the good stuff start?” Leo complained with a long-suffering sigh.
“It doesn’t,” said Nico.

“What do you mean it doesn’t?”

“There is no good stuff,” Nico clarified. “This movie is awful. All of these movies are absolutely terrible.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Yep.”

“Why the heck are we watching them then?”

“That is a very good question,” said Nico, turning to give Jason a pointed look.

“Hey, Nico said I had bad taste in movies,” explained Jason. “I needed proof.”

“I think you’ve already gotten your proof,” said Leo.

“No way,” said Jason. “He willingly sat through these with the other me. I’m demanding equal treatment.”

“Equal torture more like,” muttered Leo. “Toss me some cookies, I’m not going to get through this without major assistance.”

“No one’s forcing you to get through anything.”

“Um, excuse me, but you’re deep in forbidden territory right now,” said Leo indignantly as he ripped open a package of Oreos. “I can’t allow you to stay here without a chaperone.”

“Why? Are you afraid we’ll drool all over your nice clean floor when the movie bores us to sleep?”

Jason let out an appreciative snort at Nico’s snarkiness, which was somewhat gratifying. Usually Nico kept those sorts of thoughts to himself. It was kind of good to know that Jason liked his sense of humor.

“There has got to be a better way than this to get you two to sleep to—ow!” Leo started rubbing his knee. “You didn’t have to hit me in the same place twice.”

“Yes,” said Jason darkly. “I absolutely did.”

“Friend abuse,” complained Leo. “So many levels of friend abuse. You’re torturing me both mentally and physically. So wrong.”

“If you’ve been trying to make me regret my request, you’re doing a great job,” Jason muttered.

Request? What had Jason requested from Leo? Something besides the TV? Nico regarded the two of them suspiciously.

“Psssh, whatever man, you clearly are utterly unappreciative of my subtle genius.”

“There is nothing subtle about you or anything that comes out of your mouth,” refuted Jason.

“That’s part of my charm,” announced Leo. “And something you should take a note from. Subtlety is highly overrated. You my friend are subtle to the point of self-sabotage, if you know what I mean.” He coughed loudly.
“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Jason, equally loudly. “Now shut up and watch the movie.”

Leo lasted an additional seven minutes before his attention span decided that it would rather build something than watch TV. Without even leaving his chair he managed to make a pile of Celestial bronze scraps appear out of his tool belt and began assembling them into some sort of miniature automaton. In very little time a small robotic golden monkey had joined the viewing party. Its primary function appeared to be flinging Oreos at the TV screen.

Nico caught Jason muttering, “Not helping,” under his breath, but he didn’t really try to make Leo stop…probably because the sporadic cookie missiles didn’t detract much from the movie.

Once the snacks had been depleted Leo promptly fell asleep.

Nico felt the beanbag shift as Jason leaned towards him. “Finally,” he whispered.

Nico smiled in spite of himself. “I guess Leo doesn’t have the same sophisticated taste in film as you, huh?”

“Well I can’t fault him for that. You’re absolutely right. Apparently the other me has excruciatingly bad judgment.”

“If it makes you feel better, I don’t think he actually does. He didn’t claim these were good or anything. I’m pretty sure those two just watched stuff like this…ironically, I guess.”

“Why the heck would they do that?”

Nico shrugged. “I don’t know. It was just kind of their thing.”

“Well I propose we find a different thing to be our thing,” Jason announced. “I don’t think I can take more than one night of this.”

Nico’s stomach did an elaborate series of somersaults.

Jason wanted to have a ‘thing’ with him?

Jason wanted them to have a ‘thing.’

Had he just said that in an automatic reaction to the fact that the other Jason and Nico had a thing? Or did he really want them to have a thing too? Was that a normal thing for friends to have? Or was it more of the best-friend territory? Or more-than-friends? No, stop. What was he doing to himself? Jason didn’t want to be more-than-friends. And he didn’t need a best friend, either. Leo was already his best friend. Jason was just being friendly. He was reading way too much into that.

But still….

Jason wanted to have a ‘thing’!

“Um, yeah,” he finally managed to say. “Definitely. I agree. Different, uh, thing. That would be cool.”

Jason hadn’t moved away again after leaning in to conspiratorially whisper. Nico tried not to notice.

It was impossible not to notice.

The distracted blond seemed to be successfully not noticing though. “We’ll have to think of
something good,” he continued to brainstorm, his eyes drifting down to one of the Oreo casualties on the floor. “Maybe something to do with food? Like, do you know any good bakeries on this coast? I still haven’t found any brownies as good as the ones in New Rome.”

“Actually, yeah,” said Nico, immediately thinking of a place. He’d definitely spent a lot more time browsing food vendors outside camp territory than the other residents of Camp Half-Blood. “There’s a really good bakery in Chelsea Market. Best brownies in New York, from what I’ve heard. They’re the best ones I’ve had, anyway. We could go get some when we return the movies.”

“Sweet!” said Jason excitedly. Then he burst out laughing. “Oh my gods,” he snickered. “That was pretty bad. Brownies…sweet. Oh geeze, I think I have a problem.”

“You definitely have a problem,” Nico agreed.

“I’m lucky you put up with me.” Jason said that casually, leaning back more in the beanbag, eyes trained on the movie instead of Nico.

Nico gave him a disbelieving sideways glance.

As if there has ever been anything at all about Jason that warranted being called ‘putting up with,’ Nico marveled. If anyone was putting up with someone, it was Jason putting up with Nico. He had to know that.

“Don’t be stupid,” he mumbled.

“I’m not,” Jason said back quietly.

Nico made a dismissive noise and settled in to watch the movie.

And by ‘settle in’ what he was really doing was stiffly teetering on the edge of an impossibly slouchy blob. It took an unreasonable amount of effort to keep from sliding backwards and falling right into Jason. And the worst thing was how much he actually wanted to just give up his fight with gravity and let the inevitable slide into Jason happen.

But no. He couldn’t cross that line. It would be digging his heart into an inescapable hole.

Slouching into Jason would feel amazing though.

No. No, no, no. He couldn’t even let himself think like that.

The problem was, there wasn’t much to distract him from thinking like that. The movie wouldn’t have been a very good distraction even if he hadn’t already seen it. Already knowing what was going to happen tipped the scales from boring to intolerable. How on earth had the other him sat through this multiple times? What was wrong with those two?

Nothing is wrong with those two, his brain mocked. They’re happy together. You’re the one there’s something wrong with. His stomach twisted in unwelcome jealousy.

“Man, I’m hungry,” complained Jason, eyeing some of the cookies on the floor. “Did Leo have to waste all of the food?”

“Apparently, yes.”

“That is a lot of perfectly good Oreos on the floor.”

“Yep,” agreed Nico.
“That’s just not right,” Jason continued to complain. “That’s like at least 30 or 40 Oreos.”

“Tragic.”

“It seriously is! It’s not like we can just get more from the dining hall. Those Oreos are contraband! I had to do some serious bargaining with Connor to get them.”

Nico just shrugged.

“What do you think the floor is actually as dirty as Leo was implying?” asked Jason.

“Yes,” said Nico, making a face at the very thought.

“I don’t think it is,” Jason theorized. “I think he was just saying that to force us to sit together.”

“Why would he do that?” asked Nico.

Jason didn’t answer his question. Nico watched him sort of stiffen and then lean forward to reach for a cookie. Instead he said, “I really want to eat one.”

“Don’t do it,” Nico immediately warned. His alarm at Jason’s bad judgment quickly derailed him from pondering that weird statement about Leo’s intentions too much.

“It doesn’t look dirty,” said Jason, holding one up.

“That’s because germs are invisible,” said Nico logically. “Don’t eat it.”

“But half-bloods are supposed to be less susceptible to stuff like illness, right?” Jason rationalized. “So germs shouldn’t really be a problem, right?”

“For all we know the floor could be covered in Gorgon blood,” said Nico. “This is Leo we’re talking about. There could be anything down there.”

Jason sighed dramatically and dropped the cookie. “As usual, you’re right.”

The ‘as usual’ gave Nico a triumphant burst of pride.

“We can get some more cookies tomorrow,” Nico offered.

“I’m not sure I’ll make it till tomorrow at this rate.” Jason snorted. “I think I need some chocolate to survive this ordeal.”

“We could always stop watching the movie,” Nico suggested.

“No!” Jason immediately objected. “If that other Jason can sit through this, so can I.”

Nico raised an eyebrow at Jason’s stubbornness. He really wasn’t sure exactly what Jason was trying to prove or to whom he was trying to prove something to.

“I guess I could try shadow traveling to a store real quick or something,” he reluctantly offered.

That certainly got Jason’s attention. He whipped around and locked his fingers around Nico’s arm as if he expected Nico to vanish instantly without further discussion. “No way!” he yelped. “Don’t even think about it!”

Nico was slightly confused by the forcefulness of Jason’s reaction. “But you were the one who was
encouraging that earlier today…” he pointed out.

“That was before I saw just how likely it really is for something to go wrong,” Jason said quickly. “You were right about it being a bad idea. You almost disappeared without even taking me with you.”

Without even taking me with you. Jason said that like it was the bigger issue, not the actual disappearing.

“Okay,” Nico conceded. “No shadow travel then.”

“Not for cookies,” Jason confirmed. “I’d rather eat them off the floor.”

“Please don’t do that.”

“I won’t. Jason stifled a laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing really,” said Jason. “It’s just kinda cute how worried you are about me eating them.”

“Cute?” Nico asked, taken aback.

“Erm—uh—yeah?”

Nico wasn’t sure how to feel about that. What exactly did Jason mean? For about half a second his heart skipped at the implication…until his brain caught up. Cute wasn’t exactly considered a desirable trait for a guy his age, was it? Puppies and kittens were cute. Little kids were cute. Is that how Jason saw him? The word cute just reminded him of that painful maturity gap he’d had with Percy when his old crush had first been crystalizing. He’d thought he was a long way past that sort of thing now…but Jason was a little bit older than him. Not as much older as Percy, but that didn’t mean he didn’t see Nico the same way Percy had. Ugh.

He pulled his wrist out of Jason’s lingering grasp and folded his arms across his chest. “I’m not cute,” he said tersely. “It’s just called having common sense. I’ve seen a lot of people die, you know? Weren’t you the one a few days ago telling me not to get myself killed over something stupid like a tree? Don’t die for cookies.”

“I—uh—” Apparently Nico’s retort had shocked Jason into speechlessness. “I was just joking around,” he finally mumbled. “I wasn’t actually going to eat them.”

“Good,” was all Nico could think to say.

Jason mumbled something else under his breath, but Nico couldn’t make it out over the screech of a dinosaur on the screen. His pride held him back from asking Jason to repeat it.

He was doing a terrible job of weaning himself off of his addiction to Jason. In fact, he’d pretty effectively done the opposite. Nico was more addicted to spending time with Jason than ever. And the more he indulged in the habit, the stronger it got; the more he indulged in the habit, the more dangerous it got. He was so far past the danger zone already that he knew there was no going back.

He’d set himself up for an epic catastrophe.

He was going to get hurt. That was just a fact by this point. He was too far in to avoid it. And he was going to get hurt worse than before. Percy had been bad. His feelings for Percy had hurt a lot. But
Percy had had a safeguard in the form of Annabeth. No matter how strong Nico’s feelings for Percy got, they were always firmly weighed down by reality. Percy and Annabeth were together and no one in their right mind expected that to change. Nico knew he didn’t have a shot in Tartarus at Percy ever returning his feelings. No one did. Percy was off limits. And that was good. It kept his hopes from turning dangerous.

When all this had started he’d thought that Jason was safely off limits too. He’d assumed that Piper would effectively blockade his heart from running away from his common sense. He’d thought that things would stay under control.

Things were definitely not under control.

Out of nowhere Jason was single. Jason was showering him with attention. Jason was getting his hopes up.

Nothing good was going to come of letting his hopes go up.

He needed to end this. He needed to end this right now.

He was tempted to just immediately run for it. It’s what he would have done before. But before he didn’t consider himself as having any friends. Not real ones. Not people who might actually miss him. Not people he especially felt guilty about leaving.

He would definitely feel guilty about leaving Jason.

Because…through no intent of his own, Jason had successfully wormed his way into friend territory. They were real friends now. Which would have been awesome if it didn’t suck so much.

He really needed to stop falling in love with his friends.

Nico winced at his internal word choice, another reminder that he’d let things get alarmingly out of hand. He absolutely needed to leave. But since Jason was his friend he’d have to at least say goodbye.

He owed him that much.

__

He’d planned on searching Jason out, but it turned out he didn’t even have to. Jason showed up while Nico was still packing up his cabin. (Not that he had much to pack, but he liked to make sure everything was neat and situated whenever he left places.) It seemed like no matter what he was doing, Jason was always showing up.

*That’s part of the reason I have to leave,* he reminded himself.

Jason had been smiling when he’d stepped inside but the good humor instantly dropped off his face as he got a better look at Nico.

“What are you doing?” he asked suspiciously.

“Packing.” Nico’s instincts screamed at him to make up an excuse or flat out run. But he steeled himself and answered honestly. Just because Jason had forced the confrontation sooner than he’d been planning didn’t mean he could let himself get out of it.

Jason’s shoulders slumped. “You’re leaving? Like…right now?”

“Yes.”
“Were…you going to tell me?”

Nico winced. Jason sounded **hurt**.

“Yes,” he repeated. “As soon as I was done in here.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance I could talk you out of it, huh?” Jason asked rather tonelessly. He obviously already knew the answer.

“No,” said Nico. “I really have to go. I stayed here a lot longer than I was planning.”

“Camp is a lot better when you’re here,” Jason persisted. “More balanced, you know?”

Nico shrugged and avoided his eyes. If he looked at Jason too much he might actually give in.

Jason sighed. “Can I come with you?”

Nico looked up at Jason in surprise. “Wh—what?”

“Can I come with you?” Jason repeated.

“But—you can’t do that.” Nico was stunned at the very idea. “You’re important around here. People need you and stuff.”

“I thought we already had this discussion,” said Jason. “I’m not **that** important around here. It’s not like there’s a war going on right now or anything. I’m free to leave.”


“I belong wherever I feel like being,” Jason retorted. “My job is building temples and shrines and stuff. I can do that anywhere. I don’t have to stay at camp.”

“But…” Nico was at a loss for excuses. His heart was thudding uncomfortably as Jason leveled him with an almost pleading expression. His hand drifted backwards to clutch the edge of the dresser he’d been sorting. He felt a little dizzy.

“I just…won’t want to be here as much if you leave,” admitted Jason. “A **lot**.”

“I…” Nico looked into Jason’s big empathetic eyes. They were swimming with…some sort of strong emotion. Nico wasn’t sure what it was exactly. It made his chest stutter. “I’m sorry but I can’t do this,” he choked.

“Do what?” Jason predictably asked.

“**This**,” said Nico, waving his arms around in exasperation. “You. The **friends** thing. I can’t go through that again. It’s too hard. I’m done. I need to leave.”

“What do you mean…**again**?” Jason’s face knotted up in confusion as he sifted through Nico’s words. Nico watched in horror as the bewilderment slowly transformed into understanding. He could literally see the moment where everything clicked into place as Jason’s eyebrows shot up and his mouth formed a silent **oh**.

“Wait, do you mean—?” he began to ask.

Panic took over. Nico’s mind didn’t even have the coherency left to make an actual **decision** to leave.
His instincts hijacked his control of his body. All it took was the slightest step sideways for him to melt into a shadow. Jason’s face hadn’t even had time to move past the shock of his realization before everything dissolved into mist and smoke.

He’d never know exactly what Jason would have thought about that enlightenment.

He wasn’t sorry.

He expected to find himself in the Underworld. It’s where he would have gone if he’d had the presence of mind to actually plan ahead in his escape. It’s where he’d been thinking about going as he’d packed. It’s where he always went.

It’s where he always went except apparently when he’s frantic.

For the he’d-lost-count-of-how-many-times Nico wondered if he’d shifted realities again. He hadn’t even been trying to hold himself or his grip on the world together. He hadn’t spared a thought to the risk he was taking by shadow traveling. All he’d been able to focus on was his need to escape.

He hadn’t felt any strange pull in the nether though. Apparently his single-mindedness on running had kept him tethered to this plane.

He was in the city…or rather a city. This wasn’t New York: the streets were too wide and the buildings too low and spaced out. Far too much sprawl to be Manhattan, or even any of the farther afield neighborhoods of New York City. And yet…the longer he stared at his surroundings the more a familiar itch twitched in his mind.

The eclectic mix of neoclassical and modern architecture…the tidy landscaping in front of the huge stately buildings….

He’d definitely spent time here before.

But it had looked different then.

Lots of places had looked different in 1942.

Before he even read the street sign he knew what it was going to say: Massachusetts Ave. Really, where else would he expect to see so many embassies?

Who could blame him for not immediately recognizing this place though? The bank he was currently standing in front of hadn’t been a bank back then. The building that once stood in this spot had been much grander than the impersonal cement walls he was now staring at: an impressive display of Greek revival artistry in brick and marble. His memories of it were dim, but fragments of his past had managed to stubbornly weather the Lethe’s cleansing bath. If he concentrated he could see himself running in circles around the stone columns of the hotel’s grand lobby. It had been a game he and Bianca played: a contest of who could hold out the longest before one of them dropped from dizziness or exhaustion. Bianca and he had had a lot of private games like that back then. She’d actually liked spending time with him in those days. Things had been so different when his mom was still alive....

He felt a wave of vertigo, not dissimilar from the sensation his column chasing game used to give him. Nico promptly sat down of the edge of the sidewalk, gripping the curb as if it alone could stop the world from spinning.

What was he doing here?
Washington DC was the very last place he wanted to visit. He usually steered a very wide berth around this place. The feelings it gave him were not even remotely pleasant. Had his subconscious just wanted to torture him? Was he punishing himself for chickening out with Jason? Maybe he was here because it was the last place he wanted to be. In other words, it was probably the last place Jason would think to look for him.

Because Jason was totally going to look for him.

The realization hit him with the same sudden dawning he’d just seconds ago watched highlight Jason’s features.

Whether Jason wanted to or not, even if Nico’s disappearance had actually struck him with relief, Jason was going to come after him. He’d be driven by pity or guilt or some misguided sense of responsibility. Some characteristic painfully Jason-ish.

In fact, Jason was probably already brainstorming how to sneak into the Underworld, because that’s definitely where he’d expect Nico to be. This unexpected detour had apparently been his brain mutinying out of self-preservation.

So…what should he do?

Nico was at a loss.

Allowing Jason to attempt to access the Underworld would be bad. Very bad. His dad simply wouldn’t allow it. And if Jason tried too hard to break the rules he might not make it back out alive.

Of course, letting Jason catch up with him wouldn’t be much better.

He was stuck.

Nico sighed and pushed himself up off the pavement. Whatever he was going to do, hanging around here wasn’t an option he found acceptable. He took one last lingering look at the depressing grey box that stood like a tomb above the hotel’s ghostly footprint and then turned to walk. He didn’t know where he was going; he was just chasing that familiar urge called away.

He followed Massachusetts Ave to a traffic circle surrounding a plaza with a large stone fountain in the center. Again, he was hit with an almost painful wave of nostalgia. He’d definitely spent a lot of time here. His mom had taken them for walks around the fountain. She’d liked it, said it reminded her of Venice. It’s true that the elaborately carved monument looked like it would be more at home in Italy than here. The fountain had been whiter back in those days though. The gleaming marble was now streaked with trails of vibrant green algae. Even something as unyielding as stone had not escaped his time in the Lotus Casino unaltered.

He stood at the base of the fountain for a while, just staring at the trickling green tinged water as it spilled out its expansive top basin.

“That fountain always did irk me,” complained an all too familiar voice.

Nico turned, already knowing whom he’d find behind him. Hades was standing there, inconspicuously dressed in a business suit and tie.

“Hi dad,” he said.

“As if the world needed another nautical tribute,” Hades muttered, pointing to a carving of a woman with a ship cradled in her arms and a seagull on her shoulder. “Or to glorify the wind.” He rolled his
eyes at the likeness of a strikingly naked man tangled in billowing sails. “Bah,” he harrumphed. “And stars?” he said, waving towards the side of the fountain Nico couldn’t see from where he was standing. “What is that even? They do an allegorical triad on this thing but only bother with two out of the Big Three? They give my slot to stars? Do they know how many drowned sailors I have to take care of every year? I get even less respect in this country than on the old continent.”

“Uh, I don’t think that Greek theology was the point of it,” said Nico, staring at the inscription in the fountain’s base. It was dedicated to some Navy guy he’d never heard of.

“Don’t be dense, that’s always the point,” Hades retorted. He turned away from the fountain and leveled Nico with a weighty stare. “So. You seem to be yourself again. I would be lying if I did not say I am relieved.”

Nico was slightly taken aback. He hadn’t really expected his dad to have even noticed he was gone, to be honest. “You missed me?”

“It wounds me that you look so surprised.”

“Sorry—it’s just that I’m not very used to the idea of anyone noticing me.”

“I’ll admit that our duties prevent us gods from conforming to the conventional human standards of good parenting,” sighed Hades, “but that does not mean that we do not notice or care.”

“Yeah…I guess I knew that.”

“That also does not apply to just me.” Hades arched a dark eyebrow at his son.

“Yeah, I know some of the others aren’t exactly the world’s worst parents.” Nico muttered sarcastically.

“I was not referring to the Olympians, I was referring to the poignancy of your absence.”

“Uh, huh. Sure.” Nico didn’t believe that for one second, and he wasn’t really in the mood for an insincere pep talk.

“If you do not want to take my word for it, perhaps you should speak to some of your contemporaries.”

Yeah, like he was going to do that in a million years. “Do you know what happened?” Nico asked as a diversion. “How did I end up in another reality, anyway? Did you know that shadow travel could do that?”

“I did not,” confessed Hades. “Although I do not have the luxury of free time to spend exploring the shadows. The endless influx of souls keeps me tethered to my responsibilities. Even in my own domain I am sure there are countless possibilities I simply do not have the leeway to investigate. Perhaps you tripped over an intersection of ley lines. Or perhaps you simply spent too much time in the shadows. As you already know, excessive exposure to the nether is corrosive, even to natives of the Underworld. Your own bond with reality might have simply been stretched too thin.”

Hm, ley lines. Nico pondered. That was something that hadn’t occurred to him. But it might explain why both himself and the other Nico had gravitated to the same place in New York. He’d have to look into that….

“I wonder what brought me back then,” he wondered aloud.
“Now that is certainly the million Drachma question, isn’t it?” A hint of a smirk curled up the edge of Hades’ lip. Nico got the suspicious impression that his dad knew more than he was letting on.

“You know, don’t you?”

“Not explicitly, no,” remarked Hades nonchalantly.

“You know something,” Nico persisted.

“I know that I may have strongly encouraged one of your acquaintances to take proactive steps in facilitating your return, yes. And I’ve heard on good authority that he took my advice seriously.”

“You summoned someone to look for me?”

“Quite the opposite. It was I that was summoned. I merely took advantage of the situation to instill some suggestions.”

“You were summoned?” Nico asked in surprise. Hades was not a god whom many people were brave enough to invoke. “Who summoned you?”

“I seriously doubt that you’re incapable of deducing that,” replied Hades smugly.

Nico sighed. “It was Jason.” He didn’t even make it a question. His dad was right. He knew.

“Technically it was you who summoned me,” Hades explained. “But yes, Jason was there. And Jason was the one asking the important questions.”

“What’d he say to you?”

“He was under the delusion that I had the ability to bring you back. I had to clarify to him that I could not and that your future was in his hands, not mine.”

“You told Jason it was up to him to bring me back? That wasn’t fair. How was he supposed to do something like that?”

“You half-bloods always find a way, don’t you?” Hades smiled. “Perhaps you should ask him how he figured it out.”

“You think I actually came back because of something he did?”

“Did you come back under your own volition?” asked Hades.

“…No.”

“Then clearly something was done by someone. And that son of Jupiter really was rather adamant about his intentions to reverse your situation. It’s a logical deduction that he succeeded with the task I charged him.”

Adamant? Thought Nico. *Jason cared that much that I was gone? Enough to risk bothering my dad?*

“He didn’t say anything to me about it.” Nico frowned.

“Perhaps he did not want you to feel indebted to him,” said Hades. “I’m sure he had reasons. You could find out by talking to him.”
“I can’t do that. I…really need some space from him right now.”

“Hmmm.” Hades gave him an obnoxiously knowing look.

“Just don’t hurt him if he shows up in the Underworld looking for me, okay?” Nico pleaded. “I think he might do that.”

“I could, as always, use your help down there,” Hades countered. “If you think it so likely he’ll take such a risk for you perhaps you should come down yourself to circumvent the situation.”

“I just told you that I’m avoiding him!” said Nico in frustration.

“I spent millennia avoiding my problems,” retorted Hades. “And where did that get me? It got me being incessantly harangued by my adolescent son about how I needed to step up and stop hiding. Let me tell you, it’s very annoying.”

“This is completely different!” snapped Nico.

“Family problems are family problems,” said Hades with a shrug.

“He’s not—he’s not my—” Nico’s cheeks burned red at the insinuation. He wished that he and Jason were close enough to use words like family to describe their relationship. It’s what he wanted. But it’s not how things were.

“I’m just saying that letting these sort of things fester isn’t good for the health. I’d hate to see you show up in my kingdom before your time.”

“I’m not going to die because I’m avoiding Jason,” Nico scoffed.

“Yet you don’t seem to find it out of the scope of possibility that he won’t.”

“Please don’t hurt him,” Nico repeated.

“I have no intention of doing any such thing,” replied Hades. “He fulfilled my requests quite nicely. But I have no control over what he might do outside of my realm. From what I hear I wasn’t the only Olympian he interfered with.”

“He summoned someone else?”

“As I said, he was quite adamant about restoring you to your intended reality.”

“Huh,” said Nico, letting that sink in.

“I was being serious that I could use your help in the Underworld,” said Hades. “Don’t stay away too long.”


“Good.” Hades beamed. “I’m glad we had this talk.” He pointed at one of the streets shooting off of the circle. “There’s a bakery down that way, just so you know. You look like you could use something to eat.”

Nico was going to retort with ‘I’m perfectly fine I don’t need people forcing me to eat’ but didn’t get a chance. Hades had dissipated until his essence was indistinguishable from the fine mist billowing out of the fountain.
Nico crossed his arms and frowned at the fountain. He was caught between feeling annoyed and—something else. What that something else was exactly he couldn’t say. But for all of the irritating aspects of that conversation with his dad it had also been intriguingly enlightening.

Had Jason really wanted him to come back that badly? Enough to summon not one but two gods? Had he really promised Hades to return him?

Why?

And why hadn’t he said anything about that?

Maybe he’d just done it to get the other Nico home. Maybe he’d found out how that Nico felt about the other Jason and wanted to set things right between them, like he had.

Maybe….

Nico shut off that train of thought before it went into dangerous territory. The whole reason he’d left was to stop Jason from getting his hopes unrealistically up. The last thing he needed to do was start getting them up on his own without Jason even around. Although it didn’t completely feel like Jason wasn’t around. Because…

Nico cringed and slapped his hand over his eyes.

He’d totally just been staring at the naked wind guy carving and thinking about Jason.


Please let no one have noticed him doing that….

He hurriedly turned away from the fountain and began walking in the direction his dad had recommended. (Not because he’d been told to, of course. He was totally going to go that way anyway.)

He wasn’t planning on looking for the bakery either. He just happened to stumble across it by accident. It was kind of hard to miss what with those huge plate glass floor-to-ceiling windows and the bright awnings with Firehook Bakery loudly printed across them. You’d have to be blind to miss it.

And he was totally not planning on going in. It was just kind of hard not to look inside when the store’s windows are that big. It was impossible to walk past without glancing. And, well. It was also kind of impossible not to get hungry when rows and rows of artisan breads and elaborate cakes are staring back at you through the glass.

Yeah, he just decided to go in because he was hungry and it was convenient. That was all.

He made his way into the bakery and ordered some chocolate espresso cookies and a cup of hot chocolate. As he was handing the money over for them Nico’s eyes fell on a stack of brownies on the counter. He impulsively grabbed two and added them to his order.

(He was probably going to eat both of them himself of course. He just grabbed two because they were wrapped up and would travel well. That was definitely why he got them. The only reason.)

He sat down on a stool and dipped a cookie into his hot chocolate and absent-mindedly took a bite, barely even able to taste it. He was too distracted replaying the day’s events over in his mind to focus on food.
Jason knows how I feel now.

The very thought made him nauseous and he quickly regretted trying to eat.

Jason was trying so hard to be my friend and I had to go and ruin everything.

He probably shouldn’t have told Jason what he was doing. He should have lied. He should have snuck out and left without saying goodbye. Sure, Jason would have been mad. But he probably would have forgiven him. And Nico could have taken the time he needed to get over Jason (who was he kidding, that would probably take years) and then maybe he could have come back later and they could have stayed friends (yeah, right.)

But no. He’d just had to go and say too much so Jason couldn’t help but realize the why. And Jason knowing why would make the difference between him letting Nico run and coming after him. He’d completely screwed everything up.

What should he do?

Keep running anyway? It was what he wanted to do. The thought of seeing Jason again and officially getting rejected was about as appealing as the idea of taking a bath in lava. He wasn’t sure if he could ever comfortably face him again.

…But….

Adding to the list of things that were as appealing as a lava spa was the thought of something terrible happening to Jason because he was idiotically running around without backup trying to find someone who didn’t want to be found. Hades might have promised not to hurt Jason, but that didn’t mean that Cerberus wouldn’t. Or a monster. Or even that there wouldn’t just be an accident. Jason could fall into the river Styx and simply burn away. Just imagining fictitious scenarios like that caused his stomach to churn and bile to start creeping up the back of his throat.

He couldn’t let that happen.

No matter how much he detested the idea of seeing Jason look at him with pity and regret, he couldn’t let anything bad happen to him. He didn’t really have a choice what to do. He had to go back and stop Jason from doing something stupid. He would never be able to live with himself if he didn’t.

He ate the rest of his cookies slowly, stalling what little more he could afford in good conscience. When every last crumb had been effectively sought out and annihilated, and his paper cup thoroughly emptied Nico stood up and stuffed the brownies into his pocket. He didn’t have far to go. The awnings cast shadows like jagged teeth slicing out across the sidewalk. Nico stepped right through the front door and into Camp Half-Blood.

Dang, Jason was fast.

Nico had barely even been gone for two hours. Jason couldn’t shadow travel. Jason shouldn’t have been able to get very far. But Jason must have gotten far because Nico couldn’t find him anywhere. He hadn’t even told anyone he was leaving, which seemed like a pretty un-Jason-like thing to do. Nico went around and asked every person he could think of if they knew where Jason was. No one knew, but everyone had a useless guess.

*He’s probably in the arena training.* (He wasn’t.)
He’s probably in his cabin. (Obviously that’s the first place he looked.)

Did you try the archery range? (Yes, even though the chances he’d be there were slim.)

Leo probably knows. (He didn’t. But that didn’t stop him from making a really inappropriate joke about why Nico might be looking for him.)

Check the dining pavilion. (Like he needed to be told to check there.)

Maybe he’s at the Big House. (Of course he wasn’t.)

Nico even resorted to sending an Iris-Message to Reyna just to make sure he hadn’t gone back to Camp Jupiter. He knew Jason hadn’t, but he had to cover all the bases just to be sure.

Reyna actually looked pleased to see him for about two seconds. Then she obviously noticed that something was wrong and her happy expression schooled into business mode. Nico was still getting used to this whole people-looking-happy-to-see-him thing. It surprised him every time.

“Do you know where Jason is?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

Reyna frowned. “No,” she said immediately. “He’s not at Camp Half-Blood? I thought he was going to be at Camp Half-Blood indefinitely. Has something happened?”

“I’m not sure,” Nico admitted. “Maybe nothing. I just can’t find him. I was hoping he was at Camp Jupiter.”

“He’s not.” Reyna confirmed his suspicions. “He hasn’t been to visit here in quite a while.”

It was subtle, but Nico could pick up on the hint of disappointment in Reyna’s voice with that last statement. It made him feel guilty, even though he knew he had no reason to. He certainly wasn’t the reason Jason had been remaining at Camp Half-Blood. He’d hardly been there himself until recently. But he understood how she felt a little too vividly.

“Well, thanks, then,” Nico sighed. “Send me an IM if you hear from him.”

“Wait…if he’s missing, can’t you track him?” she interjected. “You can sense people’s life auras from pretty far away, can’t you?”

Curse Reyna and her perceptiveness. Of all the people that could know how he operated, Reyna had more insight than anyone. Nico reluctantly nodded.

“And you haven’t looked that way. Which means…you’re afraid of what you’ll find out, aren’t you? You’re afraid he’s dead.”

Nico felt his face flinch a little in spite of his intention to remain stoic. “He’s probably not.”

“But he could be.”

“I’m sure he’s fine. I would have felt it if something really bad had happened. He’s only been missing for a few hours and I have a pretty good guess of where to find him. I just wanted to rule out the obvious alternatives before I wasted energy shadow traveling. I already covered a lot of ground today and I’m pretty tired.”

Reyna arched a dark eyebrow. “It sounds like something is going on.”

Nico shrugged. “Nothing major.”
“Jason isn’t the type to disappear unless something major were going on.”

“I don’t really want to talk about it,” said Nico. “Sorry, but I need to get back to my search for him.”

Reyna frowned but she didn’t press him for details. Thank goodness for Reyna, he thought. He knew that she was one of the few people he could count on to not press too hard on his boundaries.

“Well, let me know as soon as you find anything out,” she said, still looking concerned.

“I will.”

“And Nico…” she added. “Come visit soon, okay?”

Nico shrugged. Her request made him feel warm inside and he probably would have smiled if he weren’t so preoccupied with his horror over Jason knowing and Jason disappearing. He wasn’t any more used to the idea of people wanting him to be around than he was to people looking happy to see him. Weird.

“I’m serious.”


“Good. Make sure you find Jason.”

“I will.” He said that with a little less certainty than his promise to visit. Not because he doubted his ability to find Jason, just because the thought of confronting him filled him with almost insurmountable dread.

“You’d better go before you make me worried enough to come over there and start looking myself,” said Reyna, obviously picking up on Nico’s anxiety.

Nico nodded and waved his hand through her image, ending the transmission.

He sighed. Jason wasn’t in any of the logical places he belonged. Which confirmed beyond all doubt (not that Nico had ever had any doubt, he’d merely hoped he was wrong) that he’d left to search for him. He closed his eyes and tried to hone in on Jason’s aura.

It was alarmingly faint. Not—thank goodness—because his actual life force was fading. No, his aura was difficult to feel because it was much farther away than it should have been possible for Jason to go. It was much deeper than Jason should have been able to go. Jason was exactly where Nico had feared: in the Underworld. And not simply in the Underworld in the sense of hanging around the entrance: Jason was all the way in. How had he even made it that far?

Because he’s Jason, Nico thought hopelessly. He can pretty much do freaking anything.

Nico gritted his teeth. Here goes, he thought, stepping into the nearest shadow. The only place that ever seemed genuinely safe for me is about to become Croatia version 2.0.

Not sure exactly where Jason would be, Nico shadow traveled to the outer border of Erebos, hoping to find some clues as he made his way in on foot. He wasn’t disappointed. He’d barely appeared when a clue lunged right at him and slimed him in the face.

Nico rubbed dog slobber out of his eyes as Mrs. O’Leary bounded away and went back to playing tug of war with Cerberus over a rubber dog bone.
Well, now I know how he got down here so fast, he thought.

Percy hadn’t known where Jason was though, which meant that Jason borrowed Mrs. O’Leary without telling him. That wasn’t very like Jason. At least, it wasn’t very like usual Jason.

Nico’s sense of dread grew.

He’s changing. Because of me. I’m ruining everything for him. Poisoning his goodness.

There were footprints leading away from the wall and towards Hades’ palace. Nico knew that they must be Jason’s because there wasn’t anyone else who could have left them. Nearly everyone who belonged down here was dead and didn’t possess enough physical substance to imprint the earth.

He followed the trail along the edge of the Fields of Asphodel, ignoring the overwhelming wave of melancholy that palpably rolled off the crowd of lost souls. He was glad Jason hadn’t wandered in there.

Or maybe he wasn’t, because Jason had clearly gone to the palace instead, and Nico had kind of a bad feeling about that.

The bad feeling intensified the closer he got. Everything was very quiet. Usually he enjoyed walking through the gardens that surrounded his dad’s palace. He didn’t have to worry about accidentally leaching the life out of the silvery trees and jeweled flowers if he carelessly touched them. And the pomegranate orchard filled the air with a fragrant perfume that Nico was a little bit partial to (not that he’d ever admit that out loud where Persephone could overhear.) Although granted, he’d enjoyed it a lot more before that whole jar incident. He’d lost his taste for pomegranates a bit since then. Still though, whether he wanted to eat the fruit again or not, there was something comforting about the orchard’s heady odor. It was one of his strongest associations with the Underworld, and by extension death. So when he had those not uncommon reminders thrown in his face, comments like Nico di Angelo smells like death, he could sometimes trick himself into thinking maybe that wasn’t such a horrible thing after all. He rarely believed it, but it was still a nice sentiment.

Now though, instead of appreciating the landscape’s ethereal beauty, Nico was hyperaware of just how unnatural the plants were. They grew without light or rain. Some of them grew impossibly out of elements that weren’t even alive. The very essence of most plants was living but this flora embodied death. The plants were unnatural because they belonged here: like him. Not like Jason. Jason didn’t belong here and Jason was still nowhere to be seen. Everything about this situation screamed wrong.

Even the palace itself seemed quieter than usual. Nico was used to it bustling with ghostly servants and the occasional wandering zombie. But the dark obsidian and bronze halls were uncharacteristically subdued. His own footsteps clacked noisily on the polished stone floors.

His anxiety mounted as he stormed into the throne room.

“Ah, Nico, what a surprise to see you again so soon,” said his dad, glancing up from a massive ledger book he was penning through.

“You’re not surprised,” said Nico flatly. “You know why I’m here.”

“Well I did recommend a visit,” said his dad, turning back to his work.

“Where is he?” Nico demanded.

“Where is who?”
“You know who!” said Nico in exasperation. “Jason! We were just talking about him two hours ago in DC!”

“Ah, yes,” agreed Hades. “Of course.”

“So where is he?” Nico almost yelled. “I know he’s down here somewhere.”

“He’s where all intruders who do not belong in the Underworld go,” replied his dad easily. “In the dungeon.”

“Dad!” Nico’s arms flailed. “You promised! I warned you he might come down here and you promised not to hurt him! Why did you put him in the dungeon?”

“He has not been harmed. I promised not to hurt him and I did not. I never promised not to incarcerate him.”

“That is really inappropriate!” Nico snapped. “You shouldn’t have done that!”

“And what exactly would you have had me do?” asked Hades, his tone turning mildly testy. “You wished him to remain unharmed. There are countless things down here that are designed explicitly to harm mortals. I don’t have time to babysit disobedient half-bloods. Locking him up is the only way I could keep my promise that he would remain alive.” He gave Nico a pointed look. “Perhaps if you had made an actual commitment to come down and deal with him yourself I would have known it would be unnecessary to detain him.”

“Arrgh!” Nico ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “This is just so—I mean you—it’s just—arrgh!” He took a deep breath to try and calm down. “Okay, fine. Just go let him out now, okay?”

“Afraid I can’t do that.”

“What?” Nico actually did yell this time.

“It would give me terrible PR if word got out that I’m being lenient with intruders,” said Hades. “Bad business, there. We have very strict rules about mortals coming down here before their time. It’s just not allowed.”

“You’ve let mortal intruders leave here before!”

“Well there was a war going on before.” Hades shrugged. “Sometimes allowances have to be made under dire circumstances. Believe me, it pained me greatly not to incinerate them. See? I don’t even want to incinerate this one. I just can’t go around letting him break my rules. I’m being more than fair by keeping him alive.”

“Dad!” Nico yelled again. “You can’t do this! You have to let him go!”

“I do not have to do anything,” Hades snapped back. “Don’t forget who you’re talking to. I might be your father, but I’m also a god and I have a very important job to do.”

“I’m not going to let you get away with this!” Nico insisted angrily.

“I’m sure you won’t,” Hades muttered, turning the page in his ledger and crossing something out. Nico froze mid-step, as he had been about to storm out. He looked at his dad suspiciously. “Aren’t you going to stop me?” he asked.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Hades. “And it would be wise for you to keep it that
way, because if you were to give me detailed information about your intentions then I would be forced to counteract them. But at the moment I have conveniently forgotten the fact that my son is already experienced at removing prisoners from my dungeons and so I have not had a chance to tighten security. I’m going to assume you’re just going to your room.”

“Yes,” Nico agreed. “I am definitely just going to my room right now.”

“Dinner is in two hours if you feel inclined to stick around.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Nico, backing out of the throne room. He’d barely gotten the door shut before he dove right into a shadow.

Jason was sitting on a cot in a barren cell with his head in his hands looking utterly dejected. Nico’s entrance had been completely silent and he didn’t immediately notice the intrusion.

He felt another flash of anger towards his father for putting Jason in this situation. Jason was the very last person who deserved to be treated like a criminal. (Percy hadn’t deserved to get locked up either, did his dad have some sort of unspoken rule that every guy Nico fell for had to get thrown in the slammer? It was like an initiation rite or something.) The anger was quickly replaced by guilt though. Just like Percy, it was his fault that Jason was here. He might have taken a less deliberate role in leading Jason here, but he was still just as much responsible.

He stood there for a moment, waiting for Jason to notice him. While he waited he studied Jason, taking note of the uncharacteristic slump to his shoulders. He’d never seen him looking so unconfident and hopeless. It was…startling. He hadn’t even been here for half a day. Surely after all the impossibilities Jason had faced and overcome, merely getting thrown in a cell for a couple of hours wouldn’t be the thing to make him give up?

Why wasn’t he yelling for help or banging on the walls? Why wasn’t he trying to escape?

_He doesn’t think anyone is coming to help him_, Nico realized. _He’s not expecting you to break him out. He thinks you’re going to leave him here._

He knew what that felt like all too well. He’d had the exact same thoughts while wasting away in the bronze jar. His belief that no one was coming to help him had been the worst part of that ordeal. The crushing hopelessness had hurt a hundred times more than the claustrophobia or the hunger and thirst and lack of air. He might not have felt quite so broken when he’d finally scrambled out if he’d had more optimism to sustain him through his entrapment. He’d honestly been surprised when he was rescued. He’d been surprised to find Jason among his rescuers. And now here they were, completely reversed and Jason apparently had no higher expectations of him. That hurt.

And yet, he couldn’t exactly blame him, could he?

It became apparent that Jason was too lost in his own head to notice he had a visitor. Unsure of what to say, Nico coughed to alert him to his presence.

Jason started at the noise and jerked his head up.

The transformation in his face as recognition dawned was dramatic. The veil of despair broke like a raincloud parting around the sun and Jason lit up in a brilliant smile.

“She’s got you too, Jason!” Pizza exclaimed. His relief was almost tangible.

Nico tried to ignore the way his own heart leaped a bit at seeing Jason so happy to see him.
Relieved, he corrected himself. Relieved, not happy. You’re the only person who can break him out of here. He’s just relieved.

There were a lot of things he wanted to say to Jason. There were a lot of things he needed to say to Jason. But for some reason what he found spilling out of his mouth was, “You freaking idiot! What were you thinking coming down here? Do you have a death wish? How could you be so stupid?”

And just like that he shattered something beautiful. Like he always did. He just couldn’t help himself apparently.

Jason’s happy expression crumpled. For a second he just looked confused. Then anger slid across his features, stormy enough to rival Nico’s usual repertoire.

“You don’t get to say that to me,” he said; voice dangerously low and authoritative, jumping up off the cot and stomping over to Nico. “You don’t get to. You have no right! If there’s an idiot in this room, it’s not me. I’m looking right at him!”

He towered above Nico, getting right in his face. He was careful not to actually touch him, but it was apparent in the way his hands hovered with his fingers tightly clenched that it was taking all of his self control to not grab Nico by his shirt and shake him. Nico almost wished he would actually cross that line. Then he’d have an excuse to completely freak out. And fighting Jason would be preferable to talking to Jason. Gods he would do just about anything to avoid talking to Jason right now. A physical fight would certainly be less painful.

“Excuse me?” Nico sputtered.

“You heard me,” Jason hissed. “You are the grand high reigning champion of idiots. How could you? How could you say something like that to me and not give me a chance to say anything back? Do you know how unfair that was? Do you know how stupid?”

“Right now the only stupid thing I think I’ve done was coming down here to bail you out!”

“Seriously?” Jason’s voice actually squeaked. “You seriously would rather leave me to rot in a dungeon than talk to me for five minutes?”


“I can’t believe you.”

The disappointment in Jason’s voice cut deeper than any flesh wound Nico had ever had. It was worse than lycanthrope claws. It made him want to open up the floor and just sink down until he’d completely disappeared (which was a dangerous temptation since he actually had the power to indulge in that urge if he didn’t keep himself in check.) His desperation to get away from Jason, or more importantly away from his feelings became more urgent than ever. This was a nightmare. And he couldn’t even get away because Jason was completely invading his space and leaving him no room to retreat. Not that he could have retreated anyway, because that would have been condemning Jason. And regardless of what he said, there was no way he’d ever abandon Jason. He’d never abandon any of his friends, but obviously not Jason most of all. Because he l—cared a great deal about Jason, in spite of all his efforts to remain comfortably detached. And lets be honest, that just sucked.

“What part of ‘I can’t go through this again’ wasn’t clear to you?” Nico gritted out.

“The part where you didn’t give me a chance to say you wouldn’t have to, idiot!”
Nico felt his face wrinkle up in confusion. What Jason had just said couldn’t possibly mean what it sounded like he’d meant, right? No. No, it couldn’t. He was just talking about being a supportive friend or something. That had to be it. He couldn’t possibly mean that—that. (He couldn’t even let himself think it because it would just hurt too much if he were wrong.) “Huh?”

“If you’d just stuck around for another—gods—fifteen seconds! I would have told you that you didn’t have to worry about this whole thing turning into another Percy! Because, oh schist, I’m just assuming that’s what you meant, I sure hope I wasn’t reading you wrong because, wow, awkward much? Uh, yeah. Um. Anyway. That’s how it came across to me. But maybe I was just reading too much into that because I—” He locked eyes with Nico and all the malice had already drained out of them. His face was still red but Nico sort of got the impression that that wasn’t from his anger anymore, either. And he really had no idea what to make of that, but it was getting really hard to think straight with Jason so close to his face while staring at him that intently.

“—Because I really, really, want you to like me like that, okay?” Jason finished. “Like, gods of Olympus Nico, you have no idea. I’m out of my head crazy about you.”

Okay, so Jason was saying words and Nico was hearing them but he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around what Jason was saying. Maybe he was having an auditory hallucination. “That…doesn’t make any sense,” he said stupidly.

“I’m not really sure how to be any clearer,” said Jason. “I like you. So if you think there’s any chance that you might start to like me the way you like, you know, Percy, then that’s not really going to be an issue.” He smiled fragiley.

And it was like déjà vu of being in that stuffy restaurant with that other Jason. Only if things had felt surreal then, this made a hundred times less sense. That other Jason had been close to Nico for years. It was surprising to hear him confess, but not inconceivable. But he hadn’t known this Jason for as long as that. And they’d been friends even shorter.

“But how? I haven’t even been around,” Nico pointed out.

Jason’s face fell and he took a step backwards, giving Nico more space. For one of the first times ever, Nico realized he didn’t want more space.

“Okaaay, so you’re not reacting how I’d hoped and I’m definitely getting the impression that I misinterpreted,” he said, putting his hands up like Nico was some sort of dangerous animal he needed to placate. “So, uh, I guess you can just pretend I never said any of that if you’d rather. We don’t have to talk about it.”

Nico’s arm snapped out and his fist closed tightly around Jason’s shirt. He stopped himself short of actually jerking Jason around, but just barely. His fingers clenched.

“Don’t you dare try to get out of talking about it,” he demanded. “You can’t just say things like that to me and then take them back without explaining, Grace.”

“I don’t see how that’s worse than running away,” Jason retorted.

“It’s worse because my cards were already on the table.” And Nico immediately regretted giving away that much. He needed to be protecting himself right now, not becoming more vulnerable. “You…you knew how you’d affect me by saying that.”

“No I didn’t. No they weren’t,” said Jason. “You weren’t clear about anything! I was just guessing what you meant! There were no cards on the table! At the most you flashed me like a one second
glimpse before shoving all your cards in your pocket. And leaving. You still haven’t let me know if I was off the mark or not!”

“How could you possibly like me like that when I haven’t been around at all?” Nico probed, ignoring what Jason had said. “It’s not possible! I’ve only been back for about a week! Before that I wasn’t here at all! We barely talked before now! You were with Piper! You’re supposed to be straight!”

“Yeah that last point caught me off guard too.” Jason gave a weak smile and shrugged. “I was just going through the motions with Piper for a while now without actually being particularly happy, though. The realization that out there is another version—maybe more than just one other version even—of me who might be fairly different than I am made me start examining myself a little more carefully than I ever did before. And…I realized some things.”

“You had an epiphany that you’re—” and here Nico meant to say ‘gay’ but the word stuck in his throat. No matter that there was no one here to overhear him say it except for Jason, who already knew his secret. No matter that Jason obviously wasn’t going to judge him for saying it, considering what he himself was currently implying. Old habits and aversions were hard to break. He had a serious mental block on even acknowledging the issue. Openly talking about it felt about as easy as navigating a field of land mines. “—Not straight,” he finished instead. “Just because you met some dweeby other version of me?”

“He wasn’t dweeby,” Jason retorted.

Nico raised an eyebrow. “I lived in his apartment. I saw his things. He was like me without the demigod stuff. I know what I was like before the demigod stuff. He was excessively dweeby.”

“You’re not dweeby either,” Jason stubbornly replied.

“You didn’t know me when I was like that.”

Jason opened his mouth and then clamped it shut, obviously aborting something he’d meant to say. Nico’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“What?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” Jason insisted.

“Spill it.”

Jason cringed and looked askance. “Um, don’t get mad, okay?”

“That’s not a promising opening,” said Nico, tightening his grip on Jason’s shirt.

“Well, it’s just…I do sort of know you from before the demigod stuff? I mean, not in person but…I sort of saw a lot of your memories. So I actually know you a lot better than you think I do.”

Nico could feel all the color draining out of his face. He felt nauseous. “What? You were in my head?!”

“No!” Jason violently shook his head. “Not on purpose! Cupid showed them to me! When—when he was forcing you to confess. I saw…a lot of things. I didn’t ask to! I couldn’t help it!”

“No.” Nico scrunched his eyes shut. He seriously couldn’t deal with all this right now. He felt like he’d just been striped naked. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Jason. Is that why he’d suddenly
started being so nice to him? Because he’d gotten a slideshow of Nico’s pathetic past and pitied him? That had to be where all of this was coming from. Pity. Jason was trying to step in for Percy because he felt sorry for him. “That’s not okay.”

“I know,” Jason agreed. “Cupid’s a jerk. I wouldn’t have let him do that if I’d had the ability to stop him.”

“You should have told me.”

“I would have but...you really didn’t seem like you wanted to talk about anything that had to do with that incident. You immediately shut down about it. I was afraid to bring it up.”

“So instead you’ve just been secretly pitying me for being such a pathetic loser all this time, huh?” The words were bitter in his mouth.

“Why the Hades would you assume that?” said Jason.

Why would he need to ask why? Thought Nico miserably. He saw. It should be obvious.

“Nico?” he asked, when Nico didn’t respond. “Hey Nico, dude, look at me.”

The son of Hades couldn’t bring himself to comply. He could perfectly imagine the sad look that Jason would probably be wearing. He didn’t want that visual added to his current memories. He’d stick with the image of Jason looking happy towards him, thanks. Even angry Jason was preferable. Anything but seeing his only real friend gazing on him with remorseful pity. What he really wanted to do was run again, but he couldn’t leave Jason in the cell. Going catatonic seemed like the best compromise.

“Can I touch you?” Jason asked.

“No,” he said vehemently, even though a voice inside of him was simultaneously screaming Yes! Please! (His internal voice was a backstabbing jackass.)

“Okay, no problem,” Jason said immediately. “It’s just kind of hard to convey my sincerity when you won’t look at me or let me touch you. But that’s fine. Just actually listen, okay?”

“It’s kind of hard to avoid listening to you when we’re alone in a tiny stone box,” Nico pointed out, a little more sarcastically than Jason deserved, but he was feeling way too vulnerable not to put up his defense system in full force.

“Why are you so determined to shut me down and not believe me?” Jason asked. “Is the idea that I like you really that awful?”

Nico didn’t mean to open his eyes but they popped open involuntarily out of surprise. Was Jason serious? How could it even occur to him that anyone would find the idea of his affections awful? That was like a cosmic impossibility or something.

The worry lines on Jason’s face proved that he really did think that might be the case.

“Don’t be stupid,” Nico snapped.

“I’m not being stupid,” Jason responded. “What else am I supposed to think when you’re acting this upset after I tell you something like that? I’m sorry, okay? I guess I shouldn’t have said anything. But you were running away anyway, so I figured you might as well know. It’s not like I had a chance you’d stick around if I didn’t tell you.”
Nico released the wad of Jason’s shirt and stepped back a little, so he could get a clearer look at him. Jason didn’t look pitying. He looked crestfallen. He’d never seen Jason with an expression like that, and the fact that he’d been the one to do that to him was more than a little disconcerting. He instinctively wanted to erase it, put Jason back to normal.

He took a deep shuddering breath. Okay. He could do this. He’d barred his soul and all his most embarrassing secrets to Jason once before. He could get through it again. He’d force himself to be honest if it would wipe that wretched misery off his face.

“Obviously what you said isn’t awful,” he began. “I don’t want to believe you, because it just doesn’t seem possible that it could be true. Or if it’s true I just don’t see how it could last. And it’s easier to not believe you than to get my hopes up, okay?” Nico admitted. “If I thought we had a chance and then things didn’t work out, it would crush me.”

“So you do like me,” Jason clarified.

“Duh,” Nico muttered, not meeting Jason’s eyes.

“That’s amazing.” Nico could practically hear Jason’s grin through his voice. “What do I have to do to convince you we could work?”

“You don’t know me as well as you think you do,” Nico dodged. “Seeing some of my memories isn’t the same as actually spending time with me. I’m not—I’m not very fun to be around. Whatever you’ve built up in your head that I’m like, you’re probably wrong. And you’re going to be disappointed and get tired of me.”

“I think I’m a better judge of if I’ll get tired of you or not,” Jason retorted. “It’s not like I don’t know you at all. But I do want to know you better! I want to spend time with you, and I know I’m not going to get tired of you.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Nico, I spent almost my whole life as a Roman leader. It was my job to pay attention to people and get to know them. I have a pretty good sense for that sort of thing.”

“You just spent a bunch of time with that other me. I know he’s easier to be around. He’s definitely more fun. He just confused you.”

Jason snorted. “Are you kidding? He was definitely not easier to be around. He was really high strung. And lacking some really important parts of you. Having him around just made me miss you even more than I did before.”

“You missed me before?” Nico asked suspiciously.

“Duh.” Jason echoed Nico’s own response.

“But…why?”

“Because I like you! I’ve wanted to get to know you better this whole time! I would have said so sooner if you’d been around!”

“But…why?” Nico couldn’t help repeating. It was really hard to accept that someone like Jason could be interested in him like that. It was hard enough to believe with the other Jason. But this Jason was so much more. He was a hero and a leader. He had tons of admirers. He’d already gotten to be with an insanely beautiful and competent girlfriend. He could pretty much have his pick of anyone at
either camp. Why would he settle for someone like Nico?

“I really admire your strength and integrity,” said Jason. “You’re a really good person. I value that a lot, you know?”

“I’m not that good,” Nico countered. “I’ve done some pretty terrible things.”

“We all have. It’s the cost of being a demigod. Difficult situations get forced on us. We have to make a lot of hard decisions.”

“I’ve killed someone,” said Nico bluntly. “That’s not the sort of decision demigods are supposed to make. I bet you’ve only killed monsters.”

Jason’s eyes widened a little bit, like Nico had truly caught him off-guard. His stomach sank, waiting for the fallout. If there was anything he could reveal about himself that would dissuade Mr. Upstanding-and-Perfect, that was definitely the trump card. Other people might be put off by the secret that had tormented him for years, but not Jason. Bryce Lawrence’s complete obliteration and his complicity in Octavian’s death were the secrets that would destroy whatever tentative bond Jason had been trying to build. The fact that Nico was more conflicted over the secret of his sexuality than the secret of his immoral actions was only proof that he was not nearly as good a person as Jason. Whatever stood between them would surely start to crack now that he knew the truth.

Jason pursed his lips, absorbing this new information. There was a very uncomfortable silence. Finally he said, “Sometimes people are greater monsters than the actual monsters. I’m sure you only did what was necessary.”

“That…sounds like something I would say,” mumbled Nico in surprise.

“Well, it’s true. I’m not naïve, Nico. I trust you. I know you wouldn’t do something like that without a good reason.”

“Is there ever a good enough reason?”

“We were at war. If anyone understands war, it’s Romans. Unless you tell me you were running around murdering people in cold blood I’m not going to blame you.”

“Of course I didn’t. I wouldn’t. I couldn’t do that.”

“I know,” said Jason. “That’s why I trust you.”

Nico scrunched his eyes shut again. It was hard to keep up his resolve when Jason was being so ridiculously understanding. How was he even real? He’d just told him his most horrible secret and instead of being repulsed he was offering Nico complete trust. He was looking at Nico with earnestness when he should have been backing away.

“You’re making this harder.”

“Because I want to change your mind. I really want you to give me a chance.”

“I can’t. It’s going to hurt too much!” he exclaimed, opening his eyes again.

“How do you think I’ll feel when you leave?” replied Jason. “That’s going to hurt me. And it’s not just a chance, it’s a given. You think that’s better than just taking a risk over the possibility you might get hurt? When you might even end up really happy instead?”
“I’m not supposed to be happy,” said Nico quickly. “Things don’t ever work out for me.”

“They might if you let them.”

And Jason was giving him that look. The one of steady resolution he’d had when Nico had handed him that goblet of poison. And he could feel hairline cracks spidering out through his resolve. He didn’t want to run away. He wanted to step forward and let Jason wrap his arms around him and actually believe him when he said everything was going to work out.

Did he want that badly enough to gamble with his heart with such high stakes?

He looked at Jason, took in the intoxicating mix of affection and longing in his eyes. Felt the foundation of his wall of resolve shift and weaken a fraction more. Found it a little easier to ignore the logical part of his mind screaming mistake, mistake, mistake.

Jason kept repeating how much he trusted him. Maybe it was time he trusted him back.

He nervously chewed on his lip.

“I…guess I might be able to stick around a little longer,” he conceded. “I mean, just a bit. I’m not promising anything. But…we can hang out a little more first. I guess.”

Jason’s whole face lit up like a lightning storm. He flung his arms out and began to step forward. Then immediately caught himself, obviously remembering that Nico had told him not to touch. His arms flailed awkwardly in the air for a moment before dropping to his sides. “Thank you,” he said.

“I changed my mind.”


“No.” Nico shook his head. “I meant about the touching. You can. I mean, within reason. Don’t go crazy or anythi—”

Nico didn’t get a chance to finish because the air was suddenly getting crushed out of his lungs. He could feel Jason’s face pressing into his hair. And he had to admit to himself that it felt nice. Everything about Jason felt…well, right. All the usual reactions of feeling smothered or violated that he associated with people touching him were absent. Jason felt comfortable in a way he hadn’t really thought was possible for him.

He didn’t even have to tell his own muscles to move. His arms reacted on their own, winding around Jason and hugging him back with nearly equal force. He felt Jason tighten his grip further, his fingers digging into his back.

The last remnants of his determination to leave—even a delayed leaving—crumbled and dissolved. And Nico was having a hard time remembering why he should care.

Jason Grace was holding him.

It was the best feeling in the world.

They stayed like that so long Nico’s arms started to go numb. That wasn’t really a problem though. He probably could have kept going until his arms actually fell off for all he was motivated to stop hugging Jason. No, the real problem was that they were still in a dungeon where Jason was supposed to be a prisoner and Nico was supposed to not be in at all. And while Nico was fairly certain that his
dad intended for him to rescue Jason, which meant he probably wasn’t going to send down any guards any time soon to interfere, he also knew it was a bad idea to push his luck by loitering in the cell longer than necessary. They needed to leave. As soon as possible.

“We need to get out of here,” he finally mumbled, untangling himself from Jason’s limbs.

“How?” Jason asked. “Do you have a key?”

“No, we’re going to shadow travel.”

He felt Jason’s fingers clamp down on his arm.

“Isn’t there another way?”

Nico considered that, surprised by the objection. He thought back to the last time he’d been in charge of an underworld breakout. Being hunted down by his dad’s minions wasn’t really an experience he wanted to repeat.

He shook his head. “Too risky.”

“Isn’t it actually the shadow traveling that’s too risky?” Jason asked incredulously. His mouth tilted down in disapproving worry.

“I’ve shadow traveled several times now without anything happening,” Nico reassured him. “I’m not sure why but it doesn’t seem like we have to worry about changing dimensions after all. I think it’ll be fine.”

“I wasn’t worried about changing dimensions—I actually might know why that isn’t happening anymore, by the way—I was worried about how many times you’ve done it today. You look worn out.”

Wait. Jason was trying to stop him from rescuing him because he was afraid of him overexerting himself? That revelation was so surprising that Nico failed to dwell on the probably more important part of Jason’s statement—that he might know what was going on.

“I’m fine,” he insisted.


Nico rolled his eyes. “I always look like that.”

“No you don’t. You’d been looking healthier lately. You’re definitely looking worse again.”

“Gee, thanks,” Nico muttered.

“I didn’t mean that as an insult! I meant it as concern!”

“I don’t care how you meant it, it doesn’t matter, we have to get out of here.”

“No, seriously,” said Jason. “Just how much shadow traveling did you already do today?”

Nico sighed. “Just three trips.”

“How far?” Jason pressed.

Nico sighed even louder. “I just went to DC and back and came here.”
“Washington DC?”

“No, the one in New York. Yes Washington DC, like that could be anywhere else. Geeze.”

“Nico, that’s way too much,” said Jason grimly.

“We don’t really have a choice, do we? I can’t leave you here.”

“And I can’t let you dissolve.” Jason’s mouth set into a thin determined line.

Nico scrubbed his hand across his forehead. “You are impossible,” he muttered. “Fine. I’ll just get you out of the cell but I won’t take us far, okay? We can rest before leaving the Underworld.”

Jason nodded at that. “Okay. Deal.” He put his hand out and Nico closed his fingers around it. Nico had to make an effort not to over-analyze how tightly Jason squeezed him.

They were only in the nether for a fleeting moment. Jason didn’t immediately let go of Nico’s hand when they remerged. Confusion was painted all over his face.

“I thought you agreed not to leave the Underworld yet?” he asked, only slightly accusingly.

“We didn’t,” said Nico.

“But…” Jason’s head panned around taking in their surroundings. “But…it’s so colorful in here.”

“The Underworld doesn’t have a ban on interior decorating,” Nico muttered, slightly embarrassed. The room they were in wasn’t that colorful. Just some varying shades of blue and green. It was probably just the white walls that seemed so jarring. They did contrast a bit with all the obsidian everywhere else.

“Where are we exactly?” Jason predictably asked.

Nico sighed. “My bedroom.”

Jason’s eyes widened. “But…” he started to say.

Nico cut him off with a glare. He didn’t need to hear the expected ‘but it doesn’t look anything like your cabin,’ or ‘this looks like it should be Percy’s room,’ or ‘why do you wear so much black if you actually like colors?’ He always knew he’d be seriously scrutinized if anyone ever saw this side of his life. So sue him if he wanted a space where he could pretend that he was just someone normal. He did in fact love black more than the next guy but there was an awful lot of it down here already.

“I didn’t actually decorate the Hades Cabin, just keep that in mind,” he said before Jason could comment farther. “And anyway, the Cabins are supposed to reflect your parent, not the campers.”

Yeah, I know,” Jason conceded. “I was just surprised by the surfboard. I didn’t know you could surf.” He pointed at a surfboard with a stylized skull painted on it that was mounted to the wall.

“Uh, yeah. No, I can’t.”

Jason raised an eyebrow.

“I really wanted to learn when I was younger,” Nico explained. “So my dad was all like, trying to be supportive and gave me that,” he sighed. “But the water down here’s not really very well suited to… well, anything recreational. Obviously. So it’s kind of pointless and has just been sitting around for the past few years.” He shrugged.
“You should take it above ground some time and give it a try,” Jason suggested enthusiastically. “There are some really good beaches near Camp Jupiter.”

Nico shrugged again. “Yeah, I dunno. I’ve kind of grown out of my ‘obsessed with surfing’ stage.”

‘Obsessed with surfers’ stage, to be more accurate, his mind sarcastically supplied. He of course kept that thought to himself.

“Well, let me know if you need a West Coast beach tour guide,” Jason added.

And that sounded way too appealing. For a moment Nico got caught up imagining him with Jason on an empty beach surrounded by rocky cliffs and bright blue waves…totally way too close to a personal fantasy for his comfort right now.

He made a noncommittal noise and flopped down on his bed. He noticed Jason standing and awkwardly looking around. It made him realize that his room had a distinct lack of good seating options in it. He hadn’t really furnished it with having company in mind. Jason probably didn’t know what to do with himself.

“You can sit on the bed,” he offered.

Jason sat down, looking relieved.

“Is it…safe for us to hang out here after escaping?” Jason queried.

“Oh so now you’re concerned about that.” Nico snorted.

“Well I’m more concerned about your health,” Jason immediately countered. “But I just didn’t quite picture us hiding out quite so close to your dad.”

“He knows I was going to bust you out,” Nico explained. “If he’d wanted to stop me it would have happened while we were still down there. We’re fine. He never comes in my room.”

“Oh, good.” Jason visibly relaxed and leaned back on the end of the bed.

Nico caught himself wishing that he’d sat a little closer. Then he admonished himself for thinking like that. He still felt very conflicted over this whole thing. He didn’t trust the universe enough to give in to actually being happy yet. He was afraid the second he did everything would blow up in his face.

He started to turn over because staring at Jason wasn’t helping him keep his feelings in check and he felt a squishing sensation under his leg.

“Shoot,” he muttered retrieving two very flattened brownies from his pocket. “I forgot about these.” He tossed them to Jason.

Jason peered down at the squished brown square in his hand and Nico watched as his face lit up in recognition. “You brought me brownies?” he asked happily.

“I forgot about these.” He tossed them to Jason.

“Er, well. You can’t eat the food down here,” Nico explained. “And they were just convenient so…yeah. I haven’t tried them though. They might not be great.”

“I’m sure they’ll be awesome.” Jason eagerly started tearing the plastic wrap off.

“Probably not,” Nico mumbled, thinking about how spending all that time in his pocket probably hadn’t been great for their appeal. “We can stop at Chelsea Market on the way back home though.
Those ones will be better.”

He didn’t even notice until after he said it. *Home.* He’d been referring to Camp Half-Blood. That word wasn’t supposed to go with Camp Half-Blood. It was supposed to only apply to here. He hoped Jason hadn’t noticed.

The way Jason was grinning at him made it very clear that he’d noticed.

“I would love that.”

Jason was looking at him with an expression of such genuine affection that Nico had to shut his eyes to stop himself from blushing. He did turn over now, adjusting himself to take a nap. And hey, it was totally just a coincidence that he liked to sleep low down on his pillow, which required scooting down further on the mattress. And it was definitely an accident when his foot bumped into Jason’s leg. And—he probably could have jerked it back, but that just would have been more obvious and awkward than holding still. Anyway, Jason didn’t seem to mind the encroachment. He felt fingers tentatively come to lightly rest on his foot. Which should have bothered him, but didn’t. In fact it was calming and grounding in a way he hadn’t really felt before. He buried his face into the blanket to keep Jason from noticing his smile.

He couldn’t get the mental image of Jason looking at him like that out of his head though. It was a pretty nice thing to fall asleep to.

He could get used to this.

Chapter End Notes

* The fountain Nico visits in this chapter is the Dupont Circle Fountain.

* The bakery in Chelsea Market which specializes in brownies is called *Fat Witch Bakery* and I totally recommend checking it out if you’re in the neighborhood.
Lead the Way

Chapter Notes

Okay, this acknowledgement is looooong overdue but Fimyuan did an AMAZING fanart of the scene where Jason and Nico were making s'mores by the campfire. Seriously check it out!! It made me so happy. Thank you!!!! :-D :-D

Secondly, I must apologize for how long it's taken me to get this last chapter finished. I really really didn't intend to draw out the last 2 chapters of this fic so much. Some major life events have come up that made me way busier than I expected to be at the time of posting the last one (this also caused me to get pretty awful about commenting on other people's fics the past few weeks so if you're someone I'd been commenting on, I'm really really sorry for disappearing!!) And in addition to that this one was just a bigger struggle for me to write than the others. I always have difficulty ending stories, and this one was extra hard since I spent so many months working on it.

Okay and now down to actual notes about the story content: I'd like to give a trigger warning for this chapter for homophobia/bullying. It's nothing too terrible, and only a pretty short part of the chapter, but I want to make sure that anyone who is sensitive to that is warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason was developing a very new appreciation for his disciplined Roman upbringing. Without it he surely would have lost his mind by now. Or, more likely, lost Nico.

Because knowing that his ever building feelings for his friend weren’t one-sided made it very hard not to cross that now somewhat ambiguous friendship line. And while it remained unclear to him whether or not that line might be crossable in the future, it was pretty obvious to Jason that crossing it too soon would definitely ruin any chances he had of actually having a relationship with him. Nico was either unready or unwilling and if he had any chance at all he was going to have to take things very slowly. Jason was okay with that.

Being okay with something wasn’t the same as it being easy though. Jason was pretty much 90% certain that if he hadn’t had self-restraint militantly drilled into him since the age of four he probably would have screwed up by now and scared Nico off.

He was sort of a touchy feely person by default. Maybe it was a by-product of his distinct lack of familial affection he’d had growing up but Jason was drawn to physical contact. He liked hugging people. He liked the reassurance of friendly touches. He just liked the physical confirmation of having connections to people. In other words, pretty much the exact opposite of Nico’s comfort zone.

As it was though, he’d been very careful.

But not perfect. And miracle of miracles Nico didn’t bite his head off when he screwed up.

And that was a pretty big change right there. But Jason wasn’t sure if the shift in reaction was due to him actually warming up to the idea of contact or just that Nico appreciated all the effort Jason had
made in giving him space.

He was hopeful it was actually the former. He was catching Nico looking at him with increasing frequency as the days went by. And the look in Nico’s eyes was a familiar one. It was one he’d seen plenty of times before…just directed at someone else. It was a look he hadn’t even realized how badly he wanted to be aimed at himself instead.

And that look did seriously dangerous things to the state of Jason’s insides.

Which was currently happening right now…although there was something kind of weird and strained in Nico’s expression at the moment.

“What’s wrong?” Jason asked.

Nico looked startled by the question. “Oh…” he said, eyes darting away. “I was just thinking….” He fell silent.

Jason waited, wanting to prompt Nico to continue but unsure of if that would actually encourage him to tell or just cause him to retreat entirely.

“What kind of movies do you actually like?” Nico finally said.

The question caught him off guard. “Oh…” Jason tried to think of an answer. It was kind of embarrassing how blank his mind went on the topic. “I don’t know. Good ones, I guess?”

Nico smiled. “That’s kind of vague. What type of good movies?”

“Well…” Jason tried really hard to think of a specific movie to give as an example. He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d watched anything prior to the marathon he’d had with Nico. Things like movies just hadn’t fit into his life at Camp Jupiter very well. It was incredibly rare that he had both the time and access to them. They weren’t exactly a very common commodity at Camp Half-Blood, either. “I have no idea, actually,” he admitted. “What type do you like?”

Nico shrugged. “Not horror,” he said making a face.

“Yeah, me either,” Jason agreed. “I’ve already seen enough horror in real life to last several lifetimes.”

Nico nodded vigorously. “Yeah. Yeah, that exactly.”

“So…why were you asking?” Jason asked. “Did you want me to try and get Leo to let us use his TV again?” He wasn’t sure if Leo would actually go along with that if he tried, but the idea of having another movie marathon with Nico was very appealing. Especially if the movies were of a higher caliber than the last batch they’d watched.

“No,” said Nico.

Jason felt his heart sink with more disappointment than was probably reasonable.

“I was thinking we could maybe…see something in theaters?”

Jason immediately perked up. He couldn’t care less what movie they were talking about now, he would readily agree to see anything if it meant going out with Nico. Because going to a theater was a suspiciously date-like suggestion. And going on a date with Nico currently ranked at the very top of Jason’s life ambitions.
“I would love that,” he agreed, maybe just a tad too eagerly. “Did you have a specific movie in mind?”

Nico shook his head. “I don’t even know what’s playing. I just thought it might be fun. I probably haven’t been in a movie theater since the forties, now that I think about it. I’m sure they’ve changed a lot.”

“I’ve only been to one in New Rome,” said Jason. “I don’t think I’ve ever been to a regular mortal one at all.”

“Well I guess that settles it, we have to go then.” Nico nodded his head.

“When did you want to go?” Jason asked. “Like, right now?”

“Not quite.” Nico ran his hand through his hair, momentarily pushing his bangs back. “I was thinking more like after dinner? Because—” he fished a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and smoothed it against his leg. There was an address Jason didn’t recognize written on it. “I was asking around for recommendations for good places to get brownies around here and someone mentioned this restaurant in the Upper East Side that’s supposed to have good ones. And I thought maybe we could go there first? I mean, if you wanted.”

Jason felt the edges of his face stretch tight in an impossibly wide grin.

“Are you asking me on an actual date?”

“Um…maybe?” Nico looked down at the ground for a moment before bringing his eyes up to meet Jason’s.

Jason saw something solidify in his expression as their gaze connected.

“Yes,” Nico amended. “I guess I am. I mean, if you want it to be.”

“You bet I want it to be,” said Jason. “I’d like that more than anything.”

“Good.” Some of the strain to Nico’s features softened and his lips ticked up into a faint smile. “Let’s leave at six.”

Nico had spent most of the rest of the day still hanging out with him but had disappeared briefly to ‘get ready.’ Jason had no idea what Nico had meant exactly by that. He probably should have asked. They were just going to the movies and getting something to eat, right? What would he need to get ready for? He probably should have asked Nico for more information about where they were going. If the place served brownies it probably wasn’t too fancy…right?

He washed up and changed from his camp T-shirt into a polo shirt but that didn’t take very long so Jason found himself with about a half hour of time to kill.

For lack of any better ideas he tried to take a nap.

He probably would have had better luck at singlehandedly dragging the Athena Parthenos across Europe. He couldn’t even manage to keep his eyes shut; his mind was racing too fervently for hope at rest.

He had a date with Nico!

He had a date with Nico.
Did this mean he could expect…more dates with him? Were they together now? Or was this just a one-time thing? Was Nico testing him? Would the possibility of more dates hinge on whether or not he screwed things up tonight?

How do you even screw up getting dinner and watching a movie, anyway?

Those were things they’d done together before. Well, maybe not in a theater, but that couldn’t be all that different from watching movies on TV. These were normal things friends did all the time. Except this time they’d be doing it in public and it would…mean more.

A lot more.

Jason fist pumped the air, deciding to let himself fall into excited optimism, in spite of the undercurrent of nervousness he felt at the possibility of somehow driving Nico away if the date went badly. He wouldn’t let it go badly, he decided. This meant way too much to him.

Okay, so the date hasn’t even started yet and I’ve already screwed up, Jason thought in dismay as he opened the door for Nico.

Nico was standing before him looking sharper than Jason had ever seen him. In fact, Jason hadn’t even been aware that Nico owned any shirts that weren’t plastered in skull motifs (with the exception of the tropical-atrocity-that-should-not-be-named…Nico had burned that particular exception to his wardrobe anyway,) or pants that weren’t black jeans. Apparently Jason was completely misinformed on Nico’s fashion repertoire. Nico was wearing black slacks and a crisp button down purple shirt. There was not a skull in sight (well, aside from his ever-present silver ring.) His hair even appeared to have some sort of product in it.

He looked good.

Like, really good.

Jason glanced down at his own outfit, which he’d felt perfectly fine about five minutes ago, and immediately felt like a slob.

“Uh…hang on, I should probably change,” he said lamely.

Nico reached out and latched onto his arm as he tried to turn back into his cabin.

“No, you look great,” said Nico with a smile. “Let’s get going.”

“You look amazing,” Jason immediately countered.

“Thanks?” Nico sounded surprised, like he wasn’t used to getting compliments.

Which, Jason realized with a stab of guilt, he probably wasn’t. That is definitely going to change now, he promised himself.

“So, how are we getting there?” Jason asked. “Shadow travel?”

Nico nodded.

“And you’re sure it’s working properly again?” he asked.

Nico hesitated in answering. “Not really,” he admitted. “But it’s felt normal ever since the time it almost went wrong getting the movies. I’ve still been doing it sparingly, but there haven’t been any
indications of it malfunctioning so far. Hey…you said you might know why that is?"

“Oh…yeah, I have a pretty good guess.” Jason shifted uncomfortably. He wasn’t sure how Nico was going to take the explanation.

“And that is…?” Nico prodded, staring at Jason curiously.

“Well, I asked Hecate about it,” Jason began.

Nico’s grip tightened painfully around Jason’s wrist. “You what?”

Jason gulped. “I summoned Hecate to ask her for help getting you home,” he admitted.

“Jason!” he objected. “Do you know how dangerous that was?”

“Yeah…I had a pretty good idea.”

“You shouldn’t have done that! She sided with Kronos in the Titan war because she wanted to overthrow Zeus. And she lost a lot of kids because of that. She’s unpredictable! She could have decided you’d make good revenge on him!”

“I know,” Jason said easily. “But she seemed like your best chance for getting home.”

“I…I wouldn’t have wanted to come back if you weren’t here!” Nico exclaimed.

Jason’s heart surged a little at that revelation. “Really?” he asked. “Hecate actually said you didn’t want to come back at all anyway.”

Nico’s eyes slid sideways. “I didn’t.”

“Can I ask how come?” said Jason. “You don’t have to tell me if it’s too personal. But I’ve really been wondering.”

Nico’s eyes widened in panic a little, before slipping closed as he took a deep breath. He looked steadier again as he opened them. “I felt like I actually had real friends there,” he confessed. “I was part of something, instead of an outcast. It was nice. And you….”

His voice dropped so low that Jason had to strain to hear him.

“…You and I were really close. I’ve…never had anything like that before. It was…more than just nice. I didn’t want to give it up.”

“Wait, it was because of me that you didn’t want to leave?” Jason asked in surprise.

Nico shrugged vaguely but then nodded.

Jason twisted his hand so that his fingers brushed against Nico’s grip on his wrist. He half expected it to cause Nico to let go but instead he slid his hand lower so that their fingertips were properly touching.

“I assumed you wanted to stay because of Percy.”

“Well, Percy was also being unusually nice to me there,” Nico admitted. “But it was mostly because of you.”

“Well, I already told you, I want us to be really close. So, you don’t have to give that up. Unless…
unless it’s just that you liked the other Jason better than me?”

Nico shook his head. “No. That’s not it. He was really great. I miss him a lot. But it’s not that he was better. I just didn’t think you’d feel the same way he did.”

“I do though,” Jason said earnestly.

“I’m working on believing you.”

“So you don’t still wish you were there instead of here?” Jason asked.

“No.” Nico smiled weakly. “There was more here for me to come back to than I’d realized.”

“That’s why your shadow travel is working normally again, I think,” said Jason. “Hecate said that you were trying to come back, but you couldn’t and it was because you didn’t really want to. If you’re content to stay here then there’s probably nothing pulling you off-course.”

“Huh,” said Nico. “How’d I end up back here then, though? I was trying to return, but my heart wasn’t really in it.”

“I um, think that was me,” Jason admitted. “I wasn’t trying to force you to leave if you didn’t want to…but I couldn’t really help it? Hecate said that if I wanted you back more than you wanted to stay you’d be able to break through. And…I did really want you back.”

Nico’s eyes widened and then narrowed. Jason watched as he intently scanned his face.

“You’re not lying.”

Jason shook his head. “I’m sorry?” He wondered if he should let go of Nico’s hand. He’d finally admitted that he’d manipulated Nico’s future against his will. Whether it had been intentional or not was probably irrelevant. “I’d thought you’d want to come back at first. And then I really didn’t mean to force…”

“Don’t be.” Nico cut him off. “This is right. I….” He leaned forward and caught Jason in a hug. They were still standing in the doorway of his cabin. Anyone could see this.

“…Thank you,” Nico finished.


Nico just nodded. Jason could feel his hair rubbing against his neck and it kind of tickled but also kind of made the bottom of his stomach drop out and wow did he ever have the urge to kiss Nico right now.

But no. It was definitely still too soon for that. He wasn’t screwing this up.

Nico pulled away much faster than Jason wanted him to.

“Ready to go?” he asked with a smile.

“Lead the way.”

Nico looped his arm around Jason and led him inside the cabin. The statue of Jason’s dad cast a long shadow across the center of the room. They took a step towards it and suddenly they were falling.
Jason scanned the menu in horror.

“$14 for a brownie?” he couldn’t help exclaiming. “How the schist can anyone justify charging that much for a brownie? That’s probably more than all the ingredients for an entire batch would cost!”

“It’s a brownie sundae,” Nico corrected, utterly unfazed. “You get ice cream and fancy bourbon caramel sauce and stuff on it. You’re not just paying for a brownie.”

“But still,” said Jason. “I could buy two whole meals for that much money. And this is just dessert! It’s crazy.”

Nico smirked. “You should have seen the restaurant my dad dragged us to in the other reality. It makes this place look downright reasonable.”

“Maybe we should go someplace that is actually reasonable.”

Nico’s smirk flickered and briefly turned down. Jason immediately regretted opening his mouth. He hadn’t meant to complain. He just really couldn’t help his shock at the prices. Camp Half-Blood provided the campers with a small stipend, but it was really only enough to cover basic necessities: like making the occasional Iris-message, or acquiring supplies on quests. Since most of their basic needs were covered at camp there wasn’t a real need for the Campers to worry about having an income. Going to over-priced upscale restaurants was not meant to be part of that equation though.

“Don’t even look at the prices,” Nico said calmly. “I’m covering this.”

“I can’t let you—” he began to object.

Nico cut him off with a glare. “My dad gave me a credit card for emergencies,” he explained. “He locked you in a dungeon. I’d say he owes us an awful lot more than an expensive meal and a movie. You’re ordering an appetizer and an entrée and a brownie sundae. Order every item on the menu if you want. He’d still be getting off light. He’s going to be funding our entire New York City brownie tour. This is just the first stop.”

_Just the first stop_. Despite feeling conflicted over Nico putting himself out over him, Jason couldn’t help grinning at the promise of future dates.

“Are you going to get in trouble for doing this though?” he asked worriedly.

“I doubt he’ll even notice,” Nico promised. “He has access to all the wealth in the world. And it’s not like the gods even need money. This is nothing to him.”

Okay…I just…really don’t want you to get in trouble because of me.”

“Oh believe me,” Nico leveled Jason with a serious stare. “If anyone’s in trouble, he’s in trouble with _me_, not the other way around. Knock yourself out and don’t worry about it. Unless this menu doesn’t look very good to you?”

“No, it looks great!” Jason objected. “It looks amazing. Everything about this is amazing.”

_You’re amazing_, he almost added, but stopped because he was afraid it would sound too cheesy. He didn’t really have a good feel yet for Nico’s comfort level of verbal affection and flattery.

“Good, because I’m hungry,” Nico said with a nod. “And I was kind of looking forward to the brownie sundae.”
“Me too,” Jason agreed. “That does look like the best brownie dish I’ve ever seen.”

“Well, we’ll have a lot more to test before we’ll have a verdict on that,” Nico promised.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed with a wide smile. “Yeah, we will.”

---------

The brownie was good, as was every other part of the meal, but Jason was having a hard time paying attention to the food. They could have been eating straight off the shelf of a convenience store for all he would have noticed the difference. Every ounce of Jason’s attention was honed on Nico.

He’d been a little trepidatious at first, afraid that in spite of his determination to make their date go smoothly, awkwardness would win out and ruin their dinner. But his fears had been unfounded. Once his initial misstep of complaining over the menu had slipped past, they’d actually managed to fall into comfortable conversation. In fact, talking to Nico came easier than he ever would have expected, like the discourse had been there all along and they were just stepping back into it instead of starting anew. Nico described in greater detail about his experience living his doppelganger’s life, which was particularly fascinating to Jason, considering he’d never had a real taste of the mortal lifestyle.

“You were working in a store?” he asked incredulously. The mental image was bizarre. “Like, doing customer service and stuff?”

“I know, shocking, right?” Nico smiled dryly as he took a bite of his dessert. “It was a disaster.”

“For you or for the store?”

“Take your pick. I broke a customer’s nose.”

“Well that’s definitely bad for business.” Jason couldn’t help laughing though. “I bet they deserved it.”

Nico broke into a genuine grin. “That’s what the other you said.”

“Really?” Jason laughed. “Well, am I right?”

“He definitely deserved it.”

“See, what can I say? You have a fine tuned sense of justice.” Jason meant the quip as a compliment, but Nico’s face immediately fell. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t though,” Nico said unhappily. “I don’t at all. I was all set to just strand the other Nico here. I was really considering not coming back, whether that would hurt other people or not.”

“But you did come back,” Jason reminded him.

“Yeah, but only because you stepped up and pulled me back. It wasn’t because of me.”

“Hecate told me you were trying to come back. So I know you weren’t just deliberately screwing the other Nico over.”

“I wasn’t trying all that hard though,” Nico admitted.

“Hey, Nico.” Jason leaned across the table and brushed his hand across the side of Nico’s face. He half expected to get shoved off, or for Nico to pull backwards from the encroachment. He didn’t. “You’re allowed to want to be happy, you know?”
Nico snorted and rolled his eyes. “You’re unreal,” he muttered, shaking his head.

Jason shrugged. “Hey, its true, okay? And not something I think half-bloods get told nearly often enough. Which is why for my own selfish reasons I’m really glad you’re back.”

Nico looked down at the table and poked at the melting lump of ice cream on his plate.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I’m glad too.”

Jason felt something bump up against his leg under the table and realized it was Nico’s foot. He smiled and nudged it back.

Nico was smirking when he looked back up.

Neither of them had heard of any of the movies playing, so they ended up randomly picking one based entirely off the movie posters. It was a rather uninspired action flick. The plot wasn’t terrible but they both spent a lot of time whispering to each other about how inaccurate the fight scenes were.

About halfway through the movie Jason noticed the theater getting darker. He thought at first that the power was malfunctioning and looked around to see if people were getting up to complain. But the rest of the theater appeared unaffected and on closer inspection he realized that the darkness was only congregating around him and Nico. There wasn’t a loss of power; there was an increase in shadows. A very controlled increase in shadows. The shadows weren’t obscuring his view of the screen, but they were otherwise surrounding them.

He felt Nico’s hand grab his, and braced himself for shadow travel, assuming something must have distressed him. Had someone in the movie said something that Nico would have found triggering? Nico only called forth shadows when he was upset, right?

Nothing happened.

Jason glanced at Nico to find him staring calmly straight ahead at the screen, apparently still absorbed in the movie. He glanced down at their hands, but couldn’t actually see them. Which meant that the other people in the theater also couldn’t see them, and oooohhh.

Nico had summoned the shadows so that he could hold Jason’s hand without drawing attention. Well then.

This was definitely a situation that he was going to take full advantage of. He leaned against Nico and felt Nico subtly lean back into him. He was tempted to throw an arm around him too, but didn’t only because in order to do so he would have had to let go of Nico’s hand, and that was definitely not something he wanted to do. This was the first time Nico had ever touched him like that with the obvious intention being because he wanted to, and not because it was necessary for shadow traveling or because he was trying to stop Jason from moving away, or some other similar excuse. Sure they’d hugged a couple of times, but hugs could be platonic. And most of their non-essential contact had been initiated by Jason. The way Nico’s fingers were twisted between his own right now did not feel platonic in the least.

Jason felt his uncertainty about a possible relationship with Nico quickly transforming from an if into a when.

He spent the next half hour fighting the temptation to test Nico’s newly expanded boundaries. It was a little too easy to let his mind slip into fantasies about pulling Nico down completely into the
shadows and passionately making out. (That scenario probably wouldn’t play out as smoothly as he was imagining if he dared to try it…which he didn’t.) It was hard to resist pulling up the armrest between them and more thoroughly impinging on Nico’s space as well. (He might actually be able to get away with that…but was it too soon to risk trying?)

In the end Jason wasn’t brave enough to press his luck. He was pretty happy to simply be allowed to hold hands with Nico and didn’t want to ruin that.

He kept waiting for Nico’s personal space tolerance timer to go off and feel his hand get dropped. But Nico’s grip stayed steady throughout the rest of the movie, occasionally tightening from time to time as something loud or startling happened on the screen. It was only as the lights came back on that the steady pressure slackened. Jason watched in mild disappointment as the shadows retreated and Nico’s hand broke away.

“Well,” he said as they slowly made their way out of the theater. “That was a lot of fun.”

“Yeah.” Nico shot him a genuine smile. “I enjoyed that more than I thought I would, actually.”

“Me too,” Jason agreed. “We should definitely do it again.”

“Yeah, totally.”

They stood there as the crowd cleared out around them.

“So,” Jason said, stretching for something witty or charming to say and drawing a blank.

“Yeah…”

He stared at Nico, who was returning his gaze with comparable intensity.

*If this were a movie, Jason thought, this would be the part where I’d kiss him.*

He kept staring at Nico.

*Or he’d kiss me.*

Nico kept staring at him. He watched as he nervously bit his lip. The tightness in Jason’s stomach clenched into something a bit stronger than just nervousness. He felt himself unconsciously start to lean forward a fraction and—

He stopped.

*This isn’t a movie, Jason reminded himself. This is just our first date. Nico has a lot of boundaries and he’d hate getting kissed in a public theater. Don’t screw this up.*

“We should probably head back,” he said instead.

“Y—yeah.” Nico nodded. “It’s kind of late.”

Nico’s hand rejoined with his and the air turned cold around them.

And maybe it was just Jason’s imagination but he thought Nico’s voice had held a trace of disappointment in it.

Jason decided he was going to blame Leo for their second date.
Sure, it had been Jason’s decision to ask Nico out before Nico could ask him again. Nico had taken
the initiative to ask him for their first one, so he wanted Nico to know that he was just as serious
about this. They were equals and he wanted their relationship to be balanced. Besides, if he’d waited
for Nico to ask again it might have taken weeks. Now that his confidence in their future together had
been bolstered, Jason was getting pretty anxious to seal the deal. He didn’t want to just be casually-
sort-of-ambiguously-dating. He wanted to be able to say with confidence that they had an actual
relationship.

The problem was, Jason’s experience in the courtship stage of dating was seriously messed up. He
hadn’t done this properly before. Piper had already considered him her boyfriend before he’d even
learned her name. He hadn’t had to win her over or even go through the awkward getting-to-know-
each-other stages. It might have just been fake memories, but Piper already knew him. He hadn’t had
to plan any dates, he’d simply been single one moment and already deep in a serious relationship the
next. All he’d had to do is make up his mind whether he wanted to break that off or go along with it.

That had all seemed more or less okay at the time, but it was not exactly a good model for building
future relationships.

And so, as Jason had no past experience in planning beginning-of-the-relationship dates, he’d turned
to Leo for advice. Not necessarily because Leo was actually the romance expert he claimed to be—
more because Leo was the only member of camp who dared to mess around with the dangers of
things such as accessing the Internet. Leo was his gateway to other people’s ideas.

Apparently though, other people were idiots.

He shouldn’t have tried to be creative. He should have just stuck with the fail-safe formula of dinner
and a movie. He should have asked anyone but Leo.

Leo had suggested they go bowling. Jason had been slightly skeptical of the suggestion, but for lack
of any better ideas himself he’d gone ahead and invited Nico.

Nico had looked slightly surprised at the suggestion but had still readily agreed.

The bowling itself wasn’t bad. Neither of them had ever played before, but it was pretty easy to pick
up on by watching the other people around them. And all their strength and aim training from
fighting monsters gave them a huge skill advantage. They both performed drastically better than the
average beginner. Their advantage only increased when it occurred to Jason that he could pretty
much make the ball go wherever he wanted by manipulating the air in the lane. Okay, so maybe that
was cheating. Did it really matter though? It’s not like this was the Roman war games or anything.
Besides, he didn’t do that for his own turns. He might have just helped Nico’s ball once or twice.
Nico may or may not have noticed.

In all truth, the bowling itself wasn’t too bad. Jason and Nico both liked playing competitive games.
And the fact that the bowling alley provided an endless supply of French fries and soda didn’t go
unappreciated by Nico.

The French fries proved to be their downfall though.

Jason had volunteered to pick up a refill while Nico bowled his turn. He wasn’t exactly paying a lot
of attention as he placed the order. He was distractedly watching Nico out of the corner of his eye.

“One large curly fries with extra ketchup,” a voice behind him announced.

Jason turned to claim his order. The lady behind the counter was grinning widely as she presented
the greasy cardboard tray to him.

“Nice and fresh,” she said, nodding enthusiastically.

“Thanks,” said Jason, accepting the carton of fries.

“You should try one now while they’re hot,” she said, her grin creeping into clownish proportions. “They’re very good. We use the perfect proportion of salt and seasonings.”

“Oh, yeah, I know,” said Jason. “I already had some. They’re pretty decent.”

“This batch is even better than the last one.” She winked at him and ran a hand through her voluminous dreadlocks.

Jason frowned and glanced down at his fries. They looked just like the other fries he’d eaten barely 20 minutes ago. Why was the vendor being so insistent that he eat them immediately? It was kind of weird….

“I’m sure they are, thanks,” he began to say, intending to walk away. He was rather anxious to get back to Nico. He wanted to tell him about his bizarre encounter with an overenthusiastic fast food server. They’d probably laugh about it together.

Before he’d taken a step, one of the woman’s dreadlocks darted out and sank its teeth into Jason’s arm. Pain shot up from the bite. Jason’s head whipped around to see a reptilian head retreating from his hand.

“I’m sorry, I really must insist you have some immediately,” said the server, who Jason was realizing in horror wasn’t a real server.

Her dreadlocks began to writhe, the colorful snakes encircling her head now clearly agitated.

Snakes. Not hair. Her dreadlocks weren’t dreadlocks at all, but snakes.

_Schist._

How had he missed that? He’d been too distracted by his date to pay attention to make sure he was seeing through the Mist. Jason tried to reach for his sword but was met with the following complications:

1) He didn’t have his sword because they hadn’t wanted to draw a lot of attention on their date and had left their weapons at camp. And—

2) Even if he had had his sword it wouldn’t have done him any good. The muscles in his arm were uncooperative. His entire body was rapidly draining of energy; he felt weak and dizzy. He could see an angry red line shooting up his arm from the puncture wounds.

_A line racing right towards his heart._

“Nico!”

He tried to call out but Jason barely managed a hoarse gasp. No part of his body seemed to be working properly. The snake venom was working too fast.

Was this really how he was going to go? Killed by a gorgon’s snakebite while ordering junk food in a seedy bowling alley? He was almost too embarrassed to be upset.
The gorgon was swinging herself over the counter, a handful of French fries thrust out before her.

“The real secret is in the ketchup,” she cackled. “Have you ever tried gorgon blood? It really adds a little extra special something to the recipe.”

He tried to back away but all of his muscles had officially gone on strike. The ketchup dish was inching closer and closer to his face and he was helpless to pull away.

A blur of black knocked the container out of her gnarled hand. There was a loud shriek followed by the crunch of fracturing linoleum as a bowling ball plowed into the floor.

Nico quickly followed the path of the ball he’d just thrown and tackled the gorgon, pinning her limbs as he wrapped his arms around her waist. She struggled to pry him off but Nico nimbly twisted in her grasp without slackening his hold on her. Jason watched the struggle helplessly.

A flailing hand reached out and grabbed a plastic spork off the counter and Nico drove it into the gorgon’s right arm. Which confused Jason a bit. Wouldn’t the bowling ball have been a better weapon to take her out? Why had he aimed it at the ketchup instead of directly at her? If he was going to stab her with a flimsy piece of tableware, why not go for the jugular? Or one of her eyes? Well, getting near her eyes meant getting near the snakes, he supposed, but….

In a flash Nico released her and was sprinting over to Jason.

He wanted to yell at him, tell him to finish killing the gorgon. What was he doing?

Nico’s eyes were frantic as he dropped down next to Jason and all but thrust his hand in his mouth. Nico’s hand was sticky and slightly metallic tasting. Jason started to gag.

Then he realized that gagging meant that his muscles were working again. Almost instantly his strength began to surge back. He regained control of his body just in time to see the gorgon grab Nico and drag him back towards the counter.

“How dare you steal my blood!” she screamed.

Jason sprung to his feet and launched himself at the abandoned bowling ball, sweeping it up off the ground. It took a little more effort for him to pick it up than it should have; his strength may be returning but he still felt a bit woozy from the venom.

Jason threw the ball at her with all his reclaimed strength. He called on the wind to ensure his aim stayed true and the ball didn’t hit Nico by mistake. The bowling ball connected with its target. He’d hoped the mere impact of the projectile would be enough to dissolve her into dust, but the gorgon was sturdier than that. She merely got thrown backwards, her body catching on the metal counter.

Jason saw his opportunity. He sprinted forward and slammed his hands down on the counter, surging an electrical charge through the stainless steel surface. The gorgon began jerking and twitching unnaturally. He refocused and channeled an additional blast. The monster exploded in a glimmering shower.

He hadn’t even had a chance to turn back and look to see if Nico was okay before he felt icy fingers connect with his skin and shadows reaching out to drag him in.

They were both breathing hard when they remerged in the Camp Half-Blood woods.

“That was stupid,” Nico panted. “I can’t believe we got caught off-guard like that.”
“I was stupid,” Jason corrected. “I’m the one who got caught off-guard. You were really smart. How did you counteract the poison like that?”

“Only the blood on the left side of a gorgon’s body is poison,” Nico explained. “Blood from the right side will cure anything.”

“That was quick thinking,” Jason said appreciatively. “Thanks. I would have just taken her out immediately without thinking to do that first.”

“You probably would have been okay with some ambrosia or nectar,” Nico said with a shrug. “I don’t think the snake’s venom is as deadly as her blood…or at least not as fast acting, anyway. But I didn’t want to take any chances.” His face hardened into a more serious expression. “How are you feeling?” he asked. His eyes tracked Jason’s features, clearly scanning for any lingering damage.

“I feel a bit off, but my strength came back immediately. I think I’m fine.”

Nico frowned. “You should have been completely cured by that. I wasn’t able to get very much blood on my hand though. Maybe you didn’t get enough for it to completely cure you? We should probably take you to the infirmary and have you checked out.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. I really think I’m fine.”

Nico stared at him skeptically.

Jason stared back, trying to look as reassuring as possible.

Something in his gaze must have been effective. Nico’s evaluating expression softened into a much more affectionate one. He tentatively reached up and ran his fingers along Jason’s jaw, gradually dropping them to his shoulders.

“Styx, you really scared me for a minute there,” he said in a low whisper.

“I wasn’t feeling too good about the situation myself,” Jason admitted. “I guess that was a pretty spectacularly terrible date.”

“It wasn’t that terrible.”

“If you don’t think that was terrible, I’d hate to know what you’d consider an actually terrible date,” Jason tried to joke.

His quip fell flat as distress flashed across Nico’s face. Jason immediately knew exactly what Nico was thinking: he was picturing a date where at least one of them didn’t actually make it back alive.

“We’ll do better next time,” he quickly added. “This date needs a do-over.”

Nico nodded and Jason felt the hands on his shoulders squeeze him reassuringly. He waited for Nico to let go and step back. He didn’t.

Jason’s heart thudded as he took in the way Nico was staring at him. He leaned forward, wondering if Nico would lean in too or take that as his cue to pull away.

Nico tilted his head up, sending Jason’s chest into an overactive hyper drive.

_This was it._

_They were finally going to…_
He was just taking a breath, preparing himself to bridge the gap and kiss Nico when his stomach lurched and a wave of dizzying nausea hit him.

Wait. Maybe that thudding he felt hadn’t actually been his heart so much as his….

Jason tried to push Nico away and turn his head before he could throw up all over Nico’s shoes.

He almost made it.

They managed to get almost all the way through their third date before anything went wrong.

Or, more accurately, before they noticed that something had gone wrong.

Jason figured he probably shouldn’t complain. After all, it was kind of an outright miracle that he had even managed to get a third date out of his boyfriend(?) after puking his guts out all over him. (Jason wasn’t actually sure if Nico was his boyfriend yet or not. But incurable optimist that he was, he’d started thinking of him as such inside his own head.)

They’d simply stuck with the tried-and-true formula of going to the movies.

The movie had been okay. Or, Jason assumed it had been okay. He hadn’t really paid a whole lot of attention to it. This time he’d been brave enough to raise the armrest between their seats and sling an arm around Nico’s shoulders. And Nico had promptly slouched into him and right then and there Jason decided that he could probably die happy. Except that dying wasn’t really such a great thing to think about while on a date. Not considering how close he’d come to doing just that on their last one. Anyway, the point was that their dates were definitely getting more date-y and Nico was obviously getting more comfortable with him and Jason was increasingly feeling like he’d won the lottery.

Nico hadn’t even hesitated to take Jason’s hand as they walked out of the theater.

He was pretty much on cloud nine as they casually strolled down the street.

“HA! I fuckin’ knew it!”

The voice behind them was so full of malice that Jason swiveled around, expecting to see another monster. His hand dropped, poised to pull out the dagger he’d concealed in his cargo pocket: bringing his sword to a movie theater still hadn’t seemed like a great idea, but they’d learned their lesson from the last date not to venture out defenseless, and packed more subtle weapons.

Jason blinked in confusion as his gaze was met by a completely ordinary looking college student.

He squinted, trying to look through any sort of magical glamour that might be shielding a monster’s true form.

For some reason they were just being heckled (in a strangely familiar way) by a completely unremarkable dude bro.

Well, mostly unremarkable. His nose was sort of crooked.

Jason glanced at Nico and saw that his boyfriend(??) had gone white as a sheet. Clammy fingers quickly pulled away and left Jason’s hand empty.

“I knew it! I knew you were gayer than a Ricky Martin concert, you fucking freak!” taunted the heckler. “I fuckin’ called it.”
Jason’s stomach sank. Oh schist. He’d been prepared to face any number of issues: monsters, first and foremost. He’d been prepared to face gods or corrupted demigods. He had not been prepared to deal with this.

Which is stupid, really. He ought to have been expecting to encounter something like this. It’s exactly what Nico had been worried about when Jason had first discovered his secret.

The thing was though, Jason had really been sincere when he’d assured Nico that everyone would accept him. The other demigods he knew were, for the most part, really decent. Even the unpleasant ones, like Drew Tanaka, he just couldn’t really imagine attacking someone over a matter like this. Being mean about someone’s appearance, or godly parentage, sure. He’d witnessed plenty of ruthless teasing over that. But considering the sexual track records of their godly parents, homophobia just didn’t really make sense among the demigods. Vague discomfort was pretty much the worst he would have expected. It was more of an abstract concept that Jason had heard about happening out in the non-magical world but never really witnessed.

He hadn’t grown up in the non-magic world though. But Nico had.

Nico’s horrified expression wasn’t surprise; it was resignation.

Jason waited for Nico to freak out. He expected him to vanish into the shadows at the very least (hopefully with Jason in tow.) Nico didn’t move though. The expression of dismay on his face just stretched wider and wider.

“What are you doing here?” he finally stuttered out.

The question clearly surprised the heckler as much as it surprised Jason.

“What the hell do you mean, ‘what am I doing here’?” the dude sneered. “What are you doing here? I shoulda put a restraining order on you! Stay the fuck away from me you psycho freak!” He reached into his pocket and whipped out a cell phone, pressing a button on it and pointing the device at Nico. “I’m filming you by the way,” he added. “If you so much as come within three feet of me I’m going to sue your ass all the way to Fort Knox.”

Nico put up his hands and took a step backwards. “Like I’d want to touch you,” he muttered.

“Sure you do, you couldn’t keep your slimy hands off’a me last time. You probably want to bang me,” the unpleasant man sneered. “Fucking sick, man.”

Nico jolted, and Jason watched his hands twitch, stretching for a weapon, but halting midair. The air around them dropped several degrees and the contents of a flowerpot on a nearby apartment stoop withered. The asshole didn’t seem to notice.

“You should leave,” Jason said tersely.

“You should leave,” the dude snapped back. “And seriously?” He gave Jason a skeptical look. “You too? I mean, I knew psychoboy here was queerer than a two headed nickel, but I can’t believe you’re one of them too. You seemed cool, man. Did you like, catch his queer cooties or something? How long have you two been screwing?”

A vein of ice blossomed beneath Nico’s feet and branched out through the cracks in the sidewalk. The street began to darken, even though the sky remained cloudless.

Jason’s mouth dropped open in shock. Partially out of bafflement that the heckler was acting like he knew him (Jason had never so much as laid eyes on this guy before,) and partly because Jason was
pretty certain that he was two seconds away from witnessing a first-degree murder. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to hold Nico back from obliterating this guy after a malicious taunt like that.

“We’re not—” Jason began to object in hopes of diffusing the situation.


Nico’s voice cut through the noisy chatter of the avenue like icy bullets, effectively silencing not only Jason’s denial but several nearby pedestrians’ conversations. The air felt thick with an almost tangible sense of dread. Suddenly Jason was reliving the battle with Gaea; he was facing Beryl Grace’s mania; he was witnessing Leo’s vaporization; he was watching Percy and Annabeth fall into Tartarus and Nico breaking under Cupid’s taunts and Piper being attacked by Cyclopes. It seemed like every bad experience he’d ever had was suddenly choosing this very moment to jar out of his memory and overwhelm him.

The heckler’s complexion paled considerably. He opened his mouth like he was preparing a retort but the words failed to form and he ended up silently gaping, fishlike.

“We have to go,” Nico bit out. He held his hand out to Jason expectantly.

Jason was slow to react, still feeling dazed by…whatever that had just been.

Nico didn’t wait for him to recover. He grabbed Jason’s hand possessively and proceeded to drag him aggressively down the street.

“What…” Jason was having difficulty getting his thoughts back in order. “Wait, what…?”

“Styx.” Nico was muttering under his breath. “Styx, styx, styx!”

“I’m sorry!” The apology came automatically. “I didn’t mean to give you away…I mean, you didn’t have to let him think…wow, you actually let him think that—”

Nico stopped abruptly, causing Jason to accidently bump into him. The anger clouding his eyes quickly bled into worry.

“Well, we are, aren’t we?” He asked anxiously, dropping Jason’s hand again. “I mean, obviously we haven’t—you know, what he said—” Nico’s unnaturally pallid skin subtly flushed “—but—we’re together, right?”

“YES!” Jason had never answered any question faster in his life. He nodded vigorously to drive the point home. “Yes, absolutely.”

A little bit of tension eased out of Nico’s frame. “Good,” he stated simply. “Yeah, that’s good.” He resumed tugging Jason down the street, still muttering the occasional “Styx.”

“Why’d that guy act like he knew me?” Jason asked as he let Nico drag him along.

“Because he does know you,” Nico mumbled. “If my suspicion is right.”

“How? I’ve never seen him before. Did I know him at Camp Jupiter before Juno stole my memories?”

Nico shook his head. “He probably knows you from you visiting me at the comic book store.”

“What comic book stor—oh.” The pieces fell into place and Jason suddenly knew why Nico was acting so agitated even though they’d already gotten well away from the heckler. “Wait, you mean
“He knows the other Jason?”

“That’s the guy I hit in the face and got fired over,” Nico confirmed with a nod.

“Well I can certainly see why you did that now,” said Jason with a grimace. “Saying he deserved it was an understatement. So does this mean we’re in the other place?”

“That’s what I’m trying to confirm, but my gut says yes.”

Jason followed as Nico veered them down a side street that was lined with brownstones and brick row houses. They stopped in front of a tall brick building and Nico jumped up and began to scale a drainpipe. Before he made it halfway up the side of the building, a middle-aged lady in a ratty Black Sabbath T-shirt stepped through the door and went wide-eyed at the sight of Nico’s antics.

“Nico di Angelo!” she shrieked in horror. “Just what the heck do you think you’re doing?”

Nico froze mid-climb and looked down in confusion. He didn’t seem to recognize the lady any better than Jason did.

“I…locked myself out?” he said uncertainly.

“Is that how the window ended up broken before?” she asked disapprovingly.

“Errr….” Nico sheepishly slid back down the drainpipe.

“Why the blazes didn’t you knock and just have me let you in?”

“I…didn’t think you were home?”

The lady rolled her eyes and made a tsk-ing noise in Nico’s general direction. “Get your scrawny butt over here and let me get my keys,” she huffed.

Nico and Jason obediently followed her up three stories of stairs.

“Don’t you even think about breaking and entering if this happens again!” she lectured, as she opened the door for them. “It wouldn’t be hard for me to find a new tenant!”

“Yes ma’am.” Nico nodded.

“Kids!” she muttered to herself as she left them alone in Nico’s apartment.

“Well I think that confirms it,” said Nico quietly as soon as they were alone. “She definitely knew me and I sure as heck don’t know her, so we must be in the other place. This is certainly the apartment I was living in.”

“Wow,” said Jason, scanning their surroundings. “This is nice.”

“It kind of beats Cabin Thirteen anyway,” agreed Nico, rubbing his head awkwardly.

“The décor is more you,” said Jason.

“Not really,” objected Nico. “I’ve outgrown all this junk.”

“I like it though,” said Jason. “It has a lot of personality.”

“Some of it is yours,” said Nico, who was also carefully scanning the room. “It’s a bit different than
before. It looks to me like you’ve moved in.”

“Yeah?” asked Jason. He felt kind of warm at the revelation. Him and Nico living together? He liked the idea. He liked it quite a lot. Not for the first time he found himself slightly jealous of the other him.

“Yeah,” Nico confirmed. “A bunch of this stuff wasn’t here before, but I saw it in Jason’s apartment. It makes sense though, Jason was living in a really tiny place almost an hour away by subway. He had a roommate he didn’t particularly like all that much. And Nico was living in this big place alone. It’s pretty logical for them to move in together.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.” Jason agreed. His eyes fell on a photograph pinned up on the fridge with magnets. In it was the other Nico, looking infinitely happier than he had ever seen in person. An arm was comfortably slung around his shoulder, connected to a mirror image of himself. He got a weird sense of déjà vu as he looked at the photo of a him that wasn’t actually him.

“This is so weird,” he said, still staring at the photo.

“Yeah,” agreed Nico, coming to join him in front of the fridge. “Isn’t it?”

“Super weird.”

“They look really happy,” Nico commented, staring at the photo.

“Yeah, they really do,” said Jason. “I’m glad.”

“Me too,” said Nico. “It looks like they’re together now. I wasn’t sure if they would be. Jason…he sort of confessed his feelings to me shortly before I left. I told him he had to tell the other Nico, but I really wasn’t sure if he would follow through.”

“I could tell that Nico was in love with him,” commented Jason. “It was kind of obvious. It’s good they worked things out.”

“Ah.” Nico kept staring at the photo and an awkward silence descended. Jason sort of wished he’d chosen his words a little more carefully. ‘Love’ had been kind of a heavy word to drop. Maybe he’d made Nico feel put on the spot by using it. It had felt appropriate though. That particular emotion had been vividly written all over the other Nico.

“You’re not…” Nico turned to look at Jason as he finally broke the silence. “I mean, you’re not…just…because of them?”

Jason shook his head and wrapped an arm around Nico, in an unintentional reflection of the photo. “No way,” he objected. “They might have caused me to look a little harder at my feelings, but my feelings are one hundred percent my own.”

“And those feelings are…?” Nico cautiously probed.

“I’d rather show you than tell you,” said Jason. “Would that be okay?”

Nico nodded.

Jason was grinning as he finally managed to drag Nico in for a real kiss. He kept it light because he didn’t want to overwhelm Nico, but Nico was definitely kissing him back. And when he pulled away Nico didn’t let go of his grip on Jason’s shirt.
“Okay?” he checked.

“Better than okay,” said Nico. “What’d you stop for?”

“Just…just making sure.”

“Well I’m sure I want you to show me some more of that.”

Jason was more than happy to oblige.

“I guess it’s my fault,” Nico explained, as they got ready to leave. “I was sort of wondering about them as we were leaving for the movies. It seemed like the sort of thing that they’d be doing if they were together and I was wondering if they’d gotten to that point or not. I guess the stray thought redirected us as we were shadow traveling.”

“But you think you can get us back?”

“Yeah.” Nico nodded. “I think I’m getting a better feel for the whole thing now.”

He held out his hand and Jason tightly grasped it as shadows enveloped them.

“Duuuuuude.” Percy jumped them as soon as they stepped back into camp. “You are not going to believe this! Nico’s doppelganger was totally here again and this time your doppelganger was with him!”

“Um, yeah, I sort of guessed that,” said Jason abashedly. “We figured they must have been because we accidently ended up where they came from too.”

“No, wait, that wasn’t the part you weren’t going to believe!” Percy was practically bouncing with barely contained restraint over whatever news he was dying to tell them. “Get this! They were dating!”

Nico and Jason exchanged an anxious look.

“Um, yeah. We know,” said Jason.

“Isn’t that weird?” prodded Percy, apparently disappointed by the lack of reaction his assumed shocking news garnered.

“Uh, Percy…” Jason began. He felt Nico tense substantially.

“We’re dating too,” Nico cut him off.

Nico and Jason exchanged an anxious look.

“Um, yeah. We know,” said Jason.

“Isn’t that weird?” prodded Percy, apparently disappointed by the lack of reaction his assumed shocking news garnered.

“Uh, Percy…” Jason began. He felt Nico tense substantially.

“We’re dating too,” Nico cut him off.

Percy’s eyes widened and then dropped down to take in the fact that Nico and Jason’s hands were still enmeshed from their shadow jump. “But…” he began, he brow scrunching up in confusion, but then he halted and shrugged. “Huh. Oh, okay then. Cool,” he said instead. “Lucky you came back though, the party is tomorrow night. You guys almost missed it.”

“…Party?” Nico asked dumbly.

“Yeah! The reunion one?” Percy prompted. “That we were planning at the campfire a few weeks ago? Remember? Don’t tell me you forgot! Hazel and Reyna will both be there!”

“…I totally forgot,” Nico admitted.
“Me too,” confessed Jason. “I’ve sort of had a lot on my mind lately.”

Percy snorted and raised an eyebrow. “I bet,” he snickered.

“We’ll be there,” Jason said, not really appreciating Percy’s insinuations. He glanced at Nico hoping that Nico didn’t mind the commitment.

Nico nodded. There might even have been a hint of a smile on his face.

“Excellent.” Percy rubbed his hands together conspiratorially. “I’ll be sure to add a few extra slow dances to the playlist in honor of the happy couple.”

“I don’t dance!” Nico quickly objected.

Percy didn’t hear him over his own laughter as he walked away.

“I can’t believe everyone knows.”

Nico stared into the fire while Jason sat with his arm draped around him. They’d been spending a lot of time together like that and Jason was never going to get tired of it.

“It’s better though, right?” Jason asked. “It’s a relief not having to keep secrets from people.”

“I…don’t know. I wasn’t planning on telling anyone,” Nico mumbled.

“I’m not very good at lying,” Jason reminded him. “They would have figured us out eventually. It’s better you outright told them.”

“I…guess.” Nico shook his head in disbelief. “But I can’t believe I told everyone.”

“And they were all cool about it,” Jason reminded him.

Nico looked up from the fire and caught Hazel grinning radiantly at him from across the circle. He turned only to catch Reyna giving him a thumbs up. Even Percy and Annabeth were smiling at them.

He buried his face into Jason’s shoulder in embarrassment. “Yeah,” he conceded. “Yeah they were. Everything kind of turned out perfect.”

Jason nodded as he tightened his hold on Nico and stuck another marshmallow into the campfire.

He couldn’t agree more.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I can't believe this is finally over!!! It ended up being about 3 times longer than I expected when I started writing it, haha. And the positive response you guys have given me has completely knocked me over. I can't even say how much I've appreciated all the comments and fanart this has gotten. Thanks for being such wonderful readers!!! I'll definitely miss updating this one.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!