The Second Life

by uptoolate

Summary

When Nico di Angelo was fifteen years old, there were a few ideas he was certain were fact: He knew who he was, dorky and kind of scary; Jason Grace was the best guy on the planet, and Nico would never love anyone else; Sometimes, Percy Jackson was kind of a dick; Having a dad who wears a cloak of tormented souls will make a guy perpetually unpopular.

Nico's life didn't quite end up as he'd planned.

Now, he's been turned into a god and left on an isolated beach, imprisoned with the last two people he'd have chosen, Percy Jackson and Jason Grace. Together, the three have to navigate the new world of godhood and the frustrations of prison. They'll need to make peace with their jagged pasts and forge a future that none of them planned.

***This is a completed work comprised of 71 chapters examining the characters' first and second lives. Because it's complete, I'll post updates generally every other day.***

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The First Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sun was scorching the sand, making it brutally hot, when three men appeared on the beach out of nowhere. They were an odd lot, appearance-wise. The oldest had unruly, windswept black hair and round, dazzling sea green eyes. He was long and lean, though powerful muscles clearly lay beneath his faded blue t-shirt and sagging jeans. He stared at the ocean with a hard grimace, as though it had personally wronged him. His tanned hands were clenched in fists.

The man who appeared to be in the middle, age-wise, looked exactly like the kind of man one would find modeling underwear in some upscale magazine. His jaw and cheekbones were chiseled to perfection, his eyes an intense, icy blue, his hair a perfectly coiffed mid-length golden blond. He was taller and more muscular than the older man. The amazing good looks he sported seemed enhanced by his clear disinterest in his appearance, as he was wearing nothing more special than a purple t-shirt and a pair of distinctly unfashionable light blue jeans. The model squinted toward the sky, a puzzled look on his face.

As beautiful and interesting as the first two men undoubtedly were, and as out of place as the model looked on the beach, their companion was exponentially more so. He was clearly the youngest, still a boy, even, all gangly arms and legs, hard muscle and skin and bone, absent any fat, and none of his parts seemed to have settled comfortably into manhood. His skin was an unearthly pale expanse that made him appear to glow. His lips were so full and pink they seemed to belong to someone else. Everything else, from his clothes to his boots to his thick, curly, almost overgrown hair, was black. Enormous black eyes looked out from under lusciously long black eyelashes and dismally scanned the scene before him, taking in his two companions and the beach.

Abruptly, the youngest companion turned away from the beach and looked inland. He took a few steps over the dunes and sank to one knee. His hand rested on the earth almost like he was looking for something. Appearing satisfied after a few minutes, he stood and returned to the beach. A smooth, low, black rock materialized at his feet, and the boy promptly sat on it, pulled out the black sword hanging from a belt around his slim waist, and began gouging deep trenches in the sand.

The trio was still for longer than one might expect, neither inspecting their surroundings nor paying any attention to one another. Finally, the blond, tiring of squinting into the unrelenting sky, turned to the dark boy.

"Where are we?" the blond asked, his voice calm, with a cool air of authority.

Before the boy could answer, the older man turned inland and glared daggers at the blond.

"How should I know?" he growled, then mumbled under his breath, "jackass."

The blond's jaw stiffened. He kept his composure, but his voice was clipped. "I was asking Nico."

The green eyed man rolled his eyes, then pointed dramatically at the boy. His voice came out raspy and full of venom. "Well, if any of us should know, it'd be him, gods know. He's the reason we landed in this hellhole!"

"Shut up, Percy," the blond retorted. "This isn't his fault."

The oldest man, Percy, threw his head back and roared with derisive laughter.
"Of course it is," he yelled to the sky, then turned tempestuous eyes on the blond, who stood erect and defiant. "It is totally his fault we're here! Little fucker couldn't keep his pants on, and now we're all paying the price!"

The blond glanced toward the rock where Nico sat, still gouging the sand with his sword and looking thoroughly disinterested in the conversation. The blond took two steps toward Percy.

"You're an idiot, Percy, if you think this is about his...indiscretions. This is about power, about our power, all three of us. Plain and simple."

"No it's not, Jason," Percy said. There was suddenly a sword in his hand, which he used to gesture to Nico. "Nothing is plain and simple here. Make us gods because we're getting too powerful? Sure. Strand us here in this gods-forsaken place with some kind of 'bond' between us? That's all on Nico." Percy considered Jason for a moment before adding, "you won't admit it because you're hoping he'll still let you fuck him."

That utterance seemed to finally break Jason's patience. He drew his own sword and advanced closer to Percy, who watched the approach lazily, his sword pointed at the ground.

"What're you gonna do, Jason? Kill me? Because I'm telling the truth?" Percy sneered "Give it your best shot, you pompous asshole! Nothing's going to happen to either one of us now, thanks to Nico."

The men were a foot apart when the ground below them exploded and a jet black wall of solid rock, ten feet square, shot up between them. Both ran into it and tumbled backward.

"Australia."

The boy's voice was so quiet that Percy and Jason both looked in his direction to make sure he was the one who'd spoken.

"We're in Australia," Nico repeated in his deep, flat voice. "And Percy’s right that this is my fault. But Jason's right that you're being an idiot about it, Percy."

Percy closely examined at Nico for the first time since they'd appeared on the beach. His shoulders dropped, and he found himself unable to meet Nico's eyes.

"It's not your fault, Nico. I'm sorry for the things I said about you." Percy's voice was thick, and he was ashamed. "I didn't ask for this, you know?"

"None of us did, Percy," Nico replied tiredly, "but here we are anyway. Now, can I move the rock, or are you and Jason going to fight again?"

Jason and Percy mumbled their assent, and Nico raised his hands in front of him and made a sharp downward movement like a bandleader. The rock separating the men sank into the earth. After a hesitant moment, Jason sheathed his sword while Percy extracted a pen cap from his pocket and touched it to the tip of his sword. The sword shrunk unceremoniously into a pen, and Percy shoved the pen into his pocket.

"Jason, I'm sorry to you, too. I was out of line." Percy ducked his head sheepishly and stuck his hand blindly toward the blond.

Jason took it without a moment's hesitation, causing a small smile to grace Percy’s lips.

Nico broke the moment. "Now that you two are done being fools for the time being, let's figure some things out."
The men sat cross-legged and knee to knee on the beach in the waning sunlight. What they'd found out so far was that they were confined to a roughly 100 yard radius of the spot they currently occupied. They had neither human food nor drinking water, not that they needed either any longer. About an hour ago, a green backpack had appeared on the sand. It contained nectar and ambrosia, the food of the gods. That was good since that was what they now were. They maintained some of their old powers: Nico could shadow travel within the circle of their confinement, manipulate the earth, and raise a few skeletons to do his bidding, but at least for now, his deeper, darker Underworld powers appeared to be cut off; Jason could manipulate the winds and brew a small rainstorm, but he couldn't summon lightning; Percy could raise or calm the sea within their area of confinement, but he couldn't create a hurricane or cause an earthquake. In all, thinking about what the three had been able to do during their lives as demigods, perhaps it was no wonder they'd been immortalized and stripped of their greatest powers. They were deeply dangerous, and dangerously defiant.

"Okay, so we've found out what we can and can't do from our old lives," Jason said.

Percy winced at the mention of "old lives." That was fair. After all, Percy had lost the most.

"But there have to be new, godly things we can do now, right?" Jason persisted. He wanted there to be something positive to come from this. He needed it.

"They said they weren't sure what we'd be the gods of," Nico said. "I doubt we have any amazing skills right now. It's probably more dumb god stuff like changing clothes and redecorating our house. If we had a house."

"They said they'd talk about it at the summer solstice meeting," Jason said.

Percy flung himself backward onto the sand. "That's six months from now! What the hell are we supposed to do in the meantime?"

His anger was piqued again, and Percy needed to get away before it exploded at one of his friends. Friends. Because whatever else Jason and Nico were, they were his friends first. He'd need to remember that.

"I'm gonna go for a walk, guys. Clear my head."

Percy walked about five yards before he ran into an invisible barrier.

"Shit!" he exclaimed. He traced the barrier with his hands while Jason and Nico watched. It formed a circle with them at center. "Why's the damn thing so close all of a sudden?"

He made a few more circles around the barrier before Nico stood and stopped him, catching him by the arm.

"It's getting smaller." The dark boy nodded toward Jason, who was still sitting in the same spot in the sand. Percy was only about ten feet away from the blond. He looked back to Nico with panic in his eyes.

"Can you move it?" he asked.
Nico shook his head. He wished he could help Percy feel better. “I already tried. It's the same as the outer barrier. In fact, I'd say it is the outer barrier, slowly shrinking in on us.”

"Well, what do we do?” The panic in Percy’s eyes dropped into his voice. He didn't like being confined.

"We wait."

Percy jumped as Jason’s voice startled him. The blond was barely visible through the oncoming darkness.

"Come back over here and sit down. It can't be that bad, we're gods. It's not like they're going to kill us. This was probably designed to make us uncomfortable."

"Well it's working. Assholes." Percy's voice rose in pitch. Nico took his hand and led him to sit by Jason.

When they were seated, Nico released Percy’s hand, but leaned over and whispered quietly, "you're going to be okay."

Percy, careful to hide his motions from Jason, took Nico’s hand again. He circled the fingers of his other hand around Nico's silver and black bracelet. Nico wanted to jerk away but made himself stay still.

There was silence for half an hour. The men eventually laid down side by side on their backs, with Nico, their buffer, in the middle. Sleep seemed like a good idea, even if they didn't strictly need it anymore.

The boundary of their confinement continued to shrink until they were forced to move closer, pressed against one another from shoulder to knee. Eventually, they felt the barrier press against the top of their heads and the bottom of their shoes. Just when panic engulfed Percy, the movement stopped.

"What the hell?" Percy whispered.

"I'm feeling for a ceiling," Nico said. He reached his hand over his head, and it hit something that sounded almost like glass.

"Stay still," Nico told the other two.

"What're you doing?" Jason asked.

"Investigating," Nico replied. Nico held his hand up again and felt the smooth barrier about a foot above his head. Slowly, keeping his hand on the barrier, he began to stand. Before long, he was standing at his full height, his hand still a foot above his head.

"You can move the barrier," Percy said, a hint of accusation in his voice.

“I told you already, I can't.” Nico dropped back to a seated position between the older men. He was tired of Percy's suspicion and struggling to keep his patience. His long legs stretched out in front of him. Percy could see the moonlight glinting off the tips of Nico's boots. “I can't move it, but it's malleable. I think it'll move to accommodate our bodies as long as we stay close to each other. Jason, stand up with me this time."

Jason nodded and sat up. Percy watched Nico and Jason stand. As soon as they both straightened
fully, Jason collapsed into Nico and Percy reached out with both hands to steady Nico's legs to keep from being stepped on. Nico's back arched over Percy and hit the invisible barrier on Percy's other side.

"It's the barrier, pressing me into you," Jason said, his arms wrapped around Nico's back. He pulled gently, and Nico straightened into his embrace. Jason had missed feeling Nico in his arms.

"I know, Jason," Nico said softly. "It's okay."

Nico turned in the embrace. Percy worried Nico would step on him as he turned, but Nico was careful. Percy slid his hands up to Nico's thighs and intently watched what little he could see of Nico's body. The coolness of Nico's skin was easy for Percy to feel, even through the jeans. Nico reached down and tugged at Percy's hands. "Stand up now, Perce. Let's see what happens."

"Does it matter, Nico?" Percy asked, but he allowed himself to be dragged up.

"I'm curious to see how much we can manipulate it." Nico owed it to his friends to find out all he could. Percy stood and was vacuumed against Nico as the barrier pressed in all around him. Percy was pressed so tightly to his friend that he could feel Nico's heartbeat. He could also feel the way Jason's powerful forearms clenched possessively around Nico. Percy let go of Nico's hands and slowly slid his own hands up Nico's arms. On Nico's left shoulder, he felt Jason resting his head. Percy pushed at Jason's head and heard it hit the barrier while he laid his own head on Nico's other shoulder.

"Stop, Percy," Nico said. "We can't pick at each other."

"Pick at each other?" Percy's anger flared. "We can't fucking move, Nico. How the hell are we supposed to live like this? We're so close I can feel your heart beating. Hell, I could probably feel Jason's heart through your body if I tried."

"That's exactly why we can't get aggravated," Nico reasoned. "They want us to fight. That's why they're forcing us to be so close. Don't give in on our first night."

"Nico's right, Percy," Jason said. "This is meant to make us argue and weaken our emotional bond. We have to show them that we won't get angry at each other or them."

Percy dragged the hand that had pushed Jason back down Nico's body in order to keep it away from the blond. He wanted to shove Jason again, harder. Jason could be condescending. He was accustomed to being a leader, like Percy, and sometimes that made them butt heads. Nico was much easier to get along with in situations like this. He was quiet and introspective, and although he had the worst temper of the three, he was feeling guilty enough about their predicament to keep his temper in check for a little while. Plus, Nico was smart. They needed his brain to help them survive this. Percy's and Jason's leadership and fighting ability meant nothing here. Percy rested his hand on Nico's hip and slid his thumb inside Nico's jeans pocket. Nico noticed, but he didn't say anything.

"So what is this thing, then?" Percy asked.

Nico took a deep breath. The movement made Nico press further into Percy. The barrier expanded slightly to allow the breath. "Think of this as a bubble--"

"Like blowing bubbles?" Percy interrupted. Jason rolled his eyes, and Percy wanted to hit him again.

"Not quite," Nico said. "It's like a bubble of space around us, not necessarily round, just accommodating our bodies. It was expanded during the day, but now that it's night, the thing has collapsed around us."
"Why would they do that?" Jason asked.

"They want us to fight, like I said." Nico said.

"But we'll fight plenty without being this closely confined," Jason said. They had never needed to be suctioned together to fight before.

"I'm not sure," Nico said, and Percy grunted against his ear. Jason's arms tensed around Nico, as if to pull him away from Percy.

"That's not very helpful," Percy said.

"Do you have an idea, asshole?" Jason snipped.

"Yeah, I do, douche," Percy said. "They want us to sleep together."

Nico stiffened. Percy slid his other hand down Nico's torso and rested it fully inside Nico's pocket. Jason turned his head away from the other men.

"I think Percy's right," Nico said quietly. "I don't necessarily think it's a sex thing. It's a physical closeness thing, I'm pretty sure."

Percy tugged Nico's hips against his own and thrust against him a few times. The barrier expanded to allow his bucking hips. Nico gasped and Percy let out a satisfied, angry sigh. "It's a sex thing, Nico."

"Why, I wonder?" Jason's voice was strained. He'd pulled Nico as tight against him as he dared. Percy was going to push this, and Jason thought they should get it out of the way now.

Nico groaned at Jason's question. Percy grimaced and said, "gee, why would the gods want to make sex an easy thing for us to do to pass the time? Why would they even think we'd be interested in having sex? I mean, it's not like one of us broke the rules while he was still a demigod and fucked a god, is it? What do you think, Nico?"

Nico threw his head back on Jason's shoulder and closed his eyes. He breathed slowly through his nose. Jason and Percy stared at each other across the expanse of Nico's pale, exposed throat.

"Why are your arms still around him, Jason?" It should not bother Percy that Jason enjoyed holding Nico. Wanted him. It absolutely should not.

"Where are your hands, Percy?" Jason replied quietly. Jason's quiet signified danger. He couldn't kill Percy, but he could hurt him.

"Shut up, both of you," Nico breathed. "I'm not a damned chew toy for you two to fight over. I'm not a sex doll, either. The gods want sex, maybe you guys can work on it, but leave me out of the whole thing."

Nico, whose arms had been hanging limply at his sides the whole time, finally moved. He tried to shove Percy away, but Percy had nowhere to go. He pulled Percy's hands out of his pockets and yanked Jason's arms from around his body. He tried to step to the side, to not be in the middle, but found the barrier wouldn't allow it. A cold, bitter laugh escaped his lips.

Percy saw Jason's arms flit to Nico's sides again before he let them drop without actually touching
anything. "I'm sorry about the way I was treating you, Nico. I know you're not a toy. Percy just pisses me off."

"Yeah, well, likewise, oh great and perfect Jason Grace," Percy spat. It wasn't fair, the way Percy was acting, but he'd left a good life behind -- one he felt was vastly superior to the ones Nico and Jason had been forced to give up. They didn't have a wife, a child...

Nico grabbed Jason's right wrist before he could throw the punch. He put his other hand against Percy's cheek, and Percy surprised himself by leaning into the touch. Nico should not feel so soothing. Nico was Percy's biggest problem. "I'm sorry for what you had to leave, Percy. I truly am. Jason didn't make this happen, though, and he's hurting, too. Stop making it worse."

Percy's eyes flared. He wanted to scream at Nico, swear again that this was all his fault, but that gentle touch was all that was keeping him moored right now. Instead, he pressed a soft kiss to Nico's cheek. Afterward, Percy stared at Jason but didn't say anything. He wanted Jason to say something, to react to the kiss. He was disappointed, though, because Jason didn't say a word.

"Let's lay back down and try to sleep," Percy said. He wouldn't apologize to Jason, even if what Nico said was true. Jason didn't understand what Percy was going through. Yes, he'd left someone behind, but everyone could see things were empty between him and Piper. Jason wanted Nico. All Percy wanted right this moment was Annabeth.

Jason grunted and slowly sank back to the earth. He needed Percy to stop talking. He needed Nico to touch him. Maybe sleeping would make things better.


* * *

Earlier:

"Jason! Percy! You have to come now!" Nico screamed at them from the shade of the nearest tree. His black eyes were wide, and for the first time Jason could remember, there was fear there. Jason didn't understand why. They'd saved the day. They were heroes. "We don't have time!"

Jason was drunk on his success, proud and exhilarated by what they'd done. He ignored Nico, turned and fist bumped Percy, and was caught unawares by Nico's simultaneous scream and the searing pain that shot through his shoulders as an eagle snatched him from the ground. He heard Nico's screams, saw his anguished face, before the third eagle appeared and Nico melted into the shadows. The empty-taloned eagle screeched and veered off, flying in front of the eagles carrying him and Percy. Jason could feel its empty-clawed shame.

Jason woke panting heavily, startled from his memory. He was grateful that he'd at least seen Nico one more time, even if it was in such an insubstantial way. He took a deep breath and sat up on the luxurious bed. His room was glistening white. Everything in it, from the sheets to the walls, was the same pristine shade. There was a white desk, empty, a white lamp, unnecessary, and a white table, unused. The only part of the room Jason had touched, in the four days since he had been brought here, imprisoned, in the "guest suites" of Olympus, was the bed. He only touched it because he had
Jason waited alone for twelve more days. His cell afforded him a view of Olympus, and he watched gods come and go. The lesser gods seemed oblivious, happily carrying on with whatever minor duties they managed and reveling in the luxury of being a god. The major gods, and Jason only saw a few, seemed tense and troubled. Jason saw Athena arrive three days ago, her face set in a stern mask. He hadn't seen her leave. Apollo had run from the building about a week ago, screaming and crying, destroying everything he came near. Jason had never seen the sun god, his brother, so angry, so unhinged. Apollo had returned yesterday, his face splotchy and twisted. He looked straight ahead and ignored all the lovely nymphs who gathered around him. This morning, he had seen Poseidon arrive, wearing his fishing hat and Hawaiian shirt and looking grim. His wife, Amphritite, and son, Triton, scurried along in his wake, looking scared and resentful.

Jason felt like the tension was building. Something would happen soon. He would pray for help, if the man he'd pray to wasn't the same man keeping him prisoner.

A door appeared in the wall, and Hermes stuck his head into the room.

"C'mon kid," he said quietly. "It's time."
Jason walked silently out the door. It would be pointless to ask questions. He knew Hermes wouldn't answer.

Percy, when he'd been liberated from his cell, apparently hadn't realized the same thing.

"Hermes, what's going on? I want to see my father. Where's Nico? Can I talk to Annabeth?" Percy kept up the stream of endless questions, only getting more and more angry with the silence of the messenger god. He turned to Jason. "Fuck, Grace. What's going on here?"

"I don't know anything more than you, Percy," Jason told him coolly. Jason felt angry toward Percy, but he wasn't sure if it was something fresh or old resentment he'd never been able to shake. Percy hadn't convinced him to do what they'd done. Jason had been eager to go, to help. Maybe, if Percy hadn't been there, Jason would have taken Nico's hand more quickly when it was offered, though. Maybe he'd be free right now. Except Jason knew with certainty that Nico wasn't free, not anymore, and that knowledge crippled his stomach and made him feel like he'd vomit on the perfect white floor.

"You've been a prisoner, too?" Percy asked, somewhat incredulously. "But he's your dad, man."

Jason nodded and avoided Percy's eyes.

Abruptly, Hermes wheeled around and held them both at a shoulder. His grip was like an iron vise, and it cut against the bruises Jason still had from the flight with the eagles.

"Don't speak, just listen," Hermes said quickly. "Keep your heads. This doesn't have to be so bad. You can't let your anger rule you, Percy. Stay calm."

With that cryptic advice, Hermes turned again and opened a door. Jason followed him through and entered the throne room.

Zeus sat on his throne at the head of the room, Hera by his side. They both ignored Jason. Aside from three empty chairs, every seat was occupied. Hermes guided Jason and Percy to the center of the room and turned them to face Zeus and Hera before he perched on his own throne. Jason could feel every set of eyes, except his father's and Hera's, on him. He glanced over at Percy and saw that Percy's head was thrown back, defiant. Jason bowed his head and looked at his feet. He'd need to be a balance to whatever idiot thing Percy did here.

The silence in the room was oppressive. He knew better than to be the one to break it, but he was worried Percy would crack soon. Percy couldn't bear silence. He'd talk just to escape the quiet. He probably talked to himself all the time when he was alone, Jason mused. The brief silly thought was a welcome reprieve. Jason was probably about to die, about to watch Percy die, about to watch Nico die. He'd take the momentary levity.

The doors at the back of the throne room flew open, and Ares and Hephaestus clomped in. In Ares's fist, held by heavy chains that bound his wrists to his ankles, was Nico. Jason let out an audible gasp. Nico was battered. His left shoulder was clearly out of socket. His eyes were both blackened. Both the whites were blood red. Blood spurted from his mouth and one ear. Jason and Percy both started toward him when Ares gave a great, angry yell and hurled Nico to the floor at their feet. Jason heard the sickening crunch as Nico's chin and cheek hit the marble floor. He tried not to think about how he could see the bone of Nico's jaw through the gap where Ares had cut open his chin.

Jason dropped to his knees and scrabbled, looking for some way to help. His hands ran across Nico's broken body and fumbled against Percy's. They jumbled together in their futility.
Nico met Jason's eyes. Jason's hands froze on Nico's skin.

"Up, fools! Stand!" Nico hissed. Jason had no idea how Nico could even form words. He and Percy both stood, and Percy pulled Nico by the back of his t-shirt, setting him upright on his knees, his bound hands stretched behind him toward his ankles.

"Trouble?" Zeus asked, his blue eyes were bored and angry.

"Took me a while to forge chains that could hold him, Father," Hephaestus said. "He's a slippery little devil."

Zeus rolled his eyes.


"He's a mortal, my sons," Zeus said. "It is your weakness that prevented you from fetching him, not his strength. Why are so many of my assembled children such gross disappointments?"

Zeus glowered at Ares and Hephaestus, who meekly assumed their thrones, before directing his gaze at Apollo, who visibly squirmed, then, finally, at Jason.

"My greatest disappointment," Zeus said quietly, regarding Jason with disgust. "My biggest mistake."

"My lord, Father, please, if I may treat his injuries," Apollo interjected. His voice sounded so broken. His normally glorious blond hair was tangled and matted. Jason wanted to throttle him. This wasn't the time for weakness, even as Jason's own tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Are his injuries immediately life-threatening, my son?"

"Not currently, Lord, no, but--"

"Then he can wait." Zeus's voice was dismissive.

"Like hell he can," came a roar from the back.

"Oh, look, another disappointment." Zeus had gone back to his bored tone and began picking his nails.

"You promised me, brother," Hades shouted, emerging from the back of the room, "no harm would come to him if I allowed him to be brought here."

"I said, brother," Zeus infused the word with as much loathing as Jason figured was possible, "that he wouldn't be harmed if he didn't fight his extradition. Look at my sons. Does it look like he didn't fight? His injuries remain."

Jason looked at Ares. He was bleeding ichor, the blood of the gods, from deep scratches across his face. His short black hair was missing in places. He had a bruised eye, too, the golden color of the ichor a stark contrast to the flame red of his eyes. Hephaestus didn't look better. Jason had been too distracted by Nico to notice at first, but now he remembered that Hephaestus had walked in limping much more profoundly than usual. He seemed to be missing a couple fingers, and his frizzy brown hair also had a few bald patches.

"Perhaps we should move this hearing along, since all of our, ahem, guests are here," Athena interjected.
"Very well," Zeus said. "Perseus Jackson, Jason Grace, Nico di Angelo, you have been brought before the council of Olympians because you committed acts of treason to the gods. I recommend we kill them immediately. Except di Angelo. He can suffer for his other crimes."

Hades bellowed, and Apollo sobbed. Jason looked at Nico, slowly dying on the ground, and tried to think of a way to get them out of this. Percy was the only one who spoke. "Like hell you're going to kill us right now. What'd we even do? Isn't there like some right to a fair trial thing or something?"

"Zeus, I agree with Perseus," Athena said. "The traitors appear to be ignorant of their crimes. They should at least be informed before their deaths."

"You interfered with godly business. You used your powers in direct opposition to the gods--" Zeus began.

"We fucking saved lives!" Percy screamed. "You should be pleased!"

"You are not gods, Jackson," Dionysus said, and the fact that he got Percy's last name right indicated that they were in deep shit. "You were not intended to use your powers like that. It is in defiance of our order. You three are too powerful."

"Enough!" Zeus barked. "You've said too much, fool."

"Brother, it may be prudent to explore another option," Poseidon offered. Though his voice was calm and light, Jason could see that he was furious. He didn't want Percy to die any more than Hades wanted Nico to die. The only one whose father wished him death was Jason. Jason swallowed down his self-pity. "We have discussed--"

"No. I do not wish it," Zeus said.

Jason could hear the ragged breath of Hades behind him, itching to argue. He could see Poseidon's calm mask begin to slip. Things were falling apart. Zeus raised his master bolt and pointed it at Nico.

"I've changed my mind, little brat," he said. "You can die first, and your lovers can watch. Much more entertaining."

Zeus leveled the bolt and an arc of lightning shot from the tip. A wall of black rock shot up to meet it. The lightning deflected and hit a minor goddess in the second row of thrones. She screamed and fell.

Zeus glared malevolently at Nico, who stared back defiantly. "Bastard child. How many blasts do you think you can block? Your power is finite. Mine is infinite!"

Electricity shot forth again, and Jason's gladius deflected it seconds before it struck Nico. The shock arced up his body, but the bulk of the electricity had been deflected by his blade. Another shriek rose from a back row of the gods. Zeus looked crazed. He leveled the bolt at Jason and had barely let fly when another wall of rock erupted, shielding Jason. Nico fell against him, too spent and injured, too near death, to fight any longer. Jason knew Nico wouldn't be able to block a third lightning strike. He gently lowered his cousin, his lover, to the ground and looked up in time to see Percy deflect another strike, again, just before it could touch Nico's skin. Zeus screamed in outrage and tried again.

Jason threw his body over Nico's. The lightning hit his back, and Jason knew he was dead. His body convulsed on the ground, and he watched as blood poured from his body and joined Nico's on the floor. He heard Percy's screams and felt the air ripple with another strike. A black dome covered his cousins and himself. There was more screaming and shouting, not just from Percy, but from gods and goddesses within the front row of thrones. The dome retracted and another blast of lightning
came near. This one was swallowed by a flood of water.

Jason's ears failed. He managed to jerk his body until he was face to face with Nico, their eyes inches apart. Nico was alive, barely, his black eyes watching Jason. Jason was shocked to realize Nico was crying. He'd never seen Nico cry, not once in the seven years he'd known him. He needed to tell Nico, needed to make sure he knew. The room was smoky, and Percy dropped to his knees, straddling Nico's hips. Jason could see the way his brave, fierce, loyal older cousin screamed and begged, but he didn't know what Percy was saying. His eyes found Nico's again. They dipped to Nico's mouth, where words spilled soundlessly, mixing with his blood.

Jason raised his eyes back to Nico's. He shouted, "I love you! I always loved you, Nico! Can you hear me? Please, know I always loved you!"

Slowly, as if death wasn't on his heels, and he had all the time in the world, Nico nodded. His eyes faded, and Jason's world ended.

Chapter End Notes

Even though the story is complete, I'll still answer comments if you're compelled to leave them (and I really appreciate it if you do). Thanks for reading! :-)
Six Years Earlier:

Jason Grace was in trouble, and he knew it. He'd run from the campfire, giggling like an insane man, tearing through camp. Now, as he approached his cabin, his laughter had died and in its place was dread and maybe a little regret. He hadn't meant it to happen. He'd been feeling so warm and happy, with Piper on one side of him and Leo on the other, both here for Christmas vacation. The war was long over, the Apollo kids were singing Christmas carols, and all of his friends were right there around him, even Percy and Annabeth. He'd lost his head for a minute.

Jason thrust open his cabin door and plunged into the darkness. He shut the door and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Why'd you do it?"

The voice came from a foot behind him, and Jason jumped and whirled around. Lightning flashed overhead, illuminating two large black eyes. Jason reached behind himself and turned on the light.

"Gods, Nico, you scared me!" Jason was careful not to say what he was really thinking, which was "Gods, Nico, you scare me."

Nico ignored him.

"Why'd you do it?" Nico's voice was cold and flat, as emotionless as the first day Jason had met him.

Jason sighed and stepped around Nico, grabbing a water bottle from his nightstand and taking a long drink. Nico huffed in exasperation and started to talk again, but Jason raised his arms and Nico stopped.

"Shut up and let me think," Jason said. "I'll answer you, I swear."

Nico glared at Jason and waited.

Why had Jason done it? He was feeling so safe and content, with his friends around him, and he'd wanted to include Nico. Nico had been sitting in front of him, stiff and uncomfortable, with Will Solace sitting anxiously next to him, no doubt trying to figure out how to put his arm around the son of Hades. Jason had watched, smirked at Will's unease. He'd been happy when Will had finally worked up the nerve to gingerly touch Nico's far shoulder and Nico had immediately shrugged him off. Jason hadn't stopped to think. He'd bent over, grabbed Nico's bony, dry elbow and kissed him right behind his too-big ear. Nico had stiffened, and Jason had recoiled, horrified by what he'd done. Then he had run.

"It was an accident?"

"It's the third time. Even I'm not that socially inept."

"You're pretty socially inept, Nico." Jason smiled, but Nico clearly wasn't being deterred by humor this time.

"Are you making fun of me?"

Jason cringed. "It probably feels like it, huh?"
Nico nodded.

"I'm not making fun of you." Jason couldn't let the past five months of hard work convincing Nico that he truly was his friend be ruined because he couldn't stop -- whatever he was doing. He had to make Nico understand, at least as much as Jason himself understood. "I was feeling good, sitting there with everyone. I wanted you to feel good, too."

Nico's eyes narrowed. "And you thought embarrassing me in front of everyone was going to make me feel good?"

"I didn't embarrass you in front of everyone," Jason said. "Quit being so dramatic. No one even knows it happened except me and you. It looked like I was whispering in your ear."

Nico's mouth opened and closed. He looked like he wanted to say more but wasn't sure what. Finally, he settled on, "well, you didn't help things when you ran out of the campfire."

"I'll make something up," Jason shrugged.

"Don't have to. I already told everyone that you were actually whispering to me that you'd crapped your pants."

"You did not!" Jason was shocked. Scandalized.

Nico laughed. "I did. Piper's gonna bring you some Gatorade later, I bet."

"You are such a liar," Jason said, advancing on Nico and poking his skinny ribs and back until Nico broke away, giggling, and ran to the other side of the Zeus statue that dominated the center of Jason's cabin.

Jason slunk slowly around the statue, listening for Nico, but there was a reason he'd thought Nico needed a bell around his neck when they were aboard the Argo II. The kid was so sneaky and quiet, he could go anywhere undetected. Just as Jason peeked around the corner of the statue, Nico was behind him, jabbing his bony fingers against Jason's sides. Jason ran again and locked himself into the bathroom. He turned on all the bathroom lights so Nico couldn't get in, until finally Nico swore on the Styx he was done tickling Jason for the night.

Jason came out of the bathroom and observed that Nico looked entirely too pleased with himself. His tiny friend was laying on top of the blue comforter on Jason's bed with his spindly legs crossed at the ankle, boots hanging off the end of the bed. His head was resting on his arms, and he was feigning sleep. Jason sat next to him and wiggled his finger under Nico's shirt to poke his bellybutton. Nico swatted Jason's hand away and sat up.

"Stop it, creep," Nico grumbled.

Jason threw an arm over Nico's shoulders and let his hand trail down to clutch at Nico's biceps. His middle finger and thumb almost completely encircled Nico's arm. He let his pinky finger drift down and lightly scratch over the lowest of the scars Lycaon had left on Nico.

"That reminds me," Jason said, and he already regretted what he was about to say. "You should probably let Solace actually put his arm around your shoulders. He's supposed to be your boyfriend."

Nico turned to look up at Jason with a full-lipped pout. "He's annoying."

"Then why do you go out with him?"
Nico's pout turned into a smirk. "Sometimes I like annoying. It's how I put up with a friend like you."

Jason laughed, and Nico stood to go.

"I, um," Jason began. "I won't, um, kiss you like that anymore if it doesn't feel good, Nico."

Nico looked down at Jason. "I never said it didn't feel good. But you tell me..."

He dropped a knee onto the bed next to Jason and tottered a little, so his other shin ended up across Jason's lap. A steadying hand fell on Jason's far shoulder, and Nico leaned his head down close to the side of Jason's neck. Jason could feel Nico's warm breath against his skin. He suppressed a shiver. Nico's chapped lips brushed the spot behind Jason's ear, then trailed ever so slightly down his neck.

Nico raised his head and whispered, "does it feel good, Jace?"

Jason blushed and looked at Nico's face as his young friend moved away. Nico was wearing a wide, teasing, friendly grin, and he waved softly before turning away and heading to the door.

"Night, Jace," Nico said, just before the door closed on him.

Jason tossed himself back on the bed and let out the breath he'd been holding.

Yeah, that kiss felt good.

* * *

Percy Jackson was feeling extremely damned good. It was a Friday night, already a plus since that meant he was free from school for a couple of days, he'd just seen a great horror movie, and now he was sitting in his favorite diner, all flashy chrome and '50s charm, sharing a banana split with his beautiful girlfriend, Annabeth Chase.

Percy took a big bite of ice cream and banana and made a moaning sound. Annabeth grinned. "Don't hurt yourself there, Seaweed Brain."

Percy smiled warmly and fed Annabeth a bite. Before she could chew the banana, Percy swooped in and kissed her, stealing the banana out of her mouth.

Annabeth's cheeks colored, and she covered her mouth as Percy pulled away. Percy looked at her smugly and stuck out his tongue, revealing the banana. Annabeth laughed.

"Gods, Percy, you can be so childish!"

"C'mon, Annabeth, that was hot. You know it."

"It was gross, Percy," Annabeth said, but Percy could see the way the corners of her eyes crinkled into smile lines.

They were halfway through their senior year of high school, and so soon Percy could almost taste it,
they'd be moving to New Rome to go to college. After five years spent saving the world, a nice little life tucked away from gods and monsters sounded like heaven to Percy. Sweetening the deal was the idea he'd get to spend that life with Annabeth. He loved her so much. Looking at her now, blond hair falling around her face, escaping from the ponytail she'd hastily thrown into her hair when he'd picked her up, gray eyes and tanned skin, he thought she was the most beautiful girl in the world. But that wasn't all. Percy felt like an infomercial -- "But wait, there's more!" -- but with Annabeth there really was. She was smart and funny and so crazy talented at combat and architecture and strategy and anything that she set her mind to. Percy couldn't begin to understand everything about Annabeth, but he knew he loved it all. She was the one for him.

Someday, he'd ask her to marry him, and they would have a whole lifetime together. For now, he was content to have this night and the rest of high school.

"Hey, Percy, you okay?" Annabeth asked, her gray eyes mirroring the concern in her voice. "You were kind of zoning out there."

"Sorry, I was thinking about how much I love you." Percy shouldn't have done that, the zoning out. It could mean he was getting a vision or a visit from a god or something. Annabeth had seen enough to worry.

"I would say you're full of it, Percy, but I know you're not," Annabeth said. "You're a corny ball of goo, though."

Percy blushed. "Am not."

"I need to get home," Annabeth said, checking her watch. "My dad said I had to be in by 10:30."

Percy rolled his eyes but deposited some cash on the table and took Annabeth's hand to lead her out of the diner. Ten minutes later, they were in front of Annabeth's house, making out in the car. Percy had climbed over the center console of his stepdad's Prius and was crouched in Annabeth's lap, cupping her face with the hand closest to her house and cupping her breast with the other. Annabeth chewed Percy's lower lip momentarily while she rubbed her leg against his crotch, eliciting a long moan. She broke the kiss and pushed Percy away.

"Move, Percy. I've got to go in now," she panted.

Percy pushed in again for another kiss and playfully tweaked her nipple before she shoved him away for good. He reluctantly climbed back into the driver's seat.

"Do you want me to walk you to the door?" Percy asked.

"Don't be an idiot," Annabeth said. "See you tomorrow. We're going to that exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, remember?"

Percy groaned, and Annabeth laughed as she opened the door. Percy watched until she was safely inside her building before he drove away, smiling.

He smiled all the way home. At least, he did until he opened his apartment door and saw his mom and Paul sitting stiffly on the couch, facing a visitor. The visitor was in the chair facing away from the front door, so Percy couldn't immediately see who it was. It couldn't be good, though, if someone was here at the apartment at eleven o'clock on a Friday night. Percy wondered what he'd done this time.

"Percy, did you forget something?" Sally asked him nervously.
Percy shook his head. He was pretty sure he hadn't. He stepped fully into the living room and faced the visitor. His hand flew to his forehead in horror.

"Shit!" He glanced quickly at his mom and said, "Shoot! I mean, shoot!"

Sally Jackson grimaced at her son, and Percy felt like he was five years old. He loved his mom so much, but sometimes he ached for the time when he would feel like a grown-up.

"How long has he been here?" Percy asked.

"About four hours," Paul said. He didn't seem happy.

Percy looked at the dead, lifeless eyes and rotting flesh of their visitor. Gods, he'd screwed up.

"It's too late now, Jules-Albert," he sighed. "You can go."

Without a sound, Jules-Albert rose and exited the apartment. Percy sank into the chair the zombie had vacated, ignoring his mom's pained cry of, "let me clean it first, Percy!"

"I'm sorry, guys," Percy began. At least his mom and stepdad had met Jules-Albert before. Nico had loaned him to Percy to transport himself, Annabeth, Piper, and Rachel back to the city at the start of the second semester.

"Honey, was Nico expecting you for something?" Sally asked.

Percy looked up at the ceiling and steeled himself. "It, uh, was his birthday. He was having a party."

"Perseus Jackson! That boy has saved your life more times than I care to count!" Sally shouted. "How could you not go to his birthday party? The poor dear barely has any friends!"

"Geez, mom, I know, okay?" Percy said. "I feel sick about it. I forgot! I'm sorry."

"You're saying sorry to the wrong person, young man," Sally said. "Go in your room right now and call him."

Percy rolled his eyes and grumbled, but he stood and went to his room. Once there, he collapsed on the bed and covered his eyes. Shit. He was a shitty friend. Nico had been so good to him, and after he and Annabeth had escaped from Tartarus, Percy had vowed to be the kind of friend and big brother figure Nico needed. Of course, after the war, Nico had confessed he'd had a crush on Percy, and Percy had felt all kinds of weird. Well, different kinds of weird, because Nico had always made Percy feel weird.

Nico swore he wasn't into Percy anymore, and Percy guessed he believed him, but it still made him second-guess everything he did when it came to the son of Hades. It wasn't like he minded that Nico had liked him -- that part was kind of flattering. It was more that he didn't know how to act. He'd been awkward with Rachel, too, and any other girls who'd expressed interest in him, except Annabeth. Hell, he'd probably been awkward with her.

Nico was going to be pissed. The kid had a terrible temper. Actually, Percy hoped Nico was pissed because the alternative, that he was mopey and down on himself, was way worse. Percy briefly considered not calling at all, but his mom would ask tomorrow whether or not he had. He couldn't lie to her.

Sitting up, Percy grabbed a drachma off his desk and quickly manipulated the water from the small fountain in his room to make a rainbow. Maybe he should wait until tomorrow. Maybe Nico would
be asleep already. Oh, who was he kidding? This was prime awake time for a vampire like Nico. He tossed the drachma into the fountain, made the required plea to Fleecy, and Nico di Angelo came into focus.

Nico appeared to be sitting on the beach. Alone. Damn. He looked like he was sulking, swinging his oversized sword around with his skinny knees pulled up to his dumb pointy chin. Percy wanted to smack Nico for making him feel so guilty without even saying a word.

"Hey, Nico..." Percy started.

Nico looked up and scowled. His lips were so pink he looked like a baby when he wasn't scowling, but he was basically always scowling, Percy thought.

"Go away, Percy," Nico said, and he swiped his hand through the message, breaking the connection.

Percy gave a groan of frustration, pulled another drachma off his desk, and connected again. Nico didn't even let Percy say anything this time. He broke the connection as soon as it came through. Percy yelled and ripped another drachma off his desk. He shouted the incantation that would show Nico a third time.

"Hey, dickhead!" Percy yelled as soon as Nico's form appeared. Nico at least was shocked enough not to immediately break the connection. "Quit wasting my money on these calls!"

Nico frowned and threw his arm out to the side. Three drachmas appeared in a shadow on Percy's bed. Percy appreciated the payback, but he also got the message. This was a wasted call, too, in Nico's opinion.

"I'm sorry, okay? I forgot."

"Whatever, Percy," Nico said.

"Happy birthday."

"Whatever."

"Zeus, Nico, cut me a break," Percy complained. "Did you have a good party?"

"Yeah, it was nice," Nico said with a smile Percy knew was fake. Percy's insides twisted. "Hey, I've got to go. I'll talk to you later, yeah?"

"I'll call you tomorrow, and you can tell me all about it, alright?" Percy asked.

"Sure."

Percy broke the connection with every intention of calling Nico in the morning. He always had the best of intentions.

* * *

After talking to Percy, Nico stayed on the beach, gouging a trench in the sand with his sword and
glaring at the waves. Eventually, he heard footsteps and stopped the wide swath of his sword.

Nico didn't turn. He knew who would come out to find him long after all the other campers would be in bed.

Jason sat and leaned against Nico's back. Nico could feel the way his bony shoulders dug into Jason's muscular back. He rested his head between Jason's shoulders for a moment and closed his eyes.

"On the count of three, your left," Jason said. "One, two, three."

*Clang!*

Nico and Jason moved together, their arms moving in a wide arc back toward the other boy, their swords connecting and swinging away. *Clang!* again, this time to Nico's right. Back and forth they moved, Stygian iron clashing against Imperial gold, over and over, their shoulder blades rocking against each other, their heads still. It was a dangerous game. They'd been banned from playing it at camp after Nico had accidentally sliced through the tendon connecting Jason's biceps to his elbow and Will had reported the injury to Chiron. Now, they only played when no one was around, and they'd been lucky to incur only relatively minor cuts, which they treated themselves with nectar and ambrosia. Nico knew they shouldn't play -- it was too dangerous -- but, hey, they liked the thrill.

"What've you been doing out here, stranger?" Jason asked, his sword knocking against Nico's.

"You saw me an hour ago," Nico said. They clanged swords a few more times before he continued. "I talked to Percy."

"Oh?"

"He called me a dickhead."

Jason snorted. "How does that work? 'Happy birthday, dickhead. Sorry I missed your party that I said I'd come to, but anyway, you're the dickhead, not me?'"

"I guess." Nico grunted after Jason knocked his sword back a little harshly.

"He's an asshole sometimes, Nico," Jason said. "I'm sorry."

"I hung up on him a couple times."

"That's not an excuse."

"Yeah, probably not."

"Getting tired?" Jason asked.

"Drop on three," Nico panted. He was getting a bit winded, since he'd been swinging his sword around before Jason came to the beach. "One. *Clang!* "Two. *Clang!* "Three. *Clang!*

Their sword arms met on three and both swords dropped to the sand. Jason chuckled and pulled Nico's wrist a little before Nico jerked it away. Nico laid his head on Jason again and turned so his cheek pressed against Jason's back. He could see Jason's ear from this position, but not much else. That was okay. He didn't want Jason to see him.

"He said he'd call me tomorrow so I could tell him about the party," Nico said.
"You don't think he will?"

"I know he won't," Nico said dismally. He looked back at the waves on the beach. Percy was so reliable in so many ways, to so many people. He was never that to Nico, except as a reliable disappointment. Nico shouldn't let it hurt him after all this time.

"Nico..."

"I'm thinking about breaking up with Will."

"What? Why?" Jason asked.

Nico knew he'd thrown Jason for a loop with the abrupt change in topic, but he needed to think about something besides Percy. How sad was it that the idea of breaking up with his boyfriend was less depressing than thinking about how his old unrequited love had let him down again?

"I don't know, exactly. I can't put my finger on it," Nico said.

"Well, try."

"It's just...shouldn't I feel something sparkly when we kiss?" Nico asked. "I mean, I like him and all, and kissing him is fine. He's good, you know. I don't feel anything. Like, it's not exciting."

"Huh."

Jason's response irked Nico. Huh? That was all he had to say? Didn't he have any expertise to add?

"How does it feel when you kiss Piper? Aren't there sparks or something? Heat?"

"I...it's nice. Warm. Pleasant," Jason said.

Nico wrinkled his nose. "It sounds like you're kissing your grandma, Jason. Surely there's something else. Something better. You don't have to hold back. Tell me. I won't laugh, no matter how annoyingly sappy you are."

"Yeah, right," Jason laughed, and Nico smiled a little and turned sideways into Jason's back. He moved his arm to curl more into Jason's warmth. Maybe he was kind of nuzzling into his friend, but no one was around to notice, and he doubted Jason could tell the difference between his bony shoulder blade and his bony shoulder.

"I won't," Nico insisted. "I want to know."

"I don't know how else to describe it," Jason huffed. "That's what it feels like. Sorry it's not like fireworks or rockets launching, dude, but that's what I feel."

"Don't you think you should feel something more when you kiss your girlfriend?" Nico asked.

"I think that's a dumb question. And too personal. How am I supposed to know if I should feel something different or not?"

"I don't know.‖ Nico rubbed his cheek on Jason's back. "I got the impression that people who are into other people feel better than 'comfortable' or 'nice' when they're kissing the person they're into."

Jason turned slightly to look at Nico, forcing Nico to sit up and not lean into the son of Jupiter anymore. "I'm tired."
"You're stupid," Nico said.

"Shut up. I'm not Percy," Jason said. "Quit being mean to me because you're mad at him."

Jason's words hung between them in the stillness of the night. It wasn't like Nico had said anything that terrible. He was tempted to snip at Jason again, but he didn't. Jason was here, for him. He was his friend. Jason mattered to Nico.

"I'm sorry," Nico said quietly. "I know you're not stupid. I'm the one asking weird questions. I'm sorry I was sort of implying you don't feel as excited about Piper as you should."

Nico thought that was exactly the truth, but if Jason wasn't admitting it, then either he was in denial or Nico was dead wrong. Nico was probably dead wrong. How could the way Jason kissed Piper not be the real, satisfying, in love kind of way? Nico had only ever kissed Will, so he had no experience to base his judgment on, unless you counted those kisses Jason had been stealing behind his ear. Did those count, he wondered?

"Hey, Jace?"

"What?" Jason had moved so that he was facing Long Island Sound like Nico. Their shoulders bumped when Jason inhaled.

Nico looked up at the starry night sky. There were so many stars; the universe was so vast and endless. Nico felt very small.

"Those kisses you've given me, do they count as kisses, like for first kisses and stuff?"

Nico looked at Jason's profile, his pretty blue eyes staring at the stars just as Nico's had been. The corner of Jason's mouth quirked up.

"Do you want them to count?"

Nico thought about it. If they counted, Jason had given Nico his first kiss, not Will.

"Yeah, I want them to count."

Jason's upturned mouth moved into a smooth, big smile. Nico smiled, too.

"I want them to count, too," Jason said, though he didn't look at Nico. "Plus that one you gave me."

"Oh, gods, I forgot about that." Nico rolled his head around on his shoulders until his forehead came in contact with Jason's shoulder. He stopped and breathed deeply before lifting his head again. Jason smelled like rain, Nico thought. If Jason thought it was weird that Nico was sniffing him, he didn't say anything. "That was embarrassing."

"I didn't think so," Jason said. "It was..."

"What?" Nico asked. "Are you having fun at my expense?"

Jason sighed. "Quit asking me that. I would never do that to you, Nico. I thought that kiss was...hot."

Nico could feel a blush spread across his cheeks and up his ears. He was glad it was dark and Jason had crappy vision. He was also glad that Jason didn't seem to expect a reply, because Nico had none to give.

They sat there for a while longer, watching the waves lap at the shore, their shoulders and eventually
their knees brushing every so often.

"I'm tired," Nico finally said, and he stood and brushed the sand off his jeans before offering Jason a hand.

"You're stupid," Jason replied as Nico pulled him to his feet.

Nico smacked his chest. "I apologized, you beefy jerk!"

Jason chuckled. "I know. I'm kidding."

They started to walk back across the beach, toward camp. Before they got far, Jason stopped and tugged Nico's hand until he faced the son of Jupiter.

"I'm tired, Jason," Nico said. "Can't it wait?"

"It's quick," Jason said. "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry about Will and Percy. I really am. Plus, I won't let you down like they have. I promise."

"We'll always be friends?" Nico looked uncertainly in Jason's eyes. They were serene and mesmerizing, a break from the world outside. Jason's smile was genuine and kind.

"I will always be your friend, Nico. I'll be everything you let me be."

* * *

"You need a shrink, Death Boy."

Nico rolled his eyes and continued picking his way through the woods. The sun was shining overhead and the day was gorgeous, but his companion was ticking him off.

"Shut up. I don't need a shrink," he grumbled. "And I hate that damned nickname. Don't call me that."

"Quit raising fucking skeletons to do your bidding, then," Clarisse countered smugly.

"No. Plus, you're not being fair. I asked a simple question, and you're avoiding answering." Nico used his sword to whack away a tangle of vines. "If I didn't know better, I'd start to worry you were chicken."

Clarisse scowled. "How the fuck am I supposed to know if you should break up with Solace or not? I don't give a shit."

"It's like, the kisses are so lackluster, Clarisse." Nico continued as though Clarisse hadn't tried to shut him down. "How does it feel, kissing Chris? Better than 'nice,' right?"

"You know I'm not your friend, right?" Clarisse asked. "I'm just babysitting you as a favor to Hedge."

Nico snorted, and Clarisse shoved him into a tree. Clarisse had been watching him as a favor to
Coach Hedge, he knew. At first, he found her attention extremely irritating, but as the Romans went back to Camp Jupiter and most of the kids at Camp Half-Blood had gone home for the school year, Nico had come to grudgingly tolerate Clarisse. Now, five or six months in, she was the closest thing he had to a friend here, other than Jason, of course.

"Yeah, I know," Nico said. He recovered his balance and straightened his shirt. "But shouldn't kissing feel exciting?"

"Why don't you ask Captain Sissypants this shit? This is more his deal than mine. He's dating an Aphrodite girl, after all," Clarisse said.

"I did ask him," Nico said. "He said kissing was, I think, 'pleasant.' That seemed weak."

"That is weak," Clarisse agreed. She stepped over a fallen tree trunk and waited for Nico to climb over, too. "Why is he such a wuss?"

"He's not a wuss, Clarisse." Nico didn't like it when Clarisse trashed Jason, but he knew she didn't mean much by it. She had to pick on someone. Better Jason, who could handle her taunting, than some poor little kid.

They walked on in silence for a while. They were supposed to be fetching something from the woods, some lost arrow of Apollo's or something, but Nico wasn't that interested in the chore. Clarisse didn't seem to be, either.

"When I kiss Chris, it's like a million fireflies light up all at once," Clarisse said softly. Nico glanced at her. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, except for her bangs, and her whole face was gentler, softer than Nico thought it was possible for such a fierce person to be. "It's heat and safety and release, Nico. I could lose myself in him."

Nico nodded. That's what he'd thought kissing was supposed to feel like. He'd been dating Will for three months now, and he'd never felt anything like what Clarisse described.

"Thanks. I'm breaking up with him tomorrow," Nico said.

"Not wasting any time, are you?" Clarisse smirked. Nico started to respond, but she cut him off with a wave of her hand. "It's okay, Nico. If it doesn't feel right to you, it isn't right. Trust your judgment."

Nico opened his mouth to answer, but he caught a glint of bronze off to their left.

"Hey, is that..." He veered off the path they'd been following and approached the metal he'd seen. Sure enough, there was a gleaming Celestial bronze arrow lodged in a tree. Carefully, so he wouldn't damage the feathers or dull the point, Nico dislodged the arrow.

"Yes!" Clarisse shouted. "Now we can get the hell out of here and do better things with our fucking lives!"

"Race you back to the Big House," Nico said. Before Clarisse could answer, he'd run off in a sprint. "Go!"

Nico dodged through the trees and smacked branches out of the way with the flat of his sword. He laughed when he heard Clarisse yell behind him.

"Hey, you cheating asshole! Get the fuck back here!"

Clarisse stormed through the underbrush. Nico could hear her clomping heavily behind him. It was
funny. Though she was fast, she had no hope of catching him, yet she was still trying. Nico thought it was endearing that she didn't give up, even on a lost cause.

"No shadow traveling either, you little shit!" Clarisse roared from behind him, and Nico picked up the pace.

Five minutes later, he was standing behind the Big House, doubled over against the blue siding, panting, trying to catch his breath, and waiting for Clarisse to make it out of the woods. Her cries of outrage had gradually fallen further behind until he couldn't hear them anymore. Finally, once Nico had completely calmed his breathing, Clarisse stormed out of the woods and body checked him into the house.

"Hey!" he shouted, rubbing his shoulder. "That was a little harsh, don't you think?"

"That's what you get for running off on me, dickhead," Clarisse complained. She pulled her shirt up and wiped the sweat off her face.


"Oh. Did Mr. Plumber say why he couldn't be bothered to show up?"

"No. He said he was sorry, though."

"Want me to go kick his ass?"

Nico laughed. "Thanks for the offer, really, but no."

"It was still a nice party, kid. Me and you and Jason and Will, we had a good time."

"Yeah," Nico agreed. He hadn't. Not really. He knew that and Clarisse knew that, but the lie was easier to deal with than the truth. Three friends at Camp Half-Blood. That was it. It was pretty pathetic, Nico thought. And now he was going to ditch one of them. Maybe he and Will could still be friends.

"Alright," Clarisse said, "let's go around front and you can give the arrow to Chiron or Apollo, if he's here."

"Don't you want to give it to them?"

"Nah, you found it. Besides, Apollo kind of creeps me out."

Nico thought that was funny, since Apollo looked and acted so (mostly) normal, and Clarisse's dad was as creepy as it was possible to be, with his red eyes. Percy had told Nico once that Clarisse was as scared of her dad as everyone else was. That was sad. Nico was glad his dad was at least less menacing than many of the gods. Well, his dad was probably the most menacing of the gods, if you asked anyone but Nico. It was all relative. Of course, he wouldn't want a god like Apollo to be his dad, either. It'd be weird to have a dad who constantly looked like a teenager.

Nico shrugged and walked with Clarisse around to the front of the Big House. Sure enough, there was Apollo, rocking back and forth on his feet. The god was gorgeous. Nico wondered when he'd started to notice how good-looking guys were, besides Percy, of course, but dang, Apollo had to be at the top of the list. He had such nice golden blond hair, like Jason's, but longer and more stylish. His pretty blue eyes were large and almond-shaped like Will's, but they had Jason's depth and intensity, almost. No one had eyes as intense as Jason's. Except stupid Percy. Nico rolled his own eyes, which were pretty intense, too, now that he thought about it. Maybe it was a Big Three thing.
He shook his head to clear it from his mental word vomit and presented the arrow to Apollo.

"Oh, my precious arrow!" Apollo gushed, taking the thing reverently from Nico's hand. "How lucky it is that you have been found!"

Nico thought that was a bit of overkill. It was an arrow, for Hades's sake. But then Apollo turned his brilliant smile on Nico, and Nico was too stunned by the god's attractiveness to do anything more than stare.

Apollo reached forward and cupped Nico's cheek. With his thumb, he stroked Nico's cheekbone then swiped across Nico's lips. His hand traveled lower, caressing Nico's neck before coming to rest on his shoulder. Nico's heart thudded in his chest, and he felt heat spread through his body.

"Thank you, Nico di Angelo, for retrieving my arrow," Apollo said softly, his eyes darting from Nico's eyes to his lips. "How old are you now, Nico?"

Nico nodded like an idiot, and Clarisse growled. "He's fifteen. Barely."

"Ah, not quite ripe," Apollo said wistfully. "Soon, though, Nico. You will be extremely tempting."

"Rules, brother," Mr. D said lazily, appearing on the front porch. Nico turned and saw the camp director glaring at Apollo. What the heck was Mr. D talking about?

Apollo let his hand drop from Nico's shoulder and turned away. "Merely making an observation."

"Thank you, Ms. LaRue, for your help as well," Chiron said. Nico hadn't noticed him sitting on the porch of the Big House. The old centaur was well back in the shadows.

"Yes, quite," Apollo agreed, turning his stunning smile on Clarisse, who merely scowled. He turned back to Nico and smiled. "I improved your health with my touch, my pretty Dark Angel. You should get more sun, love."

Apollo started to glow, and Nico quickly shut his eyes. The glow faded, and when he opened his eyes, Apollo was gone.

"What an asshole," Clarisse said. "Can we go now, Chiron? I'm hungry."

"Yes, Ms. LaRue, Mr. di Angelo," Chiron said, though he looked troubled. "Well done. Thank you."

Clarisse grabbed Nico roughly by the elbow and pulled him toward the dining pavilion.

"C'mon, you little shit, let's get some grub."

"Why'd you call Apollo an asshole?" Nico didn't understand. The god had seemed fine to him.

"He's hitting on you, stupid," Clarisse almost shouted. Nico flapped his hands for her to keep her voice down, and she thumped his chest with the side of her hand. It hurt. "What kind of creep hits on a kid?"

"I'm not a kid," Nico grumbled, but Clarisse ignored him.

* * *
"Happy Valentine's day, beautiful."

Piper smiled, and Jason thought she was the most gorgeous girl in the world. He smiled in return.

"Happy Valentine's day, Jay."

"I'm sorry I couldn't make our date," Jason said, and Piper's kaleidoscopic eyes flashed brown as she gazed at him through the Iris message. "This quest was unexpected."

"I understand, sweetie," Piper said. "Duty first, right?" Jason nodded, and Piper continued. "So Clarisse is your quest leader?"

"Yeah. She hates me," Jason confided.

"Oh, I doubt she hates you, exactly," Piper said. "I think you're the place filler for Percy. It's him she hates."

"I've been feeling like a place filler for Percy for over a year now," Jason complained. "I wonder when they'll all start treating me like Jason, instead of Percy's replacement."

"It'll happen, Jay," Piper said. "Give it time. They like having a son of the Big Three there, and it's only normal they'd compare you to Percy."

Jason bristled. "There are two sons of the Big Three here, remember? They don't pull this stuff on Nico."

Piper brushed off that fact. "Nico's different. He's scary and doesn't look the part of the hero. He's a scrawny little boy who can raise the dead. No one will ever think of him the way they think of you and Percy."

"He's as much of a hero as me or Percy, Piper." Jason hated when people diminished Nico and his accomplishments. "He's the only friend I have here, and he's our third on this quest."

Piper's eyes startled, and she looked around the message quickly. "Jason, why didn't you tell me that first?! I don't want to hurt his feelings!"

"He can't hear you. I moved far away from the campsite before I called."

"Oh, good." Piper gave a great exhale. "I don't mean anything bad. He's a good kid, when he isn't being sulky. He's young, though, and he doesn't have that spark you and Percy have."

Jason sighed. He thoroughly disagreed about Nico's spark, but he didn't want to spend his limited Iris message time talking about Nico.

"So, tell me. What are you doing tonight, since we can't go out?"

"Well, Rachel and I are going to go out to eat. Annabeth's already out with Percy, of course," Piper said. The three girls shared a living space near their high school, courtesy of Rachel's father. Mr. Dare had been willing to have Annabeth stay with Rachel, but had fallen all over himself to offer a spot to Piper, too, once he found out she was the daughter of Tristan McLean.

Maybe Jason should have gone to high school with them. He probably would have had more fun.
He was just so enamored with the Greek camp and everything it held. It felt like he was connecting
to a part of himself he'd missed out on for fifteen years. Secretly, he'd hoped his father would pay
him more attention this way, too. So far, that hadn't happened. But anyway, he wouldn't leave Nico,
not after he'd promised the guy he'd stay.

Percy had tried to get Nico to go to school with him, but Nico had furiously refused, telling Percy
that he already knew more than Percy ever would, so he didn't see the point. That had been a fun
day. Nico and Percy had very publicly screamed at one another from the front porches of Cabins
One and Three. They'd drawn quite a crowd, yelling about how little each thought the other knew.
Most of the assembled had no idea the fight had nothing to do with who had a superior knowledge of
algebra. Jason had finally picked up Nico from behind, pinning his arms, and locked him away in the
Zeus cabin for hours, holding him the entire time, until he calmed down. Annabeth later told him
she'd had to get "very creative" to calm Percy. Jason didn't ask what she meant by "very creative."
He didn't want to know. When he eventually left his cabin after soothing Nico, Jason had found that
Percy had almost torn apart the canoe lake and flooded camp, he'd been so mad at Nico. Nico, for his
part, had killed half the strawberry harvest.

"...Jay?"

Jason jumped. Damn. He'd been zoning out while talking to his girlfriend on Valentine's day. That
was pretty bad.

"I was saying that I should go," Piper said. She looked frustrated with his obvious inattention.

"I'm sorry," Jason said. He hung his head. "And I'm sorry I can't be with you. You and Rachel have
fun, okay?"

"Thanks. Tell Nico and Clarisse I say 'hey,'" Piper said. "Love you, Jay."

"Back at you."

Jason didn't miss Piper's disappointed face as he swiped his hand through the message, breaking the
connection. She wanted him to say he loved her. He didn't say it, even though he was pretty sure he
loved her. It's just, he didn't have much to go on. He wasn't sure what love truly looked like. He
should love her, that was definite. She was smart and sweet, talented and beautiful. He liked her a
whole lot. What Nico had said, the night of his birthday, about how kissing should feel was
weighing on Jason's mind more than it should. He needed to let it go. Nico had even less experience
with dating and kissing than Jason. What would he know?

Well, he knows how to kiss, a different part of Jason's brain supplied. Jason was embarrassed to find
that, six weeks after it had happened, he was still thinking about the way Nico had kissed him that
one time. It was one tiny kiss, not even on the lips, and Jason had kissed Piper more deeply a million
times. But that one kiss, it turned Jason on. It had been hot and sweet, and all those things Nico
complained Will's kisses weren't -- all those things Piper's kisses weren't. It was probably a fluke,
that's all. Jason wasn't attracted to Nico. He liked looking at guys and girls equally, but he wasn't
interested in Nico that way. They were friends, nothing more. Except he couldn't stop thinking about
Nico as something more.

He needed to stop this. He had a perfectly lovely girlfriend. The right girlfriend -- a golden girl for
his golden boy image. Juno had hand-picked Piper for him. Aphrodite approved. Even Cupid said
Jason had found true love, mostly.

Jason walked back to the small clearing where they'd set up camp for the night. When he got back,
Nico and Clarisse were sitting opposite one another across an open fire, discussing strategy for their
quest. It wasn't terribly exciting, as quests went. A gang of cyclopes was causing trouble in Texas by openly carrying mortal weapons in public. They'd be easy to deal with, as they were known to be an exceptionally dumb band of cyclopes, but the guns worried Jason.

"We can't confront them openly, Clarisse." Nico brushed his hands down over his face in exasperation. "They have guns. Those things can hurt us along with any humans who get in the way."

"We're too fast, Nico." Clarisse waved his concerns off. "They'd never react in time. Piece of cake."

"Jason, tell her she's being an idiot," Nico said.

Jason had no intention of telling Clarisse she was being an idiot. He liked having all his body parts still attached to his body.

"I do think they're slow, the cyclopes," Jason said diplomatically, ignoring Nico when he dramatically fell over and called Jason something nasty in Italian, "but I'm worried about the guns, too. Those things are never good news. Maybe we could scout them from above and when they move into a shadow, Nico can travel down and take them out from behind, then bring the gun back to us?"

"He's a little kid, Jason," Clarisse barked. "I'm not sending him down alone to take out these guys."

Nico had sat back up and was glowering at Clarisse. Jason cut him off before he could speak.

"He's not a kid, Clarisse. He's the most capable demigod I know. You haven't seen all the things he can do."

Clarisse studied Nico and Jason for long minutes before she grunted and stood. "Whatever. They shoot the runt through, and it's on your head. I'm going to bed."

Nico thrust his fist into the air triumphantly before scowling.

"Get out of my tent, Clarisse!"

"No, dipshit. It's my quest. I decide who sleeps where. You sleep with Grace in the other tent."

"That's my tent!" Nico protested. "Get out! The other tent smells like cat pee!"

Clarisse ignored him and threw both Jason's and Nico's sleeping bags out of the nice silver tent Nico had inherited from Reyna, who'd been given it by the Hunters of Artemis.

Nico whirled and faced Jason. His eyes were wide and desperate. "Help me!"

"Get it back!" Jason whisper-shouted. He didn't want to sleep in the cat pee tent, either. "It's your tent, and she's your friend."

Nico huffed out a breath and appeared to steel himself. He cautiously approached the good tent.

"I brought this tent, I set it up, and it belongs to me, Clarisse."

Clarisse appeared in the doorway to the tent and shoved Nico so hard that he did a backward somersault before regaining his footing perilously close to the fire.

"Not happening," Clarisse snarled. "I'd hate to kill you before we finish the quest. Now, shut up and leave me alone, asshole. It's bad enough I have to spend Valentine's day with Captains Pissy and
Sissy, and not my boyfriend. I get the good fucking tent."

She disappeared inside the tent and zipped the doorway shut. Nico kicked at the tent, and Jason could hear Clarisse's muffled chuckle from inside. Jason dragged Nico, now irate and muttering jerkily, away from the tent before he damaged one of his prized possessions.

"Let it go," Jason said as Nico struggled against him. "She doesn't get much good stuff, Nico. Let her have this for now. We'll sleep outside. It's warm enough."

"Fine. Let me go." Nico stilled in Jason's grip, and Jason loosened his hold. Nico jerked away and sat down on the far side of the fire with his back to the tent. Jason leaned against him and took out his sword.

"On the count of three, your right," Jason said, and he heard Nico unsheathe his blade. "One..."

"And don't start that clanging shit!" Clarisse's voice rang out from inside the tent. "It gives me a fucking headache! I hear one clang, and I will totally rat you both out to Chiron. You'll be cleaning bathrooms for the next six months!"

Nico made a growling noise, and Jason heard him sheathe his sword. Jason put his gladius up, too. He moved to the left and scooted back a little, so his hip pressed against Nico's thigh. He and Nico were facing each other in this position, and Jason hadn't thought about how close he'd be to his friend's face. Nico started to move away, but Jason gripped his hip, holding him in place.

Nico looked at Jason curiously, but didn't try to move again. "What's up, Jace?"

"I was talking to Piper earlier," Jason started, but he was distracted. Nico tilted his head and regarded Jason quizzically. From this close, Jason felt like he could see Nico's soul down those deep, black eyes. Nico's breath smelled like chocolate, and Jason flicked his eyes down to Nico's lips. The urge to kiss Nico was so strong. He hadn't done it again, not since the night Nico had kissed him back, because he was scared of how much he might like it. But wondering if there was the tiniest possibility that kissing Nico could make him feel the way kissing Piper didn't was making Jason slowly go insane. He needed to find out.

Nico opened his mouth, no doubt to complain about Jason trailing off mid-thought, but Jason moved his head closer and Nico closed his mouth.

"I need to do an experiment, okay? Don't freak out." Jason's voice came out tender and husky. His eyes were focused on Nico's lips, slowly growing closer as he leaned forward. He wasn't expecting the hand that caught him gently in the chest, halting his forward progress.

"What are you doing?" Nico breathed. Gods be damned, that chocolate on his breath was sending Jason into a tailspin.

"I need to know, Nico. About the fireworks."

Jason noted the dip in Nico's lips as the son of Hades nodded once and decreased the tension in the hand keeping Jason at bay. Freed from the obstruction, Jason moved the rest of the way forward and pressed his lips to Nico's. He felt warm, excited, but he could keep it under control. This wasn't so different from kissing Piper. Maybe a little better.

Then Nico tipped his head up and kissed back.

Jason was lost, exploded, dead and gone. He was being ripped apart and knit back together in a way that was so much better than the old version of him. So maybe they were nothing more than two
teenage boys sitting around a campfire in the middle of nowhere, kissing clumsily and awkwardly, neither of them very good or practiced, lips and tongues and teeth mashing together and falling apart, but Jason knew neither the hyperbole nor the reality accurately described what was happening. He'd gone looking in Nico for fireworks, and what he'd found was the truest piece of himself.

He was a scared sixteen year old boy who wanted nothing more special than his father's approval and a simple life with a simple girl, except here, with his hand tracing up the cool, delicate spine of the boy in front of him, he felt like he could be his own person, independent of the father and the girl and the expectations that had dogged him his entire life. He felt raw and passionate and powerful and completely in love with Nico di Angelo. In that moment, Jason was sure, in the way only demigods or teenagers can be, that this was his destiny.

Nico's hand fell on Jason's thigh and squeezed, forcing a low moan out of Jason's mouth.

"Grace!"

Jason jumped and yanked his hand out of the back of Nico's shirt. Unfortunately, his other hand had instinctively yanked away, too, but it was tangled in Nico's unruly black hair.

"Ow!" Nico yelled. He pressed Jason's hand back against his head and used both hands to untangle Jason's fingers. Jason was buying Nico a brush and forcing him to use it. For now, Jason had to wait for Nico to free his hand while Clarisse glowered at him from the tent opening.

Once Nico freed Jason's hand, he shifted lazily and looked back at Clarisse. Jason was impressed that Nico wasn't afraid. He couldn't say the same for himself. Clarisse took her "babysitting" duties very seriously.

"I changed my mind about the tent. Get in here, di Angelo," Clarisse said. "Grace, you're sleeping alone in the pee tent."

"I wanna sleep with Jason," Nico protested.

Clarisse narrowed her eyes at Jason. "That's exactly why you're sleeping with me. Now move."

Nico blew a raspberry at Clarisse and turned back to Jason. His face looked anxious, filled with uncertainty, but Jason had never felt more sure. He winked at Nico, and Nico laughed before standing, grabbing his sleeping bag, and walking toward the good tent.

Jason watched until Nico was on the other side of the fire. "Nico?"

Nico turned and looked back. He was stunning, Jason thought, wild hair and pink lips and skin glowing in the firelight.

"Fireworks. You?" Jason asked.

Nico gave him a tiny smirk, then with his hands he mimicked an explosion, complete with sounds, before disappearing inside the tent.

For the first time he could remember, maybe for the first time in his life, Jason fell asleep happy.
By the next morning, the barrier had expanded to its original shape and size. Jason manipulated the winds and flew to the domed ceiling of their enclosure. It felt like they were animals trapped in a cage. Jason thought that was the way Olympus intended them to feel. It was hard to believe their own fathers had agreed to, or in Jason's case, pushed, this punishment upon their sons.

Nico and Percy slowly woke below Jason. Percy's arms were wrapped around Nico, and he was clearly holding on tight. Nico was pressed flat against Percy. The sight of Nico being held so intimately by someone else, especially Percy, made Jason's stomach lurch. He wanted to be the one holding Nico, be the one pressed against him. He'd blown his chances.

Nico stirred more and extracted himself from Percy's embrace. He felt the absence of Jason's warmth and pressure against his back. He could almost convince himself he didn't miss it. He squinted up at Jason and waved. Jason slowly descended and stood in front of Nico. He offered a hand, and Nico took it. Jason pulled Nico up and gave him a quick one-armed embrace. He didn't dare let the hug linger, not in the sunlight, where it was too bright to hide the sting on his face when Nico would inevitably reject him.

"The barrier has expanded again," Jason said rather unnecessarily. "I wish I could fly higher."

"I'm glad you can fly some," Nico told him. "It's good for you. It'll help to have a place where Percy and I can't go."

"Percy can go under the water for a bit, too." Jason continued Nico's thought. "What about when you need to get away from us?"

Nico gave him a knowing smile and closed his eyes. The earth around them rumbled and changed. Jason watched, fascinated, as a dome of sand rose up over them and solidified, forming an earthen shell and closing them off from the rest of the beach.

Outside, Percy sat up and seethed with anger, watching the dome rise and take shape. He was worried Nico and Jason would pair off. He would be alone.

Inside the dome, Jason said, "neat trick, Neeks."

Jason was talking to darkness, because the sand cut out all light. Jason felt closed in. He reached an arm out to feel for Nico and stave off the panic boiling inside him. Nico's spidery hand met his, and Jason was buoyed by its cool comfort.

"Sorry," Nico said. "I forget other people can't see like this. It's okay, Jason."

Nico stepped closer to Jason and rested a cool hand against his chest. Jason wrapped his arms around Nico again. He couldn't help himself. It was the move of a love-sick fool, which was exactly what he was, but in the dark, panic and loneliness were winning out. Nico felt a pressing need to keep Jason calm. He did what was necessary and moved closer. Jason was surprised when Nico's cool lips brushed his own.

Nico moved away before Jason could deepen the kiss. It was torture for Jason, the glimpse of everything he wanted, pulled away from him a second later.

"Nico, I--" Jason started.
"Don't, Jace," Nico said quietly. "We need to focus on finding a solution to this mess that'll work for all three of us. I need to pull the walls down now so Percy doesn't feel left out."

"Then why did you kiss me?" Jason asked. "Torture?"

"That's not fair," Nico said. There was an undercurrent of anger in his voice. "You rejected me. Don't forget that. I kissed you because you were scared and needed reassurance. Don't read anything else into it."

"How could I forget?" Jason asked as Nico lowered the makeshift cave back into the sand. Jason wanted to continue the conversation, but Percy was there, angry and annoyed. His hand cupped Nico's elbow.

"You could have told me you were going to do that, Nico," he said.

Nico breathed in through his nose and prayed for patience. "It didn't occur to me you'd be bothered. Not at first. As soon as it did, I pulled the walls down. I'm not trying to hurt you, Percy."

"Fuck off," Percy growled. "You already hurt me."

Nico turned wordlessly and walked away over the dunes. Jason and Percy watched Nico walk until he ran into the invisible wall. Before either of them could react, he raised another wall that cut him off from their view. Percy felt like crying, watching Nico run away from them. He hated hurting Nico.

"You're an asshole, Percy." Jason hated Percy right now. He hated himself more, of course, for years of making Nico feel inadequate. He sunk to the sand and hoped Percy didn't punch him in the back or run him through.

Percy sat on the sand next to Jason and nudged him with his shoulder. "We're both assholes, brother. You just hide it better."

"Isn't that the truth?" Jason agreed.

Inside the dome he'd created, Nico kicked and beat at the barrier. He needed release. He needed freedom from Jason and Percy. Nico had accepted this banishment because he had broken the gods' rules. Being confined here with Percy and Jason, the two people who left him frayed, confused, and guilty, was a punishment designed to test him.

Percy and Jason sat silently outside the dome and waited for Nico to emerge. They would wait for a long time.

Nico's crimes against the gods were not ones mortals of conscience would understand. Nico didn't feel like he'd done anything wrong. Sex between two consenting adults shouldn't be a crime. And the other part, well, he and Percy and Jason had saved so many lives. They were trying to help. How were they to know death and destruction was the gods' plan? Even if they knew, how were they supposed to be okay with it?

Percy and Jason wouldn't give Nico much breathing room. They both desperately needed him. Forty-two minutes after Nico disappeared behind his wall of rock, Percy was on his feet to break Nico's solace when a bright light glinted across the sky and a god appeared before them.

The arrival of Hermes would have killed Percy and Jason when they were mortal. He was in his true godly form, powerful and brilliantly bright, for at least five seconds before he morphed into his human persona as the neighborhood mailman in jogging pants. Jason didn't say anything, but instead
ran to Nico’s hiding spot and banged with his sword until Nico came out.

Percy glanced at Hermes warily. Hermes merely looked on passively and said, "it's okay, Jackson. I'll wait, as long as the pretty boy doesn't take too long."

* * *

When he heard banging on his makeshift lean-to, Nico lowered the wall and saw Hermes waiting with Percy. Jason's eyes were wild and gleaming. He didn't wait for Nico to move. Instead, he grabbed Nico's hand and dragged him back onto the beach. Whatever Hermes had to say, Jason wanted Nico with him.

Percy watched them approach and wondered if Hermes would say anything about how Nico had already been hiding from him and Jason -- that they had already driven him away. It occurred to Percy that maybe Hermes could take a message to Annabeth. That thought immediately pushed worries about Nico out of Percy's mind.

"Hermes?" Percy began, as Jason continued to drag a very reluctant Nico back toward the beach. "Do you think..."

"Can't Percy," Hermes cut him off. "The gods have forbidden you to have contact with her."

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Percy looked at the dirt, then fixed Nico with a new gleam of contempt. He had warned Nico many times, begged him to call it off. The gods might have forced godhood on Percy, but he believed they wouldn't have made him stay away from Annabeth if they weren't trying to punish Nico. You must choose. The words floated into Percy's brain, and his stomach clenched.

"Can you at least tell me how she's doing? Maybelle?"

"You don't want to know, kid," Hermes said sadly. "But I'll tell you this, your wife is strong. She will get through, and she'll make things good for your little girl."

Percy shook his head. Tears welled in his eyes. He wanted to be there for Maybelle, not here, stuck on a beach with Nico and Jason.

Nico yanked against Jason's grip, but Jason was stronger. He dragged Nico front and center for an audience with Hermes. Nico saw the tears clouding Percy's eyes, but he could also see the hard hatred behind the tears and knew it was directed at him. He looked away, Jason hadn't dropped his hand, and for the first time, Nico was tempted to allow himself the comfort of Jason's touch. He roughly pulled his hand away.

Hermes watched the silent exchange between the men without comment. He'd never been a mortal, so he had no idea how they felt. Judging from the way they looked, it wasn't good.

"Now that you're all here, I have been sent to tell you how portions of your, ah, 'trial period' will work," Hermes said. "Each day, you'll be visited by a different god who will instruct you in the wisdom of the gods, help you understand what you can and can't do, and maybe offer you some respite from whatever you're going through, but don't count on that last part."

Jason's head had perked up at the mention of godly visits. He was intrigued that they could learn something, prove themselves.
Percy scoffed. He didn't want any 'help' from the gods. He was still far too angry. "Tell them to fuck off, Hermes."

"Percy, you may be a god now, but they won't tolerate that," Hermes warned. "Zeus and your dad are still capable of really hurting you and your friends. Is that what you want?"

"They're not my friends," Percy said. "Just my cousins."

When their eyes met, Percy saw the pain he'd caused Nico. Nico looked away because he knew Percy wasn't sorry. He turned to walk away, but Jason's arm caught his waist. This time, Nico let himself be pulled in. He watched Hermes from the relative safety of Jason's purple-clad shoulder.

"Ouch," Hermes said. "You shouldn't be so hasty Percy. You need them. Like it or not, you got yourselves into this mess together. Don't blame it all on Nico."

"Sexed up fucker," Percy muttered under his breath.

Hermes sighed and decided to ignore Percy. Nico couldn't do the same. Percy's words felt like a knife cutting Nico's skin. Jason tightened his grip around Nico and bit his tongue until he could feel blood in his mouth. The tension built in the silence until Percy uttered a guttural yell to the sky and walked a few feet away, his back to the three other men.

"Are you listening, Jackson?" Hermes asked. "I'm only saying this shit once. I've got other stuff to do."

Percy nodded and kept his back turned.

"Fine. The three of you, together, defied the gods. I know you felt like you were doing the right thing, and I know you didn't know you were going against the gods' wishes. Even if you had known, you still would have done it," Hermes said rapidly.

"They were wrong," Jason said. He pressed his palm flat into the small of Nico's back and willed him to take comfort in the touch.

"Not having an argument with you about that, brother," Hermes said before moving on. "Starting tomorrow, one god per day will show up to help you. Expect varying degrees of help. Some of them are feeling hostile toward you. Some of them don't know how to help. Some of them want a little piece of what Apollo got."

Nico shot a horrified look at Hermes. He couldn't be serious. Nico's breath caught in his throat.

"What were you expecting, gorgeous?" Hermes asked. "You demigods were off limits, and we all respected that, except Apollo. You're not off limits anymore. There are a lot of immortals impressed by your looks and...skills."

Hermes paused to let the implication sink in. When the gods had found out what Nico and Apollo had been doing, they hadn't confronted the lovers right away. They'd watched. And salivated. Hermes didn't want to scare the boy, but Nico needed to know what was coming.

Jason gripped Nico tighter. He swore would not let Nico become a fuck toy for the gods.

"Relax, brother," Hermes said. "They're not going to rape him, probably. Expect seduction. Lots of it."

Percy returned to the group and touched Nico's shoulder. He was powerfully mad at Nico, but he
wasn't letting him get hurt, at least, not by people besides himself.

"Today is my day to help you," Hermes said, before he sank to the sand and motioned for Jason, Nico, and Percy to follow his example. "I'm not going to try to seduce you today, either, kid, so relax, all three of you."

Jason and Percy each held Nico by a knee until Nico pushed their hands away and glared at Hermes. "Not today?"

"I'll come, you have to understand," Hermes said matter-of-factly. "You're sexy as hell, literally. But not today. Today, forget about it and ask me questions." Hermes checked his watch. "I've got fifteen minutes to answer whatever you want."

"The barrier," Nico said. "What's causing it to close around us?"

"You," Hermes said simply. "The gods want you three as tight together as possible. It keeps you at each other's throats, which they want. It keeps the sexual tension high, which they also want. They might give you more freedom or less, later, as they see how you react."

Nico nodded. That was the answer he'd expected.

"What can we do here on this beach? What do you suggest?" Nico asked.

"Build a house. You can do that yourself, Nico," Hermes said. "You can probably conjure some rudimentary living materials -- a bed, a sofa -- on your own, if you concentrate. As I'm sure you've no doubt realized, you have no need for food, drink, or eliminating food and drink."

Percy was confused. He didn't understand what Hermes meant by “eliminating food and drink.”

"He means taking pisses and shits, Percy," Jason supplied.

Percy's face reddened. He fought back the urge to slap Jason and snaked his hand across Nico's thighs, making sure Jason could see. Nico smacked his hand away.

"Charming, brother," Hermes told Jason.

"What should we know that we haven't asked?" Nico said.

"A million things I don't have time to tell you, kid," Hermes replied. "But here are a few basics. When I leave, altars will appear for each of you. You aren't allowed to contact your mortal friends and family or your fathers, but your mortal loved ones can now send you offerings. It's just food, and maybe an occasional note, if they think to do it, but maybe it'll help you not feel so isolated. I know you want to know about the solstice, but I don't have any information for you on that front. Truthfully, I don't think your dads, at least Percy's and Jason's, have decided what to do with you. Nico, your dad will make another plea for your freedom, no doubt."

Nico nodded. He hadn't always appreciated his father, but he did now. Jason's and Percy's dads hadn't raised any objection to their punishment. In fact, Zeus had pushed for it adamantly. He'd said he was embarrassed that Jason was his son. Nico felt bad all over again and reached for Jason's hand. Reflexively, before Jason could get too excited, Nico took Percy's hand, too.

Hermes continued making suggestions. "You'll need to stave off boredom. I recommend sex. That isn't directed just at you, Nico. I mean all three of you. It's fun, and it will make the gods happy. Be sure to keep things even, or one of you is bound to get jealous. More jealous. Sparring is good, but don't get too out of control. The gods want you to fight, but it's to your advantage not to. Don't give
in to your anger. Build sandcastles. Watch birds. Meditate."

Jason snorted. "Meditate? That's your advice? Watch fucking birds? That's what we're supposed to do for six months?"

Jason released Nico's hand and stood. His body grew larger and a glow emanated from his skin. Jason's anger scared him. It was out of character and out of control, in ways it hadn't been for a long time. Jason's anger today stemmed from what his father had said, the way Zeus hadn't looked his way in the seconds between the pronouncement of their punishment and their landing here.

Percy had rarely seen Jason angry. He felt temporary pity that prevented him from biting out a scathing remark. He also agreed with his cousin.

"And spar. And fuck," Hermes said. "I don't know why you're bitching, Grace. You're the one who got off easiest. Got to finally ditch the girl you didn't want and now the one you do want is sitting right here next to you, able to take you balls deep all night long. And yet you bitch."

Jason glowed brighter. His fury was palpable. This was a godly manifestation. Nico was the only one of the three who'd been able to throw off that kind of aura before. Nico stood and reached for Jason. He didn't intend to let Jason sleep with him, but he loved the blond and hated that he hurt. Jason's hand felt like fire in Nico's, but it didn't burn him. Nico laid soft kisses along Jason's cheeks and lips until the glow faded, and Jason pulled him into his arms. Jason's quiet tears dropped on Nico's shoulder.

"Keep it even, Nico," Hermes said, and Nico turned around to look at him. He'd never hated a god so much, even as he recognized Hermes was trying to help. "You're the fulcrum. They won't survive without you, but you've got to make it fair."

Percy furiously watched Nico.

"I don't want to fuck Nico!" Percy yelled, and Nico flinched. "I want my wife."

Percy's voice broke, and he started to cry. Hermes gave them a final look of pity before he vanished.

* * *

The altars showed up like Hermes said they would. As soon as he left, three small gazebo-like structures appeared behind the dunes. Their appearance was enough to distract Percy and Jason from their tears. The three men climbed over the dunes and examined the altars.

It was fairly clear which altar belonged to which god. Nico's was made of obsidian and decorated with skulls. Percy's was made entirely of shells. Jason's was plain blue, except for a small statue of a wolf in a back corner. To Jason, the altar was another punch in the gut, another reminder that his father didn't want him. There were no symbols of Jupiter, no lightning bolts, no storms, no eagles. Also, no raped and pregnant women, Jason thought. He wasn't sure why he would want his father's praise. Zeus was not an admirable man.

Nico stroked Jason's arm and tried to help him keep it together. Jason barely noticed. On Nico's other side, Percy stepped into his altar and looked around. On his face was a mix of shame and amazement.
"Hey, Nico," he called. "Do you think this will work? Like, will Annabeth really send me notes this way?"

"I think so, Percy," Nico said. "Annabeth will probably be the first person to send something."

Percy hoped Nico was right. If he was, Percy could hear about Maybelle. Perhaps he could see a photo of her and Annabeth. It seemed too much to hope for, but Percy hoped nonetheless. Jason and Nico hadn't gone into their altars. Percy came back and stood next to Nico. Hermes was right. Nico was their center. Jason and Percy would kill one another without him, gods or no. Percy leaned sideways and gave Nico a kiss.

Nico sighed and took Percy's hand. He had no idea how to be the fulcrum. It felt like more pressure than he could handle. "Let's go look at them together, okay?"

Percy and Jason nodded, and Nico led them toward Percy's altar first. Inside, the sun glinting off the shells made beautiful patterns along the floor. The altar smelled of the sea. Percy traced the lumpy shell walls with his hands until he was satisfied. He took Nico's hand again, and Nico pulled him away. Nico's altar had smooth black walls and a black marble floor. It looked like a crypt. Nico wasn't surprised. He was sure his dad had chosen it for him, just as Percy's and Jason's had chosen theirs. It smelled like earth -- dirt and peat moss.

"Smells like you, Neeks," Jason said shakily. He had been quiet so long his voice was rusty. He knew Nico was trying to help him. He felt three steps away from losing his sanity entirely. Nico held his hand tightly.

"Death," Nico said.

Jason was surprised that Nico would say such a thing. "You don't smell like death."

"You told me I do," Nico reminded him.

Uncomfortably, Percy listened to admissions from an intimate conversation that had taken place years ago.

"I was lying," Jason said. "Trying to hurt you. It all seems so pointless now."

"Well, it worked," Nico said, dropping Jason's hand. "I'll never forget how you made me feel that day, not if I live billions of years."

Jason hung his head and was silent. Percy watched the two broken lovers fall apart all over again. At least, if Annabeth and he were torn apart, they'd never done it to themselves. Their love had always been sure, even when Percy's eyes had strayed. Percy couldn't make himself let go of Nico's hand, even though he knew he should. He settled for stroking Jason's back until Jason turned and walked out of the altar. He and Nico followed silently, still holding hands.

Jason entered his altar and felt like he was being crushed. His father's denial of him. Nico's admission. He was holding his breath, but it didn't matter since he didn't need to breathe. He ventured to the corner and looked at the wolf statue. It was a gift from the goddess Lupa, who'd raised him, more than anyone else. Jason touched the statue's muzzle. The feeling of the granite wolf beneath his fingers was comforting.

He turned away from the statue when Nico's breath ghosted against his neck. Nico's eyes were black and bottomless. Jason had always loved staring at them. When they'd been lovers, when sex had taken them and they were completely wrapped up in each other's bodies, Jason would sometimes find himself sinking into those eyes, even as he sank into Nico's body. He had felt like he was being
swallowed whole by Nico, body and soul. It was scary and so powerful. Jason had known, then, swallowed and consumed, that he loved Nico unlike anything he’d ever feel again. And still, he’d let him go. Forced him away. Now here Nico stood, beautiful and timeless, staring at Jason with those eyes. Jason moved slowly, kissed Nico's lips. He was surprised Nico let him. Near the end of the kiss, which was little more than a tender memory, he opened his eyes and saw that Nico was still looking at him. Jason wanted to shake Nico, to slap him, to hold him down and make him scream, just so he could know his lover was still in there.

"C'mon, Jason," Percy interrupted. "Let's make Nico build us a house."
Breaking the Waves

The quest had gone fine. There were a few more difficult cyclopes, but Nico had taken out all but one by the time Clarisse got too anxious and tired of waiting. So when she dropped an ax from the rooftop where she and Jason were stationed, waiting for Nico, and the cyclops's gun discharged right as the ax hit him, Nico had already disappeared in his shadows. Thankfully, no mortals had been hurt, either.

They'd made it back to camp a week ago, and now Jason had to do something that worried him much more than a band of cyclopes. He had to break up with his girlfriend.

"Is this the right spot?" Nico asked as their feet hit concrete.

Jason tried to clear the fog from his head and look around. Shadow travel left him breathless. Half a block away, he could see Piper's brownstone. He nodded, then turned and vomited in an alleyway. When he straightened, Nico was holding a water bottle and a toothbrush.

"How did you...?"

"You're a little predictable, Jason Grace," Nico smirked. "Besides, remember last time?"

Jason rolled his eyes. Last time they had shadow traveled, he'd puked on Nico's boots. Nico was so mad he didn't talk to Jason for a week afterward. Jason took the water and toothbrush and made his mouth presentable again. He grabbed for Nico and pulled him into a tight hug. Nico allowed a small, tongueless kiss, but pulled back when Jason pressed for more.

"Get this over with so we can go back to camp and you can rinse your mouth thoroughly. Then I'll kiss you as much as you want," Nico said.

Jason laughed. "As much as I want? Are you sure about that?"

Nico seemed to reconsider. "As much as you want until I get sick of it, how's that?"

Jason dropped his head and pulled Nico up against him until the younger boy stood on Jason's toes. He whispered in Nico's ear. "You haven't gotten sick of anything yet."

Nico squirmed as Jason latched onto his neck and sucked a hickey where it would be safely hidden under Nico's mounds of hair.

"Go," Nico ordered, pushing Jason back. He was smiling, but his eyes betrayed the faintest hint of anxiety. "Do it and come back to me, please?"

Jason nodded and stepped away.

He was so head over heels for Nico. He wasn't sure how it could happen in such a short time, but he was sure of how he felt. He wasn't looking forward to breaking up with Piper, though. She was a good person and someone he'd like to have as a friend. Hopefully, he could break things off in a positive way and get back to Nico without creating too many hard feelings.

Too soon, he was standing on Piper's stoop. He hesitated momentarily and glanced back at Nico. From half a block away, Jason couldn't make out Nico's expression, but he recognized the tense, stooped posture Nico adopted when he wanted to run away but didn't have anywhere to go. Jason turned and rang the bell.
Feet thudded down a flight of stairs. The sound of steps grew louder, and the door was flung open to reveal a slightly disheveled Percy Jackson.

"Jason! Hey, bro, what'cha doin' here?" Percy asked. He was eating blue M&Ms, and his mouth was full.

"I came to see Piper," Jason said. "Is she around?"

"Yeah, her and the girls are having a pow-wow in her room," Percy said after swallowing down the candy. Jason did not have a good feeling about the girls having a meeting at the same time he happened to be coming over. Percy continued, oblivious to Jason's discomfort. "How'd you get here, dude? Did you bring Tempest or something or..."

Percy trailed off and picked right up again before Jason could answer.

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Don't BS me, Grace. Nico. I know he's here. I can feel his stupid fear aura." Percy was scanning the street, and Jason could see the exact second his eyes settled on Nico. Jason watched Percy grin slightly then school his features into a determined fake-friendly mask. "Girls are up the stairs, first door on the right, Jason. See yourself in."

And then Percy was gone, walking quickly down the street toward Nico. Jason watched for a minute and saw Nico's posture morph into something different, false and defiant, when Percy got within twenty feet. Jason shook his head and entered the house. He wished they could sort each other out and quit acting so weird together. Nico was awkward enough on his own without adding an awkward Percy to the mix.

Thoughts of Nico and Percy faded quickly as Jason closed the door behind him and made his way down the light marble tiled entry toward the stairs. He'd been here before, to help Piper move in, so he didn't need Percy's directions. The place looked pretty much the same. Marble entry, wide wood stairs ascending on the left, a dark hallway with large pieces of Rachel's art hung on the walls. Piper's door.

Jason took a deep breath and knocked. The door opened, and it was Annabeth staring him down. Her eyes looked angry, and she didn't seem surprised to see him.

"Grace." She said it like she was reading his name off for an execution, but she let him into the room.

Rachel and Piper were sitting on Piper's big bed, the soft green comforter curled around them. Piper looked like she'd been crying. Rachel was patting her back, but she looked at Jason sympathetically.

"Annabeth, Rachel," Jason greeted the other girls. Annabeth was moving behind him, and Jason felt like he was in a battle and needed to turn to protect his rear. "Could I, um, talk to Piper alone for a bit?"

Annabeth grunted while Rachel nodded and moved off the bed.

"We'll be downstairs if you need us, Piper," Annabeth said, and she and Rachel left the room.

Piper's room looked a lot different than it had when Jason had helped her move in. It looked like she lived here now. All her things were unpacked, of course, and taking up comfortable space. Jason saw that she'd hung her enormous movie poster collection (gifts over the years from her dad) and
was glad that she had this room and space to spread out. It was so much more homey than the
Aphrodite cabin. He wondered what she'd do when the school year was over and Annabeth and
Rachel were ready to move on to college. Somehow, he'd never asked.

"Jay?"

Jason walked over to Piper's old white desk and sat on the chair in front of it. Piper hadn't moved
from the bed.

"Hey, Pipes, how's it going?"

"Who is she?"

"What?" Jason didn't understand what Piper was asking, but he felt like Piper knew something he
hadn't realized she'd know.

"The girl you're in love with?" Piper asked, and her eyes filled with tears again. "I've felt your heart
growing more detached from me, more attached to someone else."

Jason gasped. "Did Clarisse tell you?"

"You're in love with Clarisse?" Piper looked more confused than Jason felt. He managed a laugh as
a mental picture of him and Clarisse floated into his head.

"Gods, no." Jason chuckled again, and he was relieved when Piper laughed a little, too.

"But there is someone, isn't there, Jason?" she asked, and Jason ached for the melancholy in her
voice.

"I'm sorry, Piper," he said. "I didn't plan it. It happened recently, but I love him."

"Him?" Piper asked incredulously.

Jason wasn't sure why she was so surprised. He had told her he found boys as interesting as girls.

"But there weren't any guys who caught your eye," Piper said, almost to herself. "Unless you
finally...Damn. It's Nico, isn't it?"

"I...yeah, it is," Jason admitted. "How did you know? What did you mean when you said 'unless you
finally'?"

Piper sighed and clasped her hands together on top of the comforter. "It was pretty obvious when I
came to camp over the winter break that you were going to fall in love with Nico eventually. The
only question was how long it would take you to realize it."

Jason blinked rapidly. Piper had known? "Why didn't you say something?"

"What would I say? 'Hey, Jay, I know you're happy with me and this may never even come up, but
you're going to fall in love with a guy who'll bring you nothing but heartache? I'll go ahead and step
out of the way now?" Piper's voice was bitter, but she smiled at Jason from the bed. "I didn't want to
give you up until I had to, Jason."

"What do you mean about bringing me heartache? Nico makes me happy in a way I've never been
before." Jason cringed as soon as the words were out of his mouth. "I'm sorry, I...you made me
happy, too, Piper."
"But it's different, right?" Piper said waspishly, and Jason could only nod. "Yeah, well, enjoy it while it lasts."

"Are you saying we won't last?"

Piper laughed. "No, bastard. Your love will probably last for all eternity. That doesn't mean it'll make either one of you happy."

She rose and crouched in front of Jason. His head was reeling, trying to keep up with all Piper was telling him. She'd known he'd love Nico. She was also saying he'd love the son of Hades forever. And that it wouldn't make them happy in the end.

"Look, in all the world there aren't more star-crossed lovers than you and Nico," Piper continued. "Think about who your fathers are. There's no one Zeus hates more than Hades and no one Hades hates more than Zeus."

"We're not defined by our fathers, Piper," Jason said. He could feel his anger rising. Piper knew too well how much his dad's approval meant to him.

"Aren't you?" Piper scoffed. "Maybe he's not, but he's his father's son, more than you or Percy would ever be. And you, you'd do anything to get daddy to notice you. Do you really think Zeus and Hera are going to be pleased when they find out you're dating their despised brother's son? What will you do, Jay, when they tell you to break things off?"

Jason pushed the chair away from Piper and stood. He didn't need to hear about how he craved his father's attention. He didn't want to think about how Zeus and Hera would react to him being in love with Nico. "I'm leaving. I hope we can be friends."

"Sure, Jay," Piper said. She stood, too, and gave him a gentle hug. "I know it sounds like I'm being hard on you right now, but I do care about your well-being. Plus, I'm getting dumped here."

"I'm sorry, Pipes," Jason said again, and he meant it. He released her and walked to the door.

"Oh, Jason, one thing," Piper said. "Could you guys not make it obvious? I kind of want some time to myself to tell people about us breaking up. Maybe wait until I come for summer to start carrying on in public?"

Jason considered the request. "I'll talk to Nico. I think it'll be fine. He's not a fan of PDAs anyway."

Piper smiled sadly, and Jason left her.

* * *

Percy made his way down the block toward Nico. He was getting the interaction right this time, damn it all. Nico looked at him apprehensively as he approached, and Percy watched Nico's tiny, stooped frame expand as he stood up to his full (still small) height. Nico acted like he was about to head into battle, except he was slightly less happy. Great. Percy half expected his little cousin to draw his sword.
"Nico!" Percy exclaimed when he'd come within ten feet. Nico was wearing his usual battered and frayed black jeans. His dumb skeleton t-shirt and combat boots were just as worn out. His skull ring reflected the sunlight. The circles under his eyes seemed slightly less pronounced, and his overgrown hair seemed like it might have been combed sometime in the past couple weeks. At any rate, he looked like the nightmare of every father with a young teen girl. Percy held out his arms. "Can I have a hug from the guy who's been blowing me off every time I try to talk to him?"

_Bad start, Percy_, he thought.

Like he'd expected, Nico bristled. His baby-pink lips curled up in a sneer. "Asks the guy who blew off my birthday party then didn't call like he said he would. Hug yourself."

"Ouch. The mighty son of Hades has mortally wounded me," Percy deadpanned. "How ever will I recover? Oh, that's right, I'll hug myself."

He turned his back to Nico and wrapped his arms around his chest, pressing his hands up and down his back. He kept it up long enough for people passing on the street to stop and stare at him like he was some performance artist. For all Percy knew, Nico might have given up on Jason and shadow traveled away to escape the embarrassment.

After what felt like ages, Nico spoke. "You're such an idiot. Are you going to stay twelve years old forever?"

Percy wheeled around and caught the faintest glint of a smile on Nico's face before it tightened back into a scowl. He shrugged and poked Nico's side. "You liked me better when I was twelve."

Nico rolled his eyes. "I didn't know you when you were twelve, Percy."

"Exactly. That's the only time you've ever liked me," Percy grinned into the statement, but his smile faded as he thought about what he'd said. It wasn't just the crush that laid between them. There would always be Bianca, too. They would never escape their shared pain. Gods, he was fucking this up so bad already.

"You know the thing about idiots, Percy?" Nico asked after they'd spent too long staring at each other. "It's hard to hate them because they can't help the way they act."

Percy smiled. He recognized Nico was forgiving him. Maybe not for everything, not ever that, but for the missed party and the absent phone call and the way he was making Nico feel shitty right now. Percy laid a hand on Nico's arm.

"Sit with me while you wait for Jason?" Percy asked. He dropped onto his butt against a red brick building, and Nico muttered a curse before sitting next to him. "So, how are you doing?"

"Fine."

Percy waited, but nothing else seemed to be coming. He huffed out a breath. "This is where you say 'how are you, Percy'?"

"This is stupid."

"That's not what you're supposed to say," Percy sing-songed.

"Fine. How are you Percy?" Nico parroted.

"I'm great, Nico. Thanks for asking!" Percy said with mock enthusiasm. "What've you been up to?"
"Nothing."

Percy waited a beat, then threw his hands in the air.

"Gods, Nico, come on!"

Nico dropped his head onto his knees and said, "what've you been up to, Percy?"

"The usual. Dates with Annabeth, homework. Ooh, I got a C+ on my chem quiz last week!"

Nico raised his eyebrows and nodded his head.

"You don't have any idea what I'm talking about do you?" Percy asked, and Nico shook his head. "This is why you should have come to school with me. Gods, you suck at this."

"I don't want to have this fight again," Nico said in a bored tone. "And I'm not some chimp you need to socialize."

"You need friends."

"I have Jason."

"Fuck Jason, Nico."

Nico's cheeks colored, and Percy plowed on.

"Pardon my language, but you need more than one friend. If you'd come to school, you could have lots of friends. I know it."

"You mean, if I went to a place that didn't know anything about me?" Nico asked.

"Yeah."


"Damn it, Nico, why do you make it so hard for me to talk to you? I'm just trying to look out for you. I'm just trying to look out for you." Percy was getting pissed. He hated fighting with Nico. It was frustrating to feel like he was arguing with someone smarter than him. At least with Annabeth, they were usually fighting about the same subject. With Nico, he wasn't ever sure they were arguing about the same things. Had they ever been friends? Real friends? Had they ever talked without arguing? Gods, Nico was frustrating.

"I don't want you to look out for me," Nico grumbled. His black hole eyes darkened. "I never wanted you to look out for me, Percy. If you want to be my friend try acting like one instead of this awful fake big brother slash scientific researcher garbage. Just be my friend."

Percy pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, imitating Nico's posture. They stared at each other again, their ears resting on their knees, while the world went on around them. Car horns blared. People talked on their phones. Occasionally, Nico's and Percy's elbows would touch.

"I want to be your friend," Percy breathed.

Nico nodded and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked calmer and more in control. "I had a nice birthday party. Jason, Clarisse, and Will were there. I don't like being around too many people at once. It would have been nice if you could have made it, but I understand, you know, that it slipped your mind. Where were you that night?"
"I'd gone to the movies with Annabeth," Percy said, giving Nico a weak smile. "My mom said Jules-Albert got to the apartment like ten minutes after I left, but she didn't have any way to contact me. Annabeth had forgotten to charge her phone so my mom couldn't even call her."

"I bet your mom loved that, Jules being there. Tell her I'm sorry," Nico said.

"He stayed until I got home, too" Percy laughed at the memory. "The next day, my mom made me spend four hours cleaning the chair he sat in as punishment for being such a jerk to you."

Nico chuckled. "I'll have to send him over more often."

"You won't," Percy said. "I still can't believe Clarisse is your friend, man. That's weird, right?"

"She says she's 'babysitting;' but she won't let me be. We went on this quest, and she actually stole my tent and then made me sleep in it with her."

Percy threw back his head and laughed at the sky. "Oh, gods, I bet that was a fun trip. Does she snore?"

"Mhm," Nico admitted. "But it wouldn't have gotten any better, because Jason was our third and he snores, too."

"I remember from back on the Argo," Percy said. "Did you get any sleep at all? Or did Clarisse rock you to sleep like her little chimp baby?"

Percy made ape-like noises until Nico shoved him over.

When Percy righted himself, he asked, "how's Will?"

"Fine, I guess," Nico said. "We broke up a couple weeks ago."

"Oh, man, that sucks. I'm sorry. You okay?"

"Who says Will broke up with me?" Nico asked, looking offended.

"You dumped him? Why?"

Nico shrugged. "There wasn't anything real between us."

"How do you know unless you give it time to develop?" Percy asked. "Besides, sometimes it's nice to have someone to be with, even if they aren't the one, you know?"

"Who says I'm not with anyone?"

"Zeus almighty, Nico!" Percy squealed. "You move fast! Who?"

Nico gave Percy an exceptional poker face. "I didn't say I was with someone, either. You should stop making assumptions."

"And you should stop being a cryptic ass."

Percy expected Nico to be angry, but instead Nico laid his head back on the bricks, unwrapped his arms from his knees, and laughed. Percy did the same, covering Nico's hand on the concrete with his own and laughing until he didn't have any air left to spare. When he was finished, he pulled Nico's hand up onto his own knee and played with the skull ring Nico always wore, all the while poking at the little crescents at the base of each of Nico's nails.
"You have big hands for such a small kid," Percy said. It was nice, being allowed to touh Nico. "I bet you grow into them."

"My dad's tall," Nico said quietly.

"How is Uncle Hades?"


"Dunno," Percy said, his laugh instantly vanishing. "Never see him."

"Sorry."

"It's okay." Percy mostly meant it. "You're the only one that has a close relationship with your dad, you know? Could be worse. Things could be like they are with Jason and his dad."

Percy sometimes was jealous of Jason. Jason was so good. He had Nico's friendship. Everything seemed to come easy to him. But he didn't envy Jason's relationship with his dad. The only time they had ever met, Zeus had basically threatened Jason, just for speaking freely. Poseidon would never do that to Percy. Hades might threaten Nico, but he also loved him. Hell, he even allowed Nico to live with him sometimes.

"Zeus kind of hates us, me and you," Nico confided, like this was some big secret. He was looking at Percy for the first time since Percy had taken his hand. Percy knew he was sort of on thin ice, holding Nico's hand. It was neither fair to Nico nor entirely clear to Percy what he was doing, but he wasn't ready to let go. Nico looked away, and Percy went back to tracing the lines of Nico's knuckles. "What are you doing this summer?"

"Camp, I guess. We'll head to New Rome for college in late August."

Nico nodded and grunted. Percy realized he hadn't followed his own socialization rules.

"What about you? Are you staying at Camp Half-Blood this summer?"

"I don't know," Nico said. "I should probably go visit Hazel sometime. If I go during the school year she'll be as bad as you about trying to get me to go to school."

"That's because you should go to school!" Percy cried triumphantly. "Your whole life is going to be ruined because you don't know Darwin's theory of relativity."

"It was Einstein's theory," Nico said smugly. "And I've talked to both him and Darwin."

"Show-off."

"I can't help it that I've achieved a vastly superior education."

Percy nudged Nico's shoulder, and they both laughed.

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"Dunno," Percy said, his laugh instantly vanishing. "Never see him."

"Sorry."

"It's okay." Percy mostly meant it. "You're the only one that has a close relationship with your dad, you know? Could be worse. Things could be like they are with Jason and his dad."

Percy sometimes was jealous of Jason. Jason was so good. He had Nico's friendship. Everything seemed to come easy to him. But he didn't envy Jason's relationship with his dad. The only time they had ever met, Zeus had basically threatened Jason, just for speaking freely. Poseidon would never do that to Percy. Hades might threaten Nico, but he also loved him. Hell, he even allowed Nico to live with him sometimes.

"Zeus kind of hates us, me and you," Nico confided, like this was some big secret. He was looking at Percy for the first time since Percy had taken his hand. Percy knew he was sort of on thin ice, holding Nico's hand. It was neither fair to Nico nor entirely clear to Percy what he was doing, but he wasn't ready to let go. Nico looked away, and Percy went back to tracing the lines of Nico's knuckles. "What are you doing this summer?"

"Camp, I guess. We'll head to New Rome for college in late August."

Nico nodded and grunted. Percy realized he hadn't followed his own socialization rules.

"What about you? Are you staying at Camp Half-Blood this summer?"

"I don't know," Nico said. "I should probably go visit Hazel sometime. If I go during the school year she'll be as bad as you about trying to get me to go to school."

"That's because you should go to school!" Percy cried triumphantly. "Your whole life is going to be ruined because you don't know Darwin's theory of relativity."

"It was Einstein's theory," Nico said smugly. "And I've talked to both him and Darwin."

"Show-off."

"I can't help it that I've achieved a vastly superior education."

Percy nudged Nico's shoulder, and they both laughed.
Nico felt strange, sitting against the wall with Percy, talking and holding hands. This was the first time Percy had made an authentic effort to befriend him, and Nico wasn't sure how to handle it. On the one hand, he was nervous. This was Percy, of all people, the guy he'd fought with and said terrible things to and who'd disappointed him, and yeah, the guy he'd disappointed and hurt, too. Their past was so jagged, it was hard to imagine that they could be friends. On the other hand, this was Percy, his cousin, his crush, his hero.

Percy was still pressing Nico's hand into his knee. He'd run his fingers over Nico's nails and knuckles, and now he was tracing the bones of Nico's hand, slowly and methodically, as though he was trying to map and memorize them. It was incredibly flattering that Percy was paying this much attention to him – flattering and unnerving, all at once.

Nico was saved from trying to figure out some rationale for Percy's behavior when he saw Jason walking steadily toward them, looking troubled. Jason hadn't spotted them yet, but Nico was pretty sure he wouldn't be thrilled to see them holding hands. Nico tried to move his hand away from Percy and stand, but Percy gripped his hand tighter and slid his fingers between Nico's. Now Nico was standing and holding Percy's hand, making the contact obvious, even to Jason, who was still some distance away. Nico saw Jason's steps stutter and a scowl light his face when he saw the position Nico had gotten himself in.

"Percy, let me go."

He must have looked anxious, because Percy stood, way too close, but didn't let go of his hand. In fact, he squeezed tighter.

"Why, Nico? Are you embarrassed because of Jason? He's your best friend, isn't he? He won't mind seeing you holding hands with a boy."

Oh, gods, Percy was oblivious.

"That's not it, Percy. Let me go." Nico jerked and wriggled his hand while Percy looked on bemused and hung on for dear life.

Jason reached them, and his scowl looked even worse up close.

"Hey, Jace," Percy said happily. "Short visit, man. You must have been really hard up."

"Do you have to be so crass, Percy?" Nico asked.

"Let's go, Nico," Jason said, ignoring Percy.

"Wait a minute," Percy said. "I'm not done talking to my friend Nico."

Nico groaned, and Jason's eyes flashed down to Percy's and Nico's intertwined fingers. Jason took Nico's other hand.

"He's done talking to you, Jackson. Let's go, Nico," Jason choked out through gritted teeth. He pulled on Nico's hand, and Percy pulled back the other way.

"I don't think he is, Grace," Percy said. "Besides, shouldn't Nico decide when he's done? What's it to you, anyway?"

Jason glared at Percy. "Why are you holding his hand?"
Nico would have hit his head against the wall if it wasn't brick. This whole conversation was both maddening and pointless. Nico had just become the latest prize in Percy's and Jason's never-ending "friendly" competition. If he could get his hands free he could shadow travel away right now, and neither Percy nor Jason would notice.

"Why don't you two hold hands, too, and we'll play Ring Around the Rosie?" Nico hissed. "That would be fun, since you're both acting like spoiled six year olds."

Jason and Percy looked down at Nico. Jason grimaced and dropped Nico's hand. A few beats later, Percy did the same. They both mumbled some version of "sorry, Nico."

Nico turned toward Jason, who was running his hand through the top of his hair and pointedly not looking at either of his companions. "I was having a nice time talking to Percy, but if you're ready to go then we'll go."

Jason looked back and forth between Percy and Nico before he schooled his face into a calm mask and leaned against the bricks. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, which made his biceps tense. "It's fine. Finish your conversation. I'll wait, Neeks."

Nico wanted to reach out to touch Jason, to reassure him that holding Percy's hand had been completely innocent, at least on his part and surely on Percy's, too, but doing so might give away the nature of the relationship between himself and Jason, and Nico wasn't quite certain where they stood. For all he knew, Jason had gone in there and Piper had talked him out of breaking up with her. Jason wouldn't do that, though. He'd told Nico he was done with Piper, and Jason always kept his word.

"So, uh, Nico, we're going to the beach, I think, for spring break," Percy said. "You wanna come with?"

"The ocean?" Nico asked. He let his attention return to Percy.

"Where else?"

"Pass."

"Geez, Neeks," Percy said. "You shot me down immediately. That sucks."

Jason snorted, and Nico ignored him.

"Your dad would kill me if I stepped foot in the ocean, Perce."

"No, he wouldn't! He likes you," Percy said. "I think."

Nico laughed.

"You have no idea how your dad feels about me, do you?"

"No, but--"

"How much does my dad like you?" Nico asked.

"Um, not at all, but--"

"And Jason's dad already tried to kill me once, and he'd kill you, too, if you ever got in the air, right?"

"Yeah, but--"
"Not going."

Percy hung his head. Almost immediately, he raised his head and regarded Jason like the son of Jupiter was his ticket to success.

"You're being a worrywart, Nico," Percy said happily. "Jason's going. He's not going to pass up the chance to see hot girls on the beach just because my dad might try to kill him. Tell him, Jason."

Jason rolled his eyes. "He's gay, Percy, he doesn't care about hot girls, and neither do I. I'm not going, either."

"But, Piper said--"

"Piper didn't ask me. If she had, I would have said no." Jason stared fiercely at Percy for a moment before glaring at his own feet.

"Face it, Percy," Nico said. "It's not happening, at least not for me and Jace."

Percy made a pouty face and clasped his hands in front of his chest. He batted his eyelashes.

"Your sad puppy eyes have no effect on me," Nico said.

Percy looked at Nico for a few seconds before he sighed and dropped the act. "I would have enjoyed your company. Now it's gonna be me and a bunch of girls."

"Oh, you'll love that, Percy," Jason said, managing a small grin.

Percy raised an eyebrow. "Now that you mention it, I do like that kind of attention. If you were there, Nico, they'd all be oohing over the cute, sulky baby and trying to force feed you. Never mind. I don't want you to come anyway."

"Perfect." Nico was sure Percy's version of what would happen if Nico came was far from the truth. The girls would probably ignore him. And he had no idea what to do with the knowledge that Percy had called him cute. He decided to ignore it.

"I guess I won't see you again until summer, then," Percy said.

"Guess not, Perce," Nico agreed. "Jason and I should get back to camp."

"That's it?" Percy asked.

Nico was puzzled. What more was there to say? "Is there something else I'm supposed to say, Mr. Social Scientist?"

"Tell me you'll miss me."

Nico threw back his head in exasperation. "Gods, Percy, really?"

"Just do it so we can leave, Nico." Jason had stopped leaning against the building and had moved closer to the conversation. Nico could tell Jason desperately wanted to get back to camp. He hoped everything had gone alright with Piper.

Nico made false noises of disgust. He selected his most grumpy voice. "I'll miss you, Percy."

Percy surged forward and hugged Nico so tightly that he almost pushed the air out of Nico's lungs. Worse, Percy picked Nico up off the ground, so Nico was completely at the son of Poseidon's
mercy. Nico tried to reach his toes to the ground, but Percy chuckled and arched his back slightly, pulling Nico too far away to get any sort of traction.

"I'll miss you, too, Nico." Percy turned so Nico's back was to Jason and nuzzled his face in Nico's hair. "Mmm, you're cuddly. I could do this all day."

"Put me down," Nico huffed.

"It's pissing Jason off," Percy whispered. Nico was mortified when Percy's hands started moving all over his back. "Why doesn't he like me touching you, Nico?"

"Gee, I don't know," Nico growled in Percy's ear. "Maybe because, for some reason that is a complete mystery to me right now, I had a crush on your dumb butt, and Jason, nice guy that he is, recognizes how horrified I am by what you're doing to me?"

"Aw, shit, damn it, fuck." Percy set Nico back on the ground and loosened his hold but didn't let go. "I forgot, Nico. I'm so sorry. Gods, I screw up everything I do with you. Fuck. Just when I think I'm getting it right."

Nico could hear the real frustration in Percy's voice. He relaxed his shoulders and raised his arms to give Percy a quick, awkward hug before pulling away. Percy looked at him with what Nico guessed was hope. Nico waved to Percy as he walked toward a shadow. Jason followed close behind.

"It's a start, Perce," Nico said softly, and Percy nodded his head. "I will miss you."

"Miss you, too," Percy replied.

Jason grabbed Nico's hand, and they melted into the shadows.
Nico turned out to be quite proficient at building a home. The walls rose easily from the sand and solidified into domes the way Nico had shown Jason earlier. With a rumble, the first dome that Nico built rose around the three companions. Nico wasn't sure how much he could do, so he made this dome rather large, twenty feet in diameter, with a high ceiling and a hole at the top to let in a little light. He was surprised, when the dome was secure and he'd melded the sand into rock, that he didn't feel more tired. He didn't feel tired at all, actually.

"That's great, Nico," Percy said, patting his friend on the back. "What about doors and windows?"

Nico turned and looked at Percy with his unnervingly emotionless eyes. Percy remembered when they'd been so full of life. "Why do we need doors and windows?"

"Because, we need to be able to..." Percy trailed off when he saw Nico's smile. "Smartass."

"Jason, go stand by a wall for me, please," Nico said.

Jason cautiously walked to a wall and stood still. He didn't make eye contact with either of his companions. He hadn't, not since the altars had appeared and Nico had made that horrible confession. What does one say after the only person he's ever loved confirms his worst fears? Jason had ruined Nico. He'd done it with a few careless words. Started the ruin, at least. Jason wasn't naive enough to believe that one moment had sent Nico drifting and lost. No. He'd filled Nico's last years with moments like that.

He jumped when the dome began shaking around him. It reminded him too much of their last day of freedom. He hurried over near Nico, whose brow was furrowed in concentration. A section of the dome lowered back into the sand. They now had a doorway. Percy walked through it and came back in.

"Nice work, Neeks," he said.

"Good. Percy, go stand over by the wall this way." Nico gestured to the left of the doorway.

Percy did as instructed, standing about one quarter of the dome's circumference away from the first opening. Nico cut away another doorway, using Percy as a guide to make sure the space was the right height. Both he and Jason were taller than Percy, but Nico had noticed the way Jason was upset by the rumbling when he'd stood by the first doorway.

Nico grabbed Jason's hand and pulled him through the newly created hole in the wall. When Percy didn't immediately follow, Nico went back in the dome and pulled Percy out, too.

"What are you doing, Nico?" Percy asked.

"I'm going to try to make a second room," Nico said, "but I want you guys out here in case I do something that makes the first room collapse."

This was easier for Percy, this working toward something. He felt less like he needed to be angry. Nico was taking care of things, at least. He and Jason were standing there, doing nothing, but there wasn't much they could do.

Nico started to raise another dome, and Jason moved so close to him that Nico could feel Jason's breath on his neck. The second dome came up much more quickly than the first. Nico was beginning
to understand better how to shape and harden the sand. There was already a window built into this one, and the structure was pressed seamlessly against the first dome, making an overlapping wall. This room wasn't as big, as Nico intended it to be a bedroom. It was approximately fifteen feet in diameter, big enough for a large bed and a dresser. There was no point in making separate bedrooms for everyone since they were stuck sleeping together for the time being, but Nico could add on to this first structure as time wore on. He thought they might find they each needed a separate space, but since he had no idea how to make doors to give anyone privacy, that would have to wait.

"Hermes said we should be able to conjure a couch and a bed," Nico reminded the others. "Let's go back in the main room and try a couch first."

Percy grunted his assent and walked away. Nico followed until he realized that Jason was lagging behind. He went back and tugged on Jason's hand, but Jason didn't move. It seemed like Jason's feet were encased in cement instead of sand.

"Jason?" Nico asked. He couldn't ask if Jason was okay, because he wasn't. None of them were. Nico brushed Jason's cheek with the back of his hand. Jason finally looked down at Nico and let out a shaky breath.

"I'm sorry. For what I said to you that day, and for all the other days I lied to and manipulated you," Jason said. "I'd give anything to take it all back, but especially that first day. I hate myself for what I did to you."

Nico didn't say anything, but Jason could see something moving in his eyes, some emotion.

"If we could only have one or the other, all of it or none of it, what would you choose?" Nico whispered. Before Jason could answer, Nico clamped a hand over his mouth. "Don't answer. I don't want to know."

Jason pulled Nico's hand away. "I'd be the same selfish bastard I've always been, Nico di Angelo."

Nico nodded. This time when Jason looked at Nico, he could see one very clear emotion in those eyes.

"Me, too," Nico said, and this time, when he pulled Jason toward the main room, Jason came willingly.

* * *

Nico had made building the house look easy. The young gods expected conjuring a sofa to be more of the same. This was not the case. Two hours later, all three men sat inside Nico's neat dome, concentrating. Nothing had shown up. Percy threw himself back on the newly hardened sandstone floor and moaned.

"Damn it, this sucks!" he yelled up at the hole in the roof.

"Maybe there's some trick to it that Hermes forgot to mention," Jason said. He leaned on the wall and used his shirt to wipe a few beads of sweat off his forehead.

"He was too busy undressing Nico with his eyes to remember everything," Percy bit out.
Nico turned and glared at him, and Percy did a bit of his own mental undressing. He'd seen Nico's body already, but he couldn't stop the way his eyes wandered. Nico slapped him.

"Snap out of it, asshole. It's not happening."

"What?" Percy said, massaging his face. "I wasn't doing anything."

"We've been through this. Ten years, Perce, I've known you," Nico said. "You can't pull shit over on me."

Percy was about to proclaim his innocence, so Nico faced him and called his bluff. Nico laid on his side with his knee bent upward and an arm stretched out so his wrist rested on his knee. His silky thin black t-shirt and tight, jet-black designer jeans clung to his long, muscular frame. Percy's mouth opened hungrily, and his face flushed red. Nico was immensely satisfied when Percy turned away from him.

Jason watched, both jealous and amused. It was obvious Percy wanted Nico. It had been obvious for many years. Jason understood Percy's current denial, though. After all, he'd lived it, too. Desiring their attractive male friend didn't fit with plans to marry the right girl and have the right number of children and live the right life. It didn't fit with pining over a life left behind, either.

At least Percy could say he'd made the best decisions for himself, most of the time, Jason thought. Percy was meant to marry Annabeth. Jason had never been meant to marry Piper. Supposed to, perhaps, but meant to, never. His destiny had always been meant for Nico.

Jason glanced at Nico laying provocatively on the floor he'd made and had to resist the urge to jump him right there with Percy looking on. Jason believed Nico would kill him, figuratively now, of course, and it would blow his chances of reconciliation with the son of Hades for a while, but the idea was tempting. Jason wanted to kiss him, rip his clothes off, fuck him into the ground. The feeling was so intense, so powerful.

In the blink of an eye, Nico's shirt was gone. He hadn't taken it off. He hadn't moved. He sat up and looked around warily for his shirt or some attacker, but there was nothing except himself and Percy and Jason in their little "home." Jason was stunned. He'd thought about taking Nico's clothes off, and now Nico was missing his shirt.

"How?" Nico asked, more to himself than anyone. He ran his hand down his now-bare torso, like his shirt might be hidden there somewhere.

Percy turned around and gaped at Nico's naked chest. "Ha! Serves you right, motherfucker. You shouldn't have made fun of me!"

Percy had no idea what was actually going on, but he was enjoying both the sight of Nico without a shirt and the confused look on his friend's face. It was clear to Percy that Nico himself hadn't taken off the shirt. Percy was fairly certain he hadn't done it. He wondered if Jason had.

"Whoa, Jason, couldn't wait for him to do it for you, huh?" Percy laughed. He sat up to get a better look at Nico.

Jason glared at him and looked apologetically at Nico. "I, um, I think I did it. I was...thinking...about you...like..."

"Shut up. I don't need a play by play," Nico grumbled. His black eyes glittered. "But if you can do that, you can get us a couch, see? It's the same thing."
Jason's face flushed. "I don't think I can want a couch the way I wanted--"

"Shut up again," Nico warned. "Try."

Jason closed his eyes, and Nico and Percy waited with bated breath. Jason's face was contorted in concentration for several long minutes. Nothing happened.

"Damn it, Jason!" Percy yelled. "You're not concentrating enough!"

"It's not about concentration, you idiot," Jason yelled back. "It's about wanting, desire."

Percy flopped onto the floor again and slapped Nico's thigh. "Make him want a fucking couch, Nico."

Nico slid his hands down his face and came to stand very close to Jason, though it was to Percy that he spoke. "I hate you, Percy. Even more when I think you're right about stuff."

Percy flipped Nico off.

Nico regarded Jason. Eventually, he tugged on the tall blond's shirt until Jason slid it over his head. The heavy, intricate tattoo on Jason's muscular shoulder distracted Nico momentarily. He fingered it lightly, traced the outline of the wings, then slipped his arms around Jason's neck and pressed his body against the son of Jupiter. Jason's breath caught in his throat, and he embraced Nico, sliding one hand up his spine and dipping the other lower until he firmly cupped Nico's ass. Nico looked up at him with those big black eyes.

"Listen to me, Jason." Nico tipped his head and dragged his lips delicately over Jason's neck as he spoke. "I want a large blue couch. It needs to be comfortable, deep and soft, and long enough that you can stretch all the way out on it. Once we have it, I want you to press me into the cushions. Lay me down and pin my body underneath yours so I can't move. Kiss me. Undress me. Hold us together and rub that big hard dick of yours against mine until we're both screaming into our orgasms and the cum drips over your hand and down along my stomach."

Nico glanced over and smiled to find a perfect blue couch, long and with soft-looking pillows and deep seats, sitting in the middle of the floor. He patted Jason's cheek. Percy was already sitting on the couch, rolling around on it like it was the most wonderful thing in the universe, and Nico started to walk over to check it out for himself. Jason roughly pulled him back and pressed him against a high wall of the dome.

"You did that little trick too well, Nico," Jason said, his voice thick and sexy. He pressed his hips hard into Nico's body, and Nico gasped at Jason's powerful erection. Jason at any time was imposing and intimidating, but Jason fully aroused was something else entirely. Nico found it intoxicating, and his body responded before his brain could scream at him to stop.

He pulled Jason's head forward and kissed him, forgoing any kind of gentleness and moving straight to gnashing teeth and hard, probing tongues. Jason moaned loudly and rolled his hips into Nico. His hands pinned Nico's upper arms to the wall, hard enough to bruise. He broke their kiss and bit at Nico's neck. Nico tilted his head to give Jason better access and caught sight of Percy staring at them in awe.

"Jason, stop," Nico said loudly, though Jason was too far gone to hear. Nico was almost too far gone to listen to himself. That had always been the way Jason could take him, so fast that objecting wasn't even an option. Jason bit him again and pleasure surged through Nico's body.

Jason barely registered Nico's knee slamming into his crotch. It wasn't a direct hit. Nico didn't want
to hurt him. It was just enough for Jason to loosen his hold on Nico’s arms. Nico quickly pulled his arms away and shoved Jason hard enough to send him several paces back. Both men were panting, their erections evident.

Percy wasn’t angry, sitting there watching. He was feeling something he wasn’t currently willing to admit to himself. He crossed his leg over his own erection and tried not to watch the way Nico moved, cat-like, deadly and sexy, as he slunk out of the house and disappeared from view.

Percy turned his eyes back toward Jason, who was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Jason picked up his shirt and put it on before he walked over and sat at the other end of the couch.

"Is it always like that for you two?" Percy asked.

Jason hummed and nodded his head.

"Even when you were kids?"

"Pretty much," Jason admitted. He laid his head on the back of the couch and closed his eyes. His body thrummed with the heat Nico generated. "We had to learn first, but always that passionate, yeah."

"Holy fuck," Percy whistled. "I see why you--"

"It's more than that, you jerk, but," Jason rolled his head toward Percy and smiled, "yeah, that part's not a bad perk."

"What'd he say to you?" Percy asked. "To get the couch? I could hear him talking, but I was kind of distracted and didn't listen to what he was saying."

"Not your business," Jason said smugly. "Enjoy the couch."

Percy shrugged and slid his hands over the seats. "Nice choice, Jace. Smooth and comfortable."

"He told me what he wanted," Jason said. "He just made me really want the same thing."

"Think he can make you really want some more furniture?"

Jason snorted. He closed his eyes and thought about how he'd take Nico on a coffee table. He imagined the way the table would look: square, a dark mahogany stain, how it'd be long enough that he could lay Nico's long torso across it and low enough that Jason wouldn't have to stretch from his knees to...

"Sweet!" Percy exclaimed. He put his feet up on the table and sunk further into the couch.

Jason made a mental image of their space, picturing furniture, sometimes with Percy's suggestions, and thought of all the ways and places he could be with Nico.

By the time Nico returned, slouching shirtless into the house, Jason had conjured a tv stand, two end tables, a soft purple rug, a dresser, and a huge bed with an imposing black headboard and red silk sheets. Nico looked around at the living area, mildly surprised. Once Jason had successfully made the couch, Nico had been confident his old lover could create more furniture, but he hadn't expected the blond to be so prolific. Nico shivered and set aside questions about what Jason may have been thinking to conjure all the items. He needed to tell Percy and Jason something.

"We have stuff at the altars."
The Good Days

Jason had awakened with two problems. Nico had taken care of the first problem for him -- truly, what he could do with his mouth was enough to inspire Jason's constant devotion, even if love had never entered the picture. Now, Jason was left with the second problem, a weird feeling of foreboding, as he watched Nico, red-lipped and happy, throw on clothes and get ready to leave.

"It's because Piper's coming for the summer today," Nico reasoned. "It's making you feel nervous. The breakup was smooth, but you're worried she might be a little bitter."

That was true. Jason was worried that Piper's arrival at camp might make him uncomfortable. He was sure he'd made the right choice, breaking up with her to be with Nico, but he did worry she would somehow make life at camp more difficult for them. They'd been keeping their relationship secret, as she'd requested, and Jason also felt strange about having the freedom to kiss and touch Nico in public soon, that is, if Nico would even let him. Nico was more worried about letting their relationship become known than Piper was, Jason sometimes thought.

"Yeah, that's probably it," Jason said from his perch on his bed. He was feeling lazy and hadn't moved to shower or put on clothes. "Are you sure you've got to go? You could stay longer, and I could return the favor."

Nico looked over from where he was rummaging in Jason's drawers for a clean shirt, and Jason tried to look as enticing as possible. He spread sideways on the bed, propped his head up in his hand, and bent his upper knee. Nico laughed, even as his black eyes grew wider.

"Are you trying to seduce me, Mr. Grace?"

"Only if it's working," Jason purred.

"Oh, it's working," Nico said, "but I promised Clarisse I'd help her down in the arena. Something about chariot races and birds. Now, stand up and come here."

Jason did as he was told and was slightly mollified to see that Nico hungrily watched every step of his approach. When Jason was close, Nico grabbed his hips and pulled their bodies tight together.

"You look like a god, Jason," Nico said. "You have to be the most stunning physical specimen ever to walk the earth."

Jason kissed Nico's neck, sucking and licking the tender skin, and Nico's hands traveled to squeeze Jason's butt. Too soon, Nico pushed Jason away and walked toward the front door of the cabin.

"I'll see you at lunch, Jace," Nico said, and Jason nodded.

Jason stood behind the looming statue of his father, staring at the front door, lost in thoughts of Nico and wondering if he would have to take yet another cold shower, when a voice interrupted his reverie.

"Jason, dear, do put on clothes. Your naked form is quite distracting in its beauty."

Jason jumped and whirled in the direction of the voice. Near his bed stood Hera, definitely in her Greek form, looking at him as though she was trying to decide what meat to buy at the grocery store. Jason hurried to throw on some clothes. When he returned, the goddess met his eyes.
"Better, darling, thank you," she said amiably. Her lovely brown hair was plaied down her back, and she was wearing a simple chiton. She looked beautiful and maternal. Jason knew better.

"What can I do for you, Lady Hera?" Jason asked warily.

"Dear, must you believe I only appear to you when I want something? You are my darling champion. My favorite." Hera regarded Jason with motherly disappointment.

"Forgive me, your highness," Jason tried again. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Insincere, Jason." Hera clucked her tongue and sighed. "I can hear that your opinion of my visit hasn't changed. Nonetheless, I come to offer you my counsel, nothing more."

Hera looked disdainfully around the cabin. It made Jason irrationally wish he'd done his dirty laundry or made his bed. Hera shouldn't affect him this way. He shouldn't care what she thought. After a few moments where Hera continued to examine the space, she shrugged and a sofa and chair appeared behind the Zeus statue.

The sofa was a soft bluish-gray with a high back and overstuffed cushions. The chair was a large blue and gray striped wingback, severe and cold. Unsurprisingly, Hera sat in the chair and gestured for Jason to take the couch. Jason welcomed the addition of furniture to his space, but he wasn't about to tell Hera that. Instead, he sank wordlessly onto the couch. It was incredibly comfortable, and Jason felt himself relax.

"I would like to talk to you about affairs of the heart, my dear," Hera began, and instantly Jason tensed again. "Now, now, you needn't react like the situation is so dire. I am the goddess of marriage, after all, and I do wish for your happiness."

"Why do I get the feeling that you and I may disagree about what will make me happy?" Jason asked.

Hera laughed, controlled and superior. "Perhaps because I have been alive thousands of years and have so much experience, and you are a sixteen year old boy with almost none? A sixteen year old boy, might I add, who had a perfectly lovely, charming girlfriend?"

"She was perfect for you, maybe," Jason grumbled. Hera arranging his love life by planting false memories of him in Piper's brain did not help his esteem of Hera or his feelings for Piper. "I didn't love her."

"Jason, love is overrated. I am asking you to think in the long term," Hera said briskly. "You are enjoying a little bit of freedom with that boy, but what will happen when your father finds out, hmm?"

What Jason wanted to say was "he'll probably wish he'd fucked Nico first," but he refrained. "He probably won't care, Hera. He's never shown that much interest in my life before. And my boyfriend has a name. He's Nico, and you know that."

Hera's eyes flashed, and Jason knew he'd hit a nerve. "The boy is of no consequence, Jason. He's not an Olympian, not part of the family, no matter how his father may have tried to insinuate himself back into our lives. And your father cares very much for you, dear. I care very much for you. I do not wish to see you cavorting about with someone so beneath you."

"He's not beneath me!" Jason managed to keep from shouting, but his anger was beginning to show. "He's more powerful than me or Percy, Lady, and he's more honorable, too."
"Jason, dear, is it the sex?" Hera asked sympathetically. "I can arrange for Piper to become more sexually pleasing to you."

"Oh, my gods, Hera!" Jason covered his face with his hands. "I cannot believe I'm having this conversation with you. Did you even listen to me? It has nothing to do with the sex. That's a side benefit. Oh, gods, I can't believe I'm saying that to you, of all people. I. Love. Him. He's interesting and worthwhile and funny and smart. He's powerful and good. Why wouldn't you want me to be happy?"

Jason knew he'd started rambling, and Hera's eyebrows had risen higher with each word he'd uttered. She did not look very happy with him.

"Love and happiness needn't go hand in hand, child," Hera scoffed. "Your love for the boy doesn't matter. He will only make you unhappy."

Jason gasped. That was almost exactly what Piper had said. Did they know something he didn't? He tried to reassure himself with what Rachel Dare had told him when she'd pulled him aside before he left Piper's the day they'd broken up. Rachel had seemed to know Jason would be tested.

"Happiness isn't the only emotion that's worthwhile, or worth fighting for," Jason argued. "He matters enough to me to fight for him."

"You are sixteen years old, Jason Grace," Hera said. "You have no idea what is best for you. You will do what I tell you! Break things off with the boy today and ask Piper to take you back. She will say yes, I am sure. Her love for you is strong."

"Why does her love matter, but mine doesn't?"

"Because her love is advantageous to your advancement, Jason. It's not the love that matters, it's what it can do for you." Hera's fingernails dug into the arms of her chair. "You are a petulant child. I am trying to care for your well-being."

"You're trying to control my life, just like always." Jason stood and walked around to the front of his father's statue. He glared up at the cold, dead marble eyes and tried to picture what his father would say. Probably the same thing as Hera, except not as nice.

"You are our golden boy, Jason," Hera said softly, walking over to stare at the statue with Jason. She rested her head on Jason's shoulder. "You've made me and your father so proud. We both love you and care for you. I'm trying to help you find what's best for you. Your life can be long and filled with good things. You need a mate who can help you in all ways. Love and sex are such small parts of the great man you will become, my love. Let me guide you."

Was his father really proud of him? He certainly wouldn't be when he realized Jason was with Nico. Hera's hand felt so soothing stroking across his shoulders, and Jason indulged in the fantasy that Hera was his birth mother and truly cared the way she claimed. He wanted that so much, for Hera to be a mother to him, for Zeus to be proud. Tentatively, he wrapped his arms around Hera. He was rewarded with a warm hug in return.

"There, there, dear," Hera whispered. "I care for you so much. Take your time and think things over. You needn't come to a decision today. You have always been such a good boy."

Jason couldn't help the tear that trickled down his cheek. "Thank you, my Lady."

Hera patted Jason's back and pulled away. She smiled at him as she began to glow. "I will be looking out for you, Jason."
Those birds had almost pecked Nico's eyes out. Clarisse owed him big time.

"Here, chew this and quit being such a whiny baby," she said gruffly, thrusting some ambrosia in Nico's hand. He was bleeding freely from several wounds along his stomach and chest, and though Clarisse swore there were no gouges on his back, Nico's hand had come away bloody when he'd tried to feel back there himself. At least Clarisse looked as bad as he did. She'd stripped down to her sports bra, and it was covered in blood. Both of her shoulders looked pecked to death. Neither of them had gotten hit in the face, though their arms were a mess.

"Thanks for almost getting me killed," Nico huffed as he chewed on the ambrosia. The track was filled with feathers and bird blood. Clarisse had thought the Stymphalian birds might be a fun reenactment of a chariot race that had occurred years earlier, apparently, but Nico was pretty sure this "trial run" had convinced her it was a bad idea. Pretty sure.

"You're good with the sword," Clarisse said, and Nico was caught off guard by the rare compliment. He instantly forgot his next complaint, which was probably exactly what Clarisse was going for. "Why don't you teach sword fighting? You're better than Sissypants any day."

"Jason's good, and he's more patient," Nico reminded her. "Plus, the other kids are scared of me."

"Maybe they wouldn't be if they could see what you can do," Clarisse said.

"I think if they knew what I could do they'd get more scared," Nico said. "Except freaky weirdos like you who are impressed by my ability to inflict carnage and destruction."

Clarisse laughed and clapped Nico heavily on the back. She hit about a dozen "nonexistent" injuries, and Nico winced. "Here, give me your shirt."

"What? No!"

"Yes. We need to go back to camp, and my shirt is ruined. Chiron told me I can't walk around in my bra anymore."

"My shirt'll be too small," Nico said.

"Fuck you. I don't care if it's tight," Clarisse barked. "Chris'll probably think it's hot."

Nico rolled his eyes and took off his shirt. He handed it to Clarisse. "Keep it."

They made their way back toward the cabins. Nico hoped he could poke into his cabin and get a shirt before he saw too many other campers. He wasn't in a hurry to have his scrawny body on public display. What he hoped even more was that Clarisse would change out of his shirt before anybody saw her and realized whose clothes she was wearing.

"I hear Percy and Annabeth are coming back today," Clarisse said idly.

"Yeah, so?"

"So, that means Piper's coming back, too, right?" Clarisse asked.
"Yeah. It'll be fine. Jason's not interested. We're good." Nico nodded, working on shooing the nagging doubts out of his head. Jason loved him. He'd said so himself. Piper wasn't a threat.

"Whatever you say, kid," Clarisse said. "For what it's worth, you're worth a billion Pipers and two billion Jasons."

"I already gave you my shirt, Clarisse. You're not getting my jeans, too."

Clarisse threw back her head and laughed. Nico smirked to himself. They walked on, talking about capture the flag and how baby Chuck was doing, and Nico got so engrossed in the conversation that he almost didn't see the commotion over near the dining pavilion. When he did, he made his way over, even though Clarisse did her best to pull him toward the cabins.

As usual, campers moved away from Nico, so he had an easy time making his way to the heart of the disturbance. There in the center were Percy and Annabeth, chatting with campers. Nico paid them no attention. Instead, he focused solely on Jason, who was holding Piper in his arms and spinning her around, her feet flying out from her. She was laughing and had laid her head on Jason's shoulder. Nico turned and started to walk away, but Percy must have spotted him.

"Nico! Hey, wait!"

Nico didn't mind being an antisocial jerk. It was how everyone thought of him anyway. But he'd always had a hard time saying no to Percy. He halted and turned reluctantly, though he didn't walk back to where the others stood. Percy came to him. Nico didn't even spare a glance in Jason's direction. His head pounded and red was slowly seeping into his vision.

"Hey, buddy, how's it going?" Percy asked. His smile lit up his face.

"Fine," Nico gritted out through clenched teeth.

"Wanna come hang with me and Annabeth? We were gonna--"

"I'm going to my cabin," Nico said. He turned to leave, but Percy caught his arm and jerked him back around.

"Quit being a dick," Percy said. "I just fucking got here and didn't do shit to you. Now, I'm trying to be your friend. Come hang out with me."

"I don't want to hang out with you and your girlfriend right now. Let me go." Nico yanked his arm away and turned around again. He'd gone three feet when Percy spoke.

"Why's Clarisse wearing your shirt, Nico?"

Damn.

He turned slowly and was horrified to see that the crowd that had centered around the new arrivals was now congregating around him and Percy. His cheeks flushed. At least Clarisse had continued on toward the cabins and wouldn't be here to "help."

"There were some birds. Her shirt got all torn up."

Jason had disentangled himself from Piper and made his way over. He rested his hand on Nico's shoulder. Nico shrugged him off without looking in his direction.

"I guess you've got a lot of blood all over you," Percy said suspiciously. Nico didn't know what his
problem was. It wasn't like there was anything going on between him and Clarisse. That idea was laughable. Even if there was, why should Percy care? Mostly, though, Nico wanted to get away from Jason and his perfect ex-girlfriend.

"Yeah, I do. Look, if it suits your highness, can I go get cleaned up now?"

Percy's face hardened, and he nodded. Nico gave a mocking bow and turned to leave, sending nosy campers scattering from his path. He shouldn't have been surprised that Jason walked with him.

"Do you need to go to the infirmary?" Jason asked.

Nico ignored him and sped up. Jason matched his pace. When Nico reached his cabin, he opened the door and tried to slam it in Jason's face, but Jason caught it with his foot and pushed his way in. Nico growled in frustration and went deeper into the dark, cool cabin, straight back to the bathroom, where he soaked a towel and began to dab at all the blood on his arms, chest, and stomach.

"What happened with the birds?" Jason asked. Nico still ignored him.

He didn't want to talk to Jason. Even as his rational mind told him that there was probably no more to Jason's actions than that of one old friend greeting another, he pushed the thoughts away. Jason probably hadn't greeted Percy, Annabeth, or Rachel like that. Nico's dabbing of the blood on his body grew more manic. Jason made a grab for the towel.

"Let me do it," Jason said softly.

"No."

"Are you mad at me?"

Nico barked out an empty laugh. "Why would you think that, Jason? Why don't you go back to your girlfriend and spin her around some more?"

Nico looked into the mirror and saw Jason's face. Jason didn't look angry, only mildly surprised, and that made Nico even more angry.

"Great thing that they're back, huh?" Nico continued. "You won't have to hang out with me anymore? You can go back to being everyone's golden boy?"

Jason recoiled as if he'd been slapped. Now his intense blue eyes burned with anger. Nico felt satisfied.

"You think this is some kind of joke to me?" Jason grimaced. "You want me to leave you?"

"It felt like a joke when you had Piper in your arms just now," Nico said. "And I don't want you to be with me because you have some sort of obligation -- because you screwed around with me when you didn't have anything better to do and now you're ready to be back with Piper but you're too honorable to break up with me."

Jason looked at Nico furiously for a full minute. Nico rinsed out the now-bloody towel and went back to work. Abruptly, Jason grabbed Nico's wrist and dragged him back to the main room of the cabin. He sat on the bed and tugged Nico between his legs before ripping the towel from Nico's hand and roughly cleaning his torso. Nico flinched.

"You're an idiot," Jason snarled. "How could you have so little faith in me? Hades, I gave her a hug. That's it. I want you. I'm in love with you."
Jason spun Nico so they were facing the same direction and began cleaning his back. He hadn't become gentler, either. If anything, the cleaning felt even harsher. Nico fought the urge to yank away when Jason pulled him down to sit on his leg.

"You know who came to see me after you left this morning? Hera." Jason chuckled angrily. "She wants me to stop seeing you. Told me I'm her stupid golden boy, like you just said, jackass. Said Piper's better for my life than you."

Nico had stopped breathing. He felt very small and vulnerable in the face of Jason's anger and Hera's manipulations. "I--"

"Do you know how hard that was? Having her act all maternal and tell me how disappointed she was I'd chosen you? How my dad would be so angry once he found out?" Jason asked. "She's right, of course. He'll be furious. Your dad, too. And I want a mom so much, Nico. I want Hera to be like a mother to me."

Jason pulled Nico off his lap and pushed him down on the bed. He started working on the buttons of Nico's fly. Nico propped himself up on his elbows and watched, completely silent and stunned.

"But I'd rather have you," Jason continued. "It isn't easy or perfect. I'll never be the golden boy this way, being with you. Hera and Piper both say our love won't make us happy. And I'd still rather have you. So don't you dare get pissy with me for hugging a friend ever again. Don't doubt my love."

Jason had undone the fly and reached down and unlaced Nico's boots. He ripped both of them off and threw them so hard they hit the wall on Hazel's side of the room. Jason was usually so neat and orderly, a product of his Roman upbringing. This was something new. He yanked on the legs of Nico's jeans, almost ripping them away. He threw them on the floor and shed his own shirt and jeans. He picked up the discarded towel and went to work cleaning the few scratches on Nico's legs.

"Now, I'm going to suck off my boyfriend, unless he thinks there's anyone in the universe I'd actually choose over him."

Jason lowered his head, but Nico grabbed the side of his face and pulled him up until their eyes were level.

"I'm sorry," Nico finally managed. His breathing was ragged, and he wasn't sure if it was from residual anger, pain, or arousal. "I'll never doubt your love again, I swear."

Jason nodded and pulled Nico into a passionate kiss before slowly lowering his mouth down Nico's body, dodging wounds and leaving slick wet bruises everywhere he touched.

* * *

Despite the bad start, the summer had gone pretty well. Piper was friendly toward Jason, but not flirtatious or clingy. Word had gotten out that they'd broken up, which made Nico happy. Nico and Jason continued to keep their relationship under wraps, partly because Nico didn't want to hurt Piper, but more because he didn't want to hurt Jason. Jason would never admit it, but he liked the reputation he had among the campers. They thought he was the perfect soldier and leader. He was an icon everyone else admired. If word got out he was dating Nico, sleeping with Nico, even, that reputation would be ruined, Nico was sure.
He'd seen it happen with Will. Instead of Nico's social status improving through his association with the kind and sunny doctor, Will had become the recipient of stares and whispers. He got picked less often to join teams. He was passed over for quests. Nico hadn't expected anyone's attitudes toward him to change, even with Reyna's warm hug and acceptance right after the war, but he hadn't expected to contaminate people's views of his boyfriend, either. So far, as friends, Jason's status seemed unaffected. Nico could keep things secret longer. Jason would go away to New Rome in a year, and as much as that made Nico sad, he also told himself that things would be better over there, both for Jason and himself, as he had no intention of staying at Camp Half-Blood once Jason left.

Jason had enjoyed the summer, too, Nico mused. He and Percy had always gotten along so well, and it was good for each to have the other around. Percy took some of the burden of leadership off Jason's shoulders and gave him an outlet for showing off and bragging. They loved to duel in the arena and fight for opposite teams on capture the flag. Nico secretly thought he was the most powerful of the sons of the Big Three, but he wasn't interested in showing off his power or boasting about his accomplishments, so he was glad Jason had Percy around to be his rival and bro.

As good as things had gone for Jason and Percy, Nico and Percy were another story. They'd been full of fits and starts, one moment pleasant enough, the next, fighting over trivial matters. Neither Nico nor Percy could let their arguments drop. Each had to get in the last word. No matter what started the argument, and Percy always seemed to be well-meaning in the things he did that irritated Nico, Nico would eventually have enough of Percy's pester and insult the son of Poseidon's intelligence. Then Percy would start calling Nico obnoxious names. Before they knew it, they'd both be screaming insults. They'd be pulled apart and not speak for days.

Now the summer was over, and Percy was heading away with Annabeth to college in New Rome. Nico felt bad and wanted to make amends, but he wasn't sure how.

A stirring next to him dragged him out of his own head. Jason wriggled around until he threw his arm over Nico's middle and pulled him close. Jason was adorable in the morning, or late afternoon, or whenever it was that they woke. They'd started having full-blown, penetrative sex just over a week ago, and that activity, or mainly how often they were engaging in that activity, had totally messed up their sleep/wake schedule. Nico couldn't even begin to guess what time it was. He smirked with the realization that he didn't care about the time as long as he had Jason inside him again soon.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Nico crooned. "You waking up, finally?"

Jason snorted and rolled over onto his back. He pulled Nico on top of him, and Nico could feel Jason's morning (or whatever time of day it was) erection pressing into his thigh. Nico slipped his legs around Jason's body and rolled his hips. Jason mumbled incoherently and didn't wake. Nico dropped his head onto Jason's chest and thought. He'd be happy to stay here like this, but Percy was leaving today. Nico had a sneaking suspicion that time was getting away from them. The Zeus cabin had white-curtained windows, and the sun peeking through seemed awfully high.

Nico pulled himself up Jason's body and whispered in his ear. "If you get up right now, I'll blow you in the shower. And I'll do it again in the woods after Percy leaves."

Jason opened one eye. "Can I still fuck you tonight?"

"Yep." Nico popped his lips on the p.

The big blond sat up and grabbed his glasses before dragging Nico into the bathroom.
Percy was going to miss this place. True, he hadn't been around much in the past few years, and never during the school year, but moving across the country for college made it feel like he was leaving Camp Half-Blood behind. It had been so much more than a home to him since he'd first come here as a scrawny, bullied, unpopular twelve year old. It had been a refuge, a place where he'd found acceptance, friends, a girlfriend. True, it was also where he'd watched friends die, or where he'd embarked on dangerous journeys where he'd watched friends die. It was where he'd had to tell Nico, ten and feisty and so annoyingly dweeby, that his beloved sister was never coming back to him. That was the worst moment he'd spent here. He stepped on the crack in the dining pavilion, the one Nico had made that day. Gods, Percy had so many regrets.

"Hey Seaweed Brain," Annabeth said, coming up behind him and wrapping her warm arms around his chest. "What're you thinking about, staring off into the distance?"

Percy turned and smiled. He dropped his head and caught Annabeth's lips in a quick kiss. "Nothing. Just, I'm going to miss this place, even though I was kind of thinking about the bad things that have happened here."

"Yeah, I'll miss it, too," Annabeth said. Percy imagined she would miss it even more than him. She'd lived here year-round for a long time. She'd practically grown up here. "Is there anything you want to do today before we leave?"

"Spar?" Percy shrugged. He felt weird hanging around with nothing to do, but he knew a lot of campers would be coming by to wish him and Annabeth well. He was looking forward to saying goodbye to some people, though a lot of his friends would be coming to New Rome to attend college, too.

"No sparring," Annabeth ordered. "You and Jason tore up the arena last time, and Chiron said you were 'grounded' from fighting each other until you come back for Christmas."

"Well, I could fight--"

"Who?" Annabeth smirked. "No one can match you except Jason."

"Nico can," Percy argued. "I could ask him."

"Have you forgotten that you called him a, and I quote, 'miniaturized peckerhead' three days ago?" Annabeth laughed. "What were you even fighting about? Why do you always have to call him euphemisms for penises?"

"I forgot," Percy said miserably. "Whatever he did, I'm sure he deserved the name. I can't help it that I'm preoccupied with penises. They're so fun to use."

Percy grabbed Annabeth's ass. She squealed and jumped away from him. He was lucky she didn't throw him to the ground.

"Save it for the bedroom, Percy," she said. "I'm not into putting on a public show."

"Ooh, is that a promise for later?" Percy asked.

Annabeth approached cautiously, and when Percy behaved, he was rewarded with a lingering kiss.
"That is a promise for later," Annabeth corrected him.

Percy wrapped his arm around Annabeth and guided her to a table in the pavilion. It was between breakfast and lunch, so they could sit wherever they wanted. He pulled Annabeth onto his lap and held her hand.

"Do you think I'll do okay in college?" he asked. This was something that worried him. He had never been a good student. Like most demigods, he had ADHD and dyslexia. He knew the college in New Rome made accommodations for their scholastic hindrances, but even among demigods, Percy seemed to struggle more than others.

"You'll be great, Percy," Annabeth said warmly. "I'll help you, and you are so much smarter than you give yourself credit for."

Percy hummed into her hair. It smelled like apples. "You'll be awesome, Annabeth. I hope I make you proud."

Annabeth turned slightly so she could look into his face. Her eyes were serious. "You always make me proud. I don't care how you do in school. I'm proud because of the person you are, Percy. Don't forget that."

"I'll remember," he promised. He wanted to change the subject. "So, do you remember what I was fighting about with Nico the other day?"

"I already told you I don't know!" Annabeth laughed.

"Speak of the devil," Percy whispered as he watched Nico emerge from the path to the cabins and head toward the dining pavilion. "Hey, why's he limping?"

Annabeth rolled her eyes. "He's having sex, Percy. Haven't you noticed the way he's been walking for the past week?"

"No shit?"

Percy stood, pushing Annabeth out of his lap. Nico was too young to be having sex. Percy was going to put an end to this. He opened his mouth to call out to Nico, who was approaching at a snail's pace now that he had noticed Percy and Annabeth in the pavilion, but Annabeth stepped on his foot.

"Ow! What the hell, Annabeth?"

"It's not your business, Percy," Annabeth said. "Leave him alone. Lots of kids have sex when they're his age."

"But..." Percy was casting about for something to say. He knew Annabeth was telling the truth. There had been four obviously pregnant girls in his class when he'd been fifteen. He'd even had offers from more than a few girls and boys at that age. "I'm supposed to watch out for him. What if the guy he's with is a jerk or, or, a pedophile or something? I didn't even know he was dating anyone!"

"Why would he tell you?" Annabeth asked incredulously. "All summer, you've called him names and fought with him. His partner is a great guy."

Percy looked at Annabeth in shock. "You know who it is?"
"Yes."

Damn, Annabeth looked smug.

"Well, who is it?"

"I'm not telling you, because it isn't your business. If he wanted you to know about any of it he'd tell you himself."

"Please, Annabeth," Percy begged. "I'm, he's, I'm supposed to take care of him."

"He doesn't want you to, Percy," Annabeth said. "Please, let him be and don't make him feel awkward."

"Awkward about what?" Nico said from behind them, and Percy and Annabeth both jumped. How Nico could manage to sneak up on them when they knew he was coming was extremely disconcerting to Percy.

"Hey, Nico, how's it going?" Percy asked.

Nico narrowed his eyes at Percy and turned to Annabeth.

"Hi, Nico, Percy was telling me how he needed to apologize to you for the rude names he called you the other day. I was telling him not to make you feel awkward."

Shockingly, Nico seemed to buy that load of shit. He smiled warmly at her, and she kissed his forehead.

"Have a wonderful time at college, Annabeth," Nico said. "I can't wait to see all the buildings you'll design and how you'll change the world."

"Thanks, darling," Annabeth replied. "I'm going to go check on Piper. She's heading back to the city today to get ready for school."

"Oh, tell her bye for me, please," Nico said. "I'm glad Rachel decided to go to college in New York so Piper could keep living with her."

"Sure thing." Annabeth smiled. "Now, why don't you stay here and talk to Percy so he can apologize?"

Percy shot an angry glare at Annabeth, who was already backing away, over Nico's head. He wasn't ready to apologize. Nico had pissed him off. Okay, so he couldn't remember exactly what Nico had done, but most of the time what they were arguing over seemed kind of irrelevant to the argument.

"You wanted to apologize?" Nico asked. He didn't seem to believe it.

"Not really," Percy said, once Annabeth was out of earshot. "But come sit with me anyway."

Nico followed him to the edge of the pavilion. They sat down on the concrete and dangled their feet onto the grass below. Percy wanted to chew Nico out for being sexually active, but he also didn't want to fight on his last day at camp. If he brought up the subject of sex, the fight they'd have would put all their others to shame, Percy felt sure.

"I'm sorry I called you a peckerhead," Percy began glumly.

Nico sighed. "I'm sorry I said squids were smarter than you."
"Do you even remember what we were fighting over?" Percy asked.

"You said pegasi were better than shadow travel."

"Ah."

"Which I know isn't even something you believe is true, because you love shadow travel," Nico said. Percy could see the fire building in his eyes.

"I love when you get all fiery and sassy," Percy said fondly. He brushed hair out of Nico's eyes, and Nico slapped his hand away. "It's cute."

"Shut up, Percy," Nico said. "I don't want to fight again. Then people ask why, and we have to tell them a reason. We both end up looking like idiots."

"Fine," Percy conceded. He leaned into Nico's shoulder. "But you are cute."

Nico glared at him, and Percy gazed in Nico's eyes and tried to imagine him having sex. Percy had often thought of Nico as a feral kitten. He guessed even feral kittens did it. Why not Nico? He blinked the thoughts away.

Nico had apparently decided not to respond to the "cute" comment. "Are you ready? For college, I mean."

Percy slumped down and huffed out a breath. "I'm so nervous, Nico. What if I fuck this up?"

"Tons of kids flunk out of college, Perce," Nico said. "They just try again. You'll do fine."

"But what if I don't?" Percy persisted. "I'm not good at school. What if I completely bomb everything?"

Nico turned and faced Percy. Percy could feel Nico's skinny shin press against his thigh. "Listen to me. You are Percy Jackson. I know you can do anything you set your mind to. If you mess up, you mess up, but you don't quit. How could you fail?"

Percy smiled at Nico and gave him a one-armed hug. He was surprised when Nico hugged back.

"Hey there, guys!"

Percy and Nico broke their embrace and turned to see Jason approaching. Nico's cheeks flushed pink, and Percy thought it was a shame Nico was embarrassed to be caught hugging. Percy stood to greet Jason and offered Nico a hand up.

"Hey, Jace!" Percy yelled.

When Jason got close enough, Percy pulled him into a hug with their clasped fists in the center. He let go quickly. It was nice, spending time with Jason this summer. Percy had forgotten how much he enjoyed the big blond's company. Sure, Jason could be a show-off, but he was also kind and concerned about the camp and not at all big-headed about his dad being Zeus. He was fun to spar with and joke around with. And unlike Nico, he could take a joke. Percy felt his lips curl slightly as he thought of how often Nico had gotten mad at him this summer just for being silly. Oh, well.

"When're you heading out, Percy?" Jason asked. His blue eyes sparkled with happiness, and Percy was a little surprised. He knew Jason and Piper had broken up, but he had expected Jason to be sad about her going back to the city. Now, without her or Percy and Annabeth to hang out with, Jason
was stuck with Nico again. Of course, they got along better than Percy and Nico ever had.

"I've got to finish packing, and then I think we'll go," Percy said. "Annabeth wants to start moving into her dorm right away."

They both would be staying in the dorms at New Rome, though next year Percy would be allowed to move into one of the unused villas that were made available to former Praetors and dignitaries. He was looking forward to that, partially because it would mean more privacy (and sex) for him and Annabeth and partially because he thought he'd do a better job studying without a roommate distracting him. The guy he was rooming with this year was a son of Apollo's named Bill. Percy had met him a couple of times at Camp Jupiter. He seemed nice. The Stoll brothers had offered to have him stay in their quad, but he was certain he'd get no studying done with them as roommates. He would flunk out in the first semester.

"Okay, well, it's been great to spend time with you this summer," Jason said earnestly. "Will you come by over the holidays?"

"Yeah, for a few days," Percy said. "My mom will also want to see me at home."

"Nico, we'd better let Percy pack. Besides, we need to take care of that thing in the forest," Jason said.

Nico smirked and rolled his eyes.

"What thing?" Percy asked.

"Nothing. It's not a big deal," Nico said. "We do have to get right on that, though."

"Well, you have to get on it. Hit it while it's so hard," Jason said. "It responds best to your special talents."

Nico ran his hand down his face. "Oh, my gods, shut up, you big dork. We've got to go, Percy."

Percy opened his arms, and Nico hugged him. A second later, the small demigod was sandwiched between Percy and Jason in a group hug.

"We'll miss you, Perce," Jason said, looking at Percy from over the top of Nico's head.

Percy dropped his head onto Nico's and kissed his unruly hair. "I'll miss you guys, too."

"Yeah, yeah, sappy sap-fest. Let's go," Nico ordered. He shoved Percy off his front and elbowed Jason until the blond released him from behind. Jason took off at a run for the forest with Nico limping along behind. Percy watched them walk for a minute. Just as he was about to leave, Nico turned back to him and gave a wave.

Percy smiled and waved back.

* * *

It was one of those times at Camp Half-Blood that Jason enjoyed most. The camp was teeming with life. His friends, many of whom had been away at school for the past several months, were here, and there was a festive, fun spirit in the air. Of course, all the festivity and fun meant one demigod, his
boyfriend, was miserable.

Jason sat on the bed in Nico's dank, dark cabin and tried to reason with his lover.

"It's only for a little while, Nico. You can manage it."

"No, Jason," Nico replied. He was perched, literally perched, on the top of his intricately designed wrought iron headboard. In his ratty black t-shirt, ripped black jeans, and black socks, he looked like a gargoyle guarding a creepy old house. "There are too many people. I'll feel all claustrophobic and tied down."

"You'll be okay. I'll be right there with you," Jason tried. He felt for each of Nico's toes buried inside the protective casing of his socks. "We could tell people about us, come out, if that would help. Then I could hold you and make it easier."

"No!" Nico's eyes widened, and he scrunched further into his crouch.

Jason tried not to be hurt. He knew Nico had some misguided idea that Jason would be hurt or treated poorly if word got out that he and Nico were together. Jason appreciated Nico's attempts to protect him, but he was certain it was protection he didn't need. It was true that he cared a little more than he should about what the other campers thought of him, but he was also sure that he could manage whatever backlash came from people prejudiced against Nico.

Jason stood and pulled Nico off the headboard. Nico came, squawking and complaining, and Jason stretched his boyfriend's skinny frame out on the bed before covering it with his own bulkier one. Jason pressed a soft kiss into Nico's neck and slowly ran a hand up Nico's side inside his t-shirt.

"I wish people knew you the way I do," he said.

Nico snorted. "If they did, I'd be very sore."

"Haha, smartass. I don't mean sex. Gods, I'd die of jealousy if anyone else had you that way." Jason shifted slightly and laid his elbows on either side of Nico's head. "Though that would make you extremely popular, as good as you are."

It was true. Nico was incredibly accomplished sexually. Jason would never have expected it of the quiet, shy boy he first kissed around a year ago, but Nico was a prodigy when it came to sex -- he could do things that made Jason fall apart completely; he could do them over and over; and then, once Jason had recovered, Nico would come back with something entirely new that had Jason seeing stars and screaming his name all over again. Jason wasn't sure how it worked, but he loved that extra perk of being with Nico.

"Well, I don't think my other traits will make the campers suddenly like me," Nico said bluntly.

"You're so kind," Jason mused, nuzzling his nose against Nico's. "You are such a decent human being. Every day I learn to be better because I'm around you. And gods, you're so powerful. It's so damned sexy, the powers you have. I can't do half as many things as you can. If I wasn't in love with you, maybe I'd find it a little creepy."

"Aha!" Nico said, and Jason knew he'd made a mistake. "See, it is creepy, what I can do, and you only look past it because you love me."

"That is not what I meant." Jason sighed. He rolled off Nico, and the smaller boy immediately climbed on top of him. Jason looked up at Nico's gorgeous face and slim body and had to work to let his brain and not his penis do the thinking. "It's the extent of your powers that's creepy, not your
"Po-ta-to, Po-tah-to." Nico shrugged. He pulled Jason's shirt up and kissed along his stomach. Jason reached down and stroked Nico's hair.

"Do you love me, Nico?" Jason asked. He knew it was a question out of nowhere, and a dumb one, too. Nico had told Jason he loved him a million times.

Nico looked up from Jason's stomach. His fingers softly scraped across one of Jason's nipples. "What do you think?"

"Be serious, for a minute," Jason chided. "I know you do. I need you to say it."

"I love you, absolutely, completely," Nico said. He climbed off Jason's hips and laid next to him. "I love you so much it terrifies me, because there's nothing I wouldn't do for you. I'd give up every part of my world if you asked me to. I'd follow you, without hesitation, to Tartarus, to certain death, to my own destruction."

"I love you, Nico, the same way you love me," Jason said. A tear slipped down his cheek, and Nico kissed it away. Jason wasn't sure why he was feeling so in need of reassurance all of a sudden. Maybe it was having Rachel and Piper here, remembering their dueling versions of advice. "Are you happy with me?"

"Happier than I've ever been." Nico's reply was instant, and Jason smiled at the certainty in his voice. "Are you happy?"

Jason turned and looked down at Nico. Nico's wild hair was falling all around his head. His black eyes were open and trusting. His full, pink lips were parted in a way that was unintentionally so inviting. He looked like an angel, like his surname promised. Jason was absolutely positive he would never love anyone the way he loved Nico. Was he happy? If he wasn't, was it really Nico's fault? What was wrong with him, that he could love someone as completely as he loved Nico and still not be sure he was happy?

"I'm ridiculously happy with you," Jason said. It wasn't a lie. But it wasn't the whole truth, either. Jason sat up, and he felt Nico sit behind him. Long, cool arms wrapped around Jason's torso. Nico rested his head on Jason's back.

"I know you're telling the truth, but I also know you well enough to know that's not all," Nico said softly. "You don't have to be someone you're not, Jason. Not with me. I can take the sad parts, too, you know."

"I want to be someone's son. I want a parent to be proud of me," Jason whispered. "You're so lucky. Hades loves you. His kingdom admires you. I know that's something you've earned, I do, but I wish I had that, too."

"My dad is different than yours, Jace. Mine hated me for a long time. He thought I was a disappointment. But he was reasonable enough to see the benefits of my actions. I'm not sure your dad is capable of seeing what you do as anything more than a reflection of him. I'm sorry." Nico kissed the back of Jason's neck. The kiss made Jason shiver. "I hope maybe you can find a way to be happy without your dad's approval."

"How do I do that?" Jason asked. His voice was choked and thick. He needed his dad's approval. He needed a family, a home.

"I don't have answers." Nico laughed quietly. "I'm sure I'm right, though."
"What if I mess up? What if I want my dad's approval so badly that I do awful things to get it?" Jason knew his father had done terrible, terrible things, including killing Nico's mom. He didn't want to end up like Zeus, but what if the pull to be his father's son was too strong?

"Everyone messes up. You'll get over it and move on. But, Jace, you're a really good person. You're not ever going to mess up in a way that can't be fixed."

Nico kissed Jason's neck again, and Jason reached behind and pulled Nico into his lap. "Come to the campfire with me."

"Oh, my gods, no!" Nico giggled and squirmed his way off the bed. "Was this whole conversation a way to make me all soft so I'd go to the stupid campfire with you?"

Hades, Jason wished it was.

"So you'd follow me to Tartarus, but not the campfire?" Jason smirked.

"The campfire is a whole different level of hell, Jace."

Jason rolled his eyes. "Fine, but I'm not bringing you back any s'mores."

"You are evil, Jason Grace," Nico said.

Jason pulled Nico back onto the bed and tickled and kissed him until the horn sounded to signal it was time for campfire. Jason reluctantly stood to leave.

"I'll bring you one s'more," Jason said, smiling as he left Nico's cabin.

The walk to the campfire was short. Once Jason got there, he took a seat between Piper and Leo at the front near the fire. Leo, like Piper, had come to visit for the holiday. He was off to MIT (it paid to be the brilliant child of a god) most of the time and rarely had time to visit these days.

"Hey there, Sparky," Piper greeted him with a smile. Leo clapped Jason on the back. "How are you doing?"

"Great, great," Jason said. He looked at Piper and smiled. It was impossible not to notice the blush that crept onto her cheeks. Jason looked over to Leo. "Hey, dude, how's it hanging?"

"Shut up, Superman," Leo whispered. He was watching the singing Apollo kids with rapt attention. "I love 'O, Holy Night!'"

Jason shook his head and turned back to Piper. He hadn't talked to her much since they'd broken up. Sure, he'd seen her during the summer, but that was always in a group, and he'd never had to spend time alone with her. It felt weird. He liked her as a person, but she obviously still had feelings for him.

"So, how are things going with you, Piper?" Jason asked.

"Good, actually," she said. Her pretty eyes looked dark brown in the firelight, and Jason noticed she'd changed the feather in her hair. "School is fun. I have a good group of friends, and I've been doing a bit of modeling in my spare time."

"Well, you'd certainly make a wonderful model. You're so beautiful."

Piper blushed again, and Jason realized his honest compliment could be mistaken for romantic interest. He needed to fix things.
Um, he and I, we're still together, and happy, so I didn't mean that in, like, a 'coming on to you' way," Jason said. Piper grimaced, and Jason felt like he was making things worse. "It was true. You are super pretty, it's just that I'm..."

"Jason, relax," Piper said. "I'm not trying to seduce you. I know you're with Nico. Try not to act so weird around me."

She had leaned her head closer to Jason to whisper Nico's name. She'd clearly picked up on the fact that they weren't openly dating. Jason was grateful and ashamed at the same time. He should insist that he and Nico make their relationship public. After all, it wasn't because Nico was embarrassed about his sexuality anymore. He'd openly dated Will. Nico was holding back for Jason, and Jason had insisted it didn't matter. Jason should tell everyone. Nico would probably be thrilled. Oh, gods, Nico would be thrilled. Jason sat, still and quiet.

"Okay, well, you sitting there ignoring me isn't helping this not feel awkward, either," Piper laughed, bringing Jason out of his thoughts.

"Shoot, I'm sorry Piper!"

"It's alright," Piper said. "But are you? You seem off, Jason, and I don't just mean not knowing how to act around me."

Could Jason talk to Piper? Share his fears with her? Nico would be furious if he learned that Jason shared details of their private life with an ex-girlfriend. But Jason needed someone to talk to besides Nico, and Piper and Clarisse were the only ones who already knew about his and Nico's relationship. Jason sure as hell didn't want to talk to Clarisse. He leaned his head closer to Piper and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

"I love Nico. I do. He loves me so much. I make him happy. Loving him makes me happy, but I'm not totally happy. Does that make sense?" Jason asked. "The parts of my life that are wrapped up in him are so good. But I find myself unhappy with where I'm headed, what my dad thinks of me. There's so much pressure on me to be this great leader and person, and I don't know if I can do it."

"So the problem isn't Nico?" Piper asked. Her eyes looked bluish now.

"Gods, no," Jason chuckled. "He's the best part of my life."

Piper shook her head and tilted it toward the side. Jason followed the tilt of her head and saw his boyfriend, arms crossed and face set in a scowl, staring at him and Piper. Just then, the song ended, and amid the cheering and clapping, Leo leaned over onto Jason's lap and yelled, much louder than necessary, "hey, you two sure look cozy! Are you getting back together?"

Jason expected Nico to leave, but instead he unfolded his arms and sat next to Percy. Percy's arm was immediately wrapped around Nico, pulling him in much closer than was necessary. Fuck, could Percy keep his hands to himself at all? Now he was brushing through Nico's hair and cupping his jaw. Jason growled. He'd hated the way Percy was so handsy with Nico this summer. The fighting between them had sucked, true, but it was better than the rare times when they were getting along and Percy treated Nico like his little toy. Gods, Jason was pissed. He started to rise, to go over there and remove Percy's hands from Nico's body, but Piper placed a hand on his thigh.

Jason sat back down and stared glumly at the campfire. He answered Leo's questions and sang the Christmas carols he knew, but he kept his hands tightly knotted in his lap. He declined when he was offered s'mores and hot chocolate. He glanced back occasionally, and it seemed Nico alternated between glaring at him and smiling at Percy. Jason hated both options.
When the campfire ended, Jason practically ran to his cabin. He threw open the door, expecting to see Nico waiting for him, but he wasn't there. Jason waited half an hour. Nico always shadow traveled to Jason's room in the evening. He should have been there by now. Jason threw his shoes on and left, wandering, in his pajamas, down toward Cabin Thirteen. He rounded the corner that marked the end of the original cabins and the start of the male gods' new row, where Nico's cabin sat first, black and looming, and saw Nico being held by Percy. Their voices were soft and didn't carry. Nico's head was nestled against Percy's neck, his nose and mouth visible under the cut of Percy's jaw. Percy's hands played at Nico's back and up in his hair.

Jason stood there, rooted to the spot, and stared. After a moment, Percy noticed his presence and pulled Nico tight against him to whisper in his ear. Nico raised his head and glanced at Jason before leaning up and kissing Percy's cheek. He broke the embrace with Percy, who seemed reluctant to let Nico go. Percy leaned in and kissed Nico's cheek in return and walked wordlessly past Jason, patting him on the back as he left. Nico entered his cabin, not giving Jason a second look.

His feet finally moved, and Jason found himself at the door of the Hades cabin. It was locked. Jason knocked and knocked, but Nico didn't let him in. Jason wanted to cry, to scream, to break the door down and force his way inside. Instead, he sat on the steps and waited. The night air had turned cold and the harpies had begun circling by the time the door opened and Jason fell into the dark interior of Cabin Thirteen.

He stood and saw that Nico was already in bed. He gently closed and locked the door and made his way to Nico's bed. The bed was big, bigger than any he'd ever seen in a cabin here at camp. It was a benefit of being both a lone camper and the beloved son of a very rich god, Jason supposed. He pulled his shirt over his head and climbed in next to Nico. Nico was facing away from him, his bony shoulder blades pointing at Jason like accusing fingers.

Jason pressed tentatively against Nico and wrapped his arm around the smaller boy's waist. He was relieved when Nico lifted his head. Jason hurried to lay his shoulder underneath Nico's head and wrap that arm around Nico, too. He pulled with both arms until Nico was tightly nestled in his embrace. Those bony shoulder blades poked his chest and stomach, but Jason didn't care. What they had felt so fragile right now, and the discomfort was almost a promise that their love was real.

"I'm sorry," Nico mumbled. Jason traced his fingers along Nico's pronounced ribs and tried to understand what his lover was apologizing for. "I was angry that you were being so cozy with Piper. I didn't think Percy would be so touchy-feely."

"I'm sorry, too," Jason said. He kissed Nico's soft hair. "I was putting my arm around Piper because I was talking to her about you, and how happy we are, but I didn't want to say your name where other people would hear, because you asked me not to, not because I care."

Nico nodded and kissed Jason's biceps. Jason let his hand wander down to Nico's hip and slide under his boxers. He circled his thumb over the smooth muscle of Nico's lower back, slowly sliding lower and lower with his circles.

"You don't want Piper, huh?" Nico breathed.

"Not at all. I hate that you're so damned insecure about what I want."

"I don't doubt you. It's myself I doubt. Why in the world would you want to be here with me when you could be with her?" Nico asked.

"I told you, the sex is fabulous," Jason teased.
Nico jutted his hips back into Jason and squirmed, trying half-heartedly to break Jason's hold on him.

"This is proving my point, Nico," Jason whispered. "Even when you're not trying, you feel like liquid sex in my arms."

"Shut up," Nico snapped. "Be serious."

"I am serious," Jason said. He rolled them over so Nico was pinned underneath him and rutted his hips down against Nico's ass. "You need to realize how amazing you are, not just sexually. You're every good thing I can think of. What was up with Percy, anyway? He was all over you."

"I don't know." Nico's breathing was labored. "Annabeth was right there, so it's not like he was hitting on me. He's weird. I should have told him to back off."

"You sure as hell should have," Jason agreed, giving a particularly hard thrust.

"Jason," Nico moaned.

"Don't ever say anyone's name like that except mine," Jason ordered. "Swear it."

"Only you, Jason," Nico panted, writhing under Jason's weight.

"You're my heaven, Nico, and gods, I love you."
"We have stuff at the altars," Nico said from the doorway.

Percy jumped off the couch and shoved Nico out of the way in his haste to get to the altars. He was sure Annabeth would have sent something for him. Jason and Nico trailed behind, much more slowly. Jason wasn't sure anyone would have left anything for him. Things were awkward between him and Piper, and the only other people he could think of who would have sent him something were Leo and Thalia, and it was unlikely either of them had yet heard of Jason's ascendancy.

Nico stood back and watched once he reached the altars. Percy was inside his, looking over a small mountain of chocolate and brisket and blue pancakes. Tears streamed freely down his face. Jason was crying, too. Inside his altar was a bag of peanut m&ms and a plate of mushy broccoli. Nico had been in his own altar earlier, had looked over the apple (Reyna), pomegranate (Hazel, he was sure), and plate of steamed carrots. Nico guessed the steamed carrots came from Clarisse, as did the broccoli Jason had gotten. He returned to his altar, picked up the pomegranate and the apple, and said a silent thank you to his friends and family. He left the altar and sat down outside, biting into the apple while he waited for his companions.

Percy ate, almost like a real dinner. He'd started with the brisket, then moved on to the chocolate. He was saving the blue pancakes for last. He was sure they were sent by his wife and mother. Percy didn't look to see what Nico or Jason had gotten, if anything, but the fact that Nico was already outside his altar didn't bode well. Nico had been so isolated the last couple of years; it was hard for Percy to believe Nico would have gotten anything aside from offerings from Reyna and Hazel.

Jason slowly ate a few m&ms, mostly to give himself time alone. Clarisse sent the gross vegetables, just to antagonize him, but he couldn't guess who would send the m&ms. Piper would have sent Snickers. It was their shared favorite. Jason thought perhaps tomorrow there'd be a Snickers and something from Leo.

Nico watched Jason from outside the altars. Jason stood and made his way to Nico's side. Nico tugged on the son of Jupiter's t-shirt hem, and Jason sat next to him and offered him a piece of candy. Nico shook his head and offered Jason some of the apple. Jason took a big bite; he wanted to be eating the same thing as Nico. Nico gave a small laugh, and Jason realized how transparent he must be.

"Would you--"

"It's not happening again, Jace. I lost my head because I wanted the couch."

"But, you love me," Jason said.

"I do," Nico admitted. "But loving you and having sex with you are not the same things."

Jason started to say he knew that, but Percy emerged from his altar, his face smeared with chocolate and blueberry.

"For the love of Hades," Nico said. "Next time, I hope Annabeth sends you a bib."

Percy glared at Nico. "There wasn't a letter. You said Annabeth would be the first one to send a
"He's not a fucking mind reader, Percy." Jason said. "You got three times the stuff either one of us got. Shut up and be happy."

Jason wasn't mad at Percy. He was mad at Nico for shooting him down so quickly and assuming that he wanted sex without love.

"Fuck you, Jason," Percy said, taking a few steps closer. "Why begrudge me a little stuff from the mortal world when you've got the whole fucking sundae with the cherry on top ready to bend over the first second you touch him?"

Percy and Jason were on each other so quickly it was almost comical. Jason got the first punch, a clean right hook to the jaw, but Percy landed a couple body blows that knocked the wind out of Jason. Nico took his time calling up a couple skeletons to wrestle the two apart. He might have been content to let them go at it all day, but he had something more to share.

Nico stood and collected Percy and Jason from his helpful skeletons. The collections of bones saluted Nico and sank back into the earth. Nico dragged Percy and Jason toward the house. Both fumed silently behind him but didn't throw more punches.

"Did you make a bed?" Nico asked Jason.

"You mean the place he obviously wants to fuck you the hardest and the most often?" Percy asked. "You're one hell of a great lay."

Nico dropped the men's hands and faced Percy. Percy took an unconscious step back.

"Is hurting me making things better for you?" Nico's eyes bored into Percy's. "Does it feel easier, being stuck here, if you're mean to me?"

Percy's eyes filled with tears. He bit his lip. "I don't know."

"Are you abandoning me?"

"Never," Percy whispered. The first tear fell on his cheek. Jason watched, dumbfounded by the change in Percy's demeanor.

Nico brushed away Percy's tear. "Then I can endure this, if it's what you need. But, Percy, remember how I told you I didn't do anything to deserve the things Jason had done to me?"

Percy nodded. He would never forget. It was one of the times he'd been most proud of Nico. He screwed his eyes shut and twisted his face away.

"I don't deserve what you're doing to me, either." Nico picked Percy's and Jason's hands back up and walked toward the house. "Come on. I want to talk to you."

Nico dragged Jason and Percy behind him like they were his wayward children. Percy cried quietly. Jason's eyes moved back and forth between his comrades. Percy's eyes remained fixed on his hand in Nico's grasp.

There were no further delays. The trio went back in the house, and Nico guided Jason and Percy to the couch. They sat down, but Nico stood in front of them although there was more than enough room for all three men to sit. Percy tugged Nico's hand, attempting to pull him into the empty seat. Nico resisted.
"Nico..."

Nico waved his free hand. "Don't. I understand. I'm fine."

Percy chuckled in a way that didn't indicate mirth. "Always your favorite lie."

"What is it you wanted to talk to us about, Nico?" Jason was anxious to interject himself back into the conversation.

Percy kissed Nico's hand and let him go. Nico looked at Percy and Jason and tried to calm his breathing.

"When I went out to the altars and found there were things in them, I looked around at mine for a second before I came to get you two. It didn't take long; I didn't have much. But I did have this." Nico pulled out a small, thick envelope and pressed it to his chest. "Don't ask me any questions. Listen without interrupting. Don't try to take it away from me. This is important, understand?"

Percy and Jason nodded.

From the envelope, Nico withdrew folded papers. He unfolded them and began to read.

"Dearest Nico,

"My mother paid me a visit last night and explained to me the reward and punishment you, Percy, and Jason have been given. She also explained about the altars and the rules the gods have decided about Percy and Jason and the limited contact they are allowed with their earthly significant others.

"I am not allowed to contact Percy, other than to supply him with offerings of food. I also am not allowed to ask you to pass on any messages. Piper is banned from Jason in the same way. It's possible Hazel and Reyna have been barred from contacting you, too. I'll talk with them tomorrow and find out what I can. Nico, I love Percy so very much. I hope he knows that Maybelle and I will always love him, but that, if necessary, we will also survive without him. He is my one true love and best friend. I'm tough enough to bear this punishment and raise our daughter to be a strong and powerful girl. I hope Percy knows how proud I am of him, and of you and Jason, too. You made a decision that saved human lives, even at the cost of your own, and I'm glad that I will be able to tell our daughter how brave her daddy and uncles were.

"It has been eighteen days since you left. There are news reports of otherworldly beautiful men who saved many lives that day. Mortals are calling you their heroes and guardian angels. If only they knew how close their descriptions were to the real thing. I am sure you saved many more lives in ways the mortals cannot explain.

"Closer to home, Maybelle is cutting her second tooth. She took a tentative maybe-step yesterday. I've enclosed a picture," Nico handed it wordlessly to Percy, "for you to have."

"Piper wants you to know that she loves Jason, but she forgave you a long time ago. Jason is a good man, she says, and she hopes he knows how much she loves him. She hopes you understand how much he loves you. You are a good man, too, Nico, and none of this is your fault. You and Percy are such special friends. I hope Percy is smart enough to remember how much you mean to him and not be angry with you for things you couldn't control. You have always cared for him as much as he cares for you. You would do anything for him." Nico's voice cracked, but he continued. "'I know you would do the same for Jason and Maybelle. I'm sorry that all of us made you feel like you had so few choices in life. We turned a blind eye to your pain, too wrapped up in our jealousies and selfishness, and I regret it deeply. I'm so sorry, Nico. Hopefully, Jason and Percy won't continue"
to make the same mistakes.

"I hope Jason knows that we have forgiven him, just as much as we have forgiven you. I hope Percy
knows that I forgive him, too. I always knew, and I love him anyway.

"I will try to write tomorrow as I contact more of your friends and family. Many of them may be
able to contact each of you directly. We will have to experiment and see. In the interim, you have my
love, sweet Nico. Please divide it and share it as you see fit.

"Yours, Annabeth"

Percy clutched the picture of Maybelle and cried. Jason cried. Nico carefully folded the papers and
returned them to the envelope. He tucked the envelope into his pocket. "You can't touch it, so don't
ask. It'll probably disintegrate if either of you touches it. If you feel like I need to read it again, let me
know whenever."

"Thank you, Nico," Jason said. He reached out for Nico, but Nico stepped back. Jason tried not to
feel hurt. It didn't work.

"I, um, I need to take some time away, by myself," Nico said. He didn't want Percy or Jason to see
him cry. "I'll come back before the sun gets too low so we can make sure we get to use our new
house." He gave Jason a small smile and turned to Percy. "Are you going to be alright, Percy, here
with Jason?"

"Mhm," Percy said. He only had eyes for the photo of his daughter.

Nico walked behind the couch and placed a hand on each of his companions' necks. "I'm sorry."

Jason's mouth dropped open, and he watched Nico walk out the doorway. He turned to Percy, who'd
fallen over on his side on the sofa. Jason shoved Percy's shoes off the couch. It was too late. There
was already sand in between the cushions.

"Did he say sorry to us?"

Percy didn't answer. Jason slapped Percy's ankle. Percy sniffled and glanced at Jason.

"What, motherfucker?"

"I think Nico just apologized to us. He told you and me he was sorry."

Percy sat up. He held Maybelle's picture to his chest.

"Shit."

* * *

Nico returned, as he'd promised he would, when the sun was low on the horizon. Though he had
spent a long time trying, he'd been unable to figure out how to make a shirt for himself. For the first
time, he found himself wishing he'd paid more attention to Apollo's lessons on the ways of the gods.
In Nico's defense, he hadn't recognized, at the time, that they were lessons on skills he'd one day
need. Perhaps fittingly, he would be the last of the three new gods to master the skill of changing his
clothing.
Jason was sitting on the couch, trying to look like he wasn't waiting for Nico to come back. Percy had gone in the bedroom to take a nap. Now that Jason understood how to make items appear, he'd used his alone time to create a picture frame for Percy's Maybelle photo, three water bottles, a heavy black comforter, a mirror, and two curtains and curtain rods to cover the doors.

"You managed to make all this stuff, and you didn't make me a shirt?" Nico asked, causing Jason to jump. Nico stood in the doorway with the new purple curtain pushed aside, surveying the small mound of items in front of Jason. His hands rested on his hips. Jason started to stand but thought better of it. He sat back on the couch.

"How do you know I didn't make you a shirt? Maybe you just haven't seen it."

Nico raised his eyebrows and walked into the room. "Did you make me a shirt?"

"I can't. I have to want something to exist in order for it to appear. You should probably be glad you still have the rest of your clothes."

Jason wasn't sure what reaction to expect, but Nico laughed. The time away had done him good. They'd been in their prison for more than twenty-four hours now, and the situation didn't seem quite as dire as it originally had, at least momentarily. Nico's mood dampened when he remembered Percy wasn't with Jason.

"Where's Percy?"

Jason tilted his head toward the bedroom. "He was pretty messed up. Took a nap. He wanted me to wake him when you came back."

Nico surveyed the room. "Give him a few more minutes. What'd you make? Besides curtains and no shirt."

"You could sit by me," Jason said. He patted the couch. Nico walked further into the house but didn't sit. He glanced toward the bedroom.

"Not without Percy. If he comes out and sees me with you...he could get the wrong idea."

That's stupid, Nico. It's sitting. What the hell difference does it make?"

Nico sneered slightly. He didn't like being told he was being stupid. Jason knew that better than most people.

"It makes a difference. Now are you going to show me the shit you made or not?" Nico crossed his arms over his chest and jutted his chin.

Percy had awakened a few minutes earlier, but he had trouble finding the doorway since it was covered with Jason's curtain. He finally found the exit and fought his way past. Nico stood in front of the couch with his back facing Percy. Jason was too busy glaring at Nico to notice Percy come out. Percy wrapped his arm around Nico's waist and gave him a kiss on the shoulder. Nico looked at him in surprise.

"I heard your sweet, happy voice," Percy said. "It's like little fucking birdies singing just for me." Before Nico could spin out of Percy's grasp, Percy blocked Nico with his foot and whispered in his ear. "I'm sorry about earlier."

Jason snorted in laughter. He didn't like Percy, but he liked Nico getting snarked at when it was well-deserved. Nico narrowed his eyes at Percy and then Jason. He thought better of fighting back. He
reasoned that if Jason and Percy were united against him, particularly in play, they'd be less likely to fight each other.

"Jason was about to show me all the crap he made while I was out and you were napping."

Percy rubbed his free hand on his chin. His other hand was occupied with rubbing Nico's bare side.

"Did you go Martha Stewart on us, Jace?"

"Fuck you both," Jason said. "See if I ever get you a shirt, Nico. Keep it up and I'll change that bed into a twin, too."

Nico dropped his arms from around his chest. He didn't want Jason to see Percy's hand caressing his skin.

"I'm sorry, Jace," Nico said. "I do want to see what you've made."

Jason leveled his icy blue eyes at Nico. Nico's heartbeat sped up. Jason's gaze had always had that effect on him. Percy sniffed at Nico's shoulder.

Jason kept them waiting a moment longer before he sighed and showed off the water bottles and comforter. He pointed out the mirror and was about to show them the picture frame when Percy said, "so, let me get this straight. You want to fuck Nico on the comforter, in front of the mirror, with a water bottle?"

"Damn it, Percy," Nico said. He pushed Percy's hand off his side. "Do you have to think everything's about sex?"

"Don't get huffy, baby," Percy said. He put his hand on the small of Nico's back and gently guided him until they were sitting next to Jason. He wrapped his arm around Nico's shoulders and reached across him to slap Jason's chest with his other hand. "Everything he made before had to do with you and sex. He's the one I'm taking potshots at, not you."

Jason glanced up at the hole in the roof and gauged the remaining sunlight. There wasn't much left. He decided that sleeping in a bed was more important than pouting about being teased. "Forget it, Nico. He's right. Now, do you guys want to see the last thing, or not? It's for Percy."

"I have no interest in sex with you, big guy," Percy said. Nico howled in laughter next to him. He teetered into Percy's shoulder then veered to Jason. He couldn't let one have something the other didn't.

"Likewise, dipshit," Jason said. "I figured out how to do some stuff without thinking about having sex. Here."

Jason shoved the picture frame across Nico, who was still laughing. Percy unhooked his arm from Nico and pressed into his side instead. Words failed him. Jason smiled as Percy's shock gave way to gratitude. Nico had stopped laughing. He leaned out of the way so Percy and Jason could see each other clearly.

"Jason..."

"It's for that photo of Maybelle. I thought it would be nice to have a way to display it around--"

"Hug him, Nico."
Jason and Nico both raised an eyebrow at Percy. Percy looked away and shoved Nico with his shoulder. "Hug him."

"You are ridiculous. I'm not hugging Jason because you're grateful," Nico said. He stood and picked up the comforter. "Have a bro moment, you two. I'm going to stake out the bed so we don't get locked out of sleeping on an actual mattress."

Percy and Jason watched his retreating back until he disappeared behind the curtain.

"Think he's even sexier now that he's a god?" Percy asked.

"Holy hell, yes," Jason said. He and Percy made eye contact and laughed.

"We aren't going to turn into those catty old gods, checking out anything that moves, are we?" The picture of Maybelle and letter from Annabeth had done wonders to lighten Percy's mood. The effects were likely temporary. For now, thinking about being a god didn't seem as scary.

"I hope not," Jason said. "Nico's sort of a special case."

"Yeah." Percy sighed. He held up the picture frame. It was baby pink, with little green tridents and gray owls along the frame. "Thank you, man. Let's sleep tonight, and we'll talk to Nico and clear the air tomorrow."

"Deal."

Percy had walked to the doorway separating the two rooms. He was watching Nico slip out of his jeans when Jason approached from behind.

"This is my second chance with him, Percy. Maybe it's my second chance with you, too. I don't want to mess up."

Percy smiled but didn't turn around. "I think maybe you should worry less about me and Nico and more about how to give yourself a second chance. I call dibs on Nico's face side."

Jason shrugged and decided to sleep on Percy's advice. "Suits me. I've always been partial to his ass."

"Quit talking about me, you jerks!"

Jason patted Percy's shoulder, and they both went to bed thinking maybe some things would be alright.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, friendly readers! Because I'm going to be busy Thursday (my Thursday, at least), there's a chance I may post the next chapter tomorrow. If not, I'll post on the regular posting day, but it'll probably be earlier in the day than usual. Happy reading!
Jason stormed through his cabin, angrily shedding his clothes as he went. He turned on the shower and stepped under the spray before the temperature had a chance to regulate. An icy blast hit his chest. He swore and readjusted the temperature controls.

That damned Ares kid deserved it. Even as the thought formed in his head, he knew it was a lie. The kid was an asshole, a bully, and it had felt so good to beat the shit out of him in the arena. But Jason hadn't stopped when he should have. He'd clearly outmatched the kid and had him pinned in a minute or two, but he'd let him up, pretended he was giving the kid a second chance. Instead, Jason was brutal. His fists worked as hard as his sword. An arena that had been cheering for him went silent, and then he was pelted with jeers and boos. He'd kept hitting. The kid's earlier words had pounded through Jason's head like a drumbeat: "Filthy son of Hades. Weirdo. Scrawny, creepy faggot." Jason hadn't stopped hitting until Clarisse had punched him and Nico had erected a rock wall around the Ares kid to protect him.

It was happening more and more lately, Jason losing control. His anger, which had never seemed to exist, was flaring more often, and he was lashing out at people whether or not they deserved it. This kid had. He'd called Nico names. Jason had seen him bully the younger campers who were here on an early spring break. But Jason had been wrong to punish the guy that way. And the Ares kid hadn't been the first. Last week, Jason had told Nico to fuck off. He'd almost come to blows with Clarisse over a ping-pong game. He'd made a little girl cry because she was holding her sword wrong. Jason was starting to scare himself.

He laid his head on the cool white shower tiles and tried to think. What was the source of the change in his personality? Was he still happy with Nico? Yes, absolutely. The only problem he had was that they weren't dating openly. Except what had started as Nico wanting their privacy was now Jason terrified of people finding out, and Jason felt like shit about it. Ever since the winter break incident with Piper and Percy, Jason had been gradually feeling more and more like Nico was right and they shouldn't make their relationship public. Knowing he felt that way, and knowing why he felt that way -- because people would treat him differently -- made Jason feel like a superficial coward. Maybe that's what he was.

Juno hadn't appeared to him since her visit last year, but her words were rarely far from Jason's mind. He wanted what she'd dangled before him. He wanted his father's approval.

The shower curtain ripped open, jolting Jason from his thoughts. He whirled around and found Nico standing there, appearing worried and angry.

"You coming in?" Jason asked, and he was horrified to hear that the words sounded like a challenge.

Nico nodded and began to peel off his shirt.

Jason grabbed the hem of Nico's shirt and fist ed it, holding Nico still. "Get the lube."
Nico pulled off his shirt and disappeared. He came back in a few seconds, naked and carrying a small bottle. As soon as he stepped in the shower, Jason pushed him against the wall and kissed him fiercely. Nico returned the kiss, but when Jason tried to wrap Nico's long, pale legs around his waist, Nico broke away and planted his feet firmly on the ground.

"I want to talk to you first," Nico panted into Jason's chest.

"No," Jason muttered, and he pulled Nico's mouth up to his by yanking a handful of Nico's hair.

In a heartbeat, Nico shoved Jason hard enough to cause him to stumble backward and fall against the opposite wall of the shower. Jason winced as his back hit the temperature dial. Nico grabbed him by the arm and pushed him onto the adjacent wall, pinning him with a forearm across the chest.

"Yes," Nico growled. His eyes were lit with fire.

Jason dropped his head and waited. Slowly, Nico's arm retracted, and he gently held Jason's chin and lifted it so their eyes made contact. Jason held Nico's concern-filled gaze for a few seconds before he had to look away.

"Talk to me," Nico said.

"He pissed me off." Jason shrugged, as though that was all there was to his rage.

"I know," Nico said, "but that isn't what this is about, Jason. You don't beat up kids three years younger than you because they make you mad. That's not who you are."

"Well, maybe who I am is changing." Jason could hear the anger boiling below the surface of his words. He had no doubt about it now -- he was scaring himself. He searched Nico's eyes. Nico wasn't scared. Not at all.

"You're not changing, Jason," Nico said, "but something is wrong. Something's bothering you, and until you let it out and talk about it, it's going to make you more and more unhappy."

Jason let out a yell of frustration. "How can I talk about it if I don't know what it is?"

"You might figure out what it is if you start talking," Nico said. "I'll help you, Jace. You don't have to do it alone."

"Who says I want your help? I'm fine without you."

Nico's mouth dropped open in shock. Jason could read the hurt in his dark eyes.

"Fuck. Oh, gods, Nico, I didn't mean that." Jason pulled Nico into a tight embrace. Nico stood stiff and distant. He turned his face away from Jason and didn't rest his head on Jason's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Let me go, Jason."

Jason dropped his hands and sank into a squat. He watched Nico's legs move until they were pressed against the same shower wall as Jason. They were rapidly losing the hot water.

"Are you going to leave me?" Jason asked. His voice seemed so small, even in the echo chamber of the shower.

"No, of course not," Nico said. "Jason, I love you. I'll be here as long as you want me. I'm not leaving you because you're going through a hard time."
"I've been being mean to you," Jason said. He shakily stood and faced Nico. Nico's hair was plastered to his head. Water droplets clung to his eyelashes and lips.

"You have," Nico agreed. "But I'm in this for the long haul. I don't like the way you've been treating me, but I know you're not thinking clearly when you do it."

"Nico, I love you. I do. I will talk, I promise," Jason said. "Can I have some time to think?"

Nico nodded and exited the shower. Desire surged through Jason as he watched Nico's retreating form, his bony back and rounded ass and long legs. Hastily, Jason turned off the water, grabbed the lube, and followed.

Out in the main room, Nico was toweling off his hair. Jason hurried up to his back and wrapped his arms around Nico's waist. Slowly, he began walking Nico toward the bed.

"What are you doing?" Nico asked.

"I'll think better if I fuck you first."

"Jason..."

As they reached the bed, Jason pressed Nico's head down but held his hips up high.

"Stand on my feet," he ordered.

Nico sighed, but he did what Jason asked. "Jason..."

"Please, Nico," Jason begged. "I know you're not in the mood, but you feel so hot and tight around me. You're so good, so hot. I won't be able to think of anything else until I've had you."

Jason softly brushed his finger against Nico's entrance. The resulting gasp went straight to Jason's dick.

"I guess...you could talk me into it." Nico's hips were moving, seeking out Jason's touch.

"That's my amazing, sexy lover," Jason cooed. Already, Jason could feel the anger and stress melt away as he steadied Nico's hips and began the slow descent into the place where nothing mattered but him and Nico.

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"I love you, Jace. I'll see you in a little bit, and we'll talk?" Nico walked backward toward the door of Cabin One.

Nico's lips and wrists were bruised, and he was cradling his right arm. Jason had been too rough; he knew it. Nico was so much smaller than him, even though the son of Hades had grown a great deal in the past year. Jason was normally a rough lover, but he was careful not to hurt Nico. This time, he'd needed Nico's sex, and he'd needed it hard and fast. There hadn't been any consideration of Nico's comfort. Nico hadn't complained.

"I love you, too, Nico." Jason didn't answer the question about talking. He didn't want to talk. If he talked, he might tell Nico the truth, and the truth would hurt. As Nico turned back toward the door
and left, his face a careful mask, Jason got the impression the lies hurt, too.

Jason pushed his head through his old Camp Jupiter shirt and sat on his bed to work on putting on his tennis shoes. He'd tied the second set of laces when he heard movement in the cabin. Thinking Nico had come back for something, Jason took his time straightening to standing. He was shocked when he finally raised his eyes and saw his father standing there in a gray pinstripe suit, looking like he'd just stepped out of a boardroom.

Zeus had never visited Jason, not once. The only time he'd even communicated with Jason was during the final battle with the giants in the war against Gaea. The talk hadn't gone well. Zeus had said he was proud of Jason, but not five minutes later, the king of the gods had almost electrocuted his only mortal son for daring to criticize Zeus's choice to punish Apollo.

Now here the god was, in Jason's cabin.

"Hello, Father," Jason said stiffly.

"Oh, please, call me dad, Jason," Zeus said. He took a seat on the couch that Hera had left and motioned for Jason to do the same.

"Hi, Dad," Jason tried again. The word sounded so foreign on his tongue. Jason stared at his father and saw his own eyes staring back. His eyes, his nose, his jaw. Jason knew he got a lot of his looks from his mother, too. Piper liked to tease that this was why he was so good-looking, the son of a movie star and the king of the gods, but Jason had never seriously thought about it until now.

"You look well, Jason," Zeus said amiably. "How is the mortal life treating you?"

"I'm good, Dad. Great, actually. How about you?"

"Oh, busy as always, but I was happy to make the time to come see my son." Zeus smiled grandly at Jason, and Jason found himself smiling broadly back. "Now, I wanted to speak with you about your future, son."

"My...future?" Jason was stunned. Zeus had never shown any interest in him at all. Why would he be here to talk about Jason's future?

"Yes, of course! You are the ruler of these demigods, correct? The son of the king of gods is surely the king of the demigods?" Zeus said it so certainly that Jason barely questioned whether or not the statement should be true.

"I...we don't have a king," Jason replied. "If we did, it'd be Percy, not me."

"Nonsense," Zeus said. "Fish-head's son has gone away to college, and you are twice the soldier he is."

"I guess," Jason said. "But Nico--"

"Ah, yes, my other brother's son." Zeus paused and raised his eyebrows at Jason, but when Jason didn't say anything, Zeus continued. "He is quite an attractive young man -- fairer than we've seen in many generations, I'd say, but he isn't material for the king of the demigods. No, that honor is yours alone to claim, Jason."

"We don't have a king," Jason said again.
Zeus made an impatient sound in the back of his throat. His temple pulsed, and a bit of electricity shot over the top of his perfectly coiffed salt-and-pepper hair. "You're getting hung up on semantics, boy. Call yourself whatever you'd like: leader, boss, champion. That is what you are. The other campers respect you, do they not? Chiron defers to your choices, yes?"

"But Nico and Percy--"

"Are not you, my son." Zeus said it with such an air of finality. Jason nodded his head in agreement while his father spoke. "You are getting quite old, almost eighteen. It's time you settled on a mate. The lovely daughter of Aphrodite will do nicely. If she is no longer to your liking, the Praetor to the Romans will work as well. Which would you have?"

"I...wait. Stop. I don't want Reyna or Piper, Father," Jason said. "I'm with Nico. I love Nico. If I'm choosing a mate, I choose him."

"Now, that won't do at all. You must choose one of the girls," Zeus said. "Choose one that will bring you honor and be a fit queen by your side. She will bear you children and provide wise counsel."

"I want Nico." Jason ground out the words.

"Oh, you can keep him, son. I don't mind at all. Who doesn't have a pretty little lover on the side?" The big grin had returned. Jason frowned. "Keep him, enjoy his features and skills, but choose a true mate. You needn't love her. I certainly don't love Hera. This is simply about securing your position. I'm sure either girl would be honored!"

"Father. Dad." Jason tried to school his features into an outward display of calm and authority. "That isn't the way the modern world works."

"Nonsense, foolish boy! That is exactly the way the modern world works. Perhaps not for commoners and fools, but for powerful men like you, Jason Grace, that is absolutely the way the world works."

A bug scurried out from under the statue that dominated the cabin. It scuttled two feet along the floor before Zeus blasted it with a lightning bolt. Jason could smell the singed carcass.

"Jason," Zeus said more gently. "You can have it all: the admiration and devotion of all the demigods, a lovely wife to bear you children, your sweet lover, and you'll be bringing honor to your mother, ah, Hera, and myself. We will be so proud of you, son. Follow in our footsteps. Nothing is holding you back."

"Can I think about it?" Jason asked. The way Zeus said it made everything sound so easy. Jason could have his father's approval. He could have the esteem of the camps. He could have Nico. Those were the only things he wanted. If getting them meant a little deceit, well, they were worth it, weren't they?

"Of course, of course," Zeus said as his eyes, Jason's own eyes, lit up the room. "I'll be watching, my dear son."

Zeus began to glow, and Jason closed his eyes.

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Jason spent five days privately mulling the visit from Zeus. He was making Nico unhappy, closing himself off. He'd turn to Nico for sex but shut down when Nico wanted to talk. Jason felt like he was losing his hold on himself, and that other Jason, the one his father promised he could be, the one that had it all and had it all together, well, he sounded so tempting.

It could be so simple. Date a girl. He was fond of either Reyna or Piper, and they were fond of him. Reyna would understand about power and keeping up appearances. She wouldn't object to the arrangement. She would understand that Jason was in love with Nico. Piper, she might be harder to convince. But she was closer, at least for now, until they both went to New Rome for college this fall. She had feelings for him. He wouldn't be able to tell her about Nico, though.

And Nico...Nico would be okay with it. He'd understand that Jason was doing what was necessary. Nico was practical and reasonable. Jason had been lying to Nico for long enough now that he was starting to believe the lies he told himself.

"Hey there, Jason." The voice at his ear made him jump. "You're zoning out. You okay?"

Jason looked up to find the dining pavilion deserted, except for himself and Nico. The last he'd noticed, almost the entire camp had been turned out for lunch. He watched his boyfriend shift his feet nervously. Nico was dressed in what Jason liked to call his "Nico armor" -- black combat boots, torn and faded black jeans, holey black skull t-shirt, the ever-present skull ring, and the Stygian iron blade held in place by that ridiculous silver chain link belt. Nico couldn't wear anything that would make him more appealing. Every one of Nico's features, from his tousled black hair to the length of his slim, tapered fingers, seemed designed to fill Jason with desire. Could he risk losing this?

"Jason?" Nico prompted.

"What? Oh, yeah, sorry. I guess I was lost in thought," Jason said.

Nico touched Jason's shoulder and let his hand trail down Jason's upper arm. Jason jerked away and hurriedly surveyed their surroundings. Nico's lips formed a straight line.

"No one's here but us, Jason."

"Sorry, I just..."

"Take a walk with me," Nico said. It sounded like an order.

"Can we shadow to my cabin instead? Or yours?" Jason asked.

"I think a walk in the woods would be good for both of us," Nico said. "Free us from distraction."

Jason studied Nico's face and came up with few answers. He stood. Nico turned away, and, after making sure no one was around, Jason grabbed his slender hip and slid his hand up under Nico's t-shirt and then down under his boxers. He pulled Nico close.

"You think I won't fuck you in the woods?" Jason whispered. Nico shivered.

"I think I won't let you have me in the woods," Nico replied. He pushed Jason's hand away and started walking.

Jason briefly considered not following. He thought maybe he'd return to his cabin and make Nico come to him. He'd be able to convince Nico that physical pleasure was much more enjoyable than talking. He'd put off the conversation for another day. At this point, though, he wasn't sure Nico would come to him. He followed his lover into the woods.
They walked a long time, until the trees were densely packed and the sounds of camp had faded away. Jason wasn't worried about getting lost. Either he could fly them out or Nico could shadow travel away. Besides, they both knew their way around the forest. When they happened upon a large fallen tree, Nico sat on the trunk. Tentatively, Jason sat next to him and took his hand.

After ten minutes of silence, Nico confessed. "I'm afraid I'm losing you, Jace."

"That's crazy," Jason said. "I love you more than ever. I've just had a lot on my mind."

Jason felt angry. How could Nico think that he was falling out of love? His love for Nico was the one thing of which he was sure.

"You don't talk to me. All you seem to want is sex and a body to hold through the night. You can get that from anyone, you know, being who you are." Nico hadn't looked at Jason. He looked forward, and his expression hadn't changed since they'd sat down.

"You said you wouldn't leave me." Jason grabbed Nico's jaw and forced him to make eye contact.

"I'm not leaving you. I'm asking you to talk to me," Nico said. He slapped Jason's hand away from his face. "Quit pulling me around. I'm not your toy. If you want me to look at you, ask."

"I don't know what to say." Jason tucked his slapped hand into his lap.

"Say something. Anything."

"I love you. I know that."

"Well, that's a good start," Nico said. The corners of his mouth tilted up in a small smile. Jason realized it had been a while since he'd seen Nico genuinely smile. That was his fault.

Jason turned and straddled the log. He scooted close enough to Nico that he could pull him in for a hug but far enough away that he could see his boyfriend's face. He rested his hand on Nico's thigh and began sliding it up and down. Nico sighed.

"You don't want people to know about us anymore, do you? You want it to stay a secret."

The certainty with which Nico said the words made Jason realize what a poor job he was doing keeping his feelings hidden. He laid his head on Nico's shoulder.

"I'm not embarrassed to be with you. You're wonderful," Jason said. His eyes stung with tears. "But you were right. The other campers don't see all the good things I see. They don't see your kindness and compassion. They'll never understand how you value justice. They won't give you credit for how smart you are. Maybe when Percy was around, he could have made things better. But I'm not Percy. I don't have the luxury of being loved for my heroics and my fun personality. I'm just Jason, boring and dutiful, and the campers only follow me because I'm the biggest and the strongest and my dad is Zeus. If they knew we were together..."

Nico shook his head. "They would start to see you as something less, too, the way they see me."

"Do you hate me?" Jason asked.

Nico silently chuckled. The motion didn't convey any happiness. "I hate the situation, Jace. I don't hate you."

Jason kissed Nico's knuckles. Nico stood and walked a short distance away. He placed the top of his
head and his forearms on a tree trunk and leaned in. Jason watched. He could feel the misery rolling off Nico in waves. Eventually, Nico turned and leaned his side against the tree so his back faced Jason.

"My dad came to visit me a few days ago," Jason offered. He shouldn't be bringing this up now. In some twisted way, Jason hoped it would help.

Nico turned and approached. "That's good, I think. What did he want?"

"He wanted to talk about my future."

"Oh."

"What do you mean, 'oh?'" Jason could tell Nico wasn't thrilled. But he should be happy Jason had gotten a visit from his father. He knew, better than anyone, that Jason longed for his dad to pay attention to him.

"I mean he came to tell you to break up with me, didn't he? That's why you've been even worse about talking to me lately. You've been trying to decide if you should do what he said." Nico moved closer, and Jason could see the sadness in his eyes.

"No, that's not what he said," Jason snapped. "He's looking out for me, trying to help me. He said you and I could stay together."

"It's not his business who you're with, Jason."

"It is," Jason said. "He's my dad, Nico. What he says matters to me. Don't tell me you don't care what your dad says."

"I care a hell of a lot what my dad says." Nico's voice was raised, but he wasn't shouting. "You don't think he's told me he doesn't approve of you and me? He tells me every time I visit. But my choices are mine, and my feelings are mine. My dad doesn't dictate what I do."

"Oh, and mine does?" Jason stood and crossed his arms over his chest. "You don't even know what he said! I told you, he said we can be together. He doesn't have a problem with it. In fact, he told me a way maybe it could be easier for us."

"And this suggestion was so good that it's taken you how many days to tell me?" Nico asked. His dark eyes looked dangerous and menacing. His hands were clenched in fists. Jason had to consciously stop himself from taking a step back. Nico may be smaller, younger, and not as physically strong, but he was a million times scarier than Jason or Percy could ever be.

"I had to think."

"By 'think' do you mean 'plant my dick in your ass and fuck you until you can't breathe and I can do what I want?""

Nico had never been so crude. He'd always treated their intimacy with reverence. Now, Jason was startled to realize, Nico sounded like him. Is that what Nico thought Jason was doing when they made love?

"Don't act like you don't fucking like it rough, or often." Jason's voice dripped with hostility. "You practically beg for it. I can't help it that you're such an amazing fuck. Really, Nico, if you wanted me to stop fucking you, you should probably act a bit less like some whore. If I didn't know you better, and your ass wasn't so tight, I'd swear you'd slept with a million guys."
Nico reeled away from Jason and stumbled to sit on the forest floor, facing away from his boyfriend. He pulled up his knees and curled into a ball.

"What did your father say?" Nico asked. His voice was so small that Jason could barely hear him.

Jason took a few deep breaths and tried to calm down. He would need to tell Nico he wasn't using him for sex. He wasn't sure how to do it.

"He, um, he said that I could stay with you, so don't get any ideas that this is about me and you. I love you. It's not the sex, Nico. It's you, I promise." Jason paused, but Nico said nothing, so he continued on. "He said I can have it all. The respect of the campers. You. His and Hera's approval. He told me how."

"What does he suggest?" Again, so quiet. Jason stared at the back of Nico's head, those silky black curls falling every which way. He followed the trail of Nico's spine, visible through his shirt. Jason had always loved Nico's spine. It made Nico seem delicate, fragile, the way it stuck out so far from his back. Jason had once enjoyed the way it made him feel like he was protecting Nico, though Nico clearly didn't need protection. Except for now, when Jason had the feeling he was the threat from which Nico's spine needed protected.

Jason sat down behind Nico and pulled up his black shirt. He traced each vertebra, all the way up to Nico's skull and all the way down to his tailbone.

"He says that I should choose a girl to be a mate. Not romantic. Just a partner to show to the camps." Jason needed to assure Nico that their love wouldn't be compromised. "Nothing would change between you and me. We'd be the same as we are now. If I did that, then the camps would respect me more. I'd be part of a super-couple like Percy and Annabeth. My dad, he'd be proud when I'm the undisputed leader of the camps. He says that's the arrangement he has with Hera."

Nico nodded. "Who would be your girlfriend?"

"My dad suggested Piper or Reyna."

"Reyna wouldn't do that, Jason." Nico said it with such certainty that Jason was surprised.

"Why not? She used to have a crush on me. She understands duty and honor."

"Because it's not honorable," Nico murmured. "She knows, about me and you. I didn't tell her, but she knows. She would never hurt me like that. She wouldn't settle for something false, either."

Reyna knew? How many others knew? Jason had heard whispers, rumors, but as far as he knew, that's all they'd been. No one had any proof. He felt his stomach tighten. And, wait, Nico was saying this would hurt him? Shit.

"Piper, then. You're the Reyna expert, after all." Jason felt the acid in his words. "Why do you say this would hurt you? Nothing has to change."

"You love me?"

"That shouldn't even be a question," Jason snarled. He dropped his hand from Nico's back.

"How long are you supposed to have this 'mate?'" Nico asked, turning his head slightly to gaze at Jason.

"I don't know. Marry her, I guess."
"Have some kids?" Nico prompted.

"Yeah, that's the plan."

"And I'm supposed to what, exactly?" Nico turned all the way around and faced Jason. Jason grabbed for Nico's hand, but Nico jerked it away. "Be your kept man? Your little something on the side, while you put on a public show with your trophy wife, and sleep with her, and have a family, have it all? What about that says you love me, Jason?"

"Because I wouldn't have to give you up." Why couldn't Nico see this?

"I'm not your possession. You're not the only damned one with feelings. You're thinking so much about making yourself into what everyone else wants you to be that you aren't giving any thought to me. You think I want to spend my life waiting for you to get a little free time to what? Fuck me? You think that's love? I want a home. I want a family. I want someone to treasure me as much as I do them."

"I do treasure you, Nico." Jason was crying now. "Please don't be this way."

"You don't treasure me at all, or even know me, if you'd ask this of me." Nico dabbed at Jason's tears with the side of his hand. "If you love me, tell your father no. Let's go public with our relationship. In three months, I'll move with you to New Rome, and no one will care that you're dating me. We can have a good life together."

"I love you." Jason swore he'd never meant anything more in his whole life. "But I can't do what you're asking. My dad, gods, Nico, I'm so close to gaining his approval."

Nico nodded. His fingertips trailed over Jason's cheek. He stood and brushed forest debris from his body.

"I love you, too, Jason." Nico closed his eyes and visibly swallowed. He nodded again and opened his eyes. "I think it's time for me to go."

"Wait! What? What do you mean?" Jason jumped up and wrapped his hand around Nico's wrist.

"I mean I'm leaving."

"You're leaving the forest?"

"I'm leaving you."

Jason dropped Nico's wrist like he'd been burned. Nico stared at him, and his eyes, usually so full of life and emotion, were dark and empty. He turned and started to walk away.

"Nico! You can't walk away! We've been together for over a year! Just, wait, okay?" Jason chased after Nico when he didn't stop or turn around. He caught up to his boyfriend and stepped in front of him, blocking the path. "I love you."

Nico turned his head away. "If you loved me, you wouldn't do this. You wouldn't seriously entertain the thought of sleeping with someone else in order to make your dad happy. You wouldn't expect me to give my life away to wait for you to show up on my doorstep for secret little quickies. You wouldn't treat our love like some trivial, meaningless part of your life."

Two steps off the path, and Nico was around Jason and trudging back toward camp. He'd gone ten feet when Jason hit him in the back with a small rock. Nico turned.
"I moved the winds to make sure it went where I directed it. I...I wouldn't hurt you, Nico," Jason said. Nico stared, emotionless. Jason motioned to the path ahead. "Why are you walking instead of using the shadows?"

"Because I want to see how far you'll pursue me. I'm giving you a chance to change your mind. Will you follow me all the way into camp, Jason?" Nico asked.

Jason shook his head.

"That's what I thought. Well, you can watch me go." Nico resumed his course.

Jason was distraught. He hadn't meant to drive Nico away, but now he was leaving and there was nothing Jason could do. Nothing Jason was willing to do. Anger, his new best friend, flared in his chest.

"Fine! Go! You're just a hot body and a pretty face. That's all it ever was, Nico! I used you!" Jason screamed. He wasn't done. He took three steps closer to Nico, who'd stopped once again, but hadn't turned around. "Why the hell would anyone want you for any other reason? You smell like death! You're mean-spirited and creepy! If you want someone who'll keep you, you better get down on your knees one hell of a lot, because the way you fuck and suck is all you've got going for you, you weird little shit!"

Jason was five feet away, his hand outstretched to grab Nico's shirt and pull him back, to beg and plead for forgiveness, to swear he hadn't meant it, when Nico let out a huge breath and melted into the shadows.
The three men slept in such an entertaining way. None of them were accustomed to sleeping alone, but they were unaccustomed to sleeping with one another. They had been forced by the barrier into extremely close proximity for most of the night, and with the expansion of the barrier in the morning, they’d spread out in a way that allowed them space but kept them in physical contact.

Because he felt like he’d gotten the better deal by getting to sleep with Nico facing him, Percy had volunteered to take the side of the bed that touched the wall. He was pressed into it now, with only the comforter between him and the scratchy earthen surface. Nico’s head rested on Percy's chest. One of his hands was wedged under Percy's side and the other had slipped between Percy's thighs. Nico was uncovered and gave the impression he needed warmth. His legs splayed out diagonally along the bed and were almost completely covered by Jason, who was laying on his stomach with his head pressed into the small of Nico’s back. One of Jason's arms wrapped tightly around Nico's waist while the other dangled over the edge of the bed. Both of Jason's calves had dropped off the bed, too, and one upper leg kept sliding off as well. Jason would startle slightly each time and drag his leg back onto the bed, never fully waking.

All it would take was a small shift in Percy's posture and Jason would find himself face-down on the floor. Percy seemed content, though, curled into his corner. One hand held Nico's rib cage, and the other made slow, clumsy strokes up and down Nico's upper arm. Godhood had not fixed Percy's drool problem.

The goddess Hygieia stood at the foot of the bed and decided she could help with that, Percy's drool and morning breath, at least. She had been sent to help them, after all.

Nico began to stir. He stretched his legs underneath Jason, knocking Jason's leg off the bed once again. Jason brought his leg back up and tightened his grip on Nico's middle. Percy patted Nico's head and mumbled, "go back to sleep, baby." He fell back asleep before he could remove his forearm from the side of Nico's face.

Nico responded by trying to curl Percy into his upper body. He wedged his bottom arm fully under Percy, hooked his hands together behind Percy's backside, and began pulling. Percy resisted the movement, so Nico tried to drag his own body closer instead. Jason felt to Nico like a warm blanket that had tangled around his legs, preventing his snuggling with what his sleepy mind had branded a very warm pillow. He kicked to free himself while still tugging on Percy. Nico's feet appeared and disappeared between Jason's knees with each kick. Jason grunted and began to fall from the bed in earnest. He dragged Nico with him as he fell, and Nico, in turn, pulled Percy.

The whole, mangled heap of godliness fell onto the floor.

Jason and Percy received the worst of it. Jason landed on his back with Nico sitting on his chest. Percy dropped on top of Nico but fell to the side and cried out in pain when Nico's stubborn forearm slammed into his testicles. Obliviously, Nico laid his head on Percy's stomach and slept on. Hygieia covered her mouth to suppress her giggles and cleared her throat.

"Good morning, godlings," she said.

Jason raised his head from behind Nico's hip and stared at her. Percy was too busy trying to escape Nico's stranglehold on his pelvis to pay any attention. Jason shoved at Nico's butt and said, "My Lady, thank you for visiting us."
Hygieia laughed and stepped over Percy toward the door. "I shall wait for you in your living room, dears."

When she'd left the room, Jason shoved Nico very hard. "Get the fuck up, Nico! We have company."

"Damn it, Jason," Percy said. His face was turning purple. "Every time you shove him he holds onto me harder. He's racking my balls. Pinch him."

Jason didn't want to pinch Nico, but he very much wanted to get off the floor and find out who their mystery visitor was. He pinned Nico's legs with one hand and slipped the other between Nico's upper thighs. He dug around until his fingertips moved the boxers out of the way and brushed bare skin. He readied his thumb and index finger. Nico would not like this. "Be ready, Percy."

"Do it already," Percy wheezed.

Jason sucked in a big breath and pinched. Nico squealed, arched his back, clanged heads with Percy, and rolled down the length of Jason's and Percy's legs. He looked manic and frightened, wide-eyed, and grabbed at his hip over and over, reaching for his sword, which was, to Jason's and Percy's benefit, not attached to his boxers.

Nico was accustomed to sleeping wrapped in his lover's arms. He was also accustomed to waking up alone. Jason's pinch startled him more than it would have if it had occurred at some other time of day. He saw Percy and Jason on the floor and tried to make sense of what had happened. Jason grinned in relief that he hadn't suffered any kicks or headbutts or anything terrible at all. Percy wheezed some more and laid his cheek on the floor. Nico decided there was no use asking why Percy and Jason were on the floor. He stepped over Percy and opened the curtain in the doorway, only to pull it tightly shut a second later.

"There's a lady here," he whispered. Hygieia had made herself at home in the living room. Her chiton and sandals seemed more in keeping with their living arrangements than the men's t-shirts and jeans.

"No shit, Sherlock," Percy gasped between labored breaths. "Maybe she brought me and Jason cups to sleep in."

Jason stood. He and Nico began to dress while Percy remained on the floor.

"What do you mean about cups?" Nico asked. "Why would you sleep with a cup?"

"He means athletic cups," Jason said. "Remember from football?"

Nico reflexively squeezed his knees together. He'd endured one direct hit in the entire football season. It wasn't a memory he enjoyed.

"Football players don't wear cups," Nico said. "I should've, though."

"You played football?" Percy asked from the floor. His face was less purple, and he no longer felt like he was dying a godly death.

Nico paused in zipping his jeans and helped Percy up. He shrugged once Percy was upright. "I'm full of surprises."

Jason tugged on his sock, but after considering its uselessness, he took it off. They were gods. Items like socks seemed irrelevant. He watched Nico wriggle into his boots. "He can tell you about his
glory days later. Let's figure out who our visiting goddess is."

"Not an Olympian," Nico said. "Also not Persephone, obviously, Hecate, Nemesis, Styx, Nike--"

"Thank you, Nico," Jason said. He didn't want to be rude, but Nico could go on all day eliminating goddesses and they'd still be no closer to figuring out who sat in their living room. "I think we should go ask."

"That would be prudent," Hygieia called.

Percy raised his eyebrows, shrugged into his shirt, and tugged Nico out into the main room. Jason followed while Percy finished fastening his jeans.

"We're sorry, Lady," Nico said. He bowed in front of the simple, low stool on which Hygieia was perched. She found him, all of them, really, instantly charming.

"Be comfortable, young ones," she said. "My name is Hygieia, and I have been sent to help you with matters of godly health."

"Ha! I knew you looked familiar," Jason said. He sat on the couch closest to Hygieia, with Nico between him and Percy. "I met your statue at your dad's office once."

"Ah, yes," the goddess said. "My father told me. Your glasses are no longer necessary, dear, though you may continue to wear them if you find them comfortable."

Jason was surprised. He hadn't thought about it. He took the glasses off and eyed the room. His vision was perfect. He smiled sheepishly at Nico. Nico liked the glasses. Jason knew Nico liked the glasses. He put them back on his face.

"Poser," Percy coughed.

Wisely, everyone ignored Percy.

"Now, what are you calling yourselves?" Hygieia asked. She wanted to be polite and professional.

"Um, Nico, Jason, and Percy?" Nico said. He wasn't aware that there were other options.

"Yes, those were your human names, but you are gods now. You can refashion yourself any way you want. You can go by your last name, choose a completely new name, or keep your given name. Though if you decide on the latter, Perseus and Jason, you may find that people confuse you with your earlier counterparts."

Percy and Jason looked at each other in alarm. Neither had considered the possibility of a different name. None of them had considered the reality that their names would be spoken, that they would exist, for hundreds, thousands more years. Percy's carefree attitude faded. He had a daughter. A wife. They would live their lives, grow old, die, all without him. He dropped his head onto Nico's back.

Nico reached behind him and took Percy's hand. "I think I probably want to stay Nico," he said. "It's what my dad and Persephone already call me. And Apollo."

Hygieia nodded. "Grandfather has been banned from you for a period of 3000 years. Zeus was quite angry that Granddad's hubris resurfaced so quickly after the Giant War. I'm sorry, Nico."

Nico wrapped his arm around his stomach. He'd expected it, but he would still mourn the loss of his lover. "Was he punished in any other way?"
"None that hurt him as much as that," Hygieia said.

Percy's hand wrapped more tightly around Nico's. Jason rested his hand on Nico's knee. Yesterday, Nico might have brushed them both off. Today, he was grateful for their touch. It helped that they weren't fighting over him.

"Do you think we'll be given time to choose our name?" Jason asked. "I'm kind of used to being Jason -- and being confused for the other Jason. Grace would only make me think of my sister. Something new would feel fake, and," Jason tilted his head toward Nico and Percy, "I spent way too much of my first life being fake. I'm not making that mistake again."

Hygieia smiled at Jason. Nico leaned forward, with Percy's head still on his back, and nudged Jason's shoulder with his forehead.

"Jason is a lovely name," the goddess said. When it became clear Percy wasn't going to offer any new name, she continued. "Now, as I said, I'm here to instruct you in the ways of godly health. Gods are, by our physically perfect nature, not generally in need of more than a little maintenance and occasional troubleshooting. We run along quite well without anything more than a bit of nectar and ambrosia. We have few requirements. We do not get sick. If injured, unless the injury is particularly devastating, we heal quickly."

Hygieia paused, but the three men said nothing.

"As an example, Nico, you recently severed a few of Hephaestus's fingers."

Nico blanched. He hadn't wanted to hurt Hephaestus, but he'd needed to fight, to try to escape. Percy and Jason turned their attention to Nico. Neither could imagine what he'd been able to do to injure the gods, and neither had thought to ask before now what Nico had done during the days he'd been free while they'd been held captive. The discussion would have to wait.

"You'll be happy to know that, without any intervention besides a bit of nectar poured over the wounds, Hephaestus healed completely earlier this morning. You did cause him a great deal of pain. As you have noticed during your waking up time today, you are capable of feeling pain."

"You racked me, Neeks," Percy said.

Nico almost laughed at the absurdity of those being Percy's first spoken words in ten minutes. Instead, he said, "I'm sorry."

"Yes," Hygieia said. "And how do you feel now, Perseus?"

Percy's face colored. "Fine. No lasting damage."

"Good. If a mortal had done that to you, you would have felt no pain."

"That's true," Nico said. He made eye contact with both Jason and Percy. "There were times when Apollo and I..." Nico trailed off. He wasn't sure if he was allowed to talk about the affair.

Hygieia understood Nico's reluctance, but Jason and Percy were eager to hear what Nico had to say.

"Speak, godling," Hygieia said. Her brown, wavy hair bounced as she nodded her head to encourage Nico. "You cannot be punished again for your transgressions."

"Anyway," Nico said, "we'd spar sometimes. I could knock him down and stuff, but I could hit him as hard as I wanted and he never felt it. There were times he'd accidentally bruise me just from
tensing his fingers. It's shocking, the difference between the strength of a god and the strength of a mortal."

"That is correct," Hygieia said. "When you are allowed contact with mortals, you must have learned to control your touch so you do not cause harm. The three of you can relate to one another much the same as you always have, though. The physical ways you could inflict pain on one another before would cause the same amount of pain now."

Jason wanted to ask how sex worked, but he was too embarrassed to ask directly. "So we can hurt each other the same as always. And, um, pleasure..."

"Jace, gods," Nico said. His cheeks flushed bright red. "Don't ask her that."

"I can give you clinical information, Jason," Hygieia said, "but I lack practical experience for the kind of pleasure I believe you reference. I imagine Nico would have more relevant answers."

Jason turned and opened his mouth.

"Shut up," Nico hissed. Percy poked his head around Nico's shoulder and made a goofy face at Jason. Nico nudged Jason's knee. "Quit being embarrassing. Ask Lady Hygieia about stuff while she's here to help us."

"My time is limited, I'm afraid," the goddess said. "We visiting gods have been given a one hour time limit for our chats with you. I'm happy to stay for the entire hour and answer your questions to the best of my ability, but I should cover a few more areas within my realm before I open things up for q&a."

Jason, Nico, and Percy nodded as one. Nico sat back against the couch cushions and tried to hide, now that Percy didn't need his back for emotional support. Percy moved a bit closer and wrapped his arm around Nico's shoulders. He wanted to be sure he paid attention to everything Hygieia said.

"Now, as you noticed with Jason's glasses, your physical imperfections have vanished. Percy, dear, your slightly oversized adenoids have returned to a standard size. You can cure your morning breath and drooling simply by closing your mouth when you sleep. Nico, you had no physical imperfections of a clinical nature."

"Always has to be perfect," Percy said under his breath. Nico elbowed him.

"If any health-related problems arise, you can heal yourselves through concentration. Nico and Percy, you already possess healing powers, correct?"

The men nodded.

"Those are enhanced. You can heal yourselves or Jason even faster than the normal godly healing process. Ah, one other point," Hygieia said. "I am a goddess of health, but I am also the goddess of hygiene, thus the origin of the word. Pardon my frankness, but none of you smells particularly pleasant at the moment."

Percy sniffed his armpit and silently agreed. He leaned forward and smelled Nico's chest. "Ew, dude, she's right. We're ripe."

Nico stuck his tongue out at Percy. "Jason smells worse."

"I'm a big guy," Jason said. He wrinkled his nose. He did smell rather bad. "Percy probably stinks the worst. He's hairy."
"You're hairier in the places that create a smell, Jace. Percy has...I'm going to shut up now."

Nico was reaching a new record for the number of times he'd blushed in a half-hour period. Jason and Percy were both blushing, too.

"At any rate," Hygieia said, anxious to change the subject from the hair in the men's more private areas, "you each possess the power to clean yourselves and others, though I would not recommend doing that without first receiving permission from the person you want to clean. All you need to do is wish to be clean. Perseus--"

"Huh?" Percy thought Hygieia sounded a bit like his mother, whom he'd never see again. He pushed away thoughts of Sally Jackson. "Yes, I mean."

"Concentrate now. Focus on making your underarms clean. You have to want it."

Jason snickered at him, but Percy tuned him out. He concentrated, but his armpits felt as rank as they had a few minutes ago. Percy thought perhaps he could get Nico to climb on top of him and whisper seductive phrases in his ear the way he'd done with Jason to get the couch. That would make him wish for cleanliness. As soon as the thought occurred to him, Percy's armpits were clean. He could feel the difference.

"Haha! Smell it, Grace!" Percy said. He whooped and tried to put his armpit in Jason's face.

Nico pushed him back. "The rest of you still stinks, Percy. Have mercy on me."

Percy raised an eyebrow at Nico, who plastered himself into the couch. Percy laid his hand on Nico's shoulder and let his mind wander. Instantaneously, he was spotlessly clean. He wiggled his eyebrows at Nico, who looked scandalized.

Hygieia laughed.

"It is a long time since I was a young goddess. I had forgotten what a large help desire can be in harnessing godly powers. Perhaps it is one of the reasons we are so carnally driven."

"I bet Hestia and Artemis don't stink," Jason said. He closed his eyes and concentrated. The feeling wasn't so different from conjuring the furniture. Within a few breaths, he was clean.

"Wonderful!" Hygieia clapped. She was glad the men were able to do this, but she was also glad they no longer stunk. "Now, Nico."

Nico tried. He did. He'd blocked off a large part of himself in order to survive being stranded with Jason and Percy. He had felt it was necessary to put his needs and wants aside in order to make sure Percy and Jason didn't fall into a tailspin. Now, aside from the brief moment where he'd gotten carried away by Jason yesterday, he was having trouble reaching the part of himself that was selfish, that wanted.

"Hey, Neeks," Percy said. Nico opened his eyes. Percy and Jason watched him in concern. Nico did not like having attention focused on him. His eyes flitted to Hygieia, who was kindly examining one of Jason's water bottles. Percy patted Nico's knee. "You'll get it."

Nico nodded. He didn't believe Percy. "I'm going to go outside, maybe swim. That'll at least make me smell a little better. Thank you, Lady Hygieia, for helping us."

He left as quickly as possible.
While Nico struggled to refrain from throwing his boots and jeans into the ocean in a fit of rage, Percy and Jason stayed inside and attempted to contain their worry for Nico.

"He didn't try," Percy said.

"He did," Jason argued.

"He did," Hygieia agreed. "He will struggle to accept and control his powers. You two will need to help him."

Percy settled back on the couch. "But why? He was the strongest of the three of us, back when we were mortal."

Hygieia tucked her feet up under herself on the stool, which morphed into an office chair. She worked to decide what impartial truth she could share with Jason and Percy.

"The powers of a demigod, particularly ones as powerful as the three of you were, are largely driven by emotion. Nico had a massive store of power, but he also was capable of extreme emotion to make the best use of the power. That is not necessarily a negative thing. Love is more powerful than hatred, acceptance more than anger, and so on. The power of the gods works in much the same way. You each have a finite store of power, and it is particularly limited during your incarceration. In order to access and work with those powers, you must tap into your emotional state. I believe each of you have focused on a positive feeling to achieve the use of your powers thus far."

"You're saying Nico has shut down, and that's why he can't do anything?" Jason asked.

"A muted emotional palette will not lend itself to the discovery and use of powers," Hygieia said.


"That is a question you and Jason are much more qualified to answer," Hygieia said. "You are his friends. More than friends, if I understand correctly. If you honestly do not know, perhaps you should find out. Have you any other questions?"

"A million," Jason said. He looked at Percy, who nodded. "But we need to have a talk with our friend. Thank you, Lady Hygieia."

"It has been my pleasure," Hygieia said. She rose from the chair, and it vanished. "I hope we meet again under happier circumstances. Welcome to the pantheon."
Nico had't known where he was going when he'd entered the shadows. He'd just known he had to run. Jason was closing in behind him, and he would pull Nico back and cry and swear he hadn't meant any of the cruel words he'd said. And, after long protests, Nico would let himself be convinced Jason hadn't meant it. He'd let himself get roped back into a life where he felt smaller and less worthwhile every day. Maybe Jason didn't mean what he said now, but if Nico stayed, if he let himself do what Jason wanted, those awful words were who he'd become. He loved Jason more than his own life, but he couldn't let himself be something they'd both grow to hate.

When the shadows spit him out at a nondescript brown wood door located partway down a nondescript beige hall with tan carpet, Nico was confused. He'd never been here before. He'd wanted to find someplace he could hide for a little while. Then he could go back to the Hades cabin, get some supplies, and head to the Underworld.

His dad had warned him. Hades had said Jason would be too wrapped up in ideas of grandeur to be a partner to Nico. When things had started to turn bad, he'd begged Nico to cut his losses and come live in the Underworld for a while. Now here Nico was, preparing to run to his father. He hoped Hades's arms were still open wide.

Nico steadied his feet and focused. He was feeling extremely tired, so he must have gone far off course. No matter. He could sleep for days in his room in the Underworld. The shadows pooled around him, and Percy Jackson opened the door in front of him.

"Hey, Percy," Nico said wearily. The drowsiness was pulling at Nico from all sides, and it was all he could do to stay on his feet. No wonder, if he'd made the jump from New York to California without even trying.

"Nico!" Percy seemed to have recovered from his shock, and a huge smile lit his face. "Come in, buddy. I was going to meet Annabeth to study, but this is much better, and I won't have to study."

"I'll go," Nico said. "I shouldn't keep you. Especially from studying."

Percy stuck his tongue out at him and opened the door wider. "In, now, di Angelo."

Nico entered the room and saw that one bed had been stripped of its mattress. Other than that, the room was what Nico imagined a standard college dorm to be. There were two of everything: two desks bolted to the wall right next to each other; two dressers, light brown wood; two wardrobes, same wood. Percy's roommate must have moved out. The few belongings Nico could see, a fish tank, a small fountain, a blue mini-fridge, and a way too big tv with a mountain of video games, certainly screamed "Percy Jackson!"


"Bill, yeah," Percy said. He glanced at the empty bed frame and shrugged. "We didn't get along. He moved his mattress down the hall."

Nico couldn't help chuckling, even as miserable as he felt. Percy must be a terrible roommate for the
guy to actually go to all the trouble of taking the mattress off the bed. "You chased away an Apollo kid? I didn't think that was possible."

Percy glared at him. "You sent Will running with his tail between his legs, shit-for-brains."


"So what brings you out here? If I'd known you were coming I woulda cleaned up a bit. You staying with Hazel?"

"Ew, no. I hate the barracks. They smell like pee and feet." Nico shivered.

Percy laughed. "Does it really smell that much better in here?"

Nico took a big, exaggerated breath. "Yeah, sadly, it does. Anyway, I didn't mean to come here. I needed to get away from camp for a while, and I ended up here."

Nico saw the slight expression of disappointment on Percy's face. Surely Percy hadn't expected Nico to come to visit him? They had such a weird, rocky relationship. Nico wouldn't call Percy a friend. Yes, there'd been that one confusing encounter over the Christmas break, where Percy had almost treated Nico like a...Nico wasn't finishing that thought. They hadn't even spoken since then.

"Well, you're welcome to stay as long as you like," Percy said. "Let me text Annabeth and tell her I'm not meeting her, then I'm all yours."

Texting was something Nico had heard of but never seen. The demigods of Camp Jupiter were able to use cell phones within the magical confines of New Rome (shoot, Nico was breaking rules, bypassing Terminus — oh, well), and Nico was intrigued. There was a rumor that one day soon they'd all be able to use cell phones anywhere. He watched over Percy's shoulder as Percy pulled out a small gadget and slowly typed on a little keyboard.

After a few seconds spent watching Percy's thumbs move over the device, Nico was bored. He started to think of Jason and the hurtful things he'd said, the horrible "solution" he'd proposed, so he threw himself onto Percy's bed and stretched. The thing was surprisingly comfortable. Nico yawned, and Percy’s attention shifted from his phone to Nico.

"Scoot over."

Nico did, and Percy sat next to him and looked him over. Finally, Percy shrugged, kicked off his shoes, and laid down next to Nico. Nico tensed and scooted toward the wall.

"I don't have cooties, jerk," Percy said playfully. He nudged Nico's shoulder with his own. "Hey, get your boots off. They're gonna get cooties for real on my bed."

Instead of wasting the energy to sit up and take his boots off, Nico shrugged his way a little bit down the bed and dangled his feet off the edge. He smirked. "Better?"

"I suppose," Percy drawled. "So how's camp life treating you?"

"Bad enough for me to leave." Nico grimaced. "Don't want to talk about it. College?"

"I actually don't suck, can you believe it?" Percy turned slightly, and Nico caught him looking again. He supposed it was what normal people did, look at a person they were speaking to. Nico's eyelids slid closed.
"I told you that you wouldn't suck, remember?" Nico said smugly.

"Yeah, yeah," Percy's voice floated down to Nico's sleepy ears. "We had the 'who's smarter' argument last year. You win. What'll we fight about now?"

"There never seems to be a shortage of topics, does there?" Nico asked through a yawn.

Percy hummed his agreement, and Nico was almost asleep when a loud slap sounded and stinging pain enveloped his thigh. Nico's eyes jerked open, and he watched Percy both rubbing his thigh and grinning above him.

"Holy Hades, Percy!" Nico squeaked. "I was almost asleep."

"I know," Percy replied, "but I wasn't ready for you to sleep yet."

"I think me sleeping has more to do with when I want to sleep instead of when you want me to sleep," Nico said. He hadn't planned to come here, true, but being around Percy and his silliness was keeping Nico's mind off his heartbreak and away from wondering what his beautiful, smart, funny, friendly ex-boyfriend was doing. Nico probably didn't want to know. He looked back at Percy and was surprised to see Percy thoughtfully surveying his body. Percy's hand had stopped moving and was now perched at the mid-point of Nico's thigh. "What?"

Percy startled. "You've grown a lot this last year, you know? You're not so shrimpy."

"Yeah, I've noticed. They don't give me kids' menus at restaurants anymore." Nico laughed at Percy's scandalized face. "I'm kidding! They haven't given me kids' menus for years."

"Thank goodness! I'd have been so jealous." Now it was Nico's turn to do a double take. Percy broke out what was surely his biggest grin and squeezed Nico's thigh. If Percy caught the hitch in Nico's breathing, he didn't let on. "Teasing. Mostly. So you shadow traveled across the continent and now you're tired?"

Nico nodded. "You know the drill. With great power..."

"Comes great need to take a nap. I remember." Percy's eyes trailed down Nico's body again. Nico didn't know what the problem was. Was his fly open or something? There wasn't a way to subtly check, so Nico crossed his fingers and hoped this was yet one more example of Percy's overall weirdness. "Well, you can...use..."

"Percy?"

Percy's fingers grazed Nico's fly and and settled on his stomach. His bare stomach. Oh, gods, that must be what Percy had been staring at. Nico's shirt must have slid up when he scooted down to dangle his feet off the end of the bed. Nico did not need another person seeing how underwhelming he was, especially on a day like today. He yanked his shirt down, but Percy kept his hand fastened to Nico's stomach.

"Dude, why are you freaking? You're ripped. I had no idea. Daddy's baby's all growing up and shit. Lemme see," Percy ordered.

Nico wasn't sure why, but he obediently lifted his shirt and let Percy gently trail his fingers across the skin of his stomach.

"Damn, bambino," Percy whispered. He removed his hand, and Nico pulled his shirt down so far that it hurt his shoulders. "'Y'know, Annabeth told me last summer you were fucking around--"
"What!?

Percy’s eyes bolted to Nico’s face in surprise. "Yeah, I mean, she wouldn't tell me who, said it wasn't my business--"

"Which it's not!"

"--but it was so hard to believe little Nico was getting some. It's not hard to imagine now. You've got to be beating gay boys off with a stick with that sweet face and hot body," Percy finished.

"Oh, my gods, Percy, shut the hell up!" Nico turned his back to Percy and moved until he was flush with the wall. "Go see Annabeth or something and let me sleep."

"You're in my room, you little hottie," Percy teased. "Besides, if I go find Annabeth now and she realizes you're sleeping, she'll make me study."

A knock at the door caused Nico to bite back his retort. For one irrational moment, he hoped it was Jason, who'd somehow magically found where he was and crossed the country in half an hour, come to beg for him to come back. Unlike half an hour ago, Nico wasn't sure he'd say no if Jason asked. Percy pinched the back of Nico's arm and got up to answer the door.

"Hey, Annabeth," Percy said. Nico could hear Percy was both happy and disappointed Annabeth was here. He smiled smugly. Now she'd make Percy study and he could rest. Nico looked up to see Annabeth push Percy out of the way before sitting on the bed and holding out her arms to Nico. Nico dutifully rolled away from the wall and snuggled into Annabeth's embrace.

"Hi, sweetie," Annabeth cooed. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. I'm just really, really tired, Annabeth," Nico pouted. He grinned into Annabeth's shoulder when he noticed the warnings and threats Percy was silently issuing behind his girlfriend's back. "Would you mind getting Percy out of here for a while so I could rest? He's trying to be a good host, but he told me how much he was looking forward to studying with you."

"Aww, how sweet," Annabeth purred. She separated herself from Nico and stared down at him. She tilted her head and smiled. "Percy's taught you so well. You're almost as full of shit as he is."

"Ha! Busted! You sneak!" Percy yelled. Annabeth rose off the bed and grinned at both of them before tugging Percy toward the door. "Hey!"

"We're still studying, Percy," Annabeth said, and Percy flipped Nico off. Nico grinned and made an extra show of nuzzling Percy's pillow. "Be good and get some rest, Nico. It's good to see you."

Nico nodded and waited until Percy and Annabeth had left the room to sit up and get his boots and socks off. He stripped down to his boxers and curled up under the blankets. With any luck, Annabeth would keep Percy out for a long time, and Nico could be up and gone before Percy got back.

Nico closed his eyes and felt the lure of sleep tugging him down. The last images that flashed through his mind were of Jason.

***
Nico's dreams were plagued with nightmares. This was nothing new. What was new was that he'd never had nightmares about Jason before. He dreamed he was in Tartarus, standing before Akhlys, who was facing away from him. When she turned, instead of the goddess of misery, he saw Jason staring at him with hatred and derision.

"Whore! You smell like death! I used you!" Jason screamed at him.

Nico ran. He ran into the forest where the arai waited. They taunted him in Jason's voice.

"Just a hot body and a pretty face! That's all it ever was!"

"You weird little shit!"

"Creepy!"

"Mean-spirited!"

"I used you!"

The arai swooped around him, a chorus of Jason's words skimming his skin and burning his lungs. He swatted at the words. He couldn't breathe. Warm hands closed like vises around his wrists.

"Nico!"

A voice that was decidedly not Jason's tore him from the words, and he jolted awake. The warm hands were on his shoulders now, hot breath on his face, a body so close to his own -- Jason! It'd been a bad dream, the whole, horrible thing. Jason would never say those words to him, would never leave him for power and approval. Nico threw his arms around Jason's neck and pressed tight into his warmth and reassurance. Strong arms held him close.

"Oh, thank the gods, it was only a dream!" He pulled Jason down on top of him and slipped up to kiss his lips. He stopped barely an inch from Jason's face when he caught the faint smell of the sea. Keeping his eyes closed, he noticed the shoulders that held him weren't quite broad enough; the hair tangled in his hands was a little too long.

He pulled back slightly and saw Percy's lovely sea-green eyes staring at him in the darkness.

Percy. Not Jason. He'd fled from Jason, from the cruel idea and vicious taunts. He'd come to Percy and fallen asleep in his bed, and Jason had really said every horrible thing in the nightmare. Nico let out a great shuddering breath and felt Percy's arms tighten even more around his body.

Nico untangled his hands from Percy's hair and brought them down to shove at Percy's bare shoulders. "Get off me, Percy."

"You had a nightmare," Percy said, somewhat unnecessarily. He didn't move. Nico could feel sweat slicking their bodies and realized with a start that Percy was mostly-naked, too. Their chests and stomachs heaved against each other. Nico had both legs flung around Percy's hips, and his feet rested against the backs of Percy's bare thighs. This might be as big a nightmare as the one from which he'd awakened. No, not possible.

"Yeah, I know," Nico said. He pushed at Percy's shoulders again and unwrapped his legs from Percy's hips. It was incredibly embarrassing, Percy's body resting between Nico's wide-spread thighs, but Percy still hadn't moved. Why had his face been so close? Why had he let himself be pulled in when Nico made to kiss him?
"Is Jason okay?"

Nico stopped shoving at Percy's shoulders and went completely still. He rubbed sweat along the dips of Percy's shoulders and willed his voice to come out normally. "He's fine. Why do you ask?"

"You were calling his name. You sounded really upset."

"I don't remember what I was dreaming about," Nico lied. "We go on quests together a lot, though, so it was probably something like that."

Percy nodded, and Nico felt Percy's hair brush his face. When Percy lifted his head, their eyes caught and held. Nico wasn't sure how much Percy could see in the dark of the room, but Nico could see the tenderness in Percy's eyes. Jason had once looked at Nico like that. It broke Nico to realize how long it had been since those times.

"I'm okay now, Percy. You can get off me."

Percy's gaze didn't falter. His voice was soft and deeper than usual. "I think it would be better if I held you."

"Don't be stupid, Percy. We can't sleep like this," Nico said. "You'll squish me, and I can't be that comfortable to lay on."

"I don't know, Nico. I think you feel extremely good underneath me."

What the heck? Was Percy...hitting on him? Oh, hell, no.

"Get off. Now."

Percy lowered his head and whispered in Nico's ear. "That's sort of what I'm trying to do."

Nico could feel Percy smile against his ear. Percy's body moved against Nico's with the ragged breathing of his silent laugh. Nico pinched the back of Percy's neck.

"Ow! Shit! You're such a meanie, Nico," Percy giggled. "I'm going already."

"I'm the meanie? You're the one making fake passes at the boy who used to have a massive crush on you."

Percy rolled off Nico. Nico turned to face the wall again and squirmed when Percy pinched his side.

"That's for pinching me," Percy explained. Nico ignored him. Why had he shadow traveled to seek comfort from a five year old?

After a few minutes of silence, Percy shifted and laid his hand on the side of Nico's thigh. He made tiny circles with his finger at the edge of Nico's boxers.

"Seriously, are you okay?" Percy asked, all joking and whatever else that was before gone from his voice.

"I'm fine, Perce. Go to sleep."

"You can always talk to me, and I'll listen."

"Percy, if you don't shut up right now, I'm going to rip your ears off, and you won't be able to listen to anyone."
Nico heard the sound of Percy's laughter as he slowly fell back asleep to the oddly calming feeling of those little circles Percy was making on his thigh.

***

Jason hadn't slept at all. He'd gone to Nico's cabin and waited for hours. He'd skipped dinner and eventually returned to his own cabin and tore it apart in a rage. His and Nico's clothes lay strewn about the floor where Jason had thrown them right before he'd taken all the drawers of out his dresser and smashed them against the wall. When the drawers were nothing but splinters, he'd dismantled the entire dresser, kicking it into smaller bits and smashing those against the wall, too. He'd done the same thing to his desk. He'd thrown the mattress and box springs off his bed and dumped whole bottles of water on them.

He'd been trying to pry the heavy marble headboard away from the wall when Clarisse had barged in his room and informed him that Chiron had said to keep it down. Jason had looked at her, eyes wild and unfocused, head swimming. He'd expected her to scream at him or hit him, something, because she was one of the only people who knew what destruction like this had to mean.

Instead, she'd simply said, "where is he?"

Jason had blinked a few times and let his hunched shoulders drop. "He left."

"Duh, dipshit. I mean where did he go?"

"I don't know," Jason had admitted.

"It was your fault?"

Jason had nodded.

"He loved you, motherfucker. Carry on, and may you get a million splinters from all your destruction, you piece of shit. But keep the noise down."

Then she'd punched him in the nose and left.

Jason had called Reyna to see if Nico was there. He'd called Hazel. He'd even called Hedge. None of them had heard from Nico. He didn't dare try contacting Nico directly. Nico would swipe his hand through the message the second it appeared, the same as he had done to Percy last January. Nico had probably gone to the Underworld, but Jason wasn't certain. If Nico had, he would have packed some supplies. Jason had checked around Nico's cabin. His backpack and armor and all the other things Nico usually took with him were still there.

Jason sat miserably on the awful couch Hera had left him, which he hadn't dared destroy, and waited. When he got close to nodding off, he moved to the uncomfortable wingback chair that was still standing, too, stark and imposing, a reminder of his "parents'" meddling and manipulations, and sat as ramrod straight as possible.

How could he have been so stupid? Zeus had made it sound so simple -- all his dreams there for him in the palm of his hand. But his father had been lying. He had to have known it was always going to be one or the other, their admiration or Nico's love, never both. Zeus probably didn't even care about Jason and what he did on earth at all, as long as it didn't include falling in love with a child of Hades.
Zeus had known Nico would leave. Gods, Nico was so honorable. Jason should have known, should have seen what he would destroy.

Maybe he had. That was the scariest thought of all. What if he'd known and done it anyway? What if he knew, and pushed down that knowledge so that he could say unthinkable things to the only person he'd ever been in love with? He knew Nico, who he was, what made him tick. Jason felt sick because some part of him had known that Nico would be disgusted, would leave, and he'd done it anyway.

And the things he'd said. Fuck. He'd been so cruel. Even if a little part of him had expected Nico to leave, he'd panicked when he was faced with that reality. He'd said anything he could think of to tear Nico down, to break his spirit, to make him feel like agreeing to Jason's plans was the best he could do in life.

Jason wallowed in his thoughts until well after the sun had risen. He heard campers going about their morning, but he sat unmoving in Hera's chair and waited.

Eventually, it occurred to him he could try to locate Nico through one other person. It wasn't likely, especially because Nico didn't even keep in contact enough to know where Percy was staying, but it couldn't hurt to try. Hurriedly, he scrounged about the floor for a drachma, then went in the bathroom and made the required plea to Iris.

A hazy image swam into view. Daylight appeared to be breaking on the west coast. Jason was confused. In the picture, he could see Nico sleeping. He looked angelic, of course, with his halo of black hair and his fair skin, but Jason had asked for Percy.

"Shit." Jason said quietly. While it was wonderful to see Nico, it didn't help Jason actually figure out where Nico was, unless he startled Nico awake, and then Nico's hand would swipe through the message before Jason could talk.

Jason was about to break the connection when he noticed a tan arm moving lazily across Nico's bare body. A hand arced up from Nico's stomach and caressed his chest before sliding up to his shoulder. It brushed across Nico's collarbone and dropped slowly back down and out of view. Jason watched, stunned, as Percy Jackson tipped his head up from behind Jason's lover and regarded Nico with extreme fondness. Jason moved slightly, and Percy looked up, resting his head on Nico's shoulder.

"Grace, what the fuck?" Percy whispered. "Do you have any idea what time it is out here? We only just fell asleep."

"What the hell are you doing with Nico, Jackson?" Jason hissed.

Percy looked at Jason like he had three heads. "What's it look like I'm doing, dumbass? I'm sleeping with him. Now get the fuck out of my space until a decent hour."

Percy's hand, which was attached to an arm and shoulder as naked as Nico's, uncurled from a spot low on Nico's stomach and swiped through the message.

Jason tore all the faucets off the sinks and smashed the mirrors with his hands.
Nico woke to the slightly ticklish sensation of something sliding from his clavicle to his belly button. The thing, whatever it was, poked into his belly and then made little swirly motions around the inner walls of the button. Nico giggled and reached down to stop the tickling. He found a finger -- one that stayed stubbornly rooted against his belly, even as he tried with both hands to dislodge it. Nico opened his eyes and saw Percy Jackson staring down at him.

"Geez, Percy, give a guy a heart attack!" Nico exclaimed, and Percy laughed.

"Sorry. You're even cuter when you sleep, but I figured you'd need to wake up soon so I could tell you when I leave for class," Percy said.

"Couldn't you have left a note?" Nico asked. "And did you have to use my body as some finger racetrack to wake me?"

Percy pulled his finger out of Nico's belly button, reached across Nico, and grasped his hand. He shrugged. "It was more fun that way."

"Were you watching me sleep?" Nico was getting a full head of steam regarding complaining now. Percy was a fool to let him get this far. Nico could complain like a champion. "Isn't that what that creepy vampire guy did in those Twilight books?"

"I'm not a vampire," Percy said.

"You're missing the point, Percy."

"Ah, well, gotta save my brain function for class."

Percy smiled down at Nico and made no move to get up for that class he supposedly had to go to. His body felt way too close. Nico needed to leave. He tried to break Percy's hold on his hand, but Percy smiled blandly and held on tighter. Nico rolled his eyes and then rolled right over the top of Percy and onto the floor. The shift in position gave him the leverage he needed to free his hand. Percy turned lazily and watched as Nico pulled on his socks and jeans.

Nico slipped his feet in his boots and knelt next to Percy's bed to lace them up. He'd finished the first one and had started the second when Percy placed a bare foot on either side of Nico's body. Nico ignored him.

"Are you leaving?" Percy asked.

"Yep."

"Do you have to? You could stay. We could have fun together." Percy's voice sounded different. Nico couldn't place what made it sound so strange.

Percy's hand dropped into Nico's hair, and he scooted forward a little until he sat on the edge of the bed, his upper thighs bracketing Nico's face. Percy's hand slid back and forth from Nico's curls to his neck. Nico wished his boots didn't take so long to lace, but he was also sort of nervous to meet Percy's eyes. Percy's thigh brushed his face.

"Percy, I swear, no more play hitting on me," Nico grumbled, finishing tying his laces at last. With Percy's hand still in his hair, holding him in place, Nico raised his head slowly and realized that Percy was absolutely not pretending. The son of Poseidon's eyes were murky with desire, and the outline of his erection was clearly visible in his boxers.

"You have a pretty mouth, Nico," Percy whispered. "What've you learned to do with it?"
Nico placed a hand on each of Percy's thighs and used the leverage to bolt upright so fast that he got a head rush. He had to wait for the spots to clear from his vision before he could search for his shirt. Thankfully, Percy hadn't made a move toward him. In fact, Percy seemed almost as embarrassed as Nico. Nico snatched up his shirt and sword and barely tossed a "see you later, Perce," over his shoulder before he disappeared in a shadow.

***

Percy and Annabeth got coffee every morning before their first class of the day. They always sat on a little bench outside the dorms and talked until they had to leave. Normally, this was one of Percy's favorite parts of the day, half an hour alone with Annabeth, the sun gleaming off her golden hair. Today, he couldn't tear his mind away from raven locks and full pink lips. Percy peeked at Annabeth and saw her watching him carefully.

"You seem distracted this morning, Percy," Annabeth said. "Did you have a good night cuddling Nico?"

Percy spit his coffee out on the ground.

"Seaweed Brain, get a grip!"

"I wasn't cuddling Nico," Percy spluttered. "And even if I was, I wouldn't have enjoyed it."

"You probably were, and yes, you would have." Annabeth raised an eyebrow and silently challenged him to deny it.

"I'm not into guys, Annabeth."

"You're so thick sometimes." Annabeth sighed. "I'm not offended that you're into him. I know you love me."

"I don't do guys."

"Maybe not most of them, but you'd do Nico if you could."

Before Percy could splutter another response, Annabeth cut him off. "Percy, do me a favor. See the big oak tree in front of us? Find me one branch that's perfectly straight, no variation all the way from where it meets the trunk to its tip."

Percy checked every branch he could see. He went to the base of the tree and gazed up through the branches. He couldn't find one that met Annabeth's criteria. He went back to the bench and sat down.

"Well?" Annabeth asked.

"I couldn't find one," Percy admitted.

"Think of each one of those branches as someone's sexuality." Annabeth had the gleam in her eyes she got when she was in teacher mode. Percy settled back to listen. "Now, there probably are a few perfectly straight branches out there somewhere, and those people's sexual preference skews only to men or only to women, and they'll never notice the other sex. That's fine. Most of us, though, we're a
little bent. We may strongly prefer one sex over another, but for most of us, there's going to be someone, or a whole host of someones, of the gender we don't normally prefer who'd make us sit up and take notice. Now, you may never feel that way about another guy again, but you do notice Nico like that."

Percy thought about it. Obviously, it was true. He would have let Nico kiss him during the night, if his pale friend hadn't pulled back. Percy had enjoyed their physical closeness. While Nico may have thought Percy was teasing, and Percy had definitely played it off that way, he'd been dead serious about how good Nico felt lying beneath him during the night and what he wanted from the contact. And this morning, he'd practically thrown himself at Nico, all but begging for oral sex.

"I...but, you..."

"I know you love me," Annabeth repeated. Her gray eyes were sparkling, and her cheeks rose in a smile. "You're allowed to look and to enjoy it if you get the occasional touch. Nothing happened, right?"

"No, but--"

Annabeth nodded, and her smile fell slightly. "But it was him that pulled away, not you?"

"Yeah," Percy confessed. "I love you to death, Annabeth, and I don't want to be with anyone else."

"Well, let's chalk it up to experience then, Percy. Now you know you want him--"

"I don't want him," Percy corrected. "I maybe want to fuck him, or, gods, have him suck my dick."

"Not really helping things with that distinction," Annabeth said. "But I get what you're saying. It's sex, not an emotional investment. It isn't what you have and want to keep with me. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Yes!" Percy was so relieved that Annabeth got it, and explained it to him, and didn't hate him because of it. Then another thought occurred to him. "So what if I mess up? What if, someday, with him or someone else, I let it happen, sex or something?"

Annabeth and Percy stared at one another for several seconds. Percy ignored the echoes of past conversations running through his head.

"Then you tell me, and we talk about it," Annabeth said. "It could be me it happens to. Do you think you're the only person I ever fantasize about? Why, just yesterday, I had this great daydream where Jason extremely slowly--"

"You're making that shit up!" Percy yelled it loudly enough to make some passing girls stare and giggle. He waved and smiled before turning back to Annabeth. More quietly, he repeated, "you're making that shit up."

"You're such a flirt. Yeah, I am. Jason never really did it for me," Annabeth said. "But I am attracted to other people sometimes. It's human, Percy. Don't beat yourself up over feelings that are perfectly normal."

"So if Jason doesn't do it for you, who does?" Percy asked.

Annabeth smiled coyly. "Ask me in the bedroom sometime. Now, did Nico stay?"

"No," Percy pouted, both at the change in subject and Nico's hasty departure. He would have liked
to spend some completely platonic time with the son of Hades. And he wanted to know who Annabeth fantasized about. "He bolted this morning almost as soon as he woke up."

"Hmm, I wonder what has him running this time?" Annabeth gathered her books and threw away her coffee cup.

It must be almost time for class to start. Percy frowned.

"Well, he had a nightmare in the middle of the night, screaming about Jason, but he swore Jason was fine," Percy said. "Then, Grace called first thing this morning. It was weird, like Blondie knew Nico was thinking about him. Guess it could be something to do with him."

"What did Jason want?" Annabeth asked. Percy could tell the news intrigued her. Maybe she did have a thing for Jason.

"I don't know. He didn't say much. Wanted to know what I was doing with Nico. I sorta hung up on him before much else. Nico didn't wake up, and I didn't mention it to him before he left."

"What did you tell Jason when he asked what you were doing with Nico?"

"I told him we were sleeping together, which, duh, was kind of obvious," Percy said.

"And did it look like you were...intimate? From Jason's perspective, I mean."

Percy paused and thought. He could hear the footsteps and conversations of the other students as they approached the main classroom building. "I guess it did. I was, uh, spooning him -- Nico, I mean -- and we weren't wearing shirts, and, uh, maybe I was...touching...his chest and stomach while he slept."

Oh, gods, that was embarrassing, both to admit to Annabeth and to realize how it must have looked to Jason. No wonder Grace had seemed so weirded out. Percy felt himself blush, but Annabeth appeared to be deep in thought.

"Shit. So now Grace thinks I'm actually fucking Nico?"

Percy and Annabeth climbed the stairs of the building. Annabeth didn't speak until they'd reached the top of the stairs. "Yeah, Percy, I'm pretty sure that's exactly what Jason thinks now."

"I'll talk to Jason," Percy said. "I don't want him thinking I'm cheating on you."

Annabeth shot him a startled look, like that was the last worry on her mind. "No, it's okay, Percy. I'll call him. I need to talk to him about some other stuff anyway."

Percy gave her a suspicious gaze, and Annabeth laughed. She pulled Percy by his shirt collar and pressed her lips to his mouth. The kiss was deep and satisfying, though not nearly long enough for Percy's liking. Annabeth's eyes twinkled as she regarded him. "Stop worrying! I swear on the River Styx that I am completely not interested in Jason Grace sexually or romantically."

Annabeth turned and walked toward her first class. Percy stood in the crowded hall and watched her. Why else would she be interested in Jason Grace?
Nico laid on the beach in his underwear. His eyes were closed, and he counted as he breathed. Percy and Jason could easily see him as they walked from their new home to the shore, but it was hard to understand what he was doing, laying motionless in the sand. The men sat one on each side of Nico, as had quickly become their custom, and watched while Nico did...nothing.

"Hey, Nico," Percy said. He poked Nico's stomach for emphasis.

Nico opened one eye and watched Percy watch him. When Percy didn't say anything more, Nico closed his eye.

Percy poked him again. Jason pulled his knees up to his chin and decided to let Percy keep aggravating Nico. Better Percy than him, he thought. When Nico opened his other eye after the second poke and glared at Jason, the son of Jupiter wiggled his fingers from their spot on his knee as if to say, “Wasn't me.”

Nico didn't open either eye the third time Percy poked him, but he said, "Never tickle a sleeping dragon, Percy."

Jason laughed. Percy didn't understand.

"But you're awake. And you're not a dragon. Unless that's going to be your godly name? Nico 'The Dragon' di Angelo. That sounds more like a wrestler. You should have been a wrestler, baby, forget football."

"Do you plan to talk me into submission?" Nico still hadn't opened his eyes, but he was smiling.

Encouraged by Nico's smile, Jason said, "We want to know what's going on in your head, Nico. We're worried about you."

The weather was hot and breezy, and the waves rolled into the beach in swarms. The tide was going out, but only Percy knew that. He and Jason watched the waves, when they weren't watching Nico.

"Stop worrying. I'm fine," Nico said when he caught them staring. He put his hands behind his head. A fly buzzed at his elbow. "I'm frustrated that I can't do the cleaning thing. Now that Hygieia said it, I can smell myself, and it's grossing me out."

Percy swatted the fly away. He was trying to decide what to say when Jason beat him to speech.

"Hygieia said it's because you aren't letting yourself feel. She says you're shutting down emotionally."

Nico got up and walked into the water. Jason sighed.

"The ocean smells like shit, Perce. Why didn't you tell me it'd make me smell worse instead of better?" Nico faced out to sea. The sunlight falling on his right shoulder made him seem to glow.

Percy rolled his eyes and stood. He undressed and joined Nico in the water. Jason wasn't far behind. Percy splashed his feet hard. Big sprays of water landed on Nico's back, and Percy was satisfied.
"I figured you knew and were just trying to run off. You've been to the beach before. Hell, we've been stuck here for two days. Surely you noticed the smell."

"Can we talk about how you're feeling?" Jason asked.

"No." Nico waded out into the water until he reached the barrier. The water wasn't deep. It reached the tops of Nico's thighs, with waves brushing his stomach. Nico laid down and held his breath. The sensation wasn't unpleasant. He didn't need to breathe. The waves lapped over his face and gently buffeted his body.

Percy and Jason watched and waited for Nico to resurface.

"Well, that went well," Percy said.

"He's being an ass," Jason said. He kicked at the water and sent a splash in Nico's direction.

"When isn't he being an ass?" Percy asked. He kicked in Nico's direction, too.

"Is this like he was before, do you think?" Jason twisted his hands.

Percy was worried. He'd spent the first two days thinking about how hard this punishment was for himself. He hadn't considered how hard the confinement must be for Nico, who already knew how it felt to be trapped in a small space. "I don't know, Grace. By the time I got there he was already so fucked up. At least you can blame me instead of yourself this time around."

"Fuck off, Percy. I'm not blaming you. Gods know how long we're going to be stuck here together. I meant what I said about this being a second chance for me. All I want is to figure out how to help him."

"He won't let you help him." Percy shrugged. He picked up a shell and hurled it about thirty feet to the right of the spot where Nico had disappeared. The shell hit the barrier and dropped silently into the ocean. "He won't let you. He won't let me. Give him space. Let me make him laugh, keep things light. You be honest with him."

"But you're worried about him?"

Percy watched the water where Nico had yet to surface. "Yeah, I am."

Nico stayed in the water for hours. Percy sat on the beach and waited. Occasionally, Nico's head would bob above a wave. Each time he saw Percy, he'd drop back down under the water's surface. Once, Percy had gotten tired of it and gone out into the water where Nico lay. He'd laid down next to his stubborn friend and tried to talk to him, but Nico kept his eyes closed and didn't answer. Nico couldn't answer, or at least, he didn't know how, since he was underwater. Percy settled for holding Nico's hand. He'd stayed until Nico turned over on his side, away from Percy. Percy got the message. He kissed Nico's shoulder and left.

Eventually, Jason walked down toward the beach and yelled that there were offerings in the altars
before he went in the house. Percy wanted to leave Nico and check his altar, but he dutifully pulled
Nico up out of the water and dragged him along. Nico came. He didn't complain. He sat on the floor
of his altar, back pressed into a corner, and ate the pear and pomegranate that had come. He ignored
the grilled cheese, brisket, and quesadilla. After a while, Percy came and sat next to him and helped
himself to the things Nico hadn't eaten.

"You're scaring Jason," Percy said. He licked his fingers to get the fatty, juicy goodness of the
brisket off them, then wiped his hands down Nico's chest.

Nico barked out a laugh and ignored Percy's terrible manners. "Tell me something new. I always
scare Jason."

"Fine, jerk. You're scaring me." Percy laid his head on Nico's shoulder. "Let me clean you. You
smell awful. The brisket juice didn't help."

"He's in the house?"

"Yep."

"Thanks, Percy."

Percy concentrated and thought about Nico on an earlier day, the way he smelled, the light in his
eyes. Nico felt the familiar change that came from being cleaned by a god. He didn't like it, and the
memory was painful because it was lost to him forever, but he was grateful for Percy's help. Percy
buried his nose in Nico's neck and took a long sniff before settling his head back on Nico's shoulder.

"So talk. It's just us," Percy prodded.

"I'm so damned sorry, Perce," Nico said. He pulled at little tufts of hair on Percy's knee. "I made you
promise not to give up your life for me, and then I took it away from you. I took you away from
Maybelle, and it's killing me. I'm so sorry."

Percy had been brutally angry with Nico. He'd been cruel. He was mad, still, about some of the
things Nico had done.

"I chose to follow you, baby. I knew the stakes."

Nico snorted. "You knew you might die. You didn't know you'd be stuck on some beach with me,
having to think about how Annabeth and Maybelle are going to live without you when you could
have been with them. You should be with them."

"Did you know something you didn't tell me? For a while, I thought you might. I don't think that
anymore. I chose this, as much as you did. More, even."

"I didn't know anything, not for sure. But I should have left you alone. I had a bad feeling, but I
thought it was only about me, or at least, I convinced myself it was only about me. Anyway, it's not
fair that you're being punished for stuff I did."

"Yeah, that part sucks bottle rockets," Percy said. He laid his hand on Nico's chest and felt his heart
beat. "But that's the gods' fault, not yours. I'm sorry I've been making you feel like shit. You were
right when you said you didn't deserve the way I've been treating you."

"There wasn't a letter today," Nico said quietly.

"I know," Percy said. He took another deep breath against Nico's skin. He wanted to kiss Nico, to
offer and receive comfort. Nico would let him, as guilty as he was feeling. Percy stood and offered Nico a hand. "You wouldn't have talked about your feelings if there was something you could do to make me feel less shitty. Let's go see Grace before he sends out a search party. Your altar floor is hurting my ass."

Nico chuckled and took Percy's offered hand. "Yours is made out of shells. I'm never sitting in there."

"The couch. Let's sit there. I bet Grace'll rub your feet if you ask him to."

"I'm not asking either of you for anything ever again."

Percy bumped Nico's shoulder with his own. "You sound like a whiny teenager. We're all going to be alright, baby. Forgive yourself."

"I am a teenager." Nico bumped Percy back.

"You're not, dumbass."

"Oh, yeah." Nico's cheeks colored again, and that made Percy smile.

Percy broke into song.

"'You take a deep breath and you walk through the doors
It's the morning of your very first day'"

Nico covered his ears and started laughing. "Stop! Don't ruin the song for me!"

"You know this one?" Percy was surprised. Nico was not literate when it came to pop culture.

"'You say hi to your friends you ain't seen in awhile
Try and stay out of everybody's way'"

"Stop, seriously, Percy," Nico said. He was still laughing, but his smile was a little sad. He started to run, and Percy watched him, laughing and singing as he followed behind.

Percy skipped a couple verses, because his Taylor Swift knowledge wasn't that great, but he was surprised when Nico wheeled around, sixteen feet from the dome, and filled in a line.

"'When all you wanted was to be wanted
I wish you could go back and tell yourself what you know now'"

"Come on, Perce." Nico tilted his head. His eyes were filled with tears that Percy could see the closer he got. "The love of my fifteen year old self's life is waiting."

***

Jason had checked his altar first and read the letter he'd found. There was a picture of Hazel and Frank enclosed, and Jason put it in a frame like he had the photo of Maybelle. Both photos sat on a
low bureau he'd created. The new piece of furniture rested near the door to the bedroom so that they could see the pictures whenever they passed from room to room.

Jason was wondering who he'd ever get a picture of, Leo, perhaps, when Nico and Percy came through the door. Nico had taken a moment to dry his tears outside while Percy rubbed his back. Now, entering the house, he gave the appearance that he was calm and in control. Jason and Percy both knew him better than that.

"You forgot your clothes," Jason said.

Nico looked down at himself in surprise. He had forgotten all about the clothes, not that Percy had given him much choice, dragging him from the beach.

"Here," Percy said. He touched Nico's boxers, and they were instantly dry. "I'll go down and get our clothes in a little bit. It's not like it matters, anyway. We've already had our visitor for the day."

"We are not going to become known as the 'gods who sit in their underwear,'" Nico said. Percy and Jason were both heartened. If Nico cared about his appearance, at least as much as he ever had, that was a good sign.

"Jace and I would have sat around in our boxers all the time if it wasn't for the girls and you. It's not that big a difference." Percy sat on the opposite end of the couch from Jason, leaving the middle for Nico, who sat rather reluctantly.

"I didn't sit around in my boxers."

Nico gave Jason a halfhearted sneer. "I don't think I ever went in your apartment when you weren't dressed only in boxers."

"You didn't go in my apartment much," Jason said. He wanted to change the subject. "I got something."

Before Nico could answer or Percy could ask a million questions, Jason pulled out the envelope.

"I got a letter from Reyna."

He opened the letter and began to read:

"'Jason,

'It has been brought to my attention that you, along with Percy and my brother, have ascended to godhood. I have been informed that I can have no contact with Nico until, at least, the summer solstice. Because Percy is a pitiful reader, I have decided to write to you.'"

"Gods, Reyna can be such a--" Percy quieted with a glare from Nico. "Go on, Jason."

"'Mortals estimate that more than 30,000 lives were saved due to what they are calling 'Miracle Mud,' explained as a naturally occurring phenomenon due to the shifting tectonic plates. No mortal or god may ever recognize it, but all of us at Camp Jupiter know and celebrate your power. Expect offerings at your altars to pick up as more campers ponder the enormity of what you did.

'We at Camp Jupiter counted and believe we rescued an additional seventy-five children who otherwise would have died. Two campers did not return to us following the rescue mission. You did not know them, but they were brave and willing soldiers. Hazel and Allie have searched but have been unable to recover their bodies. Hazel will ensure they receive a proper place in Elysium. She is
working as an emissary to Pluto, though we all acknowledge she could never do it with Nico's skill and grace.

"I'm not allowed to ask you to tell Nico how much I love him. Hopefully, he knows already that he is the most important person in my world. There are so many things I wish I had told him. Chief among them is that he was always enough, exactly as he was. I have so many regrets. I regret that I wasn't at Nico's graduation. I regret that I missed Percy's wedding. I regret, and I always will, that I wasn't there when Nico needed me.

"Michael and I are progressing well. If we are still together in another year, I may ask him to marry me. I feel old. Percy would probably laugh at that, but he would also understand. Hazel and Frank are doing as well as can be expected. I believe it is Hazel's turn to write tomorrow. We feel that if we spread the letters around, they will attract far less scrutiny.

"Jason, I hope you and Percy are able to put aside your differences for the duration of your confinement. Nico is a good mediator, but you must solve your own problems. I wish you well.

"Yours, Reyna"

Nico leaned forward on the couch. He needed comfort, but leaning into one man instead of the other would provoke the one who felt left out. He gave a great, shuddering breath, and Percy pushed him toward Jason. Jason glanced at Percy in surprise and wrapped his arm around Nico. Percy tugged at Nico's bare feet and put them in his lap.

"Michael and I are progressing well.' No one would say shit like that except Reyna," Percy said. He tried to keep his tone light. He understood what Reyna meant about feeling old.

"She loves you so much," Jason said to Nico, who was shivering into his sleeve. "I'm sorry you can't see her.

Nico didn't have anything he could say without breaking down. He missed Reyna more than Hazel, even. In some ways, he'd been lucky. The confinement, while awful, had allowed him to keep the two people who'd meant the most to him during his mortal life. They weren't easy people, and the situation was uncomfortable, but at least they were his closest loved ones. Missing his sisters, though, potentially never seeing them again, it was a terrible blow. A few tears leaked from Nico's eyes.

Jason curled his arm tighter around Nico. He looked at Percy, who gave him a little hand gesture that indicated Jason should keep trying to comfort Nico.

"We'll figure out some way that..." Jason trailed off, because there was nothing to figure out. They were prisoners, and they had no say in what happened to them. He switched tactics. "Percy's right. Reyna's such an awesome hardass. Poor Michael. He's probably groveling at her feet as we speak."

Nico chuckled. "I hate Michael's fucking guts."

"You love your sister," Jason corrected. Nico smelled much better, and Jason leaned down and buried his face in Nico's silky curls. Percy must have cleaned Nico, because it didn't seem likely he'd done it himself. Jason was jealous.

"Hey, Nico, how sad are you right now?" Percy asked. Jason shot him a glare, which Percy returned. "Humor me. How sad?"

"How sad does it look, asshole?" Nico said.

"Great! Use it. How sad does it make you that Jason stole your shirt, and you'll never see Hazel and
Reyna again? How sad are you that your best friend's a major league asshole who's spent the past couple days treating you like shit?"

"Gods, Percy, what the hell's wrong with you?" Jason asked.

Percy sat up straighter and roughly pulled Nico up to sit, too. He grabbed Nico's face and pulled until their foreheads touched. "Concentrate, baby. How much do you want your damned clothes?"

"A lot," Nico whispered.

"Damn straight," Percy said. He slapped Nico's bare chest. The sound ricocheted off the walls. "Think."

Percy smacked Nico again, but this time the sound was muted. He'd hit fabric instead of skin. He smiled broadly and looked down to find Nico fully clothed. He even had his boots. Nico pulled back from Percy and took stock of his appearance. A slow smile spread over his lips.

"Yes!" he shouted. He jumped up on the coffee table and tugged his shirt in Jason's direction. "Ha! I did it!"

Jason grinned. He was happy for Nico, but he was disappointed that Percy had been the one, again, to help him. "That's great, Neeks. I knew you could."

Nico crouched on the table with one arm on his thigh and the other between his legs. Jason found the pose ridiculously sexy. Nico smirked and stared at Jason. Percy gave a shout and pointed at Jason's chest. Jason didn't need to see to know what Nico had done. He was shirtless.

"Now we're even," Nico said. He hopped off the table and sat down on it normally so he could face Jason and Percy. "Wait 'til I figure out how to remove tattoos."

"You're not taking my tattoo." Jason protectively covered his shoulder. He closed his eyes and wished his shirt back.

Nico smiled and felt a little more normal.

Chapter End Notes

The song Percy and Nico are mangling is Taylor Swift's "Fifteen."
"Couldn't have proof laying around that this," Nico gestured between himself and Jason, "existed."

"Exists."

When Nico fled Percy's room, he traveled straight into the solid black throne room of the Palace of Hades. That was a mistake. He should have traveled to his own room at the palace and quietly stayed in bed for the next six weeks. He'd had misguided plans to see his father, though, especially because it was late enough in the year for Persephone to be above ground.

"Nico!" Hades exclaimed when Nico swirled into being and stepped out of a shadow. "What a pleasure!"

Hades stood from his throne and walked over to Nico as though he wanted a hug. Nico froze in place. He furrowed his brow and wondered what sort of game his father was playing. True, he knew Hades loved him, and the feeling was now mutual, but they weren't the "hug and kiss" type of family.

When Hades had come within a few feet, Nico could tell something was wrong. The King of the Dead never looked this apprehensive. A thin hand reached out from his cloak of souls and clasped Nico's shoulder. Hades pulled Nico close and said, "You've got one week, son, then you're topside."

"Dad! I was thinking I'd stay for a while!" When Nico was younger, his visits weren't exactly welcome or pleasant, but through the years, he and Hades had, Nico liked to think, both come to enjoy them. And with Persephone gone, Nico had expected Hades to try to entice him to stay until his stepmother returned in the fall.

"One week, Nico." Hades's voice was much quieter than usual. "Trust me, son, you'll be ready to leave before then."

"I can still hear you, Brother, even if you whisper."

"Oh, no," Nico whispered.

"Oh, yes," Hades said.

"Come here, Neeky-Neeky-no-no and give Auntie Demeter a big hug," a grating voice called out. Nico turned reluctantly and saw his aunt grinning at him from beneath her dark blackish-brown hair, her brown eyes alight with mischief. She spread her arms wide, waiting for Nico to come hug her. Hades shoved Nico in the back, and Nico turned and glared at his father, who shrugged as if to say, "Better you than me."

"What are you doing here?" Nico asked. "Persephone isn't even here."

"Vacation," Demeter replied idly. "When I noticed you were heading this way, I thought it would be a fabulous time to come down to see my favorite nephew and my favorite brother."
"You hate me," Nico said.

"Oh, did I say favorite?" Demeter asked. "I meant possibly my least favorite nephew in my entire three thousand plus year existence. I hear Triptolemus turned you into a corn plant? I sent him a thank you note. Oh, but you're a cute little thing, though, and I love the way the veins pop in your temples when I irritate you. And really, Neeky, you are so easily irritated." Demeter wiggled her fingers at Nico, indicating she still expected him to hug her.

Nico dragged his feet across the throne room and into Demeter's arms. She squeezed him tightly, then proceeded to pinch and prod all over his torso and arms. When she pinched his butt, Nico yelped and shouted "hey!" Hades merely covered his mouth and smirked. Sometimes Nico hated his family.

"Very well," Demeter said, finally finished with her inspection. She held Nico by the arm and gave his stomach one last poke. "Finally putting some meat on those little birdy bones of yours, I see. Must be all that semen you've ingested from the Grace boy."

Nico choked and wailed, "Dad!"

Hades merely shook his head, and the injustices continued.

"High in protein, semen," Demeter said. "Those Zeus boys are a virile lot, on the whole. Still, you need more pounds, boy. Hades, don't worry about feeding the child while he's here. I'll oversee his nutrition."

Hades shook his head again and raised his hands in surrender. Demeter released Nico's arm, and he walked back toward Hades.

"And Neeky?"

Nico rolled his eyes at the awful nickname and turned back to his aunt with a baleful glare.

"None of that disordered eating nonsense. You eat what I tell you, you hear?"

"Oh, my gods! Dad, are you going to just stand there and let her do this to me?" Getting no help from Hades, Nico addressed Demeter. "I do not have an eating disorder! I eat fine now that I'm used to not being held captive in a jar and starved! Which, by the way, thanks so much for zero help with! Plus, look at my dad," Nico gestured wildly back to his father. "He's thin! I'm just thin!"

"No matter, I'll make a fine specimen of you yet, boy," Demeter smiled. She was clearly enjoying this. "Now, go play in your room or something."

"I'll walk you there, my son," Hades said hastily.

Once they'd left the throne room and entered the long, dark corridor that led to the stairs and Nico's room, Hades and Nico turned on one another.

"One week, Nico. I swear, that's all I can stand of that infernal woman," Hades muttered.

"I can hear you, Brother! I am a goddess!" Demeter yelled.

"I don't care!" Hades yelled back. To Nico, he said, "You leave, she'll leave."

"Thanks for nothing, Dad!" Nico said. "Way to stand up for me in there."

"Oh, please, my son," Hades said. "You don't need anyone fighting your battles for you, even
against an obnoxious, over-stuffed shrew of a goddess."

"I can still hear you!" Another shout from down the hallway.

"I still don't care!" Hades sing-songed back.

Nico rolled his eyes.

"So, what brings you down here?" Hades asked.

Nico passed a skeleton guard and returned his salute before answering his father. "Do you really not know?"

"Shall I smite the Grace boy for you?"

"No, Dad," Nico said. "You just said I can fight my own battles. Besides, wait...can the Olympians hear what we say down here?"

"Only if they are actually down here, too," Hades said. He paused for a moment and concentrated. "No, no one down here except your dear aunt, who hates her other brothers quite as much as I do."

"Well, I get the feeling Jason's dad is the one who pushed the thing that caused us problems."

They'd reached the stairway, which was wide and high and made of an impressively veined black marble. Nico would hate to slip and fall on it. That was his biggest fear in the Underworld, other than Tartarus. Nico and Hades began to climb.

"The boy needed to show some backbone," Hades said. "He shouldn't have been deluded by his father's machinations, Nico. Jackson. Can I smite Jackson, at least?"

"Dad, no! Percy didn't even do anything this time." Nico needed to get Hades off his smiting kick. He'd been offering to smite Percy for probably five years now.

"Not for lack of trying, it seems," Hades said, and Nico did not want to have conversations with his father about his love or sex life.

"Can you, like, look away, if you notice me in compromising situations? That would be great."

"But, why? That's part of the fun," Hades said.

"Because normal dads don't watch their sons have sex. It's gross and not appreciated."

Nico glanced at his father and noticed the smirk lighting Hades's features.

"You're totally messing with me, aren't you?" Hades asked. They'd reached his room, and Nico opened the door. He was relieved to see it looked the same as ever: black, massive, and foreboding.

"I am totally messing with you, yes." Hades smiled. "I have no desire to see you carrying on relations with anyone, particularly either of those two idiot sons of my brothers. Really, Nico, couldn't you pick someone, anyone, else?"

"Sorry, Dad," Nico said. "I can't imagine being with anyone but them."

Hades placed a hand on Nico's shoulder, preventing him from entering his room. "Yes, well, a word of caution, Nico. I may turn a blind eye to your liaisons, but do not think all gods do the same. You are drawing interest from parties that would do better to leave you alone."
"Would you mind being a little less cryptic?" Nico asked.

"I would love to be more forthright, son, but that is not the way we gods work. Watch yourself."

Hades squeezed Nico's shoulder and turned to leave. Nico had almost escaped into the confines of his room when Hades turned back and said, "breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the entire week, Nico. I expect you to be at the table. If I have to eat with that woman, so do you."

***

When an Iris message patched through, Jason hoped it was Nico. He was prepared for Percy. He absolutely did not expect to see Annabeth.

They stared at one another for several long moments, Annabeth no doubt taking in Jason's appearance and his destroyed room, Jason checking Annabeth's behavior for signs she knew of Percy's infidelity.

"Di immortales, Jason, what happened to you and your room? Did Nico do that?" Annabeth finally asked. Jason could see she was in some sort of classroom. It looked deserted aside from her.

"Nico? No. He'd already left before...Clarisse punched me in the nose. The rest, I did myself."

"What happened to your hands?" Annabeth's eyes were filled with horror, and Jason couldn't blame her. His hands were heavily bandaged across the knuckles and fingers, and blood was seeping through the gauze. Even with ambrosia and nectar, Jason had needed forty stitches.

"I punched out the mirrors in my bathroom." Jason saw no reason to lie.

Annabeth nodded her head.

"Look, Annabeth, I don't know why you called, but--"

"You want to tell me that my boyfriend is cheating on me with Nico?" Annabeth asked.

Jason was once again caught off guard. He felt his eyes widen. "Uh-huh."

"I know what it looks like you saw in the Iris message this morning, Jason," Annabeth said, "but it wasn't what it looked like."

"It looked like your boyfriend was sleeping with my best friend!"

Annabeth's eyes hardened. "You mean it looked like my boyfriend was sleeping with your boyfriend."

Jason opened his mouth and closed it.

"You've been with Nico for a long time now. I've known since last summer, at least," Annabeth told him. "Why would you keep something like that a secret?"

"Did he tell you?" Jason ground out. How many people had Nico told, all this time Jason had thought Nico was keeping it a secret? "Who else knows? Have you told anyone?"
"Dear gods," Annabeth said. "Are you that embarrassed by Nico? Maybe you don't deserve him after all."

Jason felt like Annabeth had reached through the Iris message and slapped him. Recently, that sort of feeling had elicited a whole lot of anger and destruction. This time, he felt his cheeks color with shame. She was right, of course. He didn't deserve Nico.

"I'm sorry, Annabeth," Jason murmured. "At first, Piper asked us not to tell. That's how you found out? She told you?"

Annabeth's nod confirmed that theory, and Jason felt a fresh wave of guilt for doubting Nico.

"And after that," Jason continued, "he said we should keep it secret so kids didn't judge me poorly for being with him."

"You agreed to that!?" Annabeth covered her eyes with her hand. "Jason Grace, shame on you. You should have told him you didn't care what anyone else thought! You fed his insecurities and pain. You know that, right?"

"I...yes." He may as well admit it all now. Annabeth was smart enough to coax out the truth and decent enough not to share his secrets. "I should have insisted we tell. The longer we waited, the more I worried he was right."

"Whether he was right or not was of no consequence. You don't treat someone you love like that. Do you love him? Did you ever love him?"

Jason's head, which had been lowered so he could stare at his hands, snapped up. "Don't question that. I love him every bit as much as you love Percy."

"What did you do that sent him running? Percy told me he had nightmares last night, screaming your name."

"It's not your business, Annabeth."

Annabeth didn't react. She kept staring at him with those unnerving gray eyes.

Jason caved. "I...my dad came to visit. He said I should continue to keep my relationship with Nico a secret and get Piper or Reyna to date and eventually marry me, all while having Nico on the side. I told Nico about it. He reacted about like anyone would, I guess, and he started to leave. I got scared and said some seriously ugly stuff. It was bad, Annabeth."

Jason hadn't expected sympathy, especially after hearing he had starred in Nico's nightmares -- gods, that thought was heartbreaking -- but Annabeth looked at him sadly, and he could tell it wasn't only on Nico's behalf.

"Your father was manipulating you. He doesn't care what you do. There's no way you'll ever truly win his affection. He wanted to break you and Nico apart."

"Yeah, I figured that out, thanks," Jason said sarcastically. "It doesn't change how bad I've fucked up."

"Grovel?" Annabeth suggested. Her blond ponytail flopped around behind her.

"It's hard to grovel when he's on the west coast fucking your boyfriend!" There was the anger that had become Jason's companion.
Annabeth sighed. "I told you, he's not sleeping with Percy."

"Percy said he was."

"Percy says a lot of stupid things first thing in the morning, Jason." Annabeth glared at him. "He meant they were actually sleeping together, like catching zzzs, eyes closed, brains in dreamland, sleeping. He didn't mean they'd had sex."

"You didn't see them, Annabeth."

"Percy and Nico were naked, at least from what you could see, which was from the stomach up. Do you never sleep without a shirt on?" Annabeth had an air of resolution that told Jason the question was rhetorical. "They were spooning; Percy was the big spoon. Nico was asleep, and Percy was playing with Nico's stomach and chest. Is there something else you saw?"

Her voice was as cold as ice by the end of her description. Jason felt dejected, but he also felt a small glimmer of hope. "That was all I saw. But why did Nico go to Percy? Why not Reyna or Hazel?"

"I don't know, but I don't think it was on purpose. He didn't even know what dorm room Percy was in."

"You know Percy wants him." Now it was like Jason had reached through the connection and slapped Annabeth. He immediately felt guilty. That suspicion had nothing to do with trying to get Nico back, and he had no real evidence to back up the assertion.

"I know a hell of a lot more about what Percy wants than you do, Jason," Annabeth said coldly. "Clean up your shit."

She swiped her hand through the Iris message, and Jason was left alone to ponder the enormity of his mistakes.

***

Jason had gotten in the habit of sitting on Hera's wingback throne chair. When his hands had mostly healed from the cuts he'd sustained from punching the mirrors and all that was left was a little nerve damage in a few fingers of his left hand, he'd utterly destroyed his room again, taking care not to punch the mirrors this time. As had happened after the first time, he'd left the cabin only to return to every item of furniture magically repaired, every paper and water bottle and article of clothing back in place. Except Nico's things. Nico's things had been removed when the room was repaired the first time. Jason tore the room apart eight times, and every time he came back to a pristine copy of the way it had looked before he'd ruined it. He had as little control, it seemed, over the state of his room as he had over his life. After the eighth time, he'd given up.

But he could still sit in the most unpleasant place in the room. Occupying that space was its own act of defiance. Zeus and Hera may control his living arrangements; they may have manipulated him into ruining things with Nico; but he would sit where he pleased. The act was petty and small, but Jason took great pleasure in it. He was sitting in that uncomfortable monstrosity of a chair, ignoring lunch and his rumbling stomach, when the call came.

"Jace?"
Nico shimmered into being in front of him, his form slightly distorted by the Iris message. He was in a place with a lot of trees, maybe someplace cool. He was wearing a sleek black leather jacket that was a bit too big for his frame. His hair looked like it had been brushed recently, and maybe he’d gotten a new pair of boots. Jason took it all in and tried to decide what to say.

"Where are you?" Jason asked.

Nico looked around and shrugged.

"Don't lie to me," Jason said. "I couldn't catch you if you were five feet in front of me, unless you wanted to be caught."

"I'm close. In state," Nico confirmed.

"Do you want to be caught?" Jason asked softly, but he knew the answer. If Nico wanted to be with Jason, he'd be here, in his room. But he'd called. That was something.

Nico’s eyes moved slowly over Jason’s face, down his chest and torso, taking in the nerve stimulator stuck on his left hand. Nico shook his head.

"Why did you call, then?" Jason snapped. He felt like kicking himself. He wanted to talk to Nico forever, to beg forgiveness, but he was practically daring his ex-lover to pull away.

"I missed you."

Jason's eyes flooded with tears at that simple admission. He summoned his courage. "I missed you, too."

Nico nodded. He took off his jacket and sat down on the floor of the forest. His long legs were crossed in front of him, and Jason realized how much muscle Nico had packed on since the first night they'd kissed. He was still thin, but there was no way Jason's fingers would fit around his biceps anymore. His thighs strained the fabric of his jeans.

"If I came to camp to get some things, would you stay away from me?" Nico asked.

"No." Jason's voice choked on his tears.

"I'll come sometime you'll be occupied, then. You won't have to see me," Nico said.

"I called." Jason needed Nico to know. He wanted Nico to feel how much he'd missed him. "I called until I ran out of drachmas. I borrowed some from Leo, too, but then Fleecy contacted me one night and told me to quit calling you and wasting hers and Iris's time."

"You know where I keep my money," Nico said. Jason was heartbroken by how indifferent his ex-boyfriend seemed. "Take what you need to replenish your supply. Take it all if you want. My dad keeps giving me more."

"Does that mean I can call you again?"

"Save it for emergencies, Jason. I know how to call you."

They sat there, staring at each other in silence. When Iris's voice came through, asking for more money to continue the call, Jason expected Nico to hang up. Instead, he deposited more money.

"Where've you been?" Jason finally asked.
"I saw Percy," Nico started, and made a confused face when Jason snorted. "Then I went down to my dad's. Demeter sent me to Iowa for a week to help plant corn because I called her a not very nice name while I was down there. I spent a little time in Raleigh with Persephone -- that's where I got the jacket and haircut. Turns out she likes me fine when I'm not around my dad. It was nice, having her dote on me a bit. Now I'm back up here, maybe for a few days."

"But you won't come to camp unless you don't have to see me?"

"That's right."

"But you love me," Jason said.

"That's why I can't see you." Nico smiled, and Jason's heart almost broke open completely at the beautiful sight. "It'd be so tempting to be with you, to let you talk me into doing something that would make me hate myself and hate you. I won't do what you asked, Jason."

"I know." Jason raised a finger and traced, in the air, the outline of Nico's face. "Will you send me a picture of you sometime? I can't believe we were together all that time and I don't have a single photo of us."

"Couldn't have proof laying around that this," Nico gestured between himself and Jason, "existed."

"Exists."

"Have you talked to Piper yet?" Nico asked, his mask back in place. "It'll be easier to do without me around."

"She comes for spring break next week," Jason said. "I'll talk to her then."

"You're going through with it, then?" Disappointment poked through Nico's mask. Jason could feel it curling around him like one of Nico's shadows. Or maybe that was his own disgust with himself.

"You're not coming back to me, are you?" Jason waited and was met, as he had known he would be, with a shake of Nico's head. "Then what does it matter? It's better than being alone."

"I'm not sure it is, Jason."

"Fuck you, Nico. You're so damned smug and sure about things. You already have your dad's approval." Jason gripped the arms of the chair and winced when his left hand had trouble maintaining the grip. Nico noticed and looked concerned. Jason didn't want his pity. "Did you have fun sleeping with Percy? You sure looked happy in his arms."

Nico seemed surprised, and a hint of guilt crossed his face that Jason hadn't expected. Jason had believed Annabeth when she'd told him nothing had happened between Nico and Percy. Maybe Percy hadn't told her everything.

"I...I slept in the same bed as Percy, that's all." Nico said. "Nothing happened between us."

"You're lying, Nico! You think I don't know when you lie?" Jason stood and threw Hera's chair against the wall. He didn't miss the way Nico flinched.

"Quit acting like a steroid-crazed son of Ares, Jace," Nico said. "This destructive stuff has to stop. Clarisse told me what you did to your room and your hands. I didn't have sex with Percy. I didn't kiss Percy. I didn't touch him in any way that was inappropriate, not that it's any of your business, because you asked me to stand by and wait for you in the shadows while you pursued and fucked
Jason twitched as the nerve stimulator forced his fingers to bend. He was grateful for the distraction. When he focused back on the message, Nico was watching his hand, but he'd also gotten into a crouching position and drawn his sword.

"Are you okay?" Jason asked.

Nico searched Jason's eyes and deposited another drachma. He looked skyward briefly, but then turned back to Jason. "I'm fine."

"I am not interested in Piper, and I don't want to have sex with her, Nico. I only want you."

"Did you expect her to date you, marry you, and have your babies through immaculate conception, Jace? Artificial insemination, maybe?" Nico scoffed. "I'm sure she'd go for that." Before Jason could answer, Nico started talking again. "It doesn't matter, don't answer. We can't be together because I'll never give you everything you want, and if I do, I'll betray the person I am. I want good things for you, though, Jace. Will you promise me something?"

"I'd promise you anything, Nico," Jason said.

"Yeah, that hasn't worked out so good for me," Nico said. He smiled at Jason, and in spite of the admission of how much Jason had disappointed him, Jason smiled back. "Consider what matters to you. Do things that make you happy, not your parents, not me, not Piper, not the camps."

Jason nodded. What made him happy was an obstinate boy sitting in the middle of some unnamed forest who wouldn't even entertain the idea of being with him ever again. Once more, Nico glanced at the sky. Jason mimicked him, but of course, he was limited by the Iris message and could see nothing but his own cabin ceiling. When he looked back into the message, concern was lighting Nico's lovely face.

"I love you, Jace. I'll call you again sometime, but I have to go now. Keep your promise."

Nico reached out with his sword to cut through the message, Jason thought, but before the sword touched the mist, a giant eagle swept into view and slashed Nico's shoulder. Jason saw blood bubble from Nico's exposed skin before the Iris message was gone.

Oh, gods, Nico was being attacked! The only giant eagles Jason knew were from Camp Jupiter. Why would they attack Nico? He was considered family to one of their praetors, and it was only a matter of time until he was a brother-in-law to the other, the direction Hazel and Frank were headed.

A drachma. Jason needed a drachma. He had to see what was happening, see if maybe he could figure out where Nico was. He knew, in his heart, hopes of helping Nico were futile. The only person either camp had that was capable of immediately being someplace was the one being attacked, and Nico was an incredibly capable fighter. But Jason was panicked, and he couldn't live with the thought of not knowing what was happening. He rushed to his desk and threw open his middle drawer. The small stack of drachmas Leo had loaned him was gone, emptied out from a call to Frank the night before. Shit.

Jason ran from his cabin and tore across the green down to the Hades cabin, ignoring calls from curious campers. He shoved against the door frantically, but it was locked. He threw his shoulder into the door, and it didn't budge. He backed up a step and kicked the weak spot outside the handle as hard as he could. The wood cracked, and the door burst open. Jason charged inside and kicked out the underside of Nico's nightstand.
When the wood splintered, a heavy envelope dropped down. Jason ripped it open. He pulled a drachma out and ran to the bathroom to make a rainbow. He was two steps from the bathroom door when he found his way blocked by an older, taller, less attractive version of Nico who was wearing a long black cloak covered in screaming faces.

"Why are you in my cabin, son of Jupiter?"

"Please, Uncle Hades, Nico's in trouble! Giant eagles were attacking him! Can you go save him, please?" Jason dropped to his knees and pulled Hades's long, cold fingers from under his robe. He punctuated each word he spoke with a kiss to Hades's knuckles. "Please, Uncle, please, save him!"

"Stand, fool, before your father sees you groveling at my knees and my son suffers his vengeance further!"

"But, Uncle--"

"The boy is more than capable of defending himself against a few of your father's winged assassins," Hades muttered. "The true threat comes after."

Jason rose unsteadily and stared at Hades. Nico looked remarkably like his father. They had the same high cheekbones and pointed jaw. Their eyes were the same color. Hades's hair was slicked back, but it was clearly the same deep black as Nico's. Hades was a handsome man, but the subtle differences between the two only enhanced Nico's exquisite beauty. Nico's eyes were much bigger, wider set, and more expressive. His soft, luscious pink lips were a stark contrast to his father's thin scowl. Nico had long, thick lashes and his eyebrows were arched and looked inquisitive, while Hades just looked menacing, his brows a straight, severe line. The comparison whirled through Jason in a second, and he was tempted to touch Hades again, just to be nearer to a piece of Nico.

"Are you listening to me at all, boy, or are you simply pining after my son's face?" Hades said. "Do you know why Kronos was the one to wield the scythe against his father, Ouranos?"

"No, sir," Jason said. He didn't know why Hades was asking such an odd question when Nico was in trouble. Jason was sure his face was bright red since Hades had caught him red-handed zoning out and thinking about Nico's face.

"It was not because he was the smartest or the most worthy of his brothers." Hades paused and waited until Jason met his eyes. "It was because he was the most vengeful and power-hungry. The same is true each time one seizes power through force."

Was Hades insinuating the same was true of Jason's dad? "Sir, those eagles that attacked Nico? Did you say my father sent them?"

"I said they were your father's eagles. I did not say he sent them." The eyes of Hades, cold and appraising, glared down at Jason.

"But he did?" Jason asked.

"Why would my brother have reason to attack my only son, Jason Grace?"

"Nico and I talked."

"I see. In the future, I believe it would be wise to choose your communications carefully, Mr. Grace," Hades said. "Now, I believe you were thieving from my son. Retrieve what you came for."

Jason walked back to the envelope he'd discarded on the ground. He started to remove a handful of
drachmas, but Hades interrupted him while his hand was still in the envelope.

"Take the thing in its entirety. My son is the smart one of you three."

Jason understood the reference to be to him, Nico, and Percy. He folded the open edge of the envelope and stuffed the thing in his jeans pocket. "So, Nico's okay, Uncle Hades?"

Hades didn’t answer. Instead, he sat on the silly little red couch that, over Nico’s strenuous objections, Hazel had placed in this cabin.

"For the remainder of his life," Hades said, "Nico will only be completely safe from the threat you have unwittingly chosen for him when he is in the Underworld, at either camp, with you, or with Jackson. As much as you may currently dislike Jackson for the way he propositioned my son recently, he is your ally. There may come a time when none of those places is a haven for Nico. Now, I believe enough time has passed for the eagles to have left. Sit with me, Grace, and watch."

Jason, reeling from the knowledge that Percy had tried to bed Nico, stared for a moment at Hades, who merely patted the cushion next to him. Warily, Jason sat on the couch. Hades waved his arm and an image appeared in front of them, almost like on a television screen, much clearer than an Iris message.

In the foreground of the image, bloody and with a clearly broken arm, sat Nico. He appeared dazed.

"Nico!" Jason called out for him, but Hades made a hushing sound.

"You are thick, aren't you? He can't hear us. We are merely observers."

"How could you let him get so severely injured?" Jason asked. Hades cared for Nico. Why would he tolerate these injuries? "He's your son!"

"My pride and joy, the favorite of my entire life," Hades agreed. "Can you imagine what I foresee for him if I am content to let this incident, and all the others he has endured, pass by without action?"

Jason shivered and turned his attention back to the image. Nico attempted to stand but fell. Jason could see blood pouring from his shoulder, his abdomen, streaming down his right leg. He cradled his broken arm and laid back against the forest floor. He looked left and right, and Jason knew he was scanning the area for the closest shadow. Nico's eyes hardened, fixed on a patch of ground to his left, but before he could roll in that direction there was a bright light and a loud crashing noise. Nico closed his eyes against the light.

"Dark Angel," a lovely, melodic male voice said. "It is lucky I happened upon these woods today."

"Apollo?" Nico asked warily, and Jason saw a pair of mens sandals and shapely legs come into view.

Apollo, tan and beautiful, crouched next to Nico. He placed a hand on Nico's broken arm and sang a soft melody.

"Better, love?" Apollo's tone was light and affectionate.

Nico moved his wrist back and forth a few times and nodded. Apollo fixed him with a bright smile.

"Now, beautiful one, I wish to heal you, but I must return to my duties. Will you journey with me?"

"Yes," Nico mumbled. Apollo carefully wrapped an arm around Nico and helped him off the
When Jason turned to Hades to ask what he was supposed to have seen, aside from Nico luckily, though maybe unnecessarily, being saved by Apollo, his uncle was gone.

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Nico woke in a soft, comfortable bed with cool sheets under his mostly-bare skin. He could tell there was a dim light in the room, though he kept his eyes closed. A charming voice sang a comforting melody about love and healing. Warm hands skimmed his stomach.

Nico couldn't ever remember feeling more relaxed and safe. Hands on his skin would normally be something he'd react to with a strong instinct to fight or run, unless they were Jason's hands, or, apparently, Percy's. Nico knew these hands belonged to neither his ex-boyfriend nor his friend, but he felt no need to respond. He was safe. His eyelids fluttered a bit, and the warm voice chuckled lightly.

"The dreamer wakes. How are you feeling, Nico?"

Nico let his eyes open fully and found himself looking into eyes that looked so much like Jason's. Apollo. His hair was soft and curly, much longer than Jason's, and his smile was blindingly white and beautiful. Nico found himself smiling back.

"I will take that glorious smile as a sign you are feeling better, not simply enamored with my appearance. Though if that is the case, I am delighted as well, love," Apollo said. "Now, I take my healing duties very seriously, Nico, so I must insist I check your injuries one last time before I release you as my patient and you simply become my guest."

Apollo's hands moved from Nico's stomach up his chest and onto his shoulder. They slid down his arm and then reversed the route until they were slipping over Nico's boxers and down the front of his thigh.

"Hmm," Apollo hummed. He removed his hands from Nico's thigh and placed one back on Nico's stomach. "Your healing is complete, beautiful angel, and you are no longer my patient."

Nico watched the shift in Apollo's eyes from professional to seductive. He found his breath stuck in his throat.

"Now you are my guest," Apollo breathed, "and I can do whatever you would like me to."

Apollo's fingertips went back to grazing Nico's stomach. They dipped ever so slightly under Nico's waistband, and Nico shuddered at the touch.

Almost reluctantly, Nico removed Apollo's hand from his stomach. Undeterred, the god rested his hand on Nico's opposite hip. Nico couldn't sit up without entering Apollo's embrace.

"Where am I?" Nico asked. The room was not terribly big, but it was sleek and modern and clearly luxurious, with a high ceiling and bright white walls. Nico saw a low steel dresser to the left of the ground. Nico grabbed his sword and jacket, then stood fully. Apollo pressed Nico tightly to his side. They walked away from the view of the image, and Jason heard a car door open and close, followed shortly by the sound of a second door, then the roar of an engine and a bright flash of light. The clearing was empty and quiet.

When Jason turned to Hades to ask what he was supposed to have seen, aside from Nico luckily, though maybe unnecessarily, being saved by Apollo, his uncle was gone.
bed, near the door, and a matching table with a large laptop on the wall across from the headboard.

"You are at one of my residences," Apollo said simply.

Nico startled as a horrifying thought hit him. "Is this your bed?"

"No, lover," Apollo laughed. His laughter sounded like softly tinkling bells. "When you come to my bed, it will be for completely pleasurable reasons."

Wow. Apollo seemed certain it was only a matter of time until they were lovers. Nico was both offended and intrigued. What in the world would a god want with him?

"Come, my love, let me show you my humble abode, and you can view my handiwork on your body," Apollo said. Did he make everything sound sexual? Nico felt himself blush. He allowed Apollo to grasp his hand and pull him off the bed. At the doorway to the room, Nico hesitated. Apollo noticed and fixed Nico with his pretty blue eyes. "What is it, lover?"

"I need to get dressed." Nico blushed brighter.

"Your clothes were ruined, I am afraid," Apollo said, not sounding sorry about that detail at all. In fact, he let his eyes trail very slowly down the length of Nico's body before licking his lips. "Delicious. Auntie Demeter may be horrible, but she has done a wonderful job helping to sculpt you. I will dress you once you have seen yourself."

Without waiting for a reply, Apollo tugged on Nico's hand and pulled him into a short hallway. There was a door across the hall and to the left, but Apollo led Nico in the other direction. Just as Nico caught sight of a stunning living area, Apollo pulled him through a doorway on the right. They were in a bathroom outfitted entirely in sleek gray and white. Nico took in the huge shower with clear glass doors and walls done in a streaked gray and white marble-looking style. The toilet was low and modern, and the white sink and vanity were blocky and defied Nico's ability to describe them. The faucet was minimalist and black, with straight lines and crisp corners. There was a mirror over the vanity that showed a very shell-shocked Nico and a proud Apollo standing close behind him, still holding his hand. With a start, Nico noticed that he was only a couple of inches shorter than Apollo.

"The bath is lovely," Apollo agreed with Nico's unvoiced opinion. He turned on the faucet and ran his hand underneath it. "Everything here is state of the art, the latest design."

"Now, let me show you my handiwork," Apollo continued. He shut off the faucet and dropped Nico's hand, instead moving to stand directly behind Nico and holding him by the hip. The hand he had wet pressed against Nico's forearm, and Nico gasped when a gold web appeared over the spot he remembered feeling break in the beak of an eagle. Apollo smiled warmly at him. "I will stay away from complex terminology and keep it simple. Compound fractures of the radius and ulna, love, collateral muscle damage."

Apollo slowly trailed his wet hand up Nico's arm. He stopped at the scars across Nico's biceps and stroked them gingerly. "Pity. I could have healed these without scars. You were attacked by the werewolf Lycaon, yes?"

Nico nodded.

"Painful injuries, these, slow to heal. You are incredibly brave and strong." Apollo's hand, still somehow wet, traveled up to Nico's shoulder, and a new web of gold appeared. "Deep cuts through several layers of muscle. A chipped bone."
Apollo placed a leisurely, wet kiss on Nico's shoulder and began to move his hand ridiculously slowly across Nico's chest. "You have skin like silk, Nico. It feels and tastes so good."

Nico gasped when Apollo's wet fingertip slipped over his nipple. He was practically panting by the time Apollo finished sliding every other fingertip over the sensitive nub. Apollo watched him appraisingly and let his eyes drift down the mirror. Nico watched as Apollo focused on the way Nico's penis had sprung to life. Apollo didn't comment, though, and Nico closed his eyes and tried to think of anything but the way the sun god was touching him. His mind betrayed him by remaining blissfully blank.

"Cuts through all layers of the abdominal muscles. Slight perforation of the small intestine," Apollo said.

Nico opened his eyes and watched Apollo's hand trail more gold along the tight contours of his stomach. He remembered the eagles again, viciously slashing and biting at him. He'd only just been able to fight them off. Why had they attacked? He'd always thought of the eagles at Camp Jupiter as benevolent, at least to friendly demigods, which is what they saw Nico as.

"May I touch your hardness?" Apollo asked with a hot whisper in his ear. His hand was poised inside Nico's shorts, inches away from his dick. "I would very much like to."

Nico took a deep breath. He was so tempted to say yes. He wanted to say yes. How good would it feel, to be touched by someone who'd been practicing for centuries? Someone who was a stunningly beautiful god and who was giving Nico such praise and tactile pleasure? Would it feel as good as being with Jason?

"No. I'm in love with someone else." Nico let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding, and his head flooded with images of Jason. Not recent images -- none where he'd hurt Nico or lied to him or called him names -- earlier images -- Jason's friendly smile, his eyes when he was sleepy, the way his shoulders felt hot and massive when Nico dragged his nails across them as Jason moved inside him. He looked back at Apollo and found the appeal was gone. He wished very much that he was in Cabin One, curled up in Jason's embrace.

"I understand, lover," Apollo said as he removed his hand from Nico's shorts. "Your steadfastness even in the face of my foolish brother's betrayal and cruelty makes me yet more smitten. Another time."

Nico smiled at Apollo in the mirror and watched as Apollo dropped his hand to Nico's thigh and explained the injuries there. He was relieved that the web of gold and the warm touch of the god didn't affect him the way it had before he thought of Jason.

"Would you like to shower, Dark Angel?" Apollo asked. "I will wait for you in the hall. When you are finished, come out in a towel, and I will clothe you."

Nico nodded, and Apollo left him alone.

The shower felt fabulous, with multiple heads arranged in prime locations along the walls. Nico doubted he'd ever felt so clean. He used the shampoo and conditioner in the shower, and his hair felt silkier than ever. The smells didn't mask his death scent, but they seemed to make it something that even Jason may find more palatable. The thought made Nico frown. He didn't want to remember the way Jason had treated him, the horrible things he'd said that last day. He'd made Nico feel dirty and small, and Nico was still having nightmares about it. He hoped one day he would be able to see himself as he had before Jason had said those things.
Now, the shower felt flat and powerless against the way Jason's words stuck to Nico's skin. He hurriedly shut off the water and dried off. Apollo was waiting in the hall, as promised. Standing before the god in a towel, Nico felt very exposed, even more so than when he was in his boxers. Thankfully, Apollo kept a respectful distance and wasn't as blatantly seductive as before.

"Hmm, you are a fan of black, right?" Apollo asked, and Nico nodded. "It suits you, Dark Angel. Perhaps a hint more sophistication and style."

Apollo snapped his fingers, and Nico was clothed. Nico looked down. He couldn't see much of note, other than he was wearing black. The clothes were comfortable and seemed to fit him well. Nico was very picky about the way clothing touched his skin, so he was relieved that nothing poked or scratched or otherwise irritated him.

"Come, love, let me show you around, and you can take a look at your new apparel," Apollo said.

Nico let Apollo take his hand once again. They walked back down the hall they'd come from and entered the third door.

This was Apollo's bedroom. It was glamorous, in a masculine way. The modern design continued, with a low metal bed, built-in wardrobe with light wood and metal doors, a small metal nightstand, and not much else. The bed was piled with over-stuffed white pillows, white sheets, and a white comforter. It looked like a fluffy cloud.

The star of the room was the view. The outer wall had nothing but floor to ceiling windows along its entire length. The windows were bare, and Nico could see the lights of Manhattan sprawling out around and below him. In the distance, the Empire State Building loomed, impressive and foreboding.

Nico would never forget the one time he'd been allowed in the throne room of Mount Olympus -- the one time the gods had made a show of pretending he and his father belonged among them. He'd been so happy. It hadn't lasted. Jason's father was as fickle and selfish as ever and had gone back to ignoring Hades's and Nico's existence soon after. It was no wonder the god had manipulated Jason into doing what he'd done. Nico wasn't interested in forgiving Jason — his blond lover had made a decision to say the things he'd said; he'd chosen to drive Nico away — but Zeus had earned Nico's contempt. Jason may have been unhappy and confused, but Zeus pushed him into an idea he never would considered if his father's approval wasn't dangled in front of him. Nico shook his head. Apollo was tugging on his hand, and he needed to keep his mind in the present.

"The view's stunning, Lord Apollo," Nico said.

"Please, call me Apollo, Nico. I would like us to be friends." Apollo's eyes were friendly, but Nico knew he wasn't here to be Apollo's "friend." "Now, let me show you your new clothing."

Apollo tugged a bit more insistently, and Nico followed him to the wardrobe. On one door there hung a full-length mirror, and Nico was surprised by his reflection.

He was wearing all black, like before, but there were subtle differences. His t-shirt was snugger, made of a thinner, lighter weight material, and had a deep v neckline that provided a glimpse of his collarbones and chest. The sleeves were a bit shorter than Nico was used to wearing, and his biceps seemed magnified by the close fit of the shirt. The jeans were a darker black than his old, ratty ones, and there were no rips or holes. They were also more snug and fit lower on Nico's hips. He appeared to be wearing the same combat boots Persephone had chosen for him, thank goodness. Nico had liked those.
He worked his way back up his frame, and noticed that a black belt had replaced his normal chain link belt. It was sleek and thick and had a holder for his sword, which was, thankfully, at his hip. Nico couldn't imagine taking a step anywhere outside New Rome without the sword. It was like another appendage to him, as familiar and necessary as his arms and legs.

He had a bracelet around his wrist. The thing was made of groups of four thin black leather cords connecting four silver ovals at regular intervals. Nico loved it. It was a good thing he did, because he could see no clasp and it fit much too close to his skin to be able to slip it off since his hands were significantly larger than his wrists.

Apollo must have noticed his fixation on the bracelet because he said, "It is a gift for you, lover. The silver will conceal anything you slip underneath it. It will repel werewolves, as I fear Lycaon has quite the bloodlust for you. And it looks perfect on your porcelain skin."

Apollo stood next to Nico in front of the mirror and voiced what Nico was thinking might be true but was too modest to ever say or believe. "You look so handsome and sexy, Nico. All that was needed was a bit more attention paid to flattering your already outstanding assets."

Nico looked toward Apollo at the way he emphasized the first syllable of the last word he spoke. Apollo said nothing more, but turned Nico around so his back faced the mirror. The sun god gave a pointed, lingering look at Nico's butt, and Nico turned his head to the mirror. When he did, Apollo placed a hand on his chest and said, "When you are ready, we will make love in ways that will inspire legends."

_Cue the time-out machine_, Nico thought. He'd been a bit, well, a lot, flattered by Apollo's attention and suggestiveness all this time, and, yeah, he was also aroused by basically everything Apollo had done since he had woken up, but "legends?" Really? Nico's brain cried bullshit, and, for a moment, he could clearly see himself as the used plaything of a wandering god, succumbing to flattery only to wake up after the spell had worn off and Apollo had moved on to his next toy and finding himself feeling like a naive little twit. Pass. Nico had already told Jason he wasn't going to live that way. Jason. Gods. Nico needed to contact him.

Apollo sighed and removed his hand from Nico's chest. He grasped Nico's hand and led him out of his bedroom and toward what Nico surmised was the living room.

"I can see that your heart and mind are elsewhere, Nico," Apollo murmured. "My brother is a fool who will only hurt you. It will take him years to take responsibility for the grievous errors he will commit to please our father, who cannot be pleased by any of his sons. All the ways Jason has and will hurt you will be in vain. He will never have what he seeks." He faced Nico, and his eyes were sad. "I would spare you pain, Nico. I know you love him, and perhaps he loves you, but there is joy in the world, even without love. I could give you everything."

"I'm flattered, L...Apollo," Nico began, "and I know I would enjoy your company. He may bring me nothing but misery, but I want to find out for myself."

"Very well. The offer is a standing one, lover. I have heard that your father wishes you to attend college," Apollo said briskly, his voice business-like and authoritative. Nico liked it. "NYU is a prestigious school with a great public policy program and a top-rated law school. It is only a mile away. When you enroll, I hope you will consider living here with me. In the meantime, you may come and go as you please. My doors, and my arms, will always open wide to you."

Nico hadn't told anyone, not even his father, that he had considered becoming a lawyer. He already knew, of course, that NYU was a great school, and he'd hoped to go there. But again, he hadn't told anyone. Was Apollo giving him a glimpse of his future? It seemed the only possible explanation,
because Apollo was no mind reader. Did that mean they were destined to become lovers, too? Was that as certain as law school? Nico wanted to make his own choices, live his own life. The idea that his life had already been planned out, foreseen, made his skin crawl.

Nico paused in his introspection to take in the open space that created the living and dining rooms and the kitchen. It was exquisite, with a low white couch, a large TV and, again, a wall made entirely of glass with a view of the Empire State Building. Nico barely noticed. He needed to leave.

"I need to go," he told Apollo, and the god nodded his head.

"I have packed your backpack with clothing, nectar, ambrosia, and water. It seems your father has already given you enough money," Apollo said. "Nico, I wish to caution you. You will contact my mortal brother. But, know this, Zeus sent those eagles to attack you because you were continuing contact with Jason. You must keep your conversations short and leave before my father locates you. Never contact Jason unless you have the strength to shadow travel away. I wish it were not so, but my father will do whatever he can to keep you apart. You have become a fixation to him."

Nico was stunned, both at the revelation that Zeus had sent those eagles to attack him and that Apollo had spoken so plainly about his father's intentions and yet hadn't been struck down or summoned to Olympus.

"How are you able to speak freely and not suffer any repercussions? Is that a godly thing? We demigods can't criticize the gods so openly like that." Nico realized he sounded a bit like his enthusiastic ten year old self, full of questions, but he didn't care.

"This is a safe house, Nico. Each god is allowed to live privately, and what I say here cannot be heard by the other gods. What I do here cannot be seen by the other gods. By extension, you share my protection when you are here, as you share your father's protection when in the Underworld. Additionally, no god or mortal is allowed to enter the home of a god without an initial invitation. You are the only being I have ever invited here. Know how special and sincere my affection is for you." Apollo said all of this gravely, and Nico realized that perhaps Apollo might genuinely see him as more than a throwaway sexual encounter. He got goosebumps. "Now that I have invited you, you may walk out the front door and return at any time."

"Thank you for healing me and granting me a safe place, Apollo," Nico said earnestly. He walked to the door.

"It was my pleasure," Apollo said softly. "May I, just once, before you go?"

He came to stand a very short foot in front of Nico and let his eyes flick to Nico's lips. Nico nodded briefly and closed his eyes as Apollo moved forward.

The kiss was soft, tender, and expert. Nico knew he was a good kisser. Apollo was better. As Apollo's lips moved against his own, Nico was also aware that mind-blowing kisses weren't ones you could pick apart and analyze as they were happening, the way he was with this one. He remembered the way he'd mimed an explosion the first time he and Jason had kissed. This kiss with Apollo was perfect, and it wasn't even close to how he'd felt with Jason. He gently pushed Apollo away.

"Thank you, again," Nico said. He turned and walked out of the apartment.
Jason had just returned to his cabin from a sparring session, three younger campers against him. He liked sparring. It kept him in shape and kept his mind off Nico, whom he hadn't heard from in five days, not since the eagle attack, and Piper, who had shown up at camp yesterday looking lovely and available. He would ask her later today to date him again.

When the Iris message shimmered to life in front of him, Jason dropped to his knees.

"Jace?" Nico always started with his name. Gods, Jason missed him.

"Yeah?"

"I can't talk long, but I wanted you to know I'm okay."

Nico looked better than okay. He had new clothes that made him look like he'd stepped out of the pages of a fashion magazine. He looked like sex personified. Sixteen year olds shouldn't look like that.

"I've been worried," Jason admitted. "Those eagles--"

"We can't talk about it, Jace," Nico interrupted. "I don't know when I can contact you again, but I'll try soon. Did you take the money from my cabin?"

"I got it. I got the postcards, too, clever boy." In the envelope Hades had made Jason take, he'd found a stack of small postcards that were branded by Hecate to be untraceable and able to find the receiving party without needing to list an exact location.

"Good. Use one if you need me, and it'll find me," Nico said.

"I always need you, Neeks," Jason whispered.

Nico looked so sad, staring back at him. "I have to go. I love you."

Jason nodded. "I love you, too."

Nico swiped through the message and disappeared, again, from Jason's life.
The men spent the next several days entertaining a forgettable group of d-list gods and goddesses, most of whom seemed to have come only to try to woo one or all of them. They enjoyed letters from Hazel, Frank, Piper, and even Leo, whose letter had said only "Geez, dudes, I can't leave you alone for shit before you screw stuff up." They passed an inordinate amount of time antagonizing one another by changing each other's clothing at random. Nico had laughed like a hyena when Percy had put Jason in a baby diaper, but he'd sulked for hours when Percy dressed him like Batman.

Nico's problem was that, unless he was angry or sad, he couldn't do the godly things Percy and Jason could. At first, Percy and Jason hadn't minded too much making Nico angry if it helped him work through his godly growing pains, but after a while, it became clear that Nico's anger and sadness wore him down more than they helped. He refused to try the other men's preferred method, which was still to think of sexual things. A few of the visiting gods had offered to take Nico into the other room for private lessons, but Nico only fell for that ruse once. The god made a pass, but what Nico had done to Ares and Hephaestus had made the godly gossip rounds. As soon as Nico drew his sword, the god took on his true godly form and vanished.

By the end of the first week, the new gods were bored.

"I'm so fucking bored," Percy said for the seventy-fifth time that morning. He was laying on the sofa with his feet thrown over the armrest and his head dangling toward the floor.

Nico considered Percy from where he sat, leaning against the base of the couch. He was playing solitaire with a deck of cards Jason had conjured. "Do you want to play Crazy 8s or Gin?"

"You're turning into someone's old grandma. Aren't you bored? How'd you ever live without TV?"

Nico was horrifically bored, but he wasn't going to admit it to Percy. "I had a TV. I prefer books. I wish I had my books. Are you sure you can't get them for me?"

"I told you already, I don't know what they are."

"You saw them a million times! How can you not know what they are? And I can see your nose hair. Trim that, if you're so bored." Nico made a big show of leaning over Percy's upside down face and rubbing his finger under Percy's nose.

Percy softly tapped the side of Nico's head. "We can't all be fucking hairless cats like you. Hey, actually...

"Percy Jackson, if you touch my hair, so help me--"

"Easy, tiger," Percy said, rolling off the couch and sitting up. "I can't change your appearance, because I'd have to want it to change, remember? Grace, on the other hand..."

"Percy!" Jason roared from the bedroom. He had been struggling to take a nap, and Percy's prank didn't help. He regrew his hair. As soon as he did, it vanished again. He let out a loud, frustrated yell.

"Come out and play, Grace," Percy called. "You're obviously not sleeping, and I can't mess with Nico."
In reply, Percy's hair turned red and grew down to his shoulder blades.

"Give him curls, Jace," Nico said. "I want to see if he looks like Rachel."

Jason appeared in the doorway. His bald head made Nico gasp and cover his mouth. It didn't look bad, exactly, but it didn't look good, either. Jason regrew his hair, and Percy gave him an afro.

This was a game Jason could only lose, because Percy didn't mind having strange hair, but anything other than his standard cut rankled Jason. He couldn't change much about Percy because he spent so much time fixing the things Percy was doing to him. After a while, Nico started calling out suggestions, and Percy was happy to oblige. For good measure, he made Jason's chest hair grow three feet long, which Nico found funniest of all. Jason hated the game, but he was happy to see Nico laughing. After the fourteenth different hairdo, Jason sat down across from Nico and suggested they play Go Fish.

"Oh, hell, not you, too. Don't you two know any grown-up games?" Percy climbed back on the couch and laid on his stomach. He leaned his head over Nico's shoulder. Together they looked like a two-headed man.

"I said Gin, and that's grown-up game, Percy," Nico said. "It's not my fault you don't know how to play."

"Gin's an old lady's game, dipshit," Percy said.

"I gotta agree, Neeks," Jason said. His hair was spiked into a purple mohawk. Nico sort of liked it. "What did you do without TV?"

"We had a TV!" Nico almost-shouted. "We watched sports on Monday nights. Geez. I didn't live in a cave."

"Mmm, he's awfully sexy for a caveman, Jace," Percy said. He ran his hands up under Nico's shirt, which earned him a poorly placed slap on the head. The slap banged his ear into Nico's and hurt them both. "Grumpy enough to be a caveman, though."

Jason chuckled. "Okay, you watched sports. What else did you do?"

Nico glared at Jason. "I had sex. Lots and lots and lots of sex. Hot, steamy sex all the time."

"Shut up," Percy said. He dropped down to sit next to Nico. If they were playing Go Fish, Percy was going to play, too. "You were home alone all day long, if you weren't at my house or in class. What did you do when you weren't having all that sex or at school or at my house?"


"Oh!" Percy said. He leaned over and whispered in Nico's ear. Nico's face colored, and he shook his head.

"We're gods, remember? I can hear what you whispered. And I already know." Jason didn't like Percy knowing so much about Nico, things that were secrets.

Percy started to say something to Jason, and Nico slammed a hand over his mouth. "Don't. He doesn't know about that."

Percy's eyes met Nico's and understanding passed between them. "Only me?" Percy whispered.
Nico nodded, and Percy's eyes blurred. The uptick in their breathing would have been obvious even to someone who was not a god. Percy cupped Nico's jaw, ran his thumb over Nico's lips, and moved closer. Nico's eyes were half-lidded, slipping closed. Jason clenched his fists and bit the inside of his mouth to prevent himself from saying anything. He had seen Nico kiss people before. He believed he could handle it. Before there was any contact, though, Percy and Nico were both pulling back.

"Sorry," Percy said quietly. Nico shook his head and didn't meet Percy's eyes. Percy kissed Nico's temple. "I'm gonna go for a swim, guys. I'll be back in a bit."

Jason watched Percy leave. Nico stared at his hands. His guilt, which had been on the wane since he'd talked to Percy in the altar, had come roaring back. Kissing Percy would further complicate their situation.

"I'm sorry, Jason," Nico said. He twisted his skull ring and twisted his black ring, back and forth. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"You don't need to apologize to me, Nico," Jason said. He returned his hair to its normal blond and took Nico's hand. His legs stretched out under the table until his feet bracketed Nico's narrow hips. "We're complicated, and it's been a long time since I had a right to get angry with you for what you do, or who you do things with."

Nico snorted. "Never stopped you before."

"I know. I made one hell of a lot of mistakes with you. And with Percy. I'm not going to make those same mistakes this time around, okay?"

"Let's take it an hour at a time, Jace. We both made mistakes, and I doubt my ability to not repeat them, obviously." Nico tentatively smiled at Jason and caught his eye briefly before settling his attention on the cards littering the table.

Jason squeezed Nico's hand and tapped Nico's hip with his toes. "Let's play Go Fish."

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Jason had won five rounds of Go Fish to Nico's three when the goddess Eos burst into being in their living room. Even among goddesses, almost all of whom are beautiful, Eos stood out. Her dark blond hair fell in waves around her shoulders. Her lips and cheeks were a rounded and winsome pink, and she was wearing a long, flowing white sleeveless dress that showed off her lovely arms. Jason's eyes bugged out of his head when he saw her. Nico's eyes narrowed when he saw Jason's reaction.

"Go get Percy," Nico said. He and Jason both stood, but Jason didn't move or take his eyes off the goddess. Nico flicked the deck of cards at Jason's face. Jason startled and dropped out of his trance. His cheeks colored, and he grinned sheepishly at the goddess. She giggled. Nico growled.

"You're pretty," Jason said.

"Oh, you're lovely, too, Muscles," she said. "Maybe I'll have you for dessert. Run along and get your friend. Take your time. I'll keep myself busy with Apollo's sexy, sexy boytoy here."

"Gay," Nico said.
It didn’t matter. Eos was already on him, running her hands through his hair and down his chest. "I like a challenge, sexpot."

"Oh, fuck this. Jason, get your ass down to the damned beach now and get Percy. Lady, get off me." Nico pulled Eos's hands off him, but they slipped through his grasp and were pawing at him again with twice the vigor. He huffed in resignation, but when he noticed Jason still standing there, watching, as Eos slowly slid up his shirt and exposed his stomach, he stomped his foot, released a huge fear aura, and barked, "Move your ass, Grace!"

Jason jumped and hurried out of the house. Once away from Eos and Nico's fear aura, Jason's head cleared, and he felt like a fool for being so taken by the goddess of the dawn. He rushed down to the beach and splashed into the water fully clothed. The briskness of the water helped, even though it left his jeans soggy. He found Percy soon enough and pulled him back to shore without speaking. Once they were on land, Percy jerked his arm away and put his hands on his hips.

"What the hell's wrong with you? I was enjoying swimming."

"Sorry," Jason said. "Dry me off, will you? We have company."

Percy put a finger on Jason and he was dry. He started putting his clothes back on. "Who is it? Anyone good?"

"It's Eos, I'm pretty sure."

"Who-os?"

"Eos, goddess of the dawn. Aphrodite cursed her to be perpetually horny. Ring a bell?" Jason wanted to get back. He wasn't worried about Nico, but he wanted to apologize for turning into a blushing, gooey-eyed virgin.

"Nope," Percy said. "How'd she piss off Aphrodite?"

"Screwed Ares."

Percy made fake vomit noises. Jason nodded.

"Also, though, dude, she's seriously hot."

Percy narrowed his eyes. "How hot?"

"Like girl Nico hot. So imagine someone as hot as him with zero self-control. She's already all over him in there, had his shirt half off."

"Ha, good luck with that," Percy said. It took two seconds for his mind to create a picture of the scene. "But we should probably check on him."

"Yeah. Let's go."

For reasons neither could quite explain, Percy and Jason raced back to the house in an extremely competitive fashion. At the house, Jason shoved Percy into the wall and burst through the curtained doorway. What he saw took his breath away. Percy ran in behind him and skidded to a halt. On the sofa, Nico and Eos were pressed together, heartily kissing.

Nico laid on top of the goddess and slowly kissed down her neck. His shirt was missing, and Eos was fumbling with his belt. Eos noticed Percy and Jason watching them, and she laid a finger to her
mouth, bidding them be quiet. She pulled Nico's hair and guided his lips back to her mouth. Jason took a step forward, but Percy grabbed his arm and held him in place. The men stared, open-mouthed and silent, listening to the small moans Nico's mouth and hands were coaxing from the goddess, until Eos slipped a tiny pink hand down the back of Nico's jeans. Jason and Percy gasped slightly, and Nico stilled.

"We're done," Nico whispered. Eos pulled him back for one last kiss, which he allowed, and let him go. Nico sat up and helped Eos to sit, too. "Make us a chair to sit in, please."

Eos created a small armchair and snapped her fingers. She and Nico were instantly sitting in the chair, with her crouching behind him, legs spread and arms wrapped around his chest. From there, she could see the other men and impart wisdom, but she could also rub herself against Nico's back.

"Sit, Muscles and friend," Eos said. She smiled seductively at Jason. "I only bite when asked."

Jason and Percy obeyed. And stared. Eos ran her hands along Nico's arms and shoulders. Nico rolled his eyes.

"This is Eos," Nico said. "She's the goddess of the dawn. She's cursed to be perpetually--"

"Oh, Nicky," Eos purred. "These fine gentlemen don't need to know about my problems. I'm here to help with yours."

"Fine," Nico said. "What are you helping us with?"

"Anything you want, you marvelous creature." Her brown eyes sparkled with desire.

"Godly things, Eos. How to manipulate our powers. How to move from one place to another. How to--"

"I like you better when your mouth is on my skin, Nicky."

Jason raised his hand. He could hear Percy breathing rapidly next to him. Nico rolled not just his eyes but his entire head. Eos took that as an invitation to mouth his neck.

"Spit it out, Jason. She's a goddess, not a teacher," Nico said.

Percy whimpered.

"I...just...um...what was that? That we walked in on?"

Jason poked Percy in the ribs. Percy slapped Jason's head. They both blushed. Eos laughed and rocked against Nico.

"It's like babysitting a bunch of thirteen year olds at their first boy-girl dance," Nico grumbled. He fixed his eyes on Jason and Percy. "Eos and I made a bargain. That was my end. Hers is sitting here and not throwing herself at you two."

"I got Nicky to play with me for as long as you were gone, Muscles. Really, you should have taken so much longer. I didn't have nearly enough time with him." Eos gave a fake pout and pulled Nico back to kiss along his jaw.

Nico gently put his hand to Eos's forehead and pushed her away. "Focus, Eos. What can you tell us about godhood?"

"It's pretty easy, really," Eos said. "You do your job and stay out of the way of the big guns. Keep
your legs together when Zeus comes calling. No offense, Muscles."

"Great, that's fabulously helpful," Nico said. He pulled Eos's hand away from his nipple. "Can you tell us something that might help us here?"

"I know exactly what would help you, Nicky. Why can't you admit it? Let's go in your bedroom, and I'll get it out of you."

Nico slapped Eos away from his crotch. He checked his watch and wondered how much longer they'd be stuck with her. On the couch, Percy and Jason watched the way Eos touched and groped her way across Nico's body. Nico thought they looked brain dead.

"How about this, Eos?" Nico said. "How about you tell us how to hook up electricity to this place? Jason and Percy like to play video games. They've been bored."

"I think they'd rather play with you."

Jason raised his hand again.

"Oh my gods, Jason, you shit, if I could stand up without her going bananas I'd beat the hell out of you," Nico said. "Quit raising your fucking hand."

Jason ignored Nico's temper tantrum.

"Can we just, um, go back to, you know, where you two were, um, hooking up on the couch?" Jason's thoughts vacillated between arousal, intense jealousy, and a blank static.

Nico growled and sunk his hands into the chair. It was a nice gray leather. Nico hoped it stayed when Eos left. He turned to the goddess, who stopped grinding against him long enough to stare longingly into his eyes.

"I think we've learned all we can, Eos. Thank you."

"Talk to them, Nicky," Eos said. She smoothed her hand down the side of his face. "All this emotion bottled up inside you isn't a good thing. Have sex. If you work it out ahead of time, they won't get jealous. You miss it, I know you do."

"I miss a lot of things," Nico whispered.

Eos smiled and kissed his forehead. "That's a start. Look me up when the jackasses of the universe decide to let you go."

Eos glowed and vanished. Nico was, happily, left with the chair.

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Nico ran his hands over his face and back through his hair. Percy and Jason continued to stare at him.

"Well that was worthless, except for the chair," Nico said.

Percy and Jason gaped. Between both of them, there were three thoughts running through their
heads. They were all of a carnal nature.

Nico sprang from the chair and banged Percy's and Jason's heads together. He walked outside while the men were swearing and holding their respective heads.

Nico watched the sun begin to sink on the horizon. The group needed something to do, but Nico's life had been filled with few moments of wasted time. He didn't know how to fill time with activities designed to waste it.

"Hey, Hephaestus," Nico said. "I know you're probably pissed at me for the fingers and the hair, but if important gods can pay us a visit, we could really use your technological help."

No reply came. Nico hadn't expected one. Percy and Jason came and stood on either side of him. They shared a look behind Nico's back. Nico didn't acknowledge them.

"We're sorry we turned into slobbering, redneck horndogs," Percy said. He patted Nico's shoulder. "You shocked us. And fulfilled some, like, deep-seated horny fantasy, so, um..."

"I'm sorry I raised my hand," Jason said. "I was an idiot."

Nico covered his mouth with his hand to hide his smile. "Yeah, you were. Both of you."

"So you were hooking up with her to protect us?" Percy asked.

"Well, yeah. You don't want to be unfaithful to Annabeth," Nico said. "Eos would have tempted you."

"That's fucked up, Nico," Jason said, "using your body to get what you want."

Nico sneered at Jason, and Jason was instantly sorry for what he'd said.

"Well, I wonder who taught me to do that, Jason Grace." Nico tapped his chin and pretended to think. "Where could I have learned that the only things I'm good for are fucking and sucking? Hmm, who said that?"

Nico walked toward the house. Jason didn't follow, but his words did. "Are you going to let one of the worst moments of our lives define everything you ever think? Damn it, Nico. You know I was lying. Why do you keep lying to yourself?"

"Fuck, Jason," Percy said softly as he watched Nico disappear into the house. "You said that to him? How old was he?"

"Way too young," Jason said. He dug trenches in the sand with his feet. "It was the first completely horrible thing I did to him. Remember that time he came to your dorm room?" Jason couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. "You know, when you tried to get him to give you oral? Then."

"Oh, gods. Shit. Shit. Shit." Percy sat on the ground, and Jason sat across from him. "I didn't know. He didn't tell me."

"Did you give him a chance to? Or were you too busy trying to seduce him?"

To Jason's utter shock, Percy cradled his head in his hands and started to cry. Jason felt like joining him, but his eyes stayed dry. He had already cried many tears for the things he'd taken from Nico.

After fifteen minutes, when the sun was beginning to sink perilously low, Percy raised his head. His eyes were red.
"All this time, I've blamed you for all of Nico's problems. He came to me that day, and I didn't even ask what made him run. I wasn't planning it, I swear, hitting on him like I did. Gods, how awful. And then that summer, at my party...that's why he was so willing, huh? You'd told him sex was all anyone would want, and that's exactly what I did. I didn't talk to him again for six months. Oh, gods, it's as much my fault as it is yours. Fucking hell, Jason, I'm sorry."

Jason nodded and weakly patted Percy's shoulder.

"He has to let it go, Percy. We can't feed his insecurities, and he can't let this shit define his life. He was making a lot of progress before this god stuff happened. I shouldn't have said what I did about what he did with Eos. He'll be mad at me for a few days, and it'll blow over. He's stronger than you realize."

"You sound so callous about it, Jason," Percy said.

"I've spent a long time being Nico's nightmare," Jason said. He smiled sadly. "I'm working on accepting that I can't go back in time and fix my mistakes. I have to learn from them, and so does he. Hold him extra close tonight, if you would. He won't want me to touch him."

"Sure." Percy stood and offered a hand to Jason. "I feel like shit."

Jason shrugged dismally. "You get used to it."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all liked the little visit from Eos!

Folks that have taken the time to comment, thank you tremendously. I haven't been feeling that great the past few days, and I've been super-busy. Your comments - knowing you're reading and hearing what your thoughts are (even if it's a one-sentence comment, it's still awesome and makes me smile) - have kept me motivated to do my last-minute edits and have the next chapter ready to post on time when I'd rather be curled up in bed. Muchas gracias.
Percy dragged three large coolers onto the green and white linoleum of his kitchen floor. He filled one with bottles of beer, a second with bottles of water, and the third with cans of soda. One by one, he split open bags of ice and poured the ice all around the contents of the coolers. He moved around some of the ice to make it settle better and, satisfied, he replaced the coolers' lids. He straightened as he heard his back door open.

"Getting ready for tonight?" Annabeth asked. She was dressed in jeans and tennis shoes and an old Camp Half-Blood t-shirt. Percy could see her Yankees cap sticking out of her back pocket.

Percy nodded and hopped up to sit on his green countertop. Annabeth stood pressed between his legs. He liked this place and this girl. The villa wasn't a new one, though Percy could have had one of those. After living so long in his mom's modest apartment, Percy felt more at home in a place like this, with its old wood-paneled walls and bland green carpet in the living room and bedrooms. Green everything, really. Even the bathtub was green. Percy smirked.

"It'll be a fun party," Annabeth said. "You'll get to show off your new place to the Seven plus Nico and Reyna."

"I didn't invite Nico," Percy said brusquely. He knew Annabeth wouldn't approve, but he couldn't bring himself to contact his cousin. They hadn't spoken once in the four months since Nico had shown up at Percy's dorm and Percy had shoved his crotch in Nico's face.

Annabeth tilted her head and gave Percy a disappointed look. "Percy, you invited the Seven plus Reyna and Nico, minus Nico? You're going to make him feel like shit."

"I don't care."

"Liar," Annabeth chuckled. She wrapped her arms around Percy's waist and kissed his chest. "I know this is about what happened--"

"Nothing happened!"

"--when Nico visited you. Give yourself some credit. You're not going to cheat on me because you happen to be attracted to him. He's your friend, Percy, and he needs you."

"It'd be different if you were going to be here," Percy grumbled. He felt safer, stronger, less susceptible to dangerous distractions, with Annabeth by his side.

Annabeth let go of Percy's waist and turned around. Percy slipped his arms around her. He cupped and squeezed her breasts. He knew exactly how to move his fingers to make Annabeth crazy.

"I have to go, Seaweed Brain," Annabeth said. "Keep that up. It feels amazing. I know this quest is dumb, but Allie, the Minerva girl I've been mentoring, she asked me to go, and I can't say no. I'll be back soon."

Percy ran his fingers over the soft peaks of Annabeth's nipples before he pulled her away from him and jumped off the counter. Once he'd landed, he pulled her back and rubbed his growing hardness against her ass.
"Sure I can't convince you to stay?" Percy asked, his voice low and intense in Annabeth's ear.

"You're very skilled at tempting me," Annabeth said. She leaned her head to the side, and Percy latched onto her neck. He turned them again, so Annabeth was smashed against the counter, her head resting on the upper cabinets. Percy kept teasing her nipples and grinding against her mercilessly. Annabeth reached behind her and pulled Percy's hips tighter to her.

"Knock-knock!" The voice came from Percy's back door, and extremely reluctantly, Percy stopped moving.

"Your timing sucks, Valdez."

Leo, with his wild black curls and impish smile, regarded Percy smugly.

"Your timing is perfect, Leo," Annabeth said. She pulled Percy's hands off her breasts and elbowed him until he moved from behind her. "I've got to go. Make sure Percy doesn't drink too much tonight, will you?"

She kissed Percy without waiting for Leo to reply, then wordlessly left. Percy was too busy trying to find a way to hide his erection to even say goodbye.

"Dude, you need anything from the store or something?" Leo asked, after several awkward minutes where Percy still hadn't turned to face him. "Cause this is embarrassing, standing here waiting for you to get rid of your hard-on. I might as well be productive, and you might as well go jack off."

"Bean dip, tortilla chips, maybe some guac, unless you know how to make it. If you do, get the ingredients," Percy tossed over his shoulder. He reached into his pocket for his wallet.

"Whoa, there, amigo," Leo practically shouted. "I don't want anything outta your pants right now. Pay me back later."

Percy nodded and heard the back door slam as Leo left. He slapped his head against the cabinet then hobbled down the hall to his bedroom.

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"You look gorgeous."

Piper smiled and gave Jason a hug, which he returned enthusiastically. He'd come to Piper's dorm room to escort her to Percy's party. She was absolutely radiant in a slinky green dress with spaghetti straps and an uneven hemline. Most of the dress hit above the knees, but a little part in the back dipped below. She was wearing strappy gold sandals to match. With her dark, warm skin on display under the green and gold, Jason thought she looked like summer come to life. He pulled away slightly and kissed her for long seconds.

When they broke apart, Piper picked up her purse and ushered Jason out of her room. Jason lived in this dorm, now, too, so he knew where to go. They'd both decided to come to New Rome a bit early to take a course, about how to succeed in college, that was required for all incoming freshmen. It had seemed smarter to get it out of the way in the summer so they could focus on their academic classes in the fall. Plus, they got to spend a rather lazy summer in New Rome.
Jason didn't voice it, but it also got him the hell out of Camp Half-Blood. Since Nico left, he'd done little but think about his father's manipulations and his own failures. Nico hadn't called again, and his clever postcards sat safe and unused in Jason's desk. As the days had gone on without hearing from Nico, Jason had contemplated using a card, just to be sure his ex-boyfriend was okay, until one day he'd known Nico was both alright and that he'd never hear from him again.

He'd woken one morning with Piper in his arms, her beautiful body naked next to his, and made love to her. He'd been a gentleman and let her shower first. It was only after she entered the bathroom that Jason reached for his glasses. A photo was nestled between the lenses and the earpieces. Jason had held it and put on his glasses. It was a picture of Nico. It had been taken in one of those paid photo booths that snap several photos and spit three pictures out of a little slot on the outside of the booth. There was only one picture. Nico must have torn off the others. The photo was so dark that almost all Jason could see was Nico's luminous face. The son of Hades was trying to smile, but he looked haunted and strained. It was clear to see, whatever he wanted Jason to believe, that he was as unhappy as he'd been that last day they were together. Nico must have come by during the night and dropped it off. Which meant, of course, he had seen Jason and Piper naked and wrapped around each other in the same bed he'd lain in with Jason countless times. Jason had kissed the picture and tucked it in his wallet. He'd managed to dry his tears before Piper got out of the shower.

"...so Miranda and I are going to check it out Thursday night," Piper was saying.

Jason smiled and nodded his head as though he had been listening. He was trying to be a good boyfriend. When he was with Piper, most of the time, he managed not to dwell too much on Nico. It was just that now, going to Percy's party, where Nico might be, was making Jason worse. He wasn't sure how he'd react to seeing his ex-boyfriend.

"I should go back to my dorm room and get a jacket in case it's chilly when we leave Percy's," Jason said.

Piper looked at him sympathetically. "You're afraid Nico will be there, aren't you?"

Jason loved how well Piper knew him. She was a great friend. Girlfriend.

"Is it that obvious?"

"That's the third time today that you've said something that basically stalls us going to the party," Piper said. She fixed Jason with a kind smile and took his hand. "Lots of people see their exes, Jason. Heck, you saw me all last summer, and things were a little awkward at first, but then everything was fine, right?"

"Nico's not you," Jason grumbled. And I wasn't still in love with you, he thought silently.

Piper formed her pretty lips into a thin line. "I'm very much aware of that, Jason. You think I don't know you still have feelings for him?"

"Piper..."

"Look, it's alright. I knew it when I agreed to date you again, though I wish you'd tell me why you two broke up," she said. "You don't fall for someone as hard as you fell for Nico and get over it immediately. But we're together now, and I want to go to this party. I'll be by your side. Nico probably won't even be there. He and Percy have never been friends."

Jason's blood boiled as he thought about what Hades had said about Percy "propositioning" Nico. Then he felt guilty because he remembered that Hades had also said Jason had somehow risked
Nico's safety and that with Percy was one of the few places Nico was safe, whatever the hell Hades had meant.

"You're right," Jason said. He shrugged his shoulders and took a fortifying breath. "Let's go to Percy's party. Just maybe we'll take the scenic route."

Piper laughed and let Jason catch her again in a long kiss.

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"Are you aware of how childish you're being?"

"I am not."

"You are, and your previous utterance proves I'm right."

Nico groaned and made a face at his reflection in the mirror. "I don't want to go, and I look like an idiot."

"You are going. That's final. I don't care whether you believe you look like an idiot or not. Now come here and have some tea before we go." Reyna jerked Nico's elbow and led him away from the mirror to her soft tan couch. Nico flopped roughly onto the couch, stuck out his lower lip, and crossed his arms. Reyna huffed beside him and sipped her tea.

"He didn't even invite me, Reyna," Nico tried. "If he wanted me to be there, he would've asked me himself."

"You are operating under the delusion that I care what Percy wants," Reyna said. Her normally braided hair flowed free and there was a hint of makeup on her regal features. Nico didn't care anything about clothes, but the outfit she was wearing, some dress of silver, seemed nice. "You are going as my escort."

Nico thunked his head down hard on Reyna's shoulder. "Jason'll be there."

"I'd imagine so."

"Can't I stay here and wait for you to come home?" Nico rather liked Reyna's quarters. They were comfortable and quiet, and no one was allowed in unless personally invited by Reyna, which meant no one but him was allowed in. That suited Nico fine.

"No. We've discussed this. I'm old enough to need an escort to social functions, and you work nicely for those purposes." Reyna's words reminded Nico so much of what Jason had said. Maybe she would have gone along with Jason's plan. No. She wouldn't have if it had meant hurting Nico. Reyna was his best friend, now that Jason wasn't.

"This isn't a state dinner, Reyna. It's a party at Percy's. Percy's," Nico said. "He's probably serving bean dip and cocktail wienies."

Reyna snorted, then broke into a full, hearty laugh. "Probably so. But, my darling, please do this for me?"

"Who even cares? Plus, people know that I'm gay and you and I are just friends." They'd been
through this argument before, but Nico figured one more time couldn't hurt.

"People know you've dated boys, Nico," Reyna corrected. "That doesn't mean you wouldn't be interested in girls. And people know we are very close. All we have to do is go places together when you're in town and then not dispel any rumors that may start or continue, as it's likely the case there are already lots of rumors surrounding the nature of our relationship. It's that simple. Now drink your tea, and be a good boy."

Nico removed his head from Reyna's shoulder and took a sip of tea. He toyed with the idea of spilling some down his clothes so he could go change and waste more time, but the tea was hot. Instead, he'd stall the old-fashioned way: more whiny complaining.

"Why do I have to wear this? I look stupid." He was wearing another pair of the jeans Apollo had given him and a soft, thin black sweater that fit him snugly. Everything was so tight he could barely move. Reyna had dug the sweater out of his backpack and made him put it on. He had few wardrobe choices at the moment, though, because Apollo had taken the job of "clothing" him very seriously.

After his encounter with the god, Nico had sneaked back into Camp Half-Blood later that week (taking one little peek in Cabin One to watch Jason sleep and pick up his clothes, which Jason had already removed -- that killed him inside) only to find that every item of clothing he'd once owned was gone, replaced by a teeming wardrobe of clothes that Apollo had to have sent.

"You look far too sexy to be the age you are, " Reyna said. Nico sighed indignantly, and she continued. "Any person who lays eyes on you will want you, including me, if you weren't the annoying little brother I'd never asked for but got anyway. I like the idea that my citizens may believe I have something going with someone who is both inordinately powerful and devastatingly handsome. As an added bonus, why not give Jason a little reminder of what he's missing out on?"

"This is stupid," Nico groaned and stood.

"I quite agree," Reyna said, standing and wiggling her fingers around Nico's elbow. "The presence or absence of a companion is meaningless to my ability to run this place or to my own self-worth. I am merely playing a game to my advantage. Now, open the door, sexy, and let's go make people squirm."

Nico laughed and shook his head. He opened the door and stepped outside before planting a kiss on the side of Reyna's mouth and letting her lead him down the short path toward Percy's new home.

They shared pleasant conversation for the three minute walk from Reyna's villa to Percy's house. Now that he was watching for it, Nico noticed the stares he and Reyna received.

As they approached Percy's house, Nico could smell burgers on a grill. The house was a nondescript pink adobe villa with a wood door and a small front courtyard. It seemed more Spanish than Italian. Reyna rang the bell, and they were almost instantly greeted by Leo, who was wearing a white t-shirt and suspenders and had a bit of guacamole on his cheek. Reyna ignored Leo's greeting and elbowed her way past, dragging Nico along with her. Nico turned and waved to Leo and got a smirk in return.

"Reyna's here, man!" Leo yelled, presumably toward Percy. "She's as friendly as ever!"

Percy's spartan living room was lit up with Christmas tree lights all around the perimeter. Nico was sure he'd have a headache before the night was over. Percy had a couch, which was brown and looked like it might have been scavenged from a dumpster, and an odd assortment of three chairs. One was an overstuffed green number which clashed horribly with the carpet. Another was purple, and Nico was pretty sure he'd seen it in the Senate lobby not too long ago. The third was one Percy had obviously bought new for himself. It was a bright blue recliner with weird fish-themed armrest
covers. Nico shook his head. Between the furniture, the faux wood paneling, the enormous TV (Nico remembered that monstrosity from Percy's dorm room), and the cruddy green carpet, Nico felt certain this wasn't a home Percy would ever convince Annabeth to share with him. Nico didn't even care that much about decor and living conditions -- after all, he'd been homeless for many years and had slept in some pretty sketchy accommodations -- but this was a stretch.

When Percy didn't show up after a few seconds, Reyna resumed dragging Nico around and pulled him into the kitchen, where Percy was taking -- Nico called it -- bean dip out of the microwave. Percy's back was to them as he set the bean dip on the counter. When he turned, Nico could see the "oh, shit" look in his eyes when they landed on Nico.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence where Percy simply stared. Then there was an even more uncomfortable silence when Percy's stare became a slow scan up and down Nico's body. Then his eyes went up and down again.

"Told you, you hot sexy mess," Reyna whispered in Nico's ear. Nico nudged her with his elbow, and she cleared her throat.

Percy snapped out of his daze and smiled widely at them. Nico had never seen Percy with a fake smile before. It was probably the strangest thing he'd ever witnessed.

"Nico! Reyna! I'm so glad you could make it!" Percy exclaimed, focusing on Reyna. He hugged them both, though Nico noticed his hug was markedly shorter than the hug Percy gave Reyna.

"How are you, Percy?" Reyna asked. "Sorry about sending Annabeth on that quest."

Percy's eyes darkened, and they flicked back to Nico's face for a second.

"It's fine. She was happy to go help that little girl she's been mentoring. I'm good. Great, actually. Never been better. Want a beer?" Percy delivered the entire spiel in about three seconds, and Reyna burst out laughing.

"Distracted by something, Percy?" she asked, and Nico elbowed her again. "We don't drink. But we'd both love a water, I'm sure."

Percy nodded and fetched two water bottles from one of his coolers. He handed them both to Reyna.

Reyna curiously furrowed her brows at Nico and handed him a water bottle. Nico could feel the blush on his face. Percy couldn't be more obviously avoiding him, and Nico was starting to feel a little angry. Things were weird enough between them without Percy acting like this big a moron and tipping off their weirdness to everyone else. It was bad enough he'd excluded Nico from a party that was only supposed to include nine people.

He took a step toward Percy and watched, dumbfounded, as Percy took a step back.

"Oh, this is gonna be a fun night," Leo said, and Nico jumped. He'd forgotten Leo was even here.

"Come, Leo," Reyna said brightly. "Try to convince me you are not as big an ass as you have always seemed."

"Up for any challenge," Leo replied, and Nico watched the Latino smiling broadly at Reyna as they retreated toward the living room, leaving Percy and Nico alone.

"Um, I should probably..." Percy mumbled and tried to walk past Nico. Nico grabbed Percy by the elbow and pulled him back. They were almost the same height now, Nico noticed.
"What's your problem?" Nico growled. "Are you back to thinking I have cooties or something?"

Percy yanked his arm free. "Why are you even here? I didn't invite you for a reason, Nico."

"Could that reason be because the last time we saw each other you begged me to suck your dick?"

Percy's eyes widened, and he glanced toward the living room before pushing Nico gently back against the wall and holding him in place at the upper arms. "Shut up! Do you want someone to overhear?"

"Not particularly." Nico did his best to sound bored. It was hard when Percy was holding him captive and glaring at him. And looking at his lips.

"I made a mistake, Nico, doing that, and it's not going to happen again, so don't get your hopes up," Percy hissed.

"You're an asshole, Percy," Nico said. "Nothing happened because I didn't do it, not because you didn't want it. Don't pretend like it was me pushing you for sex."

"It's not sex!" Percy whispered frantically. He moved closer to Nico, into his personal space. Nico wondered if Percy realized how his hands were cupping Nico's biceps and his hips were pressing closer. "It's just...just...a little tension release between friends." Percy's eyes drifted back to Nico's lips and stayed there. "I wanted to...know you...a little better."

Nico narrowed his eyes in disbelief. Percy was infuriating. How could he delude himself into thinking he wasn't trying to weasel sex out of Nico? "So what? You were just being friendly?"

"Yes!"

"You are an idiot," Nico said. "Fine. Have it your way. It doesn't make a difference."

The relief on Percy's face was almost palpable. Nico shook his head and tried to get Percy's hands off his biceps. The doorbell rang, and Nico used the distraction to shake free of Percy. Percy turned his head and listened for a moment, until they both heard the soft, deep voice of Frank.

"I'm going to say hi to Hazel and Frank," Nico said. He left the kitchen, feeling Percy's eyes follow him the entire way.

Nico was thrilled to see Hazel. He had arrived in New Rome only the day before, and he'd been hunkered down at Reyna's villa, catching up on sleep, the entire time.

"Nico!" Hazel yelled when she saw him. She threw Leo, who had been hugging her, to the side and barreled into Nico's waiting arms.

"You've grown again, Brother," Hazel said.

"I had to go work for Auntie," Nico said. He always seemed to grow when Demeter sent him to "the farm." She had sent him a second time since he'd first gone down to see Hades after the breakup, only this time he'd had to stay in Iowa for three weeks. Miserable.
"I'm sure she means well, Nico," Hazel chided, though her eyes said she understood Nico's torment. "It really does always do you good. Oh, but you got new clothes, too! You look so handsome and grown up!"

Nico switched topics. "You've grown, too, Hazel."

It was a lie, of course. She was still as short as ever, but Nico was tired of talking about his appearance. Before Nico could shift his focus to Frank, who was skulking against a wall listening to some nonsense Leo was spouting, the doorbell rang again. Nico noted how Reyna was suddenly at his side, holding his hand.

Hazel opened the door to let in Percy's final guests. Nico sucked in a deep breath as the door opened, and he watched Jason kissing Piper so deeply it looked like he was exploring her stomach with his tongue. To say it was a painful sight was an understatement. Yes, Nico knew they were together. Hell, he even knew they were sleeping together, since that unfortunate night he'd tried to honor Jason's request and leave him with a photo. But to see it here, in front of all their friends, to see Jason openly and happily flaunting a relationship with Piper when he'd been so furiously unwilling to do so with Nico, hurt more than Nico had imagined it would. Still, Nico made himself watch. He wanted to see the moment Jason realized he was here. He wanted to know, to memorize the expression on Jason's face. That way he could break it down later, analyze it, use it to hurt himself.

The kiss continued until Reyna coughed. Jason un-suctioned himself from Piper's face, and they entered the house. Hazel gave them warm hugs, followed by Leo and Frank. Percy hugged Piper. He and Jason exchanged a handshake that was oddly half-hearted on both sides. Piper spotted Nico first. She gave him a small smile, which he didn't return, before she hugged Reyna. Reyna didn't release Nico's hand and hugged Piper with only one arm. When she moved away, there was Jason, already right behind her, clearly still unaware of the last two people he'd need to greet.

When Jason's eyes finally lit on Nico, he gave an audible gasp. Nico felt his jaw tighten in response. Jason's eyes weren't hard to read. He'd hoped Nico wouldn't be here. He'd preferred the easy way out over the chance to see someone he loved, because Nico could see the love in his eyes, too. Wasn't that what Nico had wanted, though, not to see Jason? Four months apart, and they were still the same fools. Nico inclined his head in Jason's direction. "Jason."

Jason stared a moment longer before he must have received a gentle prod from Piper, because he looked down at her like he'd forgotten she was there. His eyes shifted back to Nico. "Hey, buddy."

Nico recoiled from the childish name of endearment. That was what Percy called him when he didn't know how to talk to him and still wanted to treat him like a child. Nico's voice came out cold and emotionless. "How have you been?"

Jason swallowed. He took a step toward Nico then stopped himself.

"Excuse us, Jason, Piper," Reyna cut in. "I was telling Nico about the heavenly guacamole Leo made. He's dying to try some, so, if you'll excuse us..."

Jason and Piper nodded, both appearing relieved, and Reyna pulled Nico into the kitchen. They couldn't even talk freely, because Percy and Leo were in there arguing about baseball. Percy, who was leaning against the counter, stopped talking abruptly when Nico moved close to him to get at the guacamole behind his back.


Nico had to stand so close to Percy that their arms brushed as he spooned out the creamy green goo. He could feel the heat from Percy's body. He reached around Percy to grab the bag of tortilla chips and felt Percy's stinky alcohol breath on his face. Percy's hand languidly circled Nico's stomach and brushed the side of his waist.

"That's soft, your sweater," Percy said quietly. "What's it made out of?"

Nico fixed Percy with a look full of disdain and shrugged. "Black fabric? How should I know?"

"You're such an ass," Percy whispered.

"You like looking at my ass," Nico whispered back. He was satisfied when Percy blushed. "How much have you had to drink? You smell terrible."

"Just a sip so far, mean brat." Percy's mesmerizing eyes pored over Nico's face, freezing Nico with their intensity. His leg rubbed Nico's.

"So, Reyna how've you been?" Piper asked, and the sound of an unexpected voice in the room broke the tension between Percy and Nico. Nico grabbed the chips, and Percy's hand fell away from Nico's side. Nico rolled around to the other side of Percy, farther away from Piper's voice, and was startled to see Jason in the room, too, glaring viciously at Percy.

"Why's Jason giving me the evil eye?" Percy asked. "Don't tell me you don't know. He did it that day he came to see Piper, too. He doesn't like me touching you, does he?"

Nico ignored Percy and scowled at Jason. How dare Jason act jealous? He was sleeping with someone! He'd been passionately kissing Piper not ten minutes ago. He'd chosen this breakup, not Nico.

Nico paid for his inattention to Percy when the older boy wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him closer. Jason's eyes widened, and he stomped out of the kitchen.

"Ah, that was fun," Percy said. His fingers slid along Nico's side, and Nico was almost overcome by a round of giggles at the ticklish sensation, but he kept his composure and walked away.

He gritted his teeth and joined the conversation Reyna and Piper were having, mostly because they were close to the kitchen door and Nico could scope out where in the living room the land mine that was Jason was sitting. Once he could see that Jason had taken up a position on the couch between Leo and Frank, Nico rudely abandoned the conversation and walked into the living room to squat next to the chair Hazel occupied.

From here, Nico could see most of the living room. Jason ogled him from the couch, not even trying to make conversation with Frank and Leo. Percy ogled him from the entry to the kitchen. Nico took a deep breath and ignored them both.

"Hazel, tell me how you've been." He smiled genuinely.

"I've been doing great, Nico," she said. "School was fun, but I'm glad we're on summer break. Frank's been working hard, and he's getting excited to start college this fall."

"Will he give up his Praetor duties?"

"I'm afraid so. He can't manage college and be Praetor at the same time," Hazel said. "I know Reyna would appreciate it if he stayed on, but college is really important to Frank."
"Have you thought about running?" Nico asked.

Hazel looked shocked at the idea. "I don't know what you mean?"

"Hazel," Nico grinned. "This is not the '30s. You could run. You'd be great!"

Whatever Hazel was going to say was interrupted by the sound of a chair scooting closer to them. Nico turned and saw Percy making himself comfortable in the green chair. Nico rolled his eyes.

"Sorry, Hazel," Nico said, turning back her way. "So what do you think?"

"What're we talking about?" Percy asked, leaning over Nico and putting his hand in Nico's hair. He started petting Nico, sliding his hand from the top of Nico's head to his neck. Hazel watched, bemused.

"I, uh...Nico was telling me I should run for Praetor," Hazel said, giving Nico a perplexed look.

"Ooh, you should, Hazel, that's a great idea!" Percy enthused. His hand was still stroking Nico's head. "You're definitely qualified, and Reyna would love to have someone as hardworking and honest as you to be her partner."

"Maybe," Hazel said. "I'll think about it. Percy, what are you doing to Nico?"

"Entertaining myself," Percy replied bluntly.

Hazel laughed, her gold eyes flashing, even though she clearly didn’t understand what Percy was talking about.

"Gods, Percy, enough!" Nico growled. "I'm not a Labrador."

"Then why'd you growl at me?" Percy smirked. "Besides, c'mon, Neeks, he hates it. Check out how red his face is. When does Jason ever lose his cool?"

Nico glanced over at Jason and saw that Percy was right. Jason's face was bright red. He looked like he'd stopped breathing. Serves you right, Nico thought. Nico turned on his feet so he was facing Percy from the side of the chair. He leaned up and felt Percy's hand fall from his hair until it gripped the small of his back. Nico casually let his hand fall across Percy's lap. He placed his lips against Percy's ear and whispered, "Quit treating me like a dog, you completely obnoxious jackass."

Percy shivered at the touch of Nico’s lips. His hand clenched on Nico's back hard enough to scratch at the skin. Nico heard a loud crunching noise and looked up to see that Jason had smashed the soda can he was holding. Rivulets of soda ran down his hand and dripped on Percy's ratty carpet.

"Hey!" Percy shouted, his indignation with Jason's poor manners apparently enough to forget about whatever he was doing with Nico. "Clean that up, Grace! I had to put down a deposit on this place!"

"No you didn't, Percy," Frank said.

Percy’s mouth dropped open in disbelief. "Frankie, how could you? Traitor."

Everyone laughed, except Jason and Piper, who'd emerged from the kitchen with a handful of paper towels for Jason. Jason glared one last time at Percy, then went to work wiping up the spill. Percy decided it was time to go check the burgers and vacated his chair, which Nico promptly stole. After that, Percy stayed either outside or in the kitchen and, as long as Nico didn't look toward Jason, he had a perfectly lovely evening talking to Frank, Hazel, and Reyna.
Not too long after Nico's stomach started grumbling very insistently, Percy came back in and declared it was time to eat. He, Leo, and Piper dished out plates with burgers already on them, and each of the demigods filled the plates with other snacks from around the kitchen. Nico got a second water bottle along with his burger and a few grapes and sat back in the green chair.

Everyone settled in to eat, and by the time Percy, Leo, and Piper came in, there were no vacant seats, except for the spot on the sofa between Jason and Frank, which Leo claimed by yelling "Dibs!" and vaulting over the sofa back. Piper patted Leo’s shoulder and sat down in front of Jason's legs. Jason leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

Nico fumed so much over the kiss Jason had given Piper that he didn't realize Percy was talking to him until the son of Poseidon stood directly in front of him, blocking his view of most of the room.

"Get up, Nico," Percy said. "I was there first."

"Sit on the floor," Nico said. "I'm a guest and you got up."

"It's my house and my chair."

"Not moving, and you can't make me," Nico said. He crossed his legs and bounced his foot furiously.

Percy watched for a moment, then set his plate on the coffee table. Nico thought he'd won. Percy was back quickly, and he took Nico's plate right out of his hands. Nico was too stunned to stop him. Percy set it carefully on the table, too. Nico watched anxiously, but he still wasn't prepared for Percy flopping down on top of him as hard as he possibly could.

Nico felt the chair shudder with the force Percy used. His legs would be bruised tomorrow, he felt sure. Percy was pressing back into him, cutting off Nico's ability to breathe and squeezing his head between jutting shoulder blades. Nico did what any self-respecting demigod who may be feeling slightly panicky would do. He pinched Percy's side.

Percy squealed and lurched forward, though he didn't get off Nico's lap. "Shit! Why do you always have to pinch, motherfucker?"

Nico pinched harder. Percy jabbed his finger into Nico's ribs. That hurt, but Nico noticed the little shift of Percy's body was enough to throw him slightly off balance. He shoved against Percy's middle with all his might. Percy flew off Nico's lap, but twisted mid-flight and grabbed Nico's wrists, yanking him off the chair as well.

They fell onto the floor and wrestled on the carpet. Amid struggling arms and flailing legs, they bit out curse after curse. Nico thought he might gain the upper hand, but Percy was older and stronger and Nico soon found himself pinned with Percy straddling his hips, still holding his wrists.

"Ha," Percy gloated. "You may be meaner, but I'm bigger and stronger, and that'll win nine times out of ten."
"If that was true, we'd all be dead," Reyna remarked, garnering a few chuckles.

Percy stood without letting go and pulled Nico upright. Without warning, he spun Nico under his arm so they were facing the same way and Nico's arms were crossed. Percy dragged him backward, and they awkwardly fell on the chair, Nico in Percy's lap. Nico struggled to get free, but Percy's hold on him was deceptively tight. Nico gave up after a few fruitless minutes.

"Ar, mateys," Percy said in a garbled attempt at speaking pirate. "Who's the lucky lad or lassie who'll feed yer fearless captain and his prisoner o' war?"

"No one's feeding you shit, captain," Leo said. "You two make me look mature. I'll give you your plates if you both promise to sit there together and eat pleasantly. After you're done eating, you can go back to playing footsies under the table, but none of us wants a food fight."

Nico figured Percy must not have understood Leo's crack about footsies, because all Percy did was look up at Nico and say, "What say ye, bonnie pris'ner, to makin' the niceties and eatin' some grub?"

"I will do anything if you stop talking like that, Percy." Nico laughed in spite of his attempts to scowl. Percy was so annoying, but he appealed to Nico's mostly buried silly side.

"Deal," Percy agreed and flashed a big smile at Nico. "I don't know half the shit I was saying, anyway. Turn sideways so Leo can grub us up."

Nico shifted and flung his legs over the arm of the chair. There wasn't a whole lot of room, but he and Percy managed to maneuver so they could both hold a plate on Nico's lap and eat. As he ate, Nico noticed that although the room was full of lively conversation, Jason's voice was absent.

Nico had been trying very hard not to look in Jason's direction, but he spared his ex a glance and saw that the blond was staring at him. When Nico caught his eye, Jason brushed Piper's cheek. She looked up, and he pulled her onto his lap and kissed her deeply. Tongues were evident. Piper even had to slap away Jason's hand as he made a move toward her butt.

Nico's eyes stung as he looked away. Gods, Jason was an asshole. He was jealous of Nico spending time with Percy, so he was making Nico pay by flaunting his physical affection toward Piper. Jerk.

"Here, put the plates down if you're done eating." Percy said. Nico took both the plates and set them carefully on the floor, away from Percy's feet. He picked up his water bottle and downed the last of it in several long swallows. After he'd set it down and leaned back upright in Percy's lap, he settled more comfortably against Percy. He was surprised when Percy didn't protest and only slid a hand lazily over his thighs.

The party wore on, and Nico stayed in Percy's lap. They both took part in the conversation occasionally, but Nico felt a little removed, artificially safe from the sting of seeing Jason, as long as he was curled up with Percy. It didn't hurt that Nico knew Jason was hating Nico's seating choice. Percy didn't try to make him move, either.

At some point, music was turned on, and couples began to dance. Reyna came over and tugged on Nico's shoulder. "Dance with me."

Nico started to drag himself off Percy's lap, but Percy's hand tightened around the apex of Nico's thigh and held him immobile. "He's not dancing."

Reyna glared at Percy before she turned to Nico. "If you don't dance with me, I'll have to dance with Valdez."
Nico sought Percy’s eyes.

"Do you want to dance or stay here with me?" Percy asked. His eyes seemed way too serious for the innocence of the question. Nico focused on a spot on Percy’s chest instead.

"I want to stay with you," Nico said quietly, meeting Percy's gaze through his eyelashes. Percy smiled at him and rubbed his thigh, then scowled up at Reyna.

"He's staying with me," Percy said coolly.

Reyna leaned down and whispered in Nico's ear. "You're playing a dangerous game, Nico. Think about the consequences of your actions."

Nico didn't want to think, though. He wanted to drift, and make Jason jealous, and enjoy the way Percy felt warm and safe and strong around him. It had been four months since Nico had enjoyed this kind of comfort, and, after having it on such a long and regular basis, he was feeling quite deprived. He wanted to close his eyes and kiss Percy and pretend Percy was Jason. Nico didn't, but he also didn't complain when Percy's other hand gripped his ass.

Nico grinned and whispered in Percy's ear. "I told you that you liked my ass."

He sat back up slightly, and both he and Percy chuckled softly. Nico wondered if someone had spiked the guacamole because he didn't behave like this, and Reyna was right, there would be serious consequences for fooling around with Percy, and Jason was right there, and...

Jason was right there. Nico knew what he was going to do. Jason was holding Piper close, pressing their bodies together. As much as he appeared to be focused on Piper, he was stealing glances at Nico every chance he got. Nico felt so angry and full of spite, all of a sudden, that not even the false safety of Percy's lap could insulate him.

He wriggled a little bit and was rewarded with a hitch in Percy's breathing. Not that he'd been unsure before, really, but now he was certain -- holding him like this was turning Percy on. Nico moved again, sliding his butt along Percy's crotch, and felt Percy's erection poke his ass. He briefly wondered how Percy was fitting this experience into his insistence that his interest in Nico was friendly and nonsexual, but Nico decided he didn't care. He just wanted to stick it to Jason.

Reyna had told Nico earlier in the day, in an attempt to make the party sound more appealing, that Leo would be setting off fireworks from Festus's mouth at dusk. This sounded colossally risky and stupid to Nico, but if Reyna was going along with it, she must believe it to be safe. Nico looked out the window and saw that the sun had already set.

"Hey, Leo!" he shouted over the music. "Weren't you doing fireworks?"

"Aw, fuck!" Leo said. He scurried over to whatever was making music and turned it off. "Ladies and gentleman and pricks that can't let us eat in peace, please follow me outside for a fireworks extravaganza!"

Everyone except Nico and Percy started to make their way out through Percy's kitchen. When Reyna noticed Nico wasn't getting up, she said, "Nico, let's go."

"I'll be out in a minute, Reyna."

Reyna nodded and left. Nico was happy to see that Jason, who'd been loitering in the kitchen and surely heard their exchange, looked uncomfortable but headed outside. Good. That'd give Nico just enough time.
"What're you doing, Nico?" Percy asked. He sounded irritated. "I wanted to see the fireworks."

Nico lifted himself out of Percy's lap, although the job was made harder by Percy's reluctance to remove his hand from Nico's ass. Nico took Percy's hand and pulled him out of the chair. As soon as Nico turned away, Percy pressed against him, grabbing Nico's hips to grind into him.

"How am I supposed to go out there like this?" Percy complained. He gripped Nico's chest and whispered in his ear. "Are you gonna fix it for me?"

Nico nodded and wrapped his arms backward around Percy. He started dragging the older demigod forward and only faltered slightly when Percy's hands slid up under his sweater and started caressing his skin.

"Bedroom or bathroom, Perce?" Nico asked.

"Depends on what we're doing," Percy breathed. Nico shuddered against the breath and the thought. There was no way he was letting Percy fuck him. Nico couldn't believe Percy would think it, but the way he continued to grind against Nico's ass said that Percy wouldn't need more persuasion than a simple word from Nico.

"You asked what I could do with my mouth," Nico whispered. "Do you still want to know?"

Percy bit the side of Nico's neck. "Oh, gods, yes, so much. Bathroom."

Percy practically pushed Nico into the bathroom before he turned on the lights and slammed the door. Nico noted he didn't lock them in. Perfect. Jason would be along any time now.

Nico took off his shirt and hung it on the towel rack. Percy was already leaning against the sink, fumbling with his jeans, but Nico sank to his knees in front of him and slapped his hands away. When he looked up at Percy, Percy's eyes were glazed and his lips were parted.

"Fuck, Nico, you're so beautiful. Do me, please."

Nico unbuttoned Percy's jeans. He slid the zipper open and slowly freed Percy's erection from his boxers.

Percy was already weeping pre-cum. Nico swiped it away with his tongue. He tasted Percy's delicious salty sweetness and took a deep breath. Percy smelled nice, like the sea. It wasn't rain, like Jason, but it was close enough that Nico could almost pretend. He placed his hands on the inside of Percy's hairy thighs and slid them up and down, slowly getting closer to Percy's balls. He leaned forward and licked, slow and heavy, up Percy's shaft before he dropped his head back down and licked again. Percy moaned and put his hands in Nico's hair.

Nico ignored the pressure and swirled his tongue lazily around Percy's head. He cupped Percy's balls and gently stroked his sack. Percy bit out another curse, and Nico decided it was time to get a bit more serious.

He opened his mouth and swallowed Percy whole.

"Holy fucking shit, Nico!" Percy yelled. "Nico, oh gods, what the fuck?"

Nico looked up at Percy and swallowed. Percy threw his head back and moaned wantonly. Satisfied, Nico began to move. He kept one hand moving on Percy's balls, rubbing and stretching them, and ran the other all over Percy's skin, from his nipples to his hips, down his thighs and to his knees. He bobbed up and down on Percy's dick, using his tongue to lick long hard strokes all up Percy's length,
then switching to quick, fluttering touches when he reached the sensitive frenulum and head. Over
and over Nico moved, sucking harder and harder, until Percy's legs were shaking and his hands
clenched painfully in Nico's hair.

Nico thought he heard footsteps in the hall, and he dropped back down to take Percy into his throat.

"Oh, Nico, fucking hell, Nico!" Percy screamed, and Jason shoved open the door. Without moving
his mouth off Percy, Nico looked up at Jason, watched the way his eyes took in Nico on the floor
with his mouth wrapped around another man's dick. Percy didn't even notice the interruption. Jason
stayed, watched, as Nico switched his attention back to Percy, who met his eyes. Nico swallowed,
igniting a stream of mangled obscenities from Percy, then bobbed and slammed Percy back in his
throat again. He swallowed around Percy one more time and pushed him over the edge. Percy
screamed and shook and moaned Nico's name as he rode out his orgasm.

When Nico pulled off Percy, Jason was gone.

Nico skimmed Percy’s still-quivering thighs, stood shakily, and put his shirt back on. Percy pressed
into him, holding him against the wall. Percy's breath was hot in his face, and his forehead, pressed
against Nico's forehead, was dripping with sweat.

"That, that was amazing, dear gods," Percy swore. "You are a fucking suck-off rock star, Nico."

Nico snorted. "Thanks. Can I use your toothbrush?"


"Would you rather I go out there and watch the pretty fireworks with my mouth smelling like your
dick?" Nico asked.

Percy crossed his hands over his chest. "Eat a tortilla chip. No one will smell anything."

Nico rolled his eyes and turned to leave. Percy grabbed his wrist.

"This can't happen again, Nico."

Percy’s breath was coming out ragged and shallow. His hair was a disheveled mess. His pupils were
dilated, and he was staring at Nico with undisguised lust, even though Nico knew he'd done enough
to keep Percy satisfied for days.

"I don't think I'm the one who'll come begging for more, Perce."

***

Nico let Percy rejoin the party first. As he leaned against the kitchen counter eating tortilla chips, he
estimated they’d been away from the rest of the group for no more than fifteen minutes. He'd
managed to down about three chips when Reyna came inside.

Nico tried to act as innocent as possible as he ate a fourth chip and took a drink of water. Reyna
stared at him from across the room. Nico could practically feel her disapproval.

"How is anyone supposed to believe you're my potential mate when your face smells like Percy's
dick?" Reyna finally asked.
Nico laughed. "How do you know what Percy's dick smells like?"

"I'm not laughing, Nico," Reyna said. "You made a serious mistake tonight. What good do you think will come of this?"

Jason burst through the back door and marched across the room so quickly that Nico startled. He was livid. His hands were clenched in shaking fists, and he towered over Nico. He stood so close that Nico could barely move. Nico peered at his feet and felt the way his hair brushed Jason's heaving chest. Jason slammed his hand on the counter so hard that the dishes rattled.

"This explains so much," Reyna said. "This was your endgame, Nico?"

Nico nodded meekly. Jason kicked a cooler.

"Well, how clearly smart of you," Reyna said derisively. "How proud you must be. You helped one turn into a cheat and the other turn into a brainless Incredible Hulk. What have you turned yourself into?"

Nico felt tears build in his eyes. He didn't want to cry in front of Jason, who was still looming over him close enough that Nico longed to throw himself into his arms and beg for forgiveness.

Jason must have opened his mouth to say something, because Reyna said, "Save it, Jason. He's mine for the rest of the night. Do not lay a finger on Percy."

Reyna roughly grabbed the back of Nico's head and pulled him away from Jason, through the living room, and out the front door. She hurried him down the path toward her villa. Residents of New Rome and kids from Camp Jupiter were all out watching the fireworks.

"Head up, chin out, hold my hand," Reyna hissed. "Keep it together a bit longer."

It wasn't easy, but Nico managed it.

As soon as he was safely inside Reyna's villa, Nico sank to the floor and started to cry. He watched as Reyna took off her earrings and shoes and placed them neatly away. She put on a pot of water to boil. Then she sat down on the floor and pulled Nico's head into her lap. Nico went without protest and let Reyna stroke his hair while he cried.

When the water reached its boiling point, Reyna sat Nico up and went to make tea. Nico dragged himself off the floor and sat dejectedly on the couch. What had he done? Oh, gods, it had seemed like a good idea at the time. Now...

"Here." Reyna handed him a cup of tea, and Nico blew on it before taking a tentative sip. Reyna settled herself on the couch and watched Nico. "It'll help you sleep, so I want you to drink it all."

Nico nodded. He took another sip and prayed Reyna was right.

"Talk to me, Nico. You gave Percy sex to make Jason jealous?"

Nico laughed. Or he cried. He wasn't sure which. "No. I gave Percy sex to make Jason hurt. He was already jealous."

"Why is Jason jealous? I thought he broke up with you. And Percy's with Annabeth. Of course, he certainly didn't seem to be too worried about Annabeth when he spent the entire night drooling over you. None of this makes any sense."
Nico laid his head back in Reyna's lap. She felt so much like Bianca. It was getting harder and harder to picture Bianca's face now. Sometimes, when he thought of her, all he saw was Reyna. "Will you play with my hair some more, Reyna?"

Reyna's hands nestled in his hair, and he let out a big sigh.

"Jason didn't quite break up with me. He asked me to do something I found so repulsive that I left," Nico said. He hadn't told anyone, and now that he started, it felt like the words were clawing their way out of his throat in their haste to escape. Or maybe that was the residual feeling of tightness from Percy's dick being lodged down there. "He wanted me to let him take a false girlfriend, just for appearances, and keep seeing me in secret."

"No wonder you weren't keen on the idea of being my escort," Reyna murmured. "I'm sorry."

"At least you don't plan on marrying me and expecting to have my kids," Nico laughed. It sounded so ludicrous to say. "That's what he wants to happen. He wants to date Piper, marry her, and have me sleep with him all along the way. Well, he did want it. His dad manipulated him into thinking it would work. What I think his dad really wanted to happen was exactly what did. Jason was so eager to please daddy that he actually asked me, not realizing his dad knew all along there was no way I'd go for it. I left Jason, but before I did, he said some awful things, and I can't get them out of my head. I keep having nightmares, and it's like the words are seeping into my skin. I'm starting to believe them, and that scares the hell out of me."

"What did he say?" Reyna asked.

"He called me a whore, sort of, but I'd only ever been with him." Nico felt Reyna's fingernails dig into his scalp. He stroked her hand until she lightened her grip. "He said he used me for sex and never really cared. He said I smelled like death. He said I was weird and mean-spirited and creepy. He said the only things I was good for were fucking and sucking, and that if I wanted anyone else to want me, I'd better put out."

"So you slept with Percy?"

"I gave him oral sex." Nico was embarrassed to admit it to Reyna, even though she clearly knew he'd done something abhorrent with Percy. "I didn't think it was related to the stuff Jason said, but I guess it was. I mean, he made our whole relationship seem like it was all about sex, and I used sex to hurt him."

"He tried to diminish your self-worth so you'd stay with him," Reyna said. "You know that is what he was doing?"

Nico turned his head to look at Reyna's face. She looked weird from this angle, with him basically looking up her nose, so he sat up. "What do you mean?"

"He loves you. He got scared and tried to manipulate you into staying by making you believe you wouldn't find anyone else who'd want you." Reyna brushed a hair out of Nico's eyes. "But, Nico, that doesn't make what he said true, or fair. I saw how angry he was tonight. That's not healthy. The way he tried to keep you wasn't healthy. He's so intimidating. Are you scared of him?"

"What? No! Gods, no. He's not going to hurt me, and I can kick his ass any day of the week. Do you remember who you're talking to?"

Reyna laughed. "I had to ask, Nico," she paused and grew serious again, "but there's a difference between knowing you can defend yourself against him and actually doing it. Mentally, would you
Nico thought about it. He wasn't sure of the answer, to be honest. The thought of hurting Jason physically, even if Jason was hurting him physically, was sickening to Nico. Would he do it?

"You aren't sure what the answer is, are you?" Reyna nodded sympathetically. "You remember my father? I wasn't sure, either, until I had no choice. But, Nico, I was a child with no other place to go. You have many safe places, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," Nico scoffed. "I went to my dad's. I went to Persephone. I...I went to Percy first. He, um, he hit on me, the first night after Jason. Percy didn't know what had happened, but still, it was weird. That’s why he was acting so odd when we first went to his house for the party. Anyway, after I left my dad's, I got attacked by eagles, and rescued, and that was bad, too, another guy hitting on me." Nico didn't dare tell Reyna who exactly had tried to seduce him that time. That would be bad. He'd probably be shot through with lightning and Reyna killed along with him. "And my Auntie goes on about how I look, and I wish everyone would shut the hell up about Nico's face and Nico's body and leave me alone."

Reyna surged forward and wrapped her arms around Nico. "I'm so sorry, my sweet boy. You are so much more than your physical appearance. Gods, I'm sorry. I did it, too."

Nico choked out a laugh and nodded. He stroked Reyna's hair and squeezed her tightly around the ribs. "You didn't know about all the other stuff. If none of it had happened, I'd have no problem taking your words as compliments."

"No more body talk from me until you tell me it's okay," Reyna said. "And eagles attacked you? Not Camp Jupiter's eagles, surely?"

"No, of course not. I'd contacted Jason via Iris message. A VIP wasn't pleased."

"Oh, gods, Nico," Reyna said. She looked horrified. "You are in deep shit."

"Sucking Percy off doesn't seem as cataclysmic anymore, does it?" Nico laughed, and this time he found there was genuine feeling behind it.

Reyna laughed, too. "I suppose not. Though, in the future, I'd advise you to choose more wisely so you're not giving away big ticket items in return for few rewards. Because at the end of the day, Jason's still with Piper, Nico."

"I know. He was flaunting it, trying to hurt me." Nico groaned. "At least tell me you saw that, too."

"At the time, I saw a boyfriend in love with his girlfriend."

Nico nodded miserably. "Maybe he truly is happier without me."

"If so, he reacted quite strongly to whatever made him realize you were doing something with Percy," Reyna said. She sank a little lower into the couch, and Nico could feel the conversation would need to wrap up soon.

"I sort of manipulated things so he'd catch me in the act," Nico said.

"Nico di Angelo!" Reyna almost looked scandalized. Her reaction made him think of Hazel, and how mortified she'd be to know what he'd done. He felt a new pit of worry blossom in his stomach.

"Do you think Hazel--"
"Hazel watched you flirt shamelessly with Percy. She isn't stupid. Do I think she knows how far you took things? No, probably not. But she certainly was aware that you and Percy didn't come out to watch the fireworks with the rest of us." Reyna rolled her head on her neck and stretched her legs. "We need to go to bed, Nico. You can talk to Hazel tomorrow and see what damage control needs to be done."

Nico nodded and kissed Reyna's head. She gave him a parting hug and stood.


"I love you, too, precious Nico. Go to sleep."

Nico stood and dragged himself toward his room.

***

Percy was halfway down the hall, pursuing the smell of bacon, when he remembered the previous night. Well, remembered it in its entirety. Portions of the night had starred in his dreams and in his morning appointment with his hand. He threw his head back and groaned, then continued down the hall because, bacon.

"Dude, do you know how to wash dishes at all?" Leo asked as soon as Percy walked into the kitchen. "You're a fucking slob."

"Good morning, Sweetheart," Percy deadpanned. "I'll take milk and eggs with my bacon, please."

"Seriously, dude, you're going to die of salmonella or something."

"Maybe some nice orange juice."

Leo slapped a huge plate of bacon and eggs onto the table, and Percy gratefully stumbled over and sat down. Percy picked up a piece of bacon and started chewing. Mmm, it was so good. He'd need to wait on the eggs since Leo hadn't given him any silverware yet.

"Thanks, Honey, this looks great," Percy prompted.

Leo threw a fork at Percy, who caught it neatly, then balanced two glasses of milk and his own plate and took a seat across the table. He slammed both glasses of milk down and noisily rattled his fork against his plate.

"I don't have a hangover, Leo, so you can quit being so loud."

"You should probably try to pretend you have a hangover, amigo," Leo said seriously. His hands tapped the table in a rhythm that was making Percy cross-eyed trying to follow it. "You remember your party last night?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well." Leo's curly hair bobbed around his pointy ears as he made a circular motion with his head.

"Well what, Leo?" Percy was getting annoyed. He knew what Leo was getting at, but there didn't seem to be a question attached to what Leo was saying, so Percy wasn't sure of the point.
"Well, we're all gonna remember it, too," Leo said. "Years from now, we're all gonna get together and someone will say, 'Hey, remember that party Percy threw?' and someone else will say, 'The one Annabeth skipped?' and another someone else will say, 'Oh, yeah, the one where Percy and Nico fucked while the rest of us let off fireworks in the backyard. Good times.'"

"You're an asshole, Leo."

"You fucked your friend while your girlfriend was out of town," Leo said. "And you made all of us, like, accessories to your infidelity, man."

"You weren't this big an asshole before you met Calypso, I'm pretty sure."

"Knock it off, Percy, I'm being serious," Leo warned. His normally playful eyes were focused and intense. "What were you thinking?"

"Um, I was pretty much thinking 'hmm, here's my every wet dream sitting on top of me acting like he might let me fuck him. How fast can I get my dick inside him?'"

"And I'm the asshole."

"Gods, Leo, what do you want me to say?" Percy asked. "I fucked up big time, okay? I cheated on Annabeth, and I used Nico. I'm a creep."

"There, that's what I want you to say," Leo said. He gave Percy a small smile.

"You act like everyone knows what happened," Percy said. The idea was starting to make him nervous. Yeah, he'd been openly flirting with Nico, and maybe being a bit too touch-happy, but most of them knew he was always interested in Nico. It was harmless. Well, it had been, once upon a time.

"There comes a point when you screaming 'oh, fuck, Nico,'" Leo moaned Nico's name in a loud and obscene way, "from inside the house can't be ignored any longer, man. Next time, get him to gag you or something."

"You mean everyone heard?"

"Yes, stupid." Leo hesitated as Percy choked on his eggs. "Well, maybe not. Maybe it was just me who could hear you guys banging. No one seemed to want to get too close to the mouth end of Festus. I might've saved your ass with my recklessness. Though, what you were doing with Nico's ass...but really, I'm betting you got him to suck you, because you didn't have enough time to pound his--"

"Shut up, Leo!" Percy rolled his hand down his face. "Why did I agree to let you stay with me while you're visiting and Calypso's on her nymphquest thing or whatever?"

"'Cause the Romans won't allow me in the barracks, and I make you good breakfasts."

"Right." Percy remembered now. "That's right."

"So, what're you gonna do?" Leo asked around a mouthful of eggs.

"I don't know, man." Percy groaned. "What is there even to do?"

"Do you want to be with Annabeth or Nico?"

"Hades -- shit, probably shouldn't use him -- Hephaestus!" Percy squeaked. "That's not even a
choice. I love Annabeth. Nico...he's just this odd fascination I have."

"About that," Leo started, and Percy eyed him warily. "You got dudes and ladies throwing themselves at you all the time. I mean, you're Percy fucking Jackson, and everybody wants a piece. Why him?"

Percy didn’t answer Leo's question, at least, not out loud, and shoved eggs in his mouth. He needed to eat. It always helped him feel better.

There was a knock at the door and, instead of moving to answer it, Percy shoved more food in his mouth. What if it was Nico? Gods, Percy couldn't see him yet.

Leo rolled his eyes. "Guess I'll get that."

Percy grabbed Leo's arm as he walked past. He covered his mouth so he wouldn’t spit egg on his friend. "Dude, if that's Nico, stall so I can slip out the back or something?"

"Coward."

"Just do it!"

"Yeah, yeah," Leo mumbled. He brushed past Percy and moved to the living room to open the door. Percy hunched by the back door, ready to escape. Instead of Nico's soft voice, he heard Jason's clipped tones. Shit! Percy didn't want to talk to Jason, either. Pissing Jason off was the reason Percy had started being so handsy with Nico. Well, not really, but Jason's reaction was the excuse Percy used to touch Nico at first. Gods, Percy was so far gone by the end, so turned on, he'd have taken Nico while they were sitting there in the chair in front of all their friends if he had to.

Fuck, he needed to calm down. Leo said he was the only one who knew. Of course, when Percy had gone outside last night after finishing with Nico, he’d seen Jason's furious stare and the way his hands had been balled into fists. Then, the big blond had followed Reyna inside, and Percy had heard things slamming around. Percy didn't know what Jason's problem was, but he didn't seem very happy for a guy who'd just gotten back together with his hot girlfriend.

"Get out here, Jackson," Leo yelled. "It's just Jason."

Shit. That made it sound like Percy was trying to avoid someone. He straightened his shoulders and walked into the living room. Jason was sitting on the couch, facing away from the kitchen. His posture was perfect, of course. Everything about Jason was perfect. Jason would never cheat on his girlfriend, would never be enthralled with Nico, would never, even as he was consumed by guilt for his actions, be thinking about when he could get away to beg for more.

Percy carefully sat across the coffee table from Jason, in the chair he and Nico had occupied the night before. That was probably a bad choice, based on the way Jason's eyes darkened.

"Hey, Leo," Jason asked softly. "You mind giving us a few minutes? I need to talk to Percy privately."

Leo looked relieved to go. "Sure thing, Superman. I'm gonna go use up all Percy's hot water."

"Thanks, man," Jason said. Leo clapped him on the back and left. Jason stared at Leo until he'd gone into the bathroom, then turned his icy gaze onto Percy but didn't say anything.

They stared at each other for long minutes, and Percy felt himself gradually wilting under Jason's
gaze. He had to speak, if only so Jason would quit looking at him like that. "'Sup, man? What brings you by this morning?"

"How many times?" Jason said. The words were clipped, each syllable enunciated clearly.

"What do you mean, 'how many times'?" Percy asked. He fidgeted with his hands and tried to keep his voice light. "How many times what?"

"How many times have you had sex with Nico?" Jason said. "Was this the first time, or was the first time back in your dorm room when I called you that morning? Or, hell, was it even before that? Maybe the night you were holding him outside his cabin?"

"Dude, I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't laid a hand on Nico," Percy said.

Jason's hands clenched into fists again. Percy had heard Jason had sustained some sort of nerve damage in his hands. Maybe the clenching was because of that. Jason couldn't know what Percy had done. If good, perfect Jason knew, he'd tell Annabeth. Percy realized he'd stopped breathing.

Jason mumbled something Percy couldn't hear.

"What was that, Jace? I didn't catch you."

"I. Saw. You." Jason ground out. "I saw you in the bathroom last night. I saw you standing over him with your hands in his hair and your dick so far down his throat his lips were touching your body, so don't you dare tell me you haven't laid a hand on him. What I want to know is when it started."

Percy was panicking now. Oh, gods, Jason had seen! Percy scrambled out of the chair and stood behind it. "Look, Jason, please, I...I'll tell you whatever you want, I swear on the River Styx, but you can't go to Annabeth or tell Piper or anyone."

"Annabeth," Jason scoffed. His voice was so hard. "I tried to warn her, but she didn't listen. Fuck you, Percy. Fine. I swear on the River Styx I won't ever discuss this with Annabeth or Piper or anyone except you or Nico."

Percy let out a huge breath of relief and leaned over the chair. "What do you care for? I thought this was about you and Annabeth. Then I thought maybe it was because you and Nico are friends, but you didn't even speak to each other last night. You act like you hate him or something."

"We...had a disagreement," Jason said. His eyes betrayed nothing. His body stayed stiff and wooden. "I'm being a good commander, I guess. I've got to know what my soldiers are doing."

"I'm not your soldier, you jackass," Percy said. "And I'm not giving you info on Nico to hurt him."

"You made a promise, Percy," Jason said. "How many times?"

"Fucking pervert," Percy growled. "Once. Last night. That was it."

Jason waited, and when nothing terrible happened to Percy, he nodded. "What happened in your dorm?"

"I won't forget this, Jason." Percy felt hatred for Jason well inside him. This was private, not Jason's business. The tension was going to make Percy talk, though. He could never keep his thoughts quiet when he felt this much pressure. "We slept. He was running from something and tired. He was in my bed because my roommate moved out and took the other mattress. I left and he slept, in his underwear, and when I got back to my room I stripped down and crawled into bed next to him. He
had a nightmare. He woke and said something like 'it was only a dream.' He pulled me on top of him and acted like he was gonna kiss me. Then, I don’t know, maybe he realized it was me, not the guy he was sleeping with at the time. He tried to shove me away, but I didn't want him to. He felt good underneath me. I wanted that kiss, you sick bastard. I hate you for making me say this. I wanted him. I want him."

Jason didn’t seem fazed. "What else happened?"

Percy glared. "I tried to get him to go down on me the next morning."

"And between now and then?" Jason asked.

"I haven't seen him again until last night." Percy paced behind his chair. Jason was a pig, making him say these things.

"And before the dorm room?"

"Hadn't seen him since Christmas. Where all I did was hold him outside his cabin for a few minutes before your miserable ass came around the corner."

"And if I hadn't come around the corner?"

"I don't know!" Percy yelled. "What the hell do you want me to say? That I wanted him way back then? Fine! I did! I wanted him then! I wanted him in the spring! I wanted him last night! If he came over here this morning I'd try to find a way to get him to let me fuck the living hell out of him, girlfriend be damned!"

Jason stood abruptly and took three steps around the coffee table before he caught himself.

"You don't know how it is, fucker!" Percy continued. Now that he was letting it out, he couldn't stop. He was so angry, with Jason and with himself for what he had done and would do again, if he had the choice. "Wanting a guy, when all I've ever wanted are girls. And it's him. Fuck! Don't you think I'd choose anyone else in the world if I could? I've already screwed him over and messed with his head way too much. But, gods, Jason, he makes me so hot. I mean, I know you, with your perfect little girlfriend, and your straight, dutiful, plain-ass life, can't possibly understand, but try for a little bit. He turns me on. And gods, I finally got a piece last night, and he was so fucking amazing, Jason. Like, I can't even begin to describe it to you. I've had lots of blowjobs, not just from Annabeth, from lots of people, 'cause yeah, I am that sick fuck that cheats on his girlfriend, and he's the most incredible, delicious thing I've ever had! And you want to know the worst part? I'll swear to Annabeth and anyone else that I won't lay a hand on him again and I'll try my best, but I'm already thinking about how I can have him next time and how long I'll have to wait before it happens. I've never wanted a second helping before. Oh, wait, that's not the worst part! The worst part is I'll deny it to him a million times over. Fuck, I told him last night that I wasn't asking for sex in my dorm room, just 'tension relief.'"

Percy laughed, crazy and wild. He went back around to the front of the chair and sat. To his shock, Jason sat back down on the couch and started to smile. Slowly, the son of Jupiter started laughing, too. He matched Percy's laugh in its wildness. He laughed so hard that he fell back and laid down on the couch with his arm over his eyes. Percy sagged in the chair and kept laughing, too, some of his earlier hatred for Jason ebbing away.

Eventually, Jason removed his arm from his face. "I came here to beat the shit out of you for touching him, Percy, I really did. But you're as fucked as I am." Jason's eyes turned serious. "Well no one's as fucked as I am, or has fucked up as bad. But you're close. Congratulations, runner-up
"Aw, Grace, d'you gotta beat me at everything?" Percy mocked. "What'd you do that you think is actually worse than cheating on your hot, smart, sexy, and trusting girlfriend with your incredibly hot, smart, sexy, and trusting male cousin even though you know you'll hurt them both?"

"That's a conversation for another day, Percy," Jason said. He stood, wiping his eyes. "I've got to go."

"You know," Percy said, standing, too, "if you ever decide to try switch-hitting, dude, you have to try Nico. That mouth, oh my gods."

"Yeah, he looked incredible doing it," Jason said.

"Looks like an angel, blows like a demon. Sexiest thing that has ever happened in my life, no lie."

"I'll remember that," Jason said. He walked to the door.

Percy grabbed Jason's arm as the door opened. "Hey, we're playing, right? You're not gonna seek him out for sex? Don't hurt him. I don't want to hurt him, not ever again. I'm going to try my best to leave him alone. Right?"

"Of course." Jason turned to Percy and smiled. Percy couldn't explain it, but Jason's smile chilled him to the bone. "I'd never hurt Nico."

Jason walked away, and Percy tried to pretend like everything was alright.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this monster of a chapter!
Hephaestus

Hephaestus answered Nico's request three days later. It was good that he showed up when he did, because Nico was continuing to ignore Jason, and Percy was an ineffective mediator. Percy lacked patience and tact. Percy also did not necessarily want Nico to stop being angry with Jason. The less time Nico spent with Jason, the more he spent with Percy, and that was exactly what Percy wanted. The problem was that the more time Nico spent with Percy, the more intensely Percy wanted Nico all to himself.

Jason, for his part, had quietly insisted he didn't mind Nico ignoring him. He said Nico was being a baby and not facing up to the truth. He said he could wait for Nico to act like a grown-up. He was lying a bit, because he minded very much that Nico was ignoring him; it irritated him that Percy got Nico's extra time; and he was very sorry that he'd said the thing in the first place and then doubled down by calling Nico a baby. He did think Nico had to let those old injuries go. He also knew that Nico wasn't as offended as he was letting on and that the awful things Jason had said to him when they were very young had much less impact on the person Nico was than Nico was pretending they did.

Nico, though, was an extremely stubborn creature. He knew Jason was right, that he shouldn't have made out with Eos, used his body to keep her away from Jason and Percy. It was tacky and not who he was. Or not who he was often, at any rate. What bothered Nico more was that he'd done something that disappointed Jason. It hadn't been a conscious thought, not quite. He'd been worried about Jason's ability to withstand the goddess's seductiveness. When Eos had looked at Jason, a horrible, loud voice had reared up in Nico's chest, and that voice had said, quite clearly, "Mine."

When Hephaestus erupted into being in a great ball of fire outside the house, Jason was sitting on the couch pouting and Nico and Percy were in Percy's self-dubbed "man cave," which was originally a room Nico added on to the living room after insisting, loudly, that he needed a place to be alone. It had quickly become obvious that "alone" meant "with Percy, not Jason," when Percy went in with Nico and didn't emerge for hours. Percy had filled the room with an enormous black leather couch that was supposed to vibrate but needed an electrical supply, a huge television, two gaming systems, and a mini-fridge. Nico had complained that Percy's choices were tasteless and useless, since they didn't have electricity, but Percy had said they made him feel a little more at home. Nico had sighed and asked Percy to at least add a couple bookcases. Percy had, and he and Nico had spent several hours curled up together on the couch in the dark (Percy had conjured a light-blocking blind to cover the window) where Nico told Percy the titles of books he wanted and Percy brought them into being.

Hephaestus knocked on the wall outside the front door and waited for Jason to peel back the curtain and let him in. Hephaestus wasn't comfortable with organic life forms, but he liked Jason for all the kindness the new god had shown Leo. Percy had done him a favor once, and Nico had won him over by giving Leo a generous graduation gift. That was before the severed fingers, of course, but they'd healed and Hephaestus was inclined to forgive.

Jason opened the curtain, and his eyes went wide. "Hephaestus! Wow! We haven't had a...a..." Jason was searching for a way to say "major god" without sounding insulting to the other gods who'd visited them, "an Olympian visit us before. Please, come in."

Hephaestus followed Jason inside and sat on the chair Eos had conjured. Jason was glad, because Hephaestus's overalls were grubby and he and Percy hadn't yet figured out how to clean more than their bodies or Nico's (something Nico only let Percy do). The rest of the house was meticulously hand-cleaned by Nico, who'd made Percy and Jason do the dull work of bringing him cleaning
supplies. If Hephaestus sat on the couch, Nico would throw an absolute fit.

"Where are Jackson and that little shit di Angelo?" Hephaestus asked.

"Oh, uh, we're not going to have a problem, are we?" Jason asked. He'd forgotten Nico and the fingers in his excitement over seeing a major and friendly god. "He only hurt you because--"

"Relax, boy," Hephaestus said. "I forgave the kid days ago. That doesn't mean he's not a shit."

"True that. I'll get them." Jason chuckled and rubbed his hands together. He pulled back the man cave curtain and saw Nico and Percy asleep together on the couch. Nico was pressed into the couch back, and he was spooning Percy. Nico's arms were wrapped around Percy the way Jason had spent many nights wrapped around Nico. They were holding hands. There was nothing sexual in the pose; both men were fully clothed. It would have been a sweet sight if it didn’t make Jason so sad.

Jason cleared his throat and gently tapped Nico's and Percy's bare feet. When the men stirred, Jason said, "Hephaestus is here."

Nico looked up in surprise and nodded. Jason went back in the living room and sat down on the couch. Percy joined him and sat in Nico's usual spot. His eyes had trouble staying open. He’d wanted a longer nap.

Nico came out after another minute, running one hand through his hair. The other was tense at his side. He was ready to grab his sword, if necessary. He approached Hephaestus cautiously and dropped to one knee when he was six feet away.

"Lord Hephaestus," Nico started.

"Save it, kid," Hephaestus said. "I'm not mad. And cut out the 'Lord' crap. I'm not my father."

Percy laughed. "I always liked you, man, Mt. St. Helens aside."

Hephaestus smirked. It was hidden under his dense beard. "Likewise, Jackson. You did a number on my forge."

Percy shrugged. Nico moved from his knee to the end of the couch.

"To what do we owe the honor, Hephaestus?" Jason asked.

"Pint-size called for me," Hephaestus said, pointing at Nico. "Not so tiny anymore, though, are you?"

"No, sir," Nico said. His black eyes stared unnervingly at the elder god. "I didn't think you'd come. Thank you."

"I couldn't resist a call for technological help from one of Leo's friends. I was on the queue anyway. I just pushed my way to the front."

"Ooh, can you tell us who all's coming?" Percy asked. He leaned forward, and Nico had to lean forward, too, to see around him.

"Sorry, Jackson," Hephaestus said. He spread his enormous hands. "Hermes is overseeing the line-up, and I keep my nose outta his business. Too much bustling. Too many people. Now, tell me about your technological problems."

"Well, Jason and Percy like to play video games, and they've been incredibly bored stuck here. I
thought maybe you could show us how to get electricity?” Nico said. "Percy already got the TV and
the game things, but we don't have any way to turn them on."

Hephaestus grunted. "Well, lead me to it. Let's see what we can do."

Percy jumped up and ushered Hephaestus into the man cave. Nico moved more slowly and paused at
the door when he didn't feel Jason behind him. "Gods, Jason, come on."

Nico held out his hand behind him. Jason took it and let Nico pull him into the room.

"What you boys need first is a light. What the hell do you do when it gets dark outside?” Hephaestus
asked.

The men looked at each other. They all blushed. Light hadn't occurred to them.

"We, um, go to bed," Jason said.

Hephaestus tilted his head in confusion. "You understand you don't need to sleep, right? Or are you
using 'go to bed' as a euphemism for sex?"

"No! I mean, yes. Wait.” It was rare for Nico to be so tongue-tied. "We understand we don't require
sleep. We are not meaning 'go to bed' as a euphemism. At dark we go lay down and fall asleep. This
prison they've got us in, it shrinks, so shortly after the sun sets we're all stuck together in a tiny little
space anyway."

"My dad's a creep,” was all Hephaestus said. He snapped his fingers, and a light appeared over his
head. He ran his hand over it, and it turned on. He touched the television, the gaming systems, the
mini-fridge, and the sofa. The room filled with the soft hum of electricity. "There. Now I'll do you
one better. Sit down, boys."

The new gods obediently sat on the couch. This time, Nico sat in the middle. He was still holding
Jason's hand. Their knees pressed together. Nico took Percy's hand, too. He answered Percy’s silent
question by holding up his and Jason's locked hands. Percy nodded and returned his attention to
Hephaestus.

Hephaestus turned on the TV and waved his hand over the screen. The TV rose and mounted to the
wall, turning bronze as it went. The screen flickered to life, and there was the crazy wind god Aeolus
giving a weather report.

"Oh, wow, HephaestusTV!” Percy cried.

Hephaestus bowed and handed Nico a bronze remote. "You can use it like a regular mortal
television. There are controls for the channel and the volume. You can play with your game toys by
pressing the button that says 'input.' It's pretty self-explanatory. You boys can flip around the dial
after I leave and see what's on. Some commercials, but not too bad. Gotta pay for itself somehow.
Now, come on back out to the main room."

Jason and Nico followed the Olympian out, but this time it was Percy who lagged behind. One of
those channels, he was certain, showed scenes of the demigods going about their daily life. He might
eventually see Annabeth. Nico returned. He stood in front of Percy and blocked his view of Aeolus.
Percy closed the small gap between himself and Nico and pressed as tightly as he could into Nico's
body.

"Annabeth could be on there, Nico."
"I know, Perce. I'll sit with you after Hephaestus leaves, I promise."

Percy wrapped his arms around Nico's waist. He trailed his lips up Nico's neck to his ear. "I'm scared of what'll happen when I see her or Maybelle."

"I'll be with you. We'll get through it."

"If I'm mean to you again," Percy paused and tried to decide on the most satisfying place he could kiss Nico that wouldn't cross the line from close friendship to cheating on his wife. He settled for the corner of Nico's mouth. "I won't mean it. You haven't done anything wrong."

Nico pulled back and looked away. "I've done a million things wrong. Let's go finish talking to Hephaestus."

Hephaestus was giving Jason an update on Leo's adventures when Nico returned with Percy. He clapped his hands together and switched topics.

"Now, about HephaestusTV. There are channels that give out info and news. There are the reality channels that track the whereabouts of interesting gods and demigods. There are sex channels up in the 900s, though I've never really found them that interesting. You, kid, were ratings gold once your secret got out," Hephaestus said, pointing at Nico. "Never had numbers that high before. It's why there's such a long queue of gods and goddesses clamoring to visit you, if you haven't already figured that out."

"Wait, did you--"

"In a minute, kid. I know what you're going to ask, and I'll get to it. You'll see some things on the channels that demigods aren't privy to. Assume that if you didn't know it as a demigod, you aren't supposed to let other demigods know it, assuming you get out of the slammer before all your friends and loved ones are dead."

Percy inhaled sharply. "That's a terrible thing to say. I'm seeing my wife and daughter again."

"I believe you, Jackson. I was just saying--"

"Go on, Hephaestus, without making Percy feel awful, if you can," Jason said. He didn't want to lose the first god since Hygieia to provide them with quality information, but he also didn't want Percy to suffer unnecessarily, despite their many differences.

"Sorry, Jackson. I forget. So anyway, if you didn't know it before, it's off-limits to tell others. Now, as di Angelo knows, the home of a god is normally private. It isn't shown on HephaestusTV, and it isn't accessible in any way to mortals or other gods unless they're invited in. Yes, kid, I tampered with Apollo's protection, broke it in your bedroom. I didn't want to, but I had to follow the directions of my parents. You will, too, if you end up in a godly role above ground." Hephaestus regarded all three of them. He couldn't tell them to advocate for a godly duty in one of the other realms, but he could try to make them think about it. "I'm sorry, because I know how much it cost you."

Nico waved him off. He wasn't interested in discussing it. "You did what they made you do, like you said. I made choices I knew broke their rules."

Jason leaned over and kissed Nico's cheek. Nico recoiled. Jason wasn't sorry. Nico had rarely phrased his actions as being the result of his own choices.

"Now, because I owe you a favor for being a part of wrecking your mortal life, I'm going to do something for you. This house," Hephaestus gestured all around, "isn't held to the same standard as
the dwellings of other gods. You are confined. We all know where you are, and Father was adamant
that you appear on HephaestusTV. You have a whole channel dedicated to you. I'm going to give
you godly protection in one room, and that room will be for the three of you alone. No one can enter;
no one can spy; no one can listen in on your conversations. Which room do you want to be
protected? I recommend the bedroom."

The men looked at one another. The bedroom made the most sense. Nico was tempted to choose
another room because he understood what he'd be agreeing might happen if he chose the bedroom,
but he was tired of being the equivalent of an unwitting godly porn star. Godhood had taken away
his vomit problem, or he would have been sick thinking about how his privacy had been violated.

"Bedroom's great. Thank you," he said. Percy squeezed Nico's thigh, and Jason was kind enough
not to look in Nico's direction. Hephaestus waved his hand, and the air settled differently around
them. The bedroom was protected. Nico had an idea. "Would you swear on the River Styx never to
remove that protection as long as we live here?"

"I can swear it, kid, but here's a secret, one of those ones you can't tell demigods: swearing on the
Styx is meaningless for a god. It doesn't matter. We break oaths on the Styx all the time. It's just some
shit we say to appease demigods."

"Bastards," Percy said.

"Pretty much," Hephaestus agreed. "But you'll know if the protection ever breaks because you'll be
able to see it on the TV."

"Why would gods lie to us like that?" Jason asked. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised by godly
betrayal at this point, but I kind of am."

"You're judging gods by a human moral compass. We don't function the way mortals do. You don't
function the way mortals do anymore, either. We've been alive, most of us, for thousands of years.
We're limited to a tiny group of comrades. We don't have familial ties, not really, except for a few of
us to mortal lovers or our kids, and even then, we don't feel it the way the mortals do. Mortals don't
last, and the gods last too long. Forever is a long time to be good."

Jason grunted. "I couldn't be good for twenty-two fucking years as a human. I can't imagine being
good for all eternity."

Hephaestus narrowed his eyes. "You were one hell of a lot more good than most people will ever be,
Jason Grace. Don't let your guilt over a few terrible choices color your entire view of the
extraordinary man you were. The same goes for you two. You're gonna be good gods because of the
struggles you've gone through. Many of the gods are spoiled because life has always been easy.
You'll never carry that particular affliction."

"Two more things, before I go," Hephaestus continued. "First, everything can be reused or re-
purposed, even people. Let go of these idealized notions, Nico, about who you and they should be.
You are who you are, and there's no going back to who you used to be, or who Grace used to be.
That doesn't mean you can't find good things together again. And all three of you, cut yourselves
some slack. Ascending is hard. Being punished is hard. Hell, being imprisoned as punishment is
harder still. Do what you need to in order to get by, and don't worry so much about what your mortal
loved ones or the gods might think. Take care of each other."

The three men nodded. Hephaestus rose, and one by one, they shook his hand.

"Oh, if you need more electricity, you just have to want it. Notice a pattern?" Hephaestus smiled
kindly and vanished.

Nico took Jason's and Percy's hands, intending to pull them into the man cave. Instead, Jason tugged them around the coffee table and into their bedroom.

"Well, that made up for the previous seven shitty guests," Jason said.

Nico laughed and Percy grinned.

"No wonder Leo's so fucking smart," Percy said. "And no one will ever tell him I said that."

"Your secret's safe," Nico said. He looked from Percy to Jason and back again. "Guys, I just...I'm grateful for you both."


"Don't push it, Jace."

"C'mon," Percy said, dragging Nico and Jason out of the room. "TV!"
Getaway

After Jason "caught" Nico with Percy, he'd managed to stay away from Reyna's villa, and thus, Nico, for five days. The first night, he'd been so furious he'd wanted to storm right over as soon as he could deposit Piper in her dorm room. Reyna had warned him to stay away for the rest of the night, though. Piper hadn't made things easier. She'd been angry when he'd insisted they leave the party early. She'd yelled at him that Nico flirting with Percy wasn't cause for them to leave, even though everyone who'd been at Percy's had to know Nico and Percy had done more than flirt, even if they hadn't seen what Jason had. Piper had said Jason had to let Nico go. In fact, she'd insisted on it, saying she'd stop dating him otherwise, so Jason had agreed, at least for the night. He'd stewed privately in his dorm room instead.

And then Jason had gone to see Percy. The idiot. Percy actually believed he'd been the one using Nico. Jason knew better. Percy's cluelessness bought Nico another day.

The two days after that, Jason had decided to deny Nico the satisfaction of a visit. The day after that, Jason had exhausted himself training to avoid giving in and going. Tonight, here he was, approaching Reyna's villa close to curfew and having trouble deciding if he hoped Nico was there or if he hoped Nico was gone.

Jason punched the doorbell at Reyna's villa. He heard rapid footsteps and a pause before the doorway as someone peered through the peephole. The door opened, and Jason stepped inside to face Reyna, who was absent her usual braid and also any pants. She was clad in a long t-shirt. Jason had never seen her so casual.

"It took you longer than I thought it would, Jason."

Jason wasn't sure how to respond. "Is Nico around?"

"Perhaps," Reyna said. "I wish to have a word with you before I check."

"Look, Reyna, can you just get him?" Jason asked. "Whatever threat you want to share with me, I'm sure I already get the picture. Don't hurt your baby boo or you'll disembowel me or something, right? Got it."

"You've already hurt him," Reyna said dispassionately.

Jason would have preferred her anger to her cold dismissal.

Reyna gestured to the couch. "No, what I want to say concerns you, not Nico, at least not directly. Please, sit."

Jason sighed but took a seat. Reyna sat next to him.

"You are unaware of my life before I came here. That is because there are large portions of it which I do not wish to share. When I was a girl, I had an abusive father. He was not always so. My sister remembers a time where he was a good and decent man. As I aged, he became more and more verbally and, eventually, physically abusive." Jason started to interrupt, to say he was sorry, but Reyna raised a hand for his continued silence. "Nico is the only person who knew this, and it is for him, in part, that I am telling you." Her voice took on a quieter, more urgent quality. "You scared me the other night, Jason. You made me feel like I was a child watching my father rage, except I wasn't your target. Nico was your target. For a moment, I was worried you would hit him."
Jason's eyes filled with tears. "I would never...I love him, Reyna. I would never touch him in a way that..."

"I know you love him. And I know he had done something that was extremely disappointing. But you were close, Jason, too close to losing control," Reyna said. Jason couldn't deny it. He'd scared himself again. Reyna shook the hair off her shoulders and continued. "Nico told me the things you said to him the day he left Camp Half-Blood. You panicked, didn't you? You were so desperate to make him stay that you flung the most vile, cruel taunts his way to try to either keep him from leaving you or trick yourself into believing you didn't care?"

Jason nodded. He watched his hands. They still twitched uncontrollably sometimes. How was it Reyna knew so well what was happening to him?

"You're in trouble, my friend," she said. There was concern in her voice, not pity. "What Nico's told me reminds me of my father, too, before he became physically violent. Please think about seeking out some help. See a therapist. Read a book about anger management. I don't know. I don't want to see you end up like my father."

"And Nico?" Jason asked.

Reyna and Jason were close to the same age, but right now, she looked so much older than he had ever felt. The layers of youth and vitality had been stripped away, and Jason was looking at the deepest, truest version of Reyna. What he saw was painful.

"I had to kill my father, Jason. I live with the grief and guilt every day. Don't make Nico have to defend himself."

"Thank you for telling me, Reyna," Jason said. He felt very small and humbled in her presence. "I'll work on it, I promise."

She patted his shoulder and stood. "You're a good man, Jason. I'll get Nico."

Reyna walked out of the living room, and Jason was left alone to think. Reyna knew, first-hand, what physical and verbal abuse was like. It was terrifying to think that she knew it and saw in him the warning signs of an abuser. The truth was, he had been close to hitting Nico. It had taken all of his restraint to hit the counter instead of his lover. Never again. He was seeking help, tomorrow. There had to be a good therapist or anger management course in San Francisco.

"Jace?" Nico's voice was shaky and soft, and Jason felt his heart stop in his throat. Nico was there, in pajamas he must have borrowed from Reyna, funny red flannel pants with teddy bears on them.

"Hi." Jason smiled into the word. He might feel angry again later, but right now all he could feel was gratitude that Nico had agreed to see him and that his hand had hit the counter instead of the boy in front of him. "Will you talk with me for a bit?"

Nico didn't answer, but he sat next to Jason on the couch in the spot Reyna had vacated.

Jason picked at the knee of the pajama pants. "Nice jammies."

"Hylla likes to see if she can get Reyna progressively more atrocious gifts each Christmas, it seems," Nico said. "You should have seen the top that went with these."

Jason pulled at the knee of Nico's pants for a bit longer, unable to make eye contact. He could feel Nico watching him. He moved his hand to Nico's wrist and fingered the new bracelet he'd noticed at the party. "It's beautiful. Where'd you get it?"
"Apollo," Nico said, and Jason noted the strained quality to his voice. "After the eagles, he found me and helped me. It was a -- gift."

"It suits you," Jason said quietly. He moved his hand until his broad fingers circled all the way around Nico's wrist. Nico was strong, but Jason was stronger. The thought of causing pain to Nico's body made Jason sick. Hadn't he already, though? He'd been too rough once when he'd insisted on sex. He'd hurt Nico's arm. He'd thrown a rock at Nico, for the gods' sakes. This anger would end. He would be sure of it.

"Why are you here, Jason?" Nico asked.

Jason sought Nico's face, then, and he knew his anger problem wasn’t what was on Nico’s mind. Nico was thinking about what he'd done with Percy. His big, dark eyes looked so sad, and Jason knew what Nico had done hadn't made anything better for him. He dropped Nico's wrist and stroked the backs of his fingers across Nico's cheek. "I love you."

Nico's eyes flicked to Jason's, then down to Jason's hands.

"Curfew is in ten minutes, give or take," Nico said. "You can't stay here past then. It would look bad for Reyna."

"Oh, I guess I should let you--"

"Will you go into San Francisco with me?"

"Now?" Jason was shocked. That was the last thing he'd expected Nico to say.

"I need more time with you." Nico took Jason's hand.

"Yes, of course," Jason managed.

"Let me throw on some clothes..."

Before Jason could say anything else, Nico was gone. Jason sat on the couch, opening and closing his hands, trying to understand what was happening. Nico was back, in his usual black, and Jason still had no ideas.

"Stand up. We need to hurry."

Nico pulled Jason up by the hand and rushed with him to the door. Once outside, he dropped Jason's hand and led him hurriedly toward the edge of New Rome, where they claimed their weapons. They made a mad run to the bridge of the Little Tiber. Once they'd crossed to the outside bank, Nico stopped. The curfew whistle sounded. Damn it! They hadn't made it out and now they couldn't go back without getting in trouble.

Nico wrapped his arms around Jason’s neck. Jason was stunned, but he put his hands on Nico's waist and pulled him close.

"Fly, Jason," Nico whispered. "Get us over the hill. Then I can use the shadows."

Jason summoned the winds and carried Nico into the air.
"Are you sure you can afford this?" Jason asked.

Nico arched his brow. "My father is the god of wealth. I can afford anything."

Nico took Jason's hand and led him up the looming steps of the imposing Ritz-Carlton hotel in San Francisco. With its huge columns and carved pediment, it seemed to belong on the Acropolis in Greece millennia ago.

"It looks like...you know..."

"Yeah, neo-classical, I think," Nico agreed. He gazed at the pediment. "The winged guy is supposed to represent insurance, because this used to be an insurance company building, and he's watching over a family, keeping them safe. I like to think he's actually Thanatos. Is this okay?"

He gestured between their joined hands. It was more than okay. It made Jason feel alive like he hadn't felt since even before they'd broken up.

"Yeah, it feels good," Jason said. He kicked himself for only managing to say "it feels good." What a dumbass. Before he could think of something to say that more accurately reflected his feelings, Nico ushered him into the lobby.

Jason marveled at the huge light-colored marble lobby. He'd never seen anything so extravagant. All the furniture, low and modern in soft, cool tones, screamed sophistication. Jason wanted to go sit on every chair, just to see how different each one felt on his ass. He caught Nico watching him fondly.

"Is this what the throne room looks like?" Jason asked.

Nico squeezed his hand and smiled. "I like this better. I'm sure you'll see for yourself someday."

Jason was so busy taking in his surroundings that he didn't notice they'd reached the reception desk until Nico began speaking.

"Nico di Angelo, my father's usual suite, if it's available," Nico said. Jason whirled back to Nico and raised his eyebrows. Nico shrugged and pulled a solid black credit card out of his wallet.

"Of course, sir," the woman said, smiling indulgently. She handed him a key card. "Is there any other way we can assist you?"

"Do you have class in the morning? Or anything that makes you need to be back at a certain time, Jace?" Nico asked.

Jason was supposed to go power-walking with Piper in the morning. "No, nothing."

"Could we have a wake-up call about an hour before check-out time tomorrow, then?" Nico asked the woman, who was at least three times his age.

"Of course, Mr. di Angelo. If we can be of any other assistance, or you require anything at all, please let us know."

"Thanks," Nico said, giving the lady a short nod. He'd dropped Jason's hand to sign for the room, but as soon as they started walking, Jason latched onto him. Nico led Jason to a bank of elevators, and they waited until an empty one opened for them.

"Who lets a sixteen year old get a room in a place like this?" Jason marveled.
Nico smirked. "Anyone who likes my dad's money, I guess. It's funny. They never ask for ID or anything. I've stayed here since I was thirteen."

"And you never brought me?" Jason teased. He was alarmed when Nico's face fell.

"I was going to, for your birthday this year." Nico looked at the floor of the elevator. He scratched his forehead. "I, um, hadn't been here since we'd started dating, because, you know, I wouldn't have been able to bring you without arousing suspicion, and I wouldn't go without you. I'd figured it out and had asked Reyna for permission to be late to Camp Jupiter this summer, like, you know, a pre-college vacation for you, but..."

"Nico..." Jason closed his hand tighter around Nico's.

"I can get a new reservation, and you can bring Piper, if you want," Nico said. He slid his hand out of Jason's. "It's a bit late for your birthday, but you could go at the end of the summer semester, before classes start in the fall. My dad will insist you not stay in his suite. My treat, still, of course."

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. Nico stepped out and left Jason opening and closing his mouth in the elevator. The door had started to close before Jason walked into the hallway. He saw Nico disappear through a door off to his left. Thankfully, it wasn't too far down the hallway, so Jason could keep track of which one it was. When he reached it, he started to knock softly, but then saw that Nico had left it slightly ajar. He knocked anyway and entered.

The place really was a suite, with a front sitting area and a bedroom beyond. Everything in it was gorgeous, high-end, and luxurious. Jason barely noticed. Nico was standing with his back to him, adjusting the room's temperature setting.

"Would you like the air warmer or colder, Jace?" Nico called. Few people would have been able to tell the change in his tone compared to earlier, before talking about plans he'd made and had to give up. Jason could hear every heartbreaking nuance.

"Maybe a touch warmer, for now." They hadn't packed any bags, so Jason had nothing to busy himself with. He peeked in the bathroom and the bedroom, which had one large, glorious bed and a low white couch-thing along the window. Nico stayed in the living room. Jason joined him and carefully touched his shoulder. Nico didn't respond, but he didn't pull away. Jason said, "I only want to be here with you. Can this night count as my gift? It's more than I could have asked for."

Nico nodded, and Jason brushed his hand down Nico's back.

"I need to call Reyna," Nico said shortly. He went into the bedroom and closed the door.

Jason sat on the couch and waited. He could hear Nico's quiet voice, followed by a few sharp tones that must be Reyna. The call was brief, and Nico emerged not long after, pink and smiling slightly. He sat next to Jason, but not too close.

"Well, she's not thrilled with me right now," Nico said. There was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. Nico loved pushing people's buttons and doing nothing more or less than what he wanted. It was infuriating when you were on the receiving end of the behavior, but downright endearing when he did it to others. "She said I have to scour her villa with my own toothbrush when we get back."

"Hey, Nico--"

"That reminds me, I need to call down and get some toiletries for us." Nico jumped up and dialed the lobby from the bedroom, even though there'd been a phone right next to him.
Why had Nico asked Jason to come if he was going to blow him off all night? Jason felt his anger flare, and then he remembered Reyna's warning. He laid his head on the back of the couch and tried to breathe and count to ten. When he got to ten, he lifted his head and caught Nico staring at him from the doorway connecting the rooms. Nico looked so fractured, and Jason knew exactly why his ex-lover was having trouble being close to him.

"Sit with me, please," Jason asked.

Slowly, Nico walked forward and sat next to Jason. He leaned down and unlaced his boots, taking them off and setting them to the side, before he pulled Jason's legs into his lap and undid the laces on his tennis shoes. When Nico was done, Jason kept his legs in place. He watched, dumbfounded, as Nico pulled off both of his socks and kissed the top of each foot.

"I'm sorry," Nico whispered. He didn't look at Jason's face, just at his feet. "For what I did with Percy. I wanted to hurt you as much as you'd hurt me. The person I hurt was myself, because you're still with Piper, and I'm still without you, except now my few friends and family think I'm what you said I was."

What Jason said he was? What was that?

"What do people think you are, Nico?" Jason asked gently.

"A whore, like you said," Nico whispered. He was rubbing the hem of Jason's pants leg, over and over, like he was trying to coax a genie out of a lamp.

Had Jason called Nico a whore? He'd said, oh, gods, he'd said Nico should stop acting like a whore if he wasn't happy with the sex they had. Jason laid his head back on the couch again. How could he have said such an awful thing?

"You're not a whore, Nico," Jason breathed. "You weren't when I said that, and you aren't now that you did what you did with Percy. No one thinks that."

"You do."

"I don't, I swear." Jason needed Nico to believe him. "I never thought that. There was nothing wrong with the way you treated sex between us. It was all me. I was the one who tried to use sex to keep from talking about our problems, or whatever I was doing. You were always good and pure."

Nico snorted. "You know, when a guy's had one sex partner and it's someone they love, and that partner tells the guy he wants sex like he's a whore and it's all he's good at, the guy believes his lover, because he doesn't know any better, Jason."

Jason didn't dare try to touch Nico, but he wanted to pull him close and beg forgiveness. He could also tell Nico needed to get this out.

"And then the idiot guy has sex with another idiot, because he's sat with those words in his ears for months, and it feels like they're carved on his skin and in his brain and that's all he'll ever be -- a hot body and a pretty face who's only good for fucking and sucking, Jace. That's what you called me, and I can't get those words to go away. I don't think they'll ever go away." Nico didn't cry; Jason wasn't even sure Nico could cry after all the trauma he'd endured. Nico sat there, picking at Jason's jeans, and Jason could see the devastation and humiliation his words had caused.

"Nico, would you look at me, please?" Jason asked. He wanted to beg and grovel, to flay himself for the damage he'd done, but just like his pain over the anger, this was Nico's pain to feel. Jason couldn't make it about himself. Nico looked up slightly, and Jason continued. "I wish I could take
those words back, especially the way I used them. You are beautiful, and you do have a gorgeous face and body, and you're great, like amazing, at sex, but that stuff is such a small part of who you are and why I love you. Nobody thinks of you like that."

"A lot of people think of me like that, Jace," Nico snapped.

"If they do, they either don't know you or they're jerks," Jason said. "And Nico, we can't control what other people think of us. I shouldn't ever have said that stuff, and I don't believe it -- I never did -- but what matters most is what you believe. You can't seriously believe that one, you're the only sixteen year old who likes sex and has had a whopping two partners."

Nico chuckled slightly and raised a hand to Jason's knee. Jason took that as a sign to continue.

"And two, dear gods, have you forgotten that you're a total BAMF who doesn't take shit and who's smarter than, like, everyone but Annabeth?"

Jason tentatively reached for Nico's hand. He thrilled when long, pale fingers reached for him, too. They joined hands and rested them back on Jason's knee.

"I don't know what BAMF means," Nico admitted. He seemed to be blushing slightly. It was rare that Jason knew something Nico didn't.

"It means badass motherfucker, which is exactly what you are," Jason said. "You're the Ghost King for crying out loud! People don't get a more badass nickname than that."

"It's a title, not a nickname." Nico’s tone was so haughty that Jason had to laugh.

"So look, your highness," Jason started, "if the badass motherfucking Ghost King also happens to be the hottest piece of ass at either camp, well, that's a happy coincidence. And those measly two guys who've been the recipients of your badass motherfucking sex skills are the luckiest sons of bitches on the planet. I would know."

"Shut up, Jason!" Nico almost squealed. His face was bright pink.

Nico flopped over and laid his head on Jason's chest. Jason inhaled the sweet smell of Nico's hair and smiled, happy he'd been able to help Nico, at least a little bit.

"Can I put my arms around you?" Jason asked. He felt Nico nod into his shirt, and taking time to savor each moment of contact, Jason wrapped his arms around Nico's cool, strong shoulders. When Nico was fully enclosed in Jason's embrace, they both gave great sighs, then laughed.

"Oh, that feels so good," Nico murmured. Jason hummed his agreement.

"There's so much I want to tell you, Nico."

"Tell me again that you love me. Say that first," Nico said.

Jason could feel warm bursts of breath against his chest.

"I love you, Nico."

Nico lifted his head off Jason's chest and stared directly in his eyes.

"I love you, Jason Grace."

Their faces were so close. Jason could see each long, curled eyelash framing Nico's eyes. He could
count the few freckles on Nico's pale skin. He would only have to move a few inches to kiss Nico. Being still, not closing that gap, was one of the hardest things Jason had ever done. For once, he was feeling selfless enough to let Nico make the choice.

Nico was watching Jason as closely as Jason was watching him. Jason was aware of Nico's eyes tracing the outline of his own. He watched Nico's eyes trail down the line of his nose, focus on his lips, then move back up to his eyes.

"I can't lose myself in you again," Nico said. "I can't trust you to care about what's best for me anymore."

Jason wanted to deny it, to say he always thought of what was best for Nico, but that was a lie, and they both knew it. He didn't trust himself with Nico's heart. He would break it again.

"I understand."

"I want to lose myself in you, though, so much." Nico's words swept over Jason as the first tear dropped from his eyes. Nico brushed it away, and Jason's eyes closed at the delicate sensation of Nico's hand on his cheek. Jason leaned his head into the touch, and Nico held his hand there for a moment longer before he pulled away. "It's time for you to let go of my shoulders now."

Jason opened his eyes and let his hands drop from Nico's back. Nico gently pushed Jason's legs off his lap and stood. He stayed there, calves touching the couch, not turning around or moving away. Jason touched the back of Nico's knee, no more than a slip of his fingertips against black denim. Nico didn't give any indication that he felt, wanted, or didn't want the touch. He stayed perfectly still.

It felt like a test, this limbo, where Nico stood and Jason sat and let his hand rest against the back of Nico's knee, but Jason didn't know what to do to pass. He wanted to touch, to kiss, to take. He wasn't sure he remembered how to give or receive. So like before, he didn't move and waited for Nico to choose what to do next. Jason counted, both to gauge the time and to remember to breathe. He counted slowly to 145 before Nico moved.

Nico's hand twitched a fraction of an inch, then turned from the way it had been facing, palm against his jeans, to palm out, fingers stretched and reaching. Tentatively, like he was an animal trainer afraid to spook his wild charge, Jason slipped his hand off Nico's knee and into Nico's hand.

The grip was strange, not the way they'd held hands when they were together, but that was fitting. They weren't together. Jason felt like a child being led. Nico tugged, and Jason stood.

"It's taking too long for them to send up the toothbrushes," Nico said absently. "I want to show you the view, but I don't think we can hear a knock on the door from the bedroom."

"Do you think we should go check?" Jason asked. He had no idea how hotels worked. He wasn't sure he'd ever been in one.

"No, the cart's coming. I hear it now," Nico said.

Jason couldn't hear anything, but moments later there was a knock at the door. Nico started toward it. Jason followed. He wasn't letting go of Nico's hand until he had to. They stopped near the door, and Nico dropped Jason's hand to grip the hilt of his sword. Jason reached for his gladius. It was second nature, being armed. Demigods played at being normal teenagers, but they were fighters — killers, if necessary — and they were perpetually hunted by beings intent on their destruction. No wonder, Jason thought in a moment of rare clarity, so many of them sported an array of dysfunctions. How could they possibly be "normal" or well-adjusted?
Nico opened the door to a middle aged woman wheeling a cart.

"Two toothbrushes, toothpaste, deodorant, shave cream, a razor," the woman said. Nico took the items as she handed them to him and gave the overflow to Jason. "Is there anything else you require, sir?"

Nico glanced at Jason, who shook his head.

"No, thank you, ma'am."

The woman nodded and walked away. Jason released his gladius as Nico closed the door. There was no threat, but Jason still felt a coiled spring of tension in his body. He followed Nico to the bathroom and waited for Nico to take the toiletries out of his hands and arrange them on the sink. They were standing too close; they were too wired. Jason's breathing was shallow. His senses felt alive. He could feel the energy, the life, radiating off Nico.

Nico took the last item, the deodorant, out of Jason's hands and set it on the counter. Jason thought he should turn, step out of the bathroom, but before he could, Nico surged forward. A cool hand grabbed Jason's face. Another wrapped around Jason's neck. Nico's thumb scraped down Jason's throat and under his t-shirt. He pulled Jason's head toward him. Jason went willingly, taking in Nico's glazed eyes and parted lips.

He barely had time to notice these details before Nico's lips crashed into his. The kiss was rough and needy. Nico's hands clenched painfully against Jason's skin. His tongue pushed inside Jason's mouth at the same moment Nico threw his whole body forward, and Jason crashed back against the door jamb. His head throbbed with the contact, but Jason wasn't complaining. Before he could do more than kiss back and place a tentative hand on Nico's hip, Nico was pushing again, his hands now gripping Jason's shoulders and forcing him backward, out of the bathroom, across the carpet, down onto the bed.

The bed was so much softer than the door jamb, of course, but Jason hit it with just as much force. Nico's solid weight fell on him, and the fevered kissing and touching continued.

"Climb up the bed," Nico ordered in a rush between kisses, and Jason thrilled at the dark, rough quality his voice had taken on. "Get your shirt off."

Jason hurried to comply with both requests, first yanking his shirt off, which got stuck momentarily around Nico's neck since he wouldn't break their kiss. Then Jason wrapped an arm around Nico's back and pulled them fully onto the bed. Nico's hands were everywhere, scratching down Jason's shoulders, pinching his nipples, splaying firm and slow across his stomach. Jason moaned, and Nico pushed his tongue further into Jason's mouth, sliding it over his teeth and tongue and coaxing out another moan. Jason felt Nico smile into the kiss.

Without thinking, Jason tightened his hands on Nico's hips and thrust up into his body. Nico gasped and pulled back, his hands frozen in the process of undoing Jason's jeans. Jason could read the lust in Nico's eyes turn to shock and horror as he scrambled off Jason and the bed.

"Don't run! Don't run! Don't run!" Jason begged. Nico was halfway to a shadow, backing into it, feeling for the darkness behind him. "Please, don't run! I won't touch you, I swear! Please, don't run!"

This was it. Jason was going to lose Nico again. His pale, kind lover would run, and this time, if Nico left, there was no way Jason would ever see him again. There was nothing he could do. Nico would flee if Jason reached for him, and he would flee if Jason didn't.
Jason watched the shadows gather. He watched the horrified expression on Nico's face morph into something different, cold and aloof. He watched Nico's shoulders, which had been hunched and withdrawn, straighten.

"The Ghost King is a badass motherfucker," Nico said. "And he's done running."

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The badass motherfucking Ghost King may be done running, but that didn't stop Nico's legs from shaking as he leaned on the wall. Nico let the shadows fall. Jason threw himself back on the bed and said, "Thank the gods."

Nico braced himself against the wall for a moment before he crossed the room and knelt on the low white chaise that abutted the window. From here, there was an amazing view of Chinatown. Nico loved Chinatown. The lights, colors, and activity always reminded him of the Lotus. Not that he wanted to go back to the Lotus, but at the Lotus, Bianca had been alive.

What would Bianca think of him now?

Nico hadn't intended to attack Jason. In fact, he'd intended to never do anything sexual again after the way he'd made a mess of things with Percy. He knew, in his heart, that what Jason had said that terrible day wasn't true, but he also knew that when he gave himself physically to another person, he was handing them the potential to hurt him, and he never wanted someone to make him feel the way Jason had that last day. And yet...so much of what Jason had made him feel over the time they'd been together had been wonderful, better than anything he'd ever felt. So when he'd found Jason standing so close, breathless and vibrant from a threat that hadn't come, eyes even darker and more intense than usual, lips parted, hands big and strong and brushing against Nico's fingers, those good memories had flooded Nico's brain, and he'd acted without thinking.

And the act of sex felt so good, too. Nico liked the rush of power he got when he, smaller and quieter, commanded Jason, and Jason jumped to do whatever he ordered. He liked the way Jason's face flushed. He liked the way his touch made Jason moan. Nico had felt that way with Percy, too. He wasn't interested in sex with Percy, exactly, but he'd loved exercising the kind of power that had Percy, his hero and love and obnoxiously annoying frenemy begging, begging him, for more.

The mental high went hand in hand with the incredible physical sensations. Gods, Nico loved running his fingers over Jason's skin, feeling the change in texture and temperature as he touched different parts of Jason's body. He thrilled to the feeling of Jason's hot lips against his own cool skin and the way his nerves shot tingling sensations to his brain that were interpreted as pleasure. It still amazed Nico that varying arrangements of nerves in his body could respond so differently to Jason's touches. And that is the nerdiest reason ever to get excited about sex, Nico chastised himself. If only people who thought he was some sort of sexual rock star knew he was such a dork. Nico looked back at Jason, who was watching him from the bed. He knows, Nico thought. He knows exactly who I am.

"Can I join you?" Jason asked tentatively. He'd put his shirt back on. "You said the view was good."

"It is," Nico replied. "Come see."

Nico turned back to the window. He could hear Jason get off the bed and pad softly toward him. The
chaise sank as Jason, smelling of rain, knelt next to him.

"Oh, wow," Jason murmured. "It's so colorful. What are we looking at?"

"Chinatown. Early Chinese immigrants faced a brutal, oppressive life here in America," Nico said. He rested his forearms on the window ledge and let his head drop onto them. "They must have been so strong to fight for themselves, build their communities, and not let the best of who they were slip away. This is the largest Chinatown in America."

"You amaze me," Jason said softly. "You could be like those early immigrants; misunderstood and unfairly treated, and yet here you sit, smart, compassionate, invested in kindness, and the most decent person I know."

Nico narrowed his eyes. "Did you miss the part where I had sex with Percy to hurt you? There was nothing particularly smart, kind, compassionate, or decent about that."

"I'd hurt you. He desperately wanted it, he told me. You made a mistake, and you know it." Nico saw Jason smile out of the corner of his eye. "You're entitled to screw up, Nico. And look what you're doing for me, letting me be here with you, when we both know I don't deserve it."

Nico shifted and sat facing Jason. The outside wall was a little chilly on his bare arm. He got goosebumps. "I asked you here because I needed to see you, not for you."

"It feels like it's for me," Jason said. He maneuvered his body so they were properly facing each other. "I'm sorry for every day of about the last seven months, Nico."

"But you wouldn't make a different choice."

"I wish I was a different person." Jason grimaced. "I know that the guy my dad showed me, that version of me, was a myth. He could never exist. But I want there to be some version of me that puts your happiness, and the way you make me feel, over what anyone else thinks. That's who I want to be, but I'm not him."

"Do you think you could be someday?" Nico picked up Jason's hand and studied it. Long, thicker, tanned fingers. Broad, flat palm. Bonier than you'd expect. The nails were neatly trimmed and more flat than rounded. "I won't wait, but I'm curious to know."

"I hope so. It's almost worse now, knowing I'm not the guy my dad wants and never will be, but I'm not the guy I want to be, either. Losing you was a terrible price to pay for that little revelation."

Nico nodded. What could he say? He kept Jason's hand, though, tracing around the edges with his index finger.

"A good thing happened. Can I tell you about it?" Jason asked. "It came out of the bad parts."

"As long as it's not something horrifying, like 'Piper's pregnant.'"

Jason laughed. "Gods, no. I find that horrifying, too. I'm barely eighteen!"

Nico tried to laugh, but he wished he hadn't said anything about Piper. It reminded him that Jason was having sex -- actively, repeatedly having sex -- with someone else. He dropped Jason's hand.

"I guess I should have seen that coming," Jason muttered. "I talked to Reyna tonight before she went to get you. She told me about her dad, and she said that I scared her the other night at Percy's party. She said she was afraid I'd hit you."
"Reyna's being overprotective. You wouldn't hit me," Nico said. "I wasn't scared of you."

"Well, I was scared of me, Nico." Jason turned to face into the room, and Nico watched his profile. Jason sunk his head into his hands before continuing. "I was way too close. I wanted to hit you. I wanted to hurt you physically."


Jason met his gaze, and Nico knew he was wrong. He could see the truth in Jason's eyes.

"You didn't hit me, Jace. That's what matters," Nico said. He placed a hand on Jason's shoulder.

"No, I'm so glad I didn't hit you, but what matters is that I wanted to. Think about it, Nico. I hit you with a rock."

Nico cringed at the memory. It had hurt, that rock, despite what Jason had said about maneuvering the winds so the rock wouldn't hurt him. He'd had a bruise for over a week.

"And the time after I beat up the kid in the arena, I hurt you when we were having sex."

"You got carried away."

"Gods, stop, please." Jason sounded miserable. "Don't make excuses for me. What I did to you was horrible. What I did to that Ares kid was awful. There are so many instances where I let my anger take control. All of it was bad, but I almost hit you instead of the counter the other night."

"But you didn't." Nico said the words one last time, but his voice sounded small and false, even to himself. He moved to sit forward on the chaise, too, but he kept holding Jason's shoulder.

"I'm going to get help," Jason said. "I'm going to find something here in San Francisco, some class or shrink or something, to manage my anger better. No more close calls. No more scaring myself. No more hurting you that way."

"That's wonderful, Jace." Nico meant it. He'd never felt scared of Jason, but this could only be good for the son of Jupiter. "I'll help you, if you want. I'll help you find someone. I'll come to the meetings with you. Whatever I can."

"Thanks. That would mean a lot. Does that mean you're staying at Camp Jupiter?" Jason asked.

Nico dropped his head. He hadn't told anyone, not even Hazel or Reyna.

"No. I'm, um, going to high school."

"What!?" Jason jumped up and stared down at him in awe. "But you told Percy..."

"I'm not going to school for Percy!" Nico yelled a little too loudly and had to rein in his voice. "I'm not going to school for him. I was right. I already know more than he ever will. It's not to make stupid friends, either. It's..."

Nico trailed off, and when he didn't continue after a lengthy silence, Jason prompted him. "It's what, Neeks? You can tell me. Who the hell am I gonna tell?"

"I told my dad I wasn't staying at either camp anymore, like, never again." Nico could tell Jason was going to protest, so he cut him off. "How could I stay, Jason? I'm not watching you do this awful thing you're doing. So anyway, my dad said I can't live full-time in the Underworld because I'm, and
I quote, 'not dead, dummy, and not a foolish immortal, either.' So he basically called me stupid but not stupid, but that's beside the point. He said if I won't stay at the camps, I have to stay where there's some magical protection in place."

"Hedge?"

"No. I know Coach would be happy to have me stay with him, but that's not what I want." Nico hesitated. "I'm going to a boarding school outside Portland. Some of the Underworld gods watch over it because a few of their kids go to the primary school there."

"Nico! How could you not tell me?"

Nico glared. "Let's see, it sort of slipped my mind when I came to pay you a visit and saw you naked with your new girlfriend, Jason. After that, I didn't want to talk to you."

"I'm sorry," Jason whispered.

"You're not, so don't say it," Nico hissed. "Did you even give me a second thought the first time you kissed her again? When you lay there, and she's in your arms, do--"

"Stop it," Jason growled. He walked away. When he got to the doorway between the living area and the bedroom, he stopped and raised his hands so they held the top of the door frame. "You don't know how I feel."

Nico approached until he was maybe five feet behind Jason. He could see the harsh way Jason gripped the door frame. Jason's triceps were taut. His back was expanded; every muscle was visible through his light blue shirt. Jason was such an amazing physical specimen. It wasn't the part that Nico loved most about him, but he appreciated the beauty of Jason's body.

"I want to be a lawyer," Nico said. He closed the gap between himself and Jason and rested his head on Jason's back. He felt Jason exhale and lose a little tension. "I want to help mortals seek justice, especially if they can't afford to pay for it. My dad says I should go to high school for a year so we can see if I'll be able to handle the academic rigors of college."

"You'll be amazing, Nico," Jason said. "I bet you're top of your class."

Nico chuckled. "I doubt it. But I have access to great tutors."

"I cried the first time I kissed her." Jason's voice was so soft Nico had to strain to hear him. "I cried the whole night long that time. It took me five tries at having sex before I didn't vomit when it was time to enter her, then another six or seven where I closed my eyes and pretended I was with you. I wear a condom every time, even though she's on birth control and we don't have to worry about diseases, because I can't bear the thought of touching her as intimately as I've touched you."

Nico dropped his head so only his forehead rested on Jason's back. He didn't want Jason to know he was crying. He'd assumed Jason had thrown his clothes out and slept with Piper without considering him at all. It shouldn't make a difference to him, that Jason was hurt, too, but it did. Nico waited until his eyes had dried before he spoke again.

"Are you hungry? I should have asked earlier, I guess, but if you are, eat whatever they have in here, or we can find something else. I don't know if the restaurant or lounge is still open, but--"

"Nico, I'm fine," Jason said. "Tired, maybe."

"Lay with me a while, then?" Nico asked.
Jason dropped his arms back to his sides and turned around to look at Nico. "You don't have to offer that. I can sleep on the couch."

"I'm not, necessarily," Nico said. "I'd like to talk to you more, but we can do it laying down. I'm tired, too."

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"I appreciate you giving me my space, Jason, but I don't want you falling off the bed."

They'd decided to get ready for bed in case they fell asleep while talking. Nico didn't think there was much chance of that since they were laying fully clothed on top of the flat sheet, staring at each other from as far apart as physically possible.

"Tell you what," Jason said. "I'll move forward so I won't fall off the bed if you move forward so you won't fall off the bed."

In answer, Nico scooted forward almost a foot. Jason followed suit. They shared a small smile across the two feet of space between them. Nico laid his hand on the soft white sheet. In answer, Jason laid his hand there, too, his fingertips less than an inch from Nico's. Nico understood the silent question and appreciated that Jason was, once again, giving him the choice. This was how Jason had treated him during their friendship and for most of their relationship. He'd let Nico lead. It was only near the end, those last few months, that he'd become controlling and sometimes tried to take more than Nico wanted to give. It'd be nice to have the old Jason back. It'd be tempting, if that old Jason resurfaced, to...Nico moved his hand back an inch.

"You said something earlier that made me think you'd talked to Percy since the party," Nico said. "I haven't talked to him, obviously. Did you go see him?"

Jason's hand tightened on the bed. "The morning after the party, I went to beat the hell out of him."

"Did you? I assume not, because your hands aren't bruised and Reyna didn't do something horrifying to you." Nico knew Reyna didn't tolerate physical altercations within her camp.

"I meant to, but I wanted information first." Jason glanced at his hand, which had twitched again. "It's the nerve damage, my hand. It'll go away eventually, Will thinks. It's annoying, but it'll be a good reminder of what my anger does."

"I think so, too, Jace. I'm sorry you had to go through the pain, though." It was true. As devastated and angry as Nico had been, when he'd heard how Jason had ruined his hands, it had sent waves of remorse crashing over him. "Percy?"

"I don't know if you know how I cut my hands, or, I mean, why." Jason stumbled over the words and seemed almost more reluctant to utter them than he had been to talk about how he'd reacted to physical contact with Piper. "I called Percy, trying to find you, the morning after you left, and saw you sleeping with him. He said he was 'sleeping with you,' and I took it to mean sex. That's when I smashed out the mirrors in the bathroom. I know you weren't, and I'm embarrassed that I had so little respect for you that I believed you'd do that."

Nico inched his hand back toward Jason's and let the tip of his index finger touch the pad of Jason's thumb. "I didn't, but he, I don't know..."
"He tried to get you to go down on him, didn't he?" Jason asked. "He told me."

"Why did he tell you?" Nico couldn't think of any reason Percy would tell Jason about the ways he'd flirted, or whatever, with him.

"I told him I saw you two at the party. He didn't even realize I'd been there at the door. Scared the shit out of him because he thought I'd tell Annabeth, which I would never have done, but I used his fear to my advantage. Poor guy is so oblivious, I came away feeling sorry for playing him. He told me everything I wanted to know."

"What did you want to know?" Nico probably wouldn't like the answer.

"I wanted to know if that was the first time," Jason said quietly. "Or when it started."

"You thought I was cheating on you."

"I was worried about it, yeah."

"Bastard," Nico spat. "That's rich, coming from you."

"He was hitting on you so hard at Christmas, Nico, and then the dorm room thing, and then you on your knees in a fucking bathroom, sucking his fucking cock like your life depended on it. Do you know how hard it was for me to see you doing that to him?"

"Yeah, I do," Nico growled. "I did it because you were mauling Piper every chance you got that night, rubbing it in my face, Jason."

"Percy was all over you all night long, and you liked it," Jason said, sounding every bit as angry as Nico. His face was turning red. "You sat in his fucking lap. He kept touching your thighs and your ass, and you let him."

"I couldn't stand the sight of you with Piper, so when Percy was being so forward and I was sure he wanted me, I didn't stop to think. I wanted you to feel as miserable as you were making me."

Jason laid on his back, pulling his hand away from Nico. "Well, you won. Congratulations."

"I'm not proud of it."

When Jason didn't answer, Nico grabbed Jason's other hand, the one that was now between them, and pulled until Jason looked over at him.

"I'm not proud of it, and I already told you that. I thought you weren't mad at me about it anymore?" Nico couldn't keep the hint of irritation from his voice.

"I understand why you did it," Jason said. He scooted a little closer to Nico and maintained contact with Nico's hand. "I'll never be okay with it. Can I keep telling you about Percy?"

"Knock yourself out," Nico grumbled.

"He thinks he seduced you." Jason laughed caustically. "Apparently he cheats on Annabeth a lot, but you're his special one. He said he's wanted you since at least Christmas, and he wants more, Nico, so you better be aware. He freaked out on me, sure I couldn't understand because he thinks I'm totally straight and such a goody-goody. He went on and on telling me about how he wants you. Fucker. Like I don't know how that is."

"What did you say?" Nico asked. He couldn't believe Percy had cheated on Annabeth before, or that
he, Nico, was that tempting. Ironic, really, after how long Nico had wanted Percy and thought he'd had no chance with the guy.

"I laughed. What else could I do?" Jason said. He tugged Nico's hand to his lips and kissed it. "He thinks I'm a pervert now, because I was pushing him for information about your relationship, but I don't care. He can hate me all he wants. I do deserve it."

Nico didn't argue. He let Jason continue to hold his hand up to his face, though he wasn't sure why Jason was staring at it so intensely.

"The 'gift' from your friend after the eagles," Jason said after a while. "He made a play for you, too, didn't he?"

"What makes you say that?" Nico wasn't sure it was a good idea to talk about this, even to Jason.

"After the eagles attacked, I was frantic to find out what happened, to see if I could help you, and I broke into your cabin to steal your drachmas." Jason turned back on his side, facing Nico, and Nico instantly felt his heart beat faster. Jason seemed closer. His eyes were more vibrant. "Your dad paid me a visit while I was there. He showed me what happened to you. He said you were facing a bigger threat than the eagles. Then, you show up with this," Jason motioned to the bracelet, "and gods don't give gifts without wanting something in return."

"And you assume that's what I have to offer? I thought that's not how you think of me?"

"It's not, Neeks. But when I said people don't think of you like that, you made it pretty clear that some people do," Jason said. "I'm not as stupid as Percy. I can put the pieces together. Did he try anything with you?"

Nico hesitated. They hadn't said Apollo's name. It should be okay. He didn't know why any gods would care, but if his dad felt like this was somehow dangerous, well, he was inclined to listen carefully to what his dad had to say. "He did. He was extremely seductive. Like, he made Percy look like the most covert operator in the world, he was so openly trying to get me to sleep with him. He made it seem like it was only a matter of time until I would, too. It was strange."

"He shouldn't have done that," Jason said, and Nico felt himself shift slightly closer to Jason. The tone of Jason's voice was possessive, and it was drawing Nico in. "You could get in a lot of trouble. Gods are supposed to leave us alone."

"He didn't seem to get that memo. Clarisse and I saw him right before you and I got together, and she said he was hitting on me then, too, though that was nothing like this time. This time he had his hand in my pants, Jace." Nico probably shouldn't have told Jason that, because Jason looked like he wanted to find Apollo and cause him harm. "Nothing happened. I thought about you, and he didn't measure up."

"Nico..." Jason's voice was low and dark. Nico watched Jason's mouth as he talked. "I don't want other men touching...I...I...want you."

In the long pause between Jason's words and Nico's, Jason raised his other hand and trailed it up Nico's arm, all the way to his shoulder, under his shirt, and back down. Nico inched closer.

"I won't be the person who waits for you to come around for sex, Jason," Nico whispered. "I want to live the life I choose."

"What if I didn't ask you that anymore?" Jason moved his hand from Nico's elbow to his waist. Nico didn't protest. "What if you came to me, only when you want to, and I drop the world to be with you,
like tonight?"

"My terms?" Nico asked.

Jason moved closer, and Nico unhooked his hand from Jason's in order to slip it under Jason's shirt. The warm skin of Jason's stomach shot heat straight to Nico's core.

"Your terms. You break my heart this time, Nico."

Nico licked his lips, then bit down on his lower lip and slowly pulled his teeth back. Jason's eyes hungrily followed every movement.

"I want you," Nico breathed.

"Then take me."

Nico pulled Jason to him and studied his face. He wasn't ready to remove his hand from the inside of Jason's shirt, so he let his lips trail Jason's contours -- his eyebrows, his cheekbones, his jaw. Warm breath blew down Nico's neck and chest and made him shudder. Jason inhaled sharply when Nico bit his earlobe.

Nico pressed Jason flat on the bed and climbed on top of him. Jason was already hard, and Nico ground against him as he removed his shirt. He tugged until Jason sat up so his shirt could be removed, too. He placed Jason's large hands on his hips, then busied his own hands grabbing great handfuls of Jason's hair and holding on tight. Jason tried to move in for the kiss, but Nico held him in place. When their eyes met, Nico ground down on Jason's erection again so he could watch the way Jason's face contorted in pleasure.

Jason's hands pulled Nico closer to him. Nico thrilled at that first contact of skin on skin. He could feel Jason's nipples pressing against his chest, as hard and raised as his own. He tightened his grip in Jason's hair and used the hold to angle Jason's face until it was perfect. Slowly, so deliberately that he knew the anticipation was killing Jason, Nico lowered his mouth and flicked his tongue across Jason's slightly parted lips. Jason moaned, and Nico kissed him.
There's No Place Like Home

The thrill of watching their loved ones on TV faded quickly when the men realized everyone they loved was asleep. They found channels showing Camp Jupiter, Camp Half-Blood, New Rome, and even a channel that alternated through the homes of demigods living independently. They saw Percy's living room, though not Jason's, but the room was quiet and empty. For the first time ever, Percy wished Maybelle wouldn't sleep through the night.

"This is awful," Percy said. He wrapped himself in Nico's arm. Nico shifted awkwardly and tried to put his other arm around Jason while Percy kept talking. "I forgot we're on the other side of the fucking globe. We're gonna have to stay in here tonight after dark so we can get a chance to see them."

Jason relieved Nico from the strain of trying to wrap his arm around a much larger person. He took Nico's hand and held it at his knee. "Look, Percy, I guess we can do that, but--"

"Oh, thanks, your highness," Percy said. His eyes flashed dangerously at Jason, and he wrapped himself tighter in Nico's embrace. Nico squeezed Percy's side. Percy heard the unspoken message. Behave. Percy didn't want to behave. He wanted to see his wife and daughter.

"Let's see what's on the other channels," Nico said. His patience with Percy and Jason was wearing thin. He would never admit it, but he liked cuddling. He didn't like spending all his cuddle time trying to make sure that he gave equal attention, skin, and pressure to the men on either side of him. It felt too much like he was appeasing bratty children instead of giving and receiving comfort. Jason illustrated Nico's frustration by wedging an arm behind Nico's back and grabbing his side. Percy stiffened at the intrusion of fingers between Nico's body and his own.

"Get off him, Grace," Percy said. "You're touching me."


Jason withdrew his arm and moved as far away from Nico as he could and still sit on the couch. "Percy didn't ask."

"Father, please help me deal with these idiots," Nico mumbled. Louder, he said, "You're not Percy. You make me nervous."

"Yeah, well, you make me nervous, too," Jason said. His face colored. It made him angry, how easy it was for Nico to be with Percy -- how hard it was for Nico to be with him. "And Percy doesn't. He and I aren't groping all over each other, though."

"You think you'll make me feel more comfortable by being a dick, Jason?" Nico had been reaching out to Jason before the blond spoke, but he pulled his hand back. "I'm trying to keep things even between you jerks, but I can't help it that it's easier to touch Percy. I was holding your damned hand; our hands were on your knee. Why couldn't that have been enough?"

"What the hell?" Percy asked. While Jason and Nico had been fighting, Percy had been flipping channels. "Guys, shut up and listen. These demigods, they're not in America."

That the demigods were neither American nor were they in the United States quickly became obvious. It was light out where they were, for one thing. For another, they were rapidly conversing in a language other than English.
"What're they--"

"Shush, Jason," Nico said. He listened carefully. "French. They're speaking French."

"Where are they? Can you feel them?"

"It doesn't work anymore. I can't feel anyone but you two."

"I'm...I'm sorry, Nico," Jason said. His voice was thick. Among Nico's many former powers, Jason had always regarded his ability to locate people across a distance as a remarkable skill, even when it got Nico in serious trouble. Giving up those sorts of powers had to be hard. Jason had assumed Nico could still feel his sisters.

"It can't be helped," Nico said. He was trying to pretend it didn't matter, that it wasn't a big deal that he could no longer feel the life forces of the people he loved. Jason knew it bothered Nico a lot. Nico tentatively picked up Jason's hand.

"Can I come closer to you again?" Jason asked.

Nico didn't look at Jason, but he nodded.

"This means there's more of us," Percy said.

Jason settled back against Nico's body. Nico silently thrilled at the return of Jason's warmth. "It makes sense, I guess. Bianca and I can't have been the only demigods in the last eighty-whatever years born outside North America. I wonder if they have camps or..."

Nico's voice died away as the kids on the screen, three boys who looked a year or two younger than him, were ambushed by a group of dracenae. Blood splattered near the camera lens, and the gods looked away.

"Turn it, Percy," Jason said.

For once, Percy didn't argue.

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Percy slumped over the top of Jason, his head resting on Jason's massive back, and blearily watched TV. Jason and Nico had fallen asleep several hours ago. Nico's face was smashed in Percy's crotch, something Percy was trying very hard not to think about, and Jason laid completely on top of Nico, his head resting on Percy's far thigh. Nico had slept in some very undesirable places when he was younger, and that skill of being able to sleep despite physical discomfort, for Jason was extremely heavy on top of him, was something Nico had never outgrown. Percy slipped his hand along Nico's stomach where it rested on the couch and tried to stay awake.

His eyes were slipping shut, so he almost missed when the onscreen scene changed and Annabeth and Maybelle popped into view.

"Nico!" Percy screamed, despite Nico's proximity to him. "Nico! I need you! They're on there!"

Percy shoved at Jason, who was slowly waking. Jason was warm and comfortable on top of Nico, and he wasn't anxious to move. The trio was also suctioned together, so how Jason was able move,
even if he wanted to, was very limited. Percy shoved harder, desperate to get a firm hold on Nico while he watched his old life unfold before him. Jason screeched when Percy pulled his hair.


"Morning, Maybelle," Annabeth said. She yawned and kissed her baby’s cheek.

Jason’s head shot toward the TV, and Nico turned over and started scrambling wildly underneath him. Percy continued to pull Jason's hair as Annabeth danced Maybelle across her living room floor.

"Pull me up, Jace, and keep me squeezed between you and Percy," Nico said. "Hurry." His deep voice sent vibrations straight through Percy's groin. When Percy thought about it later, he would be horrified at how aroused he was by Nico while his beloved Annabeth moved across the screen, but in the moment, all he could think about was how he would completely lose his tether to sanity if he had to keep watching Annabeth and Maybelle without the mooring effect of Nico's body against his.

Jason pulled, happy to be the one in charge of positioning for once. He was anxious to see Annabeth, too. Nico was so worried about getting to Percy that he didn't care how Jason was holding him, cupping his shoulders and his ass, driving him into Percy. As soon as Nico was upright, Percy wrapped his arms around him. He pulled Nico as close to sitting in his lap as the bond allowed. Jason's bare shoulders pressed into Nico, and the force of their confinement pushed Jason off the couch.

Onscreen, Annabeth was changing Maybelle's diaper and singing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

Jason quickly flipped around -- the barrier would allow that much -- so he was facing the TV like Nico and Percy. Percy cried. He bit Nico's neck to keep from crying so loud he couldn't hear Annabeth. Nico gritted his teeth. He'd endured worse pain, and it was worth it to be able to give Percy what he needed. Percy was holding him so tightly that he couldn't breathe. Percy's arms wrapped all the way across Nico's torso. His hands tucked into Nico's back.

Annabeth made a silly face, and Maybelle laughed. The skin around her green eyes drew in with her smile. She wasn't quite nine months old. Percy had missed almost a month of her life. He bit harder on Nico's neck and shook them all with the force of his tears.

Nico rubbed circles on Percy's thighs and wrapped his legs around Jason's waist. He needed someone to hold onto, too, to withstand the force of Percy's heartbreak. Ichor dribbled down Nico's neck and into Percy's mouth.

As Annabeth finished dressing Maybelle, there was a knock on the door of Percy's old living room. Annabeth fastened the last snap on Maybelle's pink overalls and scooped her up. The angle of the camera followed Annabeth as she went to the door and opened it.

In unison, Percy and Nico sucked in a breath.

Sally Jackson stood in the doorway, regarding Maybelle and Annabeth with tremendous love.

"Good morning, Sally," Annabeth said. She tried to smile, but it looked more like she was in pain. "She slept good last night. It's funny how Percy leaves, and she starts to sleep. It's like she knows it's not worth the trouble to wake up if he's not going to be here."

Sally reached out and took Maybelle from Annabeth's hands. She bounced the baby a few times and coaxed out another laugh. Maybelle's blond hair was beginning to fall in ringlets around her ears.

"She's saving all the late nights for when Percy comes back," Sally said. She said it with such
conviction, like she would never doubt her son. "He was a night owl, too. They'll have so much fun together."

Annabeth tied her hair up in a messy French twist. "Let me run and shower, Sally, and I'll be right back."

"Of course, sweetie," Sally said, making herself at home with Maybelle on the couch.

As soon as Annabeth retreated to the bedroom, the scene shifted to another demigod, someone the new gods didn't know. All three cried out in protest.

They sat silently after that, hoping to see more of Annabeth and Maybelle, or at least some other loved one. Eventually, Jason created a thick mattress and box springs underneath him on the floor. Percy continued to sob, but he eased his grip on Nico's neck and sides. Jason gently tugged, and Percy and Nico fell with him onto the mattress. Jason turned to face the other men and saw that they were both crying. He also saw Nico's blood.

"Percy, let go of Nico's neck," he said. "You're making him bleed."

Percy startled and let go.

Nico shivered at the pain caused by the absence of Percy's teeth. Percy saw the bite mark and the blood and started crying harder. Nico gave Jason an apologetic smile and turned his back to him. He held Percy almost as tightly as Percy held him.

"It doesn't hurt, Percy," Nico said. "Let it out."

"Oh, gods," Percy whispered. He pressed his lips into Nico's cheek. "That was so hard. They weren't even doing anything, and it was so hard. I've missed so much, baby. Did you see how Maybelle's grown?"

"She laughed such a big laugh. Her hair's longer."

Percy sniffled. "I can't lose my baby, Nico. Please, Poseidon, gods, any of you, please don't take me away from my daughter."

"I'm so sorry, Perce," Nico said.

Tears caught in his eyelashes, and Percy licked them away. He moved his mouth to Nico's and brushed their lips together.

"I'm falling apart, Nico." Percy's eyes flicked back to Jason and then zeroed in on Nico's eyes. "Please, hold me together. Make me forget for a while."

Jason watched it in slow motion: the way Percy tilted his head and closed his eyes, how Nico's lips softened with the contact and responded, slow and gentle at first and then faster and harder as they let Percy coax them open, his tongue slide in. Percy's hands tightened into fists on Nico's back, and Jason felt the pressure Percy exerted on Nico's hips and shoulders. He heard the soft noises Percy made, the way he whispered Nico's name like a prayer.

Jason turned over and watched the random demigod on the TV. He bit the side of his hand when Percy did something that made Nico's back arch. He fell asleep to the delicate noises of deep kisses, Percy's quiet moans, and his own silent tears.
Jason got up as soon as the barrier expanded. He wasn't sure when Nico and Percy had fallen asleep, but he knew he hadn't turned around all night, and Nico hadn't turned to face him, either. Jason didn't bother to pick up his clothes. He wished himself clean and clothed as he went into the living room. What he wished more than anything was that he could leave.

He had decided he would go for a flight when Nico emerged from the man cave, nervous and uncertain. The places where Percy's teeth had pierced his skin had healed, but the whole side of his neck sported a vibrant golden bruise.

"Hi," Nico said.

"Hi," Jason said.

Nico sat on the coffee table in front of Jason. Their knees bumped together until Nico moved Jason's knee to the side and slotted his knees between Jason's thighs. He stood and scooted the table closer to Jason, so he was closer, too.

"I'm sorry that those things happened in front of you," Nico said.

Jason shrugged and looked at the floor. "You don't owe me an apology."

"Would you mind, um, putting some clothes on me?" Nico asked. "Percy's sleeping pretty good, and I didn't want to wake him by trying to find my clothes."

"Any special requests?"

"I've worn the same outfit, really, for four years. There's not much use in changing it." Nico smiled shyly and tried to catch Jason's eyes. Jason looked somewhere else. He blinked and Nico was clothed. "Thanks," Nico said. "I guess you're kind of done wanting to see me without my clothes. These feel exactly like my regular clothes, too."

Jason took a deep breath. "I wished for you to be comfortable. Gods know, I don't have any idea how to make you comfortable on my own."

Nico reached for Jason's hand. Jason let him hold it briefly before he pulled away. Nico put his hands back on his knees.

"I don't know how to fix things, Jason."

"What's to fix? You were always going to be with him."

"You understand I was comforting him, not--"

Jason crossed his arms over his chest. He was struggling to stay calm. So was Nico.

"I understand you think sex and comfort are the same thing. I understand he asked you to. That doesn't make it less sex, or less awful to lay there next to you and feel you give yourself to someone else." A tear leaked out of Jason's eye, and Nico tried to wipe it away. Jason jerked his head out of Nico's reach.

"I wasn't...we didn't...Jason." Nico laid his hand on Jason's knee. "I didn't have sex with Percy. You fell asleep. I kissed him. That's all."
"It doesn't matter," Jason said. "You're not my lover, and it's not my business. I was a fucking fool for thinking maybe I could make you mine again. I just...Nico...I was so dumb. I thought you'd love me again if I didn't screw it up."

Nico's face crumpled. "I never stopped loving you, stupid. And I didn't have sex with Percy last night. I kissed him. A lot."

"I felt you, jackass."

"You're trying to hurt me. Damn it. Why the hell would I lie to you? You're the fucking liar, not me."

Jason opened his mouth to answer, but he closed it. Nico was not a liar, not to Jason. He was brutally honest. Lying would serve no purpose here. If he'd slept with Percy, Nico would admit it. If he wanted to be with Percy without Jason, Nico wouldn't be sitting in front of Jason; he'd be sleeping with Percy.

"You didn't have sex?"

Nico's hand clenched painfully on Jason's knee. "No, you jerk. Didn't you hear him last night? He was devastated. I'm not exactly the most damned cheery motherfucker. My comforting skills are limited. I know how to kiss, Jason. That's pretty much it."

"I felt you arching your back. I heard him moan." Jason chanced a peek at Nico's face.

Nico scowled at him. "I'm kind of excellent at kissing, or do you not remember?"


"You fucking moron," Nico said. He stood up and paced between the couch and the doorway. He wanted to run. "I want to sleep with him. Hell, yes. I want to sleep with you, too. Have you and I been having tons of sex since we got here? Because I pretty much want to fuck you every damned day. Idiot. I have some self-control."

"I just...wait...so..."

Nico rolled his eyes and rapidly advanced on Jason. He grabbed Jason's hand and dragged him off the couch and into the bedroom. Jason liked the direction they were heading. He placed a hand on Nico's hip only to have it batted away. Nico shoved Jason onto the bed and sat on the floor against the wall.

"I didn't drag you in here for sex. I wanted to talk without any other gods listening, except Percy, if he's up."

"Oh."

"You're a jerk, Jason. I'm twenty years old. I'm used to having sex every day. I'm a horny damned bastard, and I've been stuck in very tight quarters with two of the three most attractive men I've ever known, both of whom want to have sex with me. I haven't slept with either of you, no matter how much I want to. It would be bad for us, as a group, and I have some small amount of self-respect left. Why in the hell would I give that up to screw Percy when he's crying over his wife and infant daughter? Can you imagine a more inappropriate time for me to make a move on him?"

To Nico's surprise, Jason laughed at him. Jason laughed, and he rolled onto his stomach on the bed,
put his head in his hands, looked at Nico, and laughed some more.

"Do you know how weird you are, Nico?"

"Do you know how close you are to having your nose broken, Jason?"

Jason buried his head in the comforter and laughed. Nico growled but didn't get up to break Jason's nose. He knew he was weird, but he didn't know what he'd done that was so funny.

"You're the only person I can imagine who would try to reassure someone he wasn't having sex by pointing out how much he wants to have sex. Oh, gods, it's hilarious."

"I'm so glad I amuse you," Nico drawled. He stood. "Since you're no longer pouting, I'm going to go clean the rug."

"Hey, no, wait!" Jason said. He rolled up to stand, too. "Stay and talk to me some more." He caught Nico's shirtsleeve and gave it a tug.

Nico huffed. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Anything," Jason said. "Come sit on the bed. I promise I'll keep my horny hands off your unbelievably sexy horny dorkboy body, too, unless you want them on you, which you can tell me at any time."

"You're starting to sound like Rachel," Nico said, but he sat on the bed and laid back so his feet dangled off the edge.

"Rachel Dare?" Jason said.

Nico nodded. "She has a horny gropy problem, I swear."

"I didn't need to know that," Jason said.

"You said we could talk about whatever."

"Um, speaking of horny, groping girls..." Jason felt like he may as well get his apology out of the way. "I'm sorry I said something about you and Eos. I mean, it was true, what I thought, but you're a grownup and you can make your own decisions. It's not like I've never used my body to get my way before."

"Are you also sorry you called me a baby? I did hear that." Nico smirked and turned on his side to face Jason. "And, do tell. When have you used your body to get your way?"

"I'm not that sorry I called you a baby. You were being a brat. Let's see," Jason rubbed his chin and pretended to think. "I believe I've done it to my sexy ex-boyfriend slash lover a few bazillion times."

"Is that it?" Nico acted unimpressed. "Tell me something I don't already know, dumbass."

"In college, I let four girls feel my muscles in order to get their notes for a US History class I'd missed."

"Oh, the shame! You bad boy. And you'd missed a class?" Nico mocked. He put on a face of pretend horror. "No wonder we're in prison."

"Hey, I'm pretty sure I missed that class because your dick was down my throat."
Nico blushed. "I guess that means prison's worth it, after all."

Jason was feeling hopeful. "Can we talk about how we're going to deal with sex? Prisoners fuck, Nico. Straight guys fuck straight guys because they get so horny they can't stand it. One day we're going to slip up, you and me or you and Percy, and it'll be so much better for all of us if we talk about it before it happens. I don't want to lose you, and I don't want to ruin what little gain I've made in friendship with Percy."

"No." Jason started to protest, and Nico cut him off. "I'm not saying I won't talk about it. But all three of us should talk together."

"Okay, well, even better topic -- what did you think of the stuff Hephaestus said?" Jason asked.

"Hephaestus said a lot of shit, Jace. Want to be more specific?"

Jason's blue eyes caught Nico's black ones. They held for a long time, and Jason knew Nico understood what he wanted to talk about.

"I don't know," Nico said. "Most of the time, I liked the person I was without you. If things started between us again...well, they really shouldn't anyway, because there's Percy, and he's my best friend, and..." Nico took a deep breath. "If things started between us again, it'd have to be healthy and smart. We couldn't act like two immature kids."

"We were never two immature kids," Jason said.

"I was a kid who thought you were every kind of perfect I'd never be. I was so naive. You weren't perfect, and I had to let go of my hero complex. And you're still the guy who gives me nightmares sometimes." Nico's brow furrowed, and he rolled onto his stomach and turned his head away from Jason. "We'd have to find a new way to be together, Jace. I do want it, though."

"That's enough for me, for now," Jason said. He meant it.
He appeared as Jason was rushing between his Freshman Comp and Geometry classes. Piper was walking two steps ahead on his right, much more interested in getting to class on time than Jason was. The sterile beige hallway was bustling with students, and by the time Jason peeled away from Piper and navigated upstream against the current of kids who didn't want to be late for their next class, the boy was gone. In his place was a yellow sticky note attached to the wall. Jason grabbed it and read. He stuffed the note in his pocket and hurried to Geometry.

For ditching her without a word, Piper didn't speak to him for the rest of the day. Jason didn't care. It made things easier. He sloppily scribbled notes in his remaining classes and ate dinner so quickly that he had to swallow some Pepto Bismol to keep the food in his stomach. His homework was completed by 7:00 that night. By 8:15, he'd showered, dressed and re-dressed, and packed his toothbrush in one front jeans pocket and his deodorant in the other. When the clock on his nightstand said it was 8:20, not a moment sooner and not a moment later, Jason burst from his dorm room and walked with haste out of the building, off campus, through the streets of New Rome, and across the Pomerian line. Once he'd retrieved his sword, he broke into a dead run through Camp Jupiter.

Jason slowed to a walk as he approached the bridge over the Little Tiber and cautiously glanced back toward camp. The camp lights didn't extend this far in the darkness, and no one was out here anyway. A solitary figure stood on the bridge. He didn't move as Jason approached. Jason took his time walking up the bridge, savoring the view of Nico's silhouette against the night sky. Nico was peering over the edge, staring into the water, his forearms resting on the guardrail. One hand cupped the other.

The closer Jason got, the taller and broader Nico seemed. It had been almost two and a half months since their last rendezvous right before Nico had left for school, and Jason couldn't wait to take in the subtle differences he would see when they were under better light. Nico straightened when Jason was close enough to touch him. He turned, and it took all of Jason's willpower to refrain from kissing him right there. Nico's eyes sparkled in the moonlight, and their darkness seemed magnified, like they were emitting their own gravitational pull. Without a word, Jason wrapped his arms around Nico's waist underneath his leather jacket and took flight, never breaking eye contact.

When Jason noticed the green hills were no longer behind Nico's back, he shifted the winds and began the descent back to earth. He went slowly, because he didn't want to take his eyes off Nico's until he had to. Their feet touched the roof of an apartment building that was shadowed by a taller building off to the right. Power shifted subtly from Jason to Nico, the faintest change in their shared stance, Nico's hips pressing against Jason's at a slightly different angle, and they were melting, disappearing into the void.

When they emerged, the hotel room was dark. The only light emanated from Chinatown on the street below. Jason lingered a moment, still lost in Nico's eyes.

"Happy Halloween, Jason Grace," Nico rasped, his voice low and sexy. He smiled, and Jason could see his perfect white teeth in the dim light. His breath smelled like chocolate.

Jason couldn't resist anymore. He pressed his lips to Nico's as gently as he could manage, which wasn't very gently at all. Nico's plump lower lip slid along Jason's lips. Jason sucked it in and bit roughly. Nico made a small noise at the back of his throat, and Jason slipped his tongue into Nico's
open mouth.

The taste of chocolate was even better than the smell. Jason moved one hand all the way up the back of Nico's jacket and popped it out the collar to grip Nico's head and deepen the kiss. His other hand was already fighting its way toward bare skin on Nico's back, searching for his spine. Nico walked backward toward the bed. Jason followed, but before Nico could reach his destination, Jason broke the kiss and held Nico still.

"I need to see you first, with the light on," Jason said.

"I look the same as ever, Jace. You can see me later."

"You're taller. You cut your hair. I want to see you with your clothes on."

"If you insist, but that's not nearly as much fun."

Jason withdrew his hands from Nico's body and clicked on the bedside light. He took a few steps back so he could get a good look.

Nico was taller. Jason gauged he was maybe only four inches or so taller than his lover now. Nico's hair was shorter, but not by much. The silky curls were sharper, more refined, like maybe Nico had gotten another haircut by someone who actually knew how to cut hair. The leather jacket fit more snugly against his arms and shoulders than it had the first time Jason had seen it.

"Take off your jacket."

"You want my clothes off, come undress me." Nico's dark eyes glimmered, and he raised his chin.

Jason placed his hands on Nico's stomach inside the jacket. Slowly, savoring every contour of Nico's firm body, he slid his hands up Nico's stomach, across his chest, over his shoulders, and down his long, muscular arms. Nico shivered when Jason's hands reached the bare flesh below his t-shirt sleeves. The jacket fell to the floor. Jason stepped back again to admire the view.

Nico's pants and shirt were definitely a little tighter. Jason could make out the dip of his navel and the outline of his nipples. The bulge in his jeans was prominent. Jason noticed Nico's boots were unlaced, which was different, but Jason didn't care much about Nico's boots.

"You have grown," Jason said appreciatively. "You are so ridiculously handsome."

"Says the guy who gets asked to pose nude for the university art students."

"Says the guy who gets asked to pose nude for the university art students."

Jason knew he blushed. That had happened, though how Nico knew about it, Jason had no idea. Piper had probably told Reyna, who had told Nico.

"Did you do it, Jason?" Nico asked. He raised an eyebrow suggestively. His eyes danced over Jason's body. "Because that would make me change my major, I think."

In answer, Jason stepped forward and traced his fingers along Nico's erection. He was pleased to hear Nico's sharp inhale and feel the jump of his dick.

"Wait until you're in college, Nico. You'll make a fortune from the art students, if you want to."

"Are you done, or is there more you want to see?"

"I want to see it all."
"You'd better get busy, then."

Jason snapped off the light and shoved Nico onto the bed.

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It wasn’t until they were in the shower that Jason noticed Nico’s hands and thought to ask why Nico was showing up on a school night when the boarding school didn't even let him leave on weekends yet. The timing was as good as any, because Nico needed help washing his sweaty hair.

"What the fuck, Nico! What happened to your hands!?"

Nico cringed a bit at the "mom" quality of Jason's voice. He wished his fingers were capable, right now, of plugging his ears. The delay in Nico's response while he thought these things must have given Jason the chance to do his own thinking.

"Why are you here on a school night? I thought you weren't allowed to leave yet? Doesn't the school have some Halloween activity or something?"

Nico rubbed his palms over his eyes. "I got kicked out of school."

"Damn it, you got in a fight, didn't you?" Jason moaned, and it sounded completely different than the moans that had escaped his lips over the last hour. "Fuck. Were you getting bullied?"

"Ha. You think I had no friends, right?" Nico asked.

Jason took a small step back and leaned his shoulders on the gray and white marble-like shower wall. Nico didn't like the gray. It reminded him of Apollo's apartment.

"I didn't say that," Jason said, though his expression indicated that was exactly what he'd thought. Nico waited. Jason sighed. "Fine. I was worried you'd have trouble making friends. Plesedon'tthateme."

Jason said the last sentence so meekly that Nico burst out laughing. It was hard to be angry with a six foot three inch giant godlike man who sounded like a squeaky baby doll.

"I was captain of the debate team. I lettered in football, which wasn't that hard once I figured out how to play," Nico said, thinking out loud. He watched Jason's eyes widen. "I got straight As. I mean, I got an A on every assignment, not just for the reporting period. Four of my eight teachers made a pass at me. Fourteen boys asked me out. Twelve girls. I was their fucking homecoming king. Apparently, at boarding school, dressing in all black makes me mysterious and rebellious instead of troubled and creepy, but I'm also athletic and geeky at the same time, which seems to appeal to mortals. At least, that's how my friends explained it. The whole thing was weird."

"Oh, my gods, I fucked the prom king." Jason made a big show of fanning himself.

"Homecoming, Jace. Keep up. Let's see. Yes, I dated. I told you I wasn't keeping my life on hold for

"Wait. Twenty-six kids asked you out?" Jason said, all merriment pushed aside. "Did you date? Who did you go to prom with?"

"Homecoming, Jace. Keep up. Let's see. Yes, I dated. I told you I wasn't keeping my life on hold for
you." Nico snipped the last sentence out, but got his irritation under control and continued. "No, to what you're undoubtedly thinking, no one got any farther than a few kisses. It's hard for any mortal to stack up to a freaking nude model who can fly, make brownies, babysit satyr kids, summon lightning, and save the entire planet. Oh, and he also has a smile that sets my heart thumping and the most awesome dorky glasses I've ever seen. Somehow 'captain of the hockey team' and 'head cheerleader' don't come close."

"You dated the head cheerleader?" Jason wrinkled his nose.

"Hey, he seemed nice at first," Nico said. "Not so much on the second date when he took me to the gym and tried to feel me up in the locker room. He couldn't do the cheer yells for a week afterward. Wash my hair, please."

Jason laughed and grabbed the shampoo. "I'm impressed with how well you handled yourself, Nico."

"Ooh, I did have a completely hot and sexy date for homecoming, though," Nico said. He loved the way Jason's cheeks flushed with jealousy. "Gorgeous black hair, beautiful body. The longest legs ever."

"If you say Percy came and took you to prom, I am dumping this entire bottle of shampoo in your hair and leaving you here," Jason said.

"Reyna, jealous guttermind. Reyna came."

Nico turned around, and Jason lathered his hair. Nico closed his eyes and let his head fall back. He was lost in the feeling of Jason's strong, gentle hands massaging his scalp and neck, slipping through his hair. Jason kneaded his way down to Nico's shoulders and worked there until Nico couldn't stand the luxury anymore and flopped back onto Jason's chest. Jason chuckled and set Nico upright. Once he'd rinsed out the shampoo and a coating of conditioner, Jason spoke again.

"Guttermind? That's not a word, Neeks." Jason bit the side of Nico's neck. "None of this tells me why you got kicked out of school for fighting."

"I never said I got kicked out of school for fighting."

"But you got kicked out of school for fighting." Jason wrapped his arms around Nico, removed a washcloth from the ledge, and started to soap it up. Nico was going to argue more, but when Jason dragged the soapy washcloth across his chest, all the fight left him, and he gave himself over to the sensual pleasure.

"Yeah, I did. Well, it wasn't much of a fight, really," Nico said. "I put the kid in the hospital, I guess."

"Nico!" Jason's voice was loud in Nico's ear, but he was washing Nico's hips and stomach, so Nico let it pass.

"He was always hitting on me way too hard, Jason. He tried groping me a few times. That was bad enough, but I can take care of myself. When he finally got the message it wasn't happening between me and him, he started in with a fourteen year old. The poor kid was so quiet and shy he could barely say 'no.' You'd have kicked this guy's ass, too."

Jason's warm hand clamped down on Nico's shoulder and held him still. With wide, firm strokes, he began to clean Nico's back.
"You're a good person, Nico. Are you going to be in trouble with the police?"

"If the only thing that's been able to catch and hold me since I was eleven years old is an army of monsters in Tartarus, do you think I'm worried about the police?" Nico asked. "Besides, they're searching for Nicholas Pluto, not Nico di Angelo. Nico di Angelo died in a gas leak a long time ago, remember?"

"Nicholas Pluto?" Jason asked. "Is that your dad's idea of a joke?"

"Alecto, actually," Nico said. "She acts as my legal guardian up here. It's lame, but she's family, so I went with it. And hey, enough soap on my butt already. You're going to have me farting bubbles."

"That settles it. You are the big spoon tonight."

Nico faced Jason, whose icy blue eyes were so beautiful and full of the kind warmth that Nico had missed terribly.

"I love you, Jason." Nico knew his voice sounded a little sad, as it did every time he'd said the words since they had broken up. Over seven months had passed, though, and Nico loved Jason as much, if not more, than he had when they were together. That didn't make being lovers in secret any easier.

"I love you, too, Nico," Jason said. He wrapped his arms around Nico and pulled him close. Nico buried his head in Jason's neck. Jason hummed in appreciation as Nico nibbled the soft skin there. "Let's get out of the shower and lay down. I want to know what you're going to do now that you're no longer enrolled in high school."

Nico let Jason herd him out of the shower.

Nico decided that, from now on, he should always get hurt directly before he contacted Jason. The way Jason was treating him, all gentle and doting, made Nico feel incredibly loved. They were perched on the bed, and Nico was curled up in the v of Jason's legs while Jason alternated between stroking his skin and feeding him tiny bits of ambrosia. If this was the way the gods lived, Nico wanted to be a god, only if Jason was there with him.

"Mmm, this is so nice, Jace," Nico practically purred. "Can we stay up all night like this?"

"I'd love to, Neeks," Jason said. "I, um, I hate to say this, but I have a test tomorrow in my ten o'clock class. I should probably be rested and there for it."

Nico leaned his head back to see Jason's face and was rewarded with a deep kiss. When the kiss ended, he placed a soft kiss on Jason's cheek.

"Of course you should be there for it," Nico said. "I know we talked about you dropping the world to be with me when I asked, and I'm holding you to that, but I want you to take your education seriously."

"I wish I could stay here with you, though," Jason said.

Nico shook his head. "Studies first. Anyway, tomorrow I need to go down and explain myself to my
"How will that go?" Jason asked. He shoved a crumb of ambrosia in Nico's mouth, along with his finger, and Nico sucked until he felt Jason squirm beneath him. He smirked and pushed Jason's finger away with his tongue.

"Fine. Dad won't care that much, I don't think." Nico hoped what he was saying was true. He wasn't interested in a long yelling match with his father. Hades was still angry with him over having to endure a week of Demeter in the spring. "We were only doing it to see if I'd handle college alright, and that seemed to work fine."

"You can't hit people in college," Jason pointed out.

"I know, smartass. You shouldn't hit people in high school, either."

"What'll you do after your dad's?" Jason sounded worried, and Nico wondered why.

"I don't know. Maybe I'll stay here."

"I don't think your dad will let you."

Nico looped his legs over Jason's thigh and turned sideways so he could see Jason's face. "What makes you say that?"

"When I saw him in your cabin, he said you were only safe in a few places," Jason said. He kissed Nico's nose. "I think because of either the person who sent the eagles or the one who picked you up afterward. He said you'd only be safe at the camps, with him, me, or Percy."

Nico scowled. He didn't like any of those options, unless he could be with Jason the way he wanted, which was openly and without any other people involved. "He thinks I'm not safe. I'm never safe, Jason. None of us are."

"But most of us aren't fending off a god or two, either."

"I can take care of myself. He's not forcing me into some sort of prison." Nico turned back to face the same direction as Jason and thumped his head against Jason's shoulder. Jason didn't say anything, which was probably wise. He stroked his fingers smoothly across Nico's chest, then dug gently into the tight muscles that connected Nico's chest to his shoulders. Nico felt too thrilled by the touch to think about the proper name for those muscles.

"We should go to bed," Jason said, after he'd so thoroughly relaxed Nico that the son of Hades was having trouble keeping his eyes open. "Will you call down to have a wake-up call at seven thirty?"

Nico groaned "That's inhumane, Jason. Why do we need to get up at seven thirty to get you to a ten o'clock class?"

"It's not the class," Jason whispered in his ear. "It's what I want to do to you before we have to leave."

"Pick up the phone and press three." Waking up early didn't sound so inhumane now. "Then hold it to my ear."

Nico could hear Jason chuckling next to him as he ordered the wake-up call. When he was done, Jason replaced the receiver on its cradle and shifted to lay Nico down.
"I thought I was the big spoon tonight," Nico said. He'd known even the threat of bubble farts wouldn't keep Jason from holding him.

"Nothing could make me not want to hold you, Nico," Jason said. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Jace," Nico whispered.

Jason switched off the lights and wrapped Nico so tightly in his arms that Nico felt insulated and safe from worries about Apollo and Zeus, fights with his dad, and the nagging worry that he was slowly slipping into the kind of life he hadn't wanted to lead.

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"The usual?"

"Yep."

"Jay, you're the only person I know who doesn't drink coffee," Piper said. "I feel like I'm ordering for a child every time."

Jason scanned the menu board mounted on the back wall of the coffee shop. The place was bustling this morning, full of students trying to grab one last chance at being fully awake before class started. Jason moved uncomfortably in his seat. Every so often, the eyes of another patron would shift in his direction, and he'd hear the whispers about the son of Jupiter, the Pontifex Maximus, the ex-Praetor. Or maybe this time the whispers would be about how handsome or built he was, or how his girlfriend was the most beautiful girl at either camp. Jason felt like a fraud.

"I like hot chocolate, Pipes." Jason had promised Nico he'd do some things that were just for himself. Hot chocolate was one, and he wasn't about to give it up to please Piper.

Piper smiled and said, "If you're sure, Sparky. I'll go place our orders."

Jason nodded, then watched Piper's retreating form. She was so lovely, such a good person. Her hair brushed her shoulders and swayed as she walked. Jason knew other boys had asked Piper out, but she'd turned them all down to be with him. She loved him. He meant it when he told her he loved her, too. He didn't love her like he loved Nico, but he did love her.

"Hey, mister," a high, excited voice said, jarring Jason out of his thoughts. "Are you Jason Grace, the son of Jupiter?"

Jason looked to his left to see that a boy had sat at the table with him. The kid had floppy ears and short brown hair. His eyes were a lovely green. Freckles dotted his pale skin. He was bouncing in the seat next to Jason.

"Um, yeah, I am."

The boy's face lit up. "See, Mikey? I knew it!"

He gestured to another boy sitting in the corner of the coffee house. This boy seemed about the same age, maybe ten or so, with blond hair and glasses. He stuck his tongue out at the first boy. The boy at Jason's table laughed and turned back to Jason.
"That's my friend, Mikey," the boy said. "He didn't think you were really him, but I knew it! You're like my greatest hero, Mr. Grace. You know everyone calls you Superman? All the kids do, I mean. You're perfect! You can fly! And you can summon lightning! And you saved the world all by yourself! Can I have your autograph?"

Jason blinked rapidly, trying to keep up with the frenetic pace of the words tumbling from the boy's mouth. Why couldn't this kid have found Percy? Percy was usually in the coffee shop, too, this time of the morning, and he'd know how to handle the kid. Jason was too stunned.

"I guess so," Jason said. "Do you have something to write with?"

The kid produced a pen and a sketch pad. Jason took the pen and hesitated. He felt ridiculous giving out an autograph.

"Can you make it out to David?" the kid asked. "That's me. I'm a legacy. My dad's a son of Ceres. I'm going to join the legion as soon as I'm old enough, Mr. Grace. I wanna be just like you. Does it hurt to summon lightning? Have you ever fallen when you were flying?"

"Here's your hot chocolate, Jason," Piper said. In the shock of having his little admirer sitting at the table, Jason hadn't even noticed her return. Jason gratefully accepted the hot chocolate.

"Ooh, is this your girlfriend?" David asked. "Man, she's so pretty! I think you must have the most amazing life in the entire world! I can't wait to be like you! I won't have your powers and stuff, but I heard you're really brave and strong and smart and a good leader."

Jason rushed to sign David's sketchbook and handed him the pen. David waved at Piper and Jason, then ran toward his friend. He made it about five feet before he plowed into Percy. The collision sent Percy back a step, but David fell backward onto his butt. Percy reached down and lifted the kid off the ground, said "Be careful, stinker," and sent him on his way.

"Hey, Piper," Percy said, shaking his head and glancing back toward the little kid. "Annabeth wants to talk to you. Would you mind going outside to see her for a sec? She hates the crowd in here."

Percy invited himself to sit at the table while Piper stood and kissed Jason's head.

"I'll see you on campus later if it takes too long with Annabeth, okay, Jay?"

Jason nodded and watched her leave before giving his attention to Percy, who'd bent one leg up in the chair and was examining his knee through a hole in his jeans. Percy didn't look at Jason, so Jason worked on cooling down his hot chocolate.

"Got an admirer, huh?" Percy asked. "Kid's a menace."

Jason laughed. "I'm betting you were exactly like him when you were little."

"Nah, I was perfect." Percy made eye contact, and Jason could see the devil in those green eyes of his. "I was not a geeky shit who got beat up all the time. I was more of a snarky shit that got beat up all the time."

"I was perfect, too," Jason said, though he couldn't mimic Percy's playful tone. Jason had been the perfect kid. He was exactly what Lupa and Hera and the Praetors and anyone else wanted him to be. He imagined Percy had a much more enjoyable childhood.

Percy's eyes narrowed. "I bet you were, asshole. Perfect Jason Grace. What'd the kid want?"
Jason kept his eyes on the table and spoke hurriedly. "He wanted my autograph."

To Jason's surprise, Percy laughed so loud that half the coffee shop stared. "Oh, my fucking gods, that's hilarious! Now I know who the kid reminds me of. He's a little fucking Nico!"

"What?" Jason's curiosity won out over his embarrassment at having Percy laugh at him.

Percy pounded his fist on the table and wiped his eyes. He waved at a few passing college girls and chuckled when one winked at him. Jason rolled his eyes and waited for Percy to turn his attention back toward him.

"Nico. Bro, you'd never guess it now, but that boy was the most annoying, obnoxious, hyper little shit ever. Like, his ten year old self makes Leo seem quiet and peaceful."

That didn't sound anything like the Nico that Jason had first met right before Hera had stolen him from his life at Camp Jupiter. That Nico, and every other incarnation of Nico that Jason knew of, had been quiet, dignified, and refined. Well, also prickly and cranky, but Jason knew now that those were just his defense mechanisms. It was hard to imagine him acting the way Percy described.

"How did you and Nico meet?" Jason realized he'd never asked.

"My buddy Grover was his keeper." Percy smiled, and Jason assumed he was thinking of Grover. "So one winter, I don't know, I guess I was maybe thirteen -- how fucked up is that? -- Grover messages and says he's got these two powerful demigod kids that need rescued outta this military school up in Maine. Me, Annabeth, and Thalia go up there and it's Nico and his sister, Bianca. I botched rescuing them, of course, and ended up trying to defend them all by myself against a manticore. Nico didn't stop asking questions from the moment I met him till I left on a quest with this girl Zoe, who was a Hunter, Thalia, and Bianca. Kid drove me bonkers."

"What happened?" Jason asked. He meant what happened to Nico, but he wasn't very clear. Percy didn't ask for clarification.

"We did what we always do." Percy shrugged. "Completed the quest. Freed Annabeth, saved Artemis, watched friends die."

"And Nico?"

Percy shifted, and Jason saw a lifetime of pain cross the son of Poseidon's features. He changed from carefree, adorable, lovable Percy to someone Jason barely recognized. He looked like the Percy that had come back on board the Argo II after Tartarus, scarred and worn.

"I ruined his life." Percy tapped the table twice with the cups of coffee he'd been carrying. "Piper's coming back. Catch ya later, Grace."

Jason watched Percy give Piper a one-armed squeeze in passing. Piper smiled at him as she sat back down, but the smile seemed forced.

"What did Annabeth want?" Jason asked.

"Strategy session," Piper said. She scrutinized Jason as she spoke. "Nico's back."

"Oh?" Jason asked. He was careful to keep the surprise to just the right level of friendly, platonic curiosity. There were no hints in his eyes or his voice that he'd made love to Nico four days ago and had been anxiously waiting to see where his lover would land after being kicked out of school. Jason was becoming as skilled at concealment and trickery as he was at fighting monsters.
Piper waited a bit longer before she continued. When Jason did nothing but stare blandly at her, she spoke. "Apparently there was some trouble at that boarding school he got sent to. Hazel told Annabeth that he got in a fight. I hope he wasn't being bullied too badly."

"What makes you say he was being bullied?" Jason asked.

Piper stared at him like he'd grown an extra head. "He's Nico? Gay? Creepy?"

Jason bristled and immediately regretted it. That was the reaction Piper had been checking for. Her face fell. "I thought you said you were completely over him, Jason?"

"I am," Jason insisted. Jason was also an impressive liar to people besides just himself and Nico these days. "I wouldn't have wanted people calling you names, either, when we were broken up."

Piper bowed her head. "I'm sorry. He creeps me out, personally, but I know not everyone finds him creepy."

"Why did Annabeth need a strategy session over Nico? Or is there something else?"

Piper checked their surroundings and lowered her voice. "With what happened between Percy and Nico this summer?"

Jason choked on his hot chocolate. Once he'd stopped coughing, he leaned forward. "What happened between Percy and Nico?"

"Jay," Piper said. "At the party. You know."

Yes, Jason did know, but Piper had never given any indication that she thought Percy and Nico had done more than flirt. She sure as hell had never told him Annabeth knew anything about it.

"I mean, I know they were kind of flirting, but..."

"Jason, you're not that naive, and neither is anyone else, except maybe Hazel," Piper whispered sharply. "You know they had sex."

Jason spluttered around for several seconds, trying to decide what to say. He finally settled on, "Annabeth knows?"

Piper nodded.

"Did Percy tell her that or something, 'cause I don't..." Jason trailed off. He wasn't allowed to talk about it, how and what he knew about what Nico and Percy had done.

"I told her."

"Holy shit, Piper!" Jason yelled. For the second time that morning, half the eyes in the coffee shop turned toward their table. Jason lowered his voice. "Why'd you do that? What did you tell her?"

Jason hated what Nico and Percy had done, but he didn't want Annabeth to know about it, even if he'd used that threat to get Percy to give him information. Annabeth could make things hard for Nico.

"Because she's my best friend, Jay," Piper spat. "She deserved to know. I told her that they were flirting a lot, and that they were cuddled together most of the night and Percy was groping Nico's butt when he thought we weren't watching, and that when we went out to watch the fireworks Percy didn't come out until much later and I could hear him moaning inside the house. It was all true."
Piper's eyes blazed, like she was daring Jason to contradict her.

"How long has she known?"

"I told her as soon as she got back from her quest," Piper said. "She didn't say much. Nico and Percy avoided each other the rest of the summer and then Nico went away to school, so it was never that big a deal, but now that Nico's back, Annabeth needs to decide what to do about it."

Jason's head was spinning. Annabeth had known all this time? Why hadn't she dumped Percy? Did Percy know that she knew? Where did this leave Nico? How long was he even back for?

"Is Nico back for good, or what? What would Annabeth 'do' about it, anyway?" Jason asked.

"Hazel says he's going to go to high school here. Annabeth just wanted to say something to Percy about Nico being back before he actually sees Nico," Piper said. "Sort of like I wanted to tell you before you saw him. Can't have the two most prominent heroes of the legion both chase after their favorite fuck toy at the same time, can we? Makes us all look bad."

"Piper!" Jason recoiled like he'd been shot. Did she know?

"Save it, Jason," Piper snapped. "I can see it on your face, how much you're dying to get a look at him. I know you love me, but I also know he tempts you. Well, we all have reputations to uphold, and you don't help any of us by drooling over your own cousin. So when you see him, you'd better act like you're in love with me and leave him the hell alone, like we agreed over the summer. That's what Annabeth is probably telling Percy, too."

She didn't know. Thank the gods. Jason could continue to play his game. The thought didn't give him much comfort. He'd been working with a counselor in San Francisco for four months now. The anger problem was under control, but he had yet to work up the nerve to address his infidelity. He was worried the woman would tell him to break things off with Nico, which he wouldn't do, or break things off with Piper, which he also wouldn't do. Piper was right. They had appearances to maintain.

Jason wanted to find that little kid, David, and tell him to choose some other hero.

Chapter End Notes

It's in this gap, between Ch. 18 and Ch. 20, that 7-10 Split takes place. If you've read it before, I hope now it's clear how the eight friends ended up so divided. If you haven't read it, please head on over and check it out.

Correction: Last chapter it was noted that Maybelle was almost six months old. She was actually almost nine months old at that time in the story, in case you're scoring at home.
Percy, Jason, and Nico watched HephaestusTV non-stop for three days. In that time, they learned a few things about the world.

There were demigods on every continent. There was a small camp for half-bloods in Spain, but most demigods in Europe, Africa, and Asia died before they ever made it to camp. Demigods in South America fared slightly better, though the gods didn't watch them often, since the South Americans were awake during the prime time to watch the North American demigods. The Australians were confined to a small camp in the Outback, and the young gods had taken to calling it "Camp Soap Opera," because there was so much cheesy intrigue and sex happening onscreen that it was hard to believe it was real.

Another thing they learned was that there were plenty of minor gods and goddesses who liked to "perform" for the camera. The minor gods' reasoning was sound. Showing off in this way meant the Olympians would be less likely to forget about them and might even grant them a favor or two if it was ever needed. Nico had begged them not to watch the sex channels, and although Percy and Jason agreed to stay away from the demigod ones, they found themselves flipping to the godly sex channels whenever things died down at Camp Soap Opera and too many demigods were getting killed on the channels dedicated to other continents in competing time zones.

They also learned that some of the Olympians, namely Zeus, Aphrodite, and Poseidon, didn't seem to mind being caught in affairs on HephaestusTV. It was horrifying for Jason and Percy, while Nico smugly pointed out that he'd warned them not to watch. Percy and Jason retaliated by reminding Nico that Hephaestus had called him "ratings gold" for his sex channel performances. Jason and Percy were both bothered by the idea that Nico had been unwittingly watched in intimate encounters, but they reasoned that they had been similarly exposed, too, on the demigod stations, and Nico was being, as Percy called him, "a haughty, know-it-all bastard." Four days after the last time they'd watched one of the sex channels, Percy and Jason were still calling Nico "Ratings Gold" whenever he made them angry. None of them were in a particularly pleasant mood.

Percy was struggling the worst of the three. Jason was embarrassed by his father's actions; Nico was offended by the new nickname; but Percy was reeling from the tiny glimpses he'd see of Annabeth and Maybelle each day.

The men had kept the mattress in the man cave and continued to lay in that room during their periods of confinement so Percy could watch for those little snippets of his old life. Jason was relatively unaffected by what he'd lost, and Nico felt like seeing the people he loved made him sadder than he would have been otherwise. Percy insisted he needed those moments. After every viewing, he'd cry and make out with Nico. Jason would get angry. Nico would get frustrated, but he was too worried about Percy's fragile emotional state to decline.

After the first four days, Nico dragged Jason out to the beach and told him he thought Percy needed to stop watching the TV and do something else. Jason agreed to try to entice Percy to play video games. It worked for an hour or two, but then Percy told Jason he was tired of playing and went back to watching HephaestusTV.

Three days later, after a week of watching a life they no longer lived and listening to his one-time lover engage in long, sometimes heated kissing sessions with his romantic rival, Jason agreed that
desperate measures were necessary. Percy had stopped getting dressed. He had been in boxers only for several days and hadn't left the man cave since the day Hephaestus visited, not even to make an appearance to the visiting gods or check his altar. Nico was incredibly worried.

"Perce," Nico said. He came into the man cave and sat so close that Percy could smell his fruity breath. Percy grabbed the back of Nico's head and licked his way into Nico's mouth, but he didn't stop watching TV. Nico allowed the kiss but pulled away as soon as it ended. "Hey, Percy, let's go swimming. I could use a dip."

"Camp Soap Opera's on," Percy said.

"It'll be on later," Nico said. He brushed his hand over Percy's neck and tried to make eye contact. Percy kissed him again, just a peck, and kept his eyes on the TV.

"Sorry, Neeks. I don't wanna."

"We could skinny dip." Nico was heartened when Percy at least looked in his direction.

Percy's eyes flicked down Nico's body and returned to the TV. He wanted to go, but he thought he might miss something important. "I'll take a rain check, please. Blaine just found out Lucky was cheating on her."

Nico swallowed his growl of frustration and pulled out his last card. He slipped off the couch and settled between Percy's thighs. Percy glanced down and put his hand in Nico's hair before he went back to watching TV. Nico slid his hands far up Percy's thighs and lightly kissed his chest. Percy grunted and scooted his hips forward.

"Jason's outside," Nico whispered. He dragged his lips along Percy's collarbone. "Why don't we go in the bedroom? It's been a long time since we've been together, Percy. I could use my mouth..."

Nico let the words hang, and the way Percy's hand tightened in his hair made him feel victorious.

"Gods, yes, Nico. But in here."

Nico had been using his best seductive voice, but his frustration overcame his patience. "You want me to suck you off in here so you can keep watching TV? Who the hell do you think you're talking to?"

Percy was stunned. He hadn't meant to offend Nico. "Wait! I mean...I'd give you my full attention. I just wanna stay here in case...You're the best, Nico, at--"

"Shut up, asswipe," Nico snapped. "You blew your chance. Jason!"

Jason, who had, at Nico's request, been waiting outside the door to the man cave and hoping Percy refused Nico's advances, came in and neatly pinned Percy's arms to his sides. He lifted Percy over the back of the couch and out toward the door. Nico scrambled to his feet and walked in front of the two. Percy had been preparing to kick Jason, but he stopped when Nico stepped in front of him. He wouldn't kick Nico, and he couldn't get around him well enough to kick Jason hard.

"What the fuck?" Percy asked. "Put me down, Grace."

"He's not putting you down until I tell him to, Percy," Nico said. His black eyes glittered with anger and a hint of enjoyment. He was worried enough about Percy to resort to abduction to get him out from in front of the TV, but he decided it didn't hurt anything to savor the moment.
"You little shit," Percy said, turning on Nico. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Getting your ass out of the house," Nico said. He stomped backward toward the beach. "You're making yourself miserable sitting in front of that damned TV all the time. It's not healthy."

"Like you would know about health, jackass. Let me go, Grace, or I swear, I'm gonna kick Nico's teeth in."

"Don't listen to him, Jason," Nico said, because Jason had hesitated. Jason didn't want Nico to get kicked. "He would never hurt me."

Nico was right. Percy wouldn't hurt him. Instead, Percy tried to wriggle free from Jason, but Jason was incredibly strong. Percy's struggles were barely enough to break Jason's long stride.

When Nico felt his boots hit the wet sand, he said, "Jason, swimsuit me, please."

"Fuck you, motherfucker!" Percy yelled. "You said skinny dipping. I want to see your lily white ass."

Both Jason and Percy thought it, and Nico was naked. He didn't care. He wasn't letting Percy fall apart.

"Happy?" Nico asked, raising his arms and turning in a circle. His feet hit the water, and a shiver rose up his spine.

Jason was happy, at least for the moment. He put himself in swim trunks. Percy stopped shouting and stared at Nico, temporarily forgetting why he'd wanted to stay in the man cave. It didn't last. Percy watched the water lap at Nico's thighs and resumed his tirade.

"You dickhead! You weren't even gonna go down on me, were you? You were trying to trick me!"

Nico stopped walking waist-deep in the water. Jason couldn't see very well directly in front of him, so he ran Percy into Nico, who fell back but righted himself before his head went underwater.

"I would've, if you'd've gotten up when I asked you to," Nico said. "Gods, Percy, I'm worried about you. You've been a wreck since we saw Annabeth and Maybelle."

"I can't help it, Nico." Percy's eyes flooded with tears. He wanted Jason to put him down. "It hurts so much, seeing them."

Jason was up to his chest in the water. A few more steps and Percy would need to tread water to keep his head up. Nico took a step back, and the water hit his chin. He jumped the waves.

"That's why you need to get out of that room, stop watching," Jason said. He dropped Percy and maneuvered the winds so he could fly overhead, out of Percy's reach.

"Fuck off, Grace." Percy slashed at his cheeks to wipe off the tears. "You didn't leave anything behind. The only person on earth who didn't hate you is here with you."

"Percy!" Nico moved forward to slap Percy, but Percy looked so miserable that Nico didn't have the heart to follow through. Instead, Nico addressed Jason. "It's not true, Jace. Leo and Thalia love you. Tons of people like you."

"He's right in the part that matters," Jason said. He chanced flying lower, and when Percy didn't grab him, he settled back into the ocean. "All I wanted was you, Nico, and you're here. It isn't fair that he
got punished so heavily and I lost so little. I’m truly sorry, Percy."

Another tear fell down Percy's cheek. He swiped it away and nodded. Jason was trying. Percy appreciated it.

"What if I miss something, Neeks?" Percy asked. "I've lost a month of Maybelle. By the time the summer solstice rolls around, I'll have missed almost half her life."

"I know." Nico surged forward and wrapped his arms around Percy. "I'm not asking you to stop watching altogether. But during the day, at least, you don't need to watch Camp Soap Opera or see Eurasian and African demigods get eaten by monsters. There are problems between the three of us, and maybe we'll never get over them, but, fuck, Percy, I love you, and I want to try to make things better if you'll let me."

"I'm so scared, Nico."

"Let us be scared with you, okay?"

Percy nodded into Nico's shoulder. He sniffled for a moment, but his voice sounded normal the next time he spoke. "Two conditions."

"Name them," Jason said.

"I get that blowjob, or we talk about the sex thing, because it's going to be an issue--"

Nico glared at Jason.

"What? All I told him was that you said you'd talk about it." Jason raised his hands and tried to look as innocent as possible.

"--and we talk about why you can't access your godly powers."

"Blowjob, no talking," Nico said.

"Nico," Jason said. "You can't avoid talking. We're going to be here another six months."

"Blowjobs for both of you, no talking."

Nico had let go of Percy, but Percy held him more tightly, and Jason grabbed his arm.

"No deal," Jason and Percy said at the same time. They looked at each other in surprise.

"Ugh, fine," Nico said. "But let's play out here first. Someone better either give me some trunks or you both have to get naked, too, because it sucks being me."

"Okay, but I should probably go check--"

Nico shut Percy up by dunking him.

"Thank you," Nico told Jason while they waited for Percy to resurface. Nico's black eyes bored into Jason's blue ones.

"I love you," Jason said. He shrugged, like it was something he said to Nico all the time. In reality, it'd been a long time since he'd said the words.

Nico's eyes went wide, and his mouth dropped open. He leaned forward to kiss Jason, and Percy
Percy hadn't known he was interrupting a moment between Nico and Jason. He'd wanted to get Nico back for dunking him. Nico stood, spluttering, with his normally curly hair plastered to his face, and Percy nuzzled his head against the ticklish spot on Nico's hip. Nico lurched forward and ran his head under the water and into Jason's stomach. He inhaled a lungful of water and realized it didn't hurt.

Nico and Percy rose to the surface at the same time and laughed, though Nico's laugh sounded watery.

Jason put a cautious hand on Nico's back. "Are you okay? You sound weird."

"Water in my lungs. Doesn't hurt," Nico said.

Jason thought, god or not, water in the lungs was probably not a good idea. Percy agreed.

"Hold still," Percy said. "I'll get rid of it."

Nico felt his lungs clear. He put a hand on each of the other gods' shoulders and slid his fingers down. He wasn't wearing trunks yet, and he wanted to know if he'd been joined in his naked embarrassment. Nico thought the water felt wonderful with no impediment to his skin, but he didn't like the idea that some godly camera was probably capturing his penis floating around underwater.

"Did you guys take your clothes off, or are you...oh."

Percy was wearing his boxers; Jason was not. Jason wiggled his eyebrows at Nico and dove underwater at a low point in the tide. For a brief moment, Jason's sculpted backside was on display. Nico gasped and Percy whistled.

"I am not into Jason, swear on my mom," Percy said, "but you guys are going to give me ass envy or something. How am I supposed to compete for your affection when he has an ass like that?"

"One, it's not a competition," Nico said. He took a step toward Percy. "Two, I don't choose my partners based on their bodies--"

Percy snorted. Nico rolled his eyes and stepped closer.

"--and three, you've got an amazing ass yourself, Percy Jackson."

Nico yanked down Percy's boxers, slapped his butt, and swam off in the direction Jason had gone. Percy laughed. He stepped out of his boxers and chased after Nico.

In the end, Jason conjured a Nerf football, and the three spent the remaining time before sunset tossing the football in the water, dunking each other, and making crass jokes about body parts and bodily functions.

When it was time to go inside, Nico slung an arm around the shoulders of each of his counterparts. In turn, they fought over who got to hold Nico's hips before compromising and deciding Percy's arm could make contact from one side of Nico's body to the other but Jason's hand could sit lower on Nico's hip. Nico acted scandalized that they were fighting over his body, but he knew that Jason and...
Percy cared about him as a person a lot more than they cared about how close they could come to touching his butt. It was a good feeling.

Inside, Jason asked to stop in the bedroom for the comforter. Percy and Nico came with him, and Percy almost said they should sleep in the bedroom. The pull of HephaestusTV, the chance to see his daughter, was too strong. They laid on the extra mattress in the man cave, huddled under the blanket, and none of them mentioned their continued nudity.

They cried when they finally saw Annabeth and Maybelle, but afterward, Percy needed less comfort than usual. Jason didn't turn away. He watched Nico's mouth move on Percy’s and heard Percy's little aroused noises and found the combination didn't hurt as much as it had on previous nights. Nico worried less about being the fulcrum between the other men and let the kisses soothe him, too. As much as he would have liked to take things further, when Percy had been comforted enough to be able to sleep he motioned for Nico to roll over. He wrapped his arms tightly around his best friend and conjured a pillow for himself since he didn't have Nico's arm for a headrest. Jason smiled tentatively at Percy and Nico, though his smile grew three times as wide when Nico gave him a tiny kiss. Jason turned over and allowed himself to be held by Nico. Nico fell asleep first, buoyed by the absence of malice between Jason and Percy.

They'd had a long and important day, and as their brains drifted in and out of sleep, they thought about how emotionally close they felt and how their hearts seemed a little lighter. None of them considered how high the water had been on their chests, or that they hadn't run into the barrier while out in the ocean. The fact that their prison had expanded in diameter by four yards went completely unnoticed.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this bit of fluff! This is one of the shortest chapters, but there'll be a big juicy update on Sunday.

Happy weekend, everyone!
Nico gave a great sigh of relief as he walked out of the high school building on the last day of class before Christmas break. It wasn't that he didn't like school. He loved his classes, but the kids here at camp were so different from the eclectic group of goofballs Nico had found to befriend at the boarding school in Portland. Here, everyone had grown up in the legion, and they were unified, single-mindedly pursuing a kind of excellence that had only one right way, the Roman way. Nico was as Greek as it was possible to be. Everything about him stood apart, from his clothes to his hair to his approach to school. It hadn't been an easy month and a half, being reminded daily how little he fit in.

His father had insisted that Nico come to either Camp Half-Blood or Camp Jupiter. Nico had protested vehemently and argued with his father so long that Hades had eventually had enough. One minute, Nico was yelling in his father's study, the next he was in front of Reyna with a suitcase in his hand along with a note from Hades explaining Nico was to enroll in high school at Camp Jupiter and not visit the Underworld until Hades sent for him. He'd fought with Reyna, too, but in the end she'd threatened to escort him to every class like he was a five year old and make him stay with her during Christmas break, so he'd relented.

It was nice to see Hazel, but she was a year behind him in studies, so they had no classes together. And, blessedly, she did have friends beyond the Seven and Reyna. She was still caught up in political limbo about whether or not she'd be elected Praetor, which Nico believed was only due to prejudice against their father. Hazel was clearly the most qualified candidate to take over Frank's vacated spot. The other three candidates, well, they were pathetic compared to his sister. He'd given his opinion on the Senate floor a few weeks ago, and he thought he may have swayed a few more minds to Hazel's cause, but not enough. What she needed was for Jason to publicly back her, as Percy already had.

Jason. Nico was pissed at him right now. Partly, it was because of the Hazel-Praetor thing. Jason was too politically rooted himself to take sides in the battle over the next Praetor. Gods forbid anyone get mad at him — unless their name was Nico. Nico hated how Jason put his need to maintain his public persona over his true feelings. Of course, that was the reason they were both in this emotional mess, pretending not to be something they were.

Their situation had been easier when Nico was away at school. He hadn't had to see Jason at all then. Now, even though he went out of his way to avoid his blond lover, he caught glimpses of Jason, his arm always around Piper, on too many days. Jason ignored him, as Nico knew he must. But Nico was feeling lonely and jealous. Even though he'd agreed to this arrangement, he felt so jilted and wronged. He had been too angry to ask Jason to go away with him since he'd been forced back to New Rome. Jason was probably mad that Nico hadn't asked. Their relationship was so messed up.

Nico was literally bumped from his thoughts when he ran into another boy. Their heads and chests collided and both tumbled backward.

"Watch it!" they both shouted.

Nico looked up from his spot on the ground and saw Percy's pretty green eyes staring back at him.

"Dickhead."

They both burst out laughing, and Percy crawled around helping Nico pick up the books that had spilled from his backpack. Once all the books were rounded up, Percy made Nico sit still while he shoved them back inside the pack. Percy was being both a little rough and a little motherly. Nico didn't need help putting his books away. For some reason, he let Percy help anyway. When Percy was done, he stood and tugged Nico up by the hand. Their hands lingered together a hair too long and they stood a step too close, but Nico was having trouble remembering why he minded.

Jason. Jason was why he minded. Jason, who slept with Piper and kissed Piper and cozied up to Piper. Nico pulled his hand away and took a step back. Percy's eyes were brighter and more stunning than Nico remembered. He hadn't been this close since the party over the summer. He and Percy had studiously avoided one another until Nico had left for school and again since he'd been back. Percy wasn't avoiding him now. He shook the tips of his straight black hair out of his eyes and reached out to straighten the strap of Nico's backpack where it lay across his chest.

"It's good to see you," Percy said. He kept his eyes on the spot where his hand lingered against Nico's chest.

"You, too," Nico said. It really was.

"Wanna catch a bite?" Percy asked. When Nico hesitated, Percy moved his eyes from Nico's chest to his face and scowled. "In public, big baby. We can get some fro-yo or something."

Nico fell into step next to Percy. "You're calling me 'big baby?' You've avoided me since I came back. And it's December, Perce, I'm not getting frozen yogurt."

Percy rolled his eyes and nudged Nico's shoulder. "I avoided you for self-preservation, man. Annabeth would flip her shit if I hung out with you. And suit yourself. You can watch me eat."

Nico had to wait to ask what Percy meant about self-preservation because the older demigod pulled him into the frozen yogurt shop and gave a very long custom order to the confused clerk behind the counter. The girl seemed relieved when Nico ordered a water.

Once Percy had his mountain of melty blue nightmare with sprinkles, marshmallows, and gummy bears on top and Nico had paid for both of them, they found their way to a table in back. The place was empty, because no one but Percy would want frozen yogurt in the middle of December.

Nico's knees brushed Percy's as they sat across from each other at the tiny table. Percy was already eating his yogurt with relish. Nico watched for a few minutes as Percy's lips gradually turned blue.

"Why would Annabeth not want you to hang out with me? She and I have always gotten along fine." Nico figured he knew why, but he wanted to hear how Percy explained things.

"Why do you think? Someone told."

"Leo or Piper, then," Nico said. "None of the rest of them would rat me out."

Percy stuck his tongue out at him, and Nico giggled. "You sound like some thirties mobster, my friend."

"Is that an Italian joke?"

"Possibly." Percy shrugged. "And yeah, it was probably Piper. Anyway, Annabeth and me worked it out, but she told me to stay away from you."
"Gee, thanks." Nico grimaced. "Not like I could've used some friends this last month and a half or anything."

"You got Hazel, dude," Percy said. "And the rest of us are in college anyway. You shoulda gone to high school with me when I asked you to."

"You didn't ask, you asshat, you told me to. And that wouldn't change anything now. We're not rehashing old arguments, Percy."

Percy scooped up a spoonful of frozen yogurt with a gummy bear and a few sprinkles. "Here. Try it."

Nico scrunched up his nose and turned his head. "That's disgusting."

"Baby chicken baby."

"You are so childish," Nico said, though he had to try hard not to laugh. Percy shoved the spoon in Nico's face, and Nico opened his mouth and let Percy feed it to him.

"Aww, my baby's trying new things," Percy mocked. "It's good, isn't it?"

"Yeah, kind of," Nico said. Percy smiled widely and shove another spoonful into Nico's mouth.

"You need fattening up anyway," Percy said, though the way his eyes raked over Nico's body suggested that Percy was quite pleased with the state of Nico's appearance. Nico decided not to point that out.

"So if you're supposed to stay away from me, why am I here with you now?"

"Annabeth went to her dad's for Christmas break, and what she doesn't know won't hurt her," Percy said. "Besides, it's just frozen yogurt and nothing is ever happening between us again."

"Damn straight," Nico said. Percy shoved more yogurt into Nico's mouth and burst out laughing.

"Straight joke from the gay boy!"

Nico kicked Percy under the table. "Shut up! Reyna wants people to believe there could be something going on between us."

"Yeah, that's dumb, dude," Percy said. He took another huge bite of yogurt for himself. "Course, I think some people believe it. The other day in my Government class I overheard these two girls talking about how the Praetor was dating the gorgeous as fuck son of Hades."

"They didn't say that." Nico could feel how he was blushing.

Percy raised his eyebrow and smiled. "They said the Praetor was dating the son of Hades. I say he's gorgeous as fuck."

The blush on Nico's skin was making his chest hot now. Nico lowered his eyes to the table.

"It's even better when you do that, Nico. The way you blush and get all shy, like you don't know how you look." Percy’s voice was low and saturated with desire.

"Shut up, Percy," Nico whispered.

"Annabeth says I can look as long as I don’t touch," Percy said. Nico removed his gaze from the
tabletop and saw Percy grinning, then he glanced under the table.

"Why the hell's your hand on my knee, then?"

"My hand's not on your knee."

"Percy, come on."

"What? I have no idea what you're talking about, Nico."

"Fine. Have it your way," Nico sighed. "But you're the most childish person I've ever met. What're you going to do when Piper comes by unexpectedly and runs to tell Annabeth you were with me, holding my knee? You think they'll think it's funny?"

"Piper went to her dad's with Jason," Percy said. He ate the last spoonful of his yogurt and squeezed Nico's knee.

Jason had left without telling him? That dick. Nico had thought he'd spend at least some of the holiday with Jason in San Francisco, especially because Piper usually went to see her father. He'd been looking forward to it, planning to take Jason to Chinatown and show him how the hotel was decorated for Christmas. Now Jason was gone and hadn't even deemed their relationship important enough to let Nico know. Fresh hurt sprung up in Nico's chest. It was painful enough to quell the heat Percy had been sending there moments ago.

"Oh," Nico said.

"So, what are you doing for Christmas?" Percy asked. "I heard Hazel and Frank are going up to Vancouver to take care of some things from his grandma's estate."

That was true. Frank hadn't been able to leave since becoming Praetor, and there were some legal issues that needed addressed. Frank was eighteen now, so he was able to make decisions for his family's money and estate, or what was left of it. Hazel was going for moral support and to turn the trip into a mini vacation. Nico was happy that they were getting the chance to do something for themselves, even though he'd be much happier if they were going to be around Camp Jupiter so he wouldn't be alone on Christmas. To be fair, though, he'd assumed he'd be spending Christmas with Jason.

"I don't know. I guess I'm going to sleep." Nico tried not to sound like Eeyore, but he wasn't sure he succeeded. "You going to your mom's?"

That was a pretty safe bet. Percy loved his mom more than he loved Annabeth.

"Yep. I'm leaving later today, as a matter of fact." Percy grinned, and although he was still suggestively gripping Nico's knee, well, more like his thigh, now, Nico could tell how innocently happy Percy was feeling about seeing his mom. "What about Reyna? Why aren't you hanging out with her?"

"Hylla's coming."

Percy rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I know. And?"

Nico didn't want to tell, but he didn't see a way out of it, either. "The last time Hylla came to visit she brought me an orange jumpsuit and a collar. Had the thing halfway around my neck before I could fight her off."
"Oh, fuck!" Percy laughed so obnoxiously that the girl behind the counter plugged her ears. "That's so fucking hilarious, man. Did you play the gay card?"

"Duh. She said she'd change my mind."

Percy moved his hand off Nico's thigh to hold his stomach with both hands while he laughed. "Oh, gods, I ate too much frozen yogurt to laugh this hard."

"You sound like a mutant hyena."

"And you still sound like a dickhead."

"Are you ever going to come up with a more creative name for me? You've been using that for a long time now, Perce."

"How about I start calling you a 'suck my dick' head?" Percy chuckled. "Or a 'swallow my dick' head?"

Nico stood and threw his water away. "You're such a jerk, Percy."

Nico's cheeks were burning. He didn't need Percy to remind him that he'd made a horrible fool of himself and acted like a...cheap person.

Percy scrambled to his feet and grabbed Nico's elbow. Nico didn't want to cause a scene, so he had no choice but to stand with Percy's hand on him while Percy threw away his yogurt container. When Percy stepped back in front of him, his eyes were serious and even a little angry.

"You're making a scene, Percy. Let me go."

"I don't care." Percy rested his free hand on Nico's hip and pulled him close. "You're not a joke to me, Nico. You act so hard, I forget you're more sensitive than me, but I'm not trying to hurt you."

"Then stop hurting me."

Percy tightened his grip as Nico tried to leave again. "I...liked...what you did to me, very much. Just because it isn't happening again doesn't mean that you did something wrong, so stop beating yourself up."

"You cheated on your girlfriend. We did that with all our friends in the back yard, all of them knowing what we were doing," Nico said. He searched for some acknowledgment of guilt in Percy's eyes. "I have never been more ashamed of myself."

"Bullshit," Percy spat. "Our timing sucked. But we are the same, Nico, and you know it. We've both done a lot worse things. Strip away what you think you should do, and that was fun. It was fun and good and hot, and you got off on it as much as I did."

Percy's eyes blazed and Nico was full of heat again, but this time it was desire for the way Percy's chest was heaving and the way his eyes were fixed on Nico's lips and the way the hand on Nico's hip had slipped under his t-shirt.

The bell over the shop door tinkled, and a cool blast of air hit them as new patrons entered the shop. Percy dropped his hands from Nico and said, "Let's go."

Nico walked with Percy out into the streets of New Rome. They didn't say anything until Nico was standing at the front door of his little villa. The place wasn't much, one bedroom and a tiny living
area, but Nico liked it.

"Are you inviting me in?" Percy asked. His eyes were still dark and intense.

"No."

Percy nodded. "Why aren't you going to see your father over Christmas?"

"He said I can't go down there until he sends for me. He's mad about me getting kicked out of school."

"Well, be ready in two hours, then."

"Ready for what?"

"To go home with me, stupid," Percy said, as though this information were obvious. "You don't think I'd leave you alone for Christmas?"

Actually, that's exactly what Nico thought. After all, it's what Jason had done. Nico wondered if maybe he and Percy could be friends. Odd friends, maybe, with too much sexual tension, but right now Nico was willing to take what he could get.

"Thanks. I'd like that."

"Good," Percy said. He almost seemed relieved. "My mom will be over the moon. She thinks you're the best little boy in the whole wide world, except for me. She'll get to feed you up and dote on you. I'll probably get, like, six extra presents just for bringing you home."

Percy stepped back and took a long look at Nico. "Two hours, Neeks. I'll pick you up."

Nico nodded and entered his villa. He had packing to do.

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Percy wasn't sure what he was doing. He'd been so good. He hadn't cheated on Annabeth since the party. He wanted to be the mature, decent boyfriend she deserved. Besides, after the blowjob Nico had given him, he hadn't wanted attention from anyone else, just Nico.

Five months, he'd been good. Now Annabeth had been gone less than a week, and he was obsessed with getting Nico. One more time. One more time and Nico would be out of his system. At least, that's what he'd been thinking up until the point he'd invited Nico home for Winter Break.

Besides, he'd been being a good friend. Nico had seemed so lonely and sad, sitting there at the yogurt shop. Percy wasn't sure what was going on, but he could tell Nico needed someone. Okay, so Nico did not need someone to feed him yogurt so they could watch the way his mouth moved, or put a hand on his knee, or slide a hand up his shirt. Well, maybe Nico did need those things -- he could use a good lay to lighten up a bit -- but he didn't need it from a guy with a girlfriend, whom he loved. Nico would get hurt.

Percy looked over at the black pegasus next to him and sighed.

"Blackjack, I'm such a mess."
"Boss, you've been a mess since the day I met you."

"Yeah, but it's getting worse, dude."

"What's the prob now?"

"I'm cheating on Annabeth."

"You shoulda been a horse. We're not like humans with that monogamy nonsense. We get the urge, we take care of the urge. Doesn't matter much with who."

"Sometimes I wonder if humans would be better off that way, too, you know? Who says I should only want one person forever? What if I want two? At least for sex."

"Ah, sex makes the world grand, Boss. I say stop worrying about it and pony up wherever the mood strikes."

"What if the mood strikes me with another guy?"

"Nature works in mysterious ways. You think humans are the only ones where boys play with boys and girls play with girls?"

"I guess not."

"Damn right. You only want two? That seems kinda conservative."

"Well, there's Annabeth. I've always wanted her. And there's Nico--"

"Wait, the kid that smells like death?"

"Yeah. Anyway, before him, I wanted, and took, like, a lot of people. Now I only want him."

"So he curbs your desire? Takes you off the market?"

"I guess."

"Then Bethie will know that's a good thing, right? Rather have her man off the market, even if she gives up a bit to keep you that way?"

"Maybe."

"Do you know how weird it is that you can talk to horses?"

Percy whirled to find Nico leaning against the side of his villa. He looked extremely sexy in a black leather jacket.

"Do you know how weird it is that you can talk to dead people?" Percy said. "How long have you been standing there?"

"A minute." Nico smirked. "Why, have you been telling Blackjack all your secrets?"

Percy knew his face flushed, and Nico's jaw dropped open in surprise.

"Well, at least you're confiding in someone smarter than you."

"Oh, Boss, I like this kid a lot better than I used to. And I don't go for humans, but if he was a horse I'd definitely take a piece of that."
"Shut up, both of you," Percy muttered.

Nico laughed, and Blackjack whinnied.

"So, we're flying all the way to New York on Blackjack?" Nico asked. He sounded a little unsure. Percy knew the pegasi usually refused to carry Nico, but Blackjack was different. Blackjack had told Percy how he'd carried Nico toward the end of his journey with the Athena Parthenos. This would work. Nico interrupted his thoughts. "Are you sure Blackjack doesn't mind carrying the extra weight?"

"Tell him I don't mind carrying him as long as you don't fuck him on my back."

"Oh, my gods, Blackjack! I am not saying that!" Percy thunked his head along Blackjack's back.

Nico went back into his villa and returned a moment later with an apple. He fed it to an eager Blackjack. "There. Maybe that'll make him more willing to carry me. Or I can shadow travel us there."

"No, dumbass, he doesn't mind carrying you. That's not what he said," Percy said. Leave it to Nico to think Blackjack was saying something negative about him. The kid had such low self-esteem.

"Then what'd he say?" Nico's eyes were narrowed.

Percy patted Blackjack, and the pegasus knelt so Percy could climb on.

"Grab my bag, Nico, and throw it on your back. You can sit behind me," Percy said. He'd decided ignoring Nico's question was the best strategy.

"Good idea, Boss. Can't fuck him if he's behind you."

"Oh, my...damn it, Blackjack! Quit being such a dick!"

Blackjack snickered. Nico hadn't moved.

"Nico, get the shit and get on the damned horse!"

Nico stomped around and picked up Percy's bag, muttering in what was probably Italian. Percy absolutely did not find that hot. Nico swung his leg over Blackjack's back and scooted close to Percy. "I hate you, Percy."

"Good thing you're coming to spend two weeks with me, then, huh? You better wrap your arms around me now, jackass, before we take off and you fall on your ass."

Nico wrapped his arms loosely around Percy, and Percy held tight to Blackjack's mane.

"The kid on there?"

"Whenever you're ready," Percy said. He'd barely gotten the words out when Blackjack ran and leapt. They were in the air, and Percy laughed. Wind whipped through Percy's hair and bit at his face. Riding Blackjack was thrilling.

Apparently, Nico didn't agree. His arms had tightened painfully around Percy's ribs, and he'd scooted so close that Percy could feel every inch of Nico's body pressed against his back and ass. Blackjack was probably right that it was a good idea Nico sat in the back.

of curses in Percy's ear took on an almost musical quality. Percy found it endearing.

Percy found it endearing for the first twenty minutes or so, at least. After that, he found it a little annoying. Now, after an hour of flight, where Nico was squeezing the hell out of Percy's ribs and his curses had gotten more creative but less interesting because of the constant repetition, Percy was done with it.

He turned his head slightly to talk, but Nico's head was lodged so tightly against his ear that Nico's head moved, too, to a place where Percy couldn't even see him.

"Nico, for fuck's sake, move your damned head off my ear and listen to me."

Slowly, Nico lifted his head. His eyes were wild, and Percy remembered how much like his father Nico was. Percy squashed the urge to lick Nico's lips just to see what he'd do.

"If you quit cussing in my ear, I'll tell you what Blackjack said on the ground."

Now that a little time had passed, Percy sort of wanted to tell Nico anyway because he liked talking about sexual stuff with the son of Hades. Even if they weren't going to do anything -- and they weren't, probably -- Percy didn't see any harm in the way they turned each other on.

"O...okay." Nico's breath blew warm across Percy's lips.

"So he said that he didn't mind carrying you as long as I didn't fuck you on his back."

Nico's hands clenched against Percy's sides. "Why the hell would he say that?"

Shit. Percy hadn't thought Nico might ask why. "Um, 'cause I was telling him about, you know..."

"Dear gods, you told your horse that I gave you a blowjob?" Nico laid his head on Percy's shoulder and rolled it around.

"Ooh, Boss, you didn't say nothin' about no blowjob! How was it? Pegasi can't do that, you know. Was he good?"

Percy leaned forward to talk to Blackjack, but Nico leaned with him. "He was phenomenal. Swallowed me down his throat and everything. Better than fucking."

"And you are still talking to your horse about it while I am sitting right behind you." Nico banged his head on Percy's shoulder in between sentences. "Have you no manners?"

"I'm going to serve you tea and crumpets later, Neeks," Percy said. "Maybe you can suck me off again, and you can have tea and cum-pets. Get it?"

Nico buried his head in Percy's shoulder and held still. "You are humiliating. I can't believe I'm attracted to you."

"Wait, what?" Percy turned his shoulders to get a better look at Nico, and Nico screamed like a little kid. Percy ignored him. "You're attracted to me?"

"I sucked your stupid dick, didn't I?" Nico grumbled. "You thought it was better than fucking?"

"Tighter, more intense, yeah," Percy said. He was a bit embarrassed to admit these things and was glad he couldn't look directly at Nico. "I think it was you, though. No other oral has felt so spectacular."
To Percy's enduring surprise, Nico chuckled. "You haven't had anal sex, then, have you?"

Percy’s heart pounded furiously as he shook his head.

"Didn't think so. J— My old partner, he said my ass was tighter than my throat."

Percy couldn't focus on the thought of Nico's old partner because he was too busy thinking about Nico's tight ass. His penis was rapidly becoming erect.

"Fuck, Nico, you can't say shit like that."


"Because." Percy dragged one of Nico's hands away from his ribs and forced it between his legs. He rubbed Nico's hand back and forth along his dick, then threw his head back on Nico's shoulder and let out a loud moan. Nico jumped and stopped moving his hand, but he kept it pressed against Percy's dick, which wasn't helping Percy calm down.

"Uh, hello, Boss, still here. Remember me? Third creature in the air with you who wants no part of your little sex play? I mean, I love ya, but I don't do cross-species."

"Shit, Blackjack, I'm sorry," Percy said. This was so embarrassing. "He's sitting back there telling me shit about fucking his ass, like that's not supposed to get me all worked up."

"That's not what I said, Percy!" Nico yelled. "Quit telling Blackjack I'm saying stuff like that!"

"That's what you said!" Percy yelled back.

"It is not!"

"It is, too!"

Percy shrieked as a giant eagle swooped down and Nico's hand tightened painfully around his dick. Nico's sword was in his other hand, fighting off the eagle, but that meant he was using his non-sword hand to stay moored to Percy and Blackjack, and his non-sword hand was really in the wrong place for that.

"Get your hand off my dick!" Percy screamed. He was doubled over in pain, so he wasn't sure Nico heard him, but Nico's hand mercifully moved and gripped his waist instead.

Percy buried his head in Blackjack's mane and gasped for breath. He could hear Nico swinging his sword around and feel the way Nico's body was jostling behind him, but he was too incapacitated to sit back up and help.

"Boss, these eagles are makin' me nervous. What do you want to do?"

Shit. There was more than one. Percy squinted an eye open and surveyed the scene. Nico was batting at one eagle, taking care not to cut it, but there were two more eagles circling Blackjack. Percy had a feeling they were sent by Zeus to make Nico and him regret flying.

"What do we do?" Percy shouted back to Nico. "Can you shadow travel us out of here?"

"Blackjack, drop down to the trees and toss us off your back," Nico said.

Blackjack made a sharp downward arc. Percy was about to tell Nico that free-falling into a shadow was not what he was thinking of when he suggested shadow travel. Before he could, Blackjack
threw them free of his back, and Percy was falling through space with Nico's arm wrapped tightly around his waist.

He counted the seconds, one, two, three, and was certain four would bring death. Then he felt them fall into the cool shade, and he was jerked sideways into the shadows.

Percy counted to two before Nico and he were tumbling over each other in the shadow of a huge air conditioning unit on top of a building. When they came to a stop, Percy was pinned beneath Nico's body, his arms pressed defensively across his chest, Nico's arm hugging his waist. His dick throbbed painfully.

"Holy fuck, you are a freaking lunatic," Percy breathed into the roofing material. He felt Nico laugh above him. "I am never taking you anywhere again."

Nico rolled off him, laughing harder and harder. Percy turned on his side toward Nico and gently headbutted his sternum before turning to face skyward with his head resting on Nico's rumbling chest. Nico wrapped his arm over Percy, and Percy grabbed Nico's hand and kissed it, then held it tight. Percy started to laugh, too, and soon he and Nico were both howling, lost in the adrenaline rush that comes with fighting off attacks and risking death.

Percy lost track of how long they laid there together, laughing and feeling so alive. The sun had been up when they landed and now it was dark. Their laughter was quieting down, and Percy thought maybe he could sleep here, on a roof under the stars, in Nico di Angelo's embrace. Percy wouldn't mind.

Nico strummed his fingers up and down Percy's abs.

"Come on, Perce, let's go see your mom."

***

Nico hadn't seen Percy's mom in a few years, so he wasn't sure what to expect. He knew that she was fond of him, once she'd realized his crazy plan had saved Percy from certain death at the hands of Kronos. But he wasn't the kind of guy that moms wanted their sons to befriend, let alone become involved with sexually, especially not if that involvement threatened the son's relationship with his absolutely perfect girlfriend. When they reached the door of Percy's apartment, Nico found himself falling back, standing, as he so often had, in the shadows.

Percy knocked. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet and grinning from ear to ear. Nico smiled, watching him. He may not love Percy anymore, but he would always love to see him happy.

The door opened, and Sally Jackson's kind face appeared. Nico watched her take one look at Percy before the son of Poseidon flew into her arms. The two hugged like they had been separated for a lifetime. Nico imagined it was how his mother might hug him, if she was alive. It wasn't a feeling he could remember.

"Oh, Percy!" Sally squealed. Percy buried his head in his mom's hair, and Nico was pretty sure he could hear Percy sniffing. Sally untangled herself from Percy and held him at arms' length. She looked so proud as she inspected him. She turned her head slightly, as if she didn't want to take her eyes off her son. "Paul!"
Mr. Blofis came running from somewhere farther in the apartment, and then he was squeezing both Percy and Sally in his arms. Nico felt his throat constrict, and he wheeled around to lean back on the wall next to the apartment door. He wasn't sure he could do this. He felt like an intruder, and he had no idea how to interact with a family. All he had was Hazel and Reyna, and right now he missed them terribly.

The voices inside Percy's apartment were a bit muffled -- Nico figured because of the hug -- and he couldn't make out what anyone was saying. The door started to close, and Nico had half convinced himself it was alright that he was alone and forgotten, when he heard something hit the door, halting its progress, and Percy screeched, "Wait!"

Percy was back in the hallway, staring at Nico with eyes that were more understanding than Nico would have expected. He grabbed Nico's hand and turned back to his apartment. "I have something for you, Mom, for Christmas. You'll love it."

"Oh, Percy, this isn't like that time you brought me that naked family of mannequins from the department store going out of business sale, is it?" Sally asked. Nico smirked.

"Better, Mom, I swear!" Percy sounded so excited. Nico knew he'd hate the way Sally's face would fall when she saw the real gift. She'd probably rather have the mannequins. "It's even better than if Annabeth was here!"

Nico's eyes went wide, and Percy chose that moment to yank him around the corner and into the apartment.

"Ta-da!" Percy dropped Nico's hand and acted like a game show model, standing to the side of Nico and holding out his arms as if to say "Look at what you've won!"

Sally and Mr. Blofis stared at Nico for long seconds. Sally's mouth had dropped open and was making a perfect "o" shape. "Nico? Honey, is that you?"

Nico nodded shyly and became very interested in his feet. In retrospect, he shouldn't have averted his eyes, because he was caught completely off guard when Sally threw her arms around him and squeezed him with more strength than Nico would have imagined such a small woman could possess. Sally drew back and planted a kiss on each cheek before she held him at arms' length, just as she had Percy, and took a long look.

"Nico, my goodness! I didn't recognize you." Sally stroked Nico's cheek and ran a hand through his hair. "You've grown so much! You're so handsome and healthy looking! Why, I think you might be taller than Percy!"

"He is not!" Percy threw his arm around Nico's shoulders and stood on his tiptoes.

Sally laughed and hugged them both. Nico was surprised to see there were tears in her eyes when she let them go. His own eyes weren't exactly dry. Percy smacked his chest and regarded him smugly. "Told ya she'd be thrilled."

"Of course I'm thrilled," Sally said. Nico looked at her bright blue eyes and found himself smiling.

"It's nice to see you, too, Sally," he said softly. "You, too, Mr. Blofis."

"Paul, please," Paul said, shaking Nico's hand. "You really do look nothing like the little boy I remember, Nico. Do you still have that cool battle helmet?"

Nico chuckled. "I do. I don't use it very often, but it fits me a lot better now."
"He doesn't need it, Paul," Percy broke in enthusiastically. "You should see him fight. He's such a killer bada..." Percy trailed off as Sally's eyes hardened. Nico caught Paul's smirk just before Percy slapped his chest again. "Wear your helmet, Nico. It'll keep you much safer."

"That's better," Sally said sternly, though her eyes were dancing with merriment. In that moment, she reminded Nico so much of Percy. "I'm sure you wear your helmet every time, right, Percy?"

"Yeah, course, ma," Percy lied. Nico had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. "Hey, me and Nico are gonna go put up our stuff. He might be tired from shadow traveling. Did we miss dinner?"

"It's in about an hour," Sally said. "Why don't you two rest, and I'll come get you when it's ready?"

"I can help, Sally," Nico offered.

Sally patted his cheek fondly. "No, sweetie, go on and get some rest. Paul can help."

Percy pulled Nico toward his room.

The place looked mostly like it had the last time Nico had been here. Percy's room was small but neat, with a double bed against the wall that had the window out to the fire escape. The walls were blue. Percy still had the same little desk; his *Finding Nemo* light sat on the same nightstand. Nico probably shouldn't be able to remember the room in such great detail. He'd only been in here once or twice.

"Put the backpacks on the floor by the closet," Percy said as he flopped on the bed. "Come lay down. I know you're tired."

Nico dropped off the backpacks, then sat at Percy's desk to unlace his boots. Percy sat up on his elbows and watched. Once Nico had his shoes off he started to drop onto the floor, but Percy caught his hand.

"Don't be a dick. I'm not gonna touch you when my mom's gonna come through that door in an hour or so. Lay down with me."

"Fine," Nico said. He was feeling emotional from the warm welcome he'd received and the longing for his own mother and family. Laying with Percy sounded extremely inviting. "Scoot over, then."

"No, climb over. I don't want the wall side."

Nico climbed over the top of Percy, who gave a satisfied grunt and laid flat on his back. Nico assumed the same position for a moment before he sat up and removed his jacket. He tossed it over to their backpacks and laid back down, only to notice Percy staring at him from close enough that their shoulders and hands were touching. Nico stared at the ceiling.

"What?" he asked when Percy didn't look away.

"I just..." Percy started. He was uncharacteristically quiet. "I don't wish you were back in the 1930s or 1940s, because I like you a lot and your life would have been so hard, being gay, but I wish your mom was here."

Percy didn't say, "and Bianca, too." He didn't have to. Those words would always be there between them.

"Thanks, Percy," Nico said. He brushed his knuckles against Percy's and wasn't all that surprised when Percy returned the gesture. "I'm glad you have your mom and you appreciate her so much."
"I do. She's the best," Percy said. He faced Nico and rested his head in his hand. "I saw your vision of your mom, before the Battle of Manhattan. Um, I couldn't help it."

Nico turned his head slightly so he could see Percy's face.

"When we were kids, you helped me a lot more than you realized or I ever appreciated. I dreamed about you a lot," Percy said. He was blushing. "Anyway, I saw you try to summon your mom, and I saw the vision you had instead. She was beautiful. So lovely. You look so much like your dad, which is freaky and intimidating, but you're so hot, too, and I know that's from him. But the way you look extraordinary, so beautiful and perfect? That's your mom."

For the first time he could remember, Nico found he didn't mind that someone, even Percy, was talking about his appearance. Someone who had seen his mother thought that Nico looked like her. That was all the Christmas gift Nico needed.

Percy placed his hand on Nico's chest and kissed his forehead. "I thought you should know."

Percy winced. The son of Poseidon rolled over to face away from Nico. After several seconds had gone by, Nico pulled Percy's arm back and kissed his elbow. He scooted closer so that his arm pressed into Percy's back, and he reveled in Percy's warmth and comfort.

"Thank you," Nico whispered. "For what you said about my mom and for inviting me here."

Percy reached back and patted Nico's stomach before he wriggled a little closer. "I'm glad you're here."

***

Jason was not feeling guilty. He pulled his arm through the water and turned his head sideways to breathe. His face dipped back under the water, and he stroked, left, right, left, before his hand touched the wall. He lifted his head and saw Piper sitting nearby at the edge of the pool. Her pink bikini was tasteful, not too revealing, but it showed off her perfect curves. Jason swam over and rested his hands on her hips.

"Having fun, Jay?" Piper asked. Her smile was gentle and complete. She looked happier than she had at any time since they'd gotten back together. Jason figured it had a lot to do with spending time with her father and being away from the camps. Jason had to admit, he was enjoying the time away, too. And he was not feeling guilty.

"It's great, Pipes," he said. He lifted himself slightly out of the water and delivered a kiss to Piper's pretty lips. When he dropped back into the water he let his hands slide down Piper's hips and under the bikini. Piper scooted forward slightly, and Jason kissed a slow line up her thigh. Her father wouldn't be home for a few hours. Jason could make the most of this time at the pool. He kissed up her other thigh and was rewarded when Piper spread her legs farther apart. Jason nuzzled his face against her damp pussy.

His tongue was out, nudging aside the material of the bikini, when a door slammed. Both he and Piper jumped.

"Cut that out, Grace, McLean! That's not appropriate behavior!"
Jason laid his head on Piper's thigh and groaned. "We're adults, Coach. We can do what we want."

Coach Hedge came over and waited for Jason to pull himself out of the pool. Once Jason had chosen a side of Piper, Hedge sat down next to him. Despite his irritation over this particular interruption, Jason had been glad to see the old satyr. Hedge’s brown fur was becoming speckled with gray, and Jason could see a few more wrinkles on his face, but he was as sprightly as ever and his brown eyes looked sharply wherever he turned. Far too sharply. Jason had been looking forward to that time with Piper.

"You may be a technical adult, Grace," Hedge barked, "but you're still a pup to me. There's a lot more growing up you need to do."

Amen to that. Grown-ups did not act like Jason. They didn't lie to the people they were supposed to love. They didn't get mad that their lover might be ignoring them and run off to their girlfriend's dad's private compound without even telling the lover, leaving the lover alone over a long holiday, knowing how that would hurt. They didn't pretend not to love the only person they were sure they loved and have lots of sex with the person they weren't so sure about. Grown-ups probably did do those things, but it wasn't the kind of grown-up Jason wanted to be. Maybe he did feel a bit guilty.

"Coach, tell us how Chuck is," Piper said. Jason shot her a grateful glance.

"Oh, he's wonderful, a chip off the old block," Coach Hedge said. "I'm going to bring him by tonight so you can babysit. Mellie and I haven't had a night out in ages."

Piper visibly gulped. Babysitting Chuck wasn't something she was comfortable with, Jason knew. Fortunately, Jason had helped Nico do it a few times when Chuck was younger. The kid was rambunctious, sure, but he was a lot of fun. Exhausting fun. Very exhausting fun. Jason shook his head. They'd be fine.

"Do you have trouble finding a sitter for him?" Piper asked. Jason heard the apprehension in her voice.

"No, not at all," Hedge said. "Nico usually watches him for us, but he couldn't get away when he was up in Portland, and once he got kicked outta that fancy school, for being a completely noble and powerful kicker of butts in a way that was not his fault, mind you, his dad set up some limits on when and where he could travel, so Mellie and I have been out of luck."

"Nico babysits Chuck?" Piper said it slowly, like it was a nonsense sentence and she was trying to decipher it.

"Yep. Good kid, that one," Hedge said. "Clarisse can't do it since we moved back out with your dad, kiddo, so Nico was the logical choice."

"Nico?"

"Yes." Hedge looked confused by Piper's confusion.

"Our Nico?"

Jason found that phrasing laughable, since Piper hated Nico. "Hated” was a strong word. Found him "creepy." That was the word she'd used. Jason scowled.

"Yes," he said. "I've helped him a couple times. We'll be fine, Coach. You and Mellie go have a good time."
"Thanks, cupcake." Hedge stood. "Oh, and thanks, both of you, for looking out for Nico after he got sent back to CJ. He told me how good you both are to him, how you include him in your group and go out of your way to make him comfortable. Between you and me, he's been really sad for a while now, and I've been worried. Something happened last spring that seemed to hurt him to the quick, not that he'd admit it."

"Of...of course," Piper said. She looked at Jason in alarm, but Jason was too busy trying not to cry to be of any help to Piper.

"He's special, that one," Hedge said. "I don't have to tell you two, I suppose. Treats everyone, especially the ones beneath him, like they're worthwhile, even tired old satyrs who sometimes doubt their worth."

"You're a good friend, Coach," Jason said softly. His stupid hand was twitching in his lap. "We should tell you more often."

Hedge walked around the edge of the pool toward the exit. "Flattery probably wins you some prizes, Grace, but the truth is much more satisfying. Try not to step in the dung you spread around. And stay outta Piper's private areas while you're in public places."

As soon as the door to the pool room closed, right as Piper's hand reached out to grab his forearm, Jason slipped into the pool. He pretended he was Percy. How long could he stay in the water and hide?

Not long, because he wasn't Percy. Jason surfaced and swam over to Piper. When he jumped out of the pool, she wrapped him in her warm embrace. He laid his head on her shoulder and sighed.

"Well, that sucked bottle rockets," Piper giggled.

"Is it that obvious that I've turned into a fake and a phony?" Jason asked. "Tell me the truth."

"No, Jay, don't say things like that," Piper said. "You're not a fake or a phony."

Jason scoffed. "Ask Hazel. Why didn't I back her? She'd be Praetor right now if I put my word behind her."

"Hazel understands that it's important for you to make and keep friends that can help you in the future," Piper said. "She's not mad at you, Jason."

"She's not happy with me, either. Percy backed her. He didn't even hesitate. He doesn't care that it may make one of the other candidates mad at him."

"You're not Percy."

"You're damned right." Jason lifted his head and looked at Piper. Her ever-changing eyes were dark brown, almost black right now. Jason wondered if that was his punishment for being a liar and a cheat. How ironic would it be if Piper's eyes started to resemble Nico's? Then every time he looked at her he could be reminded of how pathetic he was. Jason felt his anger surface, so he laid on his back and focused on counting down and calming his breathing. When he reached one, he felt less angry, but still wholly inadequate. "Percy pisses me off, but he's twice the man I am."

"Percy cheats on Annabeth and chases Nico like he's an object." Piper wrinkled her nose. "He's not twice the man you are."

Jason laughed because Piper could have said the exact same thing about him, and it would be just as
true. At least Percy was actually with the person he loved. Percy would do anything to keep Annabeth. Jason had done the only thing that would push Nico away.

"Do you think Nico told Coach all that stuff about us being nice to him?" Piper asked. Jason could hear the guilt in her voice.

"Yeah, I'm sure he did." Jason sat up next to Piper and traced the outline of a star on her leg. "He doesn't want Coach to think badly of us. He doesn't want pity. Gods, we're such assholes. We take a kid who's been lonely and abandoned for years, and he does one thing that you and Annabeth don't like and we just drop him. We didn't ditch Percy, and he was just as much a part of what happened as Nico. Nope, we stuck it to the one of us who it would hurt the most."

Jason felt sick. He loved Nico. Love. And it didn't matter. He went along with what Piper wanted for fear of making her angry and losing her. And he hurt again, again, again, the most decent person he knew, let alone the one he supposedly loved. Jason felt small and petty for running off with Piper without talking to Nico and sorting things out.

"Jay, if it'll help you feel better, I'll call Reyna tomorrow and check in on him." Piper looked a little green. At least she was feeling bad, too.

"Thanks, yeah. I suppose you still want me to stay away from him?" The star Jason had been tracing had mutated into devil's horns.

"I feel bad for him. I really do," Piper said, "but you can't be his friend and my boyfriend. He can't be Percy's buddy, either. We did what we had to do to protect our own."

"He's 'our own,' too."

"He has Hazel and Frank and Reyna. That's enough."

Jason was surprised by the hardness in Piper's voice. She was usually so serene and sweet. Jason wondered how well he really knew her.

Piper sighed. "I'll check on him, I promise. Now, we have a satyr kid to watch soon. How about we go up to my room for a quick snack?"

"I'm not hungry," Jason said.

Piper tugged him up by the arm. Her eyes had mercifully turned a soft blue. "I wasn't talking about food."

Piper headed for the exit, her hair and her ass swaying seductively. Jason, despite his inner turmoil, hastened to follow.

***

After dinner, Nico helped Percy's mom with the dishes while Percy helped Paul choose a movie. They settled on White Christmas since it was one of Sally's favorites.

Percy figured he'd let his mom and Paul have the couch, so he nestled on the little yellow loveseat that had moved with Paul from his tiny apartment in Brooklyn when he'd married Percy's mom. The
chair that Jules-Albert had sat in a couple years ago had vanished. Percy suspected his mom had put it in the dumpster as soon as he'd left for college and replaced it with Paul's old loveseat. Oh well. Percy had liked that chair, but he'd hated the reminder of how he'd let Nico down.

"So." Paul said. He tilted his head toward the kitchen. "Nico, huh?"

"Yep."

"He's quite attractive these days." Paul sounded horribly uncomfortable saying those words. He almost sounded like Percy's fifth grade teacher, Mr. Pitts, had when they'd separated the boys into one room and the girls into another and had The Talk. Oh.

"What's that mean?" Percy asked. He ignored the squelching feeling taking up residence in his stomach.

Paul squirmed. "Just what I said. I notice he's...hot--"

"Oh, gods," Percy moaned. He ran his hand over his face. "It's not like that."

"Percy, it's fine to be attracted to him," Paul said.

Percy felt his face flush with color. He did not want to have a talk about the birds and the bees. He was nineteen years old, for Hades's sake. Hephaestus. Hephaestus's sake.

"Your mother and I don't mind that you like a boy," Paul continued. "I just want to make sure you know, you know, how everything works. Where to put things. And protection. You have to use protection."

"Paul!" Percy yelled. The quiet hum of conversation coming from the kitchen halted temporarily. Percy waited until it started again before he finished speaking. "I am not interested in him that way. We're friends. That's all. And I know how things work!"

Paul pursed his lips and furrowed his brow. Percy knew this was his "Really? I'm a teacher and I've heard it all. You can't fool me" face. Percy rolled his head around on his shoulders and tried not to cave to The Face.

After three minutes or so, Percy let out a huff of resignation. "Fine. I don't know how it works, and I'm extremely interested in him in that way. But it's complicated. I appreciate the help, but I have to figure this stuff out myself."

"He'll be sore if you don't do it right," Paul said. "Or you'll be sore. I don't want to assume."

Percy put his hand over his eyes and wished he'd volunteered to help his mom with the dishes.

"That's not what I'm worried about." Percy dropped his hand back down in his lap and tried to act more mature.

"Well, what are you worried about?" Paul asked. His brown eyes were inquisitive and absent judgment. Percy had always like Paul, but he felt a new swell of affection bubble in his chest. Despite this horribly awkward conversation, Paul was trying to help. Most of all, Percy appreciated he hadn't mentioned the giant elephant in the room. That would be the elephant Annabeth Chase would ride in on and use to crush Percy if she found out he'd brought Nico, the big out-of-bounds in their relationship, home to mommy for the holidays.

"Um, Annabeth isn't gonna be happy I brought Nico home," Percy admitted.
"You're more worried about Annabeth being mad than having sex with a boy?"

"Paul, please, can we not worry about the sex part? That's not happening anyway." Percy wished it would, but his anxiety about Annabeth was a much more pressing matter. "Annabeth's my girlfriend, and I don't want to cheat on her again, but I am so attracted to Nico. Is it okay?"

Percy felt young and naive, and he was grateful for Paul's advice, even before it came.

"Nineteen is very young to have your life completely decided, Percy," Paul said. His voice was full of sympathy. "It's never wrong to feel attraction. But how can you or Annabeth or anyone your age be certain of who they want when they're still struggling to decide who they are?"

"Dude, that was so Zen."

Paul laughed. "You have no idea what Zen is, do you?"

"Nope. But I liked what you said, Paul, thanks. I'm going to stop worrying so much about the shoulds and worry more about figuring myself out."

Percy burrowed into the couch and gazed up at their crappy popcorn ceiling. Who was he? What a good question. Everyone seemed to think he knew, but what did he know, really? He loved Annabeth. He fought monsters. He loved his mom. Beyond that? Percy wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life. He wasn't sure where he wanted to live. He probably wanted to marry Annabeth, but, Paul was right, nineteen was so young. Why should he have to decide those things now?

"You're going to hurt yourself there, Perce, pondering the meaning of the universe."

Percy took his eyes off the ceiling at the sound of Nico's soft voice. Nico was smiling faintly. He may be teasing, but Percy could see the uncertainty in his eyes. Wordlessly, Percy reached for Nico's hand and pulled him down next to him on the loveseat. Nico smelled good, like earth and dish soap. Percy laid his hand on Nico's knee and tried to reconcile his competing feelings. On one hand, he'd like to curl Nico into a ball on his lap and sing him lullabies. On the other, he'd like to put Nico's hand back between his legs while he sucked huge hickeys onto the perfect white skin of Nico's neck. Percy wasn't sure how to make the two feelings fit together.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Nico moved Percy's hand off his knee. Percy put it back. Nico moved it again, pressing it unnecessarily hard into the couch. Percy put it back on Nico's knee, pressing unnecessarily hard himself. Nico shook his head and ignored Percy's hand. As soon as Percy's mom came in and switched the lights off to start the movie, Percy moved his hand between Nico's thighs. It didn't matter in the end. Nico must never have seen White Christmas before. As the movie played, he seemed to lose his self-consciousness and become engrossed in the on-screen drama. When Rosemary Clooney left the inn, Nico flopped over on top of Percy, his chest resting on Percy's lap and his head on the armrest, to get closer to the screen. His lower legs flailed in the air like a little kid, and Percy was too overcome with fondness to even try to be seductive. He laid his hands on Nico's back and watched the movie over the top of his sweet black curls.

When the movie ended, Percy was disappointed. Nico turned over and sat up, neatly ignoring him.

"That was so good, Sally," Nico said. "I don't know if I've ever seen a Christmas movie before, but I can't imagine a better one."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so glad you liked it," Sally said. Her smile lit up the dark little room. "It's always been one of my favorites. Now, I think Paul and I are ready to turn in for the night. Are you two going to stay out here?"
"Yeah," Percy said. He wanted to go to bed because he was a little tired, but he was too worried about how much he wanted to go to bed with Nico. He placed his hand on Nico's hip where it rested against the back of the couch. "Paul, will you put *Die Hard* on for me?"

"*Die Hard?* After *White Christmas?" Paul asked.

"I'm an odd, odd boy."

Paul shook his head and took care of the movie.

After Paul and Sally left, Percy pulled Nico down to his previous position with his head on the armrest, but this time Nico was facing up, his back pressed against Percy's legs. Percy laid his palm flat against Nico's chest.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey." Nico's eyes were dark and hard to read.

"This movie's awesome. You'll probably hate it."

Nico snorted. "Do you need to move a bit? I was laying on your legs for a long time. Sorry about that. I kinda forgot myself."

"'Kinda?' Is that Nico di Angelo I hear talking in sloppy English?" While he waited for an answer, Percy let his hand move across Nico's torso. He traced Nico's jutting collarbones, the v of his shirt collar, the circles around his protruding nipples, the lines of his firm muscles. Percy made himself stop when his middle finger reached the button of Nico's jeans. He didn't go any lower, but he kept making lazy circles around that button. Nico didn't stop him.

"I learned English as a second language, Perce," Nico said. Percy could hear how Nico was struggling to keep his voice even. "I can be a sloppy Italian anytime you want."

"That sounds like an invitation, Nico," Percy breathed.

"Maybe it is."

"I'm afraid of what I'll do to you if I take you to my bed right now."

Nico sat up and pressed the side of his chest against Percy. His hand slid up Percy's arm so slowly it gave Percy goosebumps. His mouth was close enough that Percy wouldn't have to move far. Percy let his hand drop to a place he'd never imagined he'd touch another man.

"What if I want you to do those things to me?" Nico's voice was even softer than usual. It was breathy. Sexy. His hand tangled in Percy's hair.

Percy reluctantly removed his hand from Nico's dick and gripped his hips. In one great surge, he picked Nico up off his lap and stood them both upright.

"Screw the movie." Percy pulled Nico tight against him and scraped his teeth across the side of Nico's neck.

"Screw me."

Nico barely got the words out before a moan escaped his lips. Percy bit and sucked his way down Nico's neck as he pushed the son of Hades back into his bedroom.
Nico knew it was wrong, what he was doing with Percy. Even if he wasn't technically cheating on anyone, Percy was. He and Percy had enjoyed every day of the past two weeks -- going shopping with Paul and Sally, having lazy movie days, preparing Christmas dinner, going to Paul's parents' house on Christmas day, going to Times Square to watch the ball drop on New Year's Eve, playing video games, and taking leisurely, cuddly naps. Then, at night, they'd retire to Percy's bedroom and have a completely different kind of fun. Today, they were scheduled to head back to Camp Jupiter. Classes would start again for Nico tomorrow, and Percy wanted to get back before Annabeth did, anyway.

This had been one of the best times of Nico's life, openly sharing kisses and touches with Percy as they explored the city and each other. Percy hadn't hidden the nature of their relationship in any way. One afternoon between Christmas and New Year's, they'd been sitting in the living room with Paul and Sally watching a movie. Percy had wrapped his arms around Nico and held him tight, occasionally kissing his cheek absentmindedly and running his fingers through Nico's hair over and over. Nico had realized how he'd longed for this kind of acceptance and family and never had it. He and Jason didn't touch publicly; Reyna and Piper were the only people who had even known they were dating. Yet here Percy was, showing Nico attention and affection in front of his parents. It made Nico sad that Jason wouldn't give him this, but it also made Nico feel like he belonged -- maybe for the first time ever.

Morning sunlight streamed in through Percy's window. Maybe it was mid-morning sunlight. The rays seemed awfully bright and warm as they spilled across Nico's bare body. Between the sunlight in front of him and Percy's warm body behind him, Nico felt almost hot enough to sweat. That rarely happened. He picked up Percy's hand from where it lay low on his belly and kissed his fingers. Despite the heat, Nico pulled Percy's arm higher until his hand rested under Nico's chin. Nico scooted tighter into the embrace and felt Percy's morning erection jab him.

Percy roused slightly and muttered "Fuck my stars, Nico," before settling back down. Nico giggled silently. Percy talked in his sleep a lot, and his dreams were extremely vivid. Nico was a little worried they'd go back to Camp Jupiter and Annabeth would hear how much and how dirty Percy talked about Nico in his sleep. Well, she already knew about the summer, so maybe she'd think that was all there was to it. Nico hoped so.

He wasn't looking forward to going back. Going back meant returning to a reality where neither Jason nor Percy would even speak to him. Going back meant Percy would head back to Annabeth. It wasn't even that Nico wanted Percy. He did. He liked having sex with Percy a lot, but Nico loved Jason as much as ever. What bothered him was being alone again and watching everyone else not be. He wanted Percy to be his friend.

Jason would still be with Piper, probably even deeper into whatever their relationship was, considering the way he'd blown Nico off. He'd had an extra two weeks to fuck Piper every chance he got, and Nico had no doubt that's exactly what Jason had done. Demeter was right. Those Zeus boys were a virile lot. That was probably why Nico couldn't make himself feel the slightest bit guilty for what he'd been doing with Percy. He wasn't feeling that spiteful urge to stick it to Jason anymore. In fact, he hoped Jason never found out he'd gone to New York with Percy, but Jason's inability to keep it in his pants provided Nico with enough self-righteousness to pass off this fling with Percy as a simple matter of evening the scales a bit.
Percy stretched behind Nico and untangled his hand. The hand traversed Nico’s body, slid down his chest and stomach and stroked his dick a few times before it cupped Nico's ass and squeezed gently. Percy kissed Nico's shoulder and began to caress Nico's backside all over.

"Mmm, you awake, my hot, sexy baby?" Percy growled in Nico's ear.

Nico had thought Percy was thinking about Annabeth when he'd first called Nico his "baby," but he'd realized that nickname was just for him when Percy was saying it while jerking him off. Percy had blushed when Nico asked about it. He had said he always teased Nico with that name anyway and figured it was preferable to his other favorite nickname for Nico, "dickhead." Nico had to agree.

"Yeah, Perce." Nico did not have a term of endearment for Percy, but he figured since he'd loved Percy for years there was a bit of love present every time he said Percy's name or some variant of it.

"Turn over and let me see you." Percy licked the shell of Nico's ear. Nico shivered.

"Mints first."

"Turn over here and let me see you, you bossy son of a bastard." Percy bit Nico's ear now and slapped his ass. When Nico didn't budge, Percy sighed and turned away momentarily. Nico knew he was reaching for the breath mints on his bedside table. Percy had terrible morning breath. Annabeth should probably thank Nico for this massive improvement he'd brought to the morning experience. Percy was back, pressed into Nico and breathing heavily on his face. "There. Now come here."

Nico rolled over and placed a long kiss on Percy's neck before he pulled back slightly to see Percy's face. "You know, you're every bit as bossy as me. You ordered me around three times just now, and I only did it once."

Percy grinned. "Yeah, but you sound like more of an ass when you do it."

"Probably."

Nico laid on his back, and Percy instantly whined. "Nooooo! I want every handful of your ass I can grab before we have to go back."

Nico's face must have shown his sadness, because Percy leaned over and kissed his forehead. "Hey, don't think about it right now. We've got a few hours. Let's get it on, a lot, then go spend some time with Mom and Paul. After that, maybe we can sneak off to the roof and have one more time and go back with our dicks good and sore."

"You are so childish," Nico said as Percy's hand made its way under his ass and gave a playful pinch.

"Are you saying you don't want to go home with our dicks good and sore?"

"That's not what I'm saying," Nico admitted. He ran his fingertips over the soft hair on Percy's chest.

Percy rolled over on top of Nico and smiled down at him with such fondness that, just for a minute, Nico felt a tug on his heart. He quickly buried it away. This would never be more than sex.

"Hey, beautiful," Percy whispered. Nico stared into Percy's eyes. They were such a pretty green, deep and rich, full of kindness. "You were spacing out on me there. Stay with me as long as you can, okay?"

Nico nodded and wrapped his arms tightly around Percy's shoulders. Percy bucked his hips down
into Nico. Nico moaned and arched his back.

"Let me fuck you, please, just one time?" Percy asked. "I'll be so gentle, Nico."

"Let me kiss you, Percy," Nico said.

"If I let you kiss me, would you let me fuck you?" Percy pulled one of Nico's hands from behind his back and kissed each finger.

"If I let you fuck me, would you let me kiss you?" Nico asked. "I think you'd be getting more out of the bargain."

"I really wanna fuck you and kiss you, you know that?" Percy murmured.

"I do. Me, too."

But they wouldn't. They both had boundaries that couldn't be crossed. Nico couldn't betray Jason fully and let Percy fuck him, and Percy couldn't betray Annabeth fully by letting Nico kiss his mouth. Over the course of the last two weeks, those had become the things each craved the most. Nico was sure he'd have more fantasies about what he hadn't done with Percy than anything he had.

As if reading his mind, Percy kissed his own fingers and placed them to Nico's lips. "A kiss to keep, Nico."

Nico repeated the gesture, pressing his fingers to first his mouth, then Percy's. "A kiss to keep."

Chapter End Notes

This is as gently fluffy and Valentine's Day appropriate as you'll probably ever get from me. I hope you enjoyed it. It's a chapter I have a soft spot for. :-)

I'm including a link to AO3's Feedback Fest in case anyone wants to participate. All AO3 is asking is for folks to write a comment on the link and mention at least three of their favorite works with a short blurb saying why they like each work. I left mine (on page 5 of the comments) and read through the others, only to find that only one other person had contributed a favorite PJO work. Within our fandom, we have lots of awesome works and authors who deserve recognition (and great, literate readers), and I thought some of you might want to participate.

Cheers, and to all of you who take the time to read, give kudos, and especially comment, thank you.
Tidings

Jason and Percy woke up early the next morning, and after they took turns having some private time in the bedroom, they settled in on the couch in the man cave and played video games. Percy felt the urge to watch HephaestusTV, but Jason, mindful of Percy's struggles, successfully convinced him they should use the time when Nico was asleep to play the most violent and sexist video game they could find. That logic was hard to argue since Nico would never let them play that sort of thing when he was around, and Percy and Jason very much liked to have him around. They passed a pleasant two hours shooting things, ogling half-dressed animated women, and trying not to blatantly ogle their naked friend while he slept.

Nico didn't make it easy for them to respect his privacy. He kept kicking off the comforter. Each time, Jason and Percy would pause their game and cover him back up. Five or ten minutes later, the comforter would be off again. After the seventh time, when it was Percy's turn to cover him back up, Percy patted his butt, kissed his cheek, and whispered, "Be good, baby."

Five minutes later, the cover was off.

Jason paused the game and took his time dropping from the couch to the mattress.

"I have half a mind to leave him ass naked," Jason said. "We could play and enjoy the view. It's like he's doing it on purpose to ruin our game." Despite his words, he tucked the blanket under Nico from both sides, trying to get it far enough under him to make wriggling out a little harder. He brushed his hand through Nico's hair, kissed his shoulder blade, and climbed back up on the couch.

They'd restarted the game and played for five minutes before Percy said, "I saw that, by the way."

Jason shot an enemy. "Saw what?"

"You kissed Nico."

Percy skewered a zombie.

"So what? You did, too, the last time you tucked him in. Help me beat this guy."

Percy and Jason combined forces to combat the zombie boss, who looked like a banker until a character refused to surrender their foreclosed home.

"He'd kick our asses if he knew we did that," Percy said. He swung his controller wildly. "Godhood's turning us soft."

"Bullshit," Jason said. He kicked the zombie banker in the testicles. "You were such a ridiculous pushover with him before, always babying him, trying to get your dick up his ass."

"That's not how it was, fucker." Percy jerked the controller and slapped Jason in the head. "It's called friendship. You wouldn't know anything about that."

Jason snorted. "If that's the way you treat your friends, I have no desire to be your friend."

"We used to be friends, Jason," Percy said quietly. Nico was beginning to wriggle under the comforter again.

"Yeah, another thing I fucked up. I meant what I said about how I'd like a second chance to be your
friend, Percy. You were right, about how I need to work on myself, but maybe—"

"Ugh! Slam his face, Jace!"

Jason slammed the banker's face, and he disintegrated. Percy whooped and held his hand up for a high five. Jason enthusiastically slapped Percy's hand.

"Shut the fuck up and quit playing that game," Nico mumbled and rolled around until the blanket came off.

Percy paused the game and climbed over Nico onto the far side of the mattress so he was facing Jason. He pulled the cover over Nico and himself. Jason could see Percy's hand running up and down Nico's back underneath the fabric of the comforter. Nico scooted closer to Percy and buried his head in Percy's chest. Jason's fists clenched as he watched, and he wondered if it would be sleazy of him to bracket Nico from the other side.

When Percy spoke again, the sadness in his voice was evident. "It always comes back to the same thing with you and me, doesn't it? How do we deal with the man in the middle?"

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When Nico woke for good that day, he found himself alone in the house. Jason and Percy were out toward the altars, playing catch with the football. Nico relished the solitude, and the other gods needed the emotional boost that comes with exercise.

After unsuccessfully trying to conjure clothes, Nico wrapped the comforter around himself and went out into the warm summer sun. He didn't mind the blanket, but it was bulky and he hated dragging it on the ground. When Jason saw Nico approaching, he fumbled his catch and had to chase after the ball. Nico was so distracting to him, wrapped as he was in the blanket, his head and a v of his chest the only exposed skin. Percy followed Jason's gaze and burst out laughing.

"Morning, Ratings Gold," Percy called. "Finally decided to show your pretty face?"

Nico scowled at Percy. He hated that nickname. All the same, he motioned Percy over.

"Clean me up and put some clothes on me, please," he said.

"I can do that kind of stuff, too, you know," Jason said.

"I'd rather Percy do it."

Percy laid his hand on the bare skin of Nico's neck and slid it down his chest. He didn't strictly need to touch Nico to clean and clothe him anymore, but the intimacy of what Nico let him do felt like something that required skin-to-skin contact. The intimacy was why Nico couldn't let Jason do it. He felt comfortable being vulnerable with Percy, but putting himself at Jason's mercy made Nico too nervous.

Jason watched helplessly as Nico was cared for by Percy.

"Okay," Jason said, after Percy was already finished. Nico discarded the blanket in his altar and sat at the entrance to watch the men play catch.
"Come play with us, Neeks," Percy said. He threw the ball to Nico, who caught it and tossed it to Jason. "I missed the whole 'Nico plays football' thing. Show me what you've got."

"I only played a little bit in high school. I got kicked out of school before the last game of the season, too. That sucked."

Percy snorted and caught Jason's pass. "Annabeth told me she heard you beat the shit out of someone."

"It wasn't a big deal," Nico said. Percy threw long on purpose, so Nico would have to give chase. He caught the ball in stride and whipped it back at Percy. "Don't be a douchebag and make me run like that. Boots and sand don't mix."

"You put the kid in the hospital, you told me," Jason said. He caught Percy's pass and lobbed the ball to Nico. "It was a big deal. He was sticking up for a younger kid who was being sexually harassed, Percy."

"Sounds like our Nico," Percy said. "Go deep, Jace."

Jason had never played sports. He had no interest in playing sports, though he liked to watch. However, he was a remarkably fit and athletic man. Percy threw the football as hard and far as he could, and Jason easily caught it. Nico stared at Jason in wonder. He'd seen his blond ex-lover fight and knew how muscled and strong he was, but he'd never seen Jason move so quickly and gracefully. He was enthralled.

When Jason caught the ball and threw it to Nico without looking, Nico stood still. The ball sailed over his head. Percy fetched the ball and tossed it to Jason, who was returning from the previous catch.

"Check your shirt, Neeks. You're drooling," Percy said.

Nico turned to say something rude to Percy and got hit in the shoulder with the ball.

"Oh, shit! Sorry, Neeks!" Jason said, jogging over. He was too close, too physical, and Nico took a step back. Jason had reached his hand out to Nico's shoulder, but withdrew it when he saw how wary Nico was. Jason found Nico's reluctance to be touched by him extremely discouraging.

"Damn it, Jason, you broke him," Percy said. He came over, too, and threw his arm around Nico, who hadn't stopped staring at Jason. "He remembered for a second that he wants to have sex with you."

"Fuck you, Percy," Nico snapped, though his hand wound around Percy's back and tucked up under his shirt. "I know I want to have sex with him. That's not my problem. You were great, Jace."

"What's your problem, then?" Jason asked. Nico's cheeks had colored, and Jason wanted to touch them. "Why won't you let yourself feel stuff?"

Nico started to turn away, but Percy tightened his grip and held him still.

"Answer him, Nico," Percy said gently. "We want you to be alright. Let us help."

"You can't help," Nico said. "Neither of you. I need to help you. I got you into this awful mess and ruined everything. I can't...ask you, either of you, to deal with more of my messes. I'm supposed to take care of you this time."
Percy pulled Nico into a tight hug, and Jason wrapped his arms around Nico from behind. He kissed Nico's hair while Percy kissed his cheeks.

"You're supposed to be the smart one, Nico," Jason said. "Have you not noticed that Percy and I want to help you, that we're kind of crazy for you?"

"You didn't ruin things," Percy added. He bent low and caught Nico's eyes. "Jason and I are in charge of our own lives, and you didn't force us into anything. I was a prick when we first landed, saying this stuff was your fault. It's not. I was scared and sad, and I took it out on you."

"Idiots," Nico said. "I don't want to have this conversation out here where any god who wants can listen in."

"Fine. Let's go in the bedroom," Jason said. He stopped hugging Nico but kept a firm hold on his arm. They were talking about this.

"Great idea, Jason," Percy said. He kissed Nico's cheek one more time and let him go. "Bedroom. Now."

"Wait."

"Nico--"

"There's stuff at the altars."

Jason and Percy swiveled the trio in that direction and saw that Nico was right.

The altars had become a bit of a grind. As Reyna had predicted, the three young gods had begun to receive mountains of food offerings. Even Nico, who'd been an outcast in the demigod world, had more food than he could possibly eat. Each day, he chose the fruit that came from Reyna and Hazel, while Percy and Jason picked out a few treats that caught their eye. The only thing that mattered to them about the altars anymore were the letters.

"It's Piper today," Nico said. He was surprised she'd written to him. Normally, she wrote to Percy. Percy and Jason crowded around Nico in his altar while he scanned the letter. After he read, he said, "Let's go in the bedroom."

Jason was happy. He'd been expecting Nico to fight with them about having a private conversation, so Nico suggesting a trip to the bedroom was a great start. It made him nervous, though, about what Piper's letter may contain.

"Weird," Percy said. He hooked his hand through Nico's elbow and guided him toward the house. He couldn't imagine why Piper would write to Nico.

In the bedroom, Nico curled up against the headboard while Jason and Percy sat attentively at his feet. His dark eyes raked over his companions, and he reined in his emotions. He opened his mouth and began to read.

"Dear Nico,

"I know I usually write to Percy, but something happened and Annabeth and I talked about it. Because this letter contains my thoughts and hers, we thought it'd be best to write to you instead of Jason or Percy. I'm sorry if it makes you uncomfortable.

"My mom came to visit me yesterday. She told me she's coming to see you guys. In her opinion, I
guess, you need her help. She says you, Nico, are stuck because you don't understand about love. I think that's a kind of obnoxious thing for her to say since you seem to understand just fine how to sleep with my boyfriend and make him fall all over himself to be with you."

Nico paused and looked up at Jason, who was fisting the sheets, and Percy. "There's more, but it's the same kind of stuff, not too flattering to any of the three of us, so I'm going to skip that part."

"'Anyway, Annabeth says I need to forgive and forget, Nico, but I can't. Not you or Jason. I don't know how Annabeth can stand to think about Percy after the way you two acted. I tried, when you first ascended, but the more things have dragged on I realize Jason's probably happier now, being with you however he wants, and that pisses me off."

"So, she's coming, like I said. She says she wants to fix your dysfunction, whatever the hell that means. Annabeth says it's probably because you're paralyzed with guilt, which is a dicky thing for you to develop all of a sudden, and she says you need to relax and stop trying to do what you think you should and do what helps you get through. Annabeth is a better person than me, I guess. The sick thing is maybe that means my mom is, too."

"I don't know, Nico. I feel so conflicted. You and Jason did a lot of bad things to me, but I did some bad things to you guys, too, especially Jason. I'm working on trying to forgive you. Maybe it's just a bad day for me. My mom messes me up. Annabeth says that's all it is, and by next week I'll be writing a letter telling you how sorry I am."

"At least now you know she's coming. I don't know how soon, but you should probably keep your guard up."

"'Best,"

"'Piper'"

The gods sat in silence and watched the way Nico's toes curled and uncurled on the bed. After several minutes, Nico let out a barking, hard laugh.

"Still want to talk about our feelings?"

"That was...harsh," Percy said. He put his hand on Nico's shin and didn't let himself be shaken off when Nico tried. "Annabeth's right. Piper's just--"

"Being honest," Nico said. He tried to squeeze himself farther back into the headboard. He felt responsible for ruining so many lives. "I hurt her, Annabeth, you two, Apollo, my dad, Ha--"

Jason lunged forward and pulled Nico down on the bed. He pinned him with his body and held Nico's hands above his head. "Who knows Piper better, me or you?"

"You, but--"

"And who knows you better, me or her?"

"You, but--"

"Then shut up and listen to me," Jason said. He glanced back at Percy, who pursed his lips and nodded. Jason refocused on Nico. "She's hurt because I don't love her. She's mad at you because you're the one I do love. She can't see how Annabeth can separate how she feels about what you and Percy have done from how she feels about you and Percy as people. She doesn't understand how Percy can love both Annabeth and you -- shut up and don't talk Percy, you know it's true -- or how
you can love me and him and my jackass brother. Because you do, Nico, and it's alright. The people you love, none of them are mad at you."

Nico opened his mouth, and Jason kissed him hungrily. He was rough and greedy and took what he wanted. Nico writhed underneath him, but when Jason let go of Nico's hands to hold his face and hip, Nico didn't throw him off. He tugged on Jason's shoulders and arched his back, forcing them closer. Jason broke away just before he lost control. His hand had slid under Nico's shirt, and he was dangerously close to wishing away Nico's clothes.

Jason got off the bed and wiped his mouth. "Does it feel like I'm hurt by or mad at you?"

Nico blushed and shook his head.

"No, it doesn't. I've listened to Percy excavate your mouth with his tongue for the last fucking week. It sure as hell doesn't sound like he's mad at you when he's moaning your name. Percy?"

Percy crawled up the bed and straddled Nico's hips. He gently took both Nico's hands and helped him sit. His green eyes reflected the torn nature of his feelings. "I'm not mad. I started kissing you because I was sad, and I'm still sad, but I've kept doing it because I love it. You mean so much to me, Nico. Part of the reason I'm so messed up is because I feel like I should be more faithful to Annabeth now than I ever was before, but I can't be because I want you so much."

Tentatively, because Jason had manhandled Nico, Percy leaned in and kissed Nico's neck. He let his lips move slow and soft, and when he made his way up to Nico's mouth, he let out a soft breath of relief when Nico opened up and let him in.

Nico was dizzy from the kisses. He'd never kissed two men in a row before -- at least, not that he remembered. Percy moaned in his mouth, and Nico pulled back.

Jason sat next to Nico on the bed and rubbed his back. "We have to talk about this stuff, Nico, for lots of reasons, including how we're going to be trapped here together for six months, at least, and we're three extremely horny guys. But more important, and first, we need you to believe us when we tell you that we're not mad and we will be here for you."

"I don't trust you," Nico whispered.

"But you trust me," Percy said. He and Nico made eye contact, and they both knew it was true. "This time, Nico, I trust Jason. He made so many mistakes, but, dude, he loves the hell out of you, and he hasn't done anything bad since we've been here. I see the way he looks at you. I trust him. Maybe I should have trusted him before."

It was hard for Percy and Jason to share a smile when they were each jealous of the place the other occupied in Nico's heart and they'd made out with him one right after the other, but Jason was so grateful for Percy's words. He patted Percy's back a couple of times, and Percy gave him a small smile.

"This is the weirdest thing that's ever happened to me, and I've been to Tartarus and been trapped in a jar and I can talk to dead people. You two are freaking me out, and we are not doing this." Nico gestured between the three of them.

Percy's brow furrowed. "Doing what?"

Nico let out a growl of frustration. "This! This touching each other, like in a group, stuff. It's creepy."

"For the last week, you've been making out with Percy while I've been pressed up against you. Or
are we pretending that didn't happen when it's daylight and we can see each others' faces?" Jason laughed because the whole experience was so absurd.

"We're doing the second thing," Nico said. "Now get off me, Percy, and quit touching me, Jason."

Percy started to move, but Jason said, "Wait."

"If you value your godly nuts you will get off me right now, Percy."

Nico didn't make empty threats, but Percy was still holding both his hands and straddling his legs, so there wasn't much he could do. Percy swung his body off Nico's lap, but he didn't let go of his hands.

"Just, talk to us, Nico," Jason said. "That's all I'm asking. It doesn't have to be about sex yet. Percy and I care about you the person, not you the sexpot."

"Ratings Gold." Percy smirked. "We like the sexpot part, too, don't get us wrong. It's just not the main attraction."

"You're both assholes," Nico said, but there was no venom behind it. He wanted to kiss them both again, but not while they were sitting right next to each other, and not in a way that caused moaning and writhing. He wanted his friends.

"We know," Jason said. He stopped rubbing Nico's back and leaned against the headboard. "Let's talk. We need to decide how to handle Aphrodite before she shows up."

"Oh, gods," Percy said. "I forgot about her holy skanky ass."

"How bad can she be? I mean, she's Cupid's mom, yeah, and he's a dickhead, but--"

"Bad." Jason and Percy both answered. Percy scooted back to the headboard on Nico's other side. Nico hesitated only briefly before joining his friends. He needed their information. He'd never officially met Aphrodite, and Percy and Jason had.

"Okay, so spill. What's she going to do to me?" Nico asked.

"Just talk, probably," Jason said. "Maybe give you a makeover, though I doubt even she would think there's something about you that could be made more perfect. She'll probably hit on you pretty hard, but you're used to that by now, surely."

"It's the talking that's the worst," Percy added. He bent his knees and laid them in Nico's lap to turn sideways and face Jason and Nico without giving up his proximity. "She likes epic love stories and plot twists. She told me when I was, like, thirteen that she'd make my love life interesting. What a freak."

"And she gushes. It's gross. Everything she says comes out either fake and flirty or matronly. She gives me whiplash. I never know where I stand with her." Jason had only met the goddess a couple of times, but each time had been unsettling. He wasn't looking forward to seeing her again.

"So we all agree, love stinks?" Nico laughed. Jason and Percy joined in the laughter and at the same time, like they'd choreographed it, laid their heads on Nico's shoulders. Nico picked up a hand from each of the men and kissed them in turn, and for the first time since they'd landed in Australia, it didn't feel forced or awkward. It felt natural and warm.
Percy washed his hands and shut off the light before stepping out of the bathroom and climbing back in bed next to Annabeth. He'd needed to take care of his morning wood before she woke up. She liked to give him oral in the morning, and blowjobs were what worried him most.

Annabeth rustled slightly as Percy slipped back under his blue covers. She turned over and laid her head on his chest before her breathing fell back into light snores. Percy chuckled. He may drool while he slept, but Annabeth snored. She didn't believe him, though. Percy had thought about recording her, just to prove it, but he doubted she'd appreciate his efforts. Better to let her enjoy her ignorance.

That's what he was doing with the cheating, too. If he told her, Annabeth would be hurt far out of proportion to the need for hurt. There wasn't any purpose to be served by her knowing.

Annabeth had always forgiven him before. He'd always 'fessed up pretty quickly or she'd found out somehow. She'd be mad and yell at him, but then they'd make up and talk about how the slate was wiped clean. When Annabeth forgave, she forgave 100%. Each time it would happen, they'd pretend like it had never happened before, would never happen again. Percy always intended for it to never happen again. He never planned to sleep with the girls he did, either. They were always random hot girls who happened upon his path and propositioned him. He was never the one who pursued them. But, if they struck his fancy and he had time right then, he could probably be persuaded. He'd never had any interest in seeing a girl more than once. Once they'd slept together, Percy found the girl about as appealing as powdered milk. Annabeth, despite her anger, could live with that. Her status as the love of his life was unchallenged.

Then Annabeth had told Percy that Nico was having sex. Nico. Percy had been shocked. And then he'd been curious. At Christmas last year, he'd been curious enough to touch, and he found he liked the way Nico fit in his arms. In the spring, he found he still liked the way Nico fit in his arms, but he also liked the way he looked and the way he felt in his bed. In the summer, he'd liked Nico's hot, snarky mouth, the things it said and what it could do. He'd finally had Nico. Hell, he'd even chased him in order to get him. It wasn't enough. He'd wanted more. He'd turned down invitations from hot girls because they couldn't possibly measure up to Nico. He'd been relieved when Nico left for school, but even the distance wasn't enough to cure Percy's longing. He dreamed about how Nico had touched him.

Then Christmas break had come, and Percy had thought, *Here's my chance. I'll sleep with him again and get over it*. He'd run into Nico on purpose the day he was set to leave for New York and thought he'd seduce him, bed him, be done. Shake the fascination. Instead, he'd invited him to his mother's for two weeks and loved every moment with him, in bed and out.

It wasn't enough. Percy wasn't done. He wasn't over it. They'd appeared on a rooftop a few blocks from Camp Jupiter the day they'd come back from New York, and Percy had held Nico so tightly. He'd held him until Blackjack was there on the roof with them, whinnying nervously. Percy had whispered the terrible truth in Nico's hair (thank the gods Nico hadn't heard) and hadn't been able to bear to watch Nico sink into the shadows. Percy had ridden back to camp and hadn't showered until it was almost time for Annabeth to return, just to have the smell of Nico on his skin as long as possible.
Three weeks later, the dreams were worse. The attachment was stronger. Percy had started thinking about Nico when Annabeth was touching him. She wouldn't forgive him these things, no matter how honestly he could tell her he still loved her best of all.

"Percy!" Annabeth yelled. She shot up to a sitting position and gasped for breath. Percy followed her and felt like shit. Fucking hell, he wasn't even noticing when she was having nightmares now? He wrapped his arms around her and rubbed her back.

"It's okay, Annabeth. I'm here," he said. He kept up the back rub until her breathing had calmed.

She lay back on the bed and looked up at him.

"Good morning, sunshine," Percy said.

Annabeth smiled at him and pulled him down for a kiss. It was brief. Annabeth was happy that Percy had started using breath mints in the morning, but she told him she was wary of pressing her luck.

"Hi, Seaweed Brain. Another nightmare?"

"Yeah. Sorry I didn't wake you in time." Percy hung his head. "What was it? Arai?"

"Yes. It's been two and a half years," Annabeth said. Her gray eyes were narrowed thoughtfully. "The nightmares will end soon, won't they?"

"You should ask Nico about it," Percy said. While they were in New York, Nico had witnessed a few of Percy's nightmares and taught him some things about controlling his dreams. The approaches Nico used had helped tremendously. Percy hadn't had a nightmare since. But he couldn't share the ideas with Annabeth, in case she realized, as she surely would because Percy was a sucky liar, where they came from. Percy wasn't even supposed to be talking to Nico. "Reyna told me he can manipulate dreams."

"That's a good idea," Annabeth said.

Percy detected no traces of suspicion or doubt in her voice. Good. That meant he'd made it through another night without talking in his sleep during his sex dreams.

"Jason and I visited the Hypnos cabin once," Annabeth said, "when you were missing. I was hoping they could help with his memories, and then we could find you. They were an annoying bunch. Nico will be much easier to deal with. I'll go see him later today."

"Tomorrow."

"Hmm? Why tomorrow?"

"Well, today's Hazel's appointment ceremony. Plus, it's his birthday." Percy had finally remembered after forgetting for far too many years. "By the way, do you think I can contact him via Iris message and wish him happy birthday? I'll keep it brief."

Annabeth frowned. "I think that's fine. Though we'll see him when Hazel is sworn in. You could wish him happy birthday then."

"I don't want to take away from Hazel's big day."

"Suit yourself." Annabeth shrugged. "Now, is there something I need to take care of for you this morning?"
Percy giggled nervously. This was the tricky part -- the part where he had to lie. "Uh, thanks, but no. I woke early this morning and couldn't wait."

"If you're sure?"

Percy nodded.

"I'm going to shower and head out," Annabeth said. She kissed Percy's cheek and left him for the bathroom.

Percy found himself missing Leo, crazy as it sounded. Annabeth wouldn't cook for Percy, and though he could cook for himself, he hadn't been able to figure out how to make bacon like Leo. That was probably because Leo cooked bacon with his hands. Percy wandered out to the main part of his house and made himself some blueberry pancakes. Annabeth never stayed for breakfast when she slept over. She seemed to prefer lighter fare than Percy made.

Percy had finished off the last of his pancakes when Annabeth rushed out of the hallway and toward the front door.

"Gotta go, Percy!" she called. "Meeting Piper in ten!"

"I'll see you at the ceremony? Or before?" Percy asked. Annabeth was tying her still-wet hair back in a ponytail. She already had the front door open.

"How about I come back by to get you, and we can go together?"

Percy smiled and blew Annabeth a kiss. "Sounds perfect."

Annabeth blew a kiss in return and closed the door behind her.

Percy put his dishes in the sink and walked back to the bedroom. He manipulated water from the fountain his dad had given him (dragged over in a U-Haul from Camp Half-Blood) and asked Fleecy to do him a solid.

A very asleep Nico appeared in Percy's field of view. He looked tiny in his big bed and fluffy white covers. Percy liked asking Fleecy when it came time for Iris messages because hers were always in HD and she seemed to give him a few extra seconds before requiring more payment. For this call, Percy definitely wanted the HD. Nico looked so much like he had on the mornings in New York when Percy had awakened first and watched him sleep (not that Percy did that, because that would be creepy). He wasn't doing it now, either. It's just that Nico's hair was wilder and curlier than usual in the mornings, which proved that he actually did try to tame the crazy stuff, an idea Percy found incredibly amusing. Fleecy's HD meant Percy could see the way Nico's black eyelashes made a perfect bow shape and how his mouth was slightly open. Percy could also see how red-brown Nico's nipples were, how shallow his belly button was, mmm, and how...Percy's face flushed.

"Nico! Wake up, sleepy baby!"

Nico didn't wake.

"Hey, birthday boy!"

Nothing.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, I can see your big dick, really wish we could screw!" Percy sang, and he saw Nico's face flush pink and a smile creep across his mouth until it
practically covered his face. "You awake now?"

"Nope," Nico said. He turned over.

"Now I'm getting a great view of your ass," Percy babbled. "How many people know you have freckles arranged in the shape of Orion's Belt back there? I sucked hickeys around each freckle on Christmas Eve."

Nico laughed and rolled back over. Percy was disappointed to see him cover his penis with the sheets.

"No fair, you're covering up some of my favorite stuff."

"It's my birthday, not yours, Percy." Nico smiled. "You should be putting on a show for me."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Did you get me some other birthday present?" Nico asked.

"No. My pretty face."

Nico sighed and pretended to examine his nails. "I like your dick better."

"I really like how much you like my dick. Wanna see how much my dick is liking our conversation? Has its own little brain. Responds well to your sexy voice."

"You're such a perv, Percy." Nico shook his head, though his voice had dropped. "Let me see."

Percy had his shirt off and his pants undone when he heard a door bang on Nico's end. Nico's head whipped around then turned back to Percy in a panic.

"Shit! It's Hazel! Damn it!" Nico said. "This was going to be my favorite present. See you, hot stuff."

Nico surged forward, his hardening dick on full display, swiped his hand through the message, and disappeared. Percy laughed wildly and shrugged his pajamas off, already halfway through his second Nico fantasy of the day.

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Hazel belonged in Praetor robes, the deep purple so regal when paired with her lovely darker skin and gold eyes. She was still angry at Jason, he could tell, but he was so proud of her. She'd come a long way from that scared little girl she'd been when Nico had first brought her to Camp Jupiter and asked them to accept her.

Frank stood on her left. It was strange now, after over two years, to see him in the Senate chambers in a plain white toga. Reyna stood to Hazel's right, also clad in the purple toga of the Praetor. Jason wondered if Reyna would ever retire from public service. He knew she hated the job, but he also knew no one could do it as well as her.

Nico stood to Reyna's right, tall and handsome in his black toga. He was standing a touch closer to Reyna than was strictly necessary, and his hand occasionally flitted to her back. Jason tried not to
stare too long at his face or at the spot where the muscles of his shoulder met his biceps, the line
between the two clearly visible. He was seventeen today. Jason wanted to be his lover again.

Jason stood a little apart from the crowds who'd come out to watch. He felt, as he usually did these
days, like an impostor. The feeling was especially pronounced in these ornate purple robes. He was
no Pontifex Maximus. He wasn't a worthy spiritual guide for this camp. Hell, he wasn't a worthy
spiritual guide for himself.

He glanced at the crowd. Piper stood about three rows back. Her eyes were red, and she glared at
him before shifting her glare to Nico. Nico seemed blissfully unaware. He only had eyes for his sister
and Reyna. Jason knew that Nico and Reyna were playing the same game he'd been asked to play
with Piper. The difference was Nico and Reyna were both aware it was a game and they hadn't
broken any hearts to play it.

"Snap out of it, Pontifex," Percy whispered next to him. Jason could hear the derisiveness with
which Percy said the word Pontifex. Percy was mad that Jason had held out so long before endorsing
Hazel, too. All of them were: Hazel, Frank, Reyna, Percy, Nico. Jason couldn't blame him. He
wondered when it had begun to require so much courage simply to do the right thing. Percy was
whispering in his ear again. "Get out there, asshole. You've kept her waiting long enough."

Percy shoved Jason's back, which did nothing to move a person as strong and heavy as Jason, but it
did make him mad. Jason briefly glared at Percy before he approached the dignitaries assembled at
the front of the Senate floor.

"Romans," Jason's voice carried over the crowd and it quieted with reverence. "Today, we are
gathered to administer the Oath of the Praetor to Praetor-elect Hazel Levesque. Please join me in
welcoming our assembled dignitaries. With us today are the Ambassador of Pluto, Nico di Angelo,
former Praetors Frank Zhang and Perseus Jackson--"

Percy crossed his eyes and grinned at Nico; Jason could hear Nico laugh quietly behind him.

"--and our esteemed Praetor, Reyna."

Jason rolled his eyes at Reyna's unwillingness to be addressed by her full name. It was the one
childish thing she did. Reyna eyed him dangerously, and he continued.

"Hazel, please place your hand on the Standard."

Hazel stepped forward and grasped the eagle Standard of the Twelfth Legion Fulminata.

"Please repeat after me: I, Hazel Levesque, swear my loyalty to the Twelfth Legion Fulminata and
the citizens of New Rome. In all matters, the concern of the Legion and my people shall be my
highest priority."

Hazel's high, sweet voice sounded powerful and brave. "I, Hazel Levesque, swear my loyalty to the
Twelfth Legion Fulminata and the citizens of New Rome. In all matters, the concern of the Legion and my people shall be my highest priority."

"I will serve as Praetor to the best of my capacity, honoring all rules and laws that govern our great
society, and I will uphold the honor of the Legion until my death."

"I will serve as Praetor to the best of my capacity, honoring all rules and laws that govern our great
society, and I will uphold the honor of the Legion until my death."

Jason stepped next to Hazel and faced the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor as Pontifex
Maximus to present to you the new Praetor of the Twelfth Legion Fulminata, Hazel Levesque. Senatus Populusque Romanus."

As one, the crowd replied, "Senatus Populusque Romanus," then broke out in thunderous applause. Jason bowed and retreated, leaving the spotlight to shine directly on Hazel.

He took his spot next to Percy while Hazel quieted the crowd and gave a brief speech. She was composed and eloquent. Jason was sure she and Nico had written the speech together. It was formal and precise, using the kind of language that made Nico so effective when he spoke in front of the Romans. It beat the hell out of Frank's speech, which had been memorable only for how many times he had said "uh" and for the fact that he hadn't vomited. Percy's speech probably had consisted of the words, "Hey, fucking A this is awesome! Let's eat stuff!"

Jason split his time between respectfully watching Hazel speak and staring at her big brother. Nico didn't glance in his direction. He hadn't the entire time. Jason wondered what the assembled Romans would think if they saw the way Jason stared. They'd probably believe he was looking at his two friends, both Nico and Reyna. At most, they might think he was jealous because Nico had Reyna. It was almost comical how biased toward hetero relationships people's thought patterns were. Jason rarely thought about it, but the idea that people wouldn't notice the want in his eyes when he looked at Nico wasn't explainable any other way.

Piper would see it for what it was. Their fight this morning had been one for the ages. They were now taking "a break." Jason could almost feel the disapproving eyes of his father boring into him. He'd endorsed a daughter of Pluto as the new Praetor, and he planned to defy the wishes of the partner Hera had specifically chosen for him. Jason felt a little sick, but he also felt proud that he had done at least a couple things right recently. It may be too late with Nico, but at least he hadn't been too late to salvage what little he could do for Hazel.

Clapping erupted all around him, and he realized Hazel's speech was over. He joined in the clapping and was surprised when Hazel included him in the round of hugs she gave to the "dignitaries" sharing the stage with her. He got the shortest hug, but it was warm and soft. He'd take it.

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Walking home from the party following Hazel's inauguration, Nico thought this birthday was alright. It certainly wasn't the worst birthday he'd ever had. That was the one right after Bianca had died. He'd turned eleven years old alone, homeless, and devastated, worried he'd either starve or have to steal to get food. He'd stolen, in the end, because being a thief was awful, but being dead like Bianca was worse.

The best birthday had been last year, when he and Jason had sneaked out of camp and gone to a fancy Italian restaurant in New York City and a geeky, obscure game shop that sold rare Mythomagic decks. Nico hadn't bought anything, even though Jason wanted to pay for something, but browsing the old figurines and decks had been so fun. It had brought back memories of Nico and Bianca, younger and innocent and happy. Jason had held Nico's hand the entire time, and when they'd left, he'd held him for an hour while he cried. They'd flown to a secluded meadow afterward and made love under the stars. Nico had allowed the idea that he would build a lifetime of memories like that with Jason. He'd been so wrong.

But this birthday a year later, it wasn't so bad. He'd gotten to see his sister become Praetor. Hazel
was an amazing person, and Nico loved her completely. She was different from Bianca and Reyna, but she shared their passion and strength. What he loved most about her was her compassion and decency. He loved the way she looked out for him and Frank, yes, but it was the way she treated people who lived at the margins of their society, guys like Don, the faun who was always begging for handouts. Nico had gotten a little tired of the constant asks, but Hazel always had a smile for Don. The camp would be better for having a person like her in charge.

Hazel, Frank, and Reyna had come over right after the wonderful morning call from Percy. Why any of them thought Nico was a morning person boggled his mind. Still, seeing them, opening their thoughtful presents in his own small home, had made Nico feel loved. Maybe it wasn't the romantic love he longed for and had all but given up on, but the familial love they provided made him feel warmer and more secure than he had since Percy's mom had wrapped her arms around him and kissed his cheek one last time over Christmas.

Best and worst of all, he'd managed not to spend the entire day dwelling on being without Jason. It was unsettling, the idea that he had lived this birthday without Jason's love and come through it alright. He wanted it to hurt more. It hurt tremendously, of course, but he was worried his pain was fading, and right now, his pain was all that connected him to Jason. He should want the pain to fade. He should want to get over Jason and move on.

Nico pulled out his keys as he reached his villa. It was dark and quiet here. Nico liked it. At his request, Reyna had assigned him the smallest and most remote villa possible. All his classmates lived in the barracks, but Nico was afforded this special privilege because of who he was. He didn't want more special privileges than were absolutely necessary, and his needs for living were pretty simple: A bed, a couch, a bookshelf, a bathroom, a well-stocked kitchen. That was it. A closet, he supposed, for the mountain of clothes Apollo had given him.

Nico stopped fiddling with his keys and touched the bracelet on his wrist. He hadn't told anyone, but Apollo still sent him clothes. Anytime a shirt or pants got ragged, too small, or stained, it would disappear and a new, more adult item would take its place. Nico was flattered but also a little scared of the attention. Hidden away in a rolled up pair of socks was a box that contained the other gifts Apollo had sent: a skull earring, a pair of designer sunglasses, an expensive watch, a black ring. Nico had been tempted to wear the ring and the watch, but in the end he'd decided against it. The gifts were lovely, but they felt like an attempt to claim ownership of him, and Nico didn't want anyone to believe he was property that could be bought and controlled.

The door creaked open as Nico gave it a push, and he stepped inside and flipped on the lights. His bare living room, with its warm wood floors, curved green couch, and low black bookcase, felt welcoming, and Nico breathed in the scent of lavender. Persephone had given him several plants over the last couple of months. At least, he assumed they were from Persephone. They'd appeared in the villa without explanation, but they flourished as though enchanted even though Nico rarely took care of them. Nico had made a special trip to eat with the legion the day after the first plant had appeared so he could burn an offering of thanks to his stepmother. Every other week or so, he'd come home to a new plant. Today, he'd come to make breakfast and found a peace lily in a heavy black planter on his kitchen counter. He knew it was a gift from Persephone and his father, and the idea that they'd jointly thought of him made him smile.

A soft tapping noise came from his bedroom, and Nico drew his sword. He hoped it was his father coming to wish him happy birthday in person, though Hades had never done that. Every birthday since the Battle of Manhattan, Nico would reach in his pocket for something and find an envelope with a small but expensive gift and a handwritten note that always said the same thing: I am proud of you. That phrase from his father would always matter.
Nico crept closer to his bedroom door and flung it open. A dark figure lurked near the dresser, so Nico pointed his sword in that direction and threw on the lights. He was so surprised by his visitor that he dropped his sword.

"No."

"Nico, I--"


"Nico--"

Nico stepped forward and grabbed Jason's wrist, trying in vain to pull him toward the living room.

"No! I had a decent birthday. I didn't fall apart."

When yanking Jason by the wrist didn't produce results, Nico stepped behind him and began pushing the small of his back.

"I went to Hazel's ceremony and listened to your voice and the urge to rip my heart out of my body and throw it on the floor at your feet for you to stomp on was so much less intense than it's been since you ruined me. Get out!"

"Nico--"

Nico stepped back a few feet and gave a running shove. Jason stumbled forward.

"Leave me alone!"

Jason turned as Nico was preparing another lunge, so Nico had to pull up short to keep from running into Jason's chest. He felt awkward and wrong-footed. Jason reached out a hand to Nico's shoulder, and Nico slapped it away.

"Happy birthday, Neeks."

"Thanks," Nico panted. He was worried he was going to have a panic attack. "Get the hell out."

Jason left Nico's bedroom without a word. Nico took a steadying breath before crossing to his doorway and picking up his sword. Gods, Jason had some nerve breaking into his house! How could he act like he cared, after all the things he'd done and the fresh ways he'd carved away at Nico's heart? The original betrayal was bad enough, but now there were months of broken offers and treating Nico like he was something vile, to be avoided and shunned. It was too much.

Nico left his bedroom to get a drink of water and found Jason sitting on his couch. He ignored the lump of blond beauty and pulled a cup down from his kitchen cabinet. The water from the tap tasted clean and cold. Nico set his cup on the counter and walked back to the living room. He stood as far from Jason as possible without backing against a wall.

"What do I need to do to get you to leave my house as quickly as possible?" he asked. He could use his powers and send so much fear through Jason that there wouldn't be an issue, but he couldn't bring himself to hurt Jason that way. He could fight him. He'd probably win because Jason wouldn't fight back. He wouldn't hurt Jason that way, either. He could tell Jason he'd been sleeping with Percy. That would get him out of here. No. He'd rather use his sword. Nico sat on the opposite end of the couch from Jason and waited.
"I'm sorry I broke into your house," Jason said. If he was looking at Nico, Nico didn't know. The only way to be sure was to look at Jason, and Nico wasn't going to do that. Jason's voice was quiet, resigned. "I was pretty sure that if I knocked on your door you would refuse to see me."

"What will get you to leave?" Nico growled.

"Will you have lunch with me tomorrow in New Rome?"

Nico was so surprised by the question that he forgot he wasn't supposed to look at Jason. Immediately, when Nico saw Jason's face, he wished he'd remembered not to look. Nico rubbed his chest and checked his fingers to see if blood from his broken heart had seeped outside his body.

"You don't go near me in public, remember? I'm the filth you can't associate with. Piper will--"

"Piper and I are taking a break," Jason murmured.

"You're toying with me, Jason." Nico went to get more water. "You had some little fight with her so you think you'll come around, get some sex, maybe hang out with me a bit, and then she'll get over it, or daddy will tell you to fall in line, and I'll be your afterthought again."

"You agreed to it, Nico," Jason hissed. "You agreed to sleep with me and meet me in secret. Don't act like that's all my fault and you're this poor neglected, used boy. You could have said no."

"I did say no! I said no at the very beginning!"

"And then you said yes."

Nico couldn't deny it. He had, of course. He'd asked Jason to go to San Francisco. He'd told Jason he wanted him. He'd said that he'd do it as long as they did it on his terms. He was the one that couldn't abide by the terms.

"I was wrong." Nico dropped his shoulders and closed his eyes. "I can't live with this. I've been so alone, Jason, and seeing you every day, seeing you and Piper and Percy and Annabeth and knowing you all would act like you'd never met me if we passed on the streets, it hurts so much. I thought that I'd be able to handle it. It was easier when I was gone because it wasn't getting shoved in my face all the damned time. What good is being your lover if I'm not allowed to be your friend?"

"Is that why you didn't ask me to come away with you after Halloween?" Jason asked. Nico chanced another look at him. He hated the way Jason's eyes looked, hurt and uncertain.

"Yes." Nico's voice sounded strangled. He wished he could make it sound stronger. "And for Hazel. You treated her like shit. Just an extension of the way you treat me, I guess."

"That's not fair. I wasn't trying to hurt her." Jason's hand clenched on his knee.

"No, you weren't. You were trying to help yourself. My Jason wouldn't ever put his political persona over doing the right thing for a friend."

Jason got up and advanced toward Nico. Tears gleamed in his eyes.

"I'm still your Jason."

Nico brushed past him, anything to get away, but found he had nowhere to go. For the first time, he wished his villa was larger. He stood in front of a wall and laid his forehead on it.

Jason approached. Nico could hear soft steps come closer. The warmth of Jason's body invaded the
cool temperature that was Nico's companion and comfort. He shuddered and closed his eyes when Jason's fingers brushed the edges of his curls.

"I'm still your Jason," Jason repeated. "I told Piper I was done ignoring you. I couldn't take hurting you like that anymore. I'm sorry I ever agreed to it. I backed Hazel because it was better late than never. I want to be the person we talked about -- the one who does the right things. I'm sorry I didn't stay here over Christmas, or at least talk to you about it before I left. I was feeling hurt because you hadn't sent for me. Will you please go to lunch with me tomorrow? I love you, Nico, so much."

"If I agree to go to lunch with you tomorrow, will you leave?" Nico asked. He didn't turn around.

"Yes."

"Then I'll go. But Jason?"

"Nico?"

"Don't ever tell me you love me again. What you do to me isn't love, and I want to believe that someday someone will say those words to me and I'll know they feel about me the way I feel about you."

Nico's front door closed, and Jason was gone.

***

Nico had just stepped out of the bathroom after his shower when he heard a knock on the door. He was pretty sure it was too early to be Jason, so he thought maybe Hazel or Reyna had come by for some Sunday morning tea or company. When he opened the door with a big smile on his face, he was not expecting to see a halo of perfect blond hair around a tanned, lovely face with piercing gray eyes. His smile fell.

"Annabeth? What do you need?"

"Hi, Nico," Annabeth said brightly. Nico watched as her calculating eyes slid down his body. He wished he'd thrown on a shirt. He wished Apollo sent him clothes that didn't hug his skin. He wished the sweatpants at least came up a little higher on his hips. He wished he'd worn underwear.

"Was there something I could do for you?"

Annabeth's eyes snapped back to his face. "Can I come in?"

Nico didn't have a reason to say no, other than she had ignored him for six months. Of course, he'd slept with her boyfriend. Six months penance for that indiscretion seemed more than fair. He wondered how many times he'd slept with Percy while they were in New York. At six months a pop, he'd never get to speak to Annabeth again. Nico stood to the side and gestured for Annabeth to enter. Her bare arm grazed his stomach as she made her way inside. Nico knew his doorway wasn't that narrow. She'd done it on purpose.

"So," Nico said as he closed the door and followed Annabeth inside. He opened the blinds and flooded the room with light. He had a bad feeling about the imminent conversation and wanted to be able to clearly see Annabeth. "What brings you by?"
"Would you mind, um?" Annabeth gestured to his torso. She wanted him to put a shirt on, Nico gathered.

"Why?"

"It's distracting." To illustrate her point, Annabeth slipped her eyes all the way down his frame. "You make it hard to concentrate."

Nico wasn't buying it. He'd had enough experience by now to know how people looked at him when they desired his face or body. Their eyes glazed. They blushed. Girls bit their lips or twisted their hair or gave some unconscious sign. Annabeth did none of those things, except rake her eyes over him. She wanted him to put on a shirt to set the tone for their conversation; she wanted to be in control.

"If it's that distracting, don't look." Nico smirked at the fleeting irritation that crossed her expression.

"Fine," Annabeth snapped. She let her eyes wander a third time and spoke in a sultry voice. "I like it better this way, Nico. You'll give me fantasies for months."

Damn it. Nico knew he blushed. He could see Annabeth’s face alight with victory.

"Do you want to keep playing for world domination, or do you want to cut out the bullshit and tell me why you're here?" Nico asked.

Annabeth laughed, warm and genuine, and that was her greatest weapon against him. Nico liked her. He always had. He'd always wanted her friendship and approval.

"I suppose we can cut the bullshit, Nico, but I doubt you'll like what I have to say," Annabeth said, her eyes growing serious. "I know you've been having sex with Percy again."

"Do you want something to drink?" Nico saw no sense in denying it. The fact that Annabeth wasn't attacking him was either reassuring or extremely troubling. They might as well be comfortable.

"Water, please," Annabeth said. She took a seat in the middle of his couch.

Nico brought out two cups of water and sat next to her. Their knees touched. Nico had to fight to keep from crossing his arms over his chest.

"So I slept with Percy again, you were saying."

"Yes. I know he took you home with him over Christmas. Thanks for making him use breath mints in the morning, by the way. He never believed me when I told him how bad his morning breath was. Or maybe you had better ways of motivating him."

"He talked in his sleep?" Nico ignored the implication of Annabeth's last sentence.

"Yes. Seems like you are quite the impressive fuck, Nico."

Nico didn't take the bait.

"Oh, and Piper told me, too, though that wasn't necessary. Seems sweet, sweet Jason was feeling guilty that he left you high and dry over Christmas, and Piper agreed to call camp to check on you. Imagine her surprise when she sent an Iris message and found you naked in Percy's arms. Annabeth watched him carefully, and he couldn't conceal his reaction. Oh, gods, if Jason found out, it would kill him.
"She hasn't told Jason." Annabeth supplied the information like she’d read Nico’s mind. Was that anger finally creeping into her voice? "I know he's what you really care about, the one you love? She remembers the way he reacted, you know, the first time you slept with my boyfriend? She thinks he'd be so jealous that he'd run into your open arms."

Nico swallowed heavily and closed his eyes.

"Piper's helped me see the emotional side of things much more clearly," Annabeth continued. "See, she's too close to Jason to realize a few things. The first is that you never stopped sleeping with him. You two have your little trysts, and she's none the wiser. The second thing she hasn't realized is that knowing you had sex, more sex, lots of sex, with Percy would absolutely devastate Jason. He'd wash his hands of you and be done. He could forgive the first time because he knew you were doing it for him. This time, well, the reasons were more complicated, weren't they, Nico? Jason wouldn't understand. He wouldn't forgive you."

"I'm sorry, Annabeth," Nico breathed. He opened his eyes, and a tear ran down his cheek. "I won't touch Percy again. Please, I'll do whatever you want, but don't tell Jason."

"Gods, Nico, he has you so messed up," Annabeth said, and Nico was surprised to hear real sympathy in her voice. "I hate that you had so little respect for me that you slept with my boyfriend, but I hate Jason more for the ways he messes with your head. Do you understand that he'd be furious with you for something he's been doing with Piper for nine months now? He was surely sleeping with her almost as much as you were sleeping with Percy during the time you were in New York. Do you understand that he chose his dad and his ambitions over you?"

"He's confused," Nico whispered. He didn't ask how Annabeth knew so much about his and Jason's secret relationship. "He doesn't mean to hurt me."

"He's incredibly good at it to be doing it on accident, then." Annabeth rested her hand on the bracelet on Nico's wrist. "I don't want to tell Jason. Regardless of how it may seem right now, I don't want to hurt you."

"I'll do whatever, Annabeth, I promise. He can't know."

Annabeth sighed. "What I want to ask is something you'd do anyway."

"I will. Percy and I already said we were done. We agreed it was only for the time we were away. He loves you so much, Annabeth. He doesn't want to hurt you any more than I want to hurt Jason."

"I don't want you to stop sleeping with Percy."

Nico's head shot up, and he looked at Annabeth in surprise. Her eyes were serious. What? "Excuse me?"

"Keep sleeping with him, please."

Nico blinked rapidly and shook his head to clear it. He spoke slowly. "You want me to have more sex with Percy?"

Annabeth nodded.

"Is this some kind of weird fetish thing, because I don't-"

"No, silly." Annabeth laughed. "Shut up and listen for a moment, and I'll explain."
Nico ran his hand over his face and neck while Annabeth repositioned herself, pulling her leg up between them on the couch. Once she was done moving, she pushed Nico’s collarbone until he sat all the way back against the cushions. He was done grappling with her for control of the conversation. Instead, he was reeling from worry about Jason finding out and shock over Annabeth’s request.

"Percy's a great boyfriend in a lot of ways, and I think I could be in the kind of love with him that lasts forever." Nico was surprised that Annabeth considered that statement less than a complete certainty. "But he has some flaws, like all of us do. The biggest one is that he is not a faithful boyfriend."

Annabeth paused, probably to let the idea sink in. After the summer incident, Jason had told Nico that Percy said he cheated a lot, but Nico hadn't quite believed it. It seemed so improbable. Percy loved Annabeth.

"You seem shocked," Annabeth said. "You are so naive for a guy that's cheating with two attached men. Don't hang your head. You love Jason tremendously, and he manipulates you into doing things. Percy, this Christmas, well, he's everything that Jason's not, right? He makes you laugh and your fights are silly and kind of fun. He gave you family and warmth and closeness when you have been so desperately alone for too long. You don't have to think about the bad stuff when you're with him, and sometimes, when you're with Jason, the bad stuff is all you can think about. Don't feel guilty, except that you hurt me and Piper."

"I should have found someone else," Nico mumbled. "Someone unattached, if I wanted some physical comfort."

"You don't work that way, Nico." She rested her hand back on his wrist and squeezed. "You are loyal and romantic. You wouldn't sleep with just anyone. It would have to be someone for whom you have deep feelings."

"I don't have deep feelings for Percy. It's just sex."

"That's bullshit," Annabeth said. "I'm not saying you love him the way you love Jason. But you care about him. You want him to be happy. You admire him. You wish he'd be your friend."

Nico watched the muscles in Annabeth's forearm move as she traced the edges of his bracelet. Her skin was almost as tan as Percy's. "Okay, so all of that is true. I do care for him, Annabeth. But I don't want to sleep with him again."

"You do want to, and I know it. Now let me finish."

Nico nodded. Annabeth was right. He wanted to sleep with Percy more.

"Percy's a cheat. He has wandering eyes. He feels terribly guilty about it, and he almost always tells me afterward. I forgive him because the pros of our relationship outweigh the cons," Annabeth said. "Now, a funny thing happened after this summer. He stopped cheating. Nico, if he followed his usual patterns, he would have cheated at least twice between the times he was with you. And I would have known. I always know. But he didn't. See, he has feelings for you, too. That's never happened before. He never wants a girl more than once. But you, he never stopped talking about you in his sleep. When I told him you were back at camp in November, his face was so torn between complete excitement and utter terror that I'd realize what he wanted from you."

"So you want me to sleep with him so he doesn't sleep with a bunch of other people?"
It was Annabeth's turn to nod. "I'd rather have him sleeping with someone he cares about, one someone, than a bunch of girls who are meaningless fucks to him. I'm not asking you to go out of your way, Nico. You don't have to seek him out. He'll find you when he can't take it anymore."

"How do you know I'm not a meaningless fuck to him?" Nico asked. He climbed off the couch and faced away from Annabeth for a second before he turned around. "You said it yourself. I'm gorgeous and an amazing lay. That's what people want from me."

"Oh, honey," Annabeth said. She stood and wrapped her arms around him. "You are so much more than that. Do you know why I like you?"

"Probably not the fuck part."

Annabeth chuckled and kissed his cheek. "No, but you are too attractive for your own good. I liked you when you were young and scrawny and your ears stuck out way too far. You're kind and smart. You love your sisters. You treat people with respect. You seek out the people who need help, and you help them."

Nico buried his face in her soft hair.

"Percy and Jason liked you then, too, Nico. Accept that even though things aren't very good right now for you, that doesn't mean you aren't very good."

"I slept with your boyfriend."

"This is me forgiving you."

"I think you used a double negative back there."
Annabeth poked Nico's side. "I can't forgive grammar corrections, Nico."

Nico laughed, despite his sadness. He pulled away and considered Annabeth carefully.

"Can you please let Percy see me socially again? I miss both of you."

"I can't," Annabeth said. She walked to the door. "I wish I could, but if I do, Percy will get suspicious. He can't know that I'm okay with this arrangement. In a weird way, he'd find it some kind of betrayal."

"So we're both in love with hypocrites? They betray us and expect loyalty in return?"

"Seems like it. I'm sorry things can't be different. If Percy ever asks, I was here for help with nightmares."

"Learn to control your dreams, Annabeth. Don't let them be in charge."

"Thanks. You're a good boy. Take care, Nico."

***

Nico had been in public with Jason for twenty minutes. Jason had shown up at Nico's door promptly at noon. They'd walked into New Rome and sat down at the first restaurant they'd come to. They'd
given the server, a chipper girl in her late teens, their orders. They'd both drank half their cups of water. They hadn't said a single word to each other.

Nico had seen mortals in restaurants playing on their little phone gadgets instead of talking to their dinner companions. He almost wished he had a phone. It had to be easier than staring across the table at the lying, cheating guy he loved, who was in turn staring back at the lying, cheating guy he loved. They deserved each other. He was as big a dick as Jason was these days. Maybe Nico should take Jason out of the restaurant and into a shadow. He could travel them back to his villa and bend over, and they could have sex and pretend they were fine for another couple days. That would be easier than this, too.

What Nico wanted most was the return of their friendship. He'd have to be willing to put in some work and withstand a little discomfort.

"So, um, you did a good job at the swearing in yesterday," Nico said. He hated this. Conversation had never been his strength. He remembered Percy's vain attempts at trying to teach him how to talk to people. Maybe he should have tried harder to learn something.

"Thanks. I didn't do much."

Jason looked beautiful. His hair was a little longer than he usually kept it, so his normally slightly spiky bangs hung down a bit. He was wearing nicer clothes. His jeans were more fitted and a darker color. His t-shirt was neither purple nor orange. It was a bright, snug v-neck tee that matched his eyes. Jason's biceps bulged as he lifted his water to his mouth. Nico watched the gesture and felt sure that Jason could see how much he wanted to spring across the table, climb in his lap, and kiss him silly.

"It was good. Thanks for throwing your support behind Hazel." Nico finished the sentence in his head. It contained a few curses and a suggestion of where Jason could stick his out-sized ego that had kept him from supporting Hazel from the start.

Jason watched him impassively. Nico wanted to fix Jason's glasses and run his hands over Jason's face. He wanted Jason to hold his hand. He wanted, he wanted, he wanted.

"I missed you," Jason said. His stare was so focused.

The table legs screeched across the floor as Nico smacked a leg with his bouncing knee. He cringed and looked up to find Jason's eyes still on his face as though nothing had happened.

"Don't say that. I shouldn't have agreed to this."

"It's the truth. I missed you."

Nico shoved his chair back from the table, walked into a shadow, and disappeared.

***

Three days later, Jason was waiting for Nico when he left the high school. Nico didn't acknowledge his presence and kept walking. Jason fell in step next to him.

"Can I walk you home?"
"No."

Jason matched Nico stride for stride. They walked quickly and wordlessly until they stood at Nico's front door.

"Can I come in?"

Nico shut the door in Jason's face.

Jason showed up outside Nico's school every day for the next two weeks. He always asked to walk Nico home. Nico always said no. Jason had stopped asking to be invited inside. They'd get to Nico's door and Jason would say "Goodbye" and walk away. On the weekends, Jason would come by and ask Nico to go to lunch with him. Nico always refused. Jason didn't push. But he didn't stop, either.

The third Monday that Nico found Jason waiting outside his school, he took a different path. Jason silently followed. They walked in the opposite direction of Nico's villa, through the entirety of Camp Jupiter, and out the Caldecott Tunnel entrance. Nico walked four blocks into the city with Jason at his side. He turned down an alleyway and grabbed the hem of Jason's shirt. Without a word, Nico traveled them away.

The valley he dropped them into was lush, green, and deserted. Nico dropped to his knees in the shade of the tree he'd landed in and waited while Jason carefully sat with his legs crossed, facing the same direction, not looking at him.

"What do you want?" Nico asked. "You show up and follow me, but you don't talk to me."

"You say no to whatever I say." Jason shrugged. "I figured I'd stop giving you reasons to say no. But I'm not staying away from you, Nico."

"But what do you want?" Nico snapped off a few blades of grass and worked to split each blade into two pieces. "You can't get that much enjoyment from making me uncomfortable for ten minutes every day."

"I want to talk to you, and I want you to listen."

"What, like when we went to lunch? You didn't say anything, and the one thing you did say was a fucking lie." Nico tried to match up the pieces of grass, to fit the severed halves back and make a whole again. It was harder to do than it seemed.

"I wasn't lying. I don't lie to you anymore," Jason said.

"Ha. That's rich. I love the 'anymore' you've tacked on there. I suppose it's true," Nico mused. "You haven't technically lied, that I know of, since we broke up. Maybe it's that the truth is so ugly. I'm in love with someone who would rather destroy me than live with his father's disapproval. And, because that's not bad enough, I let you. That's the worst part. I agreed to be your dirty little secret. I made myself cheap."

Nico abandoned the blades of grass and laid back on the ground.

"I don't know how to fix things," Jason whispered. Nico almost didn't hear him.

"You do. You won't do it."

"I thought I could manage it. I thought maybe I would fall out of love with you and in love with her, if I gave it time. I thought maybe seeing you at the Ritz would be enough. I thought I could ignore
you and not have it tear at my heart. I've been wrong every step of the way. The only thing that
could make me happy is having you back." Jason laid back on the ground and faced Nico. "I want
you back."

"Don't say things like that, Jason," Nico said. "You may think you mean it, but you don't."

"How the hell do you think you know what I mean?"

"Because I know you."

"Bullshit. The me that you know means it. It's the horrible, false me that runs my life right now that
you don't trust."

Nico glanced up at Jason and laughed. "You act like that's two different people, Jace. It's not. You're
responsible for your choices. You want me back?"

Jason nodded.

"Then take me back. I'll go. But that means giving up Piper. It means going public. It means doing
the right things and giving up on this ridiculous notion of winning your father's approval."

"That will take time, you know?" Jason asked.

"Where am I going? I have time."

Jason reached out and traced Nico's jaw. Nico closed his eyes and abandoned himself to the touch.
Could this really happen? Could he have Jason back? Jason's fingers closed around the back of his
head and tilted Nico's face toward his own.

"I'm not allowed to say the words."

Jason's breath invaded Nico's space.

The first brush of Jason's lips against his was so soft. The second was rougher, more insistent, and
Nico moved his lips to match. The third pass was full Jason, forceful and passionate, his tongue
brushing Nico's lips and teeth. Nico opened his mouth, and Jason pushed his way inside with a small
groan.

Jason moved his hand from Nico's neck to his hip and shifted his weight to lay partially on top of
Nico. He planted his knee between Nico's legs and slid his hand along the cool, exposed skin of
Nico's stomach. Nico arched up at the contact and wrapped his arms around Jason's shoulders. Jason
tasted like cucumber in Nico's mouth. Nico bit down hard on Jason's lip. Jason gasped and pulled
away.

"Too rough?" Nico asked.

"Gods, no," Jason panted. "I have missed you so fucking much. Can you take us to your villa?"

"What? No!" Nico hurriedly shoved Jason off him and stood. "I'm not having sex with you, Jason."

"You sure the hell could have fooled me. What the fuck was that?"

"I don't know." Nico could hear his voice getting louder. "Desperation? Loneliness?"

"But you said..."
"I said I'd take you back if you do the things I said. You have to actually do them first."

Jason stood, too, and started to approach Nico. He got within three feet, his eyes angry and lustful, before he turned away, threw his face to the sky and let out a loud primal scream. Nico should not have found it so attractive, but the way Jason's back arched and his arms tensed, knowing he was the cause of it, sent shivers of pleasure running up Nico's spine.

Jason turned, and the look on his face, like a wild animal, caged and angry, made Nico hot.

"I want you now, damn it."

"No."

"Are you being a tease on purpose, or is this more of your natural asshole-ishness coming through?" Jason raked his hands through his hair.

"You prick. You think this is easy for me? I want you every bit as much as you want me. It's hard to say no."

Jason surged forward and had him pinned against the trunk of the tree before Nico could squeeze out a breath. He kissed Nico so roughly that Nico could feel the tree bark scratch the back of his head. Nico returned the kiss with matching vigor. He wrapped his arms around Jason's neck and didn't protest when Jason pulled both his legs up and around his waist. The bark was scraping at Nico's back now, too, shredding his shirt. He would need ambrosia when he got home.

Jason thrust against him, and Nico let out a cry of mingled pleasure and pain. A second thrust, and Nico felt blood begin to drip down his back. He didn't stop kissing Jason. He pulled blond hair until Jason had no choice but to lift his head and break the kiss, and Nico attacked his neck, kissing, sucking, and biting until Jason moaned and writhed against him.

When Jason thrust a third time, a sharp piece of bark scratched Nico's spine, and he let out a strangled cry against Jason's mouth. Jason pulled back sharply and looked at Nico in concern.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. It's nothing." Nico leaned toward Jason to resume their kiss, but Jason caught his face and held him still.

"Lie. What is it?"

"The bark scraped my back a little is all. It's really nothing. I'm fine." Nico prayed Jason would accept his explanation. He tightened his legs around Jason's waist and tried to rub Jason's erection, but Jason held him still while he reached around Nico's back.

Nico closed his eyes as Jason fingered the shredded shirt. He winced into Jason's shoulder as fingers slipped inside the decimated fabric and felt the cuts and scrapes.

"Nico..." Jason breathed.

Nico slid back as far as he dared while Jason held him with only one hand. Jason's eyes were fixed slightly behind him, so Nico unhooked his legs and dropped to the ground. He turned and saw that Jason was staring at his hand, which was covered in blood.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Nico said quickly. He put his hand on Jason's forearm, trying to soften Jason's horror. "It's superficial, okay? Not bad."
"I hurt you."

"Jason--"

Jason gingerly picked up Nico and carried him fully into the shadows. "Can you take us back to your villa? Or do you need the infirmary?"

"I'm fine."

"Please." Jason's voice shook.

Nico sighed and maneuvered them through the shadows to the bedroom of his villa. Jason gently sat him down on the edge of the bed and ripped the shirt off him, tearing it from the collar to the hemline. Nico heard Jason's breath catch in his throat as he surveyed the damage.

"Where do you keep your ambrosia?" The shaking in Jason's voice was worse.

Nico closed his eyes. "In the kitchen. The cabinet to the right of the fridge."

Jason's footsteps retreated. Nico stood unsteadily and went to the bathroom to look in the mirror. He couldn't see all of the damage, but there was enough that he could see to make him worry about how Jason was taking things. Jason had been working diligently with that counselor in San Francisco, Nico knew, and he hadn't had any episodes of anger that Nico knew of since the night of Percy's party. Nico didn't count this as anger, only rough making out, but he knew Jason didn't see it that way. Jason had been angry before he pushed Nico into that tree. Maybe he was angry while they were kissing. Nico shouldn't have let things get that far. Now Jason would be horrified with himself.

"Here. Eat," Jason said, returning from the kitchen. He put the square of ambrosia right up to Nico's lips and waited for him to open up. Nico dutifully took the square and chewed. Jason found a washcloth and wet it. He dabbed gently at Nico's back. "Would you get in the shower? It'd be easier to clean you up, I think. I won't look or touch."

"I'm not afraid of you, Jason."

"I think you should be."

Nico unzipped his jeans and started the shower. Jason's hand trailed down his side. The touch was tentative and soft. Nico straightened and grasped Jason's hand. When Nico turned, Jason wouldn't meet his eyes. His face was streaked with tears.

"I'm not afraid of you," Nico repeated. He dropped his head so he could catch Jason's eyes.

"You said it yourself on your birthday. I ruin you. I don't mean to, Nico, but I do ruin you. Mentally, emotionally, physically. I take and I hurt."

"And yet somehow I still love you" Nico smiled, but Jason didn't return it. "I'm not weak or stupid. If I come back to you over and over again, it's because there's a lot worth coming back to."

Nico slipped off his jeans and underwear and stepped into the shower. He wanted to ask Jason to get in with him, but he knew it would be a bad idea. Jason would believe Nico was only asking to try to alleviate Jason's guilt. Nico wouldn't be able to deny it. Yet what he'd said was the truth, too. He did still want Jason. He would take him back. Jason was so many things Nico loved. He'd made terrible mistakes, but he'd been hurt and confused when he made them. And he had been doing the right things recently. He'd backed Hazel. He'd refused to continue to alienate Nico. He'd been steadfastly trying to win back some portion of Nico's acceptance. That counted. It mattered.
Nico turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. Jason was gone, but he'd laid out a towel. Nico scrubbed it over his hair and wrapped it around his hips.

"Jace?"

"Bedroom."

Nico walked into his bedroom and saw Jason gazing at the overflowing closet. Jason glanced at Nico and back at the closet.

"Sons of Zeus are persistent, I guess," Nico said.

Jason fingered the arm of a black silk shirt. "Sons of Zeus are assholes."

Nico wrapped his arms around Jason from behind and laid a soft kiss on his neck. "Not all of them, Jace. Not you."

"Let me see your back."

Nico let go.

"Better," Jason said gruffly. He returned his attention to the closet. "He still pursues you?"

"He sends me stuff, yeah," Nico said. As he searched for a new pair of underwear, his fingers brushed the socks where his hidden stash of gifts was stored.

"You haven't, uh..."

Nico could read the question in Jason's eyes.

"No. And I don't intend to," Nico said. He felt the urge to tell Jason about Percy, but he remembered Annabeth's words. Jason wouldn't forgive him. Could he at least admit that he'd been with someone? Would that break Jason? Nico didn't want to cause Jason pain, but he also didn't want to lie to him, especially if there was a chance they could get back together. "But, Jace, can you sit with me on the bed? I want to talk to you."

Jason grunted and sat. Nico pulled a pair of snug black briefs out of the drawer and slipped them on before sitting down.

"I want to be with you," Nico said. He watched for Jason's reaction, but there wasn't much -- maybe a slightly more forceful exhale of breath. Jason was shutting down, closing himself off. "I want to do it right this time, not hide and pretend. I need you to do the things I asked, but I also need to be honest with you."

Jason's eyes flashed in Nico's direction, and Nico wanted to climb on Jason's lap, use his body to bridge the divide between them. Thanks to Percy, he'd stopped worrying about being a whore or treating his body like something to be ashamed of. He couldn't help the way he looked or how he affected people physically, but he also didn't want to use his body to lull Jason into a feeling that wasn't real.

"I love you, and I probably always will. While you were gone with Piper, I saw someone. We had sex."

"Who?"

"What?" Nico felt his breathing grow more shallow. This was what he was afraid of.
"Who touched you?" Jason ground out each word like he was trying to gnaw his way out of leather handcuffs.

Nico leapt across the bed and sat in Jason's lap after all, deciding he cared less about getting himself into a sticky sexual situation than he did about Jason rampaging through camp threatening anyone who looked like a possible candidate in the crime of touching a boy he'd supposedly not spoken to in almost a year. Nico pushed Jason back onto the bed and pinned his arms. He held Jason's hands and dug his elbows into the soft skin above Jason's inner elbows.

"Shut up and listen to me," Nico said.

"No. How could you?" Jason snapped. "I want his name. Now."

"You're not getting his name or anything else. And how dare you act wronged? How many times have you slept with Piper? I've sat back and waited and hoped and been fucking ignored by you. So don't you dare try to make me feel guilty for getting a little respite from the million ways you've made me feel like shit for the past year."

"Do you love him?" The question was small, uncertain.

Nico hung his head and let out a barking laugh in Jason's ear. "I wouldn't be here with you if I loved him. I wouldn't have stuck around this long, taking the scraps off your table, if I loved someone else."

"Did you let him fuck you?"

"It's not your business. Damn it!" Nico sat up. He half expected Jason to throw him off and storm out, but Jason didn't. Jason was rubbing his eyes. Nico pulled Jason's hands off his face and waited until Jason looked at him. "I'm not sorry it happened. I needed some comfort, and he gave it to me. I would have preferred the comfort to have come from you. I'm not telling you this to hurt you or to make you jealous or to try to trick you into getting back together with me. I'm telling you because I want us to have a chance to work out, and I needed to be honest with you. Now, you can accept it and we can move forward; you can badger me about information I'm not going to give you; or you can walk out and be done with me. What do you choose?"

Nico knew he was risking a lot, forcing Jason to make a choice like that so soon after telling him he'd slept with someone else. He was more scared than he wanted to admit that Jason might walk away. As the minutes stretched out between them, Nico was more and more sure he'd lost Jason. He raised his face toward the ceiling to try to will the tears back into his eyes.

When Nico felt soft pressure against his thighs, he looked down. Jason's eyes were red, and he was biting his lip so hard it looked like he'd make it bleed. Nico swiped his thumb across Jason's mouth, and Jason let go of his lip.

"I want to move forward."

Nico collapsed on top of Jason and let out a horrible laugh/cough noise. He sounded like a constipated gryphon. Jason stroked his hands up and down Nico's sides.

"I love you," Nico whispered in Jason's ear.

"You won't let me say it back."

"No, I won't. Not yet. I want to make love to you, but I'm so afraid of how you'll interpret that. We have to wait."
"I can wait if it means having you back."

Nico smiled and rolled over onto the bed. He faced Jason and waited for Jason to face him.

"Let's try rebuilding our friendship. I'll stop ignoring you. We can hang out together."

"I like all of that." Jason smiled.

"If we mess up, we'll tell each other right away," Nico added.

"How would you mess up?"

Nico thought of Percy and how good he'd felt when they were together. He thought of Annabeth's request and subtle threat. Jason could never know it was Percy that Nico had been with. He might accept that Nico had slept with a random guy, but Percy was different. Nico had loved Percy. Nico could still love Percy, at least in some way, if he was being honest.

"I could mess up. It's been known to happen," Nico said instead. "My usual, innate asshole-ishness, as you so eloquently put it."

Jason laughed. "Can I walk you home from school tomorrow?"

"I would consider it a privilege."

Chapter End Notes

I'd originally considered dividing this story into three volumes. If I had, this is where the first volume would have ended. I hope, even as agonizing as I know parts have been, you've enjoyed it so far.

Thank you all for reading and leaving comments and kudos!
Nico woke naked and alone for the next four days. He liked it. Percy and Jason seemed to be bonding over the times when he wasn't with them. The more time they spent together, the better they got along, and the less pressure Nico felt. He was still their fulcrum, their balance, and the awkward sexual tension grew daily, but he felt less like he needed to keep the other gods from killing each other.

Percy and Jason had gone for a swim. They'd elected to continue to skinny dip, partially because the water felt better that way and partially because Nico would join them eventually and he'd skinny dip, too. It helped that neither god was modest and there was no sexual or romantic attraction between them.

"Think she'll show up today?" Percy asked as he floated on his back. He was dreading Aphrodite's appearance.

Jason was throwing the football high in the air and diving around to catch it. "Who knows? Lady's crazy. It's like she told Piper that, knowing Piper would tell us. Now we're anticipating her arrival, which I'm sure she loves."

"Did you ever love her?"

"Aphrodite?" Jason scrunched up his nose and curled his lips.

"Gross. No, Piper."

Jason shrugged. "I tried to. She was a good friend. I was in love with being someone my dad wanted me to be, and that included loving Piper. But it was always Nico. I only ever loved him. The first time I really kissed him, gods, it was like the whole world aligned."

"I felt that way about Annabeth, the first time we kissed." The memory made Percy melancholy. He missed Annabeth so much. Watching her and Maybelle for thirty seconds a day made the ache worse. He was staying up all night still, hoping for more opportunities to see them.

Jason threw the football skyward and missed when it came back down. He dove underwater and resurfaced a minute later twenty yards away. "What about the first time you kissed Nico?"

"It felt like being granted the entire universe, except it wasn't the one I was supposed to live in. Gods, I wanted it, though. Wanted him. He's my best friend, Jason, and our bond is more than this," Percy pointed up toward the sky, indicating the invisible barrier, "could ever be. I couldn't live without him, even if he'll always love you more than me."

"He may love me more, but he trusts you. You have something with him that I can't ever give him."

"The same's true for you." Percy stood up, and Jason tossed him the ball. "I don't have any answers."

"Me either," Jason said.

"That's because you two are idiots," Nico said, surprising them. He'd shadow traveled straight into the water from the man cave. It was easier than dragging the comforter out and having to get all the
"Nico!" Percy said. He chucked the ball to Jason, splashed over to where Nico stood, and gave him a hug.

Jason pretended not to notice how Percy's hand skimmed over the swell of Nico's ass, the same as Percy had pretended not to notice Jason press himself into Nico last night while the usual after-HephaestusTV makeout was taking place. Nico ignored it all.

Nico returned Percy's hug, without the touching, and gave Jason the same hug. He counted the seconds in his head to make sure they were equal.

"What are we talking about?" Nico asked, stealing the football from Jason and tucking it under his arm.

"How such a very pretty and loving boy could get so confused, silly," said Aphrodite, who'd popped inside the barrier and was floating behind the men just above the water's surface. She very much enjoyed the view.

The new gods whirled around, and Percy and Jason immediately willed themselves clothed. Mortification was another good emotional motivator, as Nico found then, because he was able to clothe himself, too.

"Pity, that was too short," Aphrodite said. "Very well, godlings. Let us converse."

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Aphrodite conjured a fluffy pink armchair in the men's living room. She wasn't interested in sitting on the sterile, modern gray leather chair, and the men were occupying the couch, sitting stiff and formal.

"Oh, don't be so awkward, boys." Aphrodite gave a tinkling laugh.

Nico was reminded of Apollo during some of their first encounters. Aphrodite, he thought, was too fake.

"To what do we owe the honor, Mistress Aphrodite?" Jason asked. It was hard for him to change his formal, respectful Roman nature in social situations. Percy wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"Oh, Jason, always so polite," the goddess said. "You've grown even more handsome. I'm glad you're currently keeping your mortal good looks. That face. Those eyes. That...body. Mmm, such a gorgeous man."

Percy made a vomit noise.

"Perseus, you sweet thing! I promised I'd make your love life interesting, didn't I?" Aphrodite wasn't phased by Percy's insulting gesture. She believed it stemmed from his inability to accept the variety of love she offered.

"Yeah, thanks for that, Lady," Percy said. "But you didn't have shit to do with this." He held Nico's hand, fingers intertwined with his own, up in the air.
"True," Aphrodite admitted. She placed a dainty hand on the arm of the chair and looked at her red nails. "My plan was for you to end up with the Chase girl, with a healthy helping of Miss Dare along the way. Then she got called to be the boring servant of that dreadful Apollo, ah, no offense, precious pretty boy," she nodded her head at Nico, "and I had to improvise. I sent you a million girls, Percy. You could have been a happy mortal on earth right now, having your wife and baby and all those little flings you so enjoyed."

Percy didn't answer. He held tight to Nico's hand and tried to convey without words that he wasn't interested in a life without Nico. He wasn't interested in a life without Maybelle and Annabeth, though, either.

"Hey, Aphrodite, would you mind not making my friend sad?" Nico asked. He felt defensive and smug, knowing he wasn't part of Aphrodite's plan for Percy, and almost surely not for Jason, either, but here he was with them anyway.

"Oh, now, don't be testy, Little Angel. You see, you were supposed to die when you were a child. Your father saved you, and you became our great wild card." Aphrodite smiled benignly at Nico.

"Wait," Jason said. "You're saying Hades changed fate?"

Aphrodite batted her eyelashes and nodded. "And look how well it has turned out for the three of you. You've been granted godhood and given a wonderful vacation away from the godly and mortal hustle and bustle. The only problem is that you aren't making very good use of it. That's why I came to help."

"What the hell--"

"Language, Perseus," Aphrodite said.

Percy rolled his eyes. He was not interested in being chastised for his speech by anyone but his mother.

"What the hell do you think this is, lady? We're in fucking prison. We can't see our families."

"So dramatic, Percy." Aphrodite sighed. "The gods may have intended this to be a punishment, but it is also a gift. The three of you, and Nico, darling, you especially, had a lot to figure out in the love department that you were unwilling to do during your mortal lives. Now you're free from distraction, dears. The world, the most important part of it, that being love, is wide open for you to explore."

"We are stuck in a cage," Nico growled.

"With the two people who cause you the most confusion, dear," Aphrodite said. She had the air of one explaining something to a very small child. "You can explore your attractions and feelings without input from others. For once, mon petit chou, you can choose what you want."

"The gods put us together like this so Nico can work out his love life?" Jason asked. He didn't believe that.

Aphrodite reached forward and patted Jason's thigh. Jason had to fight not to jerk his leg away. "No of course not. They stuck you together like this because they enjoy watching sex and fighting. Being a god is terribly dull. You see how you've been given more freedom since you've begun to have sexual interludes at night in your -- what do you term it? -- 'man cave'?"

"What do you mean, more freedom?" Nico beat Jason and Percy to the question.
"Boys, the barrier around you has expanded. Surely you've noticed how much deeper you can enter the water? The gods enjoy your youthful frolicking, too. They felt a little more water would do us all good."

The men hadn't noticed the expanding barrier. Now that they thought about it, they each remembered how shallow the water was the day Nico walked in it and laid down. They could get in much deeper water now. Nico's and Percy's eyes widened, but Jason's narrowed. He scowled.

"You mean the gods gave us more freedom because Percy and Nico are sucking face? That's revolting."

"Jason, dear, your jealousy is showing," Aphrodite said. Her hair was growing shorter and darker, at least to Jason and Percy. To Nico, her hair swirled, and her face shifted. "You would not be so opposed to the extra freedom if you were the one kissing Nico."

"That's not true." Jason crossed his arms over his chest and pursed his lips. Nico laid a hand on his knee, and when Jason didn't acknowledge him, he brushed his other hand over Jason's forearm. Jason relented. He uncrossed his arms and held Nico's hand. "I don't like the gods treating what we do together like a game or an act. It isn't funny, and our lives matter as more than some freaky godly sideshow."

"Sweet, serious Jason," Aphrodite said. "While that may be true, what I said is also true. You wish you were the one with Nico."

"Duh," Jason said. Percy snorted out a laugh.

"Look, Aphrodite," Percy said. He wanted to draw her attention away from Jason, who was already prone to being sullen. Wrangling with the goddess of love wouldn't help Jason's outlook. "We're trying to figure our shit out, but let's be clear: we don't want to be here."

"But Percy, dear, you were so swoon-worthy in the throne room the day of your ascendancy. The way you draped yourself over precious Nico's body. The things you said. What--"

"Stop." Percy's voice was deadly and commanding. Some things, he felt Jason and Nico didn't need to know. "Tell us what you're helping us with."

"I told you already. All of you, Nico especially, need help in understanding love."

"I don't need help understanding love," Nico said. The conversation was making him angry. He didn't like the gods watching him kiss Percy. He wasn't even sure why he did it, at least, not past Percy's initial need for comfort. He didn't like Jason being made more jealous and uncomfortable. Mainly, though, he didn't like Aphrodite acting as though he was clueless when it came to love. Love was one thing he understood. "I know what love is. Gods, Lady Aphrodite, I feel it so hard it rips me up inside. I'm not about to start spilling my guts to you, but I understand love."

"If you understand it so well, why are you keeping your heart locked and shut away? Your absence of emotion isn't helping you or your friends."

Nico gritted his teeth. The hands of the other gods tightened around his.

"I'm not talking to you about this."

"You don't have to, Nico. I can read your heart like it's a book open before me. You lock away your emotions because you don't want to cause trouble, but love is hard, little boy. It takes work and sacrifice. It is neither clean nor simple, particularly in your case. You're afraid to hurt your
companions, so you hurt yourself and do no service to them."

"They need me to be the center, like Hermes said," Nico said, despite his earlier vow not to talk about it. "How can I do that if I let my emotions get involved?"

"You would be their center no matter what you said or did or didn't do. You are the center because they orbit around you. It is an illusion, Nico, to believe you can control how they feel or act."

"I don't want to control them." Nico buried his face in his hands. His words came out mumbled. "I want them to survive this and not kill each other."

"We're done with that, for now, Nico," Jason said. He used his now-free hand to rub small circles in Nico's back. "If I haven't ripped Percy apart over the last two weeks, I don't think I'm going to. We're actually getting along better than we have in a long time, and sweetheart, that has nothing to do with you."

Percy choked on his laugh and bumped Nico's shoulder with his own. He pulled Nico's hands away from his face and dropped to his knees in front of the youngest god.

"Jason's right, baby. I'm having fun hanging out with him when you're not there. And we covered the guilt shit, so that shouldn't be a problem." Percy leaned in and whispered, "And what we do privately, we can work out together because it isn't this bitch's business."

"Perseus Jackson! Young man, that was an incredibly rude thing to call me." Aphrodite didn't look so benign and happy now. She was larger and glowing slightly. Nico put his hand to his mouth and coughed uncomfortably. Jason shifted in his seat. Percy rolled his head back and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you that," Percy said. He felt terrible that he'd been so offensive to a woman, even Aphrodite. He raised his head and looked directly at the goddess, who now looked a lot like Annabeth. "My mother would be horrified that I said that. Please excuse my bad behavior. I've got a lot on my mind, but that's no excuse. I'm sorry."

While Nico scooted forward and wrapped his arms and legs around Percy, Aphrodite shrunk back into her human form and stopped glowing. Nico reached back for Jason's hand and kissed it. His head was turned to the side and perched on top of Percy's. He looked at Aphrodite sadly and pulled Jason closer to him.

"I understand about love. Love is giving them what they need without expecting something in return."

"Unlike my sons, I am the goddess of all-encompassing love, Nico," Aphrodite said. "There are many forms love can take. What you are talking about is parental love. It is selfless and patient and easily the strongest form of love. Young Percy knows how it feels."

Percy sniffled into Nico's shirt and nodded. He loved Annabeth and Nico, but it wasn't as great as his love for Maybelle.

"The love between partners is much more complicated, and can take varied forms. Just as you love your sisters in vastly different ways but in the same amount, so too can you love both of your companions and not have it feel remotely the same." Aphrodite paused and watched Nico run his fingers through Percy's hair. She took in Jason's sad face and the circles under Nico’s eyes, present even though physical fatigue was impossible for a god. Her heart softened for the men. "I love my husband, Hephaestus," she said quietly. "Others do not believe this because I have many affairs and have always carried on so with Ares. Ares ignites my passion and understands me in a way that"
Hephaestus cannot. He sets me on fire. Hephaestus is a good man, in ways that Ares, by his nature, cannot be. My husband is kind and gentle. He listens to me. He loves his children and is dutiful and responsible. I respect him tremendously. It isn't what I feel for Ares, but that does not make it less real or less love."

It was Nico's turn to nod. He understood completely.

"You are worried you will hurt Percy and Jason not by what you've done, but by how you feel."

Jason let go of Nico's hand and moved until their sides were fully touching, except where Percy's arms wound around Nico. He laid his arm above Percy's on Nico's back. From there, he reached around and ran his hand up and down Nico's arm, the one that wrapped around Percy. He wasn't sure what he wanted to convey, only that it was important to give Nico his touch.

"What you feel for them isn't parental, and you do all three of you a disservice by attempting to shut down your feelings. Romantic love isn't one-sided or selfless. It is a selfish and burning need, and you receive as much as you give. If you won't let yourself receive, you will have less to give. And Nico, your ability to love people, your compassion, it has always been your biggest blessing, your greatest power. It is one the gods could not take away. Do not give it up so easily." Aphrodite smiled at him, then stood and brushed her hand through his hair. "Good luck, young ones."

There was a puff of pink smoke that smelled of roses, and Aphrodite was gone.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed reading about Aphrodite's visit to the guys.

I'm putting this up a little early because I have to go do something horribly evil. (Not really -- I save my evil leanings for my characters. It's just miserable and dull, but I feel like complaining about it.) ;-)
"Do you have to go?"

Nico smirked and threw a shirt in his bag. "You know I do."

"You're too old to go on quests." Jason threw himself back on the bed and pulled Nico's bag up on his stomach. He busied himself with opening zippers and hidden pockets.

"Frank's going. He's almost nineteen."

"Frank's Frank. He's wonderful and all," Jason said. "But you had more experience under your belt when you were thirteen than he does now. There's nothing else for you to learn."

"Which is why I should be going on these things. I can help the younger kids."

Nico sat next to Jason and played with his hair. Jason stuck out his lower lip and tried to give puppy dog eyes. "Please don't go."

"Puppy eyes don't work as well when the giver has blue eyes, Jace. You look more like you're using x-ray vision on me."

Jason shoved the bag off his stomach and yanked Nico down on top of him instead. They rolled until Nico was pinned under Jason.

"Fine. I have other ways of making you not want to go," Jason purred. He kissed along Nico's jaw.

"Not working," Nico sing-songed. "You'll have to try harder."

Nico gasped as Jason bit his neck harshly, then let out a wild squeal of laughter when Jason began mercilessly tickling his sides. Jason wasn't sure which part he enjoyed more, having his mouth on Nico's elegant neck or eliciting those piercing laughs. He bit down again and sucked ruthlessly while Nico wriggled underneath him. Nico shoved at his shoulders and bit out the beginnings of curses, but before he could get far, Jason would tickle him again and the son of Hades would fall to pieces.

When Jason was satisfied he'd left a massive red mark on Nico's neck, he pulled back to admire his handiwork. As he'd hoped, the hickey was large and framed by the bruising imprint of Jason's teeth. It felt good, leaving such an obvious claim on Nico. Two months had gone by since they'd decided to try being friends publicly, and Jason thought they were close to becoming lovers again. Nico was allowing light kisses and lingering touches, at least privately. Spending time with Nico, even as friends, was so fun. It was easy for Jason to remember why he'd sought Nico's company in the first place.

Jason felt better than he had in a very long time. He was doing the things that made him happy and treating Nico with the kind of respect and reverence he deserved. This had to be better and more worthwhile than his father's approval. It certainly made Jason happier.

Now if only Nico wouldn't go away. The quest was supposed to be easy. There were some reports of odd monster behavior up in Maine that needed checked out. Maine was under Camp Half-Blood's jurisdiction, but Clarisse had told Reyna she was feeling the pinch of too many kids away at school.
during this time of year. Since Camp Jupiter kept its campers year-round, it had more people to spare. Nico and Frank had volunteered to go -- Frank for more experience and Nico because he could get the questers to and from Maine much more quickly than they’d normally be able to travel -- and both were such good students that they’d been among the ones with the least to lose by missing school. Their third, Allie, was a daughter of Minerva and a member of the Third Cohort. Jason didn’t know her, but he had heard she was well-regarded and Annabeth considered her some sort of protégé.

"How about now?" Jason asked. Nico's face was flushed, and his eyes were streaming tears from being tickled.

"You think you can tickle me into staying?" Nico laughed, and Jason laid his head on Nico's chest to feel the vibrations of the laughter. Nico's arms encircled Jason's neck and held him close. "I don't think so."

"What about the kiss?" Jason asked.

"You call that a kiss?" Nico teased.

Jason raised his head and mock-glared at Nico. "A very good kiss, yes."

Nico threw his head back and howled. Jason punched his shoulder. When Nico didn't stop laughing, Jason started to roll off him, but Nico flung his legs around Jason's hips and clung to him. Jason ended up sitting awkwardly with Nico's legs wrapped around him while Nico's long body was stretched out before him, arched down from where his ass rested on Jason's thighs to where his head and shoulders perched on the bed. Jason watched Nico's face slowly turn bright red from laughter and blood flow to the head.

The hem of Nico's shirt had risen, and Jason watched the pale expanse of his stomach, stretched from the awkward position, rise and fall. The skin was so white against the saturated blackness of his jeans and shirt. It had been a long time since Jason had been this close to a private stretch of Nico's skin. The tip of Jason's index finger was the first to graze the skin, lightly brushing back and forth slightly below Nico's navel. Most people probably wouldn't have registered the touch as something other than the movement of clothing, but Nico wasn't most people. His body was so finely tuned to the sensation of touch that he hadn't been able to handle it for a long time when he was younger. Nico could feel when people breathed too close to him. His eyes snapped open at Jason's delicate caress.

The second time Jason let his fingertip brush that soft patch of bare skin, Nico stopped laughing. Jason traced the dark little curls that outlined the path from Nico's stomach to his penis and felt the uptick in Nico's breath. His finger slid back up the line, over Nico's belly, pulling Nico's shirt farther and farther up his body as it went. He scraped his nail over Nico's sternum, leaving a faint pink line in his wake. Jason flicked his eyes briefly to Nico's face and saw that all merriment was gone. In its place was hunger, plain and simple. Jason bit his lip and let his eyes fall back to Nico's chest.

Nico's nipples were taut and red. Jason wanted to pinch them, to lay his mouth over them and drag his teeth across them until Nico arched his back and begged for more. He didn't do it, though. He stayed disciplined and re-traced the path his finger had taken up Nico's body until his finger was pressing down into the waistband of Nico's jeans.

There, digging against Nico's waistband, Jason brought up his other hand and let eight fingertips slide along the edge of Nico's jeans, as low as they could push, until one by one, each grazed his hips. Jason scratched sharply up Nico's sides and back down, digging his nails as deeply as he could into Nico's firm flesh. Nico did arch his back then, and tried to sit up, but Jason held him down with the harsh pressure of his nails on Nico's sides.
Jason dropped his hands back to Nico's hips and gripped tightly. He let his fingers slip beneath Nico's underwear and along the smooth, toned muscle of his ass while his thumbs rubbed low circles into the soft skin inside Nico's hips. He pulled Nico hard, until his hips were in the air. Jason lowered his head toward Nico's prominent erection, but at the last moment, he moved his head to the side and sucked and bit at Nico's protruding hip.

Nico let out a loud moan, and Jason bit down harder. Nico's hands were in Jason's hair, and Jason could feel how they were trying to push him away from his hip, toward his dick. Reluctantly, Jason released Nico's hip from his mouth with one last hard swipe of his tongue over the brightly bruised skin and let his face brush Nico's erection through his jeans. Nico was pulling at Jason's head from above and thrusting against his face from below. Jason savored the scraping of Nico's hard dick against his cheeks and lips. He let it continue for a moment longer, then pushed Nico away and stood.

"Well, since I can't convince you, have a safe quest. Let me know when you get back," Jason said as nonchalantly as he could, considering how turned on he was.

Nico growled at him from the bed. His hips were still obscenely high in the air, and his face was almost purple. Jason blew a kiss and left the room. Nico screamed and cursed at him to get back and finish the job, but Jason walked out into the afternoon sunshine and took flight. He soared as high as he could without passing out, high enough that no one could see when he put his hand in his pants and stroked his dick until he came whimpering Nico's name.

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Jason sat in the Senate House and tried to keep his eyes open. These meetings were so boring when there were no quests to be meted out or attacks to thwart. Larry was railing about how the air freshener used in the First Cohort was superior to the air freshener in his. Jason gave up on the meeting, closed his eyes, and thought of Nico.

He hoped Nico came back soon. The quest party had been gone for so long. Jason wasn't worried. Nico and Frank were capable of handling anything. It was just that he missed Nico so much. When Nico came back, Jason was publicly declaring his love. The only question was whether to hire a skywriter or meet Nico outside his school with a million balloons and a big teddy bear. Nico would groan and call Jason cheesy and be embarrassed, but he'd also love the spectacle. They'd be happy.

Jason smiled and imagined the gasping crowd was responding to the way he'd yank Nico off his feet and kiss him breathless.

Someone shoved Jason's arm out from under his chin, and he startled awake. In the front of the room stood Juno, regal and imposing in her white dress and goat skin. Jason swallowed thickly. This couldn't be good.

"Romans," Juno addressed the assembled members of the senate, who were arranged in a semicircle in the bottom tier of seats.

The upper tiers of the chamber were empty. No one else had bothered to come to the proceedings on such a boring day.

Juno sounded dire. "I come to warn you. Your community is in trouble. You must act quickly to
snuff out the cancer that has invaded your midst."

The senators whispered while Reyna and Hazel shared a look of confusion behind Juno. Jason tried to calm his racing heart. He hadn't seen Juno in over two years. He could have gone at least that long before seeing her again, especially when he was finally getting his life back together after all the damage she and Jupiter had caused.

"What troubles you, my queen?" Reyna asked.

"My dear praetor," Juno said sadly. "I'm afraid you have been duped."

Reyna's eyes narrowed. Jason almost laughed. Reyna had never been duped. The word couldn't possibly apply to her.

"You are in love with a boy who only wants your power."

Someone gasped. It may have been Jason.

"Yes, I'm afraid there is a usurper in your ranks," Juno said, addressing the senate again. She walked in a slow arc in front of the senators, who regarded her with fascination and alarm. "Among you is a power-hungry fiend who has insidiously used his appearance to seduce and bewitch your leaders. His aim is to take control of your camp, Romans."

Jason tried to stand, but his legs were locked. He tried to speak, and found he was unable to move his mouth. His eyes sought Hazel's, but she was watching Juno, unaware of the road Juno was traveling.

"You must reject this traitor. Praetors, will you protect the sanctity of New Rome?" Juno asked.

"Yes, of course, Your Majesty, but we require more information," Reyna said.

"Who is this traitor?" A centurion from the Second Cohort asked. "And what must we do to stop him?"

"It will not be easy, my child," Juno replied. Jason could see her triumph, even before she revealed her cards. "The traitor has ensnared the upper echelons of your society. He beds your praetor."

"Nico's not a traitor!" Hazel yelled. Jason hated that even Hazel assumed Juno was referring to Nico and not Frank. Reyna shot her a murderous glare, but Hazel didn't stop. "Stop spreading lies about my brother!"

Jason noticed a few lares appearing and disappearing in the room. This bland little meeting wouldn't stay unattended long.

"Dear, sweet Hazel." Juno's voice dripped with false sympathy. "So naive. Your brother is your closest friend and confidant, yes? Reyna's, too? He holds enormous sway over his sister and his lover."

Hazel opened and closed her mouth. What could she say? It was true. Nico was both girls' most trusted ally.

"This is nonsense," Reyna said. She sounded firm and decisive, but Jason could read the fear in her eyes.

Juno ignored her. "Darling Hazel, you were elected because you garnered the support of three
former praetors? Your boyfriend, Perseus Jackson, and my own champion, Jason Grace?"

Hazel nodded.

"Frank Zhang backed you because you are his girlfriend. Perseus and Jason chose to endorse you because your brother is their lover."

Oh, no. Gods, no. This was bad. Shit. Jason didn’t have time to crumple inside at the realization that Percy was who Nico had been with, again, because he was too busy analyzing how bad the situation looked. Nico didn’t care about power, but Juno was making it appear that he had insinuated his way into the lives of the most powerful citizens of New Rome. He appeared hungry for power, when viewed like this. Jason remembered the way Nico had smiled and laughed at Hazel's inauguration, how his hand had flitted to Reyna's back, how he'd laughed at Percy's silliness. It looked so bad.


Jason found he could move his head, at least. His voice seemed to have returned to his control.

"Jason, tell her," Hazel demanded. There were tears of fury in her eyes.

"Do tell, Jason," Juno said. Jason hated how she was enjoying this. "How long have you had an affair with your cousin? Do not lie."

"It's not like that," Jason said, and murmurs broke out among the senators and the suddenly packed house of ghosts and demigods. "Hazel, everyone, we...yes, we've been lovers but that's not why I supported Hazel."

Hazel's eyes grew huge. "But, Piper..."

"Yes, dear," Juno said as she patted Hazel's head. "Your brother seduced my champion into betraying his girlfriend. How long have you had your lover, Jason?"

The answer was forced from his mouth. "Over two years."

Hazel covered her mouth in horror. Reyna grabbed her elbow and tugged her away from Juno, who merely smiled and turned back to the senators.

"And the poor, dear Chase girl, of whom I am so fond, she, too, had to watch her partner stray into the arms of the son of Hades. They have been lovers for nine months, Romans. The graecus has been plotting against you for years, using his body to charm and seduce your leaders into doing his bidding."

There was a general uproar before Reyna yelled, "Silence!"

The room quieted instantly.

"Do you have proof, Your Majesty." Reyna spat, "that Nico has in any way plotted to hurt the Twelfth Legion or the citizens of New Rome?"

"Why, my poor, besotted girl." Juno tilted her head and frowned. "The proof stands next to you. Tell me, senators, would you have chosen a child of Pluto as your praetor without the backing of three people beholden to the traitor? Surely, all you upstanding senators know a child of Pluto is not fit to rule. Her brother, the graecus traitor, the untrustworthy son of Hades, will be the real ruler."

"What do we do?" a girl from the Second Cohort asked. Her panic was palpable.
"We can't trust them to set things right!" a boy from the Fourth shouted.

"No, it seems you cannot," Juno agreed. "You must banish the Hades boy. The Pontifex should be stripped of his title at once. A new election must be held to determine whether or not Ms. Levesque remains as praetor."

"You can't come in here and--" Reyna was cut off by a shout from the male centurion of the First Cohort.

"I motion we vote to accept Juno's suggestions."

“Seconded.”

Reyna made a low noise in the back of her throat. Senators squirmed under the weight of her stare. She managed to grind out, “All in favor?”

Every senator except Dakota, Jason's old friend from the Fifth Cohort, raised a hand. Jason clenched his jaw and met the stare of each senator whose eyes turned his way. The personal business of hurting Piper aside, he had done nothing wrong by being with Nico, and he damned sure wasn't going to act like he had.

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"The senate meeting is adjourned." Reyna looked ill as she made the pronouncement. Slowly, as though in a trance, the occupants of the room filed out. Most were silent. Some whispered and gestured wildly. Jason sat in the front row with his head held high. He felt like vomiting.

"Praetors, I would require a word with Jason. May I make use of your chambers?" Juno asked, her voice cold and commanding.

Jason watched Reyna grab Hazel's hand and squeeze hard enough to bruise. The gold in Hazel's eyes looked like it had been sharpened into Imperial gold daggers, ready to kill.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Your Majesty," Reyna replied just as coldly. "That was our innocent brother you publicly vilified for your own aims. My counterpart and I will need our chambers. Do your dirty work elsewhere."

Jason had never seen Reyna so angry. She had never defied a god. Her chest was heaving, and she looked willing to charge into battle if Juno challenged her authority.

"Your brother is hardly innocent," Juno scoffed, and Reyna had to restrain Hazel. "Jason needed this wake-up call. You are two silly little girls playing at leadership, while he is the one who must become the true leader of the demigods."

"Get. Out." It was Hazel who spoke this time, and her voice was like ice on the road, smooth and deceptively dangerous.

"Enjoy your day in the sun, girls," Juno said. She snapped her fingers, and Jason found himself sitting on a pedestal in Juno's brilliant white marble shrine. Light flooded in from windows in the domed ceiling. Juno stood three feet away and gazed at him as though she hadn't just destroyed him.
Jason stood to leave, to get as far from his "mother" as possible. He'd gone three steps when he was rooted to the spot, forced to stand still, as though held by invisible chains. Jason laughed when he realized those chains had been there his entire life. They'd never needed to be so obvious before.

"Jason, darling," Juno crooned. "I did what was for the best. In time, you will see that."

Jason let out a maniacal laugh. "That was for the best? You come down here, tell the entire Roman senate that I've been having a secret affair with my supposedly 'inferior' cousin for almost two and a half years, that I've cheated on my girlfriend, that Nico's also been sleeping with Percy, that we are liars and cheaters and locked in scandal. You intimanted that I supported Hazel to gain sex from her brother! You got me stripped of my title. You got Nico banned from camp because they all think he betrayed three praetors! Piper and Annabeth and every other person in this camp will believe the worst of the sons of the Big Three now! Reyna looks like a fool! Hazel looks like she's incompetent! How could you?"

"For you, dear. I could do it because it serves your best interest." Juno had dropped the false matronly concern and reverted to the cold and harsh tones she reserved for when no admirers were present. "You will rise from this. You will apologize for your affair and beg forgiveness from Reyna, Piper, and the Romans. You will cast the blame on that wretched son of Hades and have nothing more to do with him. The Romans will accept you with open arms. We love to give the fallen second chances almost as much as we love to crucify them in the first place."

"I won't do this," Jason said. "I won't betray Nico. I won't leave him."

"You will. You have little choice," Juno said.

"You've played your worst card. What else can you do to me?"

"Oh, I don't know, Jason, think a little." Hera's velvety voice brimmed with condescension. "He's a pretty boy, my vile brother's son. Pretty face, pretty body, pretty mind. It would be such a shame to see that body broken, that face scratched and scarred, that bright mind ruined. Do you really think the worst terror your father can send after him is a pack of eagles?"

Jason dropped to his knees and vomited. Juno watched impassively. When Jason was done, the vomit vanished.

"Now, Jason, that was a tad extreme, don't you think?" Juno brushed her hand across his shoulders. He shrank away from the touch.

"He's safe. We keep him safe," Jason said. He needed to believe that was true.

"Ah, yes, Pluto and his little plans and machinations." Juno let loose a tinkling laugh full of spite. "The boy's not safe right now, is he? Off on a silly quest with that oaf son of Mars and some bratty Minerva girl who's almost as annoying as Chase. No, he's not safe at all."

Jason struggled to his feet. How had Hades messed up? Why did he allow Nico to leave on that damned quest? Why did Jason allow it? "What do you want me to do?"

"That's better." Juno was all business again. Jason hated that she had won. "Tomorrow, you will publicly disavow the son of Hades and your affair. You will beg forgiveness from the praetor, Reyna. You will pledge to cleanse your spirit and accept your punishment. The Romans will probably skip the punishment part altogether. After all, you are handsome and charming when you wish to be. They would much prefer you to lead."

"And Nico?"
"As long as you cease all contact, keep quiet, and do what your father and I say, he'll be in no danger from us. He's free to live his pathetic little life however he sees fit."

Jason hated Juno. "You know he has helped you and saved you as much as any of the rest of us."

Juno looked at him with disdain and spoke bluntly. "We do not require help or saving from any of you. We merely let you believe it so we can enjoy the way you puny children run around in the errant belief you are doing something noble. Grow up, boy."

Jason remembered the question Hades had asked him about Kronos the day Nico was attacked by the eagles, and something clicked in his mind. "You fear us. You fear me and Percy and Nico. That's what this is really about. Not power or prestige for me. It's about keeping us from working together. You fear that we are the next great brothers who'll rise to overthrow their parents. I can't believe I didn't see it before."

"You flatter yourself, Jason Grace," Juno said, though she didn't meet his eyes. "You will fall in line or the son of Hades will suffer, and I will make sure you have a front row seat to watch every agonizing second."

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Nico traipsed through more dank, dark, chilly woods. He brought up the rear, and it was easy to stay on the path because Frank had turned into an elephant and was cutting a wide swath through the forest. They'd been gone almost two weeks now, and Nico was getting desperate to get back to Jason. He'd had to leave when they were so close to getting back together. Nico planned to ask Jason to date him, to say he loved him again, as soon as he got back to camp. If they ever got back to camp. The pace was maddeningly slow.

Two days ago, they'd finally hit upon their first odd monster sighting. They'd literally bumped into a gorgon who was running like a bat out of hell away from the direction they were currently headed. The poor monster was so terrified that none of them had the heart to kill it, especially Nico, whose blade would permanently prevent the monster from re-forming.

Yesterday, they'd come across a drakon, normally a fearsome sight, but it had been as scared and confused as the gorgon. They'd narrowly avoided being trampled in the drakon's haste to escape. Nico worried that whatever could send a drakon running like that was truly terrifying. He'd begun to wish Percy, Reyna, or Jason was with him on this quest instead of young, unproven Allie.

Nico froze as, up ahead, he heard Frank shift forms back into a human.

"Nico?" Frank's low voice was quiet, but it carried back to where Nico stood. Nico hurried to catch up.

"What is it?"

"It was a noise," Frank said. His eyes shone in the moonlight. Worry lines creased his brow. "It was hard to distinguish with all the other animal noises around, and I can't hear it at all now that I'm in human form, but there's something up ahead."

Nico nodded. "Want me to lead?"
He didn't mean to insult Frank. The big guy was as capable in battle as Nico, but Nico was a better close range fighter while Frank excelled from further away with his bow and arrows. There were things Nico could do, powers he could utilize, that no other demigod could match. He should be in front.

Before Frank could answer, Allie shoved her way directly in front of him and turned blazing eyes on Nico. She was a good kid with a soft body and brown hair and eyes. With her quick mind and skill with a knife, Nico could see why Annabeth liked her.

"Hey, Pretty Boy," she began.

And her smart mouth, I bet Annabeth likes that, too, Nico thought. He rolled his eyes.

"I think I should get to lead," Allie continued.

"I think we should let Nico lead, Allie," Frank said. "He's--"

"--too fine to mess up," Allie said.

"Do you know who I am?" Nico growled. This "pretty boy" crap was getting old. She'd been saying it whenever they did something other than exactly what she thought they should do. Nico figured Annabeth must have coached her.

"Mmm, I'd like to know you," Allie said pointedly, taking a step closer and rubbing her hand down his chest. Frank chuckled, and Nico glared at him.

"You're, like, twelve, and I'm pretty sure we both bat for the home team," Nico said. This was wasting time.

"I'm sixteen, Gorgeous, and I'd switch teams for you."

"Frank," Nico groaned when Frank let out another deep laugh. "You're not helping by encouraging this shit. She's doing this because Annabeth put her up to it. We're wasting time. Fall in behind me."

"Oh, happily, when you put it like that," Allie said. "I can watch that sexy ass swish all day."

Nico was about to turn around and head on through the woods when the crack of a hand hitting his ass made him jump and let out a very high-pitched shriek.

"Hmm, I guess I can see what Frankie and the little mini-Hazel's-face-with-Arion's-mouth girl are saying, Jackie. You've got a pretty nice ass."

Nico whirled at the sound of the voice and stared in shock.

Frank recovered his powers of speech first. "Leo?"

"In the flesh, Zhang," Leo said. His grin was wide enough to swallow an airplane.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Nico asked.

Leo glanced his way. "Now, now, Jackie, aren't you going to introduce me to your little cutie-pie admirer, here?"

Nico huffed. "Asshole Leo Valdez, meet annoying little shit Allie Vargas. Annoying shit, meet asshole."
Leo kissed Allie's hand. She giggled. Nico rolled his eyes again.

"Leo, be serious now. What the hell are you doing here? We're tracking some weird monster activity in the area. Do you know anything?"

"Blah, blah, blah," Leo intoned. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. Not gotten any lately, Jackie?"

Allie burst out laughing. Frank slapped his large hand over her mouth. She appeared to bite him, as he let go with a horrible screech.

"Good gods," Nico moaned. "Frank, let's go on ahead and leave these two idiots to defend themselves."

Frank nodded and tried to walk around Leo and Allie, but Leo grabbed Nico's forearm and held him tight.

"I'm shitting you, Nico," Leo laughed. "You're always way too serious. I'm the monster disturbance, probably. Noticed some monsters running with the fear o' God in their eyes?"

"Yes. What do you know about it?"

If Leo was the monster disturbance, that would be wonderful. Nico could hurry them home and finally be with Jason.

Leo's eyes lit up. "Come on over to my work area, and I'll show you. It's maybe a quarter mile ahead."

Leo gave a tug on Nico's arm before he dropped it and walked in the direction the quest trio had been headed. Nico turned to Frank, who shrugged, before he turned back and followed Leo. The woods grew a little thicker here, and Nico understood how a dark, quiet area like this might be fertile grounds for monsters to appear. There wouldn't be too many demigods, but it would be a place to lie low and wait for healing or reinforcements.

Close to a half mile further ahead (Leo must be awful with distance), they came to a small encampment. The place was clearly Leo's, with fires lit all around the edge and a super-heated central fire, almost like a forge, in the middle. The heat was burning Nico's skin.

"Can you, uh, drop the flames a bit, bro?" Frank asked. He patted his magical man-purse that held the charred little stick that controlled his life.

"Oh, yeah, sorry, big guy," Leo said. He raised his hands and curled his fingers slightly. The flames died to a low simmer.

Nico gazed at the odd assortment of Celestial bronze gadgets that Leo had spread out everywhere. There was a little bronze spider, a few weapons, an Archimedes sphere, and a bunch of other objects Nico couldn't name. Coiled at the back of the area, just outside the ring of fires, was Festus. Nico walked over and laid his hand on Festus's head.

"Hey, Festus," he said. "How are you?"

Festus made a noise that sounded like a contented purr and moved his head so that Nico was scratching behind his left ear. Nico chuckled and gave a few good scratches before he let go and walked back inside the circle. Leo was pulling up a chair for Allie. Calypso was amazingly still Leo's girlfriend, and Nico had heard that she'd taught Leo some manners. That was good. Leo had a lot to
"So, what's the project?" Nico asked. He was happy to see Leo, but he was more happy at the thought of getting back home to Jason. He wanted to hurry things along.

Leo picked up a small aerosol can and waved it at Nico like it was the Hope Diamond. Nico widened his eyes and shook his head. He had no idea what he was supposed to be looking at.

"Ah, Nico, you have no imagination. It's monster repellent."

"What?" Allie's voice, clear and crisp and clearly thinking Leo was full of bullshit, cut through the night.

"That's right, little lady," Leo said. "Uncle Leo has invented the thing that will keep young demigods safe until they reach the age to begin training."

"But, that's..." Frank trailed off. Nico wasn't sure what he'd been going to say. Impossible? Unlikely? Ludicrous? All the words fit.

"Allow me to demonstrate. Can you call up some zombies or something for me, Jackie?" Leo asked.

Nico bristled.

"I am not calling my subjects for you to experiment on them."

"Your...subjects?" Allie said. She wasn't looking at Nico like he was the "super hottie McHotterson," as she'd called him earlier in the day, anymore. She was looking at him with alarm.

Frank glanced at Nico before speaking. "You understand Nico is the son of Hades, right, Allie?"

"He's the Ambassador of Pluto," Allie said. Her skin paled. "He's like your girlfriend, Praetor Hazel, except fly."

Nico laughed derisively. He wasn't sure why he was mad. He'd been dealing with the same reaction for years. People found out who he was, what he could do, and they shunned him. Recently, he'd been getting so much flak for his appearance that he'd almost forgotten how much worse the other end of the spectrum was. Leo and Frank were watching him apprehensively.

"I'm the fucking son of Hades, little girl," Nico jeered. "You think I'm a pretty face who can pull diamonds out of the ground like my sister?"

"Nico, don't," Frank said.

"Why not, Frank? Don't tell me you're still scared of me after all this time?" Nico looked in Frank's eyes and felt like he'd been mortally wounded. Frank was scared of him. Nico turned his attention back to Allie.

"I can't summon gems, sweetheart. I summon the dead. I break open the earth until it could swallow you whole. I kill things without touching them."

Nico circled Allie, who was looking right at him, he had to give her credit for that, though the fear in her eyes was evident. He stopped in front of her.

"I'm the terror that you feel when you wake up after a nightmare," he whispered. "All wrapped up in such a pretty package. Still want a piece?"
Nico bowed and held out his hand. Allie shrunk away from him.

"Right now, you're an asshole," Leo said. "She didn't ask you to give her nightmares."

"I'm the asshole?" Nico turned on Leo. "You asked me to call up my citizens so you could experiment on them. She's treated me like a piece of meat for almost two fucking weeks. I want to get this damned quest over and go home. That's all I fucking want! And I want people to treat me like a person, Leo! I'm not scary. I'm not sexy. I'm boring, geeky Nico, who gets too many answers right on his tests in school and can't figure out how to put the blinds down in his living room."

"I'm sorry," Allie said quietly. Nico was so surprised she'd spoken that it took him a moment to place where the voice had come from. He turned toward her. She was crying, but her face gleamed fierce and determined. "I didn't treat you very well. Annabeth said you're fun to mess with, and you are, but I took it too far. I didn't like taking orders from you. At least Frank's older, you know? I did think you got the spot on the quest because your sister's the praetor and the rumor is you use that hot body to fuck Reyna. I didn't know you could do all that stuff you said. You must be incredibly powerful."

Nico squatted in front of Allie and tilted his head so she met his eyes. He managed what he hoped was a kind smile. "You have the chance to have a powerful friend. I'm a senior at the high school. What year are you?"

"A sophomore," Allie said. Her bravado was gone, but something much more genuine had taken its place. "I'd like a friend. It's lonely, trying to be like Annabeth."

Nico laughed. "Annabeth does have big shoes. I'd like a friend, too."

He reached out his hand again, and Allie took it.

Frank placed his hand on Nico's shoulder. "Sorry, Nico. You don't scare me the way you used to. It was..."

"The fear aura? Yeah, sorry. I didn't mean to put it out there."

"You control that?" Allie said in awe. "All that, where it got colder and darker and it felt like I'd never be safe again? That was you?"

Nico looked at the ground. He hadn't meant to use the fear aura. He could usually control it much better than that. "Yes. Sorry."

"That was a-ma-zing!" Allie yelled. "I mean, I didn't like the way it made me feel, but shit, that's probably handy against enemies, huh?"

"I can make an entire army of monsters pee their pants and cry for their mommies," Nico admitted. He smiled shyly. "It drains me too much to keep up for more than a few minutes, though, at least against lots of creatures."

"Wow. I'm glad we're friends."

"Now that Jack's stopped being a prick, can we get back to me explaining how awesome I am?" Leo asked.

"Be my guest," Nico said. He sat at Allie's feet and faced Leo. "But that'll take a lot of explaining. Maybe give us the condensed version."

"You have no understanding of true genius, Nico."

Leo stepped forward and sprayed the aerosol on
"What the fuck, Leo?" Nico snapped, slapping his hands uselessly over his hair. "Why'd you spray that on me?"

"To prove my invention works," Leo said amiably. "Now, we wait for a monster to show."

"This is dumb," Frank said. Nico wholeheartedly agreed. Frank grabbed the aerosol can from Leo's hand. "Let's take this back to camp, and you can demonstrate. But, uh, aren't you supposed to be in school?"

"Oh, yeah," Leo shrugged. "They won't miss me for a few days. I'm on independent study."

Nico was interested in hearing more about what college was like for Leo. The son of Hephaestus was the only person Nico knew who'd been to college outside New Rome. Except Hades. Hades had a whole wall of diplomas and degrees in his office. Going to college was sort of his hobby, but Nico doubted the college experiences of an almighty god would translate well for his very human son.

"Hey, will you--"

"Neeks?"

An Iris message flickered to life in front of Nico, and Jason's face swam into view. Jason looked troubled. Nico couldn't tell where he was. Cold white marble was the only backdrop to Jason's face. Maybe he was in his father's shrine.

"Hey, Jace." Nico glanced nervously at his companions. He wondered how he could get them to leave Jason and him alone for a private conversation. "Frank and Allie are here, and so is Leo. He was the monster disturbance."

"Hey Superman!" Leo yelled, stepping behind Nico.

"Leo, hey, yeah, it's good to see you," Jason said. "I really need to talk to Nico."

"You can talk to Nico with me here, amigo," Leo said.

"I, uh, want to talk to him alone, Leo. Something happened in the senate today that he needs to hear about."

Frank shoved his way in front of the Iris message. "Is Hazel okay?"

Jason blanched. Frank's hand gripped Nico's shoulder so tightly that he winced.

"Um, no, no one's okay, exactly," Jason said.

"Is she hurt?" Nico asked. He was ready to travel with Frank back to camp and leave Allie and Leo behind if he had to.

"No one's hurt, Neeks. Just, can I just talk to Nico, please?" Jason looked at Frank and Leo, but neither moved. Jason sighed. "Juno came to the senate meeting. She called you a traitor trying to take over the camp, Nico. The way she said it sounded awful and plausible. She made it seem like Hazel was your figurehead. She told them about us, all of it."
Jason hesitated. Pain colored his features.

"She told about you and Percy, Nico. Gods, how could you be so stupid? Of all the people...it played right into her sick scheme."

Nico closed his eyes against the judgment in Jason's voice. So Jason knew. Nico didn't need to hear the rest, but when he reached to swipe through the message, Frank pulled his hand away.

"You're officially banished from camp," Jason said. He pulled at his hair. "That bitch made you seem like a power-mad conqueror, using sex to control me and Percy and Reyna. I'm not Pontifex anymore. Can't have a tarnished golden boy, one that slept with the traitor in secret for years, lead, you know. At least Reyna gets to play the role of the jilted lover, so that's good. They probably won't boot her. They're going to have another election to see if Hazel remains praetor. It's bad."

"Jason--" Nico sucked in a breath and couldn't finish his sentence.

"We can't fix it, Nico," Jason said. He wouldn't meet Nico's eyes. Jason always met his eyes -- unless he was worried he'd hurt Nico. "We can't fix us, either. We're over."

Jason swiped his hand through the message, and the four demigods in the little clearing were silent as long seconds ticked by. Frank's hand stayed steady on Nico's shoulder. Leo breathed heavily behind him. Allie sat on the chair and stared at Nico.

"You're fucking three praetors?" she finally asked incredulously.

"Be quiet, Allie," Frank warned.

"Oh, my gods, he's like a rock star!" Allie shrieked. "You're seriously the coolest guy ever, Nico!"

Nico ran his hand over his face. "That's really not the point of what he said, Allie."

"Yeah, but damn, boy. They're so hot, and you're the fucking king of hotdamn, and--"

"Leo, get her out of here," Frank ordered. "Take her for a ride on Festus, anything."

To Nico's surprise, Leo pulled Allie by the hand and helped her onto Festus. Nico watched as Festus flew off into the night. He hoped they weren't gone long. He was leaving, but he'd need to wait until Leo got back because he couldn't leave Frank alone. "And she wanted to lead," Nico scoffed. Shock was stopping him from censoring his words. It shut down his feelings.

Frank sank next to Nico. "I think she needs to grow up a bit, yeah."

"Hazel's going to be okay," Frank said.

Nico looked at his friend. Hazel's boyfriend. He wished he felt as certain as Frank seemed right now. "I hope so. You'll look after her, right?"

Frank nodded. "Where will you go? Half-blood?"

"I'm done with camps," Nico said. He meant it, too. Camp would remind him of Jason. Jason, who had said, "We're over." "I don't know where I'll go, but I'll land on my feet. I always do. Get Leo to take you back on Festus."
"You don't have to leave, you know," Frank said. "Come back to camp, and I bet we can work this out."

"I can't fight it," Nico said. He used Frank as leverage and stood. Frank followed slowly. "If I do, it'll hurt Hazel and Reyna even more. Tell them I love them, please?"

"Which ones?"

Nico looked at Frank as Festus soared back into the clearing. He stepped into a shadow and raised his hand in farewell. "All of them."

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Percy's day had sucked balls so far. That wasn't accurate, because when Nico sucked his balls (Annabeth would never do it), it was ecstasy. This day was more like being locked inside a port-a-potty.

First, he'd burned his pancakes. That never happened. He always made them perfectly. He should have known right then his day was going to shit. But no, he'd gone to classes anyway. He fell asleep in algebra. He failed a test in history. He had mountains of homework and a test in biology tomorrow that he had to pass.

He'd gone straight back to the house after classes and locked himself away, intending to study as much as he could. He'd seen people gathered in small groups, whispering and pointing at him, but that wasn't so unusual. Memories were short, but a lot of people still considered him a hero. He'd shrugged it off.

Then Annabeth showed up at his door.

Her face was pinched. She was pale and wide-eyed. Her hair was falling out of its ponytail, and Percy wasn't sure but he thought maybe her shirt was on inside out. Percy pulled her into the house and hugged her. It was hard to see Annabeth so scattered.

"What's going on Annabeth? You're scaring me."

Annabeth had snuggled tightly into Percy's embrace. Her hair tickled his lips as he bent and kissed the top of her head. When Annabeth hadn't spoken after a minute, Percy gently pried her from his arms.

"Talk to me."

"Percy, everyone's alive and not physically hurt, but things went bad today. You haven't heard what happened at the senate meeting?" Annabeth tugged Percy's sleeve and guided him to the couch. She sat close by, but sideways, like she would spring away at the slightest provocation.

"No," Percy said. He had a sick feeling in his stomach. He was tired of wars and prophecies. There was nothing he was going to do. If someone had to go risk their neck this time, it wouldn't be him. Or Annabeth. Or Nico. "I came straight home from class. What happened?"

"Juno showed up. She said some...things that were true, so no one could even deny it, but she made it sound so nefarious. It's not, of course, it's just this sick little incestuous soup we can't escape
because of who we are, and anyone with an ounce of common sense should see that this isn't what she made it look like, but they panicked and--"

"Hold up," Percy interrupted. "What are you talking about? In words I can understand, please."

Annabeth took a deep breath. She looked at Percy's eyes. Somehow that made Percy feel worse.

"Juno came. She accused Nico of trying to take over." Annabeth’s disgust was evident. "She said he was a graecus traitor. He's been banished."

Percy bolted off the couch. He needed to calm down, to school his reaction, so Annabeth wouldn't become suspicious, but he couldn't do it. He needed Nico. He lo...Shut it down, Percy. He would go to the senate. He would fix things. People didn't know Nico properly. Once he explained--

Annabeth's hand on his shoulder snapped him back to the present. He turned and looked at her. The truth was in her eyes. She knew.

"Juno told them that Nico got power by sleeping with Reyna and Jason...and you."

Percy grinned. This was sick. "He hasn't slept with--"

"He hasn't slept with Reyna, Percy," Annabeth interrupted, her voice hard. "But he's slept with you and Jason. He sleeps with you and Jason. Right? Because you took him home over Christmas and had sex over and over?"

"Annabeth--"

"We don't have time for me to play the jilted lover right now, so I'll cut to the point," Annabeth broke in. "I knew. I'm not happy about it, but I've known. I know you have feelings for him, and you're going to sleep with him every chance you get no matter what I say or how it looks. We're not breaking up over it unless you want to. What matters right now is that he got banished for something he wasn't doing; Jason lost his title; Hazel might be recalled; Reyna looks like she was played for a fool."

Annabeth laughed angrily and continued. "You, you'll skate by like you always do, because people like you. But our friends need help. You're going to get your ass up to the praetors' chambers and figure out how to make things better. I can't go with you. I have to pretend to be mad at you for a while, and Percy, I am mad at you for making me look, to all of camp, like a clueless, simpering idiot, standing by her man while he cheats. You fuck."

"I'm so sorry, Annabeth." Percy tried to hug her, but she stepped away.

"Save it." Annabeth crossed her arms and moved to the door. "I hated you fucking any random girl that shoved you into a deserted classroom and stuck her tongue down your throat. You're a serial cheater, Percy, and I've come to terms with that. At least, with Nico, you--"

"I'm not in love with him!" Percy shouted.

Annabeth's eyes filled with tears, and she slumped against the door. "Oh, gods, Percy."

"I love you most, Annabeth. Please believe that," Percy begged. If he didn't have Annabeth in his life, gods. A million Nicos couldn't take her place.

"I do," Annabeth croaked. When she spoke again, her voice was stronger. "Find Reyna and Hazel. See what you can do to help. I'll contact you when I think we've been apart long enough."
Percy nodded. Annabeth left, and Percy walked to his bathroom. He took stock of his reflection in the mirror. Black hair, messy. Green eyes, open and genuine, if not honest. Mouth, full of lies. Orange camp t-shirt, stained and a little too small. Jeans, tattered and frayed and low on his hips. How anyone believed he could help, he had no idea. He'd be fine, he had no doubt. He always was. People liked him, just like Annabeth said. They'd blame Nico, and Percy would defend him, and everyone would say what a great guy Percy was for sticking up for someone he cared about. Nothing he could say would change what they thought of Nico. It wasn't fair.

Percy brushed the hair out of his eyes and left his house, heading for Reyna and Hazel.

He found them quickly. The walk to the praetors' chambers had been uncomfortable, now that he knew why people were pointing and whispering, but no one approached him. The legion was so different now, full of strange faces, new kids who'd joined after the war. Many of his old friends had mustered out. Many had died. Percy felt like a stranger here sometimes.

When he knocked on the door to Reyna's office, he was yanked inside by Hazel without a word of greeting.

Reyna was sitting behind her desk, more haggard than Percy had ever seen her. Her braid was coming loose. She was twisting her ring so hard it looked like she'd twist her finger off. Her purple t-shirt was half tucked in and half untucked. Hazel didn't look much better. She was petting Aurum and Argentum, Reyna's gold and silver dogs, with quick rhythmic strokes that were hard enough to make a living dog whimper.

"So I heard there was a witch hunt in the senate meeting today," Percy began. Reyna and Hazel stared at him in horror. "And no one invited me, even though I had the immense pleasure of fucking the witch?"

Hazel gaped at him in open-mouthed shock, and Percy was afraid he'd pushed too far, been too flippant. But then Hazel chuckled. Reyna did, too. Percy grinned, and soon all three were laughing at the shock and horror.

"Oh, gods," Hazel said, holding her belly. "We are all in so much trouble."

Percy pulled Hazel into a tight hug. "It'll be alright, Hazel. You'll see. We'll figure out a way to keep your praetorship. We'll get Nico back."

"It is true, then?" Hazel whispered into his shirt. "You and Nico?"

"It is, but I don't want to talk about it." Percy felt Hazel's hand clench at his side. "Can it be enough for now to know that I care about him?"

"I suppose," Hazel said, pushing Percy away. "But if you two hadn't--"

"There are so many times we could say that, looking back," Reyna said. She spread her hands on the desk. "If I hadn't pressured him to have a pretend relationship. If Percy thought with his head instead of his dick--"

"Hey!"

"--if Nico hadn't pushed so hard for you to become praetor. There are a million ways we could have handled things differently. The way Juno framed events, they appear so unseemly, but one thing isn't related to the next, except that Nico is a good man who was trying to do right by most of us. But if you don't know him, if you accept the prevailing sentiment that sons of Hades are always bad guys -- I mean, for the devil's sake, Adolf Hitler was a son of Hades! -- then it's so easy to connect dots that
were never intended to be connected and come to the conclusion that Nico means us harm."

"But he doesn't," Hazel said.

"Of course not," Reyna agreed. "We need to get back on track. You must retain the praetorship. That has to be our first goal."

"But Nico--"

"Would tell you the same thing, Hazel," Percy said gently. "The only other time I've seen him as proud as he was when you were sworn in was when he sat at your father's feet on Mt. Olympus after we defeated Kronos. He's the toughest person I know. He'll be fine until we can figure out how to get him back."

"I agree," Reyna said. She stood and walked around to lean against the front of her desk. "Hazel, when Frank returns, that will bolster your cause. He was a very well-regarded praetor and is untouched by the scandal. He'll vouch for you."

"He's my boyfriend," Hazel said miserably.

"Yes, that's a problem, but I have a second idea that will help."

"And it is? Because I got nothin' to help here," Percy said.

"You do." Reyna fixed her intimidating gaze on Percy. "You have Annabeth. I assume she was aware of your extracurricular activities?"

"Apparently." Percy looked at his feet. He didn't want to discuss this with them. He didn't want to discuss this with anyone.

"And she hasn't left you?" Reyna phrased it as a question, but it seemed certain she knew the answer.

"No. She's mad, but I get the feeling it was more about making her look bad than being mad about what I did."

"Good. She needs to seem very angry with you for a while." Reyna paced like she did when she was developing a battle strategy. The image gave Percy some hope. He could live with Annabeth appearing to be mad at him for a stretch of time. Sometimes when she was immersed in a project, she'd ignore him for weeks at a time anyway. Reyna stopped pacing and tapped her fingers on her desk. "She will come speak before the senate and talk about her broken heart and your treachery, and then implore the senate to support Hazel. That will go a long way, I think."

It was a good plan. Percy didn't much like the part about laying himself open for public scorn, but if it helped Hazel, he was willing to do it.

"And Piper? It would look good if Piper did it, too?" Percy asked.

"Yes, but--"

"She'll do it, I think. She won't talk to me, but she'll talk to one of you, I'm sure."

Percy hadn't heard Jason come in. Anger surged through him. He'd gone three steps, his fists clenched and cocked, when Hazel stood between him and Jason, pushing their chests.

"Do it with words, if you have to do it at all," Reyna ordered.
"You son of a bitch!" Percy shouted. "You made me tell you all that stuff last summer, and you never once told me about you two. You were the reason he ran in the first place, weren't you?"

"Yes, you stupid fuck," Jason snarled. "You're such an idiot. It was easy to play you. I barely opened my mouth, and you spilled all your secrets. How's Annabeth taking the news, huh?"

"Bastard," Percy spat. "You cheated, too. How long have you dated Piper and had a thing with Nico on the side? Oh, my gods, don't tell me! That day you came to the apartment and broke up with her...it's been since then, hasn't it? You were the one fucking him that summer! Why didn't you tell people?"

"Yes, Jason," Reyna said pointedly. "Why didn't you tell people you were dating Nico? So much of what's happened would have been avoided."

Jason looked ashamed, and if Percy had any sympathy to give, he might have felt some for Jason in that moment, but he didn't care how Jason felt. So much of Nico's sadness had a clear reason in Percy's head now. Jason was the reason Nico ran. Jason was the reason Nico was so sad that day at the yogurt shop. Jason was the reason Nico wouldn't let Percy inside him. Percy hated Jason for the ways he must have hurt Nico. A small, quiet part of him hated Jason for having Nico first.

"I'm a horrible, despicable bastard who put his ambition ahead of his lover," Jason mumbled. He picked at a spot on his jeans. When he spoke, the words were quiet, shaky. "I'm here to tell you that tomorrow I'm going to go before the senate and publicly beg your forgiveness, Reyna. I'm going to say Nico seduced and beguiled me and that I am sorry I was taken in by his manipulations. I'll apologize for being part of hurting you and vow never to have anything to do with Nico again. I won't be able to publicly back Hazel, but I think Piper will, so maybe that'll make up for it."

Hazel's hand slipped from Percy's chest, and he closed the distance between himself and Jason in two quick steps. Jason was probably expecting a punch to the face, so Percy pounded his stomach instead. He wheeled back for a second punch and caught the side of Jason's head. The third time his hand came back, it was caught in a cold grip like an iron vise.

"Touching, I'm sure, Jackson, but it serves no purpose."

Percy wheeled to see Hades standing behind him. Or was it Pluto? Percy had never been good at telling whether a god was presenting themselves in their Greek or Roman form. This man had slicked back hair and a cloak of silently screaming faces. Hades. Percy stepped away from Jason and stood upright.

"Father?" Hazel asked. She looked more shocked than when Percy had admitted to sleeping with Nico.

Hades patted Hazel's head. "Hello, my daughter. I was proud to see you become praetor, and I'm proud that you are working diligently to defend your position against Hera's attacks. My presence here, though, concerns your brother."

"You were supposed to keep him safe," Jason growled. Percy was shocked that Jason was speaking so hostilely to a god. He thought of Jason as the ultimate suck-up. "Why did you let him go on that quest?"

Hades regarded Jason with icy detachment. "You were supposed to keep him safe, were you not? You have failed him miserably, son of Jupiter. All of this was set in motion by your cowardice and the way you succumbed to the flattery of your godly parents. This is your fault, and the only reason you still stand before me and haven't been sent to Tartarus to be tortured and killed then spit out to

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your rightful place in the Fields of Punishment is because I would be doing your father a favor.”

Jason was visibly shaking. His hands opened and closed. His voice shook, too, when he looked at Hades. "They say he'll be safe if I do what they say, Uncle. I'll do anything to keep him safe."

"Appease them for now, Jason Grace," Hades said. His voice seemed to have softened. "And do not despair. All is not lost. You remember what I told you?"

"I understand now," Jason said. His eyes were streaming tears. It was painful for Percy to watch, even though he didn't understand what was happening. "I won't give them reason to hurt him."

"Very well. I'm sure I will be seeing you again. For the time being, though, I do not require your service. I require..." Hades fixed Percy with a look that was probably reserved for Cerberus drool. "...Jackson."

Hades snapped his fingers, and Jason disappeared.

Reyna started. "Where have you sent him, Lord Hades?"

"You maintain a large mammal somewhere on the premises?" Hades asked.

"An elephant, Father," Hazel answered.

"Yes, animals were never my interest." Hades shrugged. "Grace is lounging in a vast spot of elephant dung."

Percy couldn't contain his laughter. "Good one, Uncle Hades!"

"You'll be next if you screw this up," Hades warned.

Percy glared at his uncle. "You haven't even told me what you want yet, and you're already talking about me screwing it up. Talk about messing with morale."

"Shut up, Jackson." Hades sounded so much like Nico that Percy almost laughed again. "Praetors, I require the services of this idiot for a period of perhaps several days. I assume you have no problem if I take him off your hands?"

Hazel and Reyna both shook their heads.

"Wait! Hold up! I'm not an idiot, and I have a problem with it. I have a test tomorrow!"

Hades scowled and rolled his eyes. "Very well. What grade would you like?"

"Excuse me?"

"What grade? I haven't time for this, Jackson. What grade would you like to receive on your exam?"


"Is there anything else you require?"

"Can I get a Porsche?"

"Wait!" Reyna said. "Where's he going?"

Hades looked at her coolly. "To fetch my son."

Chapter End Notes

Let it out down below in the comments.
Nico had convinced Jason and Percy that they needed to unwind, post-Aphrodite, so instead of talking they’d gone outside and sparred. When sparring had gotten tedious -- Percy would always beat Nico; Nico would always beat Jason; Percy was no match for Nico and Jason combined -- Nico had suggested they relax with a swim. The other gods had eagerly agreed, and after a stop at the altars, they'd spent the rest of the day playing in the water and on the beach.

Jason and Percy knew Nico was trying to avoid talking, but they were curious about how far the barrier had expanded and they wanted to give Nico some space to process what Aphrodite had said. Sometimes Nico caught Jason and Percy whispering together about how they should handle him, which was a silly thing for them to do since Nico could hear every word they said, but he appreciated their attempts to make him comfortable. He knew he wouldn't be able to put them off forever.

The next day's god was thoroughly forgettable. He was the god of chiropractors and herniated disks, and the only purpose he served was to remind the new gods that the duties they would eventually be expected to perform for the rest of eternity could potentially be that dull. When he offered to align Nico's spine and demonstrate how a shift in posture could help him achieve even greater sexual gratification, Jason growled and snapped his fingers. The god vanished.

"How the hell did you do that?" Percy asked from the other end of the couch. He had his legs thrown in Nico's lap and was lazily picking lint bunnies off the back of the couch.

Jason examined his hands. He was shocked. "I have no idea. I got frustrated with yet another useless god just here to hit on Nico and 'poof,' he was gone."

"You must be more powerful than him," Nico said. He was jealous. After what Aphrodite had said, Nico had begun to realize that he'd either need to open up and deal with his feelings or continue to be the weakest god in existence. He did not want to become the god of deviated septums or something equally pathetic. Jason watched him carefully, having realized the same thing. Nico slipped his hand between Percy's knees and rubbed the soft fabric of his jeans, trying to will him into different pants. He concentrated as much as he could, which was considerably more concentration than Jason or Percy could muster. Nothing happened. He pinched the back of Percy's knee in frustration and rolled his eyes. "Let's go fucking talk about our stupid, whiny, annoying feelings."

Jason laughed and jumped up. He tried to pull Nico to stand before Percy had gotten his legs off Nico's lap. When Nico didn't move, he busied himself by playing with the bracelet around Nico's wrist -- the one Apollo had given Nico long ago.

"Gods, Grace," Percy muttered. "He's not gonna let you hump him the moment you get in the bedroom." Nico glared at Percy, but Percy didn't care. He had wanted Nico to talk -- he wanted it -- but in his mind this might mean an end to all the making out Nico had been willing to do over the past couple of weeks. Percy didn't want that to end. More than that, he didn’t want to lose Nico to Jason.

Percy's worry showed on his face. Nico had been angry at the brusqueness of Percy's words, but his opinion softened some when he realized what the real issue was. Jason guessed at the problem and felt guilty for hoping Percy was right. Nico gently moved Percy's legs off his lap and held out his
hand. He hated being the center.

"Come on, Percy, let's get it over with," Nico said. Percy reluctantly took Nico's hand and allowed Jason to drag them into the bedroom.

Jason jumped onto the bed and patted the space next to him. He meant for Nico to take it, but Nico shoved Percy toward Jason. The older gods scowled in unison.

"What?" Nico snapped. "I don't always have to sit in the middle, okay? I don't even want to be on the bed with you two right now. Can't you make us some chairs in here or something?"

"The room's not big enough, Nico," Jason said. "How about bean bags?"

Nico straightened up from where he was still trying to push Percy, put his hands on his hips, and made a pinched face. "What the hell's a bean bag?"

"Oh, gods, you poor culturally clueless boy." Percy chuckled and slipped his hands through the space between Nico's arms and his sides and tried to kiss him. Nico turned his head away, which made Percy laugh harder. Percy slipped his hands up the back of Nico's shirt and rested his head on Nico's shoulder. Humor and fear danced together in Percy's brain, the way they always had. "Jason, give the boy some bean bags so he can understand what it means to be alive."

Jason laughed in spite of Nico's semi-rejection about sitting next to him and conjured three shiny royal blue vinyl bean bags that sat on the floor at the foot of the bed. Percy flopped down in one and pulled Nico into another. Jason crawled off the bed and joined them.

"See, Neeks, fine living," Percy said, patting Nico's bag.

"And you're not in the center, either," Jason added. He stuck his bare foot in Percy's face. "We're in a circle."

"Assholes," Nico grumbled while Percy slapped Jason's foot away. Nico did find the bean bag comfortable, if tacky.

"Now, as the oldest demigod-turned-god present, I think I should be in charge of this little meeting," Percy said. He was using his toes to style Jason's hair. Jason was ignoring him.

"I'm the one with the most god powers," Jason said. Percy poked him in the eye with his big toe, and Jason stuck his foot straight on Percy's face. Both men swung a second leg toward the other, intent on winning what was a rather gross war.

Nico kicked his leg out and smacked underneath their knees, disrupting the battle.

"I'm in charge."

Percy and Jason put their feet down.

"Why?" Jason asked.

Nico shrugged. "I'm in charge."

"But," Percy started. He couldn't think of a genuine reason to disagree. Nico was always in charge, always had been. Percy blew out a breath that ruffled his bangs. "Fine."

"First order of business, quit acting like adult-sized children."

Nico anticipated what came next.

"And if you swing those feet in my face, know I do not need godly powers to cut your fucking toes
Percy shot Nico a dirty look while Jason stuck his tongue out and said, "No fun."

"Second order of business," Nico watched Jason's hand inch toward his knee, "don't touch me. I don't want to talk. It makes me nervous, this whole shitfest, and you touching me will only make it worse. Both of you," he added and snapped his fingers when Percy reached out to him, too.

"Whatever you say, Ratings Gold," Percy said, withdrawing his hand. He went on before Nico could snap at him about the nickname. "I think we should do these things, these talks, frequently. That way we can discuss problems before they get out of hand. That is, if it suits your crabby ass."

"Fuck you, Percy."

Percy sneered. "Fuck you harder, Nico."

"I think that's a good idea, about the regular meetings." Jason didn't like how angry Percy and Nico seemed to be getting already. They were making progress, and he didn’t want Nico to shut down.

"Of course you do," Percy said. He kept looking at Nico, whose eyes were boring a hole in Percy's face. "The more we talk, the more he realizes he's still gaga over you and how expendable I am."

"That's not what this is about," Nico said. He wasn't any less angry. "I need to figure out how to use my powers, Percy, damn it. It doesn't have anything to do with choosing between you and Jason."

"It does, jerk," Percy said. He raised a hand to silence Jason and addressed Nico. "Gods, you idiot, I want you to learn to use your powers, but it sucks that I'll lose you in order for it to happen. Why can't you let me be sad about it and get on with it? Stop pretending like there's some other outcome."

"I'm not..." Nico tried to get out of his bean bag and couldn't. He rolled awkwardly and fell to the side then walked on his knees to Percy. "Hey," he said quietly. He waited until Percy met his eyes.

"I'm not letting you lose me. You're my best friend. Things are so fucked up, Perce, and there's a lot I'm not sure about, but I know that. I need you as much as you need me. If Zeus himself came down right now and told me I could have Jason forever and he'd be exactly the way I want him, not a douchebag like he normally is, I wouldn't say yes unless I could have you in some way, too. I don't want to be without you."

"You say that now, and I know you mean it." Percy smiled sadly and brushed his hand across Nico's cheek. "But you'll have to choose someday, and you'll always choose Jason."

"I love you both," Nico whispered. He glanced over at Jason before focusing back on Percy. "Like Aphrodite said." Nico climbed back in his bean bag and scooted closer to the others. He didn't look at them. "I love you both, and I don't want to choose. I'm not giving you up, Percy, but I do need to figure things out with Jason. I don't want to hurt either of you, and if I give in and try to figure stuff out, let out my feelings, I'll probably end up hurting both of you."

"We're not that weak, Nico," Jason said. He tapped Percy's knee. "We've put up with your shit for a long time, and we're still around. You're not going to break either of us. And our relationships will be a lot healthier if you stop censoring every feeling you have."

"He's right," Percy said. "Yeah, it makes me sad and maybe I'll act like kind of a jerk, but I'd rather you be who you are and do what you want than not be a full god and be unhappy. I'll be alright, even if it hurts at first. I just don't want you to pretend like I'm not about to get hurt."

"Ugh. I am not leaving you, stupid."
"Prove it." Percy raised his eyebrow and nudged Jason's shin with his foot. "Tell us what you need, how you're feeling. If you're so certain that the thing I'm most worried about isn't going to happen, prove me wrong by sucking it up and showing me."

"I hate the times you decide to be smart." Nico put a foot on Percy's thigh and a foot on Jason's thigh and shoved their legs back and forth. "I hate feeling so much pressure to do the right thing for you two. I don't even know what the 'right thing' is. I can't be the balance between you because the way I feel isn't balanced all the time. Sometimes, yeah, I love you both or I hate you both in equal measure, but there are a lot of times when I think you're great, Percy, and you suck, Jason, or vice versa. It can't be even because I trust you," he pointed at Percy, "in ways I'll never trust you," he pointed at Jason, "ever again. But you, you enormous blond jackass, you make my heart skip around and feel like it's going to beat out of my chest and you, Percy, my sweet best friend...don't. But even that doesn't tell it all. My heart may not beat outside my chest for you, Percy, but it beats deep and slow and steady, and that's every bit as powerful as the stupid pitter-patter shit."

"Nico--"

"Shut up, Jason. I'm not done." Nico took a big, unnecessary breath. He cupped his hands on his knees, and his skull ring glittered in the sunlight filtering in from the window. "I miss the hell out of Apollo, and I know you guys don't understand. No one can understand that. He mattered to me, and he made me feel so much better. I miss my sisters. I miss school. I miss Maybelle, Percy. I miss my dad."

Nico started to cry then, real and earnest, big body-shaking sobs punctuated by horrible coughs and snorts. Jason and Percy had a silent conversation of gestures and facial expressions and decided not to try to comfort Nico with anything more than their presence. They sat quietly and let Nico cry.

After about fifteen minutes, Nico wiped his nose and his eyes on his shirt and stripped it off. He didn't look at Jason or Percy. "I miss Rachel and her damned gropy hands. I miss Clarisse."

Percy chuckled. "You know you're the only person in the world besides Chris and Hedge who'd ever say that?"

"She's pregnant, Clarisse," Nico said. He looked up to see the shock on his friends' faces. It made him smile. "She's due in June. I wasn't supposed to tell, but it's not like you guys can tell anyone. If we're still here when it's time for the baby, I bet they show it on TV." Nico picked at a seam in the bean bag and felt his eyes fill with tears again. "I went with her to her first doctor's appointment because, um, she'd had a couple miscarriages and she didn't want to get Chris's hopes up again if things were wrong. She was so happy, watching the ultrasound, seeing that tiny little heartbeat. I guess you remember that kind of stuff, Perce. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up."

Percy was crying silently, but he waved Nico's worries away. "It's good, Neeks. That's wonderful news. Really. Clarisse deserves good things."

Nico rolled out of the bean bag again and climbed up in Percy's lap. He looked silly since he was taller than Percy to begin with. "So do you."

Percy kissed Nico's chest and hugged him tight.

"You did good, Neeks, talking," Jason said.

"Come here, Jason," Nico said.

Jason exited the bean bag much more gracefully than Nico had and walked on his knees until he was
within Nico's reach. Nico picked up his hand and kissed it.

"I want to spend time with you both separately and all together and not have it feel awkward," Nico said. He kissed Percy's head and Jason's hand again. "I won't worry so much about making one or the other of you jealous, but I'll try to be fair. If I touch one of you, I hope the other doesn't get mad, but I'm going to work on accepting that how you react is your choice, not mine, and not hide behind worrying about your feelings getting hurt."

"Okay," Jason and Percy said; Percy's response lagged a little behind Jason's.

"I'm more comfortable with Percy, Jason, and I'm going to try to stop holding back from him, but I'm also going to try to be more open with you. Percy, I want to see what I have left with Jason. Will you guys do something for me?"

Jason nodded. Percy said, "What?"

"Keep doing stuff together without me," Nico's eyes had a little of their former twinkle. "Or, put another way, don't start waking me up in the mornings. It's good for both of you, and I like to sleep in."

"No more shutting down?" Percy asked. He managed a small smile for Nico's benefit.

"Nope. If you catch me doing it, tell me." Nico caught Percy's chin and kissed him, slow and deep, until Percy squirmed underneath him. Nico pulled away and leaned into Jason's chest. It wasn't the same treatment, but Nico could feel the rise and fall of Jason's breath and knew, at least for now, it was okay. "Now, how about we have one of those ridiculous group hugs and then go swimming?"

When Jason and Percy agreed, Nico pulled Jason down on top of him and Percy and the groaning bean bag and concentrated. Sandwiched between them, with Percy's head smashed against his chest and his head smashed against Jason's, Nico felt happy. There was a small pop, and their clothes were replaced by swim trunks.

"No, naked!" Percy's yell was muffled by the way his mouth scraped along Nico's skin.

"Not until we're all standing at least three feet apart." Nico laughed, buoyed further by his success.

"You did it, Nico," Jason said. His voice was gentle in Nico's ear, and the kiss he planted right afterward made Nico blush.

Nico took a deep breath, and the bean bag burst, sending styrofoam pellets skittering across the floor and three gods tumbling to the ground. Among the ensuing laughter, Nico's rang loudest of all.

Chapter End Notes

More progress for our new gods, especially Nico!

Tumblr reader oxhe drew this sketch that feels so true to where the guys on the beach are emotionally. It's gorgeous. I'm extremely flattered my work got mentioned in conjunction with such a lovely piece. Bonus points because further down oxhe's tumblr there's an amazing sketch of Azula from Avatar: The Last Airbender.
Oh, I updated the tags to include Nico/Apollo, sort of as a promise to you all that we're getting close to Apollo's re-entry. (I know you've all picked up on the increasing mentions of Apollo anyway.)
Hades held Percy's ear far longer than necessary. It was probably permanently bigger than the other one now. They had traveled somewhere far east of camp, because it was the kind of dark that signaled that the sun had set many hours ago. They were standing on a sidewalk in a relatively quiet area, lined with shops that were closed for the evening. Directly in front of them was a large, boxy building that seemed to emanate a hum of dance music. Percy cringed. He hated dance music.

"Where's Nico? I thought you wanted me to fetch him?" Percy asked. He'd expected Hades to drop him off in some desolate woods or in an abandoned building, not in front of a dance club.

"In there." Hades nodded toward the club.

Percy narrowed his eyes. Nico would not be in a club.

"Where are we, anyway?"

Hades scowled. "I am not a map. Ask the boy, if he isn't too intoxicated already. He's always been good with geography."

"Nico doesn't drink," Percy said. He was feeling increasingly wrong-footed. Was Hades trying to trick him? Nico didn't drink. He didn't go to clubs. This couldn't be right.

"Not normally, no," Hades sighed. "He has had a rather jarring experience. You see, before Mr. Grace showed himself at the praetors' chambers, he oh so helpfully contacted Nico to let him know exactly how he'd been slandered at the Roman camp. He also told my son he would no longer associate with him."

"I'm gonna kill Jason," Percy growled.

"While I approve of your proposal, I offer you this advice: If you care for my son, you will leave the Grace boy alone. Their fates, and yours, are intertwined." Hades motioned to the club. "Now, go in there and bring Nico back here to me. I believe he is close to being eaten as a late night snack."

Percy nodded and hurried away. At the door, he was stopped by an attendant -- a big, burly guy who looked like he was in his forties. He was bald and had lots of tattoos. Awesome.

"ID?"

Percy pulled out his wallet and flashed his driver's license. He was thankful that he had these sorts of mortal conveniences. He knew Nico didn't. Of course, Nico had enough money to buy the whole club if he wanted to. It evened out. The attendant stamped his hand.

"That'll be ten dollars."

Fuck. Percy didn't want to pay to get into a club he didn't even want to go to. He turned back to Hades, who rolled his eyes. A fifty dollar bill appeared in Percy's hand. Percy shoved it at the attendant, who blinked rapidly and gave him change. Percy was keeping that other forty bucks. Hades could spare it.

Percy opened the door to the building, and the music got about a hundred times louder. He recoiled against the onslaught of noise. Why the hell would Nico be in a place like this? The walls, floor, and ceiling were painted black and laser lights supplied most of the light in the place. Percy slunk around
the edges of the club, checking in shadows. He found two guys getting oral from a girl on the floor, another girl laid out on a table being pounded by a guy, three couples making out in various states of undress, and two tables of guys who looked stoned. No Nico, though. Percy wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Hades had said Nico was about to be eaten as a late night snack, but Percy had scanned the room as soon as he walked in and hadn't seen any sign of monsters. There was only the one floor, so Percy was confused. He walked up to the bar and caught the attention of a bartender.

"Hey," Percy said, once the bartender came over. "Have you seen a kid about my height, black hair, pale, kinda thin, probably grumpy and scowling?"

The guy huffed out a breath, probably because Percy wasn't buying a drink, but he scanned the crowd. "I haven't seen any grumpy kids, but there's a lot of kids in this place, man."

"He's extremely good-looking," Percy offered. "You'd remember if you saw him. Dressed in black, curly hair, great body, looks like sex."

Percy hated describing Nico that way, but the bartender immediately pointed toward the dance floor.

"There's this really pretty guy who came in a couple hours ago. Got guys and girls buying him drinks left and right. If that's who you're looking for, you better get him quick 'cause he's wasted enough by now to fuck on the floor."

Fabulous. Percy pushed his way through the crowd until he saw a mop of dark curls about twenty feet ahead. The crowd was packed in tighter and tighter the closer he got to the curls. Percy pushed past two very drunk girls making out and caught his first full glimpse of Nico. Except this could not be Nico. This boy was covered in sweat, and Percy could tell this because the boy wasn't wearing a shirt, just tight black jeans that barely covered his dick. It looked like his jeans had been pushed down by one of the many admirers crowding around him as he danced. And holy hell, could this boy dance. As Percy watched, the boy was approached by a girl. He grabbed her from behind and began grinding sensually into her ass. The girl reached back and put her hand in his hair, and the two kissed passionately. Another girl was standing behind him and had reached her arms around the boy. She was running her hands all over his bare, shiny, finely muscled torso. Percy couldn't help the way his dick jumped.

The kiss broke, the boy raised his head, and shit. The two girls moved away, only to be replaced with two more girls, one of whom handed Nico a beer, which he sipped sloppily before slinging his arms around the two girls and swiveling his hips in a way that made Percy want to be the one to fuck him on the floor. The girls slid their hands over his carved abs, and Nico took his time kissing each girl. There seemed to be a line of people waiting for the chance to get a piece of him. The next guy up was older and covered in muscles and tattoos. He didn't waste any time and pressed against Nico's front while Nico's arms were still wrapped around the girls.

The guy and the girls started fighting about whose turn it was to dance with Nico, all while still rubbing against his body. Nico danced, completely oblivious. Percy sneaked around behind him and pulled him backward by the hips.

"What the hell are you doing, Nico?" he hissed in Nico's ear.

Nico turned his head toward Percy, but his eyes were glazed and unfocused. "Percy? Is'at you?"

"Yes. We need to get out of here." Percy tugged on Nico's hips, but Nico simply ground his ass back against Percy and didn't move his feet. Percy spluttered for breath. He tried to maintain some level of calm. "Where's your shirt?"
"Mmm, I dunno, Perce," Nico slurred. "Someone took it, I think. I don't wanna go. I'm havin' fun dancin'."

"Yeah, you're having fun dancing till one of these creeps tries to fuck you." As soon as Percy said it, the guy in front of Nico must have realized he had more competition for Nico's attention.

"Hey, asswipe," the guy said. "It's my turn. I been waiting in line for half an hour to touch this."

"He's a person, not a 'this,'" Percy growled. "And he's barely seventeen years old. Back off."

Nico ground back against Percy again, and Percy had to stifle a moan.

"Let it out, Perce," Nico said as he laid his head on Percy's shoulder and arched his back. "Dance with me."

Nico let go of the girls. He pried Percy's hands from his hips and dragged them up his body. Muscle Guy objected. Percy ignored him and managed to scoot Nico back a few inches. The girls were quicker than the guy, maybe because they were at least closer to Nico's age, and invaded the space between the man and Nico. It wasn't great, but it was better than some old pervert touching Nico all over.

"They don't want to dance with you, they want to fuck you," Percy breathed against Nico's neck. It was so hard not to kiss him.

Nico chuckled and turned to face Percy. He wrapped his arms around Percy's neck. The girls made sounds of protest, and Percy immediately covered Nico's ass with his hands to prevent Muscle Guy from doing the same.

"They don't get to fuck me, Perce. That's silly." Nico rolled his hips, and this time Percy did moan. "You can fuck me if you want, though."

Oh, gods, did Percy want to. Nico had started doing that grinding thing against him, catching Percy's dick and pushing all along his length. Percy let his eyes roll back in his head and, just for a moment, focused on the dual sensations of what Nico was doing to his dick and what it felt like for Nico's tight ass to move in his hands. Percy had touched Nico before, had felt his body without the barrier of clothing between them, but this Nico, so uninhibited and forward in a public place, was a whole new experience. Percy pulled his head back to the situation outside of his body and yanked Nico backward with him toward the nearest wall, to a chorus of catcalls and jeers from Nico's line of "friends."

"You're drunk," Percy told Nico.


Nico's alcohol breath smelled terrible in Percy's face, yet Percy was aching to kiss him. As they reached the edge of the dance floor, Percy pivoted and pressed Nico against a black wall. Nico slipped a little, and Percy tightened his grip on Nico's ass to keep him upright. Once Nico seemed steady, Percy released his hold.

"Now you know," Percy muttered. Nico had kept his arms around Percy's neck, but now they slid down against Percy's chest. The movement might have felt like it was pushing him away, but Percy was focused on Nico's eyes, which were begging him to come closer. Percy gently took the bottle of beer from Nico's hand and set it on the floor. When he stood back up, Nico replaced his hands on Percy's chest. Nico's eyes sparkled with desire. Percy stroked Nico's cheek. He shouldn't do this.
"Are you gonna kiss me?" Nico purred, and it was easy to pretend this was his normal, soft voice. Percy pressed closer.

"Are you gonna remember this in the morning?" he asked.

Nico closed his eyes and made a squished up face. When he opened his eyes, he smiled seductively. "Sure doesn't seem like it, huh?"

Percy chuckled and held Nico's cheeks. He let his thumbs graze over the high cheekbones and slipped his fingers back into Nico's silky hair. One hand drifted lower and cupped the side of Nico's neck. Percy rubbed his thumb over Nico's throat. Nico tilted his head into the hand that had stayed on his face and closed his eyes. So slowly that Percy would swear he could see the breaths leave Nico's lips, he covered the distance between them, allowing his eyes to slip shut only when he could feel the coolness from Nico's lips touch his skin.

Nico's lips were so soft, despite all the kissing and dancing he'd been doing. Percy brushed his lips against Nico's gently and slowly. The touch was featherlight. He knew he wasn't breathing. How could he breathe when he was giving in to the desire he'd been harboring for so long now?

Percy pressed a little more firmly, and Nico responded by slightly parting his lips. Percy moaned at that simple act and licked Nico's bottom lip. Nico tilted his head a bit farther, and Percy gasped when Nico's soft tongue brushed his own. He felt Nico smile against his mouth before Percy chased that soft tongue back inside. The alcohol taste in Nico's mouth was wrong, and Percy longed to be able to kiss him without it. He kept the pace slow and easy. Nico seemed content to let Percy lick where he pleased. He didn't try to deepen the kiss or push for more than Percy was giving. Percy let himself explore Nico's mouth before he licked over the length of Nico's tongue. Nico moaned quietly, and Percy pulled away.

Percy pressed a kiss to Nico's cheek and dragged his lips to whisper in Nico's ear.

When they separated, Nico focused on Percy's eyes. "Me, too."

Percy nodded. He smiled and started to pull Nico away from the wall, toward the exit, when Nico yanked him back with more force than Percy would have guessed possible, given Nico's inebriated state.

"Hey, a deal's a deal," Nico reminded Percy. Percy watched, shocked, as Nico turned and faced the wall before he reached back and pressed Percy's body against his own. Nico pulled Percy's hands to his belt buckle. Percy shot away like the buckle was scorching hot. Nico turned his head and frowned. "Said you could fuck me if we kissed."

"You're drunk, stupid," Percy said. He grabbed Nico's shoulders and turned him around.

"But you want me." Nico sounded almost hurt.

"So much," Percy agreed. "But I'm not taking advantage of you, my precious baby. Ask me when you're sober."

Percy wrapped his arms around Nico and led him out of the club.

Hades was waiting across the street. He did not look happy. Nico didn't, either. He pushed at Percy's arms and tried to head back into the club. Percy tightened his grip and guided Nico across the street.

"Took you entirely too long, Jackson," Hades said. He glanced toward the east, almost as if he was worried.
"Then you shoulda got him yourself," Percy snapped. "He had a crowd around him."

"Perce, did you know my dad's here? Hi Dad. Daddy. Ha. Hades is my daddy."

Hades made a circle with his thumb and middle finger and thumped Nico in the forehead. Nico went cross-eyed trying to follow Hades's hand, and he stumbled back at the touch. Percy had to stumble with him and drag him back upright.

Before Percy could fully recover, the three of them were standing in an enormous black room with a black couch, a television, a bookshelf, and the most massive canopied bed Percy had ever seen. It was black, too, of course.

"Where are we?" Percy was awed.

"Nico's room," Hades said dispassionately. "You will stay with him and care for him during the night. I will check in tomorrow when he wakes. When he vomits, alert one of his servants in the hall. They'll clean up the floor."

Hades walked toward the door.

"Wait!" Percy yelled. Hades glared at him. "What do I do with him when he vomits?"

Hades shrugged. "I have no idea. I have never vomited."

The King of the Underworld left. Nico puked on Percy's shoes.

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Nico buried his head tighter in the warm shoulder, seeking out pressure to counteract the horrible pain inside his head. He must be dying, because his head was exploding, his guts were liquefied, and he was shivering. The warm arms pressing into his back shifted, and he felt covers rise over his shoulders before those warm arms circled tight around him, pulling him closer. Nico went happily.

"I think I'm dying, Jace."

"You think it's him instead of me a few more times and you're going to give me a complex."

"Percy. Sorry," Nico whispered. He kissed Percy's collarbone as much as he could without moving his head. "Confused."

Percy laughed. Nico winced as he was jostled around, and the noise made his head hurt so much worse.

"Yeah, well, you probably should be. You were drunker last night than I think I've ever seen anyone in real life. Feel like shit?"

"Yes."

"Good. You shouldn't have gotten drunk like that, Nico," Percy said.

Nico wanted Percy to shut up and hold him. His voice was way too loud. Nico slung his arm up and felt along Percy's face until he found his mouth. He covered it.
"Hush," he whispered.

"Nah, I don't think I will," Percy grumbled. "See, you puked on me twice last night. I had to hold your hair back while you puked in the toilet three times. I had to shower you off twice, and the second time, you stuck your head outside the shower and puked on our clothes. You're lucky your zombie butler or whatever the fuck he is has good hearing and came when I yelled from the shower, or I'd be way more pissed at you than I already am."

"Jeeves," Nico whispered. He kissed Percy's collarbone some more. He was having trouble thinking, but he was glad he couldn't remember what Percy was describing. It sounded awful.

"Your zombie butler's actually named Jeeves? You've gotta be shitting me. Keep up the kissing. Might make me forgive you faster."

Nico chanced a tiny head movement and sucked at Percy's neck. He may have been trying to see if he could suck some water out of Percy's skin and into his parched mouth, but Percy didn't need to know that. Nico licked the spot, which made Percy moan but didn't yield any water.

"We don't know his name, and he doesn't remember, but he seems to like being called Jeeves," Nico whispered again. "Can you shut up now?"

"I'll talk softer," Percy conceded. "I like when you suck on my neck. Feel barfy, still?"

"Very."

"If you puke on me again, I'm asking your dad to find you a new babysitter."

Before Nico could do much more than register the potential meaning of Percy's words (he hadn't opened his eyes to see where they were), the room was full of noise and the smell of breakfast food, which made Nico's stomach roil even more.

"Jackson," Nico heard his father say. His voice seemed magnified to three or four times its normal volume. "Get off my son."

Nico groaned softly against Percy's neck. He pinned Percy tighter to him.

"He's on me, Uncle," Percy said. "Ooh, is that breakfast? I'm starving."

"Why, yes, boy," Hades crowed. Nico hated his father right now. "It is. Note how squishy and runny the eggs are. The oatmeal is quite mushy."

Nico rolled away from Percy, hung his head over the bed, and vomited.

"Fuck, Nico! Not again!"

Through his streaming eyes, Nico saw Jeeves come in and begin cleaning up the mess. Percy was yelling at Hades, so Nico plugged his ears and tried not to die. He laid on his back and stared at his midnight blue canopy. The thing looked black, but Nico could tell the difference. He decided it would be nicer to close his eyes and picture the canopy in his head.

After what felt like an eternity, the yelling stopped, and Nico's stomach no longer felt like it was home to a family of beavers. Deliberately, he pulled his hands away from his ears.

"Open your eyes, child. Must you always be such a baby?"

Oh, gods, not Demeter, too. Nico laid there, neither moving nor opening his eyes, until Percy
grabbed him under the armpits and forced him to sit. He could feel that Percy was already sitting almost behind him, so Nico leaned back against Percy's side and squinted out at the room. He could vaguely make out his father, Demeter, Persephone and Jeeves. It seemed his poor behavior warranted a whole family intervention. He let his eyes fall closed, only to feel them magically snap wide open. He recoiled from the blinding light. Why was it so bright? It was never bright in his room.

"That's better," Hades said briskly. "I've taken your nausea, since Jackson has served enough time as your nursemaid. However, I'm leaving you with the headache as a reminder of how incredibly foolish you were last night. You could have been accosted by mortals, monsters, or one of your enemies."

Percy stilled behind Nico. "What enemies?"

"That is none of your concern." Hades's tone was dismissive.

"Nico, honey," Persephone said. "We want you to stay as safe as possible. We can't always be watching out for you, and you put yourself in terrible danger last night."

"I'm sorry," Nico mumbled. He couldn't remember much of the previous night. Jason's call. Talking to Frank. He'd shadow traveled to...St. Paul, maybe? Found a club. Started dancing. Let people buy him drinks. The rest was fuzzy. Had it been that bad? "I was wearing monster repellent."

Percy burst out laughing, and Nico's head burst into two pieces.

"Is that like bug spray? Sign me up for some of that shit!" Percy's voice was garbled. He was eating! Nico was enduring familial torment and humiliation, and Percy was eating!

"Shut up, Percy," Nico said. "Leo sprayed it on me."

Percy laughed harder. "Oh, yeah, shit from Leo always works. No wonder you were so fucked in that club you were letting random people grope you. You're so naive."

"Can you send him back to the surface?" Nico asked his father.

He didn't mean it, but Percy's arm closed around his waist. Nico felt his face flush and warmth invade his chest. He turned slightly so he could peer in Percy's direction.

"I didn't mean it seriously," he whispered. "I'm glad you're with me."

"Good, but your breath is gross," Percy whispered back.

"Ah, young love," Demeter chimed in. "How charming. Neeky, really, you're spinning your way through the boys rather quickly, don't you think? You're acting more like one of my other brothers than your father."

"Mother!" Persephone cried. "That is rude. It's only been the two. He's such a sweet romantic, our Nico. It's cute how he--"

"Persephone!" Nico shouted and quickly put his hands to his head to calm the pain his voice had caused. More quietly, he said, "Persephone, please. Can you stop before you say anything embarrassing?"

"Oh, Neeky, are we making you uncomfortable?" Demeter boomed.
Nico nodded slowly.

"Good. Drink like that again, and we'll unleash the fury of Hell on your pathetic excuse for a backside," Hades said. "You are making me extremely angry. In fact, I like Jackson more than I like you right now, Nico. Do you know how I despise feeling this way?"

"I'm sorry," Nico mumbled once again. "I won't drink ever again. The stuff tasted gross, and I feel miserable. Happy?"

"Not remotely," Hades said. "However, we will leave you be so you can recuperate. I expect to see you no later than dinner tomorrow."

Nico was able to close his eyes again, so he did. He heard the noise he'd come to associate with his godly family leaving the room. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Is Jeeves still here?"

"Yeah," Percy told him.

"Jeeves, you can go back in the hall. Thanks for everything."

"Typical Nico," Percy grunted. "Thanks his dead zombie butler for cleaning up his puke. Says not one word of thanks to his lover."

Nico inwardly cringed. Percy was his lover, but he was longing for Jason. It wasn't fair, really. Percy was the one who was here for him. Percy was the one who acted like he cared. Nico had thought that Jason would be the kind of lover Percy was being. He decided he'd stuff away his disappointment and make the best of things with Percy. He was so...something...with Percy anyway. It wasn't hard to enjoy his attention and affection, not at all.

"Thank you for everything you've done. I'm going to brush my teeth while you finish eating and maybe we can hold each other some more?" Nico used Percy's shoulder for leverage and climbed out of bed. Percy placed a hand on Nico's waist to steady him.

"That sounds wonderful. Maybe we should get another shower, though. You puked, again, and I think I can help your headache."

Nico patted Percy's hand and started to walk away. He stopped when he noticed how restricted his thighs felt. He reached down and was alarmed to feel some skintight, man-made fabric adhering to his pelvis and thighs.

Percy must have noticed Nico's discomfort, because he giggled nervously and said, "Uh, yeah, I was kinda mad at you after you puked on our clothes. I picked out the undies that seemed like they'd annoy you the most. Well, second most. Did you know there's a g-string in your underwear drawer, man? Where'd you even get that?"

Nico groaned. "I have an, I don't know what to call him. I have a god who gets a kick out of choosing my clothes. Not my dad. This god, he never asks what I want. He replaced all my clothes with what he wants me to wear, or thinks I should wear, or whatever. It's embarrassing."

"So I should send him a thank you note for these black silk boxers I'm wearing?"

Nico turned to see, but Percy's lap was covered. Percy chuckled slyly and slipped his legs out from under the covers, letting Nico get a view of him in the boxers.

"I have another pair. Put them on after the shower." Nico was surprised by how much the idea affected him. "Maybe I'll take them off you later."
Percy stepped into the shower, solid black, of course, except for the shiny chrome of the shower heads, and held out his hand to help Nico. Nico put his palm on Percy's and entered the warm spray. Percy could feel the tug of the water itching to soothe Nico's ache.

"Here, lean back against me." Percy gently guided Nico to stand back to chest in front of him and slid them both down to sit on the shower floor. Nico was nestled between Percy's legs, his head resting on Percy's shoulder, and Percy was overcome with feeling for the boy in his embrace. His throat closed up and his nose started to run. All Percy wanted was to hold Nico close and ease his pain.

He wrapped his left arm around Nico's chest and readjusted him slightly so there was more distance between their faces. Nico went willingly, his eyes closed and his jaw relaxed, and settled against Percy's upper arm. Percy marveled that this was the same boy who'd run from him and tricked him and sworn he hated him -- the same boy whom Percy had ignored and marginalized -- the same boy who'd shrunk from touch and human contact. Nico was so trusting in his arms. Percy felt a huge responsibility not to betray that trust, and a fierce loyalty pounded in his chest. Their bond went beyond sex or love, even. It was something Percy felt in his soul.

"I'm going to use the water to see if I can work away the headache."

Nico's eyes pricked open. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, just...it means a lot to me that you trust me to hold you and touch you."

"Gods, Percy, stop being so damned mushy and fix my head."

"Dickhead," Percy murmured.

Nico brushed Percy's cheek and raised his head to kiss him. At the last moment, Percy moved so Nico's lips hit his cheek. Percy wanted that kiss, but he couldn't have it, not without fully betraying Annabeth. Last night would be his only indulgence -- safe because Nico wouldn't remember.

"I care about you," Nico said. "And I trust you."

Percy nodded. He raised his hand to Nico's temple and used the water to trail a touch of comfort and healing along Nico's brow, up his hairline, down his jaw, and over his cheekbones. The longer Percy worked, the more deeply Nico relaxed. Nico's eyes slipped closed, and his head dropped back. By the time Percy stopped, Nico was snoring lightly.

Percy brought Nico's head to rest on his chest. Nico curled on his side in a tight ball and nuzzled closer. Percy wrapped his arms securely around Nico. The water poured over them and soothed his troubled mind.

He itched to get back to Camp Jupiter, to see Annabeth and try to make amends, to help Reyna and Hazel however he could, even though that probably mostly meant being there for Annabeth to rip apart on the floor of the senate. At the same time, he agonized over the thought of leaving Nico, who couldn't return with him to camp. Would Nico stay here in the Underworld or go back to living on the move? Maybe he'd go to Camp Half-Blood. That's what Nico would do, Percy decided. He needed to believe Nico would be somewhere safe and easy for him to locate.
For now, he'd enjoy running his hands over Nico's sleek back and sliding Nico's curly hair through his fingers.

***

Even Percy couldn't sit in a shower forever. Eventually his butt fell asleep and his legs got sore. He nudged Nico awake, and they wordlessly exited the shower and towed off. In the bedroom, Percy found his clothes from the day before had been laundered, ironed, and were laying on Nico's bed.

He started to put them on, but Nico stopped him with a hand to the back of his upper arm.

"Wait, let me get the boxers."

Percy raised an eyebrow. "You like me in your underwear that much?"

Nico shrugged. "I guess so."

"I like being in your underwear," Percy purred. He walked over to where Nico rummaged through his dresser and pulled Nico's towel away from his hips. Nico huffed slightly, then went back to digging for clothes while Percy pressed against his back and ran hands up and down his sides. "You were so sexy last night. I mean, I hated that you were drinking and making out with random people, letting them touch you, but gods, Nico, seeing you dance turned me on."

Percy moved his hands to Nico's front and brushed them lightly over the smooth skin on Nico's stomach and chest. He kissed Nico's neck as his hands slid back down and over the fronts of Nico's thighs. Nico let out a soft sound of contentment before he triumphantly pulled out two pairs of underwear and said flatly, "I don't dance."

"Liar." Percy bent low and licked Nico's shoulder blade. "No one who doesn't dance is that good. If this demigod racket doesn't work out for you, you could make a killing as a stripper. I'd come to every show."

Nico turned and shoved the underwear into Percy's chest. "Don't tell anyone, okay? It's good exercise and helps me relieve stress."

Percy put the boxers on and rushed to catch up to Nico, who was sliding into a pair of his skintight black jeans. How could he breathe in those things? Once they were on, Percy put his hands on Nico's waist and pulled him close. "I won't tell, but will you dance with me sometime? Just you and me."

Nico blushed and fixed his eyes on a spot somewhere near Percy's belly button. He kept his head tilted down, but looked up through his long eyelashes and nodded. Gods, Percy felt so attracted to Nico when he did that. Percy cupped Nico's face and kissed his cheek, the same one he'd kissed the previous night before he slid his lips to Nico's ear and whispered the words he couldn't ever say or think again.

He let Nico go and put on the rest of his clothes.

"What do you want to do?" Percy asked as he slid his shirt over his head. Now that Nico was healed, mostly, and they were dressed, Percy felt awkward being in Nico's Underworld bedroom.
"Come sit with me on the couch," Nico said. "I guess I need to know what happened last night."

Percy wrapped his arm around Nico as soon as they sat down. Nico snuggled into the touch, throwing his knees in Percy's lap and holding each of Percy's hands. It felt good, being this close to Nico again when the younger boy was awake and aware enough to choose the contact.

"We fit so well together. I could hold you like this forever."

"It's perfect," Nico agreed. "Like we were made for each other."

Percy couldn't argue. That's exactly how he felt.

"But you work better with Annabeth, Percy."

Percy also couldn't argue with that.

"And you work better with Jason."

Nico looked at him then, and Percy could read the fear and heartache in his eyes. He'd never seen Nico afraid of anything, but there it was.

"You love him, don't you?"

"I don't think he loves me anymore." Nico pressed his head back into Percy's neck and kissed him. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about him. I wanted to keep it separate, you and him, and I didn't think this—"

He raised their intertwined fingers.

"—would become what it has."

"I think he does love you," Percy said. "And it's okay. I understand. I never asked, and I knew you'd been with someone. I didn't expect this to become what it has, either."

"What has it become for you, Percy?"

Percy hesitated. The truth wasn't something he could admit. "More."

Nico nodded into his neck and squeezed his hands.

"Tell me about last night, without the vomiting, please."

"I will, but you need to tell me some things, too."

Nico made a whining noise. "I'd rather not. Can't I get the details then entice you into forgetting everything else with offers of mind-blowing sex?"

"Tempting, more than you probably realize." Percy chuckled. "But I'm your friend, too, not just some guy you have sex with, or did we not cover that enough two minutes ago?"

"Yeah, yeah, mush and gush," Nico grumbled, though Percy could feel him smiling. "So, last night?"

"Well, I assume you know what happened in the senate meeting. I wasn't there, but Annabeth told me about it."
"Hera made us look like a sick mess, with me at the center," Nico said. "The worst part is that the person I wasn't sleeping with, Reyna, can't deny that she and I were lovers because she spent so much time making everyone believe we were. How's Annabeth taking things?"

"Like you'd expect, I guess. She's pissed because everyone knows about you and me now, and that makes her look bad, but she's not as mad about the actual you and me part as I thought she'd be. We're not breaking up."

"That's good," Nico said. "I mean the not breaking up part."

Percy nudged Nico's head up so he could kiss his neck. When he was done, Nico shifted sideways and leaned across Percy's legs.

"I went to Reyna's office after I talked to Annabeth. She and Hazel were working on plans to make sure Hazel stays Praetor. Hazel didn't care about that. She was only thinking of you." Nico made a grunt of protest, but Percy shushed him and continued. "Reyna and I both told her you'd want us to focus on keeping her at her post."

"I do. What else?"

"Well, Jason came by. He," Percy hesitated. "He said he was going to go by the senate the next day, today, I guess, and tell them he's sorry and it was all your fault, that you seduced and manipulated him. I'm sorry."

Nico closed his eyes. A tear dropped down his cheek. Percy hastily kissed it away and pressed Nico as tight as he could given the angle of their bodies.

"He feels like he has to," Nico whispered. "It's not what it looks like."

"It looks like he's an asshole who's breaking your heart and putting his ambition ahead of his lover," Percy said. "He even said it himself."

"It's not. I know it looks that way, and he is breaking my heart, but he's been doing that for over a year now. It's complicated, Percy, and not all his choices are his own."

"You can't seriously defend him? He's crucifying you, probably right now." Percy let go of Nico's hands, pushed him off his lap, and stood. "I hate him for what he's doing to you, for what he's done to you."

"Please," Nico said, standing, too. He took Percy's hand and kissed his fingers. "I don't want to fight with you. Can you accept that I see things differently and move on? I love how much you care about me."

Percy pulled Nico into a rougher hug than he had ever given him. Nico responded in a way Percy hadn't expected. He pressed tight against Percy's body, tangled a hand in his hair, and bit Percy's neck. Percy jumped at the sensation and let out first a gasp and then a moan when Nico pulled his hair and bit again. His hands were moving, pressing into the small of Nico's back as Nico arched against him and kissed under his jaw. This wasn't the way they normally moved together. It was harder, faster, more needy. Percy shoved Nico away.

"That's how it is with him, isn't it? That's why you went crazy for me just now? The way I touched you reminded you of him."

Percy didn't give Nico a chance to answer. He walked into the bathroom and locked the door. He turned on the tap and made a little fountain in the sink to try to drown out the noise of Nico knocking
on the door and begging to be let in. It shouldn't hurt him like this, knowing that Nico preferred
Jason. He preferred Annabeth to Nico, didn't he?

"I like the fountain. It's pretty."

Percy let the fountain turn back into water in the sink basin. He didn't look up.

"How'd you get in here?"

"I have powers too, Percy." Nico wrapped his arms around Percy's waist and rested his chin on
Percy's shoulder. "I used the shadows."

"That was shitty. You're invading my privacy." Percy stared at their reflections in the mirror. Nico's
eyes were sad.

"Then tell me to leave."

Percy sighed and closed his eyes. "I won't do that, Nico."

"Percy, look at me."

Percy opened his eyes and looked at Nico in the mirror. Nico was so beautiful, inside and out. Percy
wished more people saw what he saw. He wished maybe he didn't see it quite so much.

"I'm sorry," Nico said. "I don't compare you two, and I don't want to start. When we're together, all I
think about is you. You're all I want. I don't think about Annabeth or Jason, and I don't want you to
think about them, either. But also," Nico hesitated, let his eyes flicker away from Percy before
resettling them and continuing, "you are the one who came for me--"

"Your dad didn't give us much choice. He chose me."

"It wouldn't have mattered who my dad chose. Jason wouldn't have come, and you would have.
He'll give me his reasons, the next time I see him, and I'll believe him and forgive him because I love
him, but that doesn't erase the truth. You came. You could be at home right now, trying to fix things
with Annabeth or repair your reputation, but you're here with me. I puked a million times last night
and the worst thing you did was put me in ungodly tight underwear--"

"I bounced a quarter off your ass a lot, just to see if I could, once you fell asleep with those things
on--"

"Percy."

"Sorry, being serious. Continue."

"I acted like a first rate, um, easy person last night, from what you said, and you kept me safe. You're
not even making me feel like shit about it. I'm glad it's you here with me, not him."

"So you're glad it's me because I'm a better nurse and babysitter? That's not very reassuring."

"No. I'm glad it's you because of who you are and how I feel about you. If I had been wherever you
two were when my dad showed up--"

"Reyna's office."

Nico rolled his eyes. "If I'd been in Reyna's office, and my dad had let me choose who would come
with me, I would have chosen you."
Percy skimmed his hands over Nico's arms where they were wrapped around his waist. Nico pressed tighter into his back, as if trying to cement them together. Percy touched his temple to Nico's.

"Alright, I forgive you for making out with me super sexy and not allowing me to be a hypocrite. Also, I really did bounce a quarter off your ass last night."

Nico giggled and licked the shell of Percy's ear.

"Eww, and you call me a pervert."

"You are a pervert, Percy." Nico nibbled on Percy's earlobe until Percy moaned, then he whispered, "And you liked it."

"I like everything you do to me, Nico. You give me the best sex ever."

Percy had never intended to admit that. Both of their eyes widened at the terrifying but honest admission, and they gaped at each other in the mirror before breaking into loud laughter. Percy opened the bathroom door and pulled Nico along with him onto the bed. Nico's hand was already inside Percy's shirt when they landed face-down with Nico on top of Percy.

"This is how we landed on my mom's rooftop, remember?"

"One of the best days of my life," Nico said. "I should have stayed on top of you longer, though, Perce, you're comfy."

"Yeah, right." Percy tried to throw Nico off his back, but Nico stayed put. "That's what I told you in my dorm room, remember? You've gotten stronger than you were last summer."

"I'm a growing boy," Nico said. "And you feel amazing underneath me. I'm motivated to stay here as long as I can."

"Oh, yeah?" Percy tried to turn his head to face Nico and ended up nose to nose with him. They shared a grin. "What about me feels so amazing underneath you?"

"What do you think?" Nico snorted. He pressed his hips down into Percy's ass, then spread his legs so his knees dropped onto the bed and did that grinding thing he was doing last night at the dance club.

Percy groaned in pleasure, but they were in the wrong position. He wasn't supposed to want Nico to grind against his ass; he was supposed to want Nico to grind against his dick. The thought that this was turning him on both alarmed him and turned him on more.

"Why Percy, I didn't know you liked it like this." Nico pressed into Percy again, and Percy couldn't stifle the moan that followed.

"Fuck, Nico, stop playing," Percy whimpered.

"Seems more like we should be playing 'Fuck Percy' to me," Nico whispered.

Nico's hands were at Percy's jeans, popping open the button, sliding down the zipper. Percy mewled like a kitten when Nico raised his own hips and slid Percy's jeans down onto his thighs. He heard Nico unfasten his own jeans and when Nico ground against him a third time, Percy could feel both how little the cloth of their underwear separated them and how turned on Nico was by what he was doing. Percy lifted his hips to meet Nico the fourth time, shocking himself and Nico, who bit out a curse and abandoned grinding and began thrusting his dick into Percy's cleft.
The more Percy enjoyed it, the more scared he got. He wasn't sure which feeling would win. Nico was rutting against him furiously now, and Percy's dick was so hard he couldn't keep from touching himself. Percy watched Nico's elegant fingers dig into the sheets around his shoulders as Nico lifted his torso off Percy's back and increased his power and fierce pace. A thrust pushed the head of Nico's dick against Percy's entrance, and Percy screamed as he came. Nico thrust a few more times and came with his usual drawn-out groan.

He collapsed on top of Percy, breathing heavily in Percy's ear, and Percy shoved him off and turned in the other direction.

"Percy?" Nico lightly brushed Percy's arm, and Percy jerked away. Percy could hear the sting of rejection in Nico's voice when he spoke again. "I'll go get something to clean us up with."

What had happened? Percy felt like crying. He wanted to fuck Nico, not be fucked by him. He hadn't wanted that. Except he had. Nico would have stopped if Percy had asked. Percy had enjoyed it, wanted it, loved it. That's what scared him – not that it had happened, but how much he liked it. He wasn't gay. Up until now, he'd passed this off as some sort of weird Nico-centered fantasy, told himself it wasn't about wanting a guy; it was about wanting Nico. But now Nico had been the aggressor, the "man" in the situation. So where did that leave Percy?

"Can I take care of you?" Nico was back, and his voice sounded so small. Percy ignored Nico and rolled onto his back and stared up at Nico's pretty canopy. He felt a warm washcloth land softly in his hand. Nico's footsteps retreated, and Percy heard the son of Hades rifling through his dresser. Percy shrugged out of his jeans and Nico's underwear and used the soft cloth to clean himself. He dabbed a bit of semen off the hem of his t-shirt, then found his tattered old boxers at the foot of the bed and slipped them on. They didn't feel nearly as good as Nico's black silk.

Percy sat on the edge of the bed and put his feet back in his jeans. Nico was sitting on the couch, his knees pulled up to his chin, his arms wrapped around his knees, his head turned away from Percy. Percy couldn't see it, but he was sure Nico was twisting his skull ring.

After he fastened his jeans, Percy went to the bedroom door and asked Jeeves to come take the sheets and clothes. The zombie butler followed Percy into the room and went to work while Percy stood awkwardly behind the couch. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to comfort Nico; hell, he wanted Nico to comfort him. But there was a stranger in the room, and he wasn't sure if that stranger was Nico or himself.

"I'm so sorry, Percy," Nico said, not turning around. "Gods, please forgive me. I don't know what I was thinking. I'll take you back to the surface whenever you get your things gathered."

He sounded miserable. He thought Percy would leave him. Percy's hand landed a bit heavily on Nico's head, but it was the best he could do. Nico stiffened further under the touch. Percy slid his hand off Nico's head and walked in a daze until he could sit on the couch. He scooted until he was pressed completely against Nico's side. The space where they touched was cool, firm, comforting. He pried Nico's arm from around his knees and wrapped it around himself. He shoved Nico's feet down to the floor in order to make room for himself against Nico's body.

"Percy?" Nico sounded confused, but he also sounded less hopeless.

Percy laid his head on Nico's chest and shuffled it around until he could feel Nico's heart beating strong and loud in his ear.

"I liked it," Percy admitted. He kissed Nico's breastbone. "I'm not mad at you. I'm scared because I liked it. I loved it. I want you to do it to me again, except with less clothes and more real fucking. I'm
so scared."

"Percy, I...I've never..." Nico trailed off as Percy began to cry. Percy realized he was shaking, and he fist the great handfuls of Nico's shirt and twisted them tightly. Nico's arms wrapped around him and held him while he cried.

After a long time had passed and Percy had cried himself out, Nico spoke.

"It doesn't change who you are, Percy, that you liked what we did. It doesn't make you any less a man or mean you're gay, even."

"I hate that you know that's what I was thinking, Nico, because I'm ashamed of it. I have never thought you were feminine or anything, or doubted who you are. Gods, I know you can kick my ass. But you're beautiful, and your hair's pretty, and you smell nice, and, I don't know. I guess I separated the Nico who can kick my ass from the one that I want to fuck, and I know it's awful, because you've always been both things at once, but thinking that way, it let me not see what we were doing as me having sex with a guy, so much as me having sex with you. And then, just now, you were so dominant and assertive and it turned me on, everything you did, and I can't deny anymore that what I'm doing is sleeping with a guy. And I like it. I want more."

"Oh, Percy, I'm the worst person in the world with this, you know?" Nico kissed the back of Percy's head. "I denied who I was for so long, and I made every mistake possible. I didn't want to love you. I had this crazy idea that being gay meant I couldn't be a badass, and I so wanted to be as badass as you."

Percy chuckled. He didn't feel very badass right now, bawling on Nico's chest.

"But I finally started to realize that loving you, being attracted to guys, gods, this is mortifying, being fucked by a guy, it didn't change anything about me except who I was attracted to and the ways I liked sex. It took a long time for me to get to that point, and I shouldn't have started rubbing against you like that. I've never been the one to, you know--"

"Just say you've never been the big spoon, please," Percy said, and Nico laughed.

"Childish, but fine. I've never been the big spoon, and I got carried away. You were turned on, and I didn't stop to think about how jarring it might have been for you. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize again," Percy growled.

"I won't. But, look, whatever sex position you use doesn't have anything to do with being masculine or 'in charge.' Don't tell me Annabeth doesn't direct the sex every bit as much as you."

"More."

"And that doesn't make her masculine. It's the same thing. I'm not less of a guy because I like being--"

"The little spoon."

"You are so fucking annoying. I'm not less of a guy because I like being the little spoon, and neither are you because it finally crossed your mind that, one, you are having sex with me and I am, in fact, male, and two, that being the little spoon might feel really good."

"I didn't offend you?"
Nico ran his hand through Percy's hair and down his arm. "A few years ago, it would have shredded me, but that's because I was wrestling with those same worries. Now, no. I know who I am, and I like myself, most of the time."

Percy kissed Nico's nose. "You're amazing. Do you know that?"

"I've been told." Nico grimaced. "Of course, the last person who told me that was a liar who kicks my heart around like it's a football."

"That bastard," Percy said. "And you mean soccer ball."

"I mean football," Nico said. "You Americans are the only ones who can't get your names right."

"Oh, no you didn't insult my country and my sport," Percy said. Nico arched a very dismissive eyebrow. "It is on, di Angelo."

Percy poked Nico's belly and tickled his ribs. Nico squealed and completely abandoned Percy to try to slide down to the floor and escape. Percy followed, garnering himself an inadvertent kick in the face, and tickled Nico mercilessly, until Nico was breathless and pinned under Percy on the floor.

"Give!"

"Never!" Nico roared through a break in his giggles.

"Give, now, or I start talking like a pirate!"

"I give!"

In a way that felt oddly similar to the beginning of their first encounter last summer, Percy dragged Nico off the ground and held him by the wrists.

"Fine, no pirate talk, but you're still my prisoner."

"Oh, what do you want, my captain?" Nico batted his eyelashes and make weak, false attempts to get away.

Percy yanked him to his chest and waited until Nico met his eyes. "You. I want all of you."

"Oh, captain, I--"

"Nico."

"Oh, shit, you're being serious, aren't you?" Nico's eyes sparkled, and Percy let his hands slide up Nico's arms as they wrapped around his neck. "I, um, Percy, I want you, too."

Percy smiled. "Good. But my dick is kinda sore from you smashing it down into the bed while you ravished my delicate ass, so for now I suppose you can let me lay on top of you on the couch and hold me and play with my hair."


"Nothing except the way I feel about you." Percy brushed his thumb over Nico's lips. "That 'more' I feel for you? It's strong, Nico, and I don't think I can bear to lose you."

"I wish you would kiss me."
"I'm sorry," Percy said. "Please know that I want to kiss you more than I want anything in the world. It breaks me not to kiss you."

"Why don't you?" Nico asked. "I doubt Annabeth delineates between us kissing and us having sex."

Percy pulled back slightly so he could see deep in Nico's eyes.

"I don't kiss you because I'm afraid if I did, I'd choose you over her."

"Oh." Nico blushed beautifully and allowed Percy to lead him to the couch.
Christmas in Australia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Christmas came to Australia before it came to New York. December was the hottest month of the year where the new gods were located, so the only indications they had that Christmas was approaching were Annabeth's dated letters and Nico's still-functional watch. Unrelenting rain and highs around ninety degrees were not the sort of holiday weather to which the men had grown accustomed.

On Christmas day, Nico, who had been incessantly exercising his newly found power, conjured a Christmas tree and a small mountain of gifts for Percy and Jason. No gift could approximate the things each god wanted most – a return to exclusivity with Nico for Jason, and for Percy, going home – but Nico tried. He was in the habit of planning far in advance and giving thoughtful gifts, but this year his options and his recipients were limited.

Jason and Percy participated in Nico's Christmas festivities with differing levels of enthusiasm. Jason went all out, conjuring cinnamon candles and candy canes, a Santa Claus tree-topper, and a giant, inflatable Santa that he'd somehow made work and positioned outside their front door. He decked the doorways with mistletoe, which Nico promptly removed. Percy, on the other hand, was morose. He was missing Maybelle's first Christmas, and there was nothing Nico or Jason could do to make things better. Percy didn't complain about the Christmas items, but Nico caught him punching the blow-up Santa.

Nico offered to teach Percy how to kickbox, and they had a good time beating up Santa until Jason woke from his nap and chased them away. Jason, sword drawn and eyes vividly furious, defended Santa from multiple attacks. Finally, Nico conjured a tree on top of the dome and traveled into its shadow. He dropped from the roof onto Santa's head and pierced it with his sword. The force of the air Santa expelled sent Nico tumbling back into the dome and scraped up his back.

Jason glared at him while Percy laughed. When Nico and Percy went inside to unearth some ambrosia, Jason quietly dragged Santa to their expanding junk pile and draped him over the pink chair Aphrodite had left. Before he went inside, he re-conjured Santa, along with Rudolph, Frosty, and as many odd Christmas inflatables as he could imagine — Santa going down a chimney, a Yeti, elves, an enormous-breasted Mrs. Claus, a gingerbread man, and host of others, including an inflatable caganer of his own creation. It started to rain, and Jason gave the finger to the sky.

Inside, Nico rearranged the presents under the tree and set out the altar food that seemed most likely to have come from their earthly family. Percy laid on the couch and replayed the image of Nico dropping onto Santa's head behind Jason's back. It was all that was keeping him from crying. When the rain started, Nico curved his hand and shut the roof of the dome. The drop in light didn't help Percy's mood. Jason came in a moment later and flopped into the gray chair. He wasn't much happier than Percy. Nico pursed his lips and continued fussing over the food.

"Do you want to eat first or open presents?" Nico asked.

Percy and Jason shrugged noncommittally.

Nico swallowed his growl of frustration and tried again. "I said, do you want to eat first or open presents?" His voice sounded less polite than it had the first time.
"Food," Percy said. Jason shrugged.

"Great," Nico said. "Sit up, Percy. Both of you get down on the floor around the table."

Nico sat attentively across the table from the couch and watched Jason and Percy ooze onto the floor like slugs. He gritted his teeth. He closed his eyes and began to pray to his father.

"What're you doing?" Percy asked when he noticed Nico's lips moving silently.

"Shut up," Nico said.

"No, wait." Jason was watching Nico now, too, and he was as curious as Percy. "You're not...don't tell me you're praying to those bastards? The people who put us here? Fuck, Nico, you're a god now, too."

Nico finished his prayer and opened his eyes. "I was praying to my dad. Apollo used to make me do it, and I guess it's kind of a habit before a meal now."

"Apollo made you pray to him?" Percy's nose wrinkled. "That's sick, man."

"Not to him. To my dad." Nico was getting more and more irritated with both men, but he wanted to give them as nice a holiday as he could. "You wouldn't understand. Look, let's eat. I pulled out the stuff that I thought might have come from our friends and family."

The meal wasn't extravagant, but it was like a greeting from their loved ones. Mushy vegetables from Clarisse, three slices of delectable-looking homemade pecan pie that had come from Leo, blue pancakes from Annabeth, a salad from Reyna, six turkey legs from Frank, three apples from Hazel, and a bag of fun-size Snickers from Piper covered most of the tabletop. Nico helped himself to a turkey leg, the salad – neither Jason nor Percy would eat it – and an apple. He left the rest for Jason and Percy to haggle over.

Jason and Percy fought their way through dinner, both growing crankier as the meal progressed. Nico finished eating first and removed a letter from his back pocket. At once, the other two ceased fighting and gave Nico their complete attention.

"Dear Nico,

"Merry Christmas or Christmas Eve, depending on where you are, or if you're even on earth, I guess. Piper and I are going to host another Christmas here at the apartments. Percy's mom and Paul are coming, along with the usual cast of characters. Reyna and Michael are already here, and Frank and Hazel will get in later tonight. Chris and Clarisse are coming in the morning, but they'll have to leave before lunch to make it over to Chris's mom's house for dinner there. Rachel couldn't make it. Her parents made her fly to Brazil with them. She says to tell you that she hopes you've kept those abs rock hard and that pretty chin up, and I couldn't make that up if I tried. Honestly, Nico, the girl needs a date.

"Leo and Calypso are also here – how could I forget Leo? He says to tell you that he dropped the monster repellent aerator idea, and he expects you to remember that when you're the prince of the Underworld and deciding the fate of his soul. Gods, we have dramatic friends, sweetie."

Nico grinned and continued.

"Maybelle may be starting to crawl. I think she has been, but Sally is being a good babysitter and pretending like Maybelle does nothing exciting or for the first time when I'm not there to watch. I wish so much Percy could see how she's growing. She looks like him. I'll send a picture of her with
Santa as soon as I can. She freaked out when I tried to take her to see one in a department store, but Leo swears he can dress up as Santa and make her smile. I'm not holding my breath.

"I wish you could write me back, Nico. I miss you. I miss Percy more than probably anybody but you and Sally can imagine. I even miss Jason. He was a very good man in many ways, and I hope you and Percy are remembering to treat him well. I'd love to know where you are and what your days are like. I want to know if Percy's been writing and you've been studying. How do you occupy your time, besides the same annoying ways the two of you occupied your time when you were together before? I hope to the gods that you two are not spending all your days curled up together asleep on some couch, though I know it's one of the things both of you loved most.

"Take care, sweet friend, and I'll write again as soon as my turn rolls around. As always, you have my love. Divide it as you see fit.

"Love,

"Annabeth"

Nico folded the letter and put it back in his pocket.

Percy's face was ashen. "Gods, I miss her."

Nico nodded. He crawled around the table, and Percy ducked his head into Nico's chest as soon as he was close. Jason finished his turkey leg and wiped his hand on his jeans before patting Percy's shoulder.

"Maybe they'll be on TV more tonight," Jason said. "If they're all together in one place, they might get more air time."

"You're probably right, Jace," Nico said. Jason was instantly cheerier, all thoughts of the desecration of Santa forgotten.

Percy tucked his hand up into Nico's shirt and traced the lines of Nico's muscles. Nico's skin was cool to the touch, and Percy wanted to stick his entire head under Nico's tee and press his cheeks to the coolness. "I, uh, my present to you guys was going to be that we could sleep back in our bed again and not watch TV every night, but I can't do it yet."

"It's a nice thought, Perce." Jason had started eating a piece of pie, but he paused to pat Percy again. "We don't mind waiting. I kind of want to see everyone together, too."

"Let's open presents, and then we'll go lay down." Nico was more excited about seeing the demigods' Christmas than he should be. He knew that seeing their friends and family would only be hurtful in the long run. "Are you done eating?"

Percy nodded. He and Nico got up, but Jason stayed. He concentrated on the food, and a moment later all of it vanished, along with their dishes. They'd never been able to successfully banish something other than their clothes, so this was a big achievement. Satisfied, Jason joined Percy and Nico around the tree.

"Where'd you send it?" Percy asked. "I tried sending trash to our enemies and stuff, but it didn't work."

"I sent the good parts to a shelter in New York over by where I taught," Jason said. "I don't know where the trash went. I just wished it would go away."
Nico's arms were around Percy, but he twisted and kissed the first part of Jason he could reach, which was his broad shoulder. "That's a wonderful thing, Jace. I'm proud of you for thinking about someone who might need the stuff. We should do that from now on."

Jason puffed up with pride, but Percy stuck his tongue out at him and whispered, "Nico killed Santa."

Nico burst out laughing and shoved his way out of reach. He plucked presents out from under the tree and tossed them to Jason and Percy. The original gifts from Nico – socks, underwear, a new deck of cards, a few baseballs and gloves, a laptop for Percy and new video games for Jason – ran out, and Percy and Jason raced to put more presents under the tree.

They spent a fun half hour opening increasingly ludicrous gifts, and by the end Nico was weighed down with an assortment of necklaces and bracelets, each more gaudy than the last, and a solid gold crown that blinked the words "Ghost King" and "Ratings Gold." Jason had a medieval suit of armor, five golden rings, and a beanie with a helicopter blade. Percy had traded in his t-shirt for a bright blue western shirt with guitars on the front and a Cadillac on the back. He had a tiara, clown shoes, and pearl earrings.

"Ooh, last things," Nico said. He waved his hand and two more boxes appeared. He handed one to Percy and the other to Jason. Inside Jason's box was a camera and inside Percy's was a printer.

"You want us to take a picture?" Jason asked. Photographs weren't generally something Nico enjoyed.

"This one time," Nico said. "I want to have a way to remember exactly how crazy we look tonight."

"It's great," Percy said. He pulled the camera out of Jason's hand because the armor was too bulky for Jason to work anything small. He set the printer and camera on the bureau where they displayed the photos friends and family had sent. Nico helped Jason up, and they crowded together where Percy directed them. Percy hustled into the picture next to Nico and gripped his hips.

"It'll take as many pictures as we want in five second intervals, so we can change our pose," Percy said. "Let's be serious for the first. Then we can be silly."

The gods smiled and faced the camera, their arms wrapped around each other. A flash went off, and the silly posing began. The first shot was the classic rabbit ears photo, except Jason couldn't raise his hands high enough in time. The second had them standing cluelessly trying to decide what to do. The third featured Nico perched on Jason's armored feet with Jason's arms around him while Percy pretended to slap Jason's metal butt. In the fourth, Percy was getting a piggyback ride from Nico.

The fifth through fourteenth shots were blank, because Nico tripped over Jason's feet while Percy was still on his back and sent everyone tumbling to the ground. The fifteenth through twentieth shots featured Jason stripping off his armor while Percy tried to untangle a necklace that had become stuck on Nico's earring.

The twenty-first shot was the one they would keep, when they looked at the pictures the next morning. Jason was naked except for his beanie, which was cupped in front of his penis. Someone had stolen Nico's shirt, so all the jewelry glittered against his bare skin. Percy had taken off his clown shoes to get close enough to Nico to deal with the stuck necklace, and in this shot, one of the shoes looked like it was coming out of nowhere to kick Jason's butt. Percy's hand was tangled in Nico's necklaces, and the tiara had slipped into his mouth. All three men sported expressions of horrified humor, their eyes wide and their mouths hanging open. They were all looking at the camera, too. It was a picture they'd print out and treasure.
Percy managed to untangle his hand from Nico's neck. He shut off the camera and grinned at Jason and Nico. "Let's go to bed."

"You first," Jason said.

Nico laughed and pointedly checked out Jason's backside. "We've seen it, Jason. Why are you so modest all of a sudden?"

"There's a beanie covering my dick. Even I'm not that secure in my manhood." Jason was not going in the man cave first.

Nico shrugged and walked past him, but then he reached back and spun the helicopter blade. Percy cackled and followed after Nico.

Jason counted twenty slow breaths to recover from Nico's hand being that close to his penis. When he went into the man cave, Nico's lower half was under the covers, his crown discarded a few feet from the mattress. He was sitting up. Percy sat naked on top of the covers, struggling to get the necklaces off Nico. He was still wearing the pearl earrings. Jason discarded the beanie and rings and curled up with his face next to Nico's hip, which was bare. Jason smiled to himself and wrapped his arm around Nico's thighs.

"Hey, sit up and help, Grace," Percy said. "I can't get these damned things off."

Jason grumbled, but he kissed Nico's hip and sat up. "We should turn on the light."

"No," Nico put his hand on Jason's waist. The touch raised goosebumps all over Jason's skin. "I don't want to get stuck with the light on. The barrier should be collapsing pretty rapidly by now."

"Alright, well, what about..." Jason produced a small LED light for Nico to hold.

"Perfect," Percy said.

They slowly began to find the little clasps on each necklace and pull them around to Nico's chest to unhook them with the aid of the light. Nico's face was illuminated, and the light and gemstones combined to create sparkling, dancing color on his skin. Jason and Percy tried to focus on getting necklaces off, but they were distracted by way the light played on Nico's body and how cool and soft his skin felt under their fingers. Their touches became caresses.

Percy shifted so his leg bent on top of Nico's. Nico moved his hand to keep it out of Percy's personal space, resting it instead on the outside of Percy's thigh. Jason watched Percy move closer and noted his obvious arousal. He inched closer, too. His erection brushed Nico's hip.

"Can you two not be piggy, horny creeps for ten minutes and get these things off me?" Nico asked. He didn't like the idea of having to lay down with the necklaces still on him. He liked too much the way Jason and Percy's hands stroked his skin.

"Right, Neeks, like you're soft right now?" Percy said. He felt Nico from on top of the covers and confirmed his suspicion.

Nico didn't push him away. His lips parted, and he gave a tiny, shuddering breath.

Percy's hand traveled slowly up Nico's body, and Jason's hands stilled on Nico's chest while he watched. When Percy reached Nico's jaw, he tilted Nico's head toward Jason and whispered in his ear. "You are so beautiful."
He traced the long line of Nico's neck. Flecks of light from Nico's necklaces played over Percy's fingertips. Jason brushed his hand over Nico's protruding nipple, and when Nico gasped and rolled his head toward Jason, his huge eyes full of longing, Jason kissed him, slow and wet. Percy felt the movement of Nico's mouth from where his lips hovered over Nico's ear. He dropped his head and kissed behind Nico's jaw.

Nico squirmed from the pleasure of the combined kisses. The LED light dropped into his lap. Percy picked it up and tossed it onto the sofa. It made a light slapping noise when it hit the couch, and Nico broke from Jason's lips to look in the direction of the sound.

Percy caught Nico's lips with his. Jason grabbed Nico's waist and held him up because he was perilously close to falling back on the mattress. Jason nuzzled aside necklaces and licked Nico's neck. Percy's hand was heading south again. It passed over Jason's hand, which was still teasing Nico's nipples, before dropping steadily lower.

"Stop," Nico gasped, breaking away from the kiss just before Percy's hand closed around his penis.

Percy and Jason stilled. Jason glanced at Percy, who nodded.

"We want you, Nico," Jason said, his voice low and husky, saturated with desire. "I can feel how much you're enjoying this. Let us, please."

Nico closed his eyes and shook his head.

"We'd take things slow, baby," Percy added. "We wouldn't argue. It would all be about what you want. We'll stop right now if that's what you want, but we could make you feel so good."

"I want you to stop." Nico shivered and dropped onto his back when Percy and Jason withdrew their hands. Percy pulled his leg off Nico's lap and laid down next to him. Jason did the same. Nico took each of their hands. "I'm sorry. It felt so good, but I'm not...ready...for that. I don't know if I'll ever be."

"No apology needed," Jason said. Percy grunted his agreement. Jason kissed Nico's fingers. "We need to talk about this stuff soon, though, Nico, set up some ground rules, because this, or something like it, it's going to come up again."

"Yep, please don't think you need to apologize," Percy said, "but maybe let our real Christmas present be talking honestly about it? Think about it, at least. Now, we all probably need to turn around and take care of some private business before the Christmas special comes on, right?"

Dazed, Nico nodded, and Percy and Jason both smiled at him before they turned away. The man cave filled with small, repetitive motions and muffled moans.

Chapter End Notes

So that happened.

Caganers are worth the Google if you don't know what they are and aren't easily offended.
"Who do you think it'll be?"

"I don't know, Percy. Quit asking me."

Nico was nervous enough without Percy asking him the same question every two minutes. They were sitting in a diner a few blocks away from Camp Jupiter, waiting for someone to show up to escort Percy back to camp and bring Nico a few belongings. The diner was old, run-down, and dirty, and Nico would need a long shower after sitting in the sticky orange vinyl booth. He was on his second cup of black coffee, while Percy's hot chocolate and pancakes sat untouched before him. They'd been there long enough that the server had stopped coming by to check on them.

"But, just for kicks, who do you think it'll be?"

"Gods, Percy, if I answer will you shut up about it?"

Percy nodded his head eagerly. Their hands rested on the table, half an inch apart. Percy, who was privately so affectionate that Nico could barely go to the bathroom alone, had not touched him once since they'd come to the surface. Nico understood. He'd wanted to keep his sexuality secret, too. Of course, everyone knew by now that they were or had been lovers, but people knowing it and people seeing it were two different things. And Percy had additional considerations. He had Annabeth. Nico had never cheated on anyone, unless you counted loosely, which Nico had decided he didn't. And Percy's lover was the demigod world's pariah, hated by almost everyone. Jason hadn't wanted to be seen with him, either.

"Nico."

"Percy said his name like a kid who needed to go to the bathroom. Nico would have laughed at the noise three hours ago. Three hours ago, he'd been naked in his comfortable bed with Percy curled all around him, kissing his shoulders and whispering gentle words of assurance in his ear.

Nico shook his head to clear it. It wouldn't do to dwell on one more thing he wouldn't be able to have.

"It won't be Annabeth, because she has to look mad at you." Nico tried to adopt a detached tone. That way it would be easier to go through the litany of people he'd inadvertently hurt. "It won't be Reyna, because she has to look mad at me. It's obviously not Jason. Hazel shouldn't come, though I imagine she'll have thrown a massive fit about not being the one to show up. Piper, maybe? If she doesn't hate me as much as she deserves to? Frank, if he's back."

"Piper should hate Jason, Nico, not you. Quit sticking up for him, damn it."

"I'm not." Nico sighed. "She should hate us both. But Percy, if that's our logic, Annabeth should hate me and you. I don't want that."

"It's different." Percy said. His fingers brushed Nico's for a moment before he pulled them back. "Annabeth has known some not so good things about me for a long time, and she chooses to live with it. And I'm not treating you like garbage. But Jason, he--"

"Did things that you don't understand, and I wouldn't expect Piper to understand, either," Nico finished. Percy's eyes flashed with anger, and Nico slid the pad of his index finger along Percy's knuckles before pulling away. "And yes, you have treated me far better than he has."

"And yet it's him you love."
Nico tried to ignore the hurt in Percy's voice. What could he say? It was true. He loved Jason, and he didn't love Percy. Not like that. But Percy didn't love him, either. They were fond of each other, sure, but not in love. Nico couldn't understand why the idea that he loved Jason bothered Percy as much as it did. He tried not to think of Percy's admission about the intensity of his feelings for him. He didn't want to explore whether or not he reciprocated them.

"Piper knew Jason and I were together that year he was broken up with her. She knew we had a history, even that he still had feelings for me, and she took him back anyway," Nico said. "Whatever motivates her, she's been loyal to Jason."

"Stupidity?"

Nico smiled at Percy. He wasn't about to point out how many times people had thought Percy stupid; he was far too grateful for everything Percy had done for him recently. It didn't change the bad times between them from before -- nothing could -- but these good times far outweighed almost all the bad.

Percy's eyes focused over Nico's head.

"Frank. It's Frank," Percy said as he stood abruptly.

Nico turned toward the entry of the diner and saw his friend standing there awkwardly, a black backpack in one of his huge hands. Percy rushed over to Frank and gave him a big hug that seemed to make him even more uncomfortable before dragging him to the booth. Nico gave a slight wave as Frank approached. Frank tried to smile, but Nico could see the worry clouding his features.

Percy slipped into the booth next to Nico and held his hand underneath the table. Oxygen flooded Nico's brain, and he hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath. He was tempted to pull Percy into a shadow and escape with him back to the Underworld, like his father had taken Persephone, but he wasn't selfish enough to do it. Percy belonged in the sunny camp. He belonged with Annabeth. He belonged a million places that Nico never would. Nico looked at his lap and fought back tears.

"Eat the pancakes, if you're hungry, Frankie. Nico eats like a bird, and I don't have much of an appetite today."

A tear slipped down Nico's nose, and he quickly wiped it away. He hoped Frank hadn't seen. The way Percy's hand tightened in his told him his lover had.

"It's good to see you guys," Frank said. "Hazel wanted to come, Nico. Reyna had to basically forbid her, and Annabeth is holding her hand to keep her from trying to shadow travel to you."

"You can't shadow out of Jupiter," Nico said automatically. He looked up to see both Frank and Percy gawking at him. "It's, um, protected. My dad, trying to keep me from running, I guess. I can shadow in, but I have to walk out of camp, or you know, fly. The shadows there only move me around the grounds of the camp."

He hoped Percy was remembering their ride out of Camp Jupiter on Blackjack, not thinking about how Nico must have left camp with Jason.

Frank grunted. "Makes sense."

"Makes sense for keeping me prisoner," Nico said. "How are things going with Hazel?"

Nico needed to know this before he could leave. He wanted to ask how things were with Jason, but he knew that would make Percy furious.
"It's going to be alright, Nico," Frank said. "It is. Jason was pretty damaging when he talked to the senate, but I got home in time to speak after him and at least that balanced things somewhat. He didn't say he thought Hazel was incompetent or anything, just..."

Frank trailed off. Nico already knew what Jason must have said, so he saw no sense in making Frank repeat it. Percy, apparently, felt the need to air the dirty laundry.

"He said Nico tricked and seduced him into supporting Hazel, right? He said Nico was power-hungry?"

"Knock it off, Percy. You're not making things any better by getting upset over it. Help my sister and quit worrying about what Jason's done to me." Nico glared at Percy, and Percy glared back. Nico was vaguely aware of Frank shifting uncomfortably across the booth.

Percy narrowed his eyes and shook his head as he turned back to Frank. Nico stared at Percy's profile while Percy asked Frank what else had happened in his absence. His heart swelled with romantic notions toward Percy and the way he epitomized the Greek male hero, that he almost missed what Frank was saying. He paid attention only when the big Canadian mentioned Piper.

"Piper spoke yesterday. She wasn't as persuasive as we were hoping," Frank was saying, "but she did say Hazel was a competent leader and skilled fighter. She said she was proud to have served with her."

"But she wouldn't go against Jason, huh?" Percy said.

"No."

"It's okay." Nico hadn't expected her defend him, especially not if it risked Jason's reputation. What was left of it.

"So today, it's Annabeth." Frank put down his fork and watched Percy. "They want you there for it, Percy. They'll expect you to talk after her. Reyna will coach you beforehand."

"Of course. Whatever I have to do, as long as I don't have to tell lies about Nico."

"None of us are going to lie about Nico," Frank said gruffly. "Except Jason."

Frank had eaten most of Percy's pancakes. It would soon be time to go.

"What's in the backpack, Frank?" Nico asked.

"Oh, here, it's for you." Frank handed the backpack toward Nico, but Percy reached out with his free hand and took it, setting it on the floor at his feet. Nico knew it was because Percy wasn't ready to let go of his hand. He wasn't ready to let go of Percy, either.

"Thanks," Nico said.

"It's got some supplies and stuff from your villa and notes from Hazel and Reyna," Frank said around a mouthful of pancake. "Hazel packed kind of randomly because we weren't sure where you were going after you brought Percy back."

When Nico had contacted Hazel to arrange Percy’s return, he hadn't told her where he'd be going after this. Percy wanted to believe Nico would head to the Underworld and then go to Camp Half-Blood, and Nico hadn't had the heart to tell him the truth.
"I'm going back with my dad for a while," Nico said. That part was true, at least. He and his father needed to have a discussion about Hades's dire protectiveness and Nico's need to be on his own.

"Then what?" Frank asked.

"Half-Blood," Percy answered for Nico. Frank looked at Nico, and Nico knew he could see that he had no plans to follow through with going to the Greek camp. He was relieved when Frank didn't say anything to Percy.

"Well, we should get going, Percy," Frank said.

Percy nodded and released Nico's hand. Nico withdrew his wallet and threw a bill on the table to cover their breakfast, then stood behind Percy. The trio walked out of the diner and around a corner in the direction of camp.

"Here," Percy motioned, "let me put this backpack on you."

Nico normally would have told Percy off for coddling him, but he was too emotional to speak. This was the part he'd been dreading. Percy had been his anchor, and without him, Nico was worried he'd drift again, run until trouble found him or until he found trouble. Even if he had been delusional enough to think he'd be alright, that he wasn't broken from Jason's betrayal and Hera's accusations, he wouldn't have wanted to let go of Percy.

Percy took Nico's hand and pulled it through the strap of the backpack, then moved to his other side and guided that hand through a strap, too. After situating the pack, he tightened both of the straps and smoothed them out over Nico's chest and shoulders, even though they were already perfectly smooth. Nico watched Percy's face as he did all this, saw the concern and kindness that colored his features. When Percy was done, Nico had trouble meeting his eyes.

"Aw, fuck it." Percy threw his arms around Nico's waist and snaked them up under his shirt until his hands gripped Nico's shoulder blades. Percy held him so tightly that Nico could barely breathe. He wrapped his arms around Percy's shoulders and buried his head against Percy's neck. Nico could swear he felt Percy's heart beating against his own. They stood there on the sidewalk, holding each other, until someone yelled, "Get a room," and Percy pulled back enough to yell "Fuck off!"

Percy dropped his arms from Nico's back and cupped his face. He pulled Nico to him so their foreheads touched. He pressed his hand to Nico's chest.

"You are not alone, Nico di Angelo. We're all right here."

Nico nodded and patted Percy's chest over his heart, too. Then he kissed his fingers and laid them on Percy's lips. "A kiss to keep."

Percy smiled. It was something Nico could feel more than he could see. He was fixated on Percy's watering eyes. The tears made the green even more beautiful. Percy must have kissed his fingers while Nico was staring into his eyes, because now he was pressing them to Nico's lips. Nico kissed them as Percy said, "A kiss to keep."

Then Percy had turned and was walking rapidly away. Frank glanced back, concern etched on his face, before he laid a comforting hand on Percy's shoulder. Nico watched until he could no longer see them. He sank down against a wall and cried.

***
Being the most hated man at camp was a new experience for Jason. He wondered idly how Nico had managed to spend any time at all at either camp when he was younger. He was sitting in the same row of the senate chamber, in the same chair, as he had for the past two days. The place was packed. No one spoke to him.

The meeting should be starting soon. Annabeth was seated in the front row, appearing calm and powerful in a gray business suit. Her hair was pulled up in a sleek bun. Jason didn't think he'd ever seen it in anything but a ponytail before. He hoped Annabeth could undo some of the damage he'd caused two days ago. He'd thought breaking up with Nico would be the worst part. It hadn't even been close. His mind drifted back to when it was his turn to give testimony to the senate.

"Jason Grace, you have asked to address the assembled members of the senate. What do you wish to say?" Reyna's voice was cold, her expression impassive.

Jason tried to force himself to make eye contact, but he could only look at her indirectly. He hoped his performance would be convincing enough to make Juno and Jupiter leave Nico alone.

"I wanted to come before you, Praetor, and the senate to express my sincere apologies for my behavior. I was wrong to engage in sexual relations with a man that you were involved with." The lie tasted like acid in Jason's mouth. There was nothing wrong with how he loved Nico. He swallowed and continued. "After the war, I believed Mr. di Angelo to be in need of friendship, and I sought to help him. I was misled about his intentions. He was never interested in my friendship, only in gathering power for himself. I had misgivings, but Mr. di Angelo is very beautiful and played the part of the poor misunderstood victim very well. He seduced me, and I let him gain undue influence over my decisions, including the choice of whom I supported for the open Praetor position."

Jason dared a glance at Frank, because he couldn't look directly at Hazel, either, but Frank turned his head. The wooden chair Jason sat on, alone in front of the hundred or so people in the room, felt like an electric chair. He deserved to sit in an electric chair for the lies he was telling and the love he was betraying. He doubted that any of his former friends would care that he believed he was doing this for a noble reason. He couldn't tell them about it anyway.

"I am deeply sorry for my actions, and for the hurt I have caused you, Reyna, and my own girlfriend. I did not intend to compromise the security of Camp Jupiter by being swayed by an outsider, but I was foolish enough to believe Mr. di Angelo's lies and promises of love. I did not believe he would give me false counsel or betray the interests of this camp. I'm so sorry for the problems I have played a part in causing. I will accept whatever punishment you see fit."

"So it is your assertion, Jason Grace," Reyna pronounced his name like it was something vile, "that the claims made yesterday by Juno are true?"

"It is. At least as far as the nature of the relationship between Mr. di Angelo and myself and what I believe to have been his ultimate motivation."

Jason hoped that destroying Nico was enough. He hoped he didn't have to tear down Hazel, too.

"Is there anything further you wish to add?" Reyna asked.

"No."

Jason watched the floor as Reyna's feet came into view nearby. She was wearing running shoes, the kind with a separate hole for each toe. They were purple, of course.
"Then you are dismissed."

He stood shakily and made his way back to the shelter of the crowd.

Jason was jolted back to the present as Reyna and Hazel entered the room, looking grave. Behind them were Frank and Percy. Jason watched as Percy scanned the crowd. When his eyes found Jason, they narrowed in undisguised hatred. Jason wanted to return the gaze with equal hate, but he couldn't quite match the level of Percy's ferocity.

He hadn't seen Percy since the night in Reyna's office. Hades had appeared and stopped Jason from getting his deserved beating, then said he needed Percy. The next thing Jason knew, he was sitting in a pile of elephant shit. None of his friends, not even Piper or Annabeth, would speak to him, so he'd had no idea what Hades had said after he'd snapped Jason from the room. He could guess, though, and his suspicion that Hades needed Percy to go to Nico seemed to be confirmed after fruitlessly searching around camp for Percy the next day. Frank had come back from his quest with Leo instead of Nico, and Jason had known Nico had run. What sort of trouble Nico found himself in that required Percy's help to get him out had been a source of constant worry.

Percy and Frank apparently couldn't find any empty seats, because they leaned against the wall on the opposite side of the senate chamber from Jason. Jason tore his gaze away from Percy and looked toward the front of the room. Reyna and Hazel were seated and Reyna was calling the meeting to order.

"We are meeting to continue to discuss the accusations made by Juno three days ago," Reyna said. "Our first order of business is to hear the testimony of Annabeth Chase. Annabeth, please rise and approach."

Annabeth stood, and her heels clacked against the floor as she walked confidently toward the electric chair. How she could act so sure of herself and hold her head so high after the way Nico and Percy had embarrassed her was impressive and intimidating. Piper had looked small yesterday, sitting in the chair and telling them all that Hazel was a good leader and person. Jason couldn't ask her to contradict him, but he wished she had. He'd wanted her to skewer him, call him a liar, admit that Nico had been Jason's exclusive boyfriend for over a year, but she hadn't, and Jason supposed he had known she wouldn't. At least she hadn't caused any real damage to Hazel.

"What do you have to say, Annabeth?" Reyna asked.

"I'm here today for one purpose," Annabeth began, her voice clear and strong, "and that is to support Hazel Levesque."

Annabeth paused and looked at the assembled senators.

"Hazel is a competent leader. I had the honor of serving with her on the quest of the Prophecy of Seven. She is a capable warrior, a fierce and loyal comrade, and a staunch supporter of Camp Jupiter. In the time since the war, Hazel and I have worked together on various projects throughout this camp, and she has proven herself to be smart, diligent, and fair. When conflicts arise, Hazel is a wonderful intermediary and helps solve disputes quickly. She is a daughter of Pluto, and Pluto has not enjoyed the best reputation among the hierarchy of gods at this camp. However, I would bear you keep in mind that Hazel was chosen by Juno herself to be a part of the Prophecy of Seven. The queen of the gods had such faith in her, despite what anyone may think of her parentage, that she sent Hazel on the most important quest in Camp Jupiter's long and storied history."

Jason thought Annabeth was hitting a home run. He couldn't see the faces of the senators, but he could see Annabeth meeting each of their eyes as she spoke. Hope sparked in his chest.
"Thank you, Annabeth. If you have nothing further..." Reyna trailed off. Someone who didn't know her would assume that she was merely taking a natural pause, but Jason knew that was Annabeth's cue to continue.

"One more thing, if I may, Praetor," Annabeth said. "I have been placed in the uncomfortable position of having my private affairs made public. I am a private person by nature, so this is the only time I will comment on the matter. I hope you all can understand my reluctance. However, I would be remiss not to address the topic of Juno's assertions about Nico and Percy."

The crowd gasped. This was clearly what they'd been hoping for, though surely they hadn't expected Annabeth to give it to them.

"I have known Nico since he was ten years old," Annabeth mused. She sounded genuine and warm, as if she were telling old friends an intimate story. "He was a scared, lonely little boy who lost his sister, his only known earthly family, days after he found out he was a demigod. He left our camp, forged his own path, but every time we needed help, he was there to help us, and he never asked for anything in return. He saved us in the Labyrinth when I was fourteen years old. When he was merely twelve years old, he risked his life to save Percy from an Underworld prison and helped Percy gain the blessing of Achilles. He led an army of his father's troops in the Battle of Manhattan and was the reason we were able to succeed on the ground that day. When I plunged into Tartarus—"

The crowd murmured in scared tones, and Jason's heart thumped. He knew how serious Annabeth must be if she was willing to talk about her experiences there.

"—When I plunged into Tartarus, Nico, who'd just escaped capture by the giants and had endured a week of starvation and asphyxiation, not to mention his own trials in Tartarus, risked his life and freedom to lead the other members of the Seven to the Doors of Death. The reason Percy and I survived was because of Nico, because of his kindness and his strength of character. After that, he almost died to travel a giant statue of my mother halfway across the globe, all to bring about peace between our camps. He is not a traitor.

"He is an innocent, lonely boy who loved Percy for a long time. I don't know how or when their affair began, but I do know why. As much as it personally pains and embarrasses me, it has nothing to do with power — just with a little boy still searching for acceptance. I suspect the same is true of his relationship with Jason. After all," she looked directly at Jason, whose throat constricted. "Jason was his first and best friend."

Unable to stop himself, Jason mouthed, "Thank you."

Annabeth turned away.

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Percy had liked leaning against the wall and listening to Annabeth. She was amazing, pointing out both how awesome Hazel was and how Nico couldn't possibly be the kind of person Hera — Juno, whatever — had insinuated. Listening to her relieved some of the sting of leaving Nico, too. It reminded him who he was eventually coming home to, once enough time had passed. It didn't stop his worry for Nico or his desire to be with him, but he'd come to expect that it wouldn't. Nico was an ache, a need that Annabeth couldn't fill. Annabeth was the constant that Percy required, though. He was glad to be near her again.
Now, slouching in this chair in front of the other demigods and lares, Percy felt pressure not to screw up. But he was such a screw-up. Reyna had told him to be himself, to wing it, because everyone found him irresistible, which Percy reluctantly knew to be true. He squared his shoulders and tried to seem confident. Annabeth had once referred to him as her "sass, crass, pain in the ass," and that was the version of himself that he tried to summon.

"Percy, what testimony do you offer?" Reyna asked.

Percy jump-started his mouth. "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears..."

There were a few titters and a scathing glare from Reyna. Annabeth had crossed her legs and was pointedly looking away from him. *Part of the act.*

"What?" Percy gestured wildly. "I went to public school, thank you very much, and I did learn a few things."

More laughs.

"Look, you guys got a visit from Juno a few days ago, and she got you all worked up without ever hearing from the people actually involved. Shitty job, my friends."

A girl in the fourth row winked at him.

"Hazel's a great choice for Praetor," Percy continued. "Hazel, can you come here for a minute?"

Hazel appeared surprised to be addressed directly, but she approached Percy. Percy smiled brightly at her and held her tattooed arm up for the room to see.

"Six stripes. Hazel, how many of those did Nico get for you?"

"None." Hazel wrinkled her nose at the bizarre question.

"Wait, you mean you got these suckers for, like, years of service and doing great deeds?"

"Um, yes."

"What are they for?"

"One's from redirecting horses, one's from participating in the Prophecy of Seven, and four are for years of service."

Percy dropped Hazel's arm. "Thanks, Hazel, that was all I wanted."

Hazel shook her head and chuckled then took her seat next to Reyna.

"So anyway, she earned six stripes from you guys. That's more than most of us have. Hell, I only had one when I became Praetor. Reyna had four the year I met her, and she was already Praetor. Frank? What'd you have, big guy? Two?"

Frank nodded and held up two fingers.

"Hazel's ridiculously qualified, and no matter what may have motivated any of us to choose her, there's no denying she was the best candidate for the job. Hell, you guys voted her in. Did you all sleep with her brother, too?"

"Percy!"
"What, Reyna?" Percy shifted to face her. "It may be crude, but it's true. They completely supported Hazel three months ago and now, because Juno says they should doubt Nico, they're all doubting Hazel, too?"

He turned back to the crowd. "So, were you fucking Nico, too, and that's how come you suddenly doubt why you supported Hazel? Or do you lack the courage of your convictions?"

The members of the senate shifted restlessly, and Percy knew he'd won. He raised his chin.

"Thought so. Man or woman up, homies."

"I motion we vote to reaffirm Hazel as Praetor," Dakota said. His mouth was stained red from Kool-aid, but he looked extremely serious otherwise.

"Seconded," grunted a burly boy representing the Second Cohort.

"All those in favor?" Reyna asked.

The hand of every senator went into the air. Percy pumped his fist in victory. Frank gave him a thumbs up.

"Now, about Nico." Percy dared to broach the topic. Reyna had told him to leave it alone, but Percy didn't see the harm now that Hazel was in the clear. "Reyna and Annabeth, I'm genuinely sorry about the hurt we caused you. The rest of you, it's not your damned business, except you should know this: I was the one who started things between me and him, the, um, Annabeth, what's that word? Escalator?"

Annabeth stared at the ceiling and didn't answer.

"Instigator." Jason's eyes were cold and hard, and Percy had never hated someone more.

"Thanks, Grace," Percy growled. "You'd know, because you were the instigator, too, weren't you?"

Percy felt the room tense as everyone's eyes shifted from him to Jason. Jason's hand clenched in that tick-y way it had ever since he'd suffered nerve damage, but otherwise he was still and silent, sitting there like a maddening statue, too aloof and cold to be real.

When long moments passed and Jason didn't react, Percy started talking again. He didn't take his eyes off Jason.

"Anyway, both me and my bro Grace are too battle-tested to be tactically swayed by a pretty face. And if you've ever talked to Nico, you know the kid isn't a sweet talker, so that wouldn't have worked, either. He didn't influence my decision to support Hazel, and he didn't influence Jason that way, either."

"Are you calling the Pontifex a liar?" asked the female centurion from the First Cohort.

Percy put his hand on his chin. "Hmm, now that you mention it, yeah, I am."

Excited chatter broke out in the room as Percy watched Jason's red face morph into a sneer. Both his hands were clenched into tight fists, and Percy couldn't help how his posture changed to meet the threat. Chair legs scraped the floor as people hurriedly scooted away from Jason. Electricity crackled over the surface of his skin. Percy fingered Riptide in his pocket.

"Enough!" Hazel said. "Percy, your testimony is over. Walk away."
Percy could hear the threat and warning in Hazel's voice. He and Jason glared at one another as Percy walked back to stand by Frank.

"Stop it," Frank said in his ear. "You're making it obvious you two are jealous lovers and canceling out any good you may have done Nico. You're too emotionally involved."

"He lied, Frank! You know it!" Percy hissed. "He's hurting Nico. I can't just let him!"

"You can, and you will," Frank said. "Think about this tactically, Percy, not with your heart."

Percy laughed loud enough to draw stares from the crowd, who had been focused back on Hazel adjourning the meeting.

"My heart's in a black palace in the Underworld, Frank."

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"No."

"I believe that was the first word you uttered, Nico, when you were but a babe at the breast."

"Eww. And, still, no."

"Nonsense, son, breastmilk is nutritionally superior to formula."

Nico tried to remember the name of the god or goddess of patience. He needed to make a quick prayer.

He glanced at his father, who was sitting behind a handsome mahogany desk. People always assumed the gods sat on their thrones a lot. That was where Hades received visitors, but most of his time was spent here, in his study. Besides his own room, it was Nico's favorite place in the palace. The walls were lined with his dad's degrees and tons of family photographs. Pictures of himself and Persephone were the most numerous and prominent, but there were also pictures of Bianca and Hazel, along with pictures of him with one or the other of his sisters. Nico especially loved one that must have been taken when he was about four.

The black and white photo showed two happy, whole children, each holding a hand of Nico's beautiful mother. Nico was grinning, excitedly pointing at something in the distance. His ears stuck out far too much under his wild hair, and his grin was enormous. He had a round little belly and knobbly knees underneath a pair of old-fashioned shorts. Bianca, with her smooth hair and composed features, was wearing a summer dress and gazing at their mother in adoration. Maria di Angelo was a stunning woman. Her eyes were the same overlarge, round shape as Nico's, but there was a warmth to them, even in black and white, that Nico knew his eyes lacked. Her lips were full, with a kind smile. Her nose wasn't petite, but strong and Italian. His nose. Bianca's lips, judging by the picture. Maybe his lips a bit, too, if he was being honest. He'd always hated his full lips, but Jason and Percy raved over them.

Nico shook the boys out of his mind and tried to focus back on the picture, but the currently grating voice of his father snapped at him and pulled him out of Italy and into the Underworld.

"Boy, you need to listen to me," Hades said. He hadn't called Nico "boy" in a while. Nico rolled his
eyes and turned back to his father.

"What, Father?"

"Don't you use that tone with me, young man." Anger flashed in Hades's eyes. Nico needed to back off. He may be a petulant teen with daddy issues, but since his daddy could actually kill him, it wouldn't do to make Hades too mad so early in the conversation.

"Sorry, Dad, I don't mean to be rude or flippant. I disagree with you, though, and it's my life."

Hades glanced at the picture Nico had been focused on. "Your mother was stubborn. Bianca, too. But you, Nico, you make willfulness an art form. I'm trying to keep you safe."

Nico understood. Hades hadn't kept Maria safe, or Hazel and her mother, Marie. In the end, he hadn't been able to keep Bianca safe, either. Nico had asked once about Hades's other demigod children. His father's features had darkened, and he'd shaken his head. There were pictures or drawings of many other children on the walls. Nico was always impressed by how much Hades would remember of each child if he asked about a specific picture, but he had found few pictures besides his own where the child hadn't died a terrible death. Many that survived to adulthood were murderers and ruthless dictators. Nico was his father's crowning achievement in matters of love and protection. He remembered the birthday notes. *I am proud of you.*

"I love you, Dad."

Hades grunted in reply.

"I appreciate you wanting to keep me safe. You've done a good job with it, but I have, too. I don't make foolish mistakes."

Hades fixed Nico with a dismissive glare. "Where were you three nights ago?"

"That was because I was heartbroken and--"

"You are still heartbroken. That makes you vulnerable. Apollo looks your way far too often for my liking. Your oaf lover, Grace, not the idiot Jackson — hmm, I think that's how I'll differentiate them from now on — at any rate, your oaf lover has performed well enough in his father's and patron's eyes to buy you some amount of protection—"

"I knew that was why he said those awful things!"

"This is no time to feel victorious, Nico. He is still an oaf who has acted like a coward, and he will make more grievous mistakes, I fear. He must stay away from you, and you must not seek him out."

Nico barely heard his father's warnings. Jason hadn't betrayed him. He'd been trying to keep him safe. Nico had spent the previous day crying over leaving Percy and being hurt by Jason, missing Hazel and Reyna. Right now, none of that mattered. Jason loved him. Well, Jason loved him enough to keep him safe. Jason had to be furious with him for being with Percy, and gods, Nico had fallen right back into Percy's arms the second Jason had disappointed him. He couldn't let that happen again. His heart twisted at the thought of giving up Percy, but he had to be a person Jason would want to be with when this all blew over.

"Curse it, Nico!" Hades yelled and slammed his desk. Nico jumped and gaped at his father. Hades clenched his desk edge so hard the wood began to splinter. "You have always been too emotional, too caring. You let your heart rule you when it would be much more prudent to use your head."
Nico bristled. "Says the man who held a three thousand year grudge."

"Gah! It is an exercise in futility to talk sense to you sometimes!"

"That's right!" Nico shouted. "I know how much you'd rather have Bianca standing here in front of you. How you preferred her to me. You know, the one who could be dispassionate enough to leave her ten year old brother all alone!"

Nico regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth. Hades had apologized years ago for the horrible words he'd spoken when Nico was young, and Nico had made his peace with Bianca's choices, too. His anger and frustration were talking. He ran his hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry, Dad. That was cruel and unfair. I don't blame you or Bianca for my fate, and I know you love me as much as her."

"More," Hades said quietly. Nico's breath caught in his throat. His father had never admitted that he loved Nico before. He'd certainly never hinted that he was glad Nico was his living child. "Your mother used to do that, run her hand through her hair, when she was frustrated with me. You look so much like her, yet I forget sometimes that you are her child, too. You and I are so much alike that I am surprised on the rare occasions when our opinions differ."

Nico sighed and sat in one of the stately brown leather armchairs in front of his father's desk. He wanted to fling his legs over an arm and curl into the seat cushion, but instead he sat straight and firm to face his father.

"I want to do good for others, and Dad, I know that you want me to be useful as well as safe and happy. I need to go to college."

"You can learn all you need down here, talk to every great master."

"I'm not meant to live down here forever," Nico grinned. "I'm a human."

"Part human," Hades corrected. "And you will return to me soon enough, one way or the other."

The truth of that statement rang in Nico's ears. No one escaped his father's domain, in the end. Not even Nico.

"Dad, when I die..." Nico hesitated.

"When you die, Nico, I promise you will be granted the option of rebirth, if the choices are mine to make." Hades pursed his thin lips, and Nico realized his father could see the arc of his life. Its span. Its end. "I hope you will choose to remain at my side instead."

"I will return to you and stay as long as you want me. Until then, let me choose the life that's best for me."

Hades bowed his head. "I will have Alecto make arrangements with the school. Will you at least stay and keep me company until it is necessary for you to leave?"

Nico did a fist pump, which he tried to play off as a nervous tick while silently cursing Percy for getting that particular move stuck in his head. Hades arched an eyebrow but said nothing.

"Thanks, Dad, and yes, I'll stay until I need to get ready for school."
Christmas in New York

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The highly anticipated Christmas special, as the new gods were calling it, was uncomfortable to wait for. The barrier had moved into its dark-time position shortly after the gods had finished taking care of their sexual needs. They had spent the remaining hours mostly silent, waiting for the special in a state of awkward discomfort. Jason was torn between disappointment that nothing more had happened and relief that Nico wasn't furious with him. Percy was hoping Nico would still kiss him for a long time after the Christmas special. Nico was doing his best to keep his hands to himself and not think about how close he'd come to letting more happen.

By the time it was late enough for it to be Christmas morning in New York, Percy was so nervous he had wrapped his arms tightly around Nico, one under his head, one over his ribs, and was strumming his hand over Nico's abs like they were guitar strings. Jason settled into his normal spot on Nico's arm and tried to ignore Percy's jittery hand bumping his back. Nico tentatively laid his hand on Jason's side. With a soft sigh, Jason stroked Nico's fingers and thought about how good it would feel when the special was over and he could turn around and press his front into Nico's back, even though the position gave him a front row seat to Nico and Percy's kissing.

When the picture on the screen switched from the home of a cat-loving middle-aged son of Demeter whom the gods knew by now lived in Florida, to Percy's old living room, Percy squeezed Nico impossibly closer, squealed, and shrieked "Everyone shut up," even though no one but him was talking.

Nico moved his hand off Jason's side and took Percy's hand to calm the now-frantic pace of Percy's abdominal strumming.

On the screen, only the kitchen light was on, and Annabeth and Hazel were sleepily slicing vegetables. Percy shook Nico back and forth.

"—so happy for you, Hazel," Annabeth was saying as she bent over a cutting board full of carrots. "Have you set a date?"

Nico gasped and dragged Percy forward into Jason, trying to get a closer look at the screen.

"Not yet. We were thinking maybe in the early fall," Hazel said, her high, squeaky voice sounding like heaven to Nico's ears. "We're hoping Nico'll be home by then."

Annabeth pursed her lips and nodded. Percy understood that face. No matter what Annabeth may have written in her letters, she didn't believe they'd come home. He tightened his hold on Nico.

"The fall will be a lovely time for a wedding, Hazel, even if they aren't back yet."

"She was supposed to finish school first," Nico whispered.

"She will have, come fall," Jason said.

Annabeth scooped the carrots into a pan and started cutting through broccoli spears.

"We thought about waiting," Hazel said. She was cubing sweet potatoes. The knife moved incredibly quickly in her hand. "But after this...thing...we realized that we shouldn't waste any more
time than we have to. It'll be good for us."

"Where will you live?" Annabeth asked tightly.

"New Rome, probably. I don't want to go anywhere else. New Orleans holds too many bad memories for me, and there's nothing left in Vancouver. We'd talked about coming here, but..."

Annabeth nodded again. Hazel missed the way Annabeth wiped her eyes, but the camera didn't.

There was a quiet knock at the door, and Annabeth hurried to answer it. She returned to the view of the camera, which had stayed on Hazel, with Piper in tow. Piper radiated beauty, as she always did, even early in the morning. Hazel and Annabeth were wearing Christmas-themed pajamas, but Piper was already in a cocktail dress. Her hair and slight makeup were done.

"Weird," Jason said. "She doesn't usually get made up unless she has to go out."

Hazel and Piper exchanged greetings and hugs.

"You look lovely, Piper," Hazel said.

"Thanks." Piper started peeling the apples Annabeth had set in front of her. "Maybelle still sleeping?"

"She is. No Percy, no waking." Annabeth shrugged. There were dark circles under her eyes. They were thrown into bright contrast because of the fluorescent kitchen light.

"Why aren't you sleeping, Annabeth?" Percy whispered.

"Well, that's a good thing." Hazel didn't sound like she meant it.

"Hey, I wanted to come over and tell you before the others get up," Piper took a deep breath to steel herself. "Connor stayed over last night. Travis is going to catch a ride down with Chris and Clarisse."

"I didn't know you kept in touch with the Stolls," Hazel said.

"Here, Hazel, hand me your knife, will you, so I can wash it." Annabeth took the knife and put herself between Piper and Hazel.

"Please don't freak out, Hazel. We're dating, Connor and I."

Hazel gasped. "What about Jason?"

Piper's face hardened into stone. She didn't stop peeling apples. "Jason is not coming back, Hazel. None of them are. And even if he was, he'd be with Nico. You can't tell me you honestly think that wherever they are, they aren't back together by now. I doubt they made it two days before they were all over each other."

"Piper." Annabeth shot her a warning look.

Hazel stepped forward, and the new gods were all glad Annabeth had taken the knife from her hands. "Listen here, Piper. My brother is coming back. I don't know if he's resumed his relationship with Jason or not, and neither do you. Annabeth thinks—"

"Annabeth thinks she's doing a service to us all by being a martyr," Piper snapped. "She's not. Look at her, Hazel. She's making herself sick trying to believe in a lie. I truly hope they all come back to
us, I swear. But it's painful to wait for a lover who probably won't return. Worse for me, a lover who was never really mine."

"Annabeth?" Hazel asked.

Annabeth swept her eyes between the other women and the floor.

"I don't know."

Percy scooted down and laid his head on top of Nico's. Nico turned and kissed Percy's cheek over and over again. Annabeth never "didn't know." She wasn't answering because she'd considered the possibilities and no longer believed Percy would return to her.

Hazel slammed her hand down on the counter. The bang that accompanied the motion resulted in two yelps that could only belong to Frank and Reyna, who stumbled into view soon enough.

"What is the commotion?" Reyna asked. Her long, normally-braided hair was down. Her eyes were sharp and calculating.

"Piper and Annabeth don't think the boys are coming back," Hazel said.

"I didn't say that." Annabeth's hands shook.

"You think it, though," Piper said. "You need to accept this, say it out loud. Even if they do come back, there's a chance Percy--"

"Shut up, Piper," Reyna said. "They are returning. End of discussion."

Hazel nodded behind Annabeth. Frank squirmed.

"Michael has been told that they have gone on a transoceanic sailing trip, that Percy is an experienced sailor and Nico and Jason went along as his crew. Please, for me, continue this story." Reyna rarely asked. She normally commanded. Everyone in the kitchen nodded. "Thank you. Now —"

The view switched to another house. Percy began to sob.

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Nico and Percy were still kissing an hour later when the screen returned to Annabeth's apartment.

"Hey, it's back on." Jason reached back to tap Nico to get his attention. He hit Nico's backside, and Nico jumped and jolted into Percy, who pressed his erection into Nico's stomach with a loud moan.

Nico broke the kiss, whispered, "It's back on," and turned away from Percy as quickly as he could. He knew the sight of Percy's wife would kill Percy's erection. It had killed his. Percy curled up behind him, and Nico could feel the remnant of Percy's arousal poking him. Percy was usually more discreet when Nico turned away, but seeing Annabeth and Maybelle had driven worries about Nico's comfort from his mind.

Maybelle and Annabeth were sitting in front of a Christmas tree. Piper had crawled underneath and was handing out presents. The new gods watched silently for a while as their family opened gifts and
didn't talk more than to say "thank you" and "ooh, I love it." Nico couldn't help thinking their own Christmas celebration had ended up being much more lively.

Piper pulled out another present and handed it to Hazel.

"Frank, will you take a turn handing out gifts?" she asked.

Frank obliged, sliding down from a chair and under the tree. Piper sat next to Connor, who goggled at her like he couldn't believe his luck. Hazel glared at him.

"Funny, she's more mad about it than I am." Jason was more bothered by the fact that Piper's prediction — that he'd be back together with Nico — hadn't happened than he was that Piper had moved on. Nico patted his shoulder.

"Hazel doesn't know you never loved Piper. Now shut up." Percy punctuated his words by reaching over Nico and poking Jason. Jason slapped back at Percy, and they started trying to hit each other without looking, which meant most of the blows landed on Nico instead of the intended target.

"Knock it off," Nico hissed. "Don't make me separate you two." He and Percy laughed at the joke, though the laughter was strained. Percy wanted to hear the conversation taking place in Manhattan, and Nico was too confused about what had happened earlier to take things lightly.

The doorbell rang onscreen, and Michael let Chris, Clarisse, and Travis in. Nico mused that if he were Piper, he would have chosen Travis over Connor. Travis had always seemed less shifty and slightly more attractive. Of course, in Nico's estimation, there was no one alive more attractive than Jason, so he thought perhaps Piper had decided looks didn't matter since no one could compare to her old fiancé.

"Hmm," Nico said out loud.

"What?" Jason said, turning his head slightly.

"Nothing, tell you later."


"I said I'd tell him later, jackass." Nico moved his head to yell at Percy some more, but the way Percy's eyes were flooded with tears caused him to change his mind.

A tear rolled down Percy's cheek, and Nico leaned up to kiss it away. Percy absentmindedly patted Nico's thigh. Nico turned around and buried his face in Jason's hair.

"Merry Christmas, all," Travis said. He winked at Reyna, which earned him a scowl from Michael. Reyna rolled her eyes.

On the floor, Annabeth set Maybelle down, and the baby crawled military-style toward Hazel, who scooped her up with a happy laugh.

Percy's head was back on Nico's. He sniffled in Nico's ear and tucked his hand way down under Nico's lower hip. Jason fidgeted at where he could feel Percy's arm on his back. He didn't mind the contact as much as he minded knowing how low Percy's hand must be on Nico's body. His worries were alleviated somewhat when Percy let loose with a huge snotty sniffle. Nico rolled his shoulders and tried not to flinch.

Hazel made silly faces at Maybelle the way Nico used to. Maybelle laughed and giggled and lit up
the room with her smile. Every adult watched her with fascination. Chris and Clarisse held hands and
gave each other knowing looks. Hazel and Frank smiled shyly at each other.

Just then, the front door of the apartment burst open and Santa and Mrs. Claus bustled in. Reyna,
Chris, Clarisse, and both Stoll brothers jumped up and drew weapons, leaving a very confused-
looking Michael alone on the couch.

"Hey, hey, hey, amigos," came Leo's very distinctive voice from behind the beard. "Santa doesn't
want to fight. He came to wish you all a Merry Christmas and give big hugs and kisses to Miss
Maybelle."

"Valdez." Reyna's nose wrinkled, and she put her dagger away.

Clarisse scowled and pocketed nunchucks. Connor and Travis hid matching cans of Mace. Chris
sheepishly tucked a rosary back in his pocket.

"Dios mio, Rodriguez, you almost Catholic-ed me to death. That shit's dangerous." Leo smirked and
wiggled his eyebrows briefly before Annabeth coughed and looked pointedly at Maybelle. Leo
rolled his eyes. "Excuse me. Mama Killjoy calls."

"Leo, I'm not sure this is such a—" Calypso's voice died out as Leo ignored her and walked to the
front of the room. He'd gone three steps toward Hazel and Maybelle and dropped to his knees when
Maybelle's eyes widened in utter terror and she gave a piercing, drawn-out scream. Jason and Nico,
along with everyone in the apartment except Hazel, Leo, and Annabeth, burst out laughing.

Maybelle clawed her way up Hazel and stuck her head in Hazel's wild mop of curly hair. It hurt,
what Maybelle was doing, as Hazel's squeals joined Maybelle's.

"Damn, Annabeth, girl's got some lungs," Leo said. "You oughtta audition her to be some kind of
terror baby in horror movies."

Annabeth grabbed the last present from under the tree and repeatedly whacked Leo with it. Hazel
and Maybelle continued to scream while Frank tried to pry Maybelle's pudgy fingers out of Hazel's
hair. Chris, Clarisse, and the Stolls shared a laugh. Reyna and Michael were having a quiet
discussion about why she and her friends had threatened to mug Santa. Calypso worked to disarm
Annabeth and Leo, who'd taken off his Santa beard and was batting Annabeth about the head with
it.

That was the last image the gods had of their family before the scene changed to show Will Solace
sleeping in a dorm room at Columbia. Jason turned the TV off and rolled over to face Nico and
Percy.

"Well, at least their Christmas finally got as good as ours," Nico said. Jason snorted, and he and Nico
broke out in raucous laughter. Even Percy eventually joined in.

"Oh, gods, Maybelle was awesome," Jason said when he finally calmed down enough to speak.
"Did you see the way she looked at Leo?"

"I think we've all looked at Leo that way at least once," Percy said. He dried his eyes in Nico's hair.
"She's a smart girl."

into Jason.

"Haha, Nico and Hazel scream the same." Jason used the excuse of the extra proximity to wrap his
arms around Nico's waist.

"Move your arms, Grace," Percy said. "They're too close to my dick."

"Move your dick, then, Percy. I like where my arms are."

"I like where my dick is, and I was there first. Besides, Nico likes feeling my dick more than he likes feeling your arms."

Jason tilted his head to get a better look at Percy. "Maybe, but I promise you, he likes my dick better than he likes yours."

Nico let out one of his barking, derisive laughs. "And you two thought you could get along well enough to share."

Percy and Jason both bit back the next words they'd planned to fling.

"We wouldn't have fought," Percy said quietly. "Not about that."

"You just were fighting about that, you morons." Nico adopted a whiny baby voice. "Eww, he likes my pee-pee better than yours. Wah, don't touch me. Boohoo, let go of my toy."

The room was silent. Jason tried to meet Nico's eyes, but the youngest god stared resolutely over Jason's head.

"We don't think you're our toy, Nico," Jason kissed Nico's chest. "Please don't think that."

"It's weird, huh?" Nico said, ignoring Jason. "Hazel and Frank are engaged. Chris and Clarisse are pregnant. Piper's shacking up with Connor."

"Gross about that last part," Percy said from where his head was buried in Nico's hair.

"Agreed," both Jason and Nico said. They all laughed quietly.

"They're moving on," Percy said.

After a few minutes, Percy wasn't the only one who was sniffling.

"Do you want me to turn the TV back on?" Jason asked. He wiped his eyes and cleared his throat. "They're probably done showing Solace."

"Nah," Percy said. "That was already too much, I think. Unless Nico wants more."

Nico shook his head and turned over to face Percy. They all understood. He was making himself available for comfort.

Instead, Percy reached over Nico's hip and picked up Jason's hand. He laced their fingers together and laid them on Nico's side. They slid their hands up and down Nico's body, over and over. Jason kissed Nico's neck. When he pulled away, Percy placed a kiss on the same spot.

"You're not a toy to us, Nico." Percy squeezed Nico's front with the palm of his hand.

"And we can get along, especially to make you happy," Jason added.

"Go to sleep, if Percy doesn't need anything," Nico said.
Percy brushed his lips over Nico's. "I'll wait until you're not mad at me."

Jason kissed Nico's back.

Long after Nico drifted off to sleep, Percy and Jason smoothed their locked hands up and down his side.

Chapter End Notes

Two notes:

In case you missed the clues, Reyna's Michael isn't Michael Kahale. If I'd been thinking, I'd have given him a different name and saved you all any confusion.

This chapter makes me think of the third act of Thornton Wilder's 1938 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Our Town*. It wasn't what I was thinking about when I wrote the chapter, but each time I re-read it I feel the parallel between Percy and Wilder's Emily.
“No one's perfect, Nico. We all make mistakes.”

The senate commuted the final two months of Jason's six month probation, which was all the punishment he'd been given, in the end. When push came to shove last April, the senators had decided they'd accepted Jason's apology and reinstated him as the Pontifex. Now, to the senate at least, the whole event seemed so trivial that none of them had raised any disagreement when Hazel had asked that Jason's probation be lifted early.

Jason wasn't sure what had prompted Hazel's sudden leniency, because she hadn't spoken to him since he'd lied about Nico, but he could guess. Hazel was a kind person, but she was loyal, and she wouldn't have willingly done something to help him anymore. Nico had to have asked her to. There wasn't any other plausible explanation. That meant that, somewhere out there, Nico was alright and still cared for him, at least in some way. The thought gave Jason his lone comfort.

Most of the people in New Rome had stopped avoiding him or whispering about him. No one liked him, though. They all thought he was insincere and fake, that although Nico may be creepy and treacherous, Jason had been, as Percy had asserted, the instigator in their relationship. The little boy who'd asked for his autograph, David, stared at him but turned away whenever Jason made eye contact.

Piper had been angry over Jason's philandering, but she hadn't been surprised. When she had finally spoken to him again, she had told him that she knew he loved Nico. Jason had done nothing but cry. He couldn't admit that she was right; Juno or Jupiter may hear. Piper had seemed to take his tears as confirmation. "Did you ever love me?" she had asked, and when Jason had replied, "I wanted to," she had joined in his tears. These days, she would sometimes visit, bringing him a sandwich or brownies, but they sat far apart and never smiled.

Save for Piper and Leo, who was back at MIT after a brief, savage hug and promise of friendship that endured through times of, as Leo had called it, "one friend's serious, major, ugly-but-probably-well-intentioned jackassery," Jason's former friends had ceased to acknowledge his existence. Even Frank, who'd always been the gentlest and most forgiving of their group, turned his back whenever Jason passed. Reyna glared, icy and withdrawn. So did Annabeth. Percy leered and fingered Riptide. Hazel watched Jason with eyes so full of betrayal and hurt, as if she were operating as Nico's stand-in, reminding Jason of the pain he'd caused the person he loved most.

Once it became clear they wouldn't speak to him, Jason had tried for a long time to hold his head high when he passed any of his former friends. He'd done what he needed to do in order to keep Nico safe, and, at first, he had refused to allow himself to be shamed. As the days wore on without a word from any of them and news of Nico never reached his ears, his head began to drop. He deserved their scorn, if not for the way he'd betrayed Nico in the end then for all the little betrayals that had come before. Whenever he saw an old friend now, he immediately focused on his feet. More often than not, he didn't look up again after the friend had passed.

All of these thoughts filtered through Jason's head, along with the constant refrain that had become as integral to his existence as his beating heart. Nico, Nico, Nico. No idea where his ex-lover was, no
contact. Jason had sent one of Hecate's postcards, but he hadn't received a reply. Nico had said he'd always be there if Jason needed him. The worry that Nico was hurt or had written him off for good nagged at Jason. Nico was incredibly capable, and Jason had given his "parents" no reason to harm him, so it was probably the latter that was keeping him away.

A soft cascade of fingers down his forearm caused Jason to startle and look up from a page that was supposed to be full of notes but contained only doodles.

"Jason, darling, will you be my lab partner?" Drew Tanaka purred, shaking her long black hair back off her shoulders.

"Sure," Jason said. He tried for a smile, but it felt more like a grimace.

Drew's eyes lit up, and her red talons gripped his hand hard enough to leave marks. "I'll see you tomorrow then, chemistry partner."

Drew spared him a lingering look before she let go of his hand and exited the classroom. Jason chuckled. Why not? He could be lab partners with the only other person in the whole place as fake as him. He gathered his belongings into his backpack. Other students bustled around him as he made his way out of the classroom and building and into the late summer sunshine.

After a tentative peek around to make sure none of the Seven or Reyna was nearby, Jason raised his head to the sun as he walked down the path. He never would have imagined he'd be glad to be spending time with Drew, but he found himself looking forward to being her lab partner. Of course, Drew didn't give a shit about him as a lab partner; she wanted to sleep with him. Maybe he'd even let her. She was probably good, and it would ease the devastating loneliness he felt, at least for a while. Other girls and boys, if he wanted, would follow, once they saw that he was open to dating or sex. He would prefer sex. Simple, fast and emotionless. No ties. There was no one here who could compete with Nico, anyway. No one as funny, as smart, as kind, as loving...

"Excuse me..."

Jason's arm was touched for the second time that day, and he recoiled a bit from the shock of more human contact. He pushed down thoughts of Nico and focused on the girl in front of him. Was it starting already? He didn't recognize her from his chemistry class, though he couldn't say for sure, since he paid no attention to anyone around him. She did look vaguely familiar. This girl appeared to be a little young to be in college, though. She looked a bit like Hazel, except even smaller. Her skin was dark, and she had lovely curly hair that almost mimicked Hazel's style. Her little button nose was slightly upturned, also like Hazel, but her eyes were a deep chocolate brown. She was one of those smart kids, the kind that had a sparkle in their eyes that said, "I know more than you."

"Yes?" Jason asked.

The girl grinned nervously. "You're Jason Grace, right?"

Jason looked away for a moment before finding the girl's eyes again and nodding. He didn't like being recognized.

The girl's face morphed from the nervous grin that Jason belatedly realized was false and into an angry scowl. She reared back and kicked Jason in the shin.

"Holy motherfucker!" Jason screeched. The girl had aimed her kick perfectly. She'd struck right at the spot the Roman fighting instructors coached their charges to aim for. Jason was impressed as well as horrified. He brought his knee up to his chest and cradled his shin, his eyes watering. The girl
kicked the other shin. Jason howled. He couldn't bring up both legs, so he put the first foot back down and took three quick steps back. The girl advanced on him but didn't seem like she was going to kick him again.

"I'm Allie Vargas, you self-centered prick, and that was for Nico di Angelo." She began to storm away.

Too slowly, Jason connected the name to the face and remembered that this girl, Allie, Annabeth's disciple, was the one who had gone on that last quest with Nico. She had been with him when Jason had made that horrible call.

"Wait!" Jason was relieved when Allie stopped and waited for him to hobble closer. He made sure to keep a safe distance, though, as her eyes glinted malevolently, and Jason felt certain she'd decided to kick him again after all. "Have you talked to him?"

Allie narrowed her eyes. "Who? Nico?"

Jason made a flapping motion with his hands and glanced skyward, as though he could see if his father or patron were listening to his conversation. They weren't paying attention while he talked to a little daughter of Minerva, were they? Surely they didn't consider her close enough to Nico to threaten their security? This conversation must be safe.

"Don't say his name!" Jason hissed.

"Why? You embarrassed that you fucked him?" Allie’s hands clenched into fists.

Jason was surprised to hear a young girl talking so crudely, but he shook that concern away. She might know something about Nico.

"Not even close," Jason said. "He's special to me."

"Coulda fooled me, the way you talked about his hella hot ass at that senate meeting."

"I just want to know if he's okay," Jason said. He raised his hands in what he hoped was a placating gesture. He didn't want to get kicked again. "I'm not trying to make myself look better or do anything to hurt him. I need to know he's alright."

Allie sneered. "You're a first-rate bastard, you know that? I was with him that night you called. He was devastated. And all that stuff you said in the senate was such a bag of shit. I only knew him for like two weeks, and even in that tiny amount of time it was obvious he hated people calling him out on his body. He never would have used sex to get something, the way you said he did. It was sick, listening to you lie about him, and I barely knew him."

"Like I said," Jason tried again. "I'm not defending myself. I need to know if you've heard from him."

"What the hell for? So you can spread more lies?" Allie laughed, hard and dark. "I wouldn't tell you shit. You wanna know where he is? Go fucking find him. No one here's gonna miss your sorry ass anyway."

Allie spared Jason one last angry glare then turned and flounced away. He watched her go. Once her retreating form had vanished from his field of view, he started walking again and quickly made his way to his dorm room. He'd done nothing more than tug off his tennis shoes when there was a knock at the door. After the tongue-lashing from Allie, Jason wasn't feeling up for visitors. The only person who would come to visit him, though, was Piper, so he moved sluggishly to the door to let her in.
"Hi, Jay," Piper said, speaking even though Jason had concealed himself behind the open door in order to let her in. "I brought you some dinner. Salami sandwich, brownie, apple juice."

Jason laid his head back on the wall and closed his eyes. He let go of the doorknob and listened to the door swing back into place before opening his eyes and turning toward Piper.

"Thanks, but you know you don't have to do that, right?"

Piper put her hands on her hips and surveyed him severely. Her eyes had stopped changing color. Jason had noticed a few weeks ago that they'd been stuck on blue. He wasn't sure if it was because she didn't love him anymore or she was too sad or if there was some other reason. He'd been reluctant to ask in case it made her uncomfortable.

"I'm still your friend, Jay. You need to eat."

"I do eat."

"Only when you have to. You're losing a lot of body fat. You're almost as..."

Jason knew what she'd been going to say. He was almost as lean as Nico now. He knew. He'd seen himself in the mirror. He was still heavily muscled, but these months of less food had eaten away at the padding around his muscles. He hated to think how low his body fat percentage must be.

"I'll try to eat more often." He wasn't sure if he was telling the truth, but he wanted Piper not to worry about him. "Maybe I'll go into town tomorrow and buy some groceries."

"Why don't you come to the cafeteria? You could eat with me."

"I'm not going to have everyone ignore you for sitting with me," Jason said.

"Don't be silly," Piper said. "No one's going to ignore me for sitting with you."

"You mean the way we didn't ignore Nico for months?" Jason shouldn't have said it. He was working hard not to fight with Piper and not to say Nico's name out loud.

Piper looked stung. Her voice was hard and bitter when she spoke. "We did what we thought was best, Jay. All of us. Fat lot of good it did us, since you and Percy took 'stay away from Nico' to mean 'fuck him whenever you want.'"

"You should probably go, Piper." Jason hung his head. She'd warned him early on to stop apologizing. She said it didn't change anything, and she was right. Jason wasn't even sorry. That was the worst part. Well, he was sorry he'd hurt Piper, but he wasn't sorry for a moment he'd spent with Nico.

"I'm going on a date on Friday," Piper said as she made her way to the door. "I thought you should know."

Jason managed a small smile. "Good luck."

Piper looked like she'd hoped Jason would object. "Thanks."

The door closed behind Piper, and Jason began to shed his shirt.

"Don't get too comfy yet, Jason. It's my turn to talk to you now."

Jason whirled to find Annabeth sitting on his roommate's unmade bed. She weathered his shock with
polite interest.

"Annabeth? How did you get in here?"

"I have a magic hat. Makes me invisible. You probably care more about why I'm here than how I got in, I'm guessing."

Jason nodded. Annabeth being here made him nervous. If something had happened to Nico, the news was likely to come from Annabeth or Frank since Reyna, Hazel, or Percy, the bastard, would be too devastated and angry to speak to Jason.

Annabeth must have read the alarm in his eyes. "He's fine, as far as we know."

Jason let his head fall back again and exhaled loudly. When he returned his attention to Annabeth, he found she was scrutinizing him carefully.

"Someone made you lie."

"Come again?" Jason wasn't sure what she was talking about.

"At the hearing. I've been watching you since then, trying to understand what makes you tick. I know you love him. I know you lied about the nature of your relationship. The two are incongruous. Why would you do something so damaging to someone you love — the only person you love, from what I can tell?"

Annabeth paused, though she didn't seem to expect Jason to answer. Her face pinched and her eyes lifted skyward, like she was gathering her logic more tightly together before she resumed speaking.

"You could have done it because you found out about Percy and him. That's not likely. If that was the case, you'd have been much more likely to target Percy. I remember how last year you were so jealous of Percy that you were willing to sell...him...out to me to make me angry with Percy. You may have been angry enough to leave your lover, but you wouldn't have publicly destroyed him the way you did.

"And it's funny, too. Our great 'queen,'" Annabeth used derisive air quotes, "waits until he leaves, then shows up and makes her accusations. I noticed you were getting openly close with him again. And then she shows up. The very next day, you're ready to lie your pretty head off."

"Where's this going, Annabeth?" Jason couldn't tell her she was right. Annabeth probably already knew she was. Jason had learned that she preferred to have the answers worked out before she volunteered information.

"You're protecting him. At least, you believe you are. And the threat is so great that you're afraid to even tell him or any of us. You're willing to lose all your friends over this. For him."

"What do you want?"

"Gods, it's that bad, isn't it? You're terrified to even acknowledge the truth?" Annabeth’s eyes were wide.

Jason glanced all around the room, made sure Annabeth was watching him, and nodded his head a fraction of an inch.

"How can I help you?"
"You can't. I appreciate the gesture. I know it's for him, though I can't figure out why, given what he's done. This isn't something you can help him with."

"You, Jason, how can I help you?" Annabeth repeated. "I care about him, despite what he did. That's true. But you were also on that damned boat with us. You saved our lives, too. You love someone enough to put yourself through hell for him. I can understand that feeling."

Her sad smile reminded Jason of how very literally she meant what she was saying.

"Be my friend," Jason said. "Not publicly. I assume you sneaked in here with Piper because Percy would shit bricks if he learned you'd come to see me."

Annabeth sighed. "Percy's very loyal, and..." She rolled her eyes. "Jack Skellington...is incredibly important to him."

Jason chuckled at the euphemism. He wondered how Annabeth could be so casual in talking about Percy's cheating. It wasn't his place to ask, but he didn't understand it. He couldn't decide if Percy supposedly caring a great deal about Nico would make it harder or easier to forgive, if he was in Annabeth's place. He didn't buy the whole "Percy cares about Nico" spiel. At least, not the way Annabeth seemed to imply. Percy cared about Nico in a paternalistic way, maybe, and he probably had loved the sex, but he didn't love Nico. The thought was laughable.

Apparently, Annabeth felt Jason was taking too long to reply, because she stood and started talking again. "I'll see what I can do. Maybe I can convince Hazel or Reyna—"

"No!"

"Jason, what—"

"No one can know."

"But you're being punished unfairly."

"Consider it my penance for all the shitty things I've done. No one can know."

Annabeth looked like she wanted to argue, so Jason raised his head defiantly. Annabeth grimaced and turned to the door.

"I'll remember, Jason. You deserve better than what you've been handed."

Jason watched Annabeth disappear under her cap. The door opened and closed, and he was alone.

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"Nico, wake up."

The quiet voice didn't do anything to jar Nico from his sleep, though he heard it. The hand on his forearm sent him springing from his seat and reaching for his sword. After two fruitless swipes against his hip, he remembered he didn't have his sword, only a small concealed dagger. No matter how little mortals could see through the mist, he'd found they could hear just fine when his sword made horrible loud clanking noises against the lecture hall chairs. The two girls who sat on either side of him for this freshman comp class stared at him in fond amusement.

"I copied my notes for you," one said. Was she Miranda or Bethany? Nico got them confused.
Bethany sat on his left, Miranda on his right, he remembered. Now, if he could just subtly turn and face the same direction as them he could maybe figure out which was which.

"Um, thanks." That was easier, anyway.

"Sure." The girl smiled at him flirtatiously.

Nico made a small waving motion at both girls, who broke into giggles as they packed up their things.

"You know, Nico," the other girl started, "you should get more rest. That's the third time you've fallen asleep in class, and we've barely started school."

"I, uh, I know." A sudden inspiration hit him. "You don't happen to know of any places for rent or sale around here, do you? The commute's killing me."

"Oh, you can stay at my place," the first girl said.

Nico didn't want to have a roommate. That was why he'd refused to live in the dorms. He liked his space, and he didn't want any mortals to be in extra danger from monsters. But, mostly, he liked his space. He was getting desperate, though. He'd fallen asleep in two other classes, too.

"Do you have a spare room, then?"

The girl blushed profusely. "No, but, uh, you can share my bed."

Nico's eyes widened. He was sure he was blushing every bit as much as the girl. "I've got to go. Thanks for the notes."

He waved that dumb wave again and bolted for the exit. The girls broke out in laughter as soon as he was out of the room. That was the last straw. He needed to find a new place to sit. More importantly, he needed to find a place to live. He ducked into a bathroom and used the shadow of a stall to drag himself home.

He exited the shadows under the canopy of the lovely old oak tree that dominated his front yard. Nico liked the quaint farmhouse he'd bought. He did not like that it was a three hour commute from campus. The first week, he'd had Jules-Albert drive him, but six hours in the car was too much. Since then, he'd been shadow traveling each day, but between the travel, class, homework, housekeeping (which Nico had never done before and found to be the most soul-crushing experience, well, maybe not of his life, but he could see how it could be the most soul-crushing experience of someone else's life), and daily sparring practice, he was exhausted.

Nico dragged himself away from the tree and did a cursory sweep of the yard to check for monsters. He tended to repel small monsters by nature of who he was, but big monsters still sought him out. In the four weeks he'd lived in the house, he'd had to do away with a chimera, a hydra, two lamiae, a manticore, and two of the mares of Diomedes. It was almost enough to make him wish for more of Leo's monster repellent.

Today, there were no visible monsters, but there was a lone figure sitting on his front porch steps. Nico sighed.

"Was it our day to spar? I would've come and picked you up."

"It's not a sparring day, dipshit."
Helpful to know Clarisse is in a good mood. He walked past her up the steps and unlocked the house. She followed him inside and set a grocery bag on the counter of his little blue kitchen. The bag sounded like it had something made of glass in it. Nico briefly wondered if she'd brought him a housewarming gift.

"What brings you by?" Nico liked Clarisse's company sometimes, but she seemed even pissier than usual today. He didn't know what to make of her showing up at his place uninvited. How did she even get out there? On the days they sparred, he had to shadow to the edge of Camp Half-Blood and pick her up.

"You're too much of a tight-ass pussy to have any vodka in the house, right?"

Clarisse opened the fridge and rummaged through it, pulling out cold cuts and a leftover turkey leg.

"I'm a badass, not a tight-ass. Definitely not a pussy. I'm very seventeen, though."

"Damn it. I forget what a fucking baby you are. You're so..." Clarisse gestured up and down Nico's frame before rummaging in his cabinets.

"Why Clarisse, did you give me an almost-compliment about my appearance?" Nico teased. "I'm flattered."

He smirked, and Clarisse scowled at him as she closed a cabinet and plunked two glasses on the counter. She dug around in the bag she'd brought in and pulled out a large bottle of some sort of alcohol.

"I was going to say you were tall, doofus." Clarisse took the lid off the alcohol and poured herself a large glass. She ran the other glass under the tap and handed it to Nico.

"Right. Why didn't you just say it, then, and end your sentence, instead of making that hand gesture?" Nico was enjoying making Clarisse squirm a little. She'd certainly given him enough grief over the years.

Clarisse glared at him and downed a huge gulp of her drink. She exhaled loudly and closed her eyes.

"Why are you wearing white, you fucking little shit?"

"No clean black shirts," Nico admitted. "Want to come help me figure out how to use a washing machine and dryer?"

"Fuck off," Clarisse said. "I'm not doing your laundry. Throw the clothes and soap in there and turn the knobs. It's not that hard."

She moved over to Nico's couch and set the food, cup, and booze in front of her. Nico sat next to her.

"Make yourself at home."

"Smartass. Why do you look so tired, Pissy?"

"I need to move closer in. This place is nice, but it's too far away from school." Nico leaned back on the couch and checked his phone for messages. The phone was strange to him, but he liked to think he'd adapted to the technology relatively quickly. He knew how to make calls and send texts. The Internet was still a bit of a mystery to him. He didn't understand how the little screen could show him almost anything in the world in a matter of seconds. It was weird.
"Mr. di Angelo," a woman's voice said from his voice mail, "this is Serena Bonaparte. I'm sorry to say that there are still no homes or apartments available within your search area. I'll call you as soon as something becomes available."

Nico hung up. Clarisse was watching him in wonder.

"What the hell is that thing?"

"It's a phone. Here, knock yourself out with it." Nico handed over the phone, and Clarisse sat silently for a while, drinking, eating, and messing with the phone. After a while, her shoulders relaxed, and Nico decided to ask again. "So, what brings you by?"

"Nothing." Clarisse kicked off her boots and put her feet up on the coffee table. "Still no real estate closer in, huh?"

"No. It's strange, right? It's New York City, for crying out loud. There should be lots of places."

"You don't have any leads?"

Nico thought about the offer from Apollo. He wondered if he was getting desperate enough to go down that road. None of Apollo's gifts had made it out of New Rome in the backpack Hazel had packed him, but the day Nico moved into this house, he'd walked into his new bedroom to find a huge gift basket of fancy shampoos, lotions, and soaps. The card had a heart with an A underneath it.

"One," Nico said. "I don't think I should check it out, though."

"Shit, boy, I think you better check out anything you can get now. You got a TV?"

"Bedroom."

"Internet?"

"Yes."

"Good, get the cup for me, will you?" Clarisse stood and headed down the hall.

"Hey, wait! Where are you going?"

"To watch a movie, duh. You better get yourself something to eat, 'cause you're not sharing my food."

Nico shook his head. After a few moments he heard the sound of the TV. He hated the thing. He'd tried watching a few shows but they all seemed so vapid. There had been an enjoyable cooking show and a documentary about Tazmanian tigers. That was all of merit that he'd found. He doubted Clarisse was watching a cooking show or documentary.

"C'mon, punk," Clarisse bellowed from the bedroom. "Get your ass in here and keep me company."

Nico groaned and first went to the kitchen to grab a bag of chips. When he got to his room, Clarisse was sprawled out on his bed, eating his food, and watching his TV. He stood in front of the TV.

"Move, asshole."

"No. Tell me what's wrong and then I will."

"Nothing's wrong."
"Clarisse, come on. You've been my friend for a long time now. You're being a bitch way more than usual. Something happened. I want to help."

"Gods, you fucking whiny douchebag. Get over here and out of the way of the TV, and I'll tell you."

Nico sat next to Clarisse against the headboard. For five minutes, he watched the stupid, gory, violent movie she'd chosen. He was preparing to tell her that she had to talk. He was not prepared for her to wrap her arms around his arm and hug it tightly to her chest. She laid her head on his shoulder and let out a big sigh.

"Clarisse, you're scaring me."

"Shut up."

"But—"

"Shut up, fucker."

Nico thumped his head on the headboard. He tried to look down at Clarisse, but she reached up and slapped his face away.

"Ow. Damn it, Clarisse—"

"What part of 'shut up' was unclear? Stop talking. Don't look at me. Don't touch me."

Nico muttered, "You're touching me," but otherwise kept his mouth shut.

The movie was awful, but Clarisse seemed engrossed. The only things she'd done since taking hold of Nico's arm were take a few more drinks, tear the flesh from the turkey leg (and wipe her hand on Nico's forearm), and snuffle once. Nico couldn't tell if she had allergies or the movie was making her cry. Maybe it was the alcohol.

Clarisse turned her face behind Nico's shoulder and belched. "Chris proposed."

"Oh, my gods, that's—"

"Shut up."

Nico made the mistake of trying to look at Clarisse again. She jabbed her finger into his armpit.

"Damn it, Nico. Don't look at me."

Nico opened his mouth to say something, but decided he'd had enough. If Clarisse wasn't going to tell him, fine. They sat in silence for a few more minutes.

"I told him no."

Clarisse clapped her hand over Nico's mouth before he could ask why she'd do such a stupid thing. Clarisse loved Chris! They'd been together forever. She'd nursed him back from madness after he'd gotten lost in the labyrinth, for the gods' sakes.

"I got scared, I guess. I mean, he's so wonderful, shithead. What's he gonna do when he wakes up one day and realizes he can do so much better than me? He'll cheat on me or leave me, and I'd rather choose to be without him than have him choose to be without me. At least, that's what I was thinking."
Nico could understand that. Being left was awful. He laid his head on Clarisse's head for a moment and lifted it off before she could swat him away.

"How did you do it, Nico? How did you get better after the bastard did all the shit to you that he did?"

Nico barked out a laugh. "I'm not better, Clarisse. It hurts like hell every day. I slept with someone, don't ask who, and it was better when I was with him, but it still didn't make me miss Jason less. I miss him all the time and some days I feel so sad that it's hard to get out of bed. School's helped. I like that I'm doing something for me."

"If you don't flunk out for falling asleep in class all the time," Clarisse snorted. "And everyone knows you were fucking Percy, kid."

"My point, if you'd quit being nasty and let me get there," Nico snapped, "is that I will be okay. I might always be a little sad, but that's not such a bad thing. But, Clarisse, he did dump me. Chris may never leave you. I know he loves you. Did you tell him what you were worried about?"

"Yeah. He laughed and said I was the one who was more likely to cheat on him, since I'd done it before."

The alcohol was taking effect, because Clarisse didn't slap Nico when he gaped at her.

"You cheated on Chris?" That seemed so impossible. Who the hell else would sleep with Clarisse? More importantly, why would she cheat? "You love him."

"You're back to talking like a fucking idiot. Why'd you shack up with Jackson when Grace wasn't fucking you often enough? I was lonely. Chris was at college, and the other guy paid attention to me. He made me feel good."

"Chris forgave you."

"Not at first. It took a long time. I thought we were over it, but then he brought it up today."

Nico shook his head and rubbed his face. "But only because you told him you wouldn't marry him because he'd cheat on you."

"Maybe that was kinda dumb."

"You think?"

"Shut up and watch the movie with me, you undernourished know-it-all."

Nico did. Clarisse nuzzled tighter into his shoulder. Did everyone cheat? The idea confused him. Their godly parents were a bunch of cheaters, for sure, but he had always imagined that mortals were more virtuous. He wanted to believe his mother had never loved anyone but his father. Maybe it was true. But Percy's mom had had two husbands since Poseidon. Jason had cheated on Piper. Nico had always dismissed that since Jason was cheating with his true love. Percy cheated on Annabeth. Even if Nico told himself — as he did — that he and Percy were a special romantic circumstance, not quite love but something deep and true, nonetheless, and shouldn't be counted as cheating, there were still all the other times Annabeth had mentioned. Now he learned Clarisse had cheated on Chris? Was he a fool to think a forever, faithful kind of love existed?

Near the end of the movie, Clarisse finished her alcohol. She took a last swallow, noticed the bottle was empty, and head-butted Nico's neck.
"Go get the other bottle, Neeee-co."

Nico harrumphed. "You've had enough."

"Such a spoilsport." Clarisse spit all over him.

"You are definitely helping with my laundry tomorrow." Nico shifted to get up.

"Yay! More booze!" Clarisse yelled in his ear.

"No! No more booze!" Nico set his feet on the floor. "I'm going to go sleep in the living room."

"Neeee-co!"

"What?"

"I gotta pee!"

"Oh, for..."

Nico swore and complained the whole way, but he hoisted Clarisse out of bed and helped her safely navigate the bathroom. At least she didn't seem to be a vomiting drunk like he had been. She climbed back onto the bed and rested against the headboard. Nico started to leave, but she caught his arm.

"Stay? Please?"

Nico was so shocked by the novelty of Clarisse saying please that he didn't even protest. He sat back against the headboard, and Clarisse adopted the same head-on-shoulder, arms-strangling-arm posture she'd had for the previous two hours.

Twenty minutes into the second movie, Nico’s head got heavy. He closed his eyes and let his mind wander to Jason, so he was caught off guard when Clarisse roughly thumped his chest and started talking. It took him a moment to realize she wasn't talking to him.

"Stupid you, and your stupid marriage! Think I'm a cheater! I'll show you! I already found me a hot body to take your place. He's been fucking my brains out all night long!"

Nico's eyes snapped open, and he saw Chris Rodriguez staring back at him through an Iris message. Clarisse was unsuccessfully trying to unbutton Nico's shirt.

"Hey, Chris," Nico said. This was awful. He tried to gently remove Clarisse's hand from his chest, but she latched onto one of his fingers and viciously twisted it back. He let her keep messing with the buttons.

"Nico." Chris chuckled.

"Can you come get her?"

"Shut up, asswipe. You're fucking me, remember? Ha! Rodriguez! Look at all this nice yummy man I got with!"

Clarisse pinched Nico's cheeks and shook his head back and forth toward Chris. Nico gave up trying to free himself from Clarisse's clutches and let her jerk him around. It was easier and less traumatic.

"I know Nico's gay, Clarisse."
"Again, can you come get her?" Nico's voice came out garbled since Clarisse still had a death grip on his cheeks.

"Sorry, dude. Argus says I can't have the van until tomorrow. I woulda called sooner, but I figured she was with you and she'd be easier to deal with all liquored up."

"This is easier?"

Clarisse had stopped talking and had even let go of Nico's cheeks, but she was pressing sloppy kisses to his shoulder. She so owed him laundry.

"Well, easier for me, at least." Chris grinned. "She's almost done. The kisses come right before she falls asleep."

"You've had practice with this, then?"

"Tons. It's Clarisse. She takes a little work."

Chris gazed at Clarisse with such love that Nico felt silly for worrying that true, lasting love may not exist. The sight made his chest warm. As soon as he had that thought, he looked down to see that it wasn't the thought, but Clarisse's drool that was making his chest warm. Nico rolled his eyes.

"Hey, Chris?"

"What's up, kiddo?"

"Clarisse told me what happened. I mean, about you proposing to her, but also about what happened before. Her cheating."

Chris waited without speaking. Nico had always liked the guy. He'd never known him before, when he was part of Kronos's army. The guy he knew had always been sweet and good-natured.

"How'd you come back from it? I worry I won't be able to..."

"You're worried you won't be able to forgive Jason?"

"I guess."

The lines around Chris's brown eyes crinkled with his smile. "She forgave me for ditching her for a rebel army, one that she'd sworn herself against. I was mad at her and really hurt when she cheated. But I understood why she did it, eventually, the same as she understood why I turned my back on her and camp. No one's perfect, Nico. We all make mistakes."

"What if my biggest mistake is that I can't forgive?"

"I don't think that's true. You want to forgive him, right?"

"Definitely."

"And you're obviously imagining a time when you could be together with him again. I'd say you're more than halfway toward forgiveness already. Cut yourself a break. You're young. So's Jason. Hell, so are Clarisse and I. We'll figure lots of things out as we go. Listen to your head, but don't ignore your heart, either, kid."

"Thanks."
"Sure thing. Thanks for keeping her safe for me." Chris started to swipe his hand through the message but pulled back. "Oh, and she likes to cuddle. You might as well get comfortable."

***

Percy needed a break. Or a breakdown. He wasn't sure which.

Annabeth sat at the end of the couch, staring at him. He kept his eyes on the floor rather than face his beautiful girlfriend.

"We have to talk about this, Percy," Annabeth repeated.

They did have to talk about it. Four months removed, though, and Percy, who was never lost for words, still didn't know what to say. He had never felt lost before. Even when he was at his lowest and most vulnerable, bathing in the Styx, traipsing through Tartarus, recovering from that hell, he'd always known who and what he was. He'd known what he liked and didn't, who he liked and didn't. The truth was, he knew all those things now as completely as ever, but the person he was had shifted. He didn't know how to shift himself back.

"Get up." Annabeth was standing above him, holding out her hand, and she looked so much like the girl he'd envisioned when he'd taken that bath in the Styx, the one who'd held out her hand and pulled his soul back together. He'd seen her then, in his mind, and she'd completed him, held him firm. He'd crawled out of that river and back to Nico because he'd needed him. Now, their roles were reversed. When he was drowning now, it was Nico he saw, Nico who completed him, and Annabeth he crawled to out of need.

Percy took Annabeth's offered hand, and she tugged him off his couch and out the front door.

"Where are we going?"

"I haven't decided."

Percy wished he was back at Camp Half-Blood, around Greeks and the canoe lake and the beach and his father's cabin. The place held such strong memories, good and bad. The thing about the memories was that they were of the boy he had been, not the man he was becoming. He'd been comfortable in that boyish skin. Here, he was a marginally good student, an elder statesman, and possibly, maybe, in a tiny corner of his heart, in love with someone who wasn't Annabeth Chase.

Annabeth led Percy through New Rome, out into Camp Jupiter, and onto the bridge across the Little Tiber. There, she sat and dangled her feet over the side of the bridge. Percy followed her lead, sitting next to her and holding her hand.

"Spill."

"I don't know what to say, Annabeth. I'm trying to figure it out."

"You've spent four months trying to figure it out. Maybe you could use my help. I was your friend before I was your girlfriend."

Percy glanced at Annabeth, and she offered him a kind smile. A slight wind swirled her hair like fine strands of yellow spider web — silk, he guessed — highlighted by the way the sun glinted through
it. Her eyes didn't have that piercing quality they sometimes did when she was trying to strategize or calculate. She looked concerned for his well-being.

"I can't."

"You can. You're afraid you'll hurt me."

Damn straight.

"I love you."

"I know, Percy." She grinned into the words and readjusted herself to sit with one foot tucked under the other leg. "Let me in, please. Let me be your friend again. I'm not leaving you, no matter what you say, unless it's something like 'Annabeth, leave me.' Even then, let's face it, I'm not likely to leave."

"You could change your mind, Annabeth. What if I say something that hurts you so much that you can't be with me?" Percy ran his fingers over the red wood of the bridge. A splinter might be a nice distraction.

"If you say something that hurts me so much that I can't be with you, then we weren't meant to be, were we?" Annabeth stopped his hand from scraping over the bridge. "Hurting yourself won't help. If you could hurt me like that, how is it fair to me that we're together?"

"I can't lose you. I can live without Nico. I can't live without you," Percy admitted quietly.

"Don't you think that says a lot? You love me and can't lose me. Now, trust me that I feel the same way about you."

Percy kissed her then, a slip of his lips against hers. Her breath was warm, and she smelled like apples. Percy smiled into the kiss and brushed his nose over her cheek when they broke apart.

"I didn't mean to..."

"Fall in love with him?" Annabeth raised her eyebrows, daring Percy to deny it.

"I thought it was sex. Good sex. Not that sex with you isn't good sex. It's great. It's just..."

"Percy, you don't have to compare me and him or reassure me. We've been together four years. I'm a confident person. I'm not threatened by Nico."

"You're not?" Percy found that hard to believe. Maybe that was because he knew how deep his feelings for Nico ran. If Annabeth knew...

"You love him. He's beautiful, physically, and he's probably amazing in bed, in ways I'm not because he's so passionate and romantic, right?" Annabeth waited for Percy to bow his head and nod feebly before she moved on. "Together, though, you and I, we work."

Percy chuckled. "That's what Nico said, too. He said no matter how good things feel between me and him, it's you that I fit with."

"He's a smart kid." Annabeth nudged his shoulder

"We established years ago that he's smarter than me. I miss him." That little admission cost him. Annabeth had to know how much he missed Nico — he'd been sad and mopey since the day he'd returned from the Underworld, and there was no other explanation for his behavior — but saying the
words to her felt like more of a betrayal than all the physical contact he and Nico had shared.

"That's understandable, Percy."

"Gods, do you know how much easier this would be if you'd scream at me?" Percy had felt better in the early days after he came back from the Underworld. Annabeth had ignored him. When she'd finally talked to him, it was clipped and angry. She'd called him names, accused him of sleeping with Nico again, even after the whole camp knew. It had felt good, her anger. He had deserved it, and it had helped him keep Nico a little removed from his thoughts.

Now, she was being soft and forgiving, and he didn't deserve that. He could understand that she forgave him for what he'd done. It was what he wanted to do that didn't deserve her forgiveness. That was the part he couldn't tell her.

Annabeth's eyes had colored with irritation. "Do you want me to leave you? Because I'm working really hard at forgiveness and trying to accept that you love someone who isn't me. I get that I'm doing a great job acting patient, but it's a struggle for me every day, Percy. You think I want to have these conversations about how you love Nico?"

"That's exactly why I don't want to talk to you about it!"

"Idiot! We have to talk about it! It's worse watching you, when we're on a date or in bed together, and your eyes drift and I know you're thinking about him. I can see how you love him, how you want him, and seeing it without you doing me the courtesy of acknowledging it and working through shit is so much worse than us talking about it." Annabeth's nostrils flared, and she blew a stray hair out of her face.

Percy could feel her anger, and it fed his.

"What do you want me to say? That sometimes when I'm with you I wish I was with him, and I never, not for a second, wished I was with you when he and I were together? That sex with him is so much better than it is with you? That I'm terrified I'd leave you if he asked me to? Is this making you feel better?"

Annabeth's eyes widened. She stood abruptly and marched off the bridge. Percy was appalled with himself for telling her those things. All of them were true, but she'd asked him to be honest with her, not rip her heart to shreds.

"Annabeth, oh, fuck, gods, I'm so sorry."

He expected Annabeth to leave, to go back through camp and be done with him. Instead, she stomped to the edge of the water and wrested off the ring he'd given her for her twentieth birthday. She hurled it into the middle of the river. Next came her earrings, gifts from him on her eighteenth birthday. One at a time, she threw them in.

"I opened this Christmas morning, maybe ten o'clock, New York time," she yelled, holding up her wrist to show off a handsome bracelet with their names engraved on it. "Think you were fucking him as I opened it?"

Into the river it flew.

Annabeth took off her shoes, also gifts from Percy, and reared back to throw one into the river. At the last minute, she seemed to have a change of heart and stormed back up the bridge. She stopped about five feet from Percy and threw the shoe at his head. He got his hands up to block the first shoe, but the second caught him in the ear. When it didn't fall into the river, she picked it up and hit him
Percy scrambled to his feet when Annabeth ripped off her Camp Half-Blood necklace. Hazel might be able to retrieve the lost jewelry, and he could buy Annabeth new shoes, but that necklace was irreplaceable. His hand closed over hers just before she could fling the necklace into the river.

"Don't! Please!" Percy grabbed at Annabeth with his other hand and pulled her close. He was surprised she came. Her sobs sent jolts of guilt through him. Annabeth rarely cried. "I'm so sorry. I love you."

"You love him more. I was so vain. I thought it was me, but it's him, isn't it?"

Percy laughed, because there was one thing he was sure of. "It's you, Annabeth. I love you more. That stuff I said was true, but so's this: you're the one I want to be in love with. You're the one I want to make a life with. When I picture my world, it only works if we're together. Nico can't replace you."

"So what? I get fifty-one percent of your heart and he gets forty-nine? Oh, and he gets the thrilling parts? I get the mundane?"

"Fuck, I wish you didn't use big words. It's like, okay," Percy knew how to explain. He didn't know if it would make sense, but it was worth a shot. Anything was better than where they were now. "You know how I love my mom, right?"

"You're an imbecile."

"Don't know that word either. Anyway, I love my mom more than life, yeah? But sometimes I like Paul better. He's cool and funny, and he lets me get away with shit. There's a lot of stuff I'd rather do with Paul than my mom."

Annabeth stiffened in his embrace, and her eyes narrowed.

"You're comparing me to Sally? Your mother?"

"Well, I'm comparing Nico to my stepdad, so that's kind of uncomfortable, too."

Annabeth laughed into his shoulder. She'd stopped crying.

"So, anyway. A lot of the time, I like Paul better. But when I'm hurt or scared or sick, there's no comparison. I want my mom, not Paul. The way I love her dwarfs the way I love him, and it always will. That's the way I feel about you and Nico."

"I'm not sure that's enough," Annabeth said. The words brushed Percy's collarbone and gave him goosebumps. "I don't want you to see me as the safe option, the crutch. I want you to feel passionate and so in love with me that he doesn't stand a chance."

"I want that, too, Annabeth." Percy kissed the top of her head. "We can work on it. I want it to be you."

"Are you sure it's because you want me most? Or is it because he loves Jason?"

Percy winced. He wanted to build a life with Annabeth because they had a history, he was loyal, and he saw more possibility for their future. Nico couldn't be all the things Percy needed, or maybe he could, maybe he was, but Percy still got a choice. He chose Annabeth. But if Nico didn't love Jason, if he loved Percy instead...
"I hate that he loves that motherfucker. It pisses me off. It's the only thing we fight about. Damned Jason."

"Wow. I guess that's my answer, isn't it?" Annabeth withdrew from the embrace, took Percy’s hand, and led him back toward New Rome. "I'm not interested in being your second choice."

"Gods, you're not! I choose you. Hating Jason has nothing to do with you." Couldn't Annabeth accept that he loved her? He felt like he was giving up so much to be with her. He wanted her to understand, to appreciate his sacrifice.

"But it has everything to do with how much you love Nico."

"Annabeth, we keep talking in circles. I choose you. I want to build a life with you. I can't turn off my other feelings. I am going to try not to act on them, though, not that Nico's given me much choice, moving the fuck across the country. I want what I feel for him to go away."

They passed through the boundary to New Rome and headed toward the dorms. Annabeth needed to get a new pair of shoes. They reached the door of her dorm, and she stopped Percy with a hand to his chest.

"It's a start, I guess," Annabeth said. "Can I come see you tomorrow after class?"

"I'd like that a lot." Percy tried to give her his usual confident grin. It fell flat. "Thank you for not giving up on me."

Annabeth flashed a sad smile and disappeared inside the building. Percy watched her go then walked back to his villa. He couldn't lose Annabeth. He'd do whatever it took to keep her.

He pretended he was surprised when he let himself into his villa and walked straight back to the fountain in his room. The drachma was in his hand and the plea to Fleecy made before he thought twice. Nico swam into view, sitting at a table with a notebook and a large textbook. His eyelids were drooping.

"Hey, beautiful."

Nico jumped slightly, but when he saw Percy, his face broke into a huge grin. Percy’s heart lurched.

"Hey, Perce. What's up?"

_Tell him. Tell him you love Annabeth. Tell him you won't sleep with him anymore, not that it matters because he's the one who left you._

"I miss you," Percy said.

"I miss you, too. Are you alright? You look sad."

"Nico?"

Nico's big black eyes watched Percy curiously. The trace of a grin still lit his face. Percy looked at Nico's beautiful, elegant fingers curled around his pen. He thought about the way those fingers curled around his hand or his ribs, cool and delicate but so strong.

"I wish I could shadow travel."

"Why?" Nico chuckled. Percy knew Nico was used to him not making sense.
"Because I could touch you. I want to be with you, Nico. I want to feel your skin."

Nico frowned, but a blush crept across his cheeks. "We talked about this."

"I know. It's wrong. Gods, I know. I need you."

"Percy—"

"Don't bullshit me, Nico. I can see your face." Percy felt his cock twitch at the dark expression that crossed Nico's features. "You wish you were in my arms right now. I want to kiss your throat. I want to suck a bruise onto your perfect white collarbone. Tell me what you want."

Percy brushed his penis through his jeans when Nico squirmed in his seat. All he had to do was wait. Nico's face colored an even darker red, and he bit his lip. Percy bit back a moan.

"I want to run my fingers through your hair," Nico whispered. He stood and walked around to lean on the front of the table. "I want to scratch my nails across your back while you put that bruise on my collarbone. I want to feel your hands brush my bare hips."

Percy was vaguely aware of a knock at his front door, but he ignored it easily enough. Nico was so distracting.

"I want you to kiss my chest, Nico, my sexy baby. You make me crazy when you do that. Take off your shirt, please. I need your skin."

Nico moaned and started to lift his shirt. Percy caught a glimpse of Nico's sculpted stomach as the knocking at his door became pounding. Nico paused with his shirt halfway off.

"Is someone at your door, Percy?"

"Maybe. It doesn't matter."


"It does. We shouldn't be doing this anyway. We said we'd stop. What if it's...someone important? Go answer the door. I should study."

Percy knew Nico was thinking it was Annabeth at the door. It wasn't, since it had barely been fifteen minutes since he'd seen her. Gods, he couldn't make himself behave for even that tiny amount of time. Guilt coursed through him.

"I do miss you, Nico."

"I miss you, too, Percy. So much," Nico said sadly. "Go get the door. We can talk later."

Nico swiped his hand through the message. Percy wasn't sure what Nico meant by “talk.” It could mean actual talking, or, if he was lucky, it could mean more video sex. Sex over Iris message couldn't compare to live, in-person sex, but watching Nico touch himself was a bit like getting to watch a great porno with his favorite star doing exactly what he directed. And, oh, gods, the face Nico made when he came...

The pounding grew louder.

"Shut the fuck up!" Percy yelled. "I'm coming."

Percy adjusted his erection and hurried to the front door. He unlocked it and jogged to the couch,
arranging himself carefully before yelling at the annoying nuisance on the other side of the door to come in.

The door opened, and Jason Grace darkened Percy's home.

***

"Go the fuck away, Grace."

Percy hated Jason. He didn't want him in his home, but his erection was preventing him from doing more than shooting Jason an angry glare. Jason scowled and ignored Percy. He closed the door and sat on Percy's blue fishy recliner.

"I said go away, motherfucker."

"Shut up and listen, Percy." Jason had a big bag with him. Percy hoped Jason wasn't here to attack him. Death due to the inability to defend himself because of an enormous erection didn't sound like a particularly glorious way to die.

"Get. Out."

Jason huffed and crossed his legs. He sank back in the chair and rolled his shoulders. Percy thought about telling him he'd been getting it on with Nico over IM, but he hesitated. For all he knew, Nico was doing the same things with Jason. Hell, Nico was probably traveling back to the west coast once in awhile to fuck Jason in real life. Percy dug his nails into the fabric of his couch.

He examined Jason carefully, checking for some sign that the blond had been getting Nico's attention. This was the closest they'd been since that day in the senate chamber, when he'd recklessly ruined Nico's chances at having his banishment lifted by getting into a pissing contest with Jason. He'd been a fool that day, too angry with Jason to consider how he could damage Nico. He'd acted so hopelessly in love that it made every word he'd said, every bit of ground he and Annabeth had gained for Nico's cause, erode in minutes.

Jason looked like shit. Whatever was going on in his life, he wasn't getting to fuck Nico. If he had been getting attention from their mutual lover, Percy felt sure Jason wouldn't have bags under his eyes. He would have shorter hair. He wouldn't be so damned thin. The look worked for Nico, made his muscles extra sexy, flattered his angular features. It was hard to imagine a guy with Jason's powerful body looking malnourished, but that's exactly how he looked. Jason's appearance was haggard, sickly. Percy could almost feel some sympathy for the guy, but then he remembered the words Jason had spoken in Reyna's office, remembered the way Nico had defended him, and his anger flared again.

"What do you want, Grace?" Before Jason could answer, Percy was talking again. "You interrupted me talking to our fine-ass lover. College looks incredibly good on him.

Jason's posture morphed into something taut and interested. He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, as if he was desperate to hear anything Percy had to say.

"He's in college? Where?"

Shit. The group's unspoken rule was to deny Jason any news of Nico. Percy had forgotten in his
"haste to goad and gloat.

"Not your business. You stay away from him. You've done enough."

Jason rubbed his eyes as if he was exhausted. "I'm not getting near him. It's good to know he's okay. That's all."

"More than okay. Sexier than ever. I woulda boned him through the IM if I could."

"You're disgusting, Percy. Are you proud of how you cheated on your girlfriend? Do you even care about him at all?"

Percy was not about to let Jason make him feel bad about doing the same things he'd done, too, no matter how much the criticism stung.

"I could say the exact same about you, hypocrite. Why the hell are you in my house?"

Percy stood and tried to appear menacing. It was hard because Jason was such an intimidating figure.

"Oh, did you lose your hard-on?" Jason sneered. "Can finally stand up?"

"Don't worry. As soon as you leave, I'll call up your lover and get it back. Did he ever strip for you over IM, Jason? It's an amazing show."

Percy had expected Jason to react with anger. He'd thought maybe they'd finally have the fight that had been brewing for the past year. Jason surprised him by laughing. Percy sat back down and rested his eyes on anything but Jason.

"Oh, that's great, Percy. You trying to taunt me and make me feel like shit because you get a few little thrills from him." Jason stood and paced toward the door. When he turned back to Percy, his eyes were hard and so angry that Percy felt like he was seeing the true Jason for the first time.

"Understand this. Whatever he has ever given you has been a pale imitation of what he gives me. He may pass the time with you, but he loves me. Get that? He loves me.

"Enjoy your little gay fantasy. He wrecks you, right?" Jason raised his eyebrows and put his hands on his hips. "Yeah, he wrecks me, too. But do you know how to wreck him back? Do you know how it feels to move inside him, to fill him up? Has he begged you for more? I know all of that and a million more things you can't begin to imagine. So have fun playing video sex, just remember every time you do it, he's probably thinking about me."

Jason opened the door. "I'm leaving. I don't know where I'm going or how long I'll be gone. Tell Reyna and Hazel so they don't send some search party after my pathetic ass."

No air remained in Percy's lungs. It felt like he'd finally had that fight with Jason, and Jason had beaten him so thoroughly and quickly that he hadn't even gotten to throw a punch. The smug bastard was right. Nico loved him. Gods, that hurt like hell. Jason had been Nico's world. Percy was a space filler, nothing more. He'd been such a fool. No. Nico wouldn't use him that way. But that didn't make the other things Jason had said untrue.

"You're...leaving?" That was the only part of Jason's commentary Percy could handle. "Alone?"

"Who the fuck would come with me?" Jason asked. "Every friend I had hates me."

"Why're you telling me?"
Jason leaned against the door frame. He was silhouetted by the setting sun. "The others would try to talk me out of it. You hate me enough now to let me go."

"Jason, Nico...he...he wouldn't want you to do this. It's dangerous. No matter how shitty everyone's treating you, you can't leave. It would break him if something happened to you."

Panic gripped Percy. He was so furious at and hurt by Jason. He couldn't stand the sight of him. But he didn't want him to be a runaway like Nico had been. He didn't want the responsibility of having caused someone else he should have treated better to leave. And Nico, gods, Nico would kill him if he found out Jason had left and Percy hadn't tried to stop him.

"I can't let you do this."

"You can, and you will," Jason said. "Tell the others not to tell him. I believe that you care about him. Prove it. I have to do this. Your only job is to keep him safe, Percy. Please."

"We can work this out, Jason." Percy's eyes betrayed him, and a tear slipped down his cheek.

Jason's eyes softened from that hard, angry blue to the gentle, kind expression everyone had always associated with him before he'd dismantled Nico. "We can't," Jason whispered. "Don't let him know. Lie. Blame it all on me if he ever finds out. Make sure the others do the same. If I die, tell him he was my world."

"Jason..."

Jason gave Percy a small smile as he moved away from the door frame and the door closed on him. "Goodbye, Percy Jackson."
The morning after Christmas, Percy found an empty space next to him where Nico normally laid.

"Fuck it." He poked Jason in the ribs. "Wake up, Grace."

Jason was sleeping on his stomach. He automatically reached for Nico when he was disturbed. His hand made a slow, patting arc up and down the bed until it got too close to Percy, who batted it away.


"Damned if I know. Ran, probably. Probably has his head buried in the ocean again. Get up and let's go find him."

Jason stretched and sat up. He cleaned and clothed himself and followed Percy out of the house. They checked the water first. Percy swam and dove all over and couldn't find any sign of Nico.

"Altars," Jason said, and Percy nodded. They headed in that direction.

Nico wasn't there. They checked the trash heap, the roof, and looked all around inside the barrier for any sign of Nico.

"Well, he's either inside the house or shadow traveling away from us." Percy let out a resigned huff. The Christmas show had been painful. He wasn't feeling much like playing hide and seek this morning.

"You okay?" Jason asked.

"Been better. You?"

"Same. Christmas was hard to watch — everyone being happy without us."

Percy nodded. "Let's go back in the house and see if we can't find our stupid fulcrum."

They located the fulcrum in the bedroom. Nico was laying with his bare back facing them, his legs under the sheets. Three necklaces were still looped around his neck. He was snoring softly.

Percy's earlier irritation with Nico vanished as he watched the smooth expansion of Nico's ribs with each breath. Jason's eyes trailed from the place where Nico's spine appeared from under the covers up to the spot where it disappeared into his hair.

He leaned against the door frame and sighed. "I'm afraid we really fucked things up, Percy."

"One way to find out." Percy started toward the bed, but Jason's heavy hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna get in bed with him and get those necklaces off. We have to talk to him."
Jason's hand stayed put. "Wake him first from over here. Let him decide if he wants us that close. I mean, he got up and left us alone this morning for a reason."


"Wake up, Nico," Jason barked.

Nico rustled and turned onto his back. He fidgeted with the necklaces and slowly swiveled his head to face Jason and Percy. His eyes blinked open, and he yawned. He looked at the ceiling. His hands, which had been at his neck, slipped slowly down his body, palms sliding over smooth skin from his chest to his stomach and under the sheets. Jason and Percy hungrily watched their descent. The previous night's intimacy had only increased their desire.

"Why are you standing there staring at me, you jerks?" Nico asked.

"We, um," Percy rubbed the back of his neck and took a step forward. "We couldn't find you."

"Must not have looked that hard. I came in here because Jason was snoring extra loud."

Nico's hands continued to move. He gripped his foot and pulled his leg out from under the sheet and stretched it toward the ceiling. Percy closed his mouth so he wouldn't drool.

"I don't snore," Jason said. His breathing was shallow.

"You do, dude," Percy said, not taking his eyes off Nico. He tried to reach back and pat Jason, but he missed. "Are you, um, doing that to us on purpose?"

"What?" Nico arched his back to stretch his stomach. The sheet crept lower.

"He's not." Jason answered Percy's question, not Nico's. "When he tries to be seductive, he's about as sexy as a duck with one foot."

Nico rolled over onto his side and faced them. He put his hand under his head and propped himself up on his elbow. His other hand strummed slowly up and down his hip. "Maybe I've learned a few things since we were together, Jason."

Jason made a growling noise and stepped even with Percy. Percy shoved a little at Jason because he was too close to his space. Jason shoved him back harder. Neither one of them took their eyes off Nico. They both took a step forward. Nico smirked and glanced down at his hand, which had dipped below the sheet again and was moving suggestively.

"You're doing this to seduce us?" Jason asked. His jeans constricted his mounting erection.

Nico laughed. Percy slipped his hand inside his own shirt and rubbed his stomach. Nico arched an eyebrow.

"Us? Are you a couple now? I wanted you to get your bromance back, but I have to admit, I wasn't expecting this to be a love match." Nico winked at Jason. "Hey, think how happy you'll make the gods. I bet it'll even please your dad."

Percy's hand dropped out of his shirt. "Are you mad at us?"

Nico's eyes narrowed, and his hand stopped moving. "Now Percy, why would I be mad at you?"

"Jason, um..." Percy didn't like Jason's hands on Nico's throat, but Nico didn't seem to be truly fighting the treatment. Percy hurried over and crawled up the bed to sit on Nico's other side.

"Relax, Jackson," Jason said. "I'm getting these damned necklaces off him. Not that he doesn't deserve to be throttled."

"I deserve to be throttled?" Nico glanced at Percy before focusing back on Jason. "You two are creeps. How could you try to get me to sleep with you both at the same time?"

"Nico, that wasn't what we were—"

"Shut up, Percy," Jason said. "He knows we were." He twisted the last necklace in his hand and watched the gold links tighten around Nico's neck. "That's not his problem, though. His problem is that if we bent down right now and tried again, he'd wouldn't stop us because he wants it, too. He's scared of how he's feeling, and he's being an asshole to cover it up."

Jason yanked the necklace toward him. It broke across Nico's throat.

"Don't forget how well I know you, Nico," Jason breathed. His voice was low and threatening, and Nico's pulse quickened in response. Jason laid the broken chain on Nico's sternum and, his eyes glazed with lust, watched the way it settled. "I'm going to back away now, because I want to do things to you that would make poor Percy here have an aneurysm and make you very mad at me when you came down off the sex high. I'd rather have your love than your body, Nico. Don't shut me out for wanting both."

Jason got off the bed and walked to the opposite wall. "Will you two go in the living room and give me a few minutes' privacy in here? Then we can talk."

Percy scooped the necklace off Nico's chest and climbed over him. Nico took Percy's hand and allowed himself to be pulled out of bed and into the living room. Once there, Nico, now fully clothed, sat on the couch. He put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. Percy was still slightly aroused, but he was more concerned for Nico. He sat next to him and laid his head on Nico's shoulder blade. Nico leaned into the touch.

"I'm sorry I was a jerk," Nico said. "You didn't do anything wrong, Percy, and I know you're not interested in Jason."

"Yeah, no offense to Jason but totally gross. As far as the rest goes, it's okay." Percy slipped his arms around Nico's shoulders and rubbed his cheek. "You love me, right?"

Nico nodded into his hands.

Percy kissed the back of his neck. "Well, saying I love you means never having to say you're sorry."

Nico raised his head. Percy sat up and smiled at him.

"What the fuck, Percy? That's the dumbest thing you've ever said."

"Yeah, I don't know. I saw it in some old movie my mom made me watch." Percy shifted and sat on the coffee table in front of Nico. "The point, I think, is that I already know you're sorry and didn't mean it. You don't have to tell me sorry."
"You're a better friend than I deserve." Nico meant that.

Percy patted Nico's head. "That's what I think about you, so we're even. When Jason's done jacking off, we need to talk, and I want you to promise me something."

"Oh, gods, my favorite things," Nico groaned, "promises and talking."

"Be open and honest."

"That's two things."

"And not a dick."

Nico threw himself back on the couch. "You ask too damned much, Percy."

"I know." Percy sat in Nico's lap. Nico wrapped his arms tightly around Percy's waist and nuzzled into his neck. Percy rubbed his face in Nico's hair. "But you're on record admitting you love me, and I love you, too."

"I wonder how many people would guess the great Savior of Olympus is a complete dorky mushball?"

Percy pinched Nico's arm. "I wonder how many people would guess the scary Ghost King likes to cuddle?"

"See, this is why we have to stay friends forever," Nico said. He was smiling, finally. Percy always made him feel better. "Our secrets are too embarrassing for others to find out."

"Do you have room for one more friend?" Jason stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame. His eyes had returned to their normal appearance, kind and patient.

Nico moved Percy off his lap and quickly crossed the room. He threw his arms around Jason's neck and pressed close. "I'm sorry."

Jason curled his arms around Nico and squeezed him so tightly that his feet left the ground.

"Ah, ah, ah, no more sorry shit," Percy said. He'd followed Nico and stood behind him. His hand rested between Nico's shoulder blades and rubbed at the places that had always been sore when he was a mortal. "You love Grace, too."

"If I have to." Nico seemed to be trying to bury himself inside Jason's chest.

Jason slapped the back of Nico's head, and Percy slapped his butt.

"Let's go talk." Percy squeezed past Nico and Jason. "It better not smell like cum in here, Grace."

"I cleaned up, asswipe." Jason kept his hold on Nico and walked them into the bedroom. "Can we sit on the bed?"

"Yes," Nico said. "I'll sit in the middle, and you can both touch me, but please, let's try to keep things platonic while we talk. Non-sexual, at least."

"I can do non-sexual," Jason said.

He hoisted his ex-lover onto the bed — which Nico protested with a hard punch to the shoulder — and sat beside him. Percy took his spot on Nico's other side. Nico kept his head down and picked at
the sheets. Silence stretched between them while Percy and Jason watched the increasingly speedy movement of Nico's hands. Percy scratched his neck and rubbed his chest. Jason cracked his knuckles. Nico tore a hole in the sheet.

"Damn it. Talk, one of you. I can hear you breathing, and it's pissing me off." Nico waved his hand over the sheet, and the hole repaired. He smiled briefly at his accomplishment before letting his face drop into a scowl.

"You're in charge, Neeks," Percy reminded him. He wasn't sure what else to say.

"Oh. Well, uh, shit." Nico didn't want to be in charge of this conversation, but he didn't want to give up ownership of his right to direct discussions, either. "I guess we can, uh, I felt, uh, shit."

"It's not a big deal, Nico." Jason put his hand on Nico's shoulder and let it slide down to his chest. Nico felt this was a sexual touch, based on the way it made his breathing hitch, so he moved Jason's hand back to his shoulder.

"It is a big deal, Jason. You know it."

"I mean, it is, what we wanted last night, all of us, because you wanted it, too. Don't lie and say you didn't. What I mean is that sex itself isn't something that should be this hard to talk about. We've had sex, you and me. You two have had sex. You can talk about something you've done." Jason withdrew his hand from Nico's shoulder and sat on it. He sometimes wanted to direct Nico's attention with his hands instead of his words, and it made Nico angry. This was a delicate conversation, and making Nico angry over something not related to the discussion would be dumb.

"He's right, Neeks," Percy said. "You and I used to talk about sex all the time. It didn't freak you out. What gives now?"

"I'm nervous, obviously. That was weird, last night, whether I 'wanted it,'" Nico made air quotes, "or not. I'm not sexually deviant, mostly, and neither are you two, mostly, and it was freaky, okay? Like, who does that? Not us. I mean, it felt amazing, having you two touch me at the same time, but it, gods, what would Hazel think?"

Percy and Jason burst out laughing. Percy curled up like a pill bug in Nico's lap, and Jason laid his head on Percy's back. Nico did not find them amusing. He banged his legs around, trying to dislodge them, but that made them laugh even harder.

Finally, Jason turned his head on Percy's back and looked up at Nico. "Oh, gods, that's funny, Nico. If you've been using Hazel as your moral compass all these years, you have failed so badly. You should be a virgin nun or something. Seriously, you have fucking gods lined up outside our damned door every day who want to have sex with you. You swear like a sailor. You blew Percy while we were all there in his yard! You and I have done things that would make a sex worker blush. I think you're past the point of worrying what Hazel thinks."

Percy unearthed himself from Jason and stared at Nico. "You've done things with him that would make a sex worker blush? Baby, why haven't we ever—"

Nico gave him a hard glare. He and Percy had enjoyed several risque exploits.

"Yeah, I guess that's true." Percy wiggled his eyebrows at Nico. "We've had lots of fun."

Jason sat up and looked between Percy and Nico. He was jealous, and Nico could read it in his eyes.

"That's why we have to be careful, that look right there," Nico said, pointing at Jason. "You say you
want something, or that you're okay with it, but you don't want me with Percy. And think about how you've reacted in the past, Percy, when we've tried to talk about me and Jason. You guys get jealous. Aside from things feeling weird, I don't want to mess this up."

Jason bit his lip and closed his eyes, searching for the right words. He wanted to speak clearly and honestly. "I love you, Nico. I don't want you to love Percy, and I don't want to share you. I want you to be mine only for the rest of time. That's not going to change." He paused because he wanted Nico to understand how much he meant what he was saying. "But I've been thinking a lot about what the helpful visiting gods have said. I'm stuck here with both of you right now. Piper and everyone else we loved, they're moving forward, and they can't possibly understand what we're going through and how our lives are changing. While that hurts, it's also freeing. I can't judge myself by human standards anymore. I don't want to be like the other gods, mind you, but the people I have an obligation to and whose feelings and opinions matter are you and Percy. If we have sex together, me and Percy with you at the same time, we're less likely to get jealous thinking the other guy's getting something from you that we're not."

"He's right again, which is so annoying." Percy smiled and took Nico's hand. "I want you to myself, too, but I understand that the only way we can make this work is to make all three of us happy. That's how we survive. I'm not giving up on my old life — I can't — but seeing them last night..."

Percy swallowed heavily. "They're adjusting to a life without us. I have to focus on you and Jason and what the three of us need. And I need you, Nico. I need to be with you. I want to be your lover again."

Percy took Jason's hand and laid it on top of his and Nico's. Jason tightened his grip around his companions' hands.

"What do you need, Nico?" Jason asked.

"Slow. I need to go slow," Nico said. "It's so easy to be with you, Percy. I love you, and I want to have sex with you. I love you and want to sleep with you, too, Jason, but there's so much bad stuff between us. I need to separate sex with you from how I feel about you emotionally, because that part of me is so confused."

"So you're going to have sex with us while you work through your substantial and serious Jason issues?" Percy asked.

Nico punched Percy's chest. "I'm going to kiss you and see where it goes. I'm not promising sex. And I'm going to keep the physical stuff separate from my Jason issues, yes." Nico peered at Jason, who was closer than he remembered. His eyes instinctively closed halfway when he felt Jason's breath on his face. "Is that okay with you, Jace?"

"It makes me very happy, Nico." Jason's lips grazed Nico's. "I want to make you happy, too."

"Percy?" Nico leaned forward, away from Jason.

In answer, Percy surged forward and kissed Nico. The movement shifted them back into Jason, who let go of their hands in favor of holding Nico's hips. The kiss went on longer than Jason wanted. He occupied himself by sliding Nico's shirt up his sides and digging his fingers into the skin underneath. Nico broke away from Percy, gasping for breath. He turned to Jason to apologize, but Jason silenced him with a searing kiss of his own. Percy dropped his head and kissed at Nico's stomach and chest. Teeth scraped over Nico's nipple, and he arched his back and moaned in Jason's mouth. Percy did it again and again, until Nico had writhed his way down flat on the bed. Jason stayed with him, kissing and licking the whole way. His hand slipped past Percy's head and into Nico's jeans. Nico jolted at
"This isn't slow," he said. He was shaking a little, and though Percy had raised his head and Jason wasn't kissing him anymore, Jason's hand stayed in his jeans. "We need to talk about this."

"Talk later, after we get our daily visitor." Percy’s voice was gruff and needy. He kissed Nico’s mouth right in front of Jason's face. Nico's reaction told Percy that Jason had begun to move his hand. "This'll be alright, beautiful baby, but I need it now. Everything you'll give me."

Nico checked with Jason, who nodded.

"Then you both do the hell what I say," Nico said. Jason and Percy nodded vigorously, and Nico wrapped a hand in each man's hair. “Get your hand out of my pants, Jason.”

Jason complied and Nico sat up on his knees. He wanted them to be on a level playing field, and Jason and Percy looming over him while he lay on the bed wasn’t level at all.

“I’m going to kiss you both, but you have to be patient and wait for me.”

“Can we touch you?” Percy asked. His hand was already on Nico’s knee.

“Yes. No dicks—”

Jason groaned and bit his lip. He realized his error and put a placating hand on Nico’s forearm. “No dicks. Got it. Sorry.”

“No dicks yet. I’m not saying no for good, but until I give you clear signals otherwise, keep your hands away from anything covered by my jeans and don’t expect my hands down south, either.”

“Okay.” Percy’s hoarse voice sounded like he’d been screaming for hours.

Nico considered his friends, his lovers. “Sit next to each other.”

Jason and Percy jumped together so fast their hips made a clapping sound when they connected. Nico raised an eyebrow and climbed onto them, planting a knee between each pair of thighs. He laid one hand on Jason’s hip and cupped Percy’s face with the other.

“I love you, Percy.”

Nico kissed him, slow and delicate, though he couldn’t conceal his low moan when Percy’s tongue slipped into his mouth and rolled around inside like a tentacle, dragging over Nico’s teeth and tongue and pulling him in tighter. The moan made Percy shiver.

“Fuck,” Jason said. He had grown accustomed to seeing Nico and Percy kiss, but he’d never been invited, expected, to watch before. The movements were slow and sensual, and Jason found himself unable to refrain from palming his own erection through his jeans. Percy had gripped Nico’s face, so Jason used the hand that wasn’t masturbating to trace his way down from Nico’s throat to his chest. He pinched a nipple, and Nico rocketed forward so fast that Jason’s hand was pinned between Nico and Percy. He squeezed Nico’s pec.

Percy’s hand slid into Nico’s hair and held him tight, but as soon as he did, Nico broke the kiss and moved away.

“Such an amazing kisser, Percy,” Nico said, planting a peck on Percy’s wet lips. “Jason’s turn now.”

Nico switched his hold, moving one hand to Percy’s shoulder and the other to Jason’s. His grip
tightened when he realized Percy wasn’t letting go of his hair as he shifted into Jason’s personal space.

Jason was overwhelmed with want. He wanted to kiss Nico, but he wanted it to mean more than sexual gratification. Nico wasn’t ready for that, though. Jason knew he would have to make do with what was offered, and as Nico’s face got closer, he decided he didn’t mind.

“Do you want to kiss me, Jason?”

The darkness in Nico’s voice thickened like something the other gods could reach out and touch, and Percy’s hand tightened in Nico’s hair as Jason hooked his hands onto Nico’s sides and yanked him forward.

Nico had expected Jason’s passion, but he wasn’t prepared for the intensity of it. Their mouths met violently, and Jason’s tongue was in Nico’s mouth, probing and possessive, before Nico could breathe.

Jason’s kisses intensified, and he fucked Nico’s mouth with his tongue. Nico groaned and tried to grind his erection into his lovers. The problem was that his crotch was in a no-man’s land, suspended between Jason and Percy. Nico reached blindly for Percy’s hand, found it working his own erection, and forced it between his legs.

Percy squeezed Nico’s dick and stroked him through the thick fabric of his jeans. Satisfied that Percy’s expert hand would meet his needs, Nico took charge of the kiss. He pulled Jason’s hair and twisted enough to make it hurt. Jason yanked his head back. Nico stood up on his knees, Percy’s hand following, to get enough leverage to kiss Jason the way he wanted.

“Damn it, Nico,” Jason said.

“Shut up and tell me you like it.”

Jason’s eyes were half-lidded, but he cut them over to Percy, who was watching with rapt attention, his hand moving hard over Nico’s dick, his mouth open and his eyes glazed.

“Tick tock, Jason. I’m getting tired of waiting.”

Jason normally liked Nico’s bedroom games, but it felt uncomfortable playing in front of someone else. He hesitated, and Nico regarded him with mock disappointment.


Percy made a sound like “hmhmlfhm” and ripped his shirt off. Nico laughed and kissed Percy softly before he leaned back and stripped off his shirt as slowly as possible. Jason and Percy helped, each tugging at the shirt and caressing the skin underneath. When the shirt was off, Percy settled a hand over the small of Nico’s back and rocked against him so their chests met.

Nico groaned and kept his eyes on Jason. He shifted even more toward Percy and bent to kiss him again. Jerking Percy around was not a part of their relationship, and Nico couldn’t bring himself to do it now. It would be one of the many things they’d need to work out, how to meld Nico-in-bed-with-Jason and Nico-in-bed-with-Percy to arrive at a way to behave with both Jason and Percy at once.

Still, Nico watched Jason’s eyes as he moved in to kiss Percy. He’d almost brushed Percy’s lips when Percy’s hand caught his face and held him still.
“My eyes aren’t over there,” Percy said. His voice was gruff, but his eyes weren’t angry. He patted Nico’s back when Nico deflated and laid his head on Percy’s shoulder. “It’s okay. Let Jason watch, but don’t make me feel like you’re thinking about him when you’re kissing me.”

“I’m sorry. I love you.”

“I know. No saying sorry. Try again.”

Nico nodded into Percy’s neck and kissed him there, too. He kissed his way up to Percy’s ear and licked the shell. “I love you. I need you. You’re my soft place to fall, and you’re so, so sexy.”

The combination of the words and Nico’s warm breath over his wet ear made Percy squirm. He gripped Nico above his jeans and pressed forward so his dick rubbed Nico’s thigh. Nico raised an eyebrow and kissed Percy’s mouth while he worked his hand under Percy’s waistband and into the back of his jeans.

His other hand crept over Jason’s carved stomach and under his shirt. He traced lazy designs and scratched lightly over Jason’s nipples.

Burning desire built in Jason as he watched his lover kiss another man. He’d thought he’d be jealous, but it turned him on, and watching Percy hump Nico’s leg made Jason desperate to participate. He propped his arm on the headboard behind Percy’s head and leaned sideways into the other men’s kiss. He caught Nico’s shoulder first, then pulled back and took better aim. The cool skin of Nico’s neck contacted his lips, and Jason latched on and sucked harder than he ever had for a kiss.

They kept kissing like this for a long time, occasionally changing grips, tilting their heads a different way, and moving their hands to another spot. Nico managed to separate Jason from his shirt, mostly. It dangled from his wrist on Percy’s far side.

Nico pushed his tongue deep in Percy’s mouth one last time and broke their kiss. Percy kept riding Nico’s leg and threw his head back on Jason’s arm.

“I’m going to kiss Jason now,” Nico said.

Percy vaguely nodded as though he was barely aware of his surroundings, but his hands were more aware than his brain because they dropped from Nico’s chest to his fly.

Nico caught them and held them still as soon as they popped open the button of his jeans.

“Mess with Jason, but I don’t wanna cream my pants and that’s what’s gonna happen if I keep rubbing off on you. Let me play with your dick for a while, baby.”

As one, Jason and Nico said, “Oh, fuck.”

Percy smirked and removed Nico’s leg from in between his own. He pivoted on the bed and laid down on his stomach so his head rested on Jason’s thigh and faced Nico’s crotch.

It was lewd, the sound of Nico’s zipper opening. Even more obscene were the slick slurping noises that came from Percy’s mouth around Nico’s dick.

Nico watched, stunned for a moment, before he raised his eyes back to Jason, who was watching with undisguised desire as Nico got blown. Nico’s confidence rallied with every inch of his cock that disappeared inside Percy’s mouth.

“Tell me now, Jason fucking Grace,” he bit out between moans. “Tell me you like it.”
In answer, Jason slapped Nico’s ass hard enough to leave a red mark even through his jeans. Percy gagged as Nico’s hips thrust forward. He shoved Nico away and snapped at Jason.

“Don’t do that shit again, motherfucker. If I bite his dick off he’s gonna be really pissed at us both.”

Nico’s apology died on his lips, and they all laughed.

Jason put his hand on Nico’s hip and made tiny circles at the very top of Nico’s ass with the tips of his fingers. “I like it. Can I Nico, please?”

Nico nodded, and Jason lowered his hand inside Nico’s jeans to grope his ass. Carefully, more gently than he was accustomed to with Nico, he guided Nico’s hips until his dick slipped back into Percy’s waiting mouth. Percy hollowed his cheeks and began to bob his head.

“Damn, Percy. I like it, too. Kiss me now, Jason.”

Jason pulled Nico’s head down and kissed him. He kissed while Percy sucked, and Nico’s hands were everywhere, fluttering over Jason’s chest, undoing his jeans, squeezing hard and needy over Percy’s ass.

He bit Jason’s lip and let go to bark an order at Percy. He was getting close to coming and needed to change things up.

“Get off my dick, Percy. Stand up, both of you, and take the rest of your clothes off.”

Nico almost giggled at the haste with which Jason and Percy obeyed. Both men vaulted off the bed and began to strip out of their clothes. Neither man used his godly skills; they stripped the old-fashioned way. Nico liked that even better, seeing bits and pieces of flesh exposed a little at a time.

“Touch yourselves.”

“Damn, Nico,” Percy said, though his hand was already moving on his dick. “I didn’t know you were such a control freak.”

Nico wiggled out of his jeans and kicked them off to Percy and Jason. He threw back his head and laughed. When he looked back at his lovers, he couldn’t help his smirk. “I don’t have to be for you, Perce. Jason needs to be controlled. He has to be forced to behave.”

Jason growled as his hand squeezed his balls. “Asshole.”

“In a minute,” Nico said. He blushed but got his next words out. “Percy, do you want to rub cock with me or fuck me?”

“Why does he get to choose?” Jason asked.

“I like him better,” Nico snapped. It wasn’t exactly true, but he knew what Jason would choose and wanted to give Percy a fair shot. He had a feeling they’d both be happy.

Percy wiggled his eyebrows at Jason and slapped his temple. “Cock, Nico.”

Nico nodded. That’s what he’d thought. He sat up on his knees and moved closer to Jason and Percy but stayed out of reach. “Three things before we start. First, gods don’t need prep or lubricant, so don’t be freaked out and worried that Jason’s hurting me.”

“You knew that?” Percy asked Jason.
“Yeah.”

“Second, Jason’s really rough. He would never hurt me more than I like, but if he was, I’d stop him. I like the things he does to me, but that doesn’t mean you need to do what he does. I like what you and I do, too.”

Jason blushed and averted his eyes. Percy took deep breaths to soothe his jealousy and insecurities.

“Third, I’m going to suck you both now so you’ll care one hell of a lot less about the first two things I said.”

Nico dove down and started with Percy, whose dick was less likely to tear Nico’s unprepared throat.

“Shit, motherfucker!” Percy yelled as Nico grabbed his hips and began to bob and suck. Percy’s hand shot out and grabbed Jason’s arm for balance, but he quickly shifted it to Nico’s hair. “Oh, Nico, fuck, so good. So good.”

Nico hummed his agreement, which sent Percy incoherently babbling. Nico slurped up Percy’s cock and swirled his tongue around the head a few more times before he switched to using his hand and moved over to Jason’s waiting dick.

He kissed the head and smeared it all over his face. If it bothered Percy later, they’d figure out a solution. Nico had always loved the way Jason smelled and tasted. This part was mainly for Nico’s benefit, as it wouldn’t take Jason as long to come as it would Percy, and Nico wanted to roughly time their orgasms to happen close together.

Jason rubbed his hands over Nico’s head and shoulders and as far down his back as he could reach without putting too much pressure on Nico’s neck and head. He was ready to feel Nico open around him. In fact, if he thought about it much more, he wouldn’t make it that far. As gently as he could, he peeled Nico’s mouth off his dick.

“I can’t take it, Neeks,” he said. “Please, let me fuck you now.”

Nico took Percy’s hand and pulled him down on the bed. “Come lay with me, Perce.”

Percy smiled and let Nico line up their bodies so their dicks pressed together.


Percy slightly lifted his torso so Nico could slide an arm underneath. He rubbed the heads of his dick and Nico’s together until they were covered in slick pre-cum. He wrapped his hand around their shafts and gave a test thrust.

“Fuck, yes, Percy, that’s perfect,” Nico said. Because Percy hadn’t answered, he asked again. “Can I kiss you?”

Percy knew Jason’s dick had been all over Nico’s face and in his mouth. He couldn’t bring himself to care. All he wanted was Nico against him, kissing him. In answer, he shoved their lips together.

Nico let go of Percy’s back with one hand and crooked his finger at Jason.

Jason settled in behind Nico and rubbed his hands over Nico’s beautiful ass. His hand got closer and closer to Nico’s entrance as he watched Percy and Nico make out and rub against each other. When Nico’s back arched after Percy gave a hard thrust, Jason hit home, sliding two fingers deep inside.
Nico jerked his head back and sought Jason’s mouth. Jason kissed him briefly, but then Nico was pulling away, turning back to Percy, all the while fucking himself on Jason’s fingers.

“Fuck me, Jason. Now.”

Jason looped his forearm under Nico’s knee and pulled until Nico’s ankle rested on Percy’s shoulder. He let go, trusting that Nico knew to hold the position, and trailed his hand down the underside of Nico’s long leg.

“Damn, you’re flexible,” Percy said as Jason lined up his dick with Nico’s hole.

Nico grinned. “Never knew it would come in this handy. Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Jason’s stomach tightened with the pleasure of entering Nico and enjoyment over how much Nico obviously liked it.

“You’re so tight, Nico. So hot and tight and perfect. Want me to fuck you?”

Nico’s mouth was slack as Jason slowly pushed his way inside, lighting Nico on fire and making Percy’s assault on his dick even more intense. “Please, Jason.”

“Tell me you like it.”

“Fuck you.”

Jason pivoted a tiny bit and pushed his way fully inside. Nico groaned, and Jason waited.

“Move, motherfucker.” Nico tried to move on his own, but he was so tightly wedged between his lovers that it wasn’t possible.

“Say it.”

“I like Percy’s cock on my cock, his hand wrapped around us while we fuck.”

Percy pistoned into Nico’s dick again and again while Nico remained suspended around Jason.

“Bastard.” Jason withdrew by slow degrees.

“I like my ankle on Percy’s shoulder. His hot mouth on mine.”

Jason bit Nico’s arm.

“I — oh, fuck, Percy, more like that one. Yes.”

Jason snarled and pulled out until only his head remained, squeezed tight inside Nico’s ass.

“You pull out of me, motherfucker, and I’ll never let you back in. Fuck me, damn it.”

“Say you like it.”

Percy chuckled, and Nico snapped his teeth at him. Percy stopped laughing and concentrated on popping his hips into Nico, dick pressing into dick. He didn’t want to give up the intense friction of their dicks sliding along each other, dragging foreskin and slicking over heads.

Nico waited, tried to convince himself he could outlast Jason at this game, but Percy’s thrusts were sending tight, delicious spasms back to his ass, and Jason’s head holding him open but being
perfectly still was exquisite torture.

“Fuck you. You fucking win. I like it. I love it. Now pound the hell out of my ass, you obnoxious motherfucker.”

“I would have taken ‘I like it.’”

Nico opened his mouth to swear at Jason more, but then Jason’s hand was gripping Percy’s shoulder underneath Nico’s ankle, and Jason rammed into him with such force that Nico felt his and Percy’s bodies scoot a couple inches.

“Oh fuck, Jason,” Nico managed before Jason thrust into him again and again and again.

Percy had stopped thrusting and lay there with his mouth open, shocked by the brutality of the way Nico and Jason fucked each other.

Jason’s head was buried in Nico’s back and he slammed home with such force that Percy didn’t need to thrust — Nico’s dick slid hard inside his hand. All the same, Nico slapped Percy’s ass and gasped, “Jerk us off, Percy!”

Percy startled from his stupor and tightened his grip. He jerked in time with Jason’s thrusts, shoving his hand down when Jason thrust in and squeezing over their heads when Jason withdrew.

Nico’s senses fell apart. The sensations torn from his ass and his dick melded together into one earth-shattering explosion of bliss. He wasn’t aware of the stream of obscenities that poured from his mouth, only the fire in his belly and the tightening of his balls.

Percy knew Nico was close. Nico’s leg on his shoulder shook and spasmed. He tightened his hand and jerked faster than Jason could thrust. With his lips, he rooted around until he found Nico’s dirty mouth, still cursing.

“Come for us, baby,” Percy breathed onto Nico’s lips, then kissed him languid and gentle, in sharp contrast to the way the rest of Nico’s body was being handled.

It was the words that did it for Nico. “Come for us.” Us. Nico’s brain caught up to his body, and he remembered he was being taken by two lovers at once. Percy’s hand ripped over Nico’s head right as Jason buried his dick deep in Nico’s ass, scraping his prostate long and hard, and Nico came, moaning his orgasm down Percy’s throat.

The flood of cum over Percy’s hand and dick triggered Percy’s orgasm, and the spasming of Nico’s muscles around Jason’s dick pushed him over the edge, too.

At the same time, Percy and Jason shouted and slumped forward over Nico, banging their foreheads together and stumbling away for a few final thrusts. Each milked their orgasm as long as they could while Nico lay limp between them.

When they were done, temporarily exhausted, Percy unwrapped his hand and Jason gently withdrew. Jason let go of Percy’s shoulder and helped Nico remove his ankle from its spot next to Percy’s ear.

Percy’s hand was covered in cum, and he reached behind himself to wipe it on the sheets only to realize Jason’s violent thrusts had shoved them so far that there was no longer any bed behind him. Percy wasn’t thinking clearly enough to realize he could vanish the cum, so he did the next best thing. He wiped it in Jason’s hair, which was already slick with sweat.
Jason didn’t notice at first. He was busy planting soft wet kisses on Nico’s shoulder and neck. It took him a moment to realize the hand in his hair belonged to Percy, not Nico. By the time he did, Percy had removed his hand and begun kissing Nico’s lips. His now mostly dry hand strummed up and down Nico’s side.

“Here,” Nico said, breaking the kiss. “I want to cuddle a bit before we clean up, but I can’t lay on this side anymore. My leg feels like I lodged it up my ass.”

“Something as big as your leg was lodged up your ass,” Jason snickered.

Nico tiredly slapped back at him. “Shut up, creep. Scoot over so I can lay on my back.”

“Yeah, I need room, too,” Percy said.

“Dipsits.” Jason chuckled and moved over.

Once Nico was sprawled out on his back, a leg flung over Percy’s hips and the other flat in front of him, he kissed Percy then Jason.

“Anything you want to say, pretty boy?” Jason traced lazy hearts over Nico’s chest.

“We should have been doing that since day one,” Percy said.

Jason lightly smacked Percy’s cheek. “I wasn’t talking to you, asshole. Nico’s the pretty boy. But I completely agree.”

Jason and Percy turned their attention to Nico.

“What’s the verdict, baby? Jason and I give this two enthusiastic thumbs up. What do you say?”

There were a million things Nico thought about saying, now that he was coming down from the high of sex. He was nervous about what this would mean for them. It was scary. But there was no denying he’d had an extraordinary experience, one he could see himself repeating multiple times a day for the rest of forever.

“I guess we could do it again.”

“Whatever,” Percy said. “You came a fucking bucketful. You were like some kind of perpetual fountain.”

Jason chuckled and rubbed his hand over Nico’s stomach. He couldn’t help noticing Percy and Nico were relatively free of the perpetual fountain of cum Percy had described.

“Did you really like it, Nico?” he asked. “I don’t see all the cum Percy’s talking about.”

“I loved it, stupid. I don’t think I’ve ever had that strong an orgasm, and my lovers have always been spectacular in bed.” Nico paused and kissed Percy and Jason again, wet and lingering, before he dropped the bomb. “I know where our cum is, mine and Percy’s.”

Percy gently lifted Nico’s leg off his hip and set it on the bed. He slid his feet to the floor and got ready to run. He wanted to see Jason’s face first.

“What? Where?” Jason had no idea.

Nico smirked and pulled at a lock of his own hair.
Jason narrowed his eyes and looked closely. “In your hair? I don’t see anything.”

Nico snorted, he was trying so hard not to laugh. “Not my hair, no.”

In slow motion, Jason’s eyes shifted to Percy’s hair, until, with dawning horror, he lifted his hand to his own head. His fingers came away white and sticky.

“Jackson!”

Percy cackled madly and danced out of the room as Jason lunged for him. Jason fell to the floor and gave chase. Nico stayed on the bed and laughed and laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Not that this is what you guys care about right now, probably, but the movie Percy is referencing is either "Love Story" or "What's Up, Doc?" I kind of think "What's Up, Doc?" would be more fitting given Nico’s reaction, but I can picture Sally subjecting Percy to the horror that is "Love Story."

You know where to let me hear about it. ;-)
Nico had only been in this part of Manhattan at night once before. He'd been to Percy's plenty, of course, in a slightly stalker-y way, but this posh world felt hundreds of miles removed from Percy's modest home.

Even though his father was the god of wealth and he had more money than any other seventeen year old boy on the planet, Nico still felt cowed by the wealth on display here. Shiny gold watches, fancy clothes, gadgets and time-wasters, they seemed to be the currency of these people bustling about. He recognized that his own clothes – Apollo's designer jeans and t-shirts, Persephone's leather jacket and combat boots – were more at home here than they had been at Camp Jupiter. Realizing that he looked like he belonged with these people made Nico feel a little sick. He may have money, but he'd never had any interest in it. The thought that someone might think of him as the same as these glittering people on the sidewalk made him nervous. He would forever be a lonely homeless kid living off McDonalds, at least in his own mind.

He ordered a black coffee from a coffee shop and had a seat at the shop's outdoor patio. Apollo's building loomed across the street. Could he do this? Every fiber of his being rebelled at the thought of living with Apollo. Sex was not an option on the table. That was the deal-breaker, Nico had decided. They could be roommates, or whatever, but he was not moving in to share Apollo's bed. Between his brokenhearted love for Jason and his ongoing, confusing sex and "more" sessions with Percy, life was already complicated enough. Throwing in a seductive god whom he was attracted to but had no feelings for was a terrible, if slightly flattering, idea.

Nico pulled Jason's postcard out of his pocket, repeating a motion he'd made hundreds of times a day since he'd received it. The edges were worn, and he should put it in a safe place at his house, but he was compelled to have it with him at all times. The message had been short and suitably cryptic — "Listen to your father. Stay safe. I love you. J" — but it confirmed the belief that Jason was acting for Nico's protection. Nico had no way to contact Jason that didn't jeopardize the sacrifices the son of Jupiter had made for him. It was painful not to be able to let Jason know how much he loved and cared for him.

When his dad had first told him what Jason had done, Nico had been certain it was only a matter of time until they could be together again. As the days had worn on, he had realized nothing would be as easy as he'd originally thought. There may not be a happy ending. Reyna and Hazel had told him what had happened in the senate chamber and how Jason was being ostracized. He'd begged them to forgive Jason and let him be a part of their group of friends again. Both women had refused, but after a while, Hazel had agreed to at least try to have Jason reinstated as Pontifex. It was the best Nico could do for the time being. Maybe the job would give Jason some comfort. He might even realize Nico had played a hand in getting the job back for him. Funny, Nico was actually interfering in the business of the camp in the way Juno had warned. He didn't care. If it made Jason's life a little easier, he'd live with being considered a traitor. He brought the postcard to his lips and kissed it.

"Mmm, lucky card, beautiful boy."

Nico jumped and looked across the table to see Apollo watching him with a playful smirk. He carefully stuffed the postcard back in his jeans pocket and gave his attention to the sun god.

He wasn't the only one. Apollo’s tanned skin emitted a faint glow. His lightly muscled arms (Nico thought his own paltry muscles were more pronounced) were bare and undeniably attractive. Golden blond hair was swept back behind a headband, and Apollo's face, somewhere between Jason's perfect, chiseled features and Will Solace's relaxed, rounded edges, was striking. Men and women
stared. All the attention directed toward his table made Nico incredibly uncomfortable.

Apollo appeared to notice his discomfort. "We are the two most beautiful people in the state, love," he said. "You must expect the stares."

Nico was sure he looked a little wild-eyed. "They weren't staring until you got here."

"Oh, Nico. You cloak yourself in shadows. People don't notice you because you don't want them to. My light cancels out your darkness, and even the mortals can see you properly. They are as entranced as I am."

This was the nonsense Nico hated. "Can we skip the flattery crap? I'm sure it works wonders for wooing lots of people, but it's not happening with me."

"Which, lover, isn't working? The flattery or the wooing altogether?" Apollo leaned forward and whispered, "I am willing to work much, much harder to have you, Nico."

Nico nervously glanced skyward. He didn't want their conversation to be overheard and misinterpreted. "Can we go to your apartment to talk? This feels so exposed."

"I have only been waiting for you to ask."

Nico half expected Apollo to snap them naked onto his bed, but the god took Nico's hand and guided him to the building. In the lobby, Apollo stopped at the front desk and addressed the attendant on duty.

"Ms. Marks, you are ravishing this evening," Apollo purred. The young woman turned bright red and giggled uncontrollably. "This is my paramour, Mr. di Angelo—"

"Potential roommate, not paramour," Nico said. The woman looked taken aback that Nico would not choose to be known as Apollo's lover. Or she didn't know what paramour meant. That was possible, too.

Apollo ignored Nico's comment. "Please ensure that Mr. di Angelo is recognized by all staff and is given the same access and freedoms that I enjoy."

"Of course, sir." She bowed reverently to Apollo. "Shall I photograph him?"

"No, I do not believe that necessary. Simply inform the other staff that the most handsome dark-haired man you have ever seen is to live with me. One glimpse of his divine form will confirm his identity."

She looked Nico over. Her blush darkened. "Indeed, sir. Welcome, Mr. di Angelo."

"Thanks," Nico grunted.

Apollo was already tugging his hand, heading toward the bank of elevators.

"Come, lover, we've much to discuss."

An elevator dinged open, and Nico and Apollo stepped on board. Apollo stood much too close, but Nico had expected that. The god smelled like warmth and summer and cotton candy. The combined scent made Nico light-headed. Apollo's thumb made slow circles over each of Nico's knuckles as the elevator ascended. The lift came to a stop on the thirty-fourth floor, one level below the penthouse, and Apollo led Nico to his door.
"The penthouse would give us more space, Nico, but I have noticed that you prefer not to live like the prince you are."

"King."

"Come again?" Apollo tilted his head in confusion. The expression was interesting to Nico, since the only faces he'd seen the god show were his healing face and his Nico-let-me-fuck-you face.

"King. I am not a prince. I am the gods-be-damned Ghost King."

Apollo smirked before breaking into a poorly contained laugh. It made him look not nearly as perfect but so much more approachable. Nico smiled.

"Oh, my, but you are a feisty one, my lover! I will enjoy your company for so much more than sex."

"No sex. I—"

"Need a place to live, yes."

He opened the door to his apartment and led Nico to the couch. Nico made sure Apollo sat first, then sat as far away from him as possible, but Apollo simply moved until he was pressed flush against Nico's side.

"Now, as I was saying," Apollo continued as though he wasn't invading Nico's personal space. His arm rested lightly around Nico's shoulders, and his free hand fingered the bracelet on Nico's wrist. "The penthouse would give us more room, but the size of this apartment seemed like it would be more to your taste. We can always change it if you would prefer."

"Wait. Are you saying you chose this place..." What? Apollo had chosen this place because he'd hoped Nico would come live with him?

"I foresaw, the day you retrieved my arrow some years ago, that you would become my lover, yes. I saw that you would wish to go to NYU and would need a place to stay. I purchased this apartment within the month and have been waiting for the time to come when you would join me."

"You know that's totally creepy stalker-y, right?" Nico shook his head. "Would you mind if I got myself a glass of water?"

Apollo snapped his fingers and a bottle of Perrier replaced the coffee cup in Nico's hand. "Whatever you desire is yours, Nico."

"Thank you, Lord."

Apollo made a tut-tutting sound, and Nico remembered Apollo's request from the last time he was here.

"Thank you, Apollo. I can walk to the sink, though."

"Oh, you are so enticingly difficult," Apollo sighed. He didn't stop touching Nico, but he did lay his head back on the couch dramatically. "I enjoy caring for you."


Apollo's eyes opened and flashed a bright blue in Nico's direction. "I know you are capable of taking care of yourself. It is one of the traits that attracts me to you most heavily. Taking care of you is different than caring for you."
Nico opened his mouth to argue, then closed it without saying a word. Apollo was right. He didn't want to be coddled, but the idea of being cherished was incredibly appealing. Jason had cherished him once. Perhaps someday he would again. Apollo's warm hand shifted from his bracelet to his forearm.

"I'm sorry," Nico mumbled. "I'm being incredibly rude. I appreciate your help and concern. The thing is, I don't want strings attached, Apollo. I love Jason. That's not going away."

"I understand. I am not asking you to give up Jason Grace, Nico. In fact, I am asking nothing of you, really."

Apollo shifted impossibly closer. His hand slid up to Nico's elbow, where his thumb made slow circles on the inner part of Nico's arm. Nico shivered at the intimacy but didn't pull away.

"I want you to be safe," Apollo said. "I want to be your lover, too, but I am willing to wait for you to come to me."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I will have a very pleasant roommate while you are in college, will I not?"

"Okay, I'll stay."

"That was much easier than I thought it would be," Apollo mused.

Nico snorted. "Yes, well, the commute is killing me. I don't want to have failed at college before I've even been there five weeks."

"Nico, lover, there are some rules we must go over before you make a final decision." Apollo's voice switched to the authoritative, business-like tone that Nico found remarkably sexy. His hand had moved from Nico's elbow to his side. "I will wait for you to choose me as your lover, but I will not stop wooing you. It is rare that I am this ardent in my pursuit, but you are a special person."

"Knock it off," Nico said. He stood and took the bottle of Perrier to the kitchen. He opened cabinets until he found one with some cups in it. He chose a nice green cup and filled it with water from the sink. It tasted cold and refreshing, and Nico was sure Apollo must have messed with it because the tap water didn't taste nearly this good at Percy's house. "I'm not interested. Jason, remember?"

Nico set the glass in the sink and felt Apollo move in close behind him. Apollo's tan hands bracketed his body against the counter.

"You love Jason, I know," Apollo said. "But you regularly sleep with Percy Jackson. I know that, too, Nico. I can feel your body tense right now, as though you are surprised that I am aware of the liaisons you enjoy with Percy. If your love for Jason is so absolute, and I have no chance to win your favor, why has Percy taken you so many times?"

That was the million dollar question, wasn't it? Nico had frequently sworn he was done messing around with Percy. He'd thought for sure things were over when Percy returned to Camp Jupiter after their time together in the Underworld. But then the Iris messages had started. They'd been innocent at first, two friends looking out for one another. Things had changed when Percy messaged him one night and found him sleeping without his shirt. Nico had watched Percy take his shirt off, too, so they'd be "even," Percy said. Nico hadn't been able to take his eyes off Percy's body. A few calls later, when Percy had casually reached down and brushed his penis through his pants, Nico had moaned. He'd been mortified, but Percy's eyes had shone with lust. One touch led to another, each progressively more intimate and sexual, until they were both naked and spent, grinning at each other.
like little boys excited by the thrill of doing something taboo.

Percy's calls had become regular enough that Nico sent him money to cover the cost. Nico never asked for video sex. He also never said no when Percy pushed the conversation that way. Now Percy was hinting that Nico needed to visit him soon. He had found himself online, checking into a reservation for a hotel in San Francisco. The Ritz Carlton had popped up in the search results, and he’d hyperventilated, slamming his computer shut and going to bed swearing his loyalty to Jason. That night, his dreams had been a confusing swirl of insanely good sex, but the face and body of his lover changed between Jason and Percy so quickly that Nico couldn't keep up. In the end, he'd given his dream self over completely to the sensations the lover created, ceasing to care whether it was Percy's mouth or Jason's that drove him wild.

"I am no match for the goddess Aphrodite, nor can I compare with your nemesis, Eros," Apollo said from behind Nico. He was close enough that Nico could feel the rise and fall of his chest with his breath. "However, I have learned a few things about the nature of love, over the course of millennia. You are a constant lover, Nico. Jason is your great love. I do not doubt it, and I am not asking to replace him. But I could be to you what Percy is."

Nico gripped the edge of the sink.

"What is Percy to me?" he asked quietly.

"He is special to you, revered. He makes you happy in ways that Jason, by the nature of your broken history, cannot. You do not love him the way you love Jason, but your heart has a huge store of love to give. You love Percy Jackson. Perhaps you could grow to love me, too."

Apollo kissed the back of Nico's neck and moved away. Nico felt exposed and vulnerable. A part of him wanted to seek comfort in Apollo's welcoming arms, but that would only end with him in Apollo's bed. That's how he'd ended up with Percy, after all. Now Nico loved him. He loved Percy Jackson. Again. That wasn't what he'd wanted, but there was no denying the truth. But Nico didn't want to love Percy or Apollo or anyone who wasn't Jason. He wanted to give every part of himself completely to Jason. Gods, what a mess he'd made.

"I can see that you are upset, lover," Apollo said. He'd moved back to the couch. Nico hadn't noticed. "Come, sit with me, and let me soothe you. I promise I will not try to seduce you right now."

Nico sighed and returned to the couch. If he was going to live here, he'd need to get used to being around Apollo, even when he wasn't feeling his best.

"I don't want to love anyone but Jason," Nico confessed, sitting on the edge of the couch. He was close enough for Apollo to touch him, but the god kept his word and his distance.

"You are a good and moral man. That is an admirable wish. Real life has a way of intervening that can make your ideals terribly impractical."

"But that doesn't mean I should ignore my beliefs, Apollo. I should be better at cutting Percy off. I say I'm done after every time we're together, then he calls and I jump to answer. It makes me feel like shit."

"Oh, I do not think that is true," Apollo said. "I think it makes you feel very good, until you start to worry what Jason or Bianca or Hazel will think of you."

Nico hung his head. "Maybe. But a lot of that is me projecting my own disappointment in myself
"I thought you were going to be a lawyer, not a psychologist."

Apollo's fist playfully bumped Nico's knee. Nico gave a slight chuckle.

"You will figure it out, Nico. Despite my creepy stalker-y interest in you, I recognize that you are quite young. You have a big brain and a loving heart, and following them will not lead you too far astray."

"Thanks." Nico hadn't expected Apollo to be so kind.

"Would you like a shift in topic? We need to discuss the rules of our shared home."

Nico perked his head.

"What kind of rules?"

"Ah, yes, you are not good at following rules, are you, lover? Another trait that makes me want you. These rules will be ones I think you can abide. They are for our mutual protection. As you no doubt remember, this apartment, this building even, is a haven for us. We may carry on our lives in utmost privacy. Our relationship, however platonic you insist it be, cannot exist outside this building. Even meeting you at the cafe tonight was a risk. I cannot come to you again outside our home."

"I understand."

"Good. We can invite people into our home, but I would ask you not to. It is better if fewer people suspect or know with whom you reside. Even something as seemingly innocuous as Iris messages can compromise our security. By all means, contact your friends and family, but do so outside this building."

"But—"

"I believe you own the farmhouse in which you have been living?"

Nico nodded at Apollo's assumption.

"Maintain the property. Have your phone sex with Percy there."

Nico blushed and nodded.

"Mortals also must not be brought here. Any study dates or group projects you work on for school will have to be done elsewhere."

"Okay."

"That is all there is to it. I am aware that you will offer me money to live here. Do not bother. I may not be as wealthy as you, but for this purpose, my resources are quite as infinite. I will provide anything you require. Food will be stocked in the refrigerator and pantry, though you are welcome to either ask me for different food or do your own grocery shopping, if you would like. When we are done talking tonight, I will ask you to walk through the apartment with me so I can provide for any of your other needs."

"That's not necessary."

"I insist. Again, caring for you makes me happy," Apollo didn't wait for Nico to reply before
continuing. "I must attend to my duties during the day, as you have no doubt surmised, smart boy. It is unlikely that I can be here terribly often when the sun is up in New York. If you need me, call my name, and I will come to you as long as you are here. Occasionally, I may be away at night. Do not be alarmed if I do not return. However, I do want to know where you are. If you leave for something besides classes, please leave a note on the refrigerator."

"That sounds so domestic. I'll try," Nico said, "but I've never had to tell anyone what I was doing or where I was going before, other than Jason."

"Work on it. I can locate you anywhere in the world, if necessary, except your father's realm, but it would be much easier to read a note on the fridge."

"Fair enough. Anything else?"

"I have never had a roommate. I am loud, and I like to sing. I will walk around this apartment completely naked, though I will try not to make you uncomfortable. You are quiet and shy. I respect that. There will be a period of adjustment for both of us, my incredible lover. Do not give up on our arrangement. If you find something too disagreeable, talk to me. I would rather work things out and keep you safe and close than have you decide you cannot live with me."

Nico wrinkled his nose, and Apollo laughed. "What is this face, love?"

"Everyone talks about wanting to keep me safe, Apollo. You, my dad, Jason. I can keep my own damned self safe."

"Oh, beautiful Dark Angel, please do not be offended." Apollo gave a brilliant smile and reached out to put his hand on Nico's knee. "We all know you are capable and powerful. In fact, I daresay you are the most powerful demigod I have ever met, and therein lies the problem."

"I don't understand."

"And it is not my place to tell you. Someone divulged this information to Jason, and I am not sure the situation has been made better by his knowledge of it. Know I would tell you if I thought it would change anything."

"That doesn't sound ominous at all."

Apollo regarded Nico appraisingly. His hand tightened around Nico's knee. For the first time, Nico saw Apollo as a being thousands of years old instead of a pretty teenager.

"I care for you, Nico, perhaps more than any lover in hundreds of years. I will spare you the pain I can, but I cannot prevent the universe from unfolding, as your father would try to. If I could fix things, I would."

Nico was unsettled. His father had acted, too, like something bad was going to happen to him. He was a demigod. Of course something bad was going to happen to him. Dear gods, a million horrific things already had. Was worse coming?

"I think I'm ready for you to show me around the house now," Nico said.

Apollo smiled sadly and took Nico's hand.

***
"So, Nico, I've enjoyed working with you so much."

The library wasn't very crowded, considering how close they were getting to the end of the semester. The computers were in use, and a few students milled about at the study carrels, but Nico and Mickey were the only study group in sight. Six more weeks, and Nico would have completed, successfully, he hoped, his first semester of college.

"You, too, Mickey," Nico said as he closed his calculus textbook and stood. He offered a friendly smile to the boy across the table. "You've been a good study partner."

"It's not often you meet a freshman so talented at higher math, unless he's a math major."

Nico shrugged. "Good tutors. See you around."

"Uh, hey, Nico, you wanna go for coffee or something sometime?"

Nico looked at the brown-haired boy. The guy's glasses were fogging up. Was he asking Nico out? Or was this a friendly offer? Nico was getting tired of being asked out.

"Are you asking as friends, or...?"

"Well, uh, the thing is," Mickey stumbled, "I got the feeling you weren't into girls when you shot down Alicia and Kenya last week and, uh, you're really, like, hella hot, and—"

"No."

"Dude, have you seen yourself? You're the sexiest—"

Nico bristled. "Stop talking. I'm not interested."

Mickey deflated a bit. Nico slung his backpack over his shoulder and watched Mickey's eyes widen as they focused on his biceps and then his stomach. Nico yanked his shirt lower.

"God damn, that's too bad. Smart, built, and pretty is rare, man. You already got a man?"

Ooh, idea. He didn't want to give up having this guy as his study partner, but he was not signing on to be ogled for the remainder of the semester.

"Yes. I'm...living with someone."

"Oh, well, no hard feelings." Mickey held out his hand, and Nico gratefully shook it. "Had to try, you know?"

"It's fine. I'll see you in class, alright? It's time for me to go."

Nico waved and left the library. As soon as he found a shadow, he traveled home.

"Apollo! Are you home?"

The sun had set about twenty minutes ago, Nico figured. Apollo might be home. There was a rustling in the master bedroom, so Nico walked down the hall and knocked on Apollo's door.

"Come in, lover."
"Remember how we talked about you not calling me—shit!" Nico squeezed his eyes shut. "Can you put some clothes on? Please?"

Apollo had been lounging naked on the bed, ass up. Ridiculously gorgeous. Nico kept his eyes closed as he heard Apollo sigh.

"I rather prefer to lounge on my bed in the nude, Nico."

"Well, could you get off your bed and put some clothes on, then?"

"Or you could lounge nude on my bed, too, Dark Angel."

"Could you not be a weirdo creepfest right now, please?" Nico rolled his eyes even though they were closed. "I need to talk to you."

Apollo was at his side instantly. Nico could feel his body heat. He protectively crossed his arms over his chest. Warm hands trailed up the backs of his upper arms and over his shoulders. The soothing, healing feeling of Apollo's hands on him eased his tension.

"You can open your eyes, Nico. I am clothed," Apollo said gently. "Let us recline on the couch, and I will do what I can to relieve your stress."

Nico let Apollo pull him by the shoulders to the living room and push him down on the couch. The heat of a blush crept over his cheeks as Apollo stood in front of him. The god's crotch was far too close to Nico's face. Nico leaned back and closed his eyes. He heard Apollo kneel between his thighs. Seconds later, Nico's hand was being expertly kneaded.

The first time Apollo had knelt before him, Nico had been horrified, thinking the god was offering oral sex. Not that Nico doubted Apollo would jump at the chance, but he was proving himself to at least have enough restraint not to touch without permission. Nico had learned that kneeling at his feet was Apollo's way of showing deference. It was quite sweet.


Apollo chuckled. Nico told him that every time Apollo massaged his body. It had become their joke. Apollo kissed Nico's fingers.

"What troubles you?"

"Do you think you could retrieve one of the gifts you sent me while I was at Camp Jupiter? When I was banished, Hazel didn't know to return them to me."

"Of course, darling, but you only wish to have one?" Apollo sounded a little hurt.

"Well, you can get them all, if you want, but I think I want to wear one."

Apollo stopped rubbing Nico's hand and shifted slightly to face him. He rested his arm along the side of Nico's thigh. "You wish to wear one of my gifts?"

"Yes. The ring," Nico thought briefly. "Unless it's like some trick betrothal ring or something? I put it on and then I'm bound to you?"

Apollo frowned. "You believe I would need to trick you to bind you to me? I need not resort to such measures, Nico."

Nico tilted his head and fixed Apollo with a skeptical gaze. "So you didn't manipulate my realtor to
make it appear there were no places for rent or sale in the entire city of New York?"

"Ah, well, you were taking a rather long time to come to me, lover. I merely sped the process along."

"And I'm not even going to be mad at you about that, because I like living here and you're generally well-behaved." Nico patted Apollo's head, scarcely sparing a moment to think about what a patronizing motion that must be for a god to endure. "But if this ring is some kind of trick, you will feel the full fury of Hell."

Apollo laughed a huge belly laugh. He laid his head on Nico's leg and laughed until tears came. "Oh, Nico, how I enjoy your hubris."

"It's not hubris. You may kill me in the end, but I would hurt the hell out of you first."

Apollo stopped laughing and lifted his head off Nico's lap. His eyes were hungry as they watched Nico. He licked his lips.

"I believe you would. That makes the chase for your affection even more thrilling."

Nico opened his mouth and closed it. Apollo's eyes were too intense, and Nico's pulse quickened. He hoped Apollo couldn't tell how aroused he was.

Hands slipped up Nico's thighs. Of course Apollo could tell how turned on Nico was. He'd spent thousands of years studying lovers, after all. Nico mentally kicked himself. The heat of his blush burned his face and chest.

"Why do you want to wear the ring, Nico?" Apollo purred. He quirked an eyebrow, and Nico bit his lip, hoping the pain would keep him from shoving his crotch in Apollo's face and begging for attention to it.

Stand up, dumbass, Nico's brain helped. He did, standing abruptly and swinging one leg over Apollo's head before walking to the pool table in the dining room. They'd originally had a large, formal dining table, but he had pointed out how impractical the thing was since they'd never have any guests and Apollo didn't eat human food, except to humor Nico. He'd come home from school the next day to find this pool table. Nico had tried to convince Apollo they should switch it out for a ping-pong table, but Apollo had said Nico could play pool but not ping-pong when he was alone. Nico grudgingly agreed.

"Because people keep hitting on me, and if I have a ring on I can tell them I'm engaged."

"Why Nico, I am impressed by your cunning." Apollo stood and approached him. "Hold out your hand."

"Which one do people wear engagement rings on?"

"The right, I believe."

Nico didn't hold out his hand yet. He was feeling anxious. Wearing one of Apollo's gifts, aside from the bracelet he had no choice but to wear, felt like he was giving more of himself to the sun god. He was already so far removed from the promises he'd made to be his own person that he probably shouldn't care too much about one more step down the road of letting another man dictate his life, but a big part of him screamed to stop, to take the harder road.

"Do you think it looks enough like an engagement ring?"
"Not even a close resemblance." Apollo chuckled. "But I believe you would be furious if I gave you a ring that did. The one I chose looks like it could be an engagement ring chosen for the man you are by someone who loves you very much."

Nico blushed even worse than he had when he was aroused a few minutes ago. "Are you saying you love me? Did you even pick it out yourself?"

"Yes and yes," Apollo said simply. Nico swallowed far too hard. Apollo held out his fist and unrolled his fingers to produce the ring. Nico made a grab for it, but Apollo took his hand. "Allow me, lover, please. No strings."

There were always strings.

The ring slipped on slowly. Apollo slid it onto his finger so suggestively that Nico felt like they were having sex.

"It looks stunning against your flawless skin." Apollo kissed the ring and Nico's finger before turning his hand over and kissing the palm.

Nico did love the ring. It was simple, a thin and tall black band with rolled edges. The extra height suited his long, narrow fingers.

"Thank you," Nico whispered.

"I want to kiss you, Nico." Apollo's hair glistened in the light from above the pool table. His eyes were so vibrant.

"Cheek." That had come out entirely too squeaky. Nico cleared his throat and tried again. "You can kiss my cheek."

Apollo didn't lay a hand on him. The absence of touch anywhere except for the flame hot lips against his cheek made Nico so much hotter. The kiss lingered, but stayed featherlight. As soon as it broke, Nico was moving, walking toward the door and grabbing his jacket.

"I'm going to my house for a bit. I'll be back before bedtime."

Apollo smirked. "Tell Percy hello."

"Ha ha."

"Nico?"

Nico stopped at the door and looked back.

"You have a warm, willing body here, one that can bring you to orgasm all night long. Why do you choose to get your sexual gratification over a video connection with a boy who cannot touch you?"

"He touches my heart, Apollo."

Apollo nodded his head, and Nico left.

***
Jason wasn't sure where he was. The weather was getting colder, and he knew he'd need to head south soon. If he had to guess, he'd say he was somewhere in Missouri or someplace like that. The terrain was hilly, rolling and pretty, but not like the huge mountains of the Rockies. Along the highways, there were a lot of tourist stops selling fudge and pecans. He had stopped the first time or two he'd encountered these places and bought a little fudge, but a little went a long way.

Now he was back in the hills, camping out and hoping tomorrow he had enough energy to summon Tempest and ride into warmer weather. He was warm enough in his stolen tent — Nico's tent — wearing only his t-shirt and red and black plaid flannel shirt. It was too cold to be outside without a coat, though. He'd visited a Bass Pro Shops a few days ago and bought a nice down jacket — with Nico's money. Jason was anxious to get to a place where he wouldn't have to rely so much on what he'd stolen from Nico.

The day he'd decided to leave Camp Jupiter, he'd gone to Nico's villa and broken out a back window. He'd taken the tent, Nico's money, and a shirt from his dirty laundry. It was weird, he knew, but he also knew he'd need something to keep him grounded and sane. He'd never been good at being alone, and the past few months had reminded him how much he hated it.

At least being alone like this, by choice, was better than being alone around those who'd been his friends.

"Jason?"

He blinked and focused on the Iris message swimming into view in front of him. He turned on his flashlight and set it at his knee to give the tent a bit more light. Hazel was staring at him in undisguised shock.

"What happened to you?"

"I don't know what you mean..." Jason was confused. Percy surely had told everyone he'd left. No one had come to find him. No one had called, aside from a weekly call from Piper or Leo urging him to return.

"You look wild. Your beard...your beautiful hair. Jason." Hazel's eyes clouded with tears. Jason knew he looked like shit. He'd tried to shave the first week or two, but couldn't get the hang of holding the razor and a mirror at the same time. Eventually, he'd given up. His hair was shaggy and overgrown. He'd seen how dull it looked when he stopped in at truck stops to shower. He nervously ran his hand through it, trying to make himself more presentable. That seemed to make things worse, as Hazel made a sobbing noise.

"I'm sorry, Hazel," he said quietly. "You shouldn't have called. I...I don't want to make things harder for you."

"Come home, Jason, please. This isn't good for you."

"He managed it for years. I've only been gone two months. I appreciate it, Hazel, but don't worry about me, please. I hate disappointing you even more."

"Living like that made Nico sick and exhausted, and he had my father looking out for him! Jason, Nico wouldn't want this for you. I'm sorry. Please. We won't treat you so badly anymore. Even Percy's sorry."

Jason shook his head. "I can't get back all the things I've lost. This way's better. I'm not there being a constant reminder of how much I took from you."
"I...

"I remember how you looked at me, Hazel, like I ripped you into pieces, and I did do that. I couldn't bear to see you anymore. Now you don't have to see me, either." Jason looked at his hands. The left one had stopped twitching, most of the time. It was only bad when he was exhausted or extremely hungry. Tears dripped onto his hands, and he couldn't meet Hazel’s eyes.

"I didn't want you to leave, Jason."

"I know. I wish I was a stronger person and could have taken it. Please forget about me."

"Jason, look at me." Hazel wasn't sobbing anymore. Her voice sounded hard.

Jason glanced up and saw how determined Hazel was. She was starting to adopt Reyna's Praetor Face, it seemed. Jason smiled a little at the thought.

"You are coming home."

"I'm not."

"If you don't come home—" Hazel took a big breath. "—I'll tell Nico."

The air left Jason's lungs. He doubled over in a huge coughing spell. The flashlight slipped off his knee while he scrounged around for his canteen. He'd been coughing a lot lately. A mortal doctor had told him it was bronchitis, but there wasn't anything he could do about it.

"Are you sick? Gods," Hazel said as Jason calmed the last of his coughs.

He ignored the question. "You can't tell Nico. He'll do something stupid, Hazel. He'll try to find me. Percy said he's at college. He said Nico's happy. Let him be."

"He's acting weird," Hazel admitted. Her eyes drew together, and she frowned.

That idea shook Jason. It made him want to come home. He had to remind himself that the best thing he could do to help Nico was stay away from him.

"I was calling you because I thought you were with him, to be honest. He's not accepting our Iris messages. He calls us, but it's always in odd places like parks, never at home. Well, I guess he calls Percy from home sometimes, but...they have a strange relationship. I don't know. We thought that he'd taken up with you again."

Jason was not about to tell Hazel that her brother was probably acting secretive because he was fucking around with Percy. The thought hurt him too much, and Hazel would be mortified. It didn't quite explain why he wasn't accepting their Iris messages, either.

"Do you think he's in danger?"

"I don't think so, but he seems off somehow, like he's hiding something from us." Hazel twirled a strand of her hair. Her gold eyes seemed to glow. "Reyna's worried, too."

"You know where he is, right?"

Hazel sighed and watched something outside Jason’s field of view. "Yes."

"Can you go check on him?"
"Jason, he's on the other side of the country."

"Oh." Jason hadn't expected that. He'd thought Nico would be at Stanford or some other California school. Why would Nico go east? Surely there were good law schools closer to his friends and family.

"Clarisse used to see him almost every day, but she says he moved out of his house and is doing the same thing to her, calling from parks and stuff." Hazel was going to pull out her hair if she kept twirling so viciously. "He owns the house. It's where he calls Percy from, which is weird, too. Why wouldn't he call from wherever he's living now?"

"So he's in New York?"

"I can't tell you that."

"I didn't think so, which is why I know you're bluffing about telling Nico I left. You'd rather I die than the two of us be together again after what I did to him." It was the truth, cruel and simple.

Hazel blanched.

"It's alright, Hazel. I want you to keep him away from me."

"I don't understand you at all, Jason Grace," Hazel said. "You have ruined my brother's reputation and broken his heart. I see your face when we talk about him, though, and it’s clear you’ve never loved anyone in your life the way you love him. Nico's adamant that we forgive you. You two are hiding something."

Jason spread his hands in front of him. They were on dangerous ground, and as much as he wanted to tell Hazel all that he knew, he couldn't. It would jeopardize Nico's safety. Better to have Hazel mad than Nico dead. Hell, that had been his life for the last seven months.

"I can't tell you anything, Hazel. Talk to Nico. Make sure he's safe." Jason nervously rubbed his hands over his jeans.

Hazel's eyes hardened. "Go to a doctor for that cough, Jason. Come back to New Rome when you're done with your pity party."

Jason nodded. "Take care, Hazel. It was nice to hear your voice."

He swiped through the message as a fresh wave of sobbing overtook them both.

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"Nico, oh fuck, you're amazing."

Nico rolled over onto his back and turned his head to the side. His lips were red, and his back was arched so high that only his shoulder blades and ass touched the table he laid on. Percy couldn't imagine a more erotic image.

"You're not so bad yourself, Jackson."

Nico smiled, and Percy's racing heart jumped into an even higher gear. Gods, he was so fucked.
"I need to get a secret phone."

"What the hell, Percy?" Nico laughed, no doubt at the sudden switch from sex to cell phones.

Percy wanted to hold him, hear that laugh in person, feel his heartbeat. "That way I could take a picture of you, just like you are now, and have it with me all the time."

Nico's cheeks colored, and he turned his head to stare at the ceiling. He laid his back on the table. "I miss you, Perce."

"I miss you, too, baby. Any chance you're going to head this way over Thanksgiving?"

"I wish. I always have to go to the Underworld to eat with my dad and Persephone and Demeter. At least this year Demeter can't send me to the farm because I can't miss school."

"She's pretty intense, man."

Nico sat up and faced Percy. His legs dangled over the front of the table. Percy smiled at the difference between Nico's milky, hairless chest and stomach and his lovely hairy legs.

"Hey, quit staring at my nether regions while we're talking about family."

Percy spluttered. "I was looking at your legs, sexpot, not your dick! Nether regions — are you an old man?"

"Ha. Yes." Nico wiggled his eyebrows. "How's it feel to fuck around with an octogenarian?"

"If that means 'old fart' I'd say it feels great."

"It does mean 'old fart.' Are you coming up for Christmas?"

"I gotta go to Annabeth's. I think she wants me to stay away from you for some reason."

"But Sally..."

"I know. It sucks."

Nico climbed off the table and reached for his underwear and jeans. Percy watched the smooth movement of his muscles.

"Will you come see her some other time during the break? Maybe we could be together on New Year's or something?"

"All I want is to be with you in person, Nico. Like, I think I might want that even more than I want to see my mom — don't put your shirt on yet — but Annabeth is insisting we spend the entire break together. I feel like I'm a prisoner to my girlfriend."

Percy hated to put it that way, but that's exactly how he felt. He and Annabeth hadn't made much progress since that day on the bridge. They'd been trying to spice things up. She'd been more open to trying new things in bed; he'd been willing to talk for hours and go on dates she deemed romantic. None of it captured his imagination the way Nico did.

"You shouldn't think like that, Percy. I'd rather us get to spend some time together, but Annabeth's the one you're going to marry eventually. You need to put more effort into fixing things with her."

Nico sat back on the table. The light glinted off his white shoulders and made his beautiful black eyes sparkle even more.
"It's hard to want to fix things with her when all I can think about is fucking you."

"Don't talk like that."

This was always a hard subject for them. Nico didn't like to be reminded how deeply he and Percy were invested in one another. When Percy had asked why, Nico had told him that it wasn't fair to either of them, since they each loved someone else. Percy had nodded like he agreed, but the truth was that he was feeling increasingly like he was being unfair to Annabeth because of how much more he loved Nico. Whether that feeling was even accurate or stemmed from a desperate desire to have Nico, Percy wasn't sure.

"Sorry," Percy mumbled. "How's school going?"

"Good. As long as I don't horrifically fuck up anything these last six weeks, I should pull all As. Helps that I'm not falling asleep in class."

"Smartass. I knew you'd be amazing. Hey, that reminds me. Hazel wants me to ask you why you're calling them from parks and shit. And why aren't you accepting our calls?"

"I bet Hazel didn't want you to tell me that she wanted you to ask." Nico grinned wryly.

"You're probably right." Percy rolled off the bed and threw on his pajama pants.

"Damn it. Why'd you have to put clothes on?"

"You're avoiding."

"The person I'm rooming with wouldn't understand Iris messages. It's better for me to call Hazel and Reyna from random places and come back here to talk to you."

Nico didn't meet Percy's eyes the whole time he talked. Something was definitely fishy.

"You can't even go in your room and call us? As much as I like watching you jerk off in your farmhouse, I'd love to see you rolling around on the bed you sleep in every night."

"It's...it wouldn't work. Can we drop it?" Nico shifted and leaned back in a way that made it obvious he was trying to appear more relaxed than he felt.

A horrible thought occurred to Percy.

"That motherfucker! He said he'd leave you alone! That's what it is, isn't it?"

Nico paled. "I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, my gods, that fucking asshole Grace." Percy put his hands on his head. "You throw me a bone once in awhile, and he fucks you senseless every night, huh? Nico, that's a dick thing to do."

Percy moved to the other side of the bed to grab his shirt. He was going to tell Hazel.

"What do you mean about Jason? He's at college in New Rome with you, Percy."

Percy froze. Too late, he realized what he'd done. He sat back on the bed and ran his hands through his hair.

Nico's voice was hard and angry. "Percy, answer me. What are you talking about? First of all, get over your sorry ass. I wouldn't leave Jason to be with you any more than I'd leave you to be with
Jason. It pisses me off that you think I'll fuck you guys interchangeably. But more important, is Jason not at camp?"

"No, more important is that I'm sorry I thought you'd jerk me around that way. You're not like that."

"You mean like you and Jason?" The bite in Nico's voice made Percy flinch. "You two are the ones who cheat on your girlfriends and use me when you're bored."

"Watch it, Nico," Percy said. "I know you don't believe that. I don't want to fight when we can't be close enough to touch each other. I do cheat, but if this was a casual fling to me I'd have gotten over it a long time ago, even as fucking sexy and perfect in bed as you are. Video sex isn't exactly high value, affair-wise. I haven't touched you in seven months. If I was doing this out of boredom I'd find some random girl here to give me a blow job or fuck. Instead I'm in my bedroom, alone, getting off with my hand and trying to figure out how to be able to run my fingers through your hair again."

Nico crossed his arms over his chest and watched Percy. Percy was angry, but he didn't want to argue. Their old arguments had been brutal, and they'd gone long stretches without speaking. Back then, the stakes had been a lot lower, too. Percy forced himself to relax his posture and look as sorry as he could. Nico's harsh glare had been easing as they stared at each other, and he finally uncrossed his arms and brushed his hands through the hair at his temples. Percy wanted to touch him.

Nico sighed. "Can we start this part of the conversation over? I feel like a horrible lover, and I'm sorry. You're sorry. I have extremely strong feelings for you. You have extremely strong feelings for me. And I'd give almost anything to feel your hands in my hair."

Percy almost said the words. "I love you" was on the tip of his tongue, but he pulled it back at the last moment. "Yeah."

"Okay, good. Now, where's Jason? Why are you acting like he isn't at camp?"

Percy braced himself for the shitstorm Nico was about to unleash. "He, um, left."

"How long has he been gone? How could you not tell me?" Nico's eyes widened in fury.

"A couple months."

Nico slammed his hand down on the table and covered his eyes.

"Damn it, Percy! This is because you guys were being such dicks to him, isn't it?"

"He asked me not to tell you."

"You hate him!" Nico yelled, flinging his hand wildly away from his face. His sparkly eyes were on fire now, and his arms were raised in aggravation. "Why would you listen to anything he says? You should have told me!"

"He said you'd be happier if you didn't know. And you have been, Nico. I tried to get him to stay, I swear, but I wasn't going to wreck your first semester at college because me and Jason can't get our shit together."

"Gods! I'm so pissed at you right now!"

"Look, I know—"

"No you don't, jackass! You don't know how it feels to be ostracized and cast out!" Nico pulled at
his hair and stomped around. "It makes you desperate and hard, and you did it to Jason, even though I told you — I told you! — that you didn't understand what he was doing. I told you all to forgive him, and none of you would listen. Now he's out there somewhere, probably in constant danger, and you waited two months to tell me!"

"I'm sorry, Nico." Percy felt like crying. If Nico was so mad that he broke things off...

"Tell me that at least you've been checking in on him to make sure he's okay? Percy, please, tell me you had enough kindness in your heart to check on him." Nico's voice shook.

"Piper did, and Leo, I think." Percy's voice was tiny. He couldn't make it any louder. "Can you come here, please? Now? I'm so scared I've lost you, and I can't lose you, Nico. Oh, gods."

Nico laughed derisively. "I can't come there right now. I've got to find him, convince him to go home. I've got to go see Leo."

"Nico, please." Percy's voice shrunk even further.

Nico had been pacing the floor of his farmhouse, but he stopped when Percy spoke. Percy curled up into a ball on his bed. He thought he might be sick to his stomach.

Nico's eyes softened as he watched Percy. "I'm so mad at you, Percy, but I'm not leaving you. You didn't leave me after I scared the hell out of you with the big spoon incident, and I'm not leaving you now. I need to find Jason, though, and I can't go to him directly. I have to go to Leo. I'll call you tomorrow, if I'm not too tired from the trip, okay?"

"Do you want me to IM Jason?"

"I appreciate it, Perce, I do, but you guys are a bad combination right now. You might do more harm than good. If he comes back, promise me you'll try to be his friend again."

"I will, Nico. Anything to make you happy and want me."

"Percy..." Nico trailed off. He looked pained. "I hate leaving it like this between us. I wish I could hold you all night long and tell you over and over, right in your ear, how much you mean to me, but I have to take care of this. You're in my heart, okay?"

"Okay," Percy whispered. "You're in mine, too. I—"

Nico swiped through the Iris message.

"—love you."

For the second time that evening, Nico shadow traveled home and started yelling for Apollo. This time, he didn't bother to go find him, but went straight to his own bedroom and started packing a bag. He'd thrown in a change of clothes and some ambrosia by the time Apollo entered his room, lazily reaching out his fingers to brush Nico's hair. Nico took a microsecond to notice how the touch didn't feel nearly as good as it did when the hand in his hair belonged to Percy. He pushed thoughts of Percy away. Jason. He needed to focus on Jason.
"You know, most mortals come to the god, rather than expecting the god to come to them, lover."

"I'm in a hurry." Nico threw the backpack on his shoulder and turned to face Apollo, who was once again naked. Nico didn't spare a glance to anything but his face. "I need to go see Leo Valdez tonight. I'll be home tomorrow."

Nico was halfway to the shadow of his desk when Apollo grabbed his wrist and held tightly. Nico tried to yank his hand away, but with surprising strength, Apollo pulled him into a close embrace.

"Stop." That smooth, authoritative voice in his ear calmed Nico's breathing. "You lack the energy to safely travel to Massachusetts at this time, Nico. I will not let you compromise your health."

"Then heal me up, but I have to go." Nico laid his head on Apollo's bare shoulder and was surprised by the difference in their body temperature. He didn't feel tired, adrenaline pumping through him, but the coldness of his body screamed that he'd been overexerting himself.

"I will, but tell me what troubles you. Perhaps I can help in more than one way."

Nico pulled his head off Apollo's shoulder and made eye contact. Apollo was gazing at him in concern. Nico inhaled shakily and said, "Jason left camp. I need to figure out where he is and make Leo go get him. He can't be alone like that, Apollo. He doesn't like being alone, and everyone's been so awful to him since I left, and this is all my fault, and oh, my gods, what if something happens to him? I have to go."

"Nico, lover, you cannot make people do things." Apollo made soothing circles with his hands on Nico's back.

Nico glared at him. His voice came out low and menacing. "How long have I lived here? How long have you watched me before then? I can make people do all kinds of things if I want."

Goosebumps popped up along Apollo's skin before he glowed faintly. The places their bodies connected grew hot, and Nico flinched.

"You weaken yourself further using your powers on me," Apollo said. He put one hand on Nico's cheek while the other hardened like steel on Nico's back and pressed their bodies together. "I am going to help you. You have to let me."

"What can you do?" Nico knew he sounded brash and callous. He didn't care.

"I am a god, arrogant lover. Never forget that. I let you talk to me and treat me the way you do because I am in love with you and recognize that you are still a very young man with much to learn, but do not underestimate my power, Nico."

Nico opened his mouth to respond, but Apollo's lips crashed against his, forcing his mouth open further and licking all around inside. He tried to shove Apollo away, but found himself pushed backward until he collided with the wall. Apollo's hand was rough, shoved up under Nico's shirt, digging bruises into his skin. Nico pushed at Apollo's shoulders but he may as well have been moving a mountain. Finally, he wrenched his face to the side.

"I don't want this, my lord."

Apollo instantly released him, and Nico caught the horror written on the god's face. Apollo was taller and older than Nico had ever seen him. He was wearing a knee-length chiton, and a bow and quiver were slung across his back. He turned away and walked quickly to the other side of the room. He laid his hands on Nico's desk, and Nico could see his back heaving with the force of his breath.
Nico lifted his shirt and gazed at the thumb-shaped black bruise that had formed at the top of his hip. He was sure he’d see the entirety of Apollo's hand imprinted on his flank and back if he dared check. He dropped his shirt and tried to calm his breathing.

They stood there for long minutes, Nico pressed against the wall and Apollo doubled over his desk, where Nico's laptop was open to a paper he'd been working on for his composition class. Eventually, Apollo straightened, and Nico watched the bow and quiver vanish. A white tank top and tight white skinny jeans replaced the chiton. When Apollo faced Nico, he'd resumed his usual human form.

"I am so sorry, Nico. I lost my temper," Apollo whispered. "I am not that man. I swear, I will never touch you like that again unless you want me to. I beg your forgiveness."

Apollo approached slowly and dropped to a knee directly in front of Nico. He bowed his head.

"Don't," Nico breathed.

Apollo raised his head slightly, so Nico could see the question in his eyes, before lowering his gaze back to the floor.

"Stand up, Lord Apollo, please." Nico was shaking, but his mind felt calm and clear. He was probably in shock. "That's our relationship. I walked into your house, accepted the refuge you offered me, and gave up my choices, if I ever had any to begin with. I was wrong to delude myself. You have been a kind patron, and I'm grateful for that, but you are my lord and I am your lover. If you choose to force me, I won't be able to stop you. Please allow me to continue to look out for Jason."

"Nico, I did not intend to make you beholden to me. You do have choices." Apollo raised his head to look at Nico fully, but he didn't stand. There were tears in his eyes. "Of course you may look out for your lover, your true lover."

"Thank you."

Apollo rose slowly and tentatively raised a hand toward Nico. "I would like to heal the injuries I have caused."

"I'd prefer to keep them, if I may. It'll help me remember who and where I am."

"If that is your wish. I am not that man, Nico. I swear to you. Please. I am not my father."

It was that, finally, that made Nico cry. He felt sorry for Apollo, no matter how unwelcome that advance had been. It must be horrible to have a rapist for a father. Apollo had stopped when Nico asked him to, but he'd also used sex as a means of control, like Jason sometimes had. Jason, and that horrible time when he had cared more about impressing his awful, revolting father than protecting and cherishing his boyfriend — the memories played over and over in Nico's head. He slunk down the wall and sobbed. He was as used now as he had been then.

"Nico, sweet boy, may I please sit near you? I wish to help you, but I do not know how."

Nico laughed hysterically and scooted over to make room for Apollo. "Knock yourself out. I'm beyond screwed, and no one can help me."

"I am scared for you," Apollo whispered once he sat along the wall with Nico. He kept as much distance as possible, for which Nico was grateful.

Nico rolled his head toward Apollo and laughed some more. "You probably should be, my lord. I
scare everyone, eventually, especially myself."

"Nico..."

Nico wiped his eyes and shook his head. "It's okay. I'm alright. Flashbacks, I guess. I would like your help, Lord Apollo, if you would. You said you could help me make sure Jason is safe?"

"I will do anything I can for you." A tear rolled down Apollo's cheek, and Nico wiped it away. "I can show you Jason, if you would like, give you his exact coordinates. Then you can message the boy Valdez and tell him exactly what Jason needs and where to find him."

"I would appreciate that very much, lord."

A vision appeared in front of them. It was dark, but Nico could tell the view showed him Jason. He was in a tent, Nico's tent, Nico was startled to realize. He was laying in a sleeping bag and trying to sleep, though he kept shifting restlessly.

"He can't hear us," Apollo said, and Nico nodded.

Jason coughed. The sound was horrible, harsh and deep. One cough turned into several, and soon Jason's entire body was sharply jerking with each cough. He sat up and turned on a flashlight. Nico watched as his lover, virtually unrecognizable with a full beard and glassy eyes, reached for a canteen. He took a long drink, and the coughing stopped. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small paper rectangle. Nico couldn't see what Jason was looking at, but he knew what it was as certainly as if the angle was reversed and he was peering over Jason's shoulder. It was the picture of himself he'd left Jason after they'd first broken up. Knowing that Jason was alone, sick, and still thinking of him made Nico start to cry again. He reached out to the image, to touch Jason, and gasped when his hand went straight through Jason's chest.

"I have his coordinates now. Would you like to end this vision so you can call Valdez?" Apollo asked.

Nico kissed his fingers and pressed them to the image of Jason. He whispered "I will find you" before nodding for Apollo to break the connection.

"I am sorry, Nico. I do not understand the pain you are experiencing, but I can see how hurt you are. Here." Apollo balled his hand into a fist, then opened it to reveal a scrap of paper with coordinates on it. "May this help you."

"Sir, can you please tell me what's wrong with Jason? Will he be alright?"

"He has bronchitis," Apollo said. "It is not life-threatening, but could become worse if he continues to expose himself to inclement weather. My children at Camp Half-Blood can heal him."

"Thank you, lord."

"Nico, please." Apollo grimaced slightly. "I know I have violated your trust. I also know it will take a long time for me to earn it back. In the meantime, I would very much like it if you would consider continuing to call me by my name. You do not believe it right now, but I am not your lord. You are your own master, not me or your father or Jason or Zeus himself."

Nico took the scrap of paper and stood. "Thank you, Apollo. It probably won't take nearly as long as you think for me to trust you again. See—" He waved the paper around. "I'm a sucker for guys who treat me like shit."
He walked out the door and left Apollo sitting on the bedroom floor.

The New York air was cold, and Nico shivered a little inside his jacket. He'd taken the elevator down to the lobby, and his knees hadn't stopped shaking. Now, sitting against the back of the building, the shaking worsened. He ignored it. He pulled a penlight and a crystal out of his pocket and used the combination to make a rainbow. He offered his drachma to Iris, and Leo Valdez, sleeping with his arms wrapped around Calypso, came into view.

"Leo," Nico whispered.

Leo didn't budge.

"Leo!"

Nothing.

"Valdez, wake the fuck up."

Leo slept on, but Calypso opened her eyes and sleepily regarded Nico.

"Nico?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, my lady," Nico said. "I need a word with Leo."

"It is late, young one," she said. Nevertheless, she pulled the covers a little higher across her chest, snapped on a light, and woke Leo.

Leo bolted upright, clearly disoriented. "I want Poptarts!"

If Nico hadn't been sick with worry, fear, and confusion, he might have laughed. Calypso spoke quietly, and Leo turned his skinny, shirtless frame toward Nico. Valdez made Nico look like Jason in the muscles department.

"Hey, Leo," Nico started. "I'm sorry to bother you so late, but it's important."

"It better be, Jackie. I've got a test tomorrow."

"It's about our mutual blond friend, who's apparently been wandering around the fucking country for two months and no one thought to tell me." Nico wasn't angry at Leo, but he was angry about the entire situation.

Leo inhaled sharply and bit his lip. "He didn't want you to know, kid. And why you would care after how shitty he was to you—"

"It doesn't matter. He's sick. He needs someone to fetch him and take him to Half-Blood tomorrow. Text your professor first thing in the morning and beg out of the test. I'm sure Hazel can help manipulate the mist to get you a retest, if you need it. Take Festus and go to the coordinates I'm about to give you."

"Fuck your bossy ass, Jackie."

"Are you doing it or not?"

Leo blew a raspberry. "Yeah, I'm doing it. But you and Sparky owe me big time."

Nico grinned. "Thanks, Leo. I'll call you tomorrow night to make sure everything went alright."
"Whatever." Leo waved his hand. "Why aren't you getting him yourself? You got a test tomorrow, too, asshole?"

"It's complicated. It can't be me. Here, let me give you the coordinates."

Nico didn't want to talk about why he couldn't go to Jason himself, so he held up the paper Apollo had given him. Leo rolled his eyes and wrote down the numbers.

"How do you know Superman won't fly the coop before I get there?"

That was a good question. Nico would need to make sure Jason didn't leave.

"I'll take care of that. Go as soon as you can tomorrow morning, and he'll be there. I owe you, Valdez."

Leo stuck his tongue out at Nico and ended the message.

Nico rested his head against the building and took a few deep breaths. He wasn't ready to go upstairs and face Apollo's anxious hovering. The whole episode reminded him too much of those bad days with Jason. He'd thought those feelings of worry and inadequacy were gone, but this night brought them all to the surface. It was possible that he'd never be able to fully shake the pain of those days. And now he'd gotten himself into exactly the kind of situation he'd left Jason to avoid. He had given his life over to someone else to use and manage at his whim. He had no one to blame but himself.

He turned on the penlight and angled it at the crystal again. This time, Percy's sleeping form appeared. Thankfully, Annabeth wasn't with him.

"Percy?"

Percy must not have been sleeping, because his eyes popped open. He jumped up and disappeared from view. A light came on, and Percy moved back into Nico's field of vision. Nico propped his hand up on his knee and shone the penlight on his own face.

"Nico! Baby! Oh fuck, thank you. I was worried I wouldn't see you again."

Normally, Nico felt very uncomfortable when Percy acted like...that. He didn't want Percy to have strong feelings for him, no matter how comforting the attention was. He loved Jason, and he could never love Percy the same. Their affair would end badly if Percy got in too deep. Nico didn't want to hurt him. So why was he calling? He needed to leave Percy alone. Right now, though, he needed Percy so much, if he was being honest. Percy had never used his body to negate Nico's power.

"I wouldn't do that, Percy. I care about you very much."

Percy lowered his head.

"I wish we were together," Nico whispered. "I don't have the energy to shadow travel to New Rome right now, but I wish I did. I want to sleep with you in your bed and have you hold me close."

"Are you alright?" Percy looked back up, and the concern on his face made Nico's eyes fill with tears. "Oh, baby, honey, what's wrong? Did something go wrong at Leo's?"

"No, it's...I worked it out so I could call him instead of going there. I wasn't thinking clearly, I guess, when I talked to you before. I'm sorry I got so mad, Percy."

"It's nothing. I deserved it. I'm so sorry I didn't tell you about Jason. He said I shouldn't tell you
because I needed to keep you safe, and I believed him. We both care about you a lot, Nico, and I'd do anything to protect you."

"I know. Don't worry about it. I was a dick. Look, I should go. I needed to hear your voice, but I'm feeling better now."

"Are you sure? I can talk longer if you need me to." Percy looked so worried, Nico had to get it together.

"I'm good," Nico lied. "I'll call you again as soon as I can. Have good classes tomorrow. Sweet dreams."

"They're always sweet. I dream of you."

Nico blew Percy a kiss and ended the message.

The trip back to the apartment took far too short a time. Apollo was sitting on the couch, aimlessly rifling through an issue of *Men's Health*. Nico knew the god was actually waiting for him to return. He wasn't exactly angry at Apollo, and he wasn't exactly scared. What he was couldn't be defined so easily. He couldn't even say he was traumatized. He'd experienced much worse than an unwanted kiss. More than anything, it was those old feelings the kiss brought back. Other than that, well, he'd have to remember Apollo wasn't some random demigod. He couldn't take his superiority for granted. The whole thing sucked.

"Nico, I am glad you have returned." Apollo smiled brightly, but Nico could see the anxiety in his eyes. "Will you sit with me?"

Nico wordlessly sat on the couch, close enough for Apollo to touch him. Maybe some sick part of himself hoped the god would. After all, the roughness had reminded him of Jason, and Jason was what he craved.

"Thank you for the information you gave me, Apollo," Nico said. "Leo's going to bring Jason to Camp Half-Blood tomorrow."

"That is wonderful, lov—Nico."

"You can still call me lover, if you want. I've had worse than a rough, unwanted kiss. I don't break easily."

Nico tried to smile, but he knew he failed.

"Perhaps tomorrow, Nico. I do not break easily, either, believe it or not." Apollo managed a real smile. "I would like to prepare dinner for you tomorrow evening."

"That sounds lovely." Nico wanted to say whatever he had to in order to go to bed. "I'll look forward to it. For now, I'd like to take my leave and go to bed. The day has been long."

"You needn't ask my permission for anything. Nothing has changed about the way I feel for you or our relationship. Maybe I respect you even more."

"Thank you." Nico leaned in and kissed Apollo's cheek. If he was trapped in a snare of his own design, he may as well make the best of it. He stood and walked from the living room. Once in the hall, he looked back and saw Apollo rubbing his cheek.

Nico hurried through his bedtime routine. He was normally fastidious about cleanliness, but tonight
he barely made time to wash his face, hands, and brush his teeth before rushing to his bedroom, stripping, and going to bed. He needed to hurry up and sleep. Fortunately, falling asleep had never been Nico's particular sleep problem.

Once he was asleep, he walked his dreams deliberately. He passed the old nightmares, the people, dead and alive, begging for his help. Bryce Lawrence screamed for mercy. Nico paid him no heed. He stopped in to watch Percy for a moment. Percy was already dreaming of him. It was easy to slip into the dream, if jarring to feel Percy moving inside him, since that had never happened for real. Nico wondered how often Percy dreamed about this. It felt so incredible, even in the hazy unreality of the dream, and Nico momentarily lost himself in the feeling of being joined with his green-eyed lover. It felt wrong, though, being here without Percy's knowledge, so he kissed the son of Poseidon's cheek and pulled himself out of the dream.

He extended his senses and found Jason easily.

"Jace?"

Jason was dreaming of him, too, but the dream wasn't a happy one. He was replaying the day in the woods — the day he'd said the terrible things and Nico had left. Dream Nico was so young. He was skinny and sloppy. Nico watched for a moment — saw the way his legs fell out from under him when Jason called him a whore. Nico wanted to protect this younger version of himself, keep the rest of the events from unfolding. He wanted to protect Jason, too.

"Jason. Look at me."

Jason's head swiveled, and Dream Nico faded.

"Nico? Is it you?"

"It is. I can manipulate dreams, but not for too long. I need you to listen to me."

"Are you alright? Did something happen to you?"

"No. Listen to me, Jason. I'm fine. It's you I'm worried about."

Jason shrugged. "I'm fine."

"You're not. You're sick, and you've put yourself in danger. Stay where you are. Leo's coming tomorrow to bring you to Camp Half-Blood."

"Leo? Nico, is this real?"

"I'm real. It's a dream, Jace, but I'm real. Don't leave your campsite. Be ready for Leo in the morning."

"I don't want to go to camp, Neeks. I don't belong there."

"You are going to camp, Jason. You need medical attention." Nico moved forward in the dream and stood right in front of Jason. Jason's beard was strange, but his bright blue eyes were so warm and kind, exactly how Nico remembered them.

"Can I touch you?"

Jason was not focusing on what Nico was saying. It was frustrating. "Damn it, Jason, focus. Tell me you're going to camp with Leo tomorrow. Tell me you won't leave."
Jason brushed Nico's cheek. His hand was burning up. He had a fever. "I'm not going to camp. I can't."

"You have no choice. If you leave before Leo comes, I'll come to you myself and drag your ass to camp."

"You can't come to me." Jason warily eyed their surroundings. "Can they hear us here?"

"No. Just the Underworld gods, probably. We're safe."

Jason nodded and pulled Nico's face close. Nico couldn't breathe, couldn't think. This felt even more real than Percy's dream.

"Zeus will kill you, Nico. He'll kill you if you come near me. He's scared of us. I've worked so hard to keep you safe."

Jason sounded delirious. It increased Nico's desire to go get Jason himself.

"If you promise to stay and wait for Leo, you can kiss me right now."

Jason hesitated. "I want that, but keeping you safe matters more."

Perhaps Jason wasn't so delirious after all.

"Then you'll go with Leo. I swear on the River Styx that if I find out you didn't wait for Leo, I will find you and take you to camp myself. If Zeus kills me, so be it."

Jason's jaw clenched. "Damn it, Nico. You're forcing me to do something that will hurt me."

"You're hurting yourself, asshole," Nico said. "You think it's helpful for you to be out in the boonies in winter? You're going to Camp Half-Blood and letting them heal you. Then you are getting your ass back to Camp Jupiter and finishing college. No arguments. I'll talk to Hazel and Reyna, and they'll treat you better. Percy promised, too."

"Motherfucker. You're making it worse. I don't want to go back there. I don't want to be your other lover's friend. I don't want to be reminded every single second how I fucked up everything between us."

"I don't give a shit what you want right now," Nico snapped. "You're not thinking clearly, and I want you to be safe every damn bit as much as you want it for me."

Jason pulled Nico's head so they were face to face. Nico was stunned to realize Jason wasn't that much taller than him anymore. He'd stopped noticing his growth. Apollo replaced his clothes before his jeans got too short, and he didn't have any other way to judge his height. Nico's nerdthink was interrupted by the brush of Jason's lips against his. It was brief, the contact, a whisper, then Jason was letting go and moving away. Nico wanted to beg him to come back.

"I'll wait for Leo, but I'm not going back to school."

"Bastard."

"No. Listen to me now. I need this, this wandering." Jason ran his hand through his hair. Nico noticed that Jason's jeans were too big. He wasn't eating right.

"You're making yourself sick. You don't need that."
"I'm making myself live like you did. I need that."

"You sound like an idiot, Jason Grace." Nico was furious. How would being homeless and near death help Jason? How could he think Nico's life was some tourist pilgrimage? "My life was shit until you came along."

Jason turned in a circle and came rapidly back into Nico's space. His hands wrapped around Nico's arms, and Nico jerked away.

"I need to understand you. I need to do penance for the things I've done to you."

"Oh, my gods, do I need to call Leo back and get him to come right now? You're out of your fucking mind! You don't owe me any penance, you dipshit! I know you've been trying to keep me safe! Bastard asshole!" Nico tugged his hands through his hair. "Gods, let me love you without reliving all our old pain. I just want to love you. Damn it."

"Nico, I—"

"Shut up."

"But—"

"Shut up and sit. Now."

Jason looked at Nico like he was crazy, but he sat on the ground. Nico closed his eyes and made the space morph from the woods at Camp Half-Blood to his bed in Apollo's apartment. He climbed onto Jason's lap and pushed him down onto the bed. Jason's eyes were huge, blown wide with lust and shock. His hands gripped Nico's hips.

"It feels so real," he whispered.

"I wish it was real, but stop thinking about that right now. You're being stupid. I need to you to be safe, Jason, please. I'm not sure we'll ever be together again, but I love you every bit as much as I ever did, and I always will. I want you to be happy."

Jason's eyes filled with tears. "I can't be happy without you."

"You can. I need to believe that."

"Are you happy without me?"

Nico rolled his eyes. "Damn you, Jason. I'm trying. I'll never love anyone like I love you, but I'm trying to find other ways to be happy."

"Like fucking Percy."

Nico started to get up, but Jason rolled them over so Nico was pressed into the bed. One hand stayed at Nico's hip, but the other brushed his cheek.

"Don't answer. It doesn't matter. Have Percy if you want. I'll still love you more than life." Jason's eyes were so intense that Nico believed he meant it. "I'm proud of you for how you've handled everything. Percy told me you're in school. He said you looked good. You do look good. Better than good. I want to thoroughly ruin you."

Nico moaned. "You look like shit. Did you not pack a razor?"
Jason rolled his hips and grinned. "Do you really care about the beard?"

"Not remotely at the moment." Nico used the beard to pull Jason's face down and nuzzle his nose.

"Do you think we could..."

"Yes, please." Nico bucked his hips up into Jason's body.

Jason's mouth was back, the hair around it tickling Nico's lips. Nico giggled, and Jason laughed, too. Their lips touched softly, and this time, Nico returned the kiss.

"Jason, bro, wake up!"

_Leo_ Valdez had come through.

Jason moved his head and laid it on Nico's shoulder. "No, Nico. Not now."

"Go, Jace," Nico whispered. "Get well. I love you. I will always love you."

Nico didn't wait for a reply. He kissed Jason's hair and pulled himself out of the dream.
Forgotten

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Strangely enough, Hazel, for all her adamant belief at Christmas that her brother was coming home, was the first of the new gods’ mortal family to forget to write. It happened on a Monday ten days before Nico's birthday. The new gods knew it was Monday because they'd conjured a calendar. The thing was stuck to the wall right inside their front door, and Nico had helpfully coded it with the names of the people they were supposed to hear from each day.

Hazel's letters always came to Percy, and they were always uplifting, sweet, and funny. When the letter wasn't in Percy's altar, he tore apart the food offerings in Jason's and Nico's altars, too, in case it had been addressed to one of them. There was nothing letter-like anywhere. Percy hung his head and went back to the house.

Nico and Jason were in the man cave. Nico had his head buried in a book. Jason played a video game. Percy came into the room and wordlessly caught Jason's attention. By the grim expression on Percy's face, Jason knew something was wrong. His eyes flicked to Nico and back to Percy. Percy shook his head, mimed reading a letter, and inclined his head toward Nico.

They had developed this new, non-verbal language out of necessity. There were almost no secrets between the three now, at least not ones that pertained to their new life, but there were occasions like this that warranted a talk between two of them that couldn't be overheard by the third.

Jason paused his game and set down the controller. He put his hands to his cheeks and mouthed, "Hazel?"

Percy frowned and nodded.

"Shit," Jason mouthed. He watched the frozen screen for a moment while Percy nudged Nico forward and climbed into the space behind him. As soon as Percy had settled, Nico wedged tightly back against him and pulled his feet up on the couch without breaking his concentration on his book. The black leather of the couch squeaked under their bodies. Jason scooted so close that he jostled Nico's arm.

Nico sighed and closed the book. "What's wrong?"

"What's your book about, Nico?" Jason dropped his hand between Nico's thighs and hoped the combination of the placement of his hand and getting to talk about books would be enough to occupy Nico's mind until he or Percy had a good idea.

"It's called Last Train to Memphis. It's a biography about Elvis Presley. What's going on?" Nico asked. He spread his legs a little and let Jason make more progress between them.

"Sounds really interesting," Percy said. "Will you come in the bedroom and tell me about it while Jason gives you a little suck-off?"

He was already maneuvering them upright when Nico pressed into him, pinning him to the couch.

Jason removed his hand because Nico wouldn't want to be felt up while talking about his sister.

"Hazel didn't write," Percy said.

Nico shook his head. "Then it's not her day."

"I double-checked the calendar, Neeks."

Nico glared at Percy and at Jason, as if Jason had done something, too. "Then I got it wrong on the calendar."

"Nico, Piper wrote yesterday. Today was Hazel's day." Jason reached out his hand and laid it on Nico's forearm.

Nico shook him off and unlatched Percy's arms from his chest. He stood and stared down his nose at them. "You didn't check the altar well enough, Percy. That's all. Go check again."

"I tore them all up, all three of them, looking, baby. I'm so sorry." Percy reached out to hold Nico's hand.

Nico backed up. He opened and closed his mouth several times. It was very dry. Jason reached out as Percy had done, and Nico took another step back. "Okay. Okay." Nico nodded his head as an idea formed in his mind. "She's on a quest or something. We'll watch TV tonight and see. It's okay."

Percy smiled brightly and nudged Jason. "That's smart. I bet he's right, Jace."

Jason couldn't shake the feeling that Hazel was not on a quest. "Yeah, you're right, guys." He stood and wrapped his arms around Nico in a way he hoped didn't appear comforting. Behind Nico's back, Percy looked as uneasy as Jason felt. "Let's do something, the three of us. We could go in the bedroom, swim, play catch or cards, spar—"

"I know what there is to do here, Cruise Director Ken," Nico snapped. "Let's spar and when we're done we'll swim until nightfall."

Percy hopped up and freed Nico from Jason's arms. He pulled Nico backward by the belt loops. At the door to the man cave, Nico stopped and addressed Jason. "She's on a quest, Jace. That's all."

"Of course," Jason said. He turned off the TV and followed his companions out of the house.

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Sparring and swimming kept Nico's mind off his sister for most of the afternoon. Too soon, the gods had to go back inside and stake out their continuing nighttime position in front of the TV. Despite Percy's assurances that they could return to their bedroom to sleep, they'd never quite made it. Nico and Jason had gently prodded, but Percy had resisted. As a group, they'd agreed they could continue to stay in the man cave to sleep as long as other, more private, activities where they may want a bed took place in the bedroom.

Tonight, Nico was grateful that they hadn't given up the arrangement. He didn't want to betray his anxiety that either something was wrong with Hazel or she had genuinely forgotten him. He lay between Jason and Percy and tried to calm his fears. Jason pressed gentle kisses into his chest and
massaged his lower back. He wanted to ease what he believed to be Nico's impending suffering. Percy laid behind Nico, rubbed his shoulders, and hoped he and Jason were wrong.

Percy and Nico watched Camp Soap Opera for a bit before the East Coast demigods woke. Jason eventually fell asleep with his mouth pressed to Nico's right pectoral. Nico slung a leg over the top of Jason and eliminated all space between them.

"Here," Percy said, while they watched a sleepy mortal drop off a car at Leo's garage. Leo was talking the man's ear off. Percy picked up Jason's hand from where it rested low on Nico's back. "Put his hand back in front of you or up higher on your back or down on your thigh."

"Why?"

"Because I want to put my arm around you. When we're in that position, the place where his hand was is prime real estate belonging to my dick. I'm not sharing with Jason's hand." Percy bit down gently on Nico's shoulder to make his point.

Nico snorted out a laugh, despite his nerves. He tucked Jason's hand into his chest. "You share plenty of prime real estate with Jason's various parts these days. What difference does it make?"

"Well," Percy fluffed his pillow, scooted up slightly, wrapped his arm under Nico's head, pulled the dark-haired god closer, and pinned his hips to the area vacated by Jason's hand. "It probably doesn't make a difference to you. But to me there's a big difference. See," Percy pulled Nico's arm back and demonstrated. "Nico's hand on Percy's dick equals 'more, please, mmm, so good.'"

Nico laughed and removed his hand.


"But you get in such tight proximity when we...you know what? Never mind. This isn't a conversation for out here," Nico said. "But I am curious about it. Maybe we can talk about it tomorrow morning when we go to the bedroom?"

Percy shifted back and rubbed himself against Nico. "Well, I pretty much can't shut up and will do anything your hot, wet mouth asks, so..."

The slow and gentle rocking between the gods stopped. Percy's hand, which had been snaking across Nico's hip, stilled.

Annabeth was making her way out of the apartment building that was, or had been, Percy's home. Snow blanketed the ground and came up to her booted calf. She was wearing a blue coat and hat and awkwardly carried Maybelle's blanket-draped car seat. Maybelle was obscured from the gods' view. Nico was grateful. Seeing her was too painful.

"Shouldn't she be in a different seat by now? Do you remember what the weight limit was on that one?" Percy asked.

"I don't remember," Nico said. "I can't believe I don't remember."

"It's okay." Percy patted Nico's head. "We've been busy. Annabeth wouldn't have her in the infant seat if she was too big for it. I'm over-worrying. Ooh, look! It's your car."

Nico's stomach twisted at the sight of his lovely car. "It didn't even occur to me I'd left it at your apartment. She should've sent it up to Leo or something. Or Chris could use it, maybe."
"She's been busy being a single parent." Percy hated that Annabeth had to parent alone. "I doubt your car is a high priority."

"I know." Nico felt defensive. "It's not a big deal, but she probably has to move it a lot so it doesn't get a ticket. Might as well get it off her hands and send it to someone who'll use it. Or she could sell your car and drive mine. I'd buy you a new one if we get to go home. I wish we could write them back."

The view from the television shifted, and they were watching Chris and Clarisse make breakfast.

"She thinks your car's too showy. She wouldn't drive it. I at least wish we could write back to her," Percy agreed. "It has to be horrible for her, doubting I'm coming back but not entirely sure. How's she supposed to move on or get rid of my stuff or, damn it, heal, when the idea that I might come back hangs over her head?"

Percy scooted down the bed a little so he could lay his head on Nico's. He hugged Nico tight, and Jason settled differently in response. Percy watched Jason breathe, nuzzled into Nico. 

"I'm sorry," Nico whispered.

"No more sorry." Percy kissed Nico's cheek. "This isn't your fault. What if we aren't ever allowed to go home? Or worse, what if, when it's time to go home, we're too changed to make it work? Gods, Nico, what if that life is really over? I can feel us changing. Can you?"

This was Percy's biggest fear, and all three gods could feel it happening. Who they had been was slowly slipping away.

Nico kissed Jason's hand and turned over. He and Percy were nose to nose. "I know we're different now that we're gods, and I think Jason and I, we won't be able to go back to who we were. There's a big part of me that doesn't want to, anyway. But you're different, Percy. You have something worth going back to. Don't give up."

Percy laughed halfheartedly. "I lose, no matter what. If I can't go back, I've lost them. If I can, I lose you."

Nico shook his head. His black curls fell into his eyes, and Percy brushed them back. Percy's thumb lingered on Nico's cheekbone.

"Apollo told me once that the gods live too long, and that they don't feel family bonds, but he loves Artemis as much as he ever did. Some bonds last. Ours, yours and mine? It'll last, Percy. I'm more sure of that than anything."

Percy kissed Nico, soft and gentle. Their lips didn't move, but they stayed together, shared their air and their space. Their eyes drifted closed, and they were a hair away from sleep when the onscreen scene shifted to Rachel Dare handing out a prophecy to a group of young teens. Nico stiffened at the Oracle's voice, and Percy tried to jerk upright. He hit his head on the barrier.

"Turn it. No prophecies. No kids dying for dumb stuff that doesn't matter." Percy pressed into Nico and reached around Jason to grab the remote. He switched to the channel showing a sleeping New Rome. "All that stuff we did, Neeks, for a bunch of gods that put us in prison for being kind. They killed you, for crying out loud."

"What? What do you mean?" It was Nico's turn to try to sit up and hit his head on the barrier. "Is there something you haven't told me?"
"It's nothing. Just stuff that happened the last day." Percy wanted to change the subject. "It didn't matter. Let's check out the quest channels now. Maybe we can see where Hazel is."

Nico watched Percy carefully. He could tell Percy was being evasive, but his curiosity was outweighed by the desire to see his sister and find out if she had forgotten to write. He sighed and faced the television. Jason immediately wrapped an arm around him. Percy grimaced and wondered what he could afford to lose.

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Hazel made an appearance on HephaestusTV about three hours later. The young gods caught a glimpse of her for a moment before the scene changed. She was sitting in a little desk in a classroom, watching a film about the life cycle of *Paramecium*. The only danger she faced was boredom. Her head rested in her hand, and occasionally her chin drooped.

"She looked tired." Nico nudged Jason, who had awakened about an hour earlier. "Do you think she looked tired?"

Jason's lips were pursed, but he answered Nico. "Yeah, a little bit. She's probably been studying a lot. That must be an intersession class or something."

"I think the spring semester was set to start for me a couple days before my birthday, so I bet it's the same for her." Nico took a shaky breath. "So she's fine, just tired. That's good. She's been busy, that's all. It's good."

"Nico—" Jason turned over. Nico wouldn't meet his eyes.

"She's good. Just busy. It's fine. I'm fine. She just...forgot." Nico wrapped his arms around himself and drew in his shoulders. The shaking intensified. "It's not a big deal. It's not like she forgot me or anything. She's busy. It was going to happen, sooner or later. By the time her turn rolls around again, she'll be feeling so bad, and we can't let her feel bad. It's fine. It's really fine."

"Nico, honey, it's okay to feel upset," Jason said. "You can say it hurts."

"Probably, Neeks," Percy whispered. He put his hand on Nico's elbow and was shrugged off.

"She's good. Just busy. It's fine. I'm fine. She just...forgot." Nico wrapped his arms around himself and drew in his shoulders. The shaking intensified. "It's not a big deal. It's not like she forgot me or anything. She's busy. It was going to happen, sooner or later. By the time her turn rolls around again, she'll be feeling so bad, and we can't let her feel bad. It's fine. It's really fine."

"Nico, honey, it's okay to feel upset," Jason said. "You can say it hurts."

"It doesn't. I'm fine." Nico curled himself so tightly into a ball that the barrier allowed it, though Percy's and Jason's lower legs were forced toward the middle to maintain the tiny space. "Just turn off the damned TV, please."

Percy turned the TV off. He and Jason stared miserably at Nico. Jason ran his fingers through Nico's hair, and Nico tucked his head in between his knees. His feet rested on the tops of Jason's thighs. They shook, too.

"It's okay," Nico said into the darkness, his voice muffled. "I told Percy that you and I, Jace, we're
not going to be able to go back to the way things were. It's only right for her to move on, let go. It's healthy. I want her to be happy."

"Nico, she's not letting you go," Percy said. "She forgot once. You're right. Next time she writes, she'll be way over-apologizing. We'll laugh and wish she wasn't so hard on herself."

"I love you," Jason said. He dragged Nico's head back out from between his knees and cupped his cheeks. "You're hurting. Percy and I know it, and you know it. Let yourself feel it. We'll hold you and help you. Please let yourself grieve."

"I don't like crying, especially in front of you," Nico whispered.

"Nico." Jason wiped his own eyes. "I don't want this to be about me and you, not when you need help, but I'm not the man I used to be. If you can't grieve in front of me, then turn over and let Percy help you. I'll look the other way and not touch you any more than I have to. Whatever it takes. Let someone help you."

Nico sniffled and wiped his nose on his knuckles. He straightened his legs and pulled Percy's arm tight around him. It functioned like a guard, keeping Jason and Nico separate. Jason watched and cried.

"I want you to hold me while I cry, Jason. Please," Nico murmured. "Please hold me now."

Jason slapped his hand onto Percy's back and pulled them all closer together, closer than the barrier required. Nico gave a strangled laugh that turned into quiet, painful tears.

Chapter End Notes

The book Nico's reading, *Last Train to Memphis*, is the first of a two-part biography of Elvis Presley written by Peter Guralnick. The second book is called *Careless Love*. They are a great read of a tragic American icon, and it's fascinating even if you're not a Presley fan (and I'm not).
Florida wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Jason took off his shirt and used it to wipe gold dust from his face. He'd been here three days and was ready to leave. The first night had been nice. He'd sprung for a hotel and a haircut. Both had been great. He hadn't had a haircut since Nico forced him to go to Camp Half-Blood in early November. It was amazing how much his hair had grown in two months. The barber or hairstylist, whatever the lady was called, had taken her time with him, once she'd gotten him shaved, and his hair almost looked the way it had when he was taking care of himself before everything fell apart.

The hotel room had been nice, too. The place was laughable compared to the Ritz, but there was a bed and a toilet, so Jason wasn't complaining. He'd ordered a pizza and had it delivered to his room. The hot, cheesy mess had tasted delicious. He'd ordered a medium but found he could only eat about half of it. Nine months of scant appetite meant his stomach wasn't on board, no matter how much his brain insisted on one more slice. At any rate, he'd gotten a decent night's rest and checked out feeling great, relatively.

Then he'd gotten chased by a boar. After the boar, there had been a couple cyclopes. He had finally gotten rid of them near sundown and set up camp under a hut on the beach. At least the ocean was pretty. This morning, as soon as he'd gotten the sleeping bag packed away, he was beset by a group of cranky harpies. They seemed to like his hair. Their interest was almost enough to make him wish it still looked dull and washed out.

Jason removed a small square of ambrosia from his backpack and chewed it. He watched the scratches and claw marks disappear from his arms and chest before digging out a new shirt and putting it on. Laundry would need done soon. He pulled out his wallet and counted the cash. There was still a lot of money, almost $2000, and Jason thought about getting some lunch, too.

He'd been trying to take better care of himself since leaving Camp Half-Blood. Leo had interrupted his dream to drag him to camp, and Will Solace had been especially prickly, grumbling under his breath and giving him a proper dressing down for not behaving in a healthy manner.

Nico had visited his dreams every night he was at camp. That part sounded wonderful, when he thought of it in those terms. The reality had been far different. Nico had been sweet at first, when Jason was recovering in the infirmary. He'd held his hand and kissed his forehead. Jason had enjoyed it. Then apparently Nico had talked to Clarisse, who'd come by about three days into Jason's stay, threatening him and interrogating him about what he was doing after he healed. The dream visits changed.

The first night after Nico found out Jason intended to leave camp and go back to wandering, he'd called Jason names and raged for what felt like hours, but he'd still kissed Jason's head when the dream ended. The next night, Nico had stomped on his foot. The night after that, he'd tried being seductive, which failed miserably because Nico, sexy as he was, sucked at seduction when he was actually trying. Jason had ended up laughing and gotten his foot stomped on again. After that, things had gone progressively downhill. Nico threatened. Jason ignored. Jason couldn't figure out how to hide from Nico during dreams, but he did learn enough to conjure himself a pair of headphones and an iPod. That had made Nico even more furious. The next night, Nico hadn't come by. Even though Jason had been hoping Nico would leave him alone, he realized that wasn't at all what he wanted. The next night, Nico returned, and Jason lied, pretending that he was giving the matter some thought. That bought him three more nights, by which time he had already left Half-Blood, before Nico caught on and said he wasn't coming back to visit Jason's dreams unless he was at Camp Jupiter. It
had been forty-nine days since Jason had last seen his lover.

"Don't turn around."

Jason stiffened. He'd been so engrossed in thinking about Nico that he hadn't heard someone approach him. Was it a rogue demigod? One of those cyclopes?

"Who are you?"

"Shit man, who gives a fuck? Give me your wallet."

Jason relaxed. Oh, gods, he was getting mugged. He laughed. Seriously? Poor guy wouldn't know what hit him.

Jason shouldn't have been so cocky.

A sharp blade pierced deep into his neck, and Jason fell. His last thought was how lucky he was to die because Nico might visit him again.

***

Nico felt it the second Jason's soul started to fade. He was in a coffee shop, trying to sneak in a little preview studying of his spring courses. Something devastating had happened to Jason, and Nico ducked under the table and traveled to the exact location of his love.

The scene was horrifying. Jason was unconscious and covered in blood that was still spurting from a neck wound. Nico didn't take any time to look around. He wrapped his hand around Jason's wrist, and they were gone, hurtling through the shadows and into Nico's bedroom.

"Apollo!" Nico screamed. "Apollo! I need you! Hurry! He's dying! Hurry!"

Nico pressed his hands to the wound, but the pressure did nothing to stop the flow of blood. In less than two seconds, his hands were soaked red.

"Apollo!" He had never screamed like this. His throat burned.

"Lover?"

Apollo didn't wait for Nico to answer. He pushed Nico gently out of the way and went to work. Nico dropped to his knees and prayed to his father to slow Jason's journey long enough for Apollo to heal him.

There was so much blood. It covered Jason's entire body. His beautiful blond hair was caked with it. Nico's comforter and sheets were dripping with it. Apollo was singing, and Nico was so so so afraid.

"Nico, leave. Now. Wait in my bathroom. Lock the door and do not come out until I come for you.”

"I'm not leaving him!"

"You are counteracting my work. The darkness is spreading from you. You must leave, or you will kill him."
Nico ran. He ran into Apollo's bathroom and locked the door like Apollo had said. He sat on the floor, as far away from his own room as possible, and prayed to his father and Thanatos. He cried. Jason's blood dripped from his elbows onto the floor. Nico didn't dare wipe the blood away. What if this was the last he had of Jason?

He cried and shook, splattering blood against the walls, but he didn't feel Jason slip away. In the other room, his lover's soul pulsed and flickered. He wished he could be like Reyna and lend Jason his strength, but all he had to give was death. He'd never hated his powers so much.

Fifteen minutes passed, and Nico could still feel Jason nearby. He prayed Apollo had saved him. Ten minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Nico scrambled to his feet and opened the door to find Apollo looking tired.

"Is he okay?"

"He will likely live," Apollo said heavily. "He had lost too much blood, but I was able to restore him."

"Oh, thank you, Apollo! Thank you, Dad!" Nico started to push past Apollo, but the god held his shoulder.

"Nico, you must control your powers, or you will harm him. You must be calm."

Nico nodded. He'd never do anything to hurt Jason. Apollo watched him carefully. Nico noticed, but his eyes were on the door. He needed to get to Jason. See him. Touch him.

"Slow, love. Jason is stable. I know you are anxious to see him, but you and I must speak first."

"I need—"

"Right now you must concern yourself with what Jason needs."

Apollo's words were like a slap to Nico's brain. He met Apollo's eyes to glare at him for implying he wasn't looking out for Jason, but the glare melted when he saw no malice or anger.

"Do you know where he was?"

"No. It was sandy, I think. There's sand on my clothes."

They both looked down at Nico's blood-soaked clothes. There were gritty red bits that suggested sand had mixed with the blood.

Apollo nodded. "Let me clean you, Nico."

"No!" Nico jumped away. "I can't let go of his blood! I have to keep it."

He could tell by the expression on Apollo's face that he wasn't acting right. The god looked like he pitied him. Nico couldn't understand why. He had to save Jason's blood.

"If I can save some of the blood on your body, give it to you to keep, can I clean the rest of it?"

Apollo's voice was so soothing.

"I can keep it forever?"

"Yes, my love."
"If you promise."

"I do." Apollo smiled. "Hold out your arm, the one with the bracelet. Lend me your dagger."

Nico withdrew the dagger and held it out to Apollo. The silver glinted in the sun coming through Apollo's windows. Apollo gently cupped Nico's wrist and pushed the bracelet higher on his arm. He turned Nico's hand so the inside of his wrist faced up and moved the dagger directly over Nico's delicate skin.

"This will hurt, love."

"I don't care," Nico moaned. He was trembling with fear for Jason and anticipation over the dagger point dangling so close to his wrist.

Apollo jabbed him with the blade, and Nico gave a small pained cry. Blood oozed from the wound, then reversed its course, heading back inside his body. Nico watched in amazement as some of Jason's blood filled the cut, too. His wrist throbbed, and the pain grew as more of Jason's blood poured inside. Stars popped in Nico's vision as the cut gave a last, sharp spike of pain, then Apollo was running his thumb over the area, singing softly. The pain eased. Nico closed his eyes and tried to keep his knees from buckling.

"Now, love, I will clean you."

Nico nodded again. It was the best he could do. He felt euphoric. Jason was alive, and his blood lived inside Nico. Apollo's hand ran over his chest and guided him to sit on the bed.

Nico opened his eyes and inspected his wrist. A jagged red line like a lightning bolt was seared into his skin. There was a slight lump underneath the mark. Jason's blood. Jason's mark.

"May I see him now, please?"

"You are in shock, Nico," Apollo murmured. "You are still seeping darkness, and your body is overextended and in pain. I must heal you, too, before you can go to Jason."

"Yes, of course. Whatever you have to do." Nico's eyes were fixed on the lightning bolt on his skin.

"Lay down. I will need to touch you. Do I have your permission?"

Nico laid down. Since the kiss, Apollo had been asking for permission almost every time he wanted to touch Nico. "Of course. I need to get to Jason."

Warm hands pressed against Nico's suddenly bare chest. Apollo began to sing and move his hands along Nico's body. He moved from Nico's chest to his stomach, then back up, over his neck and through his hair. Nico hadn't realized he'd been hurt, exhausted, and not thinking clearly, but he felt it now as the sensations left his body. After a moment, he felt calm, rested, and in full control of his faculties.

"Better?" Apollo asked.

Nico sat up and swung his legs off the bed. Apollo sat next to him and took his hand.

"Thank you, Apollo. You saved Jason. Thank you for healing me, too. I am eternally indebted to you."

The skin around Apollo's warm eyes crinkled as he smiled. He squeezed Nico's hand. "Are you
ready to see your lover? We can talk further once you've seen him."

"Yes, just one thing..."

Apollo's eyes widened in surprise as Nico leaned in and softly kissed his mouth. Nico didn't move his lips, content to let them press against Apollo's. He moved away after two beats of his heart.

"What was that?" Apollo asked, his fingers pressing the place where Nico's mouth had been.

"Gratitude." Nico stood and pulled Apollo to his feet.

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Jason slept peacefully. His color was tan and robust, his chest powerful. His arms strained his t-shirt. There was no gaping, pulsing wound in his neck, only the thinnest trace of a scar. He did not look like a man who had almost died half an hour ago.

Nico watched from a foot away. He was terrified to jostle Jason, but he was even more worried about what his powers could do. He killed things. He was a killer.

"Kneel, Nico. Put your elbows on the bed and hold his hand," Apollo said. "I am here to guide you. Together we will make sure your powers stay under control. Touching him will not cause injury."

The cold floor under Nico's knees braced him as he knelt and scooted forward until his chest touched the bed. He took Jason's hand in both of his. It felt so warm and alive. Nico gave a tiny nervous laugh.

"Can I kiss his hand?"

"Of course."

There was a soft pop behind him, and Nico turned to see that Apollo had conjured a chair directly behind him.

"Do not mind me," Apollo said as he sat down. "I would like to place my hands on you to soothe your anxiety. May I?"

"Please stop asking for permission to touch me, unless you're about to try something sexual or romantic. I'm so grateful that you helped Jason. I can't imagine objecting to your touch."

"Very well, lover. You may change your mind at any time, and I will respect your wishes."

Apollo's hands pressed into Nico's shoulders, and his body released more tension. Nico kissed Jason's hand and held it to his lips for long minutes.

"Can you tell me how he is? Is there any danger now?" he asked when Apollo didn't volunteer any information.

"He is stable. I have repaired the injuries, but he will need a significant amount of rest and a skilled and loving nurse. He will be weak for several days."

Nico clutched Jason's hand to his chest and turned slightly to see Apollo's face. The god's brow was
furrowed, and he was frowning.

"Can he stay here? I'll take care of him."

Apollo brushed Nico's cheek and smiled fondly. "Of course, my lover. I would not force you to part with him so soon after such a traumatic event. You broke our rule by bringing him here—"

"I had no choice." Nico's defenses flared. Yes, he'd broken their rule, but Jason would have died otherwise, and he would never regret saving him.

"Quite true," Apollo agreed. "This was the only option, Nico, that would result in Jason remaining alive. I am not angry. I am...jealous."

"I'm sorry." It was hard to believe a god would be jealous of his love for Jason, though over the course of the last four months, Nico had come to believe Apollo's affection for him was genuine.

Apollo waved his hand dismissively. "Do not apologize for your feelings, Nico. Your love for Jason is quite charming, especially since I hope to one day share in the love you have to give. I do wish to make sure you are aware that Jason is now burdened with our secret. He must never tell anyone where and with whom you live. You are no longer hidden to him, either. He can come here to seek you at any time."

"Okay." Nico didn't see how that was such a bad thing. Jason would never tell anyone. He'd never endanger Nico. And having Jason come see him once in awhile sounded better than wonderful.

"When you retrieved Jason from wherever he was, I am sure that your contact was noticed by my father or Hera."

Nico ran a hand down his face. That was the bad part. "I wouldn't be surprised."

"You must have come and gone extremely quickly, or Jason would be dead. We can assume that you both disappeared off their godly radar, and they expect you to be in your father's realm. I hope they will also suspect Hades of preventing Jason's death. Your father knows of our living arrangement?"

"Yes."

Hades had sent Demeter to the surface one day over Thanksgiving break and called Nico to his study to yell at him endlessly for doing the exact thing he had warned him not to do.

"Very well. He will take the blame for your disappearances if Zeus asks. Our security will not be compromised."

"How would it be compromised anyway?" Nico didn't understand why this had to be so complicated. He knew Zeus and Hera didn't want Jason to associate with him, but surely they'd be grateful he'd saved their son's life?

"Only your father and I, my son Asclepius, and perhaps Thanatos could have prevented Jason's death. You have been living off the godly grid for a while now, and Zeus has assumed you've been in the Underworld, only popping up here to go to school. It has worked well as a cover for your true living arrangements. However, Zeus is suspicious and almost unbalanced in his desire to keep you and Jason apart. If he were to find out we were lovers, or roommates, he would have the excuse he seeks to punish you severely. On some occasion, he undoubtedly has entertained the notion that you are with me. If Hades were to deny you were in his realm, Zeus would seek me out immediately."
That sounded bad. Nico wasn't trying to get in more trouble with Zeus. He would much rather have an agreeably disinterested uncle than an angry, vindictive one.

"Do you love your father, Apollo?"

Apollo laughed. He stopped rubbing Nico's shoulders and bent low to kiss his hair.

"You are a curious, kind man, Nico. I do not love my father, no. I fear him, in a respectful way. Love among the gods is a nebulous thing. We have been alive together for so long that it is hard to feel the early connections we had to one another. I suppose we are all tired of breathing each other's air. I do rather like and trust Hermes."

"But some of the gods love others. My dad and Persephone love each other," Nico pointed out. "Dionysus loves Ariadne."

"Indeed," Apollo agreed. "Romantic love is different. We are a feckless, faithless lot, on the whole, but some loves last. I love Artemis. Not romantically, of course, but I do consider her my family, as annoying and self-righteous as she can be."

Nico smiled. He sometimes felt that way about Reyna and Hazel.

Jason stirred, and Nico forgot all about love among the gods. The big blond twisted in his sleep and laid facing Nico. His eyes opened for a fraction of a second, and he smiled and reached out his hand to touch Nico's face. Nico shuddered at the contact and buried his face against Jason's stomach. Apollo's hands slipped down to the small of Nico's back, but all Nico could think about was how wonderful it felt to be this close to Jason.

"There, that is what he needs, Nico — your positive energy and love," Apollo said softly. "I must leave soon to return to my duties —"

"No! What if he needs you?" Panic flared in Nico. Apollo couldn't leave! He had to keep Jason safe.

"Then you will call me, and I will come." Apollo smiled that same sad smile. Nico knew it was because he didn't love Apollo the way he loved Jason, and right now, he felt very sorry for that.

"Thank you."

"There is nothing more he needs from me, though, and he should sleep until I return home this evening. I will check on him then. In the interim, I suggest you crawl into bed with him and hold him. Rest. You will wake should he need anything, I am sure."

"I won't hurt him?"

"No. Do not fight with him if he wakes." Apollo smirked and ran his hand through Nico's hair. "You have a rather bad temper, I have noticed, and I am sure there are some harsh words stored up to use on Jason. Save them for another day. Feed him, guide him to the restroom. Give him whatever he asks."

Nico nodded. He climbed onto the bed and over Jason. He wrapped his arm gently over his sleeping lover and curled tightly into his back. Jason smelled like rain and the beach, and Nico wanted to sear the combination into his memory. Apollo leaned over and brushed his hand from Nico's wrist to his shoulder before walking out the door. There was a blinding flash of light in the hallway, and Nico knew his roommate was gone.

"It's you and me, Jace," Nico whispered. "I love you."
When Nico woke, he had trouble placing himself. It felt like he was in his bed, but there was warmth next to him that he hadn't felt since last spring when he'd been with Percy. His arm was draped over what was definitely a body. Was he with Percy now? That didn't seem right. They were too far apart geographically. It felt so good, so right, this closeness. Nico reached out with his fingers and touched the button of a pair of jeans. Gods, Apollo hadn't slipped in bed with him, had he? No, this body was bigger, more powerful. Nico moved his fingers higher, splayed them over firm abdominal muscles and a strong, broad chest. Jason? It couldn't be. Nico would forever be denied his lover.

This body felt so much like Jason's, though. Nico decided to enjoy the fantasy as long as it lasted. He let his hand move further upward and imagined he was tracing Jason's strong jaw and cheekbones and his fine Roman nose. And his lips, gods, there they were — thinner by far than Nico's own, but soft and firm. The body stirred against Nico's touch and turned over. Even the hair now under Nico's fingers tickled his palm the right way, soft and thick and just barely long enough to grab and hold when they kissed.

Nico tangled his hand in the hair and gave a soft tug to make sure it felt right. The body jerked and sharply kneed Nico in the thigh.

"Ow!"

Nico's eyes snapped open as he massaged the dull ache in his thigh. There, real and living and right in front of him, was Jason. Nico gasped, and the earlier events of the day came flooding back: Jason's soul lurching, Jason bleeding to death on a beach, the shadow travel to his bedroom, blood soaking his arms and sheets — so much blood, the way Apollo had made him leave because he killed things, and how Jason had been healed. Nico trembled and started to cry. He stroked Jason's hair over and over with manic need.

Jason fidgeted, frowning slightly, and Nico remembered Apollo's warning to control his emotions. He took a few deep breaths through his nose and worked to calm his racing heart. He stopped crying and removed his hand from Jason's head. Jason settled back into sleep.

Gods, Nico was a wreck. He was normally so composed, unless he was aroused or angry. His powers were always within his control. Guilt for so many things — the danger he'd placed Jason in, the way he'd made Apollo's job harder, living with Apollo, sleeping with Percy, loving Percy — threatened to pull him under. Tears surfaced again, and he rolled onto his back and repeated the calming breaths. He had to get it together. Jason's near death was terrifying him. There were so many places, so many times, he could look back on and wish he'd behaved differently. For the first time, he wished he'd agreed to Jason's initial request to be his secret lover. They could have talked and worked it all out. He could have been with Jason for the entire two previous years. Did it matter what he would have given up, if he'd given up so much of it now anyway?

The answer, of course, was that whatever freedoms he'd given up to Apollo would have hurt so much worse to give up to Jason. The way he loved Jason would have rendered the pain too high. Being asked to forfeit your dignity and happiness hurt so much less when a stranger made the request instead of the love of your life.

Then there was Percy. Even if he had agreed to be Jason's lover on the side, Nico eventually would have ended up in Percy's bed. Maybe not the first time, but it would have happened. He wasn't
oblivious enough to deny the attraction that had built between them, and he knew that unless Jason was his constant, open lover, Percy's arms would have been where he'd turn during the inevitable lonely times when Jason was with Piper.

Besides, it hadn't worked anyway, after he had agreed. Their meetings at the Ritz had been heady and passionate, but they'd never been enough. The times in between those meetings were too often painful and filled with resentment.

This way was better. He didn't hate Jason. He had thoroughly enjoyed his time with Percy. Apollo had saved Jason's life. None of that would be quite the same if Nico had done what Jason wanted. This life without Jason was painful. The other path would have been painful. His life would have been painful no matter what choices he made. That truth reinforced Nico's growing belief that he had no real choices at all, that he was merely buffeted along by the whims of others.

He needed to break out of this depressing series of thoughts. Jason had almost died, yet he was alive and right next to him. Nico should be feeling relieved, overjoyed.

He turned back on his side and placed a careful hand on Jason's shoulder. He let it slide down the blond's chest until he could feel Jason's beating heart. The steady thump-thumping was reassuring.

Jason startled again and jerked away, reaching for his sword. His eyes burst open, dazzling Nico with their intense, icy blue. Nico watched as Jason's eyes changed from fearful to confused to insanely happy. Without warning, Jason grabbed Nico's face and pulled him into a scorching kiss. Nico's hands uselessly flapped about before settling against Jason's chest while Jason used his tongue to tease open Nico's mouth.

After too short a time, Jason broke away and laughed. Nico didn't understand what Jason was thinking, but he loved hearing the laughter.

"I knew you'd find me, Nico. Now I can be yours for eternity." Jason lifted his head slightly and winced. "Fuck. I didn't think being dead would hurt."

Jason thought he was dead? He thought he was dead, and he was happy about it? How bad had the last nine months been?

"You're not dead, Jace."

Jason narrowed his eyes at Nico. Nico widened his in exasperation.

"You're not dead! I would know."

"Am I dreaming, then? This feels so much more real." Jason scratched his head.

"No. You're with me, in real, living, life."

Jason's happiness changed to horror in a heartbeat. "You have to leave! I have to leave! We can't be together! They'll kill you!"

Jason tried to rise off the bed, but Nico grabbed his shoulder and held on tight.

"Shh, shh, it's okay. You're safe here," Nico cooed. "We're safe here."

"Where's 'here'?"

Jason was incredibly lucid for a guy who'd almost died a few hours ago. It hadn't even been that
long. Nico could see that the sun was just now setting. Apollo would be home soon.

"A safe place. Do you remember what happened?"

Jason furrowed his brow and twisted his mouth to the side. "I was on a beach in Florida. I'd camped out there. I was gonna do some laundry, so I counted my money, and..." His face slumped. "There was a mugger. He wanted my wallet. I think I laughed. That's all I remember."

"He cut you open, Jace," Nico said quietly. "Feel the left side of your neck."

Jason felt around for a moment before his hand found the thin line of the scar where the wound had been. His mouth opened in shock.

"I take it this wasn't a superficial scrape?"

Nico shook his head.

"That's a good one." Jason grimaced. "A Hero of Olympus, cut down by a mugger. How did I end up here?"

"I felt it. I felt your soul prepare to leave your body. I shadow traveled to you and brought you here."

"But I'm not dead?"

Nico shifted a little on the bed and took Jason's hand. Jason looked down at the point of contact like he wasn't sure he believed it existed.

"If you were dead, you couldn't have kissed me like that. And, yes, you wouldn't be in pain, unless you were sent to the Fields of Punishment."

"Well, I would, then, because that's where your dad told me I was headed."

"He wouldn't do that. It was an idle threat. But you're not dead."

Jason didn't answer immediately. He seemed to be considering the information Nico had given him.

"Should I be dead?"

"Yes."

Jason shrugged. "Well, at least I remember that part right. Where am I?"

He brought Nico's fingers to his lips and kissed them. Nico smiled and fought back his dread over what he was about to admit.

"You're in my room."

"Your room in the Underworld? I was expecting black, I guess."

"No. My room in my apartment."

"Shut the fuck up!"

Jason rolled over and tried to look around. He tried to sit up, but Nico pressed his shoulder into the bed and held him down.

"You need to rest. You almost died."
"Ooh, Nico, you know I like it when you dominate me." Jason's eyes twinkled, and he tugged at Nico's shirt until Nico moved closer to him. "So this is your apartment, huh? Looks really nice, Neeks. I'm glad you have a good place to live."

"Thanks."

This wasn't so bad. Jason didn't seem to be asking too many questions. For a second, Nico held the crazy hope that he could get through this time without Jason even realizing with whom he shared an apartment. Jason was almost acting like his memories were stuck before Nico went on the quest and Hera had shown up in the senate chamber. Maybe they were.

"How did I live?"

Damn.

"Well, I brought you back here really fast—"

"Don't tell me ambrosia. I know that wouldn't have been enough."

Nico didn't like how quickly Jason had assumed he would lie. He had been tempted to lie, though. He also had a sneaking suspicion Jason knew how he'd lived.

"Asshole. I probably wasn't going to lie to you."

Jason raised his eyebrows, and Nico sighed.

"Fine. I brought you back here right away, and my roommate healed you."

"Is roommate the new code word for fuckdaddy?"

Nico jolted upright and dropped Jason's hand. He couldn't let Jason's words rip him to shreds. If he lost control...if he didn't stay calm...

"It's the word for roommate, Jason." The words came out clipped and angry. Nico scooted down to the end of the bed and stood. When he turned around, Jason was watching him intently. "But you forfeited your right to care. Are you thirsty or hungry?"

Jason stared at Nico and didn't answer. Why did he have to be so hurtful when he was jealous or disappointed? Nico ran his hand over his face.

"I'm sorry," Jason mumbled. "You saved me, and he saved me, and it's not my business."

It would always be Jason's business. At least, Nico would always want it to be.

"Do you want water or milk? I have some leftover pizza I'll bring you, too."

When Jason didn't answer, Nico left the room. The weight of Jason's words covered him, made him feel dirty, and Jason's stare amplified the feeling.

He set a tray with reheated pizza and both water and milk. When he came back into his bedroom, Jason was sitting up slightly.

"I wanted to follow you, but I can't move much," Jason said. "I am so sorry for what I said and the way I assumed you were having sex with him."

"Apollo. He has a name. You can say it safely here." Nico set the tray on his nightstand and watched
Jason gingerly lifted the water to take a drink. His hand was shaking. Nico sat next to him on the edge of the bed and steadied his hand. Jason was looking at him, but Nico kept his eyes focused on the cup. Jason took a sloppy drink and let his head fall back.

"I'm sorry," Jason whispered. "I will never be sorry enough to cover all the things I've done to you."

"Let me help you eat the pizza," Nico said. He wanted to pretend he hadn't heard Jason.

"Nico, we need to talk about it."

Nico shook his head. "Another time. Apollo says I can't get worked up or I'll accidentally hurt you with my powers."

"You wouldn't hurt me."

"Like you wouldn't hurt me, right?" Nico scoffed. "That's all we do. Let me feed you the pizza. Then I'll help you to the bathroom, and after that maybe we can act like normal, non-ruined people."

"How do those people act?"

Nico shoved a bite of pizza in Jason's mouth.

"I have no idea."

***

Nico looked amazing. Amazing. He was taller, healthier, and more handsome than ever. Jason could have stared at him for months. Or kissed him for months. In fact, he never should have broken the kiss he gave Nico when he woke. Nico would probably be naked on top of him right now. He'd certainly seemed willing to let Jason kiss him.

But Jason was a fool. He'd broken that wonderful kiss and done the worst thing possible: speak. What kind of dumbass doesn't see the love of his life for nine months, has the love of his life literally save his life, then proceeds to crudely accuse the love of his life of fucking someone else within ten minutes of their reunion? Morons like Jason.

How could he behave like a relatively sensitive, normal human being around everyone but Nico? Well, Nico and Percy — but Percy deserved every bit of Jason's malice for fucking Nico. Shit. That was what he did that Nico hated, the hypocritical possessiveness, the accusations, the temper. Jason probably hadn't needed Juno's and Jupiter's interference; he eventually would have sent Nico running simply because of the crappy boyfriend he was.

Despite being an emotional train wreck, Jason physically felt a lot better with a full belly and an empty bladder. The trip to the bathroom had been an exercise in mortification. Nico had ended up hoisting Jason on his back and dragging him into the bathroom. Then he'd had to stand behind Jason and hold him up so he could pee. At least Jason could manage to work his own fly.

This place — Nico's apartment — was fancy enough to make Jason jealous because he'd never be able to provide this kind of life for Nico. Of course, Nico was capable of providing for himself, ridiculously wealthy, and had zero interest in material possessions. That's why Jason had known it wouldn't matter that he stole the tent and money. Nico wouldn't care. Still, he wanted to give the guy
everything. All he had to offer was his love and his rude, obnoxious mouth.

"How are you feeling?" Nico's cool hand brushed Jason's forearm. The touch was so achingly tender and familiar, and Jason marveled at how many times he'd willingly let it go.

"Better." Jason studied Nico's face and saw concern lighting his eyes in the moment before Nico looked away. "Thank you."

"I want you to try to sleep more. Apollo will be home before too long, and he’ll check you over. I'll wake you."

Jason unsteadily reached out to touch Nico's thigh. Nico tensed but didn't move away.

"Will you lay with me?" Jason could barely get the sentence out. He felt guilty for asking and was poised to hear an immediate rejection.

Instead, Nico gently climbed over him and spooned him. The pressure of Nico's body against his made Jason heave a big sigh. It felt so good, being touched by Nico.

"Can I rest my head on your arm?"

Nico kissed the back of Jason's head and took a deep breath.

"Scoot down if you can and lift your head."

Jason did, probably not scooting enough, but Nico didn't complain. He laid his arm under Jason's head and tightened both arms around his torso, pulling them closer together.

"Feels so good," Jason murmured. He did feel sleepy. "Thank you for taking care of me."

Nico tucked his hand between Jason's hip and the bed and squeezed. "I have always liked to care for you."

"Do you remember when we were first together and you wanted to spoon me?"

The conversation was hushed and peaceful, and the room grew darker as night set in. Jason wanted to stay like this forever, wrapped in Nico's arms. Nico chuckled darkly behind him. His breath moved Jason's hair.

"I was too small. I could either wrap my arm under your head or match the bend of your hips, but not both."

"It was ridiculously adorable, how pissed you got that you were so much smaller than me. I loved your tiny body and your fiery temper. I still love your fiery temper—"

Nico snorted.

"—but the man's body you have now is infinitely more thrilling, and I didn't think it was possible to want you more."

Jason tugged Nico's hand up to his mouth and kissed his fingertips.

"You've always wanted my body, Jace," Nico whispered. "Do you still want my heart?"

"It's the best part of your body."
"That's almost impossible for me to believe these days."

"That's so sad, Nico. Is it because you think you've done something wrong, or because I'm a loser who treats you like your heart doesn't matter?"

Nico bent forward and pressed his face into Jason's hair.

"Both, I suppose," came the muffled reply. "But I don't want you to be sad, so never mind. I need you to get well."

"So I can get out of your life again?" Bitterness crept into Jason's voice before he could swallow it down.

"I need you to get well because I love you, stupid."

"Oh."

"Yeah, 'oh.' Jerk."

Jason kissed Nico's fingers a few more times, moving his lips down Nico's hand. Surprisingly, given what a douche Jason was being, Nico didn't resist the kisses.

"Do you think it'll always be like this?" Jason asked. "You and me, always in love, forced to be apart and making each other miserable when we're together?"

"Didn't you tell me once that Piper said our love would last but wouldn't make us happy? She was right."

"The same day she said that, Rachel told me our love would endure and was worth protecting and saving at any cost."

Jason whined as Nico pulled his body away, then purred when Nico pressed him flat to the bed and climbed on top of him, somehow managing not to put any weight on him. He grabbed Nico's hips and tried to press their bodies closer together. Nico shoved his hands off and regarded him with such intensity that Jason felt light-headed.

"You never told me that."

"I'm pretty sure I did. Put your weight on me, please."

"No. You were stabbed earlier. I kill stuff. There's no way I'm risking your life."

Nico's face morphed from irritated to hopeful. "Rachel said that? That has to be a good sign, right? Maybe Zeus and Hera will decide it's not such a big deal that their baby's gay for the dirtball son of Hades."

Jason shook his head. "That's not the reason they want us apart, Neeks."

Nico tilted his head and drew in his brows.

"Why—"

"It looks as though someone is feeling better. Nico, love, I did say to do what he wanted, but I am not sure Jason is quite up for the arousal your position is undoubtedly causing."

"Apollo!"

Nico blushed down at Jason and released his shoulders. He climbed nimbly off the bed and hugged
Apollo. Jason cringed. He could practically feel Apollo's pleasure rippling around the room. The sun god smiled radiantly at Nico, wrapped his arms low on Nico's waist, and smirked at Jason. Asshole.

Apollo kissed Nico's cheek. "Lover, I appreciate the welcome. I assume this is because you would like me to check on Jason?"

Nico blushed even brighter and nodded. He was cozying up to Apollo to get favors for Jason? Jason realized he was only alive because Apollo had a fascination with Nico. Whatever the circumstances of Nico moving in with Apollo, they'd inadvertently created a way for Jason's life to be saved. Jason tried not to think about how fucked up that was.

"Thank you," Nico said. He glared at Jason from Apollo's arms. "Jason thanks you, too."

Thanking the guy who was probably fucking his lover wasn't high on Jason's bucket list, but he swallowed his jealousy. "Yeah, thanks, Lord Apollo. I am in your debt."

Apollo looked pointedly at Nico.

"Oh, I do not know, Jason Grace. I think we are square." He bent slightly and Nico, who had been watching Jason, turned back to Apollo. Their faces were inches apart. It was clear how much Apollo wanted Nico. "Love, go in the kitchen and fetch our guest more food while I examine him, please."

Nico nodded and left. Apollo closed the door and sat next to Jason on the bed. His hand brushed over Jason's neck, and he hummed softly. Jason waited. After a few moments, not even a full minute, Apollo removed his hand. He looked down at Jason as though he was studying not quite an adversary, but certainly not a friend, either.

"He is quite extraordinary, our mutual love," Apollo said. "Over three thousand years, Jason, I have lived, and I have never loved someone like him."

"You love a lot of people."

"None like him."

Jason got the impression that conversation was finished. What could he say? "You're a cheating lech who'll probably use him and be done with him in a year" wouldn't cut it because it cut too close to what Jason had tried to do. And it would probably get him killed.

"I do not wish you to share the true reason our father works to keep you apart."

That sentence jolted Jason back to the conversation. He wasn't sure he could trust Apollo, but he didn't think he had much choice.

"Why?"

"Nico would not take it well. His fury at the gods would make him rash and reckless. He is more powerful than I had realized, and if he were to confront our father — Zeus would be terrified of the threat he provides even if your powers were not combined. You would hasten his death, which will already be perhaps more painful than you or I can bear, and the timing will be too off to give Nico a chance at a happy ending."

Jason swallowed thickly. He didn't want Nico to die, not ever. Not unless they could be together. Apollo placed a hand on his shoulder, and he felt tension seep away.

"Relax, Jason. I am not telling you this to hasten your demise, either. I remember how you stood up
on my behalf after defeating the giants. You are Nico's great love. I would not hurt him by hurting you."

"You'll just try to steal him from me?"

"I'm not a thing that can be stolen, Jason."

Jason started to bite out a retort as Nico returned and thumped a tray down on the nightstand, but Apollo beat him to it.

"Emotions, Nico. Please keep them in check until he is fully healed. After that, by all means, unleash the full intensity of your anger on him. I shall enjoy the show."

Nico turned his glare on Apollo. Jason was shocked to see how informally Nico treated the god. That wasn't what he'd expected at all. As soon as he'd realized where Nico had taken him, where he was living, Jason had pictured Nico being a submissive, controlled little fuck toy. That was clearly not the case.

"Easy, lover," Apollo said, standing behind Nico and smoothing his hands down Nico's arms. Once he reached Nico's hands, their fingers intertwined. Nico closed his eyes momentarily, and Jason could see his breathing deepen.

"Jason, can you sit up?" Nico asked, opening his eyes. Apollo's hands stayed linked with his.

Jason scowled at the continued contact and struggled a little more than he needed to in order to sit up. Nico released Apollo's hands and carefully lifted Jason around his chest, pulling him into a sitting position.

Apollo chuckled. "Well played, Jason Grace."

Nico sat next to Jason on the bed and started spooning soup into his mouth. Jason was not going to complain about the pampering. Besides, Nico's mouth opened a little each time he brought the spoon to Jason's lips. Watching his lips and tongue move was making Jason feel extremely good. He put his hand between Nico's slightly spread thighs and squeezed, gently kneading the muscles there. Nico stopped spoonfeeding Jason and stared at his hand.

"Are you groping me?"

"I'm not, just, it's not like, I'm, um..." Jason trailed off, embarrassed.

"Move your hand to the outside of my thigh and let me finish feeding you soup," Nico ordered.

That was a victory. At least Nico hadn't shoved his hand away.

Apollo came and stood close to Nico's side. Nico fed Jason another spoonful of soup and lifted his head toward Apollo.

"I will leave you now, lover—"

Jason noticed the panic on Nico's face.

"Don't leave! What if he needs something?"

Apollo smiled kindly and slid his hand across Nico's cheekbone. "I merely meant I am leaving the room, Dark Angel. I will stay at home tonight and check on Jason periodically. He needs to sleep soon. You are welcome to share my bed, if that would make him more comfortable."
"I want you to sleep with me, Nico," Jason growled. Nico rolled his eyes but nodded. Jason addressed Apollo, who was still caressing Nico's face. "You said home, like this is where you live permanently. But surely you have lots of other residences?"

"I do. However, I choose to return to Nico every day after my work is ended and stay with him until I have to return to my duties. I know that my reputation as a faithless lover has trickled down to the camps—"

"Along with your, like, six thousand kids," Jason offered. "D'you know he dated one?"

"Shut up, Jason!" Nico hissed.

Apollo ignored Jason and slipped his hand down to stroke Nico's neck and exposed collarbone. After a moment, Nico moved Apollo's hand back to his neck.

"As I was saying, I am not known as a faithful lover, but I have found someone worth coming home to every night." Apollo raised his eyebrows at Jason before redirecting his attention to Nico. "Now, lover, is there anything you require?"

"Jason needs pajamas. His jeans have to be getting uncomfortable."

"It's fine, Nico. I've slept in them for the past four months."

"Revolting," Apollo said. "Nico, what would you like him to wear?"

Jason and Nico slept naked when they were together. Jason had a feeling he wouldn't be that lucky tonight.

Nico narrowed his eyes.

"Pink flannel with bunnies, please."

Jason's clothes vanished and were replaced by horrid pink flannel footie pajamas, complete with garish buck-toothed rabbits. Nico howled and stood to high-five Apollo, who looked very pleased with himself.

"Nico!"

Nico stuck his tongue out at Jason. "Fine. Always such a pain in the ass."

Jason watched Nico's eyes. People thought that because Nico's eyes were black, they were emotionless and empty — like a shark's eyes, someone had once told Jason. It wasn't true. Jason could look in Nico's eyes and see every part of his soul. Those eyes were beautiful and timeless, and right now the view into Nico's soul said that he was perhaps more in love with Jason, impossible as it seemed, than he had ever been, and Nico had once said he was so in love with Jason that he'd follow him to Tartarus.

"Give him new pajamas, please. Soft knit cotton t-shirt and lightweight sweatpants, blue like his eyes. The most comfortable blue boxers that exist."

The clothes changed. Apollo had fulfilled Nico's wish.

"May I prepare you for bed, lover, so that you may join Jason straightaway?"

Nico made eye contact with Apollo, and the slightest hint of a blush crossed his cheeks. He nodded, and he was instantly shirtless and stuffed inside a pair of very snug, very low-cut black sleep pants.
Jason’s mouth dropped open. He would not be able to sleep next to Nico like that, not without doing things that would make his injury reopen.

Apollo took a very long look at Nico, then sighed. "Very well. Before Jason becomes too dehydrated via drool..."

A tight black t-shirt trailed over the contours of Nico's torso. Jason wasn't sure that the addition of the shirt would do much to quell his dirty thoughts. Nico kissed Apollo's cheek and climbed into bed.

"I know you normally sleep in far less," Apollo said as he headed for the door. "Should you get the urge to shed your clothing, please join me in my bed."

The god turned out the lights and shut the door.

"Sorry," Nico whispered from the darkness. "I think that stuff is for your benefit. He hasn't been that suggestive in a while."

Jason turned toward Nico and tried not to think about how his lover looked like the embodiment of sex in those pajamas.

"Why not? He seems like he'd be hitting on you pretty hard."

Nico shifted, and he was close enough that Jason could feel the cool presence of his body.

"We had an issue the night I found out you had left Camp Jupiter."

Nico must have been able to see Jason's confused expression because he elaborated.

"He kissed me."

Jason almost laughed. "I mean, I don't want him to touch you at all, but a kiss doesn't sound so earth-shattering."

"We were fighting. More like I was being a complete panicky ass worried you were going to die if I didn't get to you, and I said some obnoxious things. He lost his temper a bit and kissed me rough."

Jason’s heart stopped.

"And it made you think of me and the way I used to treat you."

"Yes, but Jason, he apologized profusely, completely out of proportion to what he'd done, and he's been a gentleman ever since." Nico placed his hand on Jason's chest. "I'm okay."

"It made you feel as trapped as I made you feel, didn't it?"

"Please, Jason." Nico's other hand found Jason's face and stroked it soothingly. "You can't undo the past, and you're not the man you used to be. Stop blaming yourself."

"I can stop blaming myself when you stop feeling the pain of what I did." Jason made the kind of smile that wasn't really a smile at all. He knew Nico could see it. "That's never going to happen, is it?"

"I love you anyway," Nico said. "And I am still the badass motherfucking Ghost King."

Jason laughed and sighed.
Nico patted Jason’s chest and kissed his jaw. "You took something away from me that I can never get back, and that will always make me sad, but you gave me so many good things, Jason."

Nico closed the gap between them and laid his head against Jason’s chest. They each wrapped an arm around the other and brought their bodies flush. As turned on as Jason had been earlier, this holding each other, quiet and still, was better than the best sex they'd ever had.

"I have longed for this for over a year, Nico. Some nights, hoping to get to hold you one last time was all that kept me going." The confession couldn't match the darkness of those times. They'd mostly been back at Camp Jupiter, when he'd been crumbling under the weight of everyone's hatred. "You're not sleeping with him?"

"No. He thinks it's only a matter of time, and he's the god of prophecy. It's probably going to happen sooner or later." Nico nuzzled his head tighter into Jason's chest. "Do you remember when I told you that I thought being alone was better than being with someone for the wrong reasons?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not so self-righteous anymore. Being alone was a lot harder to go back to after I'd had a taste of what belonging felt like."

"Nico..."

"I don't want to argue or have to explain ourselves for the bad things we've done, Jason. After you heal, I may never hold you in my arms again. Please, let's make every moment as happy as we can. I will love you forever, and I'm going to lose you. Let this be a good time for us."

Jason had a million questions. He wanted to know everything. He wanted to keep score and rehash all their old slights and find a way to make everything right, but Nico was wiser. Their time was limited. Better to create something they could hold onto than run the risk of destroying what little they had left.

"That sounds wonderful." Jason kissed Nico's curls and fell asleep breathing his soft, earthy scent.
Twenty-One

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The gods spent the night before Nico’s twenty-first birthday in their bed, not in the man cave. When they woke the next morning, Percy and Jason waited as long as they could before they dragged Nico from sleep with dueling gestures of physical affection. They ended up staying in bed, giggling and wrestling and gratifying one another, until just before the time of day they normally had to welcome a godly visitor.

Jason banished the sticky, ruined sheets and replaced them with more black silk. Nico opened a hole in the roof to air out the room. Percy counted the bruises he and Jason, mostly Jason, had left on Nico's torso. Nico blushed as the count climbed, and he put on a shirt before being talked into removing it.

The gods didn't check their altars or turn on the television. After Hazel forgot to write, when Nico stayed in bed the entire next day and left Jason and Percy to worry and fret, they agreed to only watch the television and read the letters one day a week. Jason collected the letters from the altars each day, since he was the one for whom news of home was least painful. They were all happier this way. Hearing the letters read all at once reduced the sting of them. If one of their friends forgot again — and Hazel had written a tome the next time her turn to write had rolled around, apologizing and begging for forgiveness — it wouldn't hurt so much if there were other letters to be read. Jason didn't tell Percy and Nico what he found in the altars, and Percy and Nico didn't ask.

After emerging from the bedroom, Jason sat on the couch, and Percy sat right next to him. Nico raised his eyebrows at the arrangement but straddled Jason's lap and leaned over to kiss Percy. Jason cupped Nico's backside and rocked his lover into him. He watched the kiss escalate until Nico had bent Percy's head back and was suggestively thrusting his tongue in and out of Percy's mouth. When the kiss got to be too much, made Jason too hungry, he gripped Nico's hair and ripped him away from Percy. Nico leered, and Percy groaned. Nico moved from Jason's lap to Percy's and kissed Jason instead. He rolled his hips against Percy, who was attacking his nipple and gripping his hips hard enough to add to the bruise count.

Nico preferred this position when they were sitting on the couch. Jason was taller than Percy, so the angle was more natural, less awkward, and Percy could reach Nico's chest in ways Jason, because of his height, couldn't. They were slowly learning how to maximize their enjoyment and minimize the awkwardness that they all felt about their sexual activities. Nico wasn't sure he'd ever been happier — at least, as long as all he thought about was sex.

There were so many hands on his body that he barely registered the addition of another. The only reason he reacted was that the hand that pressed into his shoulder blade was as cool as his own skin. Jason noticed the shadow that covered him and opened his eyes to see the man behind Nico. His lips stilled as he stared in wonder. Nico stopped moving when Jason ended the kiss, though Percy was rocking into him. Nico placed his hands on Percy's shoulders and pushed himself back. Percy lifted his head to find out why Nico was stopping the fun and caught sight of the man. His face split into a huge grin.

"Hey, dude! 'S'up?"

The man behind Nico smiled and rustled his enormous almost-black wings. "It is good to see you managing so well, Percy."
Nico's and Jason's eyes widened for different reasons.

"You know him?" Jason started to say, but he was interrupted by Nico scrambling off Percy's lap and throwing his arms around the visitor's neck. The man wrapped his sinuous dark arms around Nico and cradled him gently.

"Nico, young one," the man said. His voice was melodious, deep and soothing. "It is pleasing to see you. Happy birthday."

"You, too, Thanatos. Thank you." Nico shyly smiled up at Thanatos.

"Please tell me this isn't a boyfriend I don't know about," Jason said.

Nico turned in the embrace and glared at Jason. Percy playfully shoved Jason's head.

"Nah, man, this is..." Percy trailed off and studied Nico. "He's not, right? 'Cause that would be weird, Neeks."

Thanatos chuckled softly and let go of Nico, who was running his hands through his hair in aggravation.

"I am Thanatos, the god of death, Jason Grace. I am the first lieutenant of Hades, and Nico's very platonic old friend."

"Which he shouldn't need to tell either of you jackasses," Nico grumbled. He sat on the coffee table in front of Jason and Percy and motioned for Thanatos to take the gray chair. "It wouldn't be your business, and there's practically nothing about me you two don't already know."

"Sorry," Percy and Jason mumbled. Jason added, "It's good to meet you, sir."

"Likewise, godling. I have brought you a gift."

Thanatos extended his hand and motioned for Jason to do the same. Nervously, Jason did as requested. When he'd placed his hand under the older god's hand, Thanatos opened his fist and a shiny silver object dropped into Jason's palm. Before Jason could examine it, Thanatos closed a powerful hand around Jason's fingers.

"Hades is prohibited from contacting his son. He is not prohibited from contacting you. This is his message: 'This is your last chance, Jason Grace. Take better care of the things you love.'"

Thanatos withdrew his hand, and Jason opened his fingers. In his palm was a small silver cross-shaped tie pin. Jason gasped. His eyes filled with tears. He showed it to Nico, whose mouth dropped open.

"I lost it the last day. I had it on my jeans, like always, when we left New York, and then when we arrived at Olympus, I noticed it was gone. It must have fallen off in all the frenzy of the day. I've been so sick about it." Jason eyed Nico apologetically. "Nothing should have been bad enough to lose it."

Nico shook his head while Percy picked up the cross from Jason's hand.

"You lost it when you rescued those children, Jason," Thanatos said. "You were incredibly brave and selfless, and its loss could not have been prevented. Hades retrieved it once it returned to the ground."
Percy placed the tie pin back in Jason's hand. Jason affixed it to the hem of his t-shirt.

"If he couldn't help losing it, why'd Uncle Hades tell him to take better care of his stuff?" Percy asked.

Jason looked at Nico and mouthed, "I'm sorry."

"Dad didn't mean the tie pin, Percy," Nico said quietly. He rubbed Jason's knee before switching his hands to Percy. "Thanatos, thank you for returning it to Jason."

The god of death glanced at the place Nico's hands rested on Percy's legs. "Does the tie pin still belong to Jason, Nico?"

Nico looked at his feet. His lips quirked up. He nodded. "Always."

Thanatos bowed his head. "As I said, your father cannot speak to you, even through an intermediary. The queen, however, has not been given the same exclusions. She cannot visit you, but there are some thoughts she asked me to express. Queen Persephone sends her kindest birthday regards and remarks that you have always been an extraordinary young man. She wishes you to know that she has every confidence you will, as you grow into your godhood, become a powerful leader among the gods who are not Olympians. She hopes that when the period of your confinement is ended, you will accept a position serving your father. She says he wishes to grant you the full powers of his kingdom and make you the first lieutenant of his domestic affairs, on par with me, perhaps slightly above, and beneath only our great king and queen. That is the esteem, Persephone says, in which your father holds you. She says they are incredibly proud of you."

"I...wow," Nico said. He moved from the table and squeezed his way between Percy and Jason. Two sets of hands were on him immediately. Nico willed himself into a shirt. "I would like you to take a message to the Queen, if you would."

"It would be my pleasure, young one."

"Please tell her that I appreciate her birthday wishes more than I can express. Tell her there's no greater honor I would choose than being allowed to serve her and my father and the Underworld. I told my dad I would come back to him, and I meant it. Tell her that I love them, please."

Jason bumped Nico's shoulder with his own. Nico was making a big promise, and it scared Jason. Percy stared at Nico's profile and thought about what it would be like to spend an eternity in service to the lord of the dead. He thought about what it might be like to spend an eternity in the service of his own father, or worse, Jason's.

"Very well," Thanatos said. In front of him, his large hands were clasped as though in prayer. His long black hair fell in sheets around his timeless, perfect face. "In what way can I be of service to you today, Nico and friends?"

"You've given me more than I could ask for," Nico said.

The older god smiled, warm and sincere. "That was your birthday gift. What can I offer you in counsel or comfort?"

"Death is comforting," Percy chuckled.

"It can be," Nico said. "Fate is often cruel. Death, Thanatos, provides a crossing to something else. It doesn't have to be bad."
"Says the prince of death," Percy replied.

Nico slapped Percy's thigh.

"Can you tell me something, sir?" Jason asked. Thanatos nodded, and Jason continued. "I've been wondering how the gods move from place to place. Nico can shadow travel, obviously, but Percy and I still walk wherever we go within our prison. How do you move instantly from one place to another?"

"Nico, if you would, stand by the door, please," Thanatos said. "Now, Mr. Grace, the secret is the same as every other godly wish. You must simply want to be in another place. Now, do you wish to stand beside Nico?"

"More than anything." Jason blushed. Nico's heart began to do the pitter-patter beating that made him crazy.

"Then choose to be with him."

Jason watched Nico fidget uncomfortably by the door. Percy watched, too, and he noted the effect the conversation was having on Nico. Jason took a deep breath and focused. Before his next exhale, he was standing next to Nico.

"Whoa." Jason couldn't believe he'd done it. He gave Nico a hasty hug.

"Now, Nico," Thanatos said. "Back to Percy."

Jason didn't like that part much, but Percy did. In an instant, Nico was nestled next to him. Percy wrapped his arm around Nico's waist and kissed his cheek.

"Your turn, Percy," Thanatos said. "Go to Jason."

"I can't," Percy said. It was his turn to blush. "I, um, want to stay with Nico."

"I have noticed." The god of death smiled. "Nico, if you would, back to Jason."

Nico's cool weight disappeared from Percy's arm and reappeared at Jason's side. Percy barely had to think about it before he was on Nico's other side, facing the wrong direction, but where he'd intended to be.

"Yes!" he shouted. He and Jason gave each other a high five in front of Nico's face.

"Well done, children," Thanatos said. He looked at each of the new gods as he addressed them. "I must make my leave. Jason, it was a pleasure to meet you. Percy, lovely to see you again. Nico, dear one, it was heartbreaking to send you on your journey and does my heart such good to see you whole and eternal. The Underworld gods are excited for you to join us."

Before Nico could say, "What journey?" Thanatos was gone.

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"What did he mean about a 'journey'?" Nico wrinkled his nose in confusion.
Jason and Percy exchanged a glance that told Nico they knew something he didn't. Jason raised his eyebrows and inclined his head toward Percy. Percy shrugged. Neither wanted to tell Nico.

"It's your birthday, baby," Percy finally said. "Another time, okay?"

Nico checked his watch. Seconds ticked by on its black face.

"Hey, it doesn't beep anymore." Jason hoped to distract Nico. He tapped the watch face. "I didn't realize it until just now."

They'd managed to not talk about what happened in the throne room for almost two months. Nico, who normally wanted to know everything down to the most minute detail, hadn't asked. He hadn't known there was more to ask about.

"Yes." Nico grasped the watch and ran his fingers along its edge. "I figure the beeping serves no purpose now, or, you know, the one who made it beep can't be with me."

"I'm sorry, Nico," Jason said. "That was thoughtless of me."

"It was honest, Jason. Don't apologize."

Percy laid his head on Nico's shoulder. The conversation with Thanatos had made him sad. "How about we all agree no more apologizing? We've all been assholes to each other at times, and we're still thoughtless and too snarky for our own good, but it's pretty well established we both love you, Nico. You love us. Jason and I, well, at least I, I can't speak for Jason—"

"Spit it out, Percy," Jason said.

"You feel like almost a brother to me, dipshit motherfucker. Happy?"

Jason reached across Nico and gave Percy a noogie. "Well, when you put it like that, yeah."

Percy batted Jason's hand away. "Annoying shithead."

Nico raised his hands and snapped his fingers in front of his companions' faces.

"So, no more apologies. We're all on board. Watch doesn't beep. Sucks that I miss Apollo like hell. What about what Thanatos said about my 'journey'? I know you two know what he was talking about. I can see it on your guilty faces." Nico wanted to know. He didn't recall ever taking a journey with Thanatos, and he had a bad feeling about what the god had said. He belatedly remembered Percy saying something about him dying.

A large tan hand settled on Nico's stomach. Its owner kissed his neck. Nico closed his eyes and let Jason touch him.

"We'll tell you, Nico, I swear. But today's special. You're twenty-one. This one time, let it go and enjoy your life." Jason's voice was soft in Nico's ear. He'd moved around and held Nico close from behind.

Percy took Nico's hand. "Jason's right. There are better ways for us to celebrate. Let's do the less fun stuff tomorrow."

"I like the fun stuff, I swear." Nico tugged gently, and Percy pressed against his front. Standing like that, the men mimicked the position they'd found themselves in the first night on the beach; they no longer needed the barrier to bring them close. Jason had resumed gently kissing Nico's neck, and
Percy dragged his lips across Nico's lips. Nico reveled in the feeling for a moment, Percy's hands on his biceps, Jason's around his waist, before he shadow traveled them all to the bedroom. Percy and Jason lurched slightly, and Nico stepped out of their space. "Let's talk now. We can celebrate when we're done. If I was dead, guys, it sounds like I should be more grateful to be here than I already am."

"You are a hard man, Nico di Angelo," Jason said. "I love you."

"Stalling, Jace. Spit it out." Nico settled on the bed and crossed his arms.

"Gods, you're such a dick." Jason rolled his eyes and sat in front of Nico. Percy sat to Jason's right. Neither was happy about having to recall those last moments of their old life. "What's the last thing you remember about the last day?"

Nico shrugged. "Hephaestus and that rat bastard Ares caught me. Ares beat the shit out of me, but I got him good a few times before Hephaestus chained me. We went to the throne room. Ares threw me down. You two were already there, and you acted like idiots, worrying about my injuries instead of staying detached and strong."

"He is a dick, Grace," Percy said. "We were worried about you, dumbass. We hadn't seen you in what, Jace? Sixteen days? For all we knew you were dead. Then you come in looking like...that."

"Percy's right." Jason pulled off Nico's socks and kissed his toes. Nico made a revolted face but didn't make Jason stop. "I've never seen anyone beaten so badly. You were dying, bleeding internally or something. Apollo wanted to heal you, but Zeus wouldn't let him."

"I vaguely remember that, I guess." Nico bit his upper lip and tried to recall the final day. "Apollo acted like an idiot, too, all boo-hooing."

"Massive dick," Percy muttered. "He was worried about you, too, super jerk dumbass. Do you not get how bad things were?"

"Sounds like I was going to die. So what? If I died, I'd go down to my dad." Nico shrugged again. Jason slapped him, fast and hard. The blond jumped off the bed and headed toward the door.

"What the hell's your problem, Jason?" Nico snapped. He rubbed his stinging cheek.

Percy's hands curled around Nico's ankle, holding him in place, but he didn't blame Jason for the slap.

Jason turned around, and he was furious. He raised his arms out wide and sneered. "You shitty motherfucker, Nico. We," he gestured wildly between himself and Percy, "love you. You were my whole damned life, bones shoved through your skin, bleeding out in a puddle on the fucking floor. You were all I ever wanted or needed, and I was losing you. Asshole. How could you be so flippant? Holy fuck, do you know how it would feel to lose you forever? Because we wouldn't have been with you, asshole, wherever the three of us ended up. It, this, us, it would have ended. Do you really not care?"

"Jason." It was the only word Nico whispered. He held out his hand.

Jason wavered for a full minute. Those horrible images of Nico on the floor of the throne room had returned to his head. Percy was in a similar state. It wasn't something either of them wanted to relive. Without making eye contact, Jason came back and took Nico's hand. When he climbed onto the bed, Nico curled up in his arms.
"I..." Nico had to force himself not to say he was sorry. "I wouldn't have wanted to die. I want to be with you both. I shouldn't have been so cavalier. My dad's realm and all, I get kind of used to it, and so the thought of dying isn't so bad. The thought of being without you, either of you, that's awful."

Percy rubbed his face. "Let's move on."

Nico and Jason nodded.

"After that, they told us how they thought we'd fucked up and decided to kill us, or at least, Jason's dickhead father did. He hates you way worse than me, Neeks." Percy kissed Nico's knee. Nico was still curled up in Jason, but he patted the spot next to him. Percy came and laid his head on Nico's tented knees and tucked his feet under Jason's thigh, completing a tight human triangle. "He decided he wanted to kill you first, and he kept letting loose at you with his master bolt, but we all — you, until you couldn't anymore, Jason, me, your dad — we kept blocking his blows. Jason got hit. He threw himself in front of you to protect you. Do you remember that, Jace?"

"I remember. We were either going to live together or die together," Jason said.

A tightness coiled in Nico's stomach as he thought about what his lover had done for him. The idea that Jason had taken a blast of lightning meant for him made him feel small and unworthy.

"You died. I was kneeling over you, and I felt it, your last breath. Jason saw, too." Percy and Jason didn't make eye contact, but Percy brushed his hand over Jason's where it rested on Nico's ribs. Jason had said painful, heart-wrenching things that day.

"What happened?" Nico asked.

"I don't know," Jason said. "After you died, I think I must have blacked out. I probably wasn't far behind. Percy?"

"The gods caused an uproar and got your dad to stop. He agreed to let us be gods and take away most of our powers as long as we stayed in this prison for a while." Percy addressed Nico again. "He wanted to stick it to you, baby, it seems like. I didn't get it. I'm just glad your dad and my dad and the reasonable gods talked Zeus down. Then Hades brought you back, Nico, and Apollo healed you both up and that's that."

"So we were all going to die for what we did?" Nico asked.

Percy nodded.

Nico shuddered. "I'm glad the other gods got Zeus to see reason. It's surprising, given what a horrible guy he is."

"Well, they were pretty persuasive." Percy brushed his hand over Nico's cheek. "Can we go back to celebrating now?"

Nico glanced at Percy through his lashes, the way Percy loved, and smiled slyly. "What kind of celebrating did you have in mind?"

Percy leaned forward to kiss Nico, but Jason swooped in first and beat him to it. Percy watched. His hand was still on Nico's cheek, and he could feel Nico's jaw moving, feel Jason occasionally brush the inside of Nico's mouth with his tongue. He watched Nico smile into the kiss. After a while, Percy propped himself up on Nico's still-tented knees and thought about how much he loved the son of Hades. Soon, Nico would switch positions, pull Percy into a kiss almost as passionate as what he shared with Jason, but for now, Nico was where he was meant to be. Percy smiled.
I keep forgetting to mention this, but you can contact me on tumblr at uptoolatefanfic if there's something you don't want to ask here or if you want to talk about writing. I don't use tumblr often, mostly just to share things I've learned about writing (and thank you reader Eloquent Words for suggesting that), but I'll respond to anything posted there.

Thanks for reading!
Nico woke before sunrise the next morning. He untangled himself from Jason's arms and legs and quietly crawled out of bed. He found Apollo at the wall of windows in the dining room, gazing at the Empire State Building.

"Good morning, lover," Apollo murmured. Without looking, he reached out and took Nico's hand. "I do not believe I have ever seen you in the morning. Did you and our guest rest well?"

"He seemed calm."

"I checked on him several times during the night. He was peaceful and healing properly," Apollo confirmed Nico's guess. "You were restless."

"It's been a long time since I shared a bed with him."

"It will get easier."

Nico snorted. "It will get easier in time for me to have to say goodbye."

"You are probably right." Apollo squeezed Nico’s hand. “This is my favorite time of day. Did you know that?"

Nico shook his head.

"People always assume it must be the height of day, when my powers are at their zenith. I like this time better. My sister's realm is quiet and peaceful, and though that life is not mine to have, nor would I choose it, I appreciate its beauty. This time, when one day has closed and another is yet to begin, is so full of opportunity and second chances."

Apollo's voice mimicked the peacefulness of the moment. The god sounded calm and purposeful and full of hope.

"What is the opportunity the day brings?" Nico asked.

Apollo turned to Nico. Everything about his appearance was muted, more human. Nico had never found him more beautiful.

"Whatever you choose, my love."

"You're not who I thought you were," Nico said. It was true. The man he lived with was nothing like the caricature he had imagined.

Apollo smiled faintly. "How so?"

"You're kinder and more thoughtful. You've been a good friend to me, and I've learned a lot from you. At first, I thought you were kind of a hot Dionysus, party time and sex. I thought the only reason you were interested in me was to sleep with me."

"I do like parties and sex," Apollo mused. "But I care about much more. When I first asked you here, I must admit, the promise of carnal pleasure with your incredible face and body was almost all of
what I wanted. It is all I have ever wanted in a lover, until you. You are different, Nico. You challenge me, make me think. Did you know I have been considered the god of logic?"

Nico smiled. He did know that, but it hadn't fit with whom he'd believed Apollo to be. He could remember when they'd first met back when he was a little boy and Apollo had called one of Artemis's Hunters "babe." That was who Nico had thought Apollo was.

"I did, actually."

"Smart man," Apollo said. "Another attractive quality. You make me better than I was. I am grateful to have you in my life. I do love you."

Nico shuffled his feet. He didn't love Apollo, not like Jason or even Percy, but he was coming to feel something for him.

"Why are you out here, Nico, when you could be in bed with your love?"

"I wanted to know how to care for him today."

"The same way as yesterday. Stay calm. Meet his needs and wants. He is healthy enough to have sex, if that is what you are asking."

It sort of was, but Nico still blushed because Apollo had seen through him so easily. He'd known Apollo would know if he and Jason were having sex, but he'd entertained the notion that he might somehow pass it off as spontaneous or as Jason talking him into it. He felt embarrassed that Apollo knew sex was what he wanted.

Apollo stepped closer and lifted Nico's chin. "You needn't be embarrassed to have sexual needs, my love. I would not begrudge you the fleeting opportunity to lay with your beloved."

"And will you..." Nico trailed off. He couldn't finish asking about his other concern, the one that felt even more shameful than asking about sex in a situation as complicated as his.

"I will be here for you when he leaves, in whatever capacity you desire," Apollo finished for him.

"Thank you," Nico whispered. Apollo leaned forward and brushed Nico's lips with his own.

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Nico slipped back into bed and wrapped his arm around Jason's ribs. He wanted to climb on top of Jason and cover him, head to toe, claim him as his own. He recognized the feeling as the possessiveness he'd always chafed against when Jason did it to him. Now, after all the time they'd lost and heartache they'd been through, he desperately wanted Jason to stake that claim. He was Jason's. Jason was his.

Nico smiled and huffed a resigned laugh. They may belong to one another, but they would never be together. The certainty of that and having Jason so close and knowing he'd have to let him go, it was tearing Nico up inside. He would pay heavily for the dream he was currently enjoying.

Jason shifted and turned onto his back. Nico laid his head on Jason's chest and listened to his heartbeat. It sounded so strong and steady. Nico would never again take that noise for granted. He
wrapped Jason's arm around his back and snuggled tightly against his side.

There had to be a way to fix their mistakes, to be together again. Nico wasn't prone to positive thinking; he considered himself a realist. Laying here couldn't be the end of Jason and Nico, though. It couldn't. A million maybes swirled in Nico's head, and none of them ended in a logical way they could stay together. He'd have to have faith in what Rachel had said, that their love was something worth fighting for and preserving. Surely that meant they might find happiness together one day?

Nico traced the line of Jason's sternum, down his stomach, into his belly button, and down to the waistband of his pants. He wanted Jason to wake up. He wanted Jason. He slid his hand back up the path he'd traced, this time under Jason's shirt, feeling his warm, soft skin. He put his knee between Jason's thighs and moved his hips to press his hardening dick into Jason's leg. Gently, he turned Jason's face toward his and pressed their lips together.

"Mmm, Nico," Jason murmured into Nico's mouth. His hands were already moving, stroking Nico's sides and ghosting up his arms.

"Jason, I want you to make love to me." Nico breathed.

Jason's hands stilled around Nico's ribs. He opened his eyes, and Nico could see he was torn.

Nico moved so he was laying completely on top of Jason and ground his hips down. Jason arched his back and moaned.

"You're not playing fair," he groaned.

"I'm not playing."

Nico kept grinding his hips and lifted his shoulders off Jason to increase the pressure and see Jason's face, which was contorted with undeniable pleasure. He shifted his eyes and let them trail down Jason's broad chest and perfect abs to where his shirt was riding up, revealing skin that Nico had kissed and licked hundreds of times. Nico's hips stuttered, and he gasped as an image of Percy, naked and moaning under him, floated into his brain. Percy, who was smaller and leaner than Jason, and who trailed his hands reverently over Nico's chest and hips while Nico loomed over him. Percy, who'd once come so hard from this thing Nico was doing that he'd spurted semen up to his own face. He'd been so embarrassed, but when Nico had simply bent down and licked him clean, he'd gotten harder than ever and begged Nico to swallow him down his throat.

Thoughts of Percy shot out of Nico's mind when Jason wrenched him onto his back and yanked his hands so far over his head that he could feel the muscles stretch around his ribs. Jason was on top of him, heavy and powerful, and Nico eagerly accepted the rough kiss that followed. Jason slipped the hand that wasn't restraining Nico up the black shirt and scraped his nails down Nico's side hard enough to leave marks. Nico moaned at the mingled pleasure and pain, and Jason pushed so deep into Nico's mouth that their teeth clashed.

They were the game they'd played as boys, swords banging and crashing together, dangerous and wild. It had always been this way, this secret violent passion between them. Nico spread his legs and allowed Jason to nestle deeper into his body. Jason's free hand snarled in Nico's hair and pulled his head back, exposing his neck.

The kiss ended, and Jason stared at him, blue eyes hard and dark. Nico frantically arched his back and struggled to free his hands from Jason's hold.

"Please." His voice sounded hoarse and shaky.
"Please what?" Jason growled.

"Touch me, Jace."

Jason dove back against him and bit his lower lip before trailing wet, hard kisses down the side of his neck. He reached Nico's collarbone and bit sharply. Nico hissed, and Jason stilled.

"Too hard?" Jason asked Nico's chest.

Nico was gasping, breathless. "No. It's just been a while since...this. I can handle it."

Jason pressed a soft kiss on the place he'd bitten. He let go of Nico's hands. "I shouldn't be doing this to you."

"I want you to do this," Nico said as Jason rolled off him and laid on his back. "I started it."

"I don't want to leave when I'm healed and have you think that all I wanted from you was sex. I don't want to make that mistake again."

"How can I think that if I'm the one who initiated the sex?" Nico was talking far too loudly to be having a conversation with someone who was right next to him.

He was irritated. He had gotten over his worries about sex, and now here Jason was shoving them back into their world. Of course, Jason didn't know Nico was fine with his sexuality since it was Percy that had helped him overcome his hangups.

Jason ignored him and stood. "I'm going to the bathroom to take care of myself. I'll be back, and we can talk."

"I hope you have a weak orgasm!" Nico yelled as Jason disappeared from the room. Jason peeked his head back in through the doorway and smiled wryly before heading to the bathroom.

Nico flung himself onto his back and reached down to take care of his own need. Masturbating without an audience was strange to him these days. Even now, with Percy at Annabeth's over winter break, they'd managed to sneak in enough IM sessions to keep Nico satisfied. Nico had bought Percy that secret phone (and phone contract) as a Christmas gift, so Percy texted when he was able to get away. If Nico could manage it, he'd drop everything and travel to his house, and he and Percy would spend as long as they could enjoying one another's company. It was worse that way, more despicable, Nico knew, cheating Annabeth so blatantly, but he and Percy seemed to get off on it even more. One time, Percy had texted and Nico's Iris message had found him already nude and hard in Annabeth's bathroom. Percy had laid a finger to his lips and silently jacked off while he watched Nico strip. Nico hadn't come that hard since he'd been with Percy in the Underworld. The memory sent him over the edge.

He took off his shirt and used it to clean away drops of semen that hadn't fallen on the shirt to begin with. He decided he wasn't putting on a new shirt. The way Jason had ogled him last night had made it clear that he was affected by seeing Nico so undressed.

When Jason didn't come back after a few minutes, Nico went to check on him, worried that he'd had problems with the bathroom. Apollo had said Jason was healed enough for sex; he didn't say Jason was healed.

Jason wasn't in the bathroom. After a moment of panic, Nico found him with his head stuck in the fridge. He rolled his eyes and leaned against the fancy unused stove to wait.
"Fucking douchebag seductive son of a bitch," Jason swore inside the refrigerator. Nico smirked as Jason continued. "Doesn't even have damned Spaghetti-O's."

"Spaghetti-O's would be in the pantry, Jace."

Jason jumped and hit his head on the ceiling of the refrigerator. He backed out and straightened to his full height.

"So you do have some?"

Jason’s eyes tried to meet Nico’s, but they kept falling to Nico's body. Good. Nico tried to saunter toward Jason, but seduction was not his forte.

"Did you hurt yourself?" Jason asked. "You're kind of limping."

"No," Nico snapped. He stopped sauntering. "I just got out of bed."

"Could've pulled something trying to tame that enormous erection." Jason seemed to be in an especially good mood for someone who'd almost died the day before.

"Ha. Ha. Why didn't you come back in the bedroom for me?"

"I finished fast, and by the way, my orgasm was strong as hell. Had to be. I was thinking about what I want to do to you."

Great. So Jason had jerked off to thoughts of him, and he'd jerked off to thoughts of Percy. Nico tried to tell himself it was understandable. After all, he hadn't slept with Jason in over a year, and he'd done a lot of sexual things with Percy during the time he hadn't been with Jason. Percy was who he was used to, comfortable with. None of those thoughts did much to mitigate his guilt. He may be used to Percy, but he loved Jason. Yes, fine, he loved Percy, too, but it wasn't the same.

"—you?"

Nico wrinkled his nose. He needed to get his head back in the moment. "What did you say?"

Jason's answering smile was the one Nico had fallen in love with when he was fifteen. It was kind and gentle and a little playful. It showed Jason's lovely teeth, but there was something so humble underneath it. That humility was what had sucked Nico in, even more than the kindness or the sexiness. Jason had been okay with who he was and wasn't wrapped up in being the son of the king of gods. After all this time, was he making peace with himself again?

"I was asking how your orgasm was."

"Oh," Nico mumbled. "Pretty odd question from the guy who wouldn't sleep with me."

"I will once we talk."

Nico put his hands behind his head and stalked toward Jason. Jason's eyes widened, and he backed up against the refrigerator. Nico didn't stop until they were chest to chest. "If you haven't fucked me into oblivion within the next two hours, I will push you against that glass wall over there and fuck your ass in front of the entire city and the gods. Clear?"

Jason's hands flew to the small of Nico's back and pressed firmly. His fingertips traced up Nico's spine while his palms compressed Nico's muscles. Nico shivered, and Jason's hands dropped down until he was digging under Nico's waistband and cupping his ass.
"You're making me want to see if I can make it two hours without fucking you." Jason's voice was low and so sexy. He lifted Nico slightly, turned, and slammed him into the refrigerator. The fridge shook with the force he used. Nico's breathing was rapid and shallow. The cool refrigerator at his back and Jason's hot body pressed tight to his front overloaded him with sensory input. Jason's kiss, gentle, slow, and deep, brought him back from the edge and returned him to semi-rational thought. The return of thought was enough for him to choose to melt into Jason instead of swallow and consume him. When Jason released his lips, Nico laid his head on Jason's shoulder and breathed into his neck.

"I love you more than life, Jason," Nico whispered. "I'm so scared because I have to let you go."

"I'm scared, too." Jason pressed his cheek to Nico's head. "I don't think I can do it."

"You can't stay."

Apollo may be humoring Nico by letting Jason stay here, but that generosity wouldn't last forever. Hera and Zeus would get suspicious, too, if Jason stayed near the NYU campus.

"I can't. I know. And you can't come with me when I leave."

"Take your shirt off, Jace. I want to be skin to skin."

Jason pulled his hands off Nico's ass and tugged his shirt over his head. Once he did, Nico pressed back against him and wrapped his arms around Jason's neck. Jason cradled Nico and made small, soothing circles all over Nico's back.

"We'll be apart again," Jason murmured. "I don't handle it very well."

"That makes two of us," Nico said. "You run away like you're some hermit, and I move in with someone I know I should be avoiding."

"And you sleep with Percy."

"And you sleep with Piper." Nico couldn't help the irritation that crept into his voice. Yes, he slept with Percy. That hadn't started until after he and Jason had self-destructed. He'd never been sleeping with Percy at the same time he was sleeping with Jason. Jason and Percy were the ones that were cheaters.

"I haven't."

Nico lifted his head off Jason's shoulder and stared incredulously.

Jason sighed. "I haven't slept with her or anyone else since I told you she and I were taking a break. That day before you left on your quest? That was the most sex I've had."

"But you've been tempted, right?"

Nico wanted Jason to have been tempted. It would make him not feel so bad about what he'd been doing with Percy.

"I'm not great at being alone. Maybe a week before I left Camp Jupiter, Drew Tanaka asked me to be her lab partner in chemistry, and I said yes. I would have slept with her if I hadn't left, I'm sure."

That felt better. Nico didn't like it, knowing that Jason would have had sex with someone besides him, but at least it confirmed his suspicion that sadness and loneliness were things anyone would
"Why weren't you sleeping with Piper?"

Jason released Nico and stepped back. He took Nico's hand and led him to the couch, where they sat facing each other, each with a knee bent. Their shins pressed tight together, and Nico laid his foot on top of Jason's.

"She was furious at me for sleeping with you while dating her, understandably," Jason said. "She didn't stop being my friend, which was good, because I needed friends, Nico, but she didn't want to be my girlfriend. I didn't want it, either."

"She will, when you go back. Try to make things work with her. It's better than random flings."

Jason's eyes hardened. "I'm not going back."

This was non-negotiable. Jason was going back. Nico had foolishly let him keep wandering after he left Camp Half-Blood, and Jason had almost gotten himself killed. That wasn't happening a second time.

"You are, and that's final."

"I'm not, and it's not your choice to make." Jason scowled and visibly stiffened. "If we got to tell each other what to do, do you think I'd let you live up here in your ivory tower, alone and growing more distant from your friends and family every day, getting ready to sleep with a god?"

Nico's anger flared. He clenched Jason's hand as hard as he could.

"So you're not telling me what to do, Jace? Because I'm feeling pretty judged."

"I can tell you I think you're making an awful, horrible mistake by doing this, Nico. You're defying the gods' rules and cutting yourself off from people who love you. I talked to Hazel a couple months ago, and they're all worried about you. I know you already know that, bastard. I'm saying I can hate it and tell you how much I think you're screwing up, but I can't tell you to stop."

Nico tried to pull his hand away from Jason's, but Jason held tighter and continued talking.

"You're in a fucking prison of your own design, every bit as much as I am. You know that, too, don't you? I can see it in your eyes."

"You think any of this was my first choice?" Nico wanted to shake Jason, slap him, let out the hurt boiling inside. "My first choice threw me out again and again, and fuck it, Jason, I know this last time wasn't your fault, but you broke me apart, just like you did every other time. You think I started sleeping with Percy because I wanted sex? He made me feel welcome and wanted. He makes me feel welcome and wanted. I may be his secret, but I'm not his dirty secret like I always was with you. And Apollo, gods, he treats me so softly. He's thoughtful and kind to me, the way you used to be. I know that they're substitutes for you. When I want them it's because they're reminding me of you. I shouldn't be with either of them, but you fucking left me. You left me alone, banished from my home and my family, and I am trying to put together some kind of life without you, and I know I'm screwing it all up left and right. I'm hurting Annabeth. I'm hurting Hazel and Reyna. My dad always sends me that note on my birthday that says 'I am proud of you,' and I know I won't get it this year. It tears me up inside that I've become such a disappointment to everyone I love. I don't need you to tell me."

Jason stared dumbfounded at Nico until he pulled Nico's head to press against his own. Nico went
cross-eyed trying to look in Jason's eyes. They were such a clear, beautiful blue.

"Oh, Nico, honey, I didn't...you're not a disappointment. You are good and kind, and we all love you. I wish I could go back in time and fix my mistakes. I wish I could take you away where nothing could harm you and we could live together forever. You are my world. I don't want to tear you down."

"I got an A in every class last semester," Nico offered shakily. He pulled his head away from Jason. Jason could say he wasn't a disappointment, but they both knew he was. At least he was a good student. "It's something I don't suck at. Will you do something for me?"

"That's awesome, Neeks," Jason said tenderly. "I'll do anything for you."

"Go back to camp. Finish college. Make a good life for yourself. I hate giving you up, but if I can see you're happy, then it'll be easier. I'll talk to Hazel and Reyna and Frank. Percy already promised me he'd treat you like a friend. You may not want his friendship, but you need it. Make a good life."

"I don't want—"

"Please? I'm not telling you what to do," Nico said. "I'm asking you to do this for me. This is what I need. I need to know you're going to give yourself a chance at happiness, even if it's without me."

Jason hesitated. Nico could see how much he wanted to say no. Jason dropped his head and stared at his hands for a long time. "I'll go. I'll go back to camp and college and try to be happy."

Nico laid his head back and closed his eyes in relief. If Jason was safe and trying to be happy, then he could make his own life, too.

"I don't suppose you would leave here if I asked you to?" Jason asked.

"I can't. You know that. Apollo may say I could. He may even believe it right now, but gods don't get left." Nico had messed up so much.

"That's true," Jason said. "It's also true that you don't want to leave. You could hide in your father's realm until Apollo moves on."

Nico stood and walked to the wall of windows overlooking the Empire State Building. The streets and sidewalks bustled with activity, though no noise reached them up here. Far above, Olympus looked like the gods, detached and cold.

"Dad asked me to stay there, after the banishment," Nico admitted. "He said I could go to school with the greatest minds the world has ever known. I insisted he let me make my own choices. At Thanksgiving, he told me off for making myself such an easy target to my roommate. Hell, Apollo manipulated me into seeking him out, and I didn't even realize it until the damage was done and I'd moved in. I didn't want to leave here, though, by the time I figured it out. I'm close to campus, and I love school. I like having a place that feels like home and a person to come home to. I liked it, when I was little, having Bianca to keep me company. I like not being alone. I'd have preferred to be with you. I'd live with Percy, as a second choice. I'd live at Camp Jupiter with Hazel and Reyna even if I didn't have you or Percy. None of those choices are available to me. I'm going to stick it out here. Apollo will tire of me eventually, but I'll have a first-rate education. Maybe I'll have grown up enough to tolerate being alone again by the time it happens."

Jason had come to stand behind Nico as he spoke. Nico could feel the little electrical field that
surrounded him.

"Can I ask you something?"

Nico shrugged but didn't turn around.

"How did you manage it? Those years you were alone after Bianca died?"

"I was a scared little boy with emotions too big for me to understand. I look back on it now, and I'm amazed I lived. My dad helped. He gave me a place to stay, even grudgingly, if it ever got too bad up here. I'm a good fighter. I was never worried I'd die — not like that, at least. I was hungry a lot, and people always looked at me funny. Can't blame them, of course. Sometimes, I'd hang out with the other runaway teens in whatever city I was in. I didn't fit in there, either. They let me in, though, shared their food."

Nico shuddered at the memories. No child should have to live the way he had. The awful truth was that there were so many mortal kids out there who were worse off than he had ever been. Those were the people he wanted to help by becoming a lawyer.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore, Jace."

"Okay," Jason said, like that was really all there was to it. He wrapped his arms around Nico and brushed his fingers back and forth across Nico's collarbone.

"It's funny, you know," Nico continued. "Apollo puts me in these clothes and makes sure I'm healthy and look great, and my dad's given me so much money that I have no idea what to do with it. I live here in the lap of luxury. But I'm still that little boy, lost and alone, with his bedhead and ratty clothes and empty belly. I thought I would stop being him after I got to know you and Reyna, hell, even before that, when I had myself all figured out at fucking fourteen. Having myself figured out didn't change how profoundly those years affected me."

"I think that little boy was just like I said up on Auster's balcony. You're the bravest person I've ever known, Nico. You may be pretty on the outside, but the thing that makes you beautiful is your soul."

"Percy says it's my mom. He saw her in this vision he had of me."

"Percy's a lucky son of a bitch," Jason chuckled. "Which do you think is true?"

"I want to believe you both," Nico said. "Some days, though, I think you're both liars."

Jason kissed Nico's hair and tightly wrapped his arms around Nico's chest and arms. Nico hooked his hands over Jason's forearm.

"We are both liars, but not about how beautiful you are. I think Percy's in love with you."

Nico rolled his head so his temple pressed against Jason's cheek. "I know he thinks he is. He's not, though, Jason. It's an infatuation."

"How do you feel about him?"

"I told you. He's a substitute for you."

"Maybe he was at first, but you fell in love with him, didn't you?"

Nico was surprised Jason could talk to him so calmly about this. He turned in Jason's arms and caught his eye. There was pain there, but his smile was kind. Nico kissed him. He wasn't sure Jason
would let him, not after he couldn't deny he loved Percy, but Jason cupped his cheek and pulled
them closer together. Jason's lips were chapped, and there was stubble above his upper lip. Nico
twined his arms around Jason's neck. The walk backward to the glass was slow and languid as they
kissed. When Jason's hands moved from Nico's back to his hips, the glass against Nico's bare back
felt cold and unforgiving, not at all like the man in front of him.

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"Happy birthday, big brother!" Hazel's voice cut sharply through the Iris message. Frank and Reyna
stood behind her and waved.

Nico plastered on a smile he was sure they knew was fake. "Thanks, guys. It's good to see you."

"Did you get your gifts?" Hazel asked.

Her face was pinched like she was worried, and Nico wasn't sure if she was worried he didn't like
the gifts, hadn't gotten them, or if it was something else entirely. His eyes flicked to Reyna, whose
eyes were narrow and calculating. Now that Reyna and Hazel had been co-Praetors for a year and
had weathered the Juno crisis, they were working together incredibly well. Nico was pretty sure he
was about to be subjected to a game of good cop/bad cop.

"I haven't been to the house today, but I'll go by tomorrow, I promise."

Hazel frowned. "It would be so much easier if you told us your current address, Nico. Then we
could send things directly to you."

"My roommate wouldn't understand." That was the explanation he'd given Percy, and, aside from
the awful accusation that Nico was sleeping with Jason while still having sex with Percy, which
didn't seem so awful or far-fetched right now, Percy had been accepting of the answer. He doubted
Hazel and Reyna would be as easily mollified.

"Why do you have a roommate, Nico?" Reyna asked. Her voice was so smooth, like silk, and her air
demanded truth.

Nico was getting quite accomplished at lying, though. He hated to lie to the women who meant the
most in his life, but he had few options. "I had trouble finding a place to live close to campus. You
know that."

"Yes, but the second semester is about to start," Reyna reminded him. "Surely there have been other
apartments that have become available in the last four months. You do understand that you live in the
largest city in the United States?"

"I'm aware of that, yes." Nico realized his face was torn between a scowl and a smile. He must look
demented. "I like where I live."

"It's such a lovely place with a lovely roommate that you can't tell your own sisters where it is? I cry
bullshit, Nico." Reyna's eyes bored into him. He knew that she knew he was a liar. What an awful
feeling.

"We're worried, Nico," Hazel said. "Are you dating someone?"
Nico knew his cheeks colored. None of them, not even Clarisse, had asked him that.

"Oh, my gods! You are!" Hazel's expression morphed from concern to excitement. She hugged Frank and Reyna, and when she turned back to Nico, he could read the relief in her eyes. Frank shyly smiled at him.

"Congratulations, Nico," Reyna said. She still knew he was lying. Nico appreciated that she wasn't letting on to Hazel. "I hope one day we will be able to meet your—"

"Beau," Hazel finished for Reyna. She clapped her hands together. "Is he handsome?"

Nico found a genuine smile for Hazel's enthusiasm. "He is. Very. He's a nice guy, too."

"Ooh, that's wonderful! What's his name?"

"Paul." The lie slipped so easily off Nico's tongue.

Reyna arched her eyebrow. "Are you sure his name isn't Jason?"

Hazel's, Frank's, and Nico's mouths all dropped open. It would have been comical if not for the glare Reyna was giving him.

"Nope, it's Paul." Nico nodded to himself. Reyna could believe he was a liar, because he was, but she couldn't prove it. "I'm not living with Jason, guys."

"You love him." There was no pretense of a question. Reyna knew it was true.

Reyna's certainty, her easy dismantling of his lies, even if she couldn't openly contradict him, was pissing Nico off.

"Well, love didn't work out so great for me," Nico said. "I've decided to focus on hot, mindless sex instead, Reyna. Sorry Hazel. I have to go. I'll get the gifts tomorrow. Thanks for thinking of me."

Nico swiped his hand through the message.

He'd already had his birthday call/berating from Clarisse, so that left only one other person to contact. He pulled out his phone. Percy was traveling back to Camp Jupiter with Annabeth today since the new semester started in two days. They wouldn't be able to talk, not that Nico would leave Jason for half an hour with Percy, anyway. Percy had been angry the past week when, each time he'd texted, Nico had said he couldn't get away. Making Percy unhappy with him was the last thing Nico wanted, but he couldn't be the person that was with two men at the same time. He wouldn't be that person, at least not with Jason. When Jason left, which was happening tomorrow, then Nico could make amends with Percy. He knew he was making distinctions between his behavior and his lovers' when perhaps no real distinctions existed, but he needed to believe he wasn't yet that morally corrupt.

There were three texts on his phone. The only person who had his number was Percy, so Nico hurried to see what his green-eyed lover had to say. He'd need to go back inside his building soon, but he could spare a few more minutes.

The first message was a simple one. It said, "Happy birthday, Nico."

The second said, "I miss you. I'm sorry I got mad the other night. I just want to see you."

Nico understood the feeling. He missed Percy, too, even with Jason around. One more reason to feel guilty.
The third message was a photo. Nico enlarged the photo to fill the screen. It was a picture of Percy, shirtless and smiling his goofy lopsided grin. His eyes looked playful and yearning. Across his chest and stomach were the words "Happy birthday, Nico" written in big blue letters. They looked wet, glistening on Percy's perfectly tanned skin and taut muscles. Nico bit his lip and crossed his legs, trying to deny how aroused Percy made him. He hurriedly texted back.

"I miss you, too. Gorgeous present." He pressed send and slipped the phone back in his pocket. Jason didn't know about it. He knew Nico had a phone, of course. He didn't know what Nico did with it.

Nico stood and walked back into his building.

***

Apollo came home while Nico was outside sending Iris messages. Jason sat on the stupid luxurious couch and tried not to roll his eyes or behave in any way that was rude. He was having to work hard.

"Where is our birthday boy, Jason?" Apollo asked.

Apollo had to know where Nico was. The god wanted to make conversation so he could work in snippy little remarks about why he was so much better for Nico than Jason was.

"He's outside getting birthday greetings."

"Ah, perfect. I assume you have not thought to give him anything for his birthday?" Apollo raised his eyebrows expectantly.

Jason wanted to say that he'd given Nico three birthday orgasms and all his genuine love, and neither was something Apollo could match. "I can't leave the apartment, Lord, to get him a gift. And all my money was stolen, remember?"

"Very well," Apollo said. "I will attend to the gifts. You are leaving tomorrow, correct?"

Again, this was information Apollo knew. Jason pinched his fingers along the couch cushion and pretended he was pinching Apollo's head.

"Yes, Lord Apollo."

"It is for the best, Jason." Apollo was attempting to sound sympathetic, but Jason thought he sounded more like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood. "Nico needs to be able to move on. He cannot do that while you are here."

"I know," Jason bit out through gritted teeth.

"Try to time your departure so that I can rejoin him rather quickly. It is my aim to comfort him."

“Comfort” meant "attempt to fuck." Jason couldn't do anything about it. Maybe Nico would be able to hold Apollo off a bit longer, but Jason had a miserable feeling that his departure would push Nico that last little bit straight into Apollo's bed. For a crazy moment, Jason thought about messaging Percy as soon as he left and asking him to play his dumb little video sex game with Nico, just to keep Nico away from Apollo.
A subject change was in order. "What are you going to do for his birthday?"

Apollo's face lit up with genuine excitement. His blue eyes sparkled merrily. Jason was never merry. He could tell it was one of the qualities that attracted Nico to his other "friends." If only "boring" and "steadfast" were attractive qualities.

"Watch, my little brother."

An elegant table with a white tablecloth appeared in the dining room. It was set for three and littered with cloches that hid divine-smelling food. Despite his annoyance, Jason was impressed. His stomach rumbled.

Apollo laughed his irritatingly perfect laugh. "It does smell incredible. Ah, and for you and me..."

Jason felt a change in the air around him and looked down to find he was wearing a crisp white button down shirt and stylish black pants. Apollo was similarly attired, but in a white shirt and silver pants.

"We look like waiters."

Apollo rolled his eyes. "We look incredibly attractive, brother. Why, were it not for our shared lover and our familial relation, which I understand you demigods find off-putting, I would be interested in —"


"Excuse me, you annoying little peon," Apollo said. His eyes had begun to glow. "I am quite certain you did not tell me to 'shut up.'"

Jason felt the air around him crackle with electricity. "I'm quite certain I did."

The slamming front door made them both jump. Jason turned to see Nico looking between the two of them in irritation.

"Ah, lover, we were—"

"Save it," Nico snapped. "I don't want to know. Jason's leaving tomorrow, and I want his last night here to be pleasant."

It didn't escape Jason's attention that Nico made no mention of wanting his birthday to be pleasant.

"Of course, my Dark Angel," Apollo bowed low at the waist. He was nauseatingly deferential to Nico. Jason hated it. "May I wish you birthday greetings with a kiss?"

Nico glanced at Jason.

"Go ahead," Jason said. "I've given you how many hundreds today, and you'll be in bed with me tonight? Let him have his one."

"Generous, you competitive smartass." Nico moved over to Apollo and let the god wrap him in an intimate embrace.

Jason should have averted his eyes, but he watched with morbid fascination, the same way he'd watched Nico blow Percy at that party. Apollo kept one arm around Nico's waist but rested the other hand on Nico's chest. Nico awkwardly put his hands on Apollo's shoulders and closed his eyes.
Apollo whispered something Jason couldn't hear, and Nico opened his eyes and grinned. Then Apollo was kissing him, and Jason was consumed by jealousy. He'd been wrong to agree to the kiss. Nico's eyes had slipped closed again, and his fingers had tightened on Apollo's shoulders. This was the way they would kiss when Jason left, except Nico wouldn't be embarrassed, and he'd kiss back. Jason strode past them to the dining table and busied himself lifting and slamming cloches.

After the fourth cloche clattered back onto its platter, Nico was there, resting his head on Jason's shoulder. Cool arms wrapped around Jason's neck, and Nico whispered in his ear.

"I'm sorry."

Nico kissed his cheek, and Jason was glad for the lack of intimacy. If Nico had tried to kiss his mouth, he would have shoved him away rather than taste Apollo on his lips or, gods, inside his mouth.

"Don't be," Jason breathed. "You'll fuck him as soon as I walk out the door tomorrow."

"Don't do this on our last night together, Jace." Nico's hands tensed on Jason's shoulder. "Let's make our final memories of each other happy ones."

Jason had done so well this week. After his early miscues, he'd been supportive and loving, and he and Nico had grown so much closer. It wasn't Nico's fault he had to leave. This wasn't a time to spoil the progress they'd made.

"I'll do better." Jason took Nico's hand and led him to the kitchen. He poured a glass of water and handed it to Nico. "Palate cleanser."

Nico snorted and took a huge swallow. As soon as he opened his mouth after the drink, Jason pulled him into his arms, sloshing water everywhere, and kissed him so deeply that Nico let out a small moan. Nico shoved Jason away and sought Apollo's eyes.

"You needn't be embarrassed, Nico," Apollo said. "I know my brother is an absolute brute and you find it scintillating for some odd reason. You will learn other ways of receiving pleasure as you age. Let us dine."

Jason bit back another hateful comment. He wouldn't rise to Apollo's goading anymore, at least not in front of Nico.

The food was thoroughly enjoyable. Whatever healing Apollo had done after the mugging had sent Jason's appetite roaring back. He was careful not to eat too much, though. He wanted to be able to enjoy Nico's company later and a stomach ache would get in the way of those plans.

"So tell me, little brother," Apollo said as they finished their main course. "What will you be studying when you return to college?"

"I want to be a teacher, I think," Jason said. "I like kids, and I've always enjoyed helping them."

The pride on Nico's face was enough to make Jason blush.

"Jason's wonderful with children." Nico put his hand on Jason's knee under the table and gave it several rapid strokes. "He's amazing that way."

"Admirable, Jason." Apollo daintily wiped his lips on his napkin. "I'm sure you will be quite good at it, if given the chance."
Nico narrowed his eyes and stared at Apollo. "What's that supposed to mean — 'if given the chance?' I don't like this cryptic shit I get from you and my father."

"Did you hear from your father?" Jason asked. He could guess Apollo's comment had to do with the growing feeling he had that his life wasn't meant to be long. Apollo had also hinted Nico's end would be painful, and that Jason would be around for it. He had no interest in a long life without Nico anyway. Whatever the case, he didn't want Nico to catch on. He agreed with Apollo that no good would come from Nico knowing. It was better to distract him by asking about his father.

"I doubt it," Nico said softly. He reached in his pockets to check. He seemed surprised when he pulled out a small package.

With shaking hands, Nico peeled open the wrapping paper. Inside, Jason could see a small silver cross. Nico looked puzzled and unfolded the included paper. He handed the note to Jason.

Hades's handwriting was lean and slanted sharply to the right.

"This was your grandfather's tie pin. It was presented to him by your grandmother the day they married, and he, in turn, gave it to Maria to give to me. I had hoped to give it to you to give to your spouse on your wedding day, but a wedding does not seem to be your destiny. Give it to the oaf while you have the opportunity. You have made terrible mistakes, Nico. That does not make me less proud of the man you are. Happy birthday."

It was hard to imagine how much this present must mean to Nico. The gift was two-fold, really. He was given a piece of his mother, something that her hands had held, something that had belonged to Nico's grandparents and symbolized the love between his mom and dad. Jason knew Nico longed for a connection to his mother; it was why Percy telling him he looked like her had meant so much. Hades had also written that he was still proud of Nico. In his quest for his own father's approval, Jason had often envied Nico's relationship with his father, sometimes jealously thinking Nico didn't have to work as hard as he did to gain such a coveted prize. He understood differently now. Nico had earned his father's blessings. Hades was as hard to please as Jupiter, but he was much more just and moral. It was little wonder Nico had been able to win his father over. Nico was an incredibly decent young man.

Jason didn't know what to say. Nothing seemed big enough, so he pressed a kiss to Nico's cheek and held his hand. Nico wasn't crying; he didn't cry. His eyes were full of tears, nonetheless.

"Apollo, would you mind giving me a few minutes with Jason, please?" Nico asked. His shiny black eyes were so soft right now. Jason wanted to run his lips over Nico's eyelashes and kiss his temples.

"Of course, my love." Apollo didn't appear to want to leave, but he stood, kissed Nico's head, and walked down the hall.

Nico turned to Jason. "Here."

He held out his hand and presented the tie pin to Jason.

"I don't understand," Jason said. Was Nico wanting him to examine the pin?

"I'm giving it to you."

"I don't—"

"You read the note." Nico awkwardly scooted his chair closer to Jason. Their knees bumped before Nico got the angle right. "It was given as a gift of love between life partners. I'm supposed to give it
to the one I would marry, but I'll never get the chance to marry you. I'm giving it to you now, so you can know that's the deepest wish of my heart."

Jason did not have an issue with crying. Tears welled in his eyes and spilled over until they were pouring down his face. He wanted to accept this gift, but he couldn't. It would be wrong to take something so special from Nico.

"I can't take it." Jason started to make real sounds of sorrow instead of crying silently. "You'll find someone who'll love you and cherish you the right way. Save it to give to him."

Nico's brow furrowed. "If I love you this much after all the hell you've put me through, there's no way I will ever love anyone the way I love you, Jason. There isn't going to be some other person for me. You'll be the only one."

"You deserve to be happy."

Nico kissed away Jason's tears.

"I'm going to work on it. I am. There's no rule that says you have to live with the love of your life to be happy. I see people in the Underworld all the time who happily wait to be joined by their great love."

"What if I..." Jason couldn't finish the sentence. The idea was too horrible to contemplate.

Judging by the way Nico's eyes softened and saddened, he understood. "If you fall in love with someone else, and I'm not your great love anymore, keep the tie pin as a reminder that you've been lucky enough to have that kind of love twice in one lifetime."

"Nico, I can't leave you. I can't be without you anymore. I can't do this," Jason sobbed. He was falling, falling, and he didn't have the strength to rescue himself. "If I can't have you, I don't see the purpose in living."

"Don't be stupid. We're not Romeo and Juliet, Jace. I don't want to die, and I don't want you to die, either." Nico swiped his lips across Jason's fingertips. Jason couldn't remember Nico picking up his hands. "We'll protect each other, honor each other, and keep our eyes out for ways we can change your dad's mind. It's the best we can do."

"Can I tell you I love you?"

Nico smirked. "You've already been saying it kind of a lot this past week."

"Yeah, but I forgot how you told me not to," Jason admitted. "Now I remember, so I want to do things the way you want me to."

"While you're here, tell me so much I never forget." Nico turned Jason's hand over and placed the tie pin in his palm. "After this, I'm not sure I'll be able to stand to hear it."

"Okay." Jason wiped his eyes and nose and closed his fingers around the cross. "I don't have any ties."

Nico laughed out loud, big and happy, and pulled Jason by the ears to give him a kiss. When they broke apart, Nico said, "I think I need to let Apollo come back out here now. His house and all."

"Wait!"
Before Nico could do more than register a gasp of surprise, Jason had pulled his lover off the chair and onto his lap.

"Wrap your arms and legs around me."

Nico must have been in shock because he did exactly what Jason said without complaint. Jason stood and marched, with Nico clinging to him like a koala bear, to the glass wall overlooking the city and Mt. Olympus.

"Lean back, but stay on me."

Jason's stomach and back clenched as Nico did what he'd been told. As soon as Nico leaned back, Jason quickly undid his pants and Nico's as well. Nico jolted out of his stupor.

"What the hell are you doing? We can't do this with Apollo right in the other room!"

"That's not what I'm doing," Jason had already pinned Nico against the glass and fucked him. Three times. That wasn't what he wanted this time, though he did shove both their pants low enough to expose their butts.

"Oh, my gods, you lunatic," Nico panted as Jason swung him around. "You better tell me right now what you're doing, or I will drop my legs and punch your face in."

"I love you!" Jason shouted, far too loud, and turned so his back pressed against the glass. He moved Nico's legs higher and swished his hips back and forth. The cold glass gave him chills, but he was elated, euphoric. "Fuck you, Zeus and Hera, you horrible douchebags! Kiss my ass!"

"Jason!" Nico sounded horrified, but he giggled madly.

Jason gripped Nico's ass and spun them around so Nico's back was to the glass.

"Kiss his ass, too, motherfuckers! Kiss the perfect ass of the son of Hades!"

Nico buried his head in Jason's shoulder and laughed hysterically as Jason shifted from side to side and screamed, "Both cheeks, baby!"

"What in the name of our father are you doing?"

Huh. Apollo was back.

"Telling our father, the king of the gods, to fuck the hell off!" Jason roared, still pressing Nico against the glass. He knew Apollo had to be getting quite a view of his ass, but he didn't care. It felt so good to rage against his father. "Oh, and telling him to kiss the gorgeous lily-white ass of the almighty badass motherfucking Ghost King!"

"Time to pull our pants up, Jace," Nico giggle-whispered. "Privacy, remember?"

"Don't wanna. Love you so much."

"I'll take them back off you so slow and sexy soon, you stunning, crazy-ass love of my life."

Jason pulled Nico's clothes back up and carefully set him on the ground. Nico got to work fixing his fly and then tried to wriggle Jason's pants and boxers back up his legs, but Jason was too manic to hold still. He was vaguely aware that Nico's knees were jammed into his feet to hold him in place.

"That's right, you terrible, cruel rapist dickhead, I hate you! I hate you! You tried to ruin me and him,
but we're still together, still in love!"

Nico had wrestled Jason's pants back up. Now Jason could feel Nico moving behind him, wrapping his arms around him, trying to close his fly. He grabbed Nico's hands.

"No! Flip them off with me, Nico! It's so much more productive."

Jason viciously made every obscene gesture he could think of, and when that short list was exhausted, he went through it over and over again. Nico chuckled and moved them forward to put both his hands on the glass, bony middle fingers extended.

"You have gone insane," Apollo said. "I cannot cure madness."

Jason whipped his head around to Apollo, who was staring at him as though he truly was crazy. Maybe he was. He turned to Nico, and when their eyes met they both burst into raucous laughter.

"Apollo, dude, I'm not crazy," Jason said when he'd managed to calm down a little. "I'm letting off steam. You should try it. Haven't you ever wanted to tell that awful jackass father of ours where he could stick his master bolt?"

"I...You are a terrible influence on our Nico, Jason Grace." Apollo appeared to consider joining in, but he must have thought better of it.

"Oh, Apollo," Nico said. "I am so the bad influence in our relationship, believe me."

Jason nodded his head frantically. "It's true. He is." His dramatic stage whisper sent Nico howling again. "You better watch yourself, my Lord, or his evil little ass will corrupt you, too."

Apollo seemed conflicted. He narrowed his eyes at Nico. "You approve of this behavior, my love?"

"Oh, I do. Absolutely. Pinky promise."

Nico's chest shuddered against Jason's back as he tried to keep from laughing again. The feeling, along with Nico's warm breath on his neck, was starting to turn Jason on. His desire to stick it to his father was fading as desire for Nico took over.

"Well, I..." Apollo visibly steeled himself. "You are not always a very nice immortal, Zeus."

To their credit, neither Nico nor Jason laughed at Apollo. Was he this mild-mannered a guy? Jason had heard stories about how Apollo slew Python and killed Achilles and Orion. He hardly seemed like he would harm a fruit fly. Maybe he had lost some of his swagger. Maybe he needed Nico...

Jason shoved the thought away and patted Apollo's shoulder. It didn't matter how much Apollo may need Nico, he wasn't supposed to have him.

"That's a good beginning," Jason said. "That was good."

"I wish to make the gesture Nico is making," Apollo said. Nico was still flipping off the universe. His hands might be stuck that way, he'd been holding the pose for so long.

Apollo held up his hands, and Jason maneuvered his fingers into the proper position.

"Thank you, Jason," Apollo murmured. "What does this mean, that I am doing?"

"It means 'fuck you.'"
Apollo wrinkled his nose, and Nico laughed again behind Jason.

"I do not wish to have sex with Zeus or Hera, either."

Nico bit down on Jason's shoulder. Jason assumed it was to keep his laughter under control.

"It's just a saying, Lord Apollo," Jason said. "It means you're angry with the person. It doesn't mean you actually want to fuck them. Though," Jason mused, glancing back at Nico as well as he could while being bitten, "sometimes I'm angry at Nico and want to tell him 'fuck you' and I mean both that I'm really mad at him and I want to fuck him. Hey, Nico, fuck you."

The bite pressure on Jason's shoulder increased. Jason gently pushed Nico's face away and turned. Nico's face was tomato red, and his eyes were streaming tears. Jason wanted to throw him down on the pool table and fuck him in front of Apollo. He managed to rein himself in and settled for yanking Nico forward by the hips, so they were snug together.

"Let's go, Nico." Jason's voice came out rough and gravelly. "I'm done yelling at my father. I want to make you scream now."


"'Night Apollo. Nico says thank you for the birthday dinner," Jason said as he walked Nico backward toward the hall. Nico's breath smelled like mint, and his black eyes were open wide. Jason could see down them to the tips of Nico's toes. He wanted to say the words again and again and again. "I love you. I love you. I love you."

Chapter End Notes

We've made it to the halfway point of the story! I hope you all are enjoying it, and I'd love to hear your thoughts now that we're halfway there. I want to thank everyone who's taken the time to read, give kudos, and especially those of you who've commented. Your comments and support give me the motivation to keep polishing and posting, and I sincerely appreciate it.
On the sixtieth day of their incarceration, the gods woke up, had sex, played miniature golf — the barrier had expanded enough over the last month to allow Nico to build a course out past the dunes, welcomed a forgettable god — he of piercings and home appliances, had more sex, played football, and retired to their man cave. Jason and Percy were playing video games, and Nico had his nose buried in a law book.

After Jason delivered a killing blow to the zombie overlord and Percy perfectly mimicked Nico by saying, "That is so offensive to zombies," Percy pressed pause on the game and motioned for Jason to listen.

"Hey, Neeks," Percy said, "Jace and I are going for a swim, wanna come?"

Silence. Nico was too engrossed in his book. Percy tapped Jason, and they left the house without Nico registering they'd even left the couch. Down at the beach, Percy stripped and dove into the water. Jason had his clothes off and was ankle deep in the surf when Percy emerged from under a wave.

"No, stupid, leave your clothes on. I don't really want you to swim," Percy said. "I wanted to talk where Nico probably wouldn't hear us."

"We could've talked right next to him and he wouldn't have heard us. If I'm out here, I'm swimming."

Percy shrugged. "Suit yourself. I promise, you won't be out here five minutes."

"Whatever, dipshit."

"How much daylight do you think we have left?" Percy sat down facing the shore and let the waves bob over his back. "You've got enormous balls, dude."

"A couple hours," Jason said, wading past Percy. "And does your mouth have any sort of filter at all? Gods, don't look at me."

"No filter, sorry." Percy didn't turn around, but Jason could hear him. "And I can't help noticing. They were practically smacking me in the face a couple hours ago. Keep your parts on your own side of Nico."

"Well, your hands weren't exactly staying out of my territory, either, bub. You don't need to have your hands on his ass at all times." Jason decided to float on his back and count the clouds. "Did you drag me out here to talk about the size of my nuts?"

"No. I'd prefer never to talk about those hairy motherfuckers again. I'm going to swim for fifteen minutes then come in and say I'm taking a nap. Once I'm asleep, I want you to take Nico on a date."

Jason stood up so fast he got vertigo. "What?"

"You heard me, asshole. Take Nico on a date." Percy wasn't facing Jason. He wasn't sure he could.
"Why?" Jason had not been expecting the conversation to take a turn like this.

Percy sighed. His shoulders wanted to slump, but he made them stay upright. "It's what he said when we started this sex thing. He has serious 'Jason issues.' Work on fixing them."

"But...you're in love with him, Percy."

Percy nodded. "Why else would I do it?"

Jason stared at Percy's back and tried to understand him. He decided he couldn't. He waded past Percy and back onto the shore. He willed himself dry and clothed. Percy hadn't moved. Jason waved and started toward the house.

"Jason?" Percy's voice was extremely quiet and etched with pain.

Jason glanced back at Percy. Percy's green eyes were so vivid and ageless. Jason thought his cousin was beginning to look like a god.

"If you hurt him any at all, anything close to the things you've done before...god or not, I will find a way to kill you."

Jason raised a hand and wished himself to Nico's side.

***

Jason restlessly waited the fifteen minutes for Percy to come in. Nico sat next to him on the couch and fidgeted because of Jason's proximity. When Jason had wished himself next to Nico, he perhaps should have wished himself nearby Nico. He had appeared on the couch practically on top of his lover, and Nico had made a disgruntled noise and shoved him away. Nico very much liked having sex and making out with Jason, but one of their agreements was that Jason wasn't to touch him without Percy present.

To prevent himself from either going back to his video game or lunging at Nico like some horrible, sex-starved chimp, Jason got up and picked out a book. Nico was the one who had chosen the contents of their library, and Jason was too restless to do more than select a book based on the cover.

When Jason sat back down, Nico noted the book in his hand.

"Good choice."

"Huh?" Jason was surprised he was being spoken to. Nico was more interested in his law books than conversation.


Jason puffed up a bit at Nico's praise. That it was praise for the book and not for Jason directly hardly mattered.

"I, uh, some of my kids read it." Jason tried very hard, most days, not to think about the job he'd left behind. "The ones that could read. I always meant to get around to it. It helped to have something we could talk about that wasn't, 'Did your dad come home last night?' or, 'Was the food in the shelter
Nico closed his book and opened his mouth. His words were swallowed by Percy, who dropped, wet and naked, into the room at Nico's feet.

Nico's eyes crinkled with the force of his smile. "Dramatic much, there, Percy?"

"What?" Percy asked, crouching down and shaking his head so water droplets flew all over Nico. "Can a god not pop naked and wet into his own house?"

"Now you're both sounding and acting like a god. It's freaky," Nico said.

Percy pulled Nico's hips toward himself and gave Nico a long, passionate kiss that only ended when Nico pushed Percy away by the forehead and gasped for air. Percy winked at Jason.

"I'm going to take a nap." Percy walked to the door. "Oh," he said, turning around at the entrance to the room. "I'm not leaving time for Jason to get equal attention. Shit. I'm really tired, though, baby. Maybe you should go ahead and give him a little kiss while I'm asleep. Like, half of what I gave you? See you later."

Nico sighed heavily as he watched Percy's retreating back. Once Percy disappeared from view, Nico went back to his book. There was silence for five minutes, until Nico began to feel aggravated.

"Well?"

Jason frowned. "Well, what?"

"Are you going to ask me on a date or not?"

"You, um, heard me and Percy?"

"I'm neither stupid nor deaf, dumbass. We're gods. I don't know why Percy didn't tell us both, though."

"Probably so he didn't have to put up with you being insufferable, like you're currently being," Jason snapped.

"That's why!" Percy yelled from the bedroom. "Now, shut up and let me go to sleep first. And do your dirty date deed elsewhere."

Nico huffed halfheartedly and willed the water off his clothes. Jason sat awkward and immobile beside him. He nervously straightened his glasses. After a few minutes of silence, Nico shook his head and went back to his book. Jason gulped.

"Nico?"

Nico rolled his eyes. "What, Jason?"

"May I take you on a date?" Jason started to touch Nico again, but his hand stopped an inch from Nico's and hovered over his knuckles. Nico lifted his hand slightly so Jason's fingers brushed his skin.

"I'd like that," Nico admitted shyly. "Where are we going?"

Jason had been thinking about it during the time he'd had to wait for Percy. "Come with me."

Nico closed his book and walked outside with Jason. Fifty yards from the house, away from the
beach, there was a black dome tent. Jason led Nico to it. Nico raised his eyebrows.

"Come inside," Jason said. "You'll see."

The tent was lit inside with three jasmine-scented candles. As soon as Jason entered, he created a soft breeze — not enough to blow out the candles, but enough to cool the balmy summer air. Jason sat cross-legged on the floor and motioned for Nico to sit across from him. Nico did, mimicking Jason's position. They were almost close enough for their knees to touch. Jason waved his hand and a McDonald's bag and two cups appeared.

Nico's eyes widened. "You didn't?"

Jason smiled. "Plain cheeseburgers, chocolate shake, right?"

Nico smiled bigger than he had when Percy appeared wet and naked in front of him. Jason squirmed with pleasure at having made Nico smile like that.

"I've been kind of...missing McDonald's," Nico said. "I hadn't had it for a while before all of this happened, and it's always been sort of comforting."

"I remember," Jason said. He tilted his head toward the bag. "Dig in. There's fries, too."

"Ooh!" Nico hastily dug out the burgers and fries and laid them on the flattened bag. The young gods ate in silence for a while before Nico, to Jason's surprise, broke it. "Tell me about your teaching. You don't talk about it."

Jason took a big bite of his burger to buy himself some time. There was much about his old life he wanted to forget, but he wasn't sure if teaching was one of those things. He hadn't been able to do it for very long.

"I try not to think about it too much, after the things I saw the last day."

Nico quickly placed his hand on Jason's knee. The fabric of Jason's jeans was soft and worn. Even though Jason conjured a new pair every day, they always had the same lived-in feeling that Jason preferred and Nico had come to associate with him.

"I'm sorry," Nico said. "We can talk about something else."

"No, it's okay." Jason briefly covered Nico's hand with his own. He was breaking their agreement, but he thought Nico may not mind since he had broken it first. He moved his hand before Nico could object, though. "I probably should talk about things. Maybe it'll help me remember that my own students were three thousand miles away and nothing worse than their usual bad lives happened to them that day. Sometimes, I don't know, I dream about it, and it's them I see in that wrecked school."

Nico nodded. There was nothing he could say that would ease Jason's pain.

"So, anyway, my own kids," Jason said. "I loved teaching them, Neeks, but it was so hard."

"How many did you have?"

"Twenty. It was kind of a small class because they were 'troubled,' which I came to believe meant 'unfortunate enough to be poor and smart enough to be pissed about it.' I had three aides who basically hung out in there to deal with the kids when they got violent or too disruptive. Something happened every day, you know? Someone was always pissed about something. One of my kids, Robbie, he brought a switch-blade to class and told me he was going to carve me up like a
motherfucking turkey." Jason snorted a laugh at the memory. "I had that knife out of his hand in less than a second. My aides hadn't even moved."

"Sounds rough."

Jason shook his head. "Robbie was my favorite kid. Rough was him getting suspended for two weeks and knowing he'd barely have any food in his belly the whole time. I took him breakfast every day before school once his mom left the apartment. She’d have been embarrassed by the charity. His brother was too stoned to eat it, so at least Robbie got that one meal. After the suspension, he came back too thin and haunted-looking. I'm afraid the brother did something to him, and I reported it to Child Protective Services, but nothing ever came of it, that I know of. I was going to pay the brother a visit, give him a little scare, but I never got the chance."

"When we get out of here, I'll go with you and we'll scare the shit out of him. How old is he?" Nico had been a traumatized kid. He hated hearing how other young kids suffered.

"The brother's fourteen. We're not scaring the shit out of him." Jason was sad enough to cry. His eyes filled with tears, and Nico's hand was back on his knee.

"It's never that easy, is it?" Nico asked. "And the mom?"

"She works two jobs. Cleans hotel rooms and cleans up at night for a couple nail shops. I heard this other mom once, one whose kid wasn't in my class, telling her friend that Robbie's mom liked to act poor but she couldn't be all that bad off to have fancy nails like she does. It made me want to punch that mom's face in. Robbie's mom has nice nails because the manager at one of the salons feels bad for her and gives her free manicures once in awhile." Jason paused to remember what he'd started out talking about. "Anyway, the mom tries, but Robbie told me she can barely read and there's this 'uncle' that comes by around payday who, from the sound of it, gets her fucked good and takes a lot of the money."

Nico's hand tightened on Jason's knee. "That's money to support her kids. How could she let him take it?"

"You know why, Nico," Jason said. "Being alone is horrible, especially when things are bad. Things've never been so dire for us; we've never had anyone else to take care of, but you and I both have chosen the wrong thing because it was easier than being alone."

"But she has kids, Jace." Nico felt angry. The candles went out, and Jason would have been unable to see in the limited light had he not been a god. "You don't do that to kids. You make the hard fucking choices and put them first."

"You're right, and you say that, and I know you'd do it. But that's partially because you know what it feels like to be abandoned as a kid. You can relate to Robbie better than you can relate to the mom. I'm not so sure I'd be able to be selfless." Jason shook his head and waved his hand. The candles lit again. He examined Nico's hands. His fingers were so long and elegant. His nails were shiny and rounded. Jason wanted to touch them. He sat on his hands. "Most of us, we're not as principled as you."

"That's bullshit." Nico withdrew his hand from Jason's knee and folded his arms over his chest. "And you wouldn't ever hurt a kid that way."

"I've done a hell of a lot of things I never thought I'd be capable of doing, Nico, made terrible mistakes. It's easier, I think, to see how someone could fail when you've failed as miserably as I have."
Nico brushed his hand through Jason's hair. "You're a good man, Jason."

Jason snorted. "I have a lot to make up for."

"No, you don't. I'm not staying away from you because I think you need to atone for your shit or something. You know that, right?" Nico reached for his milkshake, and his hand hit the barrier. He sighed and stood.

"Then why are you staying away from me?" Jason asked, standing, too.

The blond god seemed too close to Nico now. Nico ducked out of the tent and waited for Jason to follow. Together, they made their way back to their house.

"I don't know how to trust you."

"So you've mentioned. But I don't know how to earn your trust back," Jason said. "I spent the last year and a half being what I thought you wanted me to be, giving you space, saying yes to whatever you asked. It hasn't been enough."

Nico stopped outside the house and leaned up against the wall. Jason was silhouetted by the waning sunlight. Nico thought the son of Jupiter was incredibly beautiful.

"I don't know." Nico took Jason's hand. "It's me, you know? It's not you. I can logically think about how you've behaved over the past whatever, year and a half, and see that you haven't hurt me more than you had to and you've even been rational and human and decent, for the most part. Then you step as close as you are now, or I see your face, and all the bad feelings come rushing at me. All I can think about is how I need to get away before you ruin me again. I can't stand being vulnerable in front of you, and it's hard to be myself around you when Percy or someone else isn't there. I'm so damned scared, I guess."

"Can I keep trying?"

"I'd like you to." Nico smiled. "Are you going to ask me out again, Jason Grace?"

"Nico, will you go on another date with me?" Jason inched forward into Nico's space.

Nico blushed and looked up at Jason through his lashes. He leaned forward and chastely kissed Jason's lips. The kiss ended as soon as it began. "Yes."

"Thank you," Jason said. "I'm gonna stay out here a few minutes, if that's alright."

"Not too long. Tonight's our night to sleep in the man cave, so we need some time in the bedroom before the barrier collapses."

Jason nodded, and Nico disappeared inside. The son of Jupiter walked to the barrier and drew a line in the sand a foot inside it. He stayed outside, thinking about his students and Nico until he was pushed past the line. He patted the barrier and went into the house.

Chapter End Notes
The book Jason picks up is *The Giver* by Lois Lowry.

Hope everyone is enjoying! :-)


Returning to the New Normal

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry I missed a posting day yesterday, folks. I've been feeling burnt out and needed a day to regroup. There's a longer explanation here if you'd like to read it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Returning to Camp Jupiter wasn't as terrible as Jason had made it out to be. He hated leaving Nico, and saying goodbye this afternoon had been excruciating, but last night, being given the tie pin then screaming at his father and Hera like a wild man, had set free something inside him. Those chains he'd first felt when Hera had bound him in her shrine, they were breaking. He was breaking them. For the first time since that day, he felt like he and Nico would find their way together no matter what obstacles kept them apart. Hera and Zeus may control him, but they didn't own him.

He emerged from the Caldecott Tunnel entrance and found Piper waiting for him at the bank of the Little Tiber. Nico must have told Reyna or Hazel when to expect him. Piper flew into his arms and kissed his cheeks. He laughed and let her check him over like he was a long-lost puppy.

"Jason! I've been so worried about you!" Piper's eyes were spinning into different colors again. Jason wondered what had changed. She looked as beautiful and warm as ever, and Jason gave her a big smile.

"I'm fine. Ready to start school. How have you been?"

"Forget me! Where have you been?" Piper playfully smacked his arm. "I tried over and over to call you the past week, and I never could get through. Then, Reyna told me you'd called and were coming home today."

Jason hadn't called. He hadn't made any arrangements. Nico had set up everything with Reyna. He'd told her Jason was coming home, gotten her to get him back into college, and arranged for her to give him a villa. It was funny. They'd often joked how Jason was like a mom, but this time it had been Nico who'd done all the supportive mom-work.

"I was traveling, and I got mugged." Jason showed her the scar on his neck. Piper inhaled sharply. "I was in a mortal hospital for a while."

Nico and Jason had decided it was best to pretend to all but Reyna that they hadn't been in contact with each other. Nico had said Reyna knew they were together, but he still pretended that he'd simply spoken with Jason and was passing along messages. Jason hated to think about the damage Nico might be doing to his relationships in order to cover up their affair.

"That's awful! Where were you?"

"Florida. Warmer weather and all, you know." Jason chuckled. "I don't think I'll go back."

"I'd guess not! You look great, though. Those doctors must have been extremely good."

"The best. How are things here?" Jason wanted to steer the conversation away from himself. He'd have to lie less that way.
"The usual. I went to see my dad over Christmas. He's dating some starlet, but I don't think it's too serious."

"That reminds me, how did things go with that guy you were dating?"

Piper’s eyes flicked to Jason’s and then away. Had he implied he was jealous or interested by asking? That certainly wasn't what he was going for, but the way Piper's cheeks colored slightly seemed to indicate she might think so.

"We didn't work out. You're a hard act to follow."

Jason shook his head. "I'm a lying cheater, remember? Pretty much anyone is a step up."

"You were in love," Piper said quietly. "I should have realized you wouldn't be able to stay away from him."

"Well, I fixed that up good now," Jason mocked himself. "He's on the other side of the country and forbidden to come back."

"Why did you do it?"

They had walked through Camp Jupiter and turned in their weapons at the Pomerian line. Jason saw Piper was leading him toward the neighborhood of villas where Percy lived. He hummed a little and hoped it bought him time. She'd asked before, of course, but he'd always said he did what he had to do.

Jason decided on a partial truth. "I was mad. I hated that he'd been with Percy. I still hate that he was with Percy."

"You're not like that, Jason," Piper said. Her hand brushed his arm. "You may have been furious, but you wouldn't have done that to him."

"Ask Nico how vindictive I can be. He would be the one to know." Jason's breezy feeling from earlier was dissipating. He was ready to be alone.

"Oh, here, I have your house key," Piper said. She reached in her pocket and dangled a gold key from her fingers.

Jason took the key and read the number engraved on it. Twenty-six. Wasn't Percy's...

"Shit."

Jason's new villa was directly across the path from Percy's. Shit. Shit. Shit. Nico had this grand plan that Jason and Percy could be buddies again, but it was never going to happen. There was way too much bad blood between them.

"It'll be fine, Jason," Piper said. "You don't have to see him more than you want to."

"Except every day."

Jason tried the key in the lock of his new villa and let the door swing open. At first glance, it looked pretty much like Percy's, boring and outdated. The floor plan seemed the same. The living room had a doorway that led to the kitchen, and to the right there was a small hallway that led to two bedrooms on either side of a bathroom. Jason's carpet was brown. The walls were a murky gray. Jason wrinkled his nose. He didn't care about the place’s visual appeal, but it was a far cry from Apollo's
swanky apartment.

The villa was furnished, which Jason supposed was good. The furniture looked old and smelled slightly musty. He had a feeling Reyna was trying to make him uncomfortable.

"Knock. Knock." As if summoned by his thoughts, Reyna stood in the doorway, stiff, solid, and intimidating. She didn't wait for Jason to invite her in. "Piper, I require some time alone with Jason, if you wouldn't mind leaving."

Piper mouthed "Good luck" toward Jason before walking past Reyna and out of the house.

"Does this villa meet with your approval?"

"Not really," Jason said. "Why'd you have to put me across the street from Percy?"

Reyna shrugged. "For punishment."

"I figured, but you're punishing him, too. I don't suppose you'd change my living assignment?"

"There's a nice spot under the Little Tiber bridge. I could set you up there. You could be our camp troll."

Jason made no effort to hide the roll of his eyes. Reyna was being a bitch on purpose. He may deserve it, but he didn't have to like it.

"Nico didn't want it to be like this. He told me." That would work. Jason wasn't above playing the Nico card.

Reyna sat on the couch and motioned for Jason to follow. He sat as far from her as he could. Reyna scared him.

"I'm not feeling particularly thrilled with Nico at the moment, either. Your assertion hardly bolsters your chances of getting moved."

Damn it.

"Okay, well—"

"You're not being moved, Jason. Get over it. You and Percy deserve this cozy little arrangement. Neither of you have done Nico any favors." Reyna jutted her chin and flipped her braid to the other shoulder.

"Fine." Jason stood and walked to the bedrooms. The couch smelled flat out terrible when he sat down on it. That awful cat pee tent they used to have at Camp Half-Blood smelled better. The linens in the bedrooms smelled almost as bad. He walked back to the living room. "C'mon, Reyna. Give a guy a break. At least let me have bedding that doesn't smell like puke and garbage."

Reyna snorted. "The real bedding is in the dresser, along with an odor neutralizer for the furniture. You did deserve it, Jason."

"Thank you, your evil highness." Jason gave her a fake salute, and Reyna appeared to bite back a laugh.

"Now that we have gotten your housing situation squared away, let's talk."

"So, how are you?" Jason leaned against the wall and tried to act casual. This was when the
interrogation would start.

Reyna ignored him. Her eyes bored into his. "Where have you been for the last week?"

"I got mugged and stabbed. I've been recovering in a mortal hospital."

"Show me the wound." Reyna stood, and Jason tried to take a quick step back. Damn wall.

Jason pointed to his neck. Reyna moved close and ran her nail over the scar.

"Is this what you told Piper?"

"Yeah."

"And she believed you?" Reyna narrowed her eyes in disbelief. Lying to Reyna was the most pointless endeavor Jason could imagine.

"It's the truth."

"It may be the truth that you were stabbed, Jason Grace, but mortal doctors would be unable to heal a stab wound to a fine white scar in one week. Your lying will need to improve drastically. No more lies to me. How was my brother?"

"I wasn't—"

Reyna grabbed his tongue.

"If you lie to me one more time," Reyna said, shaking Jason's head around by the tongue, "I will leave with the fresh bedding and the odor neutralizer. And by tomorrow, you won't live across the street from Percy, you'll live with Percy. Do I make myself clear?"

Jason nodded. Reyna released his tongue and wiped her hand on his shirt.

How could he tell Reyna the truth without risking Nico? He wasn't living with Percy, no way, but if their conversation was overheard... Jason walked into the kitchen. He checked the stove. It had gas burners. Good. He rummaged through the drawers, finally finding a notepad and pen in a drawer that also had six roach carcasses, at first count. Jason shivered and carefully extracted the pen and paper.

Reyna had followed him into the kitchen, and he motioned her over to the stove. He lit the burner, tore off a strip of paper and hastily wrote, "He's okay."

He showed it to Reyna, and as soon as she nodded, he burned the paper. Reyna grabbed the notepad and tore off a strip of her own. Jason handed her the pen.

"Is this necessary?"

"Keeps him safe."

"From what?"

"Who. Can't tell you."

After each strip was read, it was placed in the fire. This had to be untraceable by Zeus and Hera.

"Whom, fool," Reyna said.
"Is this the time to give me a grammar lesson?"

Reyna sighed and motioned for the notepad.

"Were you with him?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Can't say."

Reyna read the strip and hummed. She scrawled quickly on the notepad and shoved the paper at Jason.

"Why?"

"No one can know. Safety."

"Why do you know?"

"He saved me when I got stabbed."

"Only morons get stabbed by muggers."

"No argument. Done?"

"Is he safe?"

"Not really, but I can't make him safer."

"Why not?"

Jason tore out several strips of paper. He didn't dare write the entire answer at once. For all he knew, Zeus or Hera was watching this exchange, trying to read over his shoulder. Long messages wouldn't work.

"He's a stubborn idiot..."

"...who made a bad choice..."

"...and now has to live with it..."

"...Even his dad..."

"...can't fix it."

"I see."

"Who else knows about danger?"

"Which danger?"

"There are two?"

"Yep."
"Dios mio. Answer the question."

Jason thought.

"A-B knows some."

"Not surprising, I suppose."

"She figured it out."

"PJ?"

"That idiot?"

"Quit being bitter."

"I don't think so..."

"...Tries to keep us protected."

"Sometimes I think he's dumber than you and PJ combined."

"You flatter me."

"Now what?"

"Keep this secret..."

"...No more talking or asking..."

"...If I come to you for help..."

"...Help me. It's all for him."

"You love him."

"Beyond imagining. He's my world."

"Very well. It looks as though your stove is in working order," Reyna said out loud, startling Jason from their silent discussion. She walked back into the living room toward the front door. "Your course schedule is behind the toilet. There's a bit of money in one of the dresser drawers, if you need clothing. Your books are on the back porch."

"That's an impressive amount of resentment you've built up toward me," Jason said.

"It's been well-earned. Welcome home." Reyna seemed like she might mean it.

After Reyna left, Jason busied himself changing out the sheets and spraying down the furniture. He retrieved his books and got ready for school the next day. He took a long shower and spent eons in front of the mirror shaving and combing his hair different ways. Anything to stave off thoughts of Nico, who was probably getting fucked sideways by Apollo right now.

Jason wasn't angry with Nico. He was mostly not angry with Nico, at least. He remembered the kiss he'd watched between Nico and Apollo, how Nico had said he didn't want to be alone. Jason couldn't blame him for seeking comfort. If there was someone he felt close to, he might be tempted,
too, because being without Nico sucked.

At least he'd figured out a way to communicate with Reyna. He wouldn't be able to do that with anyone else. Reyna was the only one he could trust to both keep his secrets and not press when he told her there were things he couldn't divulge. It was a start.

***

Nico skulked down the streets of Manhattan, his hand on the hilt of his sword. There had to be some monster in the city who wasn't afraid to seek out the son of Hades. He just had to keep searching for it.

Normal people probably went to a gym or something. Working off his aggression and excess adrenaline by fighting monsters sounded so much more appealing than jogging on a treadmill. Danger thrilled him.

Danger didn't seem as thrilling to monsters. Word had gotten out that he was exceptionally dangerous. It wasn't his power or skill; monsters didn't mind seeking out Percy or Jason, who could match him on both fronts. Almost match him. Not quite. Monsters liked a challenge, after all, and the three sons of the Big Three were the biggest challenge possible. Felling one of them would land a monster bragging rights for eternity, Nico guessed. It was the sword. That's what scared the monsters most. If a monster was killed by Percy or Jason, well, they'd head to Tartarus to regenerate and hope for better luck next time. But death by Nico's sword? There was no coming back from that.

Nico turned a corner and found himself back on his own street. Shit. He'd been walking for two hours now and seen nothing. At first, the anticipation of getting to fight something had been enough to keep his mind off Jason, but the longer he walked the less he expected a fight and the more Jason crept into his brain.

He'd fled the apartment less than half an hour after Jason left. There was an authentic Italian restaurant about three blocks away, and Nico had stopped in there first and eaten a good meal. He could vaguely remember his mother patting his cheek when he was a boy and telling him pasta made his motor run. He wasn't sure if it was a real memory or one he'd made up, but it seemed like something he would have liked his mother to say, so he'd decided to believe it had happened.

Now, his motor was running, but he had nowhere to let it loose. No track, no game, no monsters. He trudged the last few steps into his building and dodged as quickly as he could to the elevators, avoiding the too-helpful front desk staff. He wasn't looking forward to returning to the empty apartment. He sure as hell wasn't looking forward to returning to his empty bed. Jason, gods damn him, had carved away at him again, and the destruction was almost worse this time because it had been happy destruction. Each time before, Nico at least had his anger to nurse, his feeling of being wronged to feed. This time, Jason had been wonderful, everything Nico wanted. He hadn't left by choice; he'd left because Nico made him. That Nico had no choice hardly mattered. This time, he'd broken his own heart.

The elevator dinged, and the doors opened. Nico slowly walked to his door, dread sticking his boots to the floor.

He pulled out his keys, but before he could fit them in the lock, the door was flung open and Apollo pulled him into a tight hug.
"Lover!" Apollo nuzzled his lips along Nico's neck. "I came home early, and you were not here."

Apollo pulled Nico into the apartment and hastily shut the door. As soon as they were inside, Nico was mauled again. Apollo was an octopus, with arms all over him.

"Enough." Nico pushed the god away and went to the kitchen to get a drink. "I went for a walk. I'm fine."

"You are not fine, lover," Apollo said as he followed Nico into the kitchen. "You said goodbye to Jason today. You are reeling and unsteady, Nico. I can feel it. And you did not leave a note on the fridge."

Nico glanced at the refrigerator in confusion. What was Apollo talking about?

"A note," Apollo repeated. He crossed his arms over his chest. "When you moved in, I asked you to leave a note if you were going to be out when I did not expect it."

"Oh. Well...sorry, I guess," Nico said. He brushed past Apollo and sat on the couch. Maybe he should shadow travel to the countryside to search for monsters. No, he'd play pool. Nico went over to the pool table and started setting up the balls. "Want to play?"

"Nico, would you rather talk about this?" Apollo stood very close again. His pretty blue eyes, so much like Jason's, were alight with concern. Nico looked away.

"Nope. You want to play or not?"

Apollo sighed. Nico took that as a yes. He handed Apollo a cue and took one for himself.

"Shall I break?"

"Knock yourself out."

Nico twirled the cue like it was a weapon as Apollo took the opening shot. Apollo was good at pool. Nico hated it. He didn't necessarily mind losing; he minded losing every time, even when Apollo was obviously trying to let him win. Apollo knocked in three stripes. Apollo was always stripes. Nico sighed heavily. Apollo missed his next shot on purpose; Nico could tell the difference. He sighed louder and lined up a shot. Scratch. Of course. He dug out the cue ball and slapped it on the table.

"Why are we playing this game, lover, when you obviously do not want to play? Let's talk, please," Apollo said. He put his hand on Nico's shoulder. Nico shrugged him off and went back to twirling the cue.

"What's to talk about? He's gone, and I'm alone. Again." He altered the motion of the cue, so he was twirling it across his body and around his sides. Maybe the gym downstairs had some martial arts classes he could take.

"You are not alone," Apollo corrected him.

Nico snorted. "You just want to fuck me. Take your turn."

Apollo moved around the table and sank another ball. His hair glistened, and Nico watched the muscles in his back lengthen and contract as he adjusted the angle of his shot.

"I do want that, Dark Angel, but that is not all I want. I love you." Another striped ball dropped into
"Love sucks. Can you fight?"

Apollo struck with such quickness that Nico was caught completely off guard. The pool cue clattered out of his hands, and Apollo stood smirking in front of him, retracting his own cue from Nico's personal space.

"What do you think?" Apollo raised his chin and grinned slyly. "I would rather make love to you, though."

Nico laughed and picked up his pool cue. He jabbed at Apollo and was easily deflected. "Which are you better at?"

He was ready this time when Apollo attacked. The whirling cue stayed in his hands and sent Apollo's stick ricocheting back to its owner.

"Allow me to demonstrate both, and then you may judge."

Nico spun and lashed out at Apollo's side. The god dodged, and Nico had to jump onto the pool table to evade the following blow.

"Another time. Today, why don't you tell me which you think you're better at?"

The tip of Nico's cue barely missed Apollo's face. Nico jumped backward off the pool table and resumed his spinning, waiting for Apollo to advance. Apollo stepped warily around the table, searching for an opening in Nico's defenses. His blond hair was ruffled, and his tight white t-shirt had twisted a little around his torso. Nico could see a stripe of tanned skin on his stomach.

"I will tell you which I am better at if you tell me which you are better at."

"Fuck!" Nico's hand stung where Apollo landed a shot. He stopped twirling the cue and held it defensively like his sword. "Deal. You've already watched me fuck, I'm guessing. It's not such a mystery. I'm a better fighter."

Apollo waved his free hand. "I love watching you, yes. I am surprised you are not offended. I think you underestimate your sexual skill."

Nico struck Apollo's shoulder hard. The god didn't flinch. "I lost my innocence about the gods' behavior a long time ago. Are you saying you think I'm not as good a fighter?"

Apollo lunged, and Nico danced away.

"I think you are exquisite at both."

Nico could see the hunger building in Apollo's eyes, thought maybe it mirrored his own. He whirled and kicked, missing, giving the impression he was off balance. Apollo struck again, and Nico grabbed the incoming cue and pulled Apollo close. He raked his own cue across Apollo's neck, watching the god's eyes widen in surprise.

"I'm a better fighter, I promise," Nico said. "I guess you're a better lover."

Apollo fingered his neck where a blue chalk stripe marked the path of Nico's weapon. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, and Nico watched the way it made the chalk move.

"Did you...slit my throat?"
"Blue chalk suits you."

The space between their bodies was shrinking. Nico looked up from Apollo's neck to find his face a few inches away. Apollo's eyes were focused on his lips, Nico was sure. His own breathing was rapid, and Nico told himself it was from their fight, not how close Apollo was, how good he smelled. The pool cue fell out of his hand, and he tugged at Apollo's hip. Apollo came, pressing into Nico enough that there was no hiding how aroused either man was. Apollo pried Nico's hand off his hip and held it. He loosened the other pool cue from Nico's grip, and Nico let him take it.

Apollo licked his lips and leaned in. Nico's eyes had almost slipped closed when the long side of the pool cue was pressed into his throat and his hands were forced high over his head. Apollo was holding him there, digging his elbows into the inside of Nico's elbows, using the pressure of Nico's arms to keep the cue tight on his neck. When Nico gasped and squirmed, Apollo raised their hands higher, further constricting Nico's throat.

"I am a better fighter, lover," Apollo grinned. "I see no reason why two people as accomplished as ourselves cannot enjoy both, if that is what you prefer."

Nico stepped back, easing the pressure on his throat, though Apollo moved with him, preventing his hands from dropping. Another step back, and when Apollo followed, Nico kicked out, swiping Apollo's legs out from under him and sending him sprawling on the floor. They were silent, staring at each other while the cue that had been tight on Nico's neck rattled around on the ground. Nico kicked it out of the way and extended a hand for Apollo, who took it and gracefully stood.

"Very nicely done, lover," Apollo said. "Your neck is bruised. Have I caused you any other injuries?"

"I'm fine," Nico said. His biggest problem was trying to decide what the hell he was doing. The pounding panic that had plagued him since Jason left had eased with the fight, but now it was starting to creep back into his heart. He had to make it go away. "Have I hurt you? Can a demigod even hurt a god?"

"Oh, we can be hurt by you," Apollo purred. He stepped back into Nico's body. "Someday I will tell you how, when your tongue has sufficiently loosened mine."

Apollo's arms moved, probably to wrap around him, but Nico didn't wait to see. He surged forward and kissed Apollo as hard as Jason kissed him. He felt Apollo's arms flap, and he was pushing the god back until his body hit the pool table. Nico shoved his tongue in Apollo's mouth, all heat, no finesse. The god responded, slower and gentler than Nico needed. He needed this to be hard and fast, brutal, even. He needed violence to push Jason out of his mind.

Nico spun them around so his back was to the pool table. He swiped the balls out of the way and laid down, pulling Apollo on top of him. The weight of Apollo's body wasn't enough. Apollo broke the kiss and softly licked Nico's lips.

"Harder," Nico said. "Bite me. Bruise me. Make me forget."

Apollo flew off him; Nico was alone on the pool table. He raised himself onto his elbows and watched Apollo wipe his mouth with his hand. The sun god was agitated, turning in a circle and running his hands through his hair.

"Come back here. I want this, Apollo."

Apollo walked back toward Nico and offered his hand. Nico tried to pull him back down, but Apollo
guided Nico to standing instead.

"Do you want to go in your bedroom?" Nico asked. "I don't care where we do it. We just need to hurry."

Apollo said nothing and led Nico to the couch. Nico flopped down and tugged Apollo onto his lap. His erection had waned with the end of their fight, but he could get it back. He had to. This was the only way to ease the pain. He gripped Apollo's hips and leaned up to kiss him again, but Apollo pulled his head away.

"We cannot do this," Apollo whispered.

"I have to do this." Nico used his hand to try to force Apollo's face back to his, but the god held firm.

"Nico, this is wrong. You wish to forget your heartache, and I understand that. I cannot take advantage of your emotional state."

"I don't have an 'emotional state.'" Nico put air quotes around the words. "My emotional state is horny. I want to fuck you."

"It would be wrong of me."

"You have wanted me for three years, Apollo. Here I am. Gods, will you do it already? You said you'd be here for me however I wanted, and this is what I want."

Apollo crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. Nico rolled his eyes.

"Damn it," Nico said. "You would have fucked me in front of the entire camp when I was fifteen years old. I got attacked by eagles, and you put your hand down my pants! Now, I finally want this and you're blowing me off?"

"Nico—"

"No. You know what? Fuck you. Fuck you to hell because you said you'd be here for me. You said you'd never leave me. You said you'd be everything I'd let you be, you son of a bitch, Jason Grace. How could you leave me again?"

Apollo's hand brushed through Nico's hair, but he was already falling forward, doubling over, trying to stave off the horrible dying feeling that was compressing his heart. It wasn't Jason's fault, but it hurt so much. Goosebumps prickled Nico's skin, and he wrapped his arms around himself to ease the shaking that was wracking his body.

Apollo climbed off his lap and sat next to him. Nico pressed his face into the side of Apollo's neck and burrowed into the arms that embraced him. The shaking lessened. Apollo began to sing. The song didn't quite ease the pain in Nico's heart, but it was still soothing, slowing his heart rate and vanishing the cold. He took a shaky breath and kissed Apollo's cheek.

When the song ended, he said, "I'm sorry."

"I could not hurt you the way you wish to be hurt. It may provide you momentary distraction, Nico, but the heartache would return and along with it would be shame that you chose to ease the pain in such a manner."

It was true. Nico would never forget how cheap he'd felt after he'd used sex with Percy to hurt Jason at that party. He'd tried to cut out the pain of Jason's rejection, and he'd given up a part of himself to
do it — one he'd never gotten back. If he slept with Apollo now, by tomorrow he'd have a new store of regret; he'd believe in himself a little less.

Nico laid down on the couch, and Apollo pulled his feet onto his lap and began unlacing his boots.

"You'll get your jeans dirty," Nico said, trying to move his feet off Apollo.

"It is the least of my worries, my love," Apollo said. "Allow me to care for you."

Nico nodded and closed his eyes. Once Apollo had his boots and socks off, Nico turned onto his back and stretched his legs across the the god's lap.

"Tell me how to increase your physical comfort," Apollo said. "Would you like me to heal the bruise on your neck?"

"No. I want to keep it. Can you stay with me tonight? Out here, maybe? I don't want to be alone, but I can't sleep with someone else in a bed I shared with him, and if I sleep in your bed I'll try to climb on top of you again."

Apollo kissed the soles of Nico's feet. Nico's eyes popped open, and he found the god smiling at him.

"I cleaned them, do not worry. Your feet are powerfully smelly, my love. I believe I will switch your sock brand. What would you like for dinner? Pick anything in the world."

"Can I get six plain cheeseburgers from McDonald's? And three pints of Ben & Jerry's Phish Food?"

Apollo wrinkled his nose. "That is disgusting."

"You said I could have whatever I wanted."

The food appeared on their pretentious ultra-mod coffee table, and Nico sat up and began to eat. He held a burger up to Apollo's face and got it slapped away. Apollo did peel the wrapping off one of the ice cream cartons and dig in. The silence between them as they ate was peaceful and easy. Nico felt better. He was still heartbroken, but he didn't feel so desperate and alone.

He swallowed a bite of burger and said, "Thank you."

Apollo waved him off. "I love you. Food is of no consequence."

"I mean thank you for stopping me," Nico said. "I'm sorry I tried to use you. It hurt so bad. I felt like I'd die if I didn't make it stop, but I was wrong to do that to you. I don't want us to be together like that."

"I did not want to stop you," Apollo said. He ate another bite of ice cream and took his time before speaking again. "I wanted to take you and make you mine. I am not a moral man, Nico, but I regret pursuing you when you were so young."

Nico started to interrupt, but Apollo's eyes flashed, and he rested his hand on Nico's thigh. Nico closed his mouth.

"You are a man now, and the day we will become lovers draws ever nearer. I did not expect to fall in love with you, and I am at a disadvantage because I love you and you do not return my feelings. That has never happened. I do not know how to feel. You make me desperate with desire, and I want both to make you belong to me and to protect your wishes at any cost. I hope that when we
become lovers it is because you want, finally, what I want, not because I take what you are unready to give. I want to be the kind of moral man you are."

There was nothing Nico could say. He lifted Apollo's hand off his thigh and kissed each finger. They tasted like ice cream and sunshine and felt so soft against his lips. Nico slipped onto the floor in front of Apollo and kissed his mouth, moving his lips slowly, the way he kissed Jason's lips and Percy's body first thing in the morning. Apollo didn't press, didn't touch, and the kiss never grew into something more. When Nico had enough, he pulled away and sat next to Apollo on the couch.

Neither man spoke for a long time.

***

Percy had seen him in the hallway this morning before his first class. He was impossible to miss. Tall and obnoxiously, perfectly handsome with that blond hair and those strikingly blue eyes behind dorky-ass gold-framed glasses — Percy's nemesis had returned.

The whole first day of class had almost been ruined. Percy had been looking forward to the start of the semester because he was taking so many literature and writing courses. His old middle and high school teachers probably would have laughed their heads off at the thought of Percy enjoying English, but once he'd been taught how to manage his dyslexia (audiobooks and dictation software were godsend), he'd discovered that he liked reading. Even more, he loved writing, and he was extremely good at it. Here at the second half of his junior year, he felt like he was finally getting to the part of school he'd be best at. Because of Jason, he hadn't focused during either of his morning classes.

During his lunch break, he slinked into a bathroom stall and pulled out his secret phone, the one only Nico knew about. There weren't any messages, but he had known it would be hard for Nico to navigate the time difference once classes started. Before Nico's classes, Percy would still be in bed, and Nico said he didn't want to wake him with texts, no matter how often Percy had said it was fine. After Nico was done with school for the day, Percy was only halfway through. Percy couldn't wait any longer, though. They hadn't spoken yesterday, except to wish one another good night, and Percy needed Nico to know he was thinking of him.

He typed out a quick message, erased the last three words, and pressed send. Nico should be done with class by now. Percy waited in the bathroom and tried not to think about Jason fucking Grace.

He was rewarded for his patience with a quiet ding moments later.

"Classes were good. I think this'll be an interesting semester. How have yours been so far? N. A."

"You don't have to write your initials, remember, Neeks? I know it's you. Class has been okay."

The reply was immediate.

"I forgot, sorry. Can I see you tonight and we can talk more? I miss you."

Percy's heartbeat sped up. Nico hadn't called him for over a week, and he had a miserable suspicion why. Right now, Percy didn't care. His need to see Nico was greater than his bitterness about being Nico's second choice.
"I would love that. I'll text you tonight when it's a good time, okay? Miss you tons."

"I really want to see you. Yours, Nico."

Yours. Percy smiled and kissed his phone. He tucked it back in his sock and, whistling, left the bathroom.

His afternoon class went by a lot more quickly and pleasantly than the morning ones had. Percy had decided that if Jason was back, it at least meant he wasn't with Nico. By the time he picked up Annabeth outside her last class, Percy was practically skipping.

When Annabeth emerged from her classroom, she was momentarily silhouetted in a halo of light from the room, which was brighter than the hall. Percy's breath caught in his throat as he took in her golden ringlets and curvy frame. She was so beautiful. She stepped out of the doorway and graced him with her stunning smile. Percy bounded forward and caught her in a huge hug. Her laughter shook his chest.

Percy had realized, after long months searching his soul, that he loved Annabeth every bit as much as he ever had. She was still amazing and special to him. It was just that Nico was more amazing and special to him. The thought made him sad because he didn't want to hurt Annabeth and he didn't want to be in love with someone who didn't love him, but he'd come to accept that this was his reality. He loved Nico more than Annabeth. She couldn't ever know. He kept so many secrets from her. The phone, the sex, his feelings. After that day on the bridge, she hadn't asked again for him to explain what he felt for Nico, and Percy thought he'd done a good job focusing on the truth of how much he loved her. Still, they kissed less often and had sex infrequently, and Percy worried that even if he wasn't telling her his secrets through words, he was telling them some other way.

"Hey, there, Percy," Annabeth said, waving a hand in his face. "You're spacing out again."

Percy took her hand and gave her a fake smile. He knew she could see through it. He decided on a partial truth.

"Fucking Grace is back."

Annabeth's eyes tightened.

"I know. Piper told me."

"Motherfucker."

"Look...I think it's time you forgave him," Annabeth said. She herded him out the door and toward her dorm. Percy started to protest, and she cut him off. "Hear me out. A lot of time has passed, and I can't believe Nico would want you to carry around so much hatred. It isn't good for either of you."

Percy didn't know if she meant it wasn't good for Jason and him or Nico and him. Probably the first option. She was right about what Nico would want, though; Nico had made his opinion clear. Percy had promised to be Jason's friend, and he was going to keep the promise. That didn't mean he had to like Jason.

"Why didn't you tell me he was back?"

"He got back yesterday, Percy. I guess he got mugged and stabbed in the neck. This is the first time I've seen you since Piper told me. Believe me, I would have said something if I could, because the last thing any of us needs is for you and Jason to have some sort of jealous, competitive smackdown again."
They'd had this conversation before. Percy hated it. This was the part where Annabeth said...

"If you'd both been able to refrain from acting like three year olds fighting over their favorite toy, Nico could be home right now."

And Percy said...

"Fucking hell, Annabeth, you think I don't already know? If Jason hadn't—"

That was the part of the conversation when whatever physical connection they had would cease. Annabeth dropped his hand.

"I'm getting tired of this fight, Percy. Keep on hating Jason if you want, but I'm done with it. Nico's a big boy, obviously, and he can fight his own battles. I'll see you tomorrow."

Annabeth disappeared into the dorm without bothering to look back. Percy couldn't blame her. It had to be hard to have your boyfriend going so crazy to defend his lover's honor. Percy kicked a rock and headed toward his villa.

When he was about forty yards from his house, he felt Jason behind him. The big blond wasn't that close, and he didn't have an aura like Nico did. It was more like Percy could feel a storm coming, even though the sky was blue. The hairs on his arms stood on end. He stopped in front of his door to watch Jason pass. He was surprised that Jason was glaring directly at him. Before Jason had left, he'd stopped looking at people's faces. The thought brought on a pang of guilt, but Percy pushed it aside. He was going to do what Nico wanted. That was enough.

Jason didn't pass him. He went to the villa right across the path and disappeared inside. Percy wrinkled his nose. He'd heard that villa had a bug problem. May as well go check it out and get started on keeping his word to Nico, who would likely ask him about it tonight. Percy strode across the path and knocked. He ducked down so Jason wouldn't see him from the peephole, figuring the asshole wouldn't open up if he saw who had come knocking.

The door jerked open, and Percy looked up at Jason. Gods, the fucker was huge. He looked like an SUV while Percy was a family sedan. Jason crossed his arms over his massive chest and frowned.

"What do you want?"

Percy stood and crossed his arms, too.

"I want to talk to you."

Jason grunted, which Percy took for permission to enter. He'd gone three steps when there was a crunching sound under his feet. He looked down to find a roach carcass. A quick scan showed him the floor was littered with them.

Jason must have been watching Percy's face. "It's revolting. Reyna sent an exterminator by, but the hazmat crew is running late. I guess at least I eventually get a thoroughly clean house out of the deal."

"Come to my house, dude," Percy said. "I can't take this shit. Too many memories from when I was a kid."

The roaches must have bothered Jason a lot because he followed Percy back to his house. Percy was so disgusted he was struggling to keep his stomach contents down. The first apartment he and his mom had lived in with Gabe had a roach problem. He could remember waking up to them skittering
across his walls the first night. He had slept in the bathtub with the lights on for a month after that, until his mom had saved enough money to call in a private exterminator, since the complex wouldn't pay for one.

Percy flopped down on the couch and took a few deep breaths. "Reyna hates you, bro."

"Could have been worse," Jason said. He sank into Percy's recliner, though he sat with his usual upright stick-up-the-ass posture. "She threatened to make me room with you."

"Fuck you, douchebag. I'm trying to be your friend."

"I don't want to be your friend." Jason's hands were clenched, and Percy wondered if Jason was as jealous of him as he was of Jason.

"Tough shit. I don't want to be your friend, either, but I promised Nico. I think you're a first class asswipe, but I'm keeping my word. You're stuck with me."

"How noble."

"Again, fuck you."

They sat in silence after that. Percy could stand about five minutes of silence. He wanted Jason to leave, but Nico would be pissed if he didn't give more of an effort. He had a couple hours before he could call Nico anyway — Nico did his rounds of calls with his sisters and Clarisse or whoever first — and the nicer he was to Jason would directly translate into the nicer Nico would be to him. And he wanted Nico feeling really nice.

"Wanna watch TV?" Percy asked.

"Sure."

"Hold on, Mr. Talkative. I'll get us some snacks."

Percy threw a bag of popcorn into the microwave and pulled out a couple beers. When the popcorn had popped, he poured it into a bowl and went back to the living room. Jason wrinkled his nose.

"I don't drink."

"Then go get your own shit, Grace. You know where stuff is. I'm not your mother."

Jason snarled and stalked off to the kitchen. Right. Jason didn't have a mother. Gods, Percy should be more sensitive about that kind of stuff. He was a lucky ass when it came to his mortal parent. He may hate Jason, but he wasn't cruel.

When Jason returned, he sat next to Percy on the couch and took a huge handful of popcorn. Percy had turned on the TV to *The People's Court*. Judge Milian was dishing out tough justice to a guy who'd promised to watch another guy's poodle while the second guy was on vacation but let the poodle piss all over the carpet.

"This is dumb-ass shit," Jason said.

"Yeah. It's home, though. They shoot it in Manhattan."

Jason choked a little on some popcorn. Percy watched to see if he needed help, but Jason didn't take his eyes off the screen. Percy turned his head back to the TV.
"That's right, you were just there, weren't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Motherfucking liar, but whatever." Percy shifted in his seat to be able to watch Jason from the corner of his eye. "Did he have a good birthday?"

"I got mugged and stabbed in Florida. I've been in a mortal hospital in Miami."

Jason was a good liar, Percy thought. There weren't any tells in his body language. Percy returned his attention to *The People's Court*.

"Whatever."

Through his window, he could see a team of about ten people in white suits enter Jason's villa. The friendly thing to do would be to offer his spare bedroom to Jason for the night. He didn't want to, not only because he hated Jason, but because he was loud when he and Nico were "talking." It was weird. Percy had never been all that vocal when he slept with Annabeth; he still wasn't. With Nico, though, even over IM, the boy could coax any sound out of Percy that he wanted. If Nico, in his sexy deep-sex voice, told him to moo like a cow Percy probably would do it. Jason was not staying over. In fact, Percy wanted him to leave soon. He needed to get busy and say some things first.

"Look," Percy said, not turning toward Jason. "I'm sorry for what I said about not being your mom. I forgot about her being dead."

Jason didn't say anything.

Percy rolled his eyes and continued. "And I'm sorry I never checked on you while you were out being a fucking depressed idiot. I shouldn't have let you go, and I should have made sure you were okay."

The rumbling chuckle Jason gave made Percy instantly defensive. "He has you so whipped. The great Percy Jackson, collared by a hot-mouthed jackass in a black leather jacket."

"I'm saying that shit because I mean it. I am sorry. And don't call him a jackass."

Jason threw his head back and cackled. He downed the last of his soda and crunched the can in his fist. Percy wasn't sure if that was a threat or a dumb habit.

"He is a jackass, though, Percy. Hot as hell. Thoroughly, mind-numbingly, perfectly intoxicating. Smart, beautiful, amazing, yeah. But still a jackass."

"You miss him."

The laughter stopped.

"Yeah, I miss him."

"Me, too."
The ground was hard and wet under his face. His chest heaved, and his stomach tightened with the effort to break free. Mud squelched against his torso when he was forced back down. This wasn't how things were supposed to go. Nico inhaled sharply and dug his boots into the mud. The pressure on his neck and arm increased.

"Be still, you little weaselly motherfucker. You're not getting up until I hear 'yes' come out of your sorry mouth."

"Ask a girl." Nico paid for those three words with a mouth full of mud. He tried to spit it out without opening his mouth and letting more in.

"I don't want a girl. I want you."

"No. Get off."

The weight on his back let up, and Nico thought he might have succeeded, but then a heavy hand fell with a loud crack against his soaking wet ass. Nico howled and arched his back.

"You're doing it."

"Fine. Just get up."

The weight and pressure left, and Nico raised his head, only to have it shoved back in the mud. A vile, evil laugh rose next to him. Nico rolled over onto his back, rain pelting his chest, before he sat up and glared at Clarisse.

"I hate you more than ever."

"I hate you, too." There was mud on Clarisse's eyelashes. "Now quit being such a wussy."

"I don't want to be in your stupid bridal party. It's for girls." Nico ran his hands over his chest and grabbed his crotch. "I'm not a girl, see?"

"Please," Clarisse said derisively. "If you were a girl you wouldn't have any tits anyway, skinny-ass motherfucker. And you keep whining, I'll cut that dick off. You're in the bridal party."

Nico picked up a great handful of mud and hurled it at Clarisse. It hit the side of her head and slid down onto her ear. Before Clarisse could murder him, Nico scrambled up and sprinted away. He got about fifteen feet before he lost his footing and slammed face down into the mud.

"Damn it!" Nico screamed.

Clarisse yanked him up by his back belt loop and dragged him toward the tree in his front yard. Nico didn't strictly need the tree today, since the rain clouds were covering the sun, but he wasn't going to argue with Clarisse over it.

"Take me back to camp."

"I'm never inviting you over to spar again."

Nico pulled the shadows around himself and Clarisse and dragged them back to Half-Blood Hill. Clarisse still held his belt loop. She was giving him a wedgie on purpose.

When the shadows broke, Nico saw Chris, whom he was expecting, but he was horrified to see Will Solace standing with Clarisse's fiancé. Nico hadn't seen Will in almost two years. It would have been comical, watching the way Will's eyes widened and looked Nico over from head to toe, if lust didn't
linger behind the surprise. Nico scowled, and Will's face fell.

"Hey, Nico," Chris said. "I see Clarisse used her subtle charms to encourage you to accept her request."

Nico shoved Clarisse in the back. "Your fiancée's psychotic."

Clarisse punched Nico's chest, sending him flying backward onto his ass. She gave him a smug grin and walked toward Chris, yelling over her shoulder as they linked arms and walked away.

"See you in a month, Pissy, if I don't see you before then. Chris'll talk to you about what to wear. And I better hear from you at least once a week from now on, or I'm going to come to your snooty-ass school and hunt you down."

Nico blew a huge raspberry toward Clarisse's back and flipped her off with both hands. Will chuckled nearby, making Nico jump. He'd forgotten his old boyfriend was there.

"Hey, Nico. Chris told me you were bringing Clarisse back," Will said, offering Nico a hand up, not even flinching at the mud covering Nico's hands, "and I thought I'd come say hi. It's been a while. Mud, uh, it suits you."

Will looked pretty much the same — longer blond hair, friendly blue eyes — a pale imitation of Apollo. Nico was the one who'd changed. He had been smaller than Will when they'd broken up. Now, he was a good three or four inches taller, judging from the angle he had to use to look down at Will, and, if he had to guess, he'd say he had thirty pounds on the doctor.

Nico tried to shape his grimace into a smile. He didn't want to chit-chat. He wanted to get back to the farmhouse and take a shower so he could be ready to talk to Percy. He especially didn't want to talk to Will. How would small talk work? "How's it going? I shack up with your dad now, did you know?" That sounded beyond creepy.

"Yeah, it has. It's been awhile, I mean. How've you been?" Nico awkwardly flapped his hand in Will's direction. A little mud flew from his fingertips. He needed to leave soon anyway before he started shivering. Mud wrestling with a lunatic in a New York winter was not one of the smarter things he'd ever done.

"Good, thanks. I'm going to start at Columbia in the fall. Pre-med. I still want to be a healer here, but I figure it can't hurt to branch out a bit."

"I'm kind of surprised you haven't already started, to be honest," Nico said. "You're what, two years older than me?"

Mud was caking in his ass crack. He really needed to get home. How short a time could he give Will before it would be semi-polite enough to leave?

"About that much, yeah. I wanted to stick around here until one of my siblings was prepared to take over."

"How many Apollo kids are there?"

"Twenty-eight."

Holy shit, Apollo got around. How many people was he sleeping with while he waited for Nico to climb in his bed? How many would he sleep with while he slept with Nico, too?
"What's the age range?"

Will looked at him funny.

"That's an odd question, Nico. Let's see, I'm the oldest at twenty next month, and the youngest is Vera, who's ten."

"What's the highest number that are the same age?"

"What's it matter?" Will asked.

Nico waited for Will to answer. Surely Will remembered what a weird ass Nico was? He couldn't find his questions that out of character.

"Listen, I was wondering—" Will started.

"Can you just humor me?"

Will rolled his eyes but started counting on his fingers. "There are seven twelve year olds. Dad must have been extra horny that year."

Nico ran his hand through his hair. The motion temporarily plastered the hair flat against his head and neck. He ran a hand through the other side to try to even things out a bit. He didn't want to seem like an even bigger dork in front of Will — Will and his different-fucks-for-different-days daddy.

"Anyway, I was wondering, um, I heard about the Camp Jupiter stuff, and it seems like you and Jason probably aren't together anymore and—"

"You knew about me and Jason?"

Will raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "It seemed kind of obvious. There were lots of rumors when you guys were still here at camp. Jason couldn't keep his eyes off you."

"Like, everyone knew?"

"Everyone suspected, at least. You're hard to figure out, but Jason was easy. He watched you coming and going, and those last few months before you left he was unhinged if he saw someone show any interest in you. Then you left and suddenly Piper's his girlfriend again? It didn't take a genius. The Stolls were pissed because they didn't get absolute confirmation you guys were together until your bogus banishment and the 'are they or aren't they' pool was the biggest bet Hermes cabin's ever taken odds on. Nobody won much, in the end, because so many of us bet right."

Gods, they'd worked all that time to keep things quiet and the whole camp knew, or suspected, anyway. And Jason had never been unpopular. He'd never been shunned. Nico's knees went weak.

"We didn't tell people because I was so sure they'd all treat him the way they treated you when you dated me. You know, the leper spreads his sickness."

Will shook his head and glared at Nico. "I've told you a million times, you dumbass, no one treated you differently. You're just a prickly little asshole. Well, not little anymore, but the point's the same. People didn't like you because you acted like a dick. No one cared we were dating, except you."

"But, the quests...you kept getting passed over. The whispers and pointing..."

"I asked not to be put on quests. I wanted to be with you as much as possible, which was hampered by the fact that you were always with Jason. And the gossip, that was people saying, 'Ooh, look how
fucking lucky Will is to get such a tight piece of ass.' Not that I got any piece of your fine ass." Will chuckled again.

"Jason and I were—"

"Complete idiots, yes. I can believe you were that stupid, frankly, but why didn't he insist on dating you publicly? He was so popular. Everyone admired him before he sold you out to suck up to his patron."

"You're still pretty annoying, you know."

"And you still seem to have the social skills of a fruit fly. Can I take you out?"

Nico cut his eyes sideways, searching the trees for some explanation for Will's question.

"Out where?"

"Oh, my gods, you are so bad at this." Will stepped closer and brushed a finger along Nico's neck. Nico flinched, but Will turned his finger and showed Nico the spider he'd rescued from the di Angelo mudslide. "I want to date you."

Nico's mouth dropped open in shock, and his gasp brought on a large bout of coughing, where, to his horror, he had to turn and cough up a mudball. Damn Clarisse.

"Damn," Will said. "Ten million times hotter, and you were so good-looking to begin with, but you're still the same adorable little cream puff on the inside, aren't you?"

"I've got to go, Will. It was nice seeing you. Good luck at Columbia."

Nico practically sprinted back to the shadows, but before he could make it, Will called out to him.

"Hey! What about that date?"

"I can't. I'm...living with someone."

Nico didn't wait for Will to answer. He pulled the shadows so tightly to him that he vanished from view before he vanished from the earth.

***

When Nico landed back at the farmhouse, darkness had set in. He trudged around to the back yard and stripped out of his drenched and muddy clothes. At least it was warmer than usual for January. He was starting to shiver, though. Illness wasn't a worry for him, since Apollo took care to proactively heal and care for his body — that was probably a big godly no-no, even if they weren't sleeping together — but being this cold sucked.

He turned on the garden hose, took a deep breath, and squeezed his eyes shut before turning the hose on himself.

Nico screamed a curse to the night sky. Water like icicles shot out of the hose and stabbed his skin. The shivering increased, and when he held the hose over his head to rinse the mud out of his hair, his arm shook so hard he rinsed the side of the house as thoroughly as his head.
The smarter part of his brain, the area not worried about tracking mud through the house, took over. He shut off the hose, grabbed his sword, and scurried up to the door, only to find it locked. Another curse, a trip down the stairs, a frantic search through his jeans for the house keys, and Nico was inside, trying to walk as quickly as possible to the bathroom without slipping and knocking himself out. Dying of hypothermia, naked and concussed, because he'd been too anal to get his floors dirty and too impulsive to be careful sounded like a pathetic and completely Nico way to die.

On the way past his bedroom, he noticed a light on his phone was blinking at him. Nico thought about it ignoring it and going straight for the shower, but the possibility that he'd missed Percy's "ready" text was too upsetting to ignore. He needed Percy even more than he needed the warm shower.

The blinking light did indicate a missed text, apparently. Go figure. Nico had read, cover to cover even, the instruction booklet that came with the phone, but he didn't know shit about the thing except texts, calls, and finally, blessedly, how to make use of the internet (though that had only come about once Apollo had shown him how to use it on his laptop). Every other function and feature escaped him. Nico's freezing body did not seem to be slowing down his overactive brain.

"Nico dork Angelo," he said to himself, chuckling in a way that sounded even dorkier because of all the shivering.

The text from Percy was one word — "Ready." Thankfully, Nico had only missed it by about five minutes. He quickly texted back, explaining what had happened and asking if fifteen minutes from now would still work. Sometimes, Percy had plans that left a very narrow window for talking and the other stuff they did. Nico's cheeks colored, and he felt a little warmer thinking about the other stuff.

Percy's reply was almost instantaneous. Nico read it and rolled his eyes. He went into the bathroom, turned on the light, snapped a quick picture, and sent it to Percy. The camera. He'd learned how to use that, too.

The shower water felt divine, once Nico finally got in. He put in the stopper and let the warm water fill up around his feet, too. Nico tried to focus on cleaning up and warming up, not on the conversation with Will or Jason's departure or what he was likely about to do with Percy just a day after Jason left. Thinking about getting his ass kicked by Clarisse and his face shoved in the mud was better, as was the thought of being a bridesmaid. Percy would laugh his head off when Nico told him.

Nico thought about the day Percy had left him after they'd spent their time together in the Underworld, how he'd pressed his hand over Nico's heart and promised that Nico wasn't alone. Percy's promise and his attention and affection had sustained Nico for nine months. Then Jason had torn back into his life like one of his father's storms, and Nico was left drifting and whirling in the aftermath. He needed Percy's easy smile and gentle words to act as his anchor again. Is this what his life would be like, being torn apart and fit back together by men who would never stay? What a repulsive way to live.

Nico pushed the thoughts away and climbed out of the shower. The shivering was gone, though he was sure he'd get a patronizing lecture and slow, seductive healing from Apollo when he got home.

The blow dryer puffed up his hair and turned his face a soft pink. Percy would like it. Nico wondered when he'd started to care what any of the men in his life thought of the way he looked. He stopped drying his hair when he couldn't stand to look at himself in the mirror any longer.

Nico di Angelo, kept man.
The bedroom was better, if only because he didn't have to catch glimpses of himself. He threw on a new set of clothes and turned on every light. *Get to Percy. You'll be okay if you can just get to Percy.*

Nico crawled onto his bed and used his penlight and crystal to make the plea to Fleecy. "Do me a solid" sounded asinine to Nico — a solid what? — but he couldn't argue with the enhanced clarity Fleecy granted to him and his lover. Percy's beautiful face and naked body swam into view. Nico couldn't help laughing.

"Presume much, there, Perce?"

Percy's eyes hardened, and Nico felt a shiver of concern. Had he said something wrong?

"It's been over a week since I've seen my lover, Nico. What do you think?"

Oh.

Nico closed his eyes and tried to fend off his guilt. How many times had Percy slept with Annabeth during the past week? It wasn't like Percy was all alone, pining away after him. Nico was only doing what Percy and Jason did, too. Except Jason hadn't been doing this. He shoved the thought away.

"I'm sorry. I've missed you." The way his voice came out, small but hard and edgy, was all wrong. He didn't need to apologize. It wasn't fair that Percy expected what he wouldn't give in return. Or was that Jason? Nico felt so confused. "I'm here now."

"You look stunning," Percy said softly. "I want to be with you."

"I want that, too," Nico whispered. He curled his legs up in front of him and wrapped his arms around his knees.

"Nico, baby..."

Nico glanced up to find Percy’s brow wrinkled and mouth turned down.

"Honey, why are you crying?"

Nico ducked his head and wiped his eyes on his jeans. He couldn't meet Percy’s eyes.

"This is about Jason leaving you again, right? That's where you've been this last week? Why you haven't talked to me?"

The crying intensified. It felt worse than the shivering. Gods, Nico hated looking weak. He hated being weak.

"I know, okay? I know." Percy's voice was so soothing. "I don't like not being your first choice, and I missed you so much. I wish you would have just told me, but that thing in you that makes you not be able to switch back and forth between me and him? I love it. I'm sorry I sounded so mad. I'm not mad at you, mostly. I'm mad I'm not first."

"I'm a bad person."

"Now I'm mad," Percy snapped. "Don't you ever the hell say that again, you hear me? You're the best person I know. I've got great taste, and if I want you the way I do, then there's something amazing about you."

"Yeah, my ass."
"If we were together right now I'd beat the shit out of you, starting with your ass. You don't even believe the shit you're saying. You're just beating yourself up because Jason left and broke your fucking heart all over again and you're turning to me so soon after he left."

"Should we tell Rachel you're competing for her job?" Nico chanced a glance at Percy and saw his eyes crinkle in a smile. Those little wrinkles around Percy's eyes made Nico feel better. His crying was slowing. "I wish I could touch your face."

Percy's smile widened. "I wish you could, too. Rachel's job sucks. Can you imagine coughing up green smoke? She's like a cat with a hairball. Have you heard her prophecy voice? She sounds like she's smoked three packs a day for the last three thousand years."

"Stop it," Nico laughed. "I'm trying to be all sad and mopey. How am I supposed to wallow in my vast failings with you around?"

"'Vast failings?' Do you collect them like some kind of treasure, baby? Nico di Angelo, Ghost King of the Pirates, with his mountain of failings? Is there a map to where you hide the loot?"

"Booty. It's booty, Perce. Pirates have booty. Outlaws have loot."

"Pirates are outlaws."

"Land outlaws, then. Like bank robbers."

"You are the dorkiest person I've ever slept with, and I've slept with like sixty million people."

Nico laughed again.

"Remind me how many you've slept with, baby?"

"Two," Nico said.

"Do you judge me for how much I've slept around? Or how I love Annabeth and absolutely refuse to stop being with you?"

"Of course not, but it's different."

"Why? Because you're better than me? You are, no denying it, but fuck, Nico, you're eighteen years old and look like," Percy gestured to Nico's body, "that. I know you've got a hell of a lot of people throwing themselves at you, and you've only slept with two? You're like a freaking nun."

"Probably helps that I get to watch you jack off all the time. Nuns don't watch porn, I don't think."

"Tell me what you were doing mud wrestling with Clarisse," Percy said. It was impossible to miss Percy's hand brush against his dick, which wasn't completely flaccid anymore.

"I have to be a bridesmaid at her wedding. I wasn't keen on the idea, but she insisted, physically."

"Oh, gods," Percy laughed. "You're going to be the sexiest bridesmaid ever. Be sure she stuffs you into a dress that shows off those hot legs."

"I'm not wearing a dress, dickwad. She said I can wear a suit."

Percy's eyes had slipped closed, and Nico watched him bite his lower lip. Whatever Percy was picturing, it was turning him on. Nico had to uncurl his legs to give his dick more freedom.
"Tell me what you're seeing, Percy."

"You, wrestling around in the mud," Percy said softly. "First you were wearing the dress, then the suit, now you're not wearing anything. This summer, I want to visit you at your farmhouse, and we can do a reenactment. Sound good?"

Nico nodded, which was stupid since Percy's eyes were still closed. Percy had never done the fantasizing before. He'd always directed Nico, telling him what to do and where to touch while jerking off to the scenes Nico played out. This, watching Percy come apart without asking anything of him, it was hot. Nico let his hand slip across his stomach and up his chest, savoring the way Percy had arched his back and tensed his thighs.

Percy kept touching, and Nico kept watching until he had his jeans unfastened and his dick out and his hands were flying over his erection. He watched Percy come, moaning and squirting his release all over himself. Nico thought about how much he wanted to lick Percy clean, and he was coming, too, yelling Percy's name.

Nico balled up his soiled comforter and flopped down on his belly, getting as close to the Iris message as he could. Percy didn't appear to have opened his eyes yet. He looked so contented and happy, laying there wet and sated. Nico smiled. When Percy's mouth fell open and Nico realized he was asleep, he deposited another drachma so he could watch the easy rise and fall of Percy's chest for a bit longer.

When Fleecy's voice returned, asking for more money to continue the call, Nico reached forward to swipe his hand through the message.

He stopped at the edge of the picture and looked at Percy one more time.

"I love you, Percy Jackson," he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

So a POV from all three guys as a new semester starts, along with a bit of time spent with all three "other" significant others. Did you have a favorite?

Ooh, and there was a Clarisse and Will sighting!
Percy woke first the next morning, and he was surprised when Nico woke second. Normally, Jason woke first, a remnant of being the only one of the three with a regular day job. Nico laid on his back and stretched his arms up, cuffing Percy under the chin, before bending his knees and arching his back off the mattress. Percy held the comforter at Nico's waist to protect their privacy, what they had of it, and wished he could be so flexible.

Nico stopped stretching and squeezed Jason, who was sleeping with his head on Nico's shoulder. Jason snuggled closer.

"Good morning, beautiful," Percy whispered, and Nico gave him a slow, sleepy smile.

"Hi, Perce."

Percy bent low and kissed Nico's moist lips. He lodged his forearm against Jason's face and stroked Nico's neck as they kissed. The kisses lengthened and deepened until Percy let out a soft moan and pulled away.

"More," Nico said, his hand clinging to Percy's waist.

Percy smiled indulgently, but didn't let himself kiss Nico again. "How about you shadow travel me, you, and the great blond lump to the bedroom? I'll kiss you more there."

Nico looked around. The walls of the man cave, with the bookshelves and the massive TV, presented themselves. "Shit. I forgot we were in here."

"It's okay, baby. Those bastards up on Olympus have seen more from us than that kiss."

"I know," Nico said. "I don't..." He trailed off and closed his eyes.

The trio of gods moved through the shadows to the bedroom. Jason shifted slightly in his sleep and threw a heavy arm over Nico's stomach. Percy picked up Jason's hand by the thumb and maneuvered it away from his waist, setting it down on Nico's chest. Nico rolled his eyes but didn't say anything about Percy's behavior.

"I don't want the gods to see more than we have to show them," he said instead, finishing his thought from the man cave.

"Ah, I don't care, I've decided," Percy said. "In fact, I like the extra freedom we get when we give them a little show."

"You're an exhibitionist, Perce. What were you doing yesterday, showing up in front of me naked, by the way?" Nico hadn't minded at all, but he had been surprised.

Percy pecked Nico's lips before he answered. "I wanted to see the way you reacted to me, reassure myself you want me."

Nico wiggled his eyebrows. "Unnecessary, but I'll play along. Were you reassured?"

"Well, yeah, but you were gonna go on that date with him." Percy motioned to Jason. "I'm not
exactly Jason when it comes to looks or sexual stuff and—"

"Wait a minute." Nico pushed Jason's head off his shoulder and turned on his side to face Percy. Jason snorted and started snoring. Nico made a grumbling noise low in his throat. "Shit. I hate listening to him snore. But Percy, what are you saying?"

"I don't know." Percy blushed. The room was dark enough to hide it, if he'd been with a mortal. He focused on a spot somewhere over Jason's shoulder. "You love him. He's gorgeous. He's smarter than me. He's better in bed. He's—"

"Stop. Come here."

Without making eye contact, Percy scooted closer to Nico. When Nico was dissatisfied with how far away Percy remained, he moved, too, until their bodies were in contact from their toes to their ribs. He wrapped a leg around Percy's hips and mashed them together. The blanket fell away. Jason inched back into Nico and slipped a hand along his thigh.

"About a million things are wrong with what you said, dumbass." Nico cupped Percy's shoulder and laid a kiss below his fingertips. "I love you. I love him. Maybe there's a difference, but it's by inches, not miles. Yes, he's gorgeous. So are you. I hate sleeping between you two because I feel constricted and tied down, but I like waking up in the morning and seeing extremely handsome men on either side of me. That goes for your bodies as well as your faces."

"But..." Percy ducked his head into Nico's chest.

"But what, Percy?"

"He's super-muscular."

"So?" Nico lightly scratched Percy's back. Percy arched his back and was tempted to purr like his cat.

"I'm not built like that."

"I don't care. I told you I don't choose my partners based on their bodies, and I meant it. For what it's worth, though, your body makes me hot, and I sure as hell don't compare the two of you. What's up with this thinking?" Nico slipped his hand lower and kneaded Percy's butt. He wanted Jason to wake up soon. The men had gotten into a steady habit of having sex as soon as all three were awake, and, as Nico was normally the last one to wake, he wasn't accustomed to having to wait.

"That feels good." Percy pushed Jason's lingering hand aside and returned the favor. Nico tossed his head back and ground a bit against Percy, who moaned. "It's just, he's way more, um, I don't know...you get off on him more."

Nico laughed. "I have no idea who's touching me when I come. By then, it's all this big crazy mash-up of hands and mouths and dicks, and I'd probably come for a girl."

"Oh, gods, I'd want to see that," Percy said, forgetting his worries for a moment. "That day Eos was here, holy shit, that was hot. Would you do that? Fuck a girl while Jason and I watched?"

Nico had no interest in this fantasy, but Jason had indulged talk of his fantasies before. He could do the same for Percy. He also liked the thought of Percy and Jason watching him. "I would if you'd like it, though I think our bed is at maximum capacity."

Percy kneaded Nico's backside harder, digging in and trying to dodge the heat of Jason's groin.
"You like what I do to you, though? He makes you scream."

On cue, Jason curled his finger and rubbed along Nico's perineum. Nico moaned loudly.

Percy snarled, but he didn't move away. Regardless of what turned Nico on, seeing him aroused made Percy want him.

"No, listen," Nico said, panting. His eyes rolled back in his head for a moment before he continued. "Oh, fuck, that feels good. But making me literally scream isn't the only way to make me feel incredible in bed, Perce. You know that. You always turn me on. I wanted you this morning, kissed you. If it was all about Jason, I'd have turned around and woke him up. There's a tenderness between us that makes me weak-kneed, and the way you kiss me, I want to spend the rest of this godhood shit getting kissed like that." Jason's finger slipped inside Nico, but he continued to snore softly. "Oh, Percy, fuck. Kiss me, please. I need it."

Nico didn't give Percy a chance to answer. He pulled Percy underneath him and kissed him roughly, licking and biting his way into Percy's mouth, all the while grinding his hips down, mentally pleading for Percy to respond. Percy moaned and thrust up. Both hands cupped Nico's butt. He could feel Jason's hand, and he was tempted to move it away, but before he could, Nico broke the kiss and spoke.

"I want you, Percy Jackson, and it feels so good, kissing you, making love to you. Being with you both at once, don't laugh, but it was always one of my deepest fantasies. That's why I had trouble at the beginning, because I didn't want to admit it. Jason knew, motherfucker." Nico paused to let out a string of moans and curses as Jason had finally awakened and begun to move his finger in earnest. "I need to be with both of you, Percy, please."

Percy kissed Nico and groped his ass in a way that would leave a bruise. Jason's hands moved roughly, one still penetrating Nico, the other snaking between Percy and Nico and yanking Nico's face away from Percy's for a kiss of his own. He'd barely touched Nico's lips when Nico restrained his arm and jerked his head back.

"Good morning, greedy ass," Nico said with a poorly concealed grin. "Wait your fucking turn." He went back to kissing Percy.

Jason growled and bit the back of Nico's neck. He spared a quick glance down his body to make sure it was Nico's leg he was rubbing against before redoubling his efforts to attack Nico's prostate with his fingers. Nico moaned and unsuctioned himself from Percy. When he did, Jason withdrew his fingers and knocked Nico flat onto his back. He scrambled over Percy and pinned Nico to the bed, holding Nico's hands high over his head and sprawling on top of him.

"Is it my turn now, you bratty son of a bitch?"

Beside him, Percy said, "You are a psychopath."

Nico let out his barking laugh. He winked and mouthed "I love you" to Percy before turning back to Jason. "One kiss, then be a good boy and let me up."

"Why?" Jason nipped at Nico's collarbone where the skin tasted a little salty. He nuzzled Nico's head toward Percy so he could suck at his neck. Percy seized the opportunity and kissed Nico more. His chest rested on Jason's powerful shoulder, and he was vaguely aware of the rise and fall of Jason’s body with each breath. He kissed Nico greedily, running his tongue over Nico's teeth and tongue, until Jason gave a particularly hard thrust of his hips and Nico's head fell back. Jason released Nico's hands in order to cup his jaw and neck. His kiss was deep and thorough, but not bordering on
violent, the way it sometimes was. He was thinking of their date the night before. He let go of Nico's lips and face and climbed off him. "I love you."

"Wow, I was thinking I'd get to force you to let me up." Nico sat up and rubbed his wrists. Percy followed. "Percy's feeling left out, I think."

"Shit, Nico, you dick. You didn't have to tell Grace that," Percy hissed. He scrambled off the bed but didn't leave the room.

"I'm sorry, but we promised each other no secrets, and he deserves to be a part of a discussion about what the three of us do." Nico joined Percy near the door and stroked his hands up and down Percy's back. His erection was still strong, and his penis lay on Percy's stomach. Percy made a grumpy face, but he couldn't help putting his hands on Nico's body.

"Why are you feeling left out, Percy?" Jason had sense enough to stay on the bed.

"He thinks you turn me on more than him."

"Shut the fuck up, Nico," Percy snapped. He slapped Nico's backside, but felt guilty and massaged away the sting. Nico sighed and raised his eyebrows. Percy relented. "Fine. I worry Nico enjoys sex more with you than me."

Jason laid back on the bed and laughed.

"Oh, great. I'm glad my worry amuses you, jackass." Percy scowled.

Nico glared at Jason, but Jason waved them both off.

"I don't mean to laugh," Jason said. He picked up the comforter and used it to wipe his eyes. "I worry the same thing, Perce. Nico's always so into it, kissing you and getting off with you, and you're so gentle. I feel like I have to be outrageous to make him as hot for me as he is for you."

"You do?" Percy had trouble believing Jason could feel inferior to him.

"Of course. I felt that way when we were mortals, too, dipshit. I saw the way you two always were together, so touchy-feely, and Nico gets off on it so much. I feel like I have to work twice as hard to get the same reaction."

"Can we lay back down?" Nico tugged at Percy's hand and grinned in what he hoped was an enticing way. Percy nodded, and Nico led him back to the bed. Nico laid on his back between Percy and Jason, who each laid on their side and stared at him. He pulled the other gods' free hands onto his abdomen. "There. Touch and talk."

Jason rubbed Nico's hip. "Why are you so good about talking now, but when we're talking about your feelings, you shut down?"

"We're not talking about my feelings now." Nico pulled Jason's face down for a quick kiss then did the same to Percy. "I like you two working things out, especially because I'm pretty sure I'll get some stellar sex out of it soon enough."

"Your date must've gone well," Percy said. He started tracing the words "I love Nico" on his half of Nico's cool body. "Maybe you guys want to talk about that, too."

"No." Nico realized he answered too quickly, so he tried again. "It was nice. We're going to do it again. But this talk is about the sex part, not the feelings part of our relationship, so that's what we
"Avoiding," Percy said.

"It was nice." Jason didn’t mind telling Percy, and he wanted to prevent more fighting. "I know it's going to take a lot longer for him to trust me again, though. I took him to a tent out back, and we had McDonald's and talked about my old job until it was time to come in. I got about a thirtieth of the kiss you gave him."

Percy nodded. "Thanks, Jace."

"Now that you two have gossiped like old ladies," Nico paused while Jason pinched his nipple and Percy stuck his tongue out at him, "let's talk about the actual problem we're having right now that's preventing my morning hard-on from getting attention."

"It sounds like we both worry the other is better at turning you on, or however you want to describe it." Jason brushed his hand over Nico's hipbone and down between his thighs. Percy noticed what Jason was doing and spread his tracing out to cover the entirety of Nico's chest and stomach. Jason ghosted his fingers over Nico's semi-erect penis and was rewarded with a hitch in Nico's breathing. "Tell us what you think, Nico."

"I think you're idiots who should know better." Nico was fighting to keep his eyes from slipping closed in pleasure, especially after Jason's hand, warm and calloused, slid along his length one more time. He bit his lip. "I go crazy for both of you, and I've never thought about who does what or which thing I like more. It all feels so good. I wouldn't change a thing about either of you. I like how rough Jason is and I like how gentle Percy is and the part that, oh, gods, Percy, keep touching me like that—"

"Jason's doing that."

"See, doesn't matter," Nico said. "Feels so good."

"What were you going to say?" Percy dipped his head and lightly kissed Nico's jaw. Nico hummed when Percy let go.

"I was saying the part I like best is when you both let go and be who you are. I like when you stop worrying about who I might want more in that microsecond or where the other guy's hands are in relation to yours and just do what feels good to you, because I promise you, it feels good to me." Nico writhed into Percy and kissed him as Jason's hand closed around his penis. Jason jerked rhythmically and nudged Nico onto his side. He moved his hand up and down until he felt Percy's erection press into the back of his hand. Missing the friction from Jason's hand, Nico cupped Percy's ass and ground against him. Jason grabbed a handful of Nico's hair and pulled, causing Nico to break the kiss and tilt his head far back, exposing his throat. Jason bit him again and again while Nico and Percy rutted against each other.

"Are we good now, because I need to fuck you, Nico," Jason said after he'd felt Percy's hand slip between his hip and Nico's butt.

"Mhm." Nico kissed Jason's mouth for a few seconds before turning back to Percy and kissing him. When he stopped, he asked, "Percy?"

"Fucking hell, I'm over it. I need to fuck you, too, baby. You're so sexy." Percy wasn't quite over it, but he was too turned on to care. "Let me fuck you first. I don't want Jason's ostrich egg balls flapping in my face right now."
Nico burst out laughing until his laughs were swallowed by Jason's kisses. He let Jason roll him onto his back, and he spread his legs so Percy could nestle between them. Percy sat back, Nico's feet on his shoulders, and watched for a moment as Nico and Jason kissed and touched each other. They looked beautiful together, in Percy's opinion. They looked right.

Percy breathed deep, inhaling the sweet sweaty smell of Nico's feet, and stroked his dick along Nico's entrance. He pressed inside Nico's tight heat, and thrust slow and deep. He pushed Jason's hand away from Nico's cock and took charge of the thrill of pleasing him, moving his hand up Nico's long shaft in time with the motion of his own body. Nico moaned into Jason's mouth with each thrust. The sounds Nico was making and the way his body moved because of Percy's thrusts made the kisses difficult to continue.

Jason sat up and moved until his hips were to the side of Nico's face. "I love you so much, Nico." He smoothed the hair away from Nico's eyes. "Will you suck me?"

Nico nodded and latched on, sucking and slurping in time with Percy's thrusts. Jason threw his head back and groaned. The sound went straight to Nico's crotch, and he let go of Jason long enough to yell "Faster!" to Percy, who pushed into Nico harder and faster than before.

"Oh gods, Percy, that. Yes, fuck that's good," Nico panted before returning his mouth to Jason's dick.

Jason dropped down and licked Nico's hips, back and forth, one to the other. Nico squirmed and arched his back and pushed himself further onto Percy, who was rapidly losing his ability to fuck Nico and stroke him at the same time. He jerked Nico down the bed with him and put his own feet on the floor. Jason swiped a kiss as Nico's head came past.

"Suck him off, Jason." The order surprised all of them. Jason and Nico were usually the ones who told the others what to do.

Jason swallowed his shock and hurried to comply. He gripped the base of Nico's dick and kissed the slick spongy head. He slowly made his way down Nico's length, kissing and eventually sucking. Percy had leaned back to keep his belly from hitting Jason's face too hard and had eased up on his thrusts until Jason had taken Nico fully in his mouth. Once Jason was situated, Percy picked up the pace until his body was snapping loudly against Nico's thighs and ass. Jason didn't have to move much; the force of Percy's fucking pushed Nico deep into his mouth.

Nico moaned and yelled louder than he ever had. The sensations of penetrating Jason's hot mouth and being penetrated by Percy's hard cock were working together to overload his senses. His hands scrambled around Jason's body, pinching and scratching wherever he could reach. He finally landed a hand on Jason's ass and managed to move his fingers until he located Jason's hole. He made slow, jerky circles and passes.

Jason whimpered and locked his arms around Nico's back to prevent himself from pulling away from sucking Nico and searching for more contact from Nico's hand.

Only those arms around Nico's waist kept them firm on the edge of the bed. Below them, Percy continued his frantic pace, spurred on by Nico's moans and whimpers. He watched Nico writhing and fingering Jason.

The moment Nico's finger slipped inside, Jason lurched and moaned so wantonly that he would have pulled off Nico entirely if Percy hadn't forced his head down. Soon Nico's hand joined Percy's on the back of Jason's head. Their eyes locked, Nico's and Percy's, and Percy lifted Nico's hips off the bed and slammed into him. Jason sucked harder and deeper, and Nico stiffened, toes curled around the
back of Percy's head, his orgasm rolling over him like a massive shock wave, causing him to groan loud enough that the reverberation tore through Jason's chest. Percy kept fucking until the sensation filling him, the heat pooling in his belly, became too much. He thrust deep and filled Nico with his seed.

Percy slowly withdrew, and with lightning speed, Jason rose and shoved him onto the bed. He picked up Nico like he weighed nothing and threw him next to Percy. Nico squinted open an eye and watched Jason wrench his legs farther apart. He rolled onto his shoulder and kissed Percy passionately because he knew it would push Jason, make him rougher.

"Did you like that, Nico? Did you like getting fucked by Percy while I sucked you off?" Jason's voice was low and hard. Nico nodded into his kiss. Jason ripped Nico's face away from Percy and pinned him at the wrists and throat. He straddled Nico's waist. Percy marveled at the tension Jason put into the grip and knew Nico would be bruised later.

Nico curled his lip, thrilled by Jason's brutality. His voice was hard, too. "I liked it a lot, Jason."

"Do you think I like watching you get fucked by someone else?" Jason's eyes bored into Nico’s, the connection running like a current between them.

"I do. I think it makes you want to fuck me even harder to prove I'm yours."

Jason sneered and lowered himself down Nico's body while keeping a firm hand on Nico's throat and one wrist. He slid a leg between Nico's and, from feel and memory alone, entered Nico violently. Nico hissed and arched his back.

"I don't need to prove anything. You are mine, and you know it," Jason said, pounding into Nico. "Now, kiss Percy while I fuck you, before he starts to worry you're not completely getting off on this."

Nico did. He shifted his upper body and kissed Percy. Percy hesitated at first because Jason's hand was still wrapped around Nico's throat, but soon enough Nico had coax ed him into warm and gentle kisses at odds with the way Jason possessed him.

Jason had managed to keep his powerful rhythm slow and steady at the beginning so Nico could kiss Percy, but he was quickly losing control. He normally went first when both he and Percy fucked Nico, so he'd been hard much longer than usual. Nico was still so tight, too, and he hadn't cleaned himself after Percy had come inside him, so their joining felt extra slippery. Jason adjusted his angle slightly and found Nico's prostate, causing Nico to break the kiss with Percy and shout incoherently. With the hand around his neck, Jason pulled Nico up until he could hold the younger god in his arms.

"I love you, Nico, so much," Jason whispered while thrusting harder and deeper with every pass. "Gods, you mean the world to me. I know you love him, and you aren't really mine, but I want you to be mine forever."

"I am yours, Jason," Nico said. "I always have been."

Nico wrapped his arms underneath Jason's and kissed him through the rougher thrusts, through falling back on the bed, through Jason's raging, throbbing orgasm.

When Jason finally opened his eyes and stopped kissing, Nico smiled at him and rubbed their noses together. Jason kissed him gently, then watched him kiss Percy before slowly facing him again. Nico’s eyes were deep and beautiful. Jason felt like his heart would break open from the love inside.
Nico kissed him once more, chaste and small. "I will always be yours."

Chapter End Notes

Writing three-way sex in third person omniscient is hard! Hard, I tell you! (Pun not intended, but fitting.)

The chapter title, in case you don't have a weakness for old pop chart rap like I do, is from the song of the same name by Salt-n-Pepa. I couldn't get the hook out of my head when I was writing this scene.

Thank you all for the comments and well-wishes (and wisdom). I am feeling much, much better.
Nico was having trouble paying attention in class. It wasn't something that happened very often. He may be falling apart at home, but in school he was the same single-minded, intense person he'd always been.

His fancy expensive wristwatch, the one he'd been given by Apollo and reluctantly decided to wear, told him it was three minutes after the last time he'd checked. Nico was both dreading and dreaming of the end of class. Clarisse was getting married this weekend, and though Nico was happy for her, he was not excited about the festivities. His mind drifted to Percy, who wouldn't be at the wedding, to Jason, who wouldn't be at the wedding, and to Apollo, who wouldn't be at the wedding. In fact, the number of people attending that he actually knew extended just a couple people farther than the bride and the groom. Clarisse was worse at making friends than he was.

Students all around him started packing up their books, and Nico realized he'd missed the professor's closing remarks. He'd barely taken notes. It would be okay. One bad day in one class wouldn't prevent him from becoming a lawyer. He took a deep breath, put away his books, and left.

"Nico!"

Nico startled at the sound of his name and found Annabeth twenty feet away, smiling broadly. He couldn't stop himself from returning her grin, and when she ran to him with her arms open wide, he hugged her much tighter than he'd hugged anyone in a long time. At least for now, the thrill of spending the weekend with his old friend was winning out over the horror of spending the weekend with his lover's girlfriend.

"I thought we were meeting at the Washington Arch?" Nico buried his head in Annabeth's hair after placing a soft kiss on her forehead. He hadn't seen her in a year, and he hadn't been in the same room with her since the day she'd asked him to keep sleeping with Percy. Guilt crowded his mind. He shoved it away with a kiss to Annabeth's fine, sweet-smelling hair.

Annabeth nuzzled her face against his collarbone and pulled him tighter.

"Mmm, I was too excited, Nico. It's been so long." She pulled back and ran her sharp gaze over his face and body. "You've grown a ton. And you're so healthy, sweetie. I'm glad you're taking care of yourself."

Nico shrugged and shouldered Annabeth's overnight bag. He tossed her garment bag over his shoulder, holding the hanger at his chest. "You look great, Annabeth. It's good to see you."

Annabeth slipped her hand into his and began walking rapidly. Nico had to take long strides to keep up with her.

"Hey, how'd you know what building I was in?" It kind of creeped Nico out that Annabeth had found him so easily. He'd only told her what time his last class finished.

"I got here a bit early. I went to the Arch, but I wanted to see you sooner. I called Reyna and got your schedule."

"Reyna has my schedule? She knows what building I'm in? What classroom?" Nico couldn't hide his
distaste. He hated that his family and friends kept such close tabs on him. He'd been good, stayed put and in touch, since the Giant War. Okay, so he'd lied by omission to Percy about where he was going after he was banished. And, technically, he was concealing his living arrangements from everyone but Jason. And maybe he'd flitted around like a wild bird and scared Reyna and Hazel to death after Jason had dumped him the first time.

"Oh, don't act so sour," Annabeth said. "You're behaving secretly again. She's worried about you."

"It's not her business."

Annabeth's hand tightened in his. They walked outside into the weak sunlight. Nico squinted at the brightness and seethed at the smothering.

"It is. You may not like it, but you've got people who care about you. You can't blow off your family and expect them to not check up on you, especially Reyna."

"You sound like some lecturing old grandma. I don't need babysat."

He was being a brat. It wasn't Annabeth's fault that Reyna was being overprotective. He should take his anger out on Reyna instead. He couldn't help feeling like she and his dad were in league together. Being fenced in made Nico feel panicky, and he was already feeling tied down enough by living with Apollo.

"Stop being a jerk. We have all weekend for you to remind me what an ass you can be," Annabeth snapped. "I want to see sweet Nico for a bit first."

"Nico?"

Nico turned in the direction of the voice and saw one of the girls from his sleepytime class last semester. Damn it. Miranda? Bethany? The one who'd offered to share her bed, or the one who'd giggled like an idiot at the idea? He couldn't remember.

"Oh, hi, uh..."

"Bethany," the girl supplied. She frowned and furrowed her brow. Her narrowed eyes slid over Annabeth, sizing her up. "Is this your fiancée?"

Nico was pretty sure he'd turned into a statue. He stood stiff and still and completely awkward, saying nothing. Annabeth nudged him, but his mouth was wired shut.

"I'm Annabeth," she said, holding out her hand. Bethany shook reluctantly. "I'm an old friend of Nico's."

Bethany pointedly eyed their clasped hands. Annabeth leaned into Nico's shoulder and patted his chest. She was enjoying this, Nico was sure.

"You're not the fiancée?" Bethany asked again.

"We're special friends." Annabeth kissed his cheek and slid her hand down to his stomach.

"Oh." Bethany put her hands on her hips. "I see how it is. But you couldn't be bothered to go on one little date with me, huh? You're all sweet and innocent-acting, but you're just like every other hot, rich guy who thinks he's too beautiful to date girls like me."
Annabeth laughed. "What kind of girl are you? He likes girls with very specific skills. He's kind of kinky."

"Annabeth!" Nico tried to pull his hand away, but Annabeth held on tight.

Bethany had dropped her bag and was staring at Nico in open-mouthed awe.

"I'm kidding — what did you say your name was? Bethany?" Tears of mirth streamed from Annabeth’s eyes. "Anyway, he’s like a little brother to me, and he was being kind of a dick. I'm just trying to embarrass him. I can't wait to meet his fiancée, either."

"I'm going to murder you in your sleep," Nico growled in Annabeth's ear.

"I'd like to see you try," she whispered back. To Bethany, she said, "It was nice to meet you. I have to get Nico back to my hotel room now so we can have some fun before our dinner plans. Toodles."

She dragged Nico away, walking with an extra flounce in her step. Nico watched her hips sway back and forth while his brain tried to catch up to how unpleasant Annabeth had been.

"That was...I...you're mean, Annabeth."

"Oh, please," Annabeth scoffed. Her hard gray eyes flitted about. "She was mentally undressing you. I'm surprised she didn't drool. She deserved it, and so did you. Who's your fiancé?"

They were aimlessly walking north, which was the direction of their hotel, but Nico wasn't sure how to get Annabeth there. He'd been so excited for this part of the weekend, hoping her pleasure at where they were staying would lessen her inevitable scrutinizing.

"Don't you want to get to the hotel?"

"Is it that long an explanation, Nico?" Her smile shone, playful and happy, and Nico couldn't stay mad at her.

"That girl was in one of my classes last semester. She sat next to me, and she and the girl on the other side of me were friends, I guess. They kept hitting on me all the time, so I told them I was engaged."

Annabeth blew a raspberry and laughed. "Why didn't you tell them you're gay, silly?"

"Stop laughing at me. Guys were hitting on me, too, so it was easier to go with the engaged story. Sort of a one-size-fits-all thing."

"Oh, Nico, would dating someone be so bad?"

Nico didn't look at Annabeth, but he could hear the slight edge in her voice. Did she suspect he and Percy were still lovers? She must. It wasn’t fair. She'd told him to do it. She'd asked it of him, but she would be furious if she knew it was still going on. At least, she'd be furious to learn how deep their affair went, how far into each other he and Percy had fallen, how cruelly they'd disregarded her feelings. Nico wasn't worthy of holding Annabeth's hand. He loosened his fingers and tried to shake free from her clean, kind hand, so unlike his, but Annabeth held tight again.

"How would you like to get to the hotel?" he asked, hoping to change the subject in his brain, too.

"We can walk or take a cab—"

"Can we shadow travel?"

The question surprised him. He'd never imagined someone would want to shadow travel, aside from
him and Percy, who loved it. It had taken Jason a long time to stop vomiting after each trip through the shadows. Clarisse tolerated it, but she found it freakish, although her dislike may have stemmed from having to touch Nico in a non-violent way. Even Hazel, who had learned to travel short distances, found the experience jarring and only did it when she had to.

"I guess. Are you sure you want to?"

"I've only ever done it that one time, after..." Annabeth's eyes were vacant, unseeing, and Nico didn't need her to explain. Tartarus didn't ever leave you. "I wasn't in much shape to pay attention to the experience."

Nico nodded and led Annabeth under the shade of a tree. Mortals never noticed his shadow travel, but he tried to be as discreet as possible. He pulled the shadows to them and bent them to his will. Shadow travel was like wrapping himself in a blanket — comfortable and familiar, but traveling with someone, especially Annabeth, who pulled him in many different directions emotionally, was disconcerting. He wanted to keep her safe, to make sure she had fun, to leave her behind. He had to concentrate on keeping her hand in his.

They emerged on the shadowed side of the Pulitzer Fountain.

"How was it?" he asked.

"I don't think I want to do it too often," she said, "but...Nico, you didn't!" Annabeth's eyes widened, and she gaped at the building across the street with unabashed excitement.

Nico smiled shyly. "I did. I hope it's okay."

They were already walking toward the Plaza Hotel. Its baroque exterior seemed to be magnetically attracting Annabeth.

"I can't believe you. You remembered?"

"Of course."

After the Titan War, Annabeth had told Nico what had happened while he was stuck down in the Underworld, forced by Percy's distrust into a standoff with his father. She'd told him about setting up base camp in the Plaza, and wistfully said she hoped to go back someday and study the architecture when they weren't all under the threat of death.

The doorman welcomed them and opened the door. The lobby was so opulent it made the Ritz back in San Francisco look humdrum. Nico didn't care about style or architecture, but Annabeth's eyes were darting everywhere.

Nico gave the clerk his name and was reminded of the last time he'd stood in a hotel, checking in himself and a guest who was holding his hand. Jason, his smile and his eyes and his gentle spirit (and Nico believed in Jason's gentleness as completely as he had when he was fifteen years old), overwhelmed Nico.

"My companion, Miss Chase, is scheduled to go on a private architectural tour upon our arrival," Nico said. The clerk mercifully didn't acknowledge the quiver in Nico's voice. Nico pushed Jason out of his head and handed Annabeth a room card. "The two bedroom suites were all booked, but I'll sleep on the pull-out and you can take the bed. If you'd come wake me when you're done with the tour we'll head out to the rehearsal dinner then. Does that sound alright to you?"

A small hand brushed Nico's cheek. Annabeth was watching him carefully through glassy eyes.
"You did this for me? I know it must have cost a fortune for a private tour. Nico, you shouldn't have."

Nico could feel his blush. He focused on a spot near Annabeth's knee. "I have a lot of money, Annabeth. There isn't much I like to do with it, but doing nice things for the people I care about makes me happy."

He chanced a glance at Annabeth's face and was horrified to see her crying. Did she not want the tour? He'd been sure she'd love it. Or was the hotel itself too much? Were the memories too bad? Nico petted Annabeth's head. "I can go with you on the tour, if you don't want to be alone, or you don't have to go at all. We can get a different hotel, if there are too many bad memories. I'm so sorry. Don't be sad, please? Tell me what's wrong, and I'll fix it if I can."

Annabeth's face crumpled, and she flew into Nico's arms. The front desk worker signaled for a bellhop, who quickly came and relieved Nico of Annabeth's baggage and his backpack. Nico moved them out of the way of the desk and tightened his hold. He had no idea what to do. Annabeth wasn't a person who cried, and he'd never seen her so vulnerable before. He wasn't good with crying or comforting people. The best he could figure to do was hold her and wait for her to recover her usual bravado.

It didn't take long. No more than two minutes passed before Annabeth was pulling back, wiping her eyes. The smile she gave him seemed forced.

"I'm sorry, Nico. You're being so nice, and the hotel and tour are wonderful. Thank you. I think I might be a bit emotional leaving Percy, and long flights make me melancholy."

"Do you want me to go on the tour with you or leave you alone?"

Annabeth laughed, and that didn't seem real, either. "I'd love your company, but you should rest. I'll wake you when I'm done."

Nico nodded. The tour guide and bellhop, who'd been standing awkwardly nearby, each escorted one of the pair from the lobby. Nico watched Annabeth go.

Was that whole scene caused by missing Percy? Annabeth had never struck Nico as a person who would get that worked up over absence from her boyfriend, but what did he know? He missed Percy enough that he could cry sometimes. And Jason, gods. Annabeth had been without Percy for long months between the wars. Maybe that time had made her cling to him more tightly than Nico realized. He decided to put worries about Annabeth's mental state out of his mind. She was a tough woman. It'd be fine.

Nico followed the bellhop to the room, tipped him, and as soon as the door closed, he shadow traveled back to his apartment to pick up his own bags.

The place was empty, as he'd known it would be. That was probably better. If Apollo was home, Nico would have been too happy to bury his head in Apollo's neck and take far too long getting back to Annabeth. He might even have blown her off altogether for the easy comfort Apollo provided.

The god had been even kinder than usual since Jason had left. He'd held Nico's hand and stroked his hair. Without complaint or even prompting after the first time, he'd turned their couch into a bed each night and held Nico close for the first week after Jason's departure. He hadn't badmouthed Jason or been seductive. It was almost like having a friend.

Nico wasn't naive enough to believe there weren't consequences and expectations for these
interactions. If he didn't have Percy, couldn't rely on Percy's steady presence in his life, he'd probably have succumbed to Apollo's closeness and friendship and had sex with him by now.

Apollo had thoughtfully packed Nico’s bags for the weekend, which consisted of a rehearsal dinner tonight, the wedding tomorrow, and a family — "You have to go, dumbass. You're my stupid fucking weakling demigod family," Clarisse had said — picnic on Sunday.

A note affixed to the front of his garment bag read: "I have little hope your friend and her groom will not be overshadowed by your beauty, lover. Missing you already. Much love, A." Nico laid the note on his bed, grabbed his bags, and walked to the kitchen, where he left a note of his own.

"Thank you for packing for me. See you in a few days. I'll be back Sunday."

It didn't exactly match the lovey-dovey note Apollo had left, but it was as fond as Nico could manage. He preferred to save the endearments for Percy or, if he ever got the chance again, Jason.

Nico traveled back to the hotel and sat on the couch in the living room. He liked the old-style blue velvet thing, as well as the matching furniture all around. It reminded him of the hotel he'd seen in his vision of his mother when he was a boy. He pulled out his phone and checked his texts. Not surprisingly, there was a message from Percy.

"How's it going, baby? She told me she got there. Wish I could be the one seeing you."

Nico smiled. They shouldn't be messaging each other while he was with Annabeth, but Nico couldn't help it. He was so in love with Percy. Not like Jason. Never that. It wasn't even close, but Percy had carved out a tiny wedge of Nico's heart and staked a claim.

"I wish that, too, Perce. Things are going fine. She's out getting a tour of the hotel now, and we'll head to the rehearsal dinner in a couple hours."

Nico felt a little nervous using Percy's name when he'd be sharing a suite with Annabeth for a few days, but he'd set up a lock screen on his phone. That should keep Annabeth out of it. His phone beeped. He read Percy's message.

"She's not there? Want to talk?"

Nico’s eyes widened in shock. How could Percy suggest they "talk" when Annabeth could walk in at any time? Nico must have taken too long to reply because his phone beeped again.

"We don't have to, but I promise you'd enjoy it. I'd do that thing you like..."

"No, pervert! I'd feel terrible — worse than usual, even."

Nico put his phone down, but picked it up again to add: "But you can do that thing on Monday..."

"Nope. I'm doing it right now, and you don't get to see."

Nico moaned and bit his lip. Percy was so bad. It turned Nico on. He adjusted his pants and laid down on the couch. He needed to stop texting.

"Percy?"

"Yeah?"

"Show me."
Chris Rodriguez had six million relatives, and they were all at the rehearsal dinner. Clarisse had one. Nico would have happily spent all night with Chris's family to avoid any encounter with Clarisse's.

Mama Rodriguez (she'd insisted Nico and Annabeth call her that) was one of the nicest ladies Nico had ever met. She reminded him of Sally, Percy's mom. She'd patted his arm, called him sweetie, and told him Chris spoke fondly of him. She'd complimented Annabeth on her lovely dress and beautiful blond hair. She'd asked them about college and said a lawyer and an architect were wonderful things to be. She'd said they were a stunning couple. Annabeth had laid her head on Nico's shoulder and discreetly pinched his side when he'd opened his mouth to correct Mama Rodriguez.

Chris's family didn't know he was a demigod. They thought Mama Rodriguez had an unfortunate and scandalous affair with a UPS delivery man, and despite their conservative Christian background, they'd accepted her and her illegitimate son back into warm and welcome arms when Herman (Hermes) had left them shortly after Chris was born. Mama Rodriguez herself didn't know. She thought Chris went to a summer camp and stayed on to work there once he was old enough to have a job.

Clarisse had told Nico all this once, when she was explaining how Chris could have betrayed camp and joined forces with Kronos. It had been hard for Nico to imagine, how something like that could cause Chris enough hatred toward the gods to want their downfall. Nico's mother had been murdered by Zeus, for Hades's sake. Bianca had died in service to Artemis. Nico thought that if anyone was entitled to hate the gods, it was him.

Seeing this family, though, so many earnest and kind expressions, so close-knit and loving, even if they wouldn't understand how Nico was in love not with the girl next to him but her boyfriend, it helped him understand Chris's anger. Nico's mother had known with whom she'd fallen in love. Hades had saved Nico and Bianca from Zeus's wrath. He'd tried to protect them. He'd been a presence in Nico's life. Chris didn't have that. He had a beautiful mortal family who'd been duped by an all-powerful being. Nico would've been angry, too.

"Look alive, cupcake. The beast approaches," Coach Hedge said, appearing out of nowhere to Nico's right.


Coach Hedge flicked Nico's ear. "You don't have time for small talk, smart aleck. Keep your eyes on Chase and act in love, unless you want to spend the entire weekend being nibbled on by a piranha."

Nico threw his head back and gazed up at the ceiling. This was ridiculous. He did not need to be protected from Clarisse's mom. He didn't even like girls, and he'd been shutting down advances for a very long time now. Besides, this lady was old. She'd had an affair with Ares (disgusting!) and given birth to Clarisse (not disgusting, but Clarisse). This was something he could handle. He could even be gracious about it, if he tried. There was nothing that would make him behave poorly at Clarisse's wedding. It meant way too much to her, and she meant way too much to him.

"Put your head back upright," Annabeth whispered. "You look incredibly erotic that way."

Nico snapped his head back up and stared at Annabeth.
"Oh, my gods, you did not just say that to me." His face had to be flaming red.

"I'm not interested. That doesn't make me blind. Play along. I met Clarisse's mom once. Why do you think Percy isn't invited to the wedding?"

What the hell? Percy had slept with Clarisse's mother? Nico squeezed his eyes shut and wrinkled his nose. When he opened up again, Annabeth smirked.

"I promise you, whatever you're imagining, it can't compete with how revolting the reality was. Percy was a complete pig."

"How in the hell did you stand that, Annabeth?" Just thinking about it was making Nico furious, though he wasn't sure if he was mad for Annabeth or himself.

"That's a funny question, coming from you," she hissed. Her nails dug into his waist. "It helped to believe that Percy had some sort of sex addiction, that he dropped his pants for any girl in a tight skirt who winked at him. Of course, he hasn't touched another girl in two years, so I can't blame it on an addiction anymore. He's an unfaithful bastard." Annabeth met his eyes, held them. "At least to me."

There. She knew. And now she'd made sure he knew that she knew. Nico almost felt a sick sense of relief before doubts plagued him. She hadn't come right out and said she knew. Was he reading too much into things? Maybe she thought Percy was being faithful now and he'd grown up or something. Maybe she knew and didn't care.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. Nico's entire future was a list of endless, depressing maybes. Maybe he should try to forget Jason. Maybe he should flee Apollo and live in the Underworld. Maybe he should sleep with Apollo and get it over with. Maybe he should ask Percy to come to school in New York, and they could live together at his farmhouse and approximate happiness. No. Of all the options, making a life with Percy was the one he could not entertain. It was too tempting, and in the end, it would leave them both hurt and unhappy, if not dead by Apollo's hand. He could live with his own unhappiness; he couldn't inflict it on Percy.

Coach and Annabeth were arguing across him when Clarisse hurried up to them and punched his chest. Though his eyes were watering from the punch, Nico could see that Clarisse was both wearing makeup and holding tension. He almost offered to spar with her to relieve her anxiety.

"She's coming, the evil bitch," Clarisse growled.

Nico started to ask why Clarisse had invited the woman to the wedding if she hated her so much when Annabeth's posture morphed into something completely foreign. Her back arched, and her breasts pressed into his ribs. The hand that had been clawing his waist dropped low on his hip. One leg crossed protectively in front of his thigh. Her free hand roamed slowly from his waistband up his stomach, chest, and neck and tangled in his hair. She pulled his face close to hers.

"Pretend the old lady is Medusa."

Nico sputtered out half a laugh before he registered the real fear in Annabeth's eyes. She was genuinely trying to protect him from a risk he couldn't imagine existing. Did she see him or Percy in front of her? He felt very sorry for whatever had happened the last time she'd met Clarisse's mother, and his anger with Percy over how he'd hurt Annabeth increased. He smoothed his hand up and down the small of Annabeth's back, trying to promise something he'd be able to keep.

"I'll do my best."

"Well, well, well, if it isn't your friend, what was it? Anniebell? Rissie, help me out here," a woman's
voice said. Nico had expected something gruff and demanding, like Clarisse's voice, but this woman sounded like a feminine Apollo, with a tinkling, melodic voice.

"Annabeth, Mom," Clarisse ground out. She sounded like she was chewing glass.

"Right, right," the woman chuckled. "Sorry things didn't work out with the last boy, Annie. I do appreciate you bringing me a new toy to play with. This one's even juicier than the old one."

"Ms. LaRue, would you like to meet my wife, Mellie?" Coach Hedge said.

"Met her, Gleeson," Ms. LaRue said dismissively. "Lovely lady. Now, introduce me to your friend, girls."

"Mom, this is Nico. Nico, my mom." The glass-chewing noises increased.

Nico blindly thrust out his hand, keeping his eyes locked on Annabeth. Tiny, soft hands gripped his, and he was so shocked that they felt nothing like Clarisse's solid, sturdy hands that he looked at Ms. LaRue.

Whatever he'd been expecting, it hadn't been this. Clarisse's mom was beautiful. He could clearly see Clarisse in her eyes and mouth, but this woman was stunningly attractive. She was tall, with extremely large breasts and curvy hips that put even Annabeth's lovely figure to shame. Her hair was long and blond and billowy, again, like Annabeth's. With a start, Nico realized that this woman wasn't trying to seduce him and hadn't seduced Percy because she necessarily wanted them. It was because she was a modern-day evil queen who wanted to prove she was the fairest of them all. Annabeth must be so threatening to her.

The woman's hands had started to move softly up Nico's forearm when he pulled his hand back and stroked Annabeth's face.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. LaRue," he said quickly before turning to Annabeth and gazing what he hoped was longingly into her eyes. "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, Annabeth Chase."

He kissed her, which felt weird, too soft and small, but Annabeth smiled into the kiss and tilted her head a bit. Nico didn't know what else to do, and Annabeth seemed willing, so he kept on kissing until Clarisse smacked his shoulder.

"Brilliant, Pissy!" Clarisse whooped. "Oh, my gods, that was perfect. I think she'll leave you two alone now, as long as you stay attached at the hip. I gotta go get Chris's Uncle Gustavo out of the Cheese Nips. See you in a bit."

"Hey kid, now that that's over, let's go see the wife and kid. Chuck's got some new karate moves to show you."

Coach pulled at Nico's elbow, but Annabeth put her hand on the coach's arm.

"Give us a minute, please, Coach?"

"Sure thing, cupcake. But I want the kid in no more than five minutes." Nico watched Annabeth smile at Coach Hedge as the old satyr galloped off through the crowd.

When Annabeth turned her face back to him, she leaned up and gave him another soft kiss on the lips. The kiss lingered, but stayed chaste.
"That was perfect, Nico," she said. "I'm getting tired of thinking about how perfect you are today. You're putting me to shame."

"Shut up. You're one of the most amazing people I know, next to my sisters." Nico kissed her cheek. "Guys like me don't come close to measuring up."

What he meant was annoying, crass, anti-social guys like himself. He also meant cheating, lying bastards like himself.

"You're an excellent kisser. That was a nice perk. I'll have to tell Jason and Percy thanks for that."

"Jason," Nico corrected, forgetting himself for a moment. "I haven't ever..."

"What? You haven't ever what?"

Nico could tell Annabeth wasn't finding him too perfect now. All he had to say was the truth, that he'd never kissed Percy's lips. Maybe it would matter to her as much as Percy believed it would. Saying that, though, meant admitting that he slept with someone who wouldn't kiss him. Nico felt so alone.

"I was already a great kisser before Percy," he said with a bravado he didn't feel. "Let's go get our asses kicked by a three year old."

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A Catholic wedding takes forever.

That's the lesson Nico was learning. He'd been standing at the altar for what felt like six hours. Next to him, Annabeth stood still and calm. He wanted to run or get attacked by monsters or something, anything to have an excuse to move. He shifted restlessly for the billionth time, and Annabeth poked him in the ribs.

"It hasn't even started yet. Be still."

Fine, okay, it hadn't started yet. He'd walked down the aisle with some cousin of Chris's, and Annabeth, as the maid of honor, had come to stand next to him a moment later. Now, Clarisse was walking down the aisle with Coach Hedge, and she was glowing, radiant, unlike Nico had ever seen her. He was so happy for her and Chris.

But that didn't mean he could stand still. Annabeth poked him again.

He'd been in a suit for two hours now. He and Annabeth had gotten changed at the hotel before shadow traveling to the church, St. Joan of Arc in Jackson Heights. The church was lovely, and Nico would have gladly stayed in the sanctuary or gone outside and pondered the meaning of life at the foot of a garden statue of the Virgin Mary, but instead he had to be squished into a small room with Annabeth, Clarisse, a younger Ares girl named Viola who seemed to hate him for sport, and occasionally, Clarisse's mom.

There were things that went into getting a bride, even one as dismissive of vanity as Clarisse, ready for a wedding that Nico did not care to know. Annabeth brushed Clarisse's hair for, he wasn't exaggerating, twenty minutes. Viola painted her toenails. Nico stood next to Annabeth and tried to
avoid being groped by Clarisse's mother. He did get the extreme pleasure of squeezing the hell out of Clarisse to lace all the little loopy things up the back of her dress. The loops must be made of reinforced steel, because he applied enough pressure, pushing Clarisse against a wall and digging his knee into her ass, to rip a normal dress to shreds, but those loops held firm.

Coach dropped Clarisse off at the front of the church with a kiss and a smile so proud and genuine that Nico got a little teary-eyed. He shifted again and gazed out at the packed church. He spotted Chiron sitting next to the Stoll brothers and a few Ares kids sitting together, uncharacteristically quiet and calm. Mama Rodriguez was crying. Clarisse's mom winked at him. Nico squirmed and received another poke.

He linked his arm with Annabeth's, mainly to keep her from poking him again. She leaned slightly into his side, and Nico reveled in the comfort of her contact. He missed Reyna and Hazel so much. He hadn't seen them, touched them, in almost a year. In April, after a full year had passed, they would propose to the senate that his banishment be lifted. Reyna had already told him that the senate would vote against it. They'd try again in another year. She'd told him not to give up hope.

As much as he'd been ready to write off both camps after Hera destroyed his reputation and exposed his private life, he missed being able to show up at camp. He didn't want to live there. NYU was where he wanted to be, and that wouldn't change even if he could live at Camp Jupiter exactly how things had been before. He wanted to see his sisters. And Frank. And Percy, gods. He couldn't let himself think about how desperately he wanted to see Jason.

Reyna and Hazel hadn't been able to get away to visit. He understood. The life of a Praetor was complicated, and leaving the camp, even on official business, was rare and only done when absolutely necessary. Leaving the camp to visit a guy banished for threatening the safety of the camp? It wasn't going to happen unless Reyna or Hazel lied about their plans.

He'd have to make due with this sliver of a visit from Annabeth. He and Percy talked all the time about plans for the summer, about how Percy would come to Camp Half-Blood and Nico would secrete him away during the night and they'd make love in Nico's bed in his farmhouse and talk until the sun came up. It probably wouldn't happen. Annabeth kept a close watch on Percy. He'd probably come to Camp Half-Blood and sleep with Annabeth every night while Nico lived almost alone in his "ivory tower," as Jason had called it. It felt good to indulge Percy's fantasies, though.

Clarisse and Chris were lighting candles to symbolize something that Nico had missed. Love? Eternity? Faithfulness? He remembered the gift his father had given him on his last birthday. He wondered what Jason had done with the tie pin. His father had said Nico would never marry. He'd never considered marriage before, except in childish fantasies when he and Jason were first together, but the certainty that what Chris and Clarisse were doing, that the happiness that shone on their faces, would never grace him, well, it made him extremely sad.

Annabeth would get married. She'd marry Percy, and they'd have annoyingly perfect children with green eyes and blond hair and everyone would love them. Jason would probably marry, even if he loved Nico forever. Being alone was a hard thing to manage, and everyone settled in the end. Nico had settled at seventeen, agreed to a life with Apollo, even if he hadn't realized it at the time.

There was singing and a prayer. Nico liked churches and faith. He liked the idea that there was a big G God out there somewhere who was more powerful and good than his father or Zeus. He didn't want to believe that a bunch of petty, whiny, complacent superbeings were the last word on all the miracles and wonder in the world. What a big G God would think of Nico di Angelo, that was another story.

Nico moved again, swaying away from Annabeth and back into her body, and she stomped a sharp
heel on his foot. He wasn't even wearing his boots today, just some admittedly very cool black dress shoes Apollo had conjured for him. Annabeth's heel sank in, and Nico had to stifle a gasp.

"It's almost done. Don't make me grind my heel into your foot," Annabeth hissed against his ear. It already felt like she was grinding her heel into his foot. He didn't want to make it worse, so he stood as still as possible and tried to pay attention.

"...for as long as you both shall live. I now pronounce you husband and wife." The priest turned his eyes toward Chris. "You may kiss the—"

Clarisse grabbed Chris by the collar and kissed him so hard that he bent backward and she had to hold him to keep him from falling over. The crowd broke out in raucous applause, which Nico happily joined.

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"That was fun!"

Annabeth and Nico stumbled out of the shadows of their hotel suite, giggling and holding each other tightly.

"That was horrible, Annabeth! Did you see how she grabbed my ass?"

"Nope," Annabeth laughed, "but I saw how you slapped her face."

Nico unfastened one of his hands from Annabeth's waist and slid it down his face. So much for being gracious. He couldn't believe he'd slapped Clarisse's mother. It had happened so fast. He was dancing with Annabeth at the reception, holding her close, not even thinking or talking, simply enjoying the feeling of a warm body against his. He didn't even have his eyes open. Then a hand grabbed his ass so blatantly that he didn't hesitate. He whirlsed Annabeth around and hit. Annabeth burst out laughing in a way that was highly inappropriate given the situation, and Nico stammered out an apology and dragged Annabeth into the men's bathroom to disappear.

Annabeth pulled his hand away from his face and wrapped it around her back. "Finish our dance."

"We don't have any music."

She sighed and laid her head on his shoulder. "Pretend, Nico. Oh, wait." She slipped off her shoes and kicked them toward the wall. "Better. Now move."

"Are all women this bossy, or is it a demigod thing?"

"You smell nice and are a superb dancer, so I'm going to ignore your obnoxious mouth until the dance is over," Annabeth said. Her head had dropped to his chest without the extra height created by her heels. "After that, you'd better run."

"We don't have any music."

Nico chuckled and led Annabeth around the room, dancing between the furniture to the beat he heard in his head. Annabeth danced easily in his arms. It was a far cry from the time he'd tried to teach Jason to dance. One of his toes still bent the wrong direction after being stepped on by Jason's heavy feet. He'd never danced with Percy after that one drunken night, though he was sure this wasn't the kind of dancing Percy wanted from him anyway. Apollo was probably an amazing dancer
who could lead or follow. They'd have to try some night when they were bored.

After ten minutes or so, Annabeth slipped a hand into Nico's hair and pressed the other to his chest. Nico slowed their steps until they swayed back and forth, feet no longer moving. He was getting sleepy, especially with Annabeth's hand threading through his hair. He let out a contented sigh.

"This feels so nice, Annabeth. Thank you." He kissed her hair.

"Let's get ready for bed, Nico, and then we can talk some, okay?" Annabeth didn't move her head, but her hand tightened on his chest. "Unzip my dress for me?"

Reluctantly, Nico let go, and Annabeth faced away from him. Earlier today, he'd learned the hard way that he needed to put his hand between Annabeth's skin and the zipper. He hoped the red mark had faded from her skin. He unclasped the small hook at the top of the zipper and slipped one hand inside her dress while the other carefully slid the zipper down. Annabeth's skin was so soft. Not that guys' skin wasn't soft — Nico loved the feeling of it — but Annabeth's was so much more so. Once he'd dropped the zipper far enough down for Annabeth to reach it, he turned his hand over and traced his fingertips up her spine.

"Push the dress off my shoulders, please." Annabeth whispered the words. They were much too still and close and Nico's hand lingered on Annabeth's bare back, but he used both hands, slid them up over her shoulder blades, and moved the fabric down Annabeth's shoulders. He stopped at the top of her arms but didn't let go.

"Your skin is so soft," he breathed. They stood frozen like that for long seconds. Nico wasn't sure Annabeth was breathing.

"Move your hands, Nico."

Nico startled and backed away. What the hell had he been doing?

"I'll, um, I'll change in the bathroom." He circled around the room and dug his pajamas out of his bag then practically ran to the bathroom, feeling Annabeth's eyes on him the whole time.

When he emerged, he was relieved to see Annabeth sitting on the couch in her silly red flannel pajamas that were not attractive at all, let alone sensual or sexy. She had her phone out and was rapidly touching it. Nico figured she must be texting Percy. He sat on the chair across from her and propped his feet up on the coffee table. He wanted to go to bed, but Annabeth was sitting on his sleeping spot. She'd said she wanted to talk, but she didn't seem to be going to put her phone down anytime soon.

Nico cleared his throat, and Annabeth glanced up at him and smiled. Her smile seemed forced, though. Was it because he had acted like a gross pervert before?

"Hey, Annabeth, I'm sorry about—"

"You didn't do anything, Nico." She set her phone down on the arm of the sofa and put one of her feet up on the coffee table. She let her toes slide across the ball of his foot.

"I guess, but it probably felt like something different to you than it did to me, and I wasn't thinking about that." Nico could feel his face growing red. He hadn't meant to touch Annabeth in a way that felt sexual, but he'd been so entranced by her softness.

"Probably." Annabeth shrugged. "Tell me about school."
"What do you want to know?" Nico snuggled into the cushions of his chair. This hotel was very comfortable. This whole weekend, aside from Clarisse's mother, had been comfortable. When it ended, he'd feel even more lonely than he had before.

"Just anything." Annabeth was tapping a rhythm on her legs, almost like she was nervous.

"Well, there's not much to tell. I like my classes this semester, especially history. It comes from such an American perspective, and it's interesting to hear how it differs from the history I've learned from various ghosts." Nico wasn't sure if that was the kind of information she wanted, but he didn't know what else to say.

"It must be weird, going to a human school, when you've had such a rich experience talking to the people who've actually made history."

Nico nodded. Ever since he'd first learned how, he'd sought out famous ghosts, people who could tell him first-hand about their thoughts and actions. He'd also talked to a lot of common spirits in Elysium, people who'd landed there for the everyday sort of heroics that don't get that much attention. They'd taught him the most about courage, honor, and humility, and they were the ones who'd had the most profound impact on his life.

Annabeth leaned forward. "Who was the coolest ghost you ever talked to?"

"George Burns."

Annabeth wrinkled her nose in disbelief. "Why him? He was just a comedian, and no offense, Nico, but you're not funny."

Nico rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I know I'm not, but he was. Is. He lived such a long time and saw so many things. Plus, he loved his wife so much. She died something like thirty years before he did, and he always kept her in his heart."

"He cheated on her," Annabeth said quietly.

Nico stood and stretched. He walked around the coffee table and sat next to Annabeth, who was watching him intensely. How did Percy stand her piercing gaze, especially given the things he'd done?

"He loved her. He wasn't perfect, and he made mistakes. He was with other women after she died, too, but his love for Gracie never faded. I like to think that true love endures, and he was a good example of that."

"You want that for yourself and Jason?" Annabeth wiped a tear from her cheek.

"I do." Nico smiled sadly. "But I also want it for my parents, and, weird as it sounds, for my dad and Persephone, too. He loves them both. It took me a long time to understand how he could have loved my mother so much and love Persephone even more."

"You're an idiot sometimes, Nico," Annabeth said, but she laughed when she said it. She took his hand, kissed the back of it, and wrapped his arm around her back. "You don't even realize what you're talking about."

Nico was pretty sure he knew what he was talking about. Why couldn't he want his dad to love his mom and Persephone? Duh.

"Anyway, how's school going for you?"
"Great. I've got things set up so I can graduate next winter, and once Percy graduates, we might move back to New York."

Annabeth was watching him carefully, gauging his reaction. He managed to keep his breathing steady. If she could feel how his pulse quickened, though, he'd be given away. Percy, close by. Percy, home. Nico's mind reeled. Being physically close to Percy again would be disastrous heaven. They wouldn't be able to stay away from each other. They'd be more brash and reckless. They'd lie and cheat and make promises neither could keep, but gods, touching Percy, feeling his skin and his kisses, hearing his voice and his heartbeat... Nico felt a fluttering of hope.

"That sounds wonderful, Annabeth," Nico said. "Sally and Paul will be so happy."

"Speaking of Paul, I hear you're dating someone?" Annabeth quirked her eyebrow. She hadn't interrogated him the whole time they'd been together. Why now?

"Oh, yes, well, dating is a strong word," Nico started. "We're not that serious."

"Dating isn't a very strong word at all, Nico. Where'd you meet him?"

"School."

"Was he in one of your classes?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"Freshman Comp."

"Nico?"

"Yes?"

"I know you're making this up. You already admitted you weren't dating someone, remember?"

Damn it. Annabeth was so smug. Nico shifted uneasily, but Annabeth pushed her shoulder into his. He gave up and sat still.

"Sorry. I, uh, Hazel...she...it's easier..."

"It's easier to lie to your sister?" Annabeth rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to tell her, Nico, but you shouldn't lie to her. Lying only brings trouble. You're so bad at it you can't even remember to whom you've told what lie, can you?"

Well, yes, true. Nico hated lying. He hated how many lies he'd told. And he was starting to lose track of what he had told people. It was so confusing. He just wanted to protect Jason and Percy. You just want to keep sleeping with Jason and Percy, said a very unhelpful voice in his head.

In response to Annabeth, Nico shrugged. It was a pitiful answer.

"I took some pictures, before I left camp. I thought you may want to see everyone." Annabeth nudged Nico's head with hers.

"I'd love that," Nico said. "That's so thoughtful of you. Thanks."

Annabeth's hand hesitated on its way to the phone. "Don't mention it."
She whisked through the screens much more agilely than Nico could and turned the phone to show him a picture of Reyna and Hazel sitting on Reyna's desk in the Praetor's chambers. They were grinning hugely and holding up a sign that said, "We miss you!" Nico hovered his fingers over the screen. He'd call Reyna tomorrow after he got home and make things right with her. He'd tell Hazel he'd been making up the boyfriend.

Annabeth pulled the phone back. Nico waited while she made a few more swiping motions. She moved the phone back into Nico's view to show a picture of her with Frank and Piper. Frank was leaning so far over to get in the shot that he appeared to be perched on Annabeth's head. Piper's smile was nervous and shy. Nico smiled.

"Oh, here's a fun one," Annabeth said, whipping the phone away and putting it back under his nose. The picture showed Jason and Percy, standing apart, both smiling the most awkward, fake smiles Nico had ever seen. Jason's arms were crossed and his jaw was clenched. Percy's hands were in fists at his sides. Jason's eyes were so blue. Nico studied the crinkles at the edges of his eyes, the laugh lines around his mouth. Was he happy? Was he at least trying?

"They're working on the friendship thing," Annabeth said. "For you, I'm sure. When Jason came back, Reyna put him right across the street from Percy. I doubt she told you."

Reyna hadn't told him, but Percy had. Percy made things sound a lot better than they were, if this picture was any indication of the real rift between him and Jason.

"They're so dumb," Nico whispered. His voice sounded far too fond. "They need each other. There's nothing worth fighting over."

"I think they'd both vehemently disagree about that."

Annabeth pulled the phone back and flipped around some more. "Ooh, here's my favorite."

She shoved the phone back at Nico, and his breath hitched. No.

It was him, his face turned to the side, eyes heavy-lidded and ignoring the camera. His hand had caught the lower hem of his shirt and pulled it up to reveal his white stomach.

Nico pinched his lips together and looked away.

"Don't like that one?" Annabeth asked. He could hear her swiping away on the phone. "How about this one?"

Despite the nausea creeping into his stomach, Nico looked.

Him, again, though his face wasn't visible. His bare stomach. His hand shoved down his jeans. The skull ring peeking out through the unfastened zipper.

"Or how about this one?"

He was naked in this one, his hand wrapped around his dick. He was biting his lower lip and staring lustfully at the camera.

"You want to see more?" Annabeth asked. Her hands were shaking on the phone.

"Stop," Nico whispered.

He shifted to get up, to run, to shadow travel away from this room and the evidence of how he'd lied
to and cheated this woman, but Annabeth gripped his hand where it was still fastened around her waist.

"No," she said harshly. "You don't get to run when things get hard, you son of a bitch."

Annabeth put the phone aside, and Nico took a shaky breath.

"J-Jason knows. He knows." The words were for himself, not for her, and that made it so much worse.

"Figures the first words out of your mouth would be about Jason," Annabeth said. "Jason knows? Really? He knows his sweet little Nico sends dirty pictures to Percy? I'm thinking that's a lie."

"A-Annabeth...I..." Nico ran his hand through his hair. He was going to vomit if he didn't get himself under control. Oh, gods, she knew. She knew and she had proof and she would hate him forever. They would all hate him forever.

"I what? I like to fuck your boyfriend so much that even when we're clear on the other side of the continent from each other we'll find a way to sneak around and break your heart?" Her voice was so cold and angry. The whole weekend had been an act, a lie, designed to put him at ease for this.

"Percy, he...he asked—"

"I know what Percy asked you, Nico." Her body shook so hard Nico could feel it. "I read every single text message you two liars have sent since you got him that phone. Six thousand texts in three and a half months. I read them all. Took me a week, but I needed to understand the whole picture. Ha. Picture. Do you know how many of those you sent?"

Nico shook his head. He watched his hands and wondered if he would ever feel clean again.

"I didn't know you were such a creative boy," Annabeth continued. "Percy saved them all, even though you told him to delete them. He saved everything that was a reminder of you."

"I'm sorry. Jason—"

"We're not talking about Jason!" Annabeth's hand clenched painfully around his. "This is about you and Percy and what you've done to me."

"You asked me to do this," Nico breathed. He couldn't meet her eyes.

"You're so full of shit, just like that girl at your school said — acting so sweet and humble, then doing whatever the hell you want no matter who you hurt. Yes, I asked you to, a year ago, and I know you are not so naive that you think I'd still want you to be with Percy after how I was humiliated by you two in front of the whole camp. At least have the balls to face up to what you've done."

"I'm sorry we hurt you, Annabeth," Nico mumbled.

"You're sorry you hurt me, but you're not sorry for what you did, right?"

Nico nodded to his lap. Annabeth moved her hand off his and slapped him. The sound of it echoed through the room. She took hold of his hand again and laid her head on his shoulder. They sat together in miserable silence.

A long time later, when some of the shock had worn off, Nico asked, "How did you find out?"
"Percy fell asleep in my dorm room one day. The phone fell out of his sock." Annabeth's voice was low and tired. "It was easy. His lock screen password is 'Nico.'"

Nico's guts twisted. He'd warned Percy to be careful. He'd told him to delete everything. He'd prayed Percy didn't love him the way it seemed like he did.

"Do you know what you're listed as, under Contacts?"

Nico shook his head. He wouldn't like it, whatever it was.

"You're listed as LOML."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means love of my life, Nico. He thinks you're the love of his life. You. Not me."

Nico's heart fluttered at the idea, but his head screamed at him to stop. This was wrong. He loved Jason; Percy loved Annabeth. What they had, what they did together, it was intense and wonderful, but not the forever kind of love they had with their respective partners.

"He's confused, Annabeth. That's not me; it's you."

"He doesn't seem confused at all. He loves you." Annabeth's voice was very small. "Do you love him?"

Jason knows, Nico reminded himself. Jason knows I love Percy, too, and he's living with it. It's going to be okay.

"I do, but it's not the same as Jason."

"Not every damned thing has to be about Jason, Nico. What about Percy?"

"What about him?" Nico didn’t understand.

"He's in love with you, more than anyone."

"I told you, Annabeth, he's confused. It's not real. How can he be more in love with me than you? He hasn't even seen me in a year." Nico shifted against the cushions again, and Annabeth took his free hand. He wasn't sure if she was trying to keep him still or trying to make him feel even worse.

"Then this won't be a problem. Leave him."

Nico had been expecting it, the ultimatum. A year ago, he'd been willing to do whatever Annabeth wanted in order to keep Jason from finding out. It hadn't mattered in the end. He wasn't giving up Percy without a fight, even if Annabeth threatened to show Jason those pictures.

"I can't. I'm sorry."

"You can."

"I won't, then. I'm sorry, and I don't want to hurt you, but I need Percy. You don't understand. And you can't hurt me with those pictures. Jason left me. We aren't together, and he knows I've been sleeping with Percy."

Nico chanced a glance at Annabeth, and he saw her eyes narrow. Anger marred her beautiful features.
"So you're saying you won't give Percy up even if it means Jason knowing what a...sexed up person you are?"

Nico stood and rounded on Annabeth, who tried to maintain her hold on his hand.

"I'm not running away, so you don't need to keep a hold of me. And I'm done feeling like garbage for liking sex. You think Jason doesn't know all about me and sex? Who the hell do you think I learned it from? So go ahead, show him the pictures. I'm not leaving Percy."

Nico's words didn't have the effect he'd hoped. Annabeth didn't act impressed or swayed. It would kill Nico for anyone to see those pictures. The thought that Annabeth had seen them made him sick.

"Fine. You don't care what Jason sees. I'm sure you won't mind Hazel seeing them. You are incredibly sexy and beautiful. I'm sure Hazel would be proud to know you like your body so much and you'll do anything at all that Percy asks. That fits right in with the image she has of you, the pedestal she puts you on. You know, she was so shaken after she found out you were fucking Jason and Percy, that you lied to and cheated me and Piper, that you slept with one right after the other. Not her perfect big brother."

"Don't," Nico warned. His voice had dropped, and the chill in the air warned him his powers were slipping from his control. "Don't bring Hazel into this."

"Why not?" Annabeth stood, and she sounded as dangerous as him. "You didn't care who you hurt to get what you wanted. Why should I be any different? What if I refuse? What if I tell you I'm going to show her those pictures if you don't break things off with Percy? What are you going to do? Hurt me?"

Nico pulled his shirt up over his face and breathed against the fabric, trying to calm down. When he lifted his head, Annabeth was only a few feet away.

"I'm not ever going to use physical violence to hurt you, Annabeth. I know you don't believe me anymore, and I don't blame you, but I care about you. I'm not that kind of person." Nico's knees failed him, and he slid down to the floor. Is that how far he'd fallen, that Annabeth would believe he'd cause her physical pain? Did he seem that desperate?

Annabeth sank down next to him. Her hand curled through his hair. When she spoke, her voice was soft. "I'm never showing Hazel those pictures. Even if you take Percy away from me, Nico. I'm not that kind of person, either. I just wanted to see what you'd say or do."

"That was a shitty thing to do."

"I hardly think you're justified to complain."

"I love him, Annabeth," Nico said. "I'm not going to try to take him away from you. I don't want him to leave you. He's better with you, I know. But I need him. He's the only thing I have that makes me happy."

"Put your legs out."

Nico did, and Annabeth laid her head on his thigh.

"I love him, and you love him, and he loves us both. So the question is, what's best for Percy?" Annabeth asked.

"Can't we keep going the way we are?" Nico knew she didn't want to, obviously, but he wanted to
try. "He's happy with you, and he talks to me when you aren't around anyway, so it's not like you're missing out on stuff."

"That's not the way the real world works, Nico. The deeper he falls in love with you, the more he neglects me. We aren't happy anymore. We barely have sex. We don't kiss. We fight. It's always because of you. What you're doing has consequences."

"Then maybe he should be with me." Nico didn't mean it. He couldn't mean it.

"Maybe. That's one possible solution," Annabeth said. "Let me ask you, though. What would happen to Percy the next time Jason strolls into town and decides he can be your lover again for awhile?"

"He won't. We're completely done, and we're never going to be together again." Nico tilted Annabeth's head and gently began working to free the hair from her bun. "I don't get that happy ending, Annabeth."

"I don't want you to take my happy ending, either," she said. She smoothed the wrinkles from Nico's pajama pants until they laid flat across his shins. "Percy and I could rebuild our love without you between us. But say the impossible happened. Say whatever keeps you and Jason apart changed, and you could be with him forever, or even for a month or a few days. What would happen to Percy?"

"It's a moot point. I can't ever be with Jason. I'm not answering the question." Not out loud, at least. The truth was that he'd feel horrible, but he'd choose Jason over Percy every time.

"Fine. You answered it in your head, even if you won't admit it to me. Can you give Percy everything he wants? A family? Kids? A stable, loving life? You're a freshman in college, living with a mysterious person, lying about just about everything to everyone who loves you."

"I..." No. Nico couldn't give Percy everything he wanted. He couldn't even leave Apollo. The answers Annabeth was guiding him to were the ones he already knew. He loosened the last bobby pin holding Annabeth's bun in place and stroked his fingers through her silky hair.

"Love him enough to let him go, Nico, or he's going to lose us both in the end." She tucked one hand under her head and with the other, used her index finger to circle his ankle bone over and over. It was easy to imagine her laying like this, touching Percy exactly the same way.

"Annabeth?"

"Hmm?"

"Why do you still want him, after all he's done? How do you forgive him?" This was the question Nico felt like he needed to ask everyone he could until he'd finally understand.

"I told you last year the pros outweigh the cons. He's a good man." Annabeth smiled into Nico's leg. "Love isn't always enough, Nico, but there's enough other good stuff in our relationship to make me want to try. I'm not a wimp or a martyr or a conservative old lady who defines herself by the man whose arm she hangs from. I've made mistakes, too. I let him cheat with all those girls, and then I was too proud to recognize how he was falling in love with you until it was too late. I'm quick-tempered and too often unwilling to work things out unless Percy agrees that I'm right. If he cheats on me again after you, we're through. It hurts enough to know he could manage to be faithful to you but never to me. This is his last chance."

"What if I say no? What if I won't break things off? He's all I have." Nico wished he was better at crying. He wanted to cry.
Annabeth rolled over onto her back and stared up at him. Her eyes were dry, too.

"I'll leave him."

Chapter End Notes

This one's on the short list of my favorite chapters. I hope you all liked it. So many of you have been curious about Annabeth - what she knows, how she feels. There you go. :-)

Letters From Home

Nico laid on his belly and pressed kisses to Percy's stomach. Percy, who was laying perpendicular to Nico on the bed, ran his fingers through Nico's hair. His eyes were closed.

"Jason's taking forever," Nico said between kisses.

"I don't care, if it means you do that more," Percy said. "Do that thing where you dip your tongue down in my belly button and, oh, yeah, that."

Nico laughed when he withdrew his tongue. "You're so easy to please, Percy. I barely even have to work at it."

"That's because you're so naturally pleasing to me, baby, or you had some secret godly gift bestowed upon you when you were a baby, like Sleeping Beauty." Percy paused while Nico snorted and rolled onto his back. He laid his head on Percy's belly, and Percy continued. "Did your dad have some witches come down when you were born and grant you the gifts of beauty, brains, and inhumanly good sex skills?"

Nico laughed. "I wasn't born in the Underworld, Perce. I was born in Italy."

"You know what I mean."

"If I'd had some fairy godmothers or something, I'd have ended up with an awful curse, too. Isn't that what happened to Sleeping Beauty? She pricked her finger and got trapped in eternal sleep, waiting for her true love to come?" Nico watched Percy's face, which appeared, because of the angle in which they were laying, to be little more than a nose and a chin.

"Well, you did get a curse, remember?" Percy lifted his head from his pillow and watched Nico's eyes flood with guilt, but he couldn't stop himself. "And now you're stuck in eternal punishment, except your true love, Jay-Jay the Jackass, is stuck here with you."

Nico sat up and tugged at Percy's hands until he sat up, too.

"Hey, I thought you were feeling okay about how things are here between the three of us?" Nico's voice was soft and gentle, and Percy could read the concern in his eyes. "What's going on?"

Percy laid his head on Nico's shoulder and talked to his neck. "I am feeling alright about things here, most of the time. It's letter day. That always sets me on edge. I feel guilty for being happy with you, and then I remind myself that if Jason hadn't been such a colossal fuck-up, you'd be with him completely and I'd be left alone. That's even worse."

Nico wrapped his arms around Percy and hugged him close. "Letter days are so wonderful and awful. I'm starting to hate them. I'm glad you're happy here with me, and you shouldn't feel guilty about it because it's not something you can escape from, anyway. I don't buy into this whole 'if only Jason hadn't' shit. If he hadn't had it in him to be such a fuck-up it's possible I would never have fallen for him anyway, or he wouldn't have ever been with me. The first time I fell in love with you I didn't even know Jason existed. Who's to say if things had been different I wouldn't have fallen in love with you again? Let's not go back and second guess our mortal lives, please?"

"I really love you, you know?" Percy whispered.

"I love you, too." Nico looked up to find Jason in the doorway. He smiled, and Jason gave him a
small wave in return. "Jace is back. Let's get this over with."

Percy kissed Nico's cheek and laid back down. Nico put his head back on Percy's stomach. Jason laid down with his head on Nico's stomach, his hips near Percy's head, and his long legs stretched up over the headboard and along the wall.

"We have letters from the usual gang this week." Jason decided to move right to business and not mention Nico's conversation with Percy. "Who do we want first?"

"Clarisse," Nico and Percy both said.

Jason rifled through the letters and handed one to Nico. He opened it and read.

"Dear Pissy,

"I hope you're well, you skinny little shit. Chris says to tell you hi and that he's thinking of you. Tell Sissypants and Mr. Plumber I say hey, too. They better be treating you right, or I'll kick their godly asses.

"I'm starting to feel the baby move, kid. Can you believe that? There's a whole 'nother life inside me? It's crazy. I'll tell you a secret, one you'll probably blab to those two fuckers you're stuck with, but that's okay. I'm excited to be a mom. Scared as hell, too, but excited. Chris swears I'll be nothing like my own mother (fat chance of that, anyway). I wish I could be more like his mom or Mellie, but hell, I'll take being somewhere between Hedge and you — not as prickly as coach, not as much of a sensitive little wuss as you. I'd take your kindness, though.

"I hate writing you these stinking letters. Makes me all mushy and shit. I hope you get sprung and can come visit when the baby is still small. He or she needs to meet Uncle Nico. We find out if it's a girl or boy next week. Wish us luck, your whiny godliness. Honestly, I don't much care what the sex is. Everything seems normal and healthy, and that's all we want.

"Miss you,

"Clarisse"

I never thought I'd see the day," Percy said. "Clarisse is mellowing. Motherhood is calming her down."

"Nah, it's all Nico's fluffiness rubbing off on her," Jason joked. Nico pinched Jason's ribs while Percy patted his leg and chuckled. Jason smiled and shuffled through the letters. "Who now? Frank?"

Frank was a good man, but he was a dull letter-writer. Nico and Percy nodded their agreement with Jason, but Percy broke into giggles from the way Nico's hair rubbed on his stomach. Jason gently bumped Percy's forehead with his knee, and Percy stifled his laughter.

"Sorry man. Go ahead."

Jason unfolded Frank's letter and read.

"Dear Jason,

"8:31am—"

"Oh, gods, here we go," Percy moaned.
“—breakfast included ham and eggs with skim milk and orange juice. I ate with Hazel and Reyna before they went off to school. Reyna had a grapefruit, and Hazel ate bacon and eggs Benedict. Hazel had two percent milk, and Reyna drank water.”

"Skip, Jason, before I die again," Nico said. "See if there's something interesting in there somewhere."

Jason scanned down the paper. He turned it over. He skimmed the next six pages and found nothing more exciting than what he'd already read. He got to the last page before he found anything worth sharing.

"Oh, hey, here's something. Let me read it to you."

"I hope Nico takes the news okay when he finds out, but Hazel and I are engaged. I would have asked him for permission if he was around. She graduates on May 18th, and we decided to get married on the 27th of June. That way, one way or the other, we'll know what's going on with you guys. It'll either be a celebration of your return or hopefully something to bring us a little joy if you're not able to be with us."

"And then he just goes on about what he ate for dinner. Hey, at least we have a date we can add to the calendar."

"They should've waited to get engaged. I would've given my blessing in a year or two," Nico said.

"Hell, Nico," Jason reached his hand up and brushed Nico's jaw. "If Hazel waited for your blessing, she'd be a sixty year old single virgin."

Percy guffawed. "There's nothing wrong with old virgin spinsters, Jace. Just because we deflowered sweet little Nico here doesn't mean we shouldn't wish for virtue for one of Hades's kids."

"Shut up and stop making fun of me, or neither one of you will be deflowering me any time soon."

Jason and Percy closed their mouths.

When Nico believed Jason and Percy were properly chastised and had been quiet for several minutes, he said, "Leo now, Jason."

Jason wasted no time reading.

"Sparky,

"How's it hanging, big guy? Jackie treating you nice? I figure if you and Percy had killed each other off we would have heard by now. Here's hoping you two can get along and not put Jack in the middle.

"Calypso and I have been slammed this last week. It snowed like two feet over the last two weeks, and there've been so many tourists with messed up cars that I've had to put a lot of my more interesting projects on the back burner. Sucks. Things're swamped over at the bakery, too. Calypso's had to hire another worker in order to keep up with everything.

"We got new living room furniture last week, and the dudes who delivered it, Sparky, they would've made Percy laugh. Tell him one dude had such bad plumber's crack that I thought I could see his nuts over the top of his jeans. I dared Calypso to stick a penny in that crack, and she got really mad at me."
Percy chuckled. Jason waited for him to stop before continuing.


'Hugs and all that shit,

'Leo'"

Without talking about it, Jason fished out Piper's letter and handed it up to Percy. The letters from Hazel, Reyna, and Annabeth always went last.

"’Dear Percy,

’I hope you and the others are doing well. Annabeth and I took Maybelle to see Paul's parents today. Maybelle makes them so happy. I've enclosed a picture of them with her. She's going to start to walk soon, I swear. She seems so much like you, playful and energetic. Sally told me you did everything early, too.

’I've been working a lot this past week. Modeling is going well, but I am starting to wish for something more meaningful. I'm thinking about taking some time off and joining the Peace Corps. I've got plenty of money saved. The only thing that worries me is that I wouldn't be around to help Annabeth with Maybelle. Sally's been great, but she needs to get back to work soon. I think Annabeth is considering hiring someone. She won't accept any of my money, but she says she's doing alright financially.

’I've been dating Connor Stoll for a little while now. I didn’t start as soon as Jason left, but it's been since early on. We talked a bit at your wedding, and had been talking off and on ever since. I think maybe he could be the right guy for me. He's sweet and funny, and he makes me feel special. Jason will understand. He's a good man, and I know he wants me to be happy.

’Dating Connor, finding my own happiness, it's made me want it more for Jason. I used to be so jealous of Nico because of how Jason loved him. Now I think about how hard it is to be loved by Jason, how he pushes Nico away when he gets scared. I imagine whatever you're going through to be a scary thing, so I hope Jason has learned his lesson and has quit distancing himself from Nico. I never thought I'd want to see them together, but I do. Jason deserves happiness.

’All my best,

’Piper’"

"I'm glad it seems like she's finally happy," Jason said. "I sure as hell never made her a real kind of happy."

"How could you?" Percy nudged Nico up and rolled over onto his belly. He laid his cheek on the pillow and faced Jason's hips. His voice came out smushed. "You always loved Nico. She was a barrier to your real love."

"I don't know," Nico said, nestling his head in the small of Percy's back. "I bet she was plenty happy with you, Jason, on most days. Apollo was happy, living with me, even though he knew you two would always come first."

"People are different, Neeks. She wasn't happy, I promise." Jason wanted to finish the conversation and move on. "Besides, Apollo has been alive a long time. He's a lot more comfortable with divided love and loyalty, I bet. Let Percy read."
Nico shrugged. Thinking about Apollo made him melancholy. The god of the sun had been a very
good friend. He’d been much more than that.

Jason handed Hazel's letter to Percy, who propped himself up on his elbows and squeezed Nico's
head a bit in the process.

"Dear Percy,

"Good morning, Percy! I hope you've been having an okay time. I hope all three of you are well-
cared for and are leaning on one another for support. Please give Nico a big hug for me. I miss him
terribly.

"Frank and I got engaged. Nico would probably think it's too soon, but we've been dating for almost
seven years. I think it's a little late, actually! We're going to be married on the 27th of June. The
wedding will be outside in New Rome. There's a pretty garden that I think will do nicely. We want to
keep it small, just close friends and family. After that, we're going to take a vacation, maybe go up to
Vancouver and do some volunteer work. Things are still pretty messy up there, and they could use as
many hands as they can get.

"School is still going well. I'm glad the university gave me a year's worth of credit for the time I
spent as Praetor. I'll start vet school in the fall. I'm so excited! Working with animals has always
been a dream of mine. I'll even take care of Erebos for free, Percy!"

"Good luck with that." Nico snorted.

"Fuck, I'm just glad Annabeth didn't give him away," Percy said. "I was worried when I never saw
him on HephaestusTV."

Jason shook his head, which tickled Nico and made him laugh. "He's hiding out in your room,
waiting for you to come home, I bet."

The thought that his cat was missing him made Percy almost as sad as thinking about Annabeth and
Maybelle. He cleared his throat and started to read again.

"Things are going well for the legion. Allie has been a good Praetor, and I think she might end up
serving almost as long as Reyna.

"We all miss you tons and can't wait to see you again. Give Nico more hugs for me. I wish you
could tell him, well, a million things. He's my best friend, and I can't wait to talk to him again. I love
and miss you all.

"Love,

"Hazel"

"Gods, she is an amazing human being," Nico said. "I miss her so much."

Jason and Percy nodded their agreement. Jason pulled out Reyna's letter.

"Jason,

"I hope this letter finds you and your comrades well. I hope Nico is aware how very, very much I
miss him and love him.

"School is going well. I am impressed that Nico managed it as well as he did when he was so
young. I feel overwhelmed at times, and I am an actual adult. Michael has been a tremendous help. He is teaching math at a public high school in Berkeley, and we have decided to move in together. Nico probably will not approve. I don't care. Word has trickled down about your supposed crimes, and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out where Nico was living those last few years and why he was so secretive. I don't approve; Nico doesn't care; life goes on. I love Nico with all my heart, and I'm not angry enough to let it color my thoughts.

"This letter will be short, unfortunately. I have homework to do, and I promised Michael he could take me on a date. Take care of one another.

"My best regards,

"Reyna"

Nico blew a giant raspberry. He wiped the spit off his face — he hadn't thought ahead about where the saliva would land — and said, "She's right, I don't approve of her living with Michael, and I don't give a fuck about her disapproving of me and Apollo."

"Bullshit," Jason said. "It matters to you a lot."

"Nope," Nico said. "It mattered to me a lot before, but not now. Everyone knows what I did, and they're free to judge me, but I don't regret living with him. Not at all. I'm a better person for it, and if people don't get it, tough shit."

Jason sighed. He believed Nico was lying, at least in regard to caring about what Reyna thought. "Here. Read the last one."

Nico took the letter and read.

"My dearest Nico,

"How are you today, sweetie? I miss you. I miss Jason and Percy so much. Maybelle is learning to walk, and she's started saying mama and daddy. At least, I think that's what she's saying. She gets cuter every day. I know Piper sent a picture this week, so I'll hold off and send one next week.

"Work is going well. I got a promotion, and that means I'll be able to spend a day or two a week working from home. We'll see how that goes. Maybelle may prove to be too much of a distraction.

"The strangest thing happened earlier this week. I woke up and went to feed the cat and found that the bathtub was full of hundred dollar bills. It made taking a shower hard, but it made breathing a little easier. The money had to have come from a god. I've spent some of it, and nothing bad has happened. My mother says she didn't provide the money, and I believe her because it isn't her style. The only gods I can think of who might have done something like that are Poseidon, Hades, or Apollo.

"I considered Apollo because it's possible he feels guilty about his role in taking Percy away from me, but he is being punished and can't have contact with mortals. I'm so sorry if this is the first you've heard of it, Nico. Anyway, it can't be him. Poseidon, well, he hasn't even seen Maybelle in person. That kind of hurts, but he's a busy man. I don't know why I included your dad in the list of potential benefactors, but he has a lot of money, and Percy told me your dad loves you a lot. Maybe some of that love trickled down to your niece.

"At any rate, that gives me enough money, more than enough, to hire a nanny until Percy gets home. I'm going to start interviewing next weekend. Piper says she'll help me. That way, Sally can get back to work, and I won't worry I'm putting anyone out, not that Piper or Sally have ever made
me feel that way.

"I'm hoping you three have figured out as many of your issues as you can. Jason and Percy need to restore their friendship and have it be something that isn't based on you. That puts too much pressure on you, and it isn't healthy for them. You need to figure out who and what you want, Nico. Let it be your choice, not just something you drift into. I hope you're taking care of one another in whatever way you need. Yes, I mean in every way. I forgave Percy for all the things he did with you before; I'll more than forgive what he does now. It can't be easy being a prisoner, and isolation is a powerful force. Do what you all need to do in order to make it through. You don't have my blessing, exactly, but you have my promise I'll understand when I see you again.

"All my love,

"Annabeth"

Nico neatly folded the letter and stuffed it in his pocket. He turned over and scooted up the bed until he laid on top of Percy, his chin resting between Percy's shoulder blades.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Not really," Percy said.

"Not really," Percy said.

Nico kissed the back of Percy's neck. Jason rolled off the bed to free his legs from the wall and sat back down next to Percy and Nico. He patted Nico's back.

"I wonder who sent her the money? Poseidon, I guess," Jason said.

"It wasn't my dad." Percy's face was still smashed in the pillows. "Nico's dad did it."

"Because I wrecked your life?" Nico asked. The thought of how he'd hurt Percy and his family made him miserable.

"You didn't wreck my life, asshole," Percy snapped. "No. I just know it wouldn't have been my dad. He's been hands-off for a long time now. Probably has some new favorite kid. It was your dad."

"How do you know, though?" Nico asked.

"Drop it. I just do."

Percy sounded irritated, so Nico let it go. "Do you need to fool around, or are you alright?"

Percy dumped Nico off him toward Jason. He sat up and sandwiched Nico between his chest and Jason's. Jason's hands held Nico's hips as Percy placed his hand on Jason's shoulder and kissed Nico slow and soft. He stopped when Nico's hands slipped under his shirt. The coolness of them felt so good on his skin, but Percy wanted to do something else.

"Let me swim, clear my head for a bit," Percy said.

Nico nodded. "Jason, go with him. I'm going to take a nap."

Jason reluctantly released Nico's hips. He and Percy left.

Nico laid back on the bed and listened until he could hear the other gods enter the water. He pulled out Annabeth's letter and re-opened it. His eyes scanned the words written on every other line.

"Dearest Nico only,
"I'm so damned scared, Nico. I can't tell anyone else how I'm really feeling. Percy can never know. I'm so scared he's not coming home. I look at it from every angle, and I don't see how it will work. I'm going to lose him, if I haven't already lost him to you.

"Gods aren't allowed to be with demigods. I'm guessing you've already figured out this problem, and Percy and Jason haven't. Even if Percy wants to come back to me and you're allowed to leave prison, the gods won't allow us to be together. How am I going to raise Maybelle alone? I love her so much. She's the world to me, but Percy was the one who understood kids and the domestic arts. I'm so sorry I never fully appreciated how much he did. How do I live without him?

"The others need to see me being hopeful. They need to think I believe you're coming home. But you're not, are you? None of you. I think about how detached the gods are...how there's no way my mother or Percy's dad sent that money...they don't care enough. That's why I know it came from your father; he's the only god I've seen give a damn about the well-being of their child. I hope you appreciate him.

"Maybe Percy will be the kind of godly father your dad has been. That's the best I can hope for, I think.

"I hope you are doing the same thing wherever you are that I am doing here. Percy needs to believe you think he's going home. He needs you to be strong. When the time comes, and he realizes the truth, give him everything you can. I'm not asking you to give up Jason. I know he's your true love, like Percy is mine. I'm asking you to make room for Percy in your life. I probably don't have to ask. I know you love him, are in love with him, too. I guess what I'm saying is don't let worries about hurting me hold you back. He will be devastated when he realizes he won't be much of a part of Maybelle's life. Help him.

"I miss you, which is something that is hard for me to believe. I wish a lot of things, these days, but one of the big ones is that we'd been genuine friends. That wasn't possible, given what you did, but it would have been nice. One of the things that hurts me the most about how much Percy loves you is that you and I are so much alike. He sees the differences, but part of what attracts him is our similarities. I used to think you were a pale imitation of me, but now I'm pretty sure I was a pale imitation of you. I still love him.

"Take care of him,

"Annabeth"

Nico folded the letter, curled up in a ball, and cried.
Nico sat next to the storefront window at the Ben & Jerry's adjacent to their hotel and waited. His small cup of Chubby Hubby had been finished off twenty minutes ago, and his stomach was complaining about the mix of rich ice cream and nerves.

Percy would be here any minute, if his hastily texted cab commentary was correct. He'd complained about the length of the drive from Berkeley to Fisherman's Wharf, saying they should meet at the mortal end of the Caldecott Tunnel instead, but Nico couldn't be that close to Camp Jupiter. For one, it would be asking for trouble because of the banishment; for another, he'd be far too close to Jason. It was bad enough that this hotel was less than two miles from the Ritz. Nico thought Percy would like it, though, so he swallowed his discomfort. The least he could do was show Percy a good time while he broke his heart.

Percy had been so excited when Nico had said he was coming to visit. He'd been visibly stunned when he'd called and told Nico that Annabeth was going to visit her father the same weekend Nico had enough free time to come to the West Coast. He hadn't suspected anything. Nico felt ill.

When Nico told Apollo he was leaving again so soon after he'd been gone for Clarisse's wedding, the god was furious. Furious was too strong a word, perhaps. He'd been unhappy. There'd been many pointed sighs and furtive glances and soft little hints about how lonely he would be. When Nico finally broke down and told Apollo why he was going to San Francisco, there was a complete emotional turnaround. Apollo tried to contain his glee, but he was singing loudly in the shower, reciting haiku and love poetry until Nico wanted to disappear permanently, and placing lingering, wet kisses on Nico's cheeks. He'd even bought Nico a massive bouquet of roses. The whole apartment had smelled for days.

Apollo was going to get what he wanted. Nico had never been more sure. Percy had been the only reason Nico hadn't fallen apart completely after Jason left in January. With Percy out of the picture, there was no one to keep him from jumping into Apollo's bed, except himself, and lately he'd been failing every test of self-control and human decency.

A cab pulled up out front, and Nico recognized the lanky body unfolding from the rear seat. He hurried out of Ben & Jerry's and tossed the cabbie his credit card while Percy dragged an enormous duffel bag out of the trunk of the cab. Percy didn't see him until he lowered the trunk hood. When he did, he stared, open-mouthed, until a slow, broad smile stretched across his face. Nico retrieved his credit card from the cabbie and stepped out of the street so the cab wouldn't run him over.

Percy crooked his index finger and motioned for Nico to come. He kept motioning until Nico was pressed against his chest and smiling like as big a fool as Percy.


"Hi," Nico mimicked.

"Come here often?"

Nico rolled his eyes and played along. "First time."

"You're a moron, Percy."

"You didn't answer the question, Nico. You wanna get fucked?" Percy's hand gripped Nico's hip and pulled their bodies tighter together.

"Depends on who's fucking me, I guess, doesn't it?"

"You little shit." Percy laughed and slipped his other hand in Nico's back pocket. He leaned forward and kissed Nico's cheek, then slid his lips slowly across Nico's face, leaving a millimeter between their lips, and kissed the other cheek. He whispered in Nico's ear. "Take me someplace we can be alone."

Nico grabbed Percy's shirt front and pulled him into a shadow. They emerged in their suite, and Percy pushed Nico against the wall and had his shirt half off before Nico broke away.

"Hey!"

"Look around first and see if you like the place. I want to take you someplace you'll love." So I can ruin you. And me. Nico's internal voices were merciless.

Percy blew a raspberry against Nico's neck, but he turned and surveyed the rooms. The Argonaut Hotel was housed in a reclaimed warehouse a block from the Hyde Street Pier, so the decor, like the name, was nautically themed. Nico thought Percy, a child of the sea, would love the decorative anchors and compasses and squid wallpaper.

"This is the cheesiest place I've ever seen," Percy said after he'd walked from the living area to the bedroom and back again several times.

Nico's brow furrowed. "You don't like it? We can go someplace else. There's this other hotel that's really fancy—"

"Don't be stupid. I love it! Aren't I the cheesiest person you know?" Percy asked.

"I know Valdez."

"Valdez wishes he could be as cheesy as me. He's like a mild ham compared to the majesty of my cheese. Now, come here and suck the hell out of my neck."

"Percy..."

When Nico didn't come right away, Percy came to him. He pressed their bodies together and tucked Nico's head down toward his neck.

"Suck."

Nico sighed and attached his lips to Percy's neck. The skin tasted so good, like the sea (cliche!), and Nico indulged himself, licking and kissing the spot over and over, occasionally biting down, until he pulled back to see a deep purple bruise on Percy's skin. Nico tilted his head the other direction and worked a point on the opposite side, just under Percy's jaw, until it sported a matching hickey and Percy was making soft moaning noises and pulling his hair. Nico licked under Percy's jaw, which got a big moan, and stepped back.

"I want to do that to you all weekend, but I need to talk to you first." Nico refused to be like Annabeth and fake his way through the weekend only to drop a huge bomb at the end. If Percy left him immediately after what he said, he'd have to live with it, but he wouldn't play games with
someone he loved.

"I have a better idea. Let's do more of that, then talk between rounds." Percy's hand snaked up Nico's shirt.

"It's important, Percy."

Percy's posture changed immediately. He stood straight and tall and all evidence of teasing and lust disappeared from his face. He took Nico's hand and led him to the couch.

"Are you alright, baby?"

This was worse, Percy being so concerned and kind. Why couldn't he be a dick like Jason? It was a lot easier for Nico to say cruel things when he was all riled up.

"Not really, no." Nico had decided to be as honest as possible. He couldn't tell Percy about Annabeth forcing his hand, but he would tell the rest. He took a deep breath. "I love you, Percy."

Percy didn't say anything. He didn't move or betray any hint of what was going on inside his head.

"I'm, you know, in love with you, Percy. Like, a lot."

Nico waited. Maybe Percy had been struck dumb. Finally, a slow, awestruck smile slipped across Percy's face. This must have been how Jason looked when he woke from one of his many concussions.

"I...don't see how that's a bad thing, Nico."

Nico flapped his hands around and trailed them through his hair. Percy watched and sort of chuckled.

"It's a bad thing because you're meant to be with someone else." Nico got up and paced around a bit before he sat back down. "I'm keeping you from being with Annabeth."

"That's not true. I spend plenty of time with Annabeth. It's fine." Percy took Nico's hand again.

The couch was white, and Nico wondered how much he'd have to pay to have it cleaned if he puked all over it. Damn his stupid delicate stomach.

"It's not fine. We 'talk' almost every night now. That's time you should be spending with her. You're going to marry her, Percy. You're going to have disgustingly cute babies and be a great dad, and there's no room for me in your future." Saying those words out loud hurt so much. All of it was true and inevitable, even if Annabeth hadn't found them out, but acknowledging out loud how little he would matter to Percy's future self was like a knife to Nico's chest.

Percy was quiet for a long time again. Before he spoke, he kissed Nico's fingers. "It doesn't have to be that way. The wife and kids — I don't need to have those things."

"But you want them, and I want you to have your heart's desire."

Percy's eyes were so vividly green, so large and open and trusting. Nico wanted to stare into them forever.

Percy's fingers traced the tendons on the inside of Nico's wrist. A whisper of a touch. "You're my heart's desire."
The words were so tender and earnest that Nico's eyes filled with tears. For a moment, he felt like he'd give up anything, even Jason, to make Percy happy.

"Maybe that's true right now, but you'd grow to resent what little I can give you. The world should be filled with little Percys, and you've told me before Annabeth is the one you work with, the one you need. It's never going to be me. I love you enough to give you up."

Cracks started to show. Percy's eyes hardened.

"This is about Jason, isn't it? You love that bastard motherfucker, and you need me out of the way in case he comes back to you."

Nico blinked away his tears. "It's not about Jason. He has nothing to do with it."

"Bullshit."

This was a great spot for Nico's anger to flare, self-righteous and vicious. It stayed meekly hidden.

"When Annabeth came to visit for Clarisse's wedding, she said you guys had talked about moving back to New York after you graduate. I was so excited at first, thinking about how you'd be close to me and I could see you in person, touch you, kiss you." Nico shook his head. "I'd drive an even bigger wedge between you and Annabeth, though. I can't be so selfish."

"Did she say something to you? Did she hurt you?"

_Gods, forgive me._ "No. She was lovely, which drove things home even more. She deserves her happily ever after. She deserves you."

"What the hell about what I want and deserve?" Percy's eyes flashed a brighter green. "There's no question anymore which one of you I love more, which one of you I want—"

"Don't say it. You'll only regret it when our time together is over and you go back to her."

"So what the fuck is this weekend, then? Did you book the 'fuck up your lover' suite? Why are we here, Nico, if you're dumping me?" Percy stood and picked up a huge sand-dollar shaped lamp. He set it down and flipped through a magazine.

"I wanted to be with you once more, to spend time with you," Nico said. "But I wanted to tell you first so whatever we do can be your choice. I want to spend the whole weekend with you, naked, preferably, but I also understand if you want me to take you back to Camp Jupiter right now."

Percy thumbed through a second magazine. "I need to think, I guess. I'm going to lay down in the bedroom. Give me my space."

Nico nodded. At the doorway between the rooms, Percy glanced back at him.

"I really hate you right now, Nico."

Nico looked at the floor. "I understand."

***
Nico must have fallen asleep while he waited for Percy. He woke face down on that white couch with something enormous crushing his ass. He turned his face away from the couch and saw legs crossed in front of his hips.

The pressure on his ass increased.

"Ow. Damn it."

"Oh, look, Sleeping Beauty finally woke up. Did the bitty baby have a good nappy?"

"Fuck off, Percy," Nico snapped. He tried to turn over, but Percy didn't budge. "How long have you been out here?"

"Long enough to get bored listening to you snore. I've been sitting on you for maybe twenty minutes or so. For a bony shit you're pretty comfortable." Percy bounced on Nico. Nico reached back and shoved at Percy's legs, but Percy grabbed his hand and bounced harder.

"Are you staying or going?" Nico asked. He didn't want to get too excited, but Percy could have called a cab and left while he was sleeping. That he was still here was a pleasant surprise.

"I'm staying. You're not getting off that easy. I'm going to wreck you so thoroughly that you change your mind." Percy sounded downright chipper. Nico couldn't let Percy get his hopes up about where their relationship would be after this weekend, but this reaction was so much better than he had dared hope.

"I can't change my mind about ending things, but I will thoroughly enjoy your attempts." Nico sounded like a formal asshole. Aside from the swearing, he couldn't grasp slang or easy conversation. "Wouldn't it be easier to wreck me if you weren't sitting on my ass?"

Percy bounced again, and Nico swore a piece of his hipbone chipped away. "Nah. I like this. It's some dominant kink I have, I bet. Besides, who says I can't wreck you from here?"

"I say you can't...oh, fuck." Nico had to break off because Percy's fingers were trailing up the inside seam of his jeans, coming so close to his balls that it wasn't fair. Percy's hand slid harmlessly away. So maybe he could wreck Nico without moving off his perch. The hand was coming back, sliding tantalizingly close before slipping away again. Nico spread his legs and moaned.

"Hand me the remote, will you, Neeks? It's over your head." Percy shuffled a little bit, and that felt so much nicer than the bouncing.

"Get the fuck off and get it yourself." Nico wasn't sure he wanted Percy to move.

Percy ignored him. "Did you know your language gets extremely coarse when you're turned on? It might even turn me on a little, but I want to watch Jeopardy! now, so give me the damned remote."

"Will you get off me if I give it to you?"

"Don't you mean 'will you get me off if I give it to you?' You're a naughty, naughty boy, Nico." Percy wriggled again, and this time his hand brushed Nico's balls through his jeans.

Nico arched his back and slapped at Percy. When nothing happened, he growled and reached up to get the remote.

"Why, thank you, Nico. That's awfully thoughtful of you." Percy took the remote from Nico and turned on the TV. "If you don't piss me off again, I'll move after the first round."
The reason Percy liked *Jeopardy!* was a mystery to Nico. They'd watched it every weekday except Christmas that year they'd spent the holiday at Percy's, and they'd watched it in the Underworld, too. Nico always got more questions right, although Percy kicked his ass at categories that had to do with sports, alcohol, food, and movies or TV. They'd combined their knowledge of useless information once and played Trivial Pursuit as a team against Paul and Sally. Percy and Nico were an amazing team. They complemented one another so well.

Nico squirmed underneath Percy, who'd stopped the teasing touches inside Nico's thighs as soon as Alex Trebek started talking.

"Be still, baby. Alex is talking." Percy patted Nico's back.

Nico let out an annoyed huff and propped his cheek up on his hands to see the TV better. He stunk at the game if he missed the categories when they were first revealed.

"What is the Taj Mahal?" Nico couldn't help himself.

Percy slapped the back of Nico's head without looking his way. "Shush. Let me get the easy ones. You can start answering after the commercial."

"Tickle my back, then." Nico was rewarded with Percy's hand absently scooting under his shirt and making fluttering fingertip passes all over. Percy could be so gentle. Like with Jason, Nico figured he'd miss the secret parts of Percy, the parts others didn't know, the most. He looked back as Percy answered a question. Percy's mouth was hanging open, ready to answer, and he held the hand that wasn't caressing Nico's back in a loose fist, like he was holding a game controller. He'd done that when they'd watched before, too. "You know, it's weird how you have a thing for an old Canadian guy with a mustache."

"Shut up," Percy said when the middle contestant was deciding how much to wager on the Daily Double. "Smart is sexy."

Nico snorted.

"It's true. Who is Sarah Michelle Gellar? You think I like you for that dorky snort noise you just made? Or how rude and antisocial you are? What is iron?" Percy bounced on Nico again and swore when "iron" turned out to be the wrong answer.

"I think you like me for how I suck your dick."

A commercial came on, and Percy glanced up at Nico. He slid off Nico's ass and sat on the floor. "I like you for more than that, Nico."

"I know." Nico rolled onto his side and pressed his back into the back of the couch. "Come cuddle."

Percy crawled onto the couch and laid his head on Nico's arm. Nico wrapped his arms around Percy and pulled him tight to his chest. Percy pushed back with his top leg until it was sandwiched between Nico's. Nico could feel how sad Percy was, despite the flippan attitude. There was something about the tense way he gripped Nico's hands and the way his toes dug into Nico's ankle.

"Remember how it was those last few days at your mom's? When we knew it was ending?" Nico had to say something to make it better. He was so bad at comforting people, especially if he was the one doing the hurting.

"Get to your point before the player intros are done."
Nico bit Percy's ear. "Well, we didn't let the fact that we were nearing the end stop us from enjoying each other. Let's do the same thing now. I want to always remember this weekend for good reasons."

Percy didn't answer. He reached back and pulled the back of Nico's thigh until he could wrap his hand underneath it. All he said was, "It's your turn to do the questions."

They laid there until the show ended, silent except to shout out answers. Percy turned the TV off as soon as Final Jeopardy concluded.

"What now?" he asked.

"Whatever you want." Nico meant it. He'd do anything Percy wanted.

"What you want matters, too."

Percy shifted so he was facing Nico. He scooted a little higher on the couch so their faces were even, and Nico had to actively restrain himself from kissing Percy's lips. He couldn't stop staring at them. Their affair would end, and he would never know how it felt to kiss Percy.

"I want you to make love to me," Nico said. His hand was already tracing its way inside the back of Percy's jeans. "It doesn't have to be right now, though. I can be patient."

"Yeah, your hand seems patient," Percy said, but his smile was a bit more genuine than any Nico had seen since he'd told Percy they were breaking up.

"My hand's an asshole. Ignore him. But listen to what I'm saying, Perce. When you're ready, if you want, I want you to make love to me. Not like we have been." Nico paused to take a deep breath and let his words sink in. "I...want to feel you inside me."

Percy fell off the couch, dragging Nico's asshole hand and all of Nico with him.

They resettled with Nico laying on top of Percy, who didn't seem to mind. Nico laid his head on Percy's chest and waited, feeling more and more anxious with each passing second.

"But...our deal. You said—"

"I changed my mind. If this is the last time we're ever going to have together, and it is, then I want to do this." Nico bounced his head around and tried to find a way to sound like less of an idiot. "I mean, if you want it, because obviously, if you don't then I'd live with it and we'd still have a wonderful time, but I brought a whole bunch of condoms and lubricant, and if we don't use them then they'll probably go to waste because I'm never ever ever having that kind of sex again. Or I could give them to you to take home, I guess, though whether or not you use condoms or need lubricant with—"

Percy shoved Nico's face into his chest. Nico got a tongue full of grody orange t-shirt, but it was better than continuing on like he had been. He rolled off Percy and ended up under the coffee table, so he had to tuck his knees and roll a couple more times to be able to get up. Percy, eyebrows raised, laid on the floor and watched. Nico dashed to the bedroom and came back with his hands full of condoms and lube. He tried to throw everything down on the coffee table, but half the condoms ended up on the floor. He started to pace.

"If you don't want to be with me and don't want to take them home, maybe you can help me hand them out to the homeless guys. They really need condoms. I probably should have bought more so we could do that. We can do that. They probably sell condoms in San Francisco."
"Nico—"

"Or we can go to a Warriors game, if you'd rather do that. I like baseball better, but the season hasn't started yet, and I know you like basketball. It's kind of stupid, basketball, but I can get us tickets, and we can sit in a luxury box. They have peel and eat shrimp. Or, you probably don't want to eat shrimp, huh? They'll make you a steak, then. Or—"

"Nico—"

"—we can go to Alcatraz. I'll shadow us there after dark, and we can sneak around and pretend we're prisoners trying to escape, like that Birdman. I saw a movie about him once. Did you see that movie, Percy?"

"Nico!"

"He wasn't actually trying to escape. That didn't really happen. No one ever escaped, did you know? Something like thirty-six people tried, but a lot of them drowned and—"

"Shut the fuck up, Nico!"

Nico did. He took a huge breath and backed up against the wall. Percy stood and raised a finger. He disappeared into the bathroom and came back with a glass of water, which he handed to Nico. Nico swallowed it down, though he choked a little. He had to calm down. Percy rolled his eyes and backed away slowly. He stopped next to the coffee table.

Nico opened his mouth to start babbling again, and Percy stopped him with a look. Percy picked up a condom and considered it.

"I knew no one escaped from Alcatraz, though I have no idea what movie you're talking about." Percy picked up another condom. He spoke slowly. "I would love to sneak around there in the dark with you and play prisoners. Sounds kinky." He picked up another condom. "I won't eat shrimp, you're right, but they can make me a steak when we go to the Warriors game and sit in a luxury box." Another condom. "I'm not handing out condoms to random guys on the street. They might think we want them to use them on us. We can take a whole truckload to a homeless shelter if it'll make you happy." He picked up the bottle of lube. "You're a lunatic, just like I always said."

Percy stepped closer and closer. He stopped a foot in front of Nico and took his shaking hand. Nico's breath hitched and his eyes closed when Percy leaned into him and whispered in his ear.

"Breathe, baby. Are you sure you want this?"

Nico could feel Percy's hair catching on his. Percy's chest pressed against him with every breath. He smelled like the sea, and he was trailing his mouth down Nico's neck.

Nico nodded.

Percy tugged his hand, and Nico followed him to the bedroom.

***

Fuck Annabeth and Nico.
Percy gazed at Nico, who was sleeping peacefully beside him, still flushed from their lovemaking. He trailed his fingers over Nico's plump pink lips. How could they think Percy would willingly give this up?

This was bullshit. Nico lied when he said Annabeth hadn't done something to him at that wedding. Nico was a suck liar.

This was an Annabeth scheme. Manipulate Nico. Manipulate Percy. Pretend that Percy wasn't fucking in love with Nico like he'd never loved anyone in his life before, including his mom.

Nico was so fucking naive. He'd let Annabeth convince him that ruining their love was the right thing to do. Nico had sounded just like her, talking about how he loved Percy enough to let him go. Gods, for a fucking smart, distrustful, worldly shit, Nico was so fucking naive.

The worst part of this whole shitfest was that Annabeth was right. Nico and Percy were not supposed to be together; Percy and Annabeth were. When the fuck did what Percy want stop mattering? On second thought, when the fuck had it ever mattered? That went double for what Nico wanted.

Percy licked a long stripe from Nico's shoulder up his neck, ending under his jaw. The sweaty skin tasted so good, like salty chocolate-covered pomegranate seeds. Percy dropped his head and gently bit Nico's collarbone. When Nico didn't move, Percy licked his way across Nico's lips. Nothing. Nico was such a heavy sleeper that Percy could probably enter him a third time and he wouldn't wake.

Damn, making love to Nico like that had been, what was the word? Transcendent. Yeah, that. Percy had never felt his soul laid bare before. He'd never felt like he belonged to someone. He'd never wanted to belong to someone. But there Nico had been, stripped raw and open underneath him. Percy had pressed in slow, and Nico was so tight and hot. And Nico's face as Percy had entered him, gods, so beautiful. His eyes had been wide open, and they'd never left Percy's eyes, like Nico's enjoyment of their lovemaking hinged solely on how Percy felt. And Percy loved him. He wanted to give Nico the freedom and power to destroy him completely and trust that even if the destruction happened, it was still better, so much better, than living without having given himself to Nico this way.

He should call Annabeth right now, show her Nico's perfect face and body laid out bare and trusting, and tell her that he was done with her. The lies she told served her own purpose, and maybe the lies he told served his, but he was lying for love. Percy paused. Annabeth was lying for love, too, and she had the greater claim. She'd gotten to him before he'd seen Nico as something more than a miserable reminder of how greatly he'd fucked up. It may have taken him and Annabeth four years to get together, but after four years of knowing Nico, Percy had still barely seen him as a human being. Why'd he have to be so late with the realizations?

They'd stay together, him and Annabeth. Bitch.

Percy was appalled as soon as that thought took shape. Annabeth was not a bitch. He bunched the white sheets at Nico's hip and uncovered and recovered his penis. Looking while Nico slept bordered on pervy, and Annabeth was not a bitch. She loved him, and he'd betrayed her. Trying to keep them from falling apart after all the time and energy they'd put into their relationship wasn't selfish. It was more kind than he deserved.

This stupid circle of anger and blame was pointless. Nico was leaving him, and the moments they had left were ticking away. Percy should make the most of them.
He shifted over the top of Nico to cuddle him from the other side so he could watch the boats out on the bay. The sun would set soon. He needed to wake Nico so they could go to the Warriors game and Alcatraz.

He slid his hand across Nico's chest from red-brown nipple to red-brown nipple, letting the pads of his fingers catch and drag. Nico sleepily slapped his hand.

"Leave me alone, Perce."

"Wake up, you hot tight-assed fuck." Because nothing said "I love you more than life" like that. Percy grimaced but didn't take it back. "Let's go to that basketball game. And Alcatraz."

"Later." Nico looked like he was trying without success to open his eyes. He turned on his side away from Percy.

"Now, baby." Percy slipped his fingers between the globes of Nico's ass. There was still some residual lubricant tucked deep down. Nico was almost hairless. Or, hairy in a completely sexy way. It was weird. "Do you get manscaped?"

Nico jerked when Percy brushed his entrance and rolled over onto his back. He still hadn't figured out how to open his eyes. "What the fuck does that even mean?"

"Like, you know, do you get the hair waxed off your chest and ass? And the hair around your dick is so, like, ideal, like some high-rate porn star. And your balls are hairless. What gives? I thought Italian dudes were supposed to be hairy."

Nico scowled and managed to open one eye. "Are you making stereotypical comments about my nationality or my sexuality?"

"Both." Percy shrugged. "But I got you to open an eye. Now get up and either let me fuck you again or take me to the basketball game."

"No. And I don't 'manscape.'"

Percy had been propped up on his elbow for the last couple minutes, but he laid back down and nibbled on Nico's shoulder. He started spelling out "Percy loves Nico" on Nico's stomach. "You're sexy."

"You're a dweeb."

"Only dweeby kids say 'dweeb.' Come on, you think I'm sexy, too," Percy said between nibbles.

When Nico didn't answer after thirty seconds or so, Percy stopped with the kissing and waited. Nico made little nudging movements with his shoulder, but Percy didn't kiss him more. He wanted to hear what Nico said.

Nico gave a huge huff of breath, but when he turned his face from where he had been staring one-eyed at the ceiling, he was smiling. Both his eyes were even open. Without warning, he rolled on top of Percy and pinned Percy's arms at the elbow.

"You are so fucking sexy that I want to eat you alive. Sometimes, when we're together, I know I pause, and it's because I wish my mouth could touch you everywhere at once. I can't decide where to go next. I wish it was anatomically possible to fuck you and be fucked by you at the same time. Clear?"
Nico lowered his head and bit so hard and sucked so deep on Percy's neck that Percy was sure it would leave a mark. Once Nico let go and Percy stopped moaning, he realized that the bite was proof that Annabeth had gotten to Nico. At least on the days that Percy would see Annabeth soon, Nico never left marks. Percy wanted to beg for a million more.

Before he got the chance, Nico was rolling off of him.

"Hey! Get back here! I want back inside your — everywhere!" Despite Percy's disappointment that Nico had gotten up, he turned on his side to make sure he didn't miss a second of Nico walking away from him while naked. He didn't like to miss a second of Nico walking away from him clothed, either.

Nico turned and caught him staring. He raised an eyebrow. "We've got to shower if we're going to the game."

"Damn it. Wait for me."

***

It doesn't matter how much money you have, if your immature lover starts a peel and eat shrimp war in a luxury box at a basketball game, you're still going to get escorted from the arena. At least, that was what Nico yelled at Percy when they found themselves outside Oracle Arena midway through the third quarter of the game.

It wasn't Percy's fault. Nico was so damned smug sitting there in that suite going on and on about how much better baseball was and how little teamwork there was in the NBA and how even American football was better than this shit, and Percy had snapped. He'd grabbed the first thing he could find, those revolting shrimp, and hurled a whole handful at Nico's head. While the temperature in the room dropped drastically, Nico had picked out the tenacious shrimp that had stuck to his hair.

Percy wasn't stupid. He jumped out of his chair and ran behind the suite bar. He'd managed to down three swallows of vodka before a hail of shrimp rained down on him and Nico's livid face peeked over the edge of the bar where Percy was crouched. Percy sprung up on the counter and jumped over Nico's head, which meant he'd hit his own head on the ceiling. He'd crashed to the ground right next to the table where the shrimp sat and proceeded to fire one shrimp at a time at Nico. Nico didn't have any ammo, so he was left scrounging around on the floor for the shrimp Percy was bouncing off him, throwing them back with alarming speed. Percy could throw harder, but Nico's aim was better. It had been incredibly funny, running around the suite, ducking behind the furniture, slipping on shrimp carcasses, until three armed security personnel showed up to remove Mr. di Angelo and guest from the arena.

Nico silently fumed at Percy the whole way out, though he occasionally broke out in some vicious-sounding Italian that Percy thought was probably rude enough to make Nico blush if he were to say it in English. Percy didn't get why Nico was so mad. He didn't even like basketball, as he'd made very clear.

As soon as the guards went back inside, Nico rounded on Percy. "You are an idiot! Dumbass!"

"You did it, too, shit for brains!"

Nico shoved him.
"What do you even care for?" Percy yelled. "You were only going to the game to make me happy!"

"Well are you happy now?" Nico yelled it to the night sky.

"Yeah, actually," Percy said. "That was fun."

"Oh."

Nico still seemed cranky, so Percy took a step closer to him and tried out his kicked puppy face. Nico turned his back. That meant it was working. Percy moved right behind Nico and breathed on his ear. Goosebumps rose on the back of Nico's neck, which was visible for the first time since Nico was ten years old. He'd told Percy he'd got his hair cut for the wedding. It was still unruly and curly, but the thick, silky hair was sleekly cut shorter the closer you got to Nico's neck. Percy loved it. He'd been running his hands through it and trailing wet kisses across the back of Nico's neck since they'd first gone into the bedroom after *Jeopardy!* was over.

He did it again now, except this time he slid his tongue horizontally across Nico's neck and then vertically up what was visible of his spine, licking into Nico's hair. Nico shivered, and Percy pressed his advantage. They were sheltered enough from prying eyes that Percy knew Nico wouldn't mind what he was about to do. He ran his hands up and down Nico's arms, which were hanging tensely at his sides, then brushed across the rough denim covering Nico's crotch. Nico didn't say anything, but he let his head fall back on Percy's shoulder. Percy kept it up, teasing and touching, listening to Nico's quiet whimpers, until a car passed. They jumped apart, and Nico shoved Percy's hand away when Percy made a grab for his dick.

Percy watched Nico breathing heavily in the dark and smiled. Making serious, responsible Nico come undone was a thrill. Hell, it was a thrill to make him act like a kid again, like they had up in that luxury box. Watching Nico let a little bit of his inner self out and knowing he was the cause made Percy feel better than any of his heroics or his sexual conquests ever had. He would miss it. He held out his wrists in surrender.

"Take me to the Rock, warden."

"Not the pirate voice again." The corners of Nico's mouth rose.

"Not a pirate. A criminal, Neeks. Arrest me and do with me what you will. I freely admit my crimes. Punish me, boss."

"You love every cheesy cliché possible, don't you?" Nico didn't give Percy a chance to answer. He walked forward and roughly pulled Percy's wrists, but at the last moment, he turned so Percy was pressed against his back, holding him close. The shadows were already gathering around them when Nico turned his head toward Percy and whispered, "I think I'm the one who needs punished."

Percy didn't know whether Nico was serious or playing. He did know that the way the words had been said made him hard.

The feeling vanished as soon as they landed in the shadow of the looming lighthouse on Alcatraz Island. The place was creepy. Percy pressed closer to Nico, though one hand dropped to his pocket to finger Riptide.

"Never mind," Percy said. "Let's go back to the hotel and have more hot, hot sex."

"Chickenshit. We will later, I promise. Let's poke around first. I've never been here before."

Why couldn't Percy have fallen for someone who liked rainbows and unicorns, not skeletons and
zombies and disturbing old prisons?

"Seriously, Nico, it's creeping me out."

Nico took hold of Percy's hand and patted it without making eye contact. "It's cool. Indulge me for a little bit, please?"

Percy couldn't give an honest answer because Nico was already pulling him forward, heading for the lighthouse.

They'd reached the base of the concrete structure when a loud foghorn sounded, making them both jump. Percy made a very low and gruff exclamation that did not at all sound like a mouse's squeak. He also didn't wrap his arms around Nico's waist and bury his head so far in Nico's black shirt that he could feel the fabric fibers scraping his nose.

"Holy hell, Percy, get a grip."

Percy narrowed his eyes and bit Nico's chest. Fuck the little creep for getting taller than him. "Hey, oh, brave one, I seem to remember you crying like a baby when we rode Blackjack that one time, so lay off. You squeezed my dick so hard it's like half as big around as it used to be."

"That was because of the eagles, not the flying. And if your dick was really twice as big around before as it is now there's no way it'd ever fit in my ass, so you should thank me."

Percy's head shot up and his hand was already down the back of Nico's jeans, struggling to get past his too-damned-tight underwear. He'd totally forgotten about them picking at each other or being scared of the foghorn. "Does that mean you think I have a big dick? And, thank you, baby. Why don't you take me back to the hotel so we can make sure it still fits?"

Nico wiggled and squirmed until Percy stuck his tongue out at him and gave up on the potential for fingering. "Come on, you big-dicked son of Poseidon. Let's check out the lighthouse."

They walked around the edge of the lighthouse, searching for the door. When they found it, it was locked.

"Damn," Percy said. He did a fist pump behind Nico's back. "You probably shouldn't waste any of your energy shadow-traveling, either."

"I guess," Nico said, peering up at the tower. His head was thrown far back, and Percy wanted to bite his throat. The foghorn sounded again. Nico covered his ears. "Gods, that's loud."

"Yeah, so we'll just—"

"I want to see the cell blocks."

Of course Nico wanted to see the cell blocks. Percy tugged on Nico's shirt.

"You know how your dad has that cloak of tortured souls?"

Nico's eyes widened uncomprehendingly. "Yes. So?"

"So you're gonna fit in it great someday."

Nico laughed, and his barking laughter carried all over the island. When Percy's laugh joined his, he thought they sounded like car horns honking in Manhattan. He kissed Nico's cheek and let himself be led toward the prison.
The door to the prison was locked too. Percy started to say, again, that they should go back to the hotel, but Nico had already shadowed them inside. The feeling of wrongness increased by about a thousand times. Percy shivered, and not from how fucking hot Nico made him. They were in a cell block with three rows of cells stacked on top of each other, each cell butted right up against the next. The cells were tiny, with only enough room for a small bed, a toilet, and a sink. Percy hated to think people had been forced to live this way, criminals or not. It didn't help that he felt like all the people who'd ever died here were watching them as Nico stared with obvious interest and Percy tried to distract himself by cupping Nico's butt.

"It's wrong to be here, Nico," Percy whispered. Nico's butt wasn't enough of a distraction. "People were miserable here. They died here. I feel like there's a million angry ghosts watching us."

"Of course there are." Nico's boots clicked on the floor; the noise echoed through the building.

Percy was too scared to stop walking and lose physical contact with Nico, but he was also kind of scared of Nico. How could this not bother him? Nico whirled quickly, and Percy jumped back, expecting to see a ghoul where his lover had been, but all he saw was Nico's kind and handsome face. He smiled gently at Percy and cupped his cheeks.

"Hey, it's okay, Percy. Are you forgetting who you're with?" Nico's voice was so quiet, but it carried through the prison.


"The Ghost King," Nico nodded. He laid his forehead against Percy's. "I'll make them leave you alone. You're safe with me, my love."

The endearment had slipped out, Percy could tell, because even in the dim light he could see how Nico's eyes lit up in surprise and embarrassment. He hastily pressed his hands on the top of Nico's head and the bottom of his jaw to keep him from speaking. He didn't want Nico to take it back.

"Don't take it away from me, Nico."

It took a moment, but eventually Nico's head moved up and down in Percy's hands. The fire those words had lit in Percy's belly grew hotter. He let go of Nico's head and stepped close enough to line up their bodies tight together. He didn't touch with his hands; Nico would pull away if he did. It was sad how easily Nico could do sex these days and how hard it was for him to handle love. Percy knew their IMs and all those pornographic photos he'd had Nico take and send probably hadn't helped.

"I'll get rid of the ghosts for you, Percy. And we won't go any farther than this cell block. They didn't treat people so cruelly up here. Does that sound alright?"

*Say it, Percy prompted himself. Say "I love you" out loud, right now, where he can hear you and will remember and there's no room for misinterpretation, so he never doubts it's true and that he means so much more to you than sex. Kiss his mouth. "Thanks. You smell like shrimp."*

Nico sniffed and closed his eyes. His mouth moved soundlessly, and Percy wondered if he was muttering about what a waste of his love Percy was. Nico stopped his silent words and opened his eyes.

"The ghosts are gone. They won't come in this cell block as long as we're here."

Percy kissed his cheek and tried not to pull away when Nico tucked those long, pale fingers in the back pocket of his jeans. Percy didn't deserve the intimacy.
"So, where are we?" He knew Nico would know. Nico knew a whole lot about everything except the stuff that mattered.

"This is A-block, I think. No prisoners were ever kept here when it was a federal prison. The place was a military prison first." Nico walked them over to a stairwell that descended into the floor. "There was a dungeon down these stairs." He peered down the stairwell for a moment before talking again. ―Let's look in one of the cells."

Percy pulled back when Nico headed toward a cell. "Why?"

Nico took his hand out of Percy's pocket and walked backwards, closer to the cells. His face was so pale he glowed. He spread his arms. "I'm a prisoner, Percy. That's all I've ever been. It's like coming home."

Percy swallowed his shudder and rushed after Nico into a cell. He wrapped his arms around Nico from behind, trapping Nico's arms against his sides. "Who's keeping you prisoner, Nico? I can help you."

Nico laughed. It was the laugh Percy knew gave other people chills. Nico turned his head slightly, barely enough so Percy could see his profile. "Myself. No one. I'm being melodramatic."

Percy didn't believe him.

***

Percy was too astute. Nico needed to guide him back to safer ground.

He felt constricted with Percy's arms around him, but he reached between them with his hand and brushed Percy's dick through his pants. "I want to play with you, Percy."

"You cannot be serious." Percy sounded scared, and Nico knew it wasn't the ghosts this time. It was him. It always was, sooner or later.

Nico turned and pressed Percy back to the wall. The cells in A-block were empty and reasonably clean, so he didn't have to worry about running Percy into a bed or toilet or bloodstains. He reached out to his left and pulled the bars shut. The metal made a hard, reverberating clanging noise when the door swung closed. Percy gasped. Despite his sadness, that sound made Nico want to bite Percy's lower lip. There had to be something wrong with him. He shouldn't be able to shut down his feelings and turn on his libido so easily.

He pulled back a little from Percy and slipped off his shirt. The air was cold, but it hardly registered. He had his boots and socks off and was undoing the buckle of his belt when Percy grabbed his hand.

"What the fuck are you doing, Nico?"

Nico guided Percy's hands to his belt. He wasn't that surprised when Percy undid the buckle.

"Punish me, Percy. I told you, I need punished. I know you want to. You're so mad at me."

Percy's eyes were wide, and Nico could see fear and lust warring inside them.

"I'm not mad at you." Percy slid the belt from around Nico's waist. His hands were already undoing
the button on Nico's jeans. They were shaking, Percy's hands, but they got the button through the hole and started on the zipper.

"You are. But even if you don't believe me, it doesn't matter. This is turning you on."

"Your voice. Gods, fuck, Nico."

Percy's hands were inside Nico's underwear, tugging them lower. Nico pulled back and placed his shirt under his feet and spread it out toward Percy. He picked up the belt and held it out. Percy took it, and the question on his lips died when Nico turned his back and held his wrists together behind him. He didn't even have to ask. Percy looped the belt around his wrists and pulled it tight through the buckle. Nico smiled and held his head high.

Percy struggled one-handed to get Nico's pants and underwear off, but he finally managed it. There was a brief moment when the belt went slack, and Nico could feel Percy going through the motions of taking off his own shirt.

"Come now, Warden," Nico purred. "I'm an incredibly dangerous criminal. Surely you don't plan to give me the means to escape."

The belt tightened. Percy slapped Nico's ass so hard the sound echoed almost as much as the slamming cell door had.

"Warden Jackson, di Angelo. Say it."

"Warden Jackson." Nico let the syllables roll slowly off his tongue.

Percy pulled him back, and Nico fondled Percy's very hard dick. Percy's hand snaked around and did the same to Nico.

"What now?" Percy whispered.

"Play, Percy," Nico whispered back. "You're supposed to be in charge. Do whatever you want to me."

"Fuck." Percy pulled Nico's hands away with the belt and thrust into his ass.

"Mmm, Warden Jackson, what a big dick you have," Nico said, picking up the game again. "Are you going to shove that enormous cock into my tiny asshole?"

Percy's finger slipped inside him, and Nico was incredibly grateful for the lube that was left over inside from before. It felt so tight and sexy. He moaned.

"I'd wreck your perfect ass, di Angelo," Percy said. More quietly, he added, "I'm not doing that to you without lube, Nico. You'd get hurt."

"I'd be okay."

"No lying to me, di Angelo." Percy pulled back on the belt and slapped Nico's ass again. The motion jarred Percy's finger inside him, and Nico let his eyes roll back in his head.

Percy slipped his finger out and turned Nico around. Face to face, Percy seemed to lose his nerve. Nico rolled his hips against him, and this time Percy's eyes rolled back in his head, but when he refocused, he stayed still and quiet. Nico bit his lip.

"Why, Warden Jackson, are you losing your nerve?" Nico stepped into Percy's chest. "I heard you
were the toughest warden in the system. You don't let your prisoners push you around, do you? I'd
be very disappointed." He pushed harder into Percy. "But I would take charge."

Percy moaned and turned his head.

"Look at me," Nico ordered. Percy slowly pulled his head forward. He was focused on Nico's lips.
Their faces were an inch or two apart. "What I would do to you would feel so good, so perfect,
Warden Jackson, but you'd never forgive yourself in the morning."

Nico flicked his tongue across Percy's lips. A wide smile crept across his face at the resulting gasp.

This time he was the one who broke character. "I want to kiss you, Percy. If you don't make me do
something else, I'm going to kiss you." He flicked his tongue over Percy's mouth again, slower and
harder. When Percy's lips parted, he pushed his tongue between them, but he didn't let their lips
touch.

He was so focused on getting what he'd wanted for so long that he didn't register Percy's free hand in
his hair until it had yanked down painfully, pulling his face up toward the ceiling. He hissed, and
Percy's mouth closed over his throat, biting and then licking over the teeth marks Nico knew had to
be there before biting again. When Percy stopped, he didn't let go of Nico's hair.

"You will address me as Warden Jackson, prisoner." Percy sounded hard and cruel. It turned Nico
on even more. His dick was throbbing. He was going to come without being touched if he didn't get
himself under control.

"Yes, Warden Jackson."

"Better," Percy said.

The hand in his hair pulled straight down and forced Nico to his knees. Once he was down, Percy let
go of his hair but pulled the belt up higher and forced Nico's arms straight out behind him. Nico was
flexible and could handle the pressure, but Percy, gentle, tender Percy, doing this to him was so, so
hot. Jason would have accidentally ripped his arms out of socket already. Nico shook his head to
clear Jason away. He had no place here.

"Don't you shake your head at me, boy."

Percy's hand was still shaking, but Nico watched him slowly undo his own jeans. He shimmied them
down a little and withdrew his dick. Nico licked his lips, and it wasn't all for Percy's benefit.

"The boys in the yard say you're the best cocksucker that ever lived. Suck me off, di Angelo."

Nico did. He buried his face alongside Percy's shaft and inhaled deeply, then pulled out the Jason-
level blowjob arsenal (he'd never needed it on Percy). He had Percy shouting his name in minutes.
Gentle kisses around the base of the shaft. Long, wet spirals up and over Percy's cock. Tonguing the
slit. Tugging the foreskin with his lips. Sucking the balls. Licking the taint. Sucking the cockhead so
hard Percy whimpered. Backing off. Bobbing his head up and down, licking and sucking. Forcing
Percy's cock down his throat and swallowing around it. Easing off. Starting over.

He'd taken Percy way back in his throat once more when Percy's hand was back in his hair, and it
wasn't the kind of touch he was used to from Percy. Percy's hand tightened, restricting his
movement. He pulled Nico's arms back even further, and thrust hard into his mouth. Nico moaned
around Percy's dick. Percy wailed and picked up the pace, hips snapping, relentlessly fucking Nico's
face. Stars flashed in Nico's vision and he got lightheaded before Percy screamed, loud and long, and
slumped over his head.
The grip in his hair had loosened, and Nico pulled off Percy with a loud pop. Percy leaned against the wall. Nico dragged himself to his feet. His knees ached, but his dick was rock hard. He started to lean into Percy when the belt on his wrists tightened and Percy flipped him so his back pressed against Percy's front. With one fluid motion, Percy spun and slammed Nico's chest into the wall. Nico reflexively tightened his stomach muscles to keep his dick from making contact with the wall.

"Don't you dare let my dick touch the wall, motherfucker," Nico warned. "It'll be game over."

"I like 'em feisty, di Angelo," Percy said. His shoulders pressed against Nico's back and kept his upper half pinned to the wall. "I'll smear your pretty boy dick all over this wall if I want."

He wouldn't, Nico knew. He trusted Percy with his life and his dick, which was already being stroked expertly. Percy wasn't in the same league as Jason when it came to giving blowjobs, but he could jerk Nico off every bit as well. Fuck. Not more Jason. Nico figured Percy was so good because he was such a heavy masturbator. He would have chuckled to himself if Percy's hand didn't squeeze and twist over the head of his dick. Nico moaned and shuddered instead. He was close.

Percy pushed his lips against Nico's ear. "I'm taking your perfect ass and your pretty boy dick and your deliciously sexy body back to my private chambers, you little tease, and fuck you so hard we break the bed."

Nico came all over the wall.

***

Percy was exquisitely gentle when Nico shadowed them back to the hotel room, and Nico needed it. He helped Nico into the shower and massaged his bruised wrists. He washed the leftover pubic hairs from Nico's face. He held him up until he could hold himself. He didn't apologize for a thing, which Nico appreciated most of all.

Once they were in bed, he made sure Nico wanted to before he prepared him. He kissed him everywhere. He told Nico how beautiful and extraordinary he was and entered so slowly, sure and aroused and tender. It wasn't hard sex, getting fucked, anymore; it was making love, and Nico didn't need Percy to say the words or kiss his lips. He could feel how much Percy loved him with each thrust and every glimpse into those perfect green eyes.

When they'd both come and Percy had fallen on top of him, still so gently, but hadn't pulled out, Nico leaned up and whispered, "I love you, Percy."

Percy looked at him like the whole world was passing from black eyes to green and back again. A tear slid down his cheek. "Nico."

***

They didn't cry when it was time to leave. They didn't say goodbye. They made love one last time, showered, and held each other through the shadows. Nico walked with Percy as close to camp as he dared, holding his hand. He stopped when it seemed foolish to go further. Percy had taken a step
ahead, but he came back, and they kissed each other's cheeks. They focused on their clasped hands and watched the space between their bodies spread as Percy moved away. Their hands rose, and slowly, softly, tenderly, the connection broke.

Percy didn't look back.

***

Nico watched Percy vanish into the crowd. He shadow traveled back to the hotel and called Annabeth.

When she accepted the call, he was slunk onto the floor against the wall, tears streaming down his face. He didn't care that she saw.

"It's done." What else was there to say?

Annabeth nodded. "Is there someone I can call for you?"

Nico looked away. "I told you. He was all I had."
Two Gods

Ares dropped into the dome as Nico celebrated a hole in one on the fifteenth hole of their miniature golf course. Jason was with Nico, on a date, and neither noticed their visitor. The red eyes of the god of war gleamed with hatred as he watched Jason pull Nico close and pepper his face with small kisses that gradually lengthened into one long kiss. When Jason dropped his hand to Nico’s backside and tightened his grip, pulling their bodies together, Ares clapped. This was why he’d come.

Jason and Nico jumped apart and rounded on the unexpected noise.

"Save a little ass for me, brother," Ares said, deliberately approaching the new gods, savoring the way their faces hardened and bodies went on alert. "You can have cute little Nico back when I'm done with him. I'm afraid he won't be quite the same, though."

"Fuck off, Ares," Nico said. He pulled his sword and held it in front of him. Jason did the same.

Ares was an enormous god, twice as tall as Nico and three times wider than Jason. Sunglasses normally covered his eyes, but today he wore them up like a headband so the gods could see the entirety of his cruel face. His black leather pants and jacket were set with rows of long silver spikes.

The eighth hole windmill crumpled under his boot as he advanced. "Oh, I will. I didn't get to finish playing with you, little mouse, the day I brought you to Olympus. I'm gonna take that fancy black sword of yours and shove it up your ass. Then, when you're spurt ing blood out of that hot little asshole, I'm going to fuck you so hard you beg for your dead momma."

"How long did it take your fingers to grow back, motherfucker?" Nico asked. The taunt about his mother hurt him. Jason eyed him warily.

"Not as long as it's gonna take your ass to return to normal, pussy baby," Ares snarled. It had taken four days for Ares's fingers to grow back after Nico had lopped them off. Nico had caused Ares a lot of physical injuries that last mortal day, but more than anything, he’d wounded the god’s pride.

"Oh, that's too bad." Nico tilted his head and grinned savagely. "I'll have to tell Eos and Aphrodite to wait. They've both been begging to peg me."

Jason's eyes widened. He felt like Nico needed slapped. "Shut the fuck up, Nico! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Nico dismissively waved his hand at Ares. His skull ring glinted in the sun. "This dickhead's easy pickings. If he could barely take me when I wasn't a god, what do you think his odds are now?"

"I think when I've fucked you all I want, I'll bend you in half like a pretzel and make you lick my cum and your blood out of your asshole. You'll get off on it, dirty little cunt." Ares licked his lips.

Nico rolled his eyes and let out a fake bored sigh. "You can try, I guess. Jace and I could use the exercise. And the laugh."

"Oh, my fucking gods," Jason hissed. "Quit baiting the gods-damned god of motherfucking war!"

Nico raised an eyebrow. His lips were curled in a tight sneer. "We've got this, Jace. I've been anticipating the rematch." He glared at Ares. "So. Fucking. Easy."

Jason was not convinced. "Percy!"
Ares halted his progress toward Nico and looked around. He'd had dealings with Percy before and wasn't keen to repeat the experience.

"Oh, is the little bitty baby afraid of a son of the sea god?" Nico asked in a baby voice. He took a step toward Ares. "Afraid of me. Afraid of Percy. How pathetic. No wonder you're Hera's favorite."

Ares spun his hand and a long bronze sword appeared. He spun his other hand and it was covered with a spiked black glove dripping poison.

Nico extended his free hand. In it was the hilt of a long silver dagger. "I can fight with both hands, too, dipshit."

"Percy!" Jason yelled again. Percy had been taking a nap, but he wasn't generally this heavy a sleeper.


"Look, we don't want a fight," Jason started.

"Yes, we do," Nico said.

"Shut the fuck up and don't talk again," Jason snapped.

Nico shrugged and charged Ares. He slapped away the god's long sword and cut a line across Ares's forearm. By the time Ares was ready to swing his sword or his fist, Nico was gone. Ares turned in a circle, and Nico materialized behind him. He tapped the god's shoulder. Ares turned, and Nico punched him in the stomach before disappearing again. Nico returned, standing next to Jason, both weapons drawn.

"I'm going to gut you, di Angelo." Ares growled at him like a dog. "I'm going to eat the flesh off your face."

"Revolting, and not going to happen." Nico lunged at Ares and stabbed his knee.

The god howled and hopped around.

Nico frowned up at Jason, his eyes wide and his face as scornful as he could make it. "See, Jace. Not a worry."

Percy pelted out of the house, Riptide elongating in his hand, while Ares was still hopping. "Wait for me! Wait for me! I want in!"

Nico laughed and ran toward Percy.

"Shit!" Ares bellowed. He twirled his sword, and it morphed into a machine gun.

Nico stopped laughing. Percy stopped running.

"Ha. Thought so, little pussy fucker." Ares gestured with the gun. "Not such a big man now, are you? Jackson, go stand by Grace."

Percy glanced apologetically at Nico and did what he'd been told.

"Now come here, pretty little mousie, and let's finish our game," Ares whispered. He pointed the gun
at Jason when Nico didn't move right away.

Nico's shoulders fell, and he advanced until he was within reach of the war god.

"Drop your weapons," Ares said.

Everyone did. Without moving the gun, Ares bent and picked up Nico's sword. He placed the point at the hollow between Nico’s collarbones and scraped up his throat. A small stream of golden ichor trickled down and stained Nico’s shirt.

"C’mon, man," Percy said. "Surely you've got better things to do than attack a minor god?"

"Not really, jackoff. Besides, this cocksucker has it coming."

Ares scratched his chin with the butt of the gun. "Hmm, maybe that's an idea. I've seen you, di Angelo, what you can do. Why don't you suck my cock first? Then we'll get to the part where I ram this sword up your ass."

"We can do that," Nico said. "If you want me to bite your dick off, filthy bastard."

"For the gods' sakes, Nico, shut up!" Percy tapped Jason's foot three times with his own. Jason got the message. They'd move on three.

"One," Percy said. "He's not that great at sucking dick. Two, your dick's probably too ginormous to fit in his mouth. And—"

"He is under my protection, brother."

All of the men whirled to see Artemis and Thalia Grace emerge from near the house. Their bows were drawn and pointed at Ares. Jason's eyes widened at the sight of his sister.

"I do not wish you harm, Ares," Artemis continued, "so you will leave the new godlings alone. If I ever hear that harm has come to them by your hand, well, the results will be quite painful to you."

Artemis had advanced as she spoke until she was even with Nico. She was tiny. She looked like a young teen girl. The top of her head barely reached Nico's chest.

Ares huffed. "Fine. You ruin all the fun, Artie." There was a roar of fire, and Ares was gone.

"Oh, gods, thanks Artemis," Percy said. He started toward her, and Jason was halfway to Thalia, when Artemis changed her aim and leveled her arrow at Nico.

"Drop to the ground, Nico di Angelo, while I decide what to do with you."

The arrow remained pointed at his head as Nico sank to the ground.

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"My Lady," Nico said, his tone a complete departure from the one he'd used with Ares. "It has been a long time."

"Indeed," Artemis said. Her brown ponytail waved in the wind. "Tell your friends to stand down. I would hate for Thalia to be forced to injure her brother."
"Back off, guys. It's fine." Nico's eyes flicked to Percy and Jason, who had retrieved their weapons and were pointing them at Artemis, and Thalia, who had an arrow nocked and aimed at Percy. "I mean it. Drop your swords."

"Thalia won't hurt me," Jason said with more confidence than he felt.

"I wouldn't want to, Jay," Thalia said. She was watching her brother in awe. He looked vastly different than he had the last time she'd seen him. Percy did, too. "But I would if you threatened Artemis."

"You'd side with your patron over your brother? That's cold, girl." Percy swiveled his sword toward Thalia.

"He'd side with Nico over me," Thalia pointed out. "And I got not problem seeing how your godly ass heals from an arrow wound, Seaweed Brain."

"Fuck off, Pine Cone Face," Percy said.

"Shut up, all of you," Nico said. His eyes had returned to Artemis, who was judging his every move. "Put down your weapons, Jason and Percy. Don't put Thalia in a bad position. Artemis needs to talk to me."

Jason and Percy had a silent conversation and dropped their swords.

"Smarter than most boys, I suppose." Artemis shifted her stance and moved from Nico’s side to his front. She wanted to clearly see his eyes. "Now, to business. Did you avenge your sister by causing harm to come to my brother?"

"Absolutely not," Nico said. The thought repulsed him. "I'm not thrilled with you or Thalia, for that matter. You took Bianca from me when surely a goddess as wise as yourself knew a little boy needed his family. I hated the Hunters for a long time, but that had nothing to do with my relationship with Apollo. I was only with him after he spent a long time pursuing me. It took three years before I gave in, and that's a long time for mortal boys, Lady."

"My brother is madly in love with you, enough to risk his well-being and status among the gods. What have you done to cause him this sort of insanity?" Artemis tilted her head.

Nico furrowed his brows. "I didn't do anything. He's Apollo. He loves lots of people."

"Save it, Nico," Artemis said. "He does not love lots of people the way he loves you."

"I know." Nico dropped his eyes for a moment before he spoke again. The words came out shaky. "I miss him. What we had was special, but I swear to you, I didn't do anything to get his attention. I got lucky, because being with him was good for me, even if it cost me everything in the end."

"It appears to have cost you very little." Artemis moved the aim of the arrow to Nico's heart. "He aches for you, suffers scorn, is barred from seeking humans, and you have your pick between bachelor number one and bachelor number two."

"Hey, it cost Nico plenty," Percy said. "He misses his sisters. He can't go to school. He—"

"I didn't want him to get in trouble. I still don't. I…" Nico squirmed. Percy and Jason would not like what he was about to say. "I loved him, too. We were good together. Better than good."

"Then why are you engaging in romantic relationships with Percy and Jason Grace?" Artemis was
genuinely curious. She was accustomed to Apollo's meandering, fickle loves. She understood the prize for Hera's worthless devotion to Zeus. This in-between love escaped her understanding.

"I love them, too. Apollo knew how I felt about them before he and I were together. He understood. I was never dishonest with him about what I did or how I felt. Nothing I did was to hurt your brother or you, I swear it on my love for my sisters."

Artemis let her bow go slack and withdrew her arrow. Thalia did the same and ran to hug Jason. After having arrows pointed at Nico and Percy, Jason was tempted to refuse Thalia's hug, but he relented at the last moment and scooped her into his arms.

"Ow! Ow! That hurts, Jaybird! Let go!" Thalia wriggled out of Jason's arms and punched him.

Jason stood still, unaffected by the punch, but Thalia grabbed her hand and swore.

"Calm yourself, Lieutenant," Artemis said. "Your brother is a god now, and though he may appear as you remember him, his body is changed. Let this be a lesson."

"Gods," Thalia grumbled. "I can't beat him up anymore?"

"You couldn't ever beat me up that I remember, sis."

Thalia scowled at him. She was unchanged from the last time Jason had seen her, three or four years before. It was a shock to Jason to realize that his appearance would stop changing now, too, unless he wished to change it.

"I never had the urge." Thalia turned to Percy and narrowed her eyes. "What's your story, Jackson? Why did you cast your lot with sexpot over there," she pointed to Nico, "instead of your wife?"

"Stop it, Thalia," Jason said. "He doesn't have to justify himself to you or anyone else."

"Damn straight." Percy smiled at Jason. He picked up Jason's sword and handed it to him.

"I'm just asking, Jason. Don't get your panties in a bunch," Thalia said. "Is it the sex? We've heard whispers—"

"Lady, can you control your lieutenant, please?" Nico asked. He sheathed his sword and stood between Jason and Percy. They both took his hand. Thalia's eyes hardened.

"This is why you left her? It's true? That's a shi—"

"Thalia apologizes for her rude behavior," Artemis said. "It is neither her business nor her concern what mortals or other gods do. As a favor to my brother, you three continue to have my protection. See you do not need it."

Artemis snapped her fingers, and she and Thalia vanished.

"Well, that was awkward," Jason said.

"Privacy." Percy dragged Nico and Jason into the house and to their bedroom, forgetting they each had the ability to travel there instantly.

"I'm so—"

"Don't say it, Nico." Percy kissed Nico's hand. "Don't. Thalia's a bitch for trying to make me feel like shit. She reacts before she has all the facts. Don't give in to it. Now, tell me what the hell
happened with Ares, and more important, how was your date?"

Jason and Nico looked between each other. Percy grabbed Nico's hand and pulled him from the
doorway of the bedroom down onto the bed. He motioned for Jason to follow.

"I can’t believe, after all that, you’re asking about the date.” Jason shook his head.

"Ares was here to be a dick, try to mess me up because I cut off his fingers and stuff. Like beating
me to near death and binding me in chains like an animal wasn’t enough retribution." Nico shrugged
like his last day as a mortal hadn’t been soaked in terror and pain. He wished the blood off his shirt.
"He's an ass."

"Are we going to talk about that stuff you said about Apollo?" Jason asked.

"No. That’s not going to happen. Don’t ask.” Nico crossed his arms.

“It was kind of him to ask Artemis to protect all three of us, not just you,” Jason offered.

“That’s the person he is.” Nico ran a hand through his hair. He didn’t want to think about Apollo. It
was too painful. “He loves me. He wouldn’t allow you to be harmed because it'd cause me pain. No
more talking about him. It's off limits.”

Percy had expected that. He scooted closer to Nico and put his hands in Nico's lap, trying to soothe
Nico’s underlying pain. "And the date?"

The two gods sat facing each other, knee to knee, with Jason sitting perpendicular to them, his knees
wedged against the other men’s thighs. When it became apparent Percy was serious about the shift in
topic and Nico wouldn’t answer, Jason sighed and said, "It was nice. We played mini golf. He let me
kiss him a bit."

Percy's eyes narrowed. "How much?"

Nico smirked. They'd had this conversation before. "Want me to show you?"

"Yes, very much, but first, how are things between you?" Although Percy had said to wait for the
kissing, Thalia's comments had rattled him more than he let on; he wanted to feel Nico, get his
comfort, soon.

"Getting better. I trust him more. We'll need to do it again." Nico traced his fingers up and down
Percy's arms, feeling the veins and muscles that stood out on his tanned skin. He was feeling
nervous, too, from their visitors.

"Did you have fun?" Percy asked. He wanted an answer from both of his companions. He knew
Jason was sometimes frustrated with the fits and starts of Nico’s acceptance.

"I did," Jason said. "He makes me laugh."

"I'm not trying to be funny, asshole," Nico said.

"I know. That's what makes it funny." Jason winked at Percy, which made Percy giggle and Nico
growl.

"Aw, now, pretty baby, don't be that way." Percy tucked his hands farther in Nico's lap and fondled
his testicles. "Show me how Jason kissed you. Kiss him first, then me."

Nico rolled his eyes, but he was already on the move. He put one hand on Jason's jaw and the other
on Percy's and pulled their faces close enough that they could kiss each other if they wanted. Percy put a hand on Jason's thigh to stop himself from tipping over. Jason squirmed under the touch, but then Nico's lips were on his and he forgot all about how Percy's hand was tight on his thigh.
Percy walked back into camp without acknowledging anyone. If people greeted him, he had no idea. He ignored the children that were in the habit of calling him over for a game of catch. At his door, keys in hand, he stopped. After a moment's deliberation, he returned the keys to his pocket.

Annabeth would come soon. No doubt Nico had called her as soon as he'd shadow traveled back to the hotel. He would've wanted Percy to have comfort. Who was around to comfort Nico? Percy’s eyes wandered across the path to Jason's house. Before he could think too much and change his mind, Percy marched over and knocked.

He hadn't been to Jason’s since the first visit with the dead cockroaches. Jason came over to his house, though. They rarely spoke, just sat watching TV and eating snacks. Sometimes they sparred in the backyard. They hadn't said more than "Pass the beer nuts" to each other in the two months Jason had been back.

The door popped open and Percy entered without greeting Jason or being greeted. He didn't even check to see if it was Jason who answered the door.

"Are the roaches gone?"

"Haven't seen one in three weeks."

Percy grunted and sat on the couch. Jason closed the door and went into the kitchen. He came back with two Cokes and a bag of Starburst. Percy dug his keys out of his pocket and threw them in Jason's direction. They hit Jason's thigh with a muffled thunk.

"Go over to my house and get all the beer. There's some leftover turkey from a couple days ago. It's enough for both of us for dinner."

"Why?" Jason's voice was sandpaper on Percy's nerves.

"I need to get really drunk."

"Why here?"

"I'm avoiding Annabeth."

There was a knock on the door. Percy went down the hall and locked himself in Jason's bedroom. He should've gone in the bathroom. Then he could have called Nico, although however Nico looked right now, Percy wasn't sure he could handle seeing him. He heard Annabeth's voice asking Jason if he'd seen Percy. Jason's voice was too low to decipher. Percy laid down on the bed and waited. He wasn't coming out until Annabeth left, whether Jason ratted him out or not.

After five minutes or so, which Percy used to count stains on the popcorn ceiling and bug carcasses in the light fixture, anything but think about what had happened this weekend, Jason spoke through the door. "She's gone."

Percy sat up and slowly walked to the door. From the hallway, he could see Jason was already back in the living room, sitting on the couch. The beer was sitting on the coffee table. Percy should
probably say thanks. He popped the lid off the first beer and took a long drink.

"What'd she say?"

"Said if I saw you to tell you she was looking for you."

Percy drank some more beer. There were two six packs on the table. That was a start. Was Jason old enough to buy him more? Percy didn't know the legal drinking age in New Rome. He'd been buying his own booze since he moved here when he was seventeen, but no one had ever stopped him or asked for ID. Seventeen had to be too young to drink legally. He should quit. It reminded him of Gabe, and Nico didn't like it.

Nico.

Percy remembered a time when Jason could be too talkative. He remembered the same thing about himself. What had happened to those immature boys?

"I'm in love with your boyfriend." He didn't know why he said it. The silence between him and Jason usually bothered him, but he hadn't felt the need to break it in two months.

"I know." Jason didn't sound as mad as Percy had expected.

"He loves me back."

"I know."

Percy shrugged. If Jason didn't care, why should he? He finished off the first beer and opened a second. Jason popped open the can of Coke and appeared to drink it all in one chug, if Percy's ears were working properly. If Jason drank booze he'd be amazing at drinking games.

"Do you really not drink because of your mom, or is it because Nico doesn't like it?"

"Mom. I chose before I fell in love with him."

"I'm gonna stop, for him."

"Good for you." Jason didn't sound sincere, but he didn't sound angry. Percy wondered how much Nico had told Jason about their relationship. He normally refused to discuss Jason with Percy. Of course, that was probably because Percy turned into the most jealous man alive at the thought of Jason.

"What did he tell you about us? In January, I mean?" Percy quickly glanced in Jason's direction. Jason wasn't looking at him, either. Jason looked older, sadder. He didn't look unhealthy like he had in the fall, but he looked as broken-spirited.

"It's private."

"It's about me, asshole."

Percy didn't expect an answer, so he was surprised when Jason started talking. "Not much. He loves you. He thought you were confused and not really in love with him."

"You didn't believe him?"

Jason shrugged. Percy guessed he was looking at Jason now. "It's obvious you love him. He doesn't see how anyone can love him."
"He told me, this last time after you left him? He told me he was a bad person."

Jason looked at Percy. His eyes were so cold, so bright a blue it was blinding. He took the beer bottle out of Percy's hand and took a drink. "I don't know how to open them."

Percy ignored him and opened another bottle.

"She knows about me and Nico, too. Annabeth."

"Shit."

That was an unexpected reaction. Percy had thought Jason would be happy. Jason had to know where this conversation was headed. He must know why Percy was avoiding Annabeth and trying, unsuccessfully so far, to get drunk.

"She manipulated him. At that wedding they went to."

Jason's eyes got big for a minute. He hadn't known about the wedding. He wasn't talking to Nico at all, Percy realized.


"Clarisse hates me. Calls me Sissypants."

Percy snorted and sat back more comfortably on the couch. "She hates me, too. I fucked her mom."

Jason spit beer on the coffee table.

"Fucking hell, that burns!" It was kind of funny listening to Jason swear. Percy didn't remember Jason cussing much. They hadn't been friends in a long time. "You and Clarisse's mom? Gross."

"Yeah. That's why I wasn't invited to the wedding and Annabeth had to go with Nico."

"Clarisse loves Nico." Jason considered the empty beer bottle in his hand. "How many of these do I have to drink?"

"For what?"

"To get drunk."

"Why d'you want to get drunk? You're a big dude. It'll take more than we have. I'll call the Stolls in a minute."

Jason nodded. He propped an ankle up on the knee of the other leg. Percy opened another beer for each of them.

"Thanks. So, Annabeth made you break up with Nico? That's where you've been this weekend?"

Percy was not drunk and shouldn't be having this much trouble gauging Jason. He knew stuff Percy didn't think he'd know and didn't know stuff that Percy was sure he'd know.

"I was with him, yeah. She tricked him into breaking up with me." Percy almost added the b-word again, but he stopped himself. It wasn't true.

"Damn it. Damn it. Fucking damn it." Jason looked like he was going to kick the coffee table. Instead he laid his head back and started counting silently. Percy could read his lips.
"Why're you so fucking worked up, douche? I thought you hated me being with him."

"I do hate you being with him. I hate you." Jason turned those freaky blue eyes on high beam and glared at Percy. "The other option's worse."

Percy narrowed his eyes. "What other option?"

Jason stood up and went into the kitchen. Percy pulled out his non-secret phone and texted Connor to drop off as much beer as he could gather. Connor owed him a couple favors. Percy followed Jason into the kitchen. It smelled like bleach.

"What other option?" Percy repeated.

"Look, you love him, right?" Jason was acting shifty and nervous. His eyes were darting around the room. Maybe it was cockroaches he was worried about, but Percy didn't think so.

"I already told you I fucking love him." Percy started to say, "I would have left Annabeth for him, if he'd let me," but he pulled the words back. Jason wasn't his friend, and he definitely wasn't trustworthy.

"You'd never betray him?"

Percy glared this time. "You mean like you did?"

"Fuck you, dickhead. Answer the question."

"I swear on the River Styx, I would never hurt Nico."

"His roommate."

"He's fucking his roommate, too?" Oh, gods, Percy couldn't deal with that. He reeled out of the kitchen and went back to the couch. Nico was his baby. He wasn't fucking other people. Except Captain fucking America here.

Jason came back in the living room and sat down, too. He had stupid-ass jeans.

"No, pig. Not yet, I don't think. His roommate's been trying since...a long time...to get Nico to climb in his bed. He's a major prick, worse than you. He's older, and he's taking advantage of Nico's innocence. Bastard. Motherfucking bastard."

The beer seemed to be loosening Jason up quicker than Percy would have guessed.

"Anyway, I thought that after I left, the seductive bastard would get his wish, but I hoped Nico would turn to you and hold him off. I hate your fucking guts, Percy. I really do. But I believe that you care about Nico."

"Aren't you sweet? I hate your fucking guts, too, Grace."

"No you don't," Jason said. "You're jealous because I got him first and he loves me more."

True.

"I got him last, though." Percy said it so quietly he didn't think Jason would hear him. Freakazoid must have supersonic hearing, too, because his head snapped up and he downed the rest of his beer. Percy opened another and handed it to him. He opened another for himself, too. "So what do we do about this pervert who's taking advantage of our love?"
Jason's head wobbled a little before he answered. "Nothing we can do. I'd kill the motherfucker with my bare hands if I could. I'd call down a whole host of lightning on his ass and fry him. I can't touch him. Nico knows, too. He's not stupid. He dug his own grave, hah, with this one. He's so stupid."

"Shut up." The doorbell rang, and Percy went to answer it. He'd forgotten all about Annabeth until he pulled open the door, but it was just Connor with four sacks of beer. "Thanks, man."

"Can I stay for the party?" Connor asked. He scanned the room, and Percy glanced back to see Jason sitting on the couch, blinking stupidly. Maybe they hadn't needed this much beer.

"Sorry. Grace has lice. He's pissing his pants over it, and I gotta get him drunk enough to let me pick 'em out. Unless you want to help?" Percy dropped his voice to a whisper. "I think he's got crabs, too."

Connor had already backed away about fifteen feet by the time Percy finished speaking. Percy closed the door and leaned against it, enjoying his lie. The entire school would be whispering about Jason's pubic lice by Tuesday.

"I gotta piss, Grace. Go fix the turkey."

Jason banged his knees on the table getting up. Percy headed down the hall and peed in Jason's tub. He felt a little guilty afterward and rinsed it out. It felt good, being mean. He had all this rage and sadness bottled up inside him, and he couldn't quite take it out on Annabeth. He refused to take it out on Nico. Nico, who was probably being corrupted by some old pervert right now.

Percy pulled out his phone. The secret one. He felt a little fuzzy, too. He typed "I love you" into a text and erased it before he could send it. He always did. He wrote it every time. Every text to Nico. He always erased it. He pulled up his pictures and rifled through them to find his favorite. It wasn't even one of the porno ones. Nico was sitting at that table in his farmhouse. His chin was propped up on his hand, and he had a tiny smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He was blushing slightly. His dark eyes were sparkly and full of happy fire. Looking in those eyes, you could see how smart he was, how special. Percy had snapped the picture through Iris message, and Fleecy must have been eavesdropping and worked a little goddess magic, because the picture was sharp and as clear as if Percy had taken it from three feet away.

Percy kissed the screen and put the phone back in his sock.

He went back to the living room to find Jason had set out two identical plates piled with turkey, potato chips, and carrots with ranch dressing. It was like a meal for a five year old. Percy was happy with it. Jason also appeared to have figured out how to open the beer, because he had a new bottle — something Connor had brought.

"Does this shit ever taste better?" Jason asked. His words were starting to slur. "Tastes like gym socks and rotten shit."

Percy laughed. He liked Jason better drunk.

"It never tastes better, dude. We're quitting tomorrow, both of us."

"Deal."

Jason missed his first three tries at spearing his turkey slice. Percy watched with mild amusement and hoped Jason wasn't a puking drunk like Nico. Gods, that had been awful. And wonderful. He'd live through the puking night a million times if he could have Nico back.
"You know, Nico brought enough condoms this weekend to let the entire US Army fuck him," Percy said. Jason's head jerked, but he didn't seem to be too concerned. Percy figured he wouldn't remember this in the morning. "He said he wasn't ever letting someone inside him again. Maybe things aren't as bad with the perv roommate as you're worried about."

"You fucked Nico?" Jason looked like he was going to cry. "My Nico?"

"For fuck's sake, Jason. What'd you think I do with him? Have tea parties?"

Jason crumpled. He laid his head down on the armrest and cried for real. Good fucking gods. No wonder Nico had been so reluctant to let Percy inside him. Percy felt a sick sense of joy at seeing how this fucked with Jason. He wasn't wishing Jason harm, though he might go back and piss in his sink later, too, but Nico knew it would hurt Jason this bad, being so intimate with Percy, and he'd done it anyway? Nico may not love him as much as he loved Jason, but it had to be getting close, right?

Percy ate his way through his turkey and the chips while Jason cried. When Percy had finished off the carrots and ranch (okay, he'd finished off the ranch first and had no desire to eat carrots without ranch), he, well, first he stole Jason's ranch, licked it right off the plate, then he poked at Jason's leg with his shoe. This crying shit was getting old.

"Hey, Jason, listen." Percy waited for Jason to acknowledge he was talking to him. The big idiot kept crying. Percy toed him a bit harder. He wasn't kicking, not quite, and if Jason had a bruise tomorrow, so what? "Hey!"

Jason sniffled and looked up.

"Let's get a pet."

Jason burped and sat up. "What?"

"Let's get a pet. We'll share it. What kind of pet do you want?"

This strategy worked well with Tyson when he was upset. They shared a Leafy Sea Dragon, two manta rays, and a goldfish named Herbert.

"You already got Mrs. O'Really. What you wanna 'nother pet for?" Jason eyed him suspiciously, like he knew he was being tricked.

"Mrs. O'Leary's more like a friend. Let's get one who can stay here at one of our houses." Percy gestured to Jason's plate. "Eat your food."

Jason gazed down at his plate. "Where'd my ranch go?"

"You didn't have any. What kind of pet do you want, Grace?"

"Dog. Or a cat. I like cats. Nico's like a cat, huh? We could getta cat an' call him Nico." Jason managed to stab several slices of turkey. He shoved them all in his mouth at once. Percy had to look away or run the risk of puking.

"That's hella cute, Grace, but that's also fucking weird. We're not naming our pet after a guy whose ass we know intimately."

Heat crept up Percy's face and in his belly. Jason knew what Nico's ass tasted like? Percy wasn't going to piss in Jason's sink, he was going to jack off into it. Not fair. Gross. Not fair. Now Percy was going to wonder what other treasures he'd missed.

"Okay, well, that makes naming the cat after Nico even more disturbing, dumb drunkass. We'll go to the shelter tomorrow after classes and pick out a cat."

"Shut the fuck up!" Jason stared at the door like it was a person. "I gotta go to school tomorrow? 'M so fucked up."

"Yep."

The food was gone from Jason's plate. Percy picked up the dishes and dumped them in the sink. When he came back, Jason was starting to droop. Good. Percy didn't want to sleep at home tonight, so he needed Jason to get up so he could sleep on his couch.

"Hey, Jace, it's beddy time, man. Go to your room."

"I gotta pee first."

"Go in your tub. It'll be easier. You don't need to rinse it out or anything. Plus you get extra pee points if you can shoot your stream onto the far wall."

"Ooh, thanks, Percy," Jason said. "You're bein' so nice. I miss him, too. But we'll get our Nico kitty tomorrow. That'll help."

"Just don't try to lick its ass." Gods, Percy was such a dick. He knew it, and he felt bad about it, but missing Nico was starting to curl in on him. He was paper on fire, and he needed to get Jason out of here so he could get so shitfaced he'd forget. "Go, Jace. Down the hall. You got an alarm clock?"

Jason nodded like he was trusting Percy with an issue affecting national security. "Next to the bed."

"What time's your first class tomorrow?"

Jason's eyes crossed, and he didn't answer.

"Never mind. Go take a piss. I'll set your alarm."

Jason and Percy went down the hall together. Jason's alarm clock must have been a gag gift from Leo, because it had little Superman-like guys all over it, but they were wearing nothing but jockstraps. Percy set the alarm for enough time for him to get home and change and make it to his first class. Jason would have to live with it if he missed out on anything earlier.

Percy went back to the living room, sat on the couch, and opened another beer. Down the hall, he could hear Jason stumble out of the bathroom and into his bedroom. Stupid motherfucker. Now he had to get a pet with the douchebag. Oh well. Annabeth had been talking about adopting a pet together, and right now, he'd rather share with Jason. At least Jason loved Nico, too.

Percy drank four more beers, he thought. He wasn't quite sure by the end. Jason had been snoring in his room for a long time. How did Nico put up with that shit? Grace sounded like a fucking freight train. Percy was tempted to go smother him. Instead, he laid back on the couch and let thoughts of Nico invade his consciousness. Nico's face, Nico's eyes, Nico's mouth. He moved his hand inside his jeans and stroked, thinking about all the places he'd touched Nico, how it had felt to come inside him. He thought about kissing Nico's ass, the way Jason said, and he didn't have time to stagger to the bathroom to jizz up the sink.
If Nico had any brains at all, he would have gone home immediately, while it was still light in New York. But no. He'd stayed in that empty hotel room and sat listlessly on the couch, like if he sat there long enough, Percy would come back. He wanted Percy to fight for him. He'd wanted Jason to fight for him. It wasn't like either one had gone quietly from his life, and he knew they were both hurt when he made them leave. The desire was childish and romanticized. It wasn't fair for him to be angry at them for accepting and respecting the decisions he made. It wasn't fair, but he wanted some sick, patronizing fairy tale. He wanted Percy to come back and scream at him and say he was leaving Annabeth, no matter what. He wanted Percy to force him to promise they'd work things out and be together.

The whole idea that he would even want that was part of the fantasy. If Percy had actually tried to force him to do anything, he would have recoiled. He would have kicked Percy's ass and been furious with him for trying to override his judgment. It was messed up, holding Jason and Percy to a standard that he would only bristle against.

The sun had set in Manhattan when Nico stumbled into his apartment. Apollo wasn't there to maul him like he had expected. Maybe he was giving Nico his space, too. Nico didn't want space. He wanted hands and lips and warm skin. He wanted lies and promises.

Nico went in the bathroom and showered. He could smell Percy on his skin, feel Percy inside him. He needed to wash it away.

When he came to his room after the shower, there was a tray of food on his nightstand, along with a mug of hot chocolate. Nico slowly dressed and ate. He went back to the bathroom and brushed his teeth again. He felt so dead inside.

He'd put on the pajamas Apollo said were his favorites. He'd used the shampoo Apollo chose for him. He'd cleaned between his toes because Apollo said his feet smelled. He inserted the black skull earring Apollo had given him, which went painlessly into his ear even though he'd never been pierced. He methodically touched Apollo's watch, Apollo's ring, Apollo's bracelet. He looked in the tiny mirror on his desk and fingered through the haircut Apollo had arranged for him. So much Apollo. Where the hell was Nico?

He didn't care. He didn't ever want to find Nico again.

Apollo's bedroom door was slightly ajar. Nico knocked softly and entered without permission.

The wood floor was cold under his feet as he made his way around the bed. Apollo was there, watching him. Nico didn't make eye contact. He didn't need to explain. Apollo would say he could feel everything in Nico's aura anyway. Once upon a time, Nico had believed auras to be a bunch of esoteric gobbledygook. Then he'd started throwing off an aura that made everything around him die. When considered that way, it made sense that his love life always fell apart. He killed everything.

Except a god. He couldn't kill a god. The thought comforted him as he climbed into Apollo's bed and curled up under the covers.

He closed his eyes and reached out for Apollo. His hand closed around a finely boned wrist, and he smoothed his way up Apollo's arm, taking in the soft skin and the lean muscle underneath. Apollo
was so warm. That would be comforting, when he did what he was about to do. When he reached Apollo's shoulder, he tugged until the god climbed on top of him, and Nico spread his legs so Apollo could nestle between his thighs. He remembered the way that had felt, the night he'd fled Jason and woke up with Percy on top of him, how once he'd fully awakened it had felt so foreign, being held by a stranger. It felt foreign now, too, except he was the stranger.

He still hadn't opened his eyes when he whispered, "Kiss my lips."

Apollo's lips were soft, and Nico encouraged the kiss, nurtured it, and opened his mouth when he first felt Apollo's tongue. He floated by on the feeling, and as his brain drifted away, he thought this wasn't a bad way to die, not for a boy who'd lost everything.

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Jason sighed heavily and ran his hand over his face. This was the stupidest thing he'd ever done, and he had once let Leo talk him into lighting farts.

The New Rome Friends of Animals society was located on the outskirts of the city. It smelled and it was loud, which didn't help Jason's hangover headache. He'd eaten some ambrosia this morning when he woke to his screeching alarm clock, which was set two hours behind when it should have been, but it hadn't helped. Some girl in class had given him pain pills, but she'd also been giving him not so subtle hints about how she'd like to see him naked. He'd thanked her and thrown them into the trash when her head was turned. Percy, when Jason had woken him from the couch, had said he'd bring something to help with the headache when he came back later, but of course, he'd forgotten. Or so he said. Jason thought Percy enjoyed watching him suffer.

Percy didn't have a headache, and Jason was pretty sure his "friend" had drunk at least as much as he had the night before. Percy was whistling. Jason contemplated beheading him.

"Why are we doing this again?"

The gravel of the path crunched under Percy's feet when he stopped. Jason cringed.

"We're lonely and need a friend, dumbass. Do you not remember anything?"

"Cats are not friends. And I remember everything fine, jackass who told me to pee in my bathtub."

Percy grinned. Jason hated him. Not because of the pee, though that was totally assholeish. It wasn't even because Percy had penetrative sex with Nico. It was that Percy got to see how that news destroyed Jason. He knew Nico loved Percy, and he knew Nico well enough that he could recognize how Nico's messed up brain (thanks to him) would believe he was giving Percy some parting gift by breaking up with him and fucking him all at the same time. He wasn't shocked that it had happened. He shouldn't have been shocked that it had happened, at least. And now Percy knew how vulnerable and ruined Jason was when it came to Nico.

"I peed in your sink, too." Percy added an arched eyebrow to his grin. "Hope you weren't so late for class that you filled up your sink and washed off there this morning."

Jason had his hands out to reach around Percy's neck and throttle him when the son of Poseidon grabbed the door of the animal shelter and flung it open. Jason dropped his hands and followed Percy inside.
Oh, shit. It was The Kicker. Jason hadn't seen her since the incident, but here she was, throwing her arms around Percy and giving him a giant hug. Jason couldn't help the way his lip curled. Of course she loved stupid fucking Percy. Everybody loved stupid fucking Percy.

"Hey, Allie, how's it going?" Percy was asking.

"Good, Jackson. It's good to see you."

Allie smiled warmly at Percy, and then her gaze shifted to Jason. Her cute little features transformed into a scowl, and she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Loser," she sneered. "Want to turn around and I'll kick your ass this time?"

Nice greeting.

"Your office smells like pee." It was weak, but Jason was never the witty one. People liked witty. People did not like Jason.

Percy looked back and forth between them. "I'm taking it you two know each other?"

"We got acquainted when he shit all over super sexy McFucklips."

"Nico," Jason ground out when Percy turned to him for an interpretation. He returned his attention to Allie. "Why do you hate me and hug Percy? He cheated on your hero."

"Lame," Percy hissed.

Jason kicked at the stinky concrete floor. He wished being around Percy didn't turn him into a petulant pre-teen.

"Because I'm not even into guys and I'd cheat on my girlfriend with Nico," Allie said. "That's even more true after I got to know him a little bit."

"Yeah, thanks for the breakdown of how we all suck and Nico's perfect," Jason said. "We're here to look at cats. Can we do that, please?"

"Shit, traitorface, I didn't peg you for an animal lover, but suit yourself. Follow me."

Allie led them down a narrow corridor to a room filled with cages of cats. At least it didn't smell any stronger of piss in here and the cats weren't meowing. Truthfully, Jason wasn't sure he was an animal lover. He liked them fine, but he'd never known anyone with a pet, other than Mrs. O'Leary, who only showed up if Percy or Nico called her. He looked around at the cages. Some of the cats were, okay, kind of adorable.

Percy was already sticking his fingers in the cages when Allie grabbed his arm.

"Don't do that, Jackson. Sanitize your hands in between touching each animal so you don't potentially spread disease."

Percy hurried to comply. Jason rolled his eyes. He didn't want to let Percy get first choice about what cat they got, but he didn't know what else to do. He stood stiff and tall with his arms crossed and waited.

After a few minutes of poking into cages, Percy said, "Hey, Jace, c'mere. I like this one."

Jason stood behind Percy and peered over his shoulder. The cat was cute. It was tiny, like a kitten,
and had gray and black stripes. The card said the cat's name was Tabby. How original. It had been sleeping, but it yawned and stretched and opened its eyes.

"No," Jason said, and the ferocity with which he said it surprised him. "No green-eyed cats."

Percy looked back at him like he had four heads. "All cats have green eyes, dipshit. What the fuck?"

What the fuck was that Jason didn't want a reminder of Percy and all the things Nico had done with him.

"No. Do they really all have green eyes, Kicker?"

Allie huffed at them like she was supervising a debate between three year olds. It reminded Jason of Nico.

"Not all cats have green eyes, but many do."

Jason and Percy both said, "Ha!" at the same time. Jason moved away and examined various cats’ eyes. He had to check more than half of the cages to find something that would work.

"Come here, Jackson."

Percy came and stood in front of him. He eyed the cat and read the description.

"Hey, Allie, sweetie, can we get this cat out and hang out with it for a bit?" Percy didn't even look at her.

"Um, you two want to look at Erebos?"

"Yes." They both said it.

"He's deaf. And temperamental. He's kind of...tough."

"We can read," Jason said. Percy elbowed him. Jason added, "At least I can."

"Fine. We have a 'get acquainted' room two doors down. Go in there and I'll bring him to you." Allie sighed behind them.

Jason and Percy went down the hall and into the tiny room, which was filled with cat hair. There were no chairs, so they sat on the floor. Since they were big guys, they couldn't find a way to sit without having to touch each other. Finally Jason sat in one corner and Percy sat in the diagonal corner. If they kept their legs straight they could make about of foot of space in between them. Allie tried to open the door and hit Percy in the legs. He swore and drew his knees to his chest.

Allie smirked down at them. It had to be obvious they hated each other. "This is gonna be fun. So, I know you can read, smartasses, but I'm giving you the lowdown anyway." She sat Erebos on the floor between them. The cat stepped over Jason's legs and squeezed tight into the remaining corner, between Jason's feet and the wall, acting like it wanted nothing to do with either of them. "Erebos is a male cat, approximately three years old. We found him wandering near the tunnel entrance. We thought he was feral based on our first interactions, but he warms up to people who show him lots of kindness and patience. His color is pure white, which is why he is both deaf and has heterochromia. He's been at the shelter for a year."

Percy reached out to pet Erebos but was greeted with a growl. He retracted his hand.

"Give him time. Sit with him for half an hour or so and let him get comfortable with you," Allie said.
"Which one of you is getting the cat?"

"Both," Jason said.

"What do you mean, 'both,' Neanderthal man?"

"We're going to share him."

"Um, you two kind of obviously hate each other. What makes you think you can share the cat?"

"We're neighbors," Percy answered. "We, um, we'll be able to share."

"Mhmm." Allie didn't look convinced.

Jason didn't blame her. How could they explain that they needed a cat, this cat, and they'd be able to share because the only thing they had in common was how much they missed their mutual lover, which neither could admit to having? It would sound weird to say to someone else that the cat was a Nico substitute. No one understood except Percy. Jason felt a rush of mingled hatred and kinship toward his green-eyed cousin.

"We will, Allie." Jason hoped she registered that he called her by her name. "Percy and I don't agree about a lot of things, but we're committed to Erebos."

He checked for confirmation from Percy, who was emphatically nodding his head.

"Who will Erebos live with?"

"We'll take turns. We hang out together a lot, which I know probably seems weird since we don't like each other. Please, Allie?" Percy had put on the puppy eyes, and Jason was perhaps more shocked than he should have been when Allie uncrossed her arms and rubbed Percy's hair.

"Okay. Sit in here with him and make sure he's the one you want. I'll come back later to check on you."

When the door closed, Percy stretched his legs back out. Erebos climbed over Jason and sat between him and Percy. He still wouldn't let them touch him, but Jason figured it was progress.

They sat in silence for a while before Percy said, "You're not gonna try to lick his ass, right? Cats clean themselves."

Jason fought back a laugh. "You're so fucking juvenile. It's obvious you're not grossed out. You're pissed you didn't think of it yourself. Did you jerk off to the idea already?"

The way Percy's face colored told Jason he was right.

"I still can't believe I told you that." Jason was embarrassed by how much he'd given away to Percy last night.

"It was pretty great," Percy said, and Jason didn't know if he meant Jason spilling his guts or masturbating to the thought of rimming Nico. "And you remember it all. We're gonna get you drunk again."

"We're not drinking anymore, remember? You said you were quitting, and that was definitely a one-time thing for me."

Erebos stood and walked in a circle before flopping back down. Cats didn't do much, Jason guessed.
"Ever had a cat before?" he asked. Maybe Percy would know what to do with one.

"No, but Rachel had one at that townhouse she has. They're easy to take care of. Litterbox and food, and that's about it." Percy reached out his hand and let Erebos sniff him.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. What'd she call it? Barney?"

"Yeah, Barney the pissing cat. He peed all over Annabeth's stuff. Peed on her comforter and everything once. She hated that cat."

Erebos was letting Percy gently pet him now. Jason reached out his hand and got hissed at.

"Does Annabeth like cats in general?"

"Hold your hand still and let him get used to you, Jason. She hates cats." Percy's eyes flashed, and his hand stiffened slightly.

"Do you want to talk this over with her first?" Jason wanted the cat, but he didn't want the cat to be a source of strife between Annabeth and Percy. It seemed like they might have enough problems.

"Right now, I don't care if she ever comes to my house again, so not really." Percy shrugged. "She shouldn't have done whatever she did to Nico. If she knew about us and wanted to say something, she should have talked to me."

"You don't know what she did?"

"Nico denied she'd done anything."

Jason raised an eyebrow. "Maybe she didn't do anything. Maybe he was just ready to be done."

"You're so full of shit, Jason." Percy scowled. "You wish that was true. He told me he was breaking up with me because he wanted me to be happy, have a wife and kids and shit. We wouldn't have done half the stuff we did if he was over me."

There was no way Jason was asking what they did, though he was sure Percy would tell him. Erebos circled around again and bumped Percy's hip with his head. Jason was jealous. He leaned forward and petted the cat, who let him, or at least didn't hiss again.

"You're too rough, Grace. Pet smooth and gentle."

"Quit bossing me around, Percy."

Percy ignored Jason and started talking to the cat. Jason rolled his eyes and tried to pet Erebos the way Percy said. It did seem to work better.

There was a small popping noise, and Jason looked down to see a postcard on his lap. It was one of Hecate's, like Nico had given him after their first break-up. Jason picked it up and read. His heart raced.

"How do you call him?"

Percy diverted his attention from the cat and rolled his eyes. "Who? Erebos? You can't call him. He's deaf."

Jason jumped to his knees and pinned Percy to the wall with a hand on his chest.
"Him. *Him.* How do you arrange your little video sex shit? Hurry!"

"Take your hand off my body unless you want me to slit your belly open and let the cat eat your intestines." Percy's voice was low and his eyes were deadly. He was serious.

"Now! I know you have to contact him. How? Phone? You have a phone. Is that it? Where is it?"

Oh, gods, Nico's postcard was terrifying Jason. He needed to breathe and think.

"I'm not telling you shit, Grace." Percy made a low noise in the back of his throat.

Jason moved his hand off Percy and tried to act more calm.

"He sent me a postcard." Jason held it up and read. "*Dearest Jace, I tried. I really did. The pain is just too much. I'm sorry. I love you.* We have to contact him right now and make sure he's okay."

Percy's eyes had gone wide, and he pulled a phone out of his sock. Without thinking, Jason scooped up Erebus and sat next to Percy to read over his shoulder. Percy had already typed a message.

**"Nico, I'm with Jason and see that postcard you sent. Tell us you're okay. Right now."

"Tell him to send us a picture of himself within the next ten minutes or we're going to Manhattan."

Percy typed the message into his phone.

"What now?" Percy asked.

Jason felt sick. What if Nico had done something even worse than sleep with Apollo? He'd told Jason they weren't Romeo and Juliet, but that message, it sounded so hopeless. No. Nico wouldn't do that.

"He's going to be fine. We need to make sure. That's all." Jason said it for himself as much as Percy.

"If he was doing something too drastic, he'd have contacted you, too, not just me. He wouldn't leave you without saying goodbye, Percy."

Percy nodded and sniffl ed. Jason petted Erebus, who had snuggled into his chest when he picked him up.

"It's probably what you said, about hooking up with his roommate, right? I mean, that's bad, but it's not like, death, bad."

"He's fine. How long has it been?"

Percy checked his phone. "Two minutes."

This was torture. Jason wasn't sure he'd be able to wait the full ten minutes. What time was it in New York? Seven? Nico should be home right now. He probably kept the phone close in case Percy messaged him. Would he still, after they had broken up?

"This is all my fault," Percy said. "Gods, I never should have let him go. I should have called Annabeth and dumped her and begged him to be with me."

"It's not your fault, and what you're saying, I don't think it would have worked," Jason said. "He's a stubborn ass, and he might've liked it if you'd tried, but he wouldn't've let you do it. He'd probably get pissed you didn't do exactly what he ordered you to do."
Percy opened his mouth to answer, but an Iris message swam into view in front of them. It was much clearer than any Jason had ever seen. Nico was staring at them. He looked livid.

"What the fuck is wrong with you two?"

"Are you alright?" Jason cut across Percy.

Nico sighed. "I'm fine."

"Cause that postcard—"

"I shouldn't have sent it, Jace. I was feeling sorry for myself."

"You're not going to, like, off yourself or anything?" Percy asked.

Nico narrowed his eyes. "I'm not an idiot."

"You sure as hell could've fooled me," Jason snapped. "What the hell? What did you do that made you send that card?"

"Fuck, Jason," Percy said. "Lay off."

"No. He needs to spill it right now." Jason couldn't say why he was so angry at Nico, other than he'd scared him to death. He'd been so worried... "Tell me right now, Nico, or I swear to the gods—"

"Shut up, Jason!" Nico spun in a circle. He appeared to be in a bathroom. "I did...that...thing...with...you know..."

"Where are you, baby?" Percy said it so lovingly that Jason wanted to barf. Where did he get off not being mad?

"I'm in the bathroom at the grocery store." Nico fidgeted with his fingers. Jason knew he was worried that a god was going to swoop down and kill him. "I shouldn't be talking to you two. I can't believe you let him see the phone, Percy."

"Fuck you, Nico. What did you expect us to do? It sounded like you were going to kill yourself. You think we won't work together or give up our secrets to keep you safe?" Jason wanted to reach through the Iris message and strangle Nico.

Nico ignored him. "And you, Jason. What the hell are you thinking contacting me? You know you can't do this! You showed Percy the postcard? Do you two have any respect for my privacy?"

"I'm thinking, 'Oh my gods, the only person in the world that I love is going to harm himself.' What the hell else would you have me do?" Jason was shouting now. Erebos dug his claws into Jason's chest. "You don't deserve privacy when you act like a spoiled brat."

"Okay," Percy said, "let's all calm down a bit. We're not trying to hurt you, baby. We needed to know you were okay. I'm sorry I showed Jason the phone. I was scared. I'm glad you're okay. I—"

"Suckup," Jason said. "Fucking suckup. Listen up, Nico. Pull that kind of shit again and I will be on your doorstep to drag your ass to the Underworld. You hear me?"

"I didn't do anything, Jason, except what you probably assumed I did two months ago. Everything's fine. Go back to whatever the hell weird shit you two are doing anyway." Nico paused and looked at them closely. "What are you two doing?"
Percy pointed at Erebos on Jason's chest. "We're adopting a cat."

Nico frowned. "Annabeth hates cats."

"It's for me and Jason," Percy said. "We were missing you and thought a pet would be good."

Nico ran both his hands up and down his face and through his hair. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Poor cat. Does that mean you're at least getting along with each other? That would help me a lot."

Typical. Nico was despondent enough to send that postcard, but he was still looking out for Jason and Percy. Jason felt bad for the things he'd said.

"We're working on it, Neeks," he said. "I'm sorry for being so hard on you. I love you."

Nico's eyes, which had remained angry throughout the conversation, softened. "I love you, too. And you, Percy. You wouldn't be my Jason if you didn't yell at me and hurl accusations my way. I should go, though. No sense tempting the fates further." Nico turned away, and Jason thought he'd forgotten to cancel the message, but he turned back around and Jason could read all the anguish on his face as he started talking. "I can't, um, I can't talk to you guys. It hurts. I'm not going to do something dumber than the things I've already done, and I need you to trust me on that. Stick together. Take care of your stupid cat. Fix your lives. I'm glad to see your faces, both of you, but talking like this, on Iris or text or postcard, I can't do it again. I love you."

This time, neither Jason nor Percy managed to say a word before Nico swiped through the message.

Jason and Percy sat in silence, both petting Erebos.

Jason was struggling to comprehend what felt like the absolute pointlessness of the conversation when Percy said, "I'll go tell Allie we'll take the cat."

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Erebos was an odd cat. Of course, that was why Jason and Percy had gotten him. He spent the first hour that he was in Percy's house hiding under the couch. Percy and Jason tried everything they could think of to get him to come out. They even lifted the couch and moved it, but all Erebos did was run right back under it when they put it down.

Jason had gone home fifteen minutes ago, and Percy was glad to be rid of him. It was awkward, at best, having him around. He was a constant reminder of Nico, not that Percy needed it. It was also comforting, in a way, because Jason was the only person who understood what Percy had been made to give up. A little understanding goes a long way, though, and he and Jason weren't going to get over a year's worth of anger and hatred toward each other just because they got a cat and bonded over mutual sadness. It would take time.

Annabeth had to be coming soon. Percy had kept his distance at school, which wasn't that hard now that they were in their core programs. The architecture classes were far from the English department, and if Percy ducked into a bathroom or two during the day to avoid her, well, that was to be expected. Now, though, it was only a matter of time until she knocked on his door.

Percy sat on his couch, took out his phone, scrolled through pictures of Nico, and waited.
Half an hour later, Annabeth came knocking.

When Percy opened the door, she tried to hug him. He moved back and motioned for her to come in.

"You moved your furniture, Seaweed Brain." She took a seat on the purple chair he'd stolen from the senate lobby. Percy sat in his fishy recliner and put up the footrest.

"I got a cat. We. Jason and me, we got a cat. It's under the couch."

Annabeth gave a faint smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I don't like cats."

"That's why I wanted it."

Annabeth's shoulders dropped. "Are you angry with me about something? I know it was kind of last minute, me going away this weekend, but—"

"Cut the bullshit, Annabeth. I know what you did."

Percy bounced his feet so hard on the footrest that he was worried he'd break the chair. He took a few deep breaths and concentrated on the hole in his jeans. Anything not to see Annabeth.

"What did I do, Percy?"

Percy wanted to explode at her. She deserved it, hurting him and Nico the way she had. He took in her appearance, her boring red t-shirt, her normal jeans, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, beautiful without a hint of makeup. Her eyes, they were so sad. Percy faltered.

"You took something from me that I loved. Don't pretend you didn't."

"So you want me to be honest with you? Is that it?"

"Yeah."

Annabeth laughed, sharp and angry. She stood and went into the kitchen. When she came back, she had an open can of tuna. She put some tuna in her hand and crouched in front of the couch.

"I'll be honest with you when you start being honest with me. Tell me, which one of us do you think has lied the most this past year?"

"Me." Percy got out of his chair and sat on the coffee table. He was about three feet from Annabeth, which felt too close, but he wanted to see what she was doing.

"Yes, you. I'll tell you the truth, Percy, if you want, but you have to stop lying to me, too. Is that what you want?"

"It doesn't matter anymore, so I guess."

"Way to make me feel loved." Venom dripped from Annabeth's voice. "You go first then. Where were you this weekend?"

Percy had known that having this conversation, this showdown he'd envisioned, would mean coming clean about where he'd been and who he'd been with, but saying it to Annabeth was admitting he'd betrayed her again.

"I was in San Francisco."
Annabeth looked up at him. Her eyes were hard and more angry than Percy had ever seen them. "That's what you have to say? You were in San Francisco? Fine, I'll play. What were you doing in San Francisco, Percy?"

Percy opened and closed his mouth. He tried again. Nothing.

"Virginia was beautiful. My dad says to tell you 'good tidings.'" She moved her hand to another spot along the front of the couch. "Ask me anything you want about my trip, I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"How about the trip before that? Did you leave out any little details about Clarisse's wedding?" There was something Percy could latch onto. He was going to get this out of her. By the sound of her voice, she was as ready for this confrontation as he was. Neither of them wanted to make the first move.

"Nico kissed me. He's an amazing kisser. Of course, I've never kissed anyone but you, so I don't have much to go on. It was incredibly hot, though."

Percy hadn't expected that. Why would Nico kiss Annabeth?

"He also helped me out of my dress. His hands are so sexy. I didn't want him to stop touching me. Is that how you feel when you're fucking him? Because that's what you were doing this weekend, right? Fucking Nico?"

Percy didn't answer. He'd been so ready to scream at Annabeth for hurting them. He'd wanted to end it. He'd wanted to call her a bitch, out loud and to her face. This wasn't the way it was supposed to go.

"How many times did you two do it? Five? I bet it was more than that. You hadn't seen each other in a while, right? Except all the times you Iris each other and get off together. I know about it all, Percy."

"I...the wedding...he told you?"

"No, you fucking idiot. He didn't say a damned thing that I didn't already know except that he loved you and needed you. Which is so sad, I'll give you that. You gave it all away. You keep your secret phone in your sock, for the gods' sake! You make it easy to know your secrets, because you have so little regard for how I'll feel if I find out. You're supposed to love me, not treat me like a convenient second choice."

"I don't treat you like an afterthought. I...you don't understand. I didn't plan this. I wasn't expecting to fall in love with him."

"You just expected to get a few fucks out of him? That's supposed to make me feel better?"

"It never bothered you before!"

Annabeth recoiled like Percy had slapped her. He plowed ahead.

"You never cared when I fucked around on you. You were always too busy being perfect. Nothing got you to notice me, not like I needed to be noticed. At least all those girls and Nico, they enjoyed being with me. Not like you. When I'm with Nico, I'm all he's thinking about. Everything is me and him, and he'd do anything to make me happy. I'd do anything to make him happy. When have you ever cared about me being happy?"
"Bastard," Annabeth spat. The hand holding the tuna shook. "I care about keeping you alive and safe. I care about making sure you get through college and don't piss off the gods. I care that you eat when you're supposed to. I care that your mom and Tyson and Paul and everyone else you love are safe. Being a couple isn't always about happiness. It's about being secure and safe and warm. It isn't always easy or fun. What you've been doing with Nico is a fairy tale that you've both indulged in. You may love him, whatever, but that's because you aren't trying to make a life together. Yeah, I'm hard, but so are you, Percy. You think you and Nico would have it so easy if you were having to make decisions together about your lives? He's a free spirit. You want a family. He's still a boy. He doesn't take care of you when you're sick. He doesn't see the disgusting way you leave your toenail clippings on the end table. He doesn't have to help you do your laundry because you're too big a baby to learn to do it yourself. You think it would be so easy and lovey-dovey with him if he had to do the real parts of your life, not just the parts where you're having fun times and fucking? I like those parts, too, you jerk. That doesn't make a life."

Annabeth angrily wiped a tear from her cheek. Percy felt terrible. Of course she was right. He'd been enjoying all the high points of love and sex with Nico without giving a thought to what a small amount of a relationship those things were. He couldn't help believing he and Nico could navigate those other parts of a relationship, but here was Annabeth, right here, and she had been doing it with him for a long time now.

"I'm sorry," Percy said.

"That's the first time you've said it where I really believed you." Annabeth sighed. Her hair was coming down from her ponytail. Percy reached out and smoothed it back along her head. "I love you, Percy. I love you, and I think we have something worth keeping. But I'm not going to be second in your life anymore. I don't want there to be a second person in your life. If you cheat on me again, I will leave.

Percy had been ready to tell Annabeth to leave. He'd been planning to scream at her to get out, to never have anything to do with him again. He couldn't do it.

"I need to think about us, Annabeth. I do love you, but I love Nico more. I'm sorry because that probably hurts to hear. He and I, you're right. We don't have to do the real work of being a couple, and I don't know if we could. I like being your boyfriend. I like you."

"Liking me isn't enough."

Percy hung his head. He was losing both of them, Nico and Annabeth. Fabulous. He was going to be the crazy cat man with Jason. They were going to grow old and bitter and die together, all while petting their cats and talking about how much they missed Nico. Annabeth would be a famous demigod leader. Nico would be a politician. They'd move on and have good lives. Percy'd have Jason and Erebos.

Erebos peeked out from under the couch and sniffed Annabeth's hand. He daintily licked up a piece of tuna.

"What's his name?" Annabeth asked.

"Erebos. He's deaf. And temperamental."

Annabeth huffed a laugh. "Figures. So you and Jason got a cat as a Nico replacement? That's awful for the cat. I can see why you chose him, though. One blue eye, one green, Nico's personality. He's the ultimate Big Three boy cat, right? I hope you two didn't tell anyone the asinine reason you got him."
"I'm really sad, Annabeth."

"I know. Me, too."

Erebos was letting Annabeth pet him while he ate the tuna out of her hand. Percy slipped off the table and curled himself into Annabeth's back. He put a hand on her hip and rested his chin on her shoulder to watch the cat.

"I don't have any promise to give you. I'm in love with Nico. And I'm so angry that you went to him instead of talking to me. I hate that you did something to hurt him, even if he wouldn't tell me what it was."

"I didn't like it, either," she said softly. "You've been really callous to me. He was more troubled by what you two were doing. I only hurt him as much as I needed to get the job done."

"Talk to me. You said relationships aren't easy, and you're right. This is between me and you, not you and him. I think...I think we need to take a break."

"Yes."

Percy kissed Annabeth's cheek. He'd thought he couldn't feel worse after losing Nico. He'd been wrong. "How will it work?"

Annabeth nestled back in his arms. He hadn't realized he was holding her. Erebos climbed onto her lap.

"We talk. Maybe once or twice a week? No dating for either of us — not each other, not anyone else."

"That's fine."

"No Nico, Percy. You can't contact him and have any shot with me."

"That's...okay. Yeah." Percy's eyes spilled over. Nico had said Percy couldn't contact him, but he'd planned to ignore what Nico said.

"Give me the phone you used to talk to him."

"No."

"Percy—"

"No, Annabeth. I won't contact him, but I'm keeping that phone. It has," he paused, because saying he wanted to keep the phone because there were pictures of Nico on there wouldn't make Annabeth inclined to let him keep the phone, and it wasn't quite the reason he couldn't give the phone up. "I need to know that he can find me if he's in trouble."

"That's Jason's responsibility, not yours. And Nico's not helpless. I think he's more powerful than you and Jason, honestly. He just isn't such a show-off."

"That's not what I mean," Percy said. "He's alone. Jason, the bastard asshole, isn't there for him like maybe you think he is. It's...he's not in a good situation. It's not about his powers, it's what he thinks of himself and how he self-destructs. I owe him things, Annabeth."

"He's not your child or your brother, and he can't be your lover. He's never been your friend."
Percy laid his temple on Annabeth's shoulder and looked out over her back, away from Erebos and Annabeth's face.

"I'm not giving up the phone. Let's work on me and you. I can commit to that."

"This is our beginning or our end, Percy. Either way, I love you."

Percy wrapped his arms tightly around Annabeth's waist.

"I love you, too."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter!

If there's interest, in the next few days I'll be posting a cut scene that takes place about three weeks after the conclusion of this chapter. I'll try to remember to link to it when I post Ch. 45 (if I have the scene ready to go).

Thanks, all of you, for your support and encouragement!
"This is awkward and ridiculous."

"It's a date, Nico. They are, by definition, awkward and ridiculous." Jason smiled. He moved his hands through the tide and dug his toes into the cool sand. "I know what would make it better."

"What?" Nico sat next to Jason, his knees bent and smacking together over and over.

"We could take our clothes off. That would be better."

"Ugh. People do not go on dates naked."

"They'd have more fun that way." Jason nudged Nico's shoulder with his own and fingered the hem of Nico's long black swim trunks. "Besides, we're not people anymore. We're gods."

"Don't remind me." Nico looked over at Jason, whose blue trunks were much shorter than Nico's and showed off powerful, sculpted legs covered in soft hair two or three shades darker than the sun-kissed hair on Jason's head. Nico leaned to the side and let his eyes trail up Jason's body. Jason's stomach was impressively muscled, and sitting this way, propped up with his hands in the sand behind him, his belly button was little more than a thin horizontal line. Nico sat on his hands so he wouldn't touch it.

"What are you doing?" Jason asked.

"Shut up. I'm examining your body, dumbass." Nico watched the way the sun gleamed off Jason's broad chest. He'd never seen another man with such a muscular upper body, at least not a man that was anywhere near as attractive as Jason. Jason's shoulders were enormous. Nico thought the entire span of his own shoulders could fit in the space from one of Jason's shoulders to the opposite side of his neck, and Nico was not a small man. The feeling that Jason could curl around him, blanket him, had always made Nico feel safe, even as physically rough as Jason could sometimes be with him.

"You see me all the time. What's different about now?" A hint of a smile played on Jason's lips.

"Well, usually when I see you undressed, we're having sex or swimming or it's dark out." Nico focused on one of Jason's nipples. It was very pink. "See, I can't see detail like this when it's dark, and when we're swimming or having sex I'm not thinking about how your body looks."

Nico turned his whole body to face Jason and put his face close to Jason's chest. He blew across Jason's nipple to make it hard.

"You know this is weird, right? Normal people don't examine their date's nipples."

"I'm not normal. You're bigger than you were when we were last together. Broader. More muscular, but not like weird bodybuilder muscular."

Nico scooted further in front of Jason and narrowed his eyes, visually tracing the line of Jason's sternum up to his collarbones. Jason bumped Nico's face with his chest. Nico scowled.

"I can't help it," Jason said. "It's disconcerting, the way you're examining me. What are you even
thinking?"

"I'm thinking you're a jackass. Also, I'm thinking your collarbones are more curved than Percy's. It could be the muscles, I guess. You have roughly seventy-five chest hairs."

Jason shoved Nico's face away. Nico spluttered, and Jason knocked him over. He pinned Nico's wrists to the sand, but was careful not to touch him anyplace else. He leaned his head close to Nico's chest like Nico had done to him.

"I did not look like that, Jason," Nico said. He had looked exactly like that.

"Hmm," Jason said. "The test subject appears to have a straight clavicle and no discernible chest hair. His nipples are quite erect, so there's no need for me to blow air on them like a nerdy psycho freak."

"Shut up, Jason." Nico's belly shook with a silent laugh.

Jason brushed his nose over Nico's sternum. Nico giggled but quickly stifled the noise.

"Subject appears to be ticklish. Further inquiry is recommended."

"Don't you dare."

Jason dared. Nico squealed and brought his knee up to Jason's stomach. Jason doubled over and released Nico's wrists. The son of Hades scampered to his feet and anxiously stood ten feet away. He didn't want to hurt Jason or make him mad.

Jason raised his head. His face was red, and he was clutching his stomach. He narrowed his eyes at Nico. "You'd better run."

Jason shot up, and Nico whirled and ran as fast as he could.

Nico was a very fast runner. It took Jason longer than he'd thought it would to catch up. When he did, he curled Nico into his arms and lifted the dark-haired god off his feet. Nico bent his knees, and Jason threw him up a bit higher and readjusted his grip. He carried Nico into the dry sand and laid him gently on the ground, keeping an arm around Nico's shoulders. Their faces were close together.

"I love you," Jason whispered. "Tell me something about you that I don't know."

Nico brushed some sand from Jason's eyebrow. "I miss you holding me like this, when it's soft and not sexual, just warm and friendly."

Jason rubbed his cheek against Nico's. He missed it, too. "I miss your dumb skull shirts, though I admit I like your newer wardrobe better."

"Good, because I'm not going back. I'm definitely better off without advertising I'm on a first-name basis with Death." Nico sat up a bit but stayed in Jason's embrace. "Tell me something I don't know about you."

This had become their dating game. Each time they went on a date, they shared information, got to know a little better the people they'd become.

"I thought about getting another tattoo, but I never did it because I knew you'd hate it. I did and didn't do a lot of things because I wanted your approval."

Nico hummed and laid his head on Jason's shoulder. "What would you have gotten a tattoo of?"
"I'm not sure. I had some vague ideas about a skull or crossed swords, yours and mine, stuff like that."

"Where would you have put it?" Nico nuzzled in closer. He enjoyed the feeling of Jason's warm chest touching his back.

"My other shoulder, probably. Kind of boring."

"I have two confessions to make." Nico picked up Jason's hand and made a slow path tracing the edges of his fingers. He stopped abruptly and turned so he could trace the contours of Jason's tattoo. "First, and I don't want you to get any other tattoos, but I think your shoulder looks even hotter with this obnoxious thing on there. It kind of turns me on."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said. I didn't want to encourage you. One tattoo may be hot, but multiple tattoos doesn't do anything positive for me."

"You liking the tattoo kind of turns me on. Especially the way you're touching it right now." Jason dipped his head so he bumped Nico's head.

"No sex while we're on a date. Get over the feeling." Nico removed his hand from Jason's skin. "Do you want to know the second confession?"

"It better be a good one since you stopped touching me," Jason said.

Nico bit his lip and laid back against Jason so they were facing the same way. "It is. Even Percy doesn't know. Apollo was the only one who knew."

Nico held out his arm and shook his wrist. The silver and black bracelet glittered in the sun.

"You're showing me your bracelet? I already know about that. Apollo gave it to you, like I assume he gave you the rest of the jewelry you wear." Jason tried not to let his jealousy show. He had never bought Nico trinkets of affection like that. It had never occurred to him. Obviously, Nico must have liked that Apollo had done it.

"He did, all of it, and it feels like as much a part of me as my boots and my sword, though it didn't in the beginning. It felt like handcuffs back then." Nico felt sad to admit those old feelings to Jason. "I want to show you what's under the bracelet. It's magical. Conceals whatever's underneath. I don't suppose things can get worse now, so there's no need for the concealment." Nico hesitated. "Maybe we should go inside."

"Percy's sleeping," Jason pointed out. He didn't want to go inside and break the moment. He felt so happy with Nico reclining against him.

"I know. Never mind. I'll show you another time."

"Will you show Percy, too?"

"Are you asking because you don't want Percy to know or because you do?" Nico sought Jason's eyes, but he glanced away when he found them. It was too tempting to get lost in them.

"I don't know," Jason said. "I'm not so jealous of Percy anymore. I think he's probably not as jealous of me, either. We're definitely rebuilding our friendship faster than you and I are rebuilding our romance."
"Yes, well, you did all that shit to me, not to him. Plus, he's a way better guy than me." Nico leaned forward, off of Jason's body, and wrapped his arms around his knees.

Jason leaned forward, too, and laid his head on Nico's back. He had to resist the urge to kiss his shoulder blades. Even under the warm sun, Nico's skin was still cool. He hadn't tanned any in all the time they'd lived in their beach prison. Jason's and Percy's skin had already been tan, but their tans were darker and deeper now.

"I don't think Percy's necessarily a better guy than you," Jason said. "He's definitely a better guy than me."

"No argument from me, Jace."

"Ass." Jason nudged Nico's back with his head. "You could at least pretend to consider it. Throw me a bone, man."

Nico chuckled. "Here's the bone: I think the gap between you two is closer than I used to believe."

"Thanks," Jason said sarcastically. "You're in love with him as much as you're in love with me."

"I'm not," Nico whispered. "I wish I was, to be honest. If I was, he and I could be happy. I could better ease his pain. He'd get over Annabeth, and we'd figure out a way for him to see Maybelle."

"I'm sorry. I wish you wanted to love me." Jason pulled his hands back from Nico's skin and sat up straight, so no part of him touched Nico.

"I hurt you." Nico was genuinely surprised. He hadn't meant to hurt Jason. "Isn't there a part of you that wishes you could forget about me, find happiness with someone else?"

"No. Not at all. Never." Jason stood. "There's only ever been you, and you're all I could ever want. I love you, just you, stupid, and it's worth all the shit I put up with, including this horrible conversation. Date's over. I'm going for a swim."

Nico was so stunned he didn't move or say a word as Jason got up and walked away. Jason had disappeared under the waves before he had even made it to his knees. He sighed and walked back to the house.

Percy was still sleeping when Nico went inside. The comforter was balled up around his knees. His hair was disheveled and a thin stream of drool lined his cheek. Nico gently closed Percy's mouth and wiped the drool away with Jason's pillow. He curled up next to Percy and sighed heavily. Percy continued to sleep. Nico sighed again, louder. Percy slept. Nico brushed his hair on Percy's nose and mouth, but nothing happened.

"Shit," Nico said. He resolved to act like an adult and take a nap while he waited for Percy to wake. He turned over and wedged himself tightly into Percy's body. Then he wrapped Percy's arm around his waist. He closed his eyes and waited. He rolled his eyes and wiggled his butt back into Percy's crotch. Patience was not Nico's forte.

Outside, Jason broke the surface of the water and yelled, "You're a rotten jackass, Nico!"

Nico whispered, "Fuck you, Jason."

Nico turned back over and threw his leg over Percy, who tightened his grip on Nico and fidgeted with the back of Nico's trunks. Nico thought for a moment that he may get his wish and Percy would wake, but Percy figured out the riddle of Nico's pants and slipped his hand inside them without ever
opening an eye. Nico wasn't feeling remotely amorous, but he very much wanted to rouse Percy.

He kissed Percy's lips and across his jaw. Percy squeezed Nico's butt, but didn't wake. Nico went back to work on Percy's lips, nibbling and licking until Percy was returning full, tongue-filled kisses. The older god rolled them over until Nico was underneath him and mumbled, "Want you so much, Nico."

Nico caught Percy's forehead with his hand before Percy could kiss him again. "Can we talk?"

Percy's pretty green eyes flashed open. "And then sex? Sure."

"Maybe sex," Nico said. "Can you take your hand out of my pants?"

"I'm liking this conversation less and less." Percy removed his hand from Nico's swim trunks and sat up. "What's up?"

"I got in a fight with Jason." Nico recognized he sounded whiny. He didn't stop. "The big jerk got mad at something I said, and he bolted. Said 'date's over' and jumped in the damned ocean. How are we supposed to work things out if he runs away?"

"The asshole said he wished he didn't love me!" Jason's voice floated to their ears from outside.

"That's not what I said, jackass!" Nico yelled back.

Percy covered his ears. "Are you finished breaking my eardrums?"

Nico nodded. He'd crossed his arms and ankles and was scowling fiercely. Percy ran a hand down his own face and tried to be patient.

"What did you say, Nico?"

"I said, and this is all, that I wished I loved you as much as him. That we, you and I, could be happy together here."

Percy wrinkled his nose. He climbed off the bed. "So you basically said that you wished he wasn't here and I meant more to you than being your consolation prize?"

"Ugh." Nico flung himself back on the bed and gestured at the ceiling. "Why are you both so stupid? That's not what I meant!"

"Sounded to me like that's what you meant," said Jason, who'd appeared in the doorway dripping wet and naked. A vein pulsed in his temple.

"Oh look, Stupid Number One showed up," Nico spat. "Why don't you and Stupid Number Two go stick your thumbs up your asses and play your dumb video games? I need a break."

"Gods, Nico, can we talk about this?" Percy asked. "You were complaining that Jason wouldn't talk to you about the problem, now you're shutting us out?"

Nico shook his head. "No. I don't want to talk. I'm too mad right now."

"I didn't even do anything." Percy raised his hands out to the side. He didn't like it when Nico got like this. "You shouldn't call me stupid. It's not nice."

Nico threw a pillow at him. "You are stupid, and I don't give a shit if it's nice or not."
Percy threw the pillow back with twice as much force and hit Nico in the head. "You're being a dick. I don't blame Jason for diving into the ocean to escape this shit."

"You're taking his side? I can't believe it. Morons." Nico sat up and glared at them.

"You're calling me names and insulting me and saying mean shit about me. Of course I'm siding with Jason! It's like you've turned into a fucking three year old." Percy ducked as the pillow came flying back at him. It hit Jason with a loud whack and fell to his feet. Percy wasn't about to pick it up when it was that close to Jason's naked body.

"Well, hell, you think I'm acting like a kid, too, Jason?" Nico stood up. Jason and Percy took a step back.

"Yep, a bratty little asshole three year old, jackass." The water droplets on Jason's skin turned to ice. He flicked one off, and it hit Percy in the arm.

Nico cocked his head. "No problem, then." He went back to the bed and sat. His eyes were murderous, but his voice sounded calm. "You two think I'm acting like a child? No sex. Don't want sex with a kid, after all. Have fun fucking each other."

Jason and Percy took a step apart. Jason put on clothes. Nico barked out a mean laugh and forced a huge stone into the doorway, shutting out Jason and Percy.

"Motherfucker," Jason said on the other side of the door. "It's like the fucking Red Lobster all over again. I'm in love with the world's most powerful spoiled brat."

"You and me both, brother," Percy said. He yelled to Nico, "You know we can flash ourselves in there, right?"

"Don't bother." Jason tapped Percy's shoulder. "Come on and play video games like he said. He'll quit being a whiny crybaby soon enough."

Chapter End Notes

Not a high moment for the guys in their godhood. The original title of this chapter was "Baby Fight."

As promised, I've posted a bonus scene, set after the events of Chapter 44. You can find it here. Although it's a cut scene from the main work, it's one that adds some understanding about the frame of mind of a couple of the characters and introduces a character who's been mentioned but unseen so far in the story.
Percy wouldn't admit it out loud, but he'd be glad to leave this couch behind when he graduated. He, Annabeth, Piper, and Jason were all piled onto the thing, watching some boring romantic comedy Piper had chosen. His butt was situated over the spot where a loose spring made the couch sag. He felt like he was sinking into a hole. It was worse because Jason was there, towering and massive, on the other side of the couch. Normally when Jason was over, Percy made him sit on the sagging side if they both sat on the couch, but Annabeth was making Percy be a good host since this was technically a double date.

Percy leaned into Annabeth and whispered, "This movie's stupid." Her hair smelled like apples. He would never tire of the smell.

Annabeth grinned and tightened her grip on Percy's hand, which was resting on her shoulder. Percy stared at Jason and tried to telepathically attract his attention. It worked. Jason shifted his gaze from the TV and met Percy's eyes. Percy gave an exaggerated eye roll, and Jason smirked.

As the brokenhearted female lead prepared to board a plane and the truly-sorry-he-screwed-it-up-but-this-time-it's-gonna-be-different male lead raced through the airport in a last-ditch effort to catch her and confess his true love, Percy started to fake snore. Piper shot him a hateful glance, and Annabeth elbowed him, though the gesture was halfhearted. Percy knew she hated this shit, too. He nuzzled his face into her neck and gave her a quick kiss.

They were recovering. The healing hadn't been quick or easy, and there were plenty of rocky patches, but things were getting better between them. Percy would almost say he'd never been so in love with her as he was now. She had been so wise, when she talked about what makes up a relationship, and Percy felt like he was only beginning to understand what it meant to act like an adult, with more boring and constant worries than the kind that came with the threat of imminent death. He liked having Annabeth be his partner as they moved into the world of grown-ups.

The movie mercifully ended, and Percy scooped up their dinner plates to take to the kitchen. Piper followed him while Annabeth and Jason stayed behind, quietly talking about how work was coming on one of the minor gods' shrines. It was hard to believe that almost four years after the Giant War, new minor gods were still stepping forward to claim a place in the camps. Jason had been doing a great job — way better than before — getting all the pieces in place to make the shrines come together. At first, after the war, he had tried to do everything himself and annoyed everyone around him by being a micromanager. Then he hadn't done anything for a long while, which pissed people off, too. Since he came back in January, though, he'd been able to delegate and take the job seriously. Percy guessed Jason was growing up, too.

"Here, Percy." Piper leaned against the sink and filled it with soapy water. "I'll dry if you wash."

"Thanks. That'd be great."

Piper was such a nice person. She was so nice that Percy sometimes found it odd she and Annabeth were such good friends. Not that Annabeth wasn't kind. She was. But nice was different. Nice was not saying something because you didn't want to hurt someone's feelings. Nice was trying not to make a stir or rock the boat. Annabeth wasn't nice. None of them were, except for Piper. Not even Hazel — especially not since she'd been made Praetor. That girl had serious backbone. Nico had to be so proud.

"Penny for your thoughts," Piper said.
Percy handed her the first plate he'd washed. They'd had beef stroganoff. He thought it had been excellent, but he'd caught Jason feeding his to Erebos.

"You're nice."

Piper tilted her head and gave a bemused half-laugh, and Percy realized that was more like a tenth of a penny's worth of thoughts. "I mean, that's what I was thinking. You're nicer than Annabeth. And Hazel isn't nice, either, but she's an awesome Praetor."

Piper laughed outright now. "Girls don't have to be kind, but there's so much pressure on us to be 'good' or 'nice.' It's not fair. Guys can be enormous jackasses, and nobody thinks twice about it. They call you good leaders. Reyna and Hazel are tough and fair and don't take crap and people call them bitches. No one ever said stuff like that about Frank."

"Frank is nice. Why are you so nice?"

"I'm not, really." She took another plate, dried it off, and put it in the cupboard. It was funny how comfortable Jason and Piper were at his house now. They knew where everything went. "Ask Jason if you don't believe me."

"How are you guys doing?" Percy shouldn't pry, but he was curious. Jason shut him down whenever he asked.

Piper shrugged. "The dates are nice. Gods, there's that word. The dates are fine. I like them, and I think he has a good time. He finally kissed me the other night, like a real, romantic kiss. We should take it slow like this anyway."

If they took things any slower they wouldn't get together until they were eighty. He handed Piper all the silverware.

"Percy, you didn't even wash these. That's gross."

"I rinsed. Frank told me the germs die in like three hours anyway, and no one's going to use them again for at least that long."

"You have permanently killed my willingness to eat at your house." Piper slotted the silverware back into the drawer. She'd make a good wife someday. Percy didn't want to be sexist; he knew there were lots of ways for spouses to divide chores. But Piper could cook and clean and he remembered how all the little Aphrodite kids back at Camp Half-Blood had loved her. Annabeth was okay-ish with kids and she kept things immaculate, but she didn't cook. If they ever got married, the kitchen would be Percy's domain. They might eat take-out a lot.

"You're zoning out again, Percy."

Piper gently took the plate he was washing and rinsed it for him. He picked up a cup and started cleaning it. He tried to at least pretend like he was being more thorough.

"Sorry, I was thinking about marriage."

That was the wrong thing to say. Piper squealed and wheeled around to face him.

"You're thinking about asking Annabeth to marry you?"

"What? No!" He might have shot the idea down too quickly, so he added, "I mean, not anytime soon."
Piper silently clapped her hands together and bounced on the balls of her feet.

"Oh, gods, Percy, that's so exciting! You’re the most amazing couple! Can you imagine how adorable your kids would be?"

Yeah, he could. Percy fought the urge to cover his ears. Piper didn't know about the past year's infidelity. She thought Percy's affair had ended by the time he returned to New Rome from his quest for Hades. Annabeth had explained it was a pride thing, the reason she didn't tell her best friend what Percy had done. Percy didn't blame her; he wouldn't have told anyone, either, if their roles were reversed. Jason also hadn't told. He and Jason each kept the other's secrets closely hidden.

Percy washed the last cup and handed it to Piper. He drained the sink and waited for her to finish drying so they could walk back into the living room together.

Jason and Annabeth were talking in hushed tones, and Percy could tell the conversation no longer had anything to do with shrines. They both seemed slightly angry, but hid it away when they caught sight of Percy and Piper. Percy remembered when he'd wondered if Jason and Annabeth might have a thing for each other. He had been so far off base.

Annabeth scooted off the couch and leaned in to give him a warm kiss. Percy couldn't resist deepening it a little. It was kind of rude with company right there, but maybe he'd give Jason and his glacier-paced ass some ideas. Neither of them should be waiting around for a future that wasn't going to happen.

"Hey, Piper, come to the bathroom with me?" Annabeth asked.

They were so bizarre. Percy didn't understand this need to go to the bathroom together. It was not a girl thing. He'd asked Reyna if it was and almost gotten his head slapped off. Piper kissed Jason's cheek and followed Annabeth down the hall.

"Why do they do that?" Percy asked, sitting down next to Jason.

Jason grunted. "Fuck if I know. I think they want to talk about us. That stroganoff was shit, Percy. Even Erebos didn't want it. You've gotta take a cooking class."

"Hey, take Erebos home tonight, okay? Annabeth's staying over."

Jason glared at him, and Percy knew it wasn't about the cat.

"We have to move on, Jace. That's what he told us both to do. You're not making him happy by being a lonely dick. And plus, you can't have it both ways. You can't hate me for fucking Nico and then hate me for getting over him."

"You act like it's easy, Percy. That's what pisses me off." Jason crossed his hands into his armpits. He looked ridiculous.

Percy rubbed his face. It was a habit he'd picked up from Nico. "It hasn't been easy, not at all. You know I miss him. But, fuck, Jason, he's not coming back to either of us. He hasn't made any effort to talk to us. He doesn't want us around."

"That's not true." Jason sounded tired. Percy wondered if this was the conversation Jason had shared with Annabeth. "He thinks he's doing us a favor."

"Maybe he is," Percy said quietly. He stared at his hands. Jason would hate what he'd just said. Percy dropped his voice even further. "I love him. I do. And I hate that he's closing himself off from
us, all of us, not just me and you. But we can't fix him."

"We fucked him up. It's our fault."

Percy had learned that when Jason said this to him, he meant he, Jason, had fucked Nico up. He wasn't talking about Percy. Not really. Percy didn't know everything that had happened between Jason and Nico, but he knew it wasn't pretty, even before the horrible senate debacle. Arguing with Jason when he was like this was pointless.

"Take Erebos home for me."

Jason closed his eyes and nodded. "Get his carrier."

Percy pulled it out of the small closet near the front door. It would take both of them and a hand towel to get Erebos in the crate. He didn't like making the trek from one house to the other.

"What are we going to do with him this summer? We only have a couple days left before we go," Percy said.

"I don't know. We'll shuttle him back and forth between your cabin and mine, I guess." Jason didn't seem too concerned. Percy thought he was a much better kitty father than Jason.

"How will we get him there?" Percy was excited to be spending the summer at Half-Blood. All four of them were going, and Leo was set to make an appearance. It would be fun as long as Jason wasn't a surly ass. Percy didn't have high hopes on that front. He wanted one last shot at fun and frivolity before senior year and real adulthood set in, and he needed Jason to be his partner in crime. Well, more like his wet blanket that reeled him in before he did anything too stupid. It was better when Jason was just ultra-responsible instead of morose, though.

"Let me see the picture," Jason said, startling Percy out of his thoughts.

"We shouldn't."

"Come on, Percy. You know you want to."

Percy felt a pull of dread and gazed toward the bathroom. Whatever they were doing in there was taking forever. He withdrew his secret phone. Annabeth had confessed that she'd seen everything on it, and after a long and ugly fight, she'd agreed to let Percy keep it as long as he removed the lock screen and let her see it whenever she wanted. She'd told him she could retrieve lost data, so he'd better never text anyone, meaning Nico, but Percy didn't believe her. It didn't matter, because other than that first day with Jason and the postcard, Nico hadn't replied in any way to any of Percy's texts. Percy had stopped sending them about a month ago. It still hurt.

He scrolled through the pictures until he found the right one. Jason hadn't been surprised to learn what made up the majority of Percy's photo library, and he'd told Percy to delete the sex photos, but Percy hadn't done it. He'd kept every photo and wasn't about to let any of them go. Jason liked the one that was Percy's favorite. They stared at the photo without talking until Percy heard the lock click on the bathroom door. He slipped the phone back in his pocket.

"Thanks," Jason whispered.

Percy clapped Jason's shoulder and went down the hall to get a towel.
Jason propped his head on the headrest and watched Annabeth dig bird feathers out of her teeth. He smirked. They'd been on the road for four days now, and Jason hated everyone in the car. Annabeth's discomfort was great fun. He scooted lower in the seat and dug his knees into the back of the front passenger seat.

Percy wheeled around and glared at him.

"Fuck you, fucking giant. Get your gods-damned motherfucking knees out of my fucking back. Fucker."

Jason smiled. "Nope."

Between Annabeth and Jason, Erebos meowed from inside his cat carrier.

Annabeth rolled her eyes. "I hate your stupid cat."

Percy glared at her, too. "That's part of the point of having him."

"We're almost there. Can the three of you try to get along for this last stretch?" Piper asked. She'd been drafted to drive the last bit after a particularly bad road rage incident involving Annabeth and a flock of Harpies (thus the feathers in her teeth). Percy had already lost driving privileges, and Jason didn't know how to drive, something that infuriated everyone since he'd failed to mention it ahead of time.

The SUV hit a bump and Erebos meowed again. Annabeth thumped the top of his cage. Percy unbuckled, climbed onto the armrest between the seats, unbuckled the carrier, and dragged it into the front seat with him, all the while ignoring Piper's pleas for safety.

Once he was buckled again, Percy said, "Erebos is sleeping in my cabin tonight, Grace. Tell Annabeth she isn't invited."

Piper groaned. Annabeth reached forward and stuck her middle finger in Percy's face. Just for fun, Jason kicked Percy's seat.

"Stop it, all of you." Piper didn't shout it, but she spoke with enough conviction and oomph to make them all pause in their attempts to irritate each other. "Now, we have five minutes until we get to camp. I don't want to hear anything out of any of you. Don't even move."

There was definitely charmspeak in her voice. Jason couldn't have moved if he'd wanted to. Piper must be seriously pissed. She didn't charmspeak her friends. Jason felt guilty, though he'd like to get in one more whack at Percy's seat before the trip ended.

After five minutes of complete silence, even from Erebos, who'd meowed pretty much non-stop the entire trip, they pulled onto the access road that led to Camp Half-Blood. Jason hadn't been back since he'd left for college almost two years ago. He'd once felt so at home here. When he'd been here with Nico, when they'd been young and their love had been so innocent, he'd never been happier. He doubted he would ever be as happy again.

His eyes filled with tears, and he was surprised when Annabeth managed to break Piper's hold on them and cover his hand with hers. He wished he could squeeze her fingers so she'd know how grateful he was that she didn't try to sweep his life with Nico under the rug like everyone else did.
Piper pretended he had never loved Nico. Percy urged him to move on. Hazel and Frank barely spoke to him, and then only if it was about something impersonal. Reyna kept her distance. Annabeth listened. She didn’t try to tell him to get over Nico or hint that he should focus on making Piper happy. They argued sometimes because Annabeth felt he shouldn’t be dating Piper if he wasn’t over Nico, but her argument was flat since she was sleeping with Percy again and Jason knew Percy hadn’t fully moved on.

Jason was more comfortable talking about Nico now. Last summer, he’d been terrified Juno or Jupiter would kill Nico if he even said his name out loud, but nothing had happened, despite his vague conversations with Annabeth, Percy, and Reyna. He hadn’t even had any godly fallout when he and Percy had talked to Nico on Iris message. If ever there was an event that would make Zeus afraid, Jason would have thought it would have been when all three boys were talking at once. Maybe Zeus had decided they weren’t the threat he’d thought them to be. Jason doubted it. More likely, his father’s attention had been diverted by some new threat or tight piece of ass.

"Okay," Piper said. "You can all talk and move now."

She had driven into camp and stopped in front of the Big House. Now that Jason could move his eyes and neck to look around, he saw that they had drawn quite a crowd. He didn’t see anyone he recognized. These kids were all so young! Had he and his friends been this small? He imagined his fifteen year old self, the first time he’d come here. He hadn’t been small, but Leo had been tiny. Jason smiled thinking about Leo. He was probably already here, down in Bunker 9, immersed in his latest projects.

That was the part of this summer Jason was most anticipating — reconnecting with Leo. He’d missed having Leo around. MIT was stressful, Leo said, and he hadn’t been able to get away most of the time. Jason had only seen him twice since Percy’s party, and one of those times was when Nico had sent Leo to pick up a very sick and stupid son of Jupiter. He hadn’t even been able to properly visit then because Leo had needed to hurry back to school so he didn’t miss too many classes. The time Leo brought Frank and Allie back to Camp Jupiter after Nico was banished had been as brief, but that had suited Jason fine then. He hadn’t wanted to see anyone except Nico.

Jason climbed out of the car. He was so stiff from the drive that he stretched his calves out by leaning against the frame of the black SUV they’d borrowed from Camp Jupiter. Some kids heading to California would take it back starting tomorrow. When Jason turned around, he stretched his arms over his head and caught sight of a bevy of girls watching him and Percy with rapt attention. Annabeth must have noticed, too, because she wrapped her arms around her boyfriend. Percy seemed surprised, given how antagonistic they’d been toward each other in the car, but he flushed with pleasure at the contact. Jason wanted to punch him.

"Percy! Annabeth!" Chiron’s voice cut through the crowd, and he came rushing toward Percy and Annabeth and threw his arms around them in a hug they warmly returned. Jason opened the trunk to unpack their luggage. He wasn’t expecting a warm welcome. Chiron had been a little cold to him since he’d destroyed the interior of his cabin and torn up his hands. He lifted out the last of their luggage and closed the trunk when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned and got punched in the jaw. He cupped his face and eyed his attacker, expecting Clarisse. Will Solace stared back at him, rubbing his hand. Jason looked at Will in alarm and checked to see if he was bleeding. He wasn’t. Will didn’t pack much of a punch.

"You know what that was for," Will said.

Jason nodded. Will walked away through a crowd that was eyeing Jason with even greater interest. Great start to summer. As if on cue, Jason spotted Clarisse barreling toward him. He took a fighting
stance, causing the onlookers to ooh and aah, but Clarisse waved him off.

"I didn't come to beat the shit out of you Sissypants. I'd like to, but I've mellowed."

Jason didn't believe her. She was supposed to be a leader of these little campers, but he knew that wouldn't stop her from getting in a few good blows. And unlike Will, when she was done, Jason would be bleeding.

"Congratulations on your wedding," Jason said.

Annabeth, Piper, and Percy had come over to say hi to Clarisse, too. Annabeth hugged her. That was brave. Percy stepped forward to say something to Clarisse, but she took a step back.

"Nico made me promise not to hit Grace. He didn't say anything about you, Jackson. You've been warned." Clarisse stomped away.

Jason raised a smug eyebrow at Percy, who was glaring at him while holding the cat carrier.

"I haven't done anything to him to make her want to punch me, shitass," Percy mumbled. He slammed into Jason's shoulder on the way toward his cabin. Halfway there, he turned. "Bring over the kitty litter soon."

Jason rolled his eyes and waved. Piper gave him a quick peck on the lips. She was so sweet. It might be nice to spend time with her this summer.

"I'm going to go check out the Aphrodite cabin, Jay. Do you want to come with me?"

"No, thanks." Jason hated the Aphrodite cabin. It smelled fake and too many people ogled him. "I'm going to Cabin One to get some rest before I have to deal with Percy and cat shit."

Piper patted his chest and walked away.

Jason grabbed his suitcase and the kitty litter and went to his cabin. On the porch, he took a deep breath. The door creaked when he opened it, but the cabin seemed surprisingly well-cared for. He'd expected dust and a musty smell, but everything was clean and the place smelled fresh.

The enormous statue of his father glared down at him like always. Jason had spent the past two years hating his father, but seeing the statue now, he felt the tiniest twinge of regret for not getting his father's approval. It was crazy. How could he care about the approval of a monster who'd wrecked his life and the life of his lover?

He tore his eyes away and dropped down onto the bed. Travel fatigue was too intense. He could ponder how sick it was that he wanted his dad's affection later. First, he needed a nap.

He woke what felt like moments later to a heavy weight on his shins. Startled, he sat up quickly and reached for his sword before his glasses.

"Hey, whoa there, Sparky! I know it's been a while, but take it easy."

Jason relaxed and pawed the nightstand for his glasses. "Hey, Leo. It's good to see you."

"Same. Also, Percy said to tell you to bring him the kitty litter, whatever the hell that means."

Jason flopped back on his bed. Leo crawled off Jason's shins and sat next to him, propped against the headboard. Jason turned away from Leo and wondered how rude it would be if he went back to sleep for a little while. This bed was so much cozier than the one in his dorm room. Leo could stay.
Hell, he could take a nap, too. He probably needed one, as hard as he worked.

"Are you even gonna wake up to see your best friend that you haven't seen in six months? Your best friend who recently graduated magna cum laude from MIT, might I mention."

Jason vaguely waved his hand in Leo's direction.

"Congratulations, Leo. It's awesome. So proud. Gonna sleep."

Leo nudged Jason's back. Jason rolled over and tugged at Leo's jeans.

"Go to bed, too, Leo. We can talk after we nap."

"You got me confused with some other skinny black-haired dude, amigo. You've been asleep for four hours, according to Piper, who's wandering around in a teeny tiny bikini."

Not even close to tempting right now. Jason shrugged and yawned.

"And Solace is fucking Percy in front of the Big House."

Marginally more tempting. Not enough. Jason started to turn back over.

"Nico's here."

Jason sat up so fast they hit heads.

"Ow! Motherfucker, Jason!" Leo climbed off the bed and stumbled over to Jason's old mini-fridge, which had inexplicably been stocked with water. Leo pulled out two waters and tossed one to Jason, who eyed it warily. "It's fine, you paranoid fool. I put them in there earlier."

"I'm not exactly the most popular guy around these days," Jason said, taking a drink.

"Yeah, I heard Solace clocked you. He's a wuss, though. Probably didn't even hurt."

Jason rubbed his jaw. "It kinda hurt, Leo. Where's Calypso?"

"She and Piper went off to do some sort of girly bonding thing. I think they're getting their nails done. They made plans for us to have a double date tomorrow night."

Jason grunted. He didn't much want to date, but it gave him something to do. He glanced up at Leo, who was watching him carefully. Jason stood and looked Leo over carefully, too. He was taller, not like the rest of the Nine, at least the boys, but not quite short anymore, either. He seemed a little heavier, even, though he was pretty much still a beanpole. Jason smiled when he looked at Leo's face. He was sharper, more angular, but his eyes were the same mix of genius and mischief that had made Jason adapt to being Leo's friend much more easily than he'd adapted to being Piper's boyfriend when Juno had thrown them together.

"Hey, I know I'm hot stuff, sexy, but can you quit staring?"

"I can't take my eyes off you, Leo. You make my heart pitter-patter."

Jason walked slowly toward Leo with his arms outstretched. Leo watched with mild amusement until Jason started making kissy lips at him. He squealed and ran.

"Aw, come on, Leo, baby, you know you want me."
Leo peeked out from where he was hiding behind the Zeus statue. "Mmm, you are pretty bangin' goods, Sparky. I'd totally dump my perfect immortal nymph girlfriend for you, as long as I can top."

"Come here, baby, and give me some lovin'."

Leo ran forward, jumped into Jason's arms, and wrapped his arms and legs around him. Jason walked back over to the bed and tossed Leo down. He could barely keep a straight face. He needed this sort of silliness in his life.

"You said I could top," Leo said. "Bend over and let me see your little winky hole."

That did it. Jason burst out laughing and rolled off the bed. Leo slapped the side of his head and laughed, too. Jason laid down and stretched out on his belly on his braided rug. Underneath the bed, saturated with a thin layer of dust, was a small strip of paper. Ignoring Leo kicking at his hip, he reached under the bed and pulled out the paper.

He recognized it the second the writing was visible.

For Nico's sixteenth birthday, Jason had gotten the idea that he should write a letter expressing his love. In Italian. He'd written down a bunch of gushy Italian phrases that Thalia told him were legitimate, but one day Nico had caught him stumbling over the writing. Jason had tried to hide what he was doing, but Nico had weaseled it out of him and demanded to see the letter. Turns out Thalia had been playing him, and all the romantic things Jason had thought he was writing were really phrases like, "I'll rip your tiny asshole" and, "The toaster likes it hard." Nico had laughed mercilessly because Jason had believed Thalia. Jason had pouted, and Nico had torn off the bottom of the page and scribbled something as hastily as his neat handwriting would allow. He'd told Jason it was all he ever needed to hear or read about their relationship and made Jason promise not to read it until he left. Jason had barely been able to wait until he was alone. He'd expected something moving or profound because Nico was so deep and thoughtful, but he'd unfolded the paper and all it said was, "I love you."

Jason had felt played again, and he'd tossed the paper down. That wasn't enough. He'd wanted something grand. He'd wanted words to hide the way he was starting to feel that what he and Nico had wasn't good enough — that he wasn't good enough. He'd thought Nico was jerking him around.

Jason sat up and caressed the paper. If only he'd been smarter, more aware of his failings and limitations. Nico had been sincere. All he'd ever wanted was love. Now Jason understood, and it was too late.

"Hey Leo," he said. "Will you tell me about how you found Calypso? All the work you put into it. How you didn't give up."

Leo slithered off the bed and sat next to him.

"I've already told you, Superman."

"I know." Jason sniffled. "Tell me again."

***

Apollo rested a hand on Nico's hip before he leaned into him from behind and picked a crouton out
of the salad. He popped the little piece of bread in his mouth and gave Nico's hip a squeeze.

"Delicious, love. I cannot wait to dine."

Nico rolled his eyes, but he felt himself blush. He gently nudged Apollo with his shoulder.

"I didn't make the croutons. You're only supposed to compliment the food I actually made. Do me a favor and move my stuff off the table. Everything'll be ready in a minute or two."

"You thought to include the croutons in the salad," Apollo said before he kissed Nico's cheek and moved away. "I rather feel that deserves praise, too."

Nico went over to their stove, which was finally seeing some use, and stirred the jambalaya. It was about the only dish Nico knew how to make. Plus, it reminded him of Hazel.

"You know, Pol Pot was not such a bad man," Apollo said. Nico glanced over to see the god scrolling through the open document on his laptop. He'd been working on a paper for the Asian History class he was taking this summer.

"That's what you said about Marie Antoinette, too," Nico said. "My European history professor disagreed."

"Hmm, Marie. She was accomplished at giving oral pleasure. Not so skilled as you, though. You missed a comma."

Nico hummed. "Add it in for me, will you? And save. I think I forgot to before I got up to make dinner."

He spooned the jambalaya into their red ceramic bowls and moved them to the table. His laptop and books sat neatly on the pool table, and Apollo was already pulling silverware out of the drawer without being asked. Nico went back to the kitchen for the salads.

"Water or milk, lover?"

"Milk. I think I might've been a little heavy-handed on the spice tonight."

Nico took the glasses of milk from Apollo. He waited next to his seat because Apollo liked to pull out his chair for him. Nico had resisted this tendency for a very long time, but as in many other ways, Apollo had worn him down. Once his seat was pulled out and he was escorted into it with a gentle hand to the small of his back, he lifted his fork to eat.

"Ahem?"

"Fine."

Nico pushed a little food out of his bowl and onto the plate underneath. Apollo waved his hand, and the food burned and disappeared. The smell was pleasant, not at all like the food Nico burned when he wasn't trying to. Nico mumbled something like, "Dad. King of the Dead. Thanks."

"That was pathetic, Nico. You will thank me someday." For emphasis, Apollo pointed his fork at Nico.

"He has to know I'm only doing it because you're making me. I'm telling you, he hates sucking up, Apollo." They'd had this conversation often. Apollo thought that Hades would be persuaded to give his blessing to their relationship if they (meaning Nico) acted more deferential. Nico knew his father
well enough to know that would never work. Persephone might go along with it, but Hades? Never.

"Well, perhaps that will help change his opinion of me, if he knows I am willing to work with him to keep your young and wayward bottomside in line."

"Backside. Just say ass."

"I would prefer not to think about your father and your ass at the same time."

Nico choked on his jambalaya and watched Apollo's eyes dance with laughter. When he had coughed for several seconds and a drink of milk didn't slow things down, Apollo pressed his hand to Nico's arm. The coughing stopped. Nico's skin heated under Apollo's touch as the god dragged his fingers down Nico's arm and took his hand.

"For your information," Nico said as he rubbed his thumb over Apollo's knuckles. "I don't need you or my father to keep my backside in line. I'm doing fine."

Apollo narrowed his eyes and gave Nico a look that said, "Oh, really?" "Where were you yesterday?"

Being the lover of a god was a heady thing. Nico got incredibly hot sex, as much as he wanted. All his material needs were met. Every inch of his body was perfectly cared for, and his constant exceptional health was ensured. The part that was not so great was that Apollo could find out everything Nico did. Nico's every move could be monitored if Apollo felt like being suspicious, which he had since the weekend with Percy. Apollo was convinced Nico was living dangerously. Nico was.

"You already know, so why do I have to tell you?"

Apollo took a big bite of his salad before responding.

"Stalking Hera will not make things better, Nico. I daresay it will make things much, much worse when you are inevitably discovered."

"I'm not going to get caught."

"Nico..."

"I'm not. I'm careful."

"She is a goddess, Nico. She will detect you eventually. You shouldn't even possess the power to track her. We haven't souls like mortals. I am concerned."

Nico hadn't thought about it. Right after he'd sent Jason that postcard, he had gotten the urge to find out where Hera was, concentrated on her, stepped into a shadow and stepped out a hundred feet from her. She'd been shopping at a Safeway in Baltimore. It was weird to watch the Queen of the Gods try to decide between kosher or dill.

After that, Nico had found her once a day, more if he could fit it in between school and homework. On the weekends, he told Apollo he was staying at his farmhouse, then went out and stalked Hera until he began to tire. He only did it when he could feel her essence in North America. He wasn't dumb enough to push his powers further. He also wasn't dumb enough to go after the real prize, Zeus.

Nico shrugged. "I can feel you. I figured it would be the same. It was."
"Yes. I am worried that when Hera catches you she will realize that this power has likely manifested from your intimate relationship with a god."

"I won't rat you out if she catches me."

Apollo impatiently waved his hand. Their food vanished. Nico's stomach was full, and his mouth was minty fresh. Apollo took Nico's hands and pulled him up and toward the couch. He angled his body so that one leg nestled against the back couch cushions. Nico dropped between Apollo's thighs and laid his head on the god's chest. Apollo wrapped his other leg around Nico's hips and stroked his shoulders. Nico knew the position was intended to be soothing, but he felt boxed in. He closed his eyes and worked on breathing deeply.

"I hate when you do that. I worked hard on dinner."

"I work hard to keep you safe, as does your father, as does Jason. Stop tracking Hera before you get hurt. This is not a game, Nico." Apollo brushed his fingertips across Nico's lips. Despite his frustration, Nico kissed them as they passed.

"Maybe I wouldn't take risks if you guys didn't treat me like some pathetic little kid who can't take care of himself. It's annoying."

"If I thought you were a pathetic little kid you would not be sharing my bed," Apollo said. "I think you are impulsive and angry and want to attract Hera's attention. There are healthier ways to deal with your anger, Nico. If you would consider—"

"I'm not going to that counselor."

"It would help you tremendously."

Nico laid facing the same direction as Apollo. Apollo hooked his ankle between Nico's thighs. Their hands tangled, and Nico wrapped his arms around himself to feel the warm comfort of Apollo's arms around him, too.

"I know you want to help me, and I appreciate it," he said quietly. "I need to figure out how to help myself. I have to do this my way."

Apollo's firm chest shifted underneath Nico with the force of his chuckle. "You have to do everything your way."

Nico smiled. "True. I'll try not to follow her anymore. Things are picking up in school, anyway."

Apollo would know the second he chased after Hera again. It wouldn't take long for Nico to feel the urge to see her. Who wouldn't go after a woman who'd cost him his life? He was asking for trouble, but he didn't want to stop. The whole endeavor felt mildly aggressive and menacing, and he wanted Hera to feel menaced by him. For now, he could try to keep it cool, at least until Apollo stopped checking up on him all the time.

"Very well," Apollo said. "Turn around and convince me of your sincerity."

Nico shifted and planted his hands in the couch. He looked up at Apollo through his eyelashes. "What can I do to convince you?"

"I wonder when we transitioned from our relationship being predicated on my seductiveness to yours. Kiss me, Nico."
Nico tensed his muscles and dragged his body up Apollo's. The god's mouth opened in desire, and Nico felt a rush of satisfaction at the pleasure he could give to a being who'd had thousands of lovers. The power he had over Apollo was thrilling. When their lips met, Apollo whimpered.

Nico drew away and kissed Apollo's jaw. He trailed his lips along Apollo's neck and bit his earlobe. His fingers tangled in Apollo's hair. He dropped his voice and let his lips continue to graze Apollo's neck. "I feel like there's more I should do to convince you. You are the god of truth. Your standards are probably incredibly high."

"Please, continue. You are masterful. I love you."

Apollo had to know he'd said the wrong thing. His hands grabbed at Nico's sides, but Nico was already moving away. This was their agreement. Apollo got Nico's body, his friendship, his everything, really, except that. No mention of the l-word was allowed. He could call Nico "lover," "my love," or whatever term of endearment he wanted, but Nico was done letting his heart betray him by believing in love and men who said they wanted his love but were more interested in his sex. Sure, Jason loved him. Look at all the good it had done, in the end. Percy had thought he'd loved him, but he'd let go, gone back to Annabeth and forgotten all about Nico. Apollo would move on when Nico didn't have some novel way of making his toes curl.

"I apologize," Apollo said. "I know how that phrase makes you cringe. The depth of my feeling for you cannot be so easily defined, Nico, and it has nothing to do with your sexual prowess."

Nico sat up and gave Apollo his own "Oh, really?" face.

Apollo sighed. "It has to do with your sexual prowess as well as your body and face. That is not all, and you are aware of how strongly I feel about you. As we have discussed, I am not in the habit of living with one being or limiting my dalliances for the mental well-being of one. You are special to me, Nico."

"I know." Nico leaned back on the couch and laid his hand on Apollo's chest. He wasn't in the mood for sex anymore, or even cuddling, but he wanted Apollo to know he wasn't angry. "I can accept that I'm special to you. You've proved that."

"Thank you. In time, perhaps you will once again believe that I am in love with you."

"This doesn't have anything to do with what happened with Jason and Percy, Apollo." This was another argument they'd been having recently. Apollo thought every quirk Nico had about feelings stemmed from getting left by (or leaving, if Nico thought about it from their perspective) the other two sons of the Big Three.

"What is the word of which you are so fond? Bullshit."

"That's the word." Nico laughed. He curled back against Apollo's chest and slid his arm under the god's lower back. He was very fond of Apollo and the comforts he provided. With his other hand, he lifted Apollo's shirt and began playing with his belly button. It was incredibly funny that gods had belly buttons. Surely Apollo had never had an umbilical cord?

Because Nico's finger was dipped in Apollo's belly, he felt the slight tense of muscle right before their intercom buzzed and a woman's voice sounded through the living room.

"Mr. di Angelo—"

"Send him up, Dolores," Apollo said. The intercom buzzed out.
Nico scanned Apollo's face for information and caught the tightening of the skin around his eyes. Apollo smiled, warm and tender, and kissed Nico's lips. When he pulled back, his eyes were distant, though his hands were moving all over Nico's body. Nico recognized the treatment. Apollo was shoring up chinks in Nico's armor. He anticipated a challenge.

"Apollo, what's going on?"

"You will see, love."

"A visitor? Who?"

"We have only ever invited the one."

The knock on the door made Nico jump.

***

Jason's heart pounded as he turned the knob.

The door opened, and he focused on Nico, beautiful and healthy, laying on top of Apollo. Fuck. Nico's eyes widened, and he sought Apollo’s eyes before turning back to Jason. He didn't move out of his new lover's lap. Maybe Jason should close the door and walk away.

"Come in, brother, before you let out our conditioned air," Apollo said lazily, though the way he watched Jason's movements indicated he wasn't feeling lazy or calm at all. "I rather expected you months sooner."

Jason started to sneer, but he caught a glimpse of Nico's face and changed his mind. Nico wouldn't appreciate Jason picking a fight with Apollo, and no matter who started the snipping, Jason knew he'd be the one to take the blame. He closed the door behind him and stepped into the apartment.

"Hi, Nico."

That was pitiful. Behind Nico, Apollo rolled his eyes. Jason pinched his fingers together to keep from flipping him off. It would be smarter to ignore the eye rolls and sighs and obviously grabby hands that would punctuate every interaction as long as he was in the same room with Nico and Apollo. *Make this count, you idiot.* He opened his mouth to try again.

Nico didn't give him the chance.

"Why are you here?"

"I just...I was...um...here...and—"

"Eloquent, brother. May I offer you a seat?" Apollo was smirking. He wasn't even going to have to do anything to ruin things between Jason and Nico. Jason was doing a great job on his own, and Nico didn't seem to want to see him anyway.

"Um, thanks, yeah."

Nico scowled and repeated his question as Apollo conjured a lavish gold chair arranged to put him in between Jason and Nico. Jason pinched his lips together and sat.
"I thought I'd come see you. I'm spending the summer at Camp Half-Blood and—"

"I'm aware," Nico said coldly. "You've been there a month, Jason. Why now?"

Why not a month ago? That was what Nico was asking, Jason knew. There wasn't a good way to answer the question. If he said Nico had told him to stay away, Nico would be pissed that he hadn't respected his wishes tonight. If he gave any other reason, Nico would be pissed, believing Jason didn't care enough to come earlier. Gods, Nico was an ass. The stupid ass was playing with Apollo's collarbone. Jason wanted to bite his fingers off.

"I've been busy."

"Busy doing what?" Nico tilted his head.

"Leo's been—"

"Leo's been up in Maine for three weeks, Jason. Try again."

Was the air getting cooler? Shit, fear aura.

"Can you knock it off with the fear aura? This is hard enough as it is."

Nico sneered. "If it's too hard for you, why don't you go back to camp? Piper's probably lonely."

Jason gripped the arms of the chair. His desire to see Nico was rapidly dwindling. "You told me to date Piper."

"I didn't mean it! Idiot!" Nico pushed off Apollo's chest and leaned forward. His pupils were dilated, and his knuckles were clenched tight.

Caution was called for here, but Jason didn't feel like being careful, even though Nico had dropped the temperature in the room enough to make his teeth chatter.

"Yes, you did, when you said it. You said you wanted me to have a good life. You said you wanted me to try. I've been doing exactly what you told me to do, you jerk. So six months was enough time for you to stop loving me and start wishing me ill? Because I still love you, Nico."

Nico stood and advanced on Jason. Jason jumped up and prepared to defend himself. Nico looked like he wanted to kill him. Out of the corner of his eye, Jason caught Apollo's second smirk. He let loose with the sneer now. It wasn't like he could make Nico angrier.

Apparently, he was wrong.

"Don't you look at Apollo like he's the problem here. He's the one who's been here for me. And don't say you love me. I told you not to do that anymore. No one loves me."

Jason had been defensively holding up his hands, but he dropped them as soon as the last sentence left Nico's mouth. Nico didn't believe that.

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. You may not have a ton of friends because you're a first class asshole who won't let people close, but those few you've let in, we love the motherfucking hell out of you." Jason jutted his chin toward Apollo. "Ask your new boyfriend. Quit feeling sorry for yourself."

Nico took a step closer. Every inch of Jason's skin erupted in goosebumps.
"Oh, that's rich, coming from the king of the traveling pity party. Had to get stabbed to snap out of it."

"Yeah, I was a selfish, whiny idiot. I've been an idiot a lot when it comes to you, because I never should have let you go in the first place, even if my dad killed us both. It would have been better than living these years without you and feeling like a coward. At least a god manipulated me into doing the things I did, being a wuss. What's your fucking excuse?" It felt so good to say that. Nico may kill him now, but at least he'd gotten it out.

Apollo was off the couch and had one hand on Nico's shoulder, holding him back. "Jason, I think that—"

"Shut up," both Jason and Nico said.

Apollo's eyes flashed, and Jason was thrown back into his chair. Nico and Apollo were back on the couch, and Nico was holding Apollo's hand so tightly their skin gave the impression it was melded together.

"Let us try this once more," Apollo said, "and if either of you tells me to shut up again, I promise you, Jason will feel my wrath."

Nico made a strangled noise, and his eyes showed real fear. Apollo tsked and stroked his hand.

"Now, now, lover, I meant something along the lines of a nasty toenail fungus, not annihilation." He kissed along Nico's mouth until he gradually pulled Nico's eyes off Jason. Their lips met, soft and wet, over and over, and Jason's stomach churned when Nico's eyes slipped closed and he sighed softly. Nico hadn't wanted Jason to be hurt, though. That was something.

"Excuse me, you have a guest," Jason said.

Nico stopped kissing Apollo but didn't look at Jason.

"An uninvited guest," he grumbled.

Jason put his balls on the line and went for it. "I haven't come before because I wasn't sure I should. I think of you all the time, Nico. I wonder if you're healthy, if you're eating, how school's going. I want to know if you've spoken to your father. I want to know how many people have hit on you this week and if you've gotten a haircut and if you're taller than the last time I saw you, which you are. I want everything, Nico, everything about you, and knowing that I could see you but I'll have to leave you behind again is the hardest thing, and sometimes it feels kinder to both of us to let you be. But I am never stopping loving you. You can make me stop saying it to you, but you can't make it go away. It's forever."

"May I speak to you in the kitchen, lover?" Apollo marshaled Nico to his feet and wrapped both arms around his waist as they walked into the kitchen.

Jason watched their whispered conversation. Apollo stroked Nico's cheeks and kissed his eyelids. Nico emphatically shook his head. Apollo whispered again, and Nico pressed their bodies together and kissed Apollo in a way that turned Jason on even though he hated not being the recipient of the kiss. The feeling went beyond jealousy or arousal. There was something twisted about it, and the heat in his belly made him understand for the first time why Hera and Zeus were afraid of him and Nico. He would commit murder if Nico asked and kissed him that way. He would try to kill a god.

Apollo was stronger-willed than Jason, it seemed, because he pushed Nico back and held his chin so he couldn't do it again. He gestured to Jason and whispered some more. Nico sighed and nodded.
Apollo kissed him, deep and powerful, but it had none of the eroticism of Nico's kiss. When the kiss ended, Nico laid his head on Apollo's neck. The god began to glow. Jason closed his eyes. Light flashed, and when Jason opened his eyes, Apollo was gone.

Nico leaned his head back on the cabinets. Jason didn't bother to make himself look presentable before he approached.

"He has a daughter in Chicago. She's four," Nico said. He watched Jason walk closer. "He's going to visit her for the night. She likes her daddy with the pretty voice."

"That's good," Jason said. "Kids deserve to have their fathers in their lives, if they can."

Nico nodded. "He says I need to believe in you."

Jason raised an eyebrow. Nico was close enough to touch. "I wish I had his confidence in me."

"He says you're my forever, as much as he wishes it was him."

Jason stepped closer, into Nico's personal space. Nico was only an inch or two shorter than him now. "I am your forever. But you get a choice, Nico. Who do you want?"

Nico didn't say anything. Jason ran his thumb over the black skull earring in Nico's ear. He used his index finger to trace Nico's cheekbones and the knuckles of his hand to brush Nico's jaw. Jason moved his hand away and reached into his pocket. He held out the tie pin Hades had given Nico on his birthday.

"I carry it with me everywhere. I pin it to my t-shirt when I sleep. There is not a moment when I doubt that my love for you is forever. But you get a choice, Nico."

Nico's eyes didn't stray from Jason's. He hooked his fingers in Jason's jeans pockets and tugged until Jason closed the last bit of distance between them. Jason held his breath and willed his hands to stay at his sides. He had to let this be Nico's choice.

The silence stretched between them. Finally, Nico's eyes flicked down to Jason's mouth, and he pressed a chaste kiss to Jason's lips.

"It'll always be you, Jace. I'll always choose you."

Jason threw his head back and laughed in relief. When he looked back at Nico, his black eyes were dangerous. Jason's stomach twisted again.

"Put the tie pin back in your pocket." Nico bit his lip. "I'm going to make love to you, and we need to keep it safe."

Just the words made Jason moan. He'd barely gotten the tie pin back in his pocket, slipping it past Nico's long fingers, when Nico was on him, kissing him the same tantalizing way he'd kissed Apollo. Incredibly slowly, Nico's lips pried open Jason's mouth. Jason was gone, ready to devour Nico whole, but he held back and let Nico glide their mouths together, varying the speed and pressure, sucking Jason's lower lip into his mouth and biting gently.

When Nico finally pressed his tongue along the edges of Jason's mouth, Jason almost unhinged his jaw in his haste to deepen the kiss. Nico laughed and pulled back.

"Are you anxious to move things along, Jason? Have somewhere to be?"
"Shut up. I've missed you." Something occurred to Jason. He covered Nico's mouth with his hand and prayed he was over-worrying. "You know this is about me being in love with you, right? I didn't show up here expecting to have sex. We could stop right now, and as long as we talk and you cuddle me until I have to leave, I would be over the moon thrilled."


"There, it's even. You know what would make me over the moon thrilled?"

Jason shook his head. He hoped it was hot, hard sex until sunup.

"If you stopped worrying about a problem I got over a long time ago. I like sex. That's totally acceptable. And I'm fucking amazing at it. Now, do you want some? Because I have wanted to climb on top of you and ride you like a race car since you walked through my damned door."

Jason had to adjust his jeans.

"Do you want sex, Jason?" Nico asked slowly. His hands were moving over Jason's biceps, cupping and squeezing, fingers tightening in the fabric of Jason's shirt. His normally pink lips were flushed blood red.

"I want your dirty mouth, Nico. I want your body. I want to own you."

Nico surged forward and kissed him. All the technique he'd used earlier was gone, and in its place was sloppy, hot want. Jason stumbled backward and dragged Nico along with him. Their bodies fell through a shadow and into Nico's bed. Not Nico's bed anymore, Jason noticed through the kisses. The dimly lit room was empty except for the furniture. Nico's bed was across the hall now, with another man. Jason didn't care, not right now, at least. Nico was his, and if two other men knew how spectacular it was to screw him, Jason knew he was the one they wished they could be. He was the one Nico wanted most of all.

Nico languidly rolled his hips, and Jason had to shove their bodies apart or he'd come right away. Nico seemed to understand. He rolled over onto his side and stopped touching and kissing.

"Stand up, Jason."

Jason didn't question. He had learned a long time ago that amazing things happened to his body when he did what Nico said.

"Turn on the light so I can see you."

He turned on the light.

"Take off your clothes. Slowly. Start with your shoes, then your socks, your shirt, your jeans. Leave your underwear on."

When Jason had his shoes and socks off, Nico sat up on the bed. Jason was glad he'd tried to dress up a little before coming to Manhattan. He was at least wearing a button down shirt. He took his time pulling his shirt out of his jeans, and Nico smirked at him.

"You're such a hot mess, Jason. It turns me on, the way you tuck in your shirts. It's like being seduced by an old man."

"You're one to talk, grandpa," Jason teased. "Although, good gods, if you're what little old Italian
men fuck like, I want a harem of them."

Nico laughed and stood. Jason noticed he put his hands behind his back. It was because Nico didn't trust himself not to touch, Jason was sure. He felt drunk on knowing Nico found him irresistible, too.

"Only if I can have a harem of Jason Graces. One right after the next. I'd spend the next eighty years doing nothing but fucking them. Except every time we cycled around and I got the real thing?" Nico paused and caught Jason's eye. "I would never want that to end. Loving you is better than fucking you, Jace."

"Mushball," Jason whispered. He undid the last button on his shirt and slid it over his shoulders. "I hope fucking me is still pretty good."

"The best." Nico blushed, and Jason had to hide his hands behind his back, too.

Nico walked behind him and brushed his dick against Jason's hands. Jason unclasped them, hoping for a repeat encounter, but Nico backed away.

"Tease."

"I aim to please. Jeans, Jason. Right now." Nico slapped Jason's ass. He returned to Jason's front and sat on the edge of the bed, his legs thrown wide.

Jason's fingers fumbled with the button and zipper, but he managed to get them undone. It was slow going, pulling his pants down, because his dick was so engorged. When he finally got them past his thighs, he hurriedly yanked them the rest of the way down and used his feet to take them off. Nico licked his lips.

"You didn't expect sex tonight?" Nico was focused on Jason's underwear.

Jason followed Nico's gaze. He was wearing his first-tier sexy underwear — short black boxer briefs with white trim that fit him like a second skin. They were so low-cut that his dick was protruding slightly over the waistband, even though it was stashed off to the side. Nico slipped off the bed and put his face an inch away from Jason's crotch. He looked up at Jason with a small, hungry smirk.

"I had hopes," Jason admitted.

Nico laughed. He lightly touched Jason's thighs and guided him to turn around. "Holy fuck, Jason." His fingers skirted along the waistband, skimming the swell of Jason's ass.

"Your sublime ass is barely covered. How'd you not come all over yourself on the way here, knowing you looked this good?"

On the trip out here, Jason had mostly been thinking mundane things like, "Please let him be home" and, "Please no monsters on the way" instead of concentrating on how his body felt in his clothes. Right now, though, every nerve felt alive and wired to receive pleasure, both from Nico and from himself. Nico's nails scraped across his ass, and Jason gasped, the feeling was so intense. Cool fingers lightly traced up the inside of Jason's thighs, and Jason hurried to spread his legs to give Nico greater access.

"I was going to take off your underwear with my teeth, but I like them so much I think they should stay on for a while."

Jason groaned in reply. He wanted to feel Nico's body. He wanted to be inside Nico's body.
Nico laid back on the bed and held up a hand when Jason tried to join him. Jason stood in front of him, feeling very exposed and very aroused by the exposure. Nico was eyeing him like he was trying to figure out a way to suck his dick and fuck his ass all at once.

"Touch your chest and your stomach, Jason. Go slow."

Jason started at his shoulders and worked his way down. His nipples were taut. He sucked his middle fingers and dragged them over the buds, which sent his eyes rolling back in his head. He heard Nico moan. When he opened his eyes, he did it again so he could watch Nico’s face.

"Did Percy do this for you? I know you got off together over Iris." Thinking about Nico being sexual with someone else was turning Jason on even more. He wanted to hear about it.

"Not usually." Nico flushed, but he continued. "I did it for him, mostly."

Jason sucked in a breath. "I'd have loved to have seen it. I know he has tons of dirty pictures of you. Someday I'm going to steal his phone and look at all of them. Did you like it, taking pictures of yourself like that?"

"Yes. Gods, it was hot. You know?" Nico's hand brushed his erection.

"He lets me look at one of the pictures he has — not one of the dirty ones, he's never let me see those, just told me about them. It helps when I'm missing you too much."

"Fuck. You and Percy look at me together? That's, um, oh my gods."

Jason's hands had reached his abs. He trailed his fingers over the chiseled lines of muscle and reveled in how amazing, how full of pleasure-sensing nerves, his own body was. He rarely touched himself this way, and doing it while Nico watched was incredibly erotic.

"You like that, Nico? Me and Percy sitting around together, wanting you?"

Nico closed his eyes and nodded. Jason stepped closer to the bed.

"What if we looked at those dirty pictures of you together? Would you like that? To know we're not just missing you, but thinking about fucking you at the same time. Would that feel good?"

"Jason." Nico's hand fell heavy on his dick and started stroking with his palm. Jason had to get Nico's clothes off, too.

"Take your shirt off, Nico. Let me watch your muscles move. If Percy and I looked at those pictures together, what would you want us to do?"

"Kiss him, Jason," Nico moaned. "Would you kiss him while you thought about my body?"

Jason had zero interest in kissing Percy, but he was more than happy to indulge in Nico's fantasy. "I'd tongue him for you. It would be better if you were there, watching."

Nico wriggled out of his shirt without getting off the mattress. Gods, his torso was sexy. There was so much muscle, but it was all sharp and tight, and Jason had always loved his nipples, which were almost always hard. It was a wonder Nico didn't walk around with a permanent erection, his skin was so sensitive.

"I'd like that. Would you touch him?"

"If you want me to. I'd strip off his clothes, like I want you to take your jeans off right now. I'd run
my hands over his body and pump his cock, which would be so hard from looking at you. Will you touch yourself while you watch?"

Nico nodded again. "I'd finger myself, too. Let you both see. I'd want you to fuck him, then fuck me while he sucks me off."

Jason arched his back and shoved his dick into his hand. "Fuck, Nico, that's so sexy. Is he better than me at oral?"

"No one's better than you, Jason. I want it to be you inside me." Nico had wriggled his jeans past his hips, and he was wearing the tiniest pair of black briefs Jason could imagine. His dick pointed up to his belly, and the underwear were so small that his balls barely still fit inside.

"Do you know how amazing your body is? It's like viewing art by a master. I need to fuck you, Nico." Jason pulled Nico's jeans away and threw them on the floor.

Nico rolled over onto his stomach and began inching out of his underwear. Jason moaned and dropped onto the bed. His fingers caressed each millimeter of skin Nico exposed.

"Where's your lube?"

"Oh, fuck, Jason. Shit," Nico said. He sounded like he could cry. "I don't have any. We don't have to use it."

"Oh, gods, can he fuck you without lube? I want to be a god."

Nico's face was screwed up in mingled pleasure and frustration. "We take turns fucking. I need you inside me, Jason. It'll be—"

"If you say it'll be okay, I will jerk off on your back right now and leave. We can do other things."

"No! It has to be you inside me. Apollo says that gods sometimes use nectar if they want a little extra glide."

"Good! Good. Tell me where to go and I'll get it." Jason may not be willing to fuck Nico dry, but he was about to die to fuck him.

"Pantry."

Jason ran out of the room and into the kitchen. He supposed there was some benefit to Nico's current lover being a god. That made no sense, since if his other lover was a mortal, they'd have some fucking lube, or better yet, there'd be no other lover, but Jason wasn't thinking clearly. He was thinking about sex.

Jason ripped down half the contents of the pantry, left them spinning all over the floor, before he found the nectar. He slipped on a box of macaroni and cheese and almost fell, but managed to right himself and sprint back to the bedroom.

"Got it. Fuck."

Nico had gotten his underwear all the way off and was spread out like a starfish, humping the bed. Oh, gods, Jason loved it when Nico was like this, wanton and reckless. He was so shy and inhibited so much of the time, but when they were having sex it was like a bomb went off in his brain and he was all about the way he felt. Jason dropped to his knees at the foot of the bed and licked his way up Nico's thigh and between his cheeks. Jason kneaded Nico's firm ass and spread him apart before
licking right over his hole. Nico squealed and pressed back into Jason's face. Jason licked and kissed until his tongue was making slow circles and gentle probes inside Nico's opening, then he pulled back and spilled some nectar on the spot.

"I told Percy I rim you. He's so jealous. He wants to do it, too. When we all fuck together, we'll take turns doing it to you. He should rim you while I fuck him, Nico."

"Shut up, Jason, I'm gonna fucking come if you keep talking." Nico cried out as Jason slipped the first finger inside. They usually had to go slow because Nico was tight and Jason had big fingers, but Nico was already bucking back against him. "It's the nectar, I think. No pain. More, Jace. Oh, gods, I love you. More."

Jason inserted another finger and began scissoring Nico open wide. He'd always loved this part, feeling Nico open up underneath his touch. He laid down next to him and used his free hand to pull Nico's head close.

"Hey."

It appeared to take all the effort Nico had, but he squinted one eye open. Jason laughed.

"I love you, Nico di Angelo. Kiss me before I fuck you."

Nico did. Somehow he managed to kiss Jason hard enough to press him onto his back on the bed. Jason's dick and balls finally sprang free from his underwear. He kept his fingers inside as Nico climbed on top of him. Nico bent himself upward. Jason slipped his fingers out, and Nico was sliding down on him, propping himself up with a hand on each of Jason's thighs, moving so excruciatingly slowly while making small twisting motions with his hips. Gods, he was so tight. Jason's dick was squeezed from every angle, suctioned deeper into Nico's warm core.

"You're so beautiful, Nico," Jason whispered. He ran his hands over Nico's chest and shoulders, then slid one around to caress Nico's back. "Can I touch you?"

"Not yet," Nico gasped. "I'll come so fast. You feel alive inside me."

"I'm not going to last, either." Jason wrapped his hand around Nico and began to jerk. Nico's eyes shot open, and he pivoted back and forth, impaling himself on Jason's length and thrusting up into his hand.

"Oh, Jason, fuck, yes," Nico said. "I love you so much. My forever love. You're all mine. I'm yours. Please, Jason, come inside me."

Jason rolled them over and pounded into Nico so hard the bed shuddered and banged against the wall. Nico's shoulder was shoved against the wall, too, and Jason could hear the awful scraping noise it was making. He didn't care. Nico looked two seconds away from orgasm, his eyes half-lidded, his mouth open and slack. Jason leaned forward and kissed him.

"I love you and your fucking ass. You're both mine. Don't you ever forget it," Jason snarled. He snapped his hips one more time, jerked Nico's dick hard, and Nico cried out in ecstasy.

The noise, the expression on Nico's face, made Jason come undone. His hips lost all rhythm, and he was a rutting mess, forcing his way deeper inside despite the strong contractions of Nico's muscles all around him. His balls pulled up tight, and he came with a loud, drawn-out moan, one that surely would have the people living above and below complaining to management. He could feel every burst of cunn that passed from him to Nico.
He collapsed into a sweaty pile on top of Nico and tried to catch his breath. Nico didn't seem to be faring any differently, once Jason's brain returned to his head and he could check. Nico's eyes were closed, and his hands were making weird swiping motions across Jason's back, like he wanted to hold on but couldn't figure out how to make his hands work. Jason smiled and kissed his lips.

"I love you, Nico. You are incredible. Everything about you. Thank you for loving me."

"No sappy, Jace," Nico wheezed. Jason shifted a little to take some of his weight off Nico's lungs. "I'm too happy."

"You rhymed, you nerd," Jason said. He started to laugh and found it hard to stop. Eventually, Nico joined in.

"Get off me, you big, sweaty...sex machine. I can't breathe."

Reluctantly, Jason pulled out, eliciting an exaggerated groan from Nico. He laid next to him and placed Nico's head on his chest.

"You are the most sexy lover on the planet, Jace," Nico said after they'd laid in silence long enough for Jason to begin to doze. Jason fought to open his eyes and hoped he hadn't started snoring. Nico added, "I'd seek you out for sex if I wasn't lucky enough to be hopelessly in love with you."

Jason chuckled. "That's a huge compliment coming from you. You're so good you snagged the biggest stud-god in history. You're so beautiful and sexy and everything physically that anyone who wants a man would ever want. I'm the lucky bastard who knows how much all that stuff pales in comparison to your heart and your brain and your soul."

Nico nuzzled his face into Jason's chest. "I love you, Jace."

"I love you, too."

"We're never telling anyone what we said while we were getting it on, right?" Nico arched an eyebrow. His lips quirked up at the corners.

"Not unless you want me to wither into dead grass in eternal mortification."

"Thank the gods."

"But you're on record saying I can steal Percy's phone and see those pictures, right?"

"Jason!"

"But, I wanna—"

"How about we take some together tonight and look at them the next time you visit?"

Jason's eyes probably widened to the size of saucers. "I can come back and visit again?"

Nico tilted his head upward and grinned.

"You'd better. And it sure as hell better not take six months this time."

"How about next Wednesday?"

"Yes. Why Wednesday?"
"Hump day."

Nico slapped at Jason's face and laughed. Jason had never heard anything so wonderful.
The stubbornness of the three gods lasted for five days. During the day, Jason and Percy spent all their time together, playing video games and getting exercise outside. Nico moved his law books from the man cave to the living room and bedroom and spent the entire time reading and taking notes by hand, since the laptop where he normally wrote his notes belonged to Percy. At night, Jason and Percy were allowed, because Nico had no choice, to return with him to the bedroom. The nights were long, and Nico met any wayward or hopeful hands with a hearty slap.

Jason and Percy grumbled together about Nico, but Nico remained completely silent except during their daily godly visits. At those times, Jason and Percy sat on the couch and glared at Nico throughout the interview while Nico was sickly sweet to whatever god or goddess came to their door.

"Look at him, stubborn fuck," Percy said. "I bet he gives in today. He has to be cracking."

Early morning light streamed through their window and illuminated Nico's face. Percy and Jason were perched on either side of him in the bed, watching him sleep and having the same conversation they'd had for the previous four mornings.

"Maybe for you." Jason came close to touching Nico's shoulder but pulled his hand back at the last second. Even asleep, Nico would swat him away. "You heard what he said. He doesn't want to be with me."

"Oh, come off it, Jace." Percy brushed his lips over Nico's temple and got slapped. "He has regrets, and he didn't phrase that very well. He's crazy about you, and if he didn't want to be with you he wouldn't be working so hard at finding a way back to you. He was trying to say he wanted to make things easier for me."

"I wish he'd see me when he looks at me, not some shadow of who I was, good and bad. I'm not as big as the nightmares or the love, you know?" Jason's eyes held a look of pleading.

Percy rubbed his hand over Jason's shoulder. "Hang in there. Keep giving him as honest and open a look at you as you can. You guys were making a lot of progress before this bout of extreme childishness."

"Do you think I was wrong?"

"Wrong to be offended? No. Wrong to run off? Yeah. If you'd told him what made you upset, he would've tried to make things right, explain himself." Percy shrugged and kissed Nico again. He got slapped again, too. "He has a bad temper, and you've let him down too much. For a long time, you're going to have to be the one who stays and stays calm."

"You're like the Nico-whisperer." Jason and Percy shared a laugh.

"He's my best friend."

"Hey, Perce?" Jason arced his arm over Nico and poked at Percy's sternum.

"Yeah?"
"Why are you being so nice to me?"

Percy rolled over on his back and moved as close as he could to Nico without touching him. "I'll never be okay with the things you did to him, Jason. Never, ever. And I want him for myself every bit as much as you do. You're not a bad guy, though. The mistakes — royal, massive fuck-ups — you made with him really were mistakes and not who you are. Hanging out here with you the last however the hell many days we've been here, it's reminded me that nine times out of ten you're a great guy. Plus, I like your company. It's a nice break from his royal high and mighty pain in the ass."

"His royal high and mighty pain in the ass that you're dying tofuck." Jason may be pointing it out, but he shared the sentiment.

"Hell, yes," Percy said. "If I don't fuck him soon, or something him soon, my dick's going to fall off. I'll probably pierce his intestines with how hard I come in his ass."

"Why aren't we just jerking off in the man cave under a blanket or something?"

"It's the principle of the thing, remember? If he can abstain, so can we."

"Oh, yeah. Perce?" Jason rolled over on his back, too.

"Huh?"

"We're idiots. He'll let his rocks rot off before he gives in. There's no way we can outlast him."

Percy sighed. "Yeah, I know. We gotta stop talking about it. It's making my dick harder."

"Hey, we could sneak into the man cave right now and take care of ourselves. What he doesn't know..."

Jason trailed off as Nico gave a loud, exaggerated yawn and stretched his arms over his head. He didn't open his eyes, but he knew Jason and Percy were hungrily following the movement of his body. Nico smirked.

"Son of a bitch," Percy said. "You're a little prick, Nico."

Nico opened his eyes and sat up. He scooted out from between Jason and Percy and went to the living room. Reluctantly, the other gods followed. They dragged their feet into the man cave and settled in to play more video games.

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When Hercules materialized in their living room, Nico was pointedly avoiding Jason and Percy, who had just dropped a basketball court inside the barrier and were sitting on the couch talking loudly about the sport's superiority to baseball. Because Nico was looking away, he was late to register the arrival of another god. The blow of a large hand hitting his backside came as quite a shock.

Nico whirled, fist cocked, ready to punch. He pulled up short and stared at the god in front of him. Hercules was even taller than Jason, with the same bright blue eyes. His hair was short and black. A scruffy, fashionable beard covered some of his ruggedly handsome face. Nico's mouth popped open
as he surveyed the god's toned chest, which was shoved in his face.

The grin Hercules gave bared all his ultra-white teeth. He took Nico's hand, uncurled the tight fist, and pressed Nico's long white fingers to his chest. "You can feel, di Angelo. I take it I'm pleasing to you?"

Nico blushed and nodded. Jason snorted from across the room. He was incredibly jealous of Nico's obvious attraction, and he couldn't conceal it. Nico lifted his chin and stared down his nose at Jason. He turned back to Hercules.

"You are insanely pleasing to me." Nico kept his hand on the god's chest and gazed up at him through his eyelashes the way Percy loved. Percy growled, and Nico stifled a laugh. "What gives us the honor of your presence, sir?"

"Why you, of course, gorgeous," Hercules said. His hand was back on Nico's butt. "You're a little lean for my liking, but the beauty of your face can't be denied. And this ass, mmm," Hercules grabbed a handful and squeezed. "This is the stuff of wet dreams. No wonder Polly went so apeshit for you."

Jason and Percy scowled from their perch on the couch. Nico forced down his disgust with the groping and contorted his face into a mask of pleased awe.

"Would you sit with me, Lord..." Nico trailed off because he didn't know the god's name, only that whoever he was, he made Jason angry.

Hercules threw back his head in a laugh and tousled Nico's hair. "Oh, that's wonderful. Your reaction is based upon my appearance alone and not on my reputation? We'll get along perfectly, hot stuff. Although," he turned to Jason, "I'm surprised you haven't told your little booty call about me, Son of Zeus."


"Whoa, no way," Percy said, all jealousy forgotten. "Jercules is Zachary Quinto? Dude, I loved you in Star Trek! You were a great Spock. I didn’t know gods could have, like, earthly alter egos. I still hate your guts, though, for the way you treated Zoe Nightshade."

"Zoe who?" Hercules was exasperated to be taken for his doppelganger again. "And I am taller than Zachary Quinto. Duh. And the eyes. Mine are blue. His are brown. People always forget the eyes."

Hercules waved a hand in front of his eyes, pointing out the difference between himself and Zachary Quinto.

"You're...Heracles?" Nico stammered. Despite his revulsion with the way he was being spoken to and manhandled, he felt star-struck.

Hercules raised an eyebrow and pulled Nico in close. He patted Nico's ass hard enough to push him forward. "Oh, hell, you're cute, di Angelo. Yes, I'm Heracles, the supreme son of Zeus, unlike Apollo or little loser boy over there." He grinned at Jason and wiggled his eyebrows before turning his attention back to Nico. "I go by Hercules, though. The name gets around. Where do you want to go to hook up, scrumptious?"

Nico was not familiar with many slang terms, but he did know what it meant to hook up. "Before we hook up, Lord Hercules, would you mind sitting with me and my rather pathetic friends and answering a few questions?"

"Bor-ing," Hercules said. "I want to lay into that fine ass, let you feel what it's like to be fucked by a
real god."

Jason snarled and had to be restrained by Percy. Nico felt like gagging, but he continued with the fake smile. "Ooh, that sounds...wonderful, Lord. Just a few questions, if we may. I've heard tales not only of your strength and bravery, but of your cunning and wisdom. It would be an honor to learn from you."

"Well, I am rather wise," Hercules said. He pulled Nico toward the gray chair. "I suppose I could share a bit of my time answering questions, as long as your hot little ass is situated right over my cock."

"Back off, motherfucker." Jason stood and blocked the path to the chair. He gestured between himself and Percy. "He's ours."

Percy nodded vigorously until he saw Nico's face. He moved away from Jason and shook his head just as adamantly as he'd nodded.

"Excuse me?" Nico turned away from Hercules and eyed Jason.

"Oh, wow, little inferior almost-brother," Hercules said. He patted Nico's butt again. "You can get it back after I'm gone. It won't hurt you to share a bite with me."

"Jason, you douchebag, you can't own me. I don't belong to you or Percy," Nico hissed. His hands were balled into fists. "What I do and who I do it with is my choice. I thought you'd already learned this lesson, and then you go and sound like this idiotic asshole." He jerked his thumb toward Hercules.

"Hey now, dumpling, let's take it easy on the namecalling." Hercules reached down to give Nico another pat.

Nico viciously batted him away. "You touch my ass again, you prick, and I swear to the gods it'll be the last thing that hand ever touches."

Hercules stared incredulously at Nico. He glanced over at Jason, who was openly smirking. Nico sneered when he saw Jason's reaction.

"Don't you dare smirk, Jason Grace, like you're in on some joke." Nico wildly waved his hands. "All three of you, sit on that gods-be-damned couch and don't you dare move until I tell you to. Don't speak, either."

Percy felt it wasn't fair that he'd been lumped with Hercules and Jason when all he'd done was start to agree with Jason, but he sat between the two larger gods and kept his mouth shut. Jason fumed that Nico had misinterpreted what he'd said. Hercules admired Nico's lips.

"Now, Hercules, as the only god we've met here who was once a demigod, your experiences are of great interest to me. I want to know what the transition from mortal to god was like." Nico was seething, but he didn't want to waste this opportunity to listen to someone who'd shared their experience.

Hercules started and tore his eyes away from Nico's lips. "Well, I suppose it was rather hard. I died like you did, muffin, and got brought back as a god. My wife killed herself because she caused my death, but I married Hebe, who's pretty hot, so it all evened out, I guess."

"Not for your wife, it didn't," Percy mumbled.
Hercules shrugged. "Whatevs. Anyway, it was hard to get used to being stuck on that fucking island, guarding the entrance to the Mare Nostrum, and stuff like not needing to eat or being unable to get shitfaced took some getting used to."

"Anything else?" Nico asked. "What about your familial ties? Did it feel like..." He hesitated. He would have to ask, but he hated to do it in front of Percy. "Did it feel like you identified with them less and less as time went on? Did who you were...change?"

"Look, hot little fu—"

Nico snapped his fingers and pointed at Hercules. The temperature dropped by thirty degrees. Hercules swallowed and tried again.

"Look, attractive young god that I would very much like to—"

The room grew colder.

"Lord di Angelo..."

Nico nodded. "Continue."

"Lord di Angelo, I didn't have much to do with my family anyway, other than my wife. Kids were never really my concern, you know? I had way too many to keep track of them all. But, yeah, the memory's vague now, but I felt myself changing, becoming different, detached from the mortal world. All the things that used to interest me, except for the sex and games, the things that were of genuine concern — wars, politics, that sort of thing — the interest went away."

"Okay, that was helpful," Nico said. "You can—"

"Do you love Hebe?" Percy asked. His eyes were wet. "At least, do you love her as much as you loved your other wives?"

Jason wrapped his arm around Percy and rubbed his shoulder.

"Who knows, godling?" Hercules said. "Not me. I'm not the same man I was. Don't try to draw parallels between yourself and someone else, or who you are and who you were. Only you know how you love people. You still have a beating ticker in there." He touched Percy's chest. "It works the same as ever, if you ask me."

"Thanks for telling us," Jason said.

"Any other questions?" Hercules asked.

The new gods shook their heads. They should have more questions, but none of them could think of any. Hercules stood and came close to Nico.

"That hookup isn't going to happen, is it?"

"Thanks, but I'm spoken for." Nico smiled and let his eyes flit to Jason and Percy.

Hercules lifted Nico's hand and kissed the top of it. "If you ever change your mind..."

"You'll be the fourth person I tell, I promise."

"Au revoir, mon cher." Hercules gave Nico a final, longing look and vanished.
Nico and Jason's eyes met. Nico pursed his lips and thought for a moment before he tilted his head toward the bedroom. Jason grabbed Percy's hand and tugged him along after Nico.

The bedroom was dark, as its only window faced east. Nico opened a small hole in the ceiling to let in more light. The light cascaded down, illuminating three somber young men. The air was cooler in this room than in the rest of the house. Percy and Jason sat side by side on the edge of the bed. Nico stood before them and tried to decide how best to proceed.

"I shouldn't have called you stupid, Percy." He tentatively laid his hand on Percy's thigh. "You have never been stupid, and I know you're sensitive about it. I was hurt because you took Jason's side."

"I took Jason's side because what you said sounded awful, and it hurt my feelings." Percy threaded his fingers with Nico's and pulled the younger god closer. "I don't want your pity, Nico."

"That's not what you have. I swear it. And look, what Hercules said about Hebe and his other wife. Annabeth—"

"Don't. I can't have that talk right now." A tear dripped down Percy's cheek. Nico kissed it away, and Jason wrapped his arm around Percy again. Percy sniffled. "Make good with Grace."

"I, um," Jason started, "I want to go first. Do you want to sit down with us, Nico?"

"Sure." Nico felt silly for letting his temper get the better of him for five days. He missed Jason and Percy. The older gods moved farther onto the bed and made room for Nico to sit in front of them.

"So, I should have asked you what you meant, when you said that stuff on our date. You got so mad at me out there with Hercules when I said you were ours. I wish that I'd had the chance to explain myself, and I should have given you the same courtesy I wanted you to give me." Jason stuck his hand out for Nico to shake.

Nico took Jason's hand and kissed it the same way Hercules had kissed him. "I'm listening now. Tell me what you meant by shouting 'He's ours' like a possessive child?"


"Well, I did sort of mean it the way it sounded, and I shouldn't be possessive." Jason leaned closer to Nico and Percy, but then he pulled back. He didn't want to invade Nico's space. "You're an adult and your own person and you can make those sorts of choices for yourself. I didn't mean it literally, like you belong to us like a possession, though. I meant that I believe we are emotionally bound to each other. Like, by choice, yours as much as ours."

"I am," Nico said. "I'm not interested in being with anyone but the two of you."

"What about Apollo?" Percy asked.

"He's not an option."

"So you take him entirely out of the equation?" Percy had a selfish motive for wanting the answer.

"What does it matter? I can't be with him, anyway."

"This," Percy brushed his hand over Nico's thigh, Jason's lap, and Nico's other thigh in a big, circular motion, "is the part that matters, because it's what we'll have for the foreseeable future, huh?"
Nico didn't answer. Telling the truth, saying yes, would be admitting that Percy couldn't be assured of a future with Annabeth. Whether or not anyone answered didn't matter to Percy. He knew the answer already.

"Tell Jason what you were trying to say on your date," Percy said. He made small circles and figure eights on Nico's hip.

"Sometimes, I want stuff to be easy," Nico said. "You, Percy, being with you is easy, and if I loved you more than him I could make your life easier, too. I don't know. I love you both so much, and it's not like I love him tons more than you or you're some charity case. Jason, you're hard, or I'm hard, I guess. I'm not good at letting the old stuff go, but at the same time, I'm so damned sick of carrying around all that baggage."

"You hold a grudge, dumbass." Percy nudged Nico's jaw with his head. "It's the same thing Bianca warned you about a billion years ago. Let us help you let it go."

"I would like to try, if Jason's still willing."

"More than willing."

Jason put his hand on the bed behind Percy and leaned in. Nico bent down and kissed Jason, slow and soft. When the kiss ended, Nico held Jason behind his ear and looked at Percy, who'd had a front row seat for the kiss.

"Can I kiss you, Percy?" Nico asked.

"You never have to ask me that, Nico."

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed!

I played Hercules a little less sanitized than the version RR put forth (though I liked that version, too). I just had trouble swallowing that a guy who had a billion wives, lovers, and children was that bitter with the gods over the fate of one wife.
If I'd divided the book into three separate stories this would have been the final chapter of the second book. I hope you're all still enjoying it! :-)
Once he came back, they'd worked out a compromise. Nico didn't want his loose cannon tendencies to cost him his relationship, and Apollo didn't want to feel like a prison warden. They'd agreed that Nico would see the therapist Apollo wanted him to, and Apollo would stop monitoring Nico's every step. They'd also decided that if Nico fell off the Hera-stalking wagon, Hades would be informed of the problem.

It had all seemed like a good solution. Nico had been going to the therapist, and she had been extremely helpful. She was sympathetic to his abandonment issues and outcast status. Even the unconventional nature of his romantic relationships didn't phase her. But she had taken a hard line on the stalking. She said, rightly, Nico supposed, that he wasn't turning into a criminal; he was hoping that Hera would cause him enough pain to get the attention of the people he wanted to care about him. In short, she'd branded him a pretty typical FUT (fucked-up teen).

Nico's phone buzzed again. Hera was still inside the herb store. He pulled out his phone and read the message.

Come on, baby. It's important. I'm not trying to get back in your life, I swear. Talk to me.

Percy could be such an idiot. He seemed to have decided that Nico didn't want to talk to him. Nico wanted to talk to him so much it made him cry sometimes. Apollo was overprotective and bossy. Jason was great when he was around, but he was incredibly hard on Nico. Percy had been his only lover who'd always felt soft and warm and safe. Nico missed him more than ever, even if he didn't necessarily want to rekindle their affair.

Nico glanced back at Hera, who was moving around inside the shop. Who knew a person could shop so long for herbs?

So Nico wasn't supposed to be stalking her, and as far as he could tell, Apollo believed he wasn't. Nico varied the time of day he sought her out, sometimes before class, sometimes on his lunch break, and never more than once or twice a week. He usually kept the spying part to a few minutes, too. Today was an exception. Chelsea Market provided him enough human cover to move around and observe for a long time without worrying about getting caught. If Apollo checked in on him, he'd think Nico was shopping. Nico had made sure to buy some bread they could have for dinner tonight.

His phone buzzed again. He swore softly and peeked at the message.

If you don't call me tonight I'm going to tell Jason that you're in trouble.

Fucker.

Calling you in five minutes, Percy. It better be important.

He took one last peek at Hera and shadowed to a hidden grove of trees in Central Park. It was near Orpheus's entrance to the Underworld, which made Nico a little sad, thinking about his trip through the door with Percy and about his father, whom he hadn't been to see since last Thanksgiving. He sat on the ground and used his penlight and crystal to make a rainbow.

Percy was sitting on the couch in his villa, tapping his fingers on his knees. His shoulders were twitching. Otherwise, he looked exactly the same as he had seven months ago. Nico couldn't help smiling.

"Hello, my beautiful baby," Percy said softly. "It's good to see your face."

Nico didn't know why Percy looked so sad if it was good to see him.
"Hey, Perce. It's good to see you, too."

They stared at each other for so long that Nico had to deposit another drachma to continue the call.

"Percy?"

"Yeah?"

"You wanted something? You said it was important."

Percy ran a hand through his hair. He looked down at his hands and back up at Nico. Nico waited. Percy cleared his throat.

"Are you well, Nico?"

Had someone said something? No. No one knew except Apollo.

"I'm fine, Perce. You?"

"Yeah. I'm good. Better than good, actually."

Nico widened his eyes and shook his head, trying to will Percy to get to it. "Good."

Nothing.

"Look, Percy, if you wanted me to call so we could stare at each other—"

"Wait! I need to ask you something."

Nico slid his hand down his face and said "What?" while his hand was still covering his mouth.

Percy grinned his dopey lopsided grin. "I think I'm gonna ask Annabeth to marry me."

Nico's mouth dropped open. He had stopped breathing and was going to die from shock. Forget death by goddess. He should have known death by Percy would always be his destiny. He dumped out the bread he'd bought and used the bag to keep from hyperventilating.

Percy laughed.

"Gods, I've missed you."

Nico held up a finger, signaling he would try to talk at some point, if he did not, in fact, die. After inflating the bag a few more times, he opened his mouth to say something intelligent like "Congratulations," but had to hold up a second finger and take a few more breaths. Percy must have thrown some money in on his end, because even Fleecy would have given up on Nico not acting like a fool by now.

Finally, Nico felt like he could spit out five syllables.


Seven syllables. Impressive for fifteen minutes of waiting.

"Thanks, but I'm not sure, not yet."

Percy's grin faded, and his eyes grew somber. Why had he seemed sad earlier? He wanted to marry Annabeth. Surely that was a good thing?
"I just...I...Nico..." Percy ducked his head again, and when he looked up, Nico was struck by how beautiful Percy's eyes were, how kind his face was. How not ready Nico was to close off this part of his life.

"I'm not done with you, please," Nico wanted to say. He kept his mouth shut.

"Is there a reason," Percy said, "any reason at all, no matter how tiny, that I shouldn't do this?"

Oh.

Percy would give Nico what he wanted. Hell, Percy wanted the same thing. Percy loved him. Still. It wasn't pretend, or a phase, or an infatuation. It was real, and all Nico had to do to make it his was take it. He could have something he wanted, all for himself. A vision of Annabeth swam into his mind. Annabeth, who didn't pursue a death wish by chasing a goddess across the country. Annabeth, who didn't tempt danger by sleeping with a god. Annabeth, who'd never love anyone but Percy.

Nico bit his lip when tears threatened his composure. His breaths were slow and shuddering. "Will you be happy this way?"

Percy offered a small smile. "I think there's a strong possibility. It won't be the same, though."

Nico put out his hand, slid it down the image of Percy's face and chest. "I love you. Be happy with her, Percy."

A tear slid down Percy's cheek. "I'm going to ask her this weekend, I guess. I'll let you—"

"Reyna or Hazel should tell me. It'll seem less suspicious. You should..."

"I'll go. You'll always be in my heart, Nico."

Nico nodded. "Same here."

Percy held up his phone. "I'm keeping this, so you'd better keep paying the bill. If you need me, contact me and I'll drop everything to get to you."

Nico kissed his fingers and held them up to the Iris message. "A kiss to keep."

Percy smiled again and let out a sob. He mimicked the gesture. "A kiss to keep."

Nico swiped his hand through the message and dug his phone out of his pocket. He cocked his arm, ready to hurl the phone against a tree, but he couldn't do it, not yet. He put the phone back, wiped his eyes, and shadow traveled home.

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Three weeks after Hazel told Nico the "great news" about Annabeth and Percy's engagement — after Percy's Iris message, Nico had stopped chasing Hera for a week to practice convincingly saying, "Oh, that's wonderful!" — Hera deviated from her normal pattern of mindless shopping and animal cruelty. She went to a wedding show. Nico found her next to a florist's stand, perusing bouquets of lilies. He stood hidden behind a display of dresses and watched her turn up her ugly nose at bouquet after bouquet. Persephone would love those flowers.
"Come out and play, little boy," Hera said, and without warning, Nico was standing next to her. He reached for his sword, but when he touched it, the iron burned his hand. "Now, now, Son of Hades. Daddy would be so disappointed if you ruined his most precious gift to you by trying to fight the Queen of the Gods. I do believe these flowers smell sickly. I must tell your stepmother to do a much better job. But then, that always has been the problem with your line, hasn't it, little Nico? The kin of Hades, especially the di Angelo family, aren't built to last."

Nico should have been terrified. He needed to be terrified, probably. Instead, he fell back into the old reliance on bravado and wits that had saved his life hundreds of times.

"It is an honor to see you here, Lady Hera." Nico inclined his head. "I apologize for reaching for my weapon, but you startled me. A friend is getting married in a few months, and I thought I'd like to see what all the fuss is about. I suppose it makes sense for you to be here, as you're the goddess of marriage. I'll pass along the message about the lilies."

Nico tried to leave, but his feet were stuck to the ground. He couldn't move. Hera shifted to his other side. "Oh, but do stay, little boy. I'd love your company. You've done such a fine job following me these long months. I think it's high time we both got the payout we seek."

Hera looped her arm through his and they were moving, walking among the vendors. Lying seemed to be out, at least about the fact that Nico had been stalking her. What else did she know? What did she want?

Nico needed to see if he could manipulate the shadows, but he couldn't escape since she was touching him. He waited until they were stopped next to a perfumery and threw his arm into the shadow created by the stand, reaching back and concentrating, trying for a trick he'd practiced since he was fifteen years old and managed to throw a handful of drachmas all the way from camp to Percy's bed in Manhattan. Triumphant, he pulled his hand back and held it out for Hera.

"A gift for you, My Lady." He opened his hand to reveal a miniature blown glass peacock. The artistry was exquisite. Each feather seemed individually created, but they flowed together as one undulating, lifelike mass.

"Lovely, Son of Hades," Hera said. She picked up the peacock and examined it. "The artist is talented, is he not? Have you become a thief as well as a whore?"

Nico ignored the word. He'd been expecting something along those lines. It was Hera, after all, who'd made sure everyone knew details about his sex life. She was trying to bait him. He could stay calm and figure a way out.

"I am neither, Lady," Nico said blandly. He arched an eyebrow, dug in his pocket, and produced a hundred dollar bill. He showed it to Hera and sent it through the shadows. "The artist has been richly compensated. A small price, really, in order to pay homage to a queen."

"Is this how you lured Jason? A pretty face," she swiped her nail across his cheek, "a silver tongue, and an open wallet? What of your other lovers?"

Ignore her, Nico. Deep breaths. "May I have your opinion, Lady Hera? My friend will be married in June. Will this suit be too warm for a June wedding in New York?"

Nico fingered a soft tuxedo and tried to buy himself some time. Flattery usually worked well on the gods, but since Hera knew he'd been following her, she probably wasn't going to be easily reeled in. She was shrewd, too. She would know he hated her for the devastation she'd wrought in his life. How else to escape? Nico was sure this would end poorly for him if he didn't leave soon.
"Hmm," Hera said. She slipped the fabric between her fingers. Her nails were unadorned and short. Nico thought they still resembled claws as much as those frightfully long and painted things he remembered on some of the vain girls in school. "Let us see, shall we? A body like yours shouldn't be wasted on modest clothing, after all."

She snapped her fingers and Nico's skin was bare to the cold November air. He expected the suit to fall into place, but it didn't. Seconds passed, and he was exposed while mortals passed all around him. Most didn't look at him any more than they ever did, but the feeling was raw and unnerving. It wasn't real. Hera wanted him to panic.

"Are you so vain that you've no problem letting the mortals see your body?" Hera eyed him in obvious disgust.

Nico tried to will his clothes back. Nothing happened.

"Perhaps you hope to ensnare another lover, foul boy."

"My Lady, I do not wish to be unclothed."

Nausea ate at his stomach. Maybe if he vomited on Hera she'd break her hold and he could flee. This was sick and cruel, worse even than what she'd done in the senate. People began to notice.

"You would like to be clothed? All you have to do is ask me to clothe you, Nico."

"Lady Hera, in your graciousness, would you please clothe me?" A tear ran down Nico's cheek. Hera wiped it away. He hated her. He wished Apollo hadn't stopped him when he'd been ready to kill her. Gods, he wished Apollo could save him now.

"Of course, Son of Hades. It would be my pleasure."

Hera brushed her hand over Nico's chest, and he was clothed in the suit he'd been asking about. The mortals were passing by again like nothing had happened, as though Nico hadn't been humiliated and degraded.

"Come. Let us sample the cakes."

Nico was shaking, but he had no option except to continue with Hera's game. She's trying to break me. She wants to make me doubt myself so I'll stay away from Jason. If he could submit to the humiliations, she'd let him go.

"Try this one, Nico."

Hera held a small chocolate cake ball to his lips. Nico obediently opened his mouth. The cake was made of dirt. He gagged and coughed. He thought he might finally throw up, but Hera waved her hand and his stomach settled. The foul taste of the dirt remained.

"Was that not to your taste?" Hera asked. "I was certain you'd find it perfect. You see, your mouth his dirty. Your hands are dirty. Your soul is dirty. You are dirt. It is your birthright."
"My Lady, I should be heading home. It has been an honor to accompany you, but—"

"One more experience, brat, and then we will see if you'd like to leave. You are my escort, my consort, if I choose. You are nothing I do not wish you to be."

They'd stopped in front of a large video screen that was showing images of weddings. Photos of happy couples lit the display. Hera must not be tampering with it, because there were even photos of gay men and lesbians being married. Nico's momentary comfort turned to shock when there was a picture of Percy and Annabeth standing at an altar. It was followed by a graphic image of Nico and Percy having sex. Before Nico could register more than shock, the next photo flashed on the screen. It was Jason, marrying Piper. Jason looked so happy. Then the image was gone, replaced by one showing Nico and Jason on the roof of the Ritz, naked and engaged in oral sex. Jason's face was contorted with pleasure, but from the angle of the shot, it looked like pain.

"You see, Nico? You have stolen their wonder for love and replaced it with lust and depravity. You are dirty. It is no wonder," Hera mused. "Your mother was a whore, too."

"Stop." Power pooled in Nico's gut. Hera's grasp on his arm faltered. The air turned frigid. Cracks spread from his feet. Vases shattered throughout the wedding show as the water within them froze. "I am not your puppet. You don't control me, and you won't denigrate my mother. Maria di Angelo was a good woman, and Hades is a great man. Humiliate me for loving your son, but my parents are honorable, and so am I. There is nothing you can do to me that I can't withstand."

Nico searched for a shadow. He found one and drew it toward him. He was almost free.

"Nothing? Oh, Nico, I believe that is a stretch." Hera's voice was so smooth. The hair on Nico's arms stood up.

"Kill me, if you want to try, My Lady." Nico sneered at the last words. "I don't think you will today. And even if you succeed, I will simply return to my father's side. I am the son of Hades, and if the dirt is my birthright, so is the eternity of my father's kingdom. You can't touch those I love. Leave me be. Enjoy the peacock."

"Do you love your sister, Reyna?"

Nico's hand had already disappeared into his shadow when he froze.

Hera raised her eyebrows. "She looks remarkably like the old one who was so anxious to rid herself of you that she ran off half-cocked with the Hunters and got herself killed. This one seems to like you better."

The control Nico had over his powers slipped, and the wave their discharge created knocked the mortals to their feet. Nico and Hera remained standing in the center of screams and confusion. Hera stepped closer to Nico, and he was trapped by his fear.

"What god beds you, vile, revolting child? You will die and be eternally bound in the Underworld, and he will be punished, but your sister will escape my wrath. You do love her, Nico. You are a fool who wears your heart on your sleeve. Surely you can do one thing right before you die."

Nico opened his mouth. Hera wouldn't hurt Percy or Jason. She'd leave Hazel alone because of Hades. Reyna didn't have the protection the others enjoyed. Hera would hurt her; Nico could see the determination in her eyes. He hated himself for being willing to offer up Apollo, but he couldn't let Reyna get hurt.

"Enough of your silly games, old woman."
A heavy hand fell on Nico's shoulder, and he jerked his head up to see his father standing tall and proud next to him. Hades's eyes seemed to burn with fire. He was emitting a faint white glow.

"This doesn't concern you, Hades," Hera said.

"I disagree. My son's love life is what should be of no concern to either of us. Do you make it a habit to meddle in the love lives of mortals these days? Still jealous of Aphrodite? I thought these affairs were beneath a goddess such as yourself."

Hera opened her mouth and snapped it shut. Her regal face turned red. "I...of course. I've no interest in the petty lives of mortals."

"Very well. I'm glad to hear Her Majesty has not lowered herself to such pursuits. Now, my son is deeply sorry if his fascination with you has made you uncomfortable. He is a great believer in the power of family, and your patronage appeals to him despite the cruelty you've shown him in recent years. He will not bother you again."

Hera glared at Nico. "Of course, Hades. Family is incredibly important. I forgive your son his interest."

"Is there anything further, My Queen?"

In reply, Hera disappeared.

The hand on Nico's shoulder tightened, and Hades sucked them both into the shadows.

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"Dad! That was—"

Hades cut Nico off with a hiss and pointed to one of the elegant chairs in his study.

"Sit in that chair and do not move or speak until I decide it is allowed. You are lucky at this moment that I am allowing you to breathe."

Nico gulped and decided the chair looked awfully inviting. He sat and tried to calm his racing heart. His dad had saved him! He'd saved Reyna and Apollo, too. Gods, Nico was the world's biggest asshole and idiot. How could he have endangered his family with his recklessness?

Hades walked around his desk and picked up a paperweight. He hurled it at Nico, and it whizzed by his ear and crashed through the wall.

"All gods and goddesses vacate my realm immediately!" Hades bellowed. Nico jumped at the magnified quality of his father's voice. He'd never seen Hades so terrifying, and he'd been pretty scared of his dad plenty of times. "Do not return until I have called for you! Persephone!"

The goddess popped into the room and strode toward Nico. It was clear she meant to comfort him. Hades roared and flipped over his desk. He conjured a pomegranate and threw it at Nico. It hit his chest with the force of a baseball. Gooey red seeds dripped from him like blood. He was still wearing the suit Hera had put him in.

Persephone changed directions and went to stand by Hades's side. Nico couldn't blame her.
"Demeter!"

Fuck, Nico was in deep trouble if Hades was yelling for her. A moment later, Demeter burst into being next to her daughter. She scanned the room and turned on Nico with glee.

"Neeky! Did you have a fun little date with Hera? You made daddy maddy."

Hades swiped his thumb and index finger across his lips and whatever catcall Demeter was about to bestow upon Nico was cut off. Hades snapped his fingers, and Percy and Jason appeared on opposite sides of the room. Their eyes were wide, their faces white. Hades conjured two more pomegranates and threw them at the men. Jason ducked and Percy sliced the one aimed at him in half.

"Haha! We playing Fruit Ninja, Uncle?" Percy grinned at Jason as though he expected a laugh.

Hades did the thing with his fingers again and shut Percy up, too. Nico wheeled in his chair to get a better look at Jason, who was standing slightly behind him after evading the pomegranate, and Hades hit Nico in the back of the head with another fruit. The seeds dripped into his collar, and Nico's vision went blurry. Unsteadily, he turned back to face his father. He wasn't sure, but it seemed like maybe Hades had another pomegranate aimed at his face.

"Dear," Persephone said. "Mortal bodies break when you hit them with things. He is your son."

"Gah!" Hades cried. He squeezed the pomegranate into pulp and threw that at Nico instead. It didn't hurt, but it felt sticky against the side of his face.

"Lord Uncle, sir." Jason stepped forward into Nico's field of vision and raised his hand. "It's a pleasure to see you, and Ladies Demeter and Persephone, as well. May I ask why Percy and I are here?"

Jason eyed Nico with unabashed concern. Nico glanced toward Percy and saw he sported an identical expression. Percy wasn't even trying to unstick his mouth.

"You two." Hades pointed a finger from each hand at Percy and Jason. "You two are going to rot in my dungeons."

"Dad! They didn't do anything!" Nico could handle assault by pomegranate. He deserved it. He deserved way worse, frankly, but Percy and Jason were blameless. Hades conjured a pitcher of pomegranate juice and dumped it on Nico's head.

"They fill your vapid little head with notions that will end up getting you killed, Nico! They break your heart and think you're the one who's hurting them! They are arrogant!"

Nico was so sick of his dad's opinion about Percy and Jason.

"They don't deserve to go to the dungeons because I'm an idiot, Dad. Punish me. I deserve it and I'll accept it, but leave them alone, please. Percy shouldn't even be here. He got engaged. I'm not his problem anymore."

"This situation is Nico's fault, dear," Persephone said. Nico nodded enthusiastically, though he was a little hurt that Persephone wasn't sticking up for him more.

Hades pointed at Percy with pinched fingers and then spread his fingertips wide.

"Is it true you are engaged, Jackson? Not to my son?"
Percy glanced at Nico and nodded. "Nico, what have—"

"You are no longer my concern. Goodbye." When Percy didn’t move, Hades made a little shooing motion with his hand.

Percy switched his dumbfounded gaze to Hades, who stared back expectantly.

"I...what? Is Nico in trouble?"

No one answered. Percy stepped toward Nico and reached a hand out to his hair. He stopped inches away, and Nico wasn't sure if it was because he knew he shouldn't be touching him or because of all the pomegranate.

"Uncle? Anyone?"

Demeter's lips must have come unstuck, too, because she started talking. "I like the Jackson boy better than Grace. He has balls. Remember that time he bathed in the Styx and humiliated you, Brother?"

"Auntie, now's not the time," Nico hissed. "Dad, you need to snap Percy back to the surface."

"Now's as good a time as any, Neeky."

"What's wrong with Nico?"

"Don't talk to me, little fool. He can walk on his own two feet."

"Sir, I don't mean to interrupt, but—"

"Shut the fuck up, Jason! They never answer when you're polite. Look—"

"See what I mean about the balls?"

"You are going to the farm, Nico, and then straight to your room for the rest of eternity."

"Dad!"

"Sir..."

"Did your testicles recede inside your body or were you born with none?"

"Enough!"

Everyone stopped talking and gaped at Persephone. She was glowing, and her voice sounded like demon spawn. There was a twinkling of light, and the room filled with enough rattan furniture to comfortably fit everyone who wasn't currently sitting.

"Sit, please," Persephone said, and Nico was relieved to hear her voice had returned to its normal range. "Percy, dear, I'm sorry, but this is a family discussion and since you've given up your claim on our Nico..."

She snapped her fingers, and Percy vanished. Persephone laced her fingers with her husband’s and guided him to the throne-shaped chairs sitting atop his overturned desk. Her eyes turned hard. "Now, my husband, call down the one who deserves the full pelting with the pomegranates."

"Apollo!" Hades yelled so loudly the walls shook.
Nico risked another barrage of pomegranate and turned to see Jason, who was awkwardly sitting next to Demeter on a loveseat. Jason held up his hands and mouthed "What happened?" Nico turned back around and ignored him. Jason would be furious when he found out what Nico had been doing.

A soft rustle on his fingers made Nico jump, but when he dropped his gaze to his hand he saw that small purple flower petals were weaving themselves into rings on his fingers. A crown of flower blossoms appeared on his knee. He peered at Persephone, who nodded gently. He picked up the crown and laid it on his hair. He wished he could hug her right now. His dad may be letting him move and speak a little, but he wasn't dumb enough to think he was allowed out of the chair.

"Thank you," he whispered and watched the petals weave more rings on his other hand.

A loud pop announced Apollo's arrival.

"Uncle, we are not scheduled to talk until..."

Despite his sincere contrition toward everyone in the room, Nico glared at Apollo. Had his lover been secretly updating his dad on his behavior? That was low.

"I thought perhaps we should talk now, Nephew. Look at my son." It took Hades five seconds to utter the last sentence, he spoke so slowly. Apollo's normally tanned skin drained of color. His eyes hadn't left Nico since he'd spotted him sitting in the center of the room. "Sit, Nephew. Explain."

"I...Uncle..." Apollo's hands were shaking. Nico wasn't sure if he was terrified of Hades or what he had to understand Nico had been caught doing. "He is injured and shaken. Please—"

"Let him be injured a little longer," Hades growled. "It may help drive the lesson home."

"No, Uncle, he's been traumatized. Nico, darling, I am so sorry." Apollo surged forward, dropped to his knees, and pressed his hands over the spots Hades had hit with the pomegranates. He also stopped over Nico's heart and head, singing a low, soothing hymn. Nico rested his head against Apollo's and sighed heavily.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I shouldn't have lied to you or taken your worries so lightly. I'm so sorry."

"It is I who should apologize, lover," Apollo said. He brushed a kiss across Nico's sticky cheek. "I should have realized you would not be able to let things go."

"Can someone please tell me what the fucking hell is going on?"

Nico gaped at Jason. He was used to Jason speaking that way, but as far as he knew, the only other person Jason talked to like that was Percy.

"Oh, seems you do have a pair after all. I wondered where you kept all that semen you've deposited in the boy's digestive tract. Neeky here," Demeter kicked Nico's ass with a pointy granny boot, "has been stalking our fair queen like an absolute mental case. Seven months, right Neeky? Tracking the Queen of the Gods and thinking that she wouldn't notice. It took Hades's quick thinking to save him today. And this dimwit," she pointed to Apollo, who was too far away to be kicked, "was stupid enough to think he had a handle on the situation. Neeky's a fair sight cleverer than you, Polly."

"You've been doing what?" Jason bellowed almost as loud as Hades. He leaped to his feet and took a step closer to Nico. "Oh, fuck, you fucking idiot! So great, not only do you piss her off even more but you act like a fucking psychopath to do it? Moron! Fuck!"
Nico kept his head down and waited. He knew Jason wasn't done, not by a long shot. The sick part was this was what he'd been hoping for, and he couldn't deny the pleasure Jason's concern sent rocketing through his body.

"Listen, Brother—"

"No, you listen, all of you. You're fucking gods, damn it. You're supposed to love him! Why the hell can't you keep him safe? He's one freaking mortal boy. Fuck, Apollo. You tell me how you're better for him than I am, yet look what he does on your watch!"

"It is not our responsibility to be Nico's keeper," Persephone said.

"Bullshit! You two have no other responsibilities when it comes to kids, and don't hand me some piece of shit about how Hazel matters, too. You care about him. Just. Fucking. Him. And you," Jason turned to Demeter, "you love him a million times more than you love any of your own kids. You wouldn't torture him so much if you didn't. Why couldn't you watch out for him this time?"

Demeter was silent.

"And you, Brother," Jason spat the word, "what the damned hell were you thinking? You let him do this shit for seven months? What kind of partner are you?"

"Hey, Jason, back the fuck off." Nico had loved Jason's tirade for the first few minutes. He did not love his family getting ripped to shreds over his errors. "This was my mistake."

"Oh, how fucking grand, you little motherfucking shithead!" Jason's voice had risen with his anger and dripped with sarcasm. He sounded unhinged and dangerous. Electricity sparked between his hands. "Do you not give a shit how much I love you or how hard I've worked to keep Hera away from you? All you had to do was leave her alone and keep your head down. Fuck you. It wasn't just you who lost everything that day on the senate floor; it was me, too. And it's been worth it, every horrible day and every cruel word that's been thrown my way, losing all my friends and getting punched and kicked and fucking stabbed, because it meant you were safe. You selfish son of a bitch."

Jason looked up at Hades.

"Lock him in his room or your fucking dungeon or send him out to the farm with Demeter or whatever, but I'm done."

"Jason." Nico spun to his feet and faced Jason. It couldn't mean what it sounded like. Nico reached out his hand, but Jason jerked away.

"No. We're done, and I have never stopped loving you, not through any of it." His chest was heaving, and the veins in his forearms bulged. His eyes were such a bright blue, so cold and distant, Nico almost couldn't bear to see them. "But I don't love you anymore."

Nico gasped. He tried again to touch Jason, but Jason created a wall of electricity that Nico couldn't penetrate.

Jason moved his eyes over the assembled gods. "Can someone please take me back to the surface?"

"Jason, please, please don't say you don't love me," Nico begged. He tried to sidestep the electrical field, but Jason blocked every attempt. He couldn't lose Jason. This couldn't happen. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I won't let you down ever again. I love you so much. Jason."
Jason turned his back. His shoulders were shaking. "Please, someone take me away from him."

Nico watched Demeter snap her fingers and Jason vanish. He threw himself on the floor at his father's feet and sobbed.

"Leave us, all of you," Hades said.

One by one, Nico heard his family members obey his father, until they were all alone.
"Knock, knock."

Nico didn't stop reading. "Percy asleep?"

"Yeah, you ready?" Jason traced the shoulder seam on Nico’s t-shirt. He knew that was the upper limit of touch Nico would tolerate while he was studying.

"Give me a moment to finish this section."

Nico read, and Jason tried to be patient. He tapped his fingers along the back of the couch in the man cave. He rearranged the video games, neatly stacking them in alphabetical order. He walked back over and stood in the doorway, his elbow leaning against the frame near his head and his hip jutted out, the way he'd seen Nico stand countless times.

Finally, Nico dog-eared the page, closed the book, and set it aside. "Alright, I'm ready, Ja—"

Jason blushed at how Nico's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

"Too much?"

"Turn in a circle."

Jason did, feeling the tailored black suit move with him. This was the fourth time in his life he'd worn a suit, and he felt at least as awkward as the three previous times.

Nico came closer as Jason finished spinning. Watching Jason had caused his heart rate to increase, and he felt light-headed. His words came out just above a whisper. "You are so attractive. I think that when you're wearing your ratty t-shirts and atrocious jeans. This is nice, though, really nice."

Jason offered Nico his elbow. "May I?"

Nico grinned and looped his hand under and then over Jason's forearm. Their daily godly visit had occurred less than an hour ago, so they would be able to take a leisurely date. The sun was shining outside, which was a departure from the storms they'd experienced over the last three days. A date outside sounded wonderful to Jason.

"What are we doing?" Nico asked. It felt a bit silly, but Jason liked to secretly plan their dates. Nico was happy to indulge him.

"I thought we'd take a stroll along the beach and walk the edge of the barrier. It's been a long time since any of us did that."

When their captivity had been new and strange, one of the gods had walked the perimeter every day, checking for weak spots or deformities, hoping for a way out. They’d never found anything. As they became accustomed to their confinement, curiosity about their prison waned in the face of other, more interesting, aspects of becoming a god.

"Sounds nice." Nico didn't care about the barrier anymore, but he thought a walk with Jason could be pleasant. Movement was good. It would give them something to do besides talk. "Are you hot in
"That suit?"

"I was, but then I remembered, duh, I'm a god. I can choose whether or not I get hot."

Their shoulders bumped, and the gods giggled nervously. They were comfortable together when Percy was with them. When they were on their dates, anxiety set in.

"That's a good point," Nico said. He couldn't think of something else to say.

"The bad part is that..." Jason trailed off.

"The bad part is what?" Nico watched Jason's face turn pink.

Jason turned his head away from Nico and mumbled, "The bad part about the suit is that I can't feel your skin."

When Jason turned back to face him, Nico gazed out to sea. Slowly, he slid his hand down Jason's arm and hooked their hands together, twining his fingers between Jason's and holding on tight.

Jason smiled. "That's better."

Nico nodded before he sighed. "This is so awkward, Jason. All of these dates are."

"I know. I'm not quite sure how to fix it." Jason's blue eyes shone brighter for a moment, but neither god noticed. "I know I don't want to stop trying, I like spending time with you."

"Me, too." Nico laid his head on Jason's shoulder. "I like spending time with you, too, I mean."

They ambled along the beach until they reached the barrier. Nico brushed his hand over it. It felt hard and impenetrable, like always. Its material was cold and smooth. Jason let his hand trail over the barrier, too. His fingers slipped over Nico's before they fell away.

"Do you have any idea what we can do to make this not so awkward?" Jason asked.

Nico shrugged. "Ask Percy along? We're less stupid when he's with us."

"That's because Percy takes up all the stupid." Jason and Nico chuckled. "He makes you feel safer, huh?"

"Yes. It's not that you make me feel unsafe. The opposite is true, actually. You make me feel a kind of safe that scares me, like if I'm not careful I'll lose part of myself in you. I feel less grounded, more volatile, I guess, when you're around."

"Can you explain it?" Jason wanted nothing more than to understand what made Nico pull away from him after all this time.

"I don't know." Nico veered far enough away from Jason to run into the barrier. He laughed at himself and moved closer to Jason. "You were everything to me, and I trusted you completely, every damned time. You hurt me enough that maybe I started feeling like that idea of 'safety' with you was a warning I never listened to."

"Percy says I have to prove that I'll be here, that I'm not running off."

Nico snorted. "You can't run off, dumbasses."

"Then how do I prove myself to you?"
"You already have. Please know that." Nico ran his hand down Jason's tie and fingered the tie pin before he gave a light tug on the tie and let go. "Stuff inside me is broken, Jason. It's me that has the problem."

"Bullshit." The sunlight glinted off Jason's glasses. He took them off and put them in his breast pocket. "You're more together now than you ever were. Gods, Nico, you're amazing. After everything you've gone through, everything I put you through—"

"I don't want to talk about that stuff."

Jason had to work not to throw his hands up in frustration. "How are you supposed to get over that stuff if you won't talk about it? Percy says you don't talk to him about it, either."

"Percy should keep his mouth shut."

"He's your best friend. He wants you to be happy."

"I'm a child of Hades. We don't get to be happy. Do this with me." Nico held Jason still and put his inside foot right next to Jason's. "Lean out."

Jason did as Nico asked. Slowly, they began walking by placing their feet together, holding hands, and leaning away from each other so their arms were outstretched. Each step had to be careful and deliberate and required them to rely on each other. They walked a path over the dunes, behind the altars and the trash heap, beyond the house, and back around until they were on the beach again. Walking this way along the beach was harder because of the shifting sand, but not having to walk along a curve made things easier. When they'd completed one entire loop, by silent agreement, they broke apart laughing.

"We made it! I wasn't expecting we'd make it all the way around." Nico laughed more, and when Jason pulled him into his arms, he went willingly.

Jason nuzzled his face in Nico's hair. "We make a good team. That was fun."

"We should do a competition thing, like a mini-Olympics. Waste a few days," Nico said. "We could do races, archery, mini golf, javelin. We could even do a three point shooting contest."

"Could we do it naked?"

"Pervy mind," Nico said, but he grinned. "You spend too much time with Percy these days."

"Percy has good ideas sometimes," Jason said. He stopped hugging Nico and held his hand. "And the original Olympics were naked, right? The gods haven't been letting the barrier out any farther since we do all our intimate activities in the bedroom where they can't see. I bet they'd let it out some if we put on a show like that."

Nico had to admit Jason had a point. "I'll think about it. Sit with me on the beach? I can hear Percy's still snoozing."

A big blue blanket appeared in the dry sand, and Jason and Nico sat. Jason didn't let go of Nico's hand. He traced along the edges of Nico's fingers and hoped Nico would open up to him.

"Tell me something I don't know about you," Jason said.

"I think you know everything. Um, I find spitting revolting."
"Knew that."

Nico pursed his lips. "I have seasonal allergies. Well, had. I guess I probably don't anymore."

"No, probably not," Jason agreed. "And I knew that, too."

"See, you already know everything."

Nico settled more comfortably on the blanket. He looked at the horizon over the dunes until Jason's gentle touch on his jaw made him turn around. Jason's eyes were so vibrant in the sun. Nico found them mesmerizing. He couldn't look away.

"I could know you a million years and we could have this talk every day, and I still wouldn't know everything about you, Nico di Angelo." The way Jason smiled, with his lips slightly parted and showing off his white teeth and the tiny scar on his lip, his blue eyes dazzling and intense, was more beautiful than anything Nico had ever seen.

Nico's heart melted, despite how sappy his head said Jason sounded.

"I think you were meant to be a god, Jason. You always looked like one. Right now, you feel like one, sitting so close to me."

Jason watched Nico's big black eyes dart over his face. Nico shifted closer. Warm breath cascaded over Jason's lips. The gods came together, and Nico's lips skimming Jason's and moved away before Jason had the chance to close his eyes.

"I'm in love with you," Jason murmured. "I have been in love with you since your fifteenth birthday when I found you out on the beach, sad and thinking about Percy. I regret that I had almost six mortal years after that and I couldn't ever make things right between us. It's so damned selfish, but I regret that more than every life I ever missed saving."

"Don't have regrets. What have you learned? Tell me that. We can't change our past. Tell me how you're different now." Nico took Jason's other hand, too. A tear rolled down his cheek, and neither man wiped it away.

"I learned that all the anger and jealousy I had were meaningless. They hurt me as much as they hurt you. You're stronger than me. The sick things I did, gods, I can't stand the way I acted, how I hurt you and abandoned you. I'll never be that person again, not just because of what I did to you, but because I wouldn't treat anyone that way now. It's a pretty shitty thing, to realize asshole Apollo and Percy Jackson are both better than me at being decent and kind."

Nico gave his huge, barking laugh and laid on his back on the blanket. Jason laid next to him and watched the clouds roll through the sky.

"I imagine realizing something like that could fuck with your head, for sure. For what it's worth, they're both amazing people." Nico was silent for a moment before he added, "I think you're amazing, too."

"You feel sorry for me," Jason said.

"I don't. You paid heavily for your choices, Jason. I paid for mine. We pay for them even now, and that's the part that pisses me off. Why can't I let them go?" Nico dropped Jason's hands and sat up on his elbows. "I want to be with you. You want to be with me. Why the hell can't that be enough?"

"What if it is?" Jason rolled over and butted Nico's arm with his head.
"What do you mean?"

"Well, you said you want to be with me." He talked to their blanket before working up the courage to lift his head and talk directly to Nico. "That means a whole lot to me. I obviously want to be with you, and I'd sign away my forever right now and promise it all to you. So you're not ready for that, I know. You love Percy and Apollo, too. You don't completely trust me, and I don't blame you. But you believe I love you, right?"

"Yes, but all the other stuff—"

"All the other stuff doesn't matter right here, right now, laying on this beach six inches apart from each other." The words tumbled from Jason in a rush. "I want you. I need you. I love you. If all you're willing to commit to is the time we're laying here on the blanket, being mine until we get up, I'll take it. I'll take little chunks of your life, Nico. You don't have to love me absolutely or only. You don't have to stay. Let it be enough that you want to be with me right now."

"Jason, I—"

"Really, it's enough to start."

"Shut up and let me talk," Nico snapped. Jason made a zipped lips gesture and handed Nico an imaginary key. Nico stifled a laugh. "I love you. The other stuff matters because I want to work on it, you idiot. I'm always yours, and I could promise you for-fucking-ever right this second, but when I make that kind of promise, I want to be free and open and not weighed down by the past. I'm not there yet. I'll promise I'm yours for today, how's that? With the caveat that I'm not about to leave Percy or make him less a part of my life in any way, so you'll have to accept that and accept him, maybe more than you already have. You're my soulmate, stupid, my true love. Is that what you had in mind?"

Jason retrieved the imaginary key from Nico and unzipped his lips. Nico ran his hands over his face and through his hair, but he was less frustrated with Jason's silliness than he let on.

"I would love to be, what, boyfriends? Whatever. I don't care how we describe it. I would love to be yours for today. I can live with your caveat, with Percy, and I have one of my own."

"Oh, fuck, Jason, why can't you leave it at that?" Now Nico was genuinely frustrated. He sat all the way up and wrapped his arms around his knees.

Jason sat up, too, and put his hand on Nico's forearm. "Because I want that forever promise shit, Nico. So my caveat is that you talk, even when it's a painful subject for one or both of us. We talk about the future. We talk about the past. I'm not leaving you this time. Let me prove it."

"It scares me, Jason, being that kind of vulnerable with you."

"Then we'll talk with Percy there with us, and he can be your security blanket. I don't mind. I want you to feel the best you can, whether or not that leads to the forever stuff."

Nico sighed. He turned toward Jason and kissed him quickly.

"Okay. I give in. I accept your caveat."

"And I have today?"

Nico nodded. "You have today."
Jason moved forward, into Nico's space. He stopped when they were close enough to share the air between them. "I love you."

Nico blinked, and his cheeks erupted in a blush that matched his lips. "I love you, too."

"Can I kiss you now?" Jason traced his thumb over Nico's lips, so soft and smooth, while he waited for an answer.

"Please," Nico breathed.

The kiss was tentative. Jason wanted to savor every second of it. He kissed Nico's upper lip and his lower lip. His hands shifted from Nico's face to his hip and the back of his head. Nico's breath caught when Jason's thumb slipped under his t-shirt. Still, Jason kissed slowly. He pulled Nico's lower lip between his own and sucked gently before biting down and letting go. Nico didn't open his eyes, but he leaned in closer and pulled at the lapels of Jason's jacket.

"More, Jason."

Jason gave him more.

Chapter End Notes

Thus begins the last third of the story. This was the shortest chapter of the work, but I hope you enjoyed it!
Chapter Summary

"The trick is to not start to believe the pain and the life underneath it are the same thing."

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: depression, mentions of an eating disorder

Jason was transported back to where he'd been when he was summoned, some classroom where thirty minutes ago he'd been learning...something. It was empty now, the classroom, and Jason gathered his books and walked home.

Percy sat waiting on his porch. Jason had known he'd be there.

"What's going on? Is Nico okay?" Percy asked, jumping to his feet.

Jason's hands were shaking too badly to unlock the door. He handed Percy the keys and let him do it. Inside, Jason staggered to the couch and fell onto it.

"You're scaring me, Jace," Percy said. "Is Nico okay?"

Jason made a humph noise in the back of his throat. "Do you care about me at all, or am I just an extension of your fixation on Nico?"

He'd never felt that way before, never wondered why he and Percy were friends. They'd bonded over their mutual broken hearts, and their friendship had become integral to Jason's sense of well-being. And it was all centered around the love of his life, whom he no longer loved. The hardness Jason felt toward Nico was seeping into his feelings for Percy.

"That's a shit thing to say." Percy crossed his arms and glared. "We're friends and I do care about you, but you were down there, too, and Nico was in serious trouble. Put your ego aside and tell me what's going on."

Percy flopped on the couch next to Jason and shoved the keys in his lap.

Jason took a steadying breath. He might as well tell Percy what he knew, not that it would help either of them.

"Demeter said Nico's been stalking Hera for the last seven months, following her around and shit. She caught him today. He was in deep shit, but daddy bailed him out like always. Motherfucker."

Percy whistled and covered his face with his hands. "Gods, that may be the dumbest thing he's ever done. What did she do to him?"

"I don't know."
"He looked bad."

"I don't care."

"What do you mean, you don't care?" Percy gaped at Jason, and Jason wanted Percy to leave. "What's going to happen to him? Is Hera going to leave him alone? Does he have to stay in the Underworld for a while?"

"I mean, I don't care. And I don't care. I'm sure whatever Hades does to him won't be enough to keep him from doing something else destructive and selfish as soon as he gets the chance."

"Jason," Percy touched his arm, "are you alright? You seem off. I know you have to be worried sick —"

"I'm not worried sick. I'm tired of giving a fuck about someone who doesn't give a fuck back. I'm sick of my life revolving around Nico and Nico's life revolving around Nico instead of me. Little shit hasn't appreciated anything I've gone through for him. I'm just done, Percy. I don't want to be with him anymore."

Percy got off the couch and went in the kitchen. He came back with two sodas and a bag of tortilla chips. He shoved a chip in Jason's face.

"Eat. You're in shock or something. You're not thinking right."

Jason pushed the chip away. He looked up at Percy, who was standing over him, and shrugged. He couldn't find any emotion. He'd cried, before Demeter had flashed him out. He'd screamed until there was nothing left to say. There was nothing left in him. Everything he'd felt was gone.

"I think I'm thinking right for the first time in years. I never should have taken the time to be his friend. I shouldn't have wasted years of my life and a good relationship with a nice girl for someone who'd never love me as much as he loves himself. I don't love him, Percy. I don't. Not anymore, and I hope the feeling never comes back."

"You don't mean that, Jace."

Percy sat back down and put his hand on Jason's shoulder. Jason shrugged him off. He didn't want to be touched. He didn't want to be comforted. He wanted to nurse this new feeling, whatever it was, and make himself so hard that no one could ever hurt him again.

Percy's phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and read the text on the screen. Jason tried not to watch.

"He says he's sorry," Percy said. "He says to say to you 'I've never regretted something more in my life, and I'll do anything you want to make it better, I swear. Please don't hate me.'"

Percy sniffled.

"I don't hate him. That's more concern than I have for him. He doesn't exist. You can tell him so. Tell him never to try to talk to me again. I'm sorry he's using you to get to me. See what he does? We're secondary to him, just tools he pushes around when it suits him."

"I'm not telling him that, Jason. It's cruel. That's not who Nico is at all. How could you talk about him like that? You're supposed to be his great love. Go take a nap or something, and then we can figure out how to help him."
"I don't want to help him. Percy, gods, I'm serious. I don't love him. I don't want to be in his life. If the only reason you're my friend is because of Nico, then you need to leave, because I have no connection to him now. I'm going to date Piper and get married and have a good life. I'm gonna have kids and live to be an old man. And Nico's going to die in a couple years because he's too selfish to care that I might have wanted him to live with me forever. I'll have a happy life without him."

Jason started to cry. He'd thought he was done. Sitting in that room and hearing how Nico had ignored the ways he had tried to keep him safe and secure and put his own petty crap first had poked a hole in Jason's soul, and all the good things in there had drained away while Nico sat there covered in stupid pomegranate juice and no doubt thought he'd outwitted them all. Jason was gone. The parts that made him work with Nico, they weren't a part of him anymore. It was sad, but he was free.

"This, it isn't you, Jason." Percy seemed to be pleading, and Jason couldn't understand why. Hell, Percy could have the son of a bitch now, as much as anyone could. "You love him."

"I don't, Percy. I really don't."

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Nico didn't give up, not right away.

He was confined to his room for two weeks. Thankfully, it was time for the Thanksgiving holiday and his grades had been so high that the missed week of school wouldn't hurt him too much. He wasn't allowed to sit with his father at Thanksgiving, and aside from brief daily visits from Hades, Persephone, or Demeter, he was left alone except for Jeeves. He tried to study. He thought of ways he could not be such an asshole to the people who'd loved him. He texted Percy, and he'd never been so glad not to have smashed that phone. He talked briefly to Reyna and Hazel, though he only told them he was in the Underworld for Thanksgiving and didn't hint at any of the misery in his life. Apollo wasn't allowed to contact him. It was probably just as well. He owed the god so many apologies he'd made a list to make sure he didn't forget any.

He contacted Jason.

He tried, at least. What could Zeus and Hera do to him that he hadn't done to himself?

Jason swiped his hand through every Iris message the second it came in. He didn't even look at Nico. He ignored the pleas Nico sent through Percy via text. Nico sent Jeeves to Hecate and used most of the money he had in the Underworld to buy fifty of her untrackable postcards. He'd sent every single one of them to Jason. The only thing that came back was silence.

When the two weeks were up, Nico was allowed to return to his home. Apollo welcomed him with open arms and waved away his apologies. Nico ended up shoving the list at Apollo and begging him to read it while he buried his face in Apollo's shirt and cried.

Hades had bound him to his apartment and the NYU campus. The measures weren't necessary. He wouldn't have left anyway. There was nowhere else he could go. He asked Hades to help him deed his farmhouse to Chris and Clarisse, but when Alecto approached them with the paperwork, Nico was told they refused. Apollo relayed that Clarisse had said, "Don't be a fucking idiot, Pissy," and that made Nico cry, too.

He muddled through his finals and started the intersession class he'd signed up for months ago. For
the first time he could remember, he was worried he'd fail something in school. He couldn't concentrate, and half the days he spent in school his laptop and notebooks didn't contain any more information after class than they'd contained before. He got a C on a paper.

Apollo summoned an Italian feast from Venice for their Christmas dinner. Nico smiled the best he could and thanked him, then managed to eat a few bites of pasta and a piece of bread. Apollo gave him a handsome briefcase for his Christmas present. It was the only present he received. Reyna and Hazel had been too busy working to shop, they said. He waved it off and smiled. They didn't know, still, what had happened, but they'd both commented on his weight loss and obvious sleep problems. He looked more like the boy he'd been at fourteen than he did the young man he'd become. He felt so much more like that boy, too.

He stopped sleeping in Apollo's bed. Despite assurances to the contrary, Nico couldn't imagine how Apollo would find a skinny and morose boy with stringy hair and enormous bags under his eyes appealing in any way. He wasn't interested in sex anymore, but the warmth Apollo provided would have been a welcome comfort. Between the return of his nightmares and his constant nightly shivering, he needed all the help he could get. He couldn't accept help. He didn't deserve help.

He deserved exactly what he'd gotten, to be abandoned and alone.

What Hera had done to him that day was something his counselor wanted to discuss at length. He was still allowed to see her, and he was grateful for that. She wasn't a demigod, so Hera had become known as his ex-boyfriend's stepmother and the things she'd done explained as degrading insults. The other stuff, the Jason? Nico said they broke up. He couldn't let out the wall of pain that was eating up his insides a little more every day.

Three days before his birthday, he prayed to his father — the prayers were nightly and long these days — that either he'd find something inside himself that made him willing to get up the next morning or that Hades would release him from this torment and let him join the lost souls in the Underworld. He didn't want Elysium or rebirth or his father's right hand. He wanted peace.

***

Jason spent the day after Nico's birthday relaxing poolside in Los Angeles. Coach Hedge, Mellie, and Chuck had gone on location with Mr. McLean to a shoot in New Zealand, so Piper and Jason had the mansion to themselves. Piper made nachos and lemonade, and they played tag in the pool until they were naked and panting with the combined effort of exercise and sex.

It was amazing, really, how good his life was now. He felt like he was back on the course he'd been on when he turned sixteen. He had it all. Piper was more wonderful than ever. Leo came to visit a lot more frequently. The shrines were almost completed. Almost all his old friends had accepted him back into their lives. He had become a leader in the senate and a voice for change and moderation. He was respected and admired. Zeus and Hera stayed away. He could feel their absence. His heart was light and free.

The sun didn't shine on his face. It hadn't in two months. Piper had made a joke about it, how Apollo must be jealous of Jason's good looks, and Jason had laughed it off. Jealous wasn't what Apollo was. Jason told himself he didn't care. This way was better.

Every bouquet of flowers he bought for Piper died the second he handed them to her. He'd had to go
to the infirmary when he'd begun throwing up blood. The Apollo kids determined his morning cereal was being poisoned a little each day. He avoided grains. The shadows stuck to his feet, and he didn't dare linger under their weight any longer than necessary. When he did, he felt like he was being pulled into the Underworld.

It didn't matter. He was happy, and after all the shit he'd been through, he deserved the happiness.

And if Percy whispered that Nico was sick and Reyna was worried, he didn't care.

He didn't care. He didn't care. He didn't care.

He settled into a normal life. Normal.

Jason's hair was still wet from the pool. He was in the bathroom, trying to blow-dry it, and then he wasn't. Instead, he was standing in a sunny, elegant condo, staring at a wall of windows with a stunning view of the Empire State Building, trying to ignore his powerful and horrifically more noble brother.

I don't care. I don't care. I don't care.

"Brother, you look well," Apollo said.

"I am. Please return me to my girlfriend." Jason resisted the urge to see if Nico was here. It was likely the son of Hades had no idea Jason had been summoned.

"Soon, Jason. First I would have you talk with me." Apollo smiled in a way that radiated power. Jason remembered last year how Apollo had trouble thinking of a single unkind thing to say about Zeus. He'd seemed as meek as a kitten. He didn't seem that way now. "Sit, please."

Jason knew he had no choice, so he sat at the table where they'd eaten Nico's birthday dinner. He tried to sit in Apollo's chair, but the god beat him to it. He sat in Nico's chair and made his face as hard and empty as he could. He rested his hands on the table and hated that Apollo could see how they shook.

"I don't want to hear about Nico, Lord."

Apollo raised his chin. "I am not interested in what you want. There is information I feel you need to know."

Jason rolled his eyes. "Get it over with. Nothing's going to change. I don't even know why you care. You and Percy can fight over him and run after the little morsels he throws your way without one more person to divide his attention. I bet the sex just keeps getting better."

"You should know that Nico has lost twenty pounds in the last two months." Apollo's voice was brittle with anger. "I will not bore you with details you care so little about, but he did not have that weight to lose. His health is eroding. Many days, he cannot use his powers. He has to take a taxi to school. He refuses my help and comfort. He is dying, and none of you worthless demigods has bothered to notice."

The sarcastic comment Jason needed to find took a bit longer to pull from his brain. Nico couldn't lose weight like that. That wasn't possible. Nico survived. He was tough and resilient.

"So you're saying he's being his usual obnoxious ass self and making you suffer? Because that's a state of being with Nico I'm intimately familiar with. Can I go now?"
"No, you may not. You did not stay to listen the day he was assaulted by Hera, and he has only
reluctantly shared details of the day with me. I want you to know them."

Jason didn't want to know. He didn't want to hear about the pain Nico'd brought on himself by acting
like a selfish brat, not to mention behaving like the poster child for untreated mental health issues.
Jason set his jaw and looked away.

"I knew about the stalking, and it is my fault it got so far," Apollo began. "I was vain enough to
believe I could handle the behavior without involving his father. I did not want to risk Nico's
affection. I was a fool. He almost attacked her one day, and I pulled him back and bound him to this
place. My magic was not enough to hold him, not for more than a day, but I wanted to believe he
was capable of exercising better judgment. He was too strong, and I should have seen that his
powers were growing to a place that was threatening his safety. Demigods cannot track gods, Jason.
He should not have been able to do the things he did. He has been seeing a counselor for a long time
now, on time, every week. I believe it has helped, but at the time, it was not enough.

"Hera knew. She knew he was following her, because he may be powerful and smart and brave,"
Apollo paused, and Jason gritted his teeth to keep in control, "but he is a lonely, fallible boy with an
aura that announces his presence even before he arrives. She toyed with him. Nico did not know that
she fears him, or feared him with you. He thinks she robbed him of his true love and his sisters
because he is not good enough for you. If you doubt how much he believes he does not deserve you,
I can tell you that even amidst the devastation your departure caused, when he was crying night after
night in my arms, every word he said had to do with how right Hera had been to keep him away
from you because you are so incredibly much better than him."

"Nico doesn't cry," Jason whispered. Nico never cried. Nico was tough and strong and not a person
to let a breakup destroy him. When they'd broken up the first time, sure, Nico had been sad, but he'd
been a survivor, he'd stuck it out and held his head high. He'd made mistakes, but he was always
proud and unbroken.

"You are wrong about that, Jason. I wonder how many other secret parts of himself he did not let
you see because he was sure they would not measure up to what he thought you wanted him to be?"

"This doesn't matter," Jason said. "He acted like a psycho, and he wasted all the work I'd done to
keep him safe. If he really loved me—"

"He acted like an impulsive, angry teenager who had lost his mother and sister and his first and
second love." Apollo arched a perfectly manicured brow. "Did you not spend months flirting with
death because you were angry? I believe you were eighteen then, too, or were you even older? He
tells you to go make a life with Piper. Do you ever wonder how much it costs him to wish you
happiness, knowing it is at the expense of his own? Did Percy tell you how he asked Nico if there
was any reason to prevent his proposal to Annabeth? How Nico turned him down because he both
believes Percy deserves more than him and because he would not betray you by trying to build
something permanent with someone else? He made a mistake stalking Hera. A big one. If he really
loved you, what? You would not feel so wronged?" He leaned far over the table. "Jason, are you
mad because he did it or mad because you didn't get the accolades your sacrifices deserved?"

"This doesn't matter," Jason repeated. "I'm happy. He doesn't get to keep making me miserable."

Apollo scoffed.

"Happiness is a worthless notion. It is the folly of fools. Love requires work and sacrifice. It is ugly
and cold. When everything in your being tells you to walk away, that none of this is worth it, love is
what makes you stay and hold his hand and say you forgive him."
"I don't love him anymore."

"So I have heard you tell many people. Most notably him."

Jason looked at the ceiling. This wasn't fair. Nico had fucked up, not him. Nico had chosen this path and shoved Jason down it. Nico had taken their love for granted and ripped out Jason's heart until there was no love left.

Apollo sighed. His blue eyes were the same color as Jason's. It was unnerving. Jason fidgeted in his chair.

"At any rate, Hera. She approached him at a wedding show. Obviously a set-up that Nico was too naive to understand." Apollo huffed out a pained breath. His chin trembled. "She made him eat dirt, Jason. She took his clothes off in a crowd of people and made him ask to have her clothe him again. She called him a thief and a whore. She placed images on a giant video screen of you and Percy marrying your girlfriends and interspersed them with graphic images of Nico having sex with you. She humiliated and degraded him in front of thousands of people. Our shy, introverted boy, having his worst beliefs about himself magnified and broadcast to a crowd."

The table was wet with Jason's tears. He'd thought Hera had threatened Nico. He'd expected her to make him uncomfortable. But not this. He hadn't imagined anything close to what she had done. No wonder Nico hadn't been able to tell him what happened when he had asked.

"Ah, it is refreshing to see that the cruelty with which you dismissed the confessed love of your life and moved on as though he never existed at least has some limits."

Jason shook his head.

"It isn't cruel to not love him anymore."

"It is cruel to love him and lie about it."

"I'm not lying, Apollo."

Apollo laid his hands on the table and spread his fingers out like fans.

"You believe your own lies? I am the god of truth, Jason. You are a liar."

Glass shattered in the kitchen. Apollo motioned for Jason to stay at the table and hastily left.

"Good afternoon, my love, I...Nico, you should have used the elevator."

"I, um, I'm thinking about dropping Medical Ethics and maybe doing it in the fall. I'm falling behind."
Nico’s shame was audible. He was a stellar student. School was the thing he cared about most, behind the people he loved. Jason wished he could run out the front door and leave. He shouldn't be here. This was what he'd broken away from, the way Nico was so hard and tough and vulnerable that Jason wanted to break him and piece him back together over and over. It wasn't healthy. Or he wasn't strong enough. Something.

"Do not give up yet, Nico. The semester has barely started." Apollo was trying to sound chipper, but Jason knew strain when he heard it. Did Apollo believe it a privilege to guard Nico's frailties? Jason had felt that way once, too.

"Maybe. I'm usually so far ahead, you know? It feels weird. I don't know what's gotten into me." A brief pause. Murmured song. "Thank you. That feels much better. You should get back to work, Apollo. You've missed too much time lately. Someone will get angry at you."

"It does not matter."

"I think it probably does."

Nico sounded so tired. Did he sleep? Jason remembered how he'd laid it all on the line last summer and confessed all the things he wondered about Nico's days when they were apart. He hadn't wondered, not once, not even for a moment, what Nico's days had been like the past two months. He inched off the chair and skirted around the corner to the kitchen. If he could see, for a minute, he'd see Nico was fine and Apollo was full of overprotective shit like always and Percy was a motherfucking coddler and Reyna treated Nico like a child. Nico was tough and strong and...

Nico looked like the boy who'd tumbled out of that jar in Rome. His clothes hung far too loose. Bluish skin stretched like paper over knobby protrusions. Jason's breath caught in his throat, and he turned away. Turn your back on him, Jason. That's what you do.

"Let me help you up, my love." Apollo's voice was so kind, so patient. "We have a visitor."

Jason swiped his hand across his eyes and turned around to face Nico, who was struggling to his feet with Apollo's help. Their eyes met, and Nico's had none of the fire and sparkle they normally did. They were empty. Hollow. Nico looked down at his feet. The bags under his eyes were black. The effect was so pronounced, he could have been mistaken for wearing makeup.

"You shouldn't have brought him here, Apollo," Nico said quietly. "I'm sorry, Jason."

"He needed to understand." Apollo’s fingers tightened almost imperceptibly on Nico’s waist. Jason caught Nico’s grimace.

"No, he didn't." Nico's voice shook. Jason wondered if Nico really did cry, or if he was too weak to speak normally. "He needed to be wherever he was. Let him be happy. You are happy, right, Jason?"

Jason nodded. He swallowed and closed his eyes. Anything to block out this horror.

"I will escort Nico to his room and send you on your way, then," Apollo said. He nodded curtly and carefully guided Nico past Jason and away. Jason had stepped back when Nico approached, as though whatever was making him the picture of death was contagious. Nico had barely flinched at the rejection.

As soon as Apollo returned, Jason let loose.

"How the fuck can you let him get like this? Gods, he looks like—"
"Like he is dying." Apollo laughed without mirth. "You thought I was exaggerating, I suppose." He put his hands on the sides of his neck and squeezed. "What would you have me do? Force feed him, artificially maintain his health? Drug him into unconsciousness? I did it. I did it all." His eyes filled with tears. Jason had never seen an immortal being cry. "He insisted I stop. Do you know how it is to watch this, day after day, loving him and knowing what the end will be if this continues? This was not his story, Jason Grace. You think you have put your life back on track, but you have derailed your own life and his, and this is your reward."

Jason reeled away from the accusation.

"What? So I'm supposed fix this? It's his shit! He fucked up!"

"Your great love dies while you prattle on about fairness. And no, I do not expect you to fix it. You lack the strength and compassion." Apollo pursed his lips and twisted his head. "I must admit, when I realized you were my rival for Nico's affections, I did not expect myself to be the faithful one, the better man. By all means, go on back to your girlfriend and your friends and your happy life and forget that you love that boy, who has borne every lie and betrayal you have thrown at him and never doubted his love for you. Fuck you, Jason Grace."

Apollo swiped at his eyes as Jason had done earlier.

"Oh, and these are for you."

He strode to the coffee table and pulled out two notebooks. When they were offered, Jason reluctantly took them.

"Go on. Open them. The red one first."

Jason opened the book and saw that Nico's neat handwriting filled the page. It was a numbered list. On the first line, it said, "For lying." On the next, "For not seeing your wisdom." The list continued and filled several pages.

"When Nico was returned here from the Underworld, he came bearing these two notebooks. The first is a list of all the apologies he wanted to tell me. He wrote them down because he was terrified he would forget one. Open the other notebook."

"I don't want to." Jason couldn't stop his tears. He was gasping and whimpering and he really, really, really needed to leave.

"I insist."

Jason opened to the first page. The first entry read, "For disappointing you." He slammed the cover closed.

"Keep it. He will not know. You see, he filled up this notebook some time ago and started work on a second one for you. I think it is why he has not been able to keep up with his homework. He would rather spend his time filling notebooks with all the ways he wants to tell you he is sorry. Each entry is unique, in case you are wondering."

"I need to see him. Tell him goodbye." Jason wasn't sure he was strong enough to do it, but he had to try. He would hate himself later if he missed his last chance see the boy he'd loved.

"Which of you is being selfish, Jason?"

"Please."
Apollo crossed his arms. "Make it quick. I need you out of our house."

Jason nodded. He placed the notebooks back on the coffee table and walked down the hall to Nico's bedroom. He wasn't there. With growing dread, Jason approached the closed door of the smaller bedroom, the one he'd shared with Nico on so many nights. He knocked softly and entered. Nico was laying on his back, staring at the ceiling. When he saw it was Jason, he awkwardly pushed himself up the bed and rested his back on the headboard. He tucked his knees under his chin.

"Hi," Jason said.

"Hi." Nico's voice was less than a whisper.

Jason sat on the bed in front of Nico. He hated himself for the extra space he left between them. He touched Nico's toe. Nico was freezing.

"Eat. Please."

"I'm fine." Nico waved his hand in a gesture that so resembled the old Nico that Jason smiled before he remembered he was watching his lover die.

"You're not."

"I'm sorry he kidnapped you. He won't do it again."

"Nico—"

"Don't, Jace. Don't say anything." Nico's eyes were empty black caverns. This close, his long eyelashes danced like spiders on his face. "I look into your eyes and all that's there is pity and revulsion. You don't love me. I need you to leave and not come back. Let me do this without seeing the way you're looking at me. Let me be able to close my eyes and think back to the way you looked when you loved me."

Jason nodded and brushed his hand over Nico's ankle. He left the room without looking back.

***

Percy had packed his last few things and was looking forward to a couple easy days before he had to head back to college. Wedding planning was coming along nicely, and Annabeth had returned to New Rome a couple days early for a post-graduate internship. Paul and Sally were out shopping, and Percy had just settled onto the couch for an epic movie marathon when there was a knock at the door.

"Damn it," Percy grumbled.

He stomped over to the door and flung it open. Jason Grace stood there, eyes red, hair a mess, two ratty notebooks clutched in his hands. Percy was instantly on alert.

"Jason? What is it? What's happened?"

"Can I come in?"

Jason didn't wait for an answer. He sat on the couch and shuddered. His hands were shaking
"Why aren't you in California? What's going on? Was there another prophecy?"

"No. There's no prophecy. All the California people are fine. I needed to ask you to do something."

"You flew from California to ask me to do something? Jason, dude, you could have called."

Jason gave a fake smile. "I was in the area. Look, I'm going to give you a piece of paper. It has an address written on it. I want you to go to the address and go up to the thirty-fourth floor. It's all on the paper. You have to swear on the River Styx that you'll do this and keep the address and everything there secret."

The way Jason was talking made Percy nervous. He didn't like secrets. Jason was a good guy, though, even if he'd been acting different and distant since the encounter with Nico.

"Well, that's a creepy request. Do I get any other information?"

"You have to swear first. I need you to trust me."

There was a time when Percy hadn't trusted Jason. It seemed so far away now. Jason had been a horrible ass, but he'd been trying to keep Nico safe. Hell, all this distant and "don't love him" stuff was probably more of the act.

"Sure. I swear on the River Styx I'll do what you ask and keep everything about the address and what I find there secret."

Jason slipped off the couch and laid his head on Percy's mom's glass coffee table. He seemed like he might be crying.

"Jason?"

The big guy reached in his pocket and withdrew a piece of paper. He handed it back to Percy, who read it and memorized it.

"Nice digs. What's there?"

Jason looked back at Percy then, all wide teary eyes and drawn lips and shaky breaths. Percy was scared.

"Nico."

"Jason, I can't. I'm not allowed—"

"You swore. You'll do it, Percy. He needs..." Jason stared past Percy. "He needs something I can't give him. It's desperate. I know Annabeth doesn't want you around him, and I know it's important to you guys, but I don't know what else to do. If you knew..." He broke down sobbing. "Please, gods, Percy, go. Oh, gods, I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"Hey, ssh, it's okay, Jace, whatever it is. Nico's tough. I know he was really hurt, and the girls said maybe he's not eating right again, but it's Nico. He kicks all our asses in the mental, moral, and emotional strength department. He's fine." Percy patted Jason's shoulder. Jason laid his head on Percy's knee and kept crying. By the time his tears slowed, Percy's leg was drenched.

Jason wiped his nose on the hem of his shirt, stood, and walked to the door. "Go now, please?"
Percy nodded.

"Prepare yourself, Percy. It's gonna be the hardest thing you've ever done. When you get to the lobby, ask for Mr. di Angelo. They have an intercom thing, and they'll check to make sure it's okay before you're allowed up. You'll need to show some ID. His roommate, um, I was wrong about him. He's ten times the man I am. Give him a chance. If you don't get buzzed up right away, go back. Like again tonight. Keep going back every fifteen minutes or so until they let you in."

"It sounds like a prison or something."

"It is."

Jason held out his hand. Percy felt a little silly, but he shook. They'd see each other in a couple days.

"I've liked being your friend again, Percy. Thanks for helping me not feel so alone."

"Hey." Percy lightly punched Jason's shoulder. "I'm gonna see you in like three days, man. Why are you acting like we're not gonna be around each other?"

"Go see Nico. It'll explain everything. Try not to act..." Jason shook his head. "Never mind. That's impossible. Just be there for him, okay?"

"Yeah, course," Percy said.

"I'll try to talk to you when you get back to New Rome."

"You're being so weird, Jace."

Jason sniffled and smiled. "Goodbye, Percy."

***

Percy got buzzed up on the first try. He'd known Nico would be anxious to see him. It would be great. They could hang out like friends. The roommate was probably there, which was good. Percy'd be less tempted to try to take Nico to bed. Less tempted. Still tempted. At least he could look.

When he knocked on the door, it swung open as though someone was waiting for him to arrive. Nerves jiggled around in his belly. The last time he'd seen Nico had been way too short, and Nico'd been covered in pomegranate drippings and in serious trouble. But hey, he was still a kid, and kids fucked up. That's why Percy didn't understand Jason being such a hardass about it. Nico was human, and he made mistakes, too. And that whole "not in love" crap was such a crock. Jason would never stop loving Nico.

Percy stepped inside the apartment and looked around. His lips made a popping noise, his mouth dropped open so fast. He knew Nico was rich, of course, but his mom's whole apartment could fit inside the first room of this place. Everything was so classy and clean. Percy bet no one had ever dropped guacamole on that couch. And fuck. A pool table? Maybe he and Nico could get in a game...

"Percy?"

Percy whirled, expecting to see the most beautiful man on the planet. He was horrified to see Apollo
standing there. He double checked the piece of paper still in his hand. Apollo laughed. It didn't sound real.

"You have come for Nico? You are in the right place. He is sleeping, I hope."

"What're you doing here? I mean...not trying to, like, be rude or anything, but...is one of your kids Nico's roommate? Will?"

Apollo's eyes tightened. "No. I am Nico's lover."

"You're...wait. What?" Percy was hallucinating. Had to be.

"Yes. Apollo, god of the sun, healing, poetry, music, truth, logic, many other random oddities not claimed by other gods, lover of Nico di Angelo."

"But, you're not supposed to mess with us. Demigods, I mean. It's like, the law. You're ancient, dude. What the fuck do you want with Nico? He's a kid."

"Come now, Percy. Let us be frank. I imagine I want the same with Nico as you do."

Well, tou-fucking-ché.

Percy opened and closed his mouth so often he felt like a cow chewing on grass.

"Jason sent you, I assume?" Apollo waited for Percy's stunned nod. "He could not tell you the identity of Nico's lover because it would put Nico and me in terrible danger. You must never tell anyone, either. Our location, too, must remain a secret, and you can never bring another soul here, unless it is Jason. He was the only one who knew."

"Why the fuck did he tell me? I could've gone forever without knowing it was you Nico was doing the nasty with. Wait. Jason's known this, for a year? And he hasn't told anyone? Motherfuck."

"I had forgotten how colorful you are, Percy." Apollo almost smiled. "Yes. Jason was stabbed, and he had seconds to live. Nico felt it and traveled to him then brought him here through the shadows. I had asked Nico never to bring someone to our home, but he would do anything for Jason."

Apollo sounded bitter. Was he jealous of Jason, too?

"Well, Jason'd do anything for Nico, so it's kind of a two-way street."

"Indeed?" Apollo's shoulders squared, and Percy could feel the heat coming off him. "Jason has done very little for Nico aside from slowly rip away at the fabric of his life. Forgive me if I do not currently hold your friend in high regard. I am grateful he sent you. Nico will not be happy to see you, though. You will need to be a stronger man than my brother."

Percy had to think for a moment to realize Apollo was referring to Jason as his brother. How had that gone down when Jason had been here last year? Jason didn't like to share Nico. What did Apollo mean about Nico not being happy to see Percy? Nico loved him!

While Percy was thinking, Apollo had led him down a short hall. They'd passed some sort of super-funky bathroom ripped from the pages of a fancy house magazine. Apollo paused at a doorway near the bathroom.

"Wait here, Percy. I will see if Nico is able to see you."

Apollo disappeared inside the room. Percy didn't remember Apollo being so formal. Hadn't he called
one of the Hunters "babe?" Maybe he'd mellowed, or maybe he was being the kind of guy Nico would be attracted to. Nah. Nico had a thing for him and Jason, and they were two of the most crude and talk-like-their-dick-did-all-the-thinking guys on the planet. Whatever. It was weird.

Percy crept back to the open living area and checked out the view. Holy fucking Hephaestus. Apollo had to have balls the size of upstate Maine to stash his secret, forbidden lover right under Zeus's nose like this. A hand touched his shoulder, and Percy jumped.

"He'll see you. He is angry, but it's not with you."

Percy started toward the door Apollo had led him to. Apollo put another hand on his shoulder. This wasn't going to be a thing, was it? Percy did not need to be hit on by a dude.

"Nico is not like you remember him. He is not well. His appearance may shock you, but try to focus on the fact that he is still the same man he was the last time you spoke. You can do this, Percy."

Percy furrowed his brow and nodded as Apollo opened the door. It'd only been two months, how bad off could Nico be?

Bad. Oh, gods, bad. Percy burst into tears and tackled Nico onto the bed. Nico's bones were so sharp they cut into his skin. Percy rolled sideways so he didn't damage anything. Nico felt like a toy in his arms.

"Saying hi works, Perce," Nico said softly. His voice was wrecked. What the hell had happened to him? Did he have cancer? AIDS? Demigods weren't supposed to get STIs, but Apollo had to have fucked a lot of people in his lifetime. What if one of them had something that skipped over Apollo and landed right on Nico? Oh, gods.

"Are you contagious? Should I back off?" Percy ran his hand over Nico's chest, checking for signs of tumors or growths. All he felt were hollow spots where Nico's glorious body had been. Before Nico could answer, Percy rolled over and glared at Apollo. "You're the fucking god of healing! Fix him!"

Apollo raised his hands in surrender. "What say you, Nico? It seems like Percy would feel better if I were to—"

"No."

Percy slammed his hand down on the bed like a four year old. "You can't say no. He's a god of healing. You're sick, stupid. Let him do his godly duty."

"I'm not sick." Nico followed up that proclamation with a cough. Percy narrowed his eyes, and Nico shrugged his shoulders. The movement looked like it hurt. "Okay. I'm sick. But it's not the kind of sick that should be fixed. I don't have any diseases or anything, Perce. I'm just..."

"Sad." Percy finished for him. He knew now why Jason had acted like their friendship was over. It was. How could Jason hurt Nico this way? "Well, buck up, baby, 'cause Percy's here and the fun ship's about to set sail."

"We're not doing the pirate talk again, are we?"

Percy smiled and pretended he could see a sliver of his lover in those empty eyes. He bent forward and wrapped his lips around the pulse point on Nico's neck and kissed him more tenderly than he ever had. The spot felt so foreign, not like Nico's neck at all. Nico's body always felt cool, which Percy found refreshing, especially when they were getting it on, but now Nico felt frigid, like he was
one day away from heading down to the morgue for a toe tag. Percy started crying again.

"Hey," Nico rasped. Percy broke the kiss. As gentle as he'd been, he'd left an enormous bruise. "Hey, it's okay. Everything's alright, Perce."

"You're lying, Nico. Unless your version of 'alright' includes going down to see your dad in a funeral shroud."

"Percy," Apollo said. He didn't finish.

"I want to watch one of Apollo's healing sessions. That's not a problem, right, Nico? Everything's alright, so it's not even like he'd do anything?"

"You can't force me into things, Percy." At least Nico's words had some force behind them, some life.

Percy gently scooped Nico up by the shoulders and pulled him onto his lap. Nico made soft noises of protest, but Percy wrapped his arms as tightly around Nico's torso as he dared. Nico didn't have the strength to break free. "Oh, wait, what's this? Looks like I can. Get crack-a-lackin', Apollo."

"May I, lover?" Apollo asked. So polite.

Nico made a growling noise. Apparently Apollo found that to be enough of a yes to continue. He motioned for Percy to move his arm up slightly, then slid his hand under Nico's shirt and started moving and singing.

"You're insufferable, Percy."

"One of the benefits of having a limited vocabulary is that I don't care much when people insult me. And that growling noise is seriously hot."

"Nothing about me is seriously hot right now," Nico said.

Percy took his hand and kissed his fingers. They felt a little warmer.

"Oh, really, smartypants? Want me to poke you with my super-sized dick and you can see how hot I find you?" Percy couldn't imagine a situation where he'd be less aroused, but that had nothing to do with Nico's appearance. It had to do with the tennis ball that had lodged in his heart that kept shaking with the fear that Nico was going to die. "Unless your lover-god there's opposed. Don't wanna end up dead-meat stew for hitting on his man."

Apollo glanced at Percy and grinned. It seemed genuine and not forced this time. Huh. The guy loved Nico, too. It was written all over his face.

"Not at all. I rather enjoy threesomes, and Nico is extremely versatile."

Nico shoved his hand over Apollo's face, but the ghost of a grin lit his lips. "Gods, Percy, you're here five minutes and already he's worse for being around you."

Percy nipped behind Nico's ear. "Thank you, baby." To Apollo, he said, "So what's next, doc? How long before he's healed up?"

Nico stiffened in his arms, but Percy had expected it. He didn't care. Nico was getting well, if Percy had to drop out of school and move in to do it. Apollo's face wasn't light and playful anymore. Percy guessed Apollo had been trying for a very long time to get Nico to agree to be healed.
"If you would let me do this four times a day for the next seven to ten days, Nico, you would be returned to your previous state of optimum health."

"No."

"Hey, doc, can you lube me up?" Percy held out his middle finger.

Apollo cocked his head to the side, but he slid his fingers over Percy's. Percy's finger came away glistening. He pulled Nico sideways and started fiddling with the gaping back of his jeans.

"Percy! What the fuck are you doing?" Swearing. That was good. More like healthy Nico.

"Somehow a contrary bone got stuck way, way up your ass. I'm going in to get it. Might as well get comfy, Nico. It's been in there a long time and these operations can take a while. I promise you'll enjoy it. I can use a bigger instrument later."

Nico giggled, and Percy started crying again. He was going to have to heal a headache of his own if he kept up all the boohooing. Nico laid his head on Percy's shoulder and sighed.

"No one makes me laugh like you, Percy. It's good to see you. But this is a one-time thing, okay? You may have manhandled me and worn me down this time, but as soon as you walk out that door, I'm back to being Apollo's nightmare patient. This isn't a medical issue."

"So here's the deal, 'cause it sounds like I forgot to say this out loud. I'm staying until you're healed, and I'm driving you to your classes at your fancy-ass school, and I'm holding you on the couch when His Royal God-Stud has stuff to do, and I'm holding your hand, and I'm making you play pool with me and fix me that dumb jambalaya shit Hazel taught you."

"Brilliant plan. Sign me up."

Percy hadn't expected that. Apollo's singing seemed to be winding down. Nico's voice sounded stronger.

"Really? Swear on the River Styx?"

"Why not? I, Nico di Angelo, swear on the River Styx that I'll let Apollo heal the hell out of me as long as Percy Jackson stays by my side, which would be great, if only, gasp, Percy didn't have to go back to school in two days." Nico narrowed his eyes and glared at Percy. "Sorry."

"Oh, but you are a tricky little boy." Percy shifted and pulled his phone (the non-secret one) out of his back pocket. He was a champion butt-dialer. He pressed a button and held the phone up to his ear. While it was ringing, Percy said, "But I've been known to hatch a few tricks of my own, my little sexpot."

Annabeth picked up on the fourth ring.

"Hey, Annabeth, some news. I gotta stay in New York for the next week to ten days. It's kind of an emergency. Can you go up to school tomorrow and let my professors know? Yeah, mom and Paul are fine. It's Nico."

Nico was trying to grab the phone away from Percy, but his attempts were weak. Apollo had stopped touching Nico's chest, so Percy hooked a leg over Nico's arms and torso and held him loosely.

"No! It's not the kind of needing to be with Nico you're thinking it is. See, Jason decided to climb to
the top of the 'amazing douchebags in bad jeans' heap again, and he left Nico brokenhearted and possibly anorexic. Nico swore on the River Styx he'd get help as long as I was here, thinking I'd need to leave in a couple days and he could go back to being a self-destructive little prick. Ha. Tricked him. So anyway, you'll talk to the teachers?"

Percy listened. He knew what Annabeth would say.

"Nope. He's got a fucking lover anyway. It's revolting how pretty they are together. They should be in some men's perfume ad in a magazine, all half-naked and sexually suggestive together. Guy's got it bad for Nico, too. What's his name?"

Percy looked frantically at Nico. He hadn't thought this far ahead. Nico rolled his eyes as if to say "typical."

Apollo made a "give me" motion, and Percy handed the phone over. It probably couldn't get worse. Besides, even if this made Annabeth mad, Percy was doing it.

"Hello, love, what's your name again?" Apollo sounded like some English dude straight out of Manchester. His voice was deeper and firmer, too. "Annabeth. Lovely name. Right, well, I'm Paul, and my beautiful Nico has himself in a bit of a bind, and I need your, what is he? Fiancé? Ah, yes, right, your fiancé, Percy, to help out. There'll be no shenanigans on my watch, ma'am. I'm gay, but I'm a right straight arrow when it comes to what I'll tolerate in my lover. I told your bloke Percy that there's to be no improper touching, no nothing. Okay, love? He did? Ah, Nico's had his eye on me for a while, now, I must say." Apollo listened for a moment. "Yeah, to you, too. I'll pass you back to your man."

Annabeth asked Percy to give Nico her best and said she'd take care of Percy's schedule. He told her he loved her and hung up, feeling very pleased with himself. He held up his fist to Apollo. Apollo stared at Percy's fist in confusion before he wrapped his palm around it. Percy shrugged and pulled back. Good enough.

"You, Percy." Nico shook his head. His eyelids were drooping, and he felt loose and relaxed in Percy’s arms. Percy gently climbed out from behind him and laid him back on the bed. Once Nico was laying down, Percy climbed over him and snuggled close. Apollo could lay on the other side if he wanted. Percy kissed Nico's cheek.

"Me, Percy, what?"

Nico laid his forehead against Percy's lips. "Just you."

Percy felt the same way. He wrapped his arm under Nico's head and whispered sweet nothings and silly stories in his ear until Nico fell asleep.

Percy found Apollo's eyes once Nico had begun to snore lightly. The god offered him a smile and a handshake. Percy accepted.

"Thank you."

They said it at the same time.

***
Jason called Piper from a borrowed phone and had her buy him a ticket on a non-stop flight from LaGuardia to SFO. He told her he'd explain as soon as he could. Once his flight touched down in San Francisco, he used his wind powers to steal a wallet and lighten it by cab fare to Berkeley. He was in such a rush that he didn't even send the wallet back to its owner.

He flew over Camp Jupiter and into New Rome. It was only around four, but Jason pounded on the Praetor's chamber doors like he was trying to wake someone in the middle of the night. After a minute, a very harassed-looking Reyna answered.

Jason pushed past her and into the room. There were four centurions there, obviously in a meeting with Reyna and Hazel.

"Out." Jason gestured to the door, and the centurions scampered.

"What is the meaning of this, Jason?" Except for the chirpy voice, Hazel sounded exactly like Reyna.

"Your brother needs you."


"No, it's him. I broke his heart."


"Again. I broke his heart again."

Reyna sat back against the desk and surveyed Jason shrewdly.

"You continued your affair?"

Jason closed his eyes while he talked because he wouldn't be able to stand to see the disappointment bloom on Hazel's face.

"I slept with him at least once a week almost the entire summer." He opened his eyes. Hazel and Reyna regarded him impassively, like they expected him to be a cheater. One more thing to blame on Nico. "But that's not the problem, at least not Nico's problem. I got mad because he did a ridiculously reckless and stupid thing, a lot, and I said a bunch of really awful but true stuff and told him I didn't love him anymore. He's always known I love him. Now it's gone and I can't bring it back, but I swear on my sister's life that I didn't know it would affect him like this."

"This is why he hasn't been eating?" Hazel asked. "We know about that. We're working on it."

"No, you don't know. Not if you think working on it from here is enough. He needs to see your faces, have your support there. You have to leave for New York as soon as possible. Like now, if there's a flight."

"Jason, we appreciate your concern, but this isn't your business."

"Why are you speaking freely about Nico? Has something changed?" Reyna's arms were crossed, and she was tapping her foot.

Jason took a deep breath. He could barely hold back his tears. He'd cried the entire trip from New York.

"Because. They don't care about it anymore." He gazed at the wall behind Reyna. It didn't look very
"I meant what I said... I don't love him."

"Well, that's a relief," Reyna said.

"Damn it!" Jason shouted. "You two aren't listening. I was there in New York with him, not eight hours ago. He's so sick he's dying. He looks like—" Jason found Hazel's eyes, realized he was clasping his hands, pleading. "Hazel, he looks like he did after Tartarus and the jar. Please, gods, I am begging you to go to him."

"We can't leave. Our jobs—"

"Will be here when you get back. And if they're not, who gives a fuck? Will that really make you feel better when you're saying a final goodbye to the boy who loves you two more than anyone else in the world? Gods, I'm not playing. Go." Jason shoved himself into a corner and sat on the floor. He pulled a lighter out of his pocket and ran his hand over the flame. He'd picked the lighter up at the airport and played with it the entire cab ride back to Berkeley. "Percy went to be with him, but he has to come back to school in a couple days and Annabeth doesn't want him anywhere near Nico."

"Annabeth changed her mind, Jason."

Jason jolted and saw Annabeth standing in the doorway. He flicked the lighter off, stood rapidly, and hugged her as tightly as he could without crushing her. "Thank you."

Annabeth briefly returned the hug then pushed him away. She turned to Reyna and Hazel. "Percy's staying with him for the next seven to ten days, he said. It's urgent. He slipped me a picture while he was talking to me on the phone. Look."

Jason didn't look. He had seen. He dropped back into his corner and pulled out the lighter. Nico could not die. Jason wouldn't let it happen. Not without taking him, too. He watched Hazel burst into tears. Reyna wasn't breathing. She picked up a phone and started making travel plans.

Annabeth sank down next to Jason.

"Are you okay?"

"No."

"You're helping him this way, Jason. Reyna and Hazel and Percy, they'll take care of him."

The wall felt cool under Jason's head. He leaned his cheek against it, and the tears started up again.

"Earlier today, I was almost as close to him as you are to me right now. He needed me, Annabeth, more than he ever has. It was my one chance to come through for him after all the times I've burned and razed him. He's always pulled himself back together before, every damned time. He didn't this time. He needed me, and I walked away. Sure, I'm sending the cavalry after him, but that doesn't change that it should be me there right now instead of Percy."

Jason tried to gather his thoughts, but they seemed so scattered. He searched for some sign of encouragement on Annabeth's face. "When I left camp that fall and he found out, he was so mad, but he hunted me down and sent Leo after me and haunted my fucking dreams to try to get me to come back here. When I got stabbed, he risked his life to save me. We weren't lovers then. I'd betrayed him, and still, there he was risking everything for me. The thing he did this time, it wasn't even that awful. He made me mad and something inside me got hard. I left and didn't look back. I've never been more scared in my life than I was today, and I still walked out of his house without even saying goodbye."
"Why did you do it?"

"Today? Or two months ago when I found out what he'd been doing? It's the same answer, I guess. I don't love him anymore. All that stuff I felt for him is gone. I get so tired of him being my problem."

Annabeth laid her head back on the wall, too, and took the lighter from Jason's hand.

"I used to do this when I was a girl." She passed her hand over the lighter like Jason had. She could put her hand much closer to the flame and leave it there longer. "It was when I was a runaway, living with Luke and Thalia. The pain, it made life feel more real. The trick is to not start to believe the pain and the life underneath it are the same thing."

"We need to leave the office so we can pack," Hazel said. "You two will have to go somewhere else."

Annabeth clicked the lighter off and stood before offering Jason a hand.

"The best flight is in four days. Can Percy—"

"He would die before he'd let Nico hurt himself more."

Jason looked at Annabeth, who'd spoken with such conviction. She had been his one friend who had listened. Even if she didn't mean it as a comparison of what Percy would do versus what Jason would do, it was hard not to take it that way. Jason was inclined to believe that's the way she meant it.

"He won't, um, you're going to have to work out where to meet with him. His dad, your dad, Hazel, he's pretty mad at Nico — he's kind of grounded. You won't be able to spend a whole lot of time with him, at least at first. Maybe once Hades sees that you're there, he'll let Nico have a little more freedom. Maybe try to work things out through Percy."

"Why would my father ground Nico?" Hazel's golden eyes flashed with surprise. She had to know Nico was the favorite of Hades. Had she every seen their tempers when they fought?

"That reckless thing he did was bad enough that your dad got involved."

"Did Hades tell Nico he didn't love him anymore?" Annabeth said it so quietly only Jason could hear. He jerked farther away from her.

"What was it that he did?" Reyna asked.

Jason weighed his options. All three women were watching him, waiting to see what Nico could have done. It was obvious that Nico would hold a grudge against Hera, at least for the banishment, even if they didn't know how she had ruined his and Jason's love. How she had tried to ruin their love. They'd ruined it on their own, in the end. One of them had. He didn't see how the women knowing what Nico had done would hurt.

"Hera, um, he figured out how to follow her around somehow. I don't understand how he did it."

"Di immortales, that's bad," Annabeth said.

Reyna covered her mouth.

"He kept it up. It wasn't once. He spent seven fucking months following her. She knew. She toyed with him. When she was done playing, she caught him, and he was in such deep shit, and it, gods, it
could have been so bad. Hades intervened, and that's probably the only reason Nico's alive."

"Thank the gods Hades was able to step in," Reyna said. She threw her cloak over her shoulder and walked toward the door. "All told, it could have been much worse."

"I know," Hazel said. "I mean, obviously, he shouldn't have been doing that, but I don't blame him, not after what she did to him."

All the women were at the door when Annabeth noticed Jason hadn't moved.

"Jason? Are you coming?"

"Nico stalked a goddess." Jason was shaking with rage. They were being so blasé about this. "He acted like a psycho. Did you guys not hear what I said? He did this shit for seven months! It wasn't like he got the urge one day and she caught him. He kept going back."

"We heard you the first time, Jason," Reyna said. "What is it that you want to say?"

"He jeopardized his life over and over and over for some stupid vendetta! This isn't some little prank gone wrong. She would've killed him! He didn't even care!" Jason was screaming at them, the same way he'd screamed at Nico. "He was playing at leaving me."

"Jason, he wasn't going to leave you. That wasn't what he was doing," Hazel said quietly. "He shouldn't, and maybe you don't deserve it, but he loves you so much that he compromises his morals and risks his life and lies to his family. That's all for you. He wouldn't—"

"He does that shit for me but he won't fucking stay safe! Gods, all the things I've done to keep him safe! It's never enough! He acts like it doesn't matter, all the shit we've had to deal with. It's not about what he does for me. It's about what he won't do."

"I don't have time to deal with his tantrums tonight," Reyna snapped when Hazel looked like she was going to reply. "Annabeth, can you get Jason home and read him a bedtime story? Pick a good fairy tale, sounds like that's what he wants."
The barrier bumped Nico and Jason off their blue blanket. They'd stayed out a long time, kissing and hugging. Percy had awakened an hour earlier and come to the door of the house. He'd seen his friends' loving touches, the intimacy of their embrace. Back inside, he'd slipped into the man cave and played video games, ignoring the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Jason and Nico walked inside holding hands. They could feel that Percy was awake, and they were both worried about how he would react to the news that they were tentatively a couple, even though Percy was the one who'd pushed them to date. Nico squeezed Jason's hand and walked ahead of him into the man cave.

"Hey, Perce." He sat so close to Percy that he bumped the game controller. Percy swore when it caused his character to die. Nico put his hand on Percy's knee. "Sorry."

Percy wiggled his leg until Nico let go of him. "I was about to beat that level, Nico. Scoot over and give me some space."

There had only been one other time he'd asked Nico for space, and that was the day Nico had told him they had to break up. Nico shot a worried glance at Jason, who'd taken a seat on the opposite end of the couch.

"Okay, well, can we talk to you when you're done with this level? Like, pause the game or something?"

Percy didn't want to pause the game. He believed Nico was leaving him. "Sure, buddy. Whatever you say."

Nico's lip curled at the condescending nickname. The controller in Percy's hand vanished. Nico grabbed Percy by the face and pulled him into the shadows. They emerged in their bedroom. Jason followed a second later.

"What the fuck, Nico?" Percy shook his face free of Nico and stepped around him. "Couldn't you wait a motherfucking second to break my heart?"

"You bastard." Nico touched Percy's shoulder and got shrugged off. Jason blocked the door, and Percy wasn't thinking clearly enough to perform the godly magic that would take him elsewhere. He circled Nico and stood behind him. Nico turned around and came face to face with the back of Percy's head. "I told you before, and I meant it, I am not ever leaving you."

"Well, you should." Percy whirled to face him, and in Percy's eyes Nico read the jagged cracks of a broken heart. Percy could barely hold himself together. "You got what you wanted. You got Jason. Jason got you. We're friends, Nico, nothing more. I appreciate all the stuff you've done for me, but I have a wife. I love her. Not you."

"Percy, please."

"Nico, maybe you should give him some space," Jason said. As far as he was concerned, Percy was right. Percy had a wife. He didn't need to be Nico's lover. "I mean, I know Percy loves you, but he loves Annabeth more and—"
Jason stopped when Nico glared at him, and the truth was clear. Percy didn't love Annabeth more than Nico. Jason couldn't believe he hadn't realized it sooner.

Percy sniffled and sat on the edge of the bed, his lower legs dangling over the side. He watched his feet swing back and forth until Nico's enormous boots squeezed in between them.

"I am not ever leaving you." Nico brushed the hair out of Percy's eyes. It fell back as soon as he let go. "Never. I told you that even if I could have Jason exactly the way I want him to be I'd say no if I couldn't have you, too. I'll say no to Jason, Percy, if you need me to."

"It hurt her, you know," Percy said quietly, "knowing she was my second choice. It's funny that she and I were always the second choice of the person we loved most. Ironic, I guess." He made a coughing noise that he'd intended to be a laugh. "We could each understand the other's sadness that way. I don't know how she ever put up with me. She was better than I deserved." He rested his head on Nico's cool chest.

"She's not in the past." Nico played with the collar of Percy's shirt, slipped his fingers in and out. "She is, and we all know it," Percy said. "I won't see her or Maybelle again, not in a meaningful way. It's kind of what I deserve, because I spent most of my marriage wishing I was with you. What a perfect punishment. Can't have them. Can't have you."

"Don't say that." Nico started to cry. He didn't even care that Jason was behind him and would see it. "I swear to you, I love you. I'm in love with you. I don't want to lose you."

Percy keeled over and curled up in a ball. Nico climbed into bed and brought their bodies close. He pressed kiss after kiss to the back of Percy's head. Tentatively, Jason sat at the foot of the bed.

"Lose the suit, Adonis." Percy poked Jason's knee with his toes. "You make me look like an even bigger fool dressed like that."

Jason changed back into his jeans and t-shirt.

"Better." Percy gave a sniffly laugh. "Those jeans are so hideous, man. You look like an '80s sitcom mom."

Nico chuckled and slid an arm under Percy's head. "I think he looks like an '80s wrestler in street clothes."

"Hey, they're comfortable," Jason said. He rubbed his hand over Percy's calves. "Nico's only stylish because he had a runway model god pick out his wardrobe. Otherwise he'd still be dressed like he chose his clothes out of a dumpster."

Percy snorted and hid his chuckle behind his hand. "You're not making me feel better, you two."

"Why the hell not? We're funny," Jason protested.

"You're so not funny. Nico's as funny as a funeral."

"Oh, ha ha. Never heard that one before," Nico drawled. He slipped his upper hand into Percy's jeans pocket and stretched his fingertips down to Percy's thigh. "So, I should tell a joke, but I don't know any. I have to rely on wit and sarcasm."

"And being rude," Jason added.
"Jason's funnier than you, Nico." Percy wiped his nose on his shirt before he remembered he could have vanished the snot. He changed into a different shirt. "You're as funny as the morgue."

"That's dumb." Nico rolled Percy over onto his back and laid on top of him. "I am a simple man who likes simple things, which is why I'm so damned attracted to you."

Jason laughed and laid down next to Percy. Percy shifted so their shoulders touched.

"He's in love with you, Percy," Jason said. "I wanted it to be only me that he loved, and so did he, once upon a time. But you wriggled your smart-mouthed bastard way into his heart, and he can't live without you."

"Lucky him," Percy said.

"Out there on the beach, he told me you two are a package deal. He said I don't get him unless I accept that he won't give you up."

"He wants me to be his friend, Jason, not his lover, not like you." Percy shook his head and tried to move his hand away, but Jason linked their fingers and held on tighter.

"Hey, you jerk," Nico said. "Let me tell you what I want from you. Don't assume you know."

"I suppose you aren't getting off of me until you do, so knock yourself out." Percy closed his eyes so he wouldn't see Nico's sweet face.

"When Annabeth got me to break up with you," Nico started, and Percy's eyes darted back open. "She told me that she was better for you because she would only ever love you, and that I would choose Jason over you. It sucked, hearing that. I had been fighting her. I didn't want to give you up. I told her you were better off with me. But when she told me that, I knew she was right. She would only love you, and I'd choose Jason."

"Not a great start, baby," Percy said.

"I suck at this. Give me a chance. I'm much better at rolling my hips and biting your collarbone and making you forget there was a problem to begin with." Nico could tell Percy agreed, so he continued. "But I was wrong back then. I'm not saying I was wrong to do what I did, because you have Maybelle to show for it. That can't have been a mistake. I was wrong to think there was only one right way. It killed me to let you go. I didn't do the stupid things with Hera because of Jason. I did them because I lost you."

"Wonderful," Jason said. "It doesn't matter why you did it. You were a moron." The hand that held Percy's clenched on Nico's back. This was a hard subject for Jason.

"Shut up, Jace, and let me get this out. What I mean to say is that maybe there was more than one right way. If Annabeth and I could have been more open-minded and worked together, maybe you could have had her and me and Maybelle and I wouldn't have gone off the deep end." Nico shifted against the rough way Jason and Percy held him. It didn’t hurt, exactly, but it was intense. "You're not just a friend, Percy. You're the person I'm closest to, the one I trust most. I am insanely attracted to you. I have sex with you. How is that plain old friendship, what we do?"

"He's right, Perce," Jason wedged his shoulder under Percy's and scooted closer. "Leo's my BFF, man, and I don't have any desire to fuck him. I don't know how to describe what you two do besides being lovers."
Percy frowned. "Fuck buddies. Friends with benefits. There's plenty of slang terms for what we do."

"Don't be a jackass." Nico sat up, but he had to move slightly to fit his legs around both Jason and Percy because there wasn't space between them anymore. "That is never what we've been. Do you think I'd do something like that?"

Nico started to get up. He wanted Percy to understand, but he didn't want to be insulted. Percy grabbed the side of Nico's face and held him still.

"No, you wouldn't do that. Lay back down." Percy stroked Nico's face and chest until Nico laid down on top of him again. "I love you. I don't want to make you feel like shit for trying to be kind."

"Damn it, this isn't kindness. It's need. My need. I need you in my life, Percy. Yes, as my friend first, but also because I'm in love with you. Gods, Jason accepts this. Why can't you?"

Percy tried to catch Jason's eye, but the son of Jupiter's face was much too close. "Do you accept this crazy idea he has?"

"It's weird, and not the first thing I'd have chosen. But I already watch you two have sex every day —"

"You get off on watching me and Percy have sex, Jason. Be honest." Nico bit his lip. Even though he was desperate to make Percy understand and a little angry that his friend was being so stupid, thinking about how Jason reacted to seeing him with another man turned him on.

"I," Jason cleared his throat and shifted under Nico and Percy. "I got used to you two being friends a long time ago, and I wouldn't dream of trying to take that away from either of you. You were there for him in ways that I wasn't, and you've earned the right to be a permanent part of his life, in whatever way works for both of you."

"Do you really, um, what Nico said?" Percy asked.

"Put your hand on Percy, Jason," Nico said.

"What? Where?" Jason sounded as nervous as he felt.

"Doesn't matter. Put your hand on his forearm. I'm not asking you to grope him."

"Is that okay, Percy?" Jason asked.

"Yeah. It's, we touch each other. It's not weird." Percy felt very weird.

Jason laid his hand on Percy's arm. Nico smiled at them both and kissed Percy passionately. Jason gasped, and his hand tightened around Percy. Nico kissed longer, slipped his tongue into Percy's mouth, and Jason's grip increased until he was holding Percy hard enough to bruise. Percy could feel the exact places where the bruises would be. His skin was hot where Nico touched him, but it was hot where Jason touched him, too. Nico broke the kiss.

"Tell him how it makes you feel, Jason."

"I get off on it so much. Gods, Percy, it's hot. I don't want you two to stop fucking in front of me." Jason released Percy's arm and covered his mouth, mortified by what he'd admitted.

"When Heracles was here, Jason didn't say, 'He's mine.' He said, 'He's ours.' He wants to share me with you, at least as long as we keep things the way they are. What do you want, Percy?" Nico
rolled his hips this time, not to try to make Percy feel better or sway his opinion, but because he couldn't stop himself. Percy moaned. "What do you want from me and Jason?"

"Oh gods, Nico. I don't want to give you up. I love you so much, and maybe this could work. It's been working, hasn't it? You have fun with both of us. You sleep with us both. Jace and I get along. So it's not traditional and Annabeth would definitely not approve, but—"

"Annabeth's not here, Percy. I am. Say you're in." Nico kissed Percy again until all three gods were one writhing, undulating mass. Jason had moved further under Percy, or Percy had moved further on top of Jason. Their arms wrapped together around Nico, and he kissed them back and forth so fast that their faces bumped together trying to keep up.

Jason heaved Percy and Nico completely on top of him, which threw Nico off balance and sent him tumbling off the bed.

"Oh, shit." Jason scrambled to get Percy off the top of him and get to Nico. Percy was trying to get up on his own, but it was awkward with Jason perched underneath him, hard and grabbing at his hips.

"Fuck, Jason, quit. I'm trying to get up, dude." Percy tried to turn over at the same moment Jason lifted him completely off his body. Both men fell off the bed, too. "Damn it!"

They ended up sprawled over the top of Nico, who was laughing like a maniac until he caught a foot in the face. Percy, whose foot had been the offender, pulled his knees up to his chin to avoid it happening again. Jason's long legs were stuck on the bed, making a small tent for Nico's hips.

"That was not the way I envisioned it happening in my head," Nico said, and Jason and Percy laughed. "Everyone okay?"

"Fine," Jason said.

"Me, too."

"No broken dicks?" Nico started laughing again before he got the question out.

"You can't break your dick, jackass," Jason said.

"It's a thing," Percy said. "I read about it."

"Yeah, and I don't want any broken dicks," Nico wheezed. He tugged Percy's legs back down and laid his head on Percy's hip. "Percy, put your head on Jason's shoulder and don't complain."

Percy moved closer to Jason and lifted his head. He was surprised when Jason wrapped his arm under him. He nestled his head on Jason's strong chest. When Percy was situated, Jason cradled him tighter and reached his hand down around Percy's far side to play with Nico's hair.

"This is nice," Jason said. Percy felt the way Jason's voice made his body rumble. It was pleasant.

Nico hooked one of Jason's legs with his own. "I love you two. Percy," Nico rolled over to face Percy, "can this work for you? I want to make you happy and comfortable. I want you to be mine."

"I love you, too, Nico. I would...I would really like to be a part of this."

"Jace?" Nico asked.

"I'm so in, Nico."
"Good. What changes?" Nico faced the ceiling again. Percy's hand had joined Jason's in his hair. "Does anything change?"

"Let's take it a day at a time, like we said outside, except when we talk about relationship stuff we talk all together." Jason kissed the top of Percy's head before he realized what he was doing. "Sorry."

"It's, um, it's okay," Percy said. His cheeks colored bright red, but he patted Jason's thigh.

"And we promise to be honest, even me," Nico said. He was thrilled with how things had gone. It would be hard, he knew, maybe harder than ever, to keep the three of them together and happy, but he was more determined than he'd ever been to be the center they needed. "We should get to the man cave. It's our night to sleep in there, and it has to be getting close to dark."

Nico sat up, but Percy held his arm. Nico noticed the golden bruises Jason had left on Percy's skin.

"Let's skip the TV tonight," Percy said.

Jason sat up so abruptly that Percy's head hit the floor. He and Nico couldn't mask their concern. Percy smiled and sat up.

"I'm okay. Better than I've been in a while. I'd rather spend my night with you two and no distractions. I can't promise that it'll be like this from now on, but for now," Percy brushed his hands over Jason's and Nico's legs, "I want to be here, in our bedroom."

"We support whatever choices you make, Perce," Jason said.

"I want to take Nico to bed, Jason, make love to him." Percy's voice was low and husky, and his eyes were fixed on Jason. "You're okay with that?"

Jason opened his mouth to answer, but nothing coherent came out. He nodded and nudged the other gods back onto the bed.

Chapter End Notes

Did the last chapter make you all too sad to type? ;-) Sorry about that. I hope these Australia chapters provide a decent buffer between the sad stuff.
Nico fidgeted in his seat and tried to concentrate on the way Percy's hand felt heavy and alive on his thigh. That was real.

"This traffic sucks." Percy gripped the brown leather of the steering wheel with one hand and slid the other deeper between Nico's thighs. Nico felt tremendously guilty that he couldn't shadow travel them where they needed to go. Percy had insisted that he loved the car and wanted to take it everywhere. Nico thought Percy just didn't want him to feel bad.

He bit down the urge to offer use of the shadows. It made no sense anyway since they were already in the car. He fidgeted some more and slipped his fingers along Percy's wrist.

"You can use both hands on the wheel, Perce." His voice sounded better, not so wrecked, but he was sure Reyna and Hazel would notice. Or maybe they wouldn't. They had been noticing less and less about him over the past eighteen months. "I'll be okay."

"That's your favorite lie, isn't it?"

Nico didn't answer.

Percy had been enormously sweet and funny the whole time they'd been together. He'd gotten Nico through the torturous healing sessions with rapid-fire jokes and tender caresses. Nico knew he looked a million times healthier than he had four days ago. That wasn't only thanks to Apollo's amazing skill. It was Percy, too. Today, though, Percy was almost as nervous as Nico.

Percy withdrew his hand from between Nico's legs and covered his hand.

"Put your hand between my thighs for a while. You can scratch my balls at stoplights."

Nico glanced over at Percy and caught the moment when his eyes slipped from the road to Nico's face. Percy winked and returned his gaze to the road.

"We're getting close, aren't we?"

"Couple more blocks, I think. When we get there, I'll pull up out front and let you out then go park."

Nico's hand tightened reflexively on Percy's thigh. He didn't want to risk seeing Hazel and Reyna without Percy at his side.

"There's probably a valet. Let's do that, please?"

"Sure. The guy'll be so happy to get to drive this thing."

Nico chuckled, and it almost sounded genuine. Percy's cheeks rounded with a smile. Nico liked to see Percy smile, especially now. It made him feel less like a charity case.

"You know, my roommate would probably be happy to give you this thing in a few days. I didn't even know he had it."

"Nah. It'd be better if I taught you to drive it before I have to leave. That way if you get the itch to go
somewhere and don't feel like shadow traveling, you can get around in style. Cabs smell bad, Nico. This way's better."

Unsaid was that Nico should never need to drive himself anywhere. He was supposed to have his shadows. He was supposed to have the energy to summon Jules-Albert.

"You can try to teach me. I think I might be a lost cause."

Percy's hands gripped the steering wheel tighter. Nico knew Percy thought he was talking about more than learning to drive. Maybe he was.

They pulled to a stop in front of a very gray building. Its exterior was cold and imposing, which made it the perfect place to meet his sisters. Percy was out of the driver's seat and at Nico's door before he had even unbuckled. The door flung open, and Percy took his hand to help him up. He wanted to tell Percy to back off and let him do it himself, but he wasn't sure he had the strength. He stumbled while exiting the car, but Percy caught him.

"Damn it."

Percy pressed their bodies together and held him until his heartbeat slowed. He was sure Percy could feel the erratic thrumming in his own chest, too. It was like the stupid thing was trying to break out of his body. It was always so close to the surface these days, as much as he tried to shove it back deep inside.

"It's getting better," Percy whispered. His hands traced slow circles on Nico's back under his jacket.

Nico prayed to his father for guidance. He was so scared to see his sisters. They would hate him for what he'd become or done. They shouldn't have dropped their work and come all this way. Some angry part of him said they should have dropped their work and come all this way a long time ago. He bit his lip to keep from crying.

Percy untangled from their embrace and took his hand. "Ready?"

Nico nodded and let Percy lead him inside.

The hotel lobby was nothing grand, just a few comfortable-looking seating arrangements and some planters. Nico hadn't been allowed to make accommodations for Reyna and Hazel. Or had he not asked to? He couldn't remember.

Percy checked his phone.

"Reyna says we can go up."

Nico's feet were leaden as he dragged himself into an elevator and, a moment later, down a corridor. No one had asked him if he wanted to see his sisters. He didn't understand the sudden whirlwind of interest in him — how he'd gone from a horrific encounter with Jason to Percy showing up and announcing he was staying to the news a day later that Reyna and Hazel were coming. He knew Apollo had summoned Jason. Beyond that, nothing.

That wasn't true. He knew it was Jason who'd gotten Percy to come. It had to have been Jason who'd sent Reyna and Hazel. Jason, who didn't love him. Nico curled in on himself and would have fallen if Percy hadn't caught him. They were already at the door.

"Can you take me back home?" Nico whispered. Seeing his sisters was a terrible idea. This could only end badly.
"After we see them."

"Before, please?" He was shaking.

"No. You're having a panic attack. We need to go in so you can lie down."

Nico buried his nose in Percy's neck and breathed like the counselor had taught him. "I don't want them to see me like this. Hazel--"

"Is almost as tough as you. They need to see you, Nico. You have to let people back in. Keep breathing."

Percy knocked on the door. Nico squeezed his eyes shut and clung to Percy. The door opened, but Nico didn't open his eyes. There was no greeting, so he couldn't even tell which sister was there.

"Nico needs to lay down. Give us a minute." Percy sounded tight and authoritative. Was he mad at Reyna and Hazel?

It didn't matter, not really. Nothing mattered. Nico let Percy grip his waist and lift him off the ground. They were moving, but he kept his face tight to Percy. There was a bed. Percy laid him down and climbed almost on top of him, effectively shielding him from the view of his sisters.

"Breathe and count. I'm going to be right here with you."

Nico counted and breathed. He tapped his fingers on Percy's back to count the breaths. Percy whispered gentle assurances and laid as still as possible. Kisses and touches from Percy were almost always welcome, but during the panic, Nico needed peace. Once the counting was over, he let his mind wander. Percy had told him Sally had Panic Disorder and that her safe place was a meadow out behind her Uncle Rich's house where she'd grown up. Percy had described it for him, and Nico had been adding to the image, making it his own. It was sort of pitiful that there was no place in his life that filled him with peace and he had to steal one from someone else. He had to work not to envision the meadow as a fortress, a place where he could build walls. And he had to be there alone. It helped, though, thinking that Sally had done these things, too.

"Can we call your mom later?"

Nico opened his eyes to Percy's smile. That was nice. Percy kissed his nose.

"Yep. Are you ready to see them?"

"Ready as ever."

"Okay, we're going to sit on the edge of the bed. I'll hold you the whole time. They're on the other bed, facing us. Reyna's grown long tusks and shaved her head. Thought you should know."

Nico snorted, and Percy pulled them into position on the edge of the bed. Nico wasn't sure how long he'd be able to sit without something supporting his back. He kept his head buried against the side of Percy's face until all the maneuvering was done. Once they were situated, he managed to turn away from Percy and stare at his sisters' knees. It was a start.

"Ladies," Percy said coolly.

"Hi, Nico." Hazel. She was crying. She didn't sound so scary, though. Nico visually picked his way up her body until he could see her face. Her gold eyes were glimmering, and her hair framed her head like a halo. Nico surprised himself by sobbing in relief. Some part of him had thought these
women, who loved him, had ceased to exist.

Percy scooted closer when Hazel slid to the floor and crawled to press her face against Nico's knee. Nico didn't untangle his hand from Percy's — he couldn't risk his tenuous self-control to do that — but he ran both their hands over Hazel's hair. It felt rough like good wool. He'd missed touching her.

"Hi. I missed you. Both of you." He couldn't look at Reyna. She would judge him too weak, too big a disappointment. But Hazel, he could do. She would forgive him for not being stronger.

There was a scuffling, and he could tell Reyna must have gotten off the other bed. He kept his eyes on the top of Hazel's head. The bed sank next to him, and he smelled Reyna, warm and dark. He laid his head against Percy's and closed his eyes when Reyna ran her hand through his hair.

The room gradually took on the sounds of sniffing and quick breathing and steadily falling tears. No one spoke. Nico didn't need to hear any words. Percy had once pressed his hand to Nico's chest and told him he wasn't alone. For the first time in a long time, Nico believed that was true.

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"We will alternate our schedules over the next month," Reyna was saying. Percy sipped at his hot chocolate and curled his fingers around Nico's shoulder. He had to fight the urge to snap at her.

"So you'll each come here a week at a time and then leave?" He wanted to get this hammered out. He had to leave in a few days, and Nico had to be cared for when he was gone. "What if..."

"It's okay, Percy," Nico said quietly.

Percy kissed Nico's cheek. It wasn't. Not even close.

"I want to make sure they'll be able to take you to school and your appointments. You shouldn't have to miss any days because of them not getting the timing right."

"We'll be here, Percy." Hazel's voice was strained.

"Because his course load is high, and he's going to the counselor three times a week. He's got this long-term project he's supposed to be working on, so he needs to be at the library at least three nights a week, too. And you need to remind him to take his meds."

"Percy, please stop. I'm getting better. I can do these things." Nico sounded more resigned than tired. It was a huge improvement. Percy looked at his...Nico. His eyes were still empty, but the rest of him resembled the man he'd been when they were lovers. Percy knew it was physical, the change, that the mental recovery would take a lot longer. It was progress.

Nico had told him that the counselor said he had to work on his mental state without Percy's or Apollo's help. They could support him, but they couldn't fix him. It reminded Percy of how he'd said something similar to Jason, back when Jason cared about how deeply he'd fucked with Nico's head.

Percy didn't want to leave New York. He was worried that Nico would slip again. Apollo had enchanted Nico's watch so that it would remind him to eat and take his medicine. The god would be around whenever he could, and he'd keep Nico healthy. Nico had agreed to let the healing sessions continue even after Percy left. It was the mental stuff, what Nico would have to do alone, that scared
Percy. Nico was so strong. Stronger than any of them. He'd lived through Tartarus alone and didn't break. Percy had to have faith that he could do this.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said, dragging his mind back to the present. The last thing Nico wanted, now that he was physically feeling better, was coddling. "They haven't been here for you for almost two fucking years. I don't want them to screw things up."

Reyna glared at him from across the table but didn't say anything. What could she say? He was only telling the truth.

The little diner they sat in was clean and brightly lit. Percy was thankful that Hades had relaxed Nico's area of confinement. He had been getting tired of being limited to Nico's apartment, campus, and the counselor's office. Hazel's and Reyna's hotel wasn't much better. It felt as stifling as they did.

"They're here now," Nico reminded him. "That's the part that matters."

Percy didn't quite think it was. He unhooked his arm from Nico's shoulders and laced their fingers. He put their hands on the table and watched Reyna fixate on them. She didn't like their closeness. Hazel didn't, either. They saw Percy as part of the problem. He was, of course, but he was also what Nico had needed.

"If you don't like me holding your brother's hand, don't look."

"I don't like you playing with Nico's emotions," Reyna said. "You're engaged."

"Nico's sitting right here," Nico said. "Maybe if you're worried about my emotions you should ask me about them."

Reyna startled and trained her eyes on her coffee. "I'm sorry, Nico. You're right. I worry that this series of events was brought about because of Percy and Jason. I know it was, as a matter of fact. Percy's helping, but he's also going to leave you again. I'm not sure the temporary payoff is worth the long-term damage he does."

"I don't think I'd be sitting here if it wasn't for Percy," Nico said. His hand tightened in Percy's, and it felt strong. "Things were bad, Reyna, and by the time you and Hazel got here, he'd already made them so much better. I'm not delusional. I know he's engaged, and it probably makes you guys uncomfortable to see us touch and kiss. I know how things were between us before, though, and this," Nico lifted their hands, "is something different than when we were lovers. We have an intense friendship."

"What does your boyfriend think of your friendship?" Hazel asked. She'd been pretty quiet every time they visited. Percy thought she was traumatized and furious with herself for neglecting to notice how much trouble Nico was in. He was probably projecting his own feelings onto her.

"He likes Percy. He knows about how things used to be between us, but he also knows Percy loves Annabeth and I, well, maybe I don't exactly love my boyfriend, but I'm incredibly fond of him. He's good to me. He's not threatened."

Percy smirked. It was hard to imagine Apollo feeling threatened by anyone, at least as a romantic rival. He'd been exceptionally good-natured and kind toward Percy. It was cute to watch how he was with Nico. It was wrong and fucked up, him being so smitten with someone off-limits, but he was so gentle and patient. At least for right now, he was good for Nico. When Nico got back on his feet, it would need to end, but for now Apollo was mostly a positive in Nico's life. Last night, Nico had gone back to Apollo's bed. He'd been sleeping with Percy – platonically — Percy couldn't imagine
trying anything sexual with Nico in such a fragile emotional and physical state — so when Nico asked if he'd mind sleeping alone, Percy had been surprised. It was good, though. Nico's appearance was markedly more healthy today. He was back to his normal Nico-color. His hair was shining the way it used to, so black and lustrous it looked wet.

"He's a confident dude," Percy added. Nico nudged him. "Snagged Nico, so you know he's got it going on. Neeks has impeccable taste. At least for hot boys."

"But not for good ones," Reyna said.

"Reyna," Hazel snapped. Percy would never have imagined Hazel would snap at Reyna. It would have been funny, if Hazel didn't sound kind of scary. "This isn't our business. Nico's an adult, and he's smart and capable."

"Thanks, little sister," Nico said. He reached across the table and squeezed her hand. Hazel offered him a big smile.

"And Percy, we've all made mistakes. I'm never letting a job be more important than my family again," Hazel said.

"Guys, I'm feeling a little tired. Do you mind if we say our goodbyes for today?" Nico seemed more anxious to go than usual. Percy knew these daily visits with his sisters were draining. The women meant well, but it was slow going, rebuilding the relationships they'd allowed to wither, and there was still so much Nico couldn't tell them. They were being good about not asking where he lived and had accepted the lie that his miraculous recovery was because he was dating a son of Apollo, but Percy knew they were concerned that Nico hadn't brought them to his home.

Percy took one last drink of his hot chocolate and stood. Nico didn't need to be helped up anymore, but Percy wrapped his arm around Nico's waist as soon as he could. He might end up missing Nico more than Nico would miss him.

In the car, Percy started them toward the apartment, but Nico covered his hand on the gear shift and said, "Not yet."

"I thought you were tired?"

"I'm a little tired, so it wasn't technically a lie, but I wanted to get out of there." Nico slipped his fingers between Percy's and brought both hands to his lips. Percy thrilled to the touch. "They're great, but it's hard to watch Hazel cry and Reyna stare and know they're both trying to make peace with whatever role they think they had in me flying off the deep end. I'm not going to refuse their help, Perce, but spending too much time with them makes me feel worse."

"What do you want to do, then, if you aren't ready to go home? We could take in a movie, or—"

"I want you to teach me how to drive."

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Nico sat in the driver's seat and adjusted the recline of the seat back.

"Comfortable?"
Nico nodded. He wasn't, but that had very little to do with the seat.

"Okay, so check your mirrors. Make sure you can see out of them." Percy was being ridiculously patient. Nico wanted to snap at him.

"What am I supposed to see out of them?"

"You want a clear view of stuff behind you and alongside for the side-view mirrors. Check that. You should always check them when you get in the car."

"I can see that there's not shit behind us."

The big parking lot at Jacob Riis Park was perfect. No one was out for a day at the beach in the middle of January. Nico was glad Percy had such a good knowledge of New York. He'd have had no idea where to go to do this.


"Now, turn the car on."

This much, at least, Nico knew how to do. He'd seen Jules-Albert turn the key before. Except this car had no key. How the hell had Percy been driving it around? Nico widened his eyes at Percy.

"It's a button, baby. See the button there on the dash? Press it."

Nico pressed the button, and the car roared to life. He let out a huge breath. Good. Okay. He could do this. Why did he want to do this, again?

"Now," Percy's voice stayed calm and soothing, "look at the floor by your feet. See the two pedals? The one on the left is the brake. The one on the right is the gas pedal. It's kind of self-explanatory what you do with them. Oh, and only use your right foot. Very important."

"Brake. Gas. Right foot only."

"Yep. Now, put your hands on the steering wheel. Not like that. Here."

Percy climbed onto the center console and arranged Nico's hands. His hands stayed closed tight around Nico's. Nico wished he wasn't shaking. After a moment, when the shaking calmed, Percy let go and sat back in the passenger seat.

They'd been over where the controls were. Nico knew he needed to depress the brake, move the little gear shifting lever thing to D and let up on the brake, then press the gas pedal. He knew how to use the turn signals. He knew how to turn on the windshield wipers. He knew—

"Nico. Put the car in drive and go. It'll be fine." Percy's hand on his thigh slipped lower, and he ran his fingernails along the inside seam of Nico's jeans. Go. Yes.

Nico moved the lever to drive and gently lifted his foot off the brake. The car lurched forward and Nico swore. He slammed his foot on the brake.

"That's normal, baby. The car wants to move. Especially this oh so fine car. Try again. This time, go with it. Let your foot touch the gas."

Nico went through the motions again. This time, when he removed his foot from the brake, he didn't panic. He didn't put his foot on the gas, but he let the car roll forward. Percy's fingers rubbed from the inside of his knee to his balls. It wasn't something sexual. It was relaxing, and Nico appreciated
that Percy knew how to calm him.

"Give it gas. I'm right here."

Nico took a deep breath and touched the gas pedal. The car moved forward a little more quickly. Slowly, so deliberately that he felt like a scientist testing his subject, Nico depressed the pedal and learned how to make the car move at the speed he wanted.

"Brilliant! Woohoo!" Percy yelled beside him. "Now slowly turn the steering wheel and let's head back the other way. Don't stop with the gas."

The gray beach day lengthened as Nico drove the car in circles and straight lines and eventually, in long, smooth ovals. He got more daring, and what had been five miles per hour became fifteen and thirty. He stopped thinking about where to put his hands and how to move his feet. They made long, looping figure 8s and quick, jutting zigzags. When Percy turned on the radio and started singing loud and off-key, Nico laughed. He laughed so long and hard that his sides hurt. He had Percy teach him the choruses to the songs so he could sing along.

For the last pass, Nico drove to the far end of the lot and floored the gas. He reached fifty miles an hour before the adrenaline left him buzzed and happy, and he turned the car around and parked in a spot closer to the ocean. Percy laughed and pulled Nico over the console and into his lap.

"That. That is my Nico," he said. "That's the boy who instructed a pegasus to throw us off his back so we could free-fall into a shadow. That's the man who drove me wild inside a prison cell."

"I didn't leave, I promise." Nico buried his head in Percy's hair and enjoyed the sensation of Percy's hands moving over his thighs and under his shirt. "I just..."

"Hey." Percy tugged Nico's jaw so they were face to face. "No one has the right to take those things away from you. You're a miracle of life, Nico. I can feel you breathing and living on top of me right now, and you're the most wonderful, amazing man. Thank you."

Nico laughed and bumped their noses together. "I think I should be the one thanking you."

"You let me in. Both when you were feeling your very best and when you've been feeling your very worst. It's..." Percy's eyes clouded with tears, and his voice got thick. "Loving you, all of you, it's been my privilege."

Nico didn't know what to say. He wanted to say that he hadn't had much choice about the second part, but it wasn't quite true. He had sent Jason away. He'd let Percy stay. It had to do with how they'd reacted. Jason had made him feel like a scary piece of shit that might get stuck on his jeans if he got too close. Percy had made him feel like there was nothing he wouldn't do to love him, and that had been enough.

"I love you, Percy." Nico kissed Percy's wet eyelashes and pressed his hand to the back of Percy's neck. "Thank you for being you."

Percy rolled his eyes. "I am amazing. Want to say thank you with actions?"

"Is that a horrible pickup line?"

"I'm not hitting on you." Percy paused. "Well, if I'm talking to you I'm pretty much hitting on you, but that can't be helped. What I meant was, come with me."

Percy opened the door and helped Nico to his feet, where he swayed slightly. They'd need to get
home soon so Apollo could work more magic over his body. He leaned into Percy and reveled in the touch. He'd gone back to Apollo's bed last night, and they'd made love. Afterward, Nico had felt at ease and content and so much healthier. Apollo explained that while sex was a great tension reducer, sex with him also sped healing. Nico wondered if some of his interest in sex was returning. Being with Apollo had been fantastic, and Percy's touches felt different today than they had during the past week.

"Do I feel different to you?"

"What do you mean by different?" Percy led Nico around to the front of the car and sat him on the hood. He sat next to him and pulled out his phone. "We're commemorating the day Nico learned to drive."

He laid his head on Nico's shoulder and snapped a picture.

"I mean, I've been feeling depressed, obviously, but I also haven't had any interest in, you know...relations."

"You can say fucking, Nico. You have a potty mouth and happen to be a god among men when it comes to sex. Plus, thank gods, you're an adult now, legally, and you don't need to be embarrassed about the word. Plus, fucking fuck, do I like to fuck you legally."

Nico bumped Percy's shoulder with his own. "You're such a perv. You liked fucking me when I was sixteen, too."

"True. And seventeen. And eighteen. Any chance that nineteen—"

"No. Well, yes, if you weren't engaged and attached. That's what I'm trying to say. I feel like maybe some of that stuff is coming back, not just with you, no offense. I think it's me, and—"

"You used to feel like sex vibrating underneath my fingertips every time I touched you. Sometimes, it was so strong I worried I'd come from nothing more than running my hand over your face. It's that intense. When I first saw you last week it was gone. Yeah, it's back, and I can feel it."

Nico felt his cheeks heat. "Why am I like that?"

"You are such a dork. Most guys, they'd be like 'hell, yeah, I'm hot shit.' You want to figure out some sort of brain science behind it." Percy smiled and kissed his cheek. "I don't know why you're like that. Good genes? It can't be the guy you're with, because you were like that before him. What does it matter, Nico? It's a part of you, and it's great."

"You don't think it makes me bad?" Nico hadn't felt that way for a long time, but Hera's humiliations, and that word again, whore, had rattled him. And didn't there have to be something so horrifically wrong with him if someone as good and kind as Jason could wipe his hands and walk away without looking back?

Percy pushed Nico down on the hood of the car and straddled his hips. He cupped Nico's face with both hands and waited for their eyes to meet.

"You know it doesn't. There's nothing wrong with you. This is about he who must never be named, or whatever the hell they call Voldemort in Harry Potter. There's something wrong with him. I won't forgive him this time, Nico."

"He was right to be done with me."
"No, he wasn't. I thought he'd cool down, you know, when he came back to camp. But he didn't, and you didn't do anything unforgivable. You just needed a shrink. I don't get it. And then he found out how destroyed you were, and he left you anyway."

"I asked him to."

"He would've left even if you’d asked him to stay, and you know it. It's the same as why I needed to be the one to get you from that dance club. He can't handle all of you. He doesn't deserve you. And you are someone that people have to deserve, Nico." Percy bent down and sucked Nico's collarbone. Nico twisted his hand in Percy's hair and closed his eyes. It felt so good and helped ease the white-hot burn of talking about Jason. When Percy lifted his head again, his lips were wet. "You are special."

Percy wiped Nico's eyes — Nico couldn't remember crying as much as he had in the past two months in the whole time since Bianca died — and jumped down.

"Now, roll onto your side and let me take your picture. I'm gonna make a Hot Demigods of North America calendar and sell it on the internet. You're my centerfold."

"Well, I guess I'm honored. Who else have you lined up?" Nico laid on his side and let Percy take his picture.

"No one yet. Let's take a road trip this summer, you and me, and search for hot demigods. We can have a goal of fucking each other in every state in the continental US."

Nico snorted.

"You're getting married this summer."

Percy waved Nico off and helped him sit up. "Details. We'll head out after the honeymoon and steal this car. The first thing we'll do is come back here and fuck on the beach."

"It's a date."

"Here, take my elbow."

Nico did and climbed off the car. He was surprised when Percy led him further from the car, toward the beach. "Where are we going?"

"We're going to pick out the perfect fuck spot for this summer."

"Oh, gods, Percy, you're such a goofball."

"It's what I do. Is the distance okay? We've been out for a while."

"If I'll be alright. I'll need to rest when we go home, but I would've needed that anyway."

Nico watched the surf climb onshore as they approached. The view was majestic, green and blue and brown swirling together and making something timeless and powerful. He didn't spare a glance to the sky.

The beach sand was harder to walk on than he'd anticipated. He wasn't much of a beach-goer before and balance wasn't his specialty right now. Percy let him trip once, but after the second time, he wrapped his arm around Nico's waist and draped Nico's arm over his shoulders. When Nico caught his eye, all Percy said was, "I was cold."
They walked all the way down to where the wet sand started. Percy walked them forward another five or ten feet and drew an X in the sand with his foot.

"Here. This is where we'll start our summer fuck-a-thon."

Nico laughed. "Why right here?"

Percy stepped back from Nico and onto the dry part of the beach.

"Your realm." He bent down, scooped up the sand, and let it run through his fingers. He trudged into the water. Nico watched the waves lap at his ankles. Percy manipulated the water until it spiraled around him. "And mine. The wet sand is the place where we exist together naturally."

He returned to Nico and wrapped him in a loose embrace. He furrowed his brow and turned them so Nico's back was to the sea. "My baby is not supposed to be taller than me."

"You can make me stand on lower ground, but that doesn't actually make me shorter than you."

"Gods, more with the details." Percy brushed his fingers over Nico's lips. "Hush up and let me stare longingly at you."

Percy stared so long that Nico felt self-conscious. He found himself glancing off to the side and cutting his eyes back at Percy through his lashes until he remembered that Percy found that attractive. He didn't want Percy to think he was trying to be seductive.

They stayed that way a long time, gradually moving closer. By the end, Percy had stepped so close their torsos pressed together. One of his hands slid up Nico's shirt and roamed all over his back. The other hand firmly cupped his ass but stayed perfectly still.

Nico laid his head on Percy's shoulder and closed his eyes. He'd be asleep almost as soon as he buckled back into the car. His hands skimmed slow and lazy up and down Percy's back. "You're my best friend, Perce. I never would have guessed I'd feel this way, or that I might like it even better than being your boyfriend, but I do. I'm so grateful."

He was sleepy and mumbling and he wasn't entirely sure Percy heard him, but he felt a soft kiss on the back of his neck.

"You're my best friend, too, Nico, and that means more to me than just about anything. I love you."

Percy untangled their arms and led Nico back to the car.

***

Jason laid in the dark and thought about Nico.

He tried not to. He really did.

Piper stirred beside him, and he turned toward her, gently cupped her bare breast, and buried his face in her hair. She smelled like cinnamon, which was weird because Hazel did, too, but the smell was comforting and soft. Nico, whom he did not love, smelled like earth and life and mystery, and it wasn't comforting, Nico's smell. It was powerful and deep and thrilling.
Jason breathed deeper, hoping to capture more of the cinnamon smell. Some of Piper's hairs were a little too accommodating, and he got a very itchy nose for his trouble. He pulled back and sneezed, and gods, if that wasn't the most mortifying thing. "Hey honey, I got a bunch of your hair up my nose and sneezed on your head. Sorry." Thank goodness Piper was asleep.

"Jay?" Piper's voice was quiet and sweet.

Well, shit. Jason unhooked his hand from her breast and tried to wipe some of the water droplets from her hair. "Yeah?"

"Did you sneeze on me? On my head?"

"Yeah. Sorry. It was an accident."

Piper laughed, genuine and untroubled. "I would hope so."

Jason gave up trying to wipe off her hair. He was rubbing things in. She'd take a shower in the morning. Except now her hair didn't smell like cinnamon. It smelled like man sneeze. He sighed and turned onto his back. Piper turned, too, and nestled into his side.

"What's got you up and sneezing in my hair at," she checked her little glow in the dark watch, "three in the morning?"

"I was thinking about Nico." There was no reason to lie, not anymore. It was freeing.

"There's a surprise. Want to talk about it?"

"I was wondering how he's doing." Jason tried to sound nonchalant. He failed. He always failed.

"You can ask them, you know. I think they'd tell you."

"Annabeth, maybe, though she's been mad at me, too. The rest of them, no way."

He'd lost his friends again, and even though falling out of love with someone was a really shitty reason to get mad at a person, Jason knew it was more than that. Someone — Percy, probably — had told the others how coldly he had treated Nico, and by now they'd all seen the results. He hadn't helped himself by freaking out on them in the Praetor's office after Reyna and Hazel had already agreed to go to their brother.

"I talked to Reyna yesterday. She's got another day in New York and then they're going to see if Nico can be on his own for a couple of days. His boyfriend's there, so it's not like he's completely alone. Hazel's supposed to head east on Friday. Reyna said he shadow traveled safely to and from classes yesterday, and he's also learned how to drive, though she had no idea how he'd learned. She says his car is amazing. The weight's all back, and the circles under his eyes are gone. He fainted the other day in one of his classes, but that was because he ignored the alarm that reminds him to eat. Reyna was angry at him."

"Thanks." Jason didn't remark about how weird it was that they knew each other's business so well. Jason knew Frank had bombed his last business test and was close to switching majors to botany. He knew Hazel had developed an allergy to pine nuts. He knew Percy had ordered his tux for the wedding. He hadn't spoken to any of them. Most of it, Piper told him. Some he heard in the empty spaces of senate meetings or when he had to meet with Reyna about his Pontifex duties. As much as they may hate him, they couldn't escape him any more than he could escape them. And the one who had escaped, Nico, they knew the most of all about him.
Jason thought about how hard it must be for Nico, who was so private, to know his personal life, his eating habits, his progress at school, the way his clothes fit, and the color of his skin and hair were all topics of open discussion among his friends and family. Maybe he didn't know. Reyna probably kept her mouth shut. Hazel might not. Percy sure as hell didn't.

The word was Annabeth had rescinded her "Thou shalt not speak to Nico" rule, and Percy talked to Nico all the time. He probably talked to him more now than when they were lovers. Jason remembered Nico and his phone last January, how he'd texted on occasion. He hadn't realized it had been Percy on the other end. He should have. He couldn't understand why the thought rankled him as much as it did.

"Is there anything else you want to know?" Piper asked.

"School. It was so important to him."

"It sounds like, except for the fainting incident, he's managed to catch up. Reyna's trying to get him to back off on the course load. He's on track to graduate with you and me even though he started a year after us. She told me he's pulling a 4.0 again. But he should take it slower. He's so young, and he's got a whole lifetime to take as many classes as he wants."

"She should encourage him. It helps him be less crazy."

"He's not crazy, Jason. That's an awful thing to say." Piper sounded frustrated with him. He would never, ever use the word “crazy” for someone else who had a mental illness. But this was Nico. No matter how Jason understood intellectually that Nico was going through a mental health thing that he hadn't been able to help, emotionally, he couldn't forgive what Nico had done. It was easier to call Nico names than to search for his own compassion. Piper was still talking. "He had an overflow course load last year when the stalking was happening. It didn't matter. Though Reyna says he stopped for about eight weeks in the summer, if he's thinking about it correctly. Maybe he was busy enough with school for it to make a difference."

Nico hadn't been busy with school. He'd been busy with Jason. He'd been happy. Jason had heard that story before, from Reyna, who'd recognized that the two events, the resumption of Nico and Jason's affair and the break in stalking, must have happened at the same time. Reyna probably told him to make him feel guilty, like he should have been able to prevent Nico's behavior, but Jason didn't feel guilty. He felt more angry with Nico. He didn't want to be the thing that kept Nico sane. He wanted Nico to get his own shit together.

"You know, it might help if you went back to your counselor again."

"I don't want to."

Piper rested her hand on her head and gazed at him. He could see her eyes shifting in the dim light.

"Why?"

"Because I'm not bat-shit anymore."

Piper rolled over and got out of bed. He watched her pull on her panties before it occurred to him she was getting dressed.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going back to the dorm."
Jason grabbed his glasses and rammed them on his face. He turned on the light.

"It's the middle of the night, Pipes. Stay. I'll go sleep on the couch if you're mad at me."

Piper sighed and pulled on her t-shirt. She sat at the foot of the bed and wriggled into her jeans.

"I'm not mad at you. I'm disappointed. You're one of the most compassionate people I know. You sought help from a therapist when you needed it, and you were so supportive of my dad when he had that addiction scare a couple years ago and again when he relapsed this fall. I've never heard you be cruel to the mentally ill. Then it's your lover who needs help and it's like all the kindness inside you just dried up. I don't know you when you're like this. You're not even someone I'd want to know."

"He's not my lover. I told you. I don't love him anymore."

Piper pursed her lips and went to the bedroom door. "Yes, you've told everyone who'll listen, Jason. 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks.' And that's not the point of what I'm saying. You should see your therapist because maybe she can help you figure out why, when Nico needed you most, you decided he wasn't worth the effort. I'll talk to you later."

A moment later, Jason heard the sound of his front door opening and closing. He laid back on the bed and stared at the ceiling for a few minutes before he stood, stretched, and made his way to his dresser. He opened his underwear drawer, moved aside his first-tier sexy underwear, and pulled out a worn stack of postcards and two notebooks.

He settled back on his bed and began to read.

***

Reyna met Jason at the door of her office before he could knock.

"Walk with me."

She didn't wait for him to answer. She strode past him, and Jason was left running to catch up.

"Where are we going? I was scheduled to meet with you at five to—"

"I know when and for what purpose we were scheduled to meet," Reyna said. "I am tired of seeing your face. If we walk and talk then I have an excuse to look elsewhere."

No subtlety there. Jason was neither surprised nor offended. They walked briskly through the streets of Camp Jupiter. Jason was surprised when they didn't stop and walked straight out of camp. Reyna had become more willing to leave camp since the Nico disaster, but Jason had thought leaving wasn't something she'd undertake lightly.

"Hazel spoke with Nico earlier. He remains physically fit and seems to be eating regularly and getting enough sleep. His classes are going well. She counted four smiles, of which one seemed genuine. The boyfriend didn't make an appearance, as usual. Nico spoke from his farmhouse. That is a change. It may mean he is able to shadow travel longer distances, indicating improved health, or it may mean he has gotten brave enough to drive his car farther. Either way, we are pleased."
"And the—"

"His hair was brushed. His eyes were clear, if empty. He showed Hazel the dated, notarized document from the therapist saying he'd been to every appointment within the previous month. He told Hazel that Percy and Annabeth are planning a rendezvous with him when they visit New York to work on their wedding plans during spring break. He seemed happy about it."

"What about—"

"It has not changed since yesterday. Do not ask me again. I will tell you if something does change."

"Thank you."

Reyna sighed heavily and swung her braid to the other shoulder. "I suppose I will see you again tomorrow?"

"Yes."

They walked on through the streets in silence. Reyna was heading toward the UC Berkeley campus. The rumor was that she was going to enroll in the fall. The bigger, juicier rumor was that she was going to retire as Praetor. Hazel wouldn't start college next school year; she would become the senior Praetor. Jason wondered if the rumors were true.

He decided to start small. "Where are we going?"

"Out."

Walking with Reyna was like jogging. Jason was glad he was tall and had long legs.

"Out where?" He tilted his head and tried to catch Reyna's eye. She kept her eyes fixed straight ahead.

"I want to survey the area around campus."

"This girl in one of my classes said you're retiring this fall and going to enroll there."

Jason had expected Reyna to be rude and dismissive. She twirled the ring on her finger.

"I cannot remain the Praetor forever." She sounded softer, more human, than he'd heard her in a long time. "I'd rather find what I want from my adult life now than wait five years for someone else to decide it for me."

Jason nodded, mostly to himself because Reyna wouldn’t make eye contact.

"What would you study?"

"Law. I want to help migrants."

"You'll be a judge within five years of passing the bar." Jason smiled. Reyna would be an amazing lawyer. So would Nico.

"Piper says you and she are considering returning to New York in the fall?"

Now it was Jason's turn to fidget with his hands. He wished Piper hadn't told anyone about it. He hadn't even agreed yet.
"She's been getting a lot of modeling offers. LA is nice, but New York is more her style, at least for the 'modeling scene.'"

Reyna smirked. "What does that mean? 'Modeling scene'?

"I have no earthly idea." Jason shrugged. "I'd finish up my degree at City College or Columbia."

This time it was Jason who cut Reyna off. "They're both on the opposite end of Manhattan. I'm not going to bother Nico."

"You always bother him."

Jason swerved around a lovely and amorous couple and came back to Reyna. Her shoulder brushed his arm, and that was the first time he'd touched her in years. The contact felt foreign. No one touched Reyna. Nico had, but he was special.

"I'm not going near him. I mean it. I hope he gets well, but like I said, I'm not—"

"In love with him anymore. You've mentioned. Do you think you'll make it a month in New York before you go to him? I've bet Annabeth fifty dollars that you can't even make it through her wedding and reception without speaking to or touching him. Annabeth says you won't last the wedding."

"You guys are all bitches and bastards," Jason snapped. "Why don't you listen to me? I don't love him."

"Because you're lying. Or you're delusional, which would be ironic considering how vile you're being about understanding his health issues."

"Nico doesn't have health issues. He has unstable, crazy-town mental issues." Jason slapped the side of his head. "I hate how you all want to make little cute euphemisms and baby his obnoxious ass. You sugarcoat everything. And I'm not lying."

"Right. That's why you check on him every day."

Jason didn't have an answer. It defied logic, the way he obsessively checked on Nico. He'd told Percy that Nico didn't exist to him, and he'd meant it. He'd seen Nico that day in Manhattan and treated him like a diseased dog. In the months since, he'd called Nico names and fumed and repeated the line about not being in love to everyone every time Nico's name came up. So why did he check? He didn't casually check in, either. He scheduled a daily appointment with Reyna so she couldn't blow him off.

They were getting into the area around campus now, and the sidewalks were filled with college kids. Jason felt like he stood out. Not in a good way.

"I can't explain why I check on him, but I can promise you my feelings are gone. You talk about how empty Nico's eyes look. Have you noticed mine? He took away all the love I had for him, all the good feelings, and now there's just a pit, hollow and dry, where my heart used to be."

Reyna stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and stared. She brushed a stray hair up into the tight lines of Jason's haircut.

"When I look in your eyes, I see a boy — not a man — a boy who saw a very real possibility that his true love would be lost to him forever, and he got scared. That's what I see in your eyes, Jason. Fear. You were so scared that Nico was going to die that your brain shut down everything emotional.
You're being mean to him now because you can't cope with the idea that he might not always be there for you. You can't handle the hard parts." Reyna's accusation hit Jason like a slap. "Oh, they're fine when you're the problem, because gods know, you've been the problem one hell of a lot in your relationship. He's the problem this time, and you freak out. He's your love and your safety net and your security blanket. No part of your life works without him, and coming so close to losing him made you snap. You thought it would be better to rip him out of your heart before he could hurt you, and you didn't even realize he's so stuck in there, wound so tight into who you are, that ripping him away would cause you catastrophic damage. I know you didn't just wreck Nico this time. You wrecked yourself, too."

"He wrecked me. I didn't wreck either of us."

"Bullshit. He scared you, and you ran for the hills, shooting lightning at him in your wake."

Jason leaned against a shop wall. He needed to catch his breath, and he hadn't even been the one talking. Was Reyna right? Was he scared? He'd been working on the puzzle of himself for months now, and he hadn't been able to put it together. Now, the pieces were lining up, falling into place, and he saw himself with horrifying clarity. He dropped down to the ground among pigeon poop and discarded chewing gum. Nico would throw a hissy fit if he saw him so close to germs like that. Reyna sat next to him. He felt the urge to pull out his lighter, but he knew she wouldn't approve.

"I was so scared, that day in Hades's office, when I finally found out what had happened. Hera would have killed him, and it was all so pointless and real. The day I got summoned to Manhattan, I saw him right after he'd shadow traveled home, and he was sitting on the floor because he was too weak to stand. He looked like he'd been in a concentration camp, Reyna. I was terrified. I have nightmares about it."

"That day in my office, I heard you tell Annabeth that you were tired of him being your problem."

Jason covered his forehead and eyes with his hand. The truth bubbled out of his mouth. "It was a horrible thing to say. I didn't mean it. I've been his problem way more than he's been mine, that's for sure. He's always loved me, defended me, taken me back. I'm so embarrassed that I didn't do that for him. He's not crazy or any of the other awful stuff I've said. I want to have forever with him, and the older we get the more I know it's not going to happen. He's all I want, and the guilt that I let him think he's not is killing me."

Jason removed his hand and found Reyna's warm brown eyes watching him. She nodded at him to continue.

"He doesn't have to take me back. Gods, I even hope he doesn't, but I need him to know I love him so much I can't stand how it hurts. But I can't tell him. No one can. He's getting better, and maybe he'll move on and find someone who will be the kind of lover he deserves, the kind I never was."

"Well, look at that," Reyna said softly. "Jason Grace came back and sat next to me in front of a tattoo parlor in Berkeley. I hope you stay. We've all missed you."

"We're in front of a tattoo parlor?" Jason cocked his head to the side to see.

"Jason, you're right, you know? You can't be near him now. He needs the mental space from you. There's also the matter of his boyfriend of questionable status and your relationship with Piper."

"His boyfriend is a much better man than I gave him credit for."

Reyna raised her eyebrows and shot him a silent demand for more information.
"He knows about me. I know about him. We've had a sort of uneasy understanding for a while. He hates me now, rightly, but he does love Nico."

"How very modern of you."

"It's awful, right? And then there's Percy, and—"

"What do you mean about Percy?"

Shit. No one else but Annabeth knew that Percy and Nico had been together beyond the banishment. Jason dropped his shoulders and let his head fall back. That was a mistake. Brick walls were unforgiving.

"In confidence?"

"Of course."

"They kept seeing each other, after the whole banishment thing, for another year or so." He could see the question in Reyna's eyes. "They were resourceful and didn't need physical contact to keep their affair going. It's disgustingly sweet, in a way. Annabeth found out and made Nico leave Percy. It's what started this whole heartbroken stalking of Hera thing. That has to be it. I'd bet my left arm that the first time Nico tracked Hera was the day after he dumped Percy." Jason grimaced. "At least this time Nico's foray into reckless behavior and stupid mistakes wasn't completely my fault. It's on Annabeth and Percy, too."

"It's on Nico. No one made him carry on with someone else's boyfriend or do the dumb things he does. His mistakes are his responsibility. The boyfriend knows about Percy, too?"

"He knows it all. I knew about Percy. Percy knew about me and the other guy, once the other guy became more than a roommate. Nico hasn't lied to any of us since Hera came to the senate. We all knew what we were getting into. It's me and Percy who lie, like always. Even when Annabeth confronted Nico the first time, he didn't lie. Percy says it was the same the second time, too."

"This is why you and Percy became such good friends again?"

"Yeah. I mean, we both missed Nico and no one understood except the two of us. Percy hates me again now, though. I always blame Nico for coming between me and Percy, but he never tried to pit us against each other. He begged us both to put our differences aside and be friends. It's so confusing."

"Indeed. There are things about my brother that I do not want to know. This whole...this," Reyna swirled her hand around in front of her, "is one of them. What will you do about Piper, now that you're admitting the truth to yourself?"

"I don't know. I know you'll say I should tell her and break things off, but I'm not sure. If I stay with her then maybe it'll help me stay away from Nico."

Reyna regarded Jason with disdain. He could feel her disgust. "That is an incredibly selfish thing to do to someone. It's despicable, Jason. Piper does not deserve to be used."

"It's not as easy as you make it out to be, Reyna." Jason stood. He was ready to move.

"Do you think that I have never been asked out? Never been tempted to not be so achingly alone? Has it occurred to you that I may not have liked spending all the years since you left with no one for company? It would be so easy to find a lover of convenience. I'd probably even like him. I want
better for myself and for the man with whom I eventually fall in love."

Jason gawked at her. No. None of that had occurred to him. He rarely gave Reyna a thought in the sort of way that makes a person seem human. Because Reyna wasn't human. She was like a supernatural, cold queen who needed no one. Why would she be lonely or want companionship?

Except she must. He studied her now, in a t-shirt and jeans, no armor, no cape, no regal air, simply a tired young woman. Jason remembered the way Nico had held her at the bowling alley that night, the way she'd practically purred when he dipped her and how she'd buried herself in his arms. Not even Reyna wanted to be alone.

"I'm sorry," Jason mumbled. "You're a much better person than me."

"That has been long established," Reyna said, but she smiled. "Let's go back to camp."

"Wait. I want to go in."

Jason jerked his head toward the tattoo shop.

"You cannot be serious."

"I'm totally serious."

"Straight-laced Jason Grace does not get tattoos."

Jason held up his arm, covered in his Legion tattoo. "I do. And I've never been straight-laced. Come on."

***

Nico stood in his father's study and tried not to think about the last time he was here. The desk had been repaired. There were no pomegranate stains on the walls. The rattan furniture had probably been repurposed out in Persephone's garden.

The door opened behind him, and the temperature dropped. He didn't turn around. He'd expected his father to sit at his desk, brisk and businesslike as always, but Hades stayed behind him. Nico closed his eyes.

"Hi, Dad."

"Son."

And then nothing. Had he been called down here after four months of silence to say "Hi?" It didn't matter. He knew what he'd come to say.

"I'm sorry, Dad, for the things I did. I was everything you've warned me not to be. You're so wise, and I'm kind of humbled you're my dad." Nico chuckled. "When I was young, I hated it. How embarrassing, having the black sheep of the family for your father. But now, I think about all that you do and accomplish and how you're fair and loving, even when I don't deserve it, and I realize how lucky I am. It's not easy being either of us, I guess, and you've given me an amazing example of how to live your life despite the unfair judgment of others."
"I hit you rather hard with those pomegranates, I'm afraid," Hades said. "Apollo assures me I did not damage your brain. I think what has happened is that you have grown up, which is an odd thing for a father to witness in his son, despite my longstanding and fervent desire to see it occur."

Nico felt a soft rustling of his hair. He thought maybe his dad had kissed him.

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you, too, my son."

Hades's hand fell heavy on Nico's shoulder, and without questioning it, Nico spun and buried his head in his father's chest. Hades returned the embrace and ran his fingers through Nico's curls. The horrible cloak of tormented souls felt powerless and benign. His dad was safe and comforting. Nico sniffled and tried not to get snot on his dad's clothes.

"I need you in my life. I can't believe I ever thought I didn't. If you could find it in your heart to forgive me——"

Hades pulled Nico away from him. "There is nothing to forgive, son. Everyone makes mistakes. Perhaps you made some rather grand ones, but you're making amends now. You've come through your trials stronger than ever, and you were immensely strong before. I see the progress you've made. I am proud of you."

Nico was so shocked that his dad had forgiven him so easily that he stared and remained quiet. Hades smiled and patted his cheek.

"You have fully recovered from the physical effects of your depression. You must continue to take care of yourself mentally and emotionally. You're on the right path. All of the restrictions I placed on your powers have been removed. You are free to travel where you wish and use your other powers as you see fit."

"Thank you." Nico knew there would be rules, conditions, associated with this return to full strength – most notably, things like, "Don't stalk people," and "Stay away from Jason Grace." He wouldn't have a problem following either condition. He drew his sword. Massive power surged through him. His father was right; he was stronger than ever.

"I do hope you will come down to visit more frequently, but I won't keep you from your studies any longer. Persephone and Demeter send their regards."

Nico twisted his lips and scanned the room. Where was the catch? He was free to go?

His father sighed. "I am done telling you how to live your life. You don't listen, and it has done more harm than good. I would be flattered if you would continue to seek my guidance when you feel it could be of benefit." His severe expression softened. "I have listened to your prayers, Nico. You are ready to make your own choices without my interference."

Nico gave a strangled laugh and hugged his father again. Hades patted his back and pushed him away.

"I do not know where this disturbing trend toward hugging has come from, though. Really, Nico, enough with the touching."

Nico backed up, waved, and exploded into the shadows.
Trivia:
Piper's quoting *Hamlet*.

Five points to Gryffindor (or whatever house you want) if you deduced that the trip Jason took with Piper last fall (the one that freaked Nico out enough to make him try to attack Hera) was to support her as she dealt with her father's illness. He hadn't necessarily been cheating on Piper when he was with Nico that summer, either.

Jason's Legion tattoo has eighteen bars by this time - one for the Giant War and five for years of service as the Pontifex.

I can't remember what the make/model of Nico's car is. I did use a real Italian sports car, but I lost the notes on it during a transition from one novel-organizing software to another.
"Is he serious about this? Ow, shoot that guy!" Percy clutched his game controller to his chest as though he'd actually been wounded.

Jason shot the guy. "He's always serious. It won't be that bad."

Percy climbed onto the back of the couch and kicked his leg out at the same time his onscreen character did. "How do you figure it won't be that bad? Sounds lame."

"It is lame. Totally lame." Jason veered into a convoy of military vehicles and opened fire. "But the gods'll like it. And he said we can be naked."

"I don't wanna be naked."

"He'll be naked, too."

Percy paused, but then kept on fighting. "Tempting, but we see him naked all the time."

"True, but this time we'll see him naked in the sunshine."

Percy paused the game and turned to Jason. "Really?"

Jason wiggled his eyebrows.

"Well, we shouldn't disappoint the gods," Percy said.

Jason nodded. They went back to shooting things for five seconds until Nico arrived and turned off the TV.

"Hey! We were playing that," Jason said.

"Now you're not." Nico crossed his arms, daring Jason to argue. "Come outside. It's ready."

"You said he was gonna be naked," Percy whispered, but he got up and followed Nico and Jason outside.

Nico had set up various events around their prison. He wasn't terribly interested in competition, but he did like planning.

"This is how it'll work. We have five events. First is the idiotic three point shooting competition."

Nico pointed to the basketball court, where twelve basketballs were set out on a rolling cart. "Then we'll have a three-hole miniature golf tournament. After that, it's passing accuracy."

Nico showed Jason and Percy where he'd set out a target with a Greek flag and a hole carved into the wood underneath it. Footballs were lined up on a cart similar to the one containing the basketballs. He led them toward the beach where another set of events was laid out.

"After that, we'll do the pentathlon, which consists of a javelin toss, a race along the beach, the long jump, also on the beach, wrestling, and discus. The final event's a another race."

"Wait, do you know how to do discus?" Jason asked.

"No," Nico said. "I figure we'll wing it. I got a discus, but I also got baseballs, just in case."
"That won't work, Nico." Percy felt a little silly to be the one pointing out the obvious. "We can all throw beyond the borders."

"It'll work. The gods are feeling generous today. Watch."

Nico jogged over to the waiting mound of baseballs, picked one up, and hurled it out beyond the dunes. The ball passed cleanly through the barrier and sailed out of sight.

"Okay, interesting. But we can't see where the ball landed."

Nico's brow furrowed. He scanned the horizon but saw nothing that resembled a baseball. "Oh."

"We'll figure out the discus," Jason said. "It'll be fine."

Nico was distracted by his lost baseball. It took him a moment to re-focus. "Alright, so, the winner of each event gets three points, the person in second gets two, and the last place contestant gets one point. At the end of the games, the one with the most points wins. Oh, be fair and don't cheat. This is supposed to be an honorable thing."

Percy nudged Jason.

"What are we wearing when we compete?" Jason asked.

Nico rolled his eyes. "You two are annoying. Yes, naked. And…" Nico waved his hand and a vat of olive oil appeared. "This stuff. Olive oil to rub down with, olive wreaths for the winner of each event."

Another wave of the hand and a small stack of foliage crowns appeared.

"Any questions?" Nico asked.

Jason and Percy had none. Despite their earlier complaints, they were excited for the competition.

"Okay then, strip down."

All three gods vanished their clothes, though Percy had to be reminded to get rid of his shoes, too. Nico helped Percy and Jason rub olive oil on their backs, and then Percy and Jason fought over who got to rub olive oil on Nico. They compromised and had Jason rub Nico's back while Percy rubbed his chest. The second a hand slipped below Nico's hips he slapped them both away.

"Touch me below the waist while we're out here competing for the gods and I will maim you," Nico said. Jason and Percy nodded and took him seriously.

Nico conjured a whistle and was about to blow it to signal Jason should start shooting in the three point contest when he dropped the whistle and the clipboard he was holding.

"I almost forgot." He waved his hand over his chest and the word "Athens" appeared in gray ink. He turned around to show Percy and Jason his back, which said "di Angelo."

"Here, Percy." Nico rubbed his hand across Percy's chest, and Percy became marked "Sparta" on the front and "Jackson" on the back. Jason got "Corinth" and "Grace."

"Why do you get to be Athens?" Percy asked.

Nico shrugged. "I'm smart. Plus, do you really want to be saddled with having to represent your mother-in-law? Besides, Sparta's good. Warriors and stuff. That's you."
"True that," Percy said. "Carry on."

Jason didn't care what was on his back or front. He liked the way the words shone on Nico's oiled up skin, though. He was so busy admiring the way "Athens" stood out on Nico's chest that he didn't register the whistle telling him to go. Nico had to blow the whistle three times and shout, "Start shooting, dumbass," before Jason took a shot.

Jason made seven shots, which he figured wasn't bad. Nico went next and managed to sink four baskets. He'd known he'd lose this event, and took his last four shots backwards. Jason and Percy chewed him out for being a poor sport, so Nico promised to try from then on. Percy won easily. He hit ten shots and sank one from half-court for good measure.

"Show-off," Jason said when the half-court shot hit nothing but net.

"I'm good. I can't help it, Mr. Second-best." Percy swiveled his head at Jason and stuck out his tongue.

"We'll see how good you are in a minute," Jason said. "You suck at mini golf."

"Enough. Here, Percy." Nico laid an olive wreath on Percy's head and gave him a kiss.

Jason grumbled, and Percy looked more smug than ever.

Percy stopped being smug at the next event. He did indeed suck at mini golf. Nico won all three holes, including a hole in one on the repaired eighth hole windmill, and Jason came in second. Percy complained until he got to give Nico his olive wreath and accompanying kiss.

"Now the football event," Nico said. "Then we'll take a break for lunch."

"Do you think we'll have a visiting god today?" Percy asked. Their visitors normally showed up just after noon.

"Gods, I hope not," Jason said. "Let this little exhibition be enough."

Nico, as the winner of the previous round, got to go first. He hit the target all twelve times.

"You're a cheater," Jason said after Nico sent the last ball spiraling through the hole. "You chose a sport you played."

"I couldn't think of any other things to do. Besides, if you'd ever played a sport, I would have included it. You'll probably win anyway, with your god-body." Nico pointedly eyed Jason's frame.

Percy found himself following the line of Nico's vision and averted his eyes. Noticing the size of Jason's testicles and the shape of his butt had been embarrassing enough for one godhood, he figured. "Just take your turn, Jason."

Jason tried. He gave his best effort, but only managed to get four balls through the hole. Nico thoroughly enjoyed watching Jason try. Jason's muscles were stunning, and Nico found himself moving from one side of Jason to the other in order to watch both sides of his body as he threw. When Jason finished and shrugged his shoulders with a smile that said, "Oh, well," Nico hugged him and kissed his cheeks.

"What was that for?" Jason asked.

"Sportsmanship."
"Hey, I'm a good sport, too," Percy said. He was still dealing with a bit of residual Jason-envy.

Nico grinned and kissed Percy's cheek while Jason retrieved the footballs. "You are. You haven't shown it yet. That kiss was for luck."

Percy's cheeks colored with pleasure, and he sent the first six passes through the target before missing.

"I'll be done now," Percy said. "I beat Jason, and I can't beat Nico."

Jason knew Percy was saying that for his benefit, so he wouldn't be completely embarrassed by his poor performance. He lightly punched Percy's shoulder. "Go ahead. See how close you can come to catching Nico."

Percy ended up getting the ball through the target eight times. He and Jason were both pleased by that number. Jason got to present Nico with the olive wreath, and he took great care to nestle it just right in Nico's curls. The kiss was shorter than Jason would have liked, but he knew Nico was uncomfortable putting on that sort of display in front of the gods, at least while he lacked clothing.

The gods went down to the beach where they'd finish their competition, and someone conjured a soft green picnic blanket for them to sit on. While Nico was tallying points, an elaborate spread of food and wine appeared. A note was nestled in a plate of cheese and apple slices. Jason picked it out and read.

"Dear inmates,

"We wish to extend to you a gift to express our pleasure with the way you have conducted yourselves during your incarceration. You have been model prisoners, and we are pleased that you have not fought too much or dishonored the gods. Today, we are especially pleased to see you honoring the old traditions by holding this small Olympic reenactment, though the goddess Nike informs us that your miniature golf is almost certainly not currently an Olympic sport. We will forgive such minor transgressions as, on the whole, we are greatly enjoying your display.

"Your willingness to honor the Olympians today will be considered when we discuss your future during the summer solstice.

"Best Wishes on your next hundred days,

"The Olympian gods (most of us)

"PS - More sex, please."

"Wow. That's great," Percy said. "This was a good idea, guys. Thanks, Olympians."

No matter what they may say privately, the young gods were all smart enough to keep their true thoughts about the Olympians deeply buried when they were so obviously being watched. Nico smiled and made a big show of pouring everyone a glass of wine and breaking off bread for each of his companions and himself.

"Does that mean we've been here a hundred days?" Jason asked.

Nico nodded. "I wasn't going to say anything, but yes. We probably have about another hundred to go, so we're halfway through this first part, at least."

"That's okay," Percy said. He brushed his hand along Nico's sandy feet. What he wanted to say, that
he loved being with Nico like this even if it killed him to be away from Annabeth and Maybelle, would have to wait until later. He didn't want to risk the gods deciding they weren't being punished enough.

"How're we doing through the first three events, Nico?" Jason didn't care that much, but he didn't want to risk Percy saying something that may anger the gods.

Nico jumped from where he was watching Percy's hand and picked up his clipboard. "Let's see. I'm winning, so far, with seven points, but we're all bunched right together. Percy's next with six, and you have five. One of you two will win the pentathlon, and Jason's probably a shoo-in for the footrace, so I'll enjoy my time as the early leader."

"Those garlands suit you." Jason trailed his fingers through Nico's hair and over his cheekbone. "You look like you should be immortalized as some great hero's lover."

"My lover," Percy said. Jason choked on his bread from laughing, and Nico blushed furiously. Percy put down his bread and glared good-naturedly at Jason. "Well, he is, for starters, and I was the greatest Greek hero of the age."

"He's my lover, too, and I was the greatest Roman hero of the age."

"That doesn't carry quite the same cachet, Jace, being the lover of the Roman hero. Percy wins. Though, to be honest, I'd kind of prefer to be the actual hero instead of the hero's lover." Nico smiled, but he had trouble meeting the eyes of his lovers. He'd contributed to Percy's success so often and he'd done his own heroic deeds, but Nico knew he'd never be remembered as the hero. Sons of Hades were not heroes.

"You're our hero, Nico." Jason moved closer and kissed Nico's cheek. Percy did the same on the other side, though he also fingered the writing on Nico's chest.

Nico watched Percy's hand move across his skin and knew what Percy was going to say.

"We should have told him." Percy removed his hand from Nico's chest and held it out to Jason, who took it in confusion. "I'm sorry, Jason."

"I thought we weren't apologizing, and what the hell are you talking about?"

"There was a prophecy. It wasn't a big deal, and it's over and done with, and none of it would have changed what we did." Nico met Jason's eyes and tried to convey his own apology. "It involved the three of us, and at the time..."

Jason nodded slowly and looked up at the sky. "You didn't trust me. I get it."

"We were wrong, Jason. I was wrong." Percy kissed Jason's hand, and Jason's eyes riveted to the spot. "Nico wanted to tell you, and he didn't because of me. We should have told you before, but once we got stuck here, it was pretty clear the prophecy was finished. After that, I didn't trust you for a while, and it didn't make a difference anyway. I shouldn't have said anything now. It's been on my mind, though, and I guess I wanted to lighten my burden."

"It's fine, Percy." Jason gave Percy the smile that melted Nico's bones. "I wouldn't have trusted me, either, if I was you, especially if it was something that could affect Nico. Honestly, I appreciate the way you guarded him from me. It was what I deserved."

"I'm not a fucking maiden in a tower, you douchebags," Nico snapped. "Quit being asshats. Percy was my friend, and we took care of each other. Don't treat me like I'm something delicate."
"We're not," Percy said. Nico had risen, so Percy and Jason stood, too. "You went through a lot, because of Jason, mostly, and—"

"Shove it." Nico turned around to walk to the javelin throw. "You weren't my babysitter."

Percy grabbed Nico's arm and yanked him back. Their faces were close and angry. "You. Needed. Me. It was my fucking privilege to be there for you, and it's one of the things I'm most proud of myself for. You were never weak or in need of protection, dipshit, but you were in need. You want to act like this big, tough, hard guy all the time. Fine. You are tough. You can kick my ass or Jason's any day of the week when it comes to any kind of toughness. But you're human, and when you needed someone, I was there. Don't act like it didn't matter."

Nico hung his head and didn’t try to escape Percy’s grip. "You're right. It did matter." He angled his face so he was talking right on top of Percy's lips. His voice was so quiet that Jason wouldn't have been able to hear him if he hadn't been a god. "I needed you like I have never needed anyone except for Bianca after she died. It's hard for me to think about how bad off I was, Percy, how close to giving up. Without you..." Nico's voice broke, and Percy curled the younger god into his arms.

"I know. It's okay, baby. It's okay." Percy whispered the words over and over.

Jason watched and felt helpless. This was the thing between Percy and Nico that would forever set Jason apart. When Nico had needed someone, Jason had run and Percy had stayed. Jason crouched on the picnic blanket and busied himself picking up the remnants of the Olympians' offering while Percy and Nico held each other.

"Jason?" Nico's voice was tentative and soft. "Come stand with us."

Jason's steps were slow. He knew he didn't deserve what Nico was about to give him. "I don't deserve—"

"Shut up. I'm giving it to you anyway." Nico held out his hand, and Jason took it. "We're finishing this Olympics and having a fun day. No more sad faces. That stuff that happened before is important to learn from, but it won't define our lives, except for maybe Percy, who proved he's as noble as it is possible to be. Can we please put it away now?"

Percy and Jason crowded around Nico and didn't answer. Nico rubbed their lower backs until he got too antsy. He pushed them away and picked up his clipboard.

"First part of the pentathlon is the javelin. Who's up for fondling a big stick?"

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Percy won the javelin toss. Nico won the discus, which had a science component that stumped Jason and Percy. He also won the long jump. His long legs and light frame carried him much farther through the air than Jason or Percy could manage. Jason won the race, handily beating Nico. The gods accepted all of those results. The point of contention was wrestling.

"Come on, Nico, you're the one who made this shit up," Percy said. He'd laid on their picnic blanket and sprawled his hands and feet as far apart as he could get them. Jason stayed perched as far away from Percy's foot-side as he could get and still be part of the group. Nico, on the other hand, was doing one of his scientific explorations.
Crouched between Percy's feet, he tilted his head and twisted his lips. "It is so interesting, the human body. The way the cleft of the ass divides the cheeks and lines up perfectly with the centerline of the scrotum and the penis — we are so symmetrical."

Percy sat up and put his legs together. "Quit being weird."

"Just an observation."

"A weird observation," Jason said. "Can we talk about the wrestling, because I was kind of excited for that event."

"I'm not wrestling you." Nico snapped his fingers at Percy to get up. "Percy can wrestle you. You outweigh me by at least forty pounds, Jason. I don't stand a chance. I'll take my one point and move on."

"But you're not gonna wrestle me, either, and I don't weigh that much more than you," Percy complained. "Plus, you expect me to wrestle Jason, who has to outweigh me by as much as I outweigh you and is freakishly fast and strong."

Nico shrugged. "I don't want to wrestle. You two should have paid more attention when I was talking to you about how to set up the events."

"You talked to us about how to set up the events?" Jason did not remember a conversation like that ever happening.

"Yes. I came in the man cave three days ago and said, 'Guys, I want to talk to you about the Olympics,' and you said, 'Hush, Nico, I'm trying to kill this guy,' and I said, 'But, Jason, it's important,' and Percy said, 'Shut the fuck up, Nico, we don't need to hear any of your weird-ass trivia right now,' and I said, 'Are you sure?' and Jason, you said, 'Zip it,' and I said—"

"Okay, okay, gods, we get it. You're punishing us now because we pissed you off three days ago?" Jason asked.

"Pretty much. Have fun duking it out for the gods, nudie-boys." Nico cocked a brow and smirked before leading the other two to the wrestling mat. "I know nothing about wrestling, nor do I care. You two go at it for a while. I'll watch, and when I get bored I'll say one of you is the winner. Oh, and stay in the circle, probably."

Nico conjured himself a black camp chair and sat a foot or two outside the mat. Once Jason and Percy swore heatedly and stood on the mat, Nico pulled a bell out of the chair's cup holder and rang it.

"He's getting off on having fun at our expense," Jason said. He crouched low and circled the mat with Percy.

"Prickly little bastard," Percy said. He put his hands out in front of him because it seemed to him like the thing to do. "Just don't, like, snap my bones or anything, okay, Jace?"

"Are you that brittle?"

"You're that enormous."

"Don't touch me with your armpits and keep your hands off my balls and dick. Do that, and I will try really hard not to break your body parts."
"Likewise, asshole." Percy paused. "Stay out of there, too." He stepped forward but shuffled away when Jason did the same. He was hopelessly outmatched, and they all knew it.

"You might like it up the asshole, Perce." Jason licked his lips and winked. Percy stood up in shock, and Jason pounced. He plowed into Percy's rib cage with his shoulder and tackled him onto the ground. None of Percy's bones broke, but he felt like they did. In retaliation, he shoved his armpit in Jason's face. Jason let out a muffled gagging noise and let go.

Percy scrambled out from under Jason and registered Nico's laughter before he jumped on Jason's broad back and tried in vain to flip him over. Jason rested on his head and his knees and swiped at Percy's legs. Percy kept his legs straight and off the ground, like he was doing a push-up. Jason scratched Percy's knees with his fingernails, but that was all the damage he could do. Percy's face was turning red with the effort he was exerting to move Jason.

For a moment, Percy thought he was succeeding. Jason's hugely muscled arm reached back, and his torso twisted toward the sky. But then Jason grabbed Percy's upper thigh and flipped him over the top of his body. Percy landed on the mat with a painful thud. Jason pinned him, being careful this time to keep his face well out of the armpit zone.

Nico got out of his camp chair and walked onto the mat. He pretended to check Percy's shoulders and Jason's posture. Really, he was enjoying listening to their labored breathing and seeing how Jason's sweaty hair stuck to Percy's chest and how Jason's hands held Percy down. He needed to declare a winner before he was too aroused to compete in the last event.

The bell rang from its spot in the cup holder, and Nico said, "Match is over. Jason wins."

Jason peeled himself off Percy and offered a hand up. Percy accepted, and they bumped chests.

"Good match or whatever, bro," Percy said.

"Same."

"Jason won the pentathlon. I finished second, despite skipping wrestling. I'm in first place overall, but Jason's only a point behind me, and you're only a point behind him, Percy, so it's anyone's game," Nico explained as he led the other gods to the final event.

"You cannot seriously expect us to race after we wrestled while you sat on your ass?" Percy asked. His breathing had returned to normal, but he didn't think Nico was being fair.

"Yeah, he's right," Jason said. "You should have wrestled. Now you have an advantage."

Nico raised one eyebrow and gently grabbed Percy and Jason by their penises. His voice was husky, and his eyes were dark. "Do you want to complain, or do you want to finish up this little show and let me put on a show of my own in the bedroom? I promise you'll be happy I didn't wear myself out."

"Where's the starting line?" Jason asked.

Nico smiled and let them go. "Better. Right this way."
Nico was so jittery he couldn't stop his foot from tapping like mad on the floor under the table.

"Are you always this jumpy, Nico?"

"Only when I'm meeting a former lover and I'm stuck with a drunk girl hanging on me."

"Oh, pish," Rachel said. She slapped sloppily at Nico's face and pushed his head to the side. "You're always this jumpy."

Percy and Annabeth were an hour late to dinner, and Rachel was on her third glass of wine. This must be what it was like to be dead and stuck without money to pay Charon to cross the Styx.

"Hey, Rach? Why don't you take a nap? I'll wake you up if they come."

"Can I lay my head in your lap?" Rachel eyed him like he might be about to give her the most wonderful present. Her frizzy red hair had started to give her the most wonderful present. Her frizzy red hair had started to give her the most wonderful present. Her frizzy red hair had started to give her the most wonderful present. Her frizzy red hair had started to give her the most wonderful present. Her frizzy red hair had started to give her the most wonderful present. Her frizzy red hair had started to give her the most wonderful present. Her frizzy red hair had started to give her the most wonderful present.

"Yep."

Rachel shrieked and dropped her head on Nico's lap almost before he could scoot farther back in the booth to accommodate her body. He hadn't thought this through. People were going to get the wrong idea about a girl dropping her head under the table and into the lap of her male companion. Oh well. It was better than listening to her.

"Hey, I heard that!" Rachel turned on her back and stared up at Nico from his lap.

"I didn't say anything."

"Your mouth didn't, but your brain did." Rachel made her eyes all wide and spooky. And people thought Nico was creepy. "You said you'd rather have people think I was blowing you down here than have to listen to me talk."

"That is...disturbingly accurate." Nico was slightly impressed. "How'd you figure it out?"

"Your belly told me. It tattles on your brain all the time, Nico. You should watch out for it. Mhm."

"Okay, thanks for the tip. I'll keep an eye on it." Nico reached down and awkwardly patted Rachel's forehead. "Alright now, time for that nap."

Rachel pulled the formal white tablecloth off the table and wrapped it around her like a blanket. Nico was able to snag her wine glass and his water before they ended up in his lap, too. She was snoring softly within minutes.

Nico pulled out his phone and checked. No messages. It seemed more likely that Annabeth would
have texted Rachel, but Nico was not going searching in her pockets for her phone. He swallowed down the fear that they'd been in an accident or accosted by monsters. They had probably been held up by boring, run of the mill traffic.

It would be so nice to see Percy, but Nico was dreading this meeting. He wasn't sure how to act around Annabeth. Were they friends? She'd helped Percy in January when he'd dropped everything to take care of Nico, but how would those good feelings translate now that Nico was well? As well as possible, at least. He knew a lot more about himself now, so he knew that he'd always be at risk for a relapse of the depression and he'd always have to pay attention to eating enough. It wasn't that he had an eating disorder, exactly. He was just one of those people who stopped eating when they got too sad.

Otherwise, his life was feeling pretty damned passable. Not great. Not awful. Steady. School was a good thing. His grades were back to the solid A range, and he was ahead again with his reading and homework. He'd met with his academic advisor last week, and she'd signed off on more overload coursework so he could be certain to graduate next spring. He wanted to get started on law school as soon as he could.

Life with Apollo was pleasant. The god had been heroic during Nico's illness. Nico owed him so much. Now that they were back on more even footing, their routine required some adjustments. He needed Apollo to treat him more like a lover and less like his patient. So far, they'd been making progress. Nico was itching to get home to him, in fact. If Percy and Annabeth didn't show up soon, he was going to call a cab for Rachel and leave. Apollo liked to watch basketball, which was totally unexpected, and he liked that Nico knew enough about the game to explain what was going on. It was fun. They'd curl up together on the couch, and Apollo would boo and cheer and throw popcorn at the TV and then turn to Nico with the cutest expression and ask what exactly he was booing or cheering for. Nico was missing their Monday night basketball date for this meeting.

Five minutes later, as Nico was visually boring a hole in the hostess stand, Percy and Annabeth arrived. Percy’s expression was happy and Annabeth’s was nervous. She was wearing a dress and heels, and the outfit made Nico think that she might be trying to intimidate him. Percy flipped his black hair out of his eyes and winked at the hostess. He was such a flirt. Nico smirked and waved to get their attention. Annabeth saw him first, and she waved back, grabbed Percy by the elbow, and made a beeline for the table.

Nico nudged Rachel's shoulder. "Hey Rachel, wake up. They're here."

Rachel turned her face toward his body and mumbled something that may have been "Five more minutes, ma." Nico shook her a bit.

"Nico!"

Nico couldn't help how wide his smile grew. He wanted to hug Percy and hold him close, which was probably off-limits, but he wished he could. He tried to stand, but Rachel grabbed him around the waist and held him still.

"Hey man, where's Rachel?" Percy asked. He was grinning bigger than Nico, all happy and unguarded.

Nico pointed to his lap. Percy peeked over and laughed.

"Well, that is not what I expected to see."

Annabeth spared Nico a brief smile before she leaned into his space and snapped her fingers as close
to Rachel's face as she could get. It was awkward since Rachel had her face buried in Nico's crotch. He didn't need Rachel's face or Annabeth's hands that close to his penis. He'd take Percy's face that close. Oh, not a good start to a very platonic evening. It didn't help that Percy was standing behind Annabeth making suggestive movements with his mouth. Nico averted his eyes to keep from blushing.

"Here, lean forward, Nico, and I'll unhook her arms." Annabeth seemed to have experience dealing with a drunken Rachel. Their time together in high school might have been more exciting than Nico would have imagined.

Nico leaned forward and Annabeth leaned over him and Rachel buried her head even tighter into him, trying to escape Annabeth's clutches. Percy stood back and laughed. "You could help, Seaweed Brain," Annabeth said. It came out as sort of a muffled grunt. Her head was wedged against Nico's back. He could feel her fighting with Rachel's hands back there.

"Nah, watching is way more fun." Percy leered at Nico, who couldn't stop himself from giggling. "Sorry we're late, Neeks. Flat tire."

"Hah!" Annabeth dislodged Rachel from Nico's lap and aggressively spun her around to face the table and righted her all in one move. Nico was grateful.

"Hey, Percy and Annabeth," Rachel said. She stretched and yawned. "Let's eat."

After their salads arrived, Nico decided he would go out to eat with Rachel more often, which was one of the tenets of the group "Look Out for Nico" plan that he'd been resisting. Reyna had typed up the stupid plan and mailed it to him in the mortal mail. It was obnoxious, but he was so happy to have Reyna's attention that he went along with it and even taped the thing up on his fridge.

The first point in Reyna's plan was easy to accept: Daily Iris messages with Reyna, Hazel, or Clarisse. Point two was also fine: Weekly counselor visits. Three was harder: Eat on time, every time, and take meds. Nico wasn't opposed to that, but he'd learned that ADHD and remembering petty things like eating didn't always go hand in hand.

The fourth point was Nico's favorite: Spar with Clarisse at least three times per week. He'd missed both the physical exercise and Clarisse. He'd been so out of shape the first time they'd sparred this spring, and Clarisse hadn't taken it easy on him. She'd disarmed him in thirty seconds, knocked him down, sat on him, and gloated until he'd recovered enough to go again. It had made him feel like she trusted him enough to treat him normally.

The fifth point, eat dinner weekly with Rachel, was the only one he hadn't been sticking to. Rachel lived in Manhattan, too, and seeing her should have been easy, but she drove Nico crazy and made him anxious. She knew about Apollo, for one thing, since he was her patron, and for another, Nico always worried she'd drop some awful prophecy on him.

Today, though, this salad was so good that he was willing to give Rachel more chances. Without the alcohol. Maybe they should do lunch instead of dinner.

"How's the wedding planning coming?" Nico asked. So far, they'd only been making small talk and trying to keep Rachel from laying her head back down.

To his horror, Annabeth pulled an enormous binder from her purse and proceeded to tell him.

Thirty mind-numbing minutes later, Nico was grateful he'd never get married. This was more complex than any battle strategy ever devised. Why couldn't they just show up, say their vows, kiss,
and go on a honeymoon? Who cared what the flower arrangements looked like or whether or not Annabeth's Aunt Gwynn sat next to Paul's brother's fiancee's nephew at the reception? Nico would have excused himself and hid in the bathroom fifteen minutes ago if Percy's foot hadn't found its way between his thighs.

Percy's wiggling toes felt far better than they should, especially since he was only doing it to see how embarrassed he could make Nico, and Annabeth was right there. Nico wanted to punch Percy. And do other stuff with Percy. He needed to get a handle on that. Soon. It would be the height of inappropriate to go to a wedding and spend the entire ceremony mentally undressing the groom.

"So that's really about it," Annabeth was saying. "Oh, and I need to get the security plan from you."

Nico stared stupidly at her. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"Oh, that's, uh, that's on me." Percy pulled his foot away and sat up straight. "I haven't asked him."

"Damn it, Percy, you only have sixteen jobs," Annabeth snapped. "Why couldn't you handle this?"

"I get busy."

"You and Nico talk every damned day. You get so busy you can't slip in one non-sex-related conversation?"

Ouch, now. Nico and Percy did talk about plenty of things besides sex. They usually ended up talking about sex, but they started someplace else. And how did Annabeth know about that, anyway?

"Ooh, so hot," Rachel chimed in. "Nico and Percy's babies are gonna be pretty, huh, Annabeth?"

Percy burst out laughing. Nico was glad someone found this conversation funny.

"Not physically possible, Rachel," Percy said. "We would make some fine-ass kids, though."

Nico glared at him. Gods, Percy was an idiot. Even Nico was aware enough to realize Percy should have said something about how his and Annabeth's babies would be gorgeous. Annabeth was watching him so carefully that he felt like she'd crawled inside his brain and decided to take up residence.

"Nico, I've changed my mind," Annabeth said abruptly. "I'm dumping Percy. Will you marry me instead? We can make lots of fine-ass babies, too, and ours will actually have brains in their heads."

Nico grinned at her while Percy spluttered, and he watched how warm and kind her face looked as it morphed from irritation with Percy to genuine happiness that she'd made Nico smile. He reached across the table and took her hand. "I'd be honored. No binder, though. We're eloping."

Annabeth shrugged. "Suits me. More time for making those fine-ass babies that way."

"I can shadow travel us to Vegas right now," Nico offered. "We can get married by an Elvis impersonator."

"Hey!"

Nico gave his attention to Percy, who was definitely pouting. Nico cocked an eyebrow and tilted his chin. "What's wrong, Percy?"

"I wanna get married by an Elvis impersonator." Percy turned to Annabeth. "Do you think there's
time for us to hire one?"

Annabeth sighed and let go of Nico's hand. "And that, Nico, is why we need the binder. Percy has to
ask you something."

Nico turned to Percy expectantly. Percy had his mouth half open to argue more about the Elvis
impersonator. When Annabeth ignored his pointed stare, he sighed and faced Nico.

"Okay, so you know Grover, Tyson, and the nameless one are my groomsmen?"

"Yes." Percy had explained that Annabeth absolutely refused for Percy's best man to be his former
lover, a policy which Nico found sensible, even if it made him sad not to be there for Percy in that
way on his big day.

"Well, we need security, since there's gonna be so many demigods at the church, it'll be like a neon
sign saying, 'Hey monsters, come eat us!'"

"Yes." Not exactly world-shattering news.

"So, we were wondering if you'd want to be the head of the security detail." Percy’s eyes were
shifty, but he plowed on. His nerves likely had to do with sweet but annoying concern over Nico’s
mental preparedness. "If you don't feel up to it, baby — Neeks — then just say so and we'll have
Frank or Hazel be in charge. It'd be special if it was you, but, like I said, only if—"

"Shut up, Percy. Of course. I'd be happy to."

"Wonderful." Annabeth gave him a warm smile and started to talk to Rachel about bridesmaid
dresses.

Percy rolled his eyes at Nico and made a gagging noise. Nico giggled.

"Hey, Annabeth, while you and Rachel are talking about this, maybe me and Nico can go—"

"No."

Well, that was quick. Percy was crazy to think Annabeth was going to let them be alone together.

"Aw, come on." Percy nudged Annabeth's shoulder and gave her puppy dog eyes. "We'll be at the
bar. You'll be able to see us the whole time."

"Percy, let's stay here." Nico didn't like how this was making him feel. He hadn't been with
Annabeth and Percy at the same time since before he and Percy had started their affair. He'd never
felt as much like the other man as he did now.

"No," Percy said. He was still nudging Annabeth playfully, but Nico could tell that he was upset.
"She can't start out our marriage expecting me to cheat. It's like she's daring me to prove her right."

"Ha." Annabeth looked even more upset than Percy. She pushed his shoulder away. "You mean I
haven't already been proven right by the way you've been fucking him with your eyes all night? You
think I should let you two wander off together so you can fuck him for real?"

Nico gasped, and the others lapsed into stunned silence.

After a few seconds, Rachel giggled into her fist. "Well, this is awkward."

Nico had been swirling his fingers around in the condensation on his water glass, trying to decide
what to do.

"'Him' is going home," he said. He stood shakily, but Percy grabbed his wrist as he tried to walk past.

"Don't go, Nico," Percy said. "She didn't mean to..."

Percy's voice died, and Nico figured it was because Annabeth was right, not necessarily what she'd said, but that he and Percy didn't deserve to be trusted together. There were consequences for the way they'd cheated her.

"It's fine." Nico said. "I have a date with Paul — it's sports night — anyway, so...I'll email you the security plan and...I'm sorry, Annabeth."

Annabeth didn't answer.

"Nico, please?" Percy asked.

"Let him go, Percy," Annabeth said.

Percy squeezed Nico's wrist and let him go.

***

Percy was furious.

As soon as Nico left, he silently went to the bar. The bar was crowded and noisy; it mirrored Percy's brain.

If Annabeth was feeling uneasy about his relationship with Nico, she should have told him privately instead of embarrassing them both in front of Rachel. This wasn't the way to start their marriage, with accusations and anger. He knew the ways he'd screwed up; he didn't need Annabeth to put them on public display.

And Nico, gods. He felt so guilty about what they'd done to Annabeth. Nico had told Percy a little bit about what Hera had done to him the day she caught him stalking her. Annabeth couldn't know how traumatized he'd been or why, but she could show a little compassion to a guy recovering from severe depression. Percy didn't understand how she could be so cold.

"I sent Rachel home in a cab."

Percy glanced at the barstool next to him and found it occupied by Annabeth. He watched the bar TV. "I think she's got a drinking problem. They need to stop making the Oracle be a virgin. It's making her act out, not getting any."

Annabeth snorted. She ordered a drink and drummed her fingers on the bartop. Percy wasn't ready to talk to her.

"I texted Nico and apologized. He says to tell you the Knicks are winning 48-42 at the half."

"They'll find a way to lose."
Annabeth hummed. She smiled slightly at the bartender when he gave her the drink. The guy looked like he wouldn't mind getting to know Annabeth better. Percy felt a little swell of pride, despite his annoyance. If only the guy knew her appearance was the least impressive thing about her.

"You should've told me if you were uncomfortable," Percy said.

"And what would you have done? I know you're going to see Nico. I don't even want to keep you two apart. He needs his friends." Annabeth smiled at Percy and brushed her fingers across his forearm. Her featherlight touch felt so nice. "I wasn't expecting to get so jealous."

"You don't have anything to be jealous about. It's been a year, Annabeth."

Percy took Annabeth's hand and threaded their fingers together.

"I know, but you're so attracted to him, Percy. I know that you can't control that. I've forgiven all the stuff in the past, I swear, but sitting there watching the way you looked at him, as much as I told myself there wasn't anything going on between the two of you, it made me feel foolish and small, like that day on the bridge."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to make you feel bad. I didn't even know I was doing anything."

That wasn't exactly true. He liked to hit on Nico, but the touching and the faces, they weren't serious. He wanted to see Nico smile, maybe make him blush. It didn't go farther than that.

"I think you like pushing his buttons," Annabeth said. "You're kind of obvious, Percy. So I see your attraction to him, and then you're sticking your foot between his thighs, and—"

"You saw that?" Percy was mortified. He hadn't meant to get caught.

Annabeth fixed him with an "Are you really that dumb?" stare. "He choked on his water and turned so red I was worried we'd need to call an ambulance. You're not subtle, and for a guy that's been so sexually active, Nico acts like a fifteen year old virgin."

Percy laughed in spite of his horror. "We should get him to teach Rachel how to be a little more innocent."

"Rachel's a lost cause. Did you see her shoving her face in Nico's crotch, pretending to be asleep?"

"No way. She was faking?"

"Yep. Kind of clever, but also disturbing."

"No shit." Percy finished the last of the beer he'd ordered when he came to the bar. "I'm talking to Chiron about that virgin stuff."

Annabeth laughed and ordered another drink. "You can try, but I think what Rachel's allowed to do is up to Apollo."

Percy started to say he'd talk to Apollo, too, but he caught himself in time. "That's weak, for a guy as horny as Apollo to require his Oracle to stay a maiden."

"No argument from me."

Percy watched the bartender scurry about making drinks. The man, who was wearing a tight Lynyrd Skynyrd t-shirt and had almost as many muscles as Jason, brought Annabeth her drink and waved off her money. Was it weird that Percy wasn't jealous or possessive? Maybe it was because he knew
Annabeth would never cheat. She'd said that thing after he and Nico had broken up, about how after Clarisse's wedding she'd wanted Nico to touch her, but Percy had always figured that was because she was mad and trying to piss him off.

"Can I ask you something?" He turned all the way on his barstool to face her. He wanted to see her eyes.

"I hope you spend the next seventy years or so asking me things."

Gods, he loved her. He leaned forward and kissed her, long and drawn-out enough to elicit whoops from several dudes sitting at the bar. He took his time leaning away after the kiss.

"If you ever cheated on me, what do you think I would do?"

Annabeth raised her head and stared down her nose at him. "You'd never catch me."

"Come on, Annabeth. Play along. What would I do?"

"You're such a baby, Percy. Okay. Well, I think it would depend on the situation. If it was a girl or Nico, you'd ask me to let you watch the next time."

True, probably. Not with Nico, though.

"Not with Nico. He's off-limits."

Annabeth scrunched her brows, perplexed. "Why? I thought that'd be one of your highest fantasies."

"In my fantasies, maybe, but not in real life."

"Because you're possessive of him but not me? Thanks, Percy." Annabeth turned back to the bar.

"I don't think that's it. I don't know. I hated it, him being with Jason, but I'm kind of okay with the roommate thing. I just wouldn't like the two of you together."

"Gods, you're an idiot. You know you're admitting you still have feelings for him?"

"Can we not talk about Nico?" Percy didn't want the conversation to devolve into a fight.

"It's hard to talk about affairs without talking about Nico." She pulled her hand out from Percy's.

"That's mean, Annabeth. He's apologized, and so have I."

"Mean was what you two assholes did to me." Annabeth acted like she wanted to fight, but then she seemed to think better of it. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "It's illustrative here, though. Would you be turned on watching Nico with another guy?"

Percy didn't have to think about it.

"No. Hell no. Revolting. Now if he was with a girl...maybe."

"And with me?"

"I already told you I don't want to see you two together."

"I mean, what about me and another girl?"

"Yes, definitely."
"What about me and another guy?"

Percy started to say no immediately, but he wasn't sure. "Maybe?"

"But not Nico."

"Definitely not. Because he's mine. Oh, gods, he did not hear voices in his head. Time to stamp that shit out.

"What about someone else? Jason?"

"If you want me to commit murder." Percy squeezed his beer bottle and pretended it was Jason's head.

"Bad example. But that's because you're jealous of Jason because of Nico."

"No. I hate Jason because of what he did to Nico outside the bedroom. I'd made peace with them being lovers."

"Either way, Jason's a bad example."

Percy hated thinking about Jason and his perfect face and body and how they'd been friends again. He hated that Nico had loved the big blond fake. He hated what Jason had done this last time, how cold and cruel he was being. Percy would've forgiven him if he'd apologized to Nico. It was disturbing, the way Jason had been able to see Nico in January, fallen apart and so scarily sick, and still walk away. Percy thought about the way Jason had cried on his knee that day at his mom's. What went through his former friend's head?

"I used to think you had a thing for him, remember?" Because Percy was a glutton for punishment in the form of Jason.

"Yes. You were an idiot."

"It kinda turned me on."

"Oh." Annabeth couldn't hide her surprise. It was an unexpected admission.

"I mean, it made me jealous, too, but sort of, yeah. Do you have a thing for Jason?"

"If I had ever had a thing for Jason, it would've eroded a long time ago. He's a bigger cheat than you, in some ways. Plus, the way he's acted toward Nico recently is a definite turn-off." Annabeth wrinkled her nose and frowned.

"So you had a thing for Jason?"

"There is no one who likes guys who wouldn't at least get a little pleasure out of imagining Jason naked and doing dirty things to them. Piper says he's great in bed, too."

"You're shitting me. Piper's only ever slept with Jason. What would she know?"

Annabeth leaned forward. "She says he can give her multiple orgasms."

"Meaningless."

She smirked and tipped her glass toward Percy before taking a drink. "I'd like to find out how meaningless it is sometime. Besides, you can ask Nico. He told me Jason's a kinky pervert, which is
kind of hot given his all-American persona."

"He's a shit and a fake. Nico didn't tell you that. He doesn't kiss and tell."

"How would you know?"

Nico actually had told Percy a bit about sleeping with Apollo, mainly just answering yes or no to Percy's questions. Okay, maybe Percy got a little turned on thinking about Nico having sex with another guy — as long as he knew Nico preferred him to the other guy. He got turned on by Nico. "This conversation is pointless. I think I'd rather take you back to the hotel and use my mouth a different way."

Annabeth grabbed her purse and hopped off the barstool. "This conversation hasn't been pointless at all. It's got you all riled up. It's kind of sexy, Percy. And yes, please."

***

Percy was surprised Nico agreed to see him after Annabeth's poor behavior the night before. He'd been worried enough about it that he didn't text first to see if it was okay to come over. He showed up about an hour after he knew Nico was done with class for the day and hoped Nico wasn't at the library or his farmhouse or fucking Apollo. When the girl at the reception desk of Nico's building called up to the apartment then blushed and told Percy that Mr. di Angelo would see him, he practically skipped to the elevators. He needed Nico's help.

He knocked and heard a scuffling on the other side of the door, followed by a soft "Damn."

"Come in, Perce, it's not locked." Nico's voice was muffled, but he didn't sound like he was doing any kinky shit with Apollo, at least.

Percy opened the door and sucked in a breath. "Well, hello, wet dream."

Nico rolled his eyes and awkwardly brushed away the hair in his face. Holy fuck.

"Shut up, perv. I didn't know you were coming over."

Sweat glistened on Nico's bare torso and dripped from his hair. His skin was almost flushed, and the only time Percy had ever seen it that way was when they were fucking. He couldn't help how his dick stirred.

"Boxing?"

Nico held up his gloved hands. Oh, gods, that was hot, too.

"What gave it away? Kickboxing."

Percy plucked a drop of sweat from the tip of Nico's nose and put his finger in his mouth. Nico blinked at him a few times then gently punched his chest.

"Don't be a pervert, Percy."

Percy gaped while Nico unfastened his boxing gloves with his teeth. Holy fucking fuck.
Nico glanced up from tearing open the second glove, his gorgeous 'Fuck me' lips parted slightly to reveal perfect white teeth gripping the flap of the glove, shook his head, and glared at Percy. "I'm going to take a quick shower. Make yourself comfortable."

Percy watched Nico's ass move as he walked away.

"Want me to help you wash your back?"

Nico whirled and pegged him in the shoulder with a boxing glove.

"Pervert."

"That wasn't a no!" Percy called after him. In response, he heard the door to Nico's bedroom close and the lock click in place.

His dick was hard, but jerking off now seemed rude, so he opted to raid the refrigerator instead. One of the many cool things about this apartment, aside from his sex-god eye candy best friend (see how he was trying not to think of Nico as his lover, at least?), was the ridiculous amount of luxury food available. He pulled out a bacon-wrapped filet mignon and a bottle of Perrier. He got the filet reheating in the microwave and dug out a few of those little round cheeses wrapped in red wax. Those things tasted a lot better after Nico explained he wasn't supposed to eat the wax, too.

Percy set the cheeses and the Perrier on the little table in the...whatever Nico and Apollo called the part of the room where the pool table was...and went back to the kitchen to retrieve the filet. He'd eaten through about half of it when Nico came out, dressed, thankfully, but still with sexy wet hair. Percy kept his eyes on his steak.

"I was going to eat that for dinner."

"No you weren't," Percy said around a huge chunk of cheese.

Nico grinned and walked into the kitchen. "No, I wasn't. I think we're having chicken parm tonight. Want to stay?"

Percy picked up the little bits of bacon that had fallen off the filet. He ate them all at once and licked his fingers before Nico got back, carrying a plain bottled water and two apples. Nico flopped into the chair across from Percy and took a long drink.

"Can't," Percy said. "Thanks for the offer, though. So what's up with the kickboxing? I didn't know you did that."

Nico shrugged. "I picked it up when I moved in here. Helps keep Clarisse from kicking my ass all the time. There's a gym downstairs I used to go to, but when I got sick, I felt kind of self-conscious. Apollo got me the equipment so I could do it up here and not feel like people were watching me."

It was sad that Nico was feeling the need to hide again, but not unexpected. He'd come so far from that shadowy boy he'd been, though. Percy hated that he'd had to take a step back.

"So kickboxing is the secret to kicking Clarisse's ass. I'll have to take it up."

Nico bit into his first apple. "It's still about fifty-fifty, but those are better odds than before. What's up? I didn't think I'd see you again this trip after last night."

"I'm so sorry about how Annabeth treated you. She—"
"It's not a big deal, Perce. She has a right to feel angry at both of us pretty much forever. I shouldn't have gotten so upset over it."

"She should've talked to me privately, not dragged you into it." Percy wasn't mad today, but he wanted Nico to know that being friends after the marriage wouldn't be an endless barrage of Annabeth shame. "We talked it out, kind of."

"'Kind of' talks don't tend to fix things."

Nico licked the juice off his apple, and Percy tried to think of anything but that pink tongue.

"Anyway, I have a problem, and you can help."

"As long as the problem isn't in your pants, I'd be happy to."

Percy stuck out his tongue and threw his last cheese at Nico's head. "You'd be happier if it was, though."

Nico stuck his tongue out at Percy in return. "Probably."

Percy screwed up his resolve and asked for what he wanted.

"Teach me to dance, Nico. 'Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope.'"

***

"Put your hand on my shoulder and hold my other hand."

Percy's nose wrinkled. "Why do I have to be the girl?"

"You can be the lead once you learn to do it." Surely there was a YouTube video Nico could direct Percy to instead of living through this? Nico loved him, he did, but no love could withstand trying to teach Percy something that required at least a little discipline.

"I'm the man in our relationship, though."

Nico narrowed his eyes at Percy and leaned back against the pool table.

"The man in which relationship? Because, last I checked, we're both sporting penises."

"Want to check again?" Percy wiggled his eyebrows.

"What makes you the man in our relationship?" Nico enjoyed watching Percy try to figure out what to say. He could see the little hamster in Percy's brain spinning his wheel.

Percy's eyes lit up. "I'm hairier than you."

"That makes you hairy, not the manlier man, stupid." Nico lifted his chin and smirked. "I'm taller."

"So cruel. You're younger."

"My voice is deeper."
"I'm louder and more obnoxious."

"True, but stereotypical. I'm more mature."

Percy raised his hands in bewilderment. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I don't know, but none of this is relevant and it's probably all offensive to women, the whole 'weaker, fairer sex' crap. I'm leading because I know how to dance."

"Fine." Percy stepped into Nico's arms, laid his hand in Nico's outstretched hand, and blew a raspberry on his cheek. He regarded Nico with glee. "You said I wasn't as mature."

"Gross." Nico pulled his shirt up and wiped the Percy slobber off his cheek. "Let's get this over with."

He placed his right hand on Percy's shoulder blade.

"I'm going to teach you to waltz. It's easy. Make sure you have Piper or whoever's in charge of the music choose something you can waltz to. I assume this is for your wedding?"

"Mhm. I want to give her a nice surprise."

"That's sweet, Perce. She'll like this."

Nico didn't have any idea whether Annabeth would like it or not. He did think it was incredibly sweet. "Okay. So, like I said, waltz is easy. You're basically making a box over and over and turning a little each time."

Percy nodded.

"The lead, me, for now, dictates how the couple steps. Whatever he does, the partner will do the opposite, so they're moving together. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Now, there are three steps to each part of the box. For the first, the man—"

Percy cleared his throat.

"Sorry. The lead steps forward with his left foot, so the partner steps back with his right. Then, the lead brings his right foot forward, even with the left, about shoulder width apart. Last, he brings his left foot next to his right."

"Show me."

Nico backed up a little and demonstrated, moving a foot closer to Percy with each set of steps.

"So each time you move, you use the other foot, not the same one you just moved."

"How do you end up not going in a line and running into a wall?"

Nico was impressed. Percy seemed to be concentrating and paying attention, at least so far.

"You make the rest of the box. The first three steps were forward, diagonal, side, right? The next three steps are the same, except the first step is back with the right foot."

"Will you show me again?"
Nico felt his heart swell with fondness. Percy was watching him with such gentle intensity. His hair was swept off to the side even more than usual, probably so he could clearly see. As Nico performed the steps, Percy's hands swung back and forth with each step Nico took. His eyes were fixed on Nico's feet.

"Okay. Let's try together."

Nico put his hand back on Percy's shoulder blade and held out his other hand for Percy to take hold. It felt nice, holding Percy this way.

"You're going to step back with your right foot, back and sideways with your left, and then bring your right foot to your left. Let's try."

Percy watched Nico's feet the whole time, but he moved his feet the right way.

"Nice. Now let's make the second part of the box."

Again, Percy managed it without making a mistake.

They practiced a few times before Nico said, "Alright, we're going to add turns."

They kept practicing. Percy was a quick study, and in no time, he had learned the basic step, how to turn, when to raise himself up and lower himself back down, and the basic posture of the dance. They added music, and eventually, Nico let Percy lead.

"That's great, Percy, keep going!"

Percy smiled and moved Nico around the room, effortlessly avoiding the pool table and the punching bag and anything else that might trip them up. Nico found himself relaxing and letting Percy take control, and when Percy spun him, he laughed and told him to do it again.

"Can I hold you closer?" Percy had mastered the art of looking at his partner's eyes, and Nico felt a little entranced. Percy's expression suggested he might feel the same way.

"Well, we can get a little closer, but that's pretty much it, as far as the waltz goes. I can teach you something else if you don't think that'll be enough."

"No. It's..." Percy's eyes were so pretty. Nico needed to not swoon like an idiot. "I don't think I'll get to dance with you at the wedding. Even I know that'd be crossing the line. I was wondering if I could dance with you now."

"We are dancing."

"You're not as smart as people think." Percy's lips turned up at the corners. "I don't mean like we have been. I mean like this."

He pulled Nico closer, so their bodies were touching, and his arm wrapped around Nico's waist. He dropped Nico's hand and pressed his now-free hand to the small of Nico's back. Their faces were so close. Nico laid his hands on Percy's chest and felt his muscles move as they swayed back and forth.

"I like this better than waltzing," Nico murmured.

Percy smiled, but it was muted, warmer. "Me, too, though any kind of dance has to be better because I'm with you."

Nico knew he blushed, but he couldn't look away to hide it.
"I still want to kiss you," Percy said. His wide eyes were so honest. "Every day."

"I still want you to."

"Lay your head on my shoulder, baby, or I'll give in to temptation and ruin everything."

Nico did. He had to stoop slightly, but he laid his head on Percy's shoulder and looked out at the walls of his life as Percy slowly rotated them around the room. He couldn't imagine a more perfect moment. He didn't dare speak and ruin the magic. Percy stayed quiet longer than Nico had ever known him to. The sun had set before they stopped dancing.

***

Jason had chickened out for the last three months, so it wasn't that big a surprise that he kept up the streak on the cab ride to the airport, on the cross-country flight, and in a second cab ride, this time to the hotel. Every step of the way, he told himself he could be wrong; Piper could not care; he could be too late.

But getting physically closer to Nico was stirring the truth clearer and nearer to the surface, and Jason knew he wasn't wrong. He loved Nico.

He had to tell Piper. He did not want to.

In an hour, give or take, he would see Nico, and the moment Piper saw the way it affected him, she would know, whether he told her or not.

It was important that he tell her. There was no hope for a relationship with Nico. That was out of the question. Aside from that, though, Piper deserved better. She deserved a boyfriend who gave her all his love, not a carefully partitioned and far too small portion. She had made plans to move to New York at the end of the month. Jason was coming with her, not driven by any desire to live there but pulled along by the desire to take a path that caused the least stir. Piper wanted them to go to New York; they'd go to New York.

She'd already arranged everything. She and Jason were going to live next door to Annabeth and Percy. It was nothing fancy — Piper had refused her father's money — just a one-bedroom apartment in a clean and habitable building. Jason would finish out at Columbia. Piper would model. In some alternate version of the real world, Jason and Percy would get up to hijinks à la Lucy and Ethel from *I Love Lucy* while Piper and Annabeth were at work. If only Percy didn't hate him.

"Hey, Jay, are you about done in there? I need to brush my teeth." Piper knocked on the door, even though she'd already spoken. She was polite. She was pretty. She was kind. She was not who Jason wanted. The fact that he'd known for four years that Piper wasn't the one for him and they had stayed together was awful. He wondered if the Fields of Punishment had a lousy, cheating boyfriend wing. He might fit better in a wing for people who'd denied their true love.

"I'm coming out." He tightened the noose of his tie and slipped the tie pin Nico had given him into place. He'd stopped carrying it for too many months, the months Nico had needed him and he'd pretended his hurt was greater than Nico's need, but he'd taken it out and pinned it in his pocket again the day after Piper had chewed him out and left in the middle of the night.

Jason opened the bathroom door and saw Piper, gorgeous and alluring in her shiny silver bridesmaid
dress. The thing was strapless and showed off just enough of Piper's pretty legs that anyone who saw would know her body was as lovely as her face.

"You look amazing, Pipes." Jason smiled at her and ran his hand over her shoulder when she got close. This was going to be hard. "Can we talk for a few minutes after you brush your teeth?"

"Sounds serious." She was teasing him. That was worse. "I'll be quick."

While she was gone, Jason tried to gather his thoughts. He'd written out some points of discussion at home but left them tucked away in his desk. This didn't seem like the kind of talk he should plan like a term paper. He'd spent the plane trip planning, too, but no amazing idea about how to tell Piper he loved someone else, in a way that would not only spare her feelings but also leave open the possibility that they stayed a couple, presented itself.

Jason did want to stay a couple. Nico was not an option. Even if he was, Jason had proven, again, that he wasn't worthy of Nico's attention. He did a shit poor job of cherishing a man that deserved to be worshiped.

"So, what's up?"

Piper was back, still smiling.

"I, um, it's about the wedding."

"I know you're nervous about being one of Percy's groomsmen, but it's going to be fine, Jay. He needed a third person to balance Annabeth's bridesmaids and even though things are kind of rocky between you two now, it doesn't mean you aren't friends."

Percy hadn't even asked Jason himself. Piper had come to his house one day and told him he'd be a groomsman. No discussion. No chance to object.

"I hope we can be friends again someday, Pipes, but it's awkward right now. I think there were a million guys he could have chosen before me."

Jason took Piper's hand and led her to the little couch in the room. It would be better if they were sitting down.

"Annabeth shot down his only request," Piper said. "And Frank didn't want to do it. It'll be fine. The wedding won't even take that long." She glanced at her watch, her usual goofy kid one traded in for something silver and sleek. "We should head out soon. It's going to take us a while to get to the church."

"The wedding isn't for three hours, though."

"Annabeth needs to get ready. It's sort of a bridesmaid's honor to prepare the bride. You'll hang out with Percy and the other groomsmen." Piper pushed a bit on Jason's chest. "Don't look so glum! You'll probably play video games or something the whole time. Try to think positively about it."

"I'll try." Jason wanted to reassure her about something. "That's not the big thing that's on my mind."

"Hmm. If that's not it, then I'll have to guess the big thing on your mind is a handsome Italian man."

"Am I that obvious?"

"No, not anymore." Piper bit her lip and tossed her hair over her shoulder. "He's always on your
mind."
"I'm sorry."

She waved off the apology. "You loved him, and he's been through a very bad time. It's normal."
"Pipes?"
"Yes?" Her cheeks popped up when she smiled. Jason was so sorry for what he was about to say.
"I love him. Still."

The smile on Piper's face slowly slid off.
"And suddenly, I feel seventeen years old again, watching my world crumble and fall." She gave a very un-ladylike snort. "I know you love him, Jason. I don't know why you always act like it's some big shock when you admit it to me."

"It's not a shock? I mean, I know you're the daughter of the love goddess and you've said before you thought I still loved him, but...where was I going with this? I feel stupid. Of course you know."
"What do you want to happen now?"
"I don't understand."

Piper stood and walked to the door. "Walk and talk, Jay. We have to get to the church. What I mean is, what do you want from our relationship? We had plans. Are you going to toss them away to chase after Nico?"

Was she giving him a way to stay in the relationship? Why wasn't she more upset?
"I'm not chasing Nico. Reyna says he's a lot better, and I know I'd mess him up again."
"Do you ever worry about how you mess me up?"

Jason stared at the little fleur de lis patterns on the hallway carpet. This hotel needed updated. What was he supposed to say? No, he didn't worry about how he affected Piper. He felt guilty for cheating her, but he didn't consider that she'd be messed up by his anything, really. She was so much tougher than almost anyone he knew. That's what he'd told himself about Nico, too.

"I'll take your long silence as a no." Her words were sharp, bitten out. "I don't like you lying or cheating. You're an obnoxiously bad boyfriend when it comes to considering my feelings outside the context of your selfish absorption in your own guilt. I hate Nico sometimes, but I don't hate you. You're my friend, and you're convenient, and sometimes I believe I love you. I think we're happy together, when Nico's not in the way. It's not great, but I'm okay with our lives until something better comes along."

Whoa. That sounded cold. "Until something better comes along? You mean I'm a place filler?"

"Don't sound so offended. Look, I like having a boyfriend. The times we've been broken up, it felt weird. No other guys catch my eye. No girls, either. I like having you around. There are plenty of physical reasons and emotional reasons. I'm not naive enough to believe in some big, grand love thing like my mom spits out. Look how well that works anyway. Like I told you when we were younger, you and Nico will probably love each other forever, and it won't make either of you happy."
Piper sounded so jaded. Had he done this to her?

"I'm sorry I made you feel that way."

Piper scoffed as Jason pulled open a taxi door for her. He scurried around to the other side of the cab.

"You didn't. You're being self-absorbed again. It's my mom and dad. If she's the goddess of actual love, shouldn't she have a monogamous relationship with either Hephaestus or Ares? Or, heck, even one mortal love per eighty years or so? She doesn't. You've seen how full my cabin is at Camp Half-Blood. That's not love. That's sex and infatuation. It makes a girl a bit jaded, knowing her mom, who is supposedly all about love, passes through guys like drinking water."

Jason was stunned. "Why haven't you told me any of this before?"

"Your head was always too far up Nico's ass."

"Oh. So...I'm sorry. That's a lot for me to take in."

"Yeah, well, live with it." Piper's eyes were hard, and Jason felt incredibly wrong-footed. This was so at odds with how he'd always seen Piper. When had she changed, and how had he not noticed? "I know that all probably sounds callous, and the look you're giving me says I shocked you. Well, I'm tired of being the shocked one. Look, I want to move with you to New York and live next to Annabeth and model. I want you around to sleep with and be friends with and provide me some cover from unwanted advances. If you're not chasing Nico, can we do that, please?"

"I...yeah...I...whatever you want. I..."

"No more of you and your damned 'I.' You need to start thinking about other people and how what you do affects them."

Jason felt awful. He hadn't realized. He'd thought Piper loved him.

"I'll do better. Thanks for telling me." He wasn't sure what to say. He wanted to reach out to her, comfort her, but either she didn't need it or she seemed too hostile to take the chance. Jason wasn't sure which. "I'll move to New York with you."

"Good. And when you start fucking around with Nico again, do me the courtesy of letting me know."

Jason nodded. Tentatively, so she could draw back if she wanted to, he reached out and stroked her hand. Piper watched him for a few minutes before she spoke.

"Two weeks ago, right before the end of the semester, I ran into some girls." She was so quiet now. "I got to talking to them in the cafeteria. They're all daughters of Venus. Different fathers. They're the same age as me and Drew. My mom slept with six men in a year. She didn't love six guys in one year, Jay. No one falls in and out of love that fast. Love takes time. All this time, I thought it was true, the love stuff, that she and my dad had something real. He's pined away for her most of his adult life. But he wasn't even one of two that year. He was one of six. At least. I don't want to be like my dad, believing in a lie."

"Okay." Jason wrapped his arms around Piper and pulled her close. "Okay."

"I'll tell you if I start seeing anyone. You tell me when you start up with Nico again. I'd rather know than believe lies."
"Deal."

Jason held her and listened to her sniffle quietly for the rest of the cab ride.

***

Light flooded into the small room from an oversized window. The heavens were giving Percy Jackson their blessing. That's what it seemed like to Jason. From his spot next to Grover Underwood on a small green couch, Jason could see how Percy emitted a faint light of his own that was magnified by the sunlight streaming in. Percy shone. His normally windswept hair was carefully combed, and his tuxedo fit him perfectly. He was still Percy, with all the good humor and goofy smile, but more refined. Older. Happy.

"Brother, I do not think you need to brush your hair again." Tyson was sitting on a stool next to the little sofa. The stool was so tall only Tyson or Jason could even sit on it. Jason wondered if Tyson had brought it from Poseidon's palace to have a comfortable place to sit.

"You're right, Ty. I'm nervous." Percy turned to his brother and flashed one of his most winning smiles. He moved away from the mirror and flopped down on a desk chair. "I wish we didn't have to be here so early. We could've shown up fifteen minutes before the ceremony and I'd be ready to go. The waiting's making me antsy."

Percy’s eyes wandered the room, lighting on Jason for a moment before continuing. The place was sparse. It was probably normally an office or something like that. There was the couch, Tyson's stool, a desk, a small wall-mounted television, and a mirror that Jason and Grover had scavenged from a bathroom a few doors down.

"Hey, Grover, would you and Tyson mind getting me a Coke? I think I saw a vending machine down one of the hallways near the front of the building." At Percy’s request, Tyson and Grover got up. "Jace, you want anything?"

They were pretending to be friends, Percy and Jason. At least, that was what it seemed. Percy had warmly greeted Jason when he’d shown up, giving him a bro hug and everything. It felt weird. Jason wished it was real.

"I'm good, thanks."

Tyson and Grover left. Jason felt less comfortable. He shifted and stood to peer out the window, forgetting for a moment that Apollo wouldn't allow the sunlight to hit his face. The sun drifted behind some clouds, and the room darkened. There was a small courtyard outside the window. A cat made its way across the courtyard path. Jason thought about Erebus, who was no longer his cat. Percy had taken him when he got back from New York in January and had never brought him back. Jason hadn't asked. He knew Percy wouldn't let him share Erebus the way they used to. The weird thing was, he missed the cat.

"Listen, Grace."

Jason sighed and moved away from the window. The sunlight returned.

"Ty and Grover don't know about the way things are between you and me. They don't know how sick Nico was. I don't want to air his private business, which I might feel like doing if one of them
asked me why I don't like you." Percy's eyes didn't look angry right now; they looked sad. "So we're going to pretend that nothing's wrong between us and get through this. Can you do that?"

"Of course. I won't say anything." A year and a half ago, Jason would have been offended that Percy would worry he couldn't be trusted to protect Nico's secrets. He would've been rude, and they would have ended up fighting. Jason wasn't so proud or certain these days.

"The only thing is, Nico's here, and I want you to stay away from him."

Jason didn't want to stay away from Nico. He wanted to find him and beg for forgiveness. He wanted to see his eyes and kiss his mouth and tell him how sorry he was for the things he'd said and done. He wanted a lot of things he shouldn't have.

"I will, Percy. I'm not good for Nico, and I don't want to hurt him anymore."

The words burned his throat. They were true, but he hated them.

"That's a switch from the guy who told me Nico didn't exist to him." Percy straightened his tie and ran his hand through his hair, messing up all the combing he'd been doing. "He's doing security, so you shouldn't even be that close to him. Keep it that way."

Jason remembered what Apollo had told him — Percy had wanted Nico to ask him not to marry Annabeth. Were they lovers again? Doubtful. Annabeth wouldn't marry Percy if they were. They were friends, and for once, Jason couldn't make himself jealous. He was so glad that Percy had been there for Nico when he hadn't.

"I understand that we can't be friends, and I'm sorry about that, but thank you, Percy." Even though Jason meant every word, he felt awkward and phony. It's a hard thing, sounding sincere when you say thanks. "Thank you for all the help you gave Nico. Thanks for being strong enough to see him the way he was and not run."

"Like you ran."

"You're a better man than me, Percy."

"I don't believe that, Jason," Percy said quietly. "I won't forgive you for how you treated Nico, but I've seen how brave and kind you can be. You've saved my life more than once. And Nico loved you. He's a good judge of character. I don't know why you can be so admirable in every way but one."

Jason was saved from trying to think of some way to respond by the return of Grover and Tyson. They gave Percy his Coke and settled back into their spots. Percy stayed in the desk chair, and the four of them talked about baseball and the best pizza in New York and the easiest way to kill a chimera. It was homey and comfortable, and Jason wished he could have more moments like this.

A soft knock at the door interrupted the camaraderie. Grover was closest to the door, so he hopped up to answer it. It had to be getting close to time for the ceremony to start.

Grover didn't exchange any words with whoever was at the door. He glanced at Percy and said, "It's for you."

A huge smile lit Percy's face when he replaced Grover at the door. Jason heard their voices, both of them soft and tender, but he couldn't tell what they were saying. Those elegant white fingers came into view, brushing down Percy's lapel, straightening his tie, fixing his hair. Percy took Nico's hand out of his hair and laced their fingers. He pushed forward and disappeared into the hall, closing the
"My brother is too fond of little Nico," Tyson observed. "He looks at him the way he should only look at Annabeth."

Grover nervously peeked at Jason before nodding his head in Tyson's direction.

Percy's loud laugh erupted from the hall. Jason could see them in his mind, Percy making stupid jokes and keeping a tight hold on Nico, probably more than simply fingers touching now. Nico would be squirming under the public affection, secretly pleased, trying to throw Percy off and pretend like it wasn't a big deal all at once. Percy would say something outrageous for no reason except that he wanted to see how Nico's cheeks colored, and Nico would say something sarcastic while staring at the ground, which would make Percy laugh that big laugh. He'd tighten his grip with the hand that held Nico's waist and pull him closer. Nico wouldn't act like he wanted it, but he'd allow himself to be pulled in...

Percy was back, grinning and blushing, closing the door behind him. "They're ready."

Jason stood with Tyson and Grover and followed Percy out of the room.

The chapel, or cathedral, whatever it was called — Jason had been to neither a church nor a wedding before — was huge but not overly showy. The ceiling was high and had some sort of arch pattern that Annabeth probably loved. The floor was old and wooden, and Jason liked that it wasn't too polished or perfect. There were high windows along the walls perpendicular to the little raised area where Jason stood with Percy. The arches at the top of the windows mimicked those on the ceiling. The ample seats were packed, and it was no surprise. Percy and Annabeth were a popular couple.

Frank stood along the wall of windows to Jason's left. He was dressed the same as Jason, in a simple black suit and tie with a white shirt. He looked intimidating and nervous at the same time. Hazel stood guard at the door, straight down a long center aisle from where Jason stood. Her dress wasn't gray like the bridesmaids. It was a classic purple number, falling below her knees, and it accentuated the gold of her eyes and her sword. To Jason's right, Nico would be standing, mirroring Frank's position along the opposite wall. Jason hadn't looked. He was aching to, both because he was as drawn to Nico now as he ever was and because he needed to see with his own eyes to fully believe his lover was no longer that skeletal ghost he'd seen in January.

All the bits of advice about Nico and their love that he'd received over the years swirled around in his head. Rachel's, Piper's, the unnerving stuff Apollo had said in January about his and Nico's destinies. Hades, who would have Jason protect his son. He thought about all the things he'd taken from Nico that he couldn't give back. He could give him this. He could stay away. So he kept his eyes on Frank and didn't even turn when it was time to watch the bridal procession.

Jason closed his eyes and imagined himself getting married. They wouldn't do it like this, him and Nico. In a world where Jason had decent parents and had never chosen power over love, he and Nico would have been together, happily, for over four years now. They'd wait until next summer, when they'd both graduate. Hazel and Frank would be there. Piper and Leo and Calypso. Reyna and Annabeth and Percy. Clarisse and Chris. Family only. Chiron would officiate. They'd have the ceremony outside Nico's little farmhouse, nothing fancy or elaborate. An exchange of rings and promises. A binding oath. Afterward, they'd all go inside for lemonade, and Percy and Leo would sneak in some beer and get a little too drunk and talk a little too loud, and Nico and Jason would cuddle together on a chair and hold hands and whisper about how silly their friends were and how good it was to share this life with them. When it was later than they'd like, Calypso and Annabeth would finally drag Leo and Percy away and Nico and Jason would be alone. Jason would watch Nico put up the food and turn down the lights. When he was done, Nico would stand in front of
Jason and smile, the smile that had only ever been for Jason, never for Percy or Apollo or anyone else. He'd take Jason's hand, call him husband, and lead him back to the bedroom. There, they'd do the same dance, the same descent into darkness, they'd done a thousand times before, but so much sweeter because the word Forever was wrapped around it.

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The wedding was an Annabeth thing, solemn and dignified. The reception was Percy: loud and boisterous and too vibrant for its own good. Jason sat at the head table and listened to Piper say nice things about Percy and Annabeth, mostly Annabeth. Grover stood and told silly stories about how much of a screw-up Percy was when Annabeth wasn't there to guide him. After the meal, Percy led Annabeth out into the crowd and shocked the entire assembly by elegantly waltzing her around the dance floor. Annabeth cried while she laughed, and Percy looked so in love.

Annabeth’s father broke in, and Percy asked Mrs. Blofis to dance, and slowly, other couples began to dance around them. Piper wordlessly took Jason's hand and led him to the dance floor. She was so slight. She didn't fill the space Jason had left in his arms because the only person he'd ever danced with this way was Nico. They stopped after the second time Jason stepped on Piper's toes. Connor Stoll cut in and asked Piper to dance, and she seemed relieved to say yes.

Piper's earlier revelations bothered Jason. More than anything, he was sorry she was going through some sort of crisis of confidence in love and hadn't felt safe enough to tell him about it. He hadn't done much to earn her trust. How many times had he cheated on her? Two stretches, he supposed, but his heart had never been faithful, and that mattered a lot more than his body.

He gratefully retreated toward his table only to be snatched away from safety by Hazel. He hadn't expected that. Hazel blamed him for a million things. He deserved it all.

"Dance with me, please, Jason? Frank's still on security patrol, and Nico's disappeared."

Jason couldn't help the way his head swiveled to search for Percy, but Percy was in the middle of the dance floor, doing some weird shaking gyration thing, all of the elegant waltzing he'd been doing earlier discarded.

"I'm not a very good dancer."

Hazel was so much shorter than him that he had to lean his head down half a foot so he could be fairly certain she'd hear him.

"Neither is Frank. The toes of my shoes are magically reinforced."

Jason smiled and rested his arms around Hazel's tiny waist. "How'd you get off patrol duty?"

"We were all scheduled to switch out with the second security detail, which was Chris, Clarisse, and Allie, but Clarisse and Nico said they needed to talk for a few minutes, so Frank volunteered to stay on duty until she got back."

Jason moved Hazel slowly around the floor and scanned the crowd. He'd been able to make it through the ceremony without laying eyes on Nico, but the itch was getting stronger the longer the night wore on. Now at least he had the excuse that he was looking because Hazel said she couldn't find him.
"I wonder why he and Clarisse needed to talk?"

"Something about a dumb blond." Hazel interrupted as Jason began to reply. "You are going to stay away from my brother."

It wasn't a question.

"I am."

"Reyna may be stuck back in New Rome, but I will stop you myself, if I have to."

Jason had to admire Hazel's devotion. Reyna may scare him, but Hazel didn't. Not that she wasn't tough or powerful. She was, but she was Nico's kid sister with the squeaky voice and the sweet face and really, no one but Percy or Nico was a match for Jason's raw power. He was staying away from Nico because it was the right thing to do, not because of empty threats.

"I'm staying away."

"Because you don't love him?" Hazel searched his face, and Jason couldn't tell if she wanted him to contradict her or not.

"Because I do."

Hazel nodded. "At least you're telling the truth about that again."

"May I cut in?"

Frank was there, and Hazel practically flew into his arms. She hugged him like she hadn't seen him in years. He hugged her the same way. Jason smiled and backed away.

This time, instead of heading for his table, Jason found himself a nice, comfortable dark wall to lean against. The party was kicking into full swing now, with a DJ playing songs that a lot of the people seemed to know. Percy and Annabeth stayed at the center of the dance floor, and he was swinging her around with reckless abandon. Piper was near them, dancing with one hopeful guy after another. Greek and Roman demigods made up the bulk of the reception-goers, and they rarely got the chance to party. Already, they were dancing almost as wildly as Percy, singing at the top of their lungs, and occasionally breaking out into playful skirmishes that Clarisse and her security squad quickly stopped. Jason smiled at the craziness.

"Parties are so mundane. I'm surprised you're not out there."

Jason willed himself not to turn. He hadn't expected to be approached. He'd hoped. Nico's voice sounded like it had since he'd gotten through the rough breaks and cracks of puberty — sexy, like silk and power twisted into darkness. The sound made Jason's body hum.

"My boyfriend only ever taught me to dance like an old man."

"Old men are more sexually accomplished."

Jason laughed. It was tight and hard and painful, but it was real, and he hadn't felt real in a long time. He felt like he would suffocate under the weight of his reality.

"I wanted to thank you. If you hadn't sent Percy for me, I'm not sure I'd be alive."

Jason stopped laughing. He cut his eyes slightly toward Nico, barely enough to catch a glimpse of his nose.
"Yeah, well, I'm not completely inhuman. You needed someone."

Nico didn't answer. Jason knew the only answer Nico could give. Nico had needed him.

"I'm sorry." Jason's voice sounded brittle, like old newspaper.

He felt Nico shrug next to him.

"It's not your fault. Falling out of love isn't something that you can control, not for anyone. It happens."

"Not to us." Jason swiped his hand across his face. He'd told Percy and Hazel he'd stay away. He'd promised himself that he'd put Nico first. "I should go."

"Alright." Nico already sounded a million miles away. Did this hurt him as much as it hurt Jason?

"Can I look at you once before I go? They tell me you're all better and..."

Nico grunted. "It's a process. But we're not Cupid and Psyche, Jace, or Orpheus and Eurydice. You don't need permission to look at me."

"Sometimes I feel like we are. I'm Orpheus. I'm always just on the edge of getting you back, and I look every time."

"You're not Orpheus. And you don't want me back."

Jason bit the inside of his cheek to keep from contradicting Nico. He wheeled on his foot and hoped this one time would be enough to replace the nightmare image of January Nico that filled every empty crevice of his mind.

It was like looking on the meaning of life. Jason remembered the day they'd first truly kissed, how it felt like the universe fell into his lap whole and easily decipherable the moment Nico kissed him. That was the way it was now, and Jason could see forever, stretching forward and back, and he and Nico were one being, wound so tightly in each other that they were indistinguishable. They could never be parted; it wasn't a physical or emotional possibility. Jason almost laughed at how he'd worried that he and Nico would never find their way together again. It was inevitable. They were never apart.

He brushed his fingers over Nico's jaw. He didn't even realize he was crying until Nico touched his cheek and his hand came away wet.

"You love me." Nico's lips turned down. Why? He felt this, too, saw the truth in Jason's eyes.

"I never stopped. I was so scared you'd leave me permanently. Please forgive me."

Nico's brow furrowed. "You walked away. You were scared I'd leave you, so you left me first? Jason, you lied and walked away."

Too slowly, Jason saw the events of the last seven months through Nico's eyes. It had been one horrible, heartbreaking thing to think his only love no longer loved him. Nico didn't blame Jason for that. People fell out of love. Even the best loves didn't always last. It was another to know that Jason had loved him and walked out because times were hard. Jason leaving him in Apollo's and Percy's hands in January had been understandable when Nico thought he was no longer Jason's concern. Jason leaving him like that when there was love between them, walking out on a dying lover, that was something worse.
"I'm so sorry, please. I was so dumb, so selfish, so scared." Jason started talking faster. "I was so
damned mad at you for risking your life over something so pointless, when your life is supposed to
be with me forever. I didn't mean the things I said, but I thought I did, I swear. It wasn't until months
later that I understood what was going on inside my brain."

"Shut up. I need to think." Nico turned his back to Jason and walked a couple steps away, head in
his hands. The music had switched to some sort of techno crap, and it was pounding in Jason's brain.
He wasn't supposed to have said anything. He was supposed to let Nico go. Damn it! This was
exactly what everyone was afraid of. Gods, he was so selfish.

Jason moved closer and laid his head on Nico's back. Nico tensed but didn't move away.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't supposed to say anything. Everyone told me how well you were doing and said
I'd fuck things up for you again. They were right. Gods, Nico. I'm such a bastard."

Nico whirled around and took Jason's hand. "You're not a bastard. We both fuck up, Jace. I'm...I
can't do this yet. I've been making peace with myself and my life. I care about my roommate. He's
been there for me, and I can't turn my back on that. Percy..." Nico stared out at the dance floor for a
moment before turning back to Jason. "Not today. Hazel told me you and Piper are moving here this
summer?"

"Yeah, I—"

"I'll find you when I can handle this. Please, Jason. Not today."

"But, I—"

"Nico, I've been looking everywhere for you," Hazel's voice cut in. It sounded strained. Jason
pivoted and found her glaring at him. Frank stood in her wake. "Come dance with me."

Nico squeezed Jason's hand and let go. Without a word, he disappeared with his sister into the
crowd.

Frank took Jason's arm. "Let's go for a walk, Jason."

"I don't want to." Jason jerked his arm away. He wanted to follow Nico, get him to talk now.

"It's either spend a few minutes with me or spend it with Percy," Frank said. "He's coming this way."

Jason glanced toward where he'd last seen Percy on the dance floor. He saw him again, all right, red-
faces and raw with power. He was staring straight at Jason and practically knocking guests out of the
way to get to him.

"Let's go."

Frank hustled Jason through a side door and out into the small courtyard he'd seen earlier.

"I didn't even know this was the same building."

"It's not," Frank said. "It's all in the same compound, though. Nico sent me schematics."

That sounded like Nico. He was nothing if not serious about work. Jason didn't know whether to
laugh or cry.

"I'm sorry, Frank. Will you tell Hazel I'm sorry?"
Frank walked farther into the courtyard and took a seat on one of the stone benches. It was peaceful out here in the dark. Jason briefly scanned the area for the cat he'd seen earlier, but when it didn't turn up, he sat on the bench next to Frank.

"I will, but I'm not sure what you're apologizing for."

Jason did a double take. If he'd been drinking something, it would have been a spit take. Frank gave one of his low chuckles.

"You're not mad at me?"

"I'm plenty mad at you. Nico's as good as a brother to me. A scary, unsettling brother." Frank smiled grimly. "And you screw up with him so often that it's what we've all come to expect."

"Thanks, Frank. Good pep talk." Jason took a chance and patted Frank's shoulder. He got another chuckle in return.

"The prophecy seven, plus Nico, not so much Reyna, so the eight of us...well, not really Annabeth and Piper, so the boys plus Hazel," Frank paused as though he was doing math in his head, making sure the numbers were right, "we're a bunch of screw-ups, Jason. Me and Leo, Percy and Nico. It took us a long time to figure out you were part of the club, you know?"

Jason scratched his Legion tattoo and smiled. People had always treated him like he was set apart, above everyone else. He'd loathed it and lived for it. "You guys should've asked Nico. He could've told you a long time ago."

"I don't think so. He may see all your faults, but he loves you so much anyway. What I'm getting at is, by the time we figured out you were one of us, I think we'd forgotten we were once epic screw-ups, too. And the girls, they're even less forgiving because, except for Hazel, they were never screw-ups in the first place. Now we have our stuff mostly figured out, even Percy, if you discount the way he looks at Nico, and all of a sudden, you're the only one who's making terrible mistakes. We're not being fair."

"Could you have told me this a couple years ago?" Jason ran a hand through his hair and looked at Frank, whose dark eyes glimmered in the moonlight. "I kind of wasted a lot of my time feeling sorry for myself and getting stabbed and stuff."

"You didn't ask."

Jason supposed it was true. After the banishment, he'd spent some time trying to get Hazel and Reyna to talk to him. They'd both refused. Percy had been a lost cause, not that Jason had wanted anything to do with Percy then. He'd never really considered that Frank might feel differently.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed you'd go along with whatever Hazel wanted."

"Oh, I do, most of the time. She's good with knowing people, figuring them out. The fact that it's Nico you're involved with messes up her judgment. She's still mad at Percy for being with Nico in January, says Percy's not good for him, but it's mainly about how Percy took things seriously when she didn't at first."

"Percy isn't good for Nico. Neither am I."

"I don't believe that."

Jason looked at Frank incredulously. "I'm damned sure it's true, Frankie."
"It's not." Frank took out one of his arrows and poked at a rock on the ground. "You're both good for him. You light this fire in his eyes, and he's sharper and softer all at once, but it suits him, makes him better than he is alone. He's a great guy, Jason, but he isn't easy. Remember that little bit of time when he hung out with Will Solace?"

Jason grunted in affirmation.

"Yeah, well, how anyone thought that would work was crazy. Will was too nice, too normal, to put up with Nico long-term. I get that he was kind of fascinated with him and wanted to be a rebel—"

"Will liked Nico's ass."

"I don't need to know that. Anyway, he wasn't hard enough or crazy enough to deal with Nico. Nico's a force of nature, and nature isn't kind. He needs someone as powerful and strong as him, and there's just you and Percy. Percy's bowed out now, hopefully. That leaves you."

"You think I should try to win him back?"

Jason couldn't believe Frank would encourage him this way, yet what he was saying made a lot of sense. Nico had been happy with Jason before. They could be happy again.

"I think if I screwed up with Hazel there wouldn't be anything I wouldn't do to get her back. I need to get back to the party." Frank patted Jason's back, put his arrow back in his quiver, and stood. When he was halfway to the door, Jason called out to him.

"Thanks, Frank. You're a good friend."

Frank waved and went back inside.

Jason stayed out in the courtyard for a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

This is on the short list of my favorite chapters. I hope you guys enjoyed it.

Quick notes:
Rachel and her role with Nico and Apollo was expanded on a bit more in the deleted scene Abduction, if you didn't check it out the first time around (or want to leave kudos or comments there).
I Love Lucy was an American sitcom that originally aired in the 1950s. It was instrumental in paving the way for comedy on TV and remains one of the funniest shows ever.
Percy quotes from the movie Star Wars at the end of scene three.
People used to wonder what Piper was thinking. I know it's been a long time coming, but you finally get a bit more insight into her character here.
Frank rocks.
Last note: I have a nasty eye infection with a swollen cornea that's messing up my vision. I'll be fine, but if I haven't responded to your comments, know I will - and I still love to receive them! :-(
Old Demons

Nico won the footrace that marked their last Olympic event. Jason was faster, but Nico had more stamina, especially since he hadn't wrestled. Jason and Percy grumbled good-naturedly, but were happy to present Nico with the olive branch crown signifying the overall victor. They started rubbing him down with olive oil and ended up throwing it at each other when Nico blanched at what was quickly becoming overt and public sexual attention.

Flinging olive oil around had been great fun until the winged goddess of victory, Nike, descended from the heavens. She snatched the crown off Nico's head and thrust it so hard on Jason's that it bypassed his actual crown and face and ended up encircling his neck.

Nike was displeased that Nico had not even tried to wrestle Jason and Percy. She said that was the marquee event all the gods had been waiting to see and proclaimed him a "quitter, quitter, babysitter." Nico, she said, was disqualified from the entire competition and Jason was the rightful winner. She presented Percy with a light-up button that said, "Second Place Sucks, but it's Better than Being a Quitter" and floated back up from whence she'd come.

Percy and Jason had made it into the bedroom before they'd laughed at Nico and given him enough wolf-whistles and catcalls to make him sit on the bed with his arms and legs crossed and pout. Too late, the older gods realized that reenacting the moment when Nike ripped the crown off Nico's head may entertain them but it wouldn't result in any post-Olympic sex.

By the time they realized their mistake and apologized, Nico told them he was too tired to perform and they'd have to wait until the next day, unless they wanted to entertain themselves.

In the estimation of Percy and Jason, the next day took a very long time to arrive.

Jason laid next to Nico the next morning and poked Percy's side. "Can we wake him up yet?"

"Gods, Jason, are you that horny? Shut the fuck up and go back to sleep. I'm pissed you woke me up. If you wake up Nico now he'll kill us both." Percy rolled over and faced away from the other two.

"Yes, I am that horny," Jason whined. He walked his fingers up Percy's back. "Percy."

"Leave me alone."

"Wake up Nico for me and I will." Jason gripped Percy's hip and shook him. "Don't tell me you don't have a massive hard-on, too."

"I do, and I was having a nice dream where it was getting taken care of until you woke me up." Percy moved Jason's hand off his hip and set it Nico's thigh. "Turn around and rub one out. You'll be ready again when he wakes up."

Jason slipped his hand up and down Nico's thigh, between his thighs, and back to the outer edge again. He grazed Percy's skin. "Were you dreaming about Nico?"

Percy didn't choose it, but his penis responded to the dark tone of Jason's voice and the touch of his hand. He fistèd the sheets to keep from touching himself. "Yes."

"Tell me what was happening."
Jason's hand was back on Percy's hip. Strong, tanned fingers with perfectly manicured nails stayed completely still. Goosebumps erupted on Percy's skin.

"It was, we were..." Percy took a shaky breath. "He was blowing me, you know that way he does, where he takes you all the way back in his throat?"

Jason moaned. His hand tightened on Percy's hip. Percy watched the tips of Jason's fingers dig into his skin. He bit his lip.

"Yeah, I know," Jason said. He laid on his stomach and rubbed against the mattress. He was barely aware of the way his thumb started moving behind Percy's hip.

"We were in the living room. I know you made our coffee table out there to be the right height for sex, and that's what we were doing. Nico's gorgeous body was draped over it, and he was blowing me, like I said, but..." Percy couldn't hold off any longer. He touched himself. Jason's hand crept under Percy's moving arm, and Percy let out a little whimper at the sensation.

"Keep going," Jason prompted. "Was I there?"

"Mhm." Percy shivered, and Jason's hand moved closer. "You were next to me, and you kept hitting Nico's face with your dick."

"Oh, fuck." Jason's fingertips grazed the hair around Percy's cock. "Did you like it, me doing that to him?"

"So much." Percy's hand quivered, and he laced his fingers with Jason's. "Sometimes, he'd hold us together and suck our tips into his mouth at the same time. It was incredible. Touch me, Jason, please."

Jason shifted closer to give Percy what he wanted — what they both wanted. When he did, he jostled Nico, who burst into consciousness the second Jason's hand closed around Percy's dick. Percy arched his back and shook violently when Jason stroked him. Jason moaned and bit down on the thing closest to his mouth, which was Nico's chest.

Nico bolted upright at the hard bite and accidentally forced Jason's hand off Percy. Percy growled in frustration. A moment of clarity set in, and Percy realized Nico was awake and had to know what he and Jason had been doing. He scooted to the wall and pulled the comforter up to his chin.

"Percy?" Nico rubbed his chest where Jason had bit him and cautiously approached Percy.

Tears spilled down Percy's face. He curled into a tighter ball when Nico sat next to him and hugged him. Jason started to come closer, but Percy pushed him away with his foot.

"Wait, Jace," Nico said. He put his hand under Percy's chin. "Will you look at me, Percy?"

Percy shook his head and sobbed. Nico was incredibly confused. He made eye contact with Jason and nodded for him to explain.

Jason squeezed his shoulders. This wasn't comfortable for him, either. "We were wanting you to wake up so bad, and it started out innocent. He told me he was having a dream about you, and it turned me on more than I was already turned on from laying next to you. I asked him to tell me about it, and we—"

"I'm so sorry, Nico," Percy said. "I lost my head, and we were talking about you, and gods, I love you so much. I wouldn't...I didn't mean to..."
"Whoa. Slow down. Hey, Percy, listen to me." Nico adopted the voice he'd used sometimes when he helped kids in New Rome who'd lost a parent after the Giant War. They'd been scared, too. "It's okay. Lots of guys get each other off. It doesn't have to mean anything. And if it does, Jason's really attractive, Perce, and—"

"I don't care about being attracted to a guy, Nico. I grew the hell up," Percy snapped. "I care that I started to cheat on you, and you mean everything to me."

"We weren't cheating on him, Percy. He was right there. The whole thing was about him." Jason resented the implication that he would have cheated on Nico, too.

"Yes, we were, Jason." Percy's voice came out more venomous than he intended. "I like you, dude, and it's hard not to notice you sexually. But I'm not about to start cheating on Nico."

"Neither am I!" Jason yelled. "That is not what we were doing. I would never, ever disrespect Nico."

"Shut the hell up, both of you." Nico pulled Percy into his chest and took several deep breaths. "You can see the same situation different ways. I don't feel cheated on. We all sleep together and have sex together multiple times a day. Even if you two aren't screwing, you're doing sexual stuff together. I know that. I also know that the lines are going to get blurred. Why didn't you wake me up when you were fooling around?"

"Because Percy said you'd kill us for waking you up." Jason pinched at the comforter. He wanted to yank it off Percy and strangle him with it.

"So it wasn't because you wanted to be together without me, right?"

Both gods uttered a version of "Hell no."

"Percy, you're worried about this because of the way you used to treat Annabeth." Nico smiled at Percy and kissed his lips. "I trust you completely. You've earned my trust. You touching Jason—"

"Jason touched me."

"Because you asked me to."

"Shut up. You touching Jason or Jason touching you or whatever the hell was happening is a natural extension of the stuff we do anyway. From now on, unless I tell you differently, you can wake me up. You weren't trying to sneak around or be secretive, Perce. I'm not upset, and you aren't a guy who cheats on people. You haven't been that guy for a long time."

"I never cheated on you. Not since that first night you were in my dorm room. Five years, Nico, I've only been with you and Annabeth." Percy paused to vanish his sniffles. "I cheated on her so much, though. I cheated on her with you so much."

"I wish things could have been different, that we'd never hurt Annabeth, but I don't regret a moment I spent with you." Nico patted the spot next to him, and Jason tucked himself into the spaces where Nico's body wasn't. "Are you okay? I want you to make nice with Jason."

"Yeah, I'm okay. Thank you."

Nico shrugged. "I love you. Now, talking to Jason."

When neither Jason nor Percy spoke or moved, Nico sighed and tugged their hands into his lap. Tentatively, Percy laced his fingers with Jason's under Nico's hand.
"I'm sorry I made you freak out," Jason said.

"I'm sorry I acted like you'd cheat on Nico."

"No more saying sorry, remember? Say something meaningful." Nico pinched their fingers more tightly together and laid his head on Jason's shoulder.

"Nico's a bossy shit," Jason said.

"It's like being married to a mother-in-law," Percy said.

"I hate you two. You make me happy." Nico smiled for no one but himself.

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Jason and Percy were having trouble talking to each other, despite half an hour's cuddling and gentle reassurances. These had been the times, early in their confinement, that had given Nico the greatest frustration. Now, sitting between them, curling his hands in their hair, peppering their faces with soft kisses, caressing their bare skin, being the center of their love felt like a privilege.

Nico nuzzled his head in Jason's neck and kissed along his throat. The gods' hands were still clasped in his lap, and Nico could feel how Jason's hand tightened in response to his kisses. He shifted and kissed Percy the same way. Percy's hand clenched around Jason's.

"I know you feel awkward right now." Nico leaned back against Jason's chest and traced the line of Percy's biceps. "But we felt awkward when we first started having sex, too. I'm partial, probably, but I think that turned out awesome."

Percy snorted and grinned. Behind Nico, Jason kissed the top of his head.

"So, let's do like we did then, figure things out as we go, be open and honest, and talk, especially when we're uncomfortable."

Percy and Jason nodded, but they didn't talk.

"Alright, I'll go first," Nico said. "It turns me on, the idea of you two getting off together over me, both literally and figuratively. I wish I'd awakened more peacefully and you hadn't stopped. That's why I won the race yesterday. It wasn't because I was feeling competitive. It was because watching you guys wrestle and touch each other got me super horny. I wanted to come in here as fast as possible and do something about it."

"Well, that's hot," Jason said. "I wish we hadn't made fun of you. What did you want to do?"

"I hadn't gotten that far. It was more of a primal urge kind of thing." Nico blushed. "I liked the olive oil, the way you guys looked all shiny and slick. I think I would have liked to lay you down side by side — I like when you're next to each other — and sucked you off while you touched each other. Of course, then I couldn't have watched you touch each other, so I'm not sure."

"Percy, tell him about your dream," Jason said.

"I like Jason's back," Percy blurted.
Nico grimaced in confusion. "That was your dream? You like Jason's back?"

"No. Unrelated. I was thinking about saying that, and then Jason said the thing about the dream, but that thought was sort of already on its way to my mouth so I had to clear it out first." Percy thunked his head on Nico's chest. Jason untangled his hand and ran it through Percy’s hair. Percy sighed. "I'm a dork. I like Jason's back. It's so interesting and big. When we were wrestling and I was trying like an idiot to flip him over, I kept thinking what a beautiful back he has. Horrifying, frankly. Dude, I like you a lot, but I'm not in love with you."

"Same here, dumbass," Jason said. "That doesn't mean I don't think you've got a great ass."

"Oh, gods, without the double negative, please. Why am I the only one who can speak properly? I was a fifth-grade dropout." Nico shook his head.

"Fine, weirdo old lady librarian." Jason thought for a moment and tried again. "I like Percy's ass, even if I'm not in love with him. And I'm not, though I like him a lot, too. Does that meet your grammar standards, madam librarian?"

"Not really, but it's clearer, at least." Nico wheeled his head around and kissed Jason's cheek. "So, Percy likes Jason's back. Jason likes Percy's ass—"

"I like Jason's ass, too."

"—and neither of you is in love with the other. Got it. Moving forward. What do you want from each other?"

"I don't know," Jason said. "I think mostly what I want is to feel like I can touch if the mood strikes while we're fooling around. It's not like I sit around fantasizing about Percy the way I do you. There are times, though, when I'm watching you two fuck or stuff like that, and I want to participate without worrying Percy might get mad if I lay my hand on him."

"Dude, I wouldn't get mad about that." Percy lifted his head off Nico's chest and leaned toward Jason. "I like you touching me."

"You do?"

"Duh. If Nico hadn't woken up earlier, I'd have come in about ten seconds, I think."

"You were jerking him, Jason?" Nico's voice had dropped, and he wiggled back into Jason's body.

"Yeah. Just once." Jason's voice dropped, too, and he pulled Nico all the way into his lap. He bit a little on Nico's neck and rubbed his pale arms. "I would've brought him off, Nico. Tell him about your dream, Percy."

First, Percy leaned forward and kissed Nico. It was slow and wet and caused them all to moan. Percy let go and they giggled nervously.

"You were laid out on the coffee table, Nico, all naked and beautiful, that perfect ass of yours in the air like you were begging for someone to fuck you. Jason and I," Percy glanced at Jason and blushed, "you were giving us head that amazing way you do. Except this time, you were switching off us, back and forth, and when you were doing me he was smacking your face with his dick. I could feel it inside your mouth when he hit you."

"Oh, gods." Nico's nipples hardened, and Percy rolled them between his fingers.
"But then sometimes," Percy continued, "you'd line us up together, touch my dick to Jason's, and suck both our tips at once."

Jason's erection poked Nico, who shifted sideways and kept his attention focused on Percy.

"What were you and Jason doing?"

"What? That's it. That's the dream." Percy's eyes flicked to Jason's lips, and he kissed Nico again. He put his hands on Nico's thighs and ran them up and down, feeling the soft skin under the hair. He jumped slightly and increased the fervor of the kiss when his hands found their way onto Jason's smooth hips.

"Bullshit," Nico whispered after Percy shoved his tongue deep a final time and removed it. He pulled Percy's waist until Percy moved forward and straddled his and Jason's thighs. "I'll do that to you right now if you tell me the rest of the dream."

Percy hesitated.

"Tell him," Jason said. His hands had landed on Percy's strong thighs and were slipping higher, closing in on Percy's ass. "Whatever it is, Percy, gods, tell him. I want him to do that to us. Otherwise, I'm about to knock him over and fuck him sideways, so your time's limited."

Percy moaned and pressed his chest to Nico's. He grabbed the back of Jason's head while Nico writhed between them.

Vibrant green eyes met icy blue. "He sucked us, and while he did, you kissed me and fingered my ass."

"Oh, fuck, Percy, yes," Nico said. "Go stand at the foot of the bed right now."

Percy did, and when Jason was slow to move, Nico slapped his ass. Jason jumped and hurried to catch up. When he reached Percy at the bottom of the bed, Nico fell forward and arranged their hips so their bodies were separated only by his face.

"Like this?" Nico asked.

"Get your ass up higher," Jason ordered. He wrapped his arm around Percy's waist and put his other hand on Nico's shoulder blade. "I want to imagine someone back there fucking you."


Nico slid their slits together, mixing their weeping pre-cum, then licked between them and slid the wetness all around with his tongue. He sucked Percy into his mouth, and Jason gripped his hair and pushed him deeper. Jason pulled him all the way back up so they made eye contact, and Nico grinned around Percy's dick. He loved being manhandled by Jason. Jason smiled at him, too, and forced his head back down.

"Oh, damn it, baby, you're amazing." Percy kept one hand on Nico's neck, but the other scratched and pulled at Jason's hip and ass.

Jason smacked Nico with his cock, just like in Percy's dream. He hit him over and over, and Nico moaned and squirmed but kept his mouth on Percy until he couldn't stand it. He let go and sucked Jason, who leaned over and slapped Nico's butt. Nico arched his back higher and felt Jason slide a finger inside him.
"Touch Nico, Percy," Jason said. "Finger fuck him with me while he sucks us off."

Percy bent over Nico like Jason and twisted his finger up inside their lover. Jason twirled his finger around Percy's and fucked Nico hard, scraping his prostate over and over.

“How's it feel, Nico? Both of us fucking your ass at once?” Jason felt down Percy's side until he held the hardness of his hip. He needed Percy to steady him.

In answer, Nico moaned and let go of Jason with a loud popping noise. He fisted their dicks tight together. Percy whimpered at the intimate contact with Jason and rutted into Nico's hand.

“Percy, yes, fuck me, baby.” Jason panted and let his head fall forward. He kissed the nape of Percy’s neck and bit into the firm muscle of his shoulder. Percy growled and thrust harder.

Nico watched Percy thrust into the contact with Jason and reveled in holding his lovers together while they fucked. When the urge to participate overwhelmed him, he said, "Be still, and let me suck you both."

Combined, Jason and Percy were enormous, and the tips were all Nico could fit in his mouth. As soon as he did, though, Jason and Percy stilled and let Nico move. He twisted his tongue and sucked as hard as he could. Percy's legs began to shake. Nico increased his pace, and Jason twisted his hand around so he could hold Percy's hand and thrust their fingers in and out of Nico.

"Oh, gods, Nico, baby, I'm gonna come in your mouth. You're so beautiful. I love you." Percy said the words, but they came out as a mumbled moan. Jason slapped Percy's ass and groped between his cheeks. The second Jason's fingers brushed his hole, Percy shot all over Jason's dick and Nico's face.

Jason withdrew his cock and his and Percy's fingers from Nico and shoved Percy down on the bed. He crawled over him and licked a slow stripe up Percy's dick. Percy jolted and caught Jason's head, but he let him keep licking, lapping up the leftover cum. Nico watched Jason's tongue move and rubbed his back. Jason turned his head on Percy's hip and caught Nico watching.

"Are you ready to be fucked, my only love?" Jason kissed Percy’s hipbone but kept his eyes on Nico.

Nico's dark eyes shone. He nodded.

“Okay, Percy?” Jason kissed him one more time.

Percy let go of Jason’s head and ran a lazy, fumbling hand over Nico’s ass. “Love you, baby. Fuck him good, Jason. Let me see.”

Jason stood, grabbed Nico under the armpits, and in one swift movement, flipped him so they were chest to chest. He entered Nico while they were standing. Nico wrapped his legs around Jason and gave himself completely to his lover. Jason pinned him to the wall and thrust into him again and again.

"Kiss me, Nico," he managed to demand.

Nico did, and Jason licked the taste of Percy out of Nico's mouth.

"Jason, fuck you, you wonderful man," Nico said, his words interrupted by gasps and groans. He twisted his hips and pulled Jason in tighter. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Jason gripped Nico’s shoulders and wedged him against the wall so he could lean back and watch
the way they joined, see his cock possess his lover. He got even harder and started to tremble, knowing how he filled Nico.

Nico pulled Jason's head up so their eyes met, and Jason laid his head on Nico's and kissed him, soft and sweet, the words Nico had said floating back to his brain. "I love you, too."

Then Jason was thrusting again, rough and reckless, pushing as deep as he could, forcing Nico's legs up and apart. He came screaming Nico's name.

When the last of the tremors left his body and he couldn't trust his strength to keep Nico pressed into the wall, Jason gently laid his lover on the bed next to Percy and worked his way down his body, softly kissing his wet, flushed skin. Jason reached the base of Nico's dick, and he slowly licked and nibbled everywhere, savoring the taste and dark, earthy scent. When he couldn't stand it anymore, Nico begged, and Jason sucked him off while he and Percy wrapped their legs tight around Jason's chest and shared delicate, exhausted French kisses.

After Nico came loud and long, calling for both Jason and Percy, Jason curled up against his side and fell asleep. When he came to, it was to Percy's face in his.

"Come on, sleepyhead. Nico says he'll do it on the coffee table." Percy wriggled his eyebrows and held out his hand to help Jason stand.

Being a god had its advantages. None of them felt weak or drained. They could continue with the same vigor for many more hours, if they wanted to. Jason thought he might want to. He looped his arm over Percy's shoulders and herded him toward the door. In the doorway, Percy turned back to tell Nico, who was healing the scrapes on his back caused by the wall, to hurry, so Jason wrapped his arms around Percy and muscled him backward into the living room.

Percy, his hands on Jason's chest, was yelling for Nico to hurry up so they could fuck again. Jason was laughing, enjoying the way his cock bounced along against Percy's. Nico was two steps behind them. It was perfect.

The last thing Jason expected to see, when he peered around Percy's head to make sure he didn't run him into the coffee table, was Leo Valdez sitting on their couch.

Leo gave an embarrassed wave and sat on his hands. "I gotta admit, I was not prepared to see this, Superman."
"Oh, Nico, my angel, how you drive me mad with ecstasy. I am so enthralled by your body, your heart, your mind, your face. Making love to you is the epitome of sexual pleasure. I would conquer nations in your name. I would hand you the sun, if you asked it. I would devour the world."

Apollo mumbled all of this while licking his way across Nico's collarbone and languidly thrusting inside him. The god's eyes were closed and his face beamed with rapture, so Nico relished every cheesy word. It wasn't bad, being loved by a god, at least one as loving and attentive as Apollo. Or it could be that Apollo was the only god this wonderful. Nico moaned and pulled Apollo's face to his for a long kiss. The pace of Apollo's thrusts increased while Nico kissed him, and when Nico wrapped his legs around Apollo's hips and twisted up against him, the god lengthened his thrusts, leaving Nico empty before arcing back inside, filling him and hitting the right spot and somehow managing to brush Nico's dick with his stomach, too.

Their kiss degraded into something sloppy and moan-filled, and the next time Apollo raked his prostate, Nico screamed his release. Apollo followed shortly after, and they were left panting and sweaty on sheets that would have to be replaced.

"Nico, my lover, you are everything to me. Let me heal you, and you can take your turn inside." Apollo flopped next to Nico, which was a very ungodly thing to witness. It made Nico even more fond of him.

Nico curled Apollo's arm around himself and tucked his back into Apollo's chest. "That's three times tonight, Apollo. If I don't go to sleep soon I won't get up for class tomorrow."

Nine months ago, Apollo would have talked him into a round four, insisting that he could heal and replenish Nico well enough to be ready for class. These days, Apollo didn't take those kinds of chances.

"Of course, love. Allow me to heal you, and we will cuddle. And change the sheets."

"And change the sheets," Nico agreed, pointing a lazy finger to the ceiling. "And shower."

Apollo took care of the sheets and the cleaning first. It was a weird and intimate feeling, being cleaned after sex. All Apollo did was snap his fingers, but, particularly if Nico had been penetrated, it was like having the evidence of their lovemaking stripped away. Nico wanted some of it to stay behind, but Apollo preferred it this way.

A warm hand fell over him and stroked his stomach and hips. One brush against his dick and Nico felt ready for more sex. A moment later, when Apollo gently nudged him onto his stomach and slid his fingers everywhere, he knew he could be penetrated again if it wouldn't interfere with school.

"Are there places that require extra attention?"

Nico did a mental inventory. "The inside of my right knee."

The hand slipped between Nico's thighs and covered his knee. Healing was warm and peaceful when it was like this, dealing with superficial bruises and scrapes or sexual fatigue. It had not been warm and peaceful when Nico had been ready to check out and live with his dad permanently.
Apollo said it was because Nico had been fighting the healing. The pain of those days was hard to think about even now. How sad he'd been. How sad Jason had made him.

"There. You feel whole and healthy once more, love?"

"I do. Thank you." Nico didn't mean only for the moment. He turned in Apollo's arms and laid his head on the god's shoulder. He cupped Apollo's face and pulled him down for a soft kiss. Apollo hummed against his lips. The vibrations slid down Nico and settled warm and tender in his chest.
"Can I talk to you about something?"

"At any time, Nico. I did think you wanted to rest, though."

Apollo traced the muscles in Nico's lower back with one hand while the other stroked up and down his arm. The gentle touches were so comforting. Percy had touched him this way, too. Had Jason? Sometimes it was hard to remember. Nico wondered if he blocked out the memories. Too painful. Too powerful.

"I talked to Jason, at Percy's wedding."

Nico waited for Apollo to react. Percy had been married a month already. Nico should have told Apollo about the conversation sooner. He felt disloyal. He'd held Jason's hand. He'd told Jason he'd find him. It had seemed so urgent when they were standing next to each other, and all Nico had wanted was to take Jason somewhere they could talk.

"I am aware of this." Apollo's voice was quiet, tense. His hands had stilled on Nico's body. Nico kissed Apollo's shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring way.

"Do you already know what we talked about?"

"I watched. He let you discover his love for you had never died. You told him the conversation was not one you could handle at the time and promised to find him once you could."

Apollo seemed to anticipate the question on the tip of Nico's tongue.

"I cannot help watching after you, Nico. I was not trying to spy."

"I'm not mad. I'm kind of relieved. I've been mulling what I told him, and I don't know what to do. Your wisdom would be appreciated."

"I am not sure I have wisdom to provide."

Nico laughed and rubbed his fingers over the line where Apollo's thigh connected to his torso.
"You're the wisest being I know, next to my father. I don't understand."

"I do not wish to be wise, not about this. Wisdom requires some degree of detachment, and I am not detached from you. I cannot give you advice about Jason because I do not want to consider any perspective that does not serve my own interest, namely you here with me, happy and whole."

"I'm not trying to find a way to cheat on you or leave you." Nico wanted to make sure Apollo knew he had his loyalty. Loyalty was a shitty reason to stay with someone who loved you. Maybe loyalty was enough reason for a god. When Apollo said he loved him, he couldn't mean it the way Jason did.

"It is ironic that you have found yourself being a lover to two attached men. You are as loyal and honest as you can be. I know you would not cheat on me. You would tell me first and think that
enough, because I have allowed it in the past. I want you to be mine only, Nico. I want commitment."

"I can't give you that." Nico raised himself up on his elbow so he could see Apollo's angelic face. "I love Jason, and as much as you mean to me, it doesn't negate what I feel for him. You're a god, Apollo. You're going to tire of me. I'm going to get old or start to snore really bad or just not be that interesting in bed or out, and you're going to move on. Gods never stay. I care for you so much, but I know what we have will end."

"What if I made you a god, right now?" Apollo's eyes blazed, and the hints of gold that colored them became more pronounced. "You could stay with me forever, never age. We could be joined, married, and live our eternity together."

"And you'd be faithful to me for the rest of existence? Bullshit. You're not faithful to me now."

"I am mostly faithful to you now." Apollo paused and lightly slapped Nico's ass. "I want to be faithful to you. It is only when you have resumed your affairs that I have strayed. Mostly faithful, for a god, is the same as faithful."

"I love him." Nico whispered, and the words hurt, made him sad. He laid his head back on Apollo's chest. "I'm so sorry. Even if I was a god right now and you could give me forever — I'd be so tempted, but I love him."

"That is your answer, then, is it not?" Apollo sighed and turned so their chests pressed together. He tucked Nico's head against his neck. "Rest now, my precious Nico. Rest and know I love you enough to give you the world and withhold it, too."

***

Percy buzzed around the kitchen, washing grapes and making sandwiches. Was it weird that he sliced the grapes so Nico wouldn't choke? Probably weird, but grapes were a choking hazard. He had read it last night. Nico's watch would probably go off while he was over, and Percy wanted to make sure he was ready. Last time it had started beeping at his house, he'd frantically tried to find something Nico could eat while Nico banged the thing on the end table and swore it didn't matter. Annabeth had walked in while Percy was screaming out curses in the pantry and Nico was screaming out curses in the living room and beating his arm against the table. She had pronounced them both crazy and gone next door to Piper's, making Percy fetch her half an hour later when Nico finally got the damned alarm to shut off and Percy still hadn't found any food that didn't make Nico turn up his nose.

After Annabeth came home from Piper's and made Nico a grilled cheese (why hadn't Percy thought of that?), she'd sat them both down and showed Percy how to turn off Nico's alarm in case Nico got panicky again and had Nico make a list of foods that he would eat so Percy could keep them on hand. She'd left again to go back to work, and Percy and Nico had agreed they'd never felt like such foolish little children in need of a babysitter. Percy wasn't keen on repeating the experience.

He checked once more to make sure he had his other supplies ready. This was going to be great. Except if it wasn't. What if Nico wasn't happy with the news? What if it made him sad? Percy didn't want that, but he was dying to tell someone. That someone had to be Nico.
The elevator dinged, and Percy skipped to the door and out into the hallway. Jason was probably home, and Percy wanted to get to Nico first. There were only four apartments on this floor and the other two were rented out to crazy cat ladies, so Percy thought it was probably a safe bet that if the elevator stopped on their floor, it was either for him and Annabeth or Jason and Piper. Jason did not get the privilege of looking at Nico.

Nico was stomping off the elevator, glancing nervously at Jason's door, when Percy grabbed him around the waist and carried him into his apartment. Nico hated this kind of shit, but Percy didn't care. He was in a hurry. Nico also wouldn't complain, at least while they were in the hall, because he didn't want Jason to hear him.

Once they were inside the apartment, the complaints started.

"I'm not a fucking toy, Percy. You can't pick me up and carry me around. I don't weigh that much less than you, anyway, disphit. You're going to hurt your back and end up a decrepit old man before you even hit twenty-four."

Percy normally tried to cut off Nico's rantings early, but he was too giddy. He raced back into the kitchen and pulled out a couple party hats and a cigar. Nico was stretching his hands over his head, still grumbling about stupid crazy best friends, so Percy had the party hat stuffed on his head before he could start complaining about that, too.

"What the hell are you doing?" Nico felt the cone-shaped hat on his head and traced his finger over the elastic strap that ran down from the hat, under his chin, and back up into the hat. His face scrunched. "Have you put a cone on my head?"

"Shut up. It's good." Percy lit the cigar. He took a puff. It tasted disgusting. "Here. Do this with me."

Nico turned his face to the side when Percy tried to shove the cigar in his mouth. "I'm not smoking that. It'll give me cancer. Is this some kind of weird sex kink thing, Perce, because I'm not playing it."

"Now who's the pervert? Shut up. You're ruining it."

"How can I ruin it if you won't even tell me what it is?"

Nico was growing more agitated. Percy wanted to punch him. He pulled Nico by the wrist and shoved him down on the couch. Before Nico could launch into his spazzy OCD shit about how the couch fabric was too rough, which involved a lot of complaining, lining up a blanket behind his shoulders, and stripping off his shirt (a part Percy usually enjoyed), Percy straddled his lap and pinned his arms with a knee to each wrist.

"Ow. That hurts, Percy. Get the fuck off my wrists. This is some weird sex thing, isn't it? You're being such a—"

Percy slapped the hand that wasn't holding the cigar over Nico's mouth.

"Shut the hell up and listen to me. I'm trying to tell you good news." Percy gestured to their party hats. Nico's was askew. Nico was watching the cigar ashes slowly burn and crumble onto Percy's t-shirt. Percy jiggled Nico's head. "Read the damned hat."

Nico's eyes moved away from the cigar and up to the hat. They widened as he read. When Nico's mouth popped open in a muffled "oh," Percy deemed it safe to remove his hand.

"Now, put those pretty lips around the cigar and celebrate with this super-proud papa-to-be."
Nico's shock had rendered him mute, which was a nice change. Percy pressed the cigar to Nico's lips, and Nico mouthed it like, well, Percy was trying not to think about it. "Don't suck in, baby. We don't want any carcinogens in those perfect lungs. I'll do all the sucking this time."

Percy laughed at his own joke, and Nico glared up at him with the cigar still in his mouth. Percy pulled it out before he got an erection and fell next Nico on the couch. He took a drag, or tried to, and ended up coughing everywhere. Nico glared at him more, but he got up and brought him a cup of water. As soon as Percy took the water, Nico grabbed the cigar and went to the kitchen. Percy was sure the thing was getting doused with water and dumped in the trash.

"Don't ever do that again. It's stupid and dangerous. You looked like an idiot. A truly, deeply, not-sexy idiot. And lean forward. You're on my blanket."

Percy leaned forward, and Nico snatched the blanket off the back of the couch. He held his hand to his head and watched Nico fussily arrange the blanket and strip off his shirt.

"I hate your stupid couch."

"I thought you looked incredibly hot with it in your mouth."

"You think I look incredibly hot when I put macaroni and cheese in my mouth."

"This was better than that."

"You're gross."


"Are you gonna say anything?" Percy had hoped maybe Nico would be happy for him. He was happy. The news was unexpected, but it was still a positive development.

"Congratulations."

Percy ducked his head under Nico's arm and took his other hand, too, so he was fully wrapped in Nico's embrace. He laid his head back on Nico's chest. "Are you gonna say something you mean?"

The easy rise and fall of Nico's chest was soothing. Percy closed his eyes and pretended he wasn't crying.

"I love you. Are you ready?"

Percy huffed out a laugh. "That's what Annabeth asked. I've got eight months to figure it out."

Nico brushed away Percy's tears. He took Percy's hand again when he was done. "You want this."

"I do. I always wanted kids, baby. It's earlier than we'd planned, but that doesn't make it bad."

"Okay, then." Nico unhooked their hands and pulled off the party hats. He tugged at Percy's shoulders until Percy sat up a little and rolled his hips around on the couch so he and Nico were facing each other. Nico dipped his head and caught Percy's eyes. Percy loved the kindness he found in his friend's face. Nico smiled. "I'm so happy for you. Congratulations."

Percy buried his face in Nico's chest and wrapped his arms securely around his waist. Nico's arms curved into a tight hug.

"You won't leave me, right?" Percy asked.
"I'll always be your friend."

"And you still want me, even though we'll never do anything about it?"

"I still want you."

Percy nodded. He kissed a line along Nico's chest.

"The baby's due in early April, then Annabeth will have a couple months maternity leave. You don't start law school until next fall, right? You'll help me in the summer until I can figure out how to do things alone?"

Annabeth worked long hours at her firm. Percy was home trying to write his memoirs, at the request and commission of Camp Half-Blood. He would need Nico's help. He knew it would take longer than it should for him to feel confident caring for a baby alone. Dumbass Jason could help, too, when he wasn't doing teacher prep stuff, assuming someone was stupid enough to hire him to teach little kids. Help from Nico would be better.

"I'll have next summer off, until September. I'll be here every day."

Percy hugged Nico tighter. "I love you, Nico."

Percy could feel Nico's smile brush his hair.

"I love you, too."

Nico held Percy for a while before he gently shoved him away. When Percy questioned it, Nico's eyes were firm.

"You need to write, and I have classes to prepare for. Time's a bitch, Percy."

***

This time Nico didn't wait until after sex to tell Apollo what was on his mind.

"Percy's pregnant," he said, handing Apollo a blueberry muffin and a cup of tea when the god walked in their front door.

Apollo laughed. "Well, if any of you could circumvent the laws of nature, I assume it would be Percy."

"Ha. Ha. You know what I mean. Annabeth's pregnant. He's going to be a dad."

Apollo's laugh turned into a knowing smile. "This bothers you."

Nico ran his hands through his hair and down his face. He sat on the couch and waited for Apollo to join him. "Hell yes, it bothers me. He's too young to be a dad. Annabeth's too young to be a mom. I'm not ready."

"You are not ready?" Apollo tilted his head and aimed his sparkly eyes Nico's direction. Nico avoided his gaze.
"They're not ready."

"That is not what you said. Come, love, tell me what troubles you about this. It cannot be that this draws a wedge between you and Percy. I know you have both been faithful, at least in deed. I cannot believe that this changes Percy’s feelings toward you."

"No. It's not that." Nico laid his head in Apollo's lap and curled his body onto the couch. He'd probably end up with muffin crumbs in his hair. He covered his ear so no crumbs ended up down his ear canal. "He asked me if I'd still want him. That part isn't going to change. It's just...I don't know how to explain it."

"It made you feel old." Apollo stroked Nico’s hair and massaged his jaw.

"Yes! Old and jealous."

"Explain, please."

"I feel old. I know I am old, even though I look like a teenager. But it made me feel as old as I truly am. I felt brittle and tired, Apollo. Like my whole life was mostly already run, and Percy's was just beginning. I should be able to live another seventy years, but I know I won't. I'll be lucky to even make it through law school, right?"

"Nico, I do not want to talk about this. It serves no purpose."

"But you know. And so do I." Nico waited, hoping Apollo would contradict him. The god couldn't. He didn't lie. Nico sighed. "It made me think about the things I won't have. I won't get married. I already knew that. I won't have kids, and damn it, I didn't even know that was something I wanted. But I do. I was so jealous. I want babies with Jason, which I know couldn't happen even if we lived to be physically old farts, but we could've adopted kids. I want to know what it feels like to be a father."

"Not at nineteen."

"No, of course not. I want to be a dad at thirty-five and rescue orphaned homeless kids and take them to live in my stupid fancy penthouse that I share with my schoolteacher husband, who's a bleeding heart liberal and starts free after school initiatives and shit. Gods, Apollo. I don't know what I want, but the point is, I'll never get the chance to have it."

"I love you." Nico didn't even have the energy to bust Apollo on the forbidden words. The god continued. "I am so truly sorry. I wish I did have the power to make you a god, Nico. I would do it, even against your will, because I cannot stand to think of you not existing, or existing only within your father's realm. I will tell you this, though: You have tomorrow. That, I guarantee. And tomorrow, Piper is doing a modeling shoot in New Jersey. She will be gone at 7:30 tomorrow morning and return well after 10:00 at night. Jason is currently planning to stay home in his boxer shorts, pick lint out of his navel, and contemplate why you have not come for him."

Nico turned onto his back and gaped at Apollo. "Are you sending me after Jason?"

"I do not like it. I do not like him. But I love you, and he is your future." Apollo traced Nico's lips. His hand drifted lower, down Nico's torso, before snaking inside Nico's shirt and making its way slowly back up. "I am not. You must try to make peace with your destiny."

"I don't even know what the fuck my destiny is, except sad."

"You misunderstand." Apollo let his hand trail down, under Nico's jeans. "I find your destiny sad
because I will not long be a part of it. That does not mean you will find your destiny sad. It is entirely your choice, Nico."

"But I'm going to die. Young. Really young." Nico hated all this talk of destiny. He could handle the death part, usually. It was feeling like he didn't have a choice that he hated. Except here was Apollo saying he did.

"You are the son of the lord of the dead. You know better than anyone that death is not the end. Find Jason. Hold him close. Hold Percy close, too."

"I don't want either of them to die."

Apollo laid his head on the couch for a moment, and when he met Nico’s eyes again, his eyes looked so old. "I did not say either of them would. Take tomorrow, Nico. It is the only clear, non-elusive thing I can promise you. Make it matter."

Nico nodded. He trusted Apollo.

"Now, come with me to bed, lover. If you are going to Jason tomorrow, I intend to thoroughly make you mine tonight."

***

When the buzzer rang at 8am, Jason expected Percy to have locked himself out of his apartment. Again. This shit was getting old. They'd lived here less than two months and the guy had locked himself out four times. Jason was starting to think Percy did it on purpose so the two of them would have an excuse to talk. They were both lonely since Annabeth and Piper were working regularly. It was worse for Jason. Percy had his writing, the cat, and, undoubtedly, Nico.

Jason had heard him a couple times, telling off Percy in the hallway. He'd been halfway to his door and stopped, trying to give Nico the space to find him when he could "handle it" like he'd said. Nico didn't seem to have problems handling Percy. Jason sneered. At least they weren't fucking loud enough for Jason to hear it through the thin walls connecting his and Percy's bedrooms and living rooms. Jason remembered how loud Percy was during sex. He'd been able to hear him when they lived across the street from each other, and that was with Annabeth. Jason knew Annabeth didn't do it for Percy the way Nico did.

Jason started grumbling before he even got to the door. "Fucking hell, Percy, you gods damned moron, why do you always have to lock..."

Holy fucking shit.

Back up.

Holy fucking shit.

Did Nico make a habit of leaning against door frames with his arm over his head and smiling that "come fuck me" smirk while his shirt rode up a bit so one patch of perfect white skin was visible right at his hip? Did he practice in the mirror? Jason took two steps back and openly ogled.

Nico waited, probably for Jason to invite him in. Jason blinked and tried to remember how to speak.
"Hello, David come to life." Nico raised his eyebrows and pointed at Jason's crotch. "You're giving me a peep show."

Jason's mouth fell open. All he really heard was "blah, blah, blah, come fuck me."

"You're practically naked, do you know?" Nico was talking again. "I can see your dick hanging out of your boxers."

Jason heard "naked" and "dick." He stumbled forward, intent on throwing Nico down somewhere hopefully fully inside his apartment and doing very depraved things to him, when Nico kicked him in the stomach.

"Back off."

Jason heard that correctly, doubled over in pain as he was. He dragged himself to the couch and finally made sense of Nico's words, especially since his rapidly deflating dick was staring him in the face. Shit. Jason wheezed and fell over. Fuck, Nico was a mean shit.

The door clicked closed. He wondered if Nico had left. He managed to open one eye and dimly made out a human-shaped form near the doorway.

"Can you...go in the kitchen...or close your eyes...so I can...go get dressed...with some dignity?"

Nico snorted from somewhere to his left. "Your dignity evaporated when you answered the door yelling profanities about Percy being a moron while you're standing there with your wee-wee hanging out. But sure, knock yourself out."

Jason hobbled to the bedroom and hastily dressed. He debated putting on his top-tier sexy underwear, but decided Nico would be extremely pissed to see them if they made it far enough for the things to come into view. He went with second-tier sexy and a clean, less faded green t-shirt that had monkeys on it. He ran a comb through his hair, brushed his teeth, and put on deodorant. It would have to do.

Nico was sitting on his couch, drinking water and bouncing his crossed leg furiously fast, like he was trying to kick his lower leg off. Jason tried to act relaxed, casual.

"Hi, Nico."

Nico rolled his eyes. "Shut up and sit down."

"Glad to see you're back to feeling your usual friendly, fun self."

Jason slumped onto the couch close enough to feel the cool air that always surrounded Nico. He put his hand down between them on the couch and hoped Nico would pick it up. He didn't.

Nico did lift Jason's sleeve and stare at his tattoo. He traced the outline, then put the sleeve back down. He turned up his nose and sniffed. "I hate it."

"I didn't get it for you."

"Um, I'm pretty sure you did."

"No. I mean, yes, it's to symbolize you, but I got it for me. I never expected to see you again. I knew you'd hate it." Jason had been certain, that day in Berkeley, that if Nico ever saw the thing he'd be appalled. He didn't care. The tattoo helped ground him, remind him who he was and to whom he
belonged.

"I bet Piper loved it."

"Not my finest hour. She threw me out for a couple weeks."

"Do you regret it?" For the first time since Jason had come back to the living room, Nico was looking at his face.

Jason tried to make the most of it. He found Nico's eyes, held them, smiled. "Not for a moment."

Nico twitched. "You're probably an idiot, then."

"Did you come here to insult me, or was there some other reason? I want to be with you, but shithead Nico gets old real fast."

"You want sweet Nico?"

"That'd be nicer."

"You stomped him out. The guy doesn't exist." Nico's boot was seriously going to fly off his leg and break Jason's TV.

"Bullshit. I bet Percy gets plenty of sweet Nico." Jason sounded whiny. If he was as big a douche as Nico, he'd cross his legs and furiously bounce one, too.

"Percy didn't ditch me when I needed him. Neither did my roommate. I'm saving all the sweetness and handing it out to the people who don't betray me. Seems a better way to spend it."

"You know what?" Jason should be contrite, not angry and argumentative. He didn't stop. "Fuck you. I apologized and you said you'd find me when you could handle it. I'm sorry I'm not your pissy little babysitter."

Nico reeled, and Jason saw he'd hit his mark way too well. All his anger evaporated the second Nico tried to leave. Jason grabbed Nico's wrist and held him on the couch. Nico made his arm so cold that Jason's fingers burned, but he didn't try to leave again.

"I'm sorry. This isn't what I want to do to you." Jason had to stop behaving this way. He couldn't ruin things again before they'd even started. "It's the fucking last thing I want. You make me mad."

He watched Nico breathe heavy and slow. When Nico spoke, his voice was calm and quiet. "How long ago did you stop going to the counselor?"

"When I left New Rome after you were banished. I thought I had a handle on it."

"What do you think now?" Nico's eyelashes fluttered against his cheekbones. Jason wanted to kiss a million apologies right there.

"I think the person I'm best at lying to is myself. I miss you, Nico. Hurl any insult my way — I deserve it — and I'll take it if it means a chance to have you around."

"That thing you said, about me needing a babysitter...I know some of the things you said about me while I was sick." Nico's voice was so sad.

Jason wanted to blame Percy, because it had to have been Percy who'd told, but he had to take responsibility for who he'd been and what he'd done, as shameful as it was.
"I'm so ashamed of myself, maybe even more for the things I said than the things I did. You were sick. I know. I'm glad Percy and your roommate were there for you in ways I wasn't."

"I'm not sure I can ever forgive you," Nico admitted quietly. "Not for what you said. Not for what you did. Not for how you looked at me that day in my apartment. I've never felt as worthless as you made me feel that day."

"I was so wrong and stupid," Jason said. He swiped at his eyes and wished he could quit crying every time he saw Nico. "It was disgusting, the way I behaved. How did Percy treat you when he first saw you?"

Nico’s eyes drifted away. "He burst into tears, but he tackled me to the bed and didn't let go until the next morning. He held me and made me laugh and tricked me into letting healing occur. He made me not feel so small."

Jason traced circles with his thumb on the back of Nico's hand. He was growing accustomed to the cold. "I want the chance to do better. I want you to love me again."

"I won't ever be the boy I was. He's gone, Jason, and he's never coming back. I wasn't kidding when I said sweet Nico was gone."

"Then let me get to know who you are now."

Nico watched Jason's thumb make those circles. Jason felt hopeless, like he'd already blown everything. But Nico had come here, and he hadn't left yet. That had to mean something good.

"If I give you the number of a therapist, will you make an appointment and go?"

Gods, Nico may think he wasn't the same boy, but Jason knew better.

"I will."

Nico closed his eyes and nodded. When he opened them, he looked directly at Jason.

"Pack a bag."

"Excuse me?"

Nico made annoying little hand gestures as he spoke, like Jason wasn't capable of understanding speech alone.

"Pack. A. Bag. We're going to see Leo, and we'll be gone overnight."

Chapter End Notes

The David Nico is referring to when speaking about/to Jason is Michelangelo's masterpiece.
Leo considered his plan to find his friends a masterwork of ingenuity and skill. He'd planned for months. He had patted himself on the back the entire way to Australia and flown Festus to the 'prison' coordinates without a single hitch in his plans. It wasn't like he thought he could break the guys out or anything. He wanted to see if he could actually do it, find three imprisoned gods.

Walking into the prison, if that's what this was, had been a breeze. There must be some sort of invisible perimeter, but Leo had no trouble flying into the area and away. He'd done it several times to be sure he wouldn't be trapped along with his friends.

Inside the compound, he had gone to the building and knocked on the door frame, but there'd been no answer, so he'd let himself in and taken a peek around.

He was definitely in the right place. The domed house was something he could imagine Jackie building; there was a cute little bureau that had framed photos of him and all his friends; and there was a sweet man cave that had a huge TV and monster gaming systems. And books. Lots of books. Because smart-ass Jack lived here, too, not just dim-witted Jason and Percy.

The confusing part was that he couldn't find his inmate friends. This was prison, after all, and the places they could go were probably limited. He sat down to wait. The house, if you could call it that, was pretty tiny, but Leo didn't trouble himself too much about it. He figured gods didn't even need to sleep, which explained why there was a mattress in the man cave but no bedrooms.

And then Percy and Jason tumbled out of the wall, holding each other and laughing their heads off. Naked. Leo was trying to block that part out. When Jason saw him, he had the greatest "oh, shit" expression ever. It would have been funny if Jason hadn't clearly been banging Percy right before they appeared.

Nico was there, then, too. Jack Skellington himself, in all his birthday suit glory, with his hands on the other guys' hips and a huge grin on his face until he saw Leo. Nico didn't look as terrified as Percy and Jason. He seemed politely curious and altogether too happy for a guy who'd fucked up so royally that he got himself and his 'friends' sent to prison.

"Leo, hey. Wow. It's good to see you," Jack said. He held Jason's hand and grabbed for Percy's. Percy supplied it in an odd, jerky motion. The guy might have frozen solid. Jackie plowed ahead.
"How'd you find us?"

"Jack." Leo dropped his mouth open and widened his eyes. He nudged their direction with his head. The guys didn't seem to get the message. Leo shook his head and stated what should be obvious.
"Jackie, go get the fuck dressed."

"What?" Jason said. Maybe becoming a god turned you stupid.

Jack finally seemed to realize that he was freaking naked. He waved his hand, and all three dudes had normal clothes on. Whoa.

"Did you...clothe yourself and them?"

"Yes." Jack took a step forward, and so did Jason and Percy. If he'd been standing, Leo would have taken a step back. The guys looked too perfect, too unlike themselves. Not a zit or a wonky eyebrow hair or even any stubble anywhere. It was creepy, how different they were. "Are you thirsty or hungry, Leo? Can I get you anything?"
Leo shrugged and said the first smart-mouth thing that popped into his head. "A Quarter Pounder and a Coke?"

"What size?"

"What?"

Nico was trying to be patient, Leo could tell. "What size drink do you want?"

Was he serious? "Large, Jackie. I want a large."

Jack waved his hand again, and a McDonald's bag and a large drink sat on the coffee table. Leo's mouth dropped open on accident this time. He stared between the bag and Jackie. Jason and Percy didn't move or even, like, breathe. Leo was pretty sure they were automatons.

"You're freaking out, right? I can see it in your eyes," Jack said. He ran his hands through his hair, and at least that seemed familiar to Leo.

"You are a motherfucking god now when, the last time I saw you, you were my buddy Jack with the scary powers and the good heart who got a little too loopy at Christmas. Fuck, yes, I'm freaking out. And what's up with these two idiots? Can they talk? Did they become the gods of stupidity?"

Jack glanced to his left and right. He tugged on Jason and Percy, who took another disconcerting step forward in unison. He sighed. "No. They're the same kind of stupid they've always been." He rolled his eyes. "Sit down, boys. It's fine."

"What the fuck's wrong with them?" Leo asked as Sparky sat next to him on the couch and Percy popped a squat in this sick gray leather chair next to Leo's end of the sofa.

Jack sat on the coffee table by Leo's food. "They're shocked, Leo. Except for a brief, awful encounter with Thalia, we haven't seen a human in over a hundred days. It's just been the three of us and a daily godly visitor. Seeing you is...

"Awesome? Stupendous? 'Holy shit, that's better than godhood' good?"

"Scary," Jackie said. His eyes were sad. They weren't human anymore, either. They were deeper, older. Leo glanced at Percy and saw his eyes had changed the same as Jack's.

*Keep up the bravado*, Leo told himself. "Yeah, well, seeing you is always scary, hot shit."

Jack grinned a little, and Leo opened up the bag and took out a burger.

"How'd you get here?" Jack asked. "I got you two Quarter Pounders, by the way, in case you were extra hungry."

"Thanks. And I flew. Duh."

"Leo, you know what I mean. How'd you find us? Did the others know you were coming?"

Jackie was acting more normal, and aside from being even more startlingly handsome than he'd been before, Leo guessed he didn't actually look creepy like he'd originally thought. For a stab at friendship, Leo kicked his foot. And yelled. Because Jack's foot felt like an anvil.

"Holy shit," Leo gasped. "Did they cut your feet off and replace them with lead?"

Jack lifted his bare foot and examined it. Bony, white, and as long as a skateboard — nothing out of
the ordinary, at least for Jack.

"No one did anything to my feet. Did you try to touch me or something?"

Leo's brain went into overdrive, and his macho act faded away.

"Oh, my gods, oh, my gods, oh, my gods. Dios mio, this is like some sort of insane alternate reality, isn't it? They turned Sparky and Percy into robots and warped your mind to think these two are actually all there mentally and turned you into a...death demon or something and, like, you can't be killed and you're the government's superweapon and when the time is right they're gonna unleash your unholy hot mess on the world and you're going to annihilate us all. Oh, gods."

Jack laid all the way back on the table until his head hung off. He laughed like a madman. Leo could see his bellybutton where his shirt had ridden up. At least he still had that.

"We give burgers to all the guys we're about to annihilate," Jason said. He grinned and tugged Jack back upright. "Gods, Leo. We're just us. Way to overreact."

"Fuck off, Sparky. You haven't said a word besides 'what?'" — Leo did his best impression of a drunken southerner — "like an idiot in ten minutes. Percy still hasn't spoken. You guys look bizarre. You're taller, all of you. Jack's foot felt like steel. He made stuff appear out of thin air. You shits were powerful before, but this is a big change!" Leo took another bite of his burger. "It's scary, man."

Jack started to put his hand on Leo, but Sparky nudged it away. "Shit. Sorry, Valdez, I forgot. Jason tried to hug Thalia when she came and it hurt her. We don't know how to touch people who aren't gods. I guess it's probably freaky, the stuff we can do, but we're the same people."

"You're not going to tell Annabeth, are you? Or anyone else?" Percy seemed very worried. Leo could imagine why.

"We need you to respect our privacy, Leo," Jack said. Percy got up and sat behind him on the table. Leo could see the practiced way Percy's hands fit in the grooves of Jackie's hips, even clothed. What he'd happened upon wasn't a one-time thing. These guys were hard-core lovers. Nico covered Percy's hands. "Things are different here. I..." Jack pursed his lips. He seemed to be struggling for words. "We're different here. The guys we were before, we're them, but being a god is..."

"You're botching this, Neeks." Superman shifted on the couch and addressed Leo directly. "Don't go home and tell people that the three of us are fucking each other. Got it?"

Leo opened and closed his mouth like a fish. He put his hand under his chin to keep his trap shut.

"Well, obviously that way was better, Jason, damn it," Jack snapped. "Could you try a little tact? Percy's going to go home to Annabeth, and we want—"

"I'm not. Stop it, Nico." Percy tugged Jack backward and put his hand on the inside of his black-clad thigh. Leo averted his eyes. "Leo, I don't want Annabeth to be hurt. Tell her whatever you want, but please don't say things that'll hurt her. Tell her, I don't know, that we're trying to keep our spirits up. She'll know I'm with Nico, that he and I are romantically involved. Just don't be obscene about it. Gloss over it. Tell her I love her. Tell her I love him, too. She'll understand. Please don't tell her about what you think you saw between me and Jason."

"I don't want to think about what I think I saw between you and Jason, man, so we're good there." Leo closed his eyes and tried to get the image of Percy and Jason naked and hugging out of his head.
"Really? That's it? Why the fuck is it okay, in your moral compass, for me and Percy to be together or me and Jason to be together, but not the two of them?" Jack's lip curled up in a sneer.

"Now you're acting like my regular asshole friend, Jack. It's making me more comfortable. Thanks." Leo finished off the last of his burger and took a huge slurp of his Coke. That bad boy in a cup was excellent, the perfect mixture of syrup, water, CO₂, and ice. "See, you're, how to put this..."

"Oh, gods, whatever you're about to say is going to piss me off, isn't it?" Jack fidgeted, but Percy chuckled darkly in his ear. Leo caught the way it made Nico shiver. "No, no. Nothing like that." Leo was about to be in deep shit, one way or the other. May as well go balls to the wall. "See, you are like a walking, talking...okay, you're like sex bait. Any guy or girl who sees you and likes guys wants to fuck you. I get that. I'm not personally one of those guys, but I've been around you enough to see the effect you have on people. Percy and Sparky, well, I know they're hot, for, like, people into guys, but they're not walking billboards that shout 'Hey, I'm a great fuck!' like you are. Does that make sense?"

Jack shook his head. "Not remotely, Leo. At least it's not as offensive as I thought it was going to be, I think."

"How's Annabeth?" Percy asked.

Leo didn't have much to say. He lived in Maine and hadn't seen Annabeth in person since the Santa debacle at Christmas. "She's hanging in, Percy. That's one tough lady. I saw her at Christmas and—"

"We saw how you scared the shit out of poor Maybelle," Sparky said. His grin made Leo smile. Gods, he'd missed the big guy, not just since he'd gotten all godded up, but for a long time. "You saw that? How?"

"Your dad hooked us up with HephaestusTV. It's in the man cave, but we don't watch it much anymore. Sometimes it shows you guys."

"My dad's mentioned the TV thing before. Told me a bit about it. Why don't you watch? I think if I was you guys I'd be all over spying on the rest of us."

"I've been spied on enough. I don't want to do it to others." Jack fingered Leo's Coke cup. Another one appeared, and he took a drink. "It's painful, Leo, seeing the people we love and watching you guys move on without us."

"Hey, we're not giving up on you. Don't give up on us." Leo laid his hand on Jack's knee.

"Piper's dating Connor," Jason said. "It's okay. You can tell her I'm happy for her. Hazel's getting married. Reyna's talking about moving in with Michael. You and Calypso have a life that keeps moving on. It's not a bad thing, and we don't hold it against you."

"But we're not a part of your lives, and we can't be again. Please, Leo, don't tell Annabeth I said that. We don't even know what's going to happen to us — if we'll be confined here forever like they left Calypso on Ogygia or what." Percy shook his head and embraced Nico so tightly Leo worried for a moment that Jack wouldn't be able to breathe. "We have each other, me and Nico and Jason, and that's the only good sure thing in our entire world."

"You won't get stuck here forever," Leo said. "So Nico fucked a god and you guys saved a bunch of people the gods had, like, destined to die. Lots of people have done worse. You'll come back to us."
Percy waved his hand, and Leo was bald. He waved his hand again, and Leo was outside the house. Before Leo could process it, he was back inside, sitting exactly where he'd been. Next, his hair was back, but his shoes were gone. Percy brought them back.

"I have a daughter I can't touch. If I lose my temper with Annabeth, I could hurt her. I will live forever, and my wife and my daughter will die. How do I go back?" Percy spread his hands and watched them like they were the weapons of an enemy.

Leo didn't have an answer. There wasn't a good one. Jack stood and tugged Percy with him to the gray chair. He pulled Percy down into his lap. There were soft whispers and tender caresses, and before Leo could find someplace else to look, Percy and Jack were making out like their lives depended on it, or at least, Percy's life did.

Seeing them suck face was like watching a slow motion train wreck. Leo couldn't look away. They'd been friends, Nico and Percy, and their relationship had been uncomfortably close, but as far as Leo knew, they hadn't been lovers for a long time, years and years. Percy was married, for Hades's sake! Jason sat there and watched the professed love of his life play tonsil hockey with his sworn enemy, like it was nothing more exciting or unusual than watching a good football game where he didn't care who won. Leo didn't know what to think.

Percy's hand slid under Jack's shirt like he was trying to pull it off, and Jack ended their kiss. "Sorry, Leo. Jace, I'm going to take care of him. I'll be back."

And poof, they were gone. Leo jumped and looked at Jason.

Sparky waved his hand in the general direction where Jack and Percy had been. "Nico'll be back. Percy sometimes takes a nap after."

"What in the hell is going on? Sparky...I don't even know where to start."

Jason's eyes had always been bluer than any Leo had ever seen. He'd always been a larger-than-life figure in Leo's world, with his huge frame and his amazing battle skills and his leadership and charisma. This version of Jason was all of those things magnified to a degree Leo couldn't fathom. Power rippled off him in the same way Leo used to be able to feel Jack's creepy-ass power, but it was even more intense. People had long joked that Sparky was the ideal god among men, but now he looked like he could be the king of the gods.

"Should I call you, like, Lord Jason or something?"

"Are we that different?" Jason asked softly.

"Yeah, you are. You haven't noticed?"

Sparky examined his hands. "No, I guess not. We don't have a mirror, and Percy and Nico look the same as ever to me. We don't change. I mean, our hair and nails don't grow. We don't get taller or fatter or—"

"You're all taller, Jay. You're eyes are bluer. You're more handsome. But it's not only the physical stuff. I feel your power, all three of you, but I notice it more now that the others have left the room. Before, when Percy and Nico were still out here, I guess I thought it was Nico; he felt like that before. It's definitely coming from you."

Jason sighed. "None of us wanted this. Can you keep the way we live our lives a secret? Like, swear on the River Styx and everything? I could use someone to talk to besides Nico and Percy."
"Sure, man." Leo could give him this. "I swear on the River Styx I won't tell anyone about what I see or hear here, unless you guys say it's okay."

Sparky nodded. "I don't know everything. Percy was the only one of us conscious by the end of our 'trial.'" Jason made air quotes. "We woke up in this little room, got told we were gods and were going to be punished, and they sent us here. No instructions, no plan, no way to see or contact anyone. We're confined by this invisible barrier, and it shrinks in on us every night until there's only room for the three of us to be all smushed up together. Nico's forced to be in the center. The barrier won't let him be anywhere else. It's part of his punishment."

"Sounds like a bad sci-fi movie."

"I suppose. Want to take a peek around?" Sparky cracked his knuckles and stood. He and Leo left the house and went down to the beach. "We were so scared and angry that first night. We slept out here, and the fact that we couldn't die was almost more terrifying than being in prison. The gods could do anything they wanted to us, and we'd have to bear it."

"How'd you end up with all this stuff? I mean, I don't want to seem insensitive, but the digs ain't too bad for being prison and all."

"We made everything you see, except the altars. A god visits us each day, and sometimes they tell us how to do stuff. A lot of them come out of curiosity or to try to get in Nico's pants. From what they've told us, he was a celebrity on HephaestusTV in a kind of triple x way. It's a sore subject. Your dad was good. The Olympian gods have been incredibly helpful and benevolent to us," Sparky said. Leo thought that was probably a crock that Jason threw in because he was hoping the gods would be more lenient.

"Glad I didn't say more about the TV when Jackie was here, then. Where'd they go, by the way?" Leo squirmed in his sneakers as they walked toward a basketball court and miniature golf course. He didn't want to bring up anything that might make Jason uncomfortable.

"They're in the bedroom." Jason gestured toward the house. "Can't you hear them?"

"No, and I imagine I don't want to."

Jason chuckled. "Percy's loud."

"I remember."

"I don't want to think about why you know that. His party, right?"

Leo nodded.

"That was a long time ago. Gods, I was furious." Jason frowned and glanced back toward the house. "This is where we do mini golf and basketball, obviously. Over to the left are our altars, and to the right is our trash pile. We got the altars on the second day, and that's where we get your letters and the offerings."

"It's weird to offer up shit to my friends," Leo said, though the guys felt less like his friends than he could have ever imagined they would. "You read the letters?"

Jason nodded. "We used to read them every day, but Hazel forgot once and that was bad for us. Don't tell her, but it devastated Nico. Now I pick up the letters every day, and we read them once a week. That way if someone forgets to write we have the other letters to soften the blow."
"Why are you the one to pick them up?"

"I lost the least."

Leo hadn't thought about how much his friends had lost. Godhood sounded like an awesome deal, as far as Leo was concerned. Maybe that was because he was already dating an immortal creature.

Leo's attention shifted to the trash pile. He headed over to take a peek, but Sparky pulled him back.

"It's not that interesting, Leo, trust me. We should get rid of it. There's Christmas decorations, a pink chair from Aphrodite, and other random junk. No Celestial bronze or anything good."

That was a bummer. They headed back to the house.

"But you're not mad about Jackie and Percy?" Leo asked once they were back on the couch. "I thought you and Percy hated each other, and you and Nico were trying to be a thing. Now... And why do you keep looking at the wall?" Leo pulled a few little bits of wire and a screwdriver from his tool belt and worked while he waited for Jason to talk. Busy hands helped calm his nerves.

"I'm looking in the door to the bedroom. You don't see it?"

Leo shook his head, and Jason hummed.

"Okay. Well, we have a bedroom. It's private. Only the three of us can know what goes on in there. The gods can't watch us there. I guess you can't see or hear it. Good. Don't ask to see it. Anyway, we've all made our peace with each other. It took a while, but we're past the stuff that tripped us up when we were mortal, at least most of the time. Percy and I like each other—"

"You and Percy seemed to more than 'like' each other."

"It's complicated, and I don't expect you to understand. We love Nico, and being in such tight quarters all the time, it's...we make some adjustments for the good of all three of us." Jason's face reddened. "Can we change the subject?"

"Gladly."

Leo had made a helicopter. He let it fly around the room. Both he and Jason watched it whir through the air.

"What Percy said about not going back..." Leo didn't know how to finish.

"He's probably right. I'm only saying this because he's too preoccupied to be listening to me, okay?" Sparky leaned toward Leo, and Leo leaned back. He could tell the big guy noticed. Jason grimaced. "We're too different. Nico and I, at least, probably can't find a way to make it work. Nico's made promises to his father about his service when he's done being a prisoner, if he's allowed to do what he wants, and I want to be with Nico. Percy...Percy struggles. We try not to think about it, but it's on all our minds, what happens after this. We'll have duties and responsibilities. I'll always be your friend, Leo, and it's better to see you than I can put into words, but I'm not a person you should count on being in your life."

"Sparky..." Leo didn't want to lose his friends, especially Jason. He hadn't thought about this god gig as a permanent thing. It was. The three sons of the Big Three didn't exist in Leo's world anymore.

"I'm so sorry."

"Gods, I wish I knew how to touch you. I'm giving you a mental hug," Jason said. His smile was so
gentle. Leo would miss him. "When you go home, and I'm shocked our wardens have let you stay here this long, tell everyone we love them and we're looking forward to seeing them again."

Leo nodded and wiped his eyes.

Jack appeared by the bureau, dressed and not at all disheveled. His lips were bright red. He watched Sparky and Leo uncertainly, until Jason patted the space between his legs.

"It's alright. I think Leo understands."

"I don't come close to understanding," Leo said. He smiled at Jack. "But I understand enough to know I'm an inadequate judge."

Jack sat between Sparky's legs and leaned into his chest.

"Percy sends you his love, Leo," Jack said. "He needed a nap, though."

"It's okay. I should go." The urge to leave was strong. He was making his friends and himself uncomfortable. "I didn't tell anyone except Calypso that I was coming. Don't worry, Jack, I swore on the River Styx I wouldn't tell anyone anything you guys didn't say was okay."

Jackie glanced back at Jason, who frowned and nodded.

"Thank you, Valdez. Do you want me to send you back home?"

"I have Festus. He's outside. You can do that?"

"I guess," Jack said. "Percy popped you out of the house. Jason or I can probably send you home."

"Thanks, but I think that I could use the flight to think." Leo stood. Jack and Sparky followed. They each put their hand out, and Leo wrapped his around theirs. "You guys are great. I'll miss you."

"We'll miss you, too, Leo," Jason said. "Thank you for being the most amazing best friend a guy could have."


Jack waved, and Leo left.

He'd barely made it onto Festus's back and into the air when he started to cry.
When Jason returned to his living room, bag packed, ready to travel, he found a note from Nico taped to the front door. There was a number and name at the bottom, and the note read, "Call the therapist to make an appointment, then come to Percy's." Jason did not want to do either. Nico wouldn't see him without the therapy appointment, though, that was pretty clear. Jason called the number, explained he had "anger issues," and got an appointment for the following Monday. He felt like he should ask for a doctor's note to show his ex-boyfriend, but the receptionist would think he was nuttier than he actually was.

Jason scribbled his own note for Piper. He could have called her, but he didn't want to hear the disappointment in her voice when he told her what he was doing. He left it on the kitchen counter and went next door to Percy's.

He let himself in and found Nico and Percy standing six feet apart, arms crossed. When Percy saw Jason, he scowled. The muscles in his arms clenched.

"Go stand in a corner or something, Grace, and wait for me and Nico to finish."

Jason rolled his eyes and leaned against the door. Nico hadn't acknowledged him. Percy watched Jason for a moment more before he unwrapped his arms from his body and walked to Nico. He pulled Nico close, his arms tight around Nico's waist. All Nico did was hold onto Percy's shoulders. Jason thought the whole show was for his benefit, but Percy started talking low and quiet to Nico, his face earnest and concerned. He didn't want Nico to go off with Jason. Jason could see why. He'd been the catalyst for Nico's breakdown, and he had been cold and cruel when it had happened. If his role and Percy's were reversed, he'd feel the same way.

Erebos came in then, went right to Jason, wove between his legs and rubbed up against him. Jason bent down and scooped up the cat. Holding Erebos, feeling the soft vibration of his purring, soothed Jason. Petting the cat also gave him something to do while Nico and Percy talked and caressed each other like lovers right in front of him. Eventually, Percy laid his head on Nico's shoulder, and they stopped talking. Nico's arms tightened around Percy's shoulders, and Percy cupped Nico's ass, which prompted Nico to shove him away, laughing. Percy smiled and took Nico's hand. Together, they walked over to Jason.

"Look, Jason," Percy said. "I told him I think this is a terrible idea. He's insisting on it. But I'll tell you this, and you'd better believe I mean it. If he comes back here tomorrow looking in any way worse than he does right now, or upset at all, I will kill you."

"Percy, don't be an idiot." Nico didn't put too much effort into it. Jason thought Nico secretly liked Percy's protectiveness.
"No. He needs to know I'm serious." Percy swept his lips over Nico's jaw. It wasn't exactly a kiss, but Jason couldn't think of what else to call it. It definitely wasn't something one friend would do to another. Percy returned his attention to Jason. "He needs to eat as soon as his alarm goes off—"

"Oh, gods, Percy, shut up. I'm not a baby. I take care of this stuff all the time on my own when you're not there." Nico was squirming uncomfortably, and Jason felt even worse for saying what he had about not being Nico's babysitter. Nico had to hate how vulnerable and dependent he'd been when he was sick, and Jason had made it worse by taking a mean swipe at it.

"I know. I know." This time, Percy put his hand on Nico's cheek, slid it down his neck, and let his fingers dangle inside Nico's shirt, rubbing his collarbone. Jason had to fight not to turn away. "I worry. He's...bad for you, baby. And the trip is long. You haven't driven that far before. And what if —"

Percy was talking so tenderly. His eyes were lined with worry. Jason had never seen Percy like this. He wondered if Nico hadn't been the only one forever changed by the depression.

"If something happens, I'll call you. You can text me all you want, okay? I'm going to be fine." Nico nuzzled Percy's face. Percy practically purred. Fuck.

"Call me when you get to Leo's."

"I will."

They were embracing again, and this time when Percy cupped Nico's ass, Nico didn't push him away. Their bodies melded together. Jason half expected them to start making out. He set Erebos down and pushed his hands deep in his pockets to keep himself from yanking them apart and dragging Nico out of the apartment. Sons of bitches. That should be him locked around Nico.

"I love you." It was Nico who said it, and Jason walked away.

He was fifteen feet toward the door when he heard Percy say, "I love you, too."

Jason walked out of the apartment and stood in the hallway. Moments later, Nico closed the door behind him and took his hand. They traveled through the shadows and landed in Nico's dark spare bedroom.

"We're not lovers. Me and Percy."

Nico was watching him, Jason could tell. He didn't return the gaze. Instead, he stared at the empty wall. "It seems like you are, even if you're not having sex, Nico."

Nico dropped Jason's hand. "Believe what you want. No one could go through what we have together and not be something different, closer, than friends."

"You mean the parts where I abandoned you?" Jason couldn't believe the callous way the words left his mouth.

"Yes, asshole. I'm going to get my stuff. You can come if you want or go wait in the living room."

Jason followed Nico into his bedroom and watched him pile a change of clothes, his laptop, and an obnoxious number of books into a fancy leather suitcase.

"I thought you were between semesters?" Jason tried to focus on the mundane stuff, not on Nico having an emotional affair with Percy or Nico sleeping with Apollo in a bed not five feet from where
he currently stood. The sheets were extremely mussed up.

"I am." Nico glanced up from his packing and gave a small smile. "I like to get a head start on my reading for the next semester."

"You didn't do that while I was here a couple Januarys ago."

"No. I was preoccupied."

Jason would give anything to go back to those January days.

"Reyna says you finished the spring semester with a 4.0 still."

Nico swiveled his head in surprise. "You talk to Reyna about my grades?"

Jason scratched the back of his head and tentatively moved closer to Nico. "I, um, checked up on you a lot. She hated it."

Nico narrowed his eyes. "How often is a lot?"

"Every day. I made an appointment with her so she couldn't refuse to see me. I needed to know you were, I don't know...safe, recovering. Piper would tell me at first, until I worked up the courage to start asking Reyna. If Reyna wasn't there, I called her."

"How long?"

"I started badgering Reyna in February, and I did it until I saw you at the wedding and could see for myself you were at least physically healthy. So four months, I guess." Jason didn't know why, but he was embarrassed to admit he'd been so sick with worry.

"Huh." Nico straightened and furrowed his brow. "Why would you do that? Jason, I know you cared some, because you sent Percy to me and I know it was you who got Reyna and Hazel to take the issue seriously, but why? Why check in on me everyday? You didn't care enough to stay."

"Annabeth got them to listen. I tried, but I was too upset and they thought I was stirring up trouble. They blew me off until she came in and showed them a picture Percy'd taken of you. Then they believed me." Jason could tell Nico didn't like that story one bit. He was probably bothered by the idea that Percy had sent a picture of him to Annabeth without him knowing. "I always cared. I was so scared, like, scared like I've never been in battle or facing certain death or anything else. I'm horrified by it now, but I couldn't handle how real and terrifying it was, that I could lose you like that."

"Reyna never told me."

Jason forced a small laugh. He was close enough to touch Nico now. He pushed his hands into his pockets. "Why would she? Everything that went wrong with you was my fault."

"Don't say that. You treated me like shit, but I was reckless and dangerous and did most of the damage to myself. Being rejected, especially by someone who's rejected me so much before," Nico paused and gave a horrible not-laugh, "it shouldn't have affected me that way. The way I loved you then wasn't healthy, and that was on me, not you."

"And now?"

Nico shook his head and zipped his bag. "Let's go. We can talk in the car."
Jason almost peed his pants when he saw Nico's car. He wasn't a car guy. Not at all. He couldn't even drive. But the thing looked like sex, like a giant glaring neon sign that said, "Sex Happens Here." The exterior was red and low and curvy, and the brown leather interior was so sleek and luxurious that Jason was afraid to sit on the seat.

"If this car was black, it would be a mechanical extension of you. Sex on wheels."

Nico glanced over at him and gave a real laugh. He had his hand on the seat near Jason's shoulder, and he was backing out of the car's parking spot. "Sex is all you ever think about, isn't it? This was my roommate's car. I didn't even know he had it until Percy and I needed it."

Jason watched Nico shift into drive and felt his dick stir. He looked out the window.

"Percy taught you to drive?"

"Yeah. My dad took away most of my powers after I got caught, so I needed some way to get around. Percy drove until I was well enough to do it myself."

"I knew your dad grounded you, but I didn't realize he could do that, take away your powers." Jason was horrified by the thought. "I'm surprised I've had powers at all."

Nico brushed his hand over Jason's knee and then quickly pulled it away, like he'd forgotten he wasn't supposed to do that.

"Sorry. Me, too. Maybe it's a temporary thing. After my dad returned my powers, they were stronger than ever, like he'd given me a boost. I thought it was from regaining my strength, but maybe it had to do with having them taken away, held by a god, and returned. It happened once before, too, but the effect wasn't as pronounced. Your dad probably doesn't want to make you stronger."

That made perfect sense. Jupiter feared Jason; he wouldn't want to make him stronger. The notion seemed crazy, the king of gods fearing his mortal son, but Jason understood. It was unrealistic to think he had the power to topple Jupiter, but it wasn't unrealistic that Jason had the urge to try. He hated his father for the things he and Juno had done. If Nico asked it of him, Jason would try to wrest the world from his father's grasp. Together, their combined powers would be terrifying. And Percy, gods, he'd follow whatever Nico asked, too. The three of them together, Jason was scared to think about it. They were exactly what Hades had said, that day in the cabin when all Jason had cared about was making sure Nico was alright after the eagles attacked. Percy was the most worthy; Nico was the smartest; Jason was the most power-hungry, the most willing to do the dirty, immoral jobs. The irony was that Zeus had created and nurtured the desire to ruin him by forcing Jason away from Nico.

And the other gods, wow. Nico had two Olympians, Apollo and Demeter, who were more loyal to him than to any other god. He had Hades and Persephone. Artemis would support her brother. Poseidon would support Percy. The ideas swimming in Jason's head were too big and terrifying to think about. He pulled his brain back into the car and focused on regaining the trust of the man next to him.

"I can't drive." Moron. Utter moron.
"I know." Nico may as well have added "stupid" at the end of his sentence because he was definitely thinking it.

"How long will it take to get to Leo? I didn't even know you two kept in touch to know where he lived."

"We don't. I can feel him, though."

"So what, we're driving around following your gut, or whatever makes you feel people's souls? That sounds like a recipe for getting lost. How are you even supposed to know what roads to take?"

"Dumbass. It's called Google."

Jason was starting to believe he really was a moron. "Oh."

"Plus, I'm good with geography, like maps and roads and stuff. It's a Hades kid thing, I think. I always know where I am and how to get where I need to go, at least if I'm feeling well-rested." Nico took a hand off the wheel and waved it around a little bit.

"I didn't know that. Could you always do that?"

"Yes. I never needed it much, though. Shadows are more convenient, and I couldn't drive anyway. Jules-Albert always knew how to get wherever I'd ask him to take me."

"How did that work? When you called him? Where'd the car come from?"

"I don't know. Stolen, probably. He just showed up in a car, unless I had one on hand."

"Weird."

"Mhm."

They crossed the Harlem River and jogged east for a bit before heading north once again. Jason marveled at how busy New York was, and how easily Nico was getting around. Jason would never be able to drive in a place like this.

"Could you always feel people's souls?" He was grasping at straws to keep the conversation going. The subject of Nico’s powers was interesting, anyway, and he was surprised at how there were new things to learn about a guy he knew better than anyone.

"I could always feel when people died, though when I was young, I didn't know that's what I was feeling. When Percy was in Tartarus, I realized I could feel him, remember? It never went away, being able to feel Percy. And obviously, I can feel you. That's how I found you when you got stabbed. I could have found you even without you being in mortal peril."

"Is that how you sent Leo for me that time I was sick?"

"No. I could have gotten to you myself, but I wasn't able to pinpoint your location for someone else back then. I got help getting your coordinates."

That meant Nico must have gotten Apollo to tell him. The god was strange. He adored Nico, way more than Jason would have thought possible. And he helped Jason sometimes. He was an unexpectedly decent man. Jason startled as he realized the sun was in his eyes. Apollo had withdrawn his curse. Did that mean Nico had his blessing to be here?

"Your roommate? He knows you're with me, doesn't he?"
Jason was slightly distracted by the way Nico ran his hand through his hair. The curls jumped, springier and shinier than ever.

"He says I need to spend time with you."

"Why? I mean, I'm glad, and that's what I want. Last time I talked to him, though, he gave me the impression he thought I was the worst thing possible for you."

"You were, then. It's..." Nico sighed and let his eyes flit to Jason. His hand moved from the steering wheel to the gear shift, and the way he palmed the knob fascinated Jason. It was hard not to imagine Nico's hand someplace else. Jason shook his head and forced himself to concentrate on what Nico was saying. "You know about Percy and Annabeth, right?"

"What? The kid? Yeah. Annabeth told Piper last night."

"Percy told me yesterday. It made me feel bitter, I guess, because I won't get the normal things like a husband and kids, and I want them. So I was feeling sorry for myself because I'm probably going to die soon."

"Don't say that."

Nico grimaced. "That's what my roommate said, too. But it's true, and the three of us know it. Anyway, he told me that I have today, and that you're my destiny and I need to figure stuff out with you. I don't know. It sounded better when he said it."

"It sounds pretty amazing when you say it."

"It doesn't mean we get back together. It could mean anything. It could mean we kill each other."

"That's unsettling." Jason tapped his hand on his leg and watched Nico's fingers do obscene things to the gear shift.

"He said it's my choice whether or not I'm happy."

"You don't believe him?"

"I do. He doesn't lie. It's just...it's been a long time since I believed I had any choices about anything in my life."

"You always have choices."

"Bullshit."

"You do. They may not be the choices you want, but that doesn't make them nonexistent. Look at all the shitty choices I've made. I made them. No one forced me into them."

"Sometimes they did."

"What if I'd never listened to them? What if, after the banishment, I'd defied them and told the truth and run off to be with you? I chose the easy path, Nico. I thought I was doing the right thing, keeping you safe, but what if it was all a bluff and I should have just tried harder?"

"Then we'd both be dead."

On that happy note, Jason lapsed into silence. He didn't believe they'd be dead. They could have hidden with Hades. They could have sought refuge from Apollo, who was enamored enough with
Nico to have given it to them. They could have taken their chances that Zeus wouldn't consider them a threat if they were removed from other demigods. Hell, Jason had never even told Nico the real reason Zeus wanted them apart.

"I'm sorry, for every choice I've ever made that hurt you."

Nico snorted. "You've told me that before."

"Yeah, well, I still mean it, and I've probably added about 6,000 things onto the list since then."

"Probably. You're a first-rate asshole when it comes to me."

"And what are you when it comes to me?"

Nico's gaze never wavered from the road.

"A fool."

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Nico had apparently neglected to mention it would take six and a half hours to get to Leo. Or that they were going to Maine. Details.

"What do you mean, six and a half hours!" Jason was doing the pee-pee dance in the seat next to him. "Fuck, Nico, that's the kind of thing you tell a guy before you get in the car!"

"I told you we were staying overnight. Why would we stay overnight if we were going somewhere close?" Nico was enjoying this a little.

"I don't know! For fuck's sake, maybe you wanted to visit with Leo longer. Shit. Pull off. I have to pee."

Nico laughed. His alarm would go off soon, so they may as well eat, too.

"You have a tiny bladder, Jason."

"Fuck you. We've been in the car for over three hours. Normal people pee, Nico."

Nico exited the highway and pulled into the first place he saw, a greasy spoon diner. Jason would love it. Nico would have indigestion the entire trip. *Ah, well, the things one does for love.* He mentally slapped himself. He was not doing this for love. It was for...scientific research purposes. He was seeing if it was possible to forgive and care for someone who'd been a complete asswipe. Not love.

Jason didn't wait for him to get out of the car. He barely shut his own door before running inside as fast as possible for someone who had to keep his knees locked together. Nico took his time getting out, locking the doors, and stretching. By the time he went inside the sun-filled diner, Jason was coming out of the bathroom. Jason grabbed him by the waist, pulled him close, and whispered, "Be glad you're a dude and don't have to sit."

Nico laughed and felt himself blush. Gods, Jason did things to him, physically, in ways Percy and Apollo couldn't match. That simple touch, the feeling of Jason's body heat, which wasn't any warmer
than Apollo's or Percy's, it sent shivers down Nico's spine. He looked at the floor, which he shouldn't have done — it was filthy — to keep from getting lost in Jason's eyes.

"Hands off."

"Fine." Jason scowled. "Don't say I didn't warn you, though. You'll probably puke. How you can be such a puker and be so good at deep—"

"Shut the fuck up, Jason," Nico hissed. It wasn't like they were alone. Half the diner could hear them.

Jason winked and sat at a booth. Nico pushed open the bathroom door, took one look, and decided he'd pee out behind the building when they left. He turned around and sat down across from Jason.

"Told ya."

Their knees bumped together, and Nico slotted one of his knees between Jason's legs to be more comfortable. He supposed they were both extremely tall now. Jason was taller, and probably always would be, but he was close.

"How tall are you?"

"I don't know. Six four maybe? Why?"

"I was wondering. I don't know how tall I am. My roommate changes out my clothes and he always seems to be an inch or two taller than me, so I never notice if I grow or not. I know I'm taller than Percy."

"Yeah, you're maybe six three. Two inches taller than Percy, an inch shorter than me. Seems right. Why does your roommate..." Jason gestured up and down.

Nico got it. If Jason asked why Apollo adjusted his height, it could give away that Nico was dating an immortal. Zeus and Hera may not be interfering with them spending time together, something Nico could feel in his bones, but that didn't mean Hera wasn't listening for hints about what god he was sleeping with. His stalking wasn't something she’d forgive and forget.

"He likes being taller than me. He says it's something about the ideal partner or something. It's dumb."

"I bet Percy—"

"Well, hello, boys." A waitress came over and placed a menu in front of Jason and one in front of Nico. She leaned over far too much when she did, so that both Nico and Jason were treated (in Jason's case) and subjected (in Nico's case) to an alarming amount of cleavage. Jason's eyes crossed keeping everything in view. Nico snorted. The waitress smiled at him and winked. She rested her hip against the back of Jason's booth and continued. "Are you boys doing some modeling around here or something?"

"Yes. You should check into it, too. Can we get some waters, please?"

The waitress purred at Nico while Jason's eyes went huge. Nico smirked.

"Ooh, I knew it! You are too pretty to be allowed. Dios mio, those lips!" The waitress settled further into her stance and stared at Nico.
Nico flashed a huge fake grin and winked the way the waitress had. "Thanks. I have to keep them in shape all the time. The waters?"

The waitress blushed and brushed her nails over her collarbone before snapping back into action. "Oh, right! Be right back, gorgeous."

"What the fuck are you doing?" Jason looked torn between laughing and being mad.

Nico shrugged. "She was going to hit on one of us. Better me than you."

"Better you because...are you into girls all of a sudden?"

"No, stupid. I'm not, but you are. I might get pissy if you keep ogling her breasts."

"I wasn't ogling."

"Yes, you were."

"Wasn't. I was noticing. I couldn't help noticing." Jason sounded whiny. Nico wanted to ball up his napkin and throw it at Jason's head. "Why in the world would I be remotely interested in anyone else when you're sitting right across from me? You look like sex. I got hard watching you drive."

Nico no longer wanted to hit Jason in the head with a napkin. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do with him, but it probably wasn't something appropriate to do in a restaurant. The guy got hard watching him drive? Jason was hypersexual, but good grief. Now Nico was needing to adjust the way he sat. Jason slowly licked his lips and leaned forward, biceps flexing. He slipped his finger over the outside edge of Nico's hand. Bastard.

"Here you are, darling."

Jason jumped back, and Nico could feel himself blushing furiously. The waitress reached out and combed her fingers through his hair, clearly thinking the blush was for her. Nico was not a good flirt. He had no idea what to do now.

"Thank you. You, um, look as though you've applied your makeup properly."

Jason howled so loud the entire restaurant stared. The waitress eyed Nico like she couldn't decide whether to be offended or flattered.

"I mean, a lot of ladies look like clowns when they wear makeup. You don't look like a clown."

Jason crawled under the table and popped up next to Nico, still laughing his head off. He wiped away tears and clapped his hand over Nico's mouth. His other arm wrapped around Nico's shoulders. Nico tried to shrug him off, but the big guy held on.

"I'm sorry, miss." Jason spluttered through his laughter. "My friend here doesn't get out much."

Nico elbowed Jason's ribs. The jab didn't even register. Damn his muscles. Jason laid his head on Nico's chest and stared up at the waitress. His hair tickled Nico's throat. Nico could imagine how sexy Jason appeared right now. Those eyes were so alluring, the glasses charming, the cheekbones and jaw hard and angular. His lips. Perfect. Jason's hand slipped from Nico's mouth and slowly stroked its way down to his stomach.

The waitress watched.

"You're together, aren't you?" Her hands were on her hips.
Nico felt Jason nod against his chest.

"I'm sorry, miss," Jason said. "You're lovely, but he's all I see. Hopefully, the same is true for him."

Nico nodded vigorously.

"I'm sorry, too." Nico was. He hadn't meant to be offensive. "I'm socially awkward, and I didn't know what to say. I didn't want someone else making eyes at him."

"You should have said that you were together," the woman said. She didn't seem amused or mollified. "I was more into you, anyway."

"I'm gay."

"I gathered."

Jason started laughing again. His lips grazed Nico's neck. Nico was torn between wanting to slap him away and pull him closer. Somehow his hand had found its way onto Jason's thigh. Gods, he had no self-control.

"We should go, Jace."


"We've been rude. We shouldn't impose."

Jason turned to the waitress and blinked once or twice. She slapped her hands down on her thighs and pulled out her notepad.

"Ugh. Tell me what you want."

Nico dropped his head on Jason's shoulder and let him order for both of them.

Jason stayed next to him as they ate their food, which Nico was sure the waitress had spit in. Jason had ordered him a salad, at least, and he wasted lots of time picking through the lettuce for any telltale saliva residue. Jason rolled his eyes and called him a weirdo, but he also kept his arm around Nico's shoulders and ate with one hand. When they were done, Nico paid and left a very generous tip.

As they walked back toward the car, Jason took his hand. The contact felt so natural, and when Nico walked to the driver's side door and Jason followed, pressed him up against the car and cupped his jaw, he wanted so badly to lean into the kiss he knew was coming. At the last second, he turned his face. Jason placed a kiss on his temple.

"I'm sorry," Jason whispered. He moved away and got into the car.

They didn't speak for the rest of the ride.

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By the time they go to Leo’s, Nico was ready to be out of the car. He'd thought he'd never tire of fine Italian leather and responsive handling, but the combination of his ass falling asleep and Jason sitting
silent and hulking next to him made him anxious to get away.

Bethel, Maine was very small, and Leo's place was easy to find. "Leo's place" consisted of a white two-story building with a small mechanic's garage and bakery on the bottom floor and an apartment on the top. Nico could feel Leo nearby, but the giant "Valdez Mechanicals" sign out front, complete with a rotating animatronic dragon's head tilted skyward and breathing fire, was a dead giveaway that they were in the right spot.

"I guess this is it, huh?" Jason asked. Nico knew he was trying to fill their empty spaces.

"You think?" Nico didn't even feel like being sarcastic; it was reflex. "He's upstairs."

They found an outside stairwell to the left of the shop and made their way up. Jason knocked while Nico hovered behind him and tried not to fall down the steep steps. He was tempted to hook his fingers through Jason's belt loops, but he refrained.

There was a clattering from inside and some yelling in Spanish. Loud, clunking footsteps approached the door, and it flung open to reveal Leo, shirtless and brushing his teeth. He was in the midst of yelling again and had his back halfway turned to the door. When he turned around fully and saw Jason and Nico, the toothbrush fell out of his mouth.

"Superman! Jack?" Leo peered over Jason's massive shoulder gawk at Nico. "What the hell are you two doing here? Together?"

Jason dropped his shoulders and eyed Nico in exasperation. "You didn't tell him we were coming? Or ask if this was an okay time?"

Nico shrugged and held out his hands. "It's Valdez. He's even more boring than I am. I knew he'd be home."

"Gods. You're fucking hopeless," Jason muttered. He faced Leo again. "Hey, Leo. It's great to see you, man. I'm sorry we didn't call first. I thought Nico did. If it's a bad time..."

"No, no, it's fine. It's great to see you guys. I can show you around my shop." Leo scooped his toothbrush off the floor and resumed brushing. Nico cringed. "Come in. Lemme tell Calypso you're here so she doesn't...yeah. Be right back."

Leo's little living room was sparse but sweetly homey. The furniture was all matching vintage stuff, maybe from the fifties. There were pictures and art on the walls. Nico picked up a photo from a table. It showed Leo and Calypso at a zoo, sitting together on a giant turtle statue. They were gazing at each other, and their expressions were so affectionate. Nico smiled and put the picture down. He looked up to find Jason staring at him.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just...you have such a beautiful smile."

Nico turned away so Jason wouldn't see his blush.

Leo bustled back in, this time with a shirt and without a toothbrush. He shoved his feet in tan workbooks that he didn't lace and hurried to the door.

"Come on. Let me show you downstairs while Calypso's getting ready."

Jason wordlessly followed Leo out the door, so Nico did, too. He wasn't sure what made him decide
this morning that he and Jason should go see Leo. It was a whim. He'd wanted to do something with Jason, spend some time with him, but going to a movie or out to eat sounded so trite. He wanted something where they could talk and connect. A drive had sounded nice. Now that they were here, he wanted to get back in the car and go home. Or better yet, have the car shipped home and shadow travel there. Or, ooh! Jason could drive the car home, and he could shadow travel right this second. Wait, Jason couldn't drive. Shit.

"Nico!"

Nico snapped out of his head and realized Jason and Leo were staring at him from the foot of the stairs while he was standing at the top, perfectly still, gripping the railing. He blinked a few times and tried to make his feet move. Jason bounded back up the stairs and took his hand.

"It's okay. Just walking and listening. You don't even have to talk if you don't want to."

Nico nodded and let Jason guide him down the steps. He hated those little brain glitches. They only happened when he was extremely nervous. He wondered if he was nervous to see Leo or nervous to be so far from home with Jason. They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Nico breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Jason squeezed his hand and let go, though he brushed the back of their hands together. Nico got the message. He could pick up Jason's hand again if he wanted. He did want to, but he kept his hand to himself.

"So anyway, now that Jackie's come back to the land of the living..." Leo pulled Jason by the shirt, and they went into the garage through the open bay door. The space looked like a normal mechanic's shop. Two cars on lifts occupied the bays. Neither car looked very impressive, but Nico knew nothing about cars. Grease stains littered the floor, and a burned rubber smell hung in the air. "Back here's where the magic happens."

Leo led them through the garage to a reinforced metal door covered with an image of a fiery Festus. The door was locked with a keypad entry, and Leo entered a sequence of about thirty numbers before the lock clicked open.

"Whoa." The awe in Jason’s voice was mirrored on his face.

Nico stepped inside to see what the fuss was about. Oh, my.

The expansive workshop was filled with celestial bronze gadgets and weapons and machinery. There was a forge (unlit) in the back, and Festus slept curled up on the floor to the right. Little bronze orbs spun and clicked and occasionally whirred through the air. The place smelled acrid, like Leo had been prepping dynamite. Nico took a wary look around to make sure there wasn't a bomb or something hidden among the piles of random junk.

Leo didn't say anything. He seemed content to let Nico and Jason wander around and look at everything. Nico could never forget he was a demigod, but he hadn't been around the life in almost two and a half years. This room brought it all back – the camps, the quests, the ache. Jason started to pick up one of the orbs, but Leo slapped his hand.

"Don't touch, Sparky."

Jason gave him a teasing salute and walked back to Nico. Nico leaned ever so slightly so his chest contacted Jason's arm. He instantly felt better, more grounded, and he couldn't even bring himself to be alarmed that Jason was already the solid thing he reached for when he was nervous.

"What are you working on? Well, what's the one biggest thing you're working on?" Jason asked.
Leo watched them, his eyes darting from Nico's face to Jason's and then to the absence of space between them. When he spoke, though, he answered Jason's questions.

"Remember that monster repellent, Jackie?"

Nico nodded.

"So I got this idea that if I could develop some vessel, I could spray it over large areas, like whole cities, and keep monsters from entering heavily inhabited areas. That way, the baddies wouldn't have access to as many mortals, and we'd have an easier time tracking where they are, that is, if we eliminate cities as places of monster residence."

Nico frowned. "Wouldn't you be bunching monsters up in rural areas, and making those people more susceptible to attacks?"

"Well, yeah, at least at first, but eventually I'd have enough spray and the means to apply the stuff in all populated areas."

"How long does it last?"

"Couple weeks." Leo bounded his shoulders around like he was a boxer trying to stay loose. "I'd have to reapply a lot. Working on making a longer lasting formula, too."

Nico didn't like it, and judging by Leo's expression, his discomfort with the idea showed on his face. He didn't like the idea of the monsters, terrible as they were, being boxed in, held captive, in essence, by an invisible fence. Being trapped was a horrific feeling. Nico's skin crawled thinking about it. He slipped his hand into Jason's.

"Do you think we can see the bakery?" Jason asked.

"Sure, sure. Let's go out, and I'll run back up and get Calypso." Leo seemed more jittery than usual. He led them back out through the garage and into the sunlight. Nico took a deep breath. His lungs felt cleaner, and his head cleared some. Leo excused himself and ran back up the stairs.

"Hey."

Nico looked up and saw Jason staring at him in concern. Jason could be so kind. He could be gentle. Without warning, those blocked memories came flooding back, and Nico doubled over as wave after wave of warm, loving memories of Jason washed over him. How could he have forgotten how safe and loved Jason had made him feel? Jason held Nico's hips and stroked his back.

"I'm not about to throw up." Nico kind of felt like he was.

Jason laughed. "I know. But you need a friend."

Nico lurched upright and pressed into Jason's warm body. Tucked his arms in. Let himself be soft, be held. "I remember you," he whispered. "The real you, underneath the anger and the cruelty. Please come back to me, Jace."

"Oh, Nico." Jason squeezed so tightly that Nico could barely breathe. "I'll find my way back, I swear."

Leo cleared his throat. Jason caressed Nico's cheek and released him from the hug. Their hands locked together. Nico turned and saw Lady Calypso, elegant and timeless, in front of him. He liked her. She was calm and quiet and curious like him.
"My Lady," Nico said. He bowed.

"Calypso," Jason said. He didn't bow, but he smiled that devastatingly handsome smile of his.

Calypso smiled back. "Nico, my dear, please don't bow. It's good to see you both. I'm glad we were home to greet you."

"I'm sorry," Nico said. "I should have called first. Jason didn't know I hadn't."

With a wave of her hand, Calypso dispelled Nico's worries. "It is not a problem. Leo says you would like to see the bakery."

"Yes, please."

Calypso nodded and led them to the bakery. A bell tinkled when they entered. The floors were a deep red stained concrete, the walls a muted blue. Nico didn't know how the colors worked together, but the effect was lovely. The chairs and tables were all wooden, and a huge display counter showcased at least twenty varieties of baked goods.

"Ooh, wow! Brownies!" Jason said, pulling Nico with him to get a better look.

"Miranda," Calypso said, directing her attention to a young red-headed girl behind the counter. "These are friends of Leo's and mine. Please treat them to anything they'd like while they're in town."

"Yes, Ms. Valdez."

Nico snapped his head around and gaped at Leo, who shrugged. "It's easier that way."

"But you haven't..."

"Nah. Not yet. Someday." Leo grinned from ear to ear and gave Calypso a peck on the cheek.

"Hey, do you want a brownie or something?" Jason asked. "Will your alarm go off again soon?"

"I'm not hungry." Nico checked his watch. "I have another hour or so. Don't worry about it. You're going to end up as bad as Percy." He slapped his forehead. "Oh, shit. I forget to check to see if he texted or tell him we made it here safely. Hang on."

Jason scowled, but Nico let go of his hand and took a seat at one of the tables. Percy had texted twelve times. Nico sighed and sent off several long information- and apology-filled texts. Percy texted back instantly. Nico repeated his sigh with more gusto.

"Valdez, get over here."

"Always so pleasant, Jack. What?" Leo meandered toward him.

"Percy wants a picture with me and you to prove I'm here with you and haven't been abducted by Jason or some other monster. His words, not mine."

"Fucker." Jason mouthed the word over a bite of brownie. He'd gone to sit at a different table nearby. Nico figured he was going to pout because Percy was getting Nico's attention.

"Percy needs to get a grip, dude. He knows you're not his property, right?" Leo asked.

Nico ignored him. Leo squatted down next to him and smashed their heads together. Nico snapped
the picture and sent it off to Percy. He was surprised when Leo didn't move.

"Nico?"

This couldn't be good. Not if Leo was calling him by his proper name.

"What?"

Leo hesitated, lips pursed. "Nothing."

He stood and moved away.

That was weird. Nico looked over at Jason, who was chatting with Calypso. Jason's eyes darted to him. Nico could read the expression. Jason was worried. Leo walked to Calypso and ran his hands over her hair. She smiled, then turned to Nico.

"Come upstairs and have dinner with us, gentlemen."

***

Dinner consisted of salad and pizza in Calypso and Leo's cramped, cozy kitchen. The floors were white linoleum, and the counters were a funky blue. The room reminded Nico of his villa back at Camp Jupiter, which made him a little melancholy, but even if he'd never been forced out, he would've left for school. He wasn't meant to live in New Rome. It would've been nice to be able to visit, though.

Leo and Calypso danced around each other while making the food. They traded quips and information about their day. There was a lot of laughter between them. Jason sat next to Nico and held his hand. Neither of them spoke unless spoken to. Nico thought Jason probably felt the same way he did; being around people whose lives had worked out the way they wanted was strange. Hazel and Frank had it, too, and although it made Nico extremely happy for them, it also made him sad for himself. Even Annabeth and Percy didn't have this easy love. They had to work and scrape for everything they had, and Nico would sometimes catch Annabeth watching Percy watch him.

"Alright, boys, please eat up," Calypso said as she laid the pizza out on the table and Leo thunked down the salad bowl. They sat across from Nico and Jason. Leo scooped salad out for himself and Calypso and cut them both a piece of pizza. It was sickeningly sweet. Nico felt like a trespasser.

Nico grabbed two pieces of pizza and slapped one on Jason's plate a little harder than he'd intended. Jason stared at him and scooped salad into their bowls. He put way too much dressing on Nico's. Nico switched their bowls before Jason could bury the other bowl in an avalanche of heart attack. Jason scowled, picked up his fork, and began eating. He was still pouting about Percy.

Nico's alarm went off, and he was so embarrassed. Calypso and Leo stared at him with big, questioning eyes, and he stared back and listened to the beep. Jason gently pulled Nico's wrist up to his face and, squinting through his glasses, turned the alarm off. Nico couldn't hide his surprise.

"Percy texted me about it." Jason didn't snap at Nico, but he almost snapped at him. "Can you tell him to back the motherfucking hell off? Sorry about the language, Calypso."

"I didn't even know you had a phone," Nico said. He didn't know what to say about the other stuff.
"Piper gave it to me when we moved here. She, Percy, and Annabeth are the only ones who have the number."

Nico watched Leo make a face. Why wouldn't Leo have Jason's number? Hell, why wouldn't Jason know Leo was living in Maine?

Everyone ate silently for a while. The pizza and salad were both delicious.

"Nico, Leo and I have been meaning to write you a note of thanks," Calypso said. She gestured to the apartment. "It was a most generous gift."

"I didn't do anything." Really. Nico didn't remember giving them a gift.

"Dude, a lady with bat wings showed up at MIT and told me 'Master di Angelo' insisted she buy us a garage/restaurant wherever we wanted." Leo stuck his tongue out at Nico. "Scared the shit out of me, but I finally believed her when she pulled out some super-cute little Nico baby pictures."

"Oh, gods, Alecto. I guess I did do that." Nico vaguely remembered asking Alecto to take care of it for him two Thanksgivings ago. "She wasn't supposed to let you know who it was from."

"Again, Jackie, bat wings." Leo laughed and flapped his arms around. "Even I would've figured it out eventually. Thanks."

Nico shrugged. He could feel the weight of Jason's stare. "You went and fetched Jason for me."

Leo grimaced. "Yeah, 'stupid is as stupid does and all the rest of that shit.'"

"Leo..." Calypso said it quietly, like a warning.

"What's that supposed to mean, Leo?" Jason's voice sounded like a warning, too.

Leo wasn't good with warnings. He stabbed his fork into his salad. "How's Pipes? She know you brought Jackie up here for a sunny little vacay in Maine?"

"Yes, she does. You don't know what you're talking about, Leo, so leave it."

"Yes, she does. You don't know what you're talking about, Leo, so leave it." Jason's hand painfully clenched Nico's. "We have an understanding."

"Oh, yeah, what's that? You dump her every time Jack pays attention to you again and she takes it? Or just cheat on her if that's more convenient for you?" Leo's cheeks were getting red. "No offense, Jackie. I don't blame you. He fucks your head over so much."

Before Nico could say, "I'm kind of offended, Leo," Jason jumped up from his chair and began pacing the room. Leo's hands were smoking. Calypso sighed and grabbed the fire extinguisher off the counter.

"Fuck, Leo, you're supposed to be my best friend—"

"I'm her best friend, too, Jason. And Hazel told me the ways you've messed Nico over. You can't switch back and forth when you get bored."

"That's not what I'm doing!"

"Leo, please, we shouldn't be prying," Calypso said. She placed a tentative hand on Leo's cheek. "We don't have all the information."

"No, we have Piper crying over the phone every time my 'best friend,'" Leo's voice dripped sarcasm,
"breaks her heart. How'm'I supposed to take that in stride, Jason, and not have it affect me? I care about you guys, and she's not the one cheating. And hell, don't even get me started on this idiot." He gestured to Nico. "What the hell are you even doing with him, kid? He broke your heart and left you for fucking dead!"

Nico looked at his hands in his lap. "I don't know. It's hard to explain."

A sound like a bug zapper startled Nico. In front of him, Leo's hands and nose were on fire. Calypso pulled the pin on the fire extinguisher so it would be ready for use. Nico found Jason standing five feet behind him, face bright red as electricity raced up and down his arms and arced across his hands. He was terrifying. Nico stood quickly and approached. Jason had to calm down, or he and Leo were going to destroy the entire building.

"Can you, um, deal with your idiot and I'll deal with mine?" Nico asked Calypso. She nodded. "Jace, I don't want to get electrocuted, so—"

"So back off, then," Jason snarled.

"Okay, I won't get closer, but let's try to calm down. I can help you breathe."

Jason ignored him and focused on Leo. "It's not that easy! You get the person you want! I don't, except for random times when some god isn't paying close enough attention or I almost get killed. Then, he's mine, but it never keeps! It's not like you, with your perfect little fucking life up here, Leo. Imagine you didn't get Calypso off that island. Imagine you got her off and she loved another guy, too. Imagine it took so long to get her off there that you settled for someone else. Gods, imagine you made every mistake possible. Wouldn't you still want to try to have her?"

"Not the way you do him! I wouldn't hurt her to have her!" Leo was on his feet now, too. "Sparky, you're the best guy I know. I love you. You've gotta quit making excuses for your fuck-ups and take responsibility for them."

"That's what I'm trying to do!" Jason gestured wildly at Nico, and an arc of electricity whipped dangerously close. "I'm trying to make things right with him. I tried to make things right with Piper, too, and she didn't want me to. She told me she doesn't love me but I'm convenient, Leo. She asked me to stay with her, even though I told her I love Nico instead. She said she doesn't care, and I should let her know when I start up with Nico again. It's not what you think it is."

Gods, that was more callous than Nico could imagine Piper being. Fresh guilt sprang forth for the ways he and Jason had hurt her.

"Oh." Leo had been in a crouched fighting stance, but he stood up straight. The flames in his hands and on his nose extinguished. "Well, that's different, then."

"You think?" Jason's voice was still gruff and angry.

"Jace, let's put the light show away," Nico said.

Jason nodded and closed his eyes. Nico wished he could touch him, help him. The electricity lessened in intensity until it vanished. He rushed forward to hug Jason and was rewarded with a sharp current flooding through him as soon as he touched Jason's shoulders.

"Shit!" Nico hopped away and sat at the table. His limbs burned, and his joints ached.

"Oh, gods, Nico! I'm sorry!" Jason crouched next to him. "I needed to discharge it first. Are you
"okay?"

Nico put his head in his hands. Damn, that hurt. The hairs on his arms stood straight, and the ends were crispy. He wanted to tell Jason he was fine, but he felt a little woozy.

"Here," Calypso said. She returned the pin to the fire extinguisher and set it back on the counter before shooing Jason out of the way and assuming his spot next to Nico. She slid her hand up Nico's shirt and placed her palm over his heart. Then she began to sing.

She wasn't the kind of healer Apollo was, but Nico instantly felt better. Her voice was so soothing, and her face was kind. Nico fixated on her and let himself calm down. He was vaguely aware of Jason and Leo giving each other sloppy hand-over-mouth kisses and talking about reigniting their bromance. He began to feel alert enough again to make out their conversation.

"It's so wasted on Jackie," Leo was saying. He and Jason each had an arm slung over the other's shoulders. "I can't even be properly jealous of my girl feeling up a hot guy."

"But he's so pretty," Jason said.

"And she's so pretty," Leo added.

"We can at least enjoy the view."

Calypso smirked up at Nico. "It appears they have healed their rift. I'm sorry it ended in your electrocution. Are you feeling better?"

"Much, thank you."

Calypso withdrew her hand from Nico's shirt and turned to face Jason and Leo.

"Nico needs to rest. Where are you staying this evening?"

"Oh, I didn't make reservations. I thought I'd be spontaneous for once," Nico said. He was regretting that right now.

"There's a B&B about six blocks down," Leo said. "We can give you a ride."

"We came in a car," Jason said. "But I can't drive and Nico probably shouldn't, huh?"

"Yes," Calypso said. "No driving until tomorrow for Nico. Leo will drive Nico in your car, and you and I will walk."

Jason nodded. Nico was glad Jason was taking charge for the two of them. He wanted to sleep. Jason came and stood over him.

"I know you're going to hate this, but I need to get you out of here." He hoisted Nico into his arms, bridal style, which caused Nico to snap out of his stupor. He swore and kicked, but Jason didn't put him down. Once they were outside and heading down the steps, Nico buried his head in Jason's chest and stayed still. Gods, he hated stairs. At the bottom, Jason sat Nico down and wrapped an arm around his waist. He guided him to the car and buckled him in. On the other side of the car, Leo was having a fanboy moment over the wheels. Jason patted Nico's shoulder. "I'll see you in a few minutes."
Jason had a nice walk with Calypso. She didn't ask him about anything heavy or guilt-inducing. She told him about how busy the garage and bakery were during ski season, when the resorts around town opened and vacationers flocked to the White Mountains. She explained that the locals had been slow to warm up to them, but that was to be expected for such a small town. They'd lived here, she said, since Leo graduated, and the place was slowly starting to feel like home. Jason apologized for being so distant from Leo, but Calypso shushed him and said it didn't matter — he and Leo had made their peace.

Peace was not what Jason and Calypso found when they entered the foyer of the bed and breakfast. Leo was facing them, leaning up against Nico's back and making obnoxious faces. Judging by the look on the face of the woman behind the counter, whatever Nico was doing was twice as obnoxious.

"Thank the gods!" Leo shouted. He shoved Nico into the counter, which earned him a kick in the ass (how Nico had managed to correctly aim without looking was impressive), and strode toward them like he was escaping a burning building. "Jack's being his usual charming self. You better get in there, Sparky, or no place in town is going to give you a room. See ya."

Leo didn't wait for a response. He pressed his hand to the small of Calypso's back and guided her out the way she'd come. Jason squared his shoulders, righted his glasses, and plastered on his most charming smile. He walked over to Nico and flung a friendly arm around his shoulders. Nico shrugged him off.

"Look, ma'am," Nico sounded as mean and sarcastic as Jason had ever heard him, which was saying a lot. "Kick one of the other people out and give me two rooms. I'll pay you double whatever anyone else is paying."

"That's not the way we work, sir." The lady was condescending, though she kept glancing at the black credit card in Nico's hands. Jason could understand. Nico looked older than he was, but he still looked young, and getting ordered around by an arrogant, gorgeous, rich college kid was probably enough to set any forty-something's hair on end. "We have one room. If you want it, you'll need to present identification proving that you are over twenty-one."

"We'll take it," Jason said. "I'm twenty-one, and I have my ID on hand. He's paying, though."

Nico glared at him. "We need two rooms."

"No, we don't." Jason tried to disagree as pleasantly as possible. He didn't want the lady to think they'd trash the room. "One is fine. I can sleep on the floor."

"We need two."

"We'll take it," Jason said again, directing his smile at the lady. "Here's my ID. He'll pay you double for the room to make up for the disturbance he's caused. Nico, give the nice lady cash."

Nico started swearing in Italian, but he opened his wallet and counted out the money. Someday he'd end up mugged, as much cash as he carried around. Jason would know. The lady thumped a pen and paper on the counter.

"You," she pointed to Jason, "fill this out. You," she pointed to Nico, "stop cussing. I may not know what you're saying, but I can tell foul language when I hear it. Be glad your friend seems like a nice boy, mister. And I still want your credit card on file."
"Money. Card." Nico slapped them overly hard onto the counter. "Can I get the room key now?"

"It's going to your friend." The lady turned to Jason, who was finishing up the paperwork. Sweetly, she said, "Here you are, sir. You're up the stairs, second door on the left. Check-out is at 11am. Breakfast is served from 8 to 10."

Jason took the key, which was an actual key, not a card, and flashed the lady another grin. "Thank you very much, ma'am."

Nico stuck out his tongue at the lady. Jason had to bite his lip to keep from laughing when the lady stuck out her tongue right back.

"Neeks, honey, you could have handled that better," Jason said as they walked up the stairs. He knew Nico's stair phobia meant he wouldn't get hit for making the comment.

"Don't you 'Neeks, honey' me. And don't call me 'honey.' Or Neeks. Brat." Nico lapsed back into Italian, and Jason laughed to himself. It had been a long time since he'd heard Nico grumble in Italian. Gods, it was endearing — in the same way all Nico's rude behaviors seemed endearing when they didn't piss Jason off.

Jason put the key to the lock of the door and pushed his way inside. The room was cozy and cute. The wallpaper was a bit old-fashioned, with a little pink rose pattern, and the carpet was a pastel blue shag. The bed was small, maybe a full-size, and it had an oak four-poster frame and a pink quilt. There was a chair, but no sofa. Seemed Jason really would have to sleep on the floor.

"Fuck. We've entered the room of 1850s Barbie," Nico said.

"I don't think they had wall to wall carpet in the 1850s, Nico. Or Barbie. Come on. It's not that bad."

Nico gave Jason the look that wilted flowers when he passed. "I hope you enjoy sleeping on Barbie carpet tonight."

"That's not even a very good taunt."

Nico stared at Jason, and Jason felt triumphant, outsmartassing the king of the smartasses, for once. Then, Nico crossed his wrists and slowly dragged the hem of his shirt higher. His fingers trailed behind the fabric, brushing across his flawless white skin. Jason knew Nico's skin was velvety soft, and he was entranced, watching the slow exposure of it, all silky with hard, powerful muscles underneath. Nico's fingers caressed his skin, pressing into the flesh of his stomach, his sides, his chest, before pulling the shirt off. Jason's mouth was dry. Nico smirked at him and unbuttoned his jeans. Jason watched the zipper slip open, exposing so much off-limits skin and the faint dark suggestion of hair. No underwear, which Nico no doubt intended Jason to notice. Gods, Jason wanted him.

Nico fished in his pocket and threw the car keys at Jason. They hit his chest and bounced off.

"Go out to the car and get our bags. I'm going to take a shower."

Nico had started toward the bathroom when Jason found his voice. "Tease."

"Please. I don't even enjoy being looked at." Nico stopped walking. His jeans were sliding down. They barely covered his ass.

Jason stepped over the car keys and grabbed Nico's upper arm. He whirled Nico around so they were face to face and let go, opting to trail one finger down Nico's body, from his sternum to his
bellybutton and further, following that trail of dark hair until his finger reached the bottom of Nico's zipper. Jason dipped his head and slid his lips up the side of Nico's neck, over his jaw, until he could whisper in his ear. "You may not like anyone else to see, but you have always wanted me to notice you. You like it when I watch you."

Jason trailed his hand back up Nico's body until he cupped his jaw. He turned Nico's head to the other side, letting his lips drag across Nico's face to the other ear. Nico shivered. Jason whispered again. "I like watching you."

He bit Nico's earlobe and stepped back, picking up the keys and leaving the room. He took the stairs two at a time and almost knocked over a young couple entering the building as he exited. Gods, that had been hot. Nico was teasing him, and Jason knew he wasn't going to get any sex out of it, but damn, it had felt good. It was exhilarating, knowing he could affect Nico as intensely as Nico could affect him.

Jason grabbed their bags from the car and made his way back to their room. He knew it was fantasy, but maybe he could join Nico in the shower, slip in behind him and kiss his neck, turn him around and kiss his mouth, stroke his back, knead his ass...

When Jason got back, Nico was out of the shower, shivering, impatient, and cranky. Figures. Even the towel wrapped around him was too high and covered way too much. Nico snatched his bag out of Jason's hands and locked himself back in the bathroom. Jason turned down the bed and dug through his own bag for some pajamas. The floor looked extremely unappealing as a place to sleep.

Jason waited by the door for Nico to get out of the bathroom. The sink was running. Nico must be brushing his teeth. He was annoyingly fastidious. This could take forever. Jason knocked on the door.

"Nico, let me in. I want to get a shower, too."

There was a garbled reply that sounded suspiciously like, "Quit rushing me, douchebag."

Nico's endearing little traits didn't feel so endearing now. Jason banged on the door. The water turned off.

"What?"

"Let me in, damn it."

Nothing.

"Please?" Jason tried to put as much whiny sadness behind it as he could. He heard Nico huff in annoyance and smiled.

A moment later the door opened, and Nico stepped out wearing clingy black pajama bottoms. Jason reached out to him, but Nico shoved his hand away. Jason rolled his eyes and went into the bathroom to take the fastest shower of his life. He was out no more than ten minutes later. There was a window in the shower area that didn't quite close all the way. Jason was freezing. No wonder Nico had been so cranky.

Back in the bedroom, Nico was stretched out on the bed, a book and his laptop spread in front of him, his phone in his hand. He'd turned off the overhead light so the room was lit only by a dim lamp on the nightstand. When he saw Jason, he tossed one of the pillows on the floor.

"Thanks." Jason loaded as much sarcasm as he could into the word.
"Don't mention it."

"Are you going to bed right now?"

"Does it look like I'm going to bed right now?" Nico widened his eyes and gestured at his gear.

"Will you sit over in the chair then and let me have the bed for a bit? I'm cold."

"Um, no. The chair's by the window. It's cold over there."

"Fine. Let me have the blanket then. You're not using it."

"Also no. There are probably fleas on the floor or something. The blanket stays on the bed."

"You're being a dick on purpose."

"It's my natural state, Jace. Did you forget?"

Jason picked up the pillow and threw it back on the bed. He shoved Nico's leg until he had enough room and flopped down on half of the bed. Nico squawked in protest.

"Nope. Quit bitching," Jason snapped. "I said you could sleep on the bed. You're not sleeping, so I'm laying here until you're ready to go to sleep."

Jason pulled the covers up to his shoulders while Nico kicked halfheartedly at his back and ass. Jason wasn't about to budge. Nico slipped his freezing cold toes inside Jason's pants and pinched his ass. Jason squealed, but he didn't complain when Nico left his foot there; he reached back and massaged it, trying to warm it up some. If icicle feet was the price to pay for intimacy from Nico, Jason was willing to pay it.

Pretty much the whole visit with Leo had been a positive on the "intimacy with Nico" front. Except the fight with Leo and the Percy obnoxiousness. And the electrocuting Nico part. Jason rolled over onto his back, even though it meant Nico pulled his foot out of Jason's pants.

"I'm sorry I electrocuted you."

Nico glanced over at him and laughed. "I think 'electrocuted' is kind of a strong word. Shocked the hell out of me, though."

"Percy's gonna have a heart attack when you tell him. He'll want to kill me for real."

"I'm not telling him about it. If you're smart, you won't, either."

Jason rolled over so he faced Nico. Nico was still messing on his phone, probably texting Percy. He had a Word document pulled up on his laptop. Jason dragged the computer toward him and read. Nico’s work, full of textbook notes, was jargon-heavy, and Jason couldn't make much out. He was reminded how smart Nico was.

"Nosy much, Jace?"

"You're supposed to graduate next year, right?"

"Yes."

"Three years for a degree in public policy? That's impressive."
Nico shrugged. "School's good for me. Keeps my head clear."

He closed his book and laptop and sat them on the floor. He typed away at the phone and then set it on the nightstand.

Jason said, "Talking to Percy?" at the same time Nico said, "Tell me about school for you."

Jason smiled. "School's going well. I'm going to finish at Columbia, which you probably already knew. I'll graduate next spring, too."

"Won't you do student teaching? How does that work?"

"I'll do it in the spring. That and the companion class will be all I'll do that semester. I'm excited but nervous."

Jason was terrified, to be honest. He didn't feel ready to teach children, not formally. It all seemed to be happening so fast.

Nico chuckled and ran a hand through Jason's hair. "You'll do a wonderful job. The kids will love you. What grade, do you think?"

"Elementary somewhere. I should get some say, so I think I'd like to check out the older elementary crowd, fourth or fifth graders. The little kids have too many accidents."

"I can see why cleaning up kid piss wouldn't be high on your to-do list."

Jason laughed and fingered the hem of Nico's pants. The fabric was soft and expensive feeling. He slid his hand over Nico's ankle, which made him remember the last time he'd done that. He bent lower and laid a kiss on the spot. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want to talk about it," Nico said. He pulled his leg away, and Jason felt awful until he realized Nico was moving to lay down next to him. "Yes, I was talking to Percy."

"Can I ask about you and him?" Jason was nervous to ask, but Nico was lying facing him, both his face and body open and relaxed. If there was ever a time to talk, it was now.

"Ask. Some things are private, though."

"I know you're not sleeping with him, at least I think you aren't." Nico nodded and Jason continued. "What are you to each other, for real?"

"He's my best friend, Jason. It almost hurts me more that you're not my best friend anymore than it hurts that you aren't my boyfriend. He's been so good to me, and we love each other."

"You're in love with each other. I know you were before, but it's true now, too, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I love him. He loves me. I try not to think too much about what kind of love it is."

"He wants you. That's pretty obvious."

Nico shifted and laid on his back. Jason took in how erect his nipples were. He wanted to touch.

"I want him, too. Sex is comforting, which I know you know. It helps me cope. But I like being intimate with Percy. He's the only person I've ever been with who's never used sex as a way to control me, which you probably hate to hear. It's been a long time since you've done that to me, Jason, but the lesson was pretty lasting and powerful."
Jason nodded. "I understand. I wish I could take those times away or fill you with enough good memories to drown those out. I'm glad Percy hasn't ever treated you like that."

"Me, too, to all of it."

"What does it help you cope with, the sex?"


"A—your roommate gave me the notebook you filled, apologizing to me." Nico turned his back on Jason. Jason understood. The words Nico had written were too raw and personal, too private, to face Jason while he talked about them. "I read it all. I read the postcards. I never meant to make you feel less than me. You're the most wonderful, brave, strong, smart, fantastic person I know. There isn't any part of you that I would change. I'm the one who has a notebook of apologies to write and a list of shortcomings a mile long."

"I'm tired, Jason. Turn out the light and let's sleep."

Jason reached behind him and shut off the light. He laid his glasses on the nightstand and was trying to decide if he was allowed to stay in the bed or if he'd be booted back to the floor when Nico scooted until his back was pressed against Jason's chest. Tentatively, Jason wrapped his arm around Nico's waist. When Nico didn't shake him off, he wriggled his other arm under Nico's head. Nico kissed Jason's arm and sighed when Jason started making slow arcs with his fingers from Nico's shoulder to his elbow and back.

Jason buried his face in Nico's hair and thanked Hades for letting him hold his son once more. He fell asleep with his lips pressed to Nico's skin.

Chapter End Notes

Leo Valdez, ladies and gentlemen. We're getting to the meat of many of the moral matters these days.
Leo quotes Bruce Springsteen quoting Forest Gump (from the movie of the same name). Springsteen's song is perfectly titled for Jason and Nico, My Best Was Never Good Enough.
The B&B where Nico and Jason stay isn’t based on a real Bed and Breakfast. It’s the only hotel in the story that doesn’t exist. All the Bethel B&Bs I researched were lovely, but I wanted Nico to be uncomfortable, at least a little, so from old memories, I cobbled together a room that seemed most likely to be annoy him.
Book rec: The Red Rising trilogy by Pierce Brown is a masterpiece. I love it, and can’t imagine any Percy Jackson fan wouldn’t adore the series, too. It’s deep, morally complex, full of action, and has beautifully written characters. Anyone else already read it?
Percy had struggled more since Leo's visit. He was thrilled when Nico was touching him, sexually or otherwise, and when they were having sex of some sort in general. He managed when he and Jason were playing video games or shooting hoops. When Jason napped and Nico read, Percy escaped to the ocean.

The times that were hardest were after the barrier closed around them at night and they'd had as much sex as they could manage in such an enclosed space. He would curl into Nico's long arms and kiss him off to sleep, then lower his head and listen to Nico's heartbeat as long as he could. If Jason was still awake, they'd talk quietly while Jason rubbed Percy's shoulder or chest. Eventually, both Jason and Nico would fall asleep, though. Percy would lay awake, listening to Nico's heart and lungs, and take an inventory of Nico's body, from his toes to counting the curls in his hair. When he was done with Nico, he'd inventory the parts of Jason he could reach.

Percy would take his inventories over and over throughout the night, until first light would break and the barrier would expand. Then he'd push his way under Nico's cool body and let the weight of his love buoy him into a bit of sleep. Jason and Nico would wake and chuckle at Percy's new position. Because the gods needed no sleep, Percy would wake and suffer no physical ill effects from his nights spent counting and checking over his lovers. His greater inner turmoil stayed hidden.

The morning that Athena dropped into their prison an hour before their normal visiting time, Percy was feeling more stressed than usual. To counteract his anxiety, he and Nico were laying in the wet sand, embracing and kissing heavily. They'd been down there since they first left the bedroom, sometimes joined by Jason, who would briefly pull Nico away and make love to him before Percy would get too antsy and ask for his lover back. Jason and Nico sensed Percy's unease, but neither had been able to coax anything more verbal out of him than that he wanted Nico.

Jason had taken a swim after he'd last been with Nico, and he saw Athena first. She stood over Percy and Nico, imposing and dispassionate, and watched their bodies and mouths move. Jason hastily waded out of the water and clothed himself and his companions. Percy and Nico jumped at the sudden intrusion of fabric between their bodies. They watched Jason approach from the shore.

"We have a visitor." Jason grimly nodded toward a spot five feet behind the other gods' heads. Percy startled, as he always did when he saw his mother-in-law. She and Annabeth could be twins. Annabeth had a better sense of humor. Percy tugged Nico to his feet but couldn't decide whether or not to hold his hand. Nico didn't push. Percy decided it was pointless to try to hide the nature of his relationship with Nico from a goddess who'd been watching them engage in sexual behavior ten seconds before. He took Nico's hand. Next to him, Nico let out a heavy breath.

"It's a pleasure to see you, Lady Athena," Nico said. "May we invite you inside our home?"

Athena's gray eyes hadn't left Percy. "Nico di Angelo, I appreciate your hospitality, but I do not appreciate your love affair with my son-in-law."

Nico pursed his lips and tried to pull his hand away from Percy. The last thing he wanted was to make this visit harder on Percy, but Percy held fast to Nico's hand. Jason took up position on Percy's other side and tried to think of a way to distract Athena, who didn't appear to blink.

"We would be happy to receive you, my lady, if you would do us the honor of coming inside?" Jason asked. He motioned toward the house.
Athena didn't move. Neither did Percy. They stared at each other for several minutes.

"I see you are as ungracious as ever, Perseus," Athena finally said. She sighed and turned to Jason. "Lead the way, Jason Grace."

Jason offered Athena his arm and was rebuffed. He nodded apologetically and walked slightly ahead of her into the house. When they were almost inside, Nico tugged and pulled and pushed Percy toward the house. He was able to move Percy fifteen feet before he rested his forehead on Percy's and asked without words what was wrong. Nico wanted to ask what was most wrong, but that sentiment was more than he was capable of conveying nonverbally.

"I love you," Percy whispered. "I'm not going to disavow the way I feel about you, but I miss them, Nico. She's here to call me out on being with you."

Nico understood. Athena wouldn't see the possibility of Percy's love as inclusive, encompassing both Annabeth and him. She'd see it as an 'or.' In her view, Percy could love one or the other, not both. Nico took Percy's hand again and kissed it. Together, they went inside.

Athena was sitting in a simple wood chair she had conjured. Jason dismally sat on the couch.

"You didn't need to make yourself a chair, Athena," Percy said. Jason shot him a warning glance, but Percy brushed it off and continued. "There's nothing wrong with our furniture."

"I do not wish to sit where your semen has spilled, Perseus, or any man's, for that matter."

"You must have to conjure one hell of a lot of chairs, then," Percy said as he pulled Nico down into the gray chair with him.

"Percy!" Nico hissed. To Athena he said, "I'm sorry for Percy's behavior, Lady Athena. He hasn't been feeling himself today."

Athena's cold gray eyes shifted from Percy to Nico, and her expression didn't change. "I bore you no ill will, Son of Hades. Your parentage makes no difference to me, and I recognize your power, diplomacy, and heroism. Though you should have died a very long time ago, you have always been a valuable asset to the gods. However, you have hurt my daughter, little boy, and I would prefer not to speak to you."

"Oh, you won't talk to him, but you want to talk to me, is that it?" Percy asked. His hands clenched into fists. "How are Annabeth and Maybelle?"

"I would prefer to burn you to ashes or condemn you to an eternity in Tartarus, Perseus." Athena spoke without any emotion. Rash thought and action were foreign to her. But Percy irritated her sensibilities. "Neither of those options is available. My daughter does not wish you ill. She and the baby are fine. I daresay they are much better off without you."

Jason, who had been sitting silently on the couch, jumped up and moved down to the end near the gray chair. "Percy, that's not true. She's upset because of the infidelity. You're a good husband and father."

Percy watched the way Nico's knee bounced. He placed their joined hands over the bouncing spot, and the repetitive motion slowed.

"I am a good father, Athena. I tried hard to be a good husband." Percy ground out the words. "I failed in a lot of ways. I couldn't choose to stop loving Nico. Annabeth understood."
"You should have chosen not to marry my daughter when you were more in love with someone else."

"Fuck, lady, you'd wish Maybelle wasn't born? Fuck that." Percy began to shake and glow. Nico switched the hand that held Percy's and rubbed his back, too. When Percy stood, Nico joined him, shoulder to shoulder. The soothing effect of Nico’s ministrations wasn’t enough. The thought that Athena could wish her grandchild didn’t exist horrified Percy. "Maybelle is worth whatever hurt Annabeth and I ever suffer. Gods, think about her, Athena. She’s sweet and innocent and perfect, and if I'd backed out of the marriage she wouldn't exist. I don't regret a damned thing I did, except that there were parts that hurt Annabeth."

"You love Maybelle more than anything?" Athena asked. This was what she wanted to hear.

"Yes, of course," Percy said. The glowing intensified, and his feet left the ground.

Nico kissed Percy's cheek. He had no words of comfort to offer.

"You would choose her over the love of your life?"

Percy glanced at Nico. His eyes filled with tears, and they trickled down his face. He turned his attention back to Athena. "You already know I would."

"Very well. I was checking to see if that sentiment still held." Athena sat forward in her chair and ignored the way Percy struggled. "I come to offer you a deal."

"What?" Jason asked. He was too shocked to censor his reaction.

"It is of little concern to you, Grace," Athena said. Her hand swirled, and the wall behind her burst to life with a beautiful tapestry depicting the day Nico had learned to drive. The view resembled the selfie Percy had taken, with his head resting on Nico's shoulder as they sat on the hood of his car, but the whole car was visible and Nico shone in radiant life, as he appeared now, not as he had truly looked in the midst of his depression. He and Percy were beaming and holding hands.

Jason put his head in his hands and tried to swallow his guilt and jealousy. He'd thought the jealousy was gone.

"Is this one not pleasing to you, Son of Zeus? I took the liberty of creating several."

Next to the first tapestry, a second one appeared. This one showed Nico and Jason as they stared up at the waitress in the diner on the way to Leo's house. Jason's head rested on Nico's chest, and Nico's hand laid on Jason's thigh. Their expressions were sultry and seductive, capturing the intensity of their attraction to one another.

"The last one is my personal favorite." Athena directed the young gods' attention to the other side of the dome where an enormous tapestry unfurled. The craftsmanship was exquisite. The smallest details, like Nico's skull earring, were shown in sharp relief.

The scene showed all three gods, impeccably dressed and coiffed. They all recognized the scene Athena had chosen to convey.

One letter-reading day, they'd gotten a kick out of Piper's letter in particular. She told them that she had participated in a runway show and described, in nauseating detail, the outfits she'd seen the women and men wear. Percy had flippantly said that they could design better clothes than any snooty fashion designer and they were hotter than any runway models, to boot. The idea had made Jason and Nico laugh, and they'd spent a happy half hour conjuring hideous clothes. The first hole of their
miniature golf course had served as a faux runway where they had a contest to see who could be the most pretentious while pretending to get paid for walking in a straight line.

They'd decided Percy was the winner for the rude, disinterested attitude he displayed, Jason won for what Percy and Nico termed "animal magnetism," and Nico won for creating the most boorish and overdone clothes. For the last walk down the "runway," they'd changed into genuinely fancy suits and walked down together, holding hands and trying to act suave and sophisticated. A third of the way down, Percy had tripped and knocked Jason and Nico down with him. They'd sprawled on the ground and laughed like hyenas before struggling back to their feet and continuing their procession.

Athena's tapestry caught them near the end of the runway, when they'd regained their poise but still had their big smiles. All three of the gods were stunning. Jason was on one side in a white suit. His blue eyes, golden hair, and brilliant smile, along with his powerful body, made him remarkable. Percy was on the other side in a blue suit. With his lopsided grin and charisma, his joyous green eyes and his wonderfully floppy black hair, he was a charming, accessible balance to Jason's distant perfection.

Between them strode Nico, and instead of the fulcrum, he was their vortex. Over the years, Nico had grown immune to talk of his appearance. He'd never cared what he looked like, so he learned to ignore the words. This, he couldn't ignore. Jason and Percy and Apollo were the stars of Nico's world, and for the first time, he fully understood how he was the star of theirs. The tapestry captured more than his huge black eyes or his full pink lips or his seductively curly black hair. It captured his soul, and seeing himself this way made him feel radiant and powerful. For the first time, he felt beautiful.

"You are exquisite," Jason said. He stepped forward and raised his hand to the air an inch from the place the tapestry showed Nico's face. "It's you exactly, Nico. Our center. Our everything."

Percy opted to touch the real thing. He leaned up on tiptoe and kissed Nico's temple. "Beautiful."

"I had to search far and wide for the right silk, Son of Hades, to capture your essence. You are uncommon. Accept these tapestries as gifts on your ascendancy. They will follow wherever you make your home."

He had been asked not to speak, so Nico knelt and bowed his head in Athena's direction. Whatever strategy she had or angle she was working, Nico was grateful for the gifts.

"Thank you, my lady," Jason said. He sat back on the couch and motioned for Percy to sit with him.

Percy, whose glow had faded and feet touched the floor again, sat with Jason. He figured Nico would come to them when he rose from the floor.

"Thank you, Athena. They are beautiful," Percy said. "Your skill is unmatched."

"Better, Perseus," Athena said. "Now, about the deal I would like to offer you."

Percy leaned forward. He felt Jason's hand draw circles on his back. Athena watched them for a moment before shifting her attention to Nico, who still knelt and hadn't looked up.

"I have noticed, Perseus, that you seem very happy here, with the love of your life and his chosen one. You have watched HephaestusTV less and less, so I would like you to know that Annabeth has been becoming happier, too. Her promotion has been wonderful for her, and she is doing work she loves. The nanny takes very good care of Maybelle, though Annabeth has become better at balancing her career and her child-rearing responsibilities. She misses you, but that ache is solid and
bearable, quite different from the pain of knowing that her husband desires another."

Because of the letters, Percy had known about Annabeth's promotion, the nanny, working from home. On the TV, he'd seen how healthy and exuberant Maybelle looked and how Annabeth's cheeks were often flushed with happiness. He'd been gone almost five months. Maybelle's birthday was coming up in a few weeks. He would miss it, and Maybelle wouldn't know the difference. He looked at the tapestry of himself and Nico sitting on the car and remembered the way Nico's body felt pressed against his, the way his eyes sparkled. Percy thought about the way he loved Nico.

"I'm glad Annabeth is feeling happy and doing well," Percy said. "Maybelle..." The words choked off in his mouth. He wanted his daughter. Jason increased the pressure of his hand on Percy's back.

"When the solstice comes, the gods will decide your fates," Athena said. Her eyes shifted toward Jason now. "Perseus is collateral damage. Zeus wants you, Jason, and the son of Hades. He may be willing to end Percy's punishment. He will not end yours. I am the favored child of Zeus. I carry great influence and can perhaps steer him toward leniency for you and the son of Hades. You have appeared contrite and pleasing to the gods during your incarceration, and many of them will also ask for leniency. My voice holds the most sway." She swung her attention back to Percy. "I can lessen Nico's punishment, Percy."

"Thank you, my lady," Jason said. "We would very much appreciate your intervention on our behalf."

"Not so fast, Jason Grace." Athena answered, cold and calculating. "I have requirements."

"I stay away from Annabeth and Maybelle, and in return you'll try to make things easier on Nico and Jason," Percy said dully. He watched Nico, who was still kneeling on the floor. Nico was crying.

"You always surprise me by not being quite as dumb as you appear, Perseus," Athena said. "Yes. In addition, I will pledge my protection of Maybelle for the entirety of her life."

"Maybelle already has a protector," Percy growled.

"A powerful one," Athena agreed. "Why not add another? She will want for nothing—"

"Nothing except a father." Nico had finally raised his head. His face was streaked with tears. "Don't do this, Percy. Don't even think about it. Maybelle needs you."

"You've been happy here, Perseus," Athena said. "You can continue to be happy. Maybelle and Annabeth will be happy. No harm will come to them. It is an ideal bargain."

"Kids need their fathers," Nico said.

Athena shook her head in disgust. "Not everyone has your daddy issues, Nico. Plenty of children grow up fine without a father in the picture."

"Can I think about it?" Percy asked.

"Of course. Take your time. You have until the solstice to decide." Athena stood and walked to where Nico sat on his knees. She ran her hand through his hair. "His punishment could be very severe, Perseus, and Hades has already laid all his cards on the table. I could make it better. I could make it much, much worse."

In a flash, Athena was gone.
Nico and Percy cried. Jason tried to get each of them into the bedroom, but neither would budge. In the end, he picked them up one at a time and carried them to the bed. When he got back to the bedroom with Nico in his arms, Percy had stopped crying and was laying on his back watching clouds float past the small hole they often had in the roof. Jason climbed onto the bed and pulled Nico into his lap. He scooted them close to Percy and picked up Percy's hand. A million questions raced through Jason's mind, but he wasn't sure Percy would be able to talk.

"Tell me," Nico said through his tears, "tell me you won't do that, Percy. Maybelle needs you."

Percy smiled and pulled Nico into his arms. Nico nestled his head in Percy's chest. Percy slipped one hand inside Nico's shirt. With the other, he traced a vein in Jason's forearm.

"Don't cry, beautiful baby," Percy said. "I promise you, everything I do is for Maybelle. I won't let her down."

Percy's eyes met Jason's, and the message was clear. Percy had already made his choice.
Percy waited outside his apartment building for Nico to pull up. The Red Car of Sex came to a stop, and Percy hustled to fling open the driver’s side door. Nico unfolded himself from the seat, and Percy kissed his cheek before stealing the keys and hopping in. He motioned for Nico to sit in the passenger seat. Nico hesitated but did what Percy wanted. As soon as they were buckled, Percy laid his foot on the gas and drove away.

"Did you rob someone or something? Because I don't want to be an accomplice to a crime."

"Good Saturday morning to you, sweet baby." Percy smiled brightly.

Nico gave him a charley horse. Percy doubled over the steering wheel, which made driving difficult, like he was driving with his face.

"Fuck, Nico! What the hell was that for? Rub it out."

"I don't like mornings," Nico grumbled. He kneaded Percy's thigh to work out the cramp. "Plus, I had to cancel on Clarisse to apparently supply you with a getaway car, and she's going to kick my ass hard the next time I see her."

"Gods, this is why people don't like you. I didn't do anything. We're going shopping, is all. Annabeth and I were supposed to go, but she got called in to work." Percy hooked a left and managed to lift his head off the steering wheel and sit upright.

"I hate shopping. Is your leg better now?"

Percy's leg felt fine. Nico had done a good job with the cramp. "No. Go up higher and a little further inside. Ooh, yeah, there." Nico's hand was so high and inside that Percy wasn't even sure there was muscle up there.

"You're a perv, Percy," Nico said, but he didn't move his hand away. "Why are we shopping?"

"The baby needs a car seat."

"So?"

"So we're getting her one."

"I think that's a bad idea."

Percy stopped at a light and reached up to rub the back of Nico's neck.

"It's not a bad idea. It's for safety."

"No, Perce." Percy caught Nico leaning back and closing his eyes. Nico's voice sounded calmer. "I mean I think that's something you should wait on Annabeth for."

"We can do this. I read about it online last night. I'm not going to be a hopeless uninvolved dad, Neeks." The light turned green, and Percy pulled his hand away from Nico and put it back on the steering wheel. He was working on being a safer driver. Plus, Nico was pissing him off, no matter
how good his hand felt buried between Percy's thighs.

"I know. You're going to be an amazing father," Nico said. He used his pinky and ring fingers and gently rubbed Percy's balls. It wasn't cheating on Annabeth, them doing this. It was for relaxation and friendship, and this time, apology. Other people may not see it that way, but that was all it was. Nico kept talking. "Where are we going?"

"We're here."

Life was easier because Nico's car was small. Percy loved to drive it, and he loved to park it, too. He maneuvered into a tight space and shut off the engine. Nico's skull ring caught a bit on the seam of Percy's jeans as he withdrew his hand, but it didn't hurt. Percy got out and led Nico to the Babies 'R Us. The bright purple awning over the entry repelled Nico like kryptonite. He stopped on the sidewalk and gazed at the store in fearful awe.

"They have whole stores of baby stuff? Holy...oh my gods, that's insane."

Percy laughed and took Nico's hand. "For a rich kid, you're a shitty consumer. Come on."

Whoever might think kids make you happier should stop in a fucking Babies 'R Us for a reality check. They entered the store and were greeted by two assaults on their senses: screaming kids and the reek of shit. The smell was so strong the screaming kids had to be getting their diapers changed on the checkout counters. Percy was glad he was holding Nico's hand because Nico tried to bail.

"Oh, no you don't. We're doing this together."

Nico was green. "I'm going to throw up."

Percy removed a small blister pack from his pocket and took out a little white pill. "Put this under your tongue and shut up. You're coming."

Nico did what Percy told him. "What was that?"

"Annabeth's nausea pills. I get tired of you using the puke excuse to get out of shit."

"Fuck."

"Maybe later. Let's go find car seats."

Car seats were easy to find. The store people liked to spread their really expensive shit in among the less expensive shit so new parents didn't get too overwhelmed. The car seat section was the first expensive shit section they came to, sandwiched between bottles and feeding utensils (cheap shit) and high chairs (more expensive cheap shit, but not exactly expensive shit).

Car seats were expensive enough to have their own salesman, which was good because there were around forty seats on display and everything Percy had read the night before flew right out of his head the moment he thought about picking one. This was to protect his daughter, for Hephaestus's sake, and all he had come armed with was himself and a nineteen year old college kid with a vomit problem. He should have waited for Annabeth.

Nico must have sensed Percy's panic, because he took charge. He dragged Percy up to the salesman, a white guy who looked to be in his mid-fifties and whose name tag said he was Steve.

"Excuse me," Nico said. "My friend needs to buy a car seat for his daughter. Can you help him?"
Percy caught the way the man's eyes dropped to his and Nico's clasped hands. If Nico saw it, he didn't let on.

"How old is your daughter, sir?" Steve sounded like a dick.

"Um, Annabeth's like twenty-one weeks, so..."

"She's not born yet," Nico said. "It'll be her first car seat. I don't know if there are different kinds for different ages or what."

Even though Nico was the one talking sensibly, the man spoke to Percy. "You'll want an infant car seat then. They're over here."

The man led them to a row of smaller car seats. They had handles and little base things that stayed in the car. The actual seat snapped into and out of the base. Percy stared at them all and tried to remember something he'd read.

"Which one is the safest?" Nico asked.

Steve talked to Percy again. "They're all safe. They've had to pass government standards."

"Right, but some are safer than others," Nico said. "He wants the safest one."

The man looked at Nico. Percy watched his eyes rove over Nico's face, his earring, his bracelet and rings. Steve the Dick — Percy had decided this was the guy's full name — addressed Percy again. Before he could say more than two words, Percy cut him off.

"Nico, baby, go find the diapers and see how much the different brands cost, please."

"I don't want to." Nico squeezed Percy's hand. His fake engagement ring clanked against Percy's wedding band and pinched at Percy's fingers.

"Five minutes." Percy kissed Nico's cheek and watched Steve the Dick's reaction. The guy acted like Nico really had vomited.

"Leave it, Percy," Nico whispered.

"Annabeth wants to know the price per diaper for size ones. I don't know how to do that. Please?"

"Fine. Five minutes. Behave."

The order was ridiculous coming from Nico. The guy was an artist who whose medium was "rude." Nico walked off, and Percy momentarily watched the arch of his shoulders before turning back to Steve the Dick.

"Look, buddy, what's your problem with my friend?" Percy already knew.

"No problem," Steve said. "He sure is a fancy boy."

"And you sure are a bigot. Get me your manager." Percy realized he was fingering Riptide in his pocket. He pulled his hands out of his pockets and clenched his fists.

"Now, son, I got no problem with his kind, but I bet you got yourself a pretty young wife — I can see your ring — and boys like that, they can lead you down the wrong path if you aren't careful."

"Hey, Babies 'R Us people," Percy roared, tilting his head up to the rafters. All he could see was red.
"Steve the Dick in car seats is a bigoted homophobic asshole! Don't buy shit from him!"

That got the manager. It also brought Nico running back from diapers. He skidded to a halt next to Percy with four different brands of size one diapers in his arms. Percy thanked the gods for those diapers, because they seemed to be all that was keeping Nico from punching him.

"Idiot!" Nico bumped Percy with a diaper box. "I told you to leave it alone!"

"Sirs, what is the problem?" the manager asked. She had a nose ring and a big pregnant belly. Percy hoped she wasn't a douchebag, too.

"Steve here called my friend a fancy boy and wouldn't speak to him."

Nico turned his back to Percy and hit him with another diaper box. Those damned box corners hurt. Percy didn't care if Nico was mad or embarrassed. No one should be treated the way the guy had treated him.

The manager addressed Steve. "Did you call this gentleman a 'fancy boy'?"

"Look, Laura," Steve the Dick said. He didn't seem to respect her, either. "I didn't mean anything. I don't know where this kid is getting this stuff. I told him I don't have nothing against his" — he gestured to Nico — "kind."

"Go to the break room, Steve. Now."

Steve the Dick shot a hateful glare at Nico, not Percy, and walked off. The manager sighed.

"On behalf of Babies 'R Us, I'd like to apologize. Steve will be fired. We don't tolerate discrimination. That's completely unacceptable."

Percy opened his mouth to tell her that firing Steve wasn't good enough, but Nico turned around and cut him off.

"Fine. Thanks. My friend needs a car seat for his daughter. Can you help him choose one?"

Now Percy was mad at Nico. He wasn't buying anything here. He was starting a letter writing campaign or calling his senator or something.

The woman considered Nico and smiled. "Do you need all those diapers?"

"He wanted to know how much they cost per diaper. I figured it out." Nico shrugged. "So, the car seat? It's for an infant."

"Take all the diapers, on the house," Laura the manager said. "Buy the Britax."

"I don't want to buy anything from here," Percy said.

Nico glared at him. His black eyes were on fire. "If you talk again before we leave this gods damned store, I will walk out and leave you here."

Nico meant it. He had once left Percy at a 7-Eleven for fifteen minutes when they got in a fight over whether or not Percy could bring a Slurpee into the car. Percy'd stood outside and drank his Wild Cherry Slurpee and thought of all the ways he'd throw it on Nico when he came back, but he'd finished the Slurpee before Nico returned and had to settle for throwing him the finger.

To the manager, Nico said, "Good. We'll take it. And an extra base thing."
Percy wanted to point out an extra base was useless because he and Annabeth only had one car, but hell, it was Nico's money they were about to spend — Percy had forgotten his wallet in the car but he was forbidden to talk so he couldn't point that out — and he wanted to run up the bill as much as he could, not that Nico would care.

They hauled the enormous car seat box, the box with the spare base, and the four boxes of diapers through the checkout, where parents were not changing their kids' shitty diapers. Percy was getting used to the smell anyway. Nico paid when Percy held up his hands and shrugged, and they silently dragged the boxes down to Nico's car.

That's when their other problem, besides the raging homophobe and being furious at each other, surfaced. Six large boxes do not fit in the trunk and back seat of an Italian sports car. Two diaper boxes fit in the trunk. Two fit in the back seat. The car seat and extra base didn't fit anywhere.

"Moron!" Nico said.

"Whatever. You're the fucking soccer mom who came out with four boxes of diapers and an extra car seat base I don't even need."

Nico looked like he wanted to murder Percy. He stomped back to the curb, where they'd left the last two boxes, and pried open the lids.

"Hah. The boxes are way too huge, but the stuff inside isn't bad. Help me take this shit out."

Nico dragged out the extra base on his own, but it took both him and Percy to remove the car seat and base from the big box. The suckers were vacuumed into it. Once they got them out, Nico shoved one base into the back seat from the driver's side, while Percy shoved one base in from the passenger's side. The back seat was stuffed beyond capacity.

"Now what?" Percy asked, and not in a very nice way.

"Give me the keys."

Shit! Too late, Percy realized Nico couldn't have left him inside Babies 'R Us. He'd been duped! That just made him angrier.

"No, dickhead. You're gonna be a douche and drive away before I get in the car."

Nico tapped his foot on the ground and sighed. "You're being childish. I'm going to drive us back to your apartment."

"I'm being childish? I'm being childish because I think you might do the stupid, bratty, childish thing YOU'VE DONE TO ME BEFORE?"

People stopped on the sidewalk and stared at them, which was an impressive feat to accomplish in New York City.

Nico huffed. "I swear on the River Styx, I won't drive away until you're in the car. Happy?"

"No. I'm still stuck with you."

"Shut up and get in the car," Nico said. "I'm going to hand you the car seat, and you can hold it on the way home."

Percy flipped him off, right up against his nose, but he only did it once because Nico almost caught
his finger. If he tried again, Nico might really catch it, and Percy didn't want a broken finger. Percy sat in the seat, buckled, and prepared to receive the car seat.

"Scoot the seat all the way back."

Percy shot Nico a dirty look and scooted the seat back. Once the seat stopped moving, Nico rammed the infant seat in on top of Percy, hitting him in the head.

"Motherfucker. You did that on purpose," Percy said.

"Yep."

Nico slammed the door. He left the boxes sitting on the sidewalk and got in the car. They were silent the entire ride back to Percy's.

Once they'd wrestled the car seat, the bases, and the boxes of diapers into Percy's apartment, they turned on each other.

"You're a first-class asshole, you know that?" Percy asked. He sat down on the couch and put his legs up the long way so Nico didn't have a place to sit.

"Fuck you. I didn't ask you to be Captain Gay Crusader. You should've listened to me when I said to leave it alone."

Nico went into the kitchen. He came back with two water bottles and thunked one down in Percy's lap.

"Did you see how he was looking at you? I couldn't let that slide, Nico."

"I'd have to have been blind not to notice, jerk. But gods, you think that's the first time someone's treated me like that? It happens a lot, and I can't make a scene every time."

Nico sat on the floor with his back to Percy and started opening boxes of diapers. They did not need open boxes of diapers sitting around the apartment. Erebos would pee on them.

"Why the hell not? Guys like that deserve to lose their jobs. No one should be able to treat people the way he was treating you."

"Fine. Yes, guys like that are scum, okay? And no one should be treated that way. But that's the way it is for people like me, Percy. I can't fight every time. It gets too tiring and depressing. Bigots never change, anyway."

The diapers were wrapped in baggies inside the boxes. At least if Erebos peed on them the pee would wash off. Percy sat forward and took Nico's hand. Nico pulled it away and kept opening the diaper boxes. Once he had them all open, he opened a pack from each one and laid the diapers out side by side.

"I'm sorry, baby," Percy said, because he was. "I don't want to make things harder, and I wasn't trying to embarrass you. Don't you think it's good to have straight allies who advocate for you when you're too tired of doing it to stick up for yourself?"

"The Huggies look the best, but the Pampers were the most expensive, per diaper."

"Will you answer me, damn it?" Percy said. "I'm being serious. This shit won't stop until the Steve the Dicks of the world know people won't tolerate their asshattery."

Nico flung a package of diapers at Percy. "You're not straight, stupid."

Percy threw the diaper package back and hit Nico between the shoulder blades. Nico threw them
back, harder, and Percy had his arm cocked, bag in hand, before he remembered Hades and the pomegranate and the awful sound the fruit had made when it exploded against the back of Nico’s head. He put the bag down.

"Whatever. I pass for straight. The point is, you deserve someone in your corner, my beautiful, kind Nico, and sometimes it can be me." He leaned forward and pressed his hand to Nico's head.
"Please?"

"If I say yes can we drop it? It makes me feel shitty."

"Yes, though you have no reason to feel shitty. Steve the Dick should feel shitty. And all the kids in that store with shit in their diapers should feel shitty. And all the parents there who changed their kids' shitty diapers and got shit on their hands should feel shitty."

Nico laughed and worked on unlacing his boots. When he was done, he said, "You do make me feel better, Perce. Thanks."

"Come up here with me and let's cuddle before Annabeth gets home."

Nico took his shirt off, laid out his dumb blanket, climbed onto the couch, and stretched out. His legs were too long to fully extend, and he put one on each side of Percy's body. Percy laid between them and rested his head on Nico's chest. They wrapped their arms around each other, and Percy was quiet for a while, listening to Nico's heartbeat.

"How's things with Jason?" he asked eventually. Nico tensed underneath him.

"Same." Nico's voice was quiet, too.

"You haven't let him kiss you yet?" Percy knew he should feel bad about the lack of progress Nico was having with Jason, but he didn't. He wanted things to stay the way they were, namely Nico being free to spend mountains of time with him.

"No. It's awkward. He was so awful to me. He's trying to make things better, and sometimes I think I'll be able to get over it. Then he'll say something or look at me a certain way, and I don't know, it raises all my defenses and I feel like we have to start over at square one. I'm starting to worry it won't ever work out."

"I'm sorry." Not really. "Maybe it's time you thought about ditching your roommate. That might make things easier. Plus, it's a supremely bad idea, being with him."

"I know you think that."

"I think that because it's true."

"New topic."

It drove Percy nuts. Whenever they started talking about tough things, Nico would either ignore Percy or change the subject. They'd fought about Apollo and Jason too many times to count, and after fighting about the car seat incident today, Percy didn't feel like arguing any more.

"Why'd you want another car seat base?" he asked instead. "Annabeth and I only have one car."

Percy felt Nico smile into his hair, which caused Percy to smile into Nico's chest. At the same time, both their grips tightened.
"I wanted it for my car. We'll need to take the baby to her doctor visits or the park or wherever next summer, so we should have a second base to leave in my car."

"I love you," Percy whispered. Nico's arms tightened around him even more.

"Let's take a nap before Annabeth gets home. Fighting with you makes me tired."

Percy nodded into Nico's chest and pressed a kiss over his heart. He nuzzled in tight and fell asleep until Annabeth came home and woke them up by asking why they were barely halfway through the pregnancy and had two months worth of diapers.

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Nico got up extra early on Christmas morning so that he could spend a few minutes with Apollo before the god left to attend to his duties. He found Apollo sitting on their sofa, sipping a cup of coffee and watching A Christmas Story with the sound off. Apollo's eyes didn't stray from the TV when Nico came in. Nico sat down, wrapped his arms around Apollo's stomach, and held him close.

"Merry Christmas," Nico said.

"Merry Christmas, lover."

"Kiss me, please?"

Apollo combed his fingers through Nico's bedhead. The god himself was dressed and perfectly coiffed. His low-cut white scoop-neck t-shirt was paired with tight gold lamé skinny jeans. The outfit shouldn't work. It should be hideous and tacky. Nico wanted to unwrap Apollo like a present and lick the hell out of the box.

"You are nervous?"

Nico nodded.

Apollo kissed him, slow and soft, and let his hand travel all over Nico's frame. Nico cupped Apollo's face and kept the kiss going even after Apollo tried to pull away. When their lips finally parted, he laid his head on Apollo's shoulder and peppered his neck with little kisses.

"Everything will be fine, love. Seeing your family is a very good thing."

"It's so different from..."

"Last year was the lowest point in your life," Apollo said. He gently lifted Nico's head from his shoulder and met his eyes. "This is better. You are better."

"I wish you could come, too."

Nico wanted Apollo to be with him for so many reasons. His family was skeptical about his strange never-present boyfriend who kept Nico from inviting them over; he provided a cover from trying to decide what to do about Jason Grace; and Nico genuinely enjoyed Apollo's company. There were times when he could delude himself and believe that if they were able to live and love freely, he would choose Apollo over Jason and live a happy life. It wasn't true. Nico longed for Jason, his real and true Jason, with every breath. Apollo could never measure up, but being fond of the god was so
much less painful than loving Jason.

"Percy will provide you a space in which you can retreat should you become overwhelmed, love. You will be alright."

There was a slight edge to Apollo's voice when he said Percy's name. Maybe he knew how hard Percy was pushing Nico to move out. Nico decided to let things be.

"You're right. Thanks."

"I must leave." Apollo untangled himself from Nico and stood. "When will you be home?"

"I don't know. After dinner, maybe?"

Apollo nodded and leaned over to kiss the top of Nico's head. "Be safe and enjoy yourself, lover. If you are sidetracked and end up staying over, I will understand."

There was no time for Nico to reply before Apollo vanished.

It was hard, living this way, where two parts of Nico's life were supposed to overlap but couldn't. He didn't have a boyfriend he could introduce to his loved ones. He had a boyfriend who, as understanding as he was, didn't fully appreciate the need for family.

Nico shook his head, lethargically got ready, and traveled through the shadows.

He went to Rachel's house first because Percy had told him she would have to spend the evening before with her parents and would be hung over. Nico found her passed out in her bedroom.

"Rachel. Wake up."

Nothing. She smelled terrible, like alcohol. Nico nudged her shoulder.

"Rachel!"

Nothing. Nico was getting impatient.

"Oh, what's this? Nico di Angelo stripping naked in your bedroom?" Nico loudly unbuttoned his jeans and slid the zipper down. Rachel's eyes shot open. Nico pulled her by the arm and sat her up then closed his fly.

"You're mean, Nico." Rachel sounded like her mouth was full of cotton. Her hair was so crazy she reminded Nico of an illustration of Medusa that he had seen in a book when he was a kid.

"It worked. Go get ready. We're supposed to be at Percy's in fifteen minutes."

Nico went downstairs and occupied himself by raiding Rachel's fridge for something to bring to Percy's. He found a bag of expensive croissants. Perfect.

Rachel came down thirty minutes later and was too hungover to do more than uselessly paw at Nico's chest. Nico pulled her close, whispered "Merry Christmas" when she wrapped her arms around him and pinched his butt, and shadowed them to Percy's. They stumbled out of the shadows inside the front door, next to the coat rack. Nico was relieved to see that all the lights were off save the one in the kitchen, where Annabeth was bustling about.

Nico and Rachel made their way to Annabeth, careful not to step on either of the air mattresses laid out on the floor. In the dim light, Nico could make out Hazel and Frank on one mattress and Chris
and Clarisse on the other.

In the kitchen, Annabeth was still in her pajamas, her rounding belly straining the buttons on her red flannel top. She was doing something abusive to a turkey. Nico looked anywhere but at the raw meat.

"Oh, hey guys!" Annabeth whispered. "Merry Christmas!"

Nico returned the greeting while Rachel held her head. Annabeth gave Rachel a hug and kissed Nico's cheek.

"Everyone's still asleep except me and probably Piper."

"Percy in bed?" Rachel asked. Those were the first words she'd managed since "You're mean, Nico."

"Yes."

"Good. I'm going to sleep with him. Wake me up for presents." Rachel stumbled off and only ran into a bookshelf and the door frame on her way back to the bedroom. Annabeth watched her go.

"I hate to sound like Percy, but she really needs to get laid."

Nico laughed quietly and handed over the croissants.

"Thanks, sweetie. How are you this morning?" Annabeth took the croissants and put them on top of the fridge. "Don't let me forget about them."

"I'm fine. You?" Nico stuffed his hands in his pockets and tried not to think about how much he wanted to kiss Annabeth's husband and how good it felt when Percy's hands touched him in ways they shouldn't. He wasn't horny, exactly. Well, he was always horny, but what he was feeling was more like...guilt.

"Okay. Ready to wake everyone and make them help, but you'll do for now."

A smile poked out around the edges of Annabeth's mouth, and she leaned into him for a hug. The hug was, thankfully, nothing like Rachel's annoyingly gropy ones. It was just a hug. A comfort. When Annabeth let go, she handed him a bag of potatoes and ordered him to peel.

"What's the agenda?" Nico asked, because he knew Annabeth would have one.

"Presents at nine. Dinner at one. We'll have my house be for lounging around and Piper's for eating. Once everyone wakes up, you can supervise rearranging furniture so the tables end up at Piper's and the couches and chairs end up here."

"Shouldn't Percy or Jason be in charge of that?"

Annabeth shrugged. "I trust you more. They're idiots."

"Fair point."

Nico peeled all the potatoes, washed them, and set them in a pot to boil. He also peeled sweet potatoes, carrots, and celery, chopped onions, cleaned mushrooms, and loaded the dishwasher before anyone woke. Finally, Percy ambled into the kitchen and leaned against his back.

"Get off me. I'm working. Your breath is terrible. Where'd your mints go?"
"Shush, I'm sleeping."

Annabeth laughed. Nico stuck his butt out, trying to shove Percy off him. It didn't work. Percy's hand, the one away from Annabeth, slid up inside Nico's shirt, leaving Nico panicky and aroused.

"Go sleep on Annabeth, then. She's right there." Nico hoped he didn't sound too obvious. He needed Percy not to be so brazen.

"Can't. Baby belly."

"He's got a point, Nico," Annabeth said. She held up a long knife. "Plus, I'm armed. Go brush your teeth, Percy."

"Fuck you both." Percy licked the side of Nico's neck and walked away. After a moment, Nico heard the shower start.

"Think he even noticed Rachel in bed with him?" Nico asked. He was trying to make conversation and not think about how hot Percy's tongue had felt, even with his disgusting morning breath.

"She was probably laying on top of him," Annabeth snorted. "It'd be hard for him not to notice."

"That doesn't bother you?" Nico wasn't sure if he was talking about Rachel in bed with Percy or how obviously Percy had been hitting on him.

"Rachel's no threat. Besides, he's been faithful, and if he wasn't," Annabeth looked at Nico's face, and her eyes were steely but not hard, "you'd know before me. Go wake our guests."

Hazel and Frank were easy to wake, and Hazel squealed and hugged Nico for what felt like forever. He'd seen her around Halloween, but that had been her last trip to New York. Waking Chris and Clarisse was harder, especially because Nico's interest in self-preservation by far trumped his interest in waking Clarisse. He concentrated on Chris and finally got the guy to move by promising chocolate chip cookies. After Chris woke, Nico told him to wake Clarisse and counted his blessings. He went back to the kitchen and acted as Annabeth's sous chef for a bit longer.

Percy returned with much better breath and wet hair. He leaned back against Nico and stayed there until Clarisse came into the kitchen and yelled "Hands off the merchandise!" She whipped him off Nico and into the living room. Nico turned around to tell Clarisse off, but found himself hauling her into his arms instead. The urge to hug people, to be close to them, was so powerful. He wondered if this was the last time he'd see them all together. To his great surprise, Clarisse hugged him back.

"Merry Christmas," he said.

"Merry Christmas, Pissy." Clarisse kissed his cheek and moved away. She caught Percy staring at her and snarled. "That never happened, douchebag. Merry Christmas."

Chris gave Nico a bro hug, and he and Clarisse wandered off to take a shower. Hazel and Frank edged Nico out of the kitchen and took over the remaining prep work. Nico was grateful. His hands ached from all the peeling and cleaning, the tip of his index finger was stained orange, and he smelt like onion. Percy came over and took his hand. He pulled Nico toward the couch.

"Me and Nico are gonna watch TV now," Percy told Annabeth.

"Freeze. You and Nico are gonna," Annabeth perfectly imitated the way Percy talked, "deflate the air beds and then go wake up everyone at Piper's."
Percy grumbled, but he dropped to his knees and deflated one bed. Nico worked on the other, and together they folded the beds and stuffed them in a closet. When they were finished, they left to go to Piper's. Percy stopped in the hall and tugged on Nico until he stopped, too.

"Merry Christmas, beautiful baby," Percy murmured. He wrapped his arms around Nico's neck and played with his hair. "How are you doing?"

"Merry Christmas, Perce," Nico replied. He pulled Percy close and nuzzled his nose. "I'm scared as hell."

Percy nodded. "You have your freakout pills?"

"In my pocket." No one knew about the Valium except Percy. Nico wasn't ashamed, exactly, but he hated people knowing he was vulnerable to anything.

"Want me to tell you if you start acting like you need one?"

"Please."

"You have a game plan?"

The counselor had been big on Nico planning ahead to make himself less stressed out during anxiety-causing situations, like spending the day with fifteen people who cared about him and might look at him. The plan was reassuring, knowing he had an escape if he needed it.

"Yes. Hang out with you and Hazel as much as possible. Avoid Jason and Piper. Keep an eye on my watch so I can eat before the alarm goes off and slip into the bathroom before it starts to beep so I can turn it off without anyone hearing. Hide in your bedroom if I need to."

Percy nodded. "Sounds good. Any time you're feeling too anxious, find me. We can go downstairs or up on the roof and no one will notice, except probably jackass Jason. Maybe Annabeth."

"Annabeth won't mind?"

"She and I talked." Percy pressed closer. Nico knew it was because he'd tensed. "I told her a tiny bit about the anxiety. She wasn't surprised, and she said that she wouldn't get mad as long as we're not, you know, being sexual."

"Whose definition of 'being sexual' are we going by? Because I think hers might be different from ours."

"No worries. I'll handle it. Love you. Let's go wake the masses."

Percy waited for Nico to nod before he pulled out a key and unlocked Jason's apartment. Nico felt a thrill of dread. Facing the occupants of Percy's apartment had been easy enough. This would be less so.

Inside, Piper was up, messing in the kitchen. She waved and told them Merry Christmas before returning to her work.

"Annabeth wants us to wake everyone up," Percy said.

"I don't care, except I think you should be careful waking Reyna," Piper said. "We don't want her boyfriend to catch on that we're different from mortals."

"Oh, yeah, the boyfriend. Where are they? I want to scope him out before we wake them up." Percy
turned to Nico. "They got in late last night. Jason picked them up from the airport around midnight, so I didn't see them."

"He seems nice. Quiet," Piper said. "They're on the mattress closer to my room. Wake Leo and Calypso first."

"Calypso is awake," came a quiet voice from the living room. "Merry Christmas, loved ones. I'll wake Leo."

Everyone mumbled Merry Christmas back, and Percy pulled Nico over to the other air mattress.

Reyna's boyfriend, Michael, was a skinny, watered-down version of Jason. Like Will Solace, without the pretty. He had short blond hair and no muscles. His mouth was twitching in his sleep. His hair was dumb and he looked weak. Not good enough for Reyna.

"What the fuck with the piña coladas!??" Leo screamed, saving Nico and Percy from having to wake Reyna and Michael. Reyna shot up and had a dagger out before she hastily hid it away and glanced down at Michael, who didn't appear to have noticed. She'd have trouble keeping him in the dark if their relationship progressed.

Reyna quickly hugged Percy and squeezed all the breath out of Nico.

"Hello, sweet brother," she said. "I've missed you so much."

Nico hugged her back just as hard and kissed her hair. "I've missed you, too. I don't like him."

"You haven't met him," Reyna said.

"No one is good enough for you."

Reyna laughed and let Nico go. "True, but he was the closest I could find. Give him a chance."

Michael stood up and shook Nico and Percy's hands.

"I'm Michael," he said.

"I'm Percy, and this is Nico, Reyna's violent and overprotective brother by choice."

Michael glanced skittishly at Nico, who had dropped the room temperature about ten degrees and released a little fear aura.

"Knock it off, Jack, or I'm going to kick your ass," Leo said. He'd come to stand next to Nico and gave him a playful shove. Michael furrowed his brow, no doubt confused by Leo’s stupid nickname, but he shrugged. Nico figured the guy had already realized Leo was a complete whack job.

"It's good to meet you," Nico said. "Hurt my sister and I will literally kill you."

"Subtle," Percy said. He laughed, but then focused on Michael, whose blue eyes were shifting from Nico to Leo to Percy and back again. "He means it though, bro. He's a hardcore badass. Make Reyna happy."

"Enough," Reyna said. "If Michael makes me unhappy, I'll kill him myself."

That made everyone laugh, even Michael, perhaps because he didn't know how capable of killing him Reyna actually was.
"Go wake Jason, Percy," Piper said.

"Gladly."

Percy pulled Nico along and entered Jason's bedroom. He flipped on the overhead light. Nico let go of Percy's hand and stood with his back to the door. He did not want to be this close to Jason, especially knowing that Jason laid under those covers in nothing more than boxer shorts and if he got too close, he'd see those amazing muscles or the blue, blue eyes or the way Jason's strong fingers moved. Gods, he was going to need the Valium just from thinking about the guy.

Percy strode to the bed, picked up a glass of water from the nightstand, and dumped it on Jason's face. Nico was so shocked he didn't even shout a warning.

"Wake up, jackass."

Jason blindly shot out of bed without stopping for his glasses. He knocked Percy down and pinned him to the floor. Nico didn't know if Jason thought Percy was an intruder or if he just hated Percy. Either explanation was plausible.

"Motherfucker."

Nico guessed Jason knew it was Percy.

"Merry Christmas, scumsucker," Percy answered. "Nico's here watching you be an ass."

Jason squinted into the mellow light of the room. He climbed off Percy and pulled on his glasses.

"Hey, Nico. He threw water on me," Jason said, pointing rather unnecessarily at Percy, who had gotten back to his feet and was glowing with good cheer now that he'd tormented Jason.

"I saw. Merry Christmas, Jace." Gods, Jason. Broad shoulders and messed up hair and perfectly blue eyes. Nico wanted to eat him alive. He wanted Percy to go away and leave them alone so they could lock the door and do nothing but have sex for days. He wanted Jason to pin him to the floor the way he had Percy. He wanted sex and love and forever. He wanted not to worry he hated Jason. "Piper says to get up."

"Okay. Merry Christmas." Their eyes met for a moment before Jason walked to a dresser and pulled out clothes. Nico could see how sad his presence made Jason, mainly because it reminded them both how little progress they'd made toward reconciliation. They tried. They did. They loved each other. Something always went wrong. They fought. They said things that were harsh but true and things that were harsh and lies. It was ugly. Nico loved him, but he wasn't sure love was enough.

"Come on, baby," Percy said. He took Nico's hand and pulled him back into the living room. "We're going back to my house, peeps."

"In about twenty minutes, we'll move the furniture around," Nico said. "Be ready."

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Furniture movement went fine. Nico, Percy, Jason, Reyna, Calypso, Clarisse, and Chris moved furniture while Hazel and Annabeth worked in one kitchen and Leo, Piper, and Michael worked in
the other. Frank had been sent to buy ice and tampons. It made more sense for Nico to go, but Annabeth had shot him down when he’d suggested it. She probably suspected that if she sent him, he wouldn't come back, which was true.

Once the moving was done, there wasn't much for the non-kitchen people to do, so everyone congregated in Percy's living room. Nico felt extremely self-conscious and exposed. Since Hazel was cooking, he couldn't sit with her, and climbing up on Percy's lap, which was where he wanted to be, wouldn't be socially acceptable. He settled for pressing against Percy's side and pulling Clarisse down next to him. He hoped he could disappear between their two big personalities. He nervously bounced his leg.

Jason sat across from him on the other couch, next to Reyna. Nico tried not to look at him, but from the glances he was stealing every so often, Jason wasn't in any hurry to look at him, either.

"So, Michael," Percy said when Reyna's beau came into the apartment and sat next to her on the arm of the couch. Nico was glad someone was going to interrogate the douche. "You and Reyna met at school?"

"Yes." It came out squeaky, and Nico felt momentary pity for Michael, having to meet an enormous number of Reyna's friends all at once. Michael cleared his throat and tried again. "Yes. We're both in the student senate."

"That's nice," Percy said. "What's your major?"

"Math."

"What year are you in school?"

"Senior."

"Me, Frank, Piper, and Nico are seniors, too," Jason said, leaning forward to look across Reyna at Michael. Michael couldn't mask his surprise when Jason mentioned Nico among the seniors. Jason awkwardly flung his hand in Nico's direction. "He started early and is graduating in three years. He's a brainiac."

"What, um, what are you guys majoring in?" Michael’s skin was pale, and he was sweating a little.

"I'm elementary ed at Columbia," Jason said. He smiled his big smile, the one that made his eyes narrow into a squint, and Nico realized he was trying to put Michael at ease. Fondness swelled in Nico's heart while Jason kept talking. "Piper's in theater at CUNY. Frankie's in business. Nico's in public policy at NYU. " Jason glanced at Nico, and Nico could see the pride on his face. "He's going to be a lawyer."

"Oh, that's cool," Michael said. "I remember Reyna saying you were going to be a lawyer, too, Nico. Where does Frank go?"

"USC," Reyna said without missing a beat. Nico figured she must have planned for these sorts of questions. "Hazel's joining him next year. Percy, Annabeth, and Chris already graduated. Clarisse is —"

"Getting experience in the real world," Clarisse finished for her. Nico had never known Clarisse to express any desire for college. She was married to Camp Half-Blood as much as she was married to Chris. Clarisse stepped on Nico's bouncing foot and pinned it to the floor.

"Leo graduated from MIT, and he and Calypso run a bakery/garage up in Maine," Percy added.
"And you guys all met at summer camp? That's amazing. I barely have any friends from before college that I keep in touch with," Michael said. He shifted until he was slightly leaning into Reyna. Nico narrowed his eyes. "What do you guys who've already graduated do?"

"I do social work with juvenile delinquents," Chris said. "Clarisse runs the camp we went to, which is also kind of like social work with juvenile delinquents."


At the mention of Annabeth, Percy turned around, planted his hand three quarters of the way up Nico's thigh, and yelled, "Hey, Annabeth, when're we eating?"

Aside from deafening Nico in one ear, Percy's little display caused Reyna's eyes to narrow, Michael's to go wide, and Jason's hands to clench. Nico elbowed Percy, who turned back around and let go of Nico as though nothing had happened.

"One, Percy!" came Annabeth's delayed response.

Nico knew his face was red, and the place where Percy's hand had touched him felt like it was emblazoned with a scarlet A.

"I'm going to wake Rachel," Nico said. Percy's fingers brushed his when he stood, and Nico felt even more exposed. He hurried to the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Instead of waking Rachel, who was curled up with the cat, he climbed in bed with her and tried to meditate. He sucked at meditating and thought it was incredibly stupid (which was probably why he sucked at it), but he tried for five minutes before he went into the bathroom and took a Valium. When he came back, Rachel was stirring. He climbed back onto the bed and laid down. He was setting himself up for more groping, but he didn't care. That would be welcome after the embarrassment of having everyone see Percy touch him. At least everyone knew Rachel touching him had nothing to do with him.

"Hey, pretty boy, who's it doing out there?" Rachel said, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes as she spoke.

"That makes no sense."

"When have I ever made sense to you?"

"Pretty much never." Nico rested his hands under his head, which Rachel took as an invitation to snuggle.

Once she was all but on top of him, she spoke again. "Let me rephrase, then. Who's got you scurrying in here, desperate enough to hide that you're willing to climb in bed with me? Percy, Jason, or Reyna?"

"All."

"What happened?" Rachel propped her head up on Nico's chest and stared at him with her creepy-ass eyes.

"Nothing, really. Percy turned around to yell something at Annabeth and grabbed my thigh." Nico huffed out a breath that blew Rachel's crazy red hair around. "It wasn't so egregious, I guess, but it was too familiar a thing to do to someone unless you're romantically involved with them. The man Reyna's seeing, his eyes popped out of his head. Reyna did that thing where she looks like a crazed
predator trying to protect her cub, which I am not and do not need. Jason went all Neanderthal man, clenching his fists, which I also do not need, especially because he has to know that I'd drop almost my entire world to be with him if he'd just straighten up and not act like such a jizzbag all the time."


"Be serious, Rachel."

"I am. You spend a lot of time with Percy, doing your little Percy-Nico not quite sex but might as well be intimacy dance. Be quiet. I'm not done. Anyway, you can hardly blame Percy for forgetting he's supposed to act like he isn't halfway up your ass all the time."

"Gods, I can't believe I'm talking to you about this. It'd be more productive to talk to Clarisse. Get off."

"Ooh, if you insist. I've been waiting for that invitation for a couple years now, honeybunny."

Nico rolled his eyes. He'd learned from their dinner dates that Rachel was harmless aside from the groping, which didn't bother him anymore. She liked to talk, but she'd never try anything real.

"Do you think if you could have sex it'd help with your, you know, demons? I've tried talking to him."

Rachel sat up, straddling Nico's hips, and tugged up his shirt, exposing his stomach. "Gods, you have amazing abs. I wish you'd pose for me."

"Not happening. Answer my question."

"Do I think I wouldn't be an alcoholic if I got laid? I know that's what everyone says." Rachel dropped the sex-starved act. "I don't think so. My problems are the problems I was destined to have, and they're mine. They haven't been created by some outside force. I'm the one responsible for them. Alcoholism runs in my family. I knew it and started drinking anyway. That's the problem with you, Nico. It's why you have such a hard time forgiving Jason."

"What do you mean?" Nico shifted his weight and moved Rachel a little lower on his hips so she wasn't squishing his bladder. He needed to pee.

"Gimme." Rachel gestured to Nico’s hands and laid her own over his palms. His hands were so big and hers so small that he could curl his fingers right over the top of hers. Rachel dropped one of his hands and cupped the other in a fist inside both of her hands. She extended his index finger and used it to draw designs in the air. "You want to blame Jason for all the awful shit that's happened between you two. It has been awful. He's been a complete, horrible jerk to you so often. But you chose to go back to him over and over, and you chose to get in bed with Percy, and you chose to get in bed with Paul. You chose to act like a fruitcake and stalk the queen."

"I'm not sorry for any of that stuff except the stalking. I don't think of them as mistakes, Rachel. I'm glad Percy's in my life, and he might not be if we hadn't started out with sex. I tried to be his friend for years, and he treated me like shit." Nico thought about how improbable it was that he and Percy had become what they had. They were in a place so different from where they'd started — he a lovestruck little boy and Percy an indifferent, otherworldly hero who didn't consider Nico even worth knowing. "And Paul, he's been so much more to me than I ever imagined. He's helped me grow into a man."

"But none of it has helped you with Jason," Rachel said gently. She kissed his fingertip and set his hand down. "You would've grown up to be a wonderful man no matter what. It's who you are. You
would have always had a best friend in Reyna. I'm not saying this stuff to make you feel bad.
It's...you put too much stock in how you think other people have affected you and not enough in
who you are and the choices you make. No one made you good. You are good. No one's made you
have problems. They were the problems you were always going to have. And now, forgive Jason or
not, it's you who has to make that decision."

"It'd be easier if he'd—"

"Nope, no copouts. It'd be easier if he pooped rainbow unicorns and sprouted a couple extra penises,
but that wouldn't make the choice any less yours. You keep waiting for him to be someone he used
to be, but that guy could only ever exist as he was then. It's a snapshot of who he was at sixteen,
Nico, not who he could be now. He was going to change. You were going to change. The question
is, will you choose to accept him the way he is?"

The door rattled, and Rachel started bouncing on Nico's hips. "Go away! Hot sex happening in
here."

"Oh, my gods, Rachel! Knock it off!" Nico pulled her off him and scrambled off the bed. "I have to
pee!"

He heard Rachel laugh behind him as he ran into the bathroom. When he came out, Rachel was gone
and Percy was in her place on the bed, smirking at him.

"Did you finally give in and bone Rachel?"

"Shut up, Percy. That's gross." Nico flopped down on the bed and threw a pillow over his face. The
Valium was making him sleepy.

"It's not gross, baby. Girls are hot."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Hey, I'm not saying I wouldn't rather bone you." Percy settled in closer. Nico could feel his warmth.
"But since we're being all platonic and shit...How you holding up? I'm sorry I groped you."

"'S'okay," Nico mumbled. "I overreacted. They were looking at me, and it felt like they all knew
about us."

"They all do know about us, all except Reyna's boyfriend."

"I guess. It made it more real, them seeing it, instead of it being something private between you and
me."

"You took a pill, huh?" Percy pulled the pillow off Nico's mouth and nose. The fresh air felt better,
even if it didn't smell as much like Percy as the pillow. "Don't suffocate yourself. You'll be okay if I
leave you in here to sleep it off? I'll lock the door so Rachel can't come in and molest you again."

"Mhm. Wake me when your mom comes, okay?"

"Sure." Percy climbed over Nico and pressed their bodies together. Nico sloppily pulled at him,
trying to keep him close, but Percy was already moving away.

"Percy?"

"What, Nico?" Percy sounded like he was at the door.
"I wish I loved you more than I love Jason."

There was a pause, and Nico thought maybe Percy had already left.

"Me too, baby. Get some sleep."

***

Nico woke some time later when the foot of the bed dipped. He rolled over onto his side and tried to go back to sleep, but a strong hand caught his foot and began kneading the sole. The feeling was too heavenly to ignore.

"I don't know who you are," Nico said, "but I'll marry you as long as you promise to do this every day."

"I'd take you up on that offer." Jason had the most wonderful voice, deep and resonant, a leader's voice.

Nico pulled the pillow off his face and sat up. He was very groggy, but he was alert enough to move out of Jason's reach. He could almost feel Jason sigh in defeat.

"Is Percy's mom here? How did you get in?"

"She wasn't when I came in here, and," Jason pulled a key out of his pocket and showed it to Nico, "the front door key opens the bedroom lock, too. I wanted to check on you."

"I was sleeping, that's all." Nico wrapped his arms around himself. Jason made him jittery.

"I saw."

"How long have you been in here?" Nico rubbed his eyes and tried to wake up.

"Not long. Five minutes maybe. I'm sorry I drove you away."

"It wasn't you, exactly." Nico curled his feet closer to his body and watched Jason tap a rhythm onto the sheets. "There're too many people. It's overwhelming."

"At least they're almost all people who love you." Jason shrugged and fell sideways across the foot of the bed. He flung his tan arms straight over his head so his hands hung off the bed. He was wearing a stupid green t-shirt with a Christmas wreath on it. He'd win the family ugly Christmas sweater contest, if they had one and allowed t-shirts instead of sweaters. "Everyone hates me except Leo. Well, Annabeth, Frank, and Calypso tolerate me, but it's out of pity."

"Don't say that. They don't hate you."

"They do, and I deserve it."

Nico moved closer, so he was sitting next to Jason's hip. Except for that trip after the banishment, Jason wasn't prone to either self-pity or trying to elicit pity from others. He was saying this stuff because it was bothering him. Nico felt a curl of sympathy.

"No one hates you, not even Percy and Reyna. You also haven't done anything that makes you
worthy of hate, Jace."

Jason looked up at him and smiled. Nico thought it was the saddest smile he'd ever seen.

"I've thought, a million times, that I had to wait out the storm. That they'd all forgive me and you'd come back to me and we'd all live happily ever after." Jason brushed his hand over the bottom of Nico's knees, back and forth, before putting his hand back over his head. "But demigods don't get happy endings, especially ones like me and you. What would make you happy, Nico? I'll give it to you, if I can."

Nico didn't know how to answer Jason, so he didn't. "Rachel says I have to stop waiting for you to be the guy you were when we were first together and happy and decide if I want you the way you are now."

"Do you want me? Because I've been trying since August to be what I think you want me to be, and all I seem to do is piss you off."

"Stop trying so hard. I already love you. When I told you there would never be anyone else for me, I meant it. The question is whether I'm happier with you or without you. You make both ways hard."

Jason chuckled. "You don't make shit very easy, either, Neeks."

"That's part of the problem. We're two assholes who don't know how to behave with each other." Nico nervously touched the place where Jason's shirt had ridden up, exposing the skin of his stomach. He didn't want Jason to think he was being sexual, but he wanted to remind himself how Jason felt. Jason felt good. Really, really good. He felt warm and safe, like home was supposed to feel.

Nico looked back to Jason's face and saw that Jason was watching the motion of his hand. He was glad that Jason's hands stayed up over his head. The distance made him feel safer.

"I don't trust you, not like I do Percy and my roommate." Why did it have to be so hard? He was thinking that Jason felt warm and safe, and then what came out of his mouth was almost the exact opposite. But it felt true, too.

"Bullshit. You don't trust yourself with me. That's the real problem. You worry that if I really touched you, if you spent enough time with me, that you wouldn't say no to me anymore. It scares you how vulnerable I make you — not because I'm the bad guy, but because you're scared of yourself."

Nico opened his mouth to say that Jason was wrong, that he trusted himself fine, when he was thrown back on the bed and Jason was on top of him. Jason's hands were on either side of his head, his hips pushed down on Nico's, his face hovering close.

"Tell me you don't want me," Jason breathed in Nico's ear. "Tell me to stop. Tell me you're scared of me instead of the way you feel when you're with me."

He bit Nico's neck, rough and hard, before licking over the spot and moving to Nico's other ear.

"Tell me you don't want me," Jason breathed in Nico's ear. "Tell me to stop. Tell me you're scared of me instead of the way you feel when you're with me."

He bit Nico's neck, rough and hard, before licking over the spot and moving to Nico's other ear.

"I'm not easy, Nico, or perfect, but you trust me."

Another bite. Nico arched his back and tugged at Jason's shoulders. He wanted him closer.

"You want me, too rough, too hot, too hard. I'm never going to be exactly what you want, and you want me anyway. I swear," he kissed Nico's throat, "to you that I will protect you and love you and
keep you from harm as long as you'll let me. I want you, Nico, to be mine forever. You can handle it. You are stronger than anyone but me believes."

Nico was stunned by how true and real every word was. Jason read him, knew him, saw down deep inside. Hell, Jason had him memorized. Nico felt stripped raw and bare and he didn't want it to end.

"I love you, Jason. Gods, yes. Make me yours."

"Get off him, Jason."

Nico startled and looked around Jason's shoulder to see Annabeth. Her hands were on her hips, and she was pissed.

"The door was locked for a reason, Jason. He took a Valium. He doesn't know what you're saying or he's saying, and he sure as hell isn't going to remember it. Percy's folks are here. Get him up and fix his hair and shirt and get him out there."

Nico wanted to tell Jason that Annabeth was wrong. He knew what he was doing. It wasn't the drug. He would remember. But Jason was already off him, pulling him up to sit, straightening their shirts and running his hand through Nico's hair. He hoisted Nico to standing, and Nico was horrified to realize he could barely stand without leaning on Jason for support.

"Jason..."

Jason gently kissed the side of Nico's head. He looked broken. "I'm so sorry, Nico. I didn't know. I'm so incredibly sorry."

Before Nico could say anything, they were out the door. Jason handed him off to Percy and disappeared. He didn't rejoin them for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

The car seat buying scene doesn't really fit with the rest of the chapter, but it's probably my favorite scene of the work and I couldn't bear to cut it.

We're so near the end - just ten chapters left after this one! I hope you all are still finding the work enjoyable and worthwhile. Thanks for reading. :-) 

Because I know I have lots of overseas readers, I usually try very hard to explain American references, but there were so many this time that I'd end up with a never-ending end note. If there's something you're not familiar with, you can always ask me in the comments and I'll explain. I will mention that I've never been to the Babies 'R Us in Manhattan, so I have no idea how it smells. I have been to the one in my town, though, and it has, a time or two, smelled like baby poo. It's not a reflection on the chain in general.

The scarlet A Nico says he feels burning on his thigh after Percy's hand was removed at Christmas is a reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter.

Good luck and good rest to those of you in the throes of finals!
The Dream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In his sleep, Nico clutched Percy tighter to his body. Behind him, Jason edged closer and flung a leg over Nico's hips and Percy's, too. They were cozy, warm and safe, and Nico was content. He drifted into a dream.

He was in the front yard of his farmhouse, standing in the shade of his big old oak tree. Since his ascendancy, his dreams had been murky and outside his control. They centered on sex or sometimes random flashes of the people he loved. Occasionally, a rendering of his past slipped in. Nico assumed that this dream, although it was much more crisp and clear than his dreams had become, was about his past. Without thinking much about it, he left the shade of the oak tree and walked toward his house.

The day was sunny and hot. At least, hot for New York. His dream must be taking place during the summer. He was grateful when he reached the shade of his front porch. His door wasn't locked. Nico had rarely locked his doors. He twisted the old brass doorknob and went inside.

Light flooded into the house from the east-facing windows of his dining room. He'd never used the space as a dining room since he and Clarisse were the only people who ever came here. Instead, it had been where he studied, and his table, in this dream, was heaped with law books. Nico smiled. He had wanted so much to be a lawyer. At first, the loss of that dream had hurt tremendously, but now Nico believed he would serve those in need in some way, even if it wasn't the way he'd originally intended. Hazily, it occurred to him that this was a new thought, one he hadn't considered while awake.

He approached the table to crack open the top book when a woman's voice came from the kitchen.

"Thank the gods. It's taken you forever to get here, honeylips."

Nico switched directions and peered into the dim light of the kitchen. "Rachel?"

"In the flesh. Or, in the dream-flesh. Whatever. Yes, it's me." Rachel's smile was glorious. She threw her arms around Nico's neck and kissed his chest before pulling him down and kissing both cheeks. She let go and patted his backside. "Let's get to work now. Time's a-ticking."

"What are we working on?" Nico was confused. Rachel had never been to his farmhouse.

"You're modeling for me." Rachel pointed into the dining room at a stool that Nico hadn't noticed before. Nearby, there was an easel and a set of paints on a stand. "The light is perfect here. I can see why you chose this place."

"What are you talking about? And I'm not modeling for you. I told you before—"

"Oh, come on, sexypants," Rachel took his hand and led him into the dining room. "You know you don't mind nudity anymore, and there's this important art competition at school I desperately want to win. I'll be a shoo-in if I paint you in this light."

"What makes you think I don't mind nudity anymore? This is a weird-ass dream." Nico was growing more and more confused. The dream was so vivid. The house, Rachel, everything felt real. "This is a dream, right?"
"It's a dream. I know you don't mind nudity because I've heard about it from a little dragon-birdie." Rachel pulled Nico's shirt up and off. "Oh, gods, you're even more gorgeous now that you're a god. I wonder how Apollo feels about being the second-hottest god in existence."

Nico slapped Rachel's hands away from the button on his jeans. "Slow the fuck down, Rachel. Leo told you about his visit?"

"Nope, but he told Festus, and Festus told me. It was great. He must've said 'Dios mio' and 'naked' about a thousand times each, according to Festus. I think you scarred him for life. And don't worry, your little love-nest secret is safe with me."

Nico gave her his best glare. "You're telling me you talked to Leo's metal dragon?"

Rachel shrugged. "I once told you I talked to your belly. I'm the Oracle. I know things. Now strip."

"You are fucking insane. You know that?" Nico unlaced his boots and took them off. He pulled his socks off, too, and shot one at Rachel.

"Yep. Heard that a few times. Jeans off."

Nico sighed and unfastened his jeans. He stripped them off and sat on the stool, but Rachel snapped her fingers at him. He rolled his eyes and took off his underwear. "Happy?"

"Dear gods, yes. Damn, you are hung. I knew it."

"Are you here to paint me or ogle me? Because I can go find some other dream..."

"Oh, don't be such a fuddy-duddy. I'll be professional now. It was an idle comment." Rachel tilted her head to the side and gazed at Nico appraisingly. "Sit sideways on the stool, and I'll arrange you."

The stool was surprisingly comfortable, at least until Rachel started moving him around. She scooted him forward and made him put the toes of his front foot on the floor. He had to keep his shoulders straight, his back slightly arched, and let his back forearm dangle over the thigh of the leg that got to have its foot on the foot rest. His front hand had to rest low on his hip. His face was pointed slightly down and completely forward. The pose wasn't exactly uncomfortable — he was a god and this was a dream — but it wasn't a natural position.

"No one sits like this in real life, Rach."

"Doesn't matter. It's all about the aesthetics. You're literally perfect, Nico – those wise, vulnerable old man's eyes in a virile, youthful body. I will so win the award." Rachel opened up her paints. "Now, this may take a while, and I talk a lot while I paint. You just keep your pretty self still and listen."

Despite Rachel's assertion that she talked a lot, she was quiet for the first half hour while she drew sketch after sketch. When she was satisfied, she flipped her sketch pad open to one in particular and showed it to Nico. He had to admit, Rachel was very good at what she did. He looked almost as real as he had in Athena's tapestries.

"You're very talented, Rachel. I'm sorry I never told you that before."

Rachel patted his knee sympathetically. "It's probably been hard to tell me that kind of stuff when we spend so much of our time talking about you. Not an insult, sugar plum, merely an observation. I like you. You may have noticed. Move your lovely package off the stool and let it hang next to your thigh for me, will you?"
"I'm still sorry." Nico did what Rachel had instructed. "I like you, too, you know? Being with you always scared me, though, because I worried you'd drop a prophecy on me."

"Boy, did I ever." Rachel snorted and went to work on her canvas. "You couldn't escape it by avoiding me. The prophecy didn't turn out so terrible, did it?"

"I died, Rachel. I'm in prison. What's your definition of 'terrible?'" Nico was dying to scratch his ear. He couldn't understand why it was even itching in a dream. Jason was probably breathing on him back in their warm, comfortable bed.

"It's a pretty white-collar prison, Nico. My dad had to go to one once, too, for tax fraud. They had a swimming pool and racquetball courts. He said it was a bit like going to the spa." Rachel's eyes moved rapidly back and forth between Nico and her painting. Her tongue was stuck between her lips.

"Sure, our prison's like a spa, if the inmates have to build everything themselves and aren't allowed any contact with their families. Otherwise, things are great."

Rachel rinsed her brush in a cup of water and flicked the water from the bristles at him. Nico flinched but maintained his pose.

"Know how many drool-worthy guys are holding me right now and how many will fuck me senseless in the morning?"

"None." Nico knew he sounded sulky.

"How many hot guys are holding you right now and will fuck you senseless in the morning? And every morning. And every night. And probably a ton of times in between. Plus, you love the stupid idiots, and they love you back."


"Pretty nice?" Rachel was back to tilting her head this way and that.

"Amazing."

"Better. It's more important to be honest than spiteful, Nico. Speaking of honest, you know Apollo got sentenced to no contact with mortals?"

Guilt seared Nico's gut. He'd never wanted Apollo to get hurt. "I know. I feel terrible about it."

"Don't. He knew way more than you what he was getting into and what the consequences were." Rachel stopped painting and fixed Nico with her green eyes that had once seemed so creepy. He didn't find them scary anymore. They were wise and maybe a little sad. "He loves you. He told me all the punishment except losing you was more than made up for by the good life you two had."

"It was a good life. I wish I'd spent more time appreciating it. I thought he couldn't talk to mortals? How do you know this? Did his belly tell you?" Nico remembered he could wish away the itch. He did and breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"Smartass. He told me. The gods realized that Apollo wasn't much good for handing out prophecies if he couldn't talk to me, and it's not like we're going to sleep together, though I so totally would love that. Gods, I bet you two were blazing hot together between the sheets."

"Focus, Rachel," Nico snapped. "You've been talking to Apollo? Has he said anything else about
"You don't give me anything, Nico. It's not fair."

"I'm fucking naked on a stool, letting you paint me. I think I'm giving you plenty."

There was a brief silence. When Nico didn't give in, Rachel huffed and blew her hair out of her eyes. "Fine. Well, he happened to tell me that he is so proud of how you've handled yourself since becoming a god. He thinks it's alright that you're sleeping with Jason and Percy, and he's not upset about it. He says he knew his time with you was limited, which is why he worked so hard to make the most of it. He says if you tire of your lovers by the time his 3,000 years away from you are up, he'll be interested in going back to what you had. Arch your back a little more, honeybuns."

Nico arched his back and looked out his back windows. There was nothing, no buildings, no people, behind his farmhouse. There had been nothing, in fact, within his mortal sight on any side of the house. Just land. Most of it was his, he supposed. The Realtor had told him the acreage of the property when he'd bought the place, but he hadn't cared then. He'd just liked the yard. The tiny interior was so cozy and inviting, too. The house had been ideal. Isolation and insulation had suited him.

At the same time, he'd loved living with Apollo. He'd loved the apartment, so modern and clean and close to school. He'd loved his lover.

"Can you tell Apollo something from me?"

"I imagine." Rachel was hunched over, probably giving special attention to painting his dick.

"Tell him I miss him. Tell him I love him."

"Will do, if I can. Take a break and come here."

Nico got off the stool and stretched his arms far over his head. He took it as a sign of how serious Rachel was about her art that she didn't watch. He looped an arm over her shoulder and admired her work.

"Holy hell, Rachel. You're amazing at this. That color's the same as my skin and the light," Nico turned back to the windows before focusing his eyes where he'd been sitting, "it's perfect." He reached his hand up to the painting, and Rachel slapped it away.

"Don't touch. Ha. It's usually you telling me that. The paint's not dry. Thank you for the compliment." Rachel absentmindedly kissed Nico's chest.

The painting was nearly complete. Nico found himself not wanting to leave the house or the dream. He pulled Rachel in a little closer. She was so slight, but she felt solid and real in his grasp. Holding someone from his first life, someone besides Percy and Jason, hurt and helped all at once.

"I miss this house."

"You'll come back to it."

Nico startled and bent down to meet Rachel's eyes. Black paint flecked her nose, mingling with the freckles. "What do you mean?"

"It's a great place for a confined god or two to live. You'll make it your home again, Nico. The gods won't keep you in that prison forever, and when they let you go, you'll come back here."
"I can't come back here. I've promised to serve my father."

"Did you consider how your lovers might feel about you planning to live in the Underworld?"
Rachel unhooked herself from Nico's arm and went into the kitchen. Nico followed. She pulled two water bottles from the fridge and handed him one.

"Uh, I don't know how long it's been since I stocked the kitchen. These might not be good anymore." Nico hoped they were. He was thirsty.

"It's a dream. They're fine. Come sit on the couch for a bit."

"I'm going to get dressed first." The water tasted delicious. Nico couldn't remember the last time he'd had some.

"Don't you dare put clothes on. This is my dream, too, and I'm enjoying the hell out of it." Rachel snapped her fingers and pointed at the couch. "Besides, I'm not done painting you."

"I saw your painting. It was finished." Nico sat down, and Rachel scooted to be closer to him. She picked up his hand and bent his fingers, one joint at a time.

"Almost, but I'll do the detail work when I'm awake. I'm going to do a second pose, just in case. So, back to the question. Did you consider how your lovers would feel when you signed on to serve your dad? You're planning to live in the Underworld. Don't you think they should get some say in things?"

This was an uncomfortable question. The answer was no, Nico hadn't considered that. He wanted to make his father proud and repay the kindnesses he'd been shown. Jason and Percy, they didn't plan to stay with him after their time in Australia was up, did they?

"I don't know how to answer that."

"Honesty is also better than evading hard questions, Nico." Rachel turned his hand over and traced the lines of his palm.

"I didn't think about it. You think Percy or Jason want to be with me after our time in prison is over?"

Rachel slapped his chest and put her head in her hands. She sat up and slapped him again.

"Oh, that was fun." Rachel rubbed Nico's chest. She pinched his nipple and squeezed his pectoral. "You feel as incredible as you look. I'm going to get in trouble for groping you like this, even if it is in a dream."

"Well, knock it off, then." Nico pushed her hand away. He didn't generally mind Rachel's wandering hands, but he'd always been clothed before. Rachel sighed and took a drink. She fingered her water bottle instead of Nico's chest.

"I think it's obvious that Percy and Jason want to continue your relationship after your prison sentence is over. Stupid. You have to be the only person that knows the three of you who'd think any different. They're gaga over you."

"Percy wants to go back to Annabeth." Nico didn't think it would happen, but he wanted to do anything he could to give Percy the chance. He loved Percy enough to let him go.

"He does. That's true. He also wants to stay with you. He's in love with you, Nico. I mean long-term
commitment love. And Jason, well, that gorgeous hunk of a man wants you more than ever, I think. You know how Piper told him you'd love each other forever, but neither of you would be happy because of it?” Rachel rested her feet on the coffee table, the same way Clarisse had a long time ago. It made Nico miss them both.

"I do. She was right."

"She was right while you were mortal, but that's neither here nor there. The point is, Jason doesn't care about silly notions of happiness these days. He only wants you. He told you he was committed to you and he'd take what you gave him." Rachel had been bouncing around a bit and had seemed as kooky as usual, but now she was serious. "Nico, give him everything. Don't hold back because you're afraid. Stop thinking about the stuff he's done in the past. Pay attention to who he is now. Your entire future can be so special if you let him be there with you."

He and Jason hadn't told Leo about the conversation they'd had the day on the beach when they'd decided to try to be together. How did Rachel know what they'd said?

"I'm the Oracle," Rachel said, answering the question Nico hadn't asked aloud. She smiled. "I know things. Listen to me, for once."

Nico kissed the top of her head.

"I'll commit to thinking about it."

"Ugh. You had to end up ridiculously sexy because you're so much of a pain in the ass otherwise. Get up. Break's over."

Nico got up and walked back to his stool.

"Nope. Time for me to paint that glorious ass, sexykins. Oh, and what happens at the farmhouse stays at the farmhouse, got it?" Rachel poked him in the small of the back with her paintbrush like she was holding a gun.

"I understand," Nico said.

He let Rachel maneuver him around by the hips to get the best light. He ended up looking back over his shoulder toward his friend. She was quiet this time and gave him time to think.

When Nico woke several hours later, it was with striking clarity that he remembered the dream. Percy had already nuzzled underneath him, and Jason’s lips were pressed to Percy’s temple, his arm warm and heavy on Nico’s back. Nico spent a long time watching his lovers sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I can't count. Now there are ten chapters left. The sentiment's still the same. I love you guys for sticking around! :-)
New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason stayed away as long as he could.

He felt sick about the way he'd touched Nico and talked to him at Christmas, not realizing that all of Nico's reactions were the result of foggy thoughts. If Nico remembered anything at all, he was probably disgusted by the way Jason had taken advantage of him. Jason hadn't wanted that. Nico had seemed so lucid, but then he couldn't even stand. Jason couldn't stay and see those dark bruises he'd left on Nico's neck reminding him what a horrible, opportunistic pig he was. No doubt Nico thought Jason was abandoning him again, but Jason thought he was being kind.

On Nico's birthday, Jason emptied a flower shop of all the lilies they had. He sweet-talked the attendant at Nico's apartment building until she let him go up unannounced. He laid the flowers on Nico's doorstep, rang the doorbell, and walked away.

Two days later, there was a knock on his door, but when Jason opened it the only thing he found was an envelope addressed to him. The letter inside was short.

Jace,

The flowers were beautiful. Thank you, both for them and for remembering my birthday.

I'm not sure what I've done to make you stop asking to see me, but I'm sorry. I know I'm not the easiest person to get along with. I want so much to be whatever it is you want me to be, but all I can ever seem to be is myself, and that guy is a terrible mess. Percy says something happened between you and me on Christmas, but he doesn't know what it was. He says that something upset you. He promises it isn't my fault, but why else would you leave me again?

I'm not going to fall apart. There's been enough of that on my end to last a lifetime. I'll stay away and give you space, but I wanted to thank you, and writing it down seemed like the least intrusive way to do it.

All my love,

Nico

Jason cried while he read, then he pulled a couple sheets of paper from one of his students' notebooks and carefully wrote his own note.

My dearest Nico,

I'm not angry at you. You had taken an anxiety pill at Christmas. I didn't know, because you were awake and talking to me. I was way too forward, kissing you and laying on you and pouring my heart out to you. I bit you. You noticed the bruises on your neck? I'm so embarrassed that I took advantage of you like that. I thought you would stop me if I was doing something you didn't want, and only realized the truth because Annabeth came in and told me. I'm so sorry.

I've stayed away because I'm not good for you. I told you that day that you are stronger than anyone except me gives you credit for. That's true, Nico. You are so much stronger than anyone realizes, especially yourself. Quit doubting who you are. Exactly who you are is more than enough. I
sometimes read that notebook of apologies you wrote, and it kills me how many of those ideas about what you've supposedly done wrong are ones that I put in your head. The truth of the matter is that I've been the one to blame for just about everything that's gone wrong between us.

Being with you is so much better for me than anything else ever has been. You being with me, I don't know. I'm not vain enough to think all your problems are my fault. But I'm old enough now to think that even if I make you happy, I'm still bad for you.

I always fuck things up with you, even when I think I'm not. I don't think the other guys are any better for you, but I am absolutely certain they are better all-around people.

Everyone gives me advice about what I need to do when it comes to you, but the secret is that they don't know you the way I do. They only see bits and pieces, what you want them to see or what I tell them. Maybe bits and pieces are what you've shown to me, too. I don't know. I like to think I know you better than anyone, though, and I know this: you are absolutely amazing. It has been my privilege to be your lover. Maybe someday we'll be there again.

I should go. I could write to you for a million years and still not say everything I should or want to, but I have to get these papers graded to hand back to my students tomorrow, and I am not as good at reading and writing quickly as you are.

Yours always,

Jason

Jason made a trip to Nico's apartment the next day and left the letter under his door. A few days later, a note showed up outside Jason's door.

Jace,

Tell me about student teaching. Leave your notes in the planter in front of Percy's apartment.

Always,

Nico

And so they continued. Jason stayed away from Nico. Nico stayed away from Jason. They wrote and told each other everything, from their darkest fears to the most mundane parts of their lives. The situation wasn't great, but it was better than where they'd been before. Their fights still happened, but they were muted by having to write things down. They were more thoughtful, at least Jason was, and Nico didn't get as angry. Jason had read about lovers whose letters to one another inspired others to wish for the kind of love they had, but that wasn't what these were. These felt more like the letters of lovers slowly realizing their best days together were behind them and trying to make peace with their loss.

Jason doubted he'd ever make peace with losing Nico.

***

Jason sat curled up on the couch and signed his name to his latest letter. He was about to tear it out of the notebook when his front door opened and Piper bustled in. She had been at a shoot and appeared
to be wearing one of the outfits, an inky black strapless number with a rather short, form-fitting skirt. Her hair and makeup were still done. Piper usually washed away all traces of modeling before she came home.

"Get ready, Jay," she said. "The baby's coming."

Jason hopped up and grabbed a grocery sack of bottled water off the top of the fridge and a duffel bag of Percy’s clothes from the closet. Annabeth had delegated them jobs and made them do a few dry runs.

"Percy?"

"Nico's got him, of course, the bastard. Let's go." Piper turned on her probably thousand dollar heels and exited the apartment. Jason jogged after her.

Piper had bought a car with her modeling money, and she was a scary driver, which meant they got to the hospital in record time, even in New York rush hour traffic. Whenever she got snarled in a traffic jam, Piper rolled down the window and told everyone whose window was down how much they wanted to pull off the road and let her pass. Sometimes she drove on the sidewalks, which no one seemed to mind either since she talked to them first, through a bullhorn. Annabeth, Jason thought.

Annabeth had come straight to the hospital from work when her water broke, so she had already been admitted, Piper explained. Nico had shadow traveled Percy there. They might have beaten Annabeth. By the time Jason and Piper arrived, Percy had texted Jason the room number and all Jason had to do was follow Piper's click-clacking heels in the right direction. They were IDed in the labor and delivery ward and given wristbands with Percy's and Annabeth's names on them to prove they weren't baby snatchers. Nico came out of Annabeth's room, already branded not a baby snatcher, and took them back. He greeted Piper and Jason exactly the same, with a grunt and a nod.

The room belonged in a hotel, not a hospital. The bed looked homey, with a real wood headboard and footboard, and there was a couch and two chairs. The TV was on, though no one seemed to be watching it. If there hadn’t been medical equipment and side rails on the bed, Jason could have pretended Percy and Annabeth were on a vacation.

Percy fed Annabeth an ice chip and raised his chin in greeting. Annabeth ignored Jason but motioned for Piper to come take her hand on the side of the bed opposite Percy. Nico sat on the couch with his legs crossed and twirled his skull ring. Jason didn't know what to do, so he sat next to Nico and watched Annabeth. After a few minutes where nothing happened except some whispered conversation between the group in and around the bed, Jason was getting confused. Was Annabeth in labor or not? Where the hell was the doctor?

"What the fuck is happening? I thought she was having the baby," Jason whispered to Nico, since whispering seemed to be the thing to do.

Nico glanced anxiously at Annabeth and then Jason. "Wait for it. She's almost due for another contraction."

Jason had no idea what a contraction was, but he found out soon enough when Annabeth said, "It's starting," and Percy gripped her hand. It was fascinating to witness, the way Annabeth went limp and deepened her breathing. She closed her eyes like she was in a trance.

"Watch her belly. See how it's tightening?" Nico said. "They're lasting about thirty seconds now, from beginning to end."
"That's a contraction?"

"Yes. They'll get longer and more intense the further the labor progresses." Nico was still watching Annabeth. "See, it's letting up now. She'll have another one in ten minutes or so. Maybe less."

"Freaky."

"It's natural." Nico shrugged.

"Why does it happen?"

"It's shoving the baby farther down the birth canal and thinning out and opening the cervix."

Jason had no idea what the hell Nico was talking about. He was surprised a gay guy with no interest in women at all knew this stuff, even Nico, who knew lots of stuff about lots of stuff.

"Why do you know this?"

"Percy made me watch a bunch of videos with him. He said I needed to know what was going on in case he passed out."

"Typical." Jason rolled his eyes. "He looks like he's doing fine, though."

"So far so good," Nico agreed. He gave Jason the briefest smile, then his alarm started beeping. Jason could read the panic in his eyes. Nico didn't want to upset Annabeth. The best he managed was flinging his other hand over his wrist in an attempt to muffle the sound coming from his watch.

"I can still hear it, Nico, gods damn it!" Annabeth snapped. "Shut it off!"

Jason scrambled, trying to remember how he'd shut off the alarm that time at Leo's, but he fumbled and flailed and Nico ended up slapping him away in frustration. Percy hurried over, gently held Nico's wrist, and turned off the alarm. Nico's shoulders slumped, and he hung his head.

"It's okay, baby. She's not mad at you." Percy winked at Nico and kissed his hair before heading back to Annabeth, who'd apparently pressed the call button, because a nurse came bustling in.

As soon as Annabeth saw him, she said, "My friend over there, the cute emo boy, he needs food."

The nurse swiveled his gaze from Annabeth to Nico. Nico groaned and hid his face in his hands. He mumbled, "I'm fine, Annabeth."

"He needs food," Annabeth said again.

"Is he the baby's father? We don't give food to family and friends," the nurse said. The guy shook his head, and Jason didn't blame him. Nico obviously wasn't the father or he'd be where Percy was, holding Annabeth's hand.

Annabeth's eyebrows set. She was ready to pitch a fit at the nurse for not hopping to obey her, but Percy cut her off.

"Grace, take Nico and get him some food. They have a cafeteria a few floors down."

Jason reached for Nico's hand, but Nico was already on his feet and rushing for the door. Jason caught up to him at the elevators. Nico's face was bright red.

"Do you know where you're going?" Jason asked.
"Fuck no, and I can find my own food."

The elevator doors dinged open, and Nico stomped inside. Jason grabbed his arm and straddled the doors so Nico couldn't leave without him. The security station was right in front of the elevator, so Jason called to the guards, "Excuse me, what floor is the cafeteria on?"

The guard told him, and Jason punched in the number and let the doors close behind him.

"You can let go. I'm not running." Nico’s arms were crossed, and he was tapping his boot against the wall under his ass. Jason hadn't realized he was still holding Nico's arm. He let go.

"Sorry. You did look like you were running, though."

"Annabeth shouldn't be worrying about me eating when she's having a fucking baby."

"She cares."

"Fine. But I don't forget anymore. How the fuck could I? I can't get the damned thing to stop beeping."

"Can't you have your roommate deactivate it? He's the one who made it do this, right?" Jason brushed his fingertips over the black watch that Nico found so offensive.

"I asked. He said no."

"Well, can you take it off and, I don't know, throw it off your balcony or something?" Jason didn't get what the big deal was. Nico had managed to eat fine in the time between the war and his depressive episode (that's what Jason's counselor called it when he'd told her he was angry because Nico had gone "Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs") last year.

"Watch," Nico said. Jason laughed a little at the pun, until Nico shot him a vicious glare.

Nico took off the watch and dropped it on the ground. It sat on the floor of the elevator for a few seconds before disappearing and reappearing on Nico's wrist.

The elevator dinged, and Jason and Nico got off. The smell of hospital food, stale and antiseptic, reached Jason's nose. Ugh. He was going to have trouble convincing Nico to eat anything. Nico was distracted by the watch, though.

"Now I'll take it off again. As soon as I drop it on the ground, you stomp on it."

"Nico, I don't wanna break—"

"Shut up and do what I say."

Nico took off the watch and hurled it at the floor. Jason had to chase it down because it bounced ten feet away. He caught up to the thing and brutally smashed it between his foot and the floor. The sound of shattering glass filled the hallway, and people turned to stare. Jason didn't care. He was so happy to have done something for Nico. He victoriously sought Nico’s approval, but Nico raised a brow and held up his forearm. Nico counted with his fingers, and by the time he got to five, the watch was back on his wrist, whole and perfect.

"I'm sorry," Jason said.

"It's like a damned handcuff. I hate it."
"Why won't he trust you?"

Nico looked up at Jason then, and his big black eyes were closed off, not letting Jason in.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"You weren't there, Jason. You can't understand how awful it was for him, watching me waste away. You'll never get it, because you ran. This," Nico shook out his arm, "is the least I can do for his peace of mind, as much as I hate it. Percy, too. If it makes them feel better, then I'll do it."

Nico was twenty feet away, heading toward the smell of bland food, when Jason said, "What about what makes you feel better?"

Nico stopped, but he didn't turn around. Jason had almost caught up when he started walking again.

They silently sat in the cafeteria while Nico ate green beans and a salad before, equally silently, they went back to Annabeth's room. Nothing much seemed to have changed, other than Percy's mom had arrived. She shook Jason's hand and hugged Nico warmly, and all of Nico's surliness melted away in her arms. Then Annabeth had a contraction, and Jason and Nico were told to sit on the couch and shut up, so that's what they did.

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In the few movies Jason had seen where women gave birth, the whole thing, while dramatic, was pretty fast-paced. Somewhere around the fourth hour of sitting quietly on the couch, playing tic-tac-toe with Nico and watching Annabeth occasionally go limp, Jason realized that those movies were full of shit. Birthing a kid took a freakishly long time.

"First kids take the longest," Nico wrote on their tic-tac-toe paper. "The doctor or someone will come in soon to check her progress."

Jason nodded, because, really, what was he going to say?

Around hour six, Annabeth started puking. Which made Nico puke. At least Nico made it to the bathroom. When he came out, Percy handed him a pill and a toothbrush. Nico rolled his eyes, but he put the pill in his mouth and went back in the bathroom. Jason didn't ask.

After about eight hours, when it was close to two in the morning, Nico and Jason got the giggles. Annabeth's contractions had been getting steadily stronger and longer, and the time between them had shortened along with her temper. Percy tried to feed her an ice chip before she was ready, and she spit it right back out in his face.

Jason tried not to laugh. He really did. The timing was awful. But he looked at Percy sliding the ice chip off his cheek and then at Nico, and he couldn't help but let out a little giggle. Nico angrily shushed him and covered his own mouth, which was quirking up at the edges. Percy looked back at them and flipped them off, and they both fell into fits of hysterical laughter. Sally came over, took Nico's hand, gestured to Jason, and led them into the hallway.

She kissed Nico's cheek. "Go find something to eat and a place to rest, sweetie. We'll find you when
it's closer to time."

Nico nodded and managed to get fifteen feet down the hallway before laughing maniacally. Jason grabbed his shoulders and ushered him down the hall and into the family waiting room, where Paul was sleeping with his head resting against a wall. Nico tugged Jason out of the room and got back on the elevator. He was still laughing, though he didn't sound quite as much like a mental patient.

"Sorry, I didn't want to wake Paul. Poor guy's going to have to put up with Percy tomorrow," Nico said.

"I thought putting up with Percy was your job?" Jason thought he might have said it with too much bite, but Nico laughed some more.

"It is. Paul and I will have to take it in turns, though. Percy's going to be unbearable."

"Are you hungry?" Jason was hungry, but if Nico wasn't, he wasn't going to worry about it.

Nico checked his watch. "The bastard on my wrist says no, but my stomach says yes. Let's find a vending machine."

They found one two floors below and sat in the waiting room for a random ward, eating Ding Dongs and drinking Mountain Dew. After that, they went down to the main floor of the hospital to look for something to do. Everything was closed except for the security station and the bathroom. Nico dragged Jason into the bathroom, and they peed in adjacent urinals, which felt weird, being so close and doing something so intimate, even though it was something they'd managed to do in front of each other a million times before. Being close like that again was wonderful, even if the closeness was only physical and temporary.

Once they were done, they sat in another waiting room and watched the minutes tick by.

"Are you sleepy?" Nico asked after fifteen minutes.

"So sleepy," Jason said.

"Come on." Nico stood and offered Jason his hand, something there was no way Jason would refuse, even if Nico was planning to take him to Hades's deepest dungeon.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

Nico led Jason to a shadowy corner and traveled them to an unoccupied hospital room. Jason bent over and tried not to vomit. He hadn't shadowed with Nico since the day they went to Leo's, and before that, it had been years. When the nausea passed and Jason straightened up, he could make out a bed but no medical equipment. Nico was peeking out the door.

"Where are we?"

Nico shut the door and stood close to Jason. His cool proximity in the darkness made Jason's heart beat faster. Jason could hear his breathing and smell his skin, earthy and moist.

"These rooms aren't ready yet, part of an expansion, it seems like. We'll rest. I'll feel when the baby's getting close."

Jason gaped in wonder, even though he couldn't see Nico.
"You'll feel the baby when she's born?"

"I feel her now." There was no mistaking the pride in his voice. "She's strong, like her momma and daddy."

"Incredible."

"She will be," Nico agreed.

"I meant you."

Jason reached out in the darkness until he found Nico's face. He cupped his jaw and moved slowly, so Nico could pull away if he wanted. Just before their lips connected, Jason hesitated.

"No anxiety pills, right?"

"No," Nico whispered.

The kiss was gentle, not at all the way Jason usually kissed Nico. He slid his lips along, feeling how firm and full Nico's lips were. He'd begun to believe he'd never touch them again. He tilted his head to the side and pressed back in at a slightly different angle. This time, Nico's lips were wet, and Jason sucked the lower lip between his own to taste Nico's sweetness. When he let go, Nico followed him, and Nico's tongue licked against his lips, slipping between them and past his teeth, drawing him in deeper, warmer, wetter.

Jason didn't know when it had happened, but his hand was under Nico's shirt, skimming the cool skin of his ribs and side. Nico sighed into Jason's mouth, and Jason let out a soft moan in response.

"Take me to the bed, Nico. I can't see."

Nico slipped his hands onto Jason's waist and pulled him backward, guided him until they climbed onto the bed. Jason laid on top of him, nestled his legs between Nico's, kissed his way back into Nico's mouth. He wanted to surround himself with Nico, to hold him tight and never let him go.

He had forgotten how talented Nico was, the exact thrill of being kissed by someone so skilled. By the time he let go of Nico's face and cupped his hips instead, he was hard and panting.

"I don't want to stop."

Nico paused his kissing and smiled into Jason's neck.

"I don't want to stop, either, Jace."

So Jason didn't stop, and neither did Nico. Once upon a time, they could go from first kiss to coming together in a matter of minutes, but Jason wanted this to last. He took his time, kissing Nico's mouth, his cheeks, his neck, before scraping his teeth over Nico's collarbone.

Nico arched his back and groaned. "Feels so good. More."

Jason dug his teeth in deeper and sucked like he was trying to draw the marrow out of Nico's bones. Almost two years had passed since he and Nico were last together, and Jason reveled in exploring, remembering, how hard and angular Nico's body was. He felt his way across Nico's stomach and up his chest before slipping around to press into the muscles of his strong back. He moved his mouth back up to Nico's and covered him in wet, sloppy kisses.

"I want you, Nico. Can I make love to you?"
Nico nodded against Jason's temple, because Jason was already moving, lowering himself down to pull Nico's shirt over his head. Jason sucked and lapped at Nico's nipple until Nico moaned and shoved his head away. Jason latched onto the other and did the same. He kissed a row of bruises down Nico's abdomen and bit at the flesh of his shallow bellybutton.

"Take your shirt off, Jason. I want to feel your skin."

Jason knelt between Nico's legs and stripped his shirt away. Nico moaned in the darkness, and Jason was reminded how much better his vision was than most people's.

"You see me?" he asked.

"So beautiful, Jace." Nico's hands roamed over Jason's torso, faster and more insistent than Jason had been. He scratched at Jason's sides and pulled his nipples. He grabbed Jason's shoulders and tugged until Jason laid back on top of him.

"I need to feel you," Nico whispered. He thrust up against Jason's erection, and Jason gasped at how hard Nico was. "Unzip your jeans."

Jason did, and he tugged his jeans lower to expose his dick and his ass. As soon as he did, Nico had a lobe in each hand, kneading him roughly while grinding up into his dick. Jason pressed down with his chest and held Nico's hips still with one hand while the other ripped open Nico's jeans and shoved them down.

This time, Jason crashed back against Nico and held their dicks together, hot and hard and skin on skin. He slowly moved his hand up and down their erections, but even with the pre-cum that had spilled from someone, Jason felt too dry. He sat up and climbed his way up Nico's body until he was straddling his lover's chest.

"Suck," he said, and Nico almost impaled himself on Jason's dick. Oh, gods, Jason hadn't remembered how intense it was, what Nico could do to him. He wasn't used to it. He gripped the headboard and thrust deep into Nico's throat a few times, but he had to stop or he'd come, which was what he wanted, but not that way. He wanted to come pressed all along Nico's body, with their cocks, their mouths, their hearts right together. He wanted their semen to mix, to fuse, and be an outward representation of a bond he wanted to ensure lasted forever. "Stop, Nico, or I'll come too soon."

Nico let go, and Jason scurried back down his body until they were lined up. Jason wrapped his fist around their cocks and thrust, slow and steady, into his hand and Nico's dick.

"Oh, Jason. Beautiful, amazing Jason." Nico moaned Jason’s name like it was the sweetest word he’d ever uttered. "I love you. Feels so good. My Jason."

His hands slid up and down Jason's back and gripped at his shoulders. Jason was amazed how Nico's cool touch could feel like fire to his skin.

Jason kissed Nico more, until he was too close to coming and couldn't keep his head still. He pressed their foreheads together, content to share Nico's air, and pumped harder and faster against him.


Jason came, and he stroked them through his orgasm. Nico bucked into Jason's hand, erratic and frantic, his fingernails scratching Jason’s shoulders, until he came, too. Jason moaned when he felt Nico's cum cover his hand and splatter onto his stomach and chest.
He let go and laid heavily on Nico. He loved the way Nico's hipbones felt, sharp and digging into the soft spots inside his own hips. Nico's heart beat rapidly, so strong Jason could feel it fluttering against his chest. Their cum mixed between them, part Jason and part Nico, and Jason couldn't imagine anything that could ever compare with that. He kissed Nico again, breathless and dry, and he felt Nico smile into his mouth.

"So good, Jace. So good."

After not nearly enough time, Nico tapped Jason's arm, and Jason rolled off him.

"We need to go back," Nico said. Jason let out a cry of protest. He wanted Nico to lay with him for the next...forever. Nico's head shook, causing hair to drop into and out of Jason's face. "The baby's almost here. By the time we clean up and get dressed, she'll be arriving."

"I'd rather stay with you."

"I'd rather stay with you, too, but the birth of a child, Jace, that means something."

Nico scooted off the bed, and then his long fingers were helping Jason stand, too. He pulled the sheet off the bed and used it to clean off their chests and stomachs and Jason's hand. Jason pulled up his jeans, and Nico gathered their shirts. When they'd dressed, Nico laced their fingers and deposited them back in Annabeth's room.

They'd reappeared in a corner, removed from the action. Jason held tight to Nico and watched Percy, with shaking hands, catch his daughter as she was born. He cradled her close for a moment, then laid her on Annabeth's bare chest. Nico squeezed Jason's hand and wiped both their eyes. Percy was crying. Piper and Sally were, too. Annabeth — stoic, serious Annabeth — sobbed, and Percy kissed her forehead over and over.

Nurses took Piper's place at Annabeth's side. They rubbed the baby's slick red skin and covered her with a blanket. Percy rested his hand on the baby's head and let out a sob of his own. Annabeth looked up at him, and Jason could see the love that passed between them. He glanced at Nico, expecting jealousy, and was surprised to find that Nico was looking at him. Nico kissed him and leaned into his body. Despite how he'd felt moments ago, Jason was so grateful they'd made it back in time for this.

Percy motioned Sally over, and they hugged so tightly Jason worried Percy would break his mother. Sally must be tougher than she looked, though, because when Percy let go, she was smiling. She leaned over and kissed Annabeth's head. The nurses moved away, satisfied, it seemed, with the baby, who let out a tiny cry, nothing like the shrill crying Jason had heard in restaurants and on the subway. This was tender and small, and it made Jason want to do anything necessary to protect that baby.

Sally moved over to Annabeth's other side, next to Piper, and Percy motioned to Nico.


Nico started forward, but his hand was locked with Jason's, and Jason hadn't moved. This was too personal, too familial, and whatever Jason was to Percy, it wasn't family. Nico smiled at Jason and untangled their fingers. He covered the distance to Percy in three long strides, and then Percy was shaking in his arms, his head buried in Nico's neck. A long stretch passed where Nico held Percy, then Percy raised his head and found Jason.

"Come here, Grace," Percy said. "She's your niece, too."
Jason startled at Percy’s unexpected kindness. After a beat, he headed toward the bed but caught himself halfway there. Piper was on one side. Nico was on the other. No matter where he stood, he was going to hurt someone.

"Here, Jason," Sally said. "Take my spot. I need to wake Paul."

She smiled and patted his shoulder as she passed him. Jason stood next to Piper and wrapped his arm around her before he remembered that the hand that was holding her elbow had been holding Nico's dick ten minutes earlier. He let go. Piper didn't notice. She only had eyes for the baby. Jason followed her gaze.

Oh, gods, she was small. The nurses had stuck a little cap on her head, but it was coming off over her left ear, and Jason could make out the tiniest bit of blond hair. Her little fist was curled and rested against Annabeth's breast. Jason wasn't sure, but he thought maybe the baby was nursing. Her little head was facing Percy and Nico. Jason looked across at Nico and saw him kiss Percy's cheek. Percy pressed his head against Nico's. He was holding both Nico and Annabeth. His hand haphazardly played with the hem of Nico's shirt against his hip. His eyes focused only on his daughter. If Jason could summon any jealousy now, it was for everything Percy had, not just his relationship with Nico. Percy had a very good life, and for once, Jason was happy for him.

***

Sleeping with Jason had not cured Nico's problems, not that he had thought it would. When it was happening, he wasn't thinking much at all, except for how he could feel Jason's body heat and smell the faint scent of ozone and rain that always clung to his stunning ex-boyfriend. Feeling and smelling had made him want to touch, and the need to touch had driven every rational thought right out of his head.

A month and a half later, they were still writing letters, and Nico felt more in love and more alone than, well, not ever, but more alone than he had in a while. The more they wrote, the more Nico realized he couldn't go back to being Jason's friend only. He was happiest when they were lovers, in the truest sense. He managed and even thrived when Jason was absent from his life. He floundered when Jason was in his life and perpetually out of reach. And since Jason didn't seem to want to throw caution to the wind and be fully together, not that Nico was sure he could do it, either — gods, he'd built a life without Jason in it and running out on Apollo would be cruel — he was stuck believing that the part of his life he needed to cut out was Jason.

But not today. Today was supposed to be all about Nico, and for once, he was happy with that.

He was awake when it was time for Apollo to leave, and the god laid next to him in bed and brushed overlong strands of hair out of his face. Apollo was always glorious, but today he glowed. Nico told him so.

"Ah, love, that light is being emitted by you." Apollo smiled. "You are the one who is glowing today. Summa cum laude. I am so proud of you."

Nico felt himself blush. He stared down the bed at his feet. Apollo lifted Nico's chin and kissed him more passionately than he had time for. Apollo climbed on top of him, and it felt so strange, even though he'd been Apollo's lover, in deed not solely word, for over two years. The god was lean and lithe, and their hips banged together because their bodies were so much alike. Apollo's body felt
nothing like the heavy weight of Jason pressing down on him, blanketing him, comforting him. There was nothing like the way their hips slotted together, or how Jason's broad shoulders were the perfect size for Nico to wrap his arms around and pull tight. Being with Apollo felt wrong, and that wrongness inside Nico was growing. He had to cut Jason out and return to his comfortable life before the wrongness got too big.

"You need to go. The sun needs to rise," Nico whispered against Apollo's lips.

Apollo smiled and licked Nico's lips before climbing out of bed. "I shall see you this evening, graduate."

Nico waved, then turned over and tried to sleep for half an hour before he gave up, showered, gathered his suit, cap, and gown, and shadow traveled to Percy's.

Nico didn't even bother with the elevator. He went straight to Percy's floor, first checking the planter to see if there was a letter from Jason (there wasn't), before letting himself into Percy's apartment. Barging unannounced into someone's house was rude, Nico had finally learned, but he didn't want to take a chance on waking the baby. Maybelle was a fitful sleeper, and Annabeth and Percy needed her to sleep whenever she could.

Percy was laying on the couch in what looked to be a sugar crash stupor. There were candy wrappers all around and ten energy drink cans sitting on the coffee table. Nico hung his suit and gown on the coat rack and bent over Percy, who said nothing and simply watched him, to take a closer look.

Percy's appearance reminded Nico of himself when he was younger, with big dark circles under his eyes. He'd lost weight, too. Nico was about to go scavenge around in the kitchen for something to feed his friend when Percy grabbed his wrist and pulled him down onto his stomach.

"Shit, Percy! Give me a heart attack!"

"You saw I was awake. What were you standing over me for?" Percy was smirking, a funny combination with the eye circles. He shifted slightly so Nico was sitting less on top of him and more next to him. He laced their fingers together.

"I don't know. I wanted a better look at you. You look awful, by the way."

"Ah, yeah, Maybelle, I swear to the gods, Nico, she stayed awake for thirty-six hours straight."

Nico sighed. Percy was full of shit. Maybelle didn't sleep great, but she hadn't been awake for thirty-six hours. Percy liked to exaggerate the baby stuff.

"Is she sleeping now?"

"Yeah. Annabeth kicked me out of the bedroom 'cause she said I was being too noisy. It's not my fault I drank all this energy shit and then the kid decides to sleep. Now I'm wired and she's out. When she wakes, I'll probably have crashed again."

Nico brushed some hair out of Percy's eyes and wiped a bit of chocolate off his cheek. He hoped it was chocolate, at least.

"You should try to sleep."

Percy shoved Nico's chest in a way that felt more Clarisse than Percy. "I've tried, baby. I've been out here for fifteen minutes and all I've done was pee in one of these energy drink cans 'cause I can't get
back in my room to go to the bathroom.'

Nico was never drinking anything from Percy's table again. He shook his head and made what he hoped was a suitably disgusted face.

"That's gross, Percy."

"A guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do. Come lay down with me. It'll help."

Nico kicked off his dress shoes and pulled off his shirt. "How do you want to lay?"

Normally when they napped together, either Nico laid at the back of the couch and Percy laid in front of him or Nico laid on his back and Percy flat out laid on top of him. Nico preferred the former, because when Percy laid on top of him he drooled. The only thing Nico didn't like about cuddling with Percy like this was waking up with a bowl-sized spot of drool on his chest. Plus, Percy was heavy. Nico couldn't figure out where Percy hid the pounds he was carrying. Sure, he was muscular, but not like Jason, and Nico was taller. Nico had asked once, and Percy had said all his weight was in his dick and balls. This was back when they were lovers, and Percy had said all his weight was in his dick and balls. This was back when they were lovers, and Percy had spent five minutes smacking himself against Nico's ass to prove his point before he came spectacularly. Nico giggled at the memory.

"What's so funny?" Percy asked.

"I'm remembering that time you 'explained,'" Nico made air quotes, "where all your hidden weight was."

"Mmm," Percy hummed. He scooted so his back was against the couch back, laid Nico's blanket out, and tugged Nico to lay facing him. "That was great sex. Your ass is so wonderful."

Something about the way Percy said it and how their bodies were locked together, arms and legs wrapped around and between the other's arms and legs, chests pressed close, Percy's face inches from his own, it made Nico's body purr.

"I'm turning over," he said, and stood all the way up to lay down facing the same direction as Percy.

"What? Why?" Percy whined. "I wanted to see your face."

"You know why."

Percy laughed in Nico's hair. "Oh, pretty, pretty boy, did I make you hard?" He bit Nico's ear, tugged gently on the earring, and Nico elbowed him.

Percy held Nico's hip and rutted against him.

"Knock it off, Percy."

"Relax," Percy said lazily. "I'm too tired to get it up anyway. But you, how hard are you, baby?" He stroked his hand over Nico's erection, and Nico had to bite his lip to keep from making noise. "Pretty hard," Percy murmured. "You can jerk off into one of those cans. I'll keep my hands to myself and enjoy the show."

"Gods, you're hopeless," Nico said. "If you don't knock it off, I'm going to leave. You won't have anyone to remind you that you took a piss in one of those cans, and you'll forget and take a drink and be drinking your own pee. That's the fate that awaits you, Perce."
"Fine." Percy sounded like he was pouting. "I'll behave."

"Good. Try to sleep."

To Nico's pleasant surprise, Percy wrapped his arms around Nico's chest and stomach and fell asleep within five minutes. Nico relaxed enough to fall back to sleep, too.

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He awoke later to Annabeth standing over them, holding the baby and smacking him hard on the thigh.

"Get up, Nico. Make Percy get up, too. I want to nurse the baby out here."

Annabeth's hair was matted in places. She was wearing one of Percy's old shirts and a mismatched pair of slippers. The bags under her eyes were twice as big as Percy's. Nico decided that quickly getting out of her way was the smart thing to do.

He tugged Percy's arms out from around him and sat up. Percy resisted getting up, so Nico dragged him off the couch and onto the floor, where he laid like a slug. Annabeth stepped over him, sat down, and used his back as a footrest.

"Water," she croaked, and Nico jumped to get her some. Once he'd delivered the water, she asked for the nursing pillow, and Nico ran back to their bedroom for that. She hoisted the baby up, and he laid the pillow snugly against her waist. She latched Maybelle onto her breast, looked up at Nico through half-closed eyes, and said, "Sandwich."

Nico didn't ask what kind of sandwich she wanted. He figured she didn't care as long as it was food. There was some salami in the fridge, so she got salami and mayonnaise. Nico made three extra sandwiches and set them aside for her and Percy for later. He handed her the sandwich on a paper plate, and she laid the plate right on the baby's hip and dug in. Nico stood, awaiting further instructions.

Annabeth was silent until she'd finished her sandwich. "Go get my hairbrush and brush my hair."

Nico waited to roll his eyes until he was out of view. He came back with the brush, sat on the back of the couch, and tried to delicately brush through Annabeth's hair. The stuff was so tangled he expected a flock of birds to emerge once he dug in there deeper, but nothing more terrifying than a lost earring fell out.

Nico finished and sat the hairbrush on the table among the cans and the wrappers. "Oh, by the way, Percy says he took a piss in one of these cans, so don't drink anything off here."

"Duly noted," Annabeth said. "Come sit by me."

Nico rearranged the blanket and sat next to Annabeth. She leaned into his body, and he put his arm around her.

They sat quietly for a while. Nico listened to the little suckling sounds Maybelle made and rocked his feet back and forth on Percy's ass. Maybe Percy really had been up for thirty-six hours.
"How's it going?" Nico asked.

Annabeth switched the baby to the other breast, and Nico was perversely proud that Annabeth was comfortable enough to expose her breasts and sit around in her panties in his presence — not only in his presence, in his arms, really. It made him feel like family. Weird, inappropriate family, but family nonetheless. He reached out to brush his fingers over Maybelle's head.

"Fine, other than she won't sleep. Sally says Percy was like this, too."

"Percy says she was up for thirty-six hours straight."

"Percy's full of shit. But she was up for twelve hours straight overnight."

"I'm sorry. Are you remembering to sleep when she sleeps?"

Annabeth looked at Nico like he'd grown an extra head. Her eyes weren't as sharp as usual, but they could cut glass. He shrugged.

"I read it in one of the baby books."

"Why did you read all those?"

Nico wrinkled his brow. "Percy wants me to help him this summer after you go back to work, so I thought I should."

Annabeth turned slightly and scooted a little lower so her head rested on Nico's shoulder. From the way she'd positioned herself, Nico could look straight down at Maybelle's sweet little face. He slipped a finger back and forth across her fist.

"I hate you sometimes, Nico. I really do," Annabeth whispered. "You're so hard to hate, though. Most of the time I just wish you'd never slept with Percy because I think we could've been such good friends."

"Me, too. The friends part, I mean. I don't hate you."

"Never?" Annabeth twisted her head around to look at him, but the motion caused Maybelle to lose Annabeth's nipple so she had to turn back around.

Nico kissed her hair. "I hated you the day I had to leave Percy, because it tore my heart in two. That's the only time. Resent you? Yes, plenty."

Annabeth chuckled. "So, graduation today? Are you ready?"

"I'm ready for law school. I'm glad commencement is a big anonymous thing. My dad and Persephone'll be there, though, so I'm excited about that."

"Good. I wish we could be there for you——"

"It's okay. You need to take the chances to rest that you're given. You can't conk out at Yankee Stadium if Maybelle decides it's naptime."

Maybelle popped off the breast and suckled air in her sleep. Annabeth pulled her shirt back up and kicked a little toward Percy's head.

"Well, this idiot and I are extremely proud of you, for what it's worth. There are very few people who could have handled themselves with the grace you have during college."
Nico knew she meant that few people could have been two steps away from spending quality time in a psych ward and still graduate with highest honors a year early. He was more proud of his graduation than perhaps any other accomplishment in his life. Hades would be proud, too, and Nico was itching to see his father. He would never have a wall of degrees like his dad, but this one mattered so much because of how hard he had worked to earn it.

"Hey," said Percy from their feet. "This idiot is awake, since you kicked him in the head, cranky-ass."

Annabeth gently kicked at him again.

"I wasn't cranky until you woke up," Annabeth replied. "Here, Nico, hold Maybelle until Percy wakes up enough to take her. I'm getting a shower."

"But I just brushed your—"

Nico swallowed his complaint when Annabeth transferred Maybelle to his arms. He loved holding her. She was so small and dependent, and he could give her to someone else if she pooped or cried. Her soft breaths, the way her chest filled and her soft spot pulsed, the way her little fingers sometimes wrapped around his pinky, all of that made him feel things he'd never imagined he could feel. It went beyond protectiveness, because Nico was a protective person, and without a second thought, he'd lay down his life for his loved ones or important ideals. For Maybelle, Nico would kill, not just monsters, but gods or mortals or anyone who threatened her well-being.

Percy dragged himself off the floor and picked up one of the cans from the table.

"Stop!" Nico whisper-shouted. "Pour that shit out! You took a piss in one of those cans."

Percy closed his eyes and tilted his face to the ceiling.

"Fucking hell. Why did I do that?" He stood and collected all the cans in three trips and poured them into the sink. "Found it!"

Gods, Nico was scrubbing that sink tomorrow.

Percy came back and sat down next to Nico. He twisted at Nico's shoulders so he could both embrace Nico and see his daughter.

"She's so perfect, isn't she, Nico?"

"She really is, Perce."

Percy rubbed her cheek with his thumb and swiped his hand across Nico's chest before resting it on his arm. "Her skin's even softer than yours. I didn't think that was possible. And her little eyes. I think they might be green like mine."

Nico nodded. "They're shaped like yours, that's for sure. Annabeth's hair, though. She'll be a beauty."

Percy played with Maybelle's feet for a while before he put them down and rubbed Nico's arms.

"I'm sorry we can't go today."

"It's really okay. They won't call my name or anything. We'll just stand up with our departments. Come to my law school graduation. We'll call it even."
"Deal," Percy said. He kissed Nico's neck and stood up. "I got you something."

"You didn't have to—"

Percy was already gone, sprinting to his bedroom. He came back with a small, unwrapped box. Nico was a bit anxious. Percy was known for giving unusual gifts.

"Here, give me the baby, and you can open it."

Nico transferred Maybelle, and he was impressed with how casually Percy was able to move her from Nico's arms to his own. He took a deep breath and opened the box. Inside, there were at least a dozen ink pens, the kind with a push cap to retract the barrel. Each pen had a clear upper half with a hula girl floating in water. They said, "Congratulations, NYU Grad!"

"Thanks, Percy," Nico said. He wasn't sure what else to say. It was the weirdest gift he'd ever received.

"Take one out and shake it."

Nico did. The wording changed from "Congratulations, NYU Grad!" to "Percy Loves Nico." Nico laughed. Leave it to Percy to do something this crazy.

"They're all different. Take each one out and let's read what they say." Percy sounded so excited. Nico was happy to indulge him.

Some said sweet things like "I'm proud of you" or "Way to go, Nico!" Others said absolutely mortifying things like "You have an amazing ass!" or "Super-stellar cocksucker!" Nico had gotten down to the bottom row of pens when he spotted one that was different. Carefully, he lifted it out. It was heavy and bronze. Nico pulled off the cap and saw it was a fountain pen. The tip was delicate and elegant. He put the lid back on and noticed that the pen was engraved. The tiny words said, "To My Best Friend, Nico di Angelo, on his graduation. You are tremendous. All my love, Percy."

Nico looked up to see Percy watching, almost like he was nervous Nico wouldn't like it. Nico couldn't imagine a more wonderful gift.

"Percy...I...thank you. I'll always treasure it."

Percy shrugged. "It's not as good as the hula girls, but whatever."

Nico laughed so loudly Percy had to shush him so he didn't wake Maybelle.

They passed the time trading Maybelle back and forth, talking about the summer and law school and how Percy's memoirs were coming. When Annabeth returned from the bedroom, Percy nudged Nico to put the box of pens in his garment bag. Annabeth wouldn't find Percy's sex-related humor quite as funny as they had.

When it was time, Nico used the bedroom to change into his suit. Annabeth fixed his tie for him while Percy alternated between cooing at Maybelle and sliding his hand between Nico's thighs. Nico slipped back into his shoes and took his cap and gown from the coat rack.

"Wait, I'll walk you out," Percy said. He handed Maybelle to Annabeth and followed Nico into the hall.

Nico wasn't going any farther than here, at least not before entering the shadows, so there wasn't anyplace for Percy to walk him to. All the same, once they were in the hall, Percy pulled him into an
enormous and tender hug. He drew back and laid a hand on Nico's face.

"I'm proud of you, Nico." Percy smiled. His eyes, that sometimes looked so stormy, were calm and serene. "I'm proud as your goofy friend and as your former lover, but I'm also proud because I know the little boy you were and every awful thing you've been through, and it impresses the hell out of me that you have made it so far and are kind and compassionate and whole. You are so beautiful, inside and out. I feel kinda silly and pretentious saying this, so I hope you don't mind too much, but I'm the only person who knew her very well besides you, and Bianca would be so proud, too."

Nico rushed forward and pinned Percy to the wall. He wanted to tell Percy how much those words meant to him, but he was shaking too badly to speak. Percy seemed to understand. He stroked Nico's hair and whispered soft words of comfort until Nico got a grip and stopped smashing him into the wall.

"Thank you, Percy," Nico whispered.

Percy leaned up and kissed the farthest corner of Nico's mouth in a way that had nothing to do with their perpetual sexual tension. It was about home and family, and Nico needed to leave before he broke down in loud, horrifying sobs. He returned the kiss, walked to the shadows, and vanished.

***

Graduation was something Nico felt like he watched through a haze, or like it was something happening to someone else. He didn't have classmates with whom to celebrate, as the people in his classes had always fallen into one of three categories: strangers, study partners, and kids who hit on him. There were no friends. Students thought he was aloof and arrogant, resting on his good looks and brains, and it wasn't like he'd never heard those criticisms before, even from people who loved him. He hadn't cared to make friends. He had enough people who knew too much about his life already.

So he listened to the speakers, and he applauded when he was supposed to, and he refrained, most of the time, from scratching at the places where his purple graduation robe touched his skin. He stared out across Yankee Stadium, which he'd always wanted to visit but not necessarily for a commencement ceremony, and wondered where in the crowd his father was. When the Public Policy students were mentioned, Nico stood, and he moved his tassel across the mortar board at the right time. Eventually, the students all around him threw their caps in the air, and Nico supposed that was it. He was relieved to find a quiet corner and sink into the shadows to his father.

When he emerged from the shadows, he realized he probably could have found his dad without his curious god-seeking skills, because Hades and Demeter were in a shouting contest that had other parents staring and shuffling their children away in alarm.

"I told you not to bring that ridiculous monstrosity, Demeter!" Hades bellowed as Nico walked up to him and stood at his side.

"It's a graduation gift," Demeter said, patting the popcorn machine wheeled along behind her by an attractive young man. "You're jealous because you didn't think to bring the sniveling little brat anything."

"It's not a graduation gift, it's a torture device!" Hades paused to take a breath or a breather or
whatever gods were doing when they paused in their speech, and Nico tugged on his father’s elbow.  

"Hi, Dad."

"Shut it, boy. I'm busy." Hades opened his mouth to yell at Demeter some more.  

Persephone cut him off. "Dear?" She gestured pointedly to Nico. "The boy?"

Hades glanced at Nico and shook his head like he was seeing him for the first time. A smile lit Hades's features, and he hugged, actually hugged, Nico, like he did this physical contact stuff all the time. Nico was so shocked he stood still and stiff for the longest time, until Hades said, "Hug back, damn it," and Nico found himself moving his arms onto his father's back.  

"Proud of you son," Hades said gruffly, patting Nico's back with a hand that felt like a bear paw.

Nico couldn't get out a "thank you" before Hades had spun him out and into Persephone's warm embrace. She congratulated him and turned him over to Demeter, who, for once, only gave him a hug and a mild pat on the ass with no commentary about his many deficiencies. He was still in Demeter's arms when he heard a perfect male voice say, "Fancy running into you here, Uncle."

Nico whirled in surprise and saw Apollo standing next to Persephone, looking dapper in a white suit and incredibly pleased with himself. Before Nico could say anything, Demeter said, "Not smart, Polly. Not smart at all."

"Nonsense, Auntie," Apollo said warmly. "I have attended the spring commencement for the four previous classes at NYU, and I would be embarrassed, as a member of many campus advisory boards over the last few years, to miss this one. Uncle, your son is graduating?"

Hades snarled, and Apollo winked at Nico.  

"Yes, nephew." If Hades could kill other gods, he would have killed Apollo, Nico was sure.

"Then congratulations are in order," Apollo said. He advanced toward Nico with a look of smug satisfaction that Nico would have slapped right off his face if they'd been at home. Here, the most Nico could do was smirk. Apollo took Nico's hand and kissed it in a way that seemed innocent but suggested that Nico was in for a very busy, lusty night. He dropped his voice to a low, sexy purr. "Congratulations, Nico di Angelo."

Someone cleared their throat, and Apollo reluctantly dropped Nico's hand. Nico was trying not to be too obvious about his feelings for Apollo when his father said, "Not him, too. For the love of..."

Nico followed the direction of his father's scowl. His breath caught in his throat, and he thought he must surely be having either a heart attack or a hallucination, because standing sheepishly off to the side, wearing an exquisitely tailored blue suit that matched his eyes, was Jason Grace. It was Jason's uncertainty that did it. Nico forgot for a moment that he was twenty and jaded and had a lover standing right next to him. He morphed into his innocent, wide-eyed fifteen year old self who thought Jason Grace was the most extraordinary creature that had ever existed. He ran forward, wrapped his arms around Jason's neck, and pressed as tightly into that comforting, wonderful body as he could.  

Jason tentatively returned the hug, putting his hands on Nico's back and slowly sliding them along until he had Nico pinned to his chest. Nico could feel Jason soften and grow more confident. Jason whispered "Congratulations" and softly kissed Nico's hair. Nico’s life couldn't be with Jason, so he clung to him now, pulled him tighter and let the hug stretch on and on, even after Hades smacked Jason on the back of the head and said, "Let go of my son."
Nico turned his head into Jason's neck and breathed him in, ozone and rain and power, and he never, ever wanted to let go.

"Enough, Neeky." Demeter's grating voice snapped Nico out of his reverie. "You can go swallow his semen later. I was promised cake and ice cream."

Everyone except Hades laughed at the obnoxiousness of the elder goddess, and Demeter seemed incredibly pleased. Nico broke away from Jason and hugged her again. Then Hades snapped his fingers and all six of them were seated in a fancy restaurant.

The restaurant, with its white linen tablecloths and suit-clad waiters — servers, Jason had told him, servers — with its white linen tablecloths and suit-clad servers, smacked of opulence. Even the chairs they sat in were plussly upholstered in black and had ornate gold trim along the chairback. Nico could smell fish and seafood, and he knew his dad liked to eat seafood for the same reason he liked to microwave popcorn shrimp at Percy's. Devouring sea creatures felt triumphant, like giving the sea the finger. Nico doubted his father, after eating seafood, rubbed his greasy fingers all over Poseidon or licked up his throat the way Nico did Percy.

A server was already at their table, taking drink orders and handing out menus. Nico should have been paying less attention to the menu and more to his surroundings, because he was surprised by a sharp cracking noise behind his seat and almost drew his sword from under his graduation robes before he realized the noise was Jason's knuckles, which must have collided with Apollo's as they were both reaching around the back of Nico's seat at the same time. Hades rolled his eyes. "Imbeciles."

Jason withdrew his hand and rubbed his knuckles while Apollo chuckled and wrapped his arm around Nico's shoulder. That didn't deter Jason. He merely slipped his hand under the table and capped Nico's knee. Nico looked across the table at Persephone, who gave him a tilting smile that said something like, "Boys. What are you gonna do?"

"So, Neeky, now that you've graduated, it's time for a change of scenery, yes?" Demeter said. She wasn't asking; she was demanding. "I'm thinking law school at Stanford, maybe Yale or Harvard. We can get you in wherever, you know."

Apollo's fingers tightened on Nico's shoulder. He wasn't chuckling now.

"I've already been admitted to NYU Law."

Demeter waved her hand as if swatting a fly. "Admission is nothing, boy. Your father and I will make all the arrangements. Tell us where your heart's desire is. We'll make it happen."

"Yes, son," Hades said. "It is a worthwhile matter of academics to get degrees from various institutions. Harvard would be a better fit. I'll make the arrangements when I return home."

"He is going to NYU," Apollo said. There would be bruises from the way his hand dug into Nico's shoulder. "It has been decided."

"Guys, I—"

"Nonsense, Polly. Decided by whom? We only have his best interests at heart."

"Guys—"

"Not by me, if that is what you are implying, Auntie. The fates have decreed it. I am merely sharing the news."
"Auntie, Apollo—"

"He has no use for you and your foolish fates. He will do what his father tells him to, not the nonsensical notions you've put in his head."

"ENOUGH!"

Demeter and Apollo stopped fighting and stared at Nico in shock. Hades had been picking at a spot on his tie, but he set it aside and gave Nico his full attention. Jason's hand tightened on Nico's knee.

"I am going to NYU Law because it's where I want to go," Nico growled. "None of you, not one, gets to determine my life. I like the campus. I like the prestige of the school. I'm comfortable there."

"Fine." Persephone managed to be the first to answer. Hades and Demeter were both red and furious, and Nico imagined Apollo’s face to be smug and cocky. Nico looked at Jason, who was watching him with concern. He smiled and returned his attention to Persephone, who wasn’t done talking. "But perhaps, Nico dear, a change in your living arrangements should be considered."

Nico's heart constricted because he knew Persephone only cared about his safety and well-being. That was all any of them cared about. They just didn't agree on how to keep him safe. Nico was tired of all the fuss about his safety. He was going to die before law school ended, it seemed, so he was not playing his life for maximum safety. He was playing it for maximum enjoyment and meaning.

"I'm happy where I am, Persephone, but thank you."

The server came and took their orders. Nico normally got salads, but this time he ordered lobster. He planned to breathe on Percy later.

"You could live with this oaf." Hades gestured to Jason when the server left. "I could smite the girl—"

"Absolutely not, Dad."

"The old women with the cats, then. You could have one of their apartments. They are old anyway."

"Dad. No killing."

Hades grumbled but was distracted when Demeter asked him if, for the solstice meeting, he’d relax his Underworld rules so Michael Jackson and a crew of zombies could come to Olympus and perform *Thriller.*

Jason leaned his head close. "Thank you for shooting down Piper's death," he whispered.

Nico laughed. His dad was pretty ridiculous. "You wouldn't kill Apollo to get to me."

Jason's eyes widened, and Nico realized he'd made a terrible error. They had all been skirting too close to the secret of Nico's lover, and with Apollo sitting right there, taking part in the usual familial arguments, Nico had felt like he wasn't, for once, hiding something. Oh, gods. Oh gods. Oh gods. Oh gods.


Nico nodded once. "Dad, will you come to the bathroom with me?"

Hades raised his eyebrow. "I thought we were discussing your independence. Now you want daddy
"Dad." Nico tried to put as much information as possible into that one syllable. Hades seemed to understand, because he stood from the table, walked over to Nico, laid a hand on his shoulder, and pulled them to the Underworld. 

As soon as they landed in Hades's study, Nico began to pace.

"Oh gods, Dad, I messed up. I said something about Apollo."

"He was right there, son," Hades said. "It's not as though you wouldn't speak of him when you're in his company."

"No. I...we're alone, right?"

Hades closed his eyes and concentrated. "No one in the palace. Speak freely."

"You said that thing about killing Piper so I could be with Jason, and Jason thanked me for shooting you down. I said it was no big deal because he wouldn't kill Apollo to get to me, either. Oh, gods. Hera will know it's him. Oh, Dad. This is so bad."

Nico tossed his cap aside and ran his hands through his hair and down his face. He took off his gown and hurled it at the wall.

"Demeter! Persephone! Apollo!" Hades yelled.

Like firecrackers going off, each god popped into the room.

"The boy made a mistake. It is possible he let slip his relationship with you, you idiot." Hades appeared to be going to take out his frustration on Apollo. "Demeter, head up to the throne room and see if anyone is talking. Watch out for whispers, especially among Hera, Zeus, or Aphrodite. Persephone, darling, visit Artemis. Ask her to keep an ear out for gossip regarding her moron brother."

Persephone kissed Hades's cheek and hugged Nico tightly before disappearing. Demeter was already gone. Apollo laced his fingers with Nico's and stood straight and tall. His shoulders were back and for once, he didn't act afraid of another god.

"You," Hades sneered. "You fool, taking advantage of my son..."

"Nico is quite intelligent and capable of making his own decisions, Uncle," Apollo replied coldly. "I have never taken advantage of him. He entered into and continued this relationship of his own free will."

"I know he is smart and capable, you bastard." Hades had begun to glow. "He is my son, and you do not love him like I do, or you would never have endangered him in this way."

"He was already in danger, Uncle." Apollo was glowing, too, and Nico would have to hide his eyes soon. "He has been in danger, marked, his whole life. I chose him for many reasons, but among them was the desire to guide him and give him the skills he will need to survive the trials ahead of him."

"You told me I'm going to die," Nico said.

Both Apollo and Hades whipped their heads around and said, "Death is not the end."

They looked back at one another. Understanding passed between them and over Nico's head.
"Return to your duties," Hades said, and his voice was gentler. The glow was gone. "Spend your nights in your normal space. Watch for any sign, however slight, that your privacy has been compromised. Nico will stay with Jackson until we can ascertain the extent of the damage. Nico, your remark may have gone unnoticed. We were in a large party, and Hera would not have expected you to say something so telling with me around. Go about your normal life with Jackson, never straying from his presence, and try not to worry unless we give you reason to. No god will attack Poseidon's child without provocation. His status guarantees your safety. Immediately report anything suspicious."

Nico shook his head. "Annabeth's not going to let me stay there."

Hades waved him off. "Jackson will. He is all that matters. You are both fools to believe the Chase girl isn't aware of the nature of your relationship. She will agree to Jackson's demands. Oh, and stay as far away from Grace as possible. No sense risking scrutiny there, either. I will call him down here after you depart to tell him the same thing. If we find the situation safe, you will be allowed to return home as soon as possible. Go pack some clothes."

Apollo waved his hand, and two suitcases appeared next to Nico.

"I will give you a moment to say goodbye," Hades said. He patted Nico's shoulder as he walked by and left.

Nico faced Apollo. He wanted to cry. He had ruined everything between them.

Apollo smiled and cupped Nico's chin. He kissed his eyelids. "You have ruined nothing, my lover. I cannot predict whether or not we will be reunited. I can tell you that the past two years have been some of the most meaningful and fulfilling of my life. There are no words to express my gratitude or love for you. I will never forget you, Nico."

"I've learned so much from you. I'm so sorry. You could be in serious trouble," Nico choked.

"My time with you has been worth so much more than any punishment I could receive. Do not despair. I love you, Nico."

"I love you, too," Nico whispered.

They kissed, slow and gentle and brief, then Apollo let go and walked out the door.

Nico's alarm began to beep, and the sound made him cry.

Chapter End Notes

Are more pieces of the puzzle falling into place as we near the end? Maybelle's born (and Jason and Nico spend some cozy time together while Annabeth's in labor), Nico graduates, he lets slip his biggest secret...

Thanks for reading (and kudoing and commenting), folks!
Confessions

If Nico had never gotten in trouble, or perhaps more accurately, had never gotten caught, he would have finished his first year of law school during the week he sat on the couch wearing noise canceling headphones and pouring over books he would need to start his second year. He marked the passage of time only in his head, as the three gods had become accustomed to doing, their calendar long since removed from its place on the wall. On Maybelle's birthday a month earlier, none of them had spoken about it, except to eat the three blue cupcakes Jason brought from their altars, each with a single candle on top. Percy had cried for days.

Today, Nico sat on one end of the man cave couch reading while Percy and Jason sat at the other end and played video games. Nico was sitting sideways with his feet lodged under Jason's thighs. Occasionally, when there was a break in the on-screen action, Jason would absentmindedly run his hand over Nico's knees or between his thighs and get slapped away. It was as much of a game for Jason as the on-screen one was. Nico didn't complain too much about it, and Jason loved to touch.

"Idiot!" Percy yelled. He smacked the side of Jason's head with his controller. "You got killed by the gardener zombie! How could you not have seen that coming?"

"He was wearing work gloves. I didn't think he'd attack." Jason hit Percy back. While he waited to regenerate, he slipped his hand up the back of Nico's pantleg and massaged his calf. Nico sighed but didn't make him stop. Once Jason's metal-clad soldier reappeared on the screen, Jason slid his hand back out of Nico's pantleg and began playing again.

Nico pulled his feet out from under Jason and put them as close to his body as he could get them. He laid his book aside and stared at his lover for five minutes, but Jason didn't notice. He was too wrapped up in his game. Nico slammed his book shut, took off his headphones, and left.

When Nico hadn't returned after ten minutes or so, Jason paused the game.

"What are we stopping for?" Percy asked. He hadn't noticed Nico leave, distracted as he was by the zombie invasion and unable to see around Jason anyway.

"Nico. He got up and left a bit ago and hasn't come back." Jason and Percy were used to Nico walking out of the room if they irritated him too much, but he normally did it loudly and with much swearing. "He didn't take his book, either."

Percy's interest changed from polite confusion to concern. "He didn't take his book?"

"That's what I just said."

"Did you do something to him?"

Jason hated the implication that Nico leaving had something to do with him. He didn't think it was fair that he was always relegated to the role of the bad guy.

"No, jackass. We were playing, you and me, and let's see, I put my hand up his jeans and rubbed his leg while I waited to get reborn. He didn't mind. I give good massages."

"I know you do." Percy blushed and ducked his head. He'd been the recipient of an extremely pleasurable and thorough massage from Jason several nights ago. "You didn't say anything to him?"

"No. I've been concentrating on our game. I massaged his leg, but then I pulled away when I came
back on the game. I didn't say anything." Jason was too focused on Nico to be embarrassed by Percy's blush, though he did run his index finger along the outside seam of Percy's jeans and offer a faint smile.

"Did you touch his ankles? He has a weird thing about people not touching his ankles." That possibility was all Percy could think of that might offend Nico, based on Jason's account.


He abandoned the zombies and went to find Nico.

"Hey, wait up," Percy said. He jogged after Jason, who'd already checked the bedroom and come up empty. "What is it?"

"He hates people messing with his ankles?"

"Yeah. One time we were laying head to foot on the couch 'cause he'd been eating sushi and I couldn't stand his breath. Anyway, he threw his leg over my chest. I hugged it to me and rubbed his ankle 'cause that was all the skin I could get to, except his godawful stinky foot. Fucker jolted and kicked me right off the couch for touching him there." Neither the conversation nor the recollection was helping Percy's confusion. "So, did you touch him there?"

Jason stopped at their front door. "Probably. And I know why he hates it."

Percy started to ask why, but the gods heard a muffled thump and turned toward the direction of the noise.

"Shit. I'd say you must know why he hates it, Grace."

Nico had made a life-size cut-out of Jason and was standing forty feet from it, hurling baseballs at it. Jason and Percy watched as Nico hit it in the head, the stomach, and the left leg, which broke off. The cut-out fell, and Nico vanished it and summoned a new one exactly the same as the last.

Anger, resentment, and guilt bubbled inside Jason. He strode toward Nico and stopped close enough to grab a baseball out of his hand when he reared back to throw.

"I would have thought you'd be swearing at me, too," Jason said. The situation wasn't the least bit funny, but it was the most pleasant thing he could think to say.

Nico picked up another ball from a large pile of them and hit cut-out Jason in the chest. "If I'd started swearing you would have heard me. Didn't want to interrupt your very important video game."

"Nico, what the hell are you doing?" Percy asked. He put his hand on Nico's wrist, but Nico jerked away.

"Taking out my aggression in a way that doesn't harm anyone," Nico said. "My counselor told me that's what I needed to learn how to do."

Jason watched another baseball hit his cardboard head. He conjured his own pile of balls, erased the tattoo from his doppelganger's arm, and took aim. He missed, and Nico barked out a derisive laugh. Jason missed the next seven times, so at the risk of being beaned for real by Nico, he stepped ten feet closer and tried again. He hit himself in the crotch and the head and the armpit. Behind him, Nico snarled and threw faster. When Jason heard the snarl, he conjured a Nico cut-out and hit it in the head.
"You two are crazy," Percy said. "I'm not standing out here and watching you behave like idiots. I can't believe I'm the one that has to say this, but when you're ready to grow the fuck up and act like adults who talk about their problems, like we all agreed to do, come in the bedroom."

He tromped back into the house. Nico hit the Jason cut-out hard enough to decapitate it.

"Fuck you, Nico. I thought we were past this?" Jason hit a newly generated version of himself in the left elbow. "How long do I have to pay for the things I've done? How many times do you need me to say I'm sorry?"

"I don't need shit from you, except I don't want you to forget, Jason, not ever." Nico was next to Jason now. He stepped in front of Jason and almost got hit by a ball. Jason dropped it instead, and it fell harmlessly to the ground. Nico was so angry, but his eyes burned with tears. "I won't ever forget. It'll always sit between us, damn it. I don't need to be mad at you, but I need you to remember."

Jason grabbed Nico's upper arms and squeezed him inches closer. Nico was capable of stopping Jason, but he let it happen. Jason tightened his grip. "How the fuck could I forget?"

"Because I won't let you?"

"Because I can't forget. For myself." Jason vanished the cut-outs and the baseballs. "Come inside with me, please? We can sit with Percy and talk."

"I don't want to talk about the things that happened then," Nico whispered.

"I know." Jason dropped his thumbs down and felt the long, sharp scars on Nico's biceps. They had thrilled him when he was younger, made Nico seem even more dangerous and exotic. He knew better now. "But I think it's time. Don't you?"

Nico didn't want to talk about this, but he was so tired of carrying it with him.

He relented, and they were in the bedroom. Percy was sitting on the bed, watching a ladybug climb on his hand. Nico sat next to him and leaned over his shoulder to watch the bug, too. She crawled over the knuckle of Percy's thumb and down to his hand. Her wings fluttered, but instead of taking flight, she resumed her trek over Percy's skin.

"Put shorts on, please, Nico," Jason said.

"Nico doesn't wear shorts. He'd look weird," Percy said without taking his eyes from the ladybug.

Nico sneered slightly and wished himself into a pair of black running shorts with white trim and a matching t-shirt. "Why do I have to wear shorts?"

"One, Percy's wrong. You look hot as fuck in shorts, and I could stare at you all day like this, not that I don't spend half my time staring at you to begin with." Jason said it, and Percy's head shot up in Nico's direction. The hand that wasn't holding the ladybug went straight down between Nico's thighs and squeezed the tender skin between Nico's legs.

"Holy fuck. I'll cop to being wrong."

Nico rolled his eyes but didn't push Percy's hand away. The touch comforted and soothed him.

"Second," Jason said, continuing as though Percy hadn't interrupted. "I want to touch your bare skin, but I don't want to crowd you by sitting next to you. Plus, if I sit in front of you, I can see your face."
"Talk, Jason." Nico tried to take the ladybug from Percy and a small scuffle ensued, with a lot of elbowing from Nico and a well-placed shoulder from Percy. Percy won. Nico huffed and returned his attention to Jason. "You said it's time. I'm here. You're here. Percy's here. Let's get this over with."

Jason loved Nico, but it was sometimes hard to maintain his patience when Nico would both shut down and goad Jason to do and say more. He dug deep into his reserves and reminded himself that his counselor said Nico did this when he was feeling vulnerable. He remembered he should take Nico's willingness to be vulnerable as a good sign, even if was like putting his hand on a cactus, trying to talk in these situations. He also remembered what Percy had said, that he would have to be the one to be patient and prove to Nico that he would stick around.

"It seems like you feel uncomfortable. I don't want to be the cause of that." Jason thought that was a nice start. "What made you leave the man cave? I mean, I know I must have touched your ankle, but the last time I did that it didn't seem to freak you out."

"I told you he doesn't like that, dude." Percy turned sideways and guided the ladybug off onto Nico's far knee. He pushed Nico's other knee down and laid alongside it with his head on Nico's thigh. His hand snaked inside Nico's shorts, and he gently caressed Nico's scrotum. Nico would be less likely to run off this way.

Nico laid his head back and took a deep breath. "I left because you touched my ankle and you didn't even notice."

Jason waited. He rubbed his hands up and down Nico's lower leg, available thanks to Percy's helpful positioning, and watched what must be Percy's knuckles scrape against the inner fabric of Nico's shorts. He'd become accustomed to the strange sexual ways Percy and Nico soothed each other.

"Why don't you like it? Your ankles being touched, I mean," Percy asked. He was sleepy, and rubbing Nico’s nuts felt as relaxing to him as he hoped it did to Nico. He'd wondered about the ankle aversion, though.

"When I was sick," Nico paused, stroked Percy’s hair, and worked to gather his courage, "Apollo pulled Jason out of California to see for himself how bad things were for me. I don't know why he did it, whether it was to punish Jason or in the hopes Jason would bother to help. I know he did help. He sent you, and you were everything to me, Percy. But before Jason left, he came in my room to see me, and...look, promise you won't get mad?"

"I know Jason left you, which was a revolting thing to do," Percy said. He weighed Nico’s sack in his hand, squeezed gently, and tugged it away from Nico's body before returning to trace lazy patterns with his thumb. "He apologized, Nico, and I accept his apology. He's proven how he's not the same guy. I won't get mad."

Nico nodded. In front of him, Jason moved a hand onto Percy's flank and gave him a brief squeeze before returning to Nico. He was so grateful for Percy's friendship.

"Jason came in my room," Nico said, continuing the story. "He sat on the bed unnaturally far away from me and asked me to eat. He looked so disgusted by me, Percy, like I was the worst, most revolting thing he could imagine." Nico felt tears well in his eyes again, and he couldn't will them away. "I told him to leave, which I know you already knew, and he did, but before he left, he slipped his hand over my ankles, like that was the only part of me that wasn't too dirty to touch."

Nico lifted his eyes to Jason's. "You made me feel like every awful thing anyone had ever said about me was not only true, but better than I deserved. You made me feel completely without worth, like
no one could ever look at me and not be disgusted. It took a long time for me to believe anything
different if I wasn't with Percy or Apollo, you know? I didn't deserve that."

"You didn't," Jason whispered. "I promise you, you didn't. Outside, when I told you I couldn't forget
what I'd done, I meant I can't forget because the shameful person that day was me, and I need to
remember so I'll never, ever be like that again. Who I am depends on me remembering."

"That's fair. It makes sense," Nico said. The ladybug had flown off his knee and was crawling along
the bedspread. He hadn't noticed. "In the man cave today, what bothered me was that you did it and
didn't seem to remember that it would hurt me. I can handle being hurt most of the time these days. I
worked damned hard to get to that point, and I'm not going to fall apart easily. The thought that you
didn't remember pissed me off."

"I do remember. Most of the time." Jason smiled a little sheepishly. "I was thinking about zombies,
not real life. It didn't even occur to me what I'd done until Percy and I talked it through. I'm so used
to touching you that I do it without realizing it or when I'm preoccupied like then, and I don't always
think about where or how I'm touching you. You feel good. I think I'd glue my hands to your body if
you wouldn't cut them off or something."

Percy chuckled lightly then snored. His hand had stilled inside Nico's shorts. Nico picked up the
ladybug and let her crawl on Percy's face.

"Stop her if she starts to crawl in his mouth or up his nose or something and I don't notice, please?"
Nico asked. "Percy probably wouldn't like it, and I'd hate for her to die unnecessarily."

"Why do you say 'her'? Aren't there guy ladybugs, too?"

"Yeah, but the females are bigger." Nico moved her away from Percy's nose. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"This is hard for me. It was hard to tell you that stuff about how you made me feel." Nico looked up
at their domed roof and opened it a little farther to let in more light. "It's probably hard to believe, but
I don't want to cause you pain."

"It's not hard at all. You've always been more gentle and kind to me than I deserve."

"Come on, Jace. You know that's not true." Nico tilted his head down and looked up at Jason
through his lashes.

There are a few times you've been legitimately hurtful to me, but I know how much worse you could
be. You're capable of having some serious claws and fangs, Neeks, like a lion. You go pissed house
cat on me, but that's about it."

"I love you. You know that?"

"Yeah. I do. I love you, too."

Nico leaned forward conspiratorially. "Want to know something else?"

Jason found himself leaning forward, too. "What?"

"I'm happier than I have ever been, including when you and I were first together." Nico's smile lit up
his face, and he glowed. Jason recognized that the power of Nico's love was as great as the power of
his own anger.

"Can I kiss you?"

"I hope like hell you will."

Jason straightened Nico’s other knee so he could straddle his leg. He advanced slowly, wanting to savor every moment of this kiss. Nico licked his lips and found his eyes flicking between Jason's eyes and his mouth. His hand tightened in Percy's hair. The other hand reached out for Jason's shoulder. He thought it was the right size for him to hold onto forever.

Their lips were soft as they met and separated. Jason put both his hands in Nico's hair and tugged. Nico's mouth opened slightly, and Jason kissed his way all around Nico's lips. "You're all I need, Nico. May all the gods bless us."

"May we bless ourselves," Nico said. With that benediction, he kissed Jason's cheekbones and his eyebrows before settling back against his lips.

In all the soft, sustained kissing that followed, neither of them noticed that, in his sleep, Percy ate the ladybug.
Hades waved his hand and made the watch stop beeping. He waved his hand again and Nico was full and hydrated. Aside from the bruises Nico could feel from where Apollo’s hand had tightened on his shoulder, he was perfectly fine, physically.

"It will be okay, Nico. It will be okay."

Nico thought his father was trying to convince himself. His back was turned, his bone white hands spread wide and strong on his desk.

"Dad..." There were so many things Nico wanted to say, to apologize for, to thank his father for, big things and small ones, and all he managed was a small "I love you."

Hades turned around and regarded Nico critically before a smile quirked up one side of his mouth. The other side remained as severe and menacing as ever. He seemed to have as many things he wanted to say as Nico did.

"I love you, too."

He snapped his fingers, and Nico was standing with his suitcases in front of Percy's door.

Nico thought about not knocking, about going next door to see if Jason had come home from the restaurant. He hoped Jason hadn't been expected to pay for their aborted meal. But his father had warned him to stay away from Jason. For the first time in too long, he listened to his father.

Annabeth answered his knock, and she smiled warmly at him until she saw the suitcases. "Come in, Nico, but don't get comfortable, because you are not staying here."

He dragged the suitcases in anyway, and Annabeth made him tea like Reyna used to.

She listened while he sat on the couch and explained that he and his boyfriend broke up and he needed a place to stay. She patted his knee and told him she was sorry. "But you own a house, Nico. You can live there. If it's too far away, I'm sorry, but you're rich. Find someplace else."

"I was supposed to help Percy with Maybelle this summer. I promised."

"Then hire him a nanny. We are not going back to the way things were." Annabeth's mouth was set in a firm, thin line. Her eyes were hard.

"I'm not..." Nico pinched his lips together and let his eyes flit around the room. He was embarrassed and ashamed that he had to say the words. "I'm not trying to sleep with him, Annabeth. I need family."

"Then go to Reyna! Or Clarisse! Or hell, go to Rachel and climb in her bed and fuck her 'til your dick falls off. Go next door. Not here." Annabeth moved away from him, like she needed the distance. More quietly, she said, "Not here, Nico. He has a family that does not include you."

Percy came home then, swinging Maybelle in her carrier and singing a silly song. He smiled broadly when he caught sight of Nico, but his smile faded when he saw the grim expression on Annabeth's
"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nico came by to say hello after his commencement and now he's leaving."

Percy gently set down Maybelle's carrier. "What are the bags for?"

Nico opened his mouth and closed it a few times. "Vacation. I...um...I'm going to..."

"Liar. Don't lie to me." Percy flicked his eyes to his wife. "Annabeth?"

"He broke up with his boyfriend. He's heading to his house out in the country."

Nico stood to leave, and Percy grabbed his arm when he tried to pass.

"Are you in danger?" Percy's voice was low and urgent. He had been begging Nico to break up with Apollo for months, but Nico hadn't listened. He should have. No matter how good being with Apollo felt, he'd risked the god's well-being and his own.

"I'm not sure yet," Nico mumbled low enough for Annabeth not to hear.

"Does you being here endanger Annabeth or Maybelle?"

Nico shook his head. There was no reason to think the gods would willingly harm a child of Athena or Athena's granddaughter. That would be akin to inciting war.

"Did you come here to stay with us?"

Nico had trouble meeting Percy's eyes. "My dad said I should."

Percy looked at Annabeth and then at Maybelle before he tipped Nico's chin up and searched for something in Nico's eyes. "Go next door. Jason isn't there. I'll come get you in a few minutes."

"I need to leave, Percy."

"No," Percy said harshly. "You need to use your head. Go the hell next door and don't you dare leave that apartment before I come for you. Do you understand me?" Percy sounded so threatening. Nico was going to have another set of bruises to match the ones Apollo had made. He closed his eyes in acceptance, and Percy released his arm. Nico grabbed the first suitcase, but Percy said, "Put it down. Now go."

The screaming started before he even knocked on Piper's door. The walls were incredibly thin in this apartment complex, and though Nico couldn't make out what was being said, the tenor was unmistakable. Annabeth and Percy were both furious. Nico couldn't have broken up Apollo's well-being and his own.

Piper let him in without a word, and he sat on her couch with his head in his hands and listened to the screaming.

While Nico wondered, the yelling stopped. Ten minutes later, the door opened, and Jason and Percy were standing shoulder to shoulder, Jason white-faced, Percy red. Nico and Piper jumped up and
walked toward them. Once they got close, it was like they were in a strange stand-off, Piper and Nico on one side and Jason and Percy on the other. Everything felt wrong.

"Go home with Percy, Nico," Jason said. "Don't leave the apartment without him."

"Did you talk to my father?"

"Go home with Percy, Nico," Jason repeated. "That's all I can say."

Percy reached across the imaginary line separating them and pulled Nico out the door. In the hall, he stopped and whispered urgently in Nico's ear.

"Jason came from your father with a letter for Annabeth. Whatever it said, she shut up about you and said you could stay. Jason seems to be sworn to silence. Don't ask questions, Nico. Keep it quiet. Let me handle Annabeth."

"I don't want to cause you marriage problems."

Percy had his hands on Nico's throat so fast that Nico didn't raise his arms to protest. Percy wasn't pushing, wasn't hurting him, but his thumbs grazed over Nico's windpipe. In another situation, Nico would have found it incredibly hot.

"I'm more scared than I have ever been, baby. Whatever was in that letter must have been awful or Annabeth wouldn't have agreed to this. Now, you're going to be a good boy and do exactly what your dad says, and we are going to stick together until he says otherwise. No complaints and no apologies."

"Okay," Nico said. That one word was so inadequate. Percy had no idea what was going on, but he was willing to take chances, anger his wife, because Nico vaguely needed help. Nico felt both guilty and grateful.

Percy didn't answer. His eyes lost their focus. He slid one thumb down to Nico's collarbone and the other up and into his mouth. Nico bit him softly, and Percy pulled his finger out and rubbed the wetness all over Nico's bottom lip.

Annabeth had been right to turn him away. He may be safe this way, but he was going to ruin Percy's marriage. Oh, gods. Nico swallowed down the bile in his throat and promised himself he wouldn't let it happen.

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Jason wrote to him three days later. The letter was short, to the point, and entirely expected. Nico ripped it to shreds right after he read it.

Nico,

I want to protect you, and I want you to be happy. I want to be happy, too. We can't see each other anymore. It's like we're caught in this awful endless loop where we fall apart, get close to maybe being together, and then get ripped apart again. It's too painful for both of us. Even if this thing blows over, we'll never be together the right way. I'm going to do what you always told me and try to be happy without you. Piper and I are engaged. I hope you can find happiness, too.
Yours,

Jason

Maybelle was sleeping, so Nico ran out of the apartment and shadow traveled into the alley to scream horrible obscenities at the world. He got to rant for five minutes, at the most, before Percy was next to him, furious and frightened. Percy chewed him out for scaring the hell out of him and Annabeth. By the time Percy was done, Nico felt miserable from both the breakup and the guilt over how he inconvenienced his friends.

He let Percy pull him back into the apartment and, remembering his promise not to succumb to his yearning to be with Percy, locked himself in the bathroom and cried. Better there than where Percy might try to comfort him. Comfort and sex were synonymous to Nico now.

Keeping his promise was easier when Annabeth was home on maternity leave. She watched Percy and Nico closely, but her anger with Nico seemed to have passed. Nico was too upset over Jason to care. Percy took a cab to Nico's apartment and retrieved his car. Eventually, Annabeth trusted them enough together to send them on small errands, picking up her dry cleaning or buying diapers for Maybelle. The trips were a welcome escape for Nico, who was not accustomed to being confined. Without those, he sat in the living room and either helped take care of Maybelle or read through his law books, which Apollo had helpfully packed in those suitcases.

There were no human laws about sleeping with a god (why would there be, though?) or not being good enough for someone's son. Nico checked. New York's sodomy law had been repealed in 1980. In human terms, he'd done nothing illegal or unethical. Well, he'd been unethical to Annabeth and Piper, but he pushed that off as more Jason and Percy's lack of ethics than his own. That stance was nonsense, but it seemed like hurting the women should be counted as more his lovers' fault than his.

He slept on the couch, helped in any way he could think of, and generally tried to stay out of the way. When Annabeth went back to work, he and Percy split the Maybelle duties fifty-fifty, and Nico kept reading, though he sat as far away from Percy as possible.

Other than missing Apollo and wishing he could go home, life was fine until Rachel Elizabeth Dare showed up one Tuesday night.

She wasn't drunk, and she didn't have her spooky going on, so Nico wasn't even on guard. She seemed stunningly normal until she strode into Percy's living room and told Percy the Minotaur was coming for his parents.

The three of them, Annabeth, Percy, and Nico, were instantly on their feet and surrounding Rachel. "You need to go now, Percy. He's coming tonight," Rachel said. "Word is, he's pissed that you've bested him twice. He's out for revenge."

While Percy and Annabeth shared a look, Nico watched Maybelle sleeping peacefully in Annabeth's arms. He walked over to his suitcase, pulled out his dagger, and strapped it to his thigh. The others watched him, and when he straightened up, Rachel said, "Hot."

He ignored her and addressed Percy and Annabeth. "You can't go, either of you. Maybelle needs to be your priority. I'll go."

The protest he expected came not from Percy, but from Annabeth. "Nico, you can't...you're not supposed to be away from Percy."

"I'll take the chance." Annabeth didn't look convinced, and truthfully, neither was Nico, but he didn't
see any other option. Jason or Piper could go, he supposed, but Nico couldn't pass the responsibility off on someone else, and the thought of Jason being hurt on a job that was meant for him was too much to bear. "Sally probably has some sort of protection from the other gods. I don't think any of them have had a lover killed since..."

Nico didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to. He was the one who’d lost his mortal parent to a god's wrath. Percy patted his back.

"I'll be fine. Percy can shadow over with me, we'll tell Sally and Paul something not scary about why I'm staying over, and then he can come back. I'll deal with the Minotaur and come back once it's over. No problem."

"Let's go," Percy said. Before Annabeth could protest further, he took Nico's hand and dragged him to the shadows.

Nico put them down outside Percy's old apartment.

"It really is gonna be okay." Percy's smile couldn't disguise his concern. "I think you're right about that protection stuff. There's no one I'd trust to take care of my mom more than you, Nico. Be safe, and come back to me soon."

Percy knocked on the door.

Sally answered, already in her pajamas and a lightweight bathrobe.

"Percy, Nico? What are you boys doing here so late?" She ushered them both inside. The room was exactly the way Nico remembered it. Gods, was that four Christmases ago he'd laid across Percy on that little yellow loveseat and watched *White Christmas* before he'd climbed into Percy's bed and made love to him for the first time?

"Hey, Mom," Percy said in this weird, falsely cheery voice. "Me and Annabeth kinda have an anniversary thing tonight, and we'd like some privacy. Nico's, you know, been staying with us since he broke up with his boyfriend, but we'd kinda like some alone time tonight so I was wondering if he could stay here?"

"Of course. Nico's always welcome here." Sally smiled brightly at Nico, and he was shocked she wasn't calling bullshit on Percy. "Would you like us to watch Maybelle?"

"Oh, no, uh, she's already asleep, so, no. It's good. Just, uh, watch Nico, I guess."

Nico had to fight the urge to hit Percy. A four year old could do a better job lying to its mom.

"Okay," Sally said.

"So I'll be going now, and uh," Percy paused and threw his arms around his mom. "I love you so much, Mom."

"I love you, too, Percy," Sally said, looking confused but happy.

Percy pressed his hand into Nico's and walked away.

Sally didn't press Nico about Percy's obvious lie, though it became apparent, once Percy left, that Sally hadn't bought any of it. She insisted on making Nico dinner and cookies. Paul came out and they watched a movie together before Sally told Nico they were turning in for the night and he could sleep in Percy's old room.
It felt weird, being in Percy's room without Percy. Everything seemed so small, smaller than the last time he'd been here. He and Percy had been so carefree and happy together. Nico sat on the bed and smelled the pillows to see if they retained Percy's smell. They did. Reyna had told him once that he smelled like himself, but he also smelled a little like Percy and Jason. Big Three kids, at least the boys, had a powerful scent. The girls were supposed to, too, but Hazel smelled like Hazel, cinnamon and warmth and the tiniest touch of earth. He couldn't remember what Thalia smelled like, or maybe he'd never been close enough to smell her. He'd been so small and completely preoccupied with Percy when they'd met, and his encounters with her afterward had been more of the "run for your life!" variety — not exactly the relaxed atmosphere one would need to get a good sniff of someone else. By the time he was aware that the most powerful demigods had a powerful scent, Bianca had been long dead.

Nico stood and stretched. He wasn't getting out of shape, but sparring in Percy's cramped living room and doing sit-ups with his feet stuffed under the couch wasn't comparable to sparring out in the open with Clarisse or going through his kickboxing regimen.

Once the apartment was quiet and he was sure Sally and Paul had gone to bed, Nico went back into the living room and sat on the couch. From there, he could see the front door and the hall that led to the bedrooms. He let his senses expand and tried to find the Minotaur. He could feel every living sentient creature in Manhattan. Percy and Annabeth and Jason in their apartments. Maybelle. Apollo. There were seven gods in the throne room on Mt. Olympus. The president was in town. He could reach out further and feel Leo in Maine. No Minotaur. He was thinking that was probably because the Minotaur was an idiot, not a sentient being, when the front door burst open and Nico was staring him in the face.

The Minotaur was a great, hulking thing. Percy hadn't exaggerated, for once. His eyes were small and beady, but his chest was easily twice as wide as Nico's, and he had enough muscles to make Jason look puny. He was wearing a dirty wife-beater and jeans. Nico could make out his gnarly feet, which were human, but black with dirt and probably cow shit. His face was full black bull, with a gold nose ring, and his horns were longer than the one Percy had kept as a souvenir. Fabulous.

The Minotaur seemed to be considering Nico, too. Maybe he hadn't expected to find a fully grown demigod with a badass sword and a massive twelve-inch dagger waiting for him.

While they were considering each other, Paul and Sally ran out of their bedroom and screeched to a halt behind Nico.

"Go back to your room," Nico said without taking his eyes off the Minotaur. "I'll try not to wreck your living room too much. Maybe go to the bathroom. Sometimes I scare the pee out of people."

"Be careful," Sally said, and her voice was firm and strong. Nico loved her. He heard their retreating footsteps as he carefully bent over and turned off the TV, plunging the room into darkness.

"You're on my turf, big guy," he said. He put out a massive fear aura and heard people in other apartments scream in response. The Minotaur took a step back. Nico wondered if the bull could even see him at all. He took two steps forward and the Minotaur charged. Guess he can see me, Nico thought. He stepped to the side and hacked at the Minotaur's hand, severing it completely. The Minotaur roared and turned to swipe at Nico with his other hand, but Nico was gone. He rematerialized to the monster's left and stabbed his side with the dagger before disappearing again.

Nico dropped back out of the shadows into the space between the Minotaur and the bedroom hallway. He lunged and whacked off one of the horns.

"Hey, dumbass, over here!" He didn't want the Minotaur to forget about him and go after Sally and Paul. The last trip through the shadows had left the hallway open and vulnerable. "I have a better piercing than you. And a fucking brain."

It wasn't the right time, but he hoped Sally couldn't hear him swearing.

The Minotaur turned and charged again. Nico cut open his leg. The beast hopped around for a minute. While he did, Nico decided he was too short and needed to get above to land a killing blow. He shadow traveled onto the yellow loveseat, a foot away from the Minotaur, and drove his dagger down into the creature's head. Unfortunately, the Minotaur was not quite as dumb as Nico had thought. When Nico lunged down, he lunged up and gored Nico through the shoulder.

"Shit!"

A hand closed around Nico's abdomen, and he heard his ribs cracking. He wedged his sword arm up and pushed the blade of the sword across the Minotaur's throat. There was a horrible gurgling sound, and the Minotaur exploded into golden dust. Seems the guy didn't need his brain, but he did need to breathe. Nico laughed, until he remembered that laughing was absolutely horrible for cracked ribs and his shoulder was on fucking fire.

He sheathed his weapons and gingerly climbed down from the couch. He flipped on the lights to survey the damage. Not too bad. The TV was intact. He hadn't even knocked over Sally's favorite lamp. There were boot prints on the loveseat, though. He could send a cleaner over for that. Oh, and shit. He had a Minotaur horn sticking out of his shoulder. He tried to pull it out, but it was wedged in there pretty good. He could have Apollo...fuck...he could have Percy pull it out for him. For the first time, instead of being scared, Nico was royally pissed that he wasn't with his lover. Recovery from injury was a shit poor excuse for wanting Apollo back, but that was the way he felt. He wanted him back so many other ways, too.

"I'm done. He's gone," Nico called down the hall. Before he left, he wanted to explain about sending over a sofa cleaner.

Paul and Sally came out of their bedroom, eyes wide, skin white, and scanned the scene.

"It's not too bad. I'll send a cleaner guy over soon to get my boot prints off the loveseat, and the, uh, the dust you can sweep up with a broom. I'd do it now, but uh..."

Paul opened and closed his mouth a few times before he finally squeaked, "You have a bull horn in your shoulder."

Nico grunted. "He got me a bit. Can you tell me, does it, uh?"

He turned around, hoping they could tell him if it was poking out the back. He heard a thump and turned back around to find Paul passed out. He scrambled to help Sally pull Paul into a sitting position, but she shooed him off.

"I'll get him. It's fine. And yes, Nico, yes, it's sticking out the back, too. Can I...call you an ambulance or something?"

Nico laughed and stopped again because, ribs. "No, thanks. I'll head back to Percy's, and he can mostly fix it. Looks like I get a horn to match his."

Sally eyed him like he was absolutely insane.

"So, I'll have the cleaner call you to set up the appointment, okay? And I'll maybe see you around?"
Nico was halfway to the door when Sally called him. "Nico? This was why you came tonight?"

"Well, yes. Rachel told Percy, but he can't very well leave Maybelle vulnerable to come, so..." He hoped Sally wasn't mad that Percy hadn't taken care of this himself.

"Thank you, Nico." Sally hugged him, but stopped when he couldn't control his wince. "Sweetheart, what's wrong? Besides the horn, I mean."

"It's just ribs. I'll be fine. I should get to Percy, though, so he can," Nico tilted his head toward the horn, "pull that out."

Sally saw him to the door. As soon as it closed, he tried to shadow travel only to realize he lacked the juice. Well, he was not going back inside and inconveniencing Sally, who had to deal with Paul. He made it to the elevator and pressed the button for the ground floor before spitting out, "Shit. Shit. Shit."

He'd walk. It wasn't that far. Twenty minutes, tops. No problem.

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Ten minutes in, Nico was realizing that Minotaur horns don't magically start feeling better when they're still lodged inside your body and neither do cracked ribs. Walking was the super-suckiest idea he'd ever had. He was thinking he'd find himself a nice little alley to camp out in for a while until he had the energy to shadow travel when a car screeched around the corner and skidded to a stop five feet from him. The car was red and gorgeous and looked so much like—

"Get in the gods damned car, you fucking idiot!"

For a second Nico thought Jason had come to pick him up because no one talked to him that way besides Jason, but then Percy was climbing out of the car and dragging Nico into it. Nico resisted.

"What are you doing?" Percy hissed.

"I don't want to get blood on the leather. Why didn't you bring your car?"

Percy looked like he wanted to hit him. When he spoke again it was through gritted teeth. "Get in the motherfucking car now, Nico."

Nico did. He couldn't buckle his seatbelt, but if he leaned forward, he could keep blood from dripping on the seat. There wasn't much blood anyway, at least out the front, since the horn was still there. Percy didn't seem to have noticed it yet.

"Buckle up, damn it."

"Cracked ribs, Perce. Can't."

"Fuck. Okay. I'll drive carefully. Gods, Nico, what were you thinking, walking home? My mom called as soon as you left and when you didn't show up in a minute or two I nearly shit myself."

Nico giggled, then hissed at the pain. "I was thinking, 'Damn, I used up all my juice and can't shadow travel.'"
"Why didn't you go back inside, then?" Percy snapped. "My mom would've looked after you until I could get there. Damn it! I'm really mad at you."

"Hades, Percy, it's not that big a deal. I'm getting irritated. Paul fainted when he came out after I got rid of the Minotaur, and I didn't want to give your mom something else to worry about."

"Did that bastard mess up my mom's house?"

"Who the hell do you think you sent to fight it? Of course not," Nico said. "I need to send a cleaner over because I got some dirt on her loveseat, though."

Percy reached over to smack at Nico's shoulder. He almost jumped out of his skin when he hit the Minotaur horn instead. Nico jumped, too.

"Shit! What the hell is that?" Percy stopped watching the road and gawked at Nico's shoulder.

"Watch the road, Percy! It's still going to be in my damned shoulder when we get to your apartment."

"You've been walking the streets of fucking New York City with a motherfucking Minotaur horn sticking out of your Gods damned shoulder?" Percy screeched so loud Nico could barely make out the words. "Oh, fuck, Nico. Damn it! This is the kind of shit Jason..."

Percy closed his mouth and watched the road. He could stop talking, but Nico knew what he had been in the middle of saying. This was the kind of shit Jason had left him over. Nico's anger caught in his throat because clawing up behind it was absolute terror. He needed Percy. Gods, Percy couldn't...

"I shouldn't have said that," Percy said. He pressed his hand between Nico's thighs and squeezed hard. "I'm not leaving you, Nico. I would never do that to you. This, it isn't...I didn't mean it. I was so damned scared when you didn't come home."

"I didn't mean to scare you," Nico whispered. "I scared Jason. That's why he left."

"I'm not that motherfucker, and I am not leaving you. Not ever. Put your hands on my arm, baby. I am real and I'm not leaving." Percy slowed down and pulled off the street. He put the car in park and scrambled out of the seat, across the center console, and into Nico's lap. The weight hurt because of the broken ribs, but Nico needed it. He needed Percy close. He needed to not feel abandoned.

"How're those ribs feeling about now, baby?" Percy asked, the slightest hint of teasing in his voice. He kissed Nico's lashes and across his cheekbones.

"Like shit."

"Yeah, I bet. I suppose the horn is stuck?" Percy held Nico's hands. He rubbed tiny circles on the back of them. "The Minotaur's a grade-A asshole."

"I couldn't pull it out, and I didn't want to ask your mom because she shouldn't have to do that kind of stuff. It's longer than your old one, I think."

Percy made a big show of feeling the front side and the back side of the horn where it stuck out of Nico's shoulder. "Nah. Mine's bigger, just like my dick."

"Whatever. We'll have a comparison contest soon. We can have like a dick Olympics. Quickest to come, biggest, who shoots farther, that kinda thing. You and me. USA vs. Italy."

"Italy'll win. The only thing America is best at is bragging." Nico talked to Percy's chest.

Percy lifted Nico's chin and smiled. He nuzzled their noses. "You okay now? I could sit here in your lap all night, but I wanna get you home and pull that horn out of your shoulder."

"I'm okay."

"Not that shit lie 'okay,' either, right? Because I can tell the difference, baby."

"I know. I freaked out a little, but I know you wouldn't do what Jason did. And," Nico looked straight in Percy's eyes, because the more he said it to people the more he would believe it, "I didn't deserve what Jason did to me."

Percy broke out his biggest grin. "No, you sure as hell did not. Gods, I love you, Nico." His voice was so tender. Their eyes locked and held, and the moment stretched between them. Percy tilted his head and leaned down, closed his eyes, got so close. Warm breath dusted Nico’s lips. Heat and tension and want arced between them.

"I don't want you to stop, Percy, but you need to." Nico hated saying it, but he was not going to repay Annabeth's kindness by kissing her husband.

Percy didn't open his eyes, but he nodded and stopped moving. "Okay. Okay. I'm gonna drive us home now and take care of you."

The door opened and Percy climbed out. In a moment, he was back in the driver's seat, trying, Nico could tell, to pretend like he hadn't almost kissed his best friend. "Text Annabeth and tell her we're on our way. Tell her to run us a bath."

Nico was happy to play along. "I'm not telling Annabeth to run us a bath. I don't want my ass kicked by a new mother."

Percy's hands were back on the wheel and the car was moving. Nico felt so fucking tired all of a sudden.

"It's for the healing, baby. Tell her I say she needs to run a bath so I can use the water on your injuries."

"Fuck, no. You tell her when we get there."

Percy turned onto their block, and Nico grinned in triumph. He was off the Annabeth hook, at least for now. And Percy wasn't leaving him.

"Stay still. I'll help you get out once I park."

Nico stayed still and let Percy baby him, because he felt like he needed it. Percy parked and was at Nico's door quickly. He held out his hand and let Nico use it to pull himself up. He wrapped his arm around Nico's hips, nice and low so he didn't compress the ribs, and led him inside. Nico didn't need help walking, but Percy's closeness was soothing. He was feeling more frazzled than he had immediately after the Minotaur fight. They went up the elevator, trading kisses on the cheek, temple, and eyebrow, which helped calm Nico even more. The kisses and closeness calmed him so much that he wasn't expecting to see Jason looming in the hallway the second he walked out of the elevator.
It wasn't only Jason in the hall. Piper and Annabeth were out there, too. The gathering felt too much like another meeting of the "Why's Nico Crazy?" club, and Nico turned into Percy's chest to hide.

"Fuck, Nico! Is that the Minotaur's horn in your shoulder?" Jason asked. Nico couldn't bear seeing Jason now, not after what Percy had said and how much worry he'd caused someone else he loved.

"Shut up, Jason," he hissed. "Take me inside, Percy. I hate the look on Jason's face. One more time I let you down, huh, Jace? I should copyright the look — 'Jason Grace's Patented Nico's Such A Disappointment' face. I'd make a killing, considering how often you break it out."

"Gods, Nico. That's not even close to what I'm thinking. Fuck. All I meant was—"

Whatever Jason meant would remain a mystery. He was interrupted by Percy punching his face. He reeled back, cupping his eye.

"Di immortales, Percy! Can you act like a grown-up? Once?" Annabeth yelled. "We don't need more drama, and Nico's sure as hell vicious enough to handle Jason on his own."

A door around the corner opened. "You darned kids need to quiet down. I'm going to call the police on you one of these days!"

Everyone rolled their eyes. That was Crazy Cat Lady #2.

"You really want to forget all about us, Mrs. Hessenheffer," Piper called. "You want so much to tell us goodnight and go to sleep."

"Goodnight, kids," Mrs. Hessenheffer called out around a yawn.


"Get inside, everyone," Annabeth said.

Jason took two steps toward Percy's door. Annabeth's hand caught his chest. She looked at Piper in exasperation.

"Jason, go in our apartment," Piper said. Nico couldn't tell if Piper was using more charmspeak, but Jason turned around and headed for his own door.

At the doorway, he paused and said, "That wasn't what I was thinking, Nico," but he didn't say anything else. He disappeared inside the apartment, and Nico was left feeling like he'd made one more terrible error.

"I should apologize," Nico said, heading for Jason's door. Annabeth caught him, too.

"Save it for later, Nico. We need to get that horn out of your shoulder."

"Yeah, let's go in," Percy said. He rubbed his knuckles. "He has cracked ribs, too, he says."

"Wonderful. And you've got a bruised hand. I'm calling Will so we can find out what to do." She led them inside the apartment and back to the bedroom.

Percy started a bath and got down the ambrosia and nectar while Annabeth fished out a drachma and a prism and, from the cramped bathroom, called Will. Nico stood behind her to listen. Percy came in with a pair of scissors and cut Nico's shirt off while Will and Annabeth were working their way through the pleasantries.
When Nico turned back to face Will, the doctor paused in his conversation and said, "Hey Nico, looking good."

"I would slap you right now if I could reach you, Will Solace." Annabeth put her arm around Nico's waist and pulled him even with her. Will gave a sharp gasp when he saw Nico's injury, but Annabeth snarled like he'd been aware of the injury all along and hit on Nico anyway. "He has cracked ribs and a Minotaur horn lodged in his shoulder. We have nectar, ambrosia, and Percy's healing abilities. In what order do we take care of this? You know, when you're done being a prick and ogling him."

Nico guessed Annabeth wouldn't be getting a Christmas card from Will this year. Will shot her a dirty look and switched to professional mode.

"Do you have something to dull the pain? It's gonna hurt like hell. Maybe drink a lot of booze, Nico, or—"

"I don't drink," Nico said flatly. He, too, was kind of pissed at Will for drooling over him like a piece of meat.

"I have some Valium," Annabeth said. "Would that work?"

Nico was so relieved that Annabeth respected his privacy about the anxiety pills that he kissed her head. Will's breathing hitched.

"Oh, my gods, go stand out of his field of vision, Nico, so he doesn't come all over the Iris message," Annabeth said.

"No!" Will shouted. Then, quieter, he said, "Med school is hard, Annabeth. I work long hours. So sue me if I get distracted. I need to see his injuries. Nico, is it just the one side, or—"

Nico turned his back to the message so Will could see the exit wound. He couldn't remember if the tip of the horn was curved or how much. Of course, he didn't know if that would make a difference anyway.

"Shit. Okay, stand in profile, Nico, so I can see both sides at the same time."

Nico did as instructed and waited. Percy was sitting on the edge of the tub making little water animals come to life. He was so sweet, Percy. He hadn't needed to come get Nico, or make him feel better after he'd yelled at him, or punch Jason, though Nico wished Percy hadn't done that last one.

Annabeth hooked her hand on Nico's hip and leaned around him. "Percy, go get the Valium and have Nico take it."

Percy jumped off the tub to obey. Smirking, he slipped his hand over Nico's abs as he passed, a move that was definitely designed to make Will's pants tighter. Nico rolled his eyes. Annabeth turned Nico back to the front.

"Listen, because two of us need to know what to do."

"Okay, so take the Valium," Will began. "Get in the tub or however Percy does his thing so he'll be ready to go as soon as the horn comes out. Give Nico half a square of ambrosia and pour a tiny amount of nectar around the horn. Too much and the body will start to heal with the horn stuck inside, but too little and Nico'll have a big scar, which would be a crime against humanity."

"Fuck off, Will," Nico said.
Will winked at him. "Now, once you've poured the nectar, immediately, and I mean immediately, yank the horn out. Once it's out, pour some more nectar on the wound. Try to get it as down deep as you can, so you're healing from the inside out. If you can get it all the way closed, great, if not, it's the best we can do for now and you guys can see what magic Percy can work. Either way, really, Percy should probably mess with it."

Percy came back. He laid his head on Nico's good shoulder and watched Will. "Hey, Nico, can I put this in your mouth with my tongue?"

"Stop agitating Will, Percy," Annabeth said. "He's got to get us through this."

Percy shrugged and shoved the medicine in Nico's open mouth before holding up a cup with a straw. Nico drank and swallowed. He hadn't planned to take any more Valium after its apparent amnesiac effect on Christmas, but he figured he could make an exception this time. Minotaur horns lodged in the body were not a common occurrence, even among demigods.

"Okay, can Percy manage all this alone, or will I need to help? I don't mind, but with the baby it's probably better to either have it be something he can do alone or go get someone else to assist."

There were only two other "helper" options, and Nico didn't want to see either of them right now, so he was relieved when Will said Percy should be able to handle it alone.

"That's about it," Will said. "Call me tomorrow and let me know how it's doing. Nico, call me anytime."

Nico couldn't lift his hands, so he was glad when Percy read his mind and flipped Will off. Will blew Nico a kiss and broke the connection.

"That guy's a dick," Percy said. "I can't believe you dated him, Nico."

"I was fourteen! I didn't have a lot of experience separating dicks from non-dicks. Obviously. I spent my entire early adolescent years in love with your sorry ass."

Annabeth chuckled.

Percy crossed his arms over his chest. "That's the only time in your life you've had good taste, you obnoxious dickhead. Now get naked and take a bath with me."

"Wait, Annabeth should tell you what to do first."

Annabeth seemed aggravated, probably because of the way Percy had phrased their need to get in the tub. Nico decided he was right when, after recapping Will's advice two times, she said, "And neither of you needs to be naked. Leave your underwear on."

"Killjoy," Percy said. He bent down, his knees on the hard white subway tile, and started unlacing Nico's boots.

Nico felt very embarrassed, but there was no way he could bend over to do it himself. The situation was weird. The injuries should hurt more. As long as he stayed still, the pain wasn't bad. Percy got the first boot off and started on the second. Nico laughed when he remembered how Percy had first propositioned him all those years ago. Nico had been putting on his boots, and now here Percy was, bent down with his head almost stuck in Nico's crotch, getting the boots off. The laugh hurt, so Nico stopped fast. Annabeth regarded him quizzically. Nico shrugged, then winced, and leaned back against the sink because the Valium was maybe already kicking in.
Percy reached up and touched Nico's jeans button. Nico giggled, which hurt, so he stopped again. It didn't seem to hurt as much this time. Or he didn't care as much. Something.

"What are you doing, Percy?" Annabeth asked.

"His pants need to come off, and he can't do it. Do you want to do it?"

"I would love to," Annabeth said, her eyebrow cocked.

"That okay, Nico?" Percy asked.

Annabeth nudged Percy out of the way and started to work on Nico's jeans. Nico giggled again, which hurt even less, and let his head fall back against the mirror.

Annabeth smirked. Nico could hear it in her voice. "I don't think Nico minds much of anything right now. It all feels good, right, Nico?"

"Feels great," Nico said. "You have tiny little bird hands, Annabeth. Keep on touching."

Whether Annabeth did or not, he couldn't tell, but something was making his pants fall down. He kicked to get them off, and Percy was next to him, holding him steady. "Take it easy there, Neeks. You're really out of it."

"You did give him half a pill, right? The reason he was so sleepy at Christmas is because he only should have taken half and he took a whole one." Annabeth was talking. She sounded funny, like she was inside a tube.

"I gave him two," Percy said. He sounded like a tube-man, too. "I didn't know."

"Gods, that's four times the dose. Okay, he'll be fine. Get stripped, Percy, and let's get this over with." 

"Mmm, I like Percy all stripped. Stripped? Striped? I like him some way. He tastes like lollipops, huh, Annabeth?"

Ooh, Percy was stripped, almost naked, all muscles and yummy tan skin, and Nico liked it. He lurched forward to kiss all that deliciousness. Percy held him upright. "Not tonight, Nico."

Nico noticed someone, maybe Annabeth, in the room with them. She looked pissed.

"Hey, Annabeth. Ana-bethie. Ha. Don't be mad. If that's you, we can kiss, too. I don't mind kissing girls."

"If the Valium doesn't kill him, I will," Annabeth said.

Percy, or someone who looked like Percy, Nico wasn't so sure anymore, pulled him backward, and he stumbled over something into warmth around his ankles. The warmth felt good, and he let his head flop back on maybe-Percy's shoulder.

"Nico, we're gonna sit down now," maybe-Percy said. Nico let himself be lowered into the warmth. Stuff that tasted like Jason's brownies got shoved in his mouth.

People were talking around him, but Nico didn't listen. He heard two voices, then only one. He was floating away on Jason's yummy, special brownies, warm and just for him. His Jason, just for him.

Searing, scalding, monstrous pain shot through his shoulder, and Nico snapped back to the world
without drugs in record time.

"Holy motherfucking hell!" he screamed when his mouth made words instead of a shrill noise that belonged in a horror movie. "Son of a fucking bitch. Oh, gods, shit. Shit! Shit! Oh, fuck!"

"Nico's back," Percy said behind him.

The searing pain had receded somewhat, but Nico was blind from the original event. Where the hell was he? It was warm and Percy was behind him, bare-chested, and – was he naked? No. There were boxers. What the fuck was going on?

Nico must have said that last part out loud, because Percy answered.

"You got gored by the Minotaur, and he left you a little going away present. Dude, this horn is huge! You are such a fucking stud."

"I can't see," Nico said. "I, fucking hell, it hurts. I remember the Minotaur, but where are we?"

"I know it hurts, baby," Percy said, like he was talking to Maybelle instead of Nico. "It's going to be okay. I pulled out the horn. It's going to get better. We're in the tub so I can fix things."

"Fuck." Nico rolled his head on Percy's shoulder and saw Annabeth standing next to the tub. Huh. He could see again.

"Are you finished screaming?" Annabeth asked. She shoved some ambrosia in his mouth, and he tasted Jason's brownies. That part he remembered from before.

"I think so."

"You going to offer to kiss me again? I might take you up on it when you're not all drugged up." Annabeth laughed. She was teasing him.

"Oh, gods, did I say that? I wasn't inappropriate with you, was I?" That was all Nico needed. As if being a source of strife in their marriage and being hopelessly attracted to Percy wasn't enough.

"You were fine, sweetie." Annabeth bent over and let Maybelle num on Nico's forehead. "Don't worry about it. I'm going to lay Maybelle back down and try to get some sleep myself. Let me know if you need me, Percy."

Annabeth left the bathroom. She was gone ten seconds when the doorbell rang. Nico didn't pay much attention to it; he was busy trying to keep his breathing calm as Percy worked on his injuries.

Annabeth returned with Jason trailing behind her. "He wouldn't leave. He needs to see that you're okay, Nico."

"I'm fine, Jace," Nico said. Percy's arms contracted around Nico's body. Nico sighed. "I think I said something awful to you. I don't remember what, but I feel like whatever it was, it wasn't something that was fair to you. So, I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter," Jason said. He'd been crying, Nico could tell. He had a black eye. Nico tried to reach up to him but was stopped by sharp pain in his shoulder. "Be still, Neeks. I promise, it's fine. I'll go. I just needed to see for myself that you were okay."

"Percy?" Annabeth said. Her hand was on Jason's forearm, preventing him from leaving.

"Hmm?" Percy was working hard on Nico's shoulder.
"Don't you have something to say to Jason, too?"

Percy paused and turned so his chin rested on the side of Nico's head.

"Hey, Jason. I'm sorry you're such a motherfucking asswipe."

A memory stirred in the back of Nico's head.

"Did you," he paused to get it right. "Did you hit Jason?"

"He had it coming." Percy had turned his head back and resumed his healing.

"No one deserves to get hit, Percy. Apologize, right now." Nico was mad. Percy couldn't hit Jason. They were supposed to try to be friends.

"Be quiet," Percy said, but there was no bite to it. "You don't even remember what happened, so you don't know whether he deserved to be hit or not."

"Jason didn't deserve to be hit," Annabeth said. "You were an obnoxious shit, Nico, and Percy punched him for your perceptions."

"It's fine," Jason said again.

"He was an obnoxious shit with a Minotaur horn stuck in his shoulder and cracked ribs, Annabeth," Percy said. "None of us would have behaved all that great. Plus, we had a fight on the way home, over jackass there."

"It's not Jason's fault that we fought, Percy. Apologize."

"It is Jason's fault that we fought. Shut up and let me work on you. Get out, Jason. I'm sorry." Percy sounded about as sorry as Reyna had the time she'd sheared off Jason's shirt during sparring.

"I'm going. It's all good. Be well, Neeks." Jason brushed his fingers through Nico's hair and left. Annabeth followed behind him.

"You were an ass, Percy," Nico said. He yawned. "You shouldn't have hit him."

"I know," Percy said softly. "I was upset about us fighting, and then you were so upset when you saw him, and I snapped. I was mad at myself and looking for someone to blame. I can't figure out how to hit myself. I don't really want to, honestly. He was a convenient target. I'll apologize for real tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"Alright, be still and quiet and let me work. I ODed you on Valium on accident — that's why your memory's shit — so you might get sleepy again. If you do, don't fight it. I'll take care of you."

Nico let his eyes slip closed and dropped his hands down to play with Percy's knees. He was feeling pretty sleepy, now that Percy mentioned it. A little nap might...
During the night, Percy had a great dream that involved him finishing Nico's healing while they were both naked in the shower. Nico showed his appreciation for Percy's powers in a very pleasant way. The dream, unlike reality, did not feature him having a three month old daughter.

"Feed her faster."

"I'm going as fast as I can, Percy. You try giving a bottle to a kid someone else is holding."

Percy was on his knees in the bathtub, straddling Nico's thigh, holding Maybelle across his stomach, and moving water over what was still a rather large wound on Nico's shoulder. Nico had his free knee wedged under Maybelle's butt to give her more stability. He was also trying, pitifully, Percy thought, to give her a bottle.

"You're holding the bottle too low."

"Last time you said I was holding it too high."

"You were," Percy grumbled. There was an art to feeding a baby. "Too low, she eats too slow and gets gas bubbles. Too high, she gets more milk than she can handle and it spills out of her mouth."

Nico growled. Normally, this was a sound that, coming from Nico, sent shock waves right to Percy's groin. Right now, it pissed him off.

"Why don't we take a break?" Nico suggested. "You finish feeding her and come back to me when she's done."

They'd climbed in the shower after Percy put Maybelle down for her nap, but she'd slept approximately five minutes before she woke screaming. There had been a monster poop, and now she was hungry. Nico had been sitting in the bathtub so long his toes were pruney. Maybelle liked baths, so she was happy crammed in between Percy and Nico. Nico didn't seem to mind, either, but doing two jobs at once was wearing on Percy.

"Hold her. I'll dry off and be right back."

Nico winced when Percy shoved Maybelle into his arms. Percy knew the ribs weren't fully healed, and Nico was having trouble holding stuff with his left hand because of the wound from the horn. He'd never drop Maybelle, though.

Percy pulled a few towels out of the linen closet and willed his boxers dry. He got a diaper and a cute little outfit with bunnies on it for Maybelle. When he got back to the bathroom, Nico was singing in Italian to his daughter. Percy didn't understand a word Nico was saying, and his voice wasn't great, but the scene was so sweet. Percy hated to interrupt, but — and he never thought he'd say this — he wanted to make it out of the tub sometime today.

He laid a towel on his chest and secured it with his chin, ran his hand through Nico's hair, which caused Nico to stop singing, and gently scooped up Maybelle. He wrapped her in the towel and laid her on the bed in their room. Changing a baby was not easy, but Percy was getting the hang of it. He had her diapered in under thirty seconds. Maybelle smiled and cooed, and Percy made silly faces to keep her entertained. The clothes took a bit longer, and Maybelle started to cry for her bottle before Percy got her dressed.

"Percy? Need help?" Nico called.

"Stay in that bathtub!" Nico wasn't exactly a model patient, and Percy worried that if he got out of the tub, he wouldn't get back in. "I've got it!"
It was a shame Apollo couldn't help Nico. Percy had only gotten a very basic explanation from Nico about what was going on. He'd said he'd made a mistake and that he and his roommate had to separate for a while, but that the roommate wasn't angry with him. He'd also made it clear that staying with Percy was likely temporary. At first, Percy had been terrified that Nico was about to get killed by a god, but as the days passed and no one came to kill him, the fear faded. Now he was more worried that Nico would head back to Apollo. Sleeping with a god was a colossally bad idea, and Percy had told Nico so many times to leave his lover. Nico was stubborn and loyal, like Percy had often been told he was. Apollo had been terrific when Nico was sick; Percy wasn't sure Nico would have recovered without the god's careful healing. And it was clear Apollo was madly in love with Nico. So strange. None of this meant Apollo was good for Nico or that Nico shouldn't leave him.

"Uncle Nico's such a dummy," Percy baby-whispered to Maybelle as he settled back on the bed and held her, her head propped on his biceps and the bottle in her mouth. "It would be so much smarter for him to stay here with you and me, my little princess. You would love that, wouldn't you?"

Maybelle did love Nico, and Nico loved her, too. They were sweet together. Of course, Maybelle loved pretty much everyone she met, and she made sure the feeling was mutual. Percy didn't have much exposure to babies, but no baby could be as wonderful as Maybelle. Her little blond hair was soft, and her green eyes danced with light. Percy was sure she was already wiser than all of them. Her little arms had fat folds almost as big as the ones on her legs. Her sweet, toothless smile made Percy feel like the luckiest man in the world.

"What're we gonna do, Maybelle?" Percy asked. He kept his voice soft and gentle. Maybelle stared at him intently, like he was the most important person alive. "Are we gonna take a nappy? Daddy'd like that. Would you like to take a nap with Daddy? We wouldn't tell Mommy, no. Mommy already thinks Daddy takes things too easy."

They'd fought about it last night when Nico was gone to Percy's mom's house. Annabeth thought that Percy was letting himself get too sidetracked taking care of Maybelle and "playing," as she'd called it, with Nico — and Percy understood what she was insinuating — and he needed to be more serious and work on his writing. Camp Half-Blood may be paying him, she said, but they wouldn't wait years to see progress. Percy had argued that he'd had writer's block while she was home on maternity leave and she hadn't complained about his lack of focus then.

Annabeth had been cranky lately. She was upset that she missed out on the majority of Maybelle's day, even though she wanted to be at work. There was an important project coming due in her workgroup, too. She was frustrated that Nico was staying with them, though her frustration seemed to be directed more at Percy than Nico. It pissed Percy off because he knew her problem with the arrangement wasn't that Nico was a pain in the ass or an inconvenience, it was that she didn't trust Percy not to cheat on her, which was unfair. He hadn't cheated in over two years. He wanted to cheat; he very much wanted to cheat, but he hadn't done it. He felt like he deserved some credit.

"The bottle's empty, and she's asleep."

Percy startled and found Nico leaning against the bathroom door frame in his sweatpants. Nico was right. Maybelle was asleep, the bottle was not only empty but spit out of her mouth, and there was a line of milk drool stretching from her mouth to her ear. Percy dabbed it up with the waistband of his boxers.

"I told you to stay in the tub."

"I was starting to liquefy. I could feel my guts sloshing around in there. And the water got cold."

Nico walked into the room and sat down. Gingerly, he turned and fell sideways in slow motion onto
the bed, keeping his gored shoulder up and his good arm wrapped around his ribs.

Percy gave a fake mocking laugh. He secretly thought Nico was adorable. "It's bad enough I have to
deal with one baby, baby. You want me to baby you, too?"

Nico looked up at him with puppy-dog eyes and a pout. "I was your baby first."

Percy laughed, and Nico's pouty lips broke into a broad grin. Percy carefully laid Maybelle in her co-
sleeper and scooted across the bed until he was face to face with Nico.

"Okay, Daddy has time for you now. Let's get back in the tub."

"I'm not putting those wet boxers back on, Percy." Nico scrunched up his nose like that was the most
revolting idea in the world. "How about you put some water in a bowl and work on me out here?"

"Or you could slip out of those sweatpants and get back in the tub." Percy tugged Nico's sweatpants
lower on his hip. He used his index finger to rub along Nico's hipbone.

Nico's eyes slipped closed, but he said, "A bowl of water, Perce. Once I'm healed enough we can—"

"Cuddle up and take a nap with Maybelle?"

"Go next door and apologize to Jason," Nico corrected. "Then we can take a nap with Maybelle."

"I don't want to apologize to Jason." Percy reached around and pinched Nico's ass.

"Always with the pinching. But the faster we do this, the sooner we can cuddle. And you are
apologizing, Percy. You hit him because you were mad at me."

"I hit him because I was mad at myself, but fine. If it means cuddling, I'll say whatever I have to."

Nico snorted. "Very mature."

Percy got up and brought back their popcorn bowl. He filled it full of water and set it on the
nightstand on the side of the bed away from Maybelle's sleeper. Nico was still curled up on the bed
exactly as Percy had left him. Percy almost hoped he was asleep. He could heal him and take a nap
without having to go see Jason. He put his left hand in the bowl, stretched out his right, and touched
Nico's injured shoulder. Nico jolted and jerked his head around to see Percy.

"Relax," Percy said. "I'll do the back side of it and then you can lay on your back while I do the
front."

Nico nodded and turned his head back around. Percy concentrated. Water flowed across his body
from the bowl to his right hand, and he put as much positive energy into the water as he could. Using
his rejuvenating powers on another person was so much harder than using them on himself and
required so much more concentration. The whole healing another person thing was something he had
only learned to do recently, within the last few years or so, and he'd only done it with Nico's
hangover and a few minor bruises and cuts Annabeth had sustained. This was the biggest project
he'd worked on. He really would need a nap when he was done.

Percy worked on the wound until it was little more than the size of a bug bite, then slid his hand
down toward the bed and felt for the broken ribs, their location made obvious by the bruise the
Minotaur's enormous hand had left on Nico's skin. After a moment, he removed his hand.

"Better?"
"Yes." Nico rolled onto his back. "Thank you."

"Genuinely, my pleasure," Percy said. "I'll do the front, pop over to Jason's lickety-split, and then I call dibs right between you and Maybelle."

"Lickety-split?" Nico arched an eyebrow and smirked. "I thought I was the old fart?"

"You are," Percy said. "I take the stuff old farts say and make it cool again." He moved his hand in a circular motion over Nico's skin and let the water drop down into the wound before slowly pulling it back out. The front of Nico's shoulder was much worse than the back, since it had received the larger part of the horn. Percy wouldn't be able to mend it all the way. He worked it for as long as he could before switching to work on Nico's ribs, though he made sure to tweak Nico's nipple on his way past. Nico didn't even have the decency to react. Percy felt a bit cheated.

When he was done, Percy shoved a bit of ambrosia in Nico's mouth and dabbed nectar onto the horn wound. It was almost fully closed. One more healing session/nectar swab tonight, and Nico would be as good as new. Percy set his supplies aside and climbed over the top of Nico. His shoulder had barely hit the bed when Nico thumped his stomach.

"Nope. Get up, Perce. You're not getting out of this."

"I don't know what you're talking about, baby." Percy tried to slur his words and sound extra sleepy. "'M so tired. I need held." He snuggled toward Nico and was met with an elbow to the chest. He made a whiny noise.

"You need to apologize. You'll feel better afterward."

Nico slid off the bed and pressed his thigh against Percy's dangling foot.

"No, I won't. I hate Jason. He's the world's biggest loser."

"Knock it off. You will feel better, and you shouldn't say that kind of stuff about Jason. He believes you, you know? He actually thinks you hate him." Nico tugged on Percy's middle toe. "Besides, if you don't get up, I'm going to break your toe."

"Fuck," Percy said, sitting up. Nico wasn't an idle threat kind of guy. If he said he'd do it, he would. "What happened to hippie peace freak Nico who said I shouldn't hit people?"

"I was talking about you. I play by my own rules, not society's. You, on the other hand, thrive on societal acceptance."

"Smug, irritating bastard." Percy got off the bed and pulled on a pair of jeans that had been sitting on the floor. "I'm not putting on a shirt, I'm not going in, and you're an asshole."

"I don't care about any of that stuff," Nico said. "Apologize to him, sincerely, and I'll be happy."

Percy stepped into Nico's space. "Happy enough to let me sleep with my hands on your ass?"

Nico pretended to consider it. "Depends on how good your apology sounds."

"Let's do this." Percy wrapped his arm around Nico's waist, gave one last glance back to make sure Maybelle was completely out, and hurried next door to Jason's.

They had to knock four times and ring Jason's bell before he answered. When he came to the door, Percy was shocked — and so was Nico, it seemed — that Jason was dressed in a suit and tie. Nico
stared at the tie, and Percy noticed it had the same little cross tie pin Jason had worn at the wedding.

"Why do you look like even more of a douche than usual, Grace?" Percy tightened his arm around Nico. He felt a little silly, he and Nico half naked when Jason was so dolled up.

"Gods, Percy, can you not be a jerk?" Nico said quietly, like he didn't want Jason to hear him.

Jason didn't answer Percy. Instead, he tenderly put his fingertips close to the spot where Nico had been injured. He made a slow circle around the open wound, then trailed his fingers over Nico's shoulder, probably to feel how the exit wound was healing. After a moment, he pulled his hand away. Nico stared at him, eyes half-lidded, and Percy was so damned jealous.

"It's a lot better, Neeks." Jason said softly. His eyes flicked to Percy before focusing on Nico's face. "Thank you for helping him, Percy."

Percy decided to double down on being an asshole. "Again, why do you look even douchier than usual? Oh, and I'm sorry, you bastard, for hitting you."

Nico whispered in Percy's ear. "Enjoy sleeping with fucking freezing cold hands because they are not getting warmed by my ass. That was a terrible apology."

"Your ass is like a refrigerator," Percy said. He meant Nico's body was cold so his ass wouldn't have warmed his hands anyway, but "Your ass is like a refrigerator" probably wasn't the best way to convey his meaning. Nico stared at him for about five seconds, like he was trying to decide on the best way to murder him, before breaking out a great, barking laugh.

"Oh, gods, Percy, do you think my butt's that big?" Nico laughed some more. Even Jason laughed. Percy pretended to be mad at Nico until he couldn't stand it anymore. He pinched Nico's butt, good and hard, causing Nico to yelp.

Unabashed, Percy launched into a horrible attempt at rap.

"I like big butts and I cannot lie."

That was as far as he got before Nico slapped his hand over Percy's mouth.

"My anaconda don't want none, unless you've got the buns, hon."

"My anaconda don't want none, unless you've got the buns, hon." Jason's eyes were sparkling, and he could barely spit out the lyrics through his laughter. Letting Jason play along was so worth it to see the scandalized expression on Nico's face.

"See," Percy said. He broke back into rap. "Even white boys got to shout. Grace knows it, too."

"It's true, Nico. Best ass on the planet," Jason said.

Nico's mouth popped open in shock. He pointed at Jason and shoved Percy before saying,
"Maybelle needs me," and retreating to Percy's apartment.

Percy and Jason watched him go. Once the door to Percy's apartment slammed, they broke into uproarious laughter. Percy doubled over and leaned against Jason's stomach. He laughed until his sides hurt. When he finally straightened up, he saw Jason wiping away tears and chuckling.

"Fuck it, Percy, whatever you came over here for, that was the highlight of my day."

"I know, right? Obnoxious bastard hot-ass wants me to apologize for hitting you," Percy said. That was true, but it wasn't everything. Percy cleared his throat. "I, um, I want to apologize, too. I was wrong, Jason. I'm sorry."

Jason waved him off. "I've deserved to be hit a lot of times for the way I've treated Nico."

"Not last night, though," Percy said. "What's with the suit?"

"Job interview. Fifth graders with behavior problems at a low-performing school need a teacher."

Percy nodded. "I'd have been a lot better off if I ever had a teacher like you. Good luck, Grace."

Percy waved and headed back to his apartment. He almost had the door closed when Jason said, "Thanks, Percy."

When Percy went back to the bedroom, Nico was huffy and faking sleep. The most he'd let Percy do was curl up behind him and kiss his back. Percy thought about the encounter in the hallway and decided it was worth it.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't slept in the last thirty-six hours (sitting up with a sick family member), but I'm hoping my proofreading for this chapter wasn't too shoddy.

*White Christmas* is an American classic Christmas movie starring Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, and Rosemary Clooney. It was released in 1954.

The rap lyrics Percy and Jason mortify Nico with are from Sir Mix-a-Lot's *Baby Got Back*, from 1992. Yes, the song could be considered blatantly offensive. Or it could be considered an empowering portrayal for women who don't fit the beauty standard of white America. No political muscle is being flexed here one way or the other. Jason and Percy are just two crass guys teasing their equally crass but unaccountably prudish friend/lover. (In other words, please don't yell at me for using the lyrics.) :-(
Promises

Nico had not been a patient boy. He hadn't been a patient man. He certainly wasn't a patient god. If Jason and Percy were slow to do what he wanted, he pulled out the big guns rather quickly.

"You don't want to go inside with me and talk?" he asked.

Jason threw the football back to Percy and waited until Percy threw it to him before answering. "I'm playing catch. Can't it wait?"

"No." It could, but Nico couldn't.

"Throw the damned ball!" Percy yelled from the far end of the beach.

Nico took the ball out of Jason's hands and hurled it at Percy.

Jason's shoulders slumped. "I wanted to throw."

"And I want to go in the house."

Jason reached out at the last second and caught Percy's pass. "Later."

Nico bit back the curse on the tip of his tongue and stepped into Jason's personal space.

"Jason." His voice dropped. He walked his fingers up Jason's arm. "I'm feeling lonely."

The wind picked up on the beach, and Nico smirked. He leaned up and bit Jason's earlobe.

"That's right, Jace." Nico stepped in front of him and slid his hand up Jason's chest. His other hand slapped the football away.

"Hey," Percy said, jogging to stand a few feet away. He'd been enjoying their game of catch, but what Nico was doing promised more excitement.

When Nico heard Percy, he moved away from Jason and leaned his back against Percy's front. He made sure Jason was watching, looped his arm around Percy's head, and pulled him into a wet, sloppy kiss. Percy's arms wound around Nico. When his hands lifted Nico's shirt and Jason saw tanned hands splayed firm over a pale stomach, he darted forward and joined in.

"In the bedroom," Nico whispered between kisses.

"Can't we do it out here?" Percy asked. He dragged Nico's t-shirt over his head, and Jason latched onto one of Nico's nipples. Nico gasped and tried to push Jason away, but Percy held his hands and used them to guide Jason to the other nipple. "I like seeing your body in the sun."

Jason lifted his head. "Mhm. Percy's right. Please, Nico?"

Nico pretended to consider it. "Well, I suppose we could, but I wanted to let you do downright..." he paused for dramatic effect, "dirty things to me. Things I'd never let anyone else see me do."

Jason straightened and considered Nico, whose eyes gave away nothing. He made eye contact with Percy, whose hands had tightened so fiercely around Nico's hips that he was close to drawing blood.
An agreement passed between them and, without a word, Percy dragged Nico toward the house.

Nico hadn't expected the other two to be quite so enthusiastic, so he was caught off guard when Percy did that. His feet couldn't find purchase in the sand because Percy was moving much too fast. Jason followed behind, getting even more turned on by the way Nico was being handled by Percy.

Inside the bedroom, Percy whirled and fell on the bed, pinning Nico beneath him. Jason climbed up next to them and put his hand between their legs. Percy's hips were bucking, but they stuttered at the intimate contact from Jason. Nico made his move.

"Get up and sit on the bed against the wall, both of you."

Jason and Percy obeyed immediately. They thought they were in for a treat.

Nico crawled close to them, slow and tantalizing, and said, "I want to talk to you."

Jason slammed his head back on the wall. "Son of a bitch."

"What? I'm missing something," Percy said. He laid his hand on Jason's thigh and reached out for Nico, who curled into Percy's arm but backed away when Percy tried to kiss him.

"This dickhead tricked us into coming in here because he wants to 'talk.'" Jason made air quotes. "He's not planning to have sex with us. That was a jackass thing to do, Nico."

Nico shrugged one shoulder and smirked. "Worked."

"Yeah, but that's douchey. You should have just told me it was important. I hate it when you use your body like it's some tool." Jason folded his arms across his chest.

"Fuck you." Nico slapped Jason's thigh below Percy's hand. "I was trying to keep the gods from getting wind of the conversation. You should have come when I first asked you to. And my body can be a tool, if I have to use it that way."

"It's degrading to you."

All traces of humor had evaporated. "Asshole. Maybe if I was doing it to people I don't already fuck, but guess what? I fuck you all the fucking time. Unless you'd rather be one of the people I don't fuck. Then I won't use my body to get what I want with you."

"You're doing it again. You can't use sex to manipulate people, Nico."

"Don't tell me what I can or can't do," Nico snapped. "I get to choose what to do with my own body, and I don't need your prudey ass sitting in judgment."

"Can I still get the dirty sex thing later, once we've talked about what you want?" Percy asked. "I don't think you're degrading yourself unless you feel degraded."

"Hah," Nico said, with a sneer at Jason. "I don't, and I would love to, Percy. We'll do whatever you want."

"Gods, you're such a suck-up, Percy."

Percy opened his mouth to answer Jason, but Nico pulled him forward and into a passionate kiss. Percy twisted his hand behind his back and flipped Jason off. Jason wouldn't be proud of himself later, but in the moment, it seemed like the right thing to do. He yanked Percy's obscenely gesturing hand up to his shoulder blades, wrapped his arm around Percy's waist, and pulled the elder god onto
his lap. Percy wriggled in protest, but Jason was extremely strong.

"Hah, yourself, Nico. Now I have your boyfriend, and if you don't..." Jason stopped because he had no idea what he was doing or what he wanted.

"If I don't what, Jason? Do everything the way you think I should? You'll what? Deflower Percy?" Nico let loose with one of his harsh laughs. Jason was making him furious, but the blond's gambit was so ill-conceived it made Nico a little giddy in his superior position. "Go ahead. Percy'll get off on it for days, and I'd love to watch."

"Ugh." Jason lightly bit the spot where Percy's shoulder met his neck and fell over, bringing Percy with him.

"Can you, um, let me up now?" Percy asked. He liked being held by Jason, but he was much more interested in both what Nico had to say and the promise of dirty sex after.

Jason let go of Percy's arm but kept his own arm flung over Percy's lap. Percy sat up and gave Nico his attention. Jason rolled onto his back and appeared to ignore them both.

"I wanted to talk about what's going to happen on the solstice. We have about three weeks before it's here, and I want us to develop a game plan." Nico hated to ruin Percy's good mood, but they had to talk about what would happen. To his surprise, Percy smiled and ran his fingertips over Nico's temple.

"Let's talk, then. I've been thinking about it a lot, too, and I want us to be clear with each other so we're strong before the gods." Percy was terrified about the solstice meeting, truthfully, but he didn't want Nico to know that. "Jace, I know you're probably still mad at Nico, but can you put it aside so we can talk?"

Jason's hand in Percy's lap made a thumbs-up gesture, but he didn't sit up. Nico stuck his tongue out at Jason's profile and ignored him.

"What do you think it'll be like, when we go?" Nico didn't wait for either of his lovers to answer. "They can't kill us, so that's good, at least. Athena said Jason and I are going to be punished more severely than you, Perce. When we're in the throne room, I think we need to be clear from the beginning that any negotiation about Jason's and my punishment shouldn't have anything to do with yours. You going home needs to be our highest priority."

The smile slid off Percy's face. "I'm not going home, Nico. Don't argue. Even if the gods want to release me, Athena won't let it happen. If I don't take her deal, she'll push for me to be banned from contact with mortals, or at least physical relationships with mortals."

"But—"

"No, Nico. Why'd you get in trouble for shacking up with Apollo?"

"Gods aren't allowed to screw demigods," Jason answered. "They punished you with death, Nico. They banned Apollo from all mortal contact for gods know how long. I hate to say it, but they're not going to let Percy go back to Annabeth, even if they don't give him any other punishment."

"Maybe. Maybe there's some way we can—"

"Nico." Percy kissed his nose. "You're my home, you and Jason, if you'll have me. I love you. Please accept that I can't go back. You're making it harder for me every time you insist there's some miracle way I can be with Annabeth and Maybelle again."
Nico thought about the secret letter from Annabeth. She'd known Percy wouldn't go home. Nico had known. Agreeing to some sort of continued existence with Percy was an easy option — he'd love to spend a long time with Percy, maybe forever — but the thought of Maybelle growing up without her father was painful. Nico knew he had to let Maybelle be Annabeth's priority and Percy and Jason be his. He lowered his head.

"I'll stop. I love you, too. I'd love for you to be a major part of my life when we're done being punished." He laid his head on Percy's shoulder and watched Jason, who was watching him carefully. Jason's hand moved from Percy's lap and stroked back and forth between Nico's chest and Percy's.

Percy grabbed Jason's hand and nudged Nico off his shoulder. He held Jason's fingers to his lips and kissed them before holding them out for Nico. Nico pursed his lips and sighed, but he kissed Jason's hand.

"I don't want you to stop looking out for me, Jason," Nico said. "I want you to be less judgmental about what I do."

"I don't want you to feel judged by me. I'm opinionated and stupid sometimes, and I want what's best for you. I need to remember you're more than capable of deciding what's best for yourself." Jason palmed Nico's cheek before sliding his hand down his neck.

"It wasn't even that big a deal, what he did." Percy patted Jason's chest and leaned over his hips to rest against the wall. "Annabeth used to do that to me to get me to pay attention when she wanted to talk and I wasn't listening. It was a trick, sure, but it wasn't mean-spirited. We'd always end up getting around to the sex afterward anyway. Didn't Piper do that to you?"

"No." Jason's eyebrows furrowed as he tried to remember. Small details that had been a part of his first life grew more remote and harder to recall with each passing day. Piper had stopped writing a month before. Jason thought she'd probably joined the Peace Corps like she'd talked about. "I don't think so. She was pretty straightforward about sex versus talking."

"Did you do that to Apollo? Or did he do it to you?" Percy asked Nico.

"Uh, no. We listened to each other the first time the other partner asked." Nico didn't want this conversation to become a comparison contest between his current lovers and his former one. Life with Apollo had been smooth and easy. The sun god had been mature and kind. Nico had to remind himself that Jason and Percy, despite their godly nature, were very, very young. "Apollo was a lot more mature than all three of us. We'll get there as we get older."

"Thank you," Jason said. The hand that had gone back to Percy's lap switched and rubbed Nico's thigh. "I should have listened to you better."

"I should have made it more clear that I wanted to talk about something that couldn't wait, or," Nico threw his head back and took several loud breaths, "I could have let you finish playing catch."

Jason laughed at Nico's theatrics. "I'll listen next time, my sweetie."

"Don't call me that shit."

"You let Percy call you baby, and Apollo called you all kinds of pet names. Why not me?" Jason turned onto his side, and Percy scooted tighter into him without thinking about what he was doing. Jason smiled at the closeness and gave Nico his attention.

"The names they call me, they're not throwaways. Percy's called me 'baby' for four years. Just 'baby.'
No other cutesy names. The stuff Apollo called me, same thing. He called me a bunch of stuff at the beginning, when he was trying to seduce me and I didn't want any part of him, but by the end he was consistent. 'Lover.' 'My love.' You shoot out random, meaningless shit and expect me to tolerate it."

Nico laid on his stomach across Percy's legs and turned his head away from Jason. Warm hands fell on his back. The arrangement was soothing, except their comforter felt scratchy on his chest. He wished it away so they were sitting on the sheets instead.

"I understand, I think. Can you just..." Jason flattened his fingers in Nico's hair and threaded his way through the thick curls until he'd pulled some of them straight. Nico's hair was long. Jason let go and watched the curls bounce back into place. "I'm trying. I love you in a way that's too profound to put into words, so when I try to articulate it, I fail spectacularly. You're everything to me, Nico. You've always been my everything."

Nico blindly reached out and felt for Jason's face. He patted the spot where he found his jaw. Jason wasn't his everything. Nico had wanted that for so long, for them to have the kind of love that existed between only two people and meant forever. Jason had been constant. Nico hadn't. He loved Percy and Apollo, too. Jason may be first in his heart, but he wasn't alone. Emotion swelled Nico’s heart, both for the loss of his fantasy ‘ideal’ love and for how privileged he felt by the reality of the loves he had. After years of struggle, he was ready to fully embrace his reality. That meant accepting that he loved three men and accepting Jason, flawed and sometimes floundering, exactly as he was. Nico let out a shaky breath.

He sat up and softly kissed Percy. With one hand, he pulled Percy forward. With the other, he guided Jason to sit next to Percy. Nico sat across each of their thighs so Percy would understand that he wasn’t being excluded. Nico kept his eyes on Jason.

"I love you, Jason Grace. Listen to me," Nico ordered, because Jason had dropped his head under the intensity of his gaze. Jason raised his head and focused on Nico's eyes. Nico continued. "I'm over our past. I wanted us to be perfect together, and when we weren't, I felt disillusioned and sad. I blamed you. But now, I like how my life, the first one, turned out. I like that it was hard; it made me stronger. I like that I fell in love with Percy and Apollo and love them even now. They've made me a better person, and my life is happier because of them. Jace, I like the man you are now. You're not the perfect boy I fell in love with, and I'm alright with that. I want you, this imperfect, real, wiser you, to be in my life." Nico smiled and bumped his forehead to Jason's. "I don't need a nickname, or terms of endearment. I need you."

Jason hugged Nico as tight as he could and littered his face with kisses. Eventually, he let go of Nico with one arm and pulled Percy into the embrace, too. Nico laid his head on Jason's shoulder. Percy laid his head on Nico's shoulder. Jason scratched up and down Percy’s back and ran his fingers through Nico’s hair.

They sat that way until long after the barrier had closed them in. As the barrier tightened, it pushed Nico fully between Percy and Jason, and the young gods laid down to make themselves more comfortable.

"Thank you," Jason croaked when his voice returned to him.

In reply, Nico nuzzled his head in Jason's neck. He turned over and kissed Percy, who'd been watching Nico's and Jason's declarations of love as patiently as possible. The display had made him miss Annabeth. He didn't love her the way he loved Nico, but she had loved only him, the way Jason had loved only Nico. Watching his lovers fully reunite made Percy ponder once more all that Annabeth had given him.

Nico's cool fingers washed over Percy's temple. Percy looked up from where he'd been staring at
Nico's armpit and into his lover's kind eyes.

"Are you okay? You've been quiet."

Percy couldn't help the smile that erupted on his lips. He put his finger to Nico's lips when Nico looked like he was going to say more. "You were confessing your love. Long overdue. I wasn't gonna interrupt that. I'm so damned happy for you, Nico, my baby. If something had changed between you and me because of what you said about Jason, you would have told me, I know. I'm not jealous. I want that dirty sex part you promised, though."

Nico laughed, and Jason chuckled softly behind him. "We haven't talked about the solstice yet. After that, sex, as dirty as you want it."

"Really?" Jason lifted his head to see Percy and Nico.

"I said as dirty as Percy wants it. Not you." Nico nudged Jason with his elbow. "Percy may not be able to handle your depravity."

"I don't know what depravity is, but I bet I could handle it," Percy said.

"I'd love to watch you blush when you find out," Nico said. He caught himself thinking about it more than he should and shook the thoughts from his head. "The solstice."

"We're a united front. We push for equal, light punishments, or better yet, no further punishment," Jason said.

"Wait, we're thinking about this from the back end instead of the front," Percy said. "What are the gods going to do? How's it going to go down? Are we going to be all together or separated? Who'll decide our fates?"

"Good thinking."

"Zeus is probably the final decision maker, but he'll have to take the other gods' opinions into account. It's the only way he keeps peace among the gods," Jason said. "We have a lot of gods in our favor. I've thought about this before. The Olympian gods are the ones who matter most. We'll have Poseidon, Apollo, Demeter, and Artemis on our side. That's not a bad start."

"We'll have Athena, if I agree to her terms."

"You're not agreeing to her terms." Nico's response was swift and heated. "I'm not even talking about Annabeth right now, Percy. Maybelle needs you. There has to be a way for you to be a part of her life. Don't forfeit that automatically."

"If I don't do it, Athena's going to make your life hell, Nico. I'm not doing that to you. Maybelle will grow up great without me. The person it'll hurt is me, and I'm making peace with that."

"Percy wasn't making peace with it. The thought of losing Maybelle ate at him constantly. He'd stopped doing his mental inventories of his lovers and returned to sleeping during the night, but Maybelle was at the forefront of his mind in every quiet moment. He was consoled by reminding himself he'd done everything he could to give her the best life possible."

"I don't want you to hurt," Nico whispered. "Maybelle will feel your absence, Percy. I'm not giving
up on you being allowed to see her."

"Four of the twelve Olympians is a good start," Jason said. He didn't want the conversation to go
down the pointless road of his lovers trying to dissuade each other from a perspective they wouldn't
give up. "Dionysus might side with us. I got the feeling he actually likes you two a little."

"So, four, maybe five gods will side with us. Who else do we have to think about? Zeus and Hera
will be set on a severe punishment, at least for me and Jason. They hated me fucking their precious
mortal son." Nico turned and faced Jason's chest. He craned his neck for a peek at Jason's face. "I
don't understand why Zeus is so mad at you. I thought it was me he hated, not you. It doesn't seem
that way now."

A weight like a cannonball settled in Jason’s stomach. He had hoped never to tell Nico the real
reason they had been forced apart. "He never cared about you and me being lovers because you
weren't good enough. He cared because he thought together we'd be powerful enough to overthrow
him. Throw Percy into the mix as your other lover, and we scared the hell out of him."

"Motherfucker. That's stupid," Nico said. The idea felt twisted and wrong and made him mad. He'd
been loyal to the Olympians every time. "None of us has any interest in overthrowing the gods, do
we?"

"No. Ignored by the gods would be nice," Percy said. "I could go for that."

"Jason?" Nico asked.

Jason’s hesitation took the other gods by surprise.

"I didn't, not before I figured out that Jupiter was scared of us. He and Juno have done so many
awful things to you and me, Nico. It's kind of ironic; because of his irrational fears, my father created
a desire in me for his destruction. It wasn't there before."

Nico and Percy goggled at him.

"Oh, don't look so freaked out." Jason kissed Nico's forehead and patted Percy's cheek. "I'm not
interested in being the king of the gods. It sounds awful. They're so petty and boring. I'd much rather
be the god of retail underwear sales or something and live a quiet, peaceful life somewhere far
outside the Olympians' radar."

"Fair enough, Lord Fruit of the Loom," Percy said.

Jason pinched him. "You know what I mean. Yes, I'd love to see my dad and Juno get their
comeuppance, but it's never going to be me that does it." He hesitated again. "I'd rather have you.
Both of you."

Percy leaned forward, slow and awkward, and kissed Jason's cheekbone. His lips lingered, and
Jason breathed shakily into the space between the bed and Percy's face. By the time he lifted his lips
to meet Percy's, Percy was already moving away. Jason chuckled nervously and watched him go.

A heavy quiet settled in the room. They would need to talk about their futures together, but for now
they needed to focus on the solstice meeting.

"Aphrodite and Hephaestus might pull for us," Percy said. He cleared his throat. Jason had a greater
effect on him with every passing day. "If we play up the love angle for her, at least, and I think
Hephaestus likes us."
"Hermes. Hermes'll vote in our favor, if there's a vote." Nico had decided to follow Percy's lead and not comment about how close he and Jason had come to kissing. "There probably should be a vote, but Zeus can be irrational. There was one at our first hearing, right?"

"Sort of," Percy said. He didn't want to talk about the first hearing. "Our dads, yours and mine, were kind of pushy."

"Athena said Hades had already laid all his cards on the table or played his hand or something like that. What'd she mean?" Jason asked. "I assume she was referring to the first hearing."

"She was. He...can we not talk about this? It doesn't serve any purpose, and it makes me think about feeling Nico die. I don't like it." Percy turned Nico around and kissed him. His hands dipped under the back waistband of Nico's jeans and held on. Jason rubbed his palm up Percy's arm and tried to keep his hips still.

"Yes. This is feeling way too good, but we need to focus," Nico said, once he'd pulled his mouth away from Percy's. "That makes seven strong potential allies. We don't need Athena."

"We do," Percy said. "There's a hierarchy among the gods, and she's near the top."

Nico opened his mouth to argue, but Jason said, "Leave it, Nico."

Nico didn't want to let it go, but he did, for the time being. "Who should be our representative?"

At the same time, Nico said, "Percy," Jason said, "Nico," and Percy said, "Jason." They all laughed.

"I think it should be Percy because he has a history of getting what he wants out of the gods," Nico said.

"I said you because you're diplomatic and you were studying law." Jason completed the arc he was making up Percy's arm and moved his hand to Nico's throat. His attention for heavy topics was waning. He squeezed a little and felt Percy's hands tighten on Nico's ass.

"I think it should be you, Jason," Percy said, though his eyes had lost their focus while staring at Jason's hand. "You're the one that most needs to show you're sorry, if you're the one your dad fears. The gods like me and Nico. They need to be convinced to like you, too. Nico's good, too, though."


"This is why gods never get shit done. Fuck, we're horny bastards," Percy said. "Do you like it, what he's doing to you, Nico?"

"Mmm," Nico managed. He nodded to emphasize his agreement.

"I want to know what depravity is," Percy whispered.
"Thanks for coming, Nico," Annabeth said when she opened the door. Nico flashed her a brief smile before she touched his hand and led him into the apartment. He was glad she had answered quickly. Waiting outside their door placed him too close to Jason.

He'd been allowed back to his own apartment a month ago, after Hades and Apollo had found no evidence that anyone had heard his admission, and in that time, he'd only seen Jason once or twice. That was enough. Every time was painful.

"Hey man, 'sup?" Percy said. He was stationed on the brown wool couch with Maybelle in his arms. Nico could make out her little tufts of blond hair sticking up over Percy's arm. He hurried to the couch and sat down next to Percy, disregarding his usual couch-complaint ritual and barely glancing at his friend before turning all his attention to his little niece and basking in her sweet cuteness. Maybelle eyed Nico briefly before she fixed him with a huge smile, her green eyes lighting up.

"Geez, I don't even merit a 'hey, Perce' anymore?" Percy teased. "You'd think you gave birth to the kid."

Nico rolled his eyes. "Hi, Percy. How are you?"

Percy started to answer, but before he could, Nico cut him off and addressed Maybelle. "Your daddy's so silly. He thinks I care about how he is when my precious girl is right here? How's Uncle Nico's sweetheart?"

Maybelle and Annabeth both laughed, and Percy shoved Nico's head away from his daughter. "She pooped green today, Nico. Green. If that happens tonight, you're cleaning it up."

"She only poops once a day now, Nico. Percy's trying to scare you," Annabeth called from the kitchen. She was wearing a short dress and makeup. She almost never got so dressed up.

"You look great, Annabeth," Nico said. "Where are you going?"

"Rachel, Piper, and I are going to do a pub crawl for Rachel's birthday," Annabeth told him. "It sounds lame, but we never go out together anymore. It'll be nice to have some girl time. Thanks for keeping Percy company while he watches Maybelle."

"Sure, anytime." Nico took Maybelle from Percy's arms and propped her up on his lap. He loved Maybelle. He'd wanted kids someday, but he hadn't expected to love someone else's kid the way he did Maybelle. She was sweet and smart and had her father's beautiful eyes (though Nico would never admit out loud that it mattered to him). He would do anything for her, the same as he'd do anything for Percy.

Percy pressed Nico's shoulder and joined Annabeth in the kitchen. Talk centered around bottles and diapers, but Nico tuned them out and concentrated on making Maybelle laugh. He made her cackle in glee with a ridiculous face, crossing his eyes and making fish lips, when the doorbell rang and Piper and Rachel came in. Nico kept his eyes focused on Maybelle, but he stopped making faces.

Percy hugged Rachel tightly before she made her way over and crouched behind the couch.
"Hey, cutie pies, long time, no see," Rachel said, and Nico could feel her grinning behind him. He leaned back for her, and she kissed his cheek in an only slightly sexual way before turning her attention to Maybelle. "Come to Auntie Rachel."

Nico reluctantly handed off the baby and stood. He didn't want to see Piper, but he knew he couldn't avoid her. He turned in her direction and, as he'd expected, she was watching him. He wondered again how much she knew of what he and Jason had done. Did she know that he'd made love to her fiancé hundreds, thousands, of times? Was she aware of all the promises Jason had made? Did she know about the night Maybelle was born? Wondering didn't fix anything. Nico shoved the thoughts away.

"Hi Nico," Piper said softly. He managed a small wave.

Piper’s gaze focused on him a second more before she turned away. Nico didn't understand why she looked so sad. She'd won, after all. She had Jason. All Nico had was bitter memories. He started when he felt Percy's hand on his forearm. Percy stared at him in sympathy. Nico shook his arm free and walked over to give Annabeth a kiss on the side of the head. She leaned into him and kissed his shoulder.

"Let's head out, ladies," Annabeth said, and Nico was grateful that she could read his body language, though he couldn't help but worry about how she interpreted Percy's when he and Nico touched. She knew they weren't having sex or she wouldn't have let Nico stay this summer. The touching he and Percy did was just friendly. Very, very friendly. Nico tried to relax.

Percy walked the women to the door and planted a long kiss on Annabeth. Nico watched from the kitchen doorway. His mind drifted next door to Jason, who was probably sitting around in his dumb light jeans, eating a grilled cheese sandwich that Piper had made for him before she left. He was probably watching baseball. His glasses had probably slid too far down his nose. They never stayed up.

Nico jumped when Maybelle let out a cry close by and Percy pushed past him to get into the kitchen.

"They're gone, baby. Get your head out of Jason's apartment." Percy rummaged through the fridge for, Nico knew, a teething ring. Maybelle had been having terrible teething pains lately.

Percy was bent in front of the small white fridge, and Nico watched him rearrange food. Percy's jeans gapped low on his hips, and Nico could see his green boxers, along with a stretch of tan skin above the waistband. Maybelle was dangling precariously in Percy's arm as he moved around the contents of the fridge. The longer Nico watched, the more he worried Maybelle was uncomfortable.

"Move, Percy. I'll look for it." He nudged Percy's hip with his hand, and Percy straightened and moved out of the way. "What's this one look like?" Maybelle had made a habit of losing teething rings.

"Kinda transparent green. Round. With little nubby things..." Percy trailed off as Nico yelped triumphantly and emerged from the fridge with the teether.

"Uncle Nico to the rescue!" Nico held out the teether to Maybelle and watched as she zeroed in on it and took it from his hand. Babies grew so quickly. She hadn't been able to do that the last time he had seen her, which was maybe five days ago. Nico smiled at Maybelle and caught Percy smiling at him. He ducked his head.

"You're still a badass, Uncle Nico, don't worry," Percy chuckled, leading the way toward the couch.
"You're still a badass, too, Papa," Nico shot back, fixing the couch and shedding his shirt before settling next to Percy and bumping his shoulder.

"Do you want to talk about earlier? About seeing Piper?"

"What's to say? I hate seeing her. It makes me think of him. I'll never have him. End of story." Nico looked away and added, "And it makes me feel like a despicable human being, knowing I hurt someone as nice as Piper."

"You have me," Percy said. "He hurt her, Nico, not you."

They'd had this discussion too many times, about Jason and Piper as well as Percy and Annabeth.

"We both hurt her, Percy, even if he's the one who technically cheated, and no matter how many times you say otherwise, I know it's the truth. He didn't cheat alone. You didn't cheat alone." Off and on, Nico had denied his role in hurting Annabeth and Piper. Lately, since he'd stayed with Percy and Annabeth over the summer and spent more time with Annabeth, he'd been feeling so much more like he was every bit as much to blame as Percy and Jason, no matter how vehemently Percy swore the blame lay with him and Jason.

"You thought he loved you."

"He does love me."

"He has a shit poor way of showing it."

Nico couldn't argue with that.

Percy shifted Maybelle to one arm and stroked Nico's knee. "I don't want to fight. So let's agree to disagree and not bring them up the rest of the night. How does that sound?"

"Peachy," Nico snipped, and Percy huffed beside him before pinching the inside of his thigh.

"Fabulous, Mr. Attitude. Do you want pizza?"

"What else do you have?"

"Pizza."


"You call and I'll feed Maybelle," Percy said. "Unless you want to feed her?"

Nico pulled out his phone and ordered pizza online while Percy took Maybelle to the kitchen and strapped her into her high chair. When he was done ordering, he joined Percy at the kitchen table and watched as Maybelle attempted to down something that resembled gloppy applesauce.

"What is that?" Nico asked. "It looks disgusting."

"It is, dude," Percy said. "Rice cereal. I tried it once. Tastes like cardboard. Want some?"

Nico shook his head and pinched his mouth closed.

They spent the night playing with Maybelle and talking about law school, Percy's memoir, and Nico's disastrous weekend visit with Demeter, where he'd had to go with her to cornfields in Indiana and shuck corn, which he hadn't even known was a thing. Demeter had insisted it was important
bonding time. The pizza came, and it was tasty, Nico had to admit. Plus, watching Percy devour it like a starving man was funny, if only because of how excited his eyes got each time he took a bite. Soon enough, Maybelle fell asleep, and Percy laid her in her little co-sleeper hooked up next to his bed.

Percy and Annabeth were good parents. Nico didn't have much to judge by, at least when it came to parents of small children, but it was clear they both loved Maybelle deeply and did everything they could to meet her needs and make her happy.

"C'mon, baby," Percy said once Maybelle was settled. "Let's go watch a movie or something."

Nico had thrown his shirt back on to answer the door when the pizza was delivered, so he had to go through his couch routine again. There was no way he could miss how hungrily Percy watched him shed his shirt. And he would be a liar to say he didn't enjoy Percy's eyes on him.

"Mmm, Nico...so sexy," Percy purred. He bit his lip and reached out a hand to touch Nico's bare chest, but Nico swatted it away. Blurry lines were still lines. Percy laughed.

"Shut up and choose a movie, Perce."

The movie Percy chose was atrocious, with lots of car chases, pointless shootouts, and gratuitous sex between the "hero" and some scantily clad and poorly written blond. Nico tried not to think of Jason. Percy had cuddled into him somewhere along the way. His soft weight pressed against Nico's side, and Nico felt warm and safe. The way Percy's hand rhythmically stroked up and down Nico's thigh in the dim light had sent him drifting toward sleep. He pulled his feet up on the couch and laid his knees in Percy's lap. His head fell back.

"Sleepy baby." Percy took his hand.

"Stupid hero," Nico mumbled, linking their fingers and closing his eyes. "Watches stupid movies."

"Don't sleep with your mouth open," Percy warned. "I'm gonna drop food down there."

"No, you won't."

"I will."

"I'll choke, stupid." Nico wished Percy would shut up and let him go to sleep.

"Then I'll put something better in there," Percy murmured.

Nico opened his eyes and turned his head. Percy was already way too close, his eyes shining in the light reflected from the TV. He stroked Nico's cheek, and Nico let his eyes fall shut once more. He felt the heat of Percy's face moving closer, but he didn't move away. He was so tired of moving away.

"Nico," Percy breathed, just before their lips touched.

Nico was shocked. Sure, Percy had almost kissed him in the car the night of the Minotaur, and there'd been some other close calls, but Nico wasn't expecting it tonight. They'd been growing impossibly closer; maybe this had been inevitable.

The kiss was slow and gentle — no rush, no hurry — the way Nico had always imagined it would feel, and a fever built inside him. Percy broke the kiss, and they sat perfectly still, staring at each other, faces inches apart.
After long moments where they couldn't stop staring, Percy slipped onto Nico's lap, straddling him and burying his knees in the sofa. Nico rested his hands on Percy's thighs and watched him remove his shirt. When Percy had the shirt off, he slid his hands back to Nico's face and cupped his jaw.

"Okay, Nico? I want to kiss you more. It's so much better than I ever dreamed."

Nico swallowed and nodded.

Percy dipped his head and caught Nico's lips. He moved so softly against Nico's mouth. Nico knew Percy was exploring, experimenting. Percy's hands slid down his neck and rested on his chest. He tilted his head slightly and sucked Nico's lower lip into his mouth before letting go, tilting his head the other way, and leaning back in. The kisses continued, not growing more passionate, merely hot breath and soft lips and whispers of tongues brushing against one another. At some point, Nico moved his hands to Percy's sides, caressing heated skin.

The kisses stayed chaste enough for Nico to pretend they weren't doing anything wrong until Percy pressed a hand to the back of his head and tangled it in his hair. The next kiss was deeper, Percy's tongue fully in Nico's mouth, and Nico was being dragged under the water, caught in the undertow. His hands tightened on Percy's sides, and Percy let out a soft moan in Nico's mouth.

Nico didn't register the knock at the door or see it open. He did hear the voice say, "Hey, Percy, you shouldn't..."

Slowly, much slower than Nico would have liked, Percy removed his mouth from Nico's and turned his head. Nico didn't turn. He didn't need to see.

"Evening, Jason," Percy replied, not moving from Nico's lap.


"Get the fuck off him, you motherfucking asshole!" Jason yelled, advancing toward them.

"Shut up and back off, dickhead," Percy said lazily. "The baby's sleeping. I'll get off him if he wants me to. You're the ass that's interrupting something."

Jason was next to Percy in an instant, yanking him by the arm. Percy refused to budge.

Nico sighed. "Get up, Percy."

Percy at least had the good sense to stand quickly and move far away from Jason, who was now glowering down at Nico. The weight of the stare pressed on Nico's nerves.

"Why were you kissing him?" Jason asked him. His hand, tense and tightly fisted, dropped into Nico's field of vision.

"Why do you care?"

This wasn't Jason's business, and Nico had been so ready to give in to Percy this time. Now these two were back to acting like complete, jealous idiots. This dance they'd been doing for years now was starting to feel really old.

"Because he's a grade A asshole who's using you for a quick fuck, Nico!"

Bullshit. Whatever was happening between Nico and Percy, it wasn't quick, and it wasn't about fucking.
"Well, you're certainly the expert on that, aren't you, Jason?" Percy countered. Nico felt Jason stiffen and move away, toward Percy.

"Shut up, Percy. You don't know a damned thing about what happened between us," Jason said.

Also bullshit. Percy knew better than anyone what Jason had done to Nico. In Jason's jealousy, a grasp of the truth seemed to be eluding him. Gods, could he leave already and let Nico go back to kissing Percy? Yes, it was wrong, but Nico was past caring. Those kisses, Percy’s weight on his lap, his gentle hands, had felt so sexy and warm and safe.

"I know what I saw, Jason," Percy yelled, forgetting to keep his voice down and jabbing a finger at Jason. "I know what you did to him."

"Fuck you. You don't know shit. You have a damned hero complex and think you're so fucking much better than me."

"Oh yeah?" Percy asked, and Nico turned to see him take a step toward Jason. "You're a hypocrite, asshole. You're the one that thinks you're so much better than me! I would never use him for a quick fuck."

Jason raised his eyebrows in mockery. His face was turning red. "So you're leaving Annabeth, then? Or is she so used to seeing you two laying around groping the hell out of each other all the time that she doesn't even mind anymore?"

Okay, so not all truth was elusive to Jason. Nico's stomach turned.

He stood and walked between Jason and Percy. Jason reached for him, but he jerked his arm free. He opened the fridge and grabbed a water bottle and a slice of pizza. When he turned around, both Percy and Jason were gaping at him.

"What the hell are you doing, Nico?" Percy asked.

"If you two insist on having a pissing contest over who's fucked me over more, I might as well get a snack and make myself comfortable," Nico said as indifferently as he could. His blood was boiling, and he wasn't sure how much more he could handle. It occurred to him he couldn't handle any more when his eyes flicked to Jason's for the first time in three months and he couldn't control how much he hated his response to seeing those eyes. Gods, he loved Jason, wanted him, ached for him. Jason was looking at him with love and hurt and betrayal, and the idea that Jason would feel hurt or betrayed because Nico had kissed Percy sent him over the edge.

A chill spread from Nico’s body. He didn't stop, didn’t try to control it. Percy and Jason took a step away from him. "You want to know the worst part? This problem you have with each other doesn't have a damned thing to do with me. Neither one of you is mad because you give a fuck about my well-being. You're mad because you're two jealous babies who each want to sit at the head of a table where only the three of us can sit. Well guess what? I'm better than either of you fuckers. The head of the table is mine. I'm smarter, stronger, and more powerful, and ninety percent of the time I'm a hell of a lot more of a kind person than either of you and that's saying something, you fucking douchebags, because I am not a nice person. Now, leave me alone and work your shit out!"

Nico stormed past them toward the bedroom. At the door, he glared at them. They watched him with wide eyes and open mouths.

"I hate you both," Nico whispered, and he closed himself in Percy's bedroom.
"I hate you both."

Jason heard Nico say it. He knew Nico meant it, in that moment. But he also knew Nico didn't hate them, not really. Nico loved them. Both of them.

"Well, I guess we caught him on one of those ten percent days," Jason said after Nico had closed himself off in Percy's bedroom.

Percy snorted, and Jason turned to him and smiled. He held out his hand, and Percy gave him a fist bump. He would have preferred a handshake, but he'd take anything positive at this point.

"Have a beer with me?" Percy tilted his head toward the bedroom. "Cranky ass in there won't drink with me, even though he's probably old enough now to handle it."

"I don't drink, remember?" Jason said. "But I'll take one of those sparkling cider things Annabeth keeps for me."

Percy lifted his head from where it was buried in the fridge and stared at him. "You're the reason my fridge is clogged up with that shit?"

Jason nodded.

"Another reason to hate your guts, Jason."

Jason nodded again. Percy wasn't lacking reasons to hate him. Hell, he wasn't lacking reasons to hate himself.

Percy shuffled around in the fridge a minute more before pulling out a beer and a sparkling cider. He sat at the kitchen table.

Jason joined him. He liked the way the apartments were set up. Percy's was a mirror image of Piper's and his. The kitchens were white and orderly and had room for a table for two near the end where they opened up to the living rooms. Percy and Annabeth would probably move when Maybelle was older because the apartment wasn't designed for more than two people. Jason didn't know whether to feel happy or sad about the idea of them moving. Without Percy, he would be even further removed from Nico. It always came back to Nico, didn't it?

"Why were you kissing him? I thought you two were 'just friends.'" Jason wasn't angry anymore, just hurt and resigned. Nico could kiss whomever he wanted. Jason had ensured that. Except Nico and Percy were supposed to be completely platonic these days, at least what passed as platonic for them. As far as Jason knew, that hadn't changed.

"What makes you think I was kissing him? He could have been kissing me."

"You were on top of him. You kissed him, and he didn't stop you." Jason knew because, well, he knew.

"Fine," Percy said. "I kissed him, but he wanted it, Jason. I've never touched him in a way he didn't want."

"I know." Jason sighed. "But why were you kissing him?"
"Why do you think?"

"Percy, for Jupiter's sake, can't you answer the damned question?" Jason’s frustration was rising, but he could also hear Nico's earlier admonition in his head. His rivalry with Percy was pointless. His anger was pointless. Nico was delusional, though, to think Jason's problems with Percy were about anything other than both of them wanting Nico. "Why were you kissing him?"

There was a long stretch of silence where Percy considered Jason before he began to speak. "Because I care about him. He's sexy, and he feels perfect next to me. It's so damned easy, being with him, so natural." Percy's eyes flashed. "He doesn't ask for anything, doesn't expect anything. That's probably your fault, you selfish fuck."

"I know it's my fault, asshole," Jason grumbled. "I don't need you to tell me how I've ruined him. You think I can't see the way he expects to be hurt or left? You think I don't know that it's because of me?"

"Then why do you do it? Why not leave him alone? Why keep poking your nose in his life? You have a fiancée, Jason. She loves you."

Percy wasn't done talking, but Jason's anger had flared enough that he couldn't keep quiet. "You have a wife! Why are you kissing him when you have a fucking wife? Hypocrite."

Percy's gaze hardened, but his eyes were sad, not angry. "I love Annabeth. I do. I miss what Nico and I had, though, and sometimes it creeps back up on me. I wanted to feel him, Jason. I...care about him. He's become my best friend. I trust him, and he trusts me. I want to make him happy."

"You're not going to make him happy by kissing him and then asking him to leave, you know?"

"Well, I'll defer to your vast experience in that area," Percy snapped.

It stung. It did. Jason welcomed the sting. It had been six months since he'd last slept with Nico. Six months since he felt the deepest pleasure, followed by one hell of a lot of pain. He craved one or the other. Percy's little cuts and jabs felt like release. Jason would rather have the pleasure, but he'd take the punishment, too. He needed something to link him to Nico.

"You know I love him. Yeah, I've been awful, but I've always loved him. Fuck, Percy, I don't want to hurt him. But he and I can't be happy together. It sucks so much to have what people who don't know me think is the perfect life — hell, what I thought was the perfect life before there was Nico — and wake up every morning feeling like shit because I had something so much better and tossed it away."

Jason wasn't sure when he'd started crying. He hastily dried his eyes, not wanting Percy to think him weak. He set his hand back on the table and was surprised when Percy covered it with his own.

"Do you think he's really more powerful than us?" Percy asked as he removed his hand from Jason's. Jason was grateful for the change in topic.

"Yeah, I do."

"Me, too."

"But we're both nicer."

Percy laughed. "He's a snippy little shit."
"That he is," Jason said, smiling. "How's Maybelle, Percy? I'm sorry I don't come by to see her often enough."

"She's great, sitting up and getting ready to crawl, I swear," Percy said. The pride in his voice and his eyes was easy to recognize. Jason was happy for him. "I haven't exactly made you feel welcome to come over."

"Yeah, well, I understand your reasons." Jason grimaced. "This talk tonight, it doesn't change that, huh?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Percy agreed. "I get it, but I don't forgive you for hurting him."

"It's better if you don't, honestly. I don't deserve forgiveness."

"Nope."

Jason stood to go.

"Tell him...no, don't tell him anything." Jason's eyes clouded with tears again.

"I'll tell Annabeth to call you over to visit more often when I'm not here, so you can see the baby."

Jason nodded. "Thanks. I'd like that."

"Drink that cider shit and tell Annabeth not to get any more for you."

"I'll tell her, but she'll keep buying it."

"I know." Percy smiled.

"Bye, Perce."

"Bye, Jason."

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Percy watched Jason leave before rolling his head around on his shoulders and sitting back at the table to finish his beer. Gods, Jason and Nico were fucked. Percy had never been so grateful for his relatively stable, homey life with Annabeth, regardless of what he'd been doing with Nico when Jason burst in. He was thankful for his mom and Paul, who'd been such a good example for what a family should feel like. Nico and Jason had no idea.

Percy took a final sip, then dropped his and Jason's bottles in the recycling container under the kitchen sink. Annabeth would nag him for not rinsing out the bottles first, but he didn't care right now. He felt lazy and tired and bed sounded so much more appealing than rinsing out bottles. He made his way to his bedroom, content to sleep as much as he could before Maybelle woke.

Inside his tiny bedroom, the bedside light was on, and Nico had fallen asleep with a zonked out Maybelle on his chest. Percy smiled and spent far too long watching the easy rise and fall of his baby moving with Nico's breaths. Nico was holding her by the hips, his long fingers splayed over her diaper and his bony hands caging her safely on top of him. Maybelle's head was nestled under Nico's chin. She had drooled a little on his collarbone. Percy grabbed his phone and snapped a picture.
When the camera flashed, Nico startled and opened his eyes. He blinked up at Percy before looking down his chest at Maybelle. Percy watched as Nico stroked her back.

"Hey, divalicious, want me to take the baby?" Percy trailed his fingers through Nico's hair.

"Hi, Percy," Nico whispered. "She woke up and I got her back to sleep, but I didn't know how to put her down."

Percy removed Nico's hands from Maybelle and lifted her gently and quickly into her co-sleeper. "It's tricky, sometimes, putting her down. I'm pretty good at it now, finally."

Nico grunted, and Percy climbed over him and laid on the bed.

"Sorry about the stuff I said out there," Nico said. "I was mad and not being fair. Did you two work things out?"

"You were an asshole. But you were right about most of it. Me and Jason figure we're nicer than you, at least."

Nico chuckled and met Percy's eyes. "You're a good friend, Perce."

Percy could see that Nico wanted an answer to his question. He was waiting for Percy to think of what to say.

"We're good now, me and him."

"I've known you ten years now, Percy," Nico said, his eyes twinkling. "I know when you're full of shit."

"We're as good as we're gonna get, I think, Neeks. Be happy we didn't punch each other's faces in or create a natural disaster."

"Fair enough. I wish you two could rekindle your bromance, though I might get jealous if you did."

Percy thought that was pretty funny, considering the wall that had sprung up between himself and Jason was lean and lithe and shaped exactly like Nico di Angelo.

"Ha. If we got our bromance back you'd be even pissier than you are now. You'd be all jealous over Jason hanging out with any guy that wasn't you."

Nico shrugged. "I do get jealous. Are you saying you'd be interested in Jason?"

"Gross!" Percy scoffed, and Nico laughed again. "I'm not into guys, anyway."

Nico tsked and made a big show of lifting up the waistband of his pants and taking a long look. Percy couldn't help how his eyes wandered down Nico's bare skin as far as he could see, until soft tufts of curly black hair met the base of Nico's dick. Percy felt a flush bloom on his chest and tensed his hands on the sheet.

"You remember I'm not a weirdly flat-chested girl, right?" Nico asked, mocking. "From what I remember, you liked what's in my pants a lot. Or are you saying your attraction has faded in the last half hour?"

"Fuck off." Percy had stepped so far over the line tonight. The truth was, he was scared of what they'd been doing, even if he wasn't naïve enough these days to think that not kissing Nico's mouth made their transgressions less...cheating. "I know you're a guy, smartass. It's just...different."
"Why?" Nico asked, turning on his side to face Percy and resting his head on his hand. "And if you say something offensive right now I will beat the shit out of you."

"You mean like calling you a pissy bitch?" Percy turned on his side to face Nico, too, and he caught Nico's smirk. He tried to be serious for a minute. "It's different because I like who you are. It's not your body. It's the way I feel about you, how attached I am, how I feel when I'm with you."

"You haven't been attracted to other guys, Perce? I know I've caught you looking at girls more than once." Nico fixed him with that stare that said, "I know you," and made Percy want to climb on top of him and fuck the living hell right out of him. "Oh, and you fucking adore my body. It's not simply my sunny personality that turns you on."

"I like to look at girls, yes, but not guys, even after all the sex you and I have had. The checking people out? It's habit, nothing else. You're the one, Nico, my one and only." When Percy said it, he realized he still wished he was Nico's one and only. He hated Jason, not only because of all the shit he'd put Nico through, but still, gods, *still*, after all these years, he hated Jason because Nico loved the blond bastard more. "And yes, I worship daily at the altar of your sinful body. I have a whole shrine in the closet, with enormous pictures of my favorite parts and a life-size cast of your ass, complete with a hole for me to—"

"I'm your one and only, except for your wife," Nico said pointedly, cutting off Percy's elaborate lie that sounded like a fantasy the more he thought about it. "We can't let ourselves get swept up in each other again."

"I want you so much, Nico. It wouldn't have to be a bad thing. No one would know." Even as Percy said it, he knew none of it was true. Nico deserved more than a part-time lover. Annabeth deserved a faithful husband. She would find them out, just as she'd found them out before.

"You know that's a fantasy, right, Percy? We'd ruin your life." Nico leaned forward, like he was going to touch Percy's chest, but he pulled his hand back. "We got too carried away tonight. We can't do it again."

"I know," Percy said. "I wish we could, my beautiful, sexy baby. I want to hold you and never let go."

"I want that, too," Nico said. "I kind of love Maybelle too much to be skeevy with her daddy, though. I'm not going to be the one to hurt her."

"I find your bizarro fascination with my daughter infinitely appealing. You're the best with her, you know? She thinks you're like fucking Santa Claus."

"She doesn't even know who Santa is yet."

"Whatever. You know what I mean." Percy paused because he wanted to ask something but he wasn't sure how. He wanted to know, though. "Why'd you let me kiss you tonight, if you're so set on not being my lover?"

He trained his eyes on Nico's eyes. The black of them was so pronounced, and Percy felt so fond of him.

"I don't know why I let you." Nico hesitated. "That's not true. I do know. It's because it felt so good, Percy. I've wanted your lips for so long. It felt so comfortable and exhilarating at the same time, and I was making you happy. You were making me happy, too. It was easy and nice and so much more intimate than all the sexual stuff we play at."
"I like the way your mouth tastes." Percy should not be saying things like that. Saying it meant reliving it, which meant his desire for Nico was ramping back up. He was on dangerous ground, with Nico in his bed and the memory of Nico on his lips. Was he going to let Nico go? Or was it Annabeth? He wasn't thinking clearly. It wouldn't work. What if it could?

"I should go sleep on the couch," Nico said. "Annabeth will probably be home soon."

Nico started to crawl over Percy to get out of the bed, but Percy grabbed him by the hips and held him, knees straddling Percy's thighs, head dangling inches above Percy's.

"She won't be home for a while, Nico. Stay?"

He let his left hand break free from its hold on Nico's hip and slide across Nico's muscled body, up his stomach and chest, down over his shoulder and arm, until he played with the black and silver bracelet around his wrist.

"You have a good family, Percy," Nico breathed. "A good life. Let that be enough."

"I want to touch you, Nico," Percy said. He took a deep breath and couldn't hold back the words. "I want to protect your heart and make you mine."

"Please don't tempt me," Nico whispered, his breath warm and soft on Percy's face. "It'll only destroy our friendship and your marriage."

"It doesn't have to, baby." Percy lifted his hand from Nico's wrist and cupped his face. He stroked his thumb across Nico's lips. "I want all of you. We're three inches apart, Nico. Drop your head. Please."

Nico's eyes slipped closed, his head dropped, right before Maybelle let out a sharp cry. Nico's lips lingered an inch from Percy's. His eyes stayed closed for a moment before he opened them and gently kissed Percy's cheek.

"It's a good thing the baby has some sense." Nico rolled off Percy and stood. "I'll get her bottle for you."

Percy nodded. Nico was almost to the door before Percy sat up. "Nico?"

"Yes?" Nico turned around, and Percy studied him. He was beautiful, with his dark hair and eyes, his smooth porcelain skin, his lips so full and pink. Like a real angel.

"If it was a different life, what would you have done?"

Nico smiled.

"But could youth last, and love still breed,
Had joys no date, nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee, and be thy love."

"You should save your pretty words for your other lovers," Percy said. "They'd understand better."

Nico shook his head. "You're the only one the words apply to, Perce."
"So, in another lifetime?"

"In another lifetime."

Maybelle screeched again and sent Nico scurrying out the door. Percy flopped back on the bed and calmed his breathing before reaching for his daughter.

***

Percy woke to the sound of giggling women. Annabeth must be home, and from the sound of things, she wasn't alone. He hoped they didn't wake Nico. Percy hastily threw on his sweatpants and made his way toward the living room. When he wrenched open the door, he stopped in his tracks.

He had expected the women to be drunk, but he hadn't expected them to be this drunk. Annabeth and Piper each straddled one of Nico's thighs while Rachel crouched at his side on the folded out couch.

"He's so pretty!" Annabeth shouted in what she must have thought was a whisper. She stroked Nico's stomach and bent down to kiss his neck. Percy couldn't believe Nico could sleep through the touching; he was so jumpy when awake. He was about to make Annabeth and the others move when Annabeth's next words stopped his breath. "He and Percy, they fucked each other, you know? They would, still, if they thought I wouldn't catch them."

She giggled and went back to smoothing her hand over Nico's stomach. Piper kissed Annabeth's cheek sadly and nodded. "Jason fucks Nico every time he sees him. I mean, every time. They screwed the night Maybelle was born. And he loves him. I'd give anything if Jason loved me the way he loves Nico." She laid next to Nico, curling against his side and kissing his chest over and over. Percy wasn't sure, but he thought he heard her whisper, "What makes you so special, huh? So pretty."

"Move over, Rachel," Annabeth ordered. "I wanna lay next to him, too."

Rachel didn't answer, and, for the first time, Percy noticed she kept making the same motions over Nico's body. She started at his bellybutton, stroked up across his chest, over his shoulder, through his hair, and back down on the other side. Over and over and over. Her hands didn't stray by more than an inch, and Percy realized she was in some sort of trance, possessed by some unseen force. They were all in a trance, he understood, when he tried to move and found he couldn't.

Annabeth nudged Rachel a few times, but when Rachel didn't stop her rhythmic touch, Annabeth gave up. She went back to rubbing Nico's stomach, though now her hand dipped lower, pushed aside Nico's sweatpants, and was perilously close to touching Nico intimately. Percy couldn't even open his mouth to shout a warning. He watched helplessly as Rachel completed a few more circuits around Nico's body then bent low and kissed him passionately. As Percy had dreaded, green smoke billowed from Rachel's mouth, escaping the seam she made with Nico's lips.

Normally, when Rachel delivered a prophecy, the Oracle's voice spoke out loud, but this time, the green smoke settled across Nico's torso and formed words written on his skin in wet, shiny green ink. The writing filled his chest and stomach and continued lower, until it stopped level with where Annabeth had placed his waistband. Once the words were written, the green glow around Rachel faded, and she and Annabeth began giggling and talking as if nothing had happened, seeming
unaware they had been manhandling Nico. Piper slept nestled against him.

Percy found he could move again, and he'd almost made it to the couch when Nico's eyes shot open and he jumped, knocking Annabeth off his thigh and waking Piper.

"What the fuck!?!" Nico shouted, and the girls looked at each other before bursting out laughing.

"Ooh, he's even prettier when he's awake!" Rachel squeaked, and Annabeth and Piper nodded vigorously.

In his haste to escape, Nico hurled himself over the back of the couch. Percy would have laughed if he wasn't so terrified to find out what was written all over Nico. He reached the couch and dragged Nico to his feet.

"Ladies, you take the bed here," Percy said, pulling Nico toward the bedroom door. "I'm going to take Nico back to the bedroom."

In hindsight, that was the wrong thing to say. The women let loose a stream of catcalls and jeers that made both Percy and Nico blush. The worst was hearing his own wife yell, "He's so hot, Perrrrccccyyyy! I wanna touch him, too! It's not fair you do all the cheating!"

Percy pushed the door shut and locked it. He didn't slow down until he'd run to the bathroom and shoved a groggy and cranky Nico down on the toilet lid. He ran to Annabeth's nightstand and pulled off a notepad and pen before racing back to the bathroom. Nico had awakened enough now to be swearing in several languages, but he hadn't noticed the writing all over his torso.

"Shut up!" Percy whisper-shouted. The last thing he needed right now was for Maybelle to wake. Nico scowled and started to move from the toilet, but Percy held him at the shoulder and tried to decipher the writing. "Damn it! Damn dyslexia! I can't read it!"

"What the hell are you talking about, Percy?" Nico grumbled. "Why are you staring at me? Why were the girls all over me?"

Percy ignored Nico's questions and tried to read. It didn't make any sense. He could see the letters, but they didn't form words. Normally, he could at least read some things. He was scared right now, and that probably made it harder, but it shouldn't be this hard.

Nico ran his hands through his hair and tried to stand again. Percy dropped the notepad and clamped his hands on Nico's thighs. He leaned close to Nico's chest and squinted at the words.

"Percy, if you don't tell me what you're doing, I'm going to fucking punch you, damn it."

So much for tenderness. Percy grabbed the back of Nico's head and pulled down, so that Nico could see the writing on his body.

"Percy, I can't read it. That's the problem. I see the letters, but I can't read a damned word."

Nico started to stand again, and this time Percy let him. He stood in front of the mirror, and Percy watched his eyes travel slowly over all the green ink on his body.
"It's a mirror image," Nico said. "I can read it."

Percy jumped up from his spot on the floor and stood behind Nico. Looking in the mirror, he could read the words, just as Nico said. He scrambled back and got his notepad and pencil and rested them on Nico's back.

"Be still," he said. "I'm gonna write it down."

Nico nodded, and his eyes went back to scanning down his body. Percy wished he could read as easily as Nico could.

"'Dark son...gentle...lover...'" Percy started. "Here, bend over now, Nico, so I can use you as a table."

Nico grumbled before he turned and snatched the notepad and pencil from Percy's hands. "Let me do it. I'm not being your table."

Gods, Nico was a bossy ass. Percy rolled his eyes and made faces at Nico's reflection, but Nico didn't notice. Nico was writing words much faster than Percy was reading them, so eventually, Percy gave up and decided he'd let Nico tell him what the prophecy said. Freed from trying to read, Percy laid his chin on Nico's shoulder and watched his friend. Nico's lips moved when he read, and his brow furrowed in concentration when he wrote. Percy could feel Nico's shoulder blades moving with the motion of his hands. Without thinking about it, Percy placed his hands on Nico's hips and pulled himself closer. Nico paused in his writing for a moment but didn't say anything.

Percy went back to watching Nico's face as he alternated between writing and reading. Percy wanted to be retired, done with prophecies and fighting, but here was a prophecy staring him in the face. It had to be meant for him and Nico.

"Damn, my fingers are cramping. I can't write like this."

"Give it back, then, and I'll do it," Percy said.

"No. Shut up for a minute and let me concentrate," Nico snapped. Percy wanted to point out that he'd barely said anything, but he didn't want to risk Nico's wrath by talking so instead he stuck his tongue in Nico's ear. It was childish, even he could admit that, but it got the reaction he'd intended. Nico jerked his head away and tried to shrug Percy's head off his shoulder. Percy kept himself firmly planted, and when he wasn't dislodged after a few tries, Nico huffed and went back to reading. Percy smiled in victory.

Nico bent over abruptly to rest the notepad on the sink, and Percy stumbled backward, clinging to Nico's hips. Nico was mumbling to himself and scribbling furiously. Percy spread his hands across Nico's lower back, one hand on each side of his spine, and slowly slid them up all that white skin. Gods, Nico's skin was soft, softer than Annabeth's, even. His muscles were so firm and close to the surface. Percy could feel the striations of each band of muscle. His hands slipped slowly back down until he held Nico's hips again. He tried to ignore the pleasure that shot to his groin when Nico shifted his feet and the motion rubbed his ass against Percy's belly.

"Does your boyfriend do you like this?" Percy asked, unable to control his own mouth. "I can see why. The view's nice."

Nico jerked his head around and stared at Percy. Percy caught the faint blush on Nico's cheeks before he turned his head back and resumed writing. "Concentrate, Percy. Quit being such a perv."

Percy thrust against Nico's ass and was satisfied when Nico's head bumped the mirror. Nico
chuckled lowly, and Percy flung his head down on his back.

"I'm trying, but you're taking forever. You're being a damned prophecy hog!"

"You're not making this any easier, asshole," Nico said. "I'm almost done."

"It's not good, is it?"

"Is it ever?"

Nico straightened and compared what he'd written to what was written on him. His face grew more serious and hard-set each time his eyes shifted. Dread pooled in Percy’s stomach. It had been easy to play, to pretend nothing was wrong, when Nico was hunched over and Percy couldn't see the writing. Now it all felt real again.

"What does it say?"

"Let me get it off first. It feels creepy on my skin."

Percy couldn't imagine. Nico turned on the tap and took the yellow hand towel that had been hanging on the towel rack. He wet the towel before wiping it across his skin. Nothing happened. Nico scrubbed harder. Still nothing. He grabbed the soap dispenser and squirted soap right on his chest. He vigorously smeared the soap around and dug against his skin with the towel, but nothing happened. The words burned bright and fresh.

"Turn around and let me try," Percy said.

Nico sighed and did what Percy asked.

Percy dipped his left hand in the running water and placed his right hand on Nico's chest. He willed the water up his arm, across his chest, and down the other arm, until it slipped between his hand and Nico's chest. He concentrated, tried to make the water powerful, and deliberately moved his hand. The green writing faded some, and Percy pressed his will harder into the water, harder into Nico. He moved his hand across Nico's body and watched with satisfaction as the green slipped away.

Percy kept his focus as he erased the words. He ignored the flush on Nico's cheeks and the way his breath hitched when Percy grazed his nipples and then his hips. Percy ignored the way his own breathing stuttered when he dropped to his knees and tugged Nico's pants lower to get at the last bits of writing. He looked up at Nico's face when he was done and couldn't help thinking about how he'd felt, watching from above when Nico was on his knees in front of him, lips red and swollen and stretched around him.

He let his fingertips trace Nico's hard dick and watched his eyes go wide in shock. As soon as he broke eye contact, turning his head to watch his fingers, Nico shoved him away. Percy sat on the floor and shook his head. Nico towered over him.

"Get up, Percy. I'll tell you what the prophecy says."

***

Percy scrambled to his feet and leaned against the wall as far away from Nico as he could get in the
tiny bathroom. He had to get his head on straight. He loved Annabeth. He was married to Annabeth. Nico was his friend. That was all they were going to be. They had a prophecy to deal with.

"It said 'Dark son, gentle lover, heed this verse.'"

"Like sun the star or son the child?" Percy interrupted.

"Son the child. Can I finish, now, please?"

Percy nodded.

"Dark son, gentle lover,
Heed this verse:
Your greatest blessing
Has become your curse.

"Sons of the sea, the dead,
The bright blue sky,
The gods despise you,
They whom you'll defy.

"Golden, jealous love,
Forgive their sins.
Admit you love him,
His love you'll win.

"The earth will quiver,
The ground soak red.
With combined powers
You'll stoke their dread.

"Green eyes, constant heart,
Who has all to lose,
You can save him.
You must choose.

"'Woe is coming for
The three great sons.
What you have wrought
Cannot be undone.

"'Dark son, gentle lover,
Hear my dismay:
Both deeply love you,
But both will betray.'"

Percy smeared his hand across his face and slumped down against the wall. "I hate this shit."
Nico snorted and stepped over Percy to sit on the rim of the bathtub. "She went a little personal this time, huh?"

"What do you mean?"
"Well, she mentions you, me, and Jason. Unless you know any other sons of the sea, sky, and dead."
"No, but, well, she's usually more cryptic, don't you think? Maybe it doesn't mean what it sounds like?" Percy tried.

"What do you think it sounds like?"
"It sounds like we're in deep shit."
Nico chuckled briefly, then stood. "I need to get Jason."

"No!" Percy yelled, then peeked in the bedroom to make sure he hadn't awakened Maybelle. He tugged Nico's hand. "Don't get Jason. It's not a good idea."

"Percy, we can't not tell him," Nico said, though he didn't leave the room. "It's about him, too."

"I don't trust him," Percy said, and Nico rolled his eyes. Percy swung Nico's hand as he talked. "It said he'll betray you, baby."

"It said you'll betray me, too, Perce. That could mean anything. She could have been referencing the times he's done it before." Nico sighed and sat next to Percy on the floor. Their shoulders bumped together, and Percy didn't relinquish his hold on Nico's hand. "If we don't tell him, who do we tell? Annabeth?"
Percy looked at Nico and watched as his black eyes, eyes that were always so smart and sparkly, surveyed him critically.

"Annabeth's drunk, or do you not remember her mauling your body?" Percy asked, and he was surprised his tone was a little bitter. He wasn't mad at her or Nico. What was the problem?

"I meant when she wakes up," Nico said.

"No. We don't tell anyone. A lot of this stuff is pretty straightforward. It's about you, me, and Jason. We're assholes. The gods hate us. We make a choice we can't fix. It doesn't sound like a quest or anything. There's no directions. It sounds more like a warning. There's nothing to do, no one to tell. We wait until it comes and deal with it."

"What about the lines about the earth quivering and the ground turning red?"

"I don't know. We can both make the ground move. Maybe red is blood? Maybe we'll be in a battle and need to move the earth around?"

"It's weird. Every other stanza is personal, like addressing one of us, except that one about love. I don't understand that one," Nico said. "The other ones talk about something that'll happen."

"Here, let me see the paper."

Nico handed over the prophecy, and Percy read it through several times.

"Okay, so ignoring the parts that talk directly to one of us for now," Percy said. "It sounds like the gods hate us, and we'll defy them. Something will happen, and we'll combine our powers and 'stroke their dead.' I don't get what that means."

"'Stoke their dread,' Percy. It means that we'll make them fear us."

"Who? Who'll fear us?"

"The gods."

"Oh."

"Yes."

"Well, that'll end well," Percy said, and Nico laughed before resting his head against Percy's shoulder and closing his eyes. Percy figured Nico had to be as exhausted as he was. "Come on, let's go to bed. We'll piece together the rest later. And we won't tell anyone. Agreed?"

"I think it would be better if we told." Nico cocked an eyebrow as Percy started to protest, and Percy fell silent. "But I won't tell anyone unless we both agree."

"Fine." Percy stood and tugged Nico upright. They walked to the bedroom, and Percy watched Maybelle as she slept. He stroked her blond hair and laid his hand across her back to feel her soft baby breaths. She made little suckling sounds in her sleep.

"Percy?"

Percy took his time looking away from his daughter and toward Nico. When he finally did, he saw that Nico was watching his hand on Maybelle's back. When Nico looked back at Percy, his eyes were serious and a little sad. "In the lines from the prophecy, it says you can choose to save someone. Look, if it's me, that someone, and it would mean you giving up anything, any part of your
life? Please don't choose to save me."

Percy opened his mouth to tell Nico that was ridiculous, that he would always choose to save him, but Nico cut him off.

"Look at her, Percy, and promise me."

Percy looked at Maybelle in her little blue sleeper, her tiny hands and feet poking out at the edges. He took in her soft hair, her tiny nose, the way her eyebrows were still so faint that you could barely see them in the dim light. He would die, gladly, to protect her. Would he let Nico die, too?

Percy hesitated, then closed his eyes.

"I promise."

Chapter End Notes

So Nico and Percy finally kiss. Can you feel how conflicted and ill at ease all three guys are with the decisions they've made? And the prophecy finally arrives.

The stanza of a poem Nico quotes is from Sir Walter Ralegh's *The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd*. He couldn't have lived with Apollo all this time and not soak up a little poetry. ;-)

Something more personal that's been on my mind for the last week or so - to all of you who might think about commenting here or anywhere else but don't do it because you think no one wants to hear what you have to say: You're wrong. Your thoughts and opinions matter, and the rest of us are better off for hearing from you. I spent too long sitting in the back of the class (or in the coveted seat closest to the door), never volunteering anything, hoping no one would notice me. Tomorrow I'm going to my first ever writers' critique group, and I'm petrified. I'll have to speak. People will look at me. But I know it matters. Anyway, I just wanted to share a little of my nerves and give anyone else who may have felt or be feeling the same way a little encouragement.
Hermes

Nico, Jason, and Percy lounged on the beach and waited for their godly visitor. For much of their confinement, they'd waited in the house so that they could be proper hosts. Now, a few weeks away from the solstice, they were getting a bit lazy. After Athena's visit, it didn't seem likely they'd be visited by another major god before their confinement was over. The minor gods, they had found, weren't generally worth getting excited over.

The winter was somewhat cooler than the summer had been, but the rains had almost vanished, and the gods enjoyed spending time on the beach in the temperate weather.

"Remember the first night," Percy said, laying back on the sand and pulling Nico with him. "We were so angry and scared, and laying out here together seemed like the most awful thing in the world."

Jason laid down, too, though he rolled onto his side so he could see the other gods. "It was terrible. No instructions, no certainty. Stuck with the guy I loved when I was certain I was going to lose him to the other guy we were with."

"Yeah, me, too," Percy said.

"Now it may be time to leave and..." Nico kissed Percy's cheek and Jason's lips. The beach had come to feel less like a prison to Nico and more like a refuge.

"I want to tell you something," Jason said. Without words, he tried to impress upon Nico the seriousness of what he wanted to say. "About our future."

"I'll need to wait, Grace," said Hermes, who'd appeared behind them.

The three gods jumped up to greet their visitor. The messenger god's attire was a far cry from his normal track suit. A gray v-neck sweater and dark jeans hugged his body. The ensemble accentuated how fit and attractive he was, something none of the young gods had noticed before. He carried a single long-stemmed red rose.

"Hermes, bro, welcome back," Percy said. He and Hermes exchanged a fist bump. "What's got you all dolled up?" Percy realized what had caused Hermes to dress so attractively when he followed the line of the older god's gaze and landed on Nico. His fists clenched.

"It's good to see you, Percy. You look well." Hermes waved in Percy's direction but kept his eyes on Nico. "I was hoping we could go inside."

"Chill, little brother," Hermes said. "I can see you're starting to pull off your Incredible Hulk routine, and here's a tip I've noticed: It doesn't endear you to your lover."

Jason took a deep breath and worked to calm down. Hermes was right. Nico hated it when Jason got too overprotective and possessive.

"We're happy to receive you in our home," Nico said. He thought that if Hermes was here, it must have something to do with their upcoming meeting with the gods. He was wary of the rose, though.
"Nico." Hermes broke into a broad smile and took a few steps forward, closing the space between them. "Please accept this rose as a token of my affection."

Nico didn't want to seem ungrateful to an Olympian, so he reached out to accept the rose. When he did, Hermes's hand closed around his wrist. Slowly, without breaking eye contact, Hermes lifted Nico's hand and kissed the inside of his wrist. He thumbed the bracelet Nico had worn for five years, the one that concealed his old secrets.

Ignoring Jason's growl of protest, Hermes kept hold of Nico's wrist and gently pulled until they stood together. He wrapped his free hand around Nico's waist and tilted his head up to whisper in his ear.

"Trident, lightning bolt, sun." Hermes kissed Nico's jaw. "I'm here to help you. Bring me into your private chambers. Make it appear sexual. The gods will assume nothing different that way."

Nico had to decide what to do. Only Apollo had known what was hidden under the bracelet. He wouldn't have told Hermes without a reason. Apollo trusted Hermes, Nico remembered.

When Hermes pressed a more insistent kiss on Nico's neck, Nico closed his eyes and pretended to enjoy it.

"Mmm, more."

Nico giggled nervously and nuzzled Percy again. He felt Hermes's hands on his hips from behind.

"This is crazy, Nico," Jason said as he followed them into the house. "We can't invite—"

"A fourth person to join us," Nico finished for Jason. "Why the hell not? We've had plenty of offers. Hermes is my favorite, unless," Nico turned to Hermes, "you have a problem being with me while Percy and Jason are with me, too?"

"None at all, Nico."
Hermes kissed Nico's lips this time, and Nico walked backward into their house and toward the bedroom, letting the kiss grow more intense with every step. He wrapped both arms around Hermes and gestured for Jason and Percy to follow him. His eyes were squinted open, so he saw Jason reach out to try to stop him. He neatly maneuvered Hermes out of Jason's reach and into their bedroom.

The instant they crossed the threshold, Nico shoved Hermes away and wiped his mouth.

Hermes smirked. "It was incredibly hot while it lasted, kid. Polly has good taste."

Nico conjured two small chairs at the foot of the bed. Jason came in the room and grabbed Nico's upper arm in a way that would have dislocated the shoulder of a mortal.

"What the fuck have you done?" Jason's face was close to Nico's, and electricity zapped back and forth between them. Nico experienced little more than a pleasant buzz. Jason didn't notice the electrical show.

"Trust me, and let me go."

Jason and Nico stared at each other while they both tried to gauge what Jason would do.

To be worthy of Nico's affection, Jason knew he needed to be a better man every time. He let go of Nico's arm, rubbed his hand over the spot he'd held, and softly kissed Nico's cheek. "I trust you."


Percy jumped up, and Nico sat across from Hermes, who'd made himself comfortable in the other chair. The two remaining gods sat together on the bed.

"Nice, Nico," Hermes said. "You've done a great job being their center. You've kept them together, kept the peace, kept you all safe. The gods are pleased, on the whole."

"Thanks."

"Wait, so you're not here to sleep with Nico?" Percy asked. Jason elbowed his side.

"No, unfortunately, though I'd love to." Hermes winked at Nico and wiggled his eyebrows. "Polly's been a great friend of mine for a long time. We've gotten into and out of quite a few adventures together, and I'm pretty damned loyal to the guy. He asked me to give Nico help and refrain from putting the moves on him for as long as I could. When Polly's 3,000 years away from you are up, kid, seriously, the three of us could have mind-blowing times together. Just saying."

"Thanks, but I already have lovers that make me happy." Nico put his chin on his hand and tried to keep calm. The charade that had gotten them to the bedroom had made him uncomfortable, especially considering the fight he and Jason had the previous week about that sort of thing. He'd done what needed to be done, though.

"So I predicted, kid." Hermes smiled, but he wasn't being snarky or salacious. He was sincere. "I'm glad you figured your shit out, all three of you."

"You're here to help us?" Jason was suspicious, but he was happy Hermes and Nico had stopped making out, at least.

"Yeah, for Apollo. He wishes he could help you directly, Nico."

"Please thank him for me. Tell him I miss him."
Hermes cuffed Nico's knee. "Sure, kid. Now, I want to talk to you about the solstice."


"Here's what I'm thinking, and this is only my best guess, no guarantees or anything, got it?"

As one, the young gods nodded their heads.

"Daddy-o's still pretty hot under the collar about Nico and Polly fucking right under his nose, but that's more on Apollo than you. He's pissed about the whole 'saving human lives' crap, but that's really a bit more Poseidon's shit than his—"

Percy interrupted Hermes with a grumble that sounded like "motherfucker."

Hermes raised his eyebrows in surprise and continued. "Anyway, what Pops is most upset about is the idea that you three are going to overthrow him."

"We wouldn't ever do that," Nico said.

"Yeah, no sweat. The rest of us Olympians, except probably Hera, we know it's just Dad's obsession with being top dog. Did you know he tricked Athena's mom into turning into a fly and ate her because she was prophesied to have a son who would overthrow him? 'Phaestus had to hack Dad's head open with an ax to get Metis and Athena out."

Percy and Jason wrinkled their noses and shook their heads.

"Yeah. You got off lucky, if you look at it like that, Grace." Hermes nudged Jason's foot with his expensive leather shoe. "You didn't get raped or hacked up or swallowed, so you came out pretty good." Hermes covered Nico's knee. "Not that the stuff that Hera did to you wasn't sick and twisted shit. That woman's a psycho."

Nico removed Hermes's hand from his knee. "I'm fine. Continue, please. Zeus is worried we'll overthrow him, which we knew, but all the other Olympians, except Hera, think it's a crock. What does that mean for us?"

"What it means is that Dad and Hera will want to punish you heavily. I mean you, personally, Nico. In addition to the Polly shit, they think Jason lacks the brains and connections to organize a coup without you. Hera also hasn't forgiven you for the stalking, which was a colossally stupid thing to do, by the way."

"I'm aware of my stupidity," Nico said. "What about Jason and Percy?"

"They don't care about Percy. He's home free." Hermes flashed his bright smile in Percy's direction and noticed the "See, I told you" look Nico was giving Poseidon's son. "Jason's tricky. Dad doesn't like you, blondie, but he doesn't like any of his kids except Athena and Artie. Don't take it personally. Hera actually likes you, but she likes her power more. Megalomaniacs. He'll probably push for a mid-range punishment for you."

"What do you think the punishments will be? If we're confined here..." Jason trailed off. He knew the continuation of their imprisonment here was unlikely to happen.

"It won't be that, Grace. You're all too happy here. He might stick Nico here alone and ban him from any contact with gods or mortals, but that doesn't seem likely. If he does that, he'd severely anger your father, Nico, which he doesn't want, and you'd stew here and become a powerful, dangerous god intent on revenge. It'll be something humane, I think."
"Like what?" Percy asked.

"Well, gods regard time differently than mortals do. The twenty-three years you were alive, Percy, were a long time to you, right? To gods, it's like a few days. As you've no doubt observed, we feel the passing of each day in the same way, Dionysus tells me, as mortals do, but we've been alive one hell of a long time. That makes those years feel relatively shorter. Those hundred years Dionysus got at the camp? That was a pretty light punishment."

"Shit." Nico ran his hands through his hair. "I'm looking at several hundred years of what?"

"Probably confinement. He'll more than likely want to ban you from your family. He'll push to ban you from your boyfriends, too. I'm sorry."

Nico struggled to breathe. He'd been expecting something like this, but it was painful to hear it confirmed by a knowledgeable source.

"Breathe, Nico," Jason said. "We're not letting that happen."

"He's right. Don't get too discouraged yet, gorgeous," Hermes said. "The other gods do get a say in what happens. Polly, Artie, Demeter, and I, we're in your corner. I think we'll have 'Phaestus, too. Percy, I heard what Athena offered you. What are you going to do?"

"I'm taking her offer." Percy slid off the bed and sat on Nico's feet. "I wouldn't have been able to go home to Annabeth anyway, not to live as a couple, and I have no idea how to touch humans. I'm terrified I'd hurt Maybelle if I touched her. And I will not let Nico be hurt when it's in my power to stop it."

"Maybelle needs you, Percy. You can't do this. Tell him, Hermes." Nico pinched Percy's shoulder and directed his attention at Hermes. "He could learn how to touch mortals without hurting them. He doesn't have to be away from his daughter."

"Look, kids, this sounds like a long-running spat between you two, and I don't want any part of it." Hermes fiddled with his fingers. He normally held his staff in this hand, but George and Martha had requested a day off. They'd asked him to say hello to Percy. "The snakes say 'hey,' Percy. And yeah, Nico's right, you could learn to touch your kid safely. I think they'll let you go home, as long as you don't sleep with Annabeth."

"See, that ends the discussion," Nico said.

Percy stood up and walked to the other side of the room because he was afraid he'd punch Nico.

"It doesn't end the discussion, dickhead."

"What's likely to happen if Percy takes the deal or if he doesn't?" Jason asked. He needed Nico and Percy to take their emotions out of play. Doing so himself was hard, though. He wanted Percy to take the deal.

Nico sneered at Percy, and Percy turned around to face the wall.

"Mature. You should let your many potential suitors see this side of you, Nico. It's not nearly as attractive," Hermes said.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'll quit being rude," Nico said.

"I don't care. I'd still want to get to know you better. It might scare off some weaker competitors,
though, the ones who don't like challenges." Hermes leaned forward and licked his lips. "I like challenges."

"I like Jason and Percy. I love them, actually." Nico didn't want to get sidetracked. "Can you talk to us about what Jason asked? How Athena's stance will affect what happens?"

"Well, understand, you can't count on Uncle P. All he cares about is getting Percy off the hook. Once Percy's in the clear, it's not like he'll push for a heavy sentence for you two, but his dog's not in the fight anymore. Athena, she's probably the most important Olympian next to Zeus, Hera, and Uncle P. What she says will have tremendous impact." Hermes conjured a gyro and took a bite. "If Percy doesn't take her offer, she'll try some other way to make him stay away from Annabeth and the baby. And she will work her pretty ass off to make your life hell, Nico. If Percy does take the offer, she'll leave him alone with a simple official ban on him being a part of Annabeth's and Maybelle's lives, and she will work extremely hard to help you and Jason. With her help, Jason's looking at, I don't know, fifty years, tops, maybe sixty or seventy for you."

"My sisters...They'll be old women by the time I could see them again. At best."

"I'm sorry, Nico."

Jason and Percy hurried to Nico's side. Each took up residence on an arm of Nico's chair until Jason turned the chair into a small sofa, just enough to fit wedged between the bed and the wall. Nico took their hands.

"Where will we be confined?" Jason asked.

"Glad you asked, blondie." Hermes licked tzatziki off his fingers. "This is the good news part of the program. You'll probably be put on house arrest, so to speak. You'll go to work for a boss every day except weekends, spend seven or eight hours working, and then be sent home. Your boss won't just be the god you'll work for, they'll be the one who vouches to oversee your punishment. Nico and Percy are easy. Each of their daddies has been chomping at the bit to add them to the payroll. Hades is probably about to pee himself with excitement. You, Grace, on the other hand..."

"My dad isn't going to vouch for me. That's okay. I don't want to have to follow his orders." The thought of spending eternity carrying out his dad's sick schemes and being beholden to him made Jason ill.

"Smart. Also, Hera won't take you because she knows you're too angry with her. Uncle P can't, because it would upset the balance of power, adding a second new god to his realm." Hermes finished off the gyro. "Damn, gyros are good. I'll have to be someone under your dad's command who steps up to the plate. Athena isn't interested. Artie doesn't do boys. Lucky for you, next god down the food chain is yours truly."

"You're going to take Jason?" Nico asked. "What about Auntie?"

Hermes waved his hand in dismissal. "Auntie's too much of a shrew. It gets her moved down the pecking order. I'm a terrific suck-up, which has pushed me ahead of her and Phaes. Aphrodite's too big a flake, and she gets on Hera's nerves. Ares is a serious fuck-up. Dionysus and Polly are in the shithouse. I'm enjoying a pretty sweet deal these days, and you, Grace, get to benefit from it. I already have a job lined up for you and everything."

"Thank you." Jason wasn't sure what else to say. "What's the job?"

"Can't tell you yet. Wanna wait to see if the deal gets done. It's good, I promise."
"Godly promises don't mean shit," Percy said. "What's the catch, dude? I've known you a long time now, and you don't do shit out of the goodness of your heart."

Jason forgot for a moment that they were gods and thought Percy was about to be annihilated. Hermes gave a huge belly laugh.

"Gods, Percy, you're the best. You're right. Godly promises don't mean shit, and I'm always working an angle. This time, though, the angle's not a bad one. I care about Polly. Polly loves Nico and asked me to help him in any way I can. Nico loves you two bozos, and you being well cared for would go a long way for his peace of mind. The job I have in mind is to replace a worker who's been unhappy and poorly suited to the job. It'd help me out, too."

"Thank you," Nico said. "I really do appreciate it."

Hermes winked at him.

"Any questions?"

"Will we be able to talk at all at the meeting?" Nico asked.

"Yeah, you should be able to, but I'd recommend thinking extremely carefully before you do. No offense to my man Percy, but it shouldn't be him that talks."

The young gods nodded.

"You said we'd be able to return home each day after we've done our work," Jason said. "Where will home be?"

"That's up to your godly supervisor."

Jason nodded. "If I get you, will I get any say in where that is?"

"Probably. No guarantees."

"Fair enough." Jason held out his hand. "Thank you for all your help, Hermes, both now and at the beginning of our confinement. I'm sorry we were too scared then to react positively to the help you were trying to give us."

"No worries." Hermes stood. "I should go. We've had enough time for a good old-fashioned orgy, I think."

The younger gods got up and, like Jason had done, Percy and Nico offered Hermes their hand. Hermes shook with Percy but once again brushed his lips over Nico's wrist.

In the time it took for Nico to blush, Hermes was gone.
Chapter Summary

"We have to hurry. Reach out with your powers. Feel it."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nico startled and sat up when Apollo woke him. For a horrible moment, he worried he'd overslept and would be late to his first class of the day. When his brain unfogged and his eyes cleared, he realized it was dark out, far too early for him to be late.

He nuzzled into Apollo's neck and made an embarrassing snorting noise.

"It's too early. Can't you make the sun rise later, so we can have decent mornings?"

Apollo’s silent chuckle reverberated through Nico's chest.

"Would that I could, lover, although, knowing you, you would continue to sleep past sunrise."

That was true, Nico had to concede. He flopped backward on the bed and pulled Apollo down with him. Apollo flipped them over and wrapped his arms around Nico's torso. When Nico dropped his head, Apollo kissed him slow and deep, like he wanted the kiss to go on forever and simultaneously suck the life out of Nico all at once. Nico didn't mind. The kiss made him feel both powerful and powerless.

"I hate to say it, but I don't think we have time for sex before you have to go," Nico said when he ended the kiss.

Apollo smiled and brushed Nico's hair out of his eyes.

"It is no matter. I was hoping you would sit with me until I need to leave." His smile was warm and genuine, but it also seemed sad.

A nervous tingle shot up Nico’s spine. "Is something wrong?"

"Can a god not wish to spend a few moments with the creature he has loved above all others?" Apollo's tone was light, and Nico was sleepy. The words went straight to the part of his brain that controlled his ego.

"Well, I was going to go back to sleep and create this dream fantasy of what we can do later, but when you put it that way..." Nico rolled off Apollo and dragged on his boxers.

"Come into the living room with me, lover," Apollo said. He took Nico's hand and led him through their darkened home. Halfway down the hallway, he waved his hand, and Nico's burning need to pee vanished. That would never feel normal.

"Thanks."
Apollo didn't answer. He brought Nico to their couch. Nico started to sit, but Apollo held his waist, sat on the couch himself, and tugged Nico into his lap. Sitting on Apollo's lap like a small child made Nico squirm a bit, but soon he gave in to the warmth and comfort Apollo provided. He rested his head on Apollo's and wrapped his arms around the god's neck. At first, Apollo seemed content to sit silently and hold Nico around the waist, but soon enough his hands were moving, stroking up and down Nico's chest and arm. After a few minutes, he paused when he reached Nico's wrist and fingered the bracelet he'd given Nico such a long time ago. The piece remained as unblemished as it had been the day it appeared on Nico's wrist.

The lights came on, and Nico rolled his eyes at Apollo's godly theatrics. Couldn't he walk to the wall and flip a switch like a normal person?

Ignoring the eye roll, Apollo moved the bracelet so he could examine Nico's wrist. Nico held his breath.

"The trident is a nice addition." Apollo brushed his index finger over the tattoo. "I appreciate you not asking me to obtain some of Percy's blood in order to create it."

"Rachel, she took me to a tattoo parlor once—"

Apollo beamed at him. "Remember who sent Rachel to you that day? I have always known, Nico. There is no need to worry."

"Right. I forgot." Nico took a deep breath. "I knew you wouldn't be mad, but, well, I should have gone back to get one for you by now. Needles make me nervous."

"They make you faint, if I remember correctly," Apollo said. His eyes held the slightest hint of teasing before they grew serious. "However, daggers, it seems, do not. What if I offered you the opportunity to exchange our blood, the way I gave you some of Jason's blood?"

Would Apollo do that? How would that work, godly blood in a mortal? Of course, Nico was part god, so — how would that work? Nico laughed at himself when he realized Apollo was much more likely to have the answers to these sorts of questions than he was.

"How? Would that work? It wouldn't mess us up, would it?"

"It would not 'mess us up,'" Apollo made air quotes, which looked ridiculous coming from him. "You already have quite a bit of godly blood, Nico. Obtaining a small amount from a second deity would not harm you. You would become slightly more powerful, but your powers have already increased due to the manipulations of your father, Demeter, and myself."

"Wait." Nico made a time-out motion with his hands. He inwardly cringed at his dorky side. "I knew you and my dad increased my powers when you took them away and returned them, but Demeter? How?"

"I did increase your powers when I removed and returned them," Apollo said, confirming what Nico had suspected. "However, I also increased your powers through my healing touch—"

"That happens to anyone you heal?"

"To the extent I used those powers on you, yes. I have never imparted so much of myself onto someone else before. The length of our sexual relationship has also increased your power. This transfer of power is the main reason gods are not allowed to take a demigod lover. Pure humans do not retain any powers of their lover, but demigods do. Do you remember the day of your graduation when I told you that you were glowing?"
Nico nodded. This was fascinating. He'd learned a lot about the ways of the gods from Apollo, but
never before had they discussed gods being able to impart powers.

"What I told you was true, but the glow was more than happiness or a blessing from your father. It
was a manifestation of my power shining out from you. If you concentrate, you can recreate the glow
now."

There was a pause, and Nico realized Apollo wanted him to try. The notion was silly, but he'd give it
a try to humor Apollo. He closed his eyes and concentrated. _Light up like a Christmas tree, di
Angelo._ He was chuckling at his own goofiness when Apollo said, "Open your eyes, lover."

Nico opened his eyes and tried to jump away from his own body, which was glowing faintly in the
newly returned darkness.

"Shit!"

Apollo laughed. "Indeed. I hope you do not mind that I turned the lights off to highlight the effect."

Nico stared at himself in wonder and watched as the glow slowly faded. "I looked like a lightning
bug! Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"It did not matter. Now, Demeter."

Nico followed the change in topic like a puppy would its owner.

"Demeter interfered with your development by all the 'nutrition' she gave you. She is, as you are now
aware, extremely fond of you, and when your physical development did not seem to be keeping pace
with the development of your powers or your peers, she took matters into her own hands. All the
food she made you eat during your stays with her in the Underworld or on the farms, they were
godly meals designed to help you reach your full potential, the place to which you would have
ascended had you not suffered such severe torture in the forms of asphyxiation, starvation, and
heartbreak."

This was a lot for Nico to swallow. He shoved down the panic that surfaced when he thought about
the horrors he'd endured and focused on the new information Apollo had given him.

"So the only reason I'm as powerful as I am is because you three pushed me to be? It wasn't ever me
at all?" What a horrible revelation! Nico’s stomach churned, and he let go of Apollo’s neck to clutch
at his sides.

"No! No, not at all!" Apollo said, and Nico had to remind himself that Apollo didn't lie. If Apollo
told him he didn't have the gods to thank for his degree of power, he needed to believe him. "You
were always going to be the most powerful of the three great sons."

Nico's head jerked up from where he'd been contemplating the pattern on his boxers. Of course
Apollo knew about the horrible fucking prophecy. He was the god of it, after all. Nico had never
brought it up to him because he knew Apollo couldn't tell him more and it would only make them
both sad. All the same, it was strange to hear him use those words. Apollo pulled Nico's head down
to his own and kissed him forcefully. When he let go, he resumed speaking as though there had been
no interruption.

"You were always going to be the most powerful. Always, even if none of us interfered and you
suffered through every hardship you did. Your power is great and terrible and entirely your own.
You were always going to be stunningly beautiful, smart, compassionate. We did not change the
essence of you, Nico. We enhanced what was already there. You are perhaps an inch or two taller.
than you would have been. Your hair may be slightly shinier and your physique a few pounds heavier."

Nico started to interrupt because he didn't care about his appearance. He cared about his powers. Apollo raised a hand to silence him.

"You were always going to be more powerful than Percy and Jason, who are far more powerful than any other demigods on the planet. Your sister and Leo Valdez would come next, in case you are curious. Thalia Grace does not count. She let her fear hold her back from reaching her full potential. At any rate, Percy's and Jason's powers are secondary to yours in greater degree than they would have been, but they always would have been secondary. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Good. It is important that you do not doubt your capabilities. Percy was always going to be the strongest swordsman, as long as he did not get lazy; Jason was always going to be the most physically imposing; you were always going to be the most powerful."

"Okay. I get it."

Apollo looked out their wall of windows toward the Empire State Building. "My time draws short. Moving on. I wish to mix our blood. I will impart a bit of my blood into your body and take a bit of your blood into my own."

"Why? I mean, I'm all for me having a bit of your blood, especially if it'll leave your mark on me, but why would you want my blood? Can it even mix with yours?"

"I want your blood because we will not always be together, and yet that is my strongest desire." Apollo laid his head on Nico's shoulder. His hands tensed slightly. "If I take a bit of your blood, I will be permanently marked with a reminder of you, just as you are permanently marked with a reminder of Jason, and, to a lesser extent, Percy."

"What do you mean by 'a lesser extent'? Is it because I don't have Percy's blood? Which makes sense, but...fuck, Apollo! Did I get some of Jason's power when I got his blood?"

Nico had not wanted that. He'd been desperate to have Jason with him, to not lose him forever, and he hadn't been thinking clearly, not that he regretted that little lightning bolt on his wrist. The idea that Jason's blood existed in his body buoyed him, even during the times, like now, that it made him sad, too. Apollo's cheeks colored, and Nico knew his guess was right.

"You did not weaken Jason's powers in the slightest by taking his blood. I would not have allowed that. However, you did gain some small control over Jason's elements. When he accidentally shocked you at Leo's home, Jason was heavily channeling his powers through his anger. The electrical discharge would have killed any other demigod. His blood in your veins, his power, was the reason for your survival that day."

"I still felt awfully shitty."

Apollo smiled and bumped Nico's chest with his forehead. "Shitty is not death, love." He withdrew Nico's dagger from the end table, which was where all reputable demigods kept their daggers. "May I?"

Nico held out his wrist, but Apollo dropped the dagger into his own wrist first. Golden ichor spilled out and dripped on Nico's legs. Apollo gently took Nico's wrist and met his eyes. Nico nodded. The point of the dagger jabbed him, and Nico hissed in pain.
Apollo pressed their wrists together, lining up the spots where their skin had been pierced. Nico could feel the blood changing bodies, his blood leaving, being replaced by Apollo's. The pain was blindingly sharp, more intense than he remembered it being with Jason's blood. He was glad he was sitting down. There was a strong surge, like a spike entering his wrist, and the pain subsided. Apollo removed his arm and worked his thumb over Nico's wrist until nothing was left but a fiery gold sun.

"Try your healing skills on my wrist."

Nico gawked at Apollo. Surely he wasn't serious? Even if a bit of healing was one of Nico's powers now, he would never use it. There was no need. "I can't. I'll end up hurting you worse or something."

"Practice, love. It is a useful skill."

"I don't know what to do."

"Place your thumb, or any body part, on the wound. Sing to me of your belief in me."

"You know I can't sing."

Apollo waved his other hand dismissively. "Neither the words nor the tune are important. Try."

Nico felt like an idiot, but he rubbed his thumb over Apollo's wound and sang, "Oh, Apollo, I believe in you. Especially because I'm sitting on your lap while I'm singing this terrible song."

Nico lifted his hand off to make sarcastic jazz hands but stopped before he got his hands in the air. It had worked. The wound was closed, and Apollo had a small red skull on his wrist.

"Oh my gods, I can't believe I did it!"

Apollo kissed his sternum. "Perfect, lover. It will turn black as it ages, just as Jason's mark turned blue with time. Now, promise me you will practice on any wounds you may receive."

"I...yes, of course."

"Now, a bracelet to cover my wrist, I think." Apollo snapped his fingers, and he had a bracelet to match Nico's. Nico glanced at the three symbols on his wrist — a trident and sun on either side of a lightning bolt. From a small distance, the trio appeared to be part of one design, and in a way, they were. Nico slipped the bracelet back over his wrist, concealing the marks, and promised himself he'd spend one hell of a lot of time gazing at them tonight while he waited for Apollo to get home.

Apollo gently nudged Nico out of his lap and stood. "I must go, Nico. I love you."

Something stirred in Nico when he met Apollo's eyes, and it wasn't the usual longing for Jason. Even though he'd told Apollo he loved him, and he did, in a way, saying the words felt awkward, so he usually refrained. This time, he found he wanted to say them.

"I love you, too."

Apollo kissed his lips one last time and disappeared.
Nico fell back to sleep after Apollo left. When he woke again, five minutes before his watch would begin to beep, the first thing he did was press his thumb into his arm until he'd made a nice bruise. He placed his hand over the bruise, sang something completely mortifying ("Apollo is an amazing god and makes me great hot chocolate."), and removed his hand. The bruise had vanished. So cool! Someday, he was going to call Will and show off.

The beeping started. Nico silenced it and dragged himself out of bed. His classes today didn't start until one, so the beeping was to remind him to eat lunch. When he got to the kitchen, he saw that Apollo had sent a lunch for him — a chef's salad, Nico's favorite. There was also a glass of water, a glass of milk, and a Filet-o-Fish. Basically, it was Nico's dream meal. Nico took the platter and sat at the table. He spent fifteen extremely happy minutes eating and reading through two class vocabulary lists.

When he finished the salad and downed the last of his milk, Nico washed his dishes, brushed his teeth, took a shower, and got dressed, the same as he did every day. He'd made the bed and re-packed his backpack when he felt the first compressional wave rolling off the ocean floor. He didn't have to reach, the sensation was so powerful. Wave after wave was coming now, building and growing. This was the end. *His* end.

He dropped his backpack, strapped on his dagger, made sure his sword was secure, and traveled to Percy's bedside.

Maybelle and Percy were asleep. Nico figured Annabeth was at work. In one swift motion, he covered Percy's mouth and restrained his arms.

"Percy!" he whispered. His voice sounded scraggly from disuse.

Percy's eyes jolted open in terror, but Nico held him still and quiet until Percy focused on his face. Nico wouldn't wake Maybelle. He could give her that, at least. He slowly let go of her father's body and straightened.

"What the motherfucking hell is wrong with you, Nico?" Percy whispered way louder than Nico had done. "Since when does waking me up require gagging and restraint? Although, now that I think about it, we've done gagged and restrained before and it was so fucking heavenly, baby."

Nico cupped Percy's cheek. He was frantic, but the surge of love he felt for Percy was so strong. He didn't want to scare him. He had no choice.

"There's an earthquake in the Pacific Northwest, a big one. Earthquake, tsunami, unprecedented devastation. We have to go."

Percy pulled back and glanced at Maybelle. "I can't leave. Annabeth's at work. No one's here for Maybelle. This is someone else's problem, Nico."

Nico wished it was.

"Piper will watch Maybelle, Perce. She'll be okay. This one's our problem, yours, mine, and Jason's. We have to hurry. Reach out with your powers. Feel it."

Percy's eyes widened, absolute horror overtaking his handsome features, and then narrowed. He shook his head. "You're worried about your sisters. This doesn't have anything to do with us."

Nico knew Percy was grasping at straws, anything not to have to risk their necks again. He understood. He didn't want this to be their burden, but there was no way around it. They could save so many lives, only them. Apollo had known. It was why he'd awakened Nico. Gods. This was the
"This is ours, Percy. You have to hold back the water. I can build sea walls. Jason can save lives. This is ours. I'm certain."

"I'm not going, Nico. I don't want any more of this shit. You said it yourself; I have a good life. Let me live it."

Percy sat on the bed and crossed his legs. He looked like he was trying to cement himself to the bed. They were running out of time.

"I love you, Percy." Nico bent and kissed Percy's forehead. He turned and walked into the living room.

He'd gotten halfway to the door when there was a great clanging behind him and Maybelle started to cry.

"Fuck!" Percy poked his head out of the bedroom. "Pick up Maybelle while I get my shoes on, damn it."

Nico ran back and held Maybelle. He tried to soothe her crying, but he was so scared that she cried harder. Percy flew around the room getting dressed. As soon as he'd thrown on his shoes, he and Nico hurried out of the apartment and next door to Jason's. Percy pounded on the door. Piper answered, confused and wary.

Percy took Maybelle from Nico and held her close.

"Will you watch Maybelle?" Percy asked, his voice raw and cracked, like he knew he might not see her again. For a moment, Nico had second thoughts about pushing Percy to do this.

"I can't," Piper said. She was wearing sweatpants and one of Jason's t-shirts. It swallowed her. "Jason's home sick today and—"

At those words, Nico pushed past Piper and found Jason in his underwear, sitting on the couch and eating a sandwich. Jason jumped up when he saw Nico and stared at him with wide, uncomprehending eyes. His eyes were a bit bleary, but nothing in his face or body made him appear deathly ill.

"Get dressed. We have to go."

At those words, Nico pushed past Piper and found Jason in his underwear, sitting on the couch and eating a sandwich. Jason jumped up when he saw Nico and stared at him with wide, uncomprehending eyes. His eyes were a bit bleary, but nothing in his face or body made him appear deathly ill.

"Get dressed. We have to go." Nico was having trouble being coherent. He needed to convince Jason and Percy, not order them around. To his surprise, though, Jason nodded and jogged to his bedroom. Nico went back to Percy, who was watching Piper and Maybelle walk into his apartment. There were tears in his eyes.

As soon as Percy saw Nico, he pinned him to the wall and gripped his jaw.

"I need you to know this. I am so in love with you. If we come back from this..." Percy pressed himself into Nico. His hand tightened on Nico's face. There was so much they both needed to say. Percy shook his head and fresh tears sprang loose. "I love you."

Nico started to say, "I love you, too," but Percy cut him off, crashing their lips together and kissing him hard enough that Nico was reminded of Jason – only momentarily, though, because this was all Percy, power and passion and recklessness and the years of love they'd built between them. Nico wrapped his arms around Percy and kissed back with every ounce of his energy. Percy slipped his knee between Nico's legs and shoved him harder into the wall.
A door slammed, and Percy backed up, nipping one more time at Nico's lips before separating completely and swiping his hands across his eyes. Jason stood to Nico's left, and Nico expected anger, hardness, the demons that had plagued Jason for a long time, but there was only a horrible, empty sadness in his eyes.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

Nico took a hand from each man and pulled them through the shadows toward the center of the devastation.

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Nico expected to be let out of the shadows in San Francisco. He'd heard nightmare scenarios about how the "Big One" would come and San Francisco would fall right into the ocean. He didn't expect to be spit out in a forested area at the northern seaward tip of Oregon. The shaking had started. It was worse than anything Nico had imagined he'd feel. He held Jason's and Percy's hands and felt through his boots and his gut how much worse this was than any earthquake that had ever hit the West Coast. They dropped to their knees, unable to stand. The ground visibly moved. Five seconds passed, where Nico's mind had gone blank and all he could manage to wrap his head around was the certainty that every person in this area was going to die, before Percy wheeled in his hands and looked at him with hard determination.

"Puget Sound, Nico. Take me."

Nico closed his eyes, and they re-emerged at the mouth of Puget Sound. The glimmering city of Seattle stretched out to their south and east. The rumbling was terrible here, too. Underneath their feet, the land moved like water. The intensity was too much. They couldn't stay. Nico pulled them through the shadows again. They came out on a low plateau on one of the mountains in the Cascades. The rumbling wasn't as strong.

"Can you reach the water from here?" Nico asked.

Percy closed his eyes and concentrated. Precious seconds ticked by while he pooled his powers. Finally he opened his eyes.

"Yeah. Yeah, I've got it. I've got time, Nico, before the tsunami hits. I can—"

"Stay," Jason said, and Nico turned to him in surprise. "The tsunami causes the most damage in these earthquakes. You need to be in place well before it arrives."

Percy didn't argue. Nico hugged him and released his hand. He kept his eyes trained on Percy's green ones in case he never saw them again.

"I'll be back for you. Stay," Nico said with a conviction he didn't feel.

Percy nodded. Nico and Jason disappeared into the shadows.

The rumbling hadn't stopped, so instead of pulling them back into the earthquake, Nico went south, to Camp Jupiter. He traveled right into the senate building, where scores of legionnaires had congregated and, three and a half years earlier, he'd been condemned never to return.
The crowd stared at them in awe, and even here, the room rumbled and shook. Nico opened his mouth to plead for volunteers, but Jason beat him to it.

"The earthquake you're feeling is centered way to the north. You will be safe here, but hundreds of thousands of lives in the Pacific Northwest are in grave danger. We have the chance to help people make it out alive. If you will come with us, line up in front of Nico and me."

Nico may not have been back in three and a half years, and he recognized only a handful of faces, but his notoriety apparently hadn't diminished. People were looking back and forth between him and Jason in shock. No one stepped forward. Nico located Reyna striding toward them.

"How many can you travel?" Jason asked him, eyeing the crowd.

"Twenty maybe, including you and me."

"We need your eighteen strongest and bravest," Jason said to Reyna, who'd finally pushed her way out of the crowd. Hazel and Frank came through, too.

Reyna turned to organize the troops, proving she'd never stopped being Praetor, when Allie, her purple cloak billowing behind her, rose from the whispering, jittery crowd and screamed, "Shut the fuck up and fall in!"

Nico noticed how perfectly Praetor-ish her stance was, how commanding her presence. Hazel and Reyna had taught her well. She plucked fourteen kids out of the ranks and ran to Nico.

"We're ready, Captain McHottypants. Take us away."

The group held hands in a loose, silent circle. Nico concentrated and found too much of what he'd been dreading.

They set down in an elementary school outside Portland.

"Keep holding hands," Nico barked at the group. "I'll drop you off one at a time. A tsunami is coming, too. Assume you are in its path. Save lives."

He let go of Jason's hand, and Jason let go of Reyna next to him.

"I love you more than I can fathom, Jason Grace," Nico said, his words tumbling out in a horrible rush. "I will be back for you in five minutes. Meet me right here, and don't you dare die on me." He kissed Jason the way Percy had kissed him earlier, all desperation and need, like he was trying to put a lifetime of words into five seconds of kissing. He broke away, closed the circle of Camp Jupiter volunteers, and stared into Jason's beautiful eyes as he dove into the shadows.

Nico bounced from school to school, pushing a demigod off in each one. He wouldn't be able to remember where he'd left any of them but Jason. They'd have to survive and make it back to camp on their own. He hoped they all would. In each place, there were screams and sobs, moans for parents who were in gods knew what kind of danger themselves. At least the noise helped Nico remember there were survivors. There were so many souls arriving in Charon's waiting area.

He dropped off the last camper and went back to find Jason.

The school where he'd left Jason materialized under his feet. His watch told him he was fifteen seconds late, but when he looked up and down the hallway, which was the exact one he'd left Jason in, there was no sign of the son of Jupiter. For the first time, real, personal fear bubbled in Nico's veins, and he acknowledged the terror of what he'd dragged his loved ones into. The deaths of the
nameless and faceless receded until he was left with the wonderful faces of Jason, Percy, Hazel, Reyna, Frank, and even Allie. He hoped he hadn't sent one of them on a suicide mission.

A minute passed, and Jason hadn’t returned. The seconds ticked by in the pulsing of blood through Nico’s veins. Every second he waited left less time to help Percy, but the idea of leaving Jason behind, not knowing if he was safe or would be safe when the tsunami hit, was too terrifying to contemplate.

"Jason!" Nico screamed and screamed, until he emerged from his panic and used his senses, literally. He dove into the shadow and followed the tug of his true love.

When Nico emerged from the shadows, Jason was kneeling next to a collapsed wall, straining to lift it. There were whimpers coming from underneath, and Nico barely had time to take in Jason's dusty, bloody clothes, the cut under his eye, bruises and burns and scratches all along his arms, before he knelt next to him to help.

"Oh, thank the gods," Jason said when Nico dropped down next to him, like Nico had been the one risking his life. "I can't use the winds to lift it. The kids would get hurt by the amount of wind I'd have to whip up."

"Back up, Jace," Nico said. "I'll put up a wall."

Jason scrambled back. Nico pulled the ground up and carefully thrust it through the floor of the building. He wedged it under the collapsed wall and willed it higher. The wall was little more than a foot off the ground when tiny little children came squirming and wriggling out, followed a foot later by an adult. Nico stopped moving the wall of rock and pulled Jason into the shadows. He had no idea how long ago he'd left Percy, and that was the place they needed to be to save the most lives.

They hurtled back through the shadows and re-materialized on the plateau. Percy curled Nico in his arms and lifted him off the ground.

"Oh, gods, thank God." Percy covered Nico's face in kisses until Nico pushed him away.

"What's the status of the tsunami?"

"We have ten minutes, max. I can probably hold it off longer if Jason pushes against it with the winds."

"On it," Jason said. He and Percy turned in the direction of the coast and stretched out their arms.

Nico concentrated on feeling the ground along the edge of Puget Sound. He raised huge earthen walls, larger than anything he'd ever imagined making, only to realize he didn't know how high they needed to be before he could move on to the next ones. If he didn't cover all of the shoreline, water would rush in through whatever avenue he'd left open. If the wall was too low, it'd let all the water in and prevent it from escaping.

"How high, Perce?" Nico asked without breaking his concentration.

Percy was quiet for a moment before he said, "Puget Sound? Seventy-five feet."

"Holy hell," Jason whispered.

Nico agreed. He'd never raised anything so high. Hell, he didn't even know if Seattle could support it. He pushed his will onto the sea floor, drew rock from below, and began to draw a walled off line around the city.
When the wall was twenty feet high, Percy, his teeth gritted, said, "Seven minutes."

Nico redoubled his efforts. His hands and knees were shaking. The earth was fighting him, resisting being moved so destructively after it had endured the quake. It was slow work, coaxing the ground higher, and with every foot of progress, Nico’s strength faded. At sixty feet, he dropped to his knees. At seventy, Percy gasped, "One minute, baby." Nico pushed. The wall rose. He passed seventy-five feet, pushed it to seventy-six, eight seconds before Percy screamed in anguish and fell to the ground. Jason toppled over next to him before crawling the two or three feet to Nico and knocking him the rest of the way down.

"It's over," he said. His blue eyes were hard and exhausted. "We did all we could."

Nico wanted to scream like Percy had done, to let out his terror and frustration that there wasn't more they could do, more people they could save. Now they had to wait to see if they'd had any success or if Nico had doomed his family to death, too, while he, Percy, and Jason sat safe and removed. Nico leaned into Jason and closed his eyes for a moment. He could feel the earth, but he couldn't feel the water against it. He had no idea if his wall had held or toppled or been breached.

Percy laid with his shoulder at Nico's feet. His eyes were closed, but Nico knew he was alright — exhausted, but alright. Without a thought, Nico reached up to Jason's face and stroked his fingers over the cut on his cheek. He sang to Apollo in Italian, asking for help, telling him he loved him. When he removed his hand, Jason was healed. Jason felt his face, and his mouth dropped open. Nico ignored Jason's astonishment and ran his hands over Jason's arms, repeating the process. He'd moved on to a gash on Jason's thigh when Percy let out a huge breath and reached up to Nico.

"It held," Percy said. "Holy Mary, mother of Jesus, it held."

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Percy watched Nico process what he'd said. Nico's dark, worried eyes shifted. Next to him, Grace was smiling. Percy turned his head skyward and laughed.

Holy hell, motherfuckers! They'd done it! Percy didn't have the energy left to roll over, let alone sit, so he laid on the ground and laughed some more. How many people had they saved? Thousands, surely. He didn't know how many people lived in Seattle and the surrounding areas, but he'd seen the videos of the tsunamis in Japan and Indonesia and knew they'd helped avert at least some of that kind of devastation here. Gods, with Grace and Nico working with him, there was nothing he couldn't do.

Percy was ripped from his thoughts by a hard head banging into his chin. Nico fell on top of him, heavier than Percy remembered. Percy opened his mouth to say something, but it ended up full of Nico's hair. He laughed more and tried to spit out Nico's locks. He hugged Nico, who seemed to be trying to use his head to bore a hole in Percy's chest.

"Thank the gods," Nico said.

"Or not. They didn't do shit," Jason said. "Thank their sons."

He was watching Percy and Nico with such utter longing that Percy almost told Nico to get off him.

Jason hesitated until Nico held back his arm without turning his face toward Jason. He took Nico's hand but didn't participate in the hug.

"Now, Jason," Nico, the bossy ass, said. "It took all of us. You better get over here and warm my back. This mountain is freezing."

"No shit," Percy said. "I'm the one on the cold ground."

Percy almost had all the air squeezed out of him when Jason landed on top of Nico. Damn, he was heavy. How did Nico keep from getting squished or snapped in half when he and Jason were...never mind. He stopped thinking about it. Jason's hands snaked across Nico's waist, the backs of them pressing into Percy's stomach. It was a dick move that Jason didn't hug him, too, but Percy decided to let it slide. They'd all been traumatized today, and Percy didn't even know where Jason and Nico had gone after they'd left him here.

"Okay, group hug over," Percy said. "The bottom can't breathe."

Jason peeled off, but Nico raised his head and whispered in Percy's ear. "The bottom? I knew I'd get you there eventually, Perce."

Percy's face burned. Nico snickered and sat up, and his giggles increased when he saw Percy's face. Percy raised a fist and weakly punched Nico's arm. "Bastard. Help me up."

Jason and Nico pulled Percy into a sitting position. They sat in a rough triangle, Nico leaning against Jason, his hand propped on the ground between Jason's legs, Percy sitting near Nico's feet with his hand bolted to Nico's knee. Percy's feet were hooked under Jason's bent knee. He was trying not to show it, but his hand on Nico's knee and the anchor of Jason's leg were all that was holding him upright. Nico and Jason didn't look much better. Actually, Jason looked better than he had before they'd finished working on the wave.

"Where'd the cut on your face go? You had one before and now it's gone."

Jason touched his cheek and glanced at Nico.

"Oh," Nico said. "So, I got a new-ish power."

Percy wrinkled his brow. He'd never heard of a Hades kid with healing power. That was pretty much exclusively an Apollo kid...oh.

"How did that happen?" he asked.

Nico bit his lip. "I, uh, my roommate. We, I don't know how exactly, but I, um, got some of his powers. And since, you know, he's a son of Apollo..."

Percy thought any god listening would know Nico was full of shit. And Nico berated him for being a bad liar.

"That's cool," Percy said. What he was trying to say was "Shut up, Nico."

"Yeah, I mean, he probably didn't mean for me to do it out in the open, but I, um, Jason was hurt and I guess I wasn't thinking."

"Let's change the subject." Jason fidgeted with a rip in his jeans.

"We should go back and see who else we can help." Nico tried to get up and staggered back down,
almost in Jason's lap.

Jason wrapped a protective arm around his waist. "You don't have the energy, Nico. None of us do. We did all we could for now. Let's rest and then we'll head into the city and see what we can do."

Nico nodded.

"Where'd you guys go after you left here?" Percy asked.

Nico told him what they'd done, and Jason gave a bit of information about what he'd done those five minutes Nico was gone. His eyes were haunted, and Percy hated to think about what Jason must have found in that elementary school. Percy didn't want any of them to have to think about it. He missed Maybelle.

"And you, Nico," he said, trying to put images of broken little bodies out of his mind. "You sent people to three or four other schools, too? That's amazing. Even if each of the campers only rescued half the kids Jason did, that's remarkable."

Jason scoffed and shook his head. "He didn't travel a few campers, Percy. He jumped twenty of us."

"You did what?!" Percy exploded. No wonder Jason wasn't meeting his eyes. Nico could have killed himself. "How many trips through the shadows have you made today? You dropped them off two at a time or something, except for Jason, right?"

Nico shrugged. Quietly, he said, "I did what I had to do. I wish it could've been more."

"You dropped them all off separately, didn't you?" Jason asked.

"I wish it could've been more," Nico repeated.

"And you approved of this? Went along with it?" Percy asked, turning his fear into anger and breaking it over Jason.

"Shut up, Percy," Nico said. "I'm stronger than you think I am."

Percy wanted to slap Nico. He was trying to look out for him, not insinuate that Nico wasn't tough enough. "It's not like that, and you know it. You're the strongest person I know, mentally and emotionally, and you're one hell of a lot stronger physically than you look. I'm not trying to be a dick, so stop treating me like one."

"Then stop treating me like an invalid," Nico hissed. "It's been a long time since I was sick, Percy."

"I know that." He pulled at the low, mostly dead grass with both hands and threw fistfuls of it at Nico. Some landed in his mouth. Percy hoped a few fell down his shirt, too. The jerk would be itching for hours.

Nico spluttered in indignation. "You...you...grassed me!"

Percy roared in laughter. He caught Jason turning his head to the side with a smirk. Nico spit a few blades of grass out of his mouth and glowered at Percy. Percy was saved from whatever evil Nico was about to inflict on him by Jason giving a great shudder as he tried to conceal his amusement. Nico turned to Jason, affronted. Jason swiveled his head so far to the other side that he looked like an owl.

"Look at me," Nico ordered.
Jason squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. Nico poked his stomach, and Jason burst into laughter almost as loud as Percy's. Nico slapped Jason's arm out from where it was supporting him, knocking him over. He nudged Percy's chest with his boot, and Percy went down, too. Percy and Jason laid on the ground laughing, powerless to move, while Nico unsteadily stood and marched away with as much dignity as a guy with a muddy, grassy ass could muster. He got twenty feet away, wheeled back around, and flipped them off with both hands.

Jason and Percy laughed harder. Nico's cheeks colored, and he disappeared into the edge of the trees that dotted one side of the plateau.

"Nico!" Jason called after him and tried to stand, but Percy smacked his leg.

"Let him go. He'll come back when he calms down, or when he needs us to pick grass out of his hair or shirt. Annoying shit." Percy laughed some more. He was so fond of Nico. "He left me once, Grace. Left me standing outside a 7-Eleven because we got into a fight over Slurpees. Can you believe that? I had to wait fifteen minutes for him to come back and pick me up."

Jason snorted. "He left me in a Red Lobster once because we got in a fight over the size of the salad shrimp. Told me he was going to the bathroom. Didn't mention he went to a bathroom four states away. I sat in that damned booth for an hour waiting for him to come back."

Percy laughed. "What happened?"

"I paid the bill, the jerk, because he had mountains of money and I barely had any, got to-go boxes, dumped the shrimp all over his fettuccine, and went outside to call Tempest. The little asshole was standing in the lobby messing with the lobsters in the aquarium. I wanted to beat the shit out of him."

"Sounds like Nico."

"I got some great make-up sex out of it, though, so it wasn't all a loss."

Percy blew a raspberry at Jason. "No fair. All I got was his smug, evil laugh."

Jason turned his head toward Percy. Percy realized their ankles were crossed. He guessed he didn't mind. Jason made a nice pillow.

"How long ago was that?" Jason asked.

"I don't know. After he got well but before Maybelle was born."

Jason shifted and moved his legs out from under Percy. He rolled onto his side and propped his head up in his hand.

"You guys weren't sleeping together then anyway, I thought."

There was a hint of accusation in Jason's tone. Percy rolled his eyes. "That's what it always comes back to for us, isn't it? Who got Nico best, or last, or first? No, I wasn't sleeping with him. I haven't been with him since you and I got Erebos, dickhead. Does that make you happy?"

"Kind of," Jason admitted. "Surprised, a little. I saw you guys kissing again this afternoon, and well, I've been questioning things, I guess. It's only happened once in, like, the past two plus years, me and him, for what it's worth."

"He told me about it," Percy said. "He felt guilty."
"For sleeping with me?" Jason seemed shocked.

Percy wanted to tell him yes, that was why, that Nico had said it was a mistake. It would have been a lie. "He felt guilty because it was the night Maybelle was born. He wasn't sorry it happened, at least, not that he told me."

"I felt that way, too. We should have been more supportive of you on such a big day."

"Well, to be fair, like I told him, I flipped you both off and my mom kicked you out of the room. She forgot to go look for you, too, so you would have missed even more if Nico hadn't brought you back when he did."

Jason chuckled. "So Nico left me for an hour at Red Lobster when he was sixteen and left you for fifteen minutes at a 7-Eleven when he was nineteen or twenty. I guess we could say his temper's improving. Maybe."

Percy was about to give a flippant answer when he caught sight of Nico emerging from the trees behind Jason's back. Nico yelled something, but Percy couldn't hear him. He motioned, big and obvious, for Percy and Jason to get up and come to him. Percy nudged Jason with his foot. He wasn't feeling much desire to move.

"Our temper tantrum in a jar of hot sauce is back. He wants us to go into the trees with him."

"Forget that shit," Jason said, sitting up. "I can't move."

"You just moved, dipshit," Percy said. He sat up, too. He cupped his hands and shouted, "We're the kings of the world, baby! The saviors of Seattle! We're resting!"

He smirked at Jason and raised his hand for a fist bump. Jason complied and smiled, though he turned back to Nico and slowly started to get up. Percy did, too.

Nico was screaming again, running toward them, and Percy felt a hint of doubt, but no real worry. There was no other terror to conquer, not today. He'd made it to his feet when a vicious pain struck both his shoulders and he was lifted into the air. He looked up to find himself carried away by an enormous eagle. At first he thought this must be one of Camp Jupiter's eagles, sent to welcome them down to Berkeley like heroes. Then he saw Nico running away from the third eagle. Nico turned and looked up at Percy and Jason, hopeless and scared, before he disappeared into a shadow. The third eagle swooped empty-handed back toward the ones carrying him and Jason, and they set off to the east.

Chapter End Notes

After researching for this story, I'll never move to the Pacific Northwest. A good overview of the potential of the next Cascadia megathrust earthquake can be found in this article in The New Yorker, but there are lots of other interesting articles about it, too.

How are you guys feeling now that answers are falling on the story like fat raindrops?
On the morning of the solstice, Jason woke Percy and Nico as soon as the barrier expanded. Nico found himself staring into the eyes of his lovers as they loomed over him. He took his time kissing each of them thoroughly, and they made love over and over again until the sun had climbed to its apex in the sky. They dressed, went outside, and did all the activities they’d come to enjoy. They swam, played golf, shot baskets (which didn't cause Nico to complain, for once), and played catch with both a football and a baseball. Long overdue, they vanished their trash heap. They collected the last letter from an altar.

They went back inside at around 2:00 and spent the remainder of the day making love and holding each other.

After the visit from Hermes, they'd realized that they should have asked what time the Olympians' solstice meeting would begin. If they knew, they wouldn't be whisked away in the throes of passion, nor would they have to forgo the throes of passion waiting for a summons that could take hours to come. The next day's goddess, she of family-style luxury cruises, had told them that the Olympians began their meeting promptly at 9:00 am New York time. Nico did the math and realized they'd have the entire day of the solstice to spend together before they'd get sent to New York at roughly 11:30 that night, hours after the barrier had closed around them.

When the sun went down, Nico set the alarm on his watch for 10:30 so they'd have plenty of time to clean themselves and get dressed before heading off to Mount Olympus. There was no way to know whether they’d have an escort to the throne room or, without warning, blink and find themselves in front of all the gods. Nico's secret worry, that they'd be ferried across the ocean by giant eagles, lessened after sunset. No eagles would be able to get them to New York in such a short time.

Sometime after 10:30, while Jason watched Percy and Nico kissing and ran his hand across their locked elbows, he could take the pressure no longer. The visit from Hermes had interrupted what he needed to say, and he'd put it off. This could be his last chance.

"Nico, turn around, please. I want to talk to you."

Nico gave Percy one more soft kiss and turned. His eyes were luminous in the dark, deep and full of life like they had been during the happiest days of their early romance. Jason kissed each eyelid and, for good measure, he kissed the eyelashes where they played at the top of Nico's cheekbones.

For once, Nico was patient and let Jason gather the courage to say exactly what he wanted to say.

"I've been thinking a lot about our futures." Jason's voice shook. "I know a lot of it is out of our hands. A while ago, though, Percy said he considered you and me his home." He paused to smile at Percy, who nodded to urge him to keep talking. "I feel that way, too, Nico. I want to be with you both after today. I want...I love you, Nico, and I want to make a life with you."

"Jace, I..." Nico ran his thumb over Jason's jaw, but his brow had furrowed and he was slowly shaking his head.

Jason plowed ahead. "Okay, I'm botching this, I can see. But you make me crazy, Nico. You've always made me so crazy, and—"
"Stop." Nico's eyes were narrowed.

Behind Nico, Percy threw his hands up in the air as much as their confinement would allow and mouthed, "Dude, what the fuck?" like Jason was the dumbest man on the planet.

"You weren't botching things, but you probably would have if you'd kept talking. I love you and want to be with you, too, stupid." Nico patted Jason's hip and then Percy's. "Both of you. That's a given."

"It wasn't a given, not to me," Jason grumbled.

"Well, now it should be. It doesn't matter though, because there's nothing I can commit to. I can't commit to twenty minutes from now, Jason." Nico waved his hand and hit the barricade. He kicked at it, too, though neither movement had any effect. "I promise I'll love you twenty minutes from now, and twenty days from now, and probably twenty years from now, but that doesn't mean we get to be together."

"Promises and commitment are for suckers," Percy added. He laid on his back behind Nico and shoved his hand under Nico's head so Nico had no choice but to lay his head on Percy's shoulder. Percy twisted his hand awkwardly and rubbed Jason's stomach. "Look at the shit I promised Annabeth, the commitment I made. It was meaningless, in the end."

With that last, horrifying thought, the gods were whisked to Mount Olympus.

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The time on Nico's watch was set to Australian Central Standard Time, and it told him they were about twenty minutes early for the start of the meeting. He and his companions had materialized in a windowless muted gray office lined on every wall with books. A shiny aluminum drafting table with a rolling stool sat in one corner. In another was an impressive display of maps hung on the kind of swinging-armed apparatus that showcased area rugs for sale. Nico had seen a similar contraption a few times during his stalking of Hera.

After six months cemented together at this time of day, to have space, distance, between himself and his lovers caused an ache Nico couldn't quite explain. He struggled to keep from reaching out to draw Jason and Percy back in. Percy had gone to look at the maps while Jason squinted at the book titles. Nico laughed despite his unease because it had been over six months since Jason needed to squint but he still did it every time he read.

A white and gray marble door opened behind them, and the gods came face to face with Athena. Nico dropped to a knee. Athena had asked him not to speak to her, and he intended to honor that request as long as he could.

"Lady Athena," Jason said. Nico peeked from the corner of his eye and watched Jason rapidly shelve the book he'd been perusing and jog forward to bow to Athena. A hand landed on Nico's shoulder on the other side, and Percy's silly blue Converse entered the frame of his vision.

"I thought I might meet with you before the start of the official meeting, gentlemen. I want to know what you've decided, Perseus." Athena wore strappy Greek-style sandals. From his vantage point, Nico could see their edges peeking out from her long white robes.
Percy's hand tightened on Nico's shoulder. "It's wrong, what you're asking me to do, Athena. You want me to give up trying to make a life with people I've made promises to because you don't think I'm good enough. I think that's something Maybelle and Annabeth should be able to decide for themselves."

"Annabeth has shown an alarming lack of clear judgment when it comes to you," Athena said. "Her best interest is my sole concern."

"She won't thank you for taking the choice away from her," Percy said.

Nico raised his head so he could gauge Athena's reaction. The goddess was unmoved. Whatever Percy's argument would be, it was obvious she had a well-considered response ready. She was the master of logistics and planning. Nico dropped his head before she caught him looking.

"Perhaps. It is not a parent's job to make their children happy or thankful. It is a parent's job to do what is best for their child, no matter how painful that best thing sometimes is. You know this, Perseus. You made a choice, too."

Nico's gaze shifted again, to roughly the area occupied by Percy's knees. He didn't know what Athena meant. The hand on his shoulder moved to his neck, and Percy gently guided Nico's face back to focus on the floor in front of him.

"I agree to your terms, Athena." Percy's voice was raw and strained. "I'll stay away from Maybelle and Annabeth if you ensure Nico and Jason's sentences are light and humane, in my judgment. You'll also agree to protect Maybelle and keep her safe every day of her life."

Percy lurched forward slightly, and Nico imagined Jason was patting his back.

"I am amenable to those terms, Perseus."

Percy let go of Nico's neck, and Nico could feel the moving air that indicated Percy and Athena were shaking hands.

"The meeting will commence in approximately ten minutes. There is an antechamber outside my office that leads directly to the throne room. You may wait there, and my attendant will escort you to the throne room at the correct time."

Percy's and Jason's feet started forward, but both pairs stuttered and stopped when Nico didn't rise.

"Neeks?" Jason asked.

Nico shook his head but kept his eyes on the floor.

"Go ahead, gentlemen," Athena said. "It seems the son of Hades has something private he'd like to say."

"Leave it alone, baby." Percy tugged at Nico's shoulder, but Nico concentrated on making himself heavy and immovable. Percy sighed. "Be safe."

The sounds of footsteps echoed on the floor and died away. A door closed.

"Rise and speak, Son of Hades. You've little time."

Nico worked to perfect the right facial expression, one of polite uncertainty, shyness, nerves. It fit like a second skin. He stood.
Athena looked so much like Annabeth, and for a moment Nico was paralyzed by guilt for every mess he’d made for Annabeth Chase to sort out. He remembered the first day she'd come to him to tell him she knew he was sleeping with her boyfriend, how they'd played a game of cat and mouse that had Nico clearly outmatched. He prayed to his father he'd become a much better player.

"I, uh, I wanted to talk to you privately, Athena, because...well..." Nico stopped and took three or four shallow breaths. "Gods, I feel awful. Never mind. I'll go."

"Say it, boy, whatever it is." Athena's voice was commanding. Nico doubted she was told no often.

"It's, well, I think maybe Percy'll have trouble keeping your bargain." The words tumbled out in a rush, and Nico knew his face colored in shame. "You mentioned, when you visited us, that we'd been watching less and less of our old lives on TV. The reason is because it was too painful for Percy. It wasn't because he was enjoying being away from Annabeth and Maybelle. It was because it hurt more and more with every passing day. The day Maybelle turned one, all he did was cry, and for days after that, too."

"Why do you tell me this?" Her tone was puzzled, cautious, trying to figure out his angle.

He gave her one.

"I'm in love with Percy. I've been trying so damned hard...sorry. I've been trying so hard to be a bigger man and ask him to not take your deal, but now it comes down to it, and...I can't lose him." Nico fidgeted with his skull ring and pressed his bracelet into the flesh around his wrist. He pressed until it hurt, until he could see the outline of the bracelet in his skin. "I can't take a chance that he'll defy what you say and go back to Annabeth and Maybelle anyway. Gods, I know it's so disgusting and selfish, but I need him with me. I'm so embarrassed. If you, maybe, like, just for the span of Annabeth's life or something, got the Olympians to give us all an equal sentence, so we'd be assured to be together and he'd have no choice but to stay away from Annabeth...I don't know how it works, but..."

"Silence, Son of Hades. Join your companions. I will consider what you've said." Athena watched him carefully.

Nico pursed his lips and nodded. He walked out the door and joined Percy and Jason in a small room with comfortable-looking chairs and a small coffee bar. They eyed him with the exact same expression: trusting and inquisitive. They hadn't heard. Nico started to cry.

"Hey, baby, it's alright." Percy rushed forward and wrapped Nico in his arms. Jason followed a moment later and crushed them both in his embrace. "Did she say something upsetting to you?"

"No, nothing like that. I wanted to ask her," Nico heaved a breath and willed himself to calm down so he could lie better, "to change her mind about the agreement you two made, Percy. You shouldn't have to give up your wife and daughter."

Percy pushed Nico away and slipped out of Jason's hands. "Damn it, Nico. Let it go."

"I tried. I can't." Nico watched Percy walk away before he sought Jason's eyes. They were so kind. Now, minutes away from their hearing, Nico found there was so much he needed to say. "Gods, Jason, you've grown up to be better than I ever dreamed, more real. I do promise you my love, for what little it's worth."

"It's worth a lot to me, Nico." Jason smiled, gentle and sad.

Nico kissed him. He slotted his lips along Jason's warm mouth and held them there. Jason's hands
curled into his hair as Nico indulged in one last time to wrap his arms around those broad, powerful shoulders.

"Gentlemen, it's time."

Nico broke away from Jason and saw a lovely dark-haired woman with Athena's sharp gray eyes standing near a door on the opposite side of the room. Jason nodded and held Nico's hand. Together, they walked to the corner where Percy stood, and Nico took his hand, too.

On their way out, Nico leaned his head sideways and whispered in Percy's ear. "I love you. I'm sorry."

For a fraction of a second, Percy laid his head on Nico's shoulder, and then they were out the door and in the throne room.

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The last time Nico visited the throne room, he'd barely been conscious. There'd been no time to take a gander at how things had changed since Annabeth had redesigned the place. He'd been too busy trying not to die.

This time, once he was escorted to a low wooden seat something like a child's desk chair in the middle of the room, with Percy and Jason on either side of him, Nico took the time to look all around the room.

The Olympians occupied the first row of thrones, as they had when he was a boy. Zeus and Hera sat bored and impassive at the head of the room. Nico scanned the male gods, and his heartbeat quickened when his eyes landed on his lover, the only lover, ironically, he'd ever learned to live with and care for in a way that he would consider adult and mature. Apollo's bright blue eyes were fiery and comforting.

"I love you," Nico mouthed.

Apollo smiled and held his bracelet, the one that matched Nico's, to his heart. Nico copied the gesture. A surreal sense of calm invaded him, and he wondered if that was Apollo's doing.

Their gazes held until too much time had passed, and Apollo looked away. Nico touched his earring, his "engagement" ring, his watch, and his bracelet as his eyes continued down the row of the assembled male Olympian gods. They were all there, except Hermes. He hoped Hermes wasn't late and jeopardized Jason's chances of being assigned to him.

In the back of the room, when Nico had turned all the way around, he found his father. Hades didn't make eye contact. He sat on a truly terrifying throne of bones, one much more menacing than the one he occupied in the Underworld. Nico felt certain the throne was designed to place the top of his father's head less than a millimeter below Zeus's. Nico had never felt such an intense sense of rivalry with Hazel and Reyna. If he'd ever behaved that way with Bianca, he didn't remember it.

Hades gave the impression he was chewing the head off a live bat, complete with blood and little squeaking noises, much to the chagrin of the gods and goddesses surrounding him. The whole scene was a charade. The bats were composed mainly of black-dyed Swedish Fish and the blood was V-8 with a little red Kool-Aid thrown in to get the right texture. As snacks went, this one was gross, but
not nearly as gross as his dad liked the other gods to believe. The bat squeak noises came from an iPod in his shirt pocket. People thought Hades only wore his cloak of tormented souls, but underneath it he was dressed as normally as any kid's white-collar dad. Nico had always liked the joke.

The female goddesses sat regal and remote, with the exception of Aphrodite, who blew him a kiss. Nico smiled in a way he hoped came off as sincere and wasn't as pathetic as his horrifying attempts to flirt with the waitress the time he and Jason had driven up to Maine to see Leo. The smile must have worked, because Aphrodite winked, as did several goddesses in the second and third rows.

Nico caught Demeter's eye, and she contorted her face with crossed eyes and fish lips. She flapped her hands around her neck like they were gills. Nico bit the inside of his mouth to keep from laughing, and Demeter kept it up until Persephone leaned forward and whispered in her mother's ear. Demeter rolled her eyes at Persephone, gave Nico one last flap of her hand-gills, and resumed her austere position. Persephone gave Nico a small wave and covered her heart.

Because Nico didn't want to cry again, he looked down at his hands. They sat in his lap, still and tense. Next to him, Percy fidgeted with the hem of his t-shirt. Maybe they should have worn suits or something, but Ares was dressed like Mr. T in the '80s and Hephaestus was picking what Nico sincerely hoped was grease out of his ear and wiping it on his dirty, wrinkled overalls. T-shirts and jeans were probably alright.

A loud pop followed by some scuffling from the back rows of the women's side announced the entrance of Hermes.

"Sorry, Pops," Hermes said as he hustled between thrones and knelt at Zeus's feet. "Your Majesty," he said to Hera. "Always a pleasure to gaze on your lovely visage."

To Nico's great surprise, Zeus patted Hermes's head like he was a favored pet. "On to your throne now, boy. Busy, as always, I'm sure."

Hermes winked at Nico as he made his way to his throne. Jason's pinky edged onto Nico's lap and hooked with his. The atmosphere in the room had felt relaxed, but as soon as Hermes took his seat, everyone sat up straight and got serious.

"Welcome, gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon," Zeus said. "It is a pleasure to see you all again, my family. I am reminded during our times together at the solstice how very much I wish I could see many of you more often than I do."

Sure, the attractive ones. Nico flattened his left hand on his thigh and hooked Percy's pinky finger the same way Jason had done to him. In his peripheral vision, he saw the edge of Percy's mouth quirk up in a smile. Nico tried not to frown.

"Indeed, welcome, family, to our home on Mount Olympus," Hera said. Zeus seemed agitated that Hera had taken over. He coughed, and Hera stopped talking.

"We have important business to discuss this solstice. There are major considerations for realignment in some departments, and we have several marriages to celebrate. First, as you all know, it is our great honor," Zeus sounded like it was anything but an honor, "to welcome our three newest members, who have satisfactorily served their initial internment at a base camp in Australia. Rise, godlings, and be welcomed."

Nico stood with Percy and Jason. He was surprised by the rousing applause they received. Perhaps their situation wasn't so dire. Or perhaps there were more gods in attendance than he had realized.
The clapping died out, and he tugged Jason and Percy back to their seats.

"As is customary with new gods who've ascended in the fashion these three did, we will determine a term of confinement to home and work as well as appoint a godly supervisor for the duration of their godhood. Let us begin discussion about the term of confinement we wish to impose. Apollo, you will abstain from discussion and from voting."

"I think a suitable sentence is no less than 700 years solitary confinement per offense, thus 700 years for Grace and Jackson and 1400 years for di Angelo," Hera said.

"Oh, nonsense, Puddy," Demeter said. "Don't be such a downer. They've—"

"Don't call me 'Puddy,' Demeter. It is an abominable nickname unbefitting the queen of the gods," Hera said through gritted teeth.

"—done an admirable job in the hoosegow and proved their mettle over and over again as humans." Demeter spoke over the top of Hera. "And Puddy is a perfectly acceptable nickname for my baby sister, Puddy."

"Percy should be free to go," Poseidon said. "He has been our greatest hero, loyal to the Olympians at every step to the best of his knowledge, and he'll be an immediate asset in my realm."

Percy's finger tightened in Nico's.

"Let 'em all go," Demeter said.

"That isn't a realistic stance," Athena said.

Nico waited. All the gods did. Athena didn't add anything, though.

"Well, light sentences, then," Hermes said, clapping his hands together. "Home confinement for, say, twenty years for Grace and di Angelo. Percy can go."

"Absolutely not," Hera said. "600 years for di Angelo, 200 for Jason, and the Jackson boy goes free."

"Not acceptable, Puddy." Hades bit the head off another bat and let the “blood” dribble down his chin. "I propose 600 for Grace, 200 for that ingrate Jackson, and none for my son."

"What a surprise there," Zeus said. "I am inclined to agree with Hera's first recommendation. 700 years for all."

The room erupted into a cacophony of catcalls and jeers and offers of alternative punishments. Aphrodite floated over everyone's heads and showered them with rose petals. Demeter pulled out some knitting and loudly repeated, "Knit one, Puddy two. Knit one, Puddy two." Ares lobbed a grenade at a god in the third row. Poseidon sat to his brother's right and ran his hand down his face.

"Be quiet, right now!"

All of the gods startled and became mute. Their eyes wandered the room in surprise, but Nico knew the demonic voice. He pretended to wipe his mouth to hide his smirk.

"Now that I have your attention," Persephone said, resuming her normal light and airy voice. She rose from the second row and entered the open space before Zeus and Hera. Her floral dress fluttered as she moved, and Nico remembered how she'd once made him a crown of flowers. The air filled
with the smell of cool showers and grape hyacinth. All the gods relaxed, though Nico noticed the fleeting nod Persephone shared with Athena when she briefly turned toward the goddesses. "I would like to propose an alternative. Nico is my darling." She ran her fingers through his hair and rested her hand on his shoulder. "I would very much like to see him suffer no further punishment, not even home confinement. However, I recognize that he has committed crimes and must be held accountable. Each of these boys must be held accountable. I propose that each one is limited to home confinement and the commission of their duties for a period not to exceed fifty years. That term is long enough to make a statement and prevent them from contacting their demigod and mortal families, but not so long that they grow bitter and vengeful."

Persephone removed her hand from Nico's shoulder, bowed, and resumed her throne.

"Percy doesn't deserve a punishment," Poseidon argued. "He's our greatest hero. The only thing he did wrong was follow Nico."

Nico pinched Percy to prevent the glare he knew Percy would give his father.

"By that logic, Uncle P, Grace shouldn't be punished, either. He was the greatest hero of our Roman aspects, and he was only following di Angelo, too." Hermes leaned around Ares to talk to Poseidon. "And really, can you blame them? I mean, we all saw what di Angelo could do those months we spent snooping on him and Polly. I'd follow him, even bitter and vengeful, if, you know, he was incarcerated for so long he got that way."

Nico doubted many of the gods and goddesses understood the veiled threat. Zeus did. Nico could see it in his eyes. He could see many gods and goddesses nodding in agreement with Hermes, too. Zeus watched the nodding heads.

"Athena, my darling," Zeus said. "I would appreciate your counsel. I know Jackson is your son-in-law, but I trust you to remain dispassionate and fair."

The crowd quieted again, and Athena rose. It was clear she was admired by more gods and goddesses than most of the Olympians. Nico closed his eyes and said a brief prayer to Persephone. When he opened his eyes, there was a lily in his hand.

"Father, I have listened to the proclamations of our pantheon." Athena inclined her head toward Zeus and Hera before nodding first to the Olympian row of gods and then to the row of Olympian goddesses. "There have been many wise and thoughtful arguments."

That was a crock. Mostly, there'd been a lot of self-serving shouting. Nico crossed his fingers on the hand that held Jason's pinky. He needed Athena to take the offer.

"At the outset, I was inclined to agree with our matriarch. These young gods prevented the work of Poseidon and displayed formidable power. It seemed prudent to punish them. However, it is clear that the pantheon is disinterested in a long and perhaps pointless incarceration. Hermes is correct. We wish to mold the new gods to our benefit, not create potent potential enemies. I propose we accept Persephone's recommendation of fifty years home confinement for each god. In this way, their punishments will be equal, and will give no realm an advantage over another."

Percy's head shot up, but Nico knew he wasn't worried, not yet. Athena hadn't promised to ask for leniency for Percy. She'd promised to ask for leniency for Nico, and she had kept her word, through Persephone.

"Very well. Thank you, Wise One," Zeus said. "Would anyone care to offer an objection?"
No matter what anyone else thought, Athena appeared to have the final say in the eyes of her father. The room was silent.

"Olympians, let us vote. All in favor of each of the three new gods being sentenced to fifty years home confinement except to attend to the duties of their station and forgoing all contact with mortals and demigods, raise your hand."

Nico glanced among the Olympians. Everyone except Zeus and Hera, Poseidon, Apollo, and Ares raised their hands. Next to Nico, Jason let out a huge breath.

"Very well. I pronounce this to be a binding sentence." Zeus struck his master bolt on the floor, and Nico jumped at the current that rippled beneath his feet.

Before they could move on to the next phase of their sentencing, what Nico assumed would be the part where the gods would be chosen by a mentor, he concentrated very hard and, with both hands, made the movement he had seen his father use to silence Percy and Demeter the day he'd beaten Nico with the pomegranates. Beside him, Percy and Jason stiffened.

"Lord Zeus, may I speak?" Nico untangled his hands from Jason's and Percy's and laid the lily in Jason's lap.

"Really, boy?" Zeus asked. "I've heard enough from your irritating mouth to last several lifetimes."

"I'm curious about what the boy has to say, Father," Artemis said.

Zeus rolled his eyes like a petulant teen. "Very well. Get it over with."

Nico rose and approached the thrones of Zeus and Hera. "Sir, I'd like to offer you a deal."

Whispers broke out all over the room, and Nico could hear the sounds of wooden chairs scraping the marble floor behind him. However Jason and Percy could move, they hadn't been able to break free of Nico's enchantment yet. He clamped his hands tightly closed.

"Sniveling brat. I should have made you stay dead when I had the chance," Zeus said.

"Probably," Nico agreed. "This is what I have to offer you: As many have pointed out, most of the fault of our actions as mortals lies with me. I'm sorry that I circumvented your wishes. I'm sorry that I put a being that I love, Apollo, in harm's way. Percy and Jason, they only did the things they did because of me. Let them go. I'll serve their sentences."

The banging of Percy and Jason's chairs intensified. Someone had bound them there, though Nico didn't know who. It hadn't been him. He didn't dare turn around to see them or he would lose his nerve.

"Why would you offer this?" Zeus asked. "What's the catch?"

"Percy has a daughter—"

"We had a deal, Son of Hades," Athena boomed. She was standing next to him. Nico hadn't realized it before, but he was much taller than her.

"You had a deal with Percy — one I counseled him not to take. I made a suggestion that you accepted. Now I'm offering a deal to your father." Nico and Athena stared at each other for a long time. Quieter, he said, "I'm doing this for your granddaughter. She deserves to know her father."
Athena slapped him. Nico didn't care. He'd been slapped before, by an almost identical hand, and it had hurt much worse.

He returned his attention to Zeus. "I'll serve their terms. After all, it's me you want. I'll be out of your hair and strictly my dad's problem for 150 years. When I get free, I'll keep my ass in line and never plot your demise. But in return, you let Percy and Jason go free, and Percy has to be allowed to return to his wife and daughter."

"The Jackson boy has a daughter?" Zeus turned to Hera for confirmation.

"We've discussed the daughter, dear," Hera said blandly, "at the time we convened to kill this bastard." She nodded toward Nico. "It's how Hades saved him?"

Nico had no idea what Hera was talking about, so he kept going. "Yes. Percy has a daughter." He turned around and spoke louder, so his voice echoed around the room. "Percy has a daughter, and she's not a demigod. She's a regular human kid, and regular human kids need their fathers. Please, don't take hers away. Let him go home."

"It's forbidden, kiddo, a god being intimate with a demigod," Hermes said. "I'm sorry, but that's what got you in so damned much trouble."

"I know," Nico said. "But what happened with me and Apollo won't happen with them. Annabeth doesn't have powers. She's not like me. Limit their sexual activity if you feel you have to, but let him go home. Teach him how to wield his power responsibly so he doesn't hurt his daughter. Recognize that he had this family before he was a god. He deserves to be allowed to live with them until their time on earth is done."

"And if we do that, you will serve his punishment?" Zeus stroked his beard.

"And Jason's, too. They’d both need to go free. The only thing I ask is for Percy to be allowed to go to his family for the remainder of their lives and for me to spend one afternoon with mine. That's all."

Zeus tilted his head and rubbed the back of his hand under his chin. Nico hated him, but he needed this. He needed to finally put right the wrongs he'd committed, the poor choices he'd made.

"Father—"

"I'm sorry, Athena, dear, but the boy's offer is good." Zeus turned to Hera. "Do we have to vote on this again, or can I unilaterally..." Zeus eyed the assembled gods. "Who has our copy of Robert's Rules of Order?"

Hermes held up his hand and rushed the rulebook to Zeus. He patted Nico's shoulder as he walked past. Zeus thumbed through the book.

"Aww, fuck it," Zeus said. "I can't find it. We'll vote again, but you kids of mine better understand that I want to take di Angelo's deal. All in favor?"

Athena grumbled, but all of Zeus's children, save Apollo, raised their hands. Hera, Poseidon, and Aphrodite raised their hands, too. Among those eligible to vote, the only one whose hand wasn’t in the air was Demeter's. She frowned and shook her head. Behind her, Persephone cried. Again, Zeus slammed the floor with his master bolt.

Nico went back to his chair. On either side of him, he could feel Jason and Percy shaking with either rage or horror; he wasn't sure which. He whispered, "I'm sorry."
"I'd like to vouch for my son and take him away to begin training," Poseidon said.

Nico had just touched Percy’s hand when Zeus nodded and Percy was gone. He touched Jason's clenched fist and bowed his head. Jason didn't shake him off, but he didn't open his hand, either.

"I want the Grace kid, Pops, if no one ahead of me objects," Hermes said.

"Of course, son." Zeus seemed relieved.

"And my boy. I want my boy to come home," Hades said. His voice was rough and gravelly. Nico didn't see Zeus nod before his father whisked him home.

Chapter End Notes

I'd love to hear what you think about this chapter and the previous one. Were you surprised? Or did you see it all coming? I really don't know unless you tell me.

Thanks for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting! :-)

Those damned eagles had sharp fucking claws. That was Percy's first takeaway from the experience. He swung Riptide around like a maniac, at least until the third eagle, the Nico-less one, swooped in and yanked the sword from his grip. Every damned time. As soon as Riptide re-materialized in his pocket, he'd whip it out again and the bird would jerk it away. The whole thing was frustrating.

It would help if Grace would do more than swing in his eagle's grip like a timid mouse crossing its fingers and hoping, by some miracle, it didn't get devoured. He could fly, for fuck's sake! Why wasn't he fighting back? Percy thought about flinging Riptide across the distance and hitting Jason's eagle, but he wasn't sure Jason would take flight if he did. He wished he had something he could throw at Jason. Failing that, Percy did what he did best; he screamed and swore and fought back. It was useless. Percy kept trying.

He fought for hours. His energy, which had already been nonexistent after controlling the tsunami, waned until raising his sword arm was like lifting a boulder. After that, his attempts were feeble and destined to fail, but he kept them going to show up Jason, whose sluggish behavior was pissing Percy off more and more with each hour that passed.

This kidnapping thing had to have something to do with the prophecy. It had mentioned the three of them combining their powers and stoking the gods' dread. But they'd done a good thing! Surely, combating a natural disaster wasn't something they'd get in trouble for? They were helping people. Percy would have thought the gods would be pleased. He thought of his father, whose nickname was "Earthshaker." Had Poseidon chosen to unleash that earthquake? The tsunami? Percy knew his father's power was immense and scary, but he'd never thought before about how it could and did kill people. That tsunami in Indonesia, it had killed over 200,000 people. Had his father done that?

Riptide re-materialized in his pocket and Percy whipped out the pen, let it morph into a sword, and shouted curses with renewed vigor. If killing mortals didn't matter, or mattered so little that his dad could kill so many, Percy could see why such destructive creatures as the gods could get their panties in a bunch over what he, Jason, and Nico had done. The earthquake been one hell of a godly display, and Percy and his...friends...had put on one hell of a display of their own.

The eagle ripped the sword out of Percy's hand.

"Fuck!" Percy screamed for his impotence and his horror and his father. Another thought interrupted the next curse before it left his lips.

Nico had known. He'd come pelting out of those trees for them. He must've seen the eagles coming. How long ago had Nico realized that the prophecy referred to this event? Before Percy had, of that he had no doubt. Had Nico known back in New York and asked him to come anyway? It seemed reasonable to think so, considering who Nico slept with. No, Percy wouldn't believe Nico had much of a head start on realizing they'd made the gods angry. If he had, he would've kept Jason and Percy close. He wouldn't have left them to be captured while he roamed free. Percy wondered why the third eagle wasn't searching for Nico. The eagle must have known it wouldn't be able to keep up with him, or it had been too dumb to realize there might be some other chance. Nico couldn't have had the energy to shadow travel far. Percy hoped he would hide out with Apollo or down in the Underworld until this all blew over.
The eagle hit a pocket of wind, jostling Percy and causing him to glance warily toward the ground. The sun was rapidly setting over farmland. Well, farmland, farmland, patch of town, farmland, repeat the pattern. New York would be blanketed in darkness by the time they arrived. That's where he assumed they were going, at least. He turned his head to ask Jason what he knew, if anything, but Jason looked so dejected that Percy's words died in his throat.

He went back to hollering and screaming for the rest of the flight.

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The eagles chucked them down at the entrance to the throne room, where Hermes was waiting for them. Hermes was a cool dude, and he'd helped Percy out a couple times. Percy raised his arm to give the guy a fist bump, but Hermes turned away and said, "Follow me."

Jason shrugged and started after the god. After a moment's hesitation, Percy did, too. Hermes led them across the empty throne room. Percy paused to peek at his father's enormous fishing chair. Age hadn't made it less imposing. Next to him, Jason gaped at his father's throne. Percy figured Jason's power-craving ass had the desire to sit in it. Hermes kept walking, and they passed through a door on the left, beyond Zeus's and Hera's thrones. They walked down a long hallway where everything was white. Annabeth sure hadn't designed this place with kids in mind.

"Hey, Hermes, how's it hanging?" Percy asked. A casual start would be good.

Hermes didn't answer. Percy tried again.

"'Sup, bro? What's going on?"

Nothing. The back of Hermes's head shifted with each step. Jason towered over the god, walking along slightly behind him.

"Hey, man, I'm talking to you," Percy said. "I asked what's going on."

Jason glanced at Percy and muttered, "He's not going to answer, Percy."

That pissed Percy off, Jason's easy acceptance, his calm detachment.

"Fuck you, Jason. Hermes, I want to know what's going on, and I want to know now. If you're too chickenshit to tell me, get my dad."

Hermes didn't even acknowledge his existence.

"Fuck this shit," Percy said. "You guys aren't even gonna tell me what we did to get dragged all the way across the fucking country in the grip of some death trap bird? I want to see my father. This shit needs to end."

As the silence from Hermes stretched, Percy began to worry that he, Nico, and Jason had made a serious mistake. Maybe he'd misunderstood and the gods were angry because they hadn't saved enough lives. That didn't make much sense, though. They'd saved a lot more lives than anyone else could have, and the gods had probably been the cause of the disaster in the first place. The more likely answer, that the gods had meant those people to die, sickened him.
He thought about Maybelle and Annabeth at home and Nico out gods knew where. For the first time since Nico had returned to his side on that mountain, he worried he wouldn't see them for a while, maybe forever.

Hermes stopped in front of a door. The god opened it and nudged Jason inside. Jason went willingly. The door was probably to his dad's office or something. Percy kicked at the door as it closed on Jason, but all he did was give himself achy toes. Hermes started walking again.

"Please, Hermes," Percy said, abandoning all the anger and theatrics and heading straight to begging. "What's going on? Annabeth, the baby, Nico—"

Hermes hissed and gave a slight jerk of his head. Percy understood, he was pretty sure. Hermes wasn't allowed to talk. They stopped in front of another door. Hermes opened it and gestured Percy inside. Percy entered, and Hermes shut the door behind him.

It wasn't his dad's office.

The place sparkled like a fancy hotel room, all white and shiny, like it had been designed to remind Percy he was unwelcome, inferior. Growing up without money meant that he was never comfortable in places that showed off their wealth, Nico's sex car aside. Even Nico's apartment had made Percy uneasy at first, until he'd seen how sick Nico was. Then all thoughts about the socioeconomic divide had flown out of his head.

But this, Percy realized when he turned back toward the door, wasn't a hotel room. It was a prison cell.

The door was gone, replaced by a blank stretch of wall. He wheeled around and took stock of the room. There were two windows. Some furniture. He picked up a desk chair and hurled it at a window. The collision of the two made a satisfying crashing sound but didn't break the glass.

What was he doing? He needed to calm down and think. He wasn't even sure why he was here. Escaping wasn't the answer. It's not like he could fight off an army of godly minions or disappear, anyway. He needed someone to help him figure out what to do. He needed Annabeth or Nico.

Percy pulled out both his phones. He should have merged them together ages ago, but he had wanted to save the physical reminder of the time he'd spent with Nico. Plus that phone had all the pictures of Nico on it, and there was no way Annabeth would tell him how to transfer them over. Anyway, sidetracked. Percy checked them both, but neither had a signal. He supposed Olympus was out of the range of cell phone towers. He shoved them back in his pocket and pulled out a prism.

Damn. Nighttime.

Percy spit on the window and manipulated the spit into a blob in the air. He moved it around, trying to get the right angle between the light above him and the spit. Finally, a small rainbow appeared on the floor.

Carefully, so he didn't break his hold on the spit, he fished in his pocket and pulled out a drachma. He tossed it into the rainbow and asked Fleecy to show him Annabeth.

As Annabeth swam into view, Percy let out a sob of relief. She was home, wearing her dumb power suit — navy blue pinstripes in the jacket and skirt, a white silk blouse. No one said no to her, especially when she wore that suit. Maybelle bounced on her hip and reached out to Percy when she saw him. Percy smiled and tried not to cry.

"Hi, Maybelle, honey. Daddy loves you."
"Percy, where the hell are you?" Annabeth asked, cutting off the moment with Maybelle. Percy flicked his eyes to her. He had spent half his life learning to read Annabeth. She was angry, yes, but she was worried, too. "Piper said you shoved Maybelle off on her and ran off with Nico."

Percy bristled at the implication. It hadn’t been like that.

"Jason and I both left with Nico. I'm sure you saw on the news or something, but there was a big earthquake and—"

"And Nico pulled you out there to help. Fine, I'm glad you were able to be helpful and you’re safe, but the earthquake happened hours ago, and you're clearly not there now. It looks like," Annabeth paused and studied the space behind him, "you're at Olympus. The gods called you again? Why haven't they returned you home yet?"

"I don't know. We were on this mountain around Seattle, trying to regroup and regain our powers, and these giant eagles swooped down and carried off me and Grace and brought us all the fucking way across America, Annabeth." Percy hated how scary that had been.

"Gods, Percy, it doesn't sound like they called you for a congratulatory visit." Annabeth bounced Maybelle around and swung her hips back and forth. Percy wondered how late it was, if it was time for Maybelle to go to bed. He told her a story every night. He'd never missed it. "Nico escaped, I assume?"

"Yeah, he was separate from me and Jason, and he came yelling for us to come with him, but we didn't understand what he wanted, or we were too lazy, something. Anyway, before he could get to us, the eagles did, and he melted into the shadows."

"I'm glad he's okay, but he shouldn't have run. That'll only make things worse when he gets caught." Annabeth kept up the bouncing. Maybelle played with her necklace and nuzzled into her shoulder. She needed to nurse, Percy could tell. Annabeth kissed Maybelle's head. "I'm confused about why the gods are upset with you, though."

Percy didn't want to tell her his suspicion, but he needed her to help him sort through his thoughts. He had always needed her.

"Please don't be mad, but—"

"That's like telling me I should be mad about whatever you're about to say." Annabeth's mouth gave a little twitch, like she wanted to smirk.

Percy rubbed his hands down his jeans. This would wipe the smile off her lips. He felt so guilty for not telling her about the prophecy as soon as he could have.

"I know, but at least know I didn't tell you about it before because I didn't want you to worry. There was a prophecy."

Annabeth's smile dropped. She stopped bouncing and swaying.

"What do you mean, 'there was a prophecy?' Perseus Jackson, you knew there was some prophecy concerning you, and you didn't think it was important to tell me?"

"It was a weird prophecy, Annabeth, and we thought—"

"'We' means you and Nico, I presume?" Annabeth's lip curled. "I can't believe he didn't have the sense to tell me, either. I'm going to kill him, if the gods don't kill him first."
Percy recoiled. The gods were not going to kill Nico. How could Annabeth say something like that? She must have noticed his horror. "I'm sorry, Percy. I didn't mean that. Hopefully, you're all getting, at the worst, a slap on the wrist for being smartasses or something. I don't know. Tell me about the prophecy."

She was a good woman, Annabeth. Percy knew she hadn't meant to scare him or belittle his best friend. "We got it the night you went on that pub crawl thing. When you came home, Rachel kissed Nico while he slept—"

Annabeth snorted and rolled her eyes."

—but it wasn't the way she normally hits on him. She was in one of her Oracle trances. Anyway, instead of her speaking the words, she kissed him and they sort of spilled out all over his chest and stomach. They were a mirror image. It took us forever, it felt like, to figure it out and then there was the green stuff all over him and—"

"Get on with it, Percy. What did it say?"

"Weird random stuff, but it also said we'd combine our powers and make the gods fear us. It said 'with combined powers you'll stroke their dead.'"

Annabeth’s expression shifted from irritated to confused.

"Stoke their dread," Percy corrected. "I always mess that up."

"And let me guess," Annabeth said. "You used your combined powers to work on the earthquake?"

Percy nodded. Maybelle started crying, so Annabeth held up a finger, sat Maybelle on the floor, and stripped out of her jacket and shirt. She hoisted Maybelle up, unhooked her nursing bra and began to feed her while standing. Percy waited. He wished he could be there with them.

"Yeah," he said after he spent a few seconds watching his baby nurse. "Jason and I held off the tsunami that was threatening Seattle while Nico built a seawall around the city. It worked. I don't know why that was a bad thing."

"It wasn't a bad thing, Percy," Annabeth said, her eyes softening. "It was a very good thing, what the three of you did. The news reports coming out of Seattle are sketchy because there's no power and cell towers are down, but it seems like the damage was much less catastrophic than it should have been. No flooding at all. You did a wonderful thing." She paused and looked down at Maybelle. When she met Percy’s eyes again, her face was grim. "The gods don't view the world the way we do. Whether or not you did the morally right thing doesn't matter to them all that much. I imagine the three of you together were scary powerful. Think about how the rulers of the universe have historically been toppled — Ouranos and Kronos."

"Their kids offed them." Percy nodded. "Yeah. I mean, I get that we're powerful and all, but none of us wants to take over. That's crazy. We couldn't. The gods would squash us like bugs."

"Like I said, the gods don't view the world the way we do. Zeus is probably skittish. And look, Jason hates his father. You and Poseidon barely speak. Nico may love Hades, but Hades is an outcast. Given that incredibly stupid Hera stunt Nico pulled and the way she ruined him in New Rome, well, he has plenty of motive to defy the gods."

"Nico doesn't care about power. You know that."
"I do. You do. Everyone who knows him does. The gods only know him as the outcast's son, too powerful, too smart. With you and Jason behind him, when you'd both obviously do anything for him? You're scary to think about. Plus, how many gods and goddesses can you think of who might be more loyal to one of the three of you than they are to Zeus?"

Oh, gods, Annabeth was right. How many gods and goddesses might back them instead of Zeus? Too many. And not only minor gods. Apollo would risk anything for Nico. So would Hades and Demeter. Persephone. Artemis would side with Apollo. Poseidon alone, allied with Hades against Zeus, would be close to unstoppable. Hestia, Kym, Athena, maybe. That would be a war that Zeus couldn't easily win, if he could win at all. Percy shook his head.

"But we wouldn't do that. Are you honestly telling me that Zeus could be scared of me and Nico?"

Annabeth bounced Maybelle some more. The bouncing made one of Maybelle’s little socks fall off. Annabeth didn’t notice.

"I'm saying I think he would be wary of your power and Nico's. He's scared of Jason."

Percy made a dismissive noise and gesture. Fleecy sure was letting the call drag on. She and Iris might support him in a war, too.

"Grace is the least powerful of the three of us. He's no threat."

"Not good guy Jason, right? He is good, Percy. You need to believe that. But are you saying you've never seen Jason vengeful or angry? You've never seen him scary?" Annabeth leaned forward and widened her eyes. Of course she was right. "What if I told you that almost every asshole thing Jason's done was something he got forced into doing by his godly parents? That everything was for Nico, to keep him safe?"

"I'd say bullshit. Jason's an ass."

"He isn't, Percy. He is the guy that you adopted the damned cat with, that you saved the world with, that sometimes you still laugh and joke with. He's not perfect, but so many of the hateful things he's done were forced upon him. Imagine it — if you'd spent the last five years being manipulated and used, trying like hell to keep the only person you love safe, and enduring all the hatred from all of us that Jason has. You don't think you'd be interested in vengeance? Jason is who Zeus and Hera forced him to be, and they're right to be scared of him."

Percy thought about it. Yes, Jason had gone on and on that one time about how Percy needed to keep Nico safe. He'd acted strangely, out of character, lying about Nico at that hearing in New Rome, jerking Nico around in the first place. Percy remembered Jason at sixteen. The guy had been honest and honorable. He wasn't a liar or a cheater, and he was Nico's best friend. Percy had believed in him, trusted him, and that trust had been earned. How had he turned from that boy into a hard, jealous, angry man? What would cause someone as good as Jason to do all the awful things he had? Was it really all forced on him by Zeus and Hera? All to keep Nico safe? Percy had wondered, had even believed something like it once upon a time when he and Jason were friends.

"Do you know this for sure? Why didn't you tell me?" Percy asked.

"It's guesses, Percy, mostly. I've seen him, the way he's changed. The constant has always been Nico. He has loved Nico through everything, even when he's done awful things to him. Jason, the guy we quested with, he wouldn't treat his true love the way he's treated Nico unless there was a damned good reason. That has to be it."
"So... Jason's a threat because he's mad that Hera and Zeus forced him away from Nico? Why would they do that, keep them apart?"

"I imagine it was to avoid the very thing they created. An angry son with the backing of the two most powerful men on the planet, who probably both have access to a lot of loyal gods."

"I don't back Jason."

Annabeth smiled, sad and resigned. "You back Nico. You'd do anything for him, right? Leave your wife and daughter because he needed you? That's what you did today." Percy started to argue, but Annabeth cut him off. "I understand that the world needed saving, but Percy, you followed Nico today not just to help but because you couldn't bear him going into harm's way without you. You did. So if you back Nico, and Nico backs Jason — and you know he would — it's the same as you backing Jason."

There was a blinding flash of light to the side of the Iris message on Annabeth's end. She covered Maybelle's eyes and closed her own. Percy cried out, but the light faded. Athena, regal and imposing, stepped into view of the Iris message.

"You cannot speak to Annabeth again, Perseus," the goddess said. "Do not endanger her or Maybelle by dragging them into your mistakes."

She swiped her hand through the message, and Percy reeled. He hadn't even said goodbye.

***

After sixteen days alone in his fucking cell, Percy had passed worried and scared and gone straight to pissed.

He had been rolling around all the stuff Annabeth had said. The more time he spent thinking about it, the more sense it made — and the more confusing it was.

He'd tried to call Nico right after Athena had ended his call to Annabeth that first night, but Fleecy and Iris both spit back his drachma and showed him nothing. He'd tried Reyna, too, but the same thing had happened.

Sitting in the cell with only his own thoughts and voice for company made Percy crazy. He missed Maybelle. He wanted to hold her and kiss her and curl her up in his arms. Sixteen days she'd gone without his stories. Would a baby forget her father in sixteen days? He missed Annabeth. He missed her strength and wisdom. She was his anchor, and without her, he felt unsteady and reckless. He missed Nico, damn him. Damn him because this waiting, this missing Maybelle at bedtime, it had to be because of Nico, because he hadn't been caught. Why couldn't the gods punish Percy and Jason and send them on their merry way? They could punish Nico when they found him. They didn't have to be together.

Percy's gut twisted at the thought. He wanted to go home to his wife and his child like nothing he'd ever wanted before. The situation wasn't that simple. If Hermes came and let him out of the cell right now, told him he was free to go, Percy would stay. He would stay or he'd run straight to Nico, if he could find him. He'd told Nico that he wouldn't abandon him, and he wasn't about to start now. It wasn't like he could, anyway. He loved Nico so much. He wasn't leaving without him.
There wasn't anything to see or do here. Percy had tried screaming for Jason, but he couldn't hear any sounds outside this room so he doubted Jason could hear him. At least Jason probably had some idea what was going on. His dad may be scared of him, but he wouldn't hang him out to dry.

A door appeared in the wall and Hermes stuck his head into the room.

"C'mon, Jackson," he said. "It's time."

Percy ran out into the hall. He was so glad to be free from the cell. Jason, looking dead on his feet, stood with Hermes. His hair was a mess, and his clothes were wrinkled. Percy doubted he looked any better. He turned to Hermes.

"Hermes, what's going on? I want to see my father! Where's Nico? Can I talk to Annabeth?"

Hermes didn't answer. He walked down the hall the way they'd come in sixteen days ago. Percy was pissed. He hadn't expected to get to talk to Nico or Annabeth, but he'd thought he might get some sort of information. He wheeled on Jason.

"Fuck, Grace. What's going on here?"

"I don't know anything more than you, Percy."

Percy wanted to punch him. Surely he knew something, unless...

"You've been a prisoner, too? But he's your dad, man."

Jason nodded and avoided Percy's eyes.

Percy raised his hand to grab Jason's face and make their eyes meet, when a hard hand clamped onto his shoulder. He winced.

"Don't speak, just listen," Hermes said. "Keep your heads. This doesn't have to be so bad. You can't let your anger rule you, Percy. Stay calm."

The words "What the fuck?" were on the tip of Percy's tongue, but Hermes was already opening the door to the throne room. Percy was so anxious to get answers that he hadn't even realized they'd arrived at the door.

He followed Hermes inside and glared at Zeus and that awful bitch Hera. He hadn't forgiven her for being mean to Annabeth when they were kids or for being cruel to Nico. He wasn't about to act afraid or intimidated by these bastards, even if he was fucking terrified now that they were in the room. Did this mean they'd found Nico? Oh, gods, Percy had wanted them to find Nico before, when this seemed like such a small thing, but now, staring around at all the assembled gods and goddesses, packed in like sardines there were so many, he realized they weren't going to receive a slap on the wrist. He cursed himself for ever wishing Nico would be found. Whatever was coming, he didn't want Nico to endure it, too.

Jason hunched pitifully, standing to Percy's left like a meek little weak-ass kid, ready to cave to whatever punishment mommy and daddy dished out. The strategy was okay, especially if Zeus and Hera believed Jason was going to try to overthrow them, but Percy and Jason needed an advocate. Percy would have to be the one.

And where was Nico? Percy's knees shook. What if they'd killed him? Was that why he wasn't here? Percy met his father's eye. Poseidon may not speak to him much, but he was friendly when their
paths crossed. Today, serious and stoic, he watched Percy like they were strangers. Percy opened his mouth, and Poseidon gave a tiny shake of his head. No talking. Percy clenched his fists.

There was a scuffling at the back of the room, followed by a gasp. Percy turned and his own voice joined in with the gasping. Fuck. Nico was strung up like a torture victim. That motherfucker Ares had his hand around tight bronze chains that bound Nico's wrists and ankles. Hephaestus limped along on the other side of Nico. And Nico, oh gods. Percy wished he had one of the puke pills because his beautiful baby was so broken and battered. Nausea flared heavy and fast in Percy. Bones in Nico's face were broken. The whites of his eyes were red. Blood spilled from somewhere, and something was wrong with his body. Everything was out of place. Percy rushed toward him.

Ares screamed and threw Nico to the ground. He landed at Percy's feet with the horrible crunching sound of bones shattering.

Percy dropped to his knees and dug around on Nico, searching for some way to help him, to free him from the chains. Maybe if he could find some water...His hands ran into Jason's, and he glanced up to see Jason kneeling on Nico's other side, on the verge of crumpling.

Jason stopped moving. He was staring at Nico's face. Percy was almost glad Nico was facing away from him; he wouldn't be able to cope with seeing much more of his ruined lover.

"Up, fools! Stand!" Nico hissed.

Percy wasn't surprised Nico was strategizing, thinking of how to get them out of this. He huffed a few shallow breaths. They were going to be okay. He stood, reached down, and gently lifted Nico to his knees. Nico's shoulder was in the wrong spot. His hands were bound to his ankles. There was wetness where Percy held Nico's shirt, and he realized it was blood. He'd been wrong. This wasn't going to be okay at all.

"Trouble?" It took Percy a second to realize Zeus must be talking, but he wasn't addressing Nico, Jason, or Percy.

"Took me a while to forge chains that could hold him, Father," Hephaestus said. "He's a slippery little devil."

Zeus rolled his eyes.

"Asshole's a mean little son of a bitch, Father," Ares sneered. He was such a fucking coward. Percy hated him. The guy had to outweigh Nico by a couple hundred pounds. He probably enjoyed the way Nico was hurting. "He's tricky. Evil."

"He's a mortal, my sons," Zeus said. "It is your weakness that prevented you from fetching him, not his strength. Why are so many of my assembled children such gross disappointments?"

Zeus had babies as often as a rabbit. There were a zillion of his kids here. Percy skimmed the crowd of gods and goddesses. Athena looked serious and removed. Artemis would make a great professional poker player; her face gave away nothing. Was that Persephone in the second row? Her hands fretted, pulling petals off a bouquet of daffodils. Demeter's robes were flashing and changing. Her face was red and she wasn't breathing. Apollo. Apollo looked completely unlike Apollo. He was a mess. His hair was wild. His eyes were wet. He was splotchy, and his clothes were wrinkled and dirty. He wouldn't be such a mess unless Nico was about to die, or unless they'd been found out. Oh, gods. Nico was going to die. Nico was going to die.

"My greatest disappointment," Zeus said quietly. "My biggest mistake."
Zeus was talking about Jason. He glared down his nose at his only mortal son. Some of Percy’s anger broke off and shifted. Jason didn’t deserve to be treated that way.

"My lord, Father, please, if I may treat his injuries," Apollo said.

"Are his injuries immediately life-threatening, my son?"

Apollo's voice shook. "Not currently, Lord, no, but—"

"Then he can wait."

"Like hell he can!" Hades. Perfect timing. He wouldn't let Nico die. Percy had never been so glad to see his irritating uncle, who was standing in the rear of the room, giving off a terrifying fear aura, if the reactions of the gods around him were anything to go by. Percy couldn't tell because he was already more scared than he'd ever been.

"Oh, look, another disappointment."

Percy swiveled his head back to Zeus. The bastard was examining his nails.

"You promised me, brother, no harm would come to him if I allowed him to be brought here." Percy ping-ponged his head to see Hades striding forward, ready to challenge Zeus.

"I said, brother," Zeus sneered, "that he wouldn't be harmed if he didn't fight his extradition. Look at my sons. Does it look like he didn't fight? His injuries remain."

Percy checked out Ares and Hephaestus more closely. They’d gone to sit on their thrones, and they looked like shit. Nico had done a great job kicking godly ass. Despite his terror, Percy couldn’t help his pride.

"Perhaps we should move this hearing along, since all of our, ahem, guests are here," Athena said.

Percy winked at her. A cocky attitude was all he had going for him now, and he wasn't going to waste it.

"Very well," Zeus said. "Perseus Jackson, Jason Grace, Nico di Angelo, you have been brought before the council of Olympians because you committed acts of treason to the gods. I recommend we kill them immediately. Except di Angelo. He can suffer for his other crimes."

Hades bellowed, and Apollo sobbed.

So they knew. Damn it. Percy glared at Apollo. This much was his fault. Nico was young and naive. Apollo was thousands of years old. He should have left Nico the hell alone. Ignoring all the good Apollo had done Nico was easier for Percy right now. He didn't have room for ambiguity, not when all their lives were on the line. He had been threatened with death before. It wasn't something that scared him anymore. Nico being threatened with death, or the thought of leaving Maybelle behind, that was different.

"Like hell you're going to kill us right now. What'd we even do?" Percy thought he understood, but shouldn't the gods need to explain their reasoning? "Isn't there like some right to a fair trial thing or something?"

"Zeus, I agree with Perseus," Athena said. "The traitors appear to be ignorant of their crimes. They should at least be informed before their deaths."
Percy gave Athena a grateful nod. She acted as though she hadn’t seen. He’d be sure to send her extra Christmas cards.

"You interfered with godly business. You used your powers in direct opposition to the gods—"

"We fucking saved lives!" Percy screamed. Zeus's proclamation confirmed his worst fears. How could the gods, his father, have orchestrated the deaths of so many? "You should be pleased!"

"You are not gods, Jackson," Dionysus said. "You were not intended to use your powers like that. It is in direct defiance of our order. You three are too powerful."

Oh, gods, Dionysus got his name right. The shit was on.

"Enough!" Zeus snapped. "You've said too much, fool."

"Brother, it may be prudent to explore another option," Percy's dad said. Percy was torn between gratitude and revulsion. He’d admired Poseidon, cherished their connection, and the man had tried to kill thousands of people. What he’d attempted was horrible. And yet, here he was trying to save Percy's life. "We have discussed—"

"No. I do not wish it," Zeus said.

He was such a fucking bastard. He'd kill his own kid! Jason was standing there in front of Zeus, and Percy had never felt so much pity for another demigod, not even Nico after he found out Bianca had died. Jason looked less-than; his powerful physique drew in, shrunken and shamed. His hands flitted uselessly toward Nico and away, like he was afraid he'd only make things worse. Percy glared at Zeus.

Zeus raised his master bolt and pointed it at Nico.

Oh, no. No. Nonononono.

"I've changed my mind, little brat," he said. "You can die first, and your lovers can watch. Much more entertaining."

Lightning shot out of the tip of the bolt, straight at Nico. Before Percy could manage to pull Riptide out of his pocket, Nico defended himself, raising a wall of solid black rock. The bolt bounced harmlessly off the rock and hit some chick in a back row. She screamed and fell.

Zeus sneered at Nico. Percy glanced down at his friend, his lover, his love. He had his head raised, as angry and vengeful as Zeus.

"Bastard child. How many blasts do you think you can block? Your power is finite. Mine is infinite!" Zeus acted deranged, screaming at a kid.

Quicker than Percy could react, another bolt shot out at Nico. Jason deflected it with his sword, and it must have hit another god, because there was a yell from somewhere in the room. Percy couldn't afford to divert his attention from Zeus again to see what had happened. Riptide elongated in his hand.

He was ready for the next bolt, but Zeus shot at Jason, not Nico, and Percy couldn't reach him. Percy was filled with remorse, dreading the sound of Jason's death. Instead of a scream or groan of agony, there was another rumble, and out of the corner of his eye, Percy saw another rock shelter spring into place. Gods, Nico was strong.
Zeus took aim at Nico again, and this time Percy was ready. Even so, he was almost too late. He caught the strike on Riptide, deflected it, inches from Nico's body. Nico had slumped sideways, and Jason was gently lowering him to the ground.

Zeus screamed and shot at Nico another time before Percy could even raise his blade.

Jason threw his body over Nico's. The lightning hit his back. Percy watched in horror as Jason shook and trembled on the ground. He was bleeding, but Percy couldn't see from where. Percy realized with horror that Nico was bleeding a puddle, too. His blood mixed with Jason's. They were both dying, and there was nothing Percy could do.

"Stop it!" he screamed. "Please, Father! Zeus! Please! Gods, please don't kill them!"

Zeus shot at Nico again. Or maybe he was aiming at Percy or Jason. Things were so chaotic, it was hard to tell. Percy didn't know where to put Riptide. One of them was going to die. Even Jason couldn't survive two lightning strikes. A black dome covered them, all three of them, and Percy was thrust into darkness. Hades. Percy screamed in fear and relief. A second later, the dome was gone and Zeus was firing again. A wall of water jerked in front of them and swallowed up the lightning.

This couldn't keep happening. Was Zeus going to fight Hades and Poseidon? Would this be the way the gods fell? Percy didn't even care. Not right now. Right now, Nico was dying at his feet. Percy sobbed and dropped to his knees, straddling Nico's hips. If Nico died, Percy was going with him.

"Stop it!" Percy screamed again. "You're going to kill him! Please, please! I'll give you anything, do anything. Please don't kill him! Kill me instead!"

There was a pause, a place where Zeus wasn't shooting. Jason was screaming something private, something none of them were meant to hear. Blood gurgled out of his mouth with the words; his eyes were locked on Nico's face. Zeus curled his lip and watched. Nico's blood soaked into Percy's jeans. There was too much, more than a body could bleed and live. Percy dropped his hand to Nico's chest and felt a shuddering breath. He waited for the next one, but it didn't come.

Nico was dead.

Percy stared at the body beneath him and gasped out a sob. He slipped his hand up and tangled his fingers in Nico's bloody curls. The clang of his sword echoed around the room as he dropped it to the floor so he could use both hands to hold his love. He leaned over Nico, curled his arms around him, and sobbed into his dumb black t-shirt.

"Brother," Poseidon spoke, quiet and strained. "End this. Hades and I do not wish to fight you. Do not ruin more lives. Let Percy go home. Allow Nico to be returned to the Underworld with his father—"

"You killed my son!" Hades yelled, his voice awash in grief. Percy had never heard a sound so heart-wrenching. He knew, knew in his bones in the way only another parent can, that Hades's grief was worse than his own. The Lord of the Dead was ragged, raw, anguished. "I don't want him in the Underworld as a dead man. I want him alive! If you won't fix this, I will! Do not think I will not resurrect him! He will be a god and together, we will destroy you!"

Whether Hades was talking from grief or anger, Percy wasn't sure. He didn't know if Hades could do the things he was threatening. He lifted his head slightly and wiped his tears and Nico's blood from his eyes. Poseidon and Hades were standing over him, staring at him and Nico on the floor. Hades's eyes were rimmed red. Tears streaked his face. Next to Nico, Jason was all but dead. He was breathing, but only barely. He wasn't conscious.
"Hades, please," Poseidon said. "Zeus, we don't want war. We want our sons to return home."

"I'm not satisfied. He's going to be a god," Hades growled. "so you can't do this to him again."

"You can't disrupt the balance of power that way," Poseidon said, touching Hades's arm. "It can't be only one of them, and Percy needs to be returned to his wife and daughter."


"Brothers, please—"

"Jackson," Hades croaked, and Percy met his uncle's eyes. "What would you do for him?"

Percy didn't hesitate.

"Anything."

"Percy, you don't know what you're agreeing to," Poseidon said. "Think about Annabeth and Maybelle. Your life—"

"No harm would come to your wife or daughter," Hades said. He crouched in front of his son and stroked his hair. His bony white fingers stained red. The tortured souls in Hades's cloak had nothing on their master. "He was mine, Percy, my world, the way Maybelle is yours. If you could help me bring him back, make him whole again, would you? I swear on Nico's blood, I will protect Annabeth and Maybelle for their entire lives, if you help me save my son."

"Stop it, Hades." Poseidon knelt in front of Percy, too. "The only way to do what Hades wants is to give up your mortality, Percy. You wouldn't live normally. You may not see your wife or child again."

"But they would live?" Percy wiped his nose on his arm and tried to gather his thoughts. "Annabeth and Maybelle, they'd be okay? Hades swore to protect them. And Nico would, what? Be a god?"

"I will not allow it," Zeus said. He was still perched on his throne like an arrogant king who's lost control of his court.

Hades didn't take his eyes off Nico. "You will, or you will find yourself at war."

"They will be punished, then," Zeus said.

"I bow to your wisdom," Hades said. "We will decide the punishment together."

Zeus lowered his head in agreement, and Poseidon pursed his lips.

"You must choose, Percy." Hades said, his eyes black like his son's. "Save my son; perhaps save us all; or go back to your mortal life."

Percy tightened his grip on Nico, whom he loved so much. Not more than Maybelle, though.

"Jason? Him, too? He'd be a god?"

"It must be all three of you or none, son," Poseidon said. "Zeus will push for a harsh punishment because of Jason and Nico."
Zeus had punished Dionysus with a hundred years without booze and a job at camp. What, would he make Nico give up sex and Percy and Jason give up sex with Nico? Percy could handle that. Nico would live.

"Quickly, Percy. My boy grows cold," Hades said.

"I—"

"You must know," Poseidon put his hand on Percy’s shoulder, "Nico does not love you the way you love him. He loves the son of Jupiter."

Percy rubbed his cheek over Nico’s curls and glared at his father.

"I'm not doing it because I love Nico. I'm doing it because I love Maybelle. If she's ever in danger, I want someone to do for her what I'm about to do for Nico. The grief Hades is going through, I couldn’t bear to be in his place. I love you, Dad, but maybe you don't understand." Percy switched his attention to Hades. "I'll do this. I agree to the terms."

Hades held out his hand, and Percy shook it. Nico's blood cemented their bond.

Chapter End Notes

Now you know it all. What Nico does. What Percy did.

I'd love to hear your thoughts. One last chapter to go, my dear readers.
The Beginning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nico walked quickly through the halls of his father's dark palace. His dark palace, he supposed. He'd had an extremely busy start to his duties as the second in command of the Underworld. Instead of letting him gradually get his feet wet, Hades had thrown him in headfirst. Nico hadn't rested since the last night in Australia. He was grateful. If he stopped working, he would think about what he'd given up.

Guards saluted as he passed them, and Nico saluted back. Hades ignored the guards, but Nico felt it would be more prudent to show a softer side of the lords of the realm. At the entrance to Hades's office, Alecto stopped Nico with a small bow.

"Master Nico, allow me to announce your arrival."

Nico gazed fondly at his leathery old bat-winged equivalent of a great-aunt. "Alecto, he knows I'm coming. He can probably hear us having this conversation. I don't see the point."

Alecto bared her pointed teeth in a smile. "The point is, it's fun, Master."

"Yeah, but Dad—"

"Can hear you two yammering like sledgehammers in my brain!" Hades shouted from inside his office. "Give Alecto her fun and get in here, Nico!"

Nico tilted his head and closed his eyes. "You heard the boss."

Alecto straightened to her full, tiny height. "Announcing the arrival of His Royal Highness, Prince of the Underworld, Duke of Internal Affairs, His Father's Right-Hand Man, Prisoner Number 14509876345-123423, Master Nico."

"Really? Is the prisoner part necessary every time?"

"If Master Hades is making me say the rest then I'm fitting in the prisoner number, too, Master Nico."

Alecto giggled in a way that didn't fit her appearance. "You'd better get those reports in there."

All of the ghosts, gods, and creatures Nico had worked with so far called him Master Nico or Lord Nico, the same as they called his father. He didn't know what to make of it. Nico bit his lip and opened the door to his father's study.

"Dad, I've got those numbers on the cost per prisoner in the Fields of Punishment. I think we'd be better off if we itemized expenses based on...whoa."

Hades adjusted his gold cuff link and smiled at Nico. He was dressed in an impeccable three-piece suit, black, of course, with a tie made of actual gold. Hades smoothed his hair straight back and gestured to the wall of degrees, where another suit was hanging.

"Put the reports on the desk, Nico, and get changed."

"What are we getting so spiffed up for?" Nico willed himself into the suit as he asked, though he discarded the gold tie and exchanged it with a simple black one. He conjured a mirror and adjusted
the suit so it fit him perfectly. Nico fixed his own hair, which had been dangling a bit in his eyes. He checked, and his cuff links and shoes were black and stylish, what Apollo would have chosen for him, which was exactly what he'd wished for.

"Are you going senile, boy? Your sister's getting married today." Hades smacked the back of Nico's head, which made the hair fall back in his eyes again. Nico sighed and started over.

"I didn't forget. I've been down here six days? That's hard to believe." As a reflex, Nico ran his hands over his black watch and his bracelet.

Hades tsked. "Why did I pay for such an expensive education if you can't even do simple math? Really, Nico. Keep up."

"I'm not sure you technically paid for any of my education, Dad. I think you sent me, and I went. We probably stole the education. And I can do math."

"We don't steal. We are a king and a prince, imbecile. We appropriate." Hades thumbed through Nico's report while Nico readjusted his tie. "Nice report. Run the numbers for Isle of the Blest when we get back. Some of those goody-goodies are getting a bit too demanding about their luxury, I think. Do it like you said, by the inmate."

"They're heroes there, not inmates."

"All the same to me," Hades said. "Are you ready?"

Nico wasn't sure if he was ready or not. Hazel's wedding had been his one request of the gods. He wanted to see her happier than she'd ever been. Afterward, though, he wouldn't see her again until she came down to his father's...his...realm. Reyna, too. This was his only chance to say thank you and I love you and goodbye.

"Remember, this day is about Hazel," Hades said, seeming to pick up on Nico's mood. "You cannot be sad. She relies on your strength, Nico, and she needs to be comforted by the idea that you are happy with the hand you've been dealt, the hand you chose."

"I'll remember. You know why I asked for this day to be my last?"

Hades stood behind and slightly to the side of Nico as he checked his appearance in the mirror. He was taller and Nico was more attractive, but they were so much alike.

"Because you love your sister, and you want to see her happy. You are a family man, Nico, and I think that is one of your attributes of which I am most proud. It is why you made this sacrifice, too, for Jackson's family."

"He sacrificed himself for us, didn't he? He made a bargain with you," Nico said quietly. "The time I died."

"How long have you known?" Hades asked. "I did not get the impression he wanted you to know."

"I didn't know for sure. It was a theory that had been building. He was so certain about some things, and a few of the gods and goddesses alluded to it when they came to visit our prison. Then, at the solstice, it was the only scenario that fit some of the confusing stuff people were saying." Nico faced his father. "I couldn't let him suffer for my mistakes, Dad."

"You made very few mistakes, Nico, and saving lives that day was not one of them. Even your affair with Apollo could hardly be termed a mistake. We gods share few secrets with our demigod
children. There was so much you didn't know. Should you have demigod children of your own someday, you will see how the relationship, by necessity, must be limited. It will be painful. It is painful." Hades frowned for a moment, and his black eyes went far away before he focused on Nico and smiled. "This is better, having you here with me on equal terms."

"We'll never be on equal terms. I will perpetually be in your shadow, and I'm alright with that." Nico patted his father's shoulder. "And I'm never having kids."

"Never say never, Lord Nico," Hades said. "Shall we?"

Nico nodded. "May I?"

Hades looped his arm through Nico's. "Take it away, son."

***

Northern California was beautiful in June. It didn't approach the beauty of Hazel Levesque. Nico first saw her from behind as little Allie Vargas worked to pin elaborate curls in Hazel's hair. He and Hades, now showing his Roman aspect, so Nico supposed he had to call his dad Pluto, had arrived unnoticed at the entrance to the praetor's chambers. Nico shifted behind his father. While Allie pinned Hazel's hair, Annabeth and Reyna bustled about the back of Hazel's dress, shifting fabrics that Nico thought must be satin and lace. In the mirror, Hazel was applying lipstick, not that she needed it. Her face glowed with life and passion. Her gold eyes sparkled.

Hades, Pluto, had the good grace to wait until Hazel set down the lipstick before he cleared his throat to announce their presence. Annabeth and Reyna froze, crouched at the ground, and stared at Pluto in wonder. Allie pinned one last curl and turned, no doubt to tell off the male interloper, when she froze, too. Nico doubted Allie had seen many gods.

Hazel watched her friends in the mirror, and her kind face morphed from confusion to happiness to elation when she caught sight of Nico behind their father. She whirled, undoing all the hard work Annabeth and Reyna had put into straightening the part of her dress that hung on the floor, and ran toward the men.

Nico and Hazel had their eyes fixed on each other, but at the last moment, Hazel seemed to remember she was in the presence of her father. She tore her eyes from Nico and curtsied to their dad.

"Pluto, it is an honor to see you," Hazel said.

"Yes, well, I thought perhaps you'd like to be escorted down the aisle by myself and your brother." Pluto's voice softened. "Go ahead, Hazel. Say hello to Nico."

With that little bit of permission, Hazel hurled herself into Nico's arms. Nico had practiced touching gently, but he'd had no living humans on whom to practice. He needn't have worried. Once Hazel's tiny body was in his arms and her warm cheek pressed against his, he knew there was no way he could cause her harm. He wrapped his arms around her and swung her around in circles until they were hopelessly twisted in her dress.

Hazel buried her head against Nico's face and kissed him over and over. Nico closed his eyes and took deep breath after deep breath. He tried to etch the cinnamon smell of her and the tender feel of
"I've missed you, big brother," Hazel said. Her voice was tiny and choked.

"I've missed you, too, my precious sister," Nico said. A tear dribbled down his cheek. "You look radiant."

"Now, now, none of this crying business," Pluto said. He waved his hand and Hazel's tears vanished. "A bride cannot cry before she gets married. Nico, I'll leave you here to visit with the women. I believe I'll wander over and have a chat with this son of Mars before he weds my girl."

Pluto vanished.

"Oh," Hazel's fingers tensed on Nico's face. "Should I send you after him, Nico? I don't want him to scare off Frank."

Nico laughed and kissed Hazel's forehead. "Frank's not getting scared off, I promise. If I went after Dad, he'd get cranky, and you don't want that."

Hazel moved her hands over Nico's cheeks, through his hair, all over his face. Her pouffy long sleeves caught on his shoulders. She stared deep into his eyes. "You're different. More you. It suits you."

"I'll say," Allie said. She glanced at Hazel and appeared to be trying to find something to say that Hazel wouldn't find offensive. "You, uh, you were an incredibly brave man, Nico. It's good to see you."

"Thanks, Allie. You, too," Nico said. "Do you think you could help me get unstuck from Hazel's dress? I want to look at her, not become enmeshed in her."

Allie giggled and went to work. Nico laid his chin on top of Hazel's head and concentrated on nothing but how much he loved her.

While Allie untangled Nico from what she told him was Hazel's train, Nico kept his arms around Hazel but let his eyes wander to Reyna and Annabeth, who were talking quietly on the other side of the room. Nico wasn't sure whether or not he should tell them that he could hear every word they said, which was mainly Annabeth counseling Reyna not to hit Nico because it would hurt her. Nico gathered she'd tried it on Percy. He decided not to say anything. It was Percy's business whether or not he told Annabeth about the extent of their powers.

Percy.

Did that mean he was here, at the wedding? Nico yearned for him and for Jason. He hadn't let his mind wander to his lovers or to the hurt and betrayal he'd undoubtedly caused. At least Percy would have a life with Annabeth and Maybelle. Nico took comfort in knowing he'd done the right thing for his sweet little niece.

"There. Untangled." Allie stepped back and pretended to dust off her hands.

"Thank you," Nico said.

Hazel nudged him and tilted her head toward Reyna. Nico nodded.

"Hey, Reyna."
"Nico." Reyna walked toward him slowly, like he was a wounded animal and she hadn't decided whether to help him or eat him for dinner. Her hair was braided, but it was somehow softer than usual, and her pale pink bridesmaid dress seemed completely wrong on her.

Nico opened his mouth to tell her she looked almost as beautiful as Hazel, but he never got the chance. Reyna threw her caution to the wind and made a mad dash straight to Nico's arms. Nico didn't twirl her around like he'd done Hazel, but he buried his head in her hair and held her as tight as he dared.

"I love you," he whispered. "I'm so sorry. I love you. I'm so sorry."

"Enough," Reyna whispered back. "We're all here for Hazel. For what it's worth, Nico, I love you, too, and I am not sorry for one moment of being your sister. You will always be my precious one."

Nico sobbed a little and forgot himself for a moment until Reyna yelped and said, "Too tight! Too tight!"

Nico loosened his hold and whispered one last sentence. "I love you as much as I loved Bianca."

Reyna gasped, and she pulled back enough so that their eyes made contact. She leaned back in and whispered, "I love you so much more than Hylla."

Nico laughed, and so did Reyna. The laughter was loud and boisterous and only marginally on the proper side of crazy. Reyna kissed Nico's cheek and stepped away.

"What were you two saying?" Hazel asked, the hint of an innocent accusation in her voice.

"He told me I look hideous in pink," Reyna said. "I wholeheartedly agree."

Hazel shook her head, but she didn't push. "Nico, can you tell us about where you've been? What's next? Annabeth said Percy came home after the solstice, but no one had seen you or Jason and..."

"Well, um," Nico let his eyes flit from Hazel to Annabeth. He wasn't sure what to say. He decided on the least painful bit of the truth he could provide. "I'm not sure what Jason's been up to, but Dad's kept me busy nonstop downstairs. I guess he doesn't believe in breaking in a guy slowly."

"Ooh, what are you the god of, hot stuff?" Allie asked.

Hazel lightly slapped Allie's hand.

"Ooh, what are you the god of, Nico?" Allie asked, her eyes narrowed at Hazel.

Nico chuckled, both at Hazel and Allie's display and at his godly title. "Well, Dad's making everyone call me this horrifying title, but my actual godly title is 'God of Underworld Domestic Affairs,' and I think I'll put my education to pretty good use. For today, though, I really just want to be Hazel and Reyna's brother." Nico smiled at Hazel. "I'm so happy for you, sis."

"Thank you, Nico," Hazel said, "but—"

"I think it's about time for the ceremony to start," Annabeth said. "We should finish getting you ready. You can talk to Nico later."

"Please, don't let me keep you. I can wait outside or whatever you need." Nico flashed Annabeth a grateful smile. She cocked her head to the side and contemplated him.

"Don't be silly, Nico," Hazel said. "Have a seat, and when it's time you can go fetch our father and
do me the great honor of escorting me down the aisle."

"The honor is mine, believe me."

Nico spent the next fifteen minutes watching the finish work of preparing a bride for a wedding. He'd witnessed it before, with Clarisse and a bit with Annabeth, but it was so much sweeter when the bride was his sister. Eloping to Vegas still seemed like a better, less stressful option, but Nico could see how the ritual and ceremony could create something worthwhile, too.

Soon enough, Hazel's hair was pinned and her veil arranged. She sent Allie to tell the men and asked Nico to go find Pluto.

Nico stepped outside and said, "Dad."

He waited three beats before Pluto appeared at his side.

"Is it time, my son?" Pluto asked.

"She's ready."

"She's a beautiful young woman, so much like her mother in appearance." Pluto stopped with his hand on the door of the praetor's chambers. "However, she is a much more admirable human being. My last spate of children, you and your sisters, have made me proud. I think I'll stop while I'm ahead."

Nico laughed at the absurdity of his father until he remembered this man wasn't his father, exactly. Pluto winked, and they went back inside.

Allie and Reyna bustled about, arranging Hazel between Pluto and Nico and getting her train and veil situated so they wouldn't get stuck as Hazel walked.

"So, hot lips," Allie addressed Nico, "Hazel knows where she's going, but it's probably a little hard for her to see."

"It is, and quit calling my brother names, Allie." Hazel's voice was somewhat muffled by the veil.

Allie rolled her eyes and muttered "old lady" before continuing as though Hazel hadn't interrupted. "I'll walk out first, followed by AB, then Reyna. Count to thirty after Reyna goes and follow her all the way in. Got it?"

Nico saluted. "Aye aye, Napoleon."

"That's Praetor Napoleon to you, Lord of Underworld Domestic Affairs." Allie winked at Nico and pinched his biceps before adopting a powerful square-shouldered stance and gracefully walking away.

"She is what, at some point in history, we would have called a firecracker," Pluto said.

"I'd still call her that, Dad. She's mellowed, too," Nico said.

Annabeth watched Allie before she turned to Hazel and squeezed her hand where it was latched over Nico's arm. Nico noted she didn't touch him. If anxiety could still roil his stomach, it would be pitching a tempest over that slight absence of contact.

"Congratulations, sweet Hazel," Annabeth said, and then she was gone, too, walking after Allie.
"Have you done this before, Lord Pluto?" Reyna asked. "Have you walked a daughter down the aisle?"

"Not for a very long time, dear," Pluto said. "I may have forgotten how."

"Well, gods know, Nico has no clue," Reyna said. "Step one foot forward and bring the other foot even with it. Stop. Repeat. It's a bit like dancing, Nico."

Nico nodded, and then Reyna was gone. Nico began to count.

"Nico, don't be silly," Hazel said. "You don't actually have to count. It's my wedding. We walk down the aisle when I decide we should."

"Okay. Right. Okay." Nico nodded and shifted his shoulders. He felt so nervous all of a sudden. He was giving Hazel away. He had given everyone away.

"Ready, Father?" Hazel asked.

"As ready as one ever is, I suppose," Pluto said.

"Then walk with me. Step. Together. Step. Together." Hazel quietly repeated herself as she guided her father and brother to her wedding.

Nico listened intently to Hazel and followed her directions. When the sound of soft piano music became louder and played the wedding march, Nico listened beneath it for Hazel's voice and Percy's. He heard Percy, felt him, near the front of the congregants. He was singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Maybelle was here, too, with her father. Nico relaxed and held his head higher.

The hilltop garden they were entering was awash with bright oranges, pinks, and purples and the smell of lavender. At the garden’s center, beaming at his bride, stood Frank, who deserved someone as good as Hazel as much as Hazel deserved someone as good as him. Shoulders thrown back, eyes focused, he looked more handsome and taller than ever. Next to him were Leo, Dakota from the fifth cohort, and some guy Nico didn't know. On the other side, Reyna, Annabeth, and Allie were already in place.

Nico and Pluto delivered Hazel to the altar. They each gave her a kiss and were shooed away by Allie, who snapped her fingers and pointed at two empty chairs in the front row. A few chitters broke out at such informal treatment of gods, but Nico and Pluto hurried into their seats and, for the most part, tried not to stand out.

Nico craned his neck in the direction he'd heard Percy's voice. For the briefest second, his eyes lit on Percy, who was staring at him with more passion than Nico could handle. Whether it was a good or bad passion, Nico couldn't tell. Percy's eyes held his, and then there was movement next to Percy and his eyes shifted away. They focused instead on Maybelle, who sat in Piper's lap and reached for her father. Percy's face broke into an exaggerated grin, and Nico returned his attention to Hazel. Even if Percy hated him, he'd done the right thing.

The wedding was short and sweet. It had none of the Roman pomp and circumstance Nico had expected. A resident of New Rome whom Nico remembered from his brief stay here officiated the ceremony. She was dressed simply, absent the fancy robes they'd made Jason wear when he was Pontifex. This woman had a simple gray dress and short brown hair. She spoke about love and how whatever made love special, Hazel and Frank had it in spades.

Hazel and Frank exchanged sweet, self-written vows. They each put a ring on the other's finger. They kissed, soft and chaste, when the officiant said it was time. Nico stood and cheered and openly
wept when his sister, who was now Frank's wife, held hands with her husband and ran down the aisle, happy and full of hope.

***

The wedding had been small and intimate, but the reception was held inside the forum and it seemed everyone in New Rome and Camp Jupiter had been invited. It wasn't every day two popular former Praetors wed.

Thankfully, the music was quiet, nothing more than a string quartet in a corner, and Nico had little to do except try to remain mostly invisible and let the spotlight shine on Hazel and Frank. Hades and Persephone, who'd been sitting inconspicuously among the guests, each gave Hazel a hug and said their goodbyes as soon as the newlyweds were ready to receive guests. Hades, as Pluto, shook Frank's hand in a way Nico recognized as a bit too harsh, but Frank didn't flinch.

Nico sat alone at a table and watched his sister. He'd performed the role of "father" in the father-daughter dance, happily moving Hazel around the forum, and for a moment he'd forgotten that after today he would never touch his living little sister again. When his turn was up, he politely declined requests from a dozen girls and made his way to this table. Once here, he'd stowed himself away in the shadows and done his best to become invisible.

Hazel danced her way in and out of Frank's arms, alternating between him and a new partner with each dance. Nico's eyes perked up when Percy bowed in front of her and waltzed her around the floor just as Nico had taught him.

"This seat taken?"

Nico jumped and watched Annabeth, with Maybelle in her arms, take a seat next to him.

"I thought I was hidden," Nico said.

"You are," Annabeth's smile seemed more like a grimace. "I've known you a long time, Nico."

Nico wasn't sure what to say. He'd done what he could for Annabeth, but she didn't seem pleased that he had. That was alright, of course. He hadn't quite done it to please her. It would be helpful to know if she was angry or confused or happy, but as usual, she gave nothing away.

"Hide us with you, will you? Maybelle needs to nurse, and I don't feel like being discreet."

Nico darkened the area further. "Is that good? I can still see you fine, but I don't know what you can see."

"Almost pitch black. I can see the glimmer of your eyes and your damned annoyingly perfect teeth."

Nico closed his mouth. He was an immortal, all-powerful god, and he was intimidated by a twenty-three year old mortal mother for whom he felt nothing more than friendship. His reaction was pathetic, if he thought too long about it.

"Sorry," Nico said. He kept his teeth covered by his lips.

Annabeth yanked down her dress and put Maybelle on her breast. Their area of darkness was quiet
except for the soft suckling noises Maybelle made. Once in a while she'd pinch at Annabeth's chest, and a couple times she pulled her mother's hair. Annabeth would smooth her finger over Maybelle's fist until she let go.

"You're a good mother," Nico said, still with his lips covering his teeth. He had a vague childhood memory of some old uncle back in Italy who spoke with his dentures removed. That was how he sounded.

"For the love of..." Now Annabeth’s irritation was clear. "Nico, it's okay for me to see your teeth. Speak normally. I don't know why you work so hard to defer to what I want on small issues when, on the things that matter most, you do whatever you think is best or suits your own purposes."

"Annabeth, I—"

"Wait. Let me get re-positioned. Maybelle's really starting to get heavy. Be still." Annabeth flung her leg over Nico's thigh and laid her head on his chest. She lowered her arm to rest on her thigh so that Maybelle was in a more upright position. Nico could see how propping her arm on her leg kept Annabeth from having to carry so much weight in her arms. Without hesitation, he wrapped his arm around her lower back to offer additional support.

"Good?"

Annabeth tangled her foot around his calf, scooted tighter into his body, and nodded. "Thanks."

Nico returned to what he'd been about to say. "I'm a highly imperfect person, Annabeth. I'm not sure what else I'm supposed to say. I've said sorry, and I've meant it. Sometimes I've done what you wanted; sometimes I've done what I wanted; and it seems like no matter what, we end up in the same place. I've never known how to fix that."

"I'm not sure you helped anyone by forcing Percy to come home." The admission was so quiet Nico might not have heard her if he hadn't become a god.

"I didn't force him to go home. I made it possible. What he did with the freedom he got was his choice." That explanation sounded like a load of shit to Nico, even as he said it. He'd made an impassioned plea to all the gods about Percy's fatherhood. What else could Percy do, once he was free, but return to the wife and daughter Nico had argued he had to be with? "I wanted Maybelle to know her father."

"I know. My mother told me. You've made yourself one hell of an enemy. Stay on your toes when your sentence is over. I won't tell Reyna and Hazel about your punishment until after Hazel returns from her honeymoon, or I won't tell them at all, if you don't want me to." Annabeth sniffled a little, and Nico saw a tear fall on her cheek. "I think that's the mistake you and I have made with Percy. Why doing what I wanted had the same effect as doing what you wanted. We took away Percy's choices. Do you understand he'd already given up everything for you, sacrificed everything, and he'd done it willingly? You threw that sacrifice back in his face, took away his choice. He'd been making peace with it, from what little I can get out of him. He was ready to make a life with you."

"I didn't negate his choice. From what I've gathered, I'd be dead without it. Dead. Not some nepotistic god of Underworld domestic affairs." Nico snorted at the absurdity of his life and watched Maybelle fidget as she nursed. Her hair had gotten so long. "I'm grateful for everything Percy gave me, and I wanted to give him something back. I'm grateful for your kindness, and I wanted to make things right for you. I love your adorable little girl in a way I didn't know I was capable of loving someone. All I could think about was how much my father has meant to me and how lucky Maybelle would be if she had both her wonderful parents in her life. Damn it, I want her life to be
"And what about you? Percy sits up and watches Maybelle sleep, and I know in the spaces between her breaths, his mind is on you." Annabeth turned her head so her forehead rubbed Nico's neck. Her hair tickled above his suit jacket. "What does Percy say to console himself about losing you? What does he say that makes him feel alright that he's free and you've given up your life and your chance to love your sisters?"

Nico strummed his hand up Annabeth's side. He didn't dare touch Maybelle. "I will see them again. It's not the way I want, but it's the way things had to be."

"It's the way you set things up."

"It's the choice I made. Maybe it's all semantics, Annabeth. I'd hoped it would make you happy."

"Maybe someday it will. Percy and I...I'm not sure we can go back to the way things were before he went to prison. He's very different."

"I know. I hope it'll get easier."

"He's more in love with you now than he ever was. I'm pretty sure he was thinking about leaving me, in the end, before the earthquake. Did you know?" Annabeth lifted her head and searched Nico's eyes. Her voice was soft and sad. "I think I might have let him go, if he'd asked. Ribs, Nico. Careful. You're holding too tight."

Nico lightened his grip. "I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"Maybelle's asleep. Can you make a playpen or something so I can lay her down?"

"Yes, of course." Nico concentrated and made a duplicate of the Pack 'N Play Annabeth and Percy had at their apartment. He took Annabeth's hand and guided her to the edge of the playpen. Annabeth gently laid Maybelle on her back, and Nico conjured a soft flannel blanket to cover her. He turned his chair around and watched Annabeth's hand graze the blanket before she straightened up. She sat back down next to him and pressed into his body, chest to chest. He slipped his hands up and down her back.

"Do you love Percy?" Annabeth asked. She tucked her arms up inside Nico's jacket. "Are you in love with him?"

"So much."

"Me, too."

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After half an hour or so, Maybelle woke. Annabeth lifted her head from Nico's shoulder, where it had been perched for so long Nico thought she might have fallen asleep, scooped up her baby, and left Nico with a gentle kiss on the lips.

Nico walked around the edge of the forum several times, trying to put that soft kiss and the conversation that preceded it out of his mind. What was done was done, and he couldn't change it.
He wouldn't change it if he could, either. He leaned against a pillar and watched his sisters laugh together.

"Parties are so mundane. I'm surprised you're still here."

Nico didn't stop, didn't think. He didn't act cool, calm, and collected or the least bit godly. He threw down his shadows and practically leapt into the arms of the man next to him. Jason curled him in tighter, and they blindly kissed, finding their way to each other's mouths through touch alone. Nico kissed Jason like a man starved. The force of his kisses knocked Jason backward, and Nico felt the hard jolt as they collided with a pillar. It vibrated with the force of the impact.

"Nico," Jason gasped when he pulled away. His eyes were so bright that Nico was blinded. Jason was all he could see. "You're making a scene."

"I don't care." Nico shoved Jason harder, pinned him back at the shoulders, took great handfuls of his feathers… Wait. Nico stopped kissing Jason and actually looked at him. "You..."

Nico gaped, and Jason laughed. It made Nico want to kiss him more. It made Nico want to never stop kissing Jason.

"How about a change of scenery? Someplace that's technically a part of the wedding, but not so...public?" Jason raised his eyebrows expectantly. Nico pulled Jason with him to the empty praetor's chambers where Hazel had gotten dressed. "Better. Now we can—"

Nico jumped up on Jason and flung his arms around his neck. His legs tightened securely around Jason's waist. There was enough time to register Jason's shock before Nico kissed him again, throwing more energy into the kiss, probing with his tongue and ripping open Jason's shirt underneath his jacket.

Jason gently separated Nico from him at the shoulders. Nico clung to the tie around Jason's neck and started to cry.

"Nico, sweetheart, oh, honey," Jason's voice was so soothing and gentle. Nico cried harder. "What is it? Is working for your father that awful?"

The well of emotion inside Nico, what he'd been suppressing for the last week, bubbled over and burst from his mouth.

"I gave you up! I gave you up, and I gave up Percy, and I leveraged every good thing I had, and none of it matters. Annabeth hates me. Percy hates me. You have to hate me. If I quit kissing you, you'll leave me and I am going to be without your beautiful, precious love for 150 years and, oh, Jason, you're going to find someone else and I have lost everything and everyone."

"Percy!" Jason didn't shout, but he raised his voice. "No one hates you, Nico. Calm down. I promise you, I don't hate you."

Nico readjusted his grip and clung tighter. Jason would leave him as soon as he let go. Nico pulled Jason's tie down and kissed and sucked his neck. He had to convince Jason to stay. A warm hand secured his waist and another tangled in his hair.

There was a bright flash of light, and Jason let out a relieved noise, but Nico didn't look to see what had caused it. He kept kissing.

"Fuck, baby, is going without sex for six days that hard? We should have tapered you down or something."
Nico began to shake.

"He thinks we hate him." Jason shook his head. The motion jarred Nico's lips off his neck. "He says if he stops kissing me I'll leave him. I'm completely at a loss."

"He talked to Annabeth," Percy said. "We're struggling, me and her, and she probably wasn't the most gracious she's ever been. Put him down and let me talk to him."

"No! Don't put me down!" Nico squeezed his legs tighter and locked his ankles around Jason’s waist.

"Okay, he won't put you down." Percy's voice was closer now. A second hand joined Jason's on Nico's waist. "I'll come to you. Can you take a break from mauling Jason? Just, you know, turn your head toward my voice?"

Nico nodded. He turned his head and saw Percy's face next to Jason's. Nico lunged, threw his arms around Percy, and kissed him ferociously.

Percy kissed Nico back just as savagely.

Jason eventually stuck his hand between their faces.

"Focus, Perce."

"Yeah, okay." Percy straightened his suit, moved Nico's hands back to Jason, and grabbed Nico's chin. His extraordinary green eyes were so serene. There was no trace of hatred, only love. "You're having a panic attack, Nico. Breathe. Being a god doesn't make you immune to this shit. Jason, hold him steady and still. Don't move around."

Nico laid his head on Jason's shoulder and breathed. He counted. Oxygen surged back into his brain. He wasn't even sure why it worked, because he didn't need to breathe, but it did work. He imagined a safe place, except this time he was under the oak tree in front of his farmhouse. Curious. He felt safe there, though.

"There you go," Percy said when Nico opened his eyes. "The same as always. You've got it under control, baby."

"I love you," Nico breathed.

Percy smiled and kissed his cheek. "I love you, too."

Nico lifted his head and sought Jason's eyes. "I'm sorry you had to—"

Jason put a finger over Nico's lips. "Thank you. Even if you didn't choose it, thank you for letting me see you vulnerable and struggling. I hope you keep letting me in."

Nico unhooked his legs from Jason and stepped away. He walked to a desk and took a moment to rearrange his appearance to what it had been before the panic attack. Jason’s and Percy’s reactions were so hard to fathom. How could they not hate him for what he’d done, how he’d given up their hopes and plans? When he turned around, his lovers were carefully watching him. They were also holding hands.

"I shouldn't have assumed you hated me, either of you. Maybe what I did was wrong, tricking Athena and getting you set free, but I thought I was doing the right thing, for you two and for Maybelle and Annabeth. I miss you."
"We, um, we miss you, too, and neither one of us hates you. Since we're free, Percy and I have
gotten to talk most days. Hermes is a real hardass when it comes to work, it turns out," Jason said,
"but he's given me a little time off here and there. Percy's called me a few times when I could talk,
and I've been over to see Maybelle. Annabeth was asleep."

"Do you mean talk or 'talk'?'" Nico made air quotes. Discussing sex with his lovers shouldn't be so
hard.

"We mean regular talk, like we're doing now with you," Percy said. He nudged Jason's shoulder.
"We agreed sex without you with us isn't something we necessarily want out of our relationship."

"You're not that hard up yet, you mean."

"Take it how you want," Jason said. "Anyway, we were pretty pissed at first, not gonna lie. But the
more we talked about it, the more we realized that the important part was what you were trying to do,
which was look out for us and Maybelle and Annabeth."

"So even if it pisses us off that you went behind our backs and screwed us over," Percy continued
right where Jason had left off, "we decided that if we were lucky enough to see you sometime in the
next 150 years, we weren't going to waste one second of that time being mad at you for caring
enough about us to sacrifice yourself."

"You should have told us what you were planning. We wouldn't have let you do it, but the part
where you got Athena to lower our sentences overall was a place we could have worked from."
Jason held out his free hand, and Nico took it. "We would have figured it out. The first part of the
plan was brilliant. The second part, I'm not a fan of losing you in exchange for my freedom, or this
dickhead's freedom."

"Love you, too, Jace," Percy said. He took Nico's other hand, so they formed a triangle. "Come here.
You're our center because we adore you, and we need you in our lives."

"Tell me what your days have been like. I'm tired of talking about how I fucked up." Nico kissed the
cheeks of both gods.

"Well, I'm the god of the seashore, which I think is kind of cool, my world and yours, remember?"
Percy said. He rubbed his thumb over the back of Nico's hand. "It's been a bunch of beach clean-up
stuff so far, which I like. My dad's taking it pretty easy on me. He wants me to keep writing. He lets
me go home around three in the afternoon every day so I can be with Maybelle. Piper's been a huge
help, but she's getting ready to leave for her Peace Corps shit or whatever it is, so I need to feel more
comfortable handling Maybelle before she goes. Annabeth's been hostile. I think she feels bad about
what you did."

"She thinks you were going to leave her if we hadn't gotten sent to prison."

"What? I wasn't gonna leave her. Fuck." Percy twisted Jason's and Nico's fingers together in his
hands. "I'll have to talk to her. I'd rather be with you, and it was getting harder and harder to spend
time with you and not act on how I felt. I was going to tell her I needed you, but that it wasn't about
not needing her. I wasn't planning to leave, even if she wouldn't agree to let me be with you some."

"Tell her, then."

"I will, but now, if she made me choose," Percy's face showed his anguish, "I'd choose you, Nico.
I'd choose you and Jason and force my parental rights with Maybelle. I don't want it to be that way,
but I'm not putting my love on the back burner and trying to squash it down like it doesn't matter. I
tried that for a long time, and it didn't work."

Jason kissed Percy's temple. "It never does."

"What about you, Jace? What are you doing?" Nico didn't want to think about Percy leaving Annabeth. The point was moot, anyway. Nico and Percy couldn't be together.

"Funny enough—"

"Funnily."

"It's a wonder Hades didn't make you god of grammar snobs. Funnily enough, Hermes did have a job lined up for me. My dad had to approve it, but he thinks it's hilarious and demeaning." Jason flexed his wings, the downy white feathers rippling. "I think it's fitting and something I could see myself being honored to do for all eternity."

"But the wings are weird, bro," Percy said.

"You know they retract, Percy. I mostly had them out to show Nico." Jason folded the wings, and they disappeared. All that was left was his brilliantly white suit, his white tie with the cross tie pin, and his ripped open white shirt.

"I thought they might be kind of sexy," Nico offered.

"I'll bust them out again later when Percy's not around." Jason wiggled his eyebrows, and they all laughed. "So anyway, turns out Hermes had this goddess who was unhappy with her job and had been for a long time. She was all mopey and prone to crying, and now she's much happier since she's been reassigned. I think she's, like, the goddess of upscale indoor shopping malls of greater than two million leasable square feet or something like that."

"That's pretty specific." Percy let go of Jason's hand and started feeling up inside the back of Jason's jacket. Nico figured he was trying to find where the wings went.

"Yeah, well, I guess shopping malls are popular for gods and goddesses who are a bit worn down by concepts and heavy stuff. Her name's Eleos."

"The goddess of mercy?" Nico's mouth must have dropped open because Percy stopped groping Jason's back and closed it for him. Nico regained his voice. "You, Jason Grace, are the personification of mercy?"

"You don't think it's a good fit? Hermes said the tattoo on my shoulder gave him the idea." Jason seemed genuinely worried Nico might not approve.

"I think it's...wow." Nico wrapped Percy around his back like a coat. "I need to kiss you now, Angel of Mercy. There's no job more fitting."

Jason unfolded his wings and drew Nico and Percy in. Inside the close space, Nico kissed Jason gently, and he kissed Percy, too.

"This is it, our mercy, right here. 150 years will pass so quickly and then I'll be reunited with you, both of you, my lovers and best friends." Nico wiped his eyes on Jason's tie.

"Okay, Nico's getting sappy and the wings are still weird. Time to let go," Percy said. He kissed the back of Nico's head, kissed Jason's jaw, and stepped out of the wings.
"Spoilsport," Jason said. "I liked it." He put the wings away, but kept his arms around Nico. "Oh, one other minor detail. Part of my assignment is to act as a liaison with the Underworld, helping guide souls across from one realm to the other. Apparently, they feel Charon lacks a certain..."

"Compassion? Conscience?" Percy asked. His chin rested on Jason's shoulder, and he reached around him to pick at Nico's lapel.

"Something like that," Jason agreed. "I've been meeting with Thanatos, but he seems to be doing the Underworld side of the liaising on a temporary basis while Hades brings his new guy, some god of Underworld domestic affairs, up to speed. Guy sounds like a real pompous ass. Has a big, long title he's making everyone call him."

"Hey, I'm not making people...my dad's the one who—"

"'His Royal Highness, Prince of the Underworld, Duke of Internal Affairs, His Father's Right-Hand Man, Prisoner Number 14509876345-123423, Master Nico,' that's what the whole Underworld has to say." Jason shrugged. "Can't wait to meet him. He may be a pompous ass, but I heard he's Italian and incredibly easy on the eyes."

Nico punched Jason's chest and repaired his torn shirt. "We're going to be working together?"

"Seems like it, at least a bit." Jason's smile was more brilliant than his suit. "But for now, we'd better get you back out to your sister's wedding reception. I don't want to. I want to spend every non-working second in your arms, but today we'll put Hazel first."

"I won't see you again, either of you, for so long," Nico said.

"Let us work on that, baby," Percy said. "We're free, unimprisoned gods, and despite what you have always believed deep down, we do possess functional brains that do more than ogle your ass."

"Not much more, probably," Jason said. "But a little bit. Have faith in us, Nico, and we'll have faith in you."

***

Nico danced with Hazel and Reyna and even Leo and Calypso. He taught Frank to waltz without stepping on toes. He avoided questions about when his friends would see him again. Jason and Percy stayed at his periphery. Every now and then, he would catch them talking with their heads together or sometimes talking with Annabeth. He did his best not to listen in.

Faith, they'd discussed. Nico intended to show them he had more than enough faith in them to see him through.

He stayed until the last guests were gone and it was only them, the Nine, as well as Calypso and Maybelle, who was up way past her bedtime and charming the pants off everyone around her. Calypso held her and sang quietly while the Nine talked. They sat in Nico's old villa, which now belonged to Hazel and Frank. Nico was happy the place had gone to them.

The pull of the Underworld had begun a bit ago and was strengthening. Nico knew he'd be sent back soon. He was a prisoner, and there was no forgetting that fact.
Leo finished telling a story about a mortal ski enthusiast who caught sight of Festus poking out of his backspace garage bunker when shadows crept over Nico’s hands.

“It’s time for me to go,” Nico said. “It was a privilege to be a part of your wedding, Hazel. I’m so glad I was able to come. I love you.”

“Of course, silly.” Hazel smiled. “Where else would you be?”

“Nowhere but with you today.” Nico held up his shadowy hands. “But Dad’s calling me back, and he’s the boss, so I’ve got to go. I love you guys.”

One by one, Nico hugged his friends, even Piper. Annabeth held him for a long moment and whispered, “I do love you, sweet Nico,” in his ear. When it was their turn to hug him, Percy and Jason behaved like respectable creatures and kept their hands and mouths in appropriate places. Hazel and Reyna hugged him together, and they held on so long that Nico heard Hades scream his name. He kissed them both, told them to close their eyes, and vanished.

Hades was seated at his desk, looking stern.

“I began to call you at least ten minutes ago, Nico. You must return when called or the gods could revoke your current arrangement and remove you to a work-only situation.”

“I’ve been doing work-only for the past six days, Dad. What are they going to do? I’m already here. Are they going to take away my bedroom?”


“I do live in your palace. You’re my Dad slash boss slash warden, right?” Nico threw himself down in the chair in front of Hades's desk and began to bounce his leg.

“I’m your father, boy, and your boss, and your warden, I suppose, but you are a grown man. Grown men — grown Hades men, at least — do not live with their daddies. Go find your own house.”

“What, so I’m supposed to find a nice cave to crawl into? Thanks, Dad.” The wedding had taken an emotional toll on Nico, and he wasn’t enjoying verbally sparring with his father right now. His long exile had begun. A cave might be suitable.

“Do you enjoy living in caves?” Hades touched his fingertips together and lifted his chin and eyebrows.

“Yes, quite a lot. Don’t you?”

“I rather prefer houses with comfortable beds and running water. Have you no place you can think of that’s better than a cave?”

Nico threw his hands out in exasperation. “Not down here if I can’t stay in the palace.”

“Who said you had to limit your residence to the Underworld?” Hades shaped his fingers into a gun and shot it at Nico.

Who had said that? Nico scanned his memories. No one, actually. He gripped the arms of his chair. “Are you saying I can live above ground?”

“Nico, go home. Go to the place you’ve wanted to be for a very long time now. Take the rest of the
weekend off and get situated. I do believe this is a weekend, yes? People tend to get married on weekends. Come back Tuesday.”

“I, uh, okay. What time Tuesday?”

“When I bellow,” Hades said, as though that answer should have been obvious. “You are still expected to live here during the week of Thanksgiving, like always. Persephone and Demeter have already demanded I give you the entire week off so you can bond with them. It's tedious, really, but I'd rather it be you than me.”

“I can see the other gods?”

“Nico,” Hades leaned forward, and Nico caught himself mimicking his father. “The only one who is incarcerated is you. You are on home confinement. No one has said you can't have visitors. Think about this. Choose your home carefully. It will be protected and private.”

“Dad, thank you.” Nico was ecstatic. Hades had given him a new lease on life. Nico knew where he wanted to go, whom he wanted to see.

“Go, before I change my mind.”

Nico blinked and found himself exactly where he wanted to be.

The beginning was like his dream, except it was past sunset. He materialized under the boughs of his oak tree and walked through his yard and up his front porch steps. A light was on in the living room, which was odd. Though he'd kept up the maintenance and utilities on the place, he'd instructed his cleaning person not to leave lights on.

The door was unlocked. When Nico went inside, he took a deep breath and remembered what it felt like to be home. Something was off, though. The smell was different, almost like damp earth. There were hangings on his walls that hadn't been there before. Athena's tapestries — two of them, at least. He hadn't expected that. He'd figured Athena was mad enough at him to have ripped them to shreds. She must be more proud of her work than angry at him.

Nico stared at the stunning weaving of him with Jason and Percy walking down the first hole of their golf course. He moved to the dining room to gaze on the other tapestry, the one of Jason and him in the diner. Absently, Nico wondered where the third tapestry had gone.

He checked, but Rachel's paints and easel were missing, as was the stack of law books from his dream. He turned to the kitchen to get a drink of water and shouted. His sword was in his hand instantly, but as quickly as he'd summoned it, he dropped it on the floor.

“Jason.”

“Nico.” Jason smiled so brightly that Nico couldn't imagine a time when the sun had ever outshone him. He had changed back to his normal jeans and t-shirt. The only wings in sight were the ones on his tattoo. “I've been waiting for you to make it home.”

"You knew I'd choose to live here? How? But I haven't invited you in." Nico was incredibly confused. "How are you here?"

"I told you, Hermes gave me time off. He told me how to choose my home. I chose this place." He gestured to the tapestry showing the three new gods together. "I'm guessing you did, too. That tapestry wasn't here a minute ago. Each one of them is attached to one of us. Percy's is hanging in his living room."
"You chose my house to be your private, protected space? You've never even been here before."

Jason walked past Nico and sat down on the couch. He patted the space next to him, and uncertainly, Nico sat, too. Jason smiled, tender and kind, and brushed his fingertips over Nico's cheekbone. "When we were in Australia, toward the end, I had a dream."

Nico's stomach twisted in anticipation.

"I came to a tiny little farmhouse with a sweet front porch. There was nothing around me. I didn't know why, but I walked up to the house and went inside. It was here. This place. I'd seen it before in some of Percy's pictures, so it seemed familiar, but, at the time, I didn't realize where I was." Jason fidgeted and turned sideways. Nico could see his face much better that way: his little stapler scar, his hard cheekbones, his perfect eyes. "Then, out of nowhere, Rachel Dare was here, and she asked me if I liked my new house. I thought she meant the dome, but she laughed at that idea and took me on a tour of this place. She said it was a nice place for a god to live, but that I couldn't tell anyone about the dream. The dream started to fade, and she handed me a piece of paper. I looked at it, and there was an address written on it. When I woke up, the piece of paper was still in my hand. I memorized the address. Later that day, we went into the man cave and you had your law books out. I saw you sitting there on the edge of the couch, reading, and it jogged my memory. I remembered our favorite picture of you, mine and Percy's, where you were sitting at a table with books around you. It was the table that was at the house I'd dreamed about. Your table. Your house."

"You had a dream of Rachel, and you chose my house?" Nico felt lightheaded. He laid his forehead on Jason's lips. "I dreamed of being here with Rachel, too."

Jason lifted Nico's face off his mouth and held it until Nico met his eyes. "I chose you, Nico. I choose to be with you. I was so worried I'd gotten it wrong, that this place wasn't yours. Once I got here and saw that it really did belong to you, I worried that you'd have to serve your sentence in the Underworld and I wouldn't see you until the 150 years were up. Then I worried you'd choose some other home." Jason chuckled. "I got a little anxious. You're all I wanted, Nico, and when I made the choice about where to live, I didn't even think much about the address. It was like all the things we learned to conjure and do while we were in prison. If I wanted something to happen, all I had to do was concentrate and desperately want it. The thing I chose to want was you. You took me here."

Nico threw his arms around Jason, and Jason pulled him all the way into his lap. Nico rubbed his face all over Jason's, like he was some wild animal that needed to mark Jason as his own.

"I love you. I'm so glad you're here. We get to stay together? Like, make this a home for both of us? Forever?"

"As long as we want it," Jason said. "I was worried about that, too, so I asked Thanatos one day while I was at the border. Seemed smarter to ask in your dad's realm instead of in my dad's realm. Thanatos said that it was absolutely possible for two gods to cohabit, as long as they agreed and both chose the same space." Jason paused, and a slight pang of worry crossed his face. "I hope this, us living together, is something you're okay with?"

"I'm stunned," Nico said. "Yes, of course. I'm thrilled beyond my wildest dreams."

"Good. Me, too."

Nico crawled off Jason's lap and sat next to him again. Jason wrapped his arm around Nico's shoulders, and Nico nestled into his lover. They were quiet for a while. Nico spent the time trying to wrap his mind around what a wonderful thing was happening. He was...happy, almost.
"Do you like it here?" Nico asked. "It's pretty simple, the house."

"I loved our dome. I don't know how much more simple things can get. We don't need much, do we? Oh, I pulled all the pictures and books out of the dome. They're in a box in your closet."

"Our closet," Nico corrected. "Thank you."

"Our closet." Jason used his free hand to pick up Nico's. He laced their fingers together.

"Percy?" Nico asked. "Will he be able to visit? My dad said I'd be able to have visitors."

"All we have to do is ask him to come over. I would've done it already, but I was waiting to make sure you'd come here. I didn't want to get his hopes up. Your dad must be a serious hardass."

Nico snorted and tried to manage his excitement at being able to see both Jason and Percy. "It's crazy. He always complains about being the hardest working of the Big Three, and after this week, I believe him. He did give me the next few days off, though, so I could get settled."

"Huh. Hermes gave me the weekend off, too." Jason raised his eyebrows. "I have ideas about ways we can get settled."

"I'm sure you do. First..."

"Percy?"

Nico nodded. "I love a million things about you, but one of them is that you understand my love for him doesn't threaten my love for you."

"I do, finally," Jason said. "Repeat after me. I'd like to welcome Percy Jackson into my home."

"I'd like to welcome Percy Jackson into my home." Nico waited, but nothing happened. "Now what?"

"We wait. He might be busy. When Percy welcomed me to his home, I was in the middle of holding hands with a grieving family. Several hours passed before I could go to him."

"You'll be an amazing Angel of Mercy, Jason."

"I've learned a lot about compassion, mostly the hard way," Jason said. "It's been painful, this first week, but it's also been a privilege. The way I lived and fucked up my first life, teaching, that school at the earthquake — this is what I was meant to do."

"I believe that, too, Jace."

There was a loud pop, and Percy burst into being on top of the coffee table.

"Damn it!" he said. "I was shooting for the floor. Wait."

Percy's eyes had been scanning the room. Nico knew Percy would recognize it right away. Slowly, like his eyes may trick him if he moved too quickly, Percy's head dipped lower until he was staring at Nico and Jason. His breaths increased, and his eyes filled with tears. "Nico?"

Nico smiled and held out his arms. Percy dove into him with such force that he knocked over the couch.

With his feet thrown in the air, Percy covered Nico's face in kisses before switching to Jason and
“Jason Grace, you magical man, you came through.” Percy kissed Nico again every bit as exuberantly as the first time. He squeezed Nico’s cheeks in his palms. "He promised. We worked it out. He said we’d have you back, Nico. We do have him back, right, Grace?"

"We do," Jason wrapped an arm around Percy, and en masse, righted them and the couch. "He’s still a prisoner. He can only be here or in the Underworld on official business, but we get him back, Perce."

"So for the next 150 years, we're confined to seeing him here?" Percy asked. He smiled widely. "I don't have a problem with that. I've wanted to see him here for a very long time."

Jason nodded. "And he has the weekend off."

Percy threw his legs over Nico's and Jason's laps. "Do you now, Prince of the Underworld? It just so happens the Junior Prince of the Seas has the weekend off, too. I'm guessing that slacker-ass Angel of Mercy also got the weekend off?"

"I cannot wait to see how we spend it." Nico thrilled to the possibilities.

Chapter End Notes

Tomorrow, for the first day in exactly ten months, I won't work on The Second Life.

Thank you, each of you, for reading, for leaving kudos, for writing helpful and insightful comments, and for giving me encouragement and support. You've made me a better writer, and I'm profoundly grateful. I hope I've given you a story that's been worth the read.

I would love to hear from you - the collective you, whether you've left tons of comments or have yet to leave your first one. Are you happy with how the story ended? How was this last chapter? Looking back on the work, did you have a favorite scene? I want to know. And I want to be able to say thanks to as many of you as I can.

:-)

End Notes

Have you ever stood at the finish line of a race, cheering on someone you care about, encouraging them to finish strong? That's what comments are to an author so close to the end of a massive work. Thank you!!!!!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!