Quite a fine line

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Summary

If there's one thing Nico knows, it's that Will Solace is insufferable, and being stuck together on a mission to rescue a bunch of new demigods isn't his idea of a good time. At all.

Takes place instead of TOA, set 8 or so months after The Blood Of Olympus.

Notes

OOPS. Looks like I started writing and ended up with a whole new multi chapter fic. Is anyone really complaining? I didn't think so. Read, enjoy.
I can't believe I'm stuck with you

Chapter Notes

Added some actions, but everything else is the same.

Will Solace had been a pain in his ass ever since he met the guy. He was pushy, judgmental, had no respect for personal space, and babied Nico for months; even after he was completely fine and in control of his powers. Just one wrong move and Will was there, yelling at him, pissing him off, and just plain making him want to scream. If there was one person he couldn’t stand to be around for more than five minutes, it was that guy. So, of course, when a problem presented itself that needed both a healer and a fighter, Chiron would pick the two of them to team up. It just wasn’t his lucky day.

They were all at the counselor’s meeting when it happened. A steady rise of monsters in the immediate area was making it difficult for the Satyrs to bring new demigods into camp. A few had sent Iris messages that morning reporting some badly hurt kids and hiding places that were completely surrounded by ogres, Cynocephali, and who knows what other nasty creatures. Chiron looked grim, which should have been enough of an indication for him to blow off the meeting, but like the good little hero he was attempting to be, he did his expected duty and showed up.

“It seems the camp is completely surrounded,” the Centaur told them with a grave face, “and none of the children are exhibiting any signs of helpful powers. The Cynocephali are still bitter after the war and are trying to cull our numbers the only way they can, by hitting us where it hurts most. These new demigods are our camp’s future, so it is imperative we ensure all of their safety. I cannot stress this enough, we will need many teams to scout the area and remove the threat before it can… ah, worsen.” His horses tail twitched, front foot pawing at the ground timidly.

Whenever Chiron got nervous, his feet would trot on their own. It would be hilarious if it didn’t usually spell doom for the rest of them.

“So, what kind of teams are we talking about here,” Clarisse asked from her seat representing the Ares cabin. “Three as is usual with a quest?” Her brown eyes were bright, the prospect of killing things making her hum with excitement.

“No, I don’t think that will be necessary, Clarisse. This calls for more… delicate pairings.” Chiron’s eyes swept over the room. “Two to a team, only six teams needed. The tricky part, and here is where you come in, Will, is that we will need both a well-trained fighter and a well-trained and well-stocked healer to each team, this way any severely injured young demigods will receive immediate attention. There are some bad injuries that need tending already, and I fear that if left unchecked, it could present a huge problem.”

Will sat up a little straighter in his seat. “I have plenty of healers to spare, though some should remain at camp. I volunteer to stay here and keep the infirmary open, just in case we need it.”

Nico’s eyes drifted to the other and he glared, still angry about the last argument they'd gotten into earlier that day. Will claimed an unnecessary use of his powers was just going to find him back on mandatory bed rest, and he’d, of course, sent skeletons to chase the other off. As if he sensed him looking, Will glanced back at him and frowned.
“I’m afraid you are of more use to us on this mission,” Chiron murmured, and Will’s head snapped back to attention, blue eyes blown wide.

The son of Apollo opened and closed his mouth a few times, looking like a fish out of water. “Sir? But… what can I do that someone else can’t?”

“There is a very special group of demigods with several broken limbs. You are our top healer, and no one else can heal bone in such a short time. We are running on borrowed time as it is, which is why you and Mr. di Angelo will be leaving immediately. I’ve already packed your belongings, though you are free to grab anything else you deem necessary. You have fifteen minutes, meet me back here when you are ready.”

Nico’s jaw dropped instantaneously. He didn’t even get a say in the matter?

“But… what about the infirmary,” Will mumbled weakly, clearly just as enthused as Nico was.

“Ambrosia and nectar will help anyone in desperate need, at least until you come back. As for the rest of you, any volunteers are much appreciated, but I will be pairing you off in accordance with your abilities and knowledge. You will be leaving once you have gathered enough provisions to last three days at least, just to be safe. Take your time, and pack wisely. When you return, I will introduce you to your healing partner and inform you of your destination. Dismissed.”

The demigods all rose, six of them coming to stand before Chiron to ask permission to join in on the mission. Nico stormed back to his cabin, utterly pissed that he’d be forced to spend any amount of time with Will. He could probably do the mission himself, he’d transported the Athena Parthenos across the ocean, what was a small group of young children and a goat man really going to hurt? Then the mission would be completed within seconds, and he could finish off the monsters plaguing the area afterward.

Slamming his cabin door behind him, he rummaged through his drawers, only to find that someone had indeed packed at least five days-worth of his clothing. Great, and now their mission was going to take forever, to boot.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he let out a long, calming breath of air. Worse things had happened to him. If he could survive Tartarus, he could survive Will Solace. Or possibly kill him in the process and feign ignorance. A wicked smile curled his lips. The option didn’t sound half bad, he might even be able to blame it on Will’s incompetence.

He leaned up against the wall and looked out into the setting sun. Why anyone would think it was a good idea to start a mission in the middle of the day was beyond him, but clearly, Chiron knew what he was doing; or thought that he did.

Perhaps he could cut the mission time down a bunch by shadow traveling them to wherever they needed to be, and once Will healed everyone, he’d see about taking them back a few at a time. He might not be able to do much afterward, but at least the worst part would be done with. Just as he was beginning to grow restless, Will sauntered up, lips pursed and clearly unhappy.

“Well, aren’t you just sunshine and rainbows today, Solace. What’s the matter, afraid to leave your precious camp?”

Will glowered at him and he smirked, always glad to piss Will off as much as he could. It was payback for being a nosey, no good, annoying, idiot. “Shut it, di Angelo. Let’s just get this over with so we can get back.”
Nico rolled his eyes and followed the other boy up the big house’s steps, careful not to get too close to the demigod.

Chiron was already waiting in the parlor, stamping his feet impatiently. “Ah, good. Right on time. I trust you have all that you need,” he asked with a quirked brow.

Will patted his bag gently. “I grabbed as much ambrosia as I could spare, though I was informed another shipment will be arriving shortly due to the sudden plummeting supply.” Chiron nodded in agreement, and Will chewed his lip. “So where are we going, exactly? It seems like the other groups are going out for less time than we are.”

“Perceptive, Mr. Solace. Yes, you two are required to help a very special group of demigods. The Satyr leading them is named Dendron Greenback. He is still a youngling, and this was his very first trip. It would seem that the entire journey from a small town in Oklahoma has proved quite perilous. They are trapped in Washington DC and will be unable to make contact with anyone but me as their location is constantly moving. You will need to report back to me and keep your eyes peeled, though I’m afraid they will only disclose their location once a day to remain safe. I will have their newest location tonight around nine PM sharp, but I suggest you head out sooner. You are allowed to travel by any means necessary, and I have packed one of our special fold up tents that will fit your entire group once you meet up. Any questions?”

Nico frowned. “Why don’t I just shadow travel everyone out of there, and we can be back tonight? Wouldn’t that make the most sense?” Will gave him a ferocious look, but he ignored it, too focused on Chiron’s sudden hesitation to glare back.

“Ah, that is actually part of the problem we seem to be facing. You see, one of the three young demigods has a most… unique power. It’s actually more of an anti-power than an active power,” Chiron replied, rubbing the back of his neck.

Will stopped his scowling to tilt his head questioningly at the older man. “What, like it’s always being used instead of having to be called upon to work?”

Chiron nodded. “Precisely. She deactivates all other demigod powers whenever anyone gets within twenty or so feet of her. Unfortunately, your return trip will be on foot, which is why I have chosen only my two best for this mission. Will’s healing powers will suffice for all the other injuries, so long as he heals the two boys far away from the girl, and she is still more or less unharmed for the moment. He is also very quick on his feet and capable in battle with the use of his bow.”

“And why me,” Nico asked darkly, unable to stop himself from showing just a hair of his annoyance in being roped into something against his will.

The centaur smiled warmly back at him. “As for you, Nico, you are one of the best fighters we have, as your skill comes from practice, not a godly gift. The two of you together will be able to handle anything that comes your way, I am sure of it.”

Will’s eyes met his and they both grimaced. Their quick little mission suddenly sounded like a death trap waiting to happen. Without the use of his powers, they wouldn’t be able to get away in a pinch, which was normally his failsafe. Will looked to be thinking much the same thing, like how are we ever going to pull this off if we can’t do more than fight and flee.

Clearing his throat, Will scratched his cheek in thought. “Are you sure there’s no one better to send on this mission, Chiron,” he began slowly, choosing his words carefully. “I don’t question your judgment, but surely there is someone more powerful than the two of us. What about Percy and Annabeth? They’re a great team.”
Chiron shook his head adamantly, horses tail twitching behind him. “Percy is less skilled in battle without his powers than Nico is, and Annabeth is not a healer. Besides, they are away from camp at the moment, and I promised them I wouldn’t disturb their peace if I could help it. No, it needs to be the both of you, together. You’ll do fine.”

Nico heaved a defeated sigh. “Let’s just get this over with,” he muttered, and Will groaned in response.

“Your things are waiting by Thalia’s tree. When you are ready, I suggest you head out.” Chiron retreated into his study, no doubt waiting for the next pair of victims to walk through the door.

Without a word, the two decided to leave, both reaching for the doorknob at the same time. Nico glared Will down until he relented and motioned for the other to go first. Already, the tiniest hints of a headache were starting to throb inside his temples.

“So how are we getting to DC,” Will finally asked when they were halfway up the hill.

Nico glanced sidelong at him and huffed. “Well, if your majesty would permit it, I can get us there in two minutes using shadow travel.”

The other scoffed in response, rolling sky blue eyes. “Do you always have to be so combative, di Angelo? I was only asking for your opinion, not your attitude.”

Nico stopped walking to turn on the boy, suddenly feeling more than just a little bit agitated.

“You’re probably thrilled I won’t be able to use my ‘Underworld-y’ powers once we get there. No need to worry about me dropping dead in the process, not that I understand why you’d even care. It would save you the trouble of nagging me, and save me the headache of dealing with you.”

Will’s eyes opened wide in surprise, before narrowing into little slits. “You really think I’m pleased that our powers will be nullified? My powers are at stake here, too, you know. It’s not all about you.”

He smirked, pleased to have hit a nerve. “I apologize, your lack of helpfulness will be even more evident once we meet up.” Turning, he began to walk away, calling out with a flippant wave of his hand. “So, you’re right, you’re probably pissed you’ll be utterly hopeless.”

The next thing he knew, Will put out his foot and tripped him, glancing back innocently as he fell bodily to the ground, taking a nice bite out of the grass. “Whoops, clumsy me, I’m just utterly hopeless.” Turning on his heels, he marched the rest of the way to the tree, grabbing his pack and pulling it on.

Nico rose to his feet, dusting himself off with a deathly scowl before joining the other. When his own pack was securely strapped on, he grabbed hold of Will and sucked them both into the shadows.

Upon landing, he released his hold and watched as the son of Apollo staggered around dizzily, gagging a couple of times before groaning outright. “Whoops, silly me. I forgot to warn you, the first time is always a doozy. You’ll be fine… eventually.”

After Will successfully managed to lose his lunch all over the sidewalk, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and glared daggers at Nico. “You’re a jerk,” he muttered, and Nico grinned wickedly.

“I know. But now we’re here, so you’re welcome for the quick trip. Let’s make the most of our time and set up camp for the time being. We won’t be going anywhere for at least,” he glanced at
the sun’s position in the sky. “Four hours, give or take.”

Will seemed to concentrate for a moment, then nodded. “Four and a half exactly; it’s four thirty on the dot.”

“How do you know?” Nico asked incredulously.

Waving his hand dismissively, Will scanned the area with his eyes. “Duh, son of the sun god, I know what the positioning means year-round. Rise and set time, where the sun is over the Earth at nighttime, things like that.” His eyes landed back on Nico and a smug smile crossed his face. “Guess I’m more useful than you thought.”

Rolling his eyes, Nico snorted derisively. “I’d hardly count that as useful, there’s such a thing as a clock, or even asking strangers the time. You’ve only managed to save us half an hour, and we didn’t have anything to do, anyway. Let’s just find a place and put the tent up so I can ignore you for the next two hundred and sixty-nine minutes.” When Will frowned, he smirked. “I’m good at quick math, that’s one minute less than four and a half hours. Now come on.”

Will begrudgingly listened, following him down the sidewalk. When they got to the end of the street, they found themselves in a large park-like area, with many different ponds spread out in the center. Nico dropped his pack down next to a tree and rifled through it until he found the little box and threw it onto the ground. Seconds later, a white silk tent popped up.

“Impressive,” Will said, coming up beside him with a soft smile.

Nico only frowned, not liking how the technology was also used by the hunters that stole his sister from him. “S’Alright,” he mumbled, picking up his bag and stepping inside.

The innards were complete with a small kitchen save for a fridge, a small breakfast nook with a circular table and six chairs, and six little cots spaced along the far back end. The cupboards were open, stocked with nonperishable food items, enough for the whole group for over a week; as well as jars of lantern oil and other various supplies like rope, knives, firewood, matches, glow sticks and more. Chiron really wanted them to be prepared, which meant the trip wasn’t going to be an easy one.

Will followed close behind him. “It’s so much bigger in here than it looks from outside.” Spinning around in a circle, he gave a low whistle of appreciation.

“Yup, part of the charm. Compact, easy to carry, keeps everything stored inside intact, and large enough to not feel the urge to kill your companions when they’re utterly annoying every second of the day.” The other frowned at him and he smirked once more, throwing his belongings down on the farthest bed, claiming it as his own. “Well, get comfortable, Sunshine, cause it’ll be a nice, long wait.”

“Don’t call me Sunshine, Deathboy.”

“Don’t call me Deathboy, Solace.”

Will grinned, pulling a book out of his bag and sitting down at the table. It was definitely going to be one hell of an adventure, and not in a good way.
Meet up

Chapter Summary

Nico and Will set off to look for the little group.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nine o'clock could not come soon enough. Unlike Will, Nico didn’t bring along any form of entertainment; so, he was forced to sit on his bed, glaring at the ceiling or sometimes the back of Will’s head, and wait in silence. Except it wasn’t exactly silent, because Will had a new annoying quality he’d recently discovered.

Whilst reading, the son of Apollo enjoyed humming out of tune, drumming his fingers on the tabletop, and gasping or laughing at whatever stupid thing happened in his book. He even sometimes spoke at the thing, as if it would listen to him. After the first hour, Nico got so frustrated that he stormed out of the tent, much to the other’s amusement.

He didn’t wander too far away, so when Will poked his head out, eyes searching for him, he begrudgingly trudged back over and eyed the other coolly.

Will smirked, cocking an eyebrow and indicating the inside with his head. “It’s five minutes to nine, I thought we should figure out a way to send our Iris message so we’re prepared to head out when it’s time. Help me find something useful in here.” He disappeared back inside the tent and Nico grumbled.

Inside was darker than when he left, the light of a single lantern illuminating the space. Will was already rifling through the assortment of supplies Chiron had packed them, looking for something.

“I’m sure there’s a flashlight around here somewhere, correct,” he asked the boy, glancing at the cabinets.

Will stopped his rummaging and looked at him in confusion. “Yeah, there is. But how does that help us?”

Rolling his eyes, Nico walked over to the cupboard, taking down an empty jar and grabbing up a bottle of water. Setting them both down on the white tabletop, he filled the jar with the liquid. Then he took the flashlight from Will and angled it to shine through the side of the jar. The light reflecting through the glass made a little rainbow across the table.

“Light is made of different colors, so when it passes through the water, like with our Iris message fountains, it breaks up into those colors and forms a rainbow. I thought everyone knew that. Don’t they teach children these things anymore?”

Will scoffed, coming up beside him to examine the tiny rainbow splaying out across the table. “I don’t know, I was homeschooled by my mother until the satyr came for me when I was nine. She didn’t think I was safe in public school, being a demigod. Afterward, I only got taught the things we learn in camp or from books I’ve read. Rainbow Making 101 wasn’t on the list.”
Nico hummed quietly in contemplation. “What time is it now? Do you think Chiron is ready to tell us where to go?”

Will grinned, eyes bright in the dim light. “Oh, are you saying you need my assistance?”

“I’m saying you’ll save us a wasted drachma if you just let me know the time, Solace.”

“9:01 PM. I think we should give it another few minutes, what if the satyr isn’t as punctual as Chiron believes?”

Nico clicked off the flashlight and sat down, sighing heavily. “Next time just get me after nine, then I won’t have to sit around guessing and waiting.”

Will crossed his arms and huffed. “I didn’t know you were going to magically know how to Iris message. It’s not like we’ve discussed very much since we’ve gotten here. Like if we’re staying here for the night, if we’re packing up and making camp elsewhere, how we’re getting to these kids, what to do in an emergency. Typical things people discuss while on dangerous missions.”

Raking a hand down his face, Nico groaned. “Must you always nag? I don’t operate that way, I just improvise as I go. It’s worked quite well in the past.”

Will plopped down in the seat across from him and narrowed his eyes. “Maybe on a solo mission when someone’s life other than yours isn’t at stake, but we’re supposed to be a team, Nico. I don’t have ESP, I can’t read your mind, so I need you to at least try and communicate with me. Gods, are you this much of a pain with everyone, or am I just the lucky one?” Rubbing small circles into his temples, he let out a long breath of air through clenched teeth.

Nico gasped, taken aback. “Me? You’re the one always on my case, I don’t go around bothering you all the time. You’re the pain, Solace.”

“Well sorry for giving a shit about someone other than myself. That’s what friends do, Nico, they care about your safety and wellbeing and tell you to knock it off when you’re acting like an idiot.” His face was slowly growing pinker, voice rising as he spoke. If Nico didn’t know any better, he’d say Will was embarrassed, though that wasn’t very likely. There was nothing to be embarrassed about.

“We’re not friends,” he grumbled in response and Will huffed.

“Yeah, I know. Message received, loud and clear.” Will dropped his gaze into his lap, body seeming to deflate. “You don’t like me for some unfathomable reason, even though I’ve been nothing but nice to you ever since we’ve met.”

Nico pretended not to notice the hurt in the other’s voice, tapping his fingers quietly along the table. The silence grew awkward before he finally decided to speak again. “Is now a good time to try?”

He glanced at Will, who was still looking down sadly.

Will gave a stiff nod. “Nine-fifteen, probably safe,” he mumbled.

Nico rose to his feet and Will followed suit. “You do it, you’re the talkative one.” He switched on the flashlight and shined it through the cup once more.

Pulling a drachma from his pocket, Will tossed it into the rainbow, muttering Chiron and Camp Half-Blood under his breath. The image swam into view and Chiron glanced up from his desk, back in his human wheelchair, looking just like an old school teacher grading tests.
“Ah, perfect timing. Dendron was a little tardy sending out his message. It seems they ran into even more trouble today and couldn’t find a good location. I trust your trip went well?”

“More or less,” Will muttered, glaring at the other. Nico snickered behind his hand. “Where are they now? Is it safe?”

Chiron folded his hands beneath his chin. “They are in a park called Montrose, I trust you can figure out the location from there. As for their safety, it would be beneficial for you to hurry. They’ve been followed by a pack of Cynocephali ever since their arrival, and the dog men are quite the trackers, so it won’t be safe for long.”

“We should hurry, then,” Nico said, glancing toward the exit.

“Thus far, they’ve managed to use Dendron’s sense of smell to keep them out of harm’s way, but the satyr grows tired and can’t keep it up forever. You should seek out the threat and remove it, that would be the best course of action.” Will and Nico nodded in unison and Chiron smiled. “I expect a report tomorrow sometime, but for tonight, focus on the safety of the little group. I fear it might be quite a long night. Take care.”

The message faded and Nico clicked off the flashlight.

Grabbing up his pack from the chair, Will pulled it over his head. “You used to live here, any idea where Montrose park is?”

Nico chewed his lip in thought, his memories quite unclear since his “dip” in the river Lethe. “Vaguely. I’m pretty sure it’d take a couple of hours from here on foot. Which leaves shadow travel. Are you up for another go? I promise to warn you first.” When Will frowned he rolled his eyes. “Unless you have a better idea? We can take upwards of three precious hours or mere seconds. Even public transit will take around an hour if we’re lucky. We don’t have the luxury of time here.”

“Fine, but that’s the last time we’re using it. And I’m not pleased. My stomach still isn’t settled.”

Nico grinned and grabbed his bag, securing it over his own shoulder. When they left the tent, he collapsed it back down and slipped it into the pack. Holding out his hand to Will, the other took it reluctantly, and the two of them slipped into shadow.

The park was large, with rolling green hills and an abundance of trees. They stepped out of the shadows in the middle of a little monument area, a large metal sphere in the very center. Glancing around, he took note of their surroundings carefully.

A red brick walkway lined a circular design around the cross-shaped pathway, filled with rose bushes of varying colors. Little benches were set up along the perimeter, facing the spherical monument. One side of the park was flanked by a street, so nighttime traffic occasionally passed them by, headlights shining across their surrounding and casting shadows into the grass.

Will swayed on his feet, but seemed to gain his composure much quicker than before. “Where do you suppose we should check first,” he asked, voice thick with something akin to disgust.

“There’s a lot of little playground areas around here. I bet the kids would head straight for one, that’s what I’d do to pass the time. As for the Cynocephali, I’m sure they’re close and by finding the kids, we’re bound to encounter them.”

Will nodded in response and allowed him to lead the way. The two walked down the sidewalk until they reached a path that led straight into the heart of the area. The metal sign said Dumbarton Oaks
“I thought we wanted Montrose park,” Will mumbled, looking at him strangely.

Nico nodded. “Yeah, they’re this whole area. It’s like thirty acres of woods area and the small part over there is considered Montrose. They could be anywhere inside, so I figured we’d cut down the middle and go from there.”

Will shrugged and followed him down the paved path. Trees stretched up on both sides of them, almost like a cave or tunnel. The further they walked, the darker it got; until their eyes were forced to adjust to the dim light of the moon shining down through the branches of the trees, covering the walkway in beams of jagged white.

When the wind kicked up, the rustling of dry leaves across dirt and pavement, combined with lack of light, made the place seem sinister; like something was lurking, waiting to attack. Nico kept to a slow, leisurely pace, eyes scanning the woods for any hint of movement. A squirrel darted across their path, and his hand shot to his sword so fast he actually felt embarrassed.

Will laughed, patting him on the shoulder condescendingly. “You need to lighten up, you’re too on edge. Going to kill someone innocent someday.”

Nico glowered at the other. “We’re looking for a bunch of kids that are being followed by monsters, pardon my reflexes for trying to assure our safety.” Shrugging Will’s hand away, he quickened his pace.

Will chuckled from somewhere behind him. “If it’s the dark you dislike, I did bring two flashlights.”

Spinning back around, he gave the boy an incredulous look. “I don’t dislike the dark. I’m a son of Hades, remember? I shadow travel? Go to the Underworld on a regular basis? Ring any bells?”

Will rolled his eyes. “I meant so we can actually see where we’re going, not just fumble around blindly.” He pulled one out of his bag and clicked it on. Two glowing eyes stared back at them from the bushes and he clicked it off again in a hurry. “Uh, maybe it’s less creepy this way.”

Nico snorted. “It’s just a rabbit, Solace. They’re supposed to be cute and cuddly, not terrifying. But light isn’t a good idea anyhow, we don’t want to give away our position if we can avoid it.”

Will’s eyes widened, pulling the bow from his shoulder and nocking an arrow with lightning speed. “It’s a little late for that,” he mumbled, and Nico spun around just in time to watch the arrow fly and impale the Cynocephali directly in the chest.

The thing exploded into dust and trickled to the ground in a rain of glittering ash. Two more ran from the bushes shrieking furious wails. Nico charged, swinging his sword clean through them. Their howls of anger as they died made him smirk. He missed fighting monsters.

Will loosed an arrow right past his head and he heard the telltale sound of it hitting a mark almost directly behind his back. Glancing that direction, he saw just how close the thing had come to a surprise attack. “Thanks,” he muttered.

Will beamed in triumph. “No problem, you’d have done the same for me,” he said, slipping his bow back over his shoulder.

Nico scowled but didn’t deny it. His anger was mostly directed at himself for getting sloppy. Being stuck at camp for eight months only able to train occasionally or play capture the flag had dulled his senses significantly. Even his sword arm felt slightly stiffened as he rolled his shoulder to work
through the sting.

Glancing around at the wilderness beyond, he hummed low in his throat. “I wonder if there’s any more or if that’s the lot of them. Maybe they’ve split up and we only found a portion,” he muttered, mostly to himself.

Will’s eyes searched the area as well before he shrugged. “Guess we won’t know for sure until we find the group,” he replied.

Nico nodded, and they continued down the path, listening for anymore sounds that might indicate life. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance, mice scurrying about through the brush. Otherwise, all was silent, save the gentle patter of footsteps on the well-worn black asphalt.

Reaching a break in the road that led off into a small clearing, they decided to pass through it, following a makeshift dirt-trail until the two stepped out through a thin lining of trees into a playground area.

Stone enclosed the bark covered ground, swings and slides reflecting back the orange glow of tall streetlights as it glinted off the shiny metal. A young girl was walking alone along the top of an arched ladder, arms outstretched to keep her balance. As they approached, Nico felt a strange sensation overcome him and decided instantly that it had to do with her odd power.

Will raced off toward the other three to check and heal injuries, but he stopped short and watched the girl as she tentatively stepped across the bars, pale hair shining softly in the moonlight. Crouching down low, she slipped through a gap, swinging about a foot off the ground. When she finally caught sight of Nico standing there, she landed with a small grunt and eyed him warily.

“Hi,” he said, stepping a little closer.

She was dressed in dark colors, long pants and a zip-up jacket with the sleeves rolled up. Even in the dark, he could tell her skin was milky, the same as her shoulder length hair. “Hi,” she mumbled shyly, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. She couldn’t be more than thirteen at most, definitely not a child, but not quite mature enough to be any older.

“I’m Nico,” he offered in way of kickstarting some manner of conversational flow.

The girl eyed him coolly. “I figured, Chiron gave us a description so we’d know you were friends. I’m Sabrina. Morris. The others are over there with your friend.” Pointing across the grounds, she smiled thinly. “They don’t like being too close to me unless it’s necessary. Say it feels weird to them,” she murmured.

A cry of joy pierced the night, pulling his gaze toward the group standing on the opposite end of the jungle gym. A small boy, no more than eight or nine, jumped around giddily, waving his arms wildly about.

“I was told to wait here while everyone is healed. You can go if you want. I’m safe. Nothing can touch me.”

Alright,” Nico said with a short nod and wandered toward the rest of them, watching the glow of Will’s hands as he placed them on a dark-haired boy’s arm.

When he pulled back, the boy’s eyes widened, gazing up at Will like it was the coolest thing he’d ever seen. “Woah, can I do something like that,” he asked in an awestruck tone.

Will scratched his cheek in thought. “That depends, are you a child of Apollo? Because,
Unfortunately, it’s a rare gift that only his children have.” The boy frowned, clearly displeased. Nico stepped forward, halting the conversation as eight pairs of eyes turned toward him at once. “Ah, and this is Nico. He’s a son of Hades.”

The other, darker-haired, young boy bounced up and down on the balls of his feet, running up to examine him. “That’s so cool,” he squealed, jogging excitedly in place. His big, red-brown eyes shined with wonder, bottom lip sucked clear into his mouth. “I’m Jamie, I’m eight years old,” he beamed, sticking out his small hand for Nico to shake.

“Nice to meet you, Jamie,” Nico replied, obliging. The small hand felt warm in his larger, cooler hold.

Little eyes widened even further, if at all possible. “Woah, you’re all cold. Are you dead?”

The older boy scoffed loudly. “Jamie, that’s not very nice,” he scolded, sounding very much like a big brother.

Nico chuckled in response, seeing a lot of his younger, curious self in the small child. “No, I’m not dead. Just colder than most people. Poor circulation.”

“I’m Jonas, Jamie’s brother,” he said, rising to his feet. Aside from their similar eyes, the two didn’t look much like siblings. Jonas had straight cinnamon-colored hair and tanned skin, whereas Jamie had curly black hair and fair skin. He glanced between the two and Jonas smiled shyly. “We have different dads but share a mom.”


Jonas nodded. “Yeah, mom didn’t talk about it much. I guess it was an accident the second time around.”

If Jamie cared that his brother called his birth an accident, he didn’t show it. The boy was too busy running in circles around the four of them, arms out, making sounds like he was an airplane. “Look, Jonas, I’m just like mommy. Vrooooom.”

Nico watched the boy curiously and his brother chuckled. “Our mom is a retired pilot. He thinks she was a plane, even though we’ve told him that’s impossible.”

“I see,” Nico mumbled, attention suddenly slipping toward Will and who he assumed must be Dendron. They were discussing something in hushed tones a short distance away, causing him to frown. “If you’ll excuse me momentarily.” Marching over, he cocked an eyebrow at Will.

“Nico,” Will said with a smile. “This is Dendron. We were just talking about the Cynocephali that attacked them and then us. I guess there are more than four, so we should keep an eye out for the remaining ones.”

Dendron nodded, glancing at Nico with deep, leaf-green eyes. His hair was shaggy and white, his skin a light sun-kissed tan. On his head was a black beanie to cover his horns, though they couldn’t have been very big considering the fact he looked like a ten-year-old boy. His attire, like all of the company, was dark clothing with a zip-up jacket; which gave them look like a band of cat burglars, not three demigods and their guide.

“I don’t smell anything right now, so I think we’re safe for the night if you want to set up camp,” Dendron murmured quietly, dropping his gaze to the floor. The poor thing looked exhausted, like he hadn’t slept well in days.
Nico nodded in agreement. “Sure, we saw a nice little clearing a little ways back. It’s enclosed on all sides by trees, so it’s secluded. The Hephaestus cabin figured out how to add a cloaking device to the tent’s structure, so once we’re all inside, nothing can find us.”

Dendron’s face lit up and he let out a happy bleat. “That’s wonderful news, I was growing quite tired of using my magic to stay awake.” He yawned quietly, body slumping slightly. “These children are quite the handful all by yourself. Lots of energy, that one.”

All three of them looked at Jamie, who was climbing around the jungle gym pretending to be some sort of monkey.

“You know, I could just shadow travel the two away so this trip is less chaotic,” Nico mumbled.

Will frowned. “Only as a last resort. I’m sure everything will be fine, they’ve gotten this far in one piece, and now there’s the two of us to help out. Besides, Jamie seems to think this is some great adventure, let him have his little moment.” He looked fondly at the boy and Nico rolled his eyes.

“The second they’re too annoying I’m popping them right to camp, and you can’t stop me, Solace. Now come on, we should get everything set up. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

Chapter End Notes

If it’s all crappy, it’s cause I’m tired.
The journey begins

Chapter Summary

Come morning, the small group sets out to begin their journey.

Chapter Notes

I'm still suffering from sleep deprivation. I think it's just a constant in my life, like this is how I'm always going to feel.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The night had ended even less pleasantly than he thought it would. Sharing a room with five other people, sleeping in close quarters and listening to them toss and turn right next to him, did nothing for his sudden bought of mind-numbing insomnia.

By the time his eyes finally managed to slip closed, it felt like he'd gotten no more than a five-minute nap before Will was in his face, happily informing him it was time to eat breakfast and set out again. If the death glare he sent the other's way dampened his spirits any, he didn’t act like it. Will was just as cheerful and annoying as ever.

Nico sipped his coffee slowly, closing his eyes to enjoy the bitter tang as it washed over his tongue, a gentle smile curling at his lips. At least Chiron was sensible enough to pack a French press and pre-ground coffee; otherwise, he might have gone crazy and left them to fend for themselves.

He nursed the small cup while the others got ready, trying desperately to pretend that he was alone, in the Hades cabin; not surrounded by noisy children and stupid Will. Someone cleared their throat and he cracked open one dark eye to find the son of Apollo standing before him, dressed quite strangely, with his hands on his hips.

“What are you wearing,” he asked dryly, taking in the tighter black pants, red converse, and snug fitting off-white tee shirt. The logo said ‘Devil Makes Three’ and he assumed it was either a band name or a really bad joke.

Will rolled his eyes, crossing arms over his chest. “Normal attire, the stuff one wears while not at camp. Do you honestly believe I only wear cargo shorts and sandals or scrubs?”

Nico flicked his gaze away, embarrassed to admit that he did, in fact, assume Will was always the strange surfer type. “What does your shirt mean,” he asked instead, pointing to the odd design with roosters carrying machine guns.

Glancing down, Will gave him an amused look. “It’s a band. They’re kind of… bluegrass folk. Hard to explain.” Running an absentminded hand through his golden locks, he shrugged before plopping into an empty chair.

“I didn’t know you were into that kind of music,” Nico replied, sizing Will up once again. He didn’t
want to admit it, but the son of Apollo was actually pretty good looking. Not that it mattered, the

guy was still obnoxious.

Will leaned forward slightly, dropping his voice to an almost whisper. “I like all kinds of music, di

Angelo. You’d know that if you ever tried for friendly over hostile.” Drumming his fingers on the

table, he glanced down at Nico’s uneaten breakfast and frowned. “You should really eat. It’s the

most important meal of the day, you know.”

Nico groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “This is why I’m always hostile. Must you be such a

mother hen? Telling me to do something only makes me want to do that thing even less. And it’s

annoying, so lay off.”

Will smirked, rising from the chair and thumbing his belt loops as he tilted his head to the side.

“Fine. Whatever you do, do not eat your banana; and especially do not follow your coffee with a

glass of water. Doctor’s orders.” The boy sauntered away, chuckling to himself.

Nico watched him go, grumbling as he took another hasty sip of his coffee. Upon discovering the

lukewarm temperate, he pulled a face, then chugged the remainder of the cup as quickly as possible.

There was nothing worse than cold coffee, unless you’d intended for it to be cold. Grabbing his

pack from beside his bed, he stepped out of the tent to go look for a place to freshen up. If he

remembered correctly, there was a stream nearby.

“But, why do I have to go potty in the woods? Why isn’t there a bathroom in the tent if it’s magic?”

Flicking his gaze over to a small patch of trees, Nico watched as Jamie hopped from foot to foot,

wiggling his little body as he pouted up at his brother.

Jonas placed his hands on his hips and hissed through clenched teeth. “It’s not a five-star resort,

Jamie, be thankful you have a bed to sleep in again. Just find a tree, there are plenty,” he huffed,

gesturing to the abundance of wilderness surrounding them.

Jamie’s lip quivered slightly, and he stopped his bouncing, opening his mouth in a loud wail. The

wind kicked up around the boy as he started to sob, fat tears leaking from his eyes. “You’re so

mean, Jonas. You’re always so mean. I’m telling mommy.” His little face burned bright red, hands

wiping furiously at his cheeks.

Jonas dropped down onto a knee and took his brother’s hands in his own. “Hey, don’t cry Jamie.

I’ll go with you if you’re too scared to go alone.”

The younger boy stopped his wailing and grinned, the winds completely dying out. “Okay,” he

exclaimed, dragging Jonas off into the trees as fast as his little legs could carry him.

Nico watched them go, a frown starting to crease his brow. “That was strange,” he mumbled to

himself, not expecting anyone else to respond.

“They both exhibit some form of wind manipulation,” Dendron said from somewhere behind him.

Nico started and spun around to stared wide-eyed at the small satyr, deep green eyes staring intently

back. Dendron flicked his gaze back toward the retreating pair and shrugged. “I’m not even sure

they know who their respective parents are, but if I had to guess, I’d say the Anemoi are a safe bet.”

“You mean the four wind gods,” Nico asked, glancing back toward the trees. He supposed it would

make sense if they shared similar powers but had separate parents. Grimacing, he found himself none

too fond of the choices. Zephyros was privy to his little secret, and Notus and Boreas were both
obnoxious in their own right, according to Jason. He didn’t know much about Eurus, so the guy probably kept to himself.

“Indeed, though I’ve yet to witness anything more than the occasional wind gust. There was one time Jamie made fog roll in when he was scared, but Sabrina’s power keeps them in check whenever she’s close by. I have no idea who her parentage might be, aside from the fact she has a father, so it’s likely a goddess.”

Nico shrugged, fiddling with the strap on his messenger bag. “Kayla from the Apollo cabin has two fathers, though I’m not quite sure how that’s possible. I didn’t think it was polite to inquire, if she even knows herself.”

Dendron smiled, though it didn’t look like the smile of a young child. It was the same kind of smile Chiron gave whenever he was reluctant to disclose information he deemed unnecessary. “Ah, yes, Apollo is a strange case.” Turning on his heel, he wandered back inside of the tent, leaving Nico to frown after him.

When the group was finally ready and packed, they set off through the park toward the city’s downtown region. The sun was already high in the sky, warm beams shining down on them from over the tops of newly budding trees. Somehow, he took that to mean it was near noon, possibly a little before.

He could have asked Will for the exact time, but he didn’t want to give the boy the satisfaction that his powers were actually helpful. Not that it was even known if they would work around Sabrina. The oppressive sensation he’d felt the night before weighed heavily on him, almost like someone turned up the gravity, but only on his insides.

Nico gave an experimental release of his power, trying to call out the bones beneath his feet. In his mind’s eye, he could sense them far below the surface of the Earth, but the usual tug he felt when they’d begun responding to his whim just wasn’t there. Strange, his power worked, but didn’t.

Glancing at the fair-haired girl, he noticed her reserved body language, crouching in on herself, trying to make her form seem smaller. Knowing how it felt to be unwanted and even feared, he chewed on his lip and decided to strike up a conversation.

“So, where are you from,” he asked, falling into step with her. Will gave him a curious look, but took the lead, the other three companions trekking along behind him.

Her eyes wandered over to his face, pale purple with flecks of blue and gold. Her expression remained solemn, even as her gaze drifted back over to their terrain. “Originally, I was born here, but my father moved us around a bit when I was small until he settled in Oklahoma City. We’ve lived there since I was six, so it’s all I really know.” Her tone was emotionless, hard to read.

“What made you leave, if you don’t mind my asking.” His own eyes wandered back to the rest of the group, making sure they were far enough away that the girl might feel more inclined to open up. Jamie was busy skipping ahead a few paces, waiting for the others to catch up before skipping ahead once more.

“The monsters started coming around our home at night. My father wasn’t safe around me any longer, so I left.” Her voice was calm, collected, and he wondered how she was able to sound so unaffected, almost robotic. When he didn’t speak for some time, she glanced at him curiously. “Was
Nico shook his head, trying to muster a smile. “No, it was. Sorry, you just said it so matter of fact, like it was an easy choice.”

She nodded her head. “It was. My father’s safety is a priority over my own, so when he was no longer safe, I left him so he would be. So long as he’s alright, I’m fine with it. We shouldn’t allow our emotions to cloud our reasoning.” Tucking a strand of pale hair behind her ear, she shrugged. “I chose the logical path, the one with the least number of problems.”

Nico was busy paying attention to her face, so when he collided with something hard and warm, it took him completely by surprise. He rubbed at the side of his head, trying to lessen the throbbing sensation in his temples. “What the-“ he muttered, then glanced up into Will’s hard blue eyes.

“I think we’ve got company,” he murmured in response, grabbing Nico by the arm and dragging him through the trees. His face was void of its usual softness, brow creased, mouth a firm line. When they were more than twenty feet away, he dropped his hold and lowered his voice. “It’s too quiet, and Dendron said the animals are keeping well away from this area. He’s promised to keep the others protected with his nature magic, but we should find the source before it finds us.”

Nico’s eyes scanned the forest for any signs of visible life. Just like they said, not a single rustling could be seen; save for when a light breeze picked up, stirring the treetops. The silence sent a shiver down his spine, putting his senses on high alert.

Withdrawing his stygian sword, he stood poised and ready to strike. “Do you know the size of the area we’re talking about here,” he finally asked, taking a step deeper into the dense woods.

Will shook his head, pulling his bow from his back and nocking an arrow. “Dendron only said this side of the path was empty of all animal life, which is unnatural in such a wooded area. The animals on the other side seem to be hiding as well, which would-“

“Nico, Will, come quick.” The voice was foreign, nasally, almost like the speaker had a cold.

Nico frowned, eyes searching the direction from whence it came. “Who said that,” he whispered, stepping up against a small Aspin to use its shadow should it be necessary.

Will loosed an arrow through the trees and laughter sounded, high pitched and elated. Nocking another one, he chewed on his lip nervously. “I think… I’ve heard about of something like this,” he mumbled, spinning around and firing another arrow the opposite direction.

Nico grabbed Will’s hand before he could nock another and growled. “Careful, Solace, you’re going to shoot the wrong thing if you don’t cut that out. Now what is it, and how dangerous are we talking here?” He stared hard at the other until Will pursed his lips and gave a short nod.

“I’ve only read about them a few times, but I think it’s a Crocotta.” When Nico only blinked at him, he ran a nervous hand through his hair and sighed. “They mimic human speech and learn people’s name so they can lure them to their death. They’re said to look like a lion-wolf or dog-hyena hybrids, with great strength and super speed. Some stories say their eyes are kaleidoscope looking, and if you look them in the eye three times, they’ll freeze you to the spot. And they hunt human, so I’d say they’re pretty bad.”

Nico closed his eyes and released his powers into the ground. Half-formed skeletal creatures stirred, working their way through the soil before they erupted all around him. He heard Will shoot another arrow and curse under his breath when it didn’t hit the mark.
“I’ll try to draw it out, cover me, just in case,” he murmured quietly. Will nodded in response, and he shot off, racing toward the wicked laughter.

Through the trees, he saw a blur of brown rush past him, changing course to try and follow it. The skeletons kept coming, popping out of the ground everywhere he neared, launching themselves at the creature to slow it down. It cut through them like butter, exploding bone fragments outward as it charged straight for him.

Raising his sword high, he sliced, missing only by a narrow margin. Will’s arrow flew past him, hitting the tree just to his right. He heard even more cursing, the Greek translating to ‘how many kilos of an asshole are you?’

Spinning around, Nico swung his sword just as the beast charged him again. It bounced off the trees, leaving terrible gashes in its wake. Every time he tried to strike it down, it either dodged him, or he didn’t even come close. It was like he was trying to hit a piñata with a blindfold on, only he’d managed to walk the wrong direction in the first place. The thing howled and cackled, kicking up dirt and making it hard to see.

His breath came hard and fast, heart pounding in his ears as sweat began beading his brow. Soon, the laughter came from everywhere, like the creature was running circles around them, taunting them into frustration.

Dark eyes scanned the trees, but the thing was too fast to pinpoint. When it finally stopped a couple of feet away, the creature unhinged its jaw and growled at him hauntingly; sharp, pointed teeth dripping saliva onto the compacted dirt.

He'd never seen anything quite like the monster before him. The creature looked like someone put a badger’s head on a lion’s neck and body, giving it hooves like a goat and the pattern of a tiger. Its smile, which was the worst part, was almost humanoid; twisted and unnatural like a grotesque Cheshire Cat. The shaggy grey mane sprouting from its head and neck was a gnarled mess of blood and bone; and as it licked its lips, fear washed over him, rooting him to the spot.


It sprang forward, intent on swallowing him whole. He watched it coming, horrorstruck, unable to move a single muscle. The arm that held his sword lay limp at his side, still clutching the blade but unable to draw it upward in defense. As the body entered its descent, an arrow pierced its chest, breaking the unusual spell cast over him. Running his blade clean through, it disintegrated into a pile of shimmering dust, blowing away in the wind.

"Thanks," he murmured as Will came to stand beside him. Kicking at the remaining ashes, he dispersed them further.

Will patted his shoulder reassuringly with a warm smile. “Don’t mention it. Let’s just hope that was the only one, I don’t want to go through anything like that ever again,” he said with a shudder, strapping his bow across his back. “Well, we’ve wasted enough time here, let’s go.”

Nico nodded, sparing one last glance at the spot the creature stood as it taunted him. If he never faced anything like that creature again, it would still be too soon.

Walking took longer than expected, and by nightfall, the group was spent. Jamie was having the
hardest time, needing more breaks to rest than all of them combined. If they kept their snail-like pace, it would take two weeks to make it back to camp.

Nico practically begged Will to let him shadow travel the brothers there, but the guy wasn’t having any of it. Thus, by the time they had made it to the Patuxent River in the town of Laurel, they decided to make their camp along its shore and call it good. If they were lucky, they could probably make it outside of Baltimore by the following evening.

With the tent set up and a nice fire blazing, Will pulled him inside to send another Iris message to Chiron. Somehow, he’d forgotten their promise to update the centaur to their whereabouts and safety. The son of Apollo decided to use the flashlight and cup trick again, tossing a drachma into the rainbow it cast.

“I was just starting to think something might have befallen you. How are you faring?” Chiron was in full centaur mode once more, foot tapping the ground restlessly.

Will scratched his cheek in thought, unsure of what to disclose. “We haven’t made it as far as we’d have liked. It’s a lot slower going than it should be, and we’ve already run into a bit of trouble,” he admitted finally.

Chiron frowned, eyes flicking to Nico, then back to Will. “What sort of trouble?”

“Well, we ran across a Crocotta in the park,” Will said slowly, choosing his words carefully. “And it was harder to kill than we thought. It’s dead, of course, but we’re lucky no one got hurt. Otherwise, it’s been smooth sailing.” He chuckled nervously and Chiron’s frown deepened.

“This is most concerning. Crocotta usually only appear at night, and I’ve never heard of one spotted in the area, let alone the country. I’m glad you are safe, but I’ll need to ask around about this, see if anyone has answers.” Brown eyes flicked away as the older man stroked his chin in thought.

Will and Nico shared a look but said nothing, waiting for whatever was to come next.

After a beat, Chiron nodded firmly. “Thank you both for taking care of the thing. If left unchecked… well, I’d hate to think of the kind of damage it could have caused; and so close to a children’s playground, no less. Keep your eyes peeled for anything else strange, and report back to me in a few days unless something else happens. Be safe.”

The image disappeared, and Nico clicked off the flashlight. The two shared another uneasy look, unsure of how much to tell the others. Will stared back at him like he understood his train of thought, but Nico voiced it nonetheless. “The less the kids know, the better. I don’t want to cause a panic, we’ve got enough on our plate as it is,” he murmured, worrying a lip between his teeth.

Will smiled awkwardly and nodded, blue eyes clouded with emotions. “I agree, at least until we find out if there’s anything to discuss. Could be nothing.” His voice was strained like he was trying really hard to sound normal, but failing miserably.

Nico shuffled around, not quite sure what to do before pointing out of the tent. “We should…” his voice trailed off, but Will seemed to get the message. The two of them left without another word, heading out into the crisp night air to join the others.
The boys do have specific gods as their parents, I hope to kind of give it away with actions over words, but you can guess if you'd like.

I also have one specific idea of the Crocotta and how it looked, but many things say differently. It's kind of just whatever you like, and I liked the lion badger the best.

Any questions, feel free to ask.
Nico awoke to the sound of hail pelting the sides of the tent. It was either that, or someone was throwing small stones against the fabric at an alarmingly swift and isochronal rate. That, combined with the sudden drop in temperature, led him to believe there was a strange storm occurring outside, one that he should probably get up to go look into. It took a little while, his reluctance to leave the warmth of his blankets slowly succumbing to his curiosity, and he rose to his feet, crossing his arms in a half-hearted shiver.

The area was so cold his breath was visible, tiny puffs of vapor dissipating almost as quickly as they’d formed. Rummaging in his bag until he found a pull-on jacket, he slipped it over his head, still sore about the fact his aviator jacket had been destroyed. At least he had some semblance of warmth, Chiron must have either foreseen strange weather patterns, or the centaur was big on 'better safe than sorry'. Pulling back the flap on the door, he poked his head outside and grimaced.

The sky was dark, churning clouds of black and grey covering the blue as far as the eye could see. Even the river looked angry, little balls of hail smacking at the water, causing it to bubble and roll. The ground was littered all around him, the pea-sized ice balls making it look like someone exploded Styrofoam everywhere while they slept.

Hail wasn’t that unusual of an occurrence, but the air around him felt staticky and alive; sending jolts of electricity straight into his skin, making his face tingle. Stepping back inside the tent, he rubbed a hand through his thick hair, noting it, too, had a gentle static cling that tickled the skin of his palm.

Shuffling back to the little cots, he kneeled beside Will’s and gently tapped the other on the forehead. Eyelids twitched, a small frown creasing his brow. “Will, wake up,” he whispered, trying to refrain from disturbing the remaining companion’s rest. A trail of crusted drool ran down his chin, and Nico resisted the urge to laugh. “Will, emergency, wake up.” Flicking the other right between the eyes, they shot open.

Will blinked rapidly, face scrunched up in confusion. “Wha,” he mumbled, voice thick and sultry with sleepiness.

Nico snickered, pleased with the response. He’d never seen Will disoriented before, and it was kind of hilarious to do so now. “Come on, I need to talk to you,” he murmured, trying to portray the urgency of the situation without actually raising his voice.
Will’s eyes cleared in an instant, suddenly seeming more alert. Sitting up, he winced and pulled the blanket back up to his chin with a grimace. “Holy Hera, it’s freaking freezing. Who turned up the winter?” The son of Apollo didn’t quite understand the art of whispering, so his voice was more of a muted shout; breathy and squeaky and obnoxious.

Nico rolled his eyes, opening Will’s bag without permission and rifling through the contents until he came upon a Camp Half-Blood sweater. Tossing it at the other’s face, he relished entirely the stunned look Will gave him in response. “Hurry up, that’s part of what we need to talk about.”

Slipping from his bed, Will pulled the sweater over his head, shivering violently with chattering teeth. When Nico cocked a brow at his choice in sleepwear, he scowled. “They were a gift from my mother, and they’re comfy,” he pouted, running his hand down to cover the words on his right thigh. They read ‘male nurses know where to stick it’ with a partially full syringe in the center.

Nico clamped his lips shut hard to stifle the giggle trying to tumble out from his mouth. “Cute,” he managed to wheeze, then spun around and took three, large strides the opposite direction. Strange, scratchy noises burned the back of his throat and he covered his face with both hands to mute the sound. He heard Will huff next to him and peeked his fingers open to glance at the angry demigod.

Will’s face was bright red, arms crossed over his chest. His lip was protruding ever so slightly from his mouth, eyes staring upward at the ceiling. “What was so important you needed to wake me up at six-forty in the morning,” he asked, flicking his ocean blue gaze back down to Nico’s face.

Nico gestured outside and the other blinked in confusion. “You don’t hear the hail falling? It’s not like it’s quiet.” Will frowned, as if the sound never occurred to him before, and Nico rolled his eyes. “Pop your head out and take a look. It’s strange, and I’m pretty sure April isn’t a common month for hail, though I’ve never lived here, so who knows.”

Will obliged, pulling open the curtain for a couple of seconds before dropping it and cursing under his breath. His eyes shone with concern and he chewed his lip in thought. “Do you think we should ask Chiron if he’s heard anything about the strange weather, or should we just continue on like it’s nothing? I don’t think we should stay here, whatever we decide to do. Who knows how long a storm like this could last, and we’ll need more provisions eventually or we’ll use them all up.”

Running a hand through his hair, he plopped down into one of the chairs, looking tired.

Nico shrugged, pulling out his own chair and sitting as well. “If we’re going to head out regardless, we should just get to it and see how far we can make it before we need to stop. We can contact him later tonight, that’ll give him a little more time to figure things out. Who knows, maybe the weather is just normal for this area.”

Will gave him a skeptical look, but nodded. “Yeah, maybe. I guess we might as well wake the others, get an early start on the day. I’ll make coffee.” He rose and shuffled over to the cupboards, pulling down the battery-powered cooker to boil a kettle of water.

Nico glanced back toward the entrance, giving an involuntary shudder. Hopefully, Chiron packed some umbrellas; because if not, they were about to have a nice, soaked journey ahead of them, and he was ninety-nine percent sure the youngest of the group would also become the most vocal, cutting their trip even shorter than the previous day’s.

Hail soon gave way to rain, the small company trekking along in glum silence. They’d been walking for a few hours at least, hoods pulled up to keep the rain from splattering their faces. There weren’t
any umbrellas, but Chiron had done one better, including six thin, plastic, waterproof jackets that did nothing for the chill but kept their top portions thankfully dry.

They’d put the jackets on over their warmest attire, managing to keep their bags dry as well. While Nico’s pant legs were officially soaked through, he was thankful his shoes at least kept his feet warm. Glancing at the others, they didn’t look so lucky. Everyone except him wore some kind of sneaker, which looked to be quite wet at the moment. He couldn't see their faces for the hoods, but slumped shoulders told him no one was happy.

Another hour or so into their walk, the group decided to stop and take a break, huddling under a canopy of trees to avoid further rainfall. Will found a nice rock to sit on, removing his hood with a sigh. “Well, this is unpleasant,” he muttered, shaking the water from his coat’s arms.

Nico pushed his own hood off and stepped closer. “Do you want to stop for the day, call it good? The weather might be preferable tomorrow.” He spared a glance at the others, who were removing their raincoats to get to their bags, eager to find snacks.

Will pursed his lips with a frown. “It might only get worse. We’re all already wet and uncomfortable. I say we continue on, in case tomorrow is worse. At the very least I think we can make it to Baltimore. It’s only another two hours or so.” His eyes drifted out into the rain and he frowned once more.

“What?” Nico followed the other’s gaze but didn’t see anything that looked off or suspicious. With his powers constantly weighed down, it was harder than normal to think straight, let alone sense if the danger was close by. It made him feel naked, and he didn’t like it.

"I keep thinking I see something on the other side of the road, but it’s only little glimpses. Probably just deer or something. Or my frayed nerves, having my senses dulled.” Raking a hand down his face, he attempted a cheerful smile. “We should probably eat something, get some of our energy back. I’ll see what’s easy.”

Nico watched him walk away, then turned his attention back to where Will had indicated. It was hard to see anything through all of the rainfall, but he did catch sight of something flitting through the trees. He wished the rain would let up, at least enough to hear approaching danger. The rain was so loud, it was even difficult to hear the voices of his group standing fifteen feet away. Turning to leave, his head snapped back to the road as his wish came to fruition.

A rumble sounded and the heaviness all around him lessened significantly. Like a switch being flicked, the rain slowed its fall until it was no more than a gentle mist clinging to the air. Even the sky seemed to lighten, though the clouds still covered the blue and hid the sun behind a curtain of swirling white.

He blinked in confusion, normal sounds steadily picking up the tempo until he heard cars humming in the distance and the quiet conversation the others were having a few feet away. “Uh, guys,” he murmured, gesturing outside the shelter of the trees. They glanced his way, all but the youngest among them frowning.

“The rain stopped,” Will noted, though his voice was tight, his look saying he was also suspicious as to why. Taking a step forward, his eyes scanned the street. “Nico, maybe we should,” he gestured with his head, leaving the rest up to interpretation.

Nico nodded and the two stepped away from the others, back out onto the empty road. “Feel anything unusual,” he asked, once they were far enough from Sabrina that the strange sensation her power caused was missing. Other than a tingling down his back, and the sudden awareness of every
last bone underneath his feet in a wide arch around them, he didn’t feel anything. No sense of any sort of danger.

Will shook his head in response. “No, nothing seems to be amiss, other than the eerie change in rainfall.” Narrowing his eyes, his brow creased. “Does it feel warmer to you,” he asked, pulling at his neckline as if it was suddenly stifling, making it hard to breathe.

Nico frowned, realizing that he, too, felt warm in all of his layers. The ground around them looked dryer like it hadn’t seen hours upon hours of intense rainfall. “Yeah, like stepping inside of a warm house after being out in cold weather. What gives, this is not normal.” His eyes scanned the area once more, but nothing jumped out at him. “Maybe Dendron can tell us if he smells anything strange, otherwise we’ll just have to count it as a blessing and hope nothing even weirder happens.”

Will nodded, and they returned to their companions. Dendron shook his head when they asked if he picked up any odd scents in the immediate area. He even walked around some, making a point to cross the road and try from there, but his nose didn’t pick up anything threatening for miles around them. Nico wasn’t sure if that was good news, or if it made the whole ordeal all the more concerning.

The group made it to the outskirts of Baltimore in a much better mood than they were previously in. The weather was so nice that the company was even able to change into new shoes, dangling the wet ones from their hands to dry as they went. Nico was once again glad his shoes were decently waterproof, they were the only pair he owned. Dendron was the only other one who didn’t seem to mind the water, probably due to his having hooves instead of feet.

Jonas and Jamie chit chatted happily as they picked up the pace, talking to Will about their mother and how she only agreed to let them go along with the satyr when it became apparent that the two of them together brought more trouble to their lives than she could handle all by herself. The trio was laughing at a particular tale about Jamie bringing home a Karpoi and how terrible that went when Dendron grabbed Nico’s arm, face grave.

His deep green eyes scanned the road behind them, mouth forming a thin line. The three ahead of them kept walking and talking, but Sabrina also halted, pale eyes regarding the satyr curiously. He sniffed at the air, nose twitching like a bunny rabbit, then looked to Nico with a frown. “I smell Cynocephali. They must have followed us here from DC. No doubt the rain carried our scents further than normal. We should remain cautious, though they’re still a good distance away.”

Nico nodded, giving a short whistle that made Will stop. Blue eyes stared questioningly, so he closed the distance, dropping his voice. “Just keep a lookout for any danger, we might have company real soon.” He glanced at Jamie, who was too busy trying to drag his brother away to notice; though Jonas seemed to pick up on the mood and was also searching the area, brow slightly furrowed.

Will smiled brightly, appearing less worried than the rest of the group. “Sure thing,” he said cheerily, though his eyes hardened as they flicked behind Nico to scan the road. The smile never broke from his face as he returned to his conversation with ease, leaving the other blinking after him.

Sabrina appeared next to him then, gazing at the others with a strange look on her face. “They try so hard to spare Jamie the worry, yet their efforts would become futile should an enemy attack. The boy should be warned of the danger, it is never a bad idea to err on the side of caution.” Her pale eyes turned his way, almost as if looking to him for an answer.
“They don’t want to upset him if they can help it. I understand, he’s so young, and they want to assure him some kind of happiness while it’s still available. It’s not easy, being a demigod. We don’t get normal childhoods. The longer they can keep his sense of wonder, the better.” He felt a pang in his chest, the image of his sister flitting through his mind. Bianca was much the same way, allowing him to see the world a little brighter than it truly was, at least until she could hide it from him no longer.

Sabrina sighed, shaking her head like the idea was silly. “I guess I just don’t see the reason behind such actions,” she admitted, voice seemingly amused. It was hard to tell with the girl, she tended to lack emotions even more than Dendron.

The remaining three fell into step and picked up the pace, far less talkative than their other companions. They walked that way for some time, down the streets of the city, past the Chesapeake Bay. The water reflected the tall building back, lights shimmering across the soft waves as the sun steadily sank below the horizon. It took another hour to get through the urban areas until they came upon a park area, nestled in the middle of the bustling town.

Jamie caught sight of the playground area and practically dragged his brother away, bouncing up and down with excitement. It was getting darker, so the group decided to make camp for the night, thankful the mist would conceal them from the curious mortals still roaming the grounds.

Will hung back, eyes searching around them for any signs of danger. “How safe are we here,” he asked Dendron, keeping his voice low.

The satyr shrugged. “No better or worse than usual. You said your tent conceals our scent, so I have faith in the ability to remain unharmed, at least for the night. I’m sure the Cynocephali will wander this way eventually, so we shouldn’t dawdle, but a little time to play won’t hurt anything.” He looked around cautiously before picking up a discarded can and munching on it happily. At least he was helping to keep the park clean.

Will looked to Nico then, chewing his lip in thought. “Do you want to check the grounds, find a good place to set everything up? We should probably send Chiron another message, let him know where we are and ask if he knows anything about the strange weather changes.”

Nico glanced at the others, already steadily heading toward the playground area. Even the girl seemed drawn to the equipment, as if somewhere deep down she, too, needed to still be a child. She sat on the swing set and a look of euphoria crossed her face.

A small smile pulled at his lips as he watched them all let loose a little. “Yeah, I think there’s a lake nearby, I bet there’s a nice spot that’s a little more hidden,” he finally murmured after some time.

Will smiled at him, something strange twinkling in his eyes. “You like them,” he teased, and Nico rolled his eyes at the other’s tone. “I bet you’re kind of glad you can’t just shadow travel us all away. Sometimes it’s nice spending time with people.”

They fell into step, and Nico mulled it over. “I’m not glad, but it’s not quite as terrible as it could be,” he admitted, flushing ever so slightly. “At least I’m not stuck on that stupid boat. We have some kind of breathing room out here, so that’s nice”

Will eyed him curiously for a moment, a low hum emanating from his throat. “We all share one small tent, that’s got to be worse than having your own space.”

Nico shrugged. “Yeah, but Percy and Annabeth aren’t… never mind.” He glanced out at the trees, willing the warmth to leave his face.
Will smirked, clearly pleased with something. “So, was it the boat you didn’t like or the company?”

Nico shot the other a death glare, but Will kept the smirk on his face. “Both. Are you satisfied,” he grumbled, picking up the pace to signal the end of the conversation. Just when he was starting to forget why he disliked the other, the idiot had to be, well, a nosey idiot.

Will jogged slightly to catch up with him, looking even more pleased than before. “Actually, I am,” he murmured, shooting Nico a dazzling smile. It was so distracting, Nico almost walked into a tree. Will pulled him out of the way at the last second, causing Nico to yelp. “You should watch where you’re headed, Deathboy, it’s not safe.”

Nico huffed but turned his eyes back to his surroundings. “Look, there’s a nice grove of trees over there, I think we found our spot.” He didn’t glance back at Will again, too afraid he’d become even more distracted if he did.

Chapter End Notes

In case it never comes up, because I honestly don't know if it will, Jamie and Jonas Parker. I didn't add the last name and now it's kind of... late?

As you can imagine, the next chapter is probably taking place immediately after these events, which is why it didn't end with them already making camp.
I'm getting a little more cemented in how this thing is going to take off from this point.
Hope you enjoy. :)


A sharp cry pierced the night. Nico spun around, drawing his stygian sword up, poised and ready to attack. From the corner of his eye he could see Will was also standing ready, an arrow already nocked on his bowstring, eyes searching the trees for any signs of danger. Nico positioned himself to face the opposite direction, checking the rear in case of an attack. A light wind kicked up, swaying the tops of the trees as they waited with bated breath.

It came from all sides, the dog-faced men charging from the trees, snarling and snapping their jaws. Nico heard the arrow fly and hit the target just as his sword cut through two attackers simultaneously. They burst into shadows and slipped into the ground, another Cynocephali taking their place. Claws raked at his face, but he tucked and rolled, springing to his feet and stabbing his assailant through its back.

Wind whipped faster around the two quite suddenly, pelting them from all sides, making it hard to see. Grasping onto Will, he released his power, attempting to slip into the shadows, only to find that he couldn’t. Will shot him a curious look, before nocking another arrow and firing it at an oncoming attacker. The scream let him know it hit its mark, as the wind slowly became too intense to see more than a couple of feet in front of them.

Deciding on the next best course of action, he pulled Will along behind him, running blindly through the cyclone until he broke through it, barely avoiding smacking them into a tree.

“What is with that wind,” Will asked, bending at the waist and panting hard, sweat trickling down his face.

Nico’s eyes scanned the perimeter, guessing at the culprit. “Looks like Jonas and the others sensed the attackers as well,” he muttered, gesturing toward the boy standing a good twenty feet away. His arms were raised, face a mixture of confusion and awe. “Strange,” he mumbled, noticing the group that was standing just behind him.

“How is he doing that with Sabrina right next to him?” Will, too, noticed the lot a few feet away and was frowning slightly, looking from the tornado to the boy and back again.

The wind died out, Jonas staggering slightly on his feet. Cynocephali snarled in the clearing, noticing the children for the first time and charging toward them. Nico sprang into action, feet
slapping the ground hard as he took off in a sprint.

Will charged ahead of him, the other much faster than he could ever hope to be. When he was in good firing range, he pulled an arrow from his quiver and let it fly, hitting the closest Cynocephali and turning it to dust. It didn’t matter, there were far more than they could ever hope to take care of on their own.

“Get back,” Nico snarled, eyes locking with the satyr’s, stirring him from his stupor. A few of the dog men veered off course, charging straight at him instead. He screamed out a war cry, slicing through the monsters, hoping to draw the attention of the others to himself.

Will’s arrows flew at the ones still hoping to overtake their companions, but even he couldn’t fire off enough to hit all of their targets. “There’s too many,” he shouted from somewhere nearby, and Nico nodded, concentrating too hard to utter a response.

They kept fighting, shooting off arrows and slicing their way through the enemies, trying to keep the others safe. Most of the Cynocephali turned their attention back to the two of them, smart enough to realize Nico and Will were a threat that shouldn’t be ignored.

Nico dodged any attack that came his way, making quick work of those foolish enough to come close. Will was fully capable of picking off the monsters before they got within striking range of his person, but couldn’t hope to defend himself and their friends at the same time. A small group broke off from the rest, turning their attention back to the helpless.

A circle of fire appeared around the kids, devouring any Cynocephali that got too close to it. Silver arrows flew from somewhere to his left, piercing straight through the remainder, dropping them all like flies. Nico stabbed through one final attacker; then turned, face grim, just as the first of the girls broke through the trees and made their way over.

The cocky, dark-haired one approached him specifically, clipping the crescent moon shaped barrette back into her shaggy hair, just below her silver tiara, the symbol of her rank. “di Angelo,” she smirked, blue eyes flicking from him to Will, then back again. “And the son of Apollo, Solace, right?”

“What are you doing here, Grace?” Nico grumbled, reattaching his sword to his hip, then crossing his arms over his chest, entirely nonplused.

Will came up beside him, pulling his bow over his back and grinning lazily. “Hey, Thalia. Don’t act like you don’t know who I am. Being a Hunter can’t have warped your memory that terribly, you came into the infirmary like fifty times when you still lived at camp.”

Thalia pursed her lips but didn’t deny it, turning her attention back to Nico. “We’re passing through, lots of monsters popping up all over the place. You’re welcome, by the way. We only saved your asses; or the children’s asses, at least.”

Nico glanced over at his other companions, catching sight of the auburn-haired girl he knew to be the goddess Artemis. She was talking with Dendron, the other Hunters fawning over Sabrina, ignoring the males outright. “Yeah, we didn’t need help,” he muttered, returning his attention back to the cocky girl before him. “And since when do you lot have a fire user in your group, I don’t recall that kind of power back when we were up against Orion.”

Thalia frowned, glancing to the Hunters, then back to Nico. “We don’t, I thought that was one of your lot.” At the confused look he gave her, she rolled her eyes. “Well, clearly someone has a power you were unaware of because it definitely wasn’t one of my girls.”
Nico kept his doubts to himself, deciding to keep Sabrina’s strange affliction a secret if it could be helped. There didn’t need to be more reasons the Hunters tried to recruit her, which, from the look of things, they’d already begun their attempts.

He sighed, rubbing his temples to soothe the sudden pain building behind them. “Let’s get this weird little meet up over with, I’m sure there are things you’d like to ask, and information that might be helpful to both of our sides in the end.” He didn’t wait for a response, just walked away, sure the other two would follow.

The Hunters eyed him warily, much the same way most people did, knowing he was a son of Hades. Their mistrust came from at least one other source as well, his gender. He considered yelling at them that he didn’t even like girls, but figured it wouldn’t change much. He still had all the parts that deemed him unacceptable in their company.

Jamie bounded up to him excitedly, eyes bright with joy. “Dendron said those girls are Hunters and one of them is an actual goddess.” He scrunched up his nose distastefully and sighed. “They don’t like boys because they’re stupid and think we have cooties, but it’s still awesome.”

Nico bit his lip to suppress a laugh, eyeing Jonas curiously as the boy stared at his hands. “Yeah, the one speaking with Dendron is the goddess Artemis. She looks young, but that’s by choice.” Jamie’s eyes grew wide and Will came over to keep the small boy busy, leaving Nico to talk to the older one. “Hey, Jonas, everything alright?”

Jonas blinked up at him a few times, a sheepish look crossing his face. “Actually, I’m not so sure. I think… I think I made that fire that killed those monsters, but I don’t know how I did it or how that’s possible.”

Nico scratched his cheek idly in thought. “Well, you were right next to Sabrina, and she’s supposed to nullify our powers, so I’m not really sure how that would be possible. Speaking of which, how did you make that wind?”

Jonas frowned, chewing his lip with a shrug. “Dendron told us there was trouble nearby, so we all raced off to find you and Will. We came up and saw those dog guys running out of the woods, and Sabrina told me to do something to help out, so I… did? It was like this strange pressure building in my head and then the winds picked up and I knew it was something I was doing, but I didn’t know how to manipulate it to help, so I just let it go on until you got away.”

“Why do you think you made the fire happen,” Nico asked, glancing at Sabrina as the Hunters tried to show the girl how to shoot a bow. The expression on her face was stoic as ever, hard to tell if she was interested or not.

“I kept wishing for a barrier to protect us, hoping it would keep us from harm, and then the fire happened.” He shrugged again, like that explained everything.

“The boy is correct, his power can cause fire, though it would appear it isn’t as easy for him to manipulate.”

Nico turned around, staring into the milky, silver eyes of the goddess as she regarded the two of them coolly. Dendron shuffled his feet slightly behind her, seemingly uncomfortable. “Is he a child of Hephaestus, then? Though, that doesn’t explain the winds.”

Artemis looked at him strangely, a slight smile pulling at her lips. “Nico, you’ve grown since the last time we met.” Nico frowned, unsure if that was an age or height joke, or if the goddess was being sincere. “And no, he is a child of the Aeolus, as Dendron observed. His power resembles that of the
destroyer of crops; wind and fire both.”

“You’re sure it was him,” Nico asked, glancing back to Sabrina.

Artemis followed his gaze and nodded, seeming to catch his train of thought. “The girl is indeed special. With time, she will control her abilities as well, allowing those she alone deems worthy to use their powers; but only when she sees fit. I fear her appearance in all of this is not only by chance, she may have her own role to play in the end.”

Nico cocked a brow. “So, you know who her parent is, then?” The goddess hummed in response, making Nico frown. “Can you at least tell me what’s going on here and if it has anything to do with the weather or the monsters?”

“We have much to discuss. I will inform my Hunters to make camp. I suggest you do the same.” She walked away, the Hunters joining her as she went.

Will approached him, watching the goddess as she left. “She seems… the exact opposite of Apollo, actually. Hard to believe that’s my dad’s twin.”

Nico huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “They’re both obnoxious if you ask me. Must be a family trait.” Will glared but he ignored it, pulling the tent out of his bag and tossing it to the ground. “Might as well just camp here, I feel like it’s going to be a longer night than we thought.”

The youngest of their group had turned in early, allowing the others a moment to converse. Nico and Will sat on a log by the fire; Thalia, Artemis, and a few unknown Hunters joining them, with the latter hanging back, mostly to observe.

Nico glared at the girls, once again fighting back the urge to shout that he wasn’t interested in women, so they could stop looking at the two of them like they were evil seducers of the innocent. If it weren’t for Will, he might have, but he couldn’t speak for the son of Apollo. Knowing his father, he might just be.

“So, about these strange attacks,” Will began, looking to either Artemis or Thalia to fill in the details. “What exactly is going on around here, and is it connected to the weather issues, or was that just a freak storm or something?”

The two girls shared a look, and Thalia cleared her throat. “How much has Chiron said to you two? What exactly does he know?” She absentmindedly drummed her fingers on her knee as she spoke, gaze drifting from them to the fire. Orange glow reflected in her blue eyes, somehow making them appear almost white.

Will shrugged, glancing at Nico as if for permission. “He said he was concerned. We ran into a Crocotta in a park in broad daylight and that didn’t bode well with him. We haven’t spoken with him all day, we were actually just about to Iris message him when the Cynocephali showed up and then you guys came, and here we are.”

“Yes, Dendron informed me of this Crocotta attack,” Artemis spoke up, face forming a slight scowl. “My Hunters and I thank you for taking care of him, that’s one less monster on our long list of random appearances. You are correct to assume that something is amiss, though what, even I do not know. As for the weather, it’s not only happening here but all over the world.”

Nico frowned. “And you think this is all connected? I don’t see how strange weather and monsters
showing up can go hand in hand. And what about Sabrina? You hinted that she might have a role in all of this mess.”

Thalia shuddered. “That girl is definitely strange. I guess demigods aren’t the only people she blocks powers to. The Hunters can’t do anything around her, either.”

“But… you’re also a demigod,” Will pointed out.

Thalia rolled her eyes. “Not technically anymore. Just in ability, but it carries over to all of us except the Lady. Thankfully she is unaffected, or there would be a lot of angry gods vying for the girl’s destruction.” Her look turned grim at the thought.

Nico scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “Let me guess, you tried to recruit her until you realized it wouldn’t benefit you any.” Thalia looked ashamed, as did the girls behind her. “Typical, only care about your stupid cause, not the people that might get hurt in the process.” He kicked at the ground angrily, refusing to look at anyone. The subject was still a sore spot, and everyone knew it.

Silence ensued until Artemis spoke up. “The connection lies in the discord caused by both occurrences. It would seem that monsters who should not appear in a place are drawn to that area, the same way they are drawn to their typical environments. We have found Cerastes in wooded areas, and though the creatures are harmless to all but their prey, which is usually limited to small birds, they are typically sand dwellers. The same goes for the Amphisbaena we encountered, it originated in the Libyan desert, but we found it sulking around a graveyard in upstate New York.”

“And the weather? How is that connected,” Will asked quietly.

Artemis looked at him as if she wasn’t quite sure she wanted to respond. “The weather is also unusually chaotic. It snowed in Florida just last week. This may not sound so strange, but I have lived for thousands of years, and I know the signs. Greater forces are at work here.”

Thalia nodded her agreement. “We were hoping maybe you knew something more, perhaps Chiron has discerned something since your last conversation.”

Will looked to Nico then shrugged. “I guess it doesn’t hurt to ask, though it is kind of late.” He pulled a drachma out of his pocket, tossing it up into the air and catching it. “Just need a rainbow.”

A small, silver, velvet pouch appeared in the goddess’ hands as if by magic. She opened it up, pinching some of the contents gingerly between her fingers. Throwing it into the fire, the dust-like particles glittered as they fell, casting rainbows all around them. “You have fifteen minutes before it wears off. Best to hurry.”

Will flicked the coin with his thumb, grinning when it disappeared into one of the small fragments of light. “Cool. Chiron, Camp Half-Blood,” he murmured, and the image of the centaur swam into view.

Chiron was sitting in his office once again, staring at a piece of paper. His eyes were tired, his expression grim. When he noticed them there, he nodded stiffly but didn’t look surprised to see them together. “Thalia, Artemis, it has been a while. I trust you are all seeking the same council, but I know no more than you do.”

Artemis nodded. “Tell us what you will.”

“Some of the campers have returned already with their charges, but it has been difficult, and more enemies are encircling us every day. We haven’t seen numbers such as these since the Romans
surrounded us, and at least then we had foresight and declaration of war. This is just... madness. I thought it was the Cynocephali seeking revenge, but all monsters are drawn to us now.”

Thalia shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Do you think someone is leading them? Organizing the monsters the way Gaia did? Perhaps they are trying to finish what was started. Camp Half-Blood is a good place to wipe out the most demigods in one blow, next to New Rome. Has anyone contacted them, asking if they, too, are experiencing similar invasions?” Her fingers began drumming her knee again, playing out a beat only she knew.

The centaur nodded. “We have, and reports of strange monster sightings have begun in the surrounding area, but nothing like we are seeing on our side. For the moment, they are safe. If things continue as they are, we might have to send word to the satyrs to bring all new demigods to New Rome until this mess is sorted out. As for organization, it appears as if the only common goal amongst them is eliminating all new demigods before they make it inside the camp. None are even trying to break through our barriers to the inside, though that could change. The Athena Parthenos is partially to thank, so long as it stands, we are well protected from intruders. What news do the gods have about this mess, I assume it is larger than even I know if you and your Hunters are involved, Artemis.”

The goddess seemed to mull things over before nodding slightly. “It is as I thought. If my suspicions are correct, then no one is to blame here. We are not faced with an enemy who wishes us harm, and no one is controlling these monsters or even bribing them with promises to get them to follow orders. They are all acting on instinct, at least those that we have come across. I find this may be even more troubling than if they were being controlled, at least then we would know we stood a chance at fixing things. I fear it may be as simple as our world is once again changing all around us, shifting as everything we know alters itself once more. We immortals may just need to ride it out and see where we end up, as we have many times in the past.”

Chiron pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, suddenly looking defeated. “And what of the girl, have you been able to get a feel on her? Does she present a solution to this?”

Artemis pursed her lips, looking reluctant to speak. Her moonlike eyes drifted over their company before she released a long, slow breath of air. “I cannot say, she is either a warning of change or a bringer of change, only the Moirai know for certain how things will play out. The gods are to hold council soon to discuss these matters, I will have a better understanding of everything at that time. Until then, I feel these demigods should continue their journey as planned. My Hunters and I head out in the morning. We, too, are treating the situation as if it were something to be solved and will keep the monsters away from mortals as best we can. If things are in fact changing for good, I suppose we will just have to allow it and hope for the best.”

Chiron nodded, his horsetail twitching behind him. “I suppose we will have to hope for the best, as well. Nico, Will, continue back to camp, but do not dawdle. Remain on guard, I fear you will run into even more trouble the longer your journey takes. You would do well to listen to Dendron, he is more useful than you know.” He gave them both a look that said the information might be vital, disappearing from his features as quickly as it appeared. “Artemis, I hope to hear from you after the council of the gods takes place, and I thank you for your time and wisdom.”

The image faded, though Nico was unsure if the time had simply ended, or if Chiron decided they were done speaking and cut them off. Questions bubbled up inside of him, but only one rose above the rest. “What do you mean times might be changing?”

Artemis rose from her seat, and for a moment, Nico thought she might not reply. “Mortal consciousness isn’t the only thing that brings changes to our world, there are greater forces that are
also at work.” Her eyes got a faraway look in them, her voice turning sad. "In the beginning, the continents were all one land mass, and now they are many. Your South Pole once was lush and green and filled with life, now inhabitable and covered in ice. Perhaps the creatures that dwell in certain areas are better equipped to sense the changes happening around them than even us gods are, and are preparing themselves for when those changes take place.” She and the few Hunters standing guard left, going inside their tent.

Thalia hung back, pursing her lips and frowning into the flames. “Don’t worry about it so much, just keep moving forward and protecting those kids. Chiron will tell you anything my Lady finds out, I promise you won’t be in the dark for long.” She smiled at the two of them, then rose to her feet. “Better go rest up, it’s pretty late, and you have quite the day ahead of you.”

When she was gone, Will worried a lip between his teeth, blue eyes shining with concern. “Should we say anything or are we going to keep this from them, too?”

Nico shrugged. “We don’t even know what this is, to be honest. We’re only speculating based on partial information, so I say we talk to Dendron but keep the others out of it until it concerns them.”

Will nodded, scratching his cheek in thought. “And what about Sabrina? Is she included in being concerned in the matter, or are we going to pretend that everyone wasn’t dropping little hints that things might revolve around her existence?”

Nico rose to his feet, staring into the embers as the last of the flames consumed the remainder of firewood, desperately trying to stay alive. “I think the less she knows, the better. Something tells me she wouldn’t want to be the center of attention. It could just be a coincidence.” He glanced at Will, who nodded reluctantly. “We really should turn in. It’s, what, like midnight already?”

Will smiled, cocking an eyebrow. “Are you asking me for the time, di Angelo?”

Nico shrugged, a slight smile pulling at his lips. “Maybe you’re not fully useless. Knowing the time does come in handy.”

Will beamed in response, looping his thumbs in the pockets of his black jeans. “Almost, it’s 11:47. You’re not so bad at guessing on your own, you know.”

“Lots of practice,” he mused, sparing one last look to the flames. The two headed into the tent, falling into their cots and allowing sleep to claim them.

Chapter End Notes

If Artemis isn't exact I apologize, she's just kind of... somber, calm, collected; not really much to do but write dialogue.
I feel like she also A, doesn't hate men really, just doesn't care for lusty men
And B, probably knows Nico and Will like dudes and are zero threat

Also, I've always had full background and everything for all of my characters, any questions, just ask. Unless it's part of the plot, then you only get vague replies.
Chapter Summary

The company learns some interesting information from the goddess and Chiron, deciding to leave things alone and focus on the task at hand. If only things were so simple...

Chapter Notes

FYI, my summaries are not about below, but behind, because why would I give things away before you've read it?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nico awoke to the sounds of panic, and someone shaking him hard. He opened one eye and flinched, not expecting a set of blues one to be so close to his face. Will was saying something, mouth moving fast, but he couldn’t make it out in his half-asleep state. The remnants of a dream tugged at his consciousness, informing him of some important task or message that really shouldn’t be forgotten, but unfortunately, was.

“Slow down, too early for your blabbing, Solace,” he mumbled, waving a hand in front of Will’s face to make him shoo.

Will frowned at him, grabbing the hand and yanking him to his feet. “I said that Sabrina is missing, and we need to discuss the next course of action. I’ve already spoken with the boys and Thalia, no one has seen her since she went to bed last night. Now I’m ninety-nine percent sure she was in her cot when we finally turned in, but I can’t be certain. We need you.”

Nico snapped to attention, body taking over as his mind hurried to catch up. “How long has she been known to be missing for? Maybe she just wandered off and is close by still?”

Will ran a hand through his hair and released a slow breath. “I checked the park after I spoke with Thalia, and she promised to send a couple of girls around to check the perimeter. I’ve been up for about an hour now, not that I’m happy about that, but when I noticed she was gone, I couldn’t get back to sleep. You’re the last one we woke, I didn’t want you to grump all day if it wasn’t an actual emergency.”

Nico frowned, glancing around the tent and finding it empty. “Where is everyone?”

“Dendron took the boys to the park to keep them occupied. If we have to leave and go look for her, I think you and I should do it without them. I think they’ll be safe if they keep to this area and mostly hang out inside, so Jamie is getting some of that energy out before he’s cooped up for however long.” Will held out a cup of hot, black liquid, offering it up to Nico. “I made you coffee, drink fast and get dressed.”

Nico took the cup and watched Will hurry off, grabbing things out of cupboards and stuffing them
into their bags. He felt his stomach flutter, telling himself it was just anxiety and nothing more. The coffee was hot, so he blew on the surface before taking a sip. Finishing it off in four, large gulps, he felt the effects almost instantly, brain working at full capacity instead of half. “Have you spoken with Dendron yet? About whatever Chiron mentioned.”

Will stopped mid-step, chewing his lip and shaking his head. “I was waiting for you, actually. It could be nothing, anyway.” He resumed his frantic packing, counting off unknown things on his fingertips before nodding approvingly. “Alright, I have enough things between the two of us for most incidents and food to last two days, though we’ll need to supplement. That shouldn’t be too difficult in a large city, we have plenty of cash. We’ll also need to figure out sleeping arrangements if things take that long, we don’t have anything to take with, not that there’s room. Are you all set?”

Nico glanced down at his pajamas and sighed, raking a hand down his face. “Let me get dressed, and then yeah.”

Will tossed a banana at his head, his reflexes sharp enough to avoid it hitting his face, though only just. “Don’t forget to eat something, too,” he smirked, then stepped outside to allow some privacy.

Nico changed fast, glaring at the fruit the whole time. When he finally peeled it and took a bite, he told himself it was because coffee on an empty stomach made him jittery all day, not because Solace had told him to. Discarding the evidence, he opened the curtain, frowning up at the sky.

It looked like sunrise, though that couldn't be right because everyone was bustling around, even the mortals occupying the park. The sun was also way too high in the sky for everything to be colored the way it was, in oranges, purples, and pinks. Wandering over to Will, he pointed upward, figuring that was all that needed to be said on the matter.

Will grimaced and nodded. “It’s nine in the morning, the sun rose at precisely six twenty-five AM. The positioning is correct, it’s the sky that didn’t get the memo. We’re just ignoring it and hoping it goes away. Ready to go?”

Thalia walked up, giving the two a stiff nod. “My Hunters say she isn’t anywhere within a one block radius, none of the shops, nothing. I’m coming with you to speak with Dendron, my Lady is quite interested in what the boy might have to say.” When they feigned innocence, she rolled her eyes. “Chiron isn’t the most discrete person in the world, and you two idiots are both too dense for him to be discrete if he wanted to be. It was pretty obvious the satyr knows something important. So, come on, let’s go ask.” She walked away, heading toward the playground.

Will pursed his lips, eyes watching her as she went. “Someone is bossy,” he muttered.

Nico chuckled. “For once, we agree on something. Better follow her, she might use force if necessary to make him talk.”

They caught up to her just outside the play area. She was watching Jamie run around, a wistful smile pulling at her lips. Nico had never seen Thalia look so emotionally vulnerable, he almost did a double take to verify that she was, indeed, herself.

She sighed heavily, tucking a loose strand of dark hair behind her ear. “My brother is the same age as me now. And I never got to watch him grow up. It's never easy for me, being around younger kids.” Her blue eyes hardened, and she gave a firm nod. “Let’s get this over with.”

Dendron looked up at their approach, mouth forming a tight line. It always astonished Nico how the boy could look so much older while still looking so young. Satyrs aged differently than humans, that was true, but they also experienced time differently, which helped to even things out. There was
something odd about the other that he just couldn’t put his finger on.

Thalia cleared her throat, flicking her eyes from Dendron, to the other boys, then back again. Her intentions were clear, and Dendron followed them to a bench well out of range of any eavesdroppers. “Chiron thinks you know something, so spill.”

Will laughed, patting Thalia gently on the shoulder, causing her to frown. “What Thalia means is, Chiron might have hinted that you had useful information, and we think now is a good time to disclose that information to us, in case it can help us out.”

Dendron’s green eyes roamed over their faces, before landing directly on Nico. When he spoke, it was as if he was only talking to him. “I’ll need to start with an apology, then. It was not my intention to lie to anyone, but Chiron informed me my parentage wouldn’t be necessary to disclose on a mission such as this. I am not a regular satyr, and I wasn’t given this task, I asked for it specifically.”

Nico frowned, not understanding how any of that could be useful. “How are you not a regular satyr?”

Dendron lifted up his pant leg, showing off pale skin and human calves. Then he removed his hat, shaking out his shaggy white hair, showing off his little, twisted horns. “For one, I only have these.”

Will hummed in contemplation. “Was your mother a mortal, then? I’m not sure how else you could have human legs.”

Dendron looked at Will strangely, then shook his head. “My father was a nymph, like most satyr’s. It’s my father who is strange. I am a son of Agreus, who is the son of Hermes and Sose. My father was gifted with prophecy, as am I. I had a prophetic dream that I was standing on Mount Olympus with Nico, Will, and Sabrina, though at the time, I knew nothing of the three.”

Nico glanced at the others, verifying they, too, felt skeptical. “How do you know it wasn’t just a normal dream? I mean, I understand we were in it, and you’ve never met us, but demigods have dreams about the past, future, and present all the time. It’s nothing new.”

Dendron shook his head. “You don’t understand, prophetic dreams have a certain feel to them. Like your oracles, it’s a sense of being taken over, not just being an invisible force idly standing by. Besides, how often do you see yourself standing in your own dreams?”

Nico sighed. “You’re right. So, then what happened, after you had this dream? Did you see why we were all on Olympus? Maybe it was some other place.”

Dendron pursed his lips. “Unfortunately, no, I saw Zeus’s throne, but that’s it. The only other hint I’d gotten was Oklahoma City, so I sought counsel with Grover Underwood, and he directed me to Chiron, who told me to go and look for the girl there, keeping him posted along the way. I actually ran into the boys by chance while I was there, but couldn’t leave them to fend for themselves. Chiron promised to send help, which is how I found out how the two of you fit into the picture. He told me you were demigods already in the camp. That is the extent of my knowledge.”

Thalia cocked a brow, crossing her arms over her chest. “You’re telling me you are actually a kind of Pan? That’s what your father is, one of the Panes, along with his brother Nomios. Are you also immortal and only look like a child?”

Dendron frowned. “No, I am the equivalent of a ten-year-old human, having only lived for twenty mortal years. I’m just a satyr, nothing special. The Lady Artemis knew who I was the second she
saw me, you can ask her yourself if you don’t believe me.” He put back on his beanie, glancing at Will and Nico again. “The only thing I know for certain is prophetic dreams are rarely wrong.” Then he walked away, joining the others as they played on the jungle gym.

Thalia informed Artemis about Dendron’s prophetic dream, and she had insisted upon one of their own helping the two to find the girl. She claimed it was probably important in the grand scheme of things, seeing as how most prophets didn’t have benign visions, which was what they had decided to call it. That was how Nico found himself not only stuck with Will Solace but also Thalia Grace, trekking across the greater downtown region, following a stupid wolf as it tracked Sabrina’s scent. And he thought his mission was annoying before.

Thalia hurried them along at an obnoxious pace, eager to find the girl and get back so the Hunters could continue on their original mission. To hear her snap at them, you’d think it was they who asked for her help, instead of her offering it freely.

The remaining Hunters promised to protect the children until they returned, so at least they had a failsafe in place should anything befall them. They’d been at it for a couple of hours already, and it seemed like the trail was getting colder by the second.

Nico raked a hand down his face; hungry, and tired of walking in circles. “Are you positive that thing knows where it’s going? I’m pretty sure we passed that same shop twice already.”

Thalia’s jaw clenched as she whipped around to glare at him. “Are you doubting my methods,” she hissed.

Nico rolled his eyes. “Yes, because it’s been hours and we’re no closer to finding the girl. I highly doubt she’s been walking around the downtown region all of this time, looking at the shops. If she’s smart, and I think that she is, she’d get the fuck out of here already and find a safe place to hole up.”

Will winced. “Language,” he mumbled under his breath, ignoring the death glare Nico shot him.

Thalia huffed indignantly. “I am a Hunter, di Angelo, we make it our duty to track anything and everything. Our animals are a part of that, so she’s not wrong now. The girl is somewhere around here.” Her eyes scanned the street, looking for the familiar mop of pale hair amidst the crowd.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Nico leaned back against a brick building. “Look, it’s getting later, and I’m sure I’m not the only one that needs food. Even that mutt is looking peckish, so let’s take a break, maybe a full stomach will help us think of something else.”

Will grinned at him. “Look at you, taking your stomach seriously. It only took, what, months of nagging to get the message food is important through that thick skull of yours.”

Nico turned his temper toward the second most annoying person in the immediate area. “Don’t even start, Solace, your voice alone is giving me a headache. I have half a mind to leave you two here to look for her myself.”

Will narrowed his eyes, the underlying threat evident. “You wouldn’t dare,” he muttered, voice tight with emotions.

Nico smirked. “Watch me. I’d probably be back already if I just used shadow travel, to begin with.”

Will crossed his arms over his chest. “Why are you always so quick to run off on your own, as if no
one could ever be as good as you are at taking care of things? Reality check, di Angelo, everyone needs help from time to time.”

Will glared, and he glared back, until Thalia came up and smacked them both. “Holy Zeus, you two are worse than an old married couple. Get a room already. You could cut the sexual tension with a knife.” The two spluttered, and she sat down on the curb. “Alright, five-minute break. Eat quickly, though.”

Nico’s eyes drifted to Will and he realized he was blushing, rummaging in his bag for something, before pulling out a granola bar. Blue eyes locked onto his, and Nico quickly looked away, desperate to hide his own reddened face.

Checking his bag, he found Will had packed loads of easy snacks, perfect for on the go consumption. He settled on his own chewy granola bar and took a bite, wishing he had more coffee to wash away the salty sweetness.

Will pulled a small bag of jerky out of his pocket and threw a couple of chunks to the wolf. She chewed it up happily, looking at him with a slight tilt of her white head when she was finished. He chuckled and gave her a pat on the nose. “What’s her name,” he asked, idly scratching behind her ear. She closed her eyes, leaning into it slightly.

Thalia hummed in amusement. “Rain, and I think she must really like you because she hates being touched.”

Will gaped, stroking the soft white fur of her face. “Seriously? She’s so sweet, though.”

Thalia shrugged. “She’s still a wild animal, only comes and helps out from time to time whenever we’re both in the area. She’s the head of her pack, oddly a pack of entirely female wolves, much like the Hunters. I can’t communicate with her, but my Lady can. I think they decided on the name together, picking a word close enough to her own chosen title.”

Will smiled. “Well, she clearly only likes me for my food, then. Don’t you, yeah, you just like me cause I fed you tasty snacks.”

Nico bit his lip hard to stop from laughing outright. Will was using the same, silly voice people used on their pets, and the wolf seemed to be responding positively. Rain whined a few times, raking at the air with her paw. Will cooed some more, dumping the remainder of the bag onto the sidewalk, and the wolf happily obliged.

Thalia rolled her eyes, shaking her head sadly. “We’ve wasted enough time chit chatting. If everyone else is ready, we should get going.” The two nodded in agreement and Thalia crouched down, offering up a corner of Sabrina’s sheet as a scent tracker; the girl took her things with her when she left, a further indication she was in fact gone, not just missing.
Rain sniffed the cloth then sneezed, shaking her head like the scent was unpleasant. Her snout then bobbed through the air, searching for similarities until she caught hold of something, and gave a sharp whine. She trotted along down the sidewalk, taking them the same direction they’d gone multiple times that day.

Will hummed, causing Nico’s eyes to drift over his way. He was tapping a finger to his mouth, eyes narrowed in thought. “Say, Thalia. Would Rain be able to tell us if Sabrina was nearby, but not directly on this street? Would she know if the girl was, say, higher up, or would she take us in circles around the general area until we got the point?”

Thalia shot him a sideways glance, chewing at her lip. “I’m actually not sure, we don’t normally look for people in cities. Normally we’re hunting monsters and they tend to stick to less populated areas, or they leave some kind of mark that we can pick up on ourselves. Why, are you thinking she’s up there in one of those tall buildings and that’s why we keep patrolling this region?”

Will shook his head. “Not necessarily. I was thinking, we’re not going in a block radius, we’re kind of moving in an odd loop. If she’s in a building, you’d think the scent would lead us somewhere like a door, an alley, anything like that.”

Nico caught on, snapping his fingers. “You know, Solace, you’re right. We’re going in the same kind of pattern sewer systems follow, which isn’t always street to street, sometimes they snake off different directions.”

Will beamed at him. “Exactly, and if the air down below wafts up in this general region, maybe that’s why Rain keeps taking us through here. The girl is down below us.”

Thalia slapped her palm to her forehead. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. Well, there’s one way to know for certain.” She whistled again, causing Rain to halt her search. Walking over to a grate, she shook the piece of cloth. “Rain, does this come from here?” The wolf sniffed the cloth, then down into the hole, pawing at the ground and whining. “That answers that question.”

They all shared a grim look, glancing over at a manhole in the middle of the road. Nico cleared his throat, saying what he figured the other two must also be thinking as well. “Let’s get this over with, already. The sooner we get down there, the sooner we can throw away our shoes.”

Chapter End Notes

I know the Hunters have hunting dogs, but I'll be damned if I can't take creative liberties and insert a beautiful white wolf into the mix. Such a better thing to have track for you.
Okay, I am totally biased.

Let me know what you think.
Unless it's terrible, in which case, please don't.
Or, be gentle.
Nico climbed the footholds down into the sewer. They’d dropped a glow stick down to assure it wasn’t a death trap and found the bottom was thankfully dry, and only around twelve feet below them. He’d volunteered to go first, taking his time, careful not to miss a step. A fall from that height wasn’t going to tickle.

As he stepped down onto one of the rungs, the entire piece slipped down, dragging him along with it. Letting out a loud yelp, the ladder hit the bottom, knocking him off, onto his ass. He swore under his breath, thankful nothing was broken.

“Nico.” Will shouted down to him, face a dark blob above. He’d misjudged the distance, it was closer to twenty feet up. “Are you okay?”

Rising to his feet, he walked over to the ladder and shook it hard. It reminded him of the ones on fire escapes, collapsible, but sturdy. “Yeah, I’m fine. The ladder goes to the ground now, so, you’re both welcome for that.”

Thalia snickered at him, coming down the ladder next. When she got to the bottom, she gave him a smug look. “That’s what you get for being chauvinistic. Should have let me go first.”

Nico glared. “You would have preferred to fall on your ass instead? I was being kind, remind me to refrain next time.”

“I wouldn’t have fallen, I have better reflexes,” she replied haughtily, straightening out her jacket.

Will came down last, shining a flashlight down into the empty drain channel. “Well, good news, this isn’t a sewer, it’s a storm drain, so the water in here won’t be actual waste. It probably ends up in the bay, at some point. Which way do we go?”

The large, brick room was cavernous, the occasional street drain allowing light to shine down from above, illuminating things enough to gauge their surroundings. They were standing on a platform overlooking the drain channel, various tunnels and pipes trickling small amounts of liquid down the walls, pooling in the center of a narrow gully. From there, the water appeared to flow out to their right, disappearing into another tunnel.

Nico grabbed a flashlight and shined it down a path directly in front of him. “Well, the street we were headed down runs this way, so I say we try this one first. If I remember correctly, we went north ten blocks, before turning west, then south another ten or so, then east. In fact, we’re pretty far down. I bet some of these tunnels snake around higher up somewhere.” He shined the light up the wall, landing on a large tunnel ten feet above them.

Thalia made a face. “I’m fine with checking the one on ground level. I don’t do heights.”
The two boys nodded in agreement and hopped down off the platform. Eerie sounds rumbled from all around as they slid down one side of the ravine, and climbed the other, making their way to the tunnel. Will and Thalia both looked concerned, but he knew it was probably just the cars overhead. The thunk thunk whenever a tire ran over a manhole echoed the loudest; and with running water, pipes, and large buildings overhead, there were bound to be at least a few strange noises.

Nico took the lead, with Will taking the end. For the first time ever, Thalia didn’t complain about being treated like a scared child. Her blue eyes flicked around, searching for danger, and he could hear her breath coming in swift little puffs as she hyperventilated.

The tunnel was just tall enough for the tallest not to have to crouch, the sides barely wide enough that you could reach out and avoid hitting them. Should they run into anything sinister, it would be difficult to do battle, but Nico doubted anything truly terrible would prefer to live in a place like this.

They walked for some time, opting at one point to switch out one of the flashlights for a couple of glow sticks. It was difficult to know how long they’d be in the dark, and he didn’t want the batteries to die on them. Stumbling around blindly didn’t sound like much fun.

The tunnel ran in a straight line, with nothing but inky blackness closing in on either side. If it wasn’t for his keen senses, he’d think the darkness seemed to be living, pulsating like a beating heart. When the telltale thunk thunk of a car running over metal sounded all around them, Nico began to understand his companion’s hesitation.

“Anyone else think this is extra creepy,” Will mumbled from behind him.

Nico halted and turned to look at the other, the soft, pink light from his glow stick illuminating his tanned skin, making the boy look like a sunset. “It’s just the cars driving,” he replied with a shrug.

Thalia shook her head. “I agree, it’s overly creepy. More so than dark, closed spaces usually are.” Nico gave her an odd look and she shuffled her feet nervously. “I’m a little claustrophobic, the pitch black isn’t helping much. It makes everything feel even smaller.”

Nico frowned. “You’re afraid of heights and closed in spaces? Isn’t that kind of… strange?”

“Falling to your death should scare anyone if you ask me. I’m sure you’re afraid of something.”

Nico shrugged. “Not really, no.”

“I’m afraid of clowns,” Will chimed in, giving Thalia a reassuring smile. The girl just snickered in response.

“Nothing creepy about the darkness,” Nico scolded, shining his flashlight all around. “See? It’s just regular, lack of light. There isn’t anything down here to be-“

The sound of something sharp being dragged against a hard surface pierced the air around them. Thalia pressed herself back into the wall like she’d somehow be able to melt into it and escape. Her eyes were wide and frightened looking, bottom lip pulled hard between her teeth until the skin turned stark white.

“What was that,” Will whispered harshly, the sound almost as loud as their previous chatter. Someone really needed to teach the boy the art of being quiet.

Nico listened intently, but no other sounds followed. “I don’t know, maybe something shifted and
that was it,” he mumbled, hand hovering over his sword.

“Sounded like someone pushing a metal box over the ground,” Will whined, plucking at the bowstring nervously where it sat flush against his chest.

Nico rolled his eyes, walking further down the dark tunnel. After a minute or so, the tunnel opened up into a larger chamber, with another cross tunnel intersecting it. “Which way should we go,” he asked, flicking on his flashlight and shining it down all three paths. They looked much the same, and he wasn’t even sure if they’d walked the right direction anymore.

“I think we go left now,” Thalia murmured, just as the same, low scraping sound vibrated out from the darkness. She whimpered and pointed straight ahead. “Did I say left, I definitely meant forward. Let’s go that way, or even right.”

Nico frowned, listening hard once more. "Do you hear that echo? It sounds like it bounces around some like there’s more than just a tunnel. I say we check it out.”

Will patted Thalia on the shoulder. “I’m with Thalia on this one, creepy sounds coming from dark places is how you get killed, or captured, or eaten, which is kind of the same thing as killed, but I was thinking more along the lines of death by other means—“

“You talk too much, Solace,” Nico muttered, walking straight for the left path. Someone grabbed his arm, and he looked back into Thalia’s blue eyes.

She pursed her lips, brow creasing slightly. With a firm nod, she plucked the lunar clip from her hair and held it tightly in her palm. “Alright, but be ready to fight, just in case. And be on guard, I don’t want to see you get decapitated or something, di Angelo.”

Nico smirked, pulling his sword from his belt. “I’m always on guard, Grace,” he quipped, shining the light all around the tunnel’s entrance before stepping inside.

It didn’t seem any different than the other tunnel, and he still didn’t sense any sort of monster nearby. The red, brick walls looked much the same as before, except from time to time, he noticed small grooves in the sides; like someone had scraped a thin blade against the surface, though not so deep as to really damage much. The air grew slightly more moldy and stale, but otherwise, nothing was even remotely amiss.

The sound of their footsteps pattered along softly as they went, the rhythm of their breathing slowly starting to sync. A steady dripping noise began somewhere in the distance, growing louder the closer they got to its source. Even still, Nico felt like nothing was out of the ordinary, even the darkness around him had started to mellow itself back out, returning to a less sinister shape as it clung to the cracks in all surfaces. He kept the light shining straight ahead, feeling more and more like their panic was unfounded. Just a trick of the mind, nothing more.

The drip turned to a trickle, and then a roar, as they rounded a sharp corner and found themselves standing before a wide expanse. Another large cavern of a room, this one appeared to be pitch black, though much the same as the one they had first entered.

Pipes still emptied their contents into a singular channel, which fed itself out parallel to them, sloping down and into another tunnel beyond. This time, the stream was flowing freely, the pipes that fed it dumping more than just a light dribble of liquid down from their openings.

Nico turned to his companions and motioned toward the old metal; rusty, green, and smelling of algae and rot. “I think it’s just some old pipes making that strange noise. Perhaps one of them is
about to fall and makes weird noises as it slips from the ceiling.”

Will worried his lip between his teeth. “If you say so,” he mumbled.

“Do you sense any kind of monsters nearby,” Nico huffed, and the two shook their heads. “Exactly, so whatever it was is explainable by other means. It doesn't really matter what it was, as long as it’s not a threat. Now, where do we go from here?”

Thalia clipped her hairpin back into her bangs. “We took a left, now we should find another left to circle back around. This seems like the same overall path we were walking before. Has the same feeling of time to it, you know? And something tells me we were supposed to come this way.”

Will nodded in agreement. “We’re going west, and left is south, so the directions all match up, at the very least. Hard to tell if we need to go higher or lower from here, not that there is much lower.” He paused, squinting into the darkness before clicking back on one of the other flashlights. It only illuminated about fifteen feet before everything turned into a wall of black. “Why do you suppose there isn’t any kind of light up above us like last time? Where do you think those ladders lead?”

Nico angled the light to hit the bottom rungs of one, much like the one he descended earlier. “Hard to say, though I do remember passing a large industrial area. Maybe all of the vents are blocked up so nothing can get in.”

Thalia shivered. “Well, let’s get going, this giant empty area is almost worse than these tiny tunnels. I don’t like not knowing what my surroundings are.”

They hopped down the foot or so to the ground, shining the light along the walls. The flowing water divided the room into two parts, so they hugged the wall, making their way to the source. A strange, putrid smell wafted over them, making Nico cover his nose to avoid gagging. It almost smelled like someone was boiling eggs and old socks in the same pot, sour and pungent and completely disgusting.

Something small scampered across their path, making Will suck in a large breath of air, before spluttering and choking. “What is that foul scent,” he wheezed, rubbing his chest like it burned his lungs.

“Beats me,” Nico mumbled, the sound muffled by his hand. It really didn’t help keep the smell out, so he hooked his shirt over his nose instead.

“I don’t think I want to know,” Thalia muttered, pulling a cloth out of her pocket and holding it over the lower half of her face. Her eyes appeared watery in the dim light, making her seem like she was distraught, not repulsed. The light bobbed across something laying in their path, bits of fur and bone and black blood matted together.

Nico winced, the scent intensifying as they drew near. “I think I found the cause.”

“What is that,” Will cried, horrified by the sheer size of it. Even torn to pieces, it was roughly the size of a large cat, possibly larger.

“I think it’s a coypu,” Thalia said, bending down to get a better look.

Nico frowned, bending down next to her. “I thought those were native to South America.”

She shook her head. “I mean, they were, but not anymore. Now they’re all over the place.”

Will shuffled his feet. “What’s a coypu?”
“Giant river rodent. Harmless,” Thalia murmured, recoiling back from the remains. “Whatever did this is not, however, and it’s also quite fresh. Poor thing must have come through one of the outlets near the bay. Or it was dragged here, though I’m pretty certain this is a long way to drag a meal.”

“Unless you’re a monster,” Nico chimed in.

Thalia looked at him grimly. “Yes, well, like you said, no monsters in the area, so it was probably-“

The low scraping noise was back, only this time, it was just beyond their line of sight. With lightning fast reflexes, Thalia drew her bow, already nocking an arrow and aiming it into the darkness. No one said a word as the sound grew closer, odd hissing and growling sounds accompanying it. Nico tried his best to shine the flashlight with one hand, raising his sword, ready to attack.

At first glance the grey, bony creature appeared to be a regular, underfed human, with gangly limbs and loose-fitting skin. Strange hide-like trousers clung to its waist, the same tattered rags wrapped around its hands and feet. Terrible gashes pinched and marred its chest, but the worst part was, Nico couldn’t find a head; not even an indication there had ever been one like something lopped it off in a perfect dip between the shoulders.

As the center of its stomach opened up in a terrifying wail of hot, putrid breath and yellowed teeth, he realized that the strange gashes were in fact, its face. Beady eyes squinted against their flashlight, surrounded by flaps of reddened skin that could only be called its eyelids. Each shoulder housed a strange, see-through layer with waves of intricate flaps below that and a tiny speck of darkness in the center. Two little slits were the only indication it could smell, a weird, nasally hissing sound emanating from the region as they opened and closed, taking in their scent. With one more, gurgling wail, it raised a sharpened scrap of metal and charged.

Thalia loosed an arrow directly at its center, but it flicked its wrist and sent the thing bouncing off into the darkness. Will took up the barrage of arrows, letting them fly simultaneously with Thalia’s attacks. For being so malnourished, the creature was lightning fast, closing the distance between them at an alarming speed, all while dodging any attacks. Thalia threw one of her daggers at its legs, nicking the thing along its calf. Red blood trickled from the wound, but the creature kept coming, forcing the archers to fall back.

Nico slipped into the shadows just as it swung its makeshift sword at his face. It paused, completely thrown off guard, and wailed as he stabbed it in the shoulder from behind. Placing a foot upon its backside, he kicked the thing off the blade, sending it crumbling to the floor. It snarled and cried, writhing along the ground in pain. He brought his sword down in its center, twisting hard until its body went limp, the gurgling screams dying as well.

Thalia came up and rolled it onto its back, gagging at the terrible scent wafting off of it in waves. “Well, at least we know where that horrible smell is coming from,” she spluttered, drawing the cloth back up to her face.

“What the hell is that thing,” Will asked, kicking its leg with his shoe. “And why didn’t it turn to dust?”

“Because it’s not a monster,” Nico mumbled, walking over to the running water to rinse his blade in it. Monster blood usually evaporated along with the body, this stuff was just as red and human-like as ever. “I think it’s some kind of Draugr, though why it’s headless, I’m not certain. Usually, they’re just walking dead.”

Thalia shook her head, rising to her feet after thoroughly studying the creature’s face. “It’s an
Acephali, a race of human with no heads. Normally they’re pretty harmless, but this one looks like it evolved or something, almost like generations of living down in the darkness have warped it. Those eyes aren’t meant for bright light, I think we made it angry by shining flashlights on it. Or it’s mad, and it was going to kill us regardless.”

Will grimaced. “So, there’s more of them, then?”

She nodded, wandering over to her dagger and picking it up off the ground. Her clip was already back in her hair, indicating she deemed the threat to be over for the time being. “Probably. This is a large area, and the running water would be a good place to remain near. I’d be a little surprised if there weren’t more. We should keep our guard up, and remain quiet. Living in the darkness would mean they’ve adapted better hearing and smelling to track food.”

Nico’s stomach dropped. “You don’t suppose they have a taste for human, do you?”

Two sets of blue eyes stared at him, one alarmed, the other steely and cold. Thalia pulled a glow stick from her pocket, snapping it to activate the orange liquid. “We’d better hurry, just in case.”

Chapter End Notes

If anyone played Skyrim, I imagine the Acephali look like headless Falmer a little bit. Especially around the eye region. If you haven’t played, look it up, they’re awesome. Or, you know, use your imagination and think up whatever ugly monster you can. :)

Chapter Summary

The three wander even deeper into the darkness, wondering if they're alone, or if nefarious things are hiding amidst the shadows.
How do you know what's friend and what's enemy?

Chapter Notes

My brain is just a little off today, so if it's all sloppy, forgive me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The drain channel headed straight back through the room; ending at a larger than normal tunnel, almost like a hallway. Raised platforms flanked either side, luckily with enough height that the water only barely lapped at their edges. From there, two small footpaths led across the water’s surface on both ends of the fifteen-foot cylindrical room, allowing access to the opposite bank should they need it. Since they were headed in a southerly direction, they opted to keep to the left side path, hoping it was also the safest of the two.

The tunnel emptied into another cavernous chamber of a room, with tunnels and pipes leading off on both sides at various heights. It seemed to Nico that the place in and of itself was a labyrinth of twists and turns, and he wondered briefly if the strangely tangible darkness that occasionally crept upon them wasn’t somehow related to that which dwelled in the actual labyrinth; the one that was destroyed and then recreated. If that were the case, hopefully this presence was less sinister than its original counterpart. It would make sense how a mortal drainage system expanded far greater than seemed possible, and how their creepy friends had also come to dwell within.

Their flashlights bobbed through the inky darkness, cutting through tendrils the of black that clung desperately to their surroundings in an unnatural manner. The three companions walked side by side, Will and Nico on the outside, Thalia sticking to the middle.

While Will kept his light trained on the various tunnels and openings to their left, Nico shone his down into the water channel and across the six-foot gap, barely illuminating the farthest bank. The air around them seemed to become colder the further they traveled, the scent of wet cement and brick mixed with algae, mold, and rainwater.

With the steady beat of water pouring down into the makeshift river, it was difficult to keep their ears perked for signs of intruders. With the knowledge that their assailants were human, not a creature; their ability to sense danger was only as good as their senses of sight, smell, and sound. It was almost maddening, walking blindly through the depths of the unfamiliar terrain; and he suddenly felt sorry for regular mortals, having to live the entirety of their lives much the same way.

“Hey guys, I think I see something,” Will murmured, shining his flashlight up along the wall at one of the red brick tunnels. The hints of something poking out of the highest one could barely be seen from their low vantage point.
Thalia grabbed the flashlight from him, shining it around along either side of the area, looking for something. “Ah, I knew I’d find a way up,” she muttered, walking over to the wall and shining the light up the half-hidden brick stairwell that jutted from the surface of the stone, only large enough for one foot at a time. The little steps rose every six or so inches until they landed just close enough to gain access to the high tunnel above. “Well, I’m not climbing that thing, so one of you have fun with that.”

Will and Nico shared a look, seeming to debate silently before Nico voiced his hesitation aloud. “You’re the better climber back at camp, you go.”

Will frowned at him, folding arms over his chest. “I’m the healer, so you should go. I can heal you if you fall.”

“But you’re lighter on your feet,” he mumbled.

Will scoffed at him. “di Angelo, you are half a foot shorter and at least thirty pounds lighter, if not sixty. Do you even weigh one hundred pounds in all?”

Huffing indignantly, Nico glared the other boy down. “I weigh one thirty, I’ll have you know, and just because you’re a giant doesn’t mean I’m not of perfectly average height for a male, especially considering I come from the 30s. Which, I might add, means you’re younger, so you should have to do it.”

”Whatever, old man,” Will drawled, rolling his eyes. Setting his foot gingerly upon the first step, he rose up to balance on one foot, making sure the brick was strong enough to carry his full weight. “Just keep the light here so I don’t miss a step and die, thanks.”

Thalia slunk over to him then, leaning in close with a smirk. “Not that I don’t enjoy watching you two children squabble, but you could have just shadow traveled up to the top,” she whispered, voice low enough so Will couldn’t hear. Not that he was paying attention, the boy was clinging to the wall testing each step delicately before he’d stand on it.

Glancing sidelong at the girl, Nico smirked. “Yeah, I know, but it’s more fun this way.” Thalia laughed in response, tiptoeing away to find a better angle with which to shine her light.

About two thirds up, Will glared down angrily. “Wait a second di Angelo, you tricked me! You know you could have used your Underworld-y powers to get up here.”

Nico snorted, waving his hand dismissively. “I’m under strict doctor’s orders not to exert myself when it comes to my powers. Sorry, Sunshine, take it up with him.”

Will glowered but didn’t argue, already most of the way to the top. With one final hop, he landed in the tunnel, squatting low to assess whatever lay beyond. “Hey, Deathboy. I’ve talked with your doctor and he says to go ahead and travel up. I can’t really see very well, but I think this is-“

Nico cut him off by appearing at his side, making him flinch. “What did I say about calling me Deathboy, Solace?”

“The same thing I said about calling me Sunshine. Now every time you do, I get one free one.”

Rolling his eyes, Nico shone the light over the strangely crafted items. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say it looked like some sort of prehistoric humans had made the weird hide and bone tools. Since their run-in with the Acephali, he figured it must belong to them. A little further down the tunnel, he caught sight of large, pyramid-like objects, big enough to be called a tent.
Nico hummed, walking down to inspect the object closer, heaving a sigh when his suspicion was correct. “They live in these tunnels, though why they make little houses is beyond me.” The innards were littered with small bones and pieces of hide as he flicked the light over them, along with random shiny objects that probably fell into the drains and ended up down in the channel.

Will came up beside him, giving a low whistle. “They’re almost like crows, making little nests and keeping interesting objects that appeal to them. I wonder if they know most of this stuff is shiny, without any kind of light to see by.”

“Yeah, crows that are like seven feet tall and have no heads and carry giant pieces of scrap metal to skewer us with. Totally similar.”

“I said almost, and it was totally an analogy, and you know it. Quit being argumentative just for the sake of being argumentative,” Will scowled, turning on his heels and stalking away.

Nico snorted again, taking one last look at the little nest and deeming the items completely useless. Unless he wanted some old jewelry and tin cans, there wasn’t much need for the stuff. “I’ll stop when you stop being annoying.”

He followed Will back to the little pile of tools, watching as the son of Apollo judged the best way to descend the steps. With another eye roll, Nico grabbed the guy by the arm and slipped them back into the shadows, landing down next to Thalia. Will stumbled and moaned, grasping his head with both hands, looking like he might be sick all over the floor.

Thalia chuckled at the two of them before turning to Nico with a cocked brow. “So? Status report.”

“Just some crude tools and a little nest where I’m pretty sure some Acephali live or did live, it’s hard to say without knowing how they do things. I’m also not a tracker of odd humanoid creatures.”

Thalia nodded her approval. “That’s about what I expected. And there’s no way of knowing if they’re vacant spaces, what happened to the inhabitants, or if they’re just out for the moment without waiting around to see if they come back. I’m not too keen on running into more, I don’t know about you two.”

Will stopped his stumbling to come and glare Nico down, addressing only Thalia when he spoke. “Yeah, I’d rather be long gone before that happens. I think we’ve waited here long enough.”

The three fell into step once more, continuing down the path as quietly as possible. This time, Will kept the flashlight along the lower parts of the walls, afraid of summoning a rogue Acephali straight for them.

When they made it to another cylindrical room that separated the area from the next, Nico shined his light over the little footpath and voiced his wonder aloud. “Do you think maybe we should check the other bank? It’s kind of dark and hard to see that far. Maybe there’s something we’re missing because we’re stuck on this side.”

Thalia shook her head, stopping only to scan her eyes over the path. “Logic dictates our next path will continue on left since we went left, left, left, left. I think we’ll find our exit on this side, so we should keep to it.”

Will hummed, locking eyes with Nico and reading his doubts. “That was hours ago, she could have gone anywhere since. And maybe this was just the initial path she took, but that is bound to change. I agree with Nico, we can always backtrack later or cross back if we find another little bridge, but what if we find evidence on the other end that can help?”
Nico nodded. “And, what if the Acephali got to her, they might be on that side, which would lead us straight to her.”

Thalia frowned, blue eyes flicking between the two of them. “Are you honestly suggesting we go looking for more of the monsters that were hard to kill only one of? You’re both nuts.”

Will and Nico shared another look before Nico nodded firmly at the other. Will handed over his flashlight to Thalia, just as Nico began crossing the narrow path. “Hey, that’s okay. You stay to this side, then. We’re still in shouting distance if you need us, but this is Nico and I’s mission, and we’re going to follow gut instinct.” He turned and began crossing himself, leaving the girl standing there with her mouth agape.

“Hey, no way, you’re not leaving me all alone without backup. We stick together,” she snarled, hurrying behind Will across the bridge.

The other side was hardly different, but something strange pulled Nico toward an unseen source; almost like a beacon was sounding that only he could hear, or his powers were urging him ever forward. They shined their lights along the wall, Will taking the center and Thalia keeping flush to the edge of the channel while Nico studied the identical brick wall, wondering where this feeling was coming from.

The deeper they got, the more right everything felt to him. The heavy scent of decay began to pick up, filling his nostrils and making him choke. Still, he pushed ever onward, that growing sense of right coiling tightly around his insides, forcing his feet down the cement pathway until, without warning, he stopped abruptly, halting his companions mid-step. His skin began to crawl, instincts picking up on something even his eyes and brain couldn’t process.

“Turn off the light,” he warned, clicking his own off without hesitation.

Thalia followed suit, the entire place suddenly plunged into the deepest darkness. “What’s going on, Nico,” she whispered, coming to stand next to him and placing a hand on his right shoulder to signify her presence.

Nico reached out and caught hold of Will, knowing the sensation of the boy’s skin beneath his all too sensitive fingertips. Pulling the other against his left side, he made sure both of his companions were close enough to shadow travel away should the situation arise. “I can feel… something in the darkness. Just beyond us. There are so many bones here, almost like an entire graveyard above ground. They’re humanoid in nature, so I think we’ve found their little village.”

Using his power to feel his way forward, he kept a tight hold on both of their upper arms, dragging them reluctantly through the wall of black. Without sight, his ears perked up, hearing the irregularities in both of their breathing, sensing their doubt and fear. Will’s spare hand found his in the darkness, giving it a gentle squeeze, the resulting jolt of energy almost making him gasp. As quick as it was there, it was gone, and Nico chastised himself for wanting to slip his fingers down the arm and mesh palm to palm.

“How are we going to know where to go without the light,” Will whispered from his left, causing his head to turn that way even though his eyes were blind.

“I can tell where the bones are, so I’m just taking us closer to them,” he replied, giving an unnecessary shrug.

He heard the sound of Thalia sucking in a breath. “You’re taking us closer to them? Why in the world would you do—” without warning, he felt her ripped from his grasp, giving a startled cry as she
tumbled down bodily onto the cement.

A glow stick cracked in the darkness, green glow illuminating the hulking figure of a steadily moving object as it slowly towered above them. Thalia’s eyes widened in fear, scrambling back on hands and bottom like some form of weird crab, desperate to get away from the massive thing.

“Guess you can’t sense the live ones,” Will mumbled, pulling free of Nico’s other grip and nocking an arrow to his bowstring. He aimed directly for the huge, muscled back, pulling the string taut with an audible groan.

Nico’s mind moved in slow motion, tongue feeling leaden in his mouth. Just as the arrow shot from the bow, Nico’s voice called out to halt its departure. “Wait, don’t shoot!”

The beast roared, completely enraged by the unsuspecting attack. It turned on the two of them, hands cupped into vicious-looking claws. The strange sharp mouth opened at them, letting out a high-pitched wail that soon echoed about the room, returned by a chorus of similar-sounding replies.

In the soft glow of green, Nico watched with baited breath as the flickering of dozens of shadows encroaching in on them signified the fact they were now utterly surrounded.

Panic ripped through him, hands scrambling to grasp the flashlight tucked safely in his bag. Clicking it on, he blinded the closest one, grabbing Will by one hand and dragging him right for a terrified-looking Hunter. When he grabbed hold of the other, he released his powers, slipping them all into shadows and spitting them out on the far shore.

A desperate wail of surprise sounded all too closely, Nico silently cursing his inability to halt Will’s attack. “Why did you shoot it? I think we only confused it before, but now they’re definitely out for blood. You couldn’t have waited for a second to see if it was actually friendly,” he hissed, voice trying to sustain a low whisper. Who knows if the creatures could hear him, but it wasn’t a chance he wanted to take by shouting.

Thalia clicked on her flashlight and Nico just about screeched. The angry wails seemed to turn from confusion to bloodlust, realizing their prey were now on the opposite shore. In great bounding leaps, a few of the Acephali cleared the gap, charging at the small group as they watched on completely dumbfounded. Those that couldn’t make the jump simply waded across the running water, clearly used to the current and seemingly unaffected.

“Uh, guys,” Will mumbled, taking a step back. “I think this is where we run.”

Without a second thought, they were off, feet slapping the floor hard, the sound echoing around the room in a mixed cacophony of pursuer and prey. Will was definitely the fastest of the two of them, grasping onto Nico’s hand and practically dragging him along at an uncomfortable pace. Thalia was gifted with the art of chase, barely breaking a sweat as she occasionally stopped to loose an arrow behind them, causing even more wails and cries of anguish.

“Is that really necessary,” Nico wheezed, finding it difficult to catch his breath.

Thalia stopped to shoot another arrow back and gave him a fierce look. “Unless you have any better ideas to stop the horde of angry subhumans that want us dead, yeah, it kind of is.”

Will was muttering some kind of prayer under his breath, the hand grasping Nico’s beginning to glow. As the light traveled up their conjoined palms, Nico felt the hints of weariness start to leave him, replaced with so much energy that his feet began working themselves faster than before. His
eyes widened, taking in the sudden smirk spreading across Will’s face.

“What in the world did you do, Solace,” he asked, feeling the sting in his lungs begin to ebb.

Will released his hand, the lack of warmth regrettably evident. “Just a healing hymn for rejuvenation that helps on the battlefield, or, in this case, while we’re avoiding death.”

The edges of the next cylindrical area were visible in the bobbing beam of light. Nico pulled Will toward the little bridge, hopeful to fake out the creatures once again by crossing then shadow traveling the three of them back to the other side of the room. Perhaps once the anger fizzled out, they’d be able to sneak around undisturbed and continue their mission. Just as he was veering off course toward the little path, a group of Acephali closed in on them from the front, halting their advance and effectively surrounding their escape.

Thalia loosed a few more arrows, hitting the closest assailants and knocking them out cold. Reaching back blindly for Nico, he clasped her hand before taking hold of Will and letting his powers slip out of him. Just as he made to step into the shadows, bright, blinding beams descended upon the little group, cutting a path through the angry mob and dispersing them with wails and shrieks of terror. The three of them spun around, facing the source with utterly confused looks plastered to their faces.

Two lantern-like eyes regarded them curiously, a rumbling hiss emanating from the creature’s mouth. The serpent’s tongue flicked the air to taste at their scent, a strange webbed flap perking upward behind three great horns, its entire head cocked to one side. The blue and purple scales along its back and sides shimmered like diamonds as it shifted about; long, winding body slithering from a tunnel on its pale, glittering belly. Wings of black and deep grey unfurled from somewhere behind the head, front half rising up to reveal two, stumpy legs with talon-like claws. As the tail finally emerged from the narrow tunnel, another face identical to the one before them gazed at the trio; the only difference in the multifaceted eyes that didn’t quite glow, instead seeming to absorb the very light back out of the room.

Thalia swallowed hard, gingerly pulling an arrow from her quill. When Nico grabbed her hand, she glared at him, visibly clenching her jaw in anger. “What now, di Angelo,” she hissed, dragging her hand out of his grasp.

Nico set his own jaw in much the same manner, gesturing to the creature that had yet to do more than stare at them. “It’s not even attacking us, Grace. Are you really about to make the same mistake as that dummy and fire at something that isn’t a threat?”

Will scoffed and Thalia rolled her eyes. “It’s an Amphisbaena. They don’t belong in this region and I’m pretty sure it’s the same one we met in New York. My Lady would approve of me sending it back to Tartarus swiftly so it can’t harm anything.”

“Are they even harmful to humans, because this one looks like a friend.”

The two stared each other down until Will cleared his throat, drawing their attention over to the son of Apollo who was gently stroking the snout of the odd snake. “I’m pretty sure it’s not a threat, guys,” Will murmured, flinching when the giant thing dipped its other head down to beg for attention. Will chuckled and stoked the other face simultaneously, earning a strange purring sound from the appreciative creature.

Thalia sighed, returning her bow back to her hair and coming up to let the creature sniff her hand. “Alright, maybe they’re only dangerous if you’re a corpse. Otherwise, they only ingest very large ants. Still, it’s a little intimidating to find this thing hanging out in a graveyard.” She giggled when
the tail’s tongue flicked her in the ear.

Nico stepped forward himself, allowing the thing to get his scent. It reared up as he approached, flapping its wings wildly and beating the air with its talons, before bowing its front head down to the ground. The tail head reached up and patted down just behind the head flap, making a strange hissing sound at him before patting the area again. “Uh, I don’t speak giant snake creature, but I think it wants us to get on its back,” he mumbled, watching the backside head bob about impatiently before patting the same spot a third time.

“Maybe it knows what we’re doing here and wants to help,” Will said with a shrug, petting one of the scaly dragon-like wings softly before climbing up and grasping one of its horns like reins. Both heads hissed happily, staring down the other two until they got the message and climbed on.

Nico took the spot against Will’s back, wrapping his arms around firm muscles and swallowing thickly. He felt Thalia climb on, grabbing onto his shirt with both of her hands. “Alright,” he breathed. “Now what do we-“

The Amphibian rose up and whipped around, slithering down the tunneled path at an alarmingly quick pace. Closing his eyes against the sudden case of vertigo, he tightened his hold on the other, hoping they weren’t about to find themselves in an even bigger mess.

Chapter End Notes

Again, my own interpretation of a creature that is described in many, different ways. Colors are just something that might look pretty, most people illustrate it as grey or matching with desert landscape, as that is were it normally resides, in the Libyan desert.

Comments are appreciated and keep the creative juices flowing. :)
Wind whipped around him violently as the Amphisbaena slithered down tunnels and up walls, pulling the three of them deeper and deeper into the labyrinthine maze. At first, he tried his best to remember how many turns they’d taken to find their way back; but it was useless after the motions became so chaotic, he had to bury his face into Will’s back to keep from vomiting.

Somehow, the boy even smelled like pure sunshine, and it helped ground him slightly as the wave of nausea slowly dimmed. A warm hand covered his, giving it a reassuring but gentle squeeze. He regretted the loss of contact the moment it was gone but refrained from reaching out for it again, telling himself it was only the comfort he so craved.

When the thing finally stopped, they found themselves in a strange circular room, spiraling upward above them farther than the eye could see. The soft flicker from dozens of candles made eerie shadows dance along the walls. It distorted their combined shape, making the three of them look like some sort of crazy multi-headed monster with a long serpent’s body.

Thalia released her hold on his shirt, slipping down off the creature to further explore their surroundings. Nico found himself admiring a large nest-like object, partially hidden in an alcove across from them, when Will’s bodily vibrations brought his attention back to the present. Flicking eyes back to golden locks, he caught the gentle curve of quirked lips and the long shadow of thick eyelash splayed over high cheekbone.

Will patted his arm, dropping his voice down to a quiet murmur. “You can let go of me now, we have stopped moving.”

Nico’s arms unlatched from their death grip, slipping uselessly to his sides. “Sorry, wasn’t paying attention,” he mumbled, feeling his face begin to heat up. It was a good thing they were covered mostly in dim lighting, he didn’t want anyone seeing him blush.

Will glanced back over his shoulder, smiling lazily and shrugging. “No harm done. Let’s check this place out.” Sliding down the scaly back, he offered a hand up to help Nico off.

Against his better judgment, Nico clasped it in his own, sliding along the cool surface until his feet connected with the floor. The ground shifted and he stumbled a bit, but Will’s grip kept him firmly upright, the boy’s free arm wrapping around his waist to steady the wobble in his knees.
“Ah, thanks,” he muttered, glancing up into soft, blue eyes. His breath caught in his throat, mouth going dry as Will’s lips pulled into another, slow grin.

“Don’t mention it,” Will replied in that strange, harsh whisper sound that was somehow slowly becoming endearing. Their conjoined hands were crushed awkwardly in between their bodies, but neither made any move to step back.

“If you two are done snuggling or whatever, I found the girl,” Thalia said loudly, chuckling to herself when the two shot away from each other like repelling magnets.

Will wrung his hands nervously, refusing to look anywhere too close to him. Not that Nico was looking much himself, he was quite busy inspecting the toe of his shoe, hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his too tight pants.

He snapped out of it when his brain fully registered Thalia’s words, eyes searching the room until they landed on the girl standing just inside the alcove, mostly covered in shadow. Her face was smug, arms folded across her chest. Inclining her head at the weird nest, she climbed up the side and disappeared from view as she slid down into the thing.

Nico’s curiosity got the best of him, wandering over to peek at its contents.

The walls were up to his mid-torso, the entire structure big enough to fit the fifteen-foot Amphisaena coiled up, and then some. Two, four-foot tall sparkly black eggs sat nestled in the very center of a pile of feathers and strips of cloth, the sleeping demigod wrapped around the left one like it was her favorite stuffed animal. White blonde hair splayed over her pale face, but the steady rise and fall of her chest verified she was, in fact, still alive.

Thalia crouched down beside the younger girl, swiping pieces of hair back behind her ear. Dark lashes fluttered softly, a small sigh escaping her lips. Nico clambered over the top of the nest, sinking down against the fluffy interior that reminded him of a cloud, even though it appeared to be nothing more than random sticks and discarded materials. Will followed close behind him, a look of wonder crossing his face as he, too, admired the gentle softness with his hands.

“Maybe we should let her sleep, for now, it’s got to be pretty late,” Thalia murmured, stepping away from the younger girl as she buried her face closer to the strange, glittering object.

Will glanced up, frowning slightly before he gave a firm nod. “It’s after midnight. I guess I didn’t realize we were in those tunnels for so long.” Flicking blue eyes around the large space, a wistful smile curled his lips. “Maybe we should all rest up here for the night. It has been a very long day.”

At the mention of the late hour, Nico felt his body begin to grow heavy; the soft, gentle sensation beneath his back begging him to close his eyes and rest. He stifled a yawn, blinking sleepily over at Thalia to gauge the girl’s opinion. She, too, looked suddenly quite tired, sitting down atop the fluffy surface and smiling herself.

Nico yawned again, leaning back against the curve of the wall. “You think we’re safe here? I know the Amphisaena hasn’t done anything sketchy yet, but sleeping in its nest sounds like we’re asking to get eaten alive.”

Will curled up nearby, turning so that his body faced the other’s. He smiled lightly, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “If she let us near her eggs, she’s probably not a threat. I mean, someone is bound to wake up before all of us could be eaten, and then her babies would be at risk. I think we’re,” he yawned, wrapping his arms around himself and snuggling deeper into the ground. “We’re safe,” he breathed, face going slack as sleep stole him away.
Thalia nodded in agreement, curling up near the other girl. “Get some rest, di Angelo. Tomorrow could be just as long of a day. I have fine-tuned senses, nothing will get passed me, even if I am asleep. Goodnight.”

Closing his eyes, he hummed contentedly. “Goodnight,” he whispered to no one in particular, listening to the gentle melody of sleep that rose up to answer him.

The sound of light rustling nearby gently roused him from a dreamless sleep. Cracking open an eye, Will’s sunny smile greeted him from mere inches away. After days of being stuck with the guy, he supposed there were worse sights to wake up to.

Will handed him a bottle of dark liquid, looking quite pleased with himself when Nico accepted the thing, untwisting the cap to take a whiff. The sharp, heavenly scent of coffee greeted him, and he frowned at the other, wondering how it was possible without heat or a coffee press.

Will seemed to read the questioning look on his face, drawing his shoulder up in a shrug. “I made extra and bottled it before I woke you up yesterday. I know you don’t enjoy functioning without the stuff. There’s still two more, just in case, though I’m sure we’ll be back to camp before we need to turn in for the night.”

Nico took a long sip, crinkling his nose at the awkward temperature, but thankful for the sudden energy boost he already felt working its way through his system. Will smiled at him softly, causing his heart rate to pick up speed. “Thanks. You didn’t have to do that, you know,” he murmured, eyes wandering over to the other two still fast asleep.

“I know. I wanted to.”

Flicking his gaze back suddenly, curiosity bubbled up inside of him at the other’s words. Will worried a lip between his teeth, glancing down shyly into his lap, the hints of pink tinging his tanned cheeks.

Nico frowned at the boy’s strange reaction, swallowing hard to dislodge the lump slowly forming in his throat. “Why,” he finally asked, unable to keep the skepticism from his tone.

After all, he’d been nothing but obnoxious to the other at least eighty percent of their trip. Why would Will go out of his way to be nice to someone that wouldn’t be nice back? Blue eyes bore into him suddenly, causing a strange fluttering sensation to start deep inside his stomach.

Will’s look softened slightly, the hints of a smile brightening up his features. “That’s what friends do,” he replied, eyes crinkling in the corners. He chuckled quietly, amused by something. “I mean, I’d like to be your friend, if you’d let me.”

Opening and closing his mouth, Nico tried to think of something to say. A hundred different things came to mind, but none of them seemed quite right. Before he could settle on one, a large dark shape shifted above him, a low hissing sound making him flinch. Bright lights shone their way down into the nest, and it took a moment for him to remember they were still inside the Amphisbaena’s little home.

Thalia sat up with a start, hand flying toward her lunar hair clip as she assessed the danger. When she saw it was just the creature, her shoulders relaxed. “What time is it,” she asked, stretching arms high above her head. Her gaze wandered over to the still sleeping demigod and she smiled softly.

“Just after seven,” Will replied, rising from his spot next to Nico. He came over and touched the younger girl on the shoulder, pulling her out of her deep slumber.
Sabrina blinked at the lot of them, eyes widening in surprise before the look replaced itself with something akin to guilt. Her violet gaze flicked around between the three of them, deciding to land on Nico in the end. “I don’t apologize for leaving,” she mumbled, eyes narrowing slightly, daring him to argue. “It was the right thing to do. I cause too much trouble for everyone.”

Nico cocked a brow at the girl, realizing it was the most emotion he’d seen her exhibit since their meeting. “And why do you think that?”

Sabrina tilted her chin up defiantly, face becoming a somber, unreadable mask. When she spoke, her tone was matter of fact. “I heard what Chiron and Artemis had to say, so if I’m part of the problem, the solution lies in my leaving. I refuse to be a burden on anyone but myself.”

Thalia rose to her feet, folding arms across her chest. “My Lady never implied you were a problem that needed to be handled, and it was wrong of you to run off without telling anyone. Do you know how lucky you are to still be breathing right now? Do you understand how dangerous it is out there by yourself when you have no clue how to use your powers to protect yourself? You’re lucky I don’t throw you over my shoulder and drag you back to camp, kicking and screaming.”

Sabrina winced at the harshness of Thalia’s words, drawing her legs up to her chest and wrapping both arms around them. “I don’t need to be protected. I’m just a hindrance. Without me, the boys would be safely in camp, and everyone could focus on other problems. Just let me stay here, I don’t need any help.”

Will patted the girl affectionally on the knee. “Too bad, if Thalia won’t drag you back, I will. I’m sure Nico agrees with me.” His eyes flicked over to confirm, and Nico gave a short nod. “You’re no less important than any one of us,” he said quietly, catching the look of surprise on Thalia’s face at the softness of his words. Rising from his spot opposite the three of them, he came to crouch in front of the girl. “I know better than anyone how it feels to be shunned and avoided due to the strange quality of your powers. You can’t let fear control you, though. You’ve got to let in the people that want to help, and show the rest of them there’s nothing to be afraid of. Your powers don’t make you bad, Sabrina. They make you, you.”

Violet eyes swam with tears, the stoic expression on her face crumbling beneath the weight of her overflowing emotions. Throwing her small arms around Nico’s middle, she buried her face into his shirt and wailed loudly. “I don’t want to be different anymore, I just want everything to go away. I want it to stop.”

Nico hugged the girl back, gaze lowering from the two sets of blue eyes that shone at him brightly and glistened with barely contained tears. He couldn’t handle three weepy messes all at once, so he settled on the one that was scared and confused and in desperate need of guidance. “Camp can help you with that. You’ve already done it once, with time and practice, you’ll be able to choose when your powers work and how.”

She pulled back, sniffling a few times, then nodded her head. “I’m sorry I worried everyone,” she offered with a watery smile. The two of them rose at the same time, Thalia pulling the girl into an unexpected hug.

Will grinned at him, stepping closer and bumping their sides together playfully. “If I didn’t know any better, di Angelo, I’d think you’re speaking from experience. That can’t be the case, you don’t let anyone help you without a fight.”

Nico glowered, fighting hard to keep his own smile from his face. “Quiet, Solace. I don’t need any lip from you.”
Will bit his lip hard to suppress his laugh. “Oh, I don’t know about that,” he teased, eyes twinkling with amusement. Nico flushed heavily in response.

Thalia cleared her throat, killing off any witty retort his mind could come up with. “When you’re done flirting, we should discuss a game plan.” Nico’s mouth fell open in shock, earning a snort from the girl. Waving a flippant hand his way, she dragged Sabrina off toward the edge of the nest. “Far be it from me to stop you in the middle of it, just wrap it up quickly so we can get out of these tunnels.”

Will’s laughter filled his ears, the bubbly sound sending a jolt of warmth straight through his chest. Sabrina told them the story of how she wound up in the storm drains, having been cornered almost immediately and chased by another group of dog men, only narrowly escaping by running through a crowd. The choice to slip through a drain was of necessity, and she got lucky she chose one directly connected to one of the smaller tunnels, so she remained unharmed when she fell.

She never ran into any of the Acephali, of which she was also quite lucky, but she did stumble upon the Amphisbaena and struck up an oddly instant friendship. The creature’s motherly instincts must have sensed the girl’s vulnerability because it let her hide in its nest, leaving her little gifts of dead mice and the carcass of another Coypu for nourishment. The girl had enough sense to pack her own provisions, so she avoided winding up half-starved by the time the others found her. For all of her inexperience, she really was quite fortunate.

When they were done discussing their strategy, the group came to a unanimous decision. They couldn’t ask the Amphisbaena for any more of her help, she’d already risked enough coming to find them the first time. Their only choice was to figure out the way through the tunnels until they came upon anywhere with an access opening out into the world above. It shouldn’t be too difficult, there was usually some sort of opening at the end of almost every area. With a last wave at the snake creature, they set off once more.

Nico took the lead again if only to stop himself from staring hard at the back of Will’s head. He didn’t know where this sudden, squirmy feeling came from, but it was much like the same thing he felt or thought he felt, all those months ago after the war. When it never came back, he shrugged it off and called it leftover anxiety. There was absolutely no way he actually felt something for the other, other than annoyance and anger. The same thing crossed his mind now, though with much less certainty than before.

Shaking the stray thoughts from his head, he shined the light down through the tunnel, wishing someone had the good sense to properly mark the things or give them some sort of variation from one to the next. Plain, red brick surfaces or metal pipes really didn’t help to decipher where you were, though he supposed most people entering the storm drain knew the layout at least enough to navigate better.

They came to a crossroads and he stopped, shining a light down the three available paths. “Well, I’m stumped. Any ideas?”

Will cleared his throat, drawing their attention toward him. “We went south, west, south, west, north, then west. If it helps any, the left is east.”

Nico nodded, turning down the left tunnel and repeating the sequence over and over in his head. He wouldn’t admit it aloud, but having Will with him actually was beneficial, especially in such a dark and hard to navigate space. “Alright, just keep telling me directions if they happen to change,” he murmured, hearing the amused hum of confirmation from somewhere behind him.
They wound their way back through the maze, twisting and turning each time a new passage became available to them. The dark didn’t dissipate once, the scent of mold and algae clinging thickly to the air. It took the better part of two hours before they’d made it through five of the six turns, and they still hadn’t reached anywhere that hinted at a way of escape.

They may have been going in the correct directional sequence, but they definitely must be somewhere other than their original path, because not a single new room ever opened up before them. In fact, by the time they made it to the end of the line, they found themselves standing in a bubble-like room, barely taller than their heads, the only escape a small hatch above them that opened up to gods knows where.

The party shared a wary look, shining their lights along the walls and ceiling to look for anything they might have missed. Nico reach a hand up, feeling the surface of the metal hatch to test it for vibration or temperature. When it was silent and cold, he shrugged his shoulders and grabbed onto the circular handle with a tight grip. It groaned a little before giving in, unsealing the door from its frame.

Will helped him push the heavy weight upward, wincing as it fell back with a loud crash that echoed for some time before silence ensued. After a beat, he shined the light up into the empty blackness above. The only sound coming from outside was rushing water and steady dripping, more or less the typical noises they’d heard the entire time they’d traversed the tunnels.

“I’ll go first,” Nico offered.

Sticking the flashlight between his teeth, he grabbed hold of a low rung and pulled his weight up through the little hole. It was hard without footholds, but he managed to work his torso up until he could roll himself over and drag his legs out the rest of the way. The room he found himself in was much the same as the large, cavernous spaces they’d seen before, still lacking in any source of outside light.

“What’s up there,” Thalia asked, shining her flashlight through the opening in search of him.

Popping his head over, he stared down at the three curious faces blinking owlishly up at him. “It’s just a room like before,” he mumbled, offering down a hand to help the smallest girl out. Will gave her a boost from the bottom, and she wiggled her way up like a worm.

Next came Thalia, and lastly Will. They closed the hatch, just for aesthetic purposes, and dusted off the thin layer of grime now coating their persons from the cement surface they found themselves on. In the center of the room, split once more into two halves, a drain channel ran toward the right, down a steady incline and out of sight. To their left, another large cylindrical hallway led into a deeper part of the sewers.

Will shined a light down the right, brow creased slightly in thought. “Well that’s East, and if nothing else, this water drains out into the bay at some point. We can follow it until we find a drain or until it ends, and we’re forced to go an alternative route. Hard to say which of these rooms we began at.”

Thalia’s eyes darted around the visible area, though even with three flashlights and one glow stick, it was still only about fifteen feet in whatever direction they pointed them. “Be on guard, this is where we ran into the Acephali. Nico, if you sense the bones nearby, now is a good time to tell us so we can avoid them.”

Nico focused hard, his mind a numbed mess since Sabrina joined their ranks again. He picked up something from a few little mouse skeletons here and there, but the cement was so thick, and the tunnels so intricate, it was hard to get a sense of much, aside from a growing sense of confusion.
“Not much, but it’s hard to tell until I get right up on them. Even without Sabrina around,” he added when she visibly recoiled at his words. He offered a reassuring smile her way, but she only blinked slowly in response.

“Alright, let’s just keep quiet and alert,” Thalia decided, and they all nodded.

Wandering down the path in a straight line, Nico found himself walking along the edge of the channel, with Will on his right, and Sabrina just after that. Thalia took up the area closest to the wall, shining her light down the various tunnels they passed, looking for danger. Just when he wondered if they were in the clear, a loud echoing wail pierced the relative silence, sending a jolt of adrenaline straight through the company.

They came from somewhere behind, though it was hard to know for certain which direction. Without hesitation, the four of them took off at a dead run, Thalia hanging back every so often to shoot off more arrows at the group that was closing in fast.

With no way out and very few options, Nico wracked his brain for a solution. Up wasn’t an option, the Acephali made their homes up in the highest tunnels, so they had little trouble climbing. He couldn’t use his powers, not with Sabrina anywhere nearby, and he couldn’t leave the girl after they tried so hard to get her back. He wouldn’t.

A thought occurred to him, and he grabbed onto the younger girl’s arm, drawing her attention as they ran. “You need to give me permission to shadow travel us out of here,” he bellowed, the sound ripping around the room, loud enough for all of the company to hear.

Sabrina’s eyes went wide, brow creasing slightly in confusion. “I need to do what,” she squeaked out, incredulously.

“Give me permission to use my power,” he cried, lungs starting to burn from the effort of running so hard. The end of the room was closing in fast, the bounce of their flashlights ricocheting off the walls. If they reached the end, it wasn’t known how much time would be lost attempting to navigate the narrower pathway.

The girl shook her head, clearly unsure of what he meant. “I can’t control it,” she whined, voice dripping with fear.

He squeezed her forearm, willing her anxiety away. “You’ve done it before, you can do it again. Please, just try your hardest. Picture me being able to help us, whatever you need to do. Then say I need to help, vocalize what you want. If you don’t, we’ll all die.”

Will came and grabbed Nico’s free hand, Thalia reaching out on the other’s far side to grasp hold of the girl. The four ran along together, limbs seeming to slow down, at least ten Acephali closing the distance fast. Sabrina shut her eyes tightly, taking a deep breath before her voice ripped from her throat, echoing off the walls and assaulting them from all angles.

“Nico, get us out of here, now!”

He knew it the second the words left her lips. A surge of power like he’d never felt before washed over him in an energizing wave. Concentrating hard, he willed the shadows to obey, stretching them around the four of them like a blanket of darkness. The hot, stale breath of an Acephali tickled his neck, just as the shadows sucked them down and out of harm’s way.

He spat them back out somewhere outside. The harsh light of day, paired with the overwhelming dizziness of shadow travel, caused them to stumble a bit before Nico let everyone go, panting to
catch his breath. Will staggered the hardest, falling to his knees and coughing, deep and aching sounds. When his vision returned, he glanced down at the son of Apollo, first confused, then horrified.

Spots of bright red dotted the sidewalk, a stream of it leading up to Will’s lips. A sea of crimson leaked down the boy’s shirt, the end of a large piece of scrap metal sticking out through a hole in his back. Eyes fluttered and then closed as his arms buckled and he tumbled toward the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, don't hate me, but something along these lines was planned from the start. Working it in was the unknown part, but I’m satisfied with how it came to pass. Apology for the cliffhanger, it's part of the reason I added so much extra. Putting something like that in the middle of a chapter just isn't the same as torturing... I mean, kindly making you wait to see what happens next. :3
A lot of blood

Chapter Summary

Nico panics as Will loses a lot of blood.

Chapter Notes

I'm terrible at summaries, chapter titles, and making people wait...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nico reached out with deft arms, catching the other before he had a chance to hit the ground. Breath came in short, quick gasps as his mind tried to make sense of the sight before him. Will was injured and bleeding badly. He needed to do something fast, or the boy might lose too much blood.

Panicked sounds faded in and out of focus, little buzzing noises that carried themselves away on the gentle breeze that swept through his hair with a soft caress. The only thing he acknowledged, the only sensations he could truly feel, was the weight of Will in his arms and the sight of the blood as it trickled down the side of his slowly paling mouth.

A warm hand touched his cheek, wet and sticky, yet somehow soothing. He tried his best to blink back the tears that steadily blurred his vision, distorting the world around him until it was nothing but blue, and bronze, and sickeningly deep red.

Will wheezed something out, but Nico was far too stunned for his mind to grasp it. Another wet cough racked the boy’s body, snapping his brain to attention as the wails and sounds from his other companions trickled in. Sabrina was screeching, and Thalia was hushing the girl, probably embracing her tightly against herself so she couldn’t see the terrible sight.

Nico swallowed hard, tearing his eyes from Will’s soft blue ones, searching around before landing on Thalia’s wide, terrified gaze. “Get her somewhere safe. Take your time, but meet us back at camp. I’m going to take him there, he needs medical attention immediately. I need,” his voice cracked, lip quivering slightly. When the wave of emotions died down again, he released a shuddering breath. “I need to check the wound and stop the bleeding.”

Thalia bit her lip, giving a stiff nod. “She’ll be safe with me, I promise. Hurry, we’ll be there as soon as we can.”

Nico watched them go until he was sure they were out of range. His eyes drifted back down to the other’s, making sure the other was still conscious. Will gave him a tight smile, moving his head slightly to confirm he was ready to go. “It’s going to be okay,” Nico murmured, shifting the body in his arms until Will was pressed tightly against his chest. Slamming his eyes shut, he dragged them back into the shadows once more.

The sounds are what greeted him first, the tail end of familiar speech cut short, followed by sharp intakes of air, and an explosion of panic. Someone yanked Will from his arms, eyes flying open in
distress to watch a couple of Hunters disappear into their tent. Nico tried to roll from his bottom onto his knees, but someone grasped his shoulder and kept him firmly glued to the spot.

“Easy, everything is going to be alright. Tell me all that happened.”

The words washed over him in a wave of calming warmth. Craning his neck back, he glanced up into silvery-yellow eyes, as bright as the full moon. The goddess kept a strong but gentle grip on his shoulder, crouching down to his level to await his response.

With a tongue as heavy and stiff as iron, he willed his mouth to speak. “We were on our way back,” he whispered, unable to raise his voice any higher. The goddess nodded her head, urging him to continue. “We found Sabrina. She was down in the storm drains. Cynocephali chased her there, and the Amphisbaena rescued her. It’s going to have twins.”

A sob shuddered his whole body, hands shaking as his mouth slammed shut on the remainder of the words. Artemis stared back at him patiently, waiting for the remainder of the story he already felt bubbling up in his throat. When he was calmer, he continued.

“The Acephali also made a home down there. They’re not like the stories, twisted and grotesque things, far different from the kind and gentle creatures from long ago. We must have made them angry, and they attacked. The Amphisbaena saved us the first time, took us to the girl, but we didn’t have that luck on our way out. I got us away by shadow travel. They were trying to kill all of us, but I guess I didn’t get out fast enough. Will,” swallowing hard, he squeezed his eyes together, fighting back the burning sensation that prickled there.

A cool hand pressed against his cheek, slowing the ache ripping through his chest. "He’s going to be fine, Nico. You saved everyone.”

Shaking his head, wetness seeped from his closed lids. "I wasn’t fast enough,” he spat, swiping furiously at the tears already dripping down into the grass.

"Look at me, Nico," Artemis commanded, though her voice held no anger; only soft, motherly affection. He obeyed, the image of the goddess swimming into view. She smiled at him gently, rubbing a few, stray tears from the corners of his eyes. “It’s better than it looks. Use your gift, you can sense impending death. Do you feel such a thing anywhere nearby?”

Nico frowned, closing his eyes again to help his concentration. When he realized she was right, his eyes popped open in shocked surprise. “Is he going to be okay,” he asked, worried that his powers might just be malfunctioning due to stress.

Artemis cocked a brow at him, the hints of a smile pulling at her lips. “When you have calmed, you may see for yourself.” She released her hold, rising to her feet and stepping out of the way.

Nico took a few, deeply calming breaths; allowing his emotions to taper off until they were nothing more than a tiny pinprick in the deepest part of his mind. Scrambling up and through the tent, he braced himself for the worst. Blood covered the ground and bed; ugly, red-brown stains marring the virgin white sheets in long streaks that churned his gut uneasily. The large, sharp piece of metal lay discarded on a table, impossibly black compared to the terrifyingly bright stain surrounding it.

Two girls stood, one propping the boy gently upright, the other wrapping the whole of his naked chest in layer after layer of snowy, fluffy gauze. Will’s back was to him, so he couldn’t see if he was conscious or not, but the raspy sound of his breathing caused Nico’s heart to pump even harder, adrenaline forcing him from the spot in the entrance that his feet seemed to be rooted to a moment before.
When they were satisfied with their patch job, they laid him back against the pillows, careful to avoid disturbing the wound. Slipping a piece of ambrosia between his lips, both girls glanced at Nico oddly before letting themselves out the little flap. Taking hesitant step after hesitant step forward, he took in the whole of the other a little at a time.

Will’s shoes were muddy and covered in blood, black pants appearing to be too dark to notice any sort of stain. His bronze stomach was firm and dusted with a soft smattering of freckles, the strips of white thoroughly blocking any view higher than midway up. Blue eyes stared up at the ceiling, face slackened and void of emotion. If it wasn’t for the occasional twitch of a finger, Nico would assume the worst.

The boy blinked a few times, tilting his head slightly so he could look at Nico standing a few feet away. A slight smile pulled at his mouth, a tinge of red still marking one side. “I think the worst part about being a healer is I can’t heal myself.”

Nico glared back in response, heart rate picking up speed, this time out of anger. “That’s the best you can come up with? You lost how much blood just now, and the first thing out of your mouth is that you regret not being able to heal yourself? You’re impossible, Solace.”

Will tried to shrug, wincing slightly as it pulled on his bandages. “If I could, I wouldn’t be here healing so slowly. I’d be done already, and you wouldn’t still have that distraught, wide-eyed look on your face,” he murmured, gaze softening sadly.

Nico chewed his lip, closing the last bit of distance and kneeling down next to the blood-soaked mattress. “That wouldn’t matter if I had been just a little bit faster. I’m sorry I didn’t get us away in time. I’m sorry you got hurt.”

Reaching out his hand, Will caught hold of Nico’s, lacing their fingers and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Don’t beat yourself up about that. We’d all be screwed right now if you didn’t think well on your feet. You can’t stop all the bad things from happening all the time. Just be thankful when it’s something everyone gets to walk away from, injuries aside.”

“But I-“

Will narrowed his eyes menacingly, effectively cutting off his retort. When Nico frowned but remained silent, he smiled again, lids fluttering closed. “Stay with me? Sleep will speed up the recovery process, but I don’t want to be alone.” Popping open one blue eye partway, he awaited a response.

Nico nodded stiffly, swallowing hard when Will’s thumb began rubbing small circles over the back of his hand. Instead of pulling away awkwardly, he brought his free hand up to clasp around the other side, sandwiching the limb softly. Will’s mouth twitched slightly, an amused hum sounding in his throat.

“That’s not trying to sleep,” Nico scolded, frowning down at the other even though both eyes were once again firmly closed.

Will grinned. “Sorry, just a little distracted.”

Nico huffed, pulling his extra hand back and trying to wiggle free of the sudden death grip on his left one. “I can leave,” he threatened, relaxing his movements when he grew too anxious it might hurt the other.

“Okay, I’m sleeping. Consider me drifting as we speak.”
Even when Will’s breathing slowed, lips parting softly as his hand tried to loosen its claw-like grip, Nico refused to let go.

Nico sat in that spot, poised on his knees that were beginning to ache, back going stiff from the awkwardness of the position. Despite the minutes that leaked into hours, time slipping away as he watched the slow rise and fall of unobstructed breathing; he still refused to budge from that spot.

Will’s eyelashes fluttered softly from time to time, and Nico couldn’t help but wonder what it was the other dreamed about. He hoped it was peaceful, without the knowledge of pain or despair. It wouldn’t be fair if Will had to suffer through getting impaled by a creepy, headless subhuman, only to turn around and have demigod nightmares to boot.

The sound of someone coming up beside him caused his gaze to flicker over toward his right, catching sight of shaggy black hair and solemn blue eyes. Thalia didn’t say anything, just watched the other sleep for a moment, before patting Nico’s shoulder and leaving. Somehow, he got the feeling she only wanted to reassure him that they were also safe, and possibly to check up on Will to see for herself that he was still okay.

It was perhaps another hour more before he felt the grip in his hand tighten slightly, a light chuckle bubbling up from the other’s throat. “I didn’t mean you had to kneel there uncomfortably the whole time. It’s been like four hours now.” Both eyes opened steadily, lids stopping halfway up to gaze at him softly. A slow smile broke out across his face, making him look exhausted but thoroughly pleased.

“How are you feeling,” Nico asked, shifting his weight a bit and wincing. It definitely wasn’t his best idea to keep perfectly still for hours on end. Even if he couldn’t bring himself to care too much all things considered.

Will glanced around the room, looking for something. His eyes zeroed in on it, and he waved his free hand at a spot somewhere behind Nico. “Unbelievably stiff and sore. Could you get me more ambrosia? It’s in my bag over there.”

Nico’s shoulders sagged, but he didn’t refuse. Prying their hands apart, he groaned as his rickety limbs bent in agonizingly new directions, working his way from the floor to his feet. Will chuckled again as he hobbled like an elderly person across the room, rummaging through the bag until he found the item in question. Getting back was easier, the blood flowing to his sore joints starting to ebb some of the pain. This time he pulled up a chair, plopping into it and handing over a single square.

Will cocked an eyebrow, an amused look on his face. Placing the ambrosia into his mouth, he pushed himself upright, brow creasing slightly in pain. “Holy Hera, that really doesn’t tickle,” he gasped, moving his arms gently to gauge the level of discomfort. “Well, I think I can take these bandages off now, I don’t feel any new blood seeping out. Can you help me get them off, maybe? Kind of limited range of motion here.”

Nico blinked a few times, before jumping to his feet and running around the other side of the bed. Will’s entire backside was brown with dried blood, the bandages darkest in the spot he knew the metal had pierced. Reaching both arms carefully around to the front, he grabbed at the end piece, untucking it and unraveling the thing slowly.

Where the blood had seeped out the most, the gauze had become a little stiff, occasionally needing a
delicate tug to pull free from the layers beneath. Will refrained from complaint, though the tensing of his shoulders gave the pain away whenever Nico accidentally brushed against the wound. When he was finished, a grisly looking jagged pink scar was the only reminder of what had happened.

“All finished,” Nico mumbled, suddenly unable to endure continuing to look at the raised flesh.

Will glanced back over his shoulder, gasping again when he stretched too far and disturbed the injury. “How does it look,” he finally asked, giving up trying to see for himself.

Nico came back around to the front, so the flesh couldn't continue to judge him, plopping down into the chair in defeat. “Angry, probably going to leave a lovely mark for the rest of time. You know, a wonderful reminder of my inability to react fast enough.”

Will frowned at him, crossing his arms slowly over his chest. He winced a few times but managed to keep the unamused look firmly on his face. “For the last, and final time, it was in no way your fault. I’d probably be dead right now, so be glad it’s only a scar you’ll rarely have to see.”

Cocking an eyebrow, Nico titled his head slightly. “You mean never have to, when are you ever going to be around me with your shirt off?”

Will blinked a few times, a light blush spreading like wildfire over his nose and cheeks. “Uh… swimming?”

Nico’s mind drifted to other shirtless activities, and he shuffled about nervously in his seat, forcing his eyes to look anywhere but the tanned and fully exposed chest. “You… I should get you a shirt. You’re probably cold,” he mumbled, springing to his feet and rifling through Will’s bag once more. He tossed a random black one the other’s way, wincing when it hit the boy directly in the face.

Will frowned again, lifting up the shirt halfway and struggling to bend his head down far enough to slip it on. With a frustrated sigh, he pouted over at Nico. “I can’t do it.”

Rolling his eyes, Nico walked back over and stood before the other. Taking the shirt from him, he quickly slipping the fabric over Will’s head. Tugging it down gently, he pulled each arm through, before yanking the end down to cover the offending area. “You’re hopeless,” he muttered, stepping back to cock a brow at the strange look on the other’s face.

Rising to his feet, Will pulled him into a crushing hug, or what he meant to be a crushing hug but turned into a gentle squeeze. “You’re the best,” he gushed, pulling back to beam down at Nico’s wide-eyed look. “Thank you, for everything.”

Nodding stiffly, Nico hoped his face wasn’t as red as he thought it might be. “Ah, don’t mention it,” he squeaked, then shuffled awkwardly away. Anywhere to avoid the feeling bubbling up inside his chest.

When he stepped out of the tent, he noticed the sky for the first time. It still had that strange sunrise look to it; though with the positioning of the sun, sinking down toward the western hills, he supposed it was more of a sunset look now. From the height, he guessed it was around four in the afternoon, which meant they’d probably be camping out another night even if Will was capable of fluid movement.

As if he heard Nico’s thoughts, Will stepped out of the tent and glanced up into the sky with a grim expression. “I guess it’s consistently creepy that it looks like that, even at four fifteen.” When Nico smiled happily to himself, he titled his head and frowned. “What? Did I say something amusing?”

Shaking his head, he rubbed the back of his neck in thought. “Ah, no. Just good to know I’m
usually right about the time of day, that’s all.”

Thalia caught sight of them and wandered over, smiling sadly at Will. “Hey, how is your lung doing,” she asked softly, ignoring Nico’s suddenly horrified look aimed their way.

Will shuffled around a bit, looking sheepish. “It’s… good now.”

“What? What was wrong with your lung,” Nico squeaked, looking back and forth between the two of them for answers. Will grimaced, while Thalia rolled her eyes.

“It was punctured. Why else do you think he was spitting blood all over the place, di Angelo? By the way, your face is covered in his blood, you really should wash it.” Her tone was back to its usual, haughty superiority; though her look softened when Will’s gaze dropped to his feet, skin turning slightly pale.

Nico’s eyes widened in utter shock, before narrowing back to little slits as he directed the full force of his anger at the jerk beside him. “You didn’t tell me your injury was so severe,” he hissed, crossing his arms over his chest. “What do you think you’re doing out of bed after something like that? You get back in there and heal some more. Are you trying to collapse your lung or something?”

Thalia snickered, waving her hand at the two of them as she slowly backed away. “Sorry to interrupt your moment. And sorry for putting you in the doghouse, Solace. Carry on.” Spinning on her heel, she walked away cackling.

Will patted Nico’s shoulder softly, smiling down at him with a calm expression. “I’m good, I promise. I know what I’m talking about.”

Scoffing loudly, Nico grabbed the boy by the arm and began pulling him back into the tent. “Oh, no you don’t, Solace. You had me lay in a bed for three days and I was nowhere near as injured as you are. Get in there and lay down. Now.”

It was Will’s turn to scoff, grabbing hold of Nico and forcing him to spin around abruptly. “Are you kidding me? You were literally going to fade away into shadow, your entire being was turning into mist, and you think you weren’t injured? At least I know when to admit I need help.”

“Get in that bed, now.”

They stared each other down, neither budging until Will burst out laughing. He covered his face in both of his hands, trying hard to stifle the sound. Peeking through a crack in his fingers, he hyperventilated a few times before gaining a little composure. “Sorry,” he gasped, and Nico cocked an eyebrow at him. Biting his lip, he made strange throaty noises, still trying to suppress his laughter. “I can’t take you seriously with blood all over your face. And you’re so short, you’re about as threatening as a kitten.”

Nico huffed, stomping over to his bag and pulling out a bottle of water. He splashed some on a clean washcloth and scrubbed his face until the brown no longer showed up. Turning back around, he glared Will down. “Go sit down before you hurt yourself. How do you expect to leave tomorrow if you’re not healed? So help me, I will shadow travel and drag you back to camp, then finish this mission alone if I have to.”

Will gasped, drawing a hand up to his chest, staring back owlishly in response. “You wouldn’t dare,” he whined.

Nico smirked, crossing his arms smugly and cocking a hip. “Try me, Solace.”
Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to have actual storyline, and then I just kept writing the fluff and I couldn't stop myself, and I mean, I stabbed Will... so I kind of had to?
I didn't want this chapter to get out of control long, so I capped it at just over 3,000 words.
I also slept like crap, so I'm quite glad this was over 2,500 words in as of last night, or I'd never have finished.

Love makes the world go round, but so do comments. :D
He’d stayed up later than he’d have liked to, making sure Will didn’t leave the bed. It probably didn’t help matters much that no one disturbed them again, even though he did occasionally hear hushed voices directly outside the perimeter, so the lateness of the hour wasn’t noted until Will encouraged him to get some rest. Of course, he didn’t listen, not until he was positive Will was already asleep first. Not that it took long, the son of Apollo was almost as deep of a sleeper as he was.

At one point throughout the day, he thought their little group was going to join them, but nothing ever came of it. It seemed Jamie was perplexed as to why he couldn’t go back inside his own tent, but the bulk of the conversation with Jonas was too far away to catch, so he never heard his companion’s reasoning. In truth, he was a little grateful, the events of the day had been so stressful for him that the moment his head touched his pillow, he was out cold. Dreamless sleep met him; that, or he didn’t have dreams worth remembering.

Sunlight peeked through a small hole in the fabric of their enclosure, heating up the sensitive skin of his right eyelid until his brain acknowledged the fact he was officially awake. He remained motionless for some time, contemplating going back to sleep when a low grumble caught his attention. The son of Apollo rustled around a bit before an aggravated sigh and creaking of springs indicated Will had more likely than not sat upright, causing Nico’s eyes to pop open and glare the boy down.

Will flinched, before a sheepish grin spread across his face. “You know, that’s probably the creepiest thing you’ve ever done, di Angelo. And you can raise the dead, so that’s saying something.”

Nico scoffed, rolling himself into a seated position and crossing his arms over her chest. “What, were you watching me sleep or something? Who is the real creep?”

Will chuckled at that and shrugged. “I was trying not to wake you, so I happened to be gauging your reaction. You normally sleep a little more soundly than that, I hope you’re well rested.”

The mixture of heat and light was probably what had actually woken him, but Nico decided to pretend like it was Will’s fault. “How anyone could sleep through all of your racket? I wouldn’t be surprised if the Hunters heard you from their tents.” When Will went to rise to his feet, he shot off
the bed and closed the distance between them quickly. “Just what do you think you are doing? Are you even healed properly yet? I think you should stay down until someone can come check on you.”

Will smirked, then rose to his full height, towering over Nico. “You know, you sound… well, like me, actually.” Nico spluttered in response, and he grinned. “I’m fine, though. And if I don’t get out of this tent soon, I’m going to go crazy. So, come on, cut me a break.”

Nico felt his face begin to warm at the sheer proximity of their persons. Taking a step back, he rolled his eyes. “You’re lucky I’m not a tyrant like you are, or I’d make you stay an extra two days, just to piss you off.” The bubbly sound of the other’s laughter caused Nico to flush even harder.

“Believe me, if we had two extra days to spare, I’d probably agree with that,” he murmured, smiling softly. Nico swallowed hard, unsure why the tone of Will’s voice suddenly made his heart hammer wildly in his chest. Will shrugged then, raking a hand through his hair. “As it is, we’ve already lost two days, and if we don’t get going, we’re bound to lose another good chunk of this one. We should speak with the others, see if they’ve learned anything new in our absence.”

Nico nodded stiffly, and Will rummaged through his bag until he found a bottle of prepared coffee and handed it over with a smile. “Thanks,” Nico said, accepting the thing and unscrewing the lid. It was worse today than yesterday, but he didn’t complain. There were worse things than shitty coffee. Like no coffee.

Will hummed in amusement. “Don’t mention it. Come on, it’s going on nine in the morning, everyone else is bound to be awake by now.” He sauntered out the door, leaving Nico staring after him with a pensive look on his face.

Sure enough, the entire collective party was mulling about, breaking down their camp and gearing up for something. The boys were all off somewhere, probably playing at the playground, but Sabrina was chatting quietly with Thalia and Artemis thirty or so feet away, the mood seemingly tense. The trio caught sight of the two of them headed their way and their body language seemed to relax as if they were trying to appear blasé. Nico locked eyes with the goddess, and then Thalia, but Sabrina kept her violet gaze on her feet.

“How are you feeling today,” Thalia asked, pointedly attempting to keep the conversation away from the three of them.

Will lifted one shoulder up in a shrug, before letting it drop back down. “Good enough to get this show on the road. We have quite a journey ahead of us, so it’s probably best if we started sooner than later. That is, if everyone else is up for it?” He directed the last part to Sabrina, who shuffled her feet around but didn’t glance up.

Artemis offered the two of them a warm smile, drawing their attention to her instead. “Actually, there is a matter with which we need to speak, I’m afraid.” She glanced at her lieutenant, seeming to pass a message just with her eyes. “Thalia, would you please fetch Dendron, this concerns him as well.”

Thalia gave a short nod, pursing her lips slightly. “As you wish, My Lady.”

Turning the milky gaze back onto the two of them, the goddess gestured to a large, flat boulder a few feet away. “Please, have a seat in the meantime. Your wound is still healing, rest while you can.” She didn’t wait for their response, just began walking away, Sabrina following close behind.

The strange, sinking feeling Nico had gotten when his sister told him she was leaving him for the
Hunters suddenly wormed its way through his intestines. Though they had seemed adamant on not offering the girl a place amongst them, Nico was pretty sure they’d learned of her ability to control her powers, and deemed her a fit candidate to join their ranks. Seeing as how the girl didn’t want to be a bother, it was highly likely she’d take them up on it, which meant he’d failed his mission in the end.

The group remained silent for a long time, Will sitting down on the rock while Nico leaned rigidly against it. Sabrina never took her eyes off her feet, which practically screamed a guilty conscience. No matter how he felt on the inside, Nico promised himself he wouldn’t do or say anything to upset the young demigod. That didn’t stop him from glaring daggers at the goddess, who looked on with amused curiosity.

Thalia and Dendron returned with the boys a few minutes later, the two youngest breaking from their party to go inside the tent. Probably for the best, they could be briefed on the situation later when no one was around to watch the scene Jamie would more than likely make when he discovered Sabrina wasn't continuing on with them. The one, single plus Nico saw was that without the girl, he’d be able to shadow travel them all back to camp and finish the rest of their mission by night’s end. They might be one companion short, but at least he'd made sure the girl was safe. That was all that really mattered.

Artemis cleared her throat, pulling Nico from his thoughts. “Now that we’re all gathered, we can discuss the matter at hand.” Her gaze caught Nico’s once more, and she cocked an eyebrow in amusement. “Contrary to what you think, I am not stealing your companion away from you.”

Nico spluttered, crossing his arms over his chest. “I never said that,” he mumbled, feeling his cheeks begin to heat up.

Artemis hummed quietly, turning to each of them in turn. “I have already spoken with Sabrina, so now it is time to speak with the rest of you. Dendron had a vision concerning the gods and Mount Olympus. This was the reason there was even a quest, to begin with, because Chiron deemed it important enough that the girl should be found. It would stand to reason that since the four of you are here now, together, your next destination is the meeting being held amongst the gods, which will take place tomorrow at sunset.”

Will squirmed in his seat a bit, and everyone turned his way. “I hate to be the one to point out the obvious, but even if we left this second, we’d never make it to New York in time to attend the meeting. Are you certain this vision didn’t happen to take place at some other time when the gods aren’t all congregated?”

Artemis looked to Dendron, giving him a short nod of encouragement. The satyr let out a long breath of air, leafy green eyes regarding the other males in the group. “I would agree with you, were it not for the small detail that Sabrina had this same small scratch on her cheek in my vision,” he murmured, pointing to the girl’s face where sure enough, a light pink mark marred her porcelain flesh, under her left eye. Nico wondered if she’d had it there all along, or if something happened on her walk back with Thalia.

Dendron then gestured toward the two of them. “And, had Will not had a small mark of red on his shirt, in the same place he was injured, which I now realize is probably blood seeping through. After the four of you got back yesterday, I spoke with the Lady, and she agreed these previously insignificant details narrowed the vision down to sometime in the next three days. It makes the most logical sense that we are supposed to be there during this meeting, for some reason that none of us can guess.”

Nico chewed his lip in thought. “I suppose I could shadow travel us all there if Sabrina could help
me out again like last time.” The girl visibly flinched, and Nico frowned.

Artemis shook her head sadly. “I have spoken with the girl, and I do not think she is ready for such a thing. It would be dangerous to allow such an attempt when the outcome could prove dire. You could wind up somewhere dangerous with no way to get out. No, I refuse to allow it.”

Nico blinked a few times, slightly confused. “Well, how do you expect us to get there, then?”

The goddess stared coolly back, almost reluctant to answer. After what seemed like an eternity, her lips curved slightly in a gentle smile. “I have come to a different solution.” Taking a few steps into the forest, she stood there statuesque, back to the group, waiting for something.

No one dared move, afraid to interrupt whatever it was the small, auburn-haired goddess was doing. After a minute or two, a glint of sparkling light caught Nico’s attention in the distance, the light patter of hooves crunching over leaves and twigs. There, through the trees, he steadily became able to make out the shape of a large stag, deep black eyes shining with humanlike intelligence. The hooves on its feet were silver and copper, the horns on its head appeared to have been dipped in gold. It came up to the small girl, towering over her, and nuzzled its nose into her palm.

“This is the Ceryneian hind,” she said softly, though somehow the sound resonated as if she’d spoken it directly next to his ear. “She is faster than an arrow, and for your kindness toward my Lieutenant, for saving everyone’s life, I will ask her to take you there.” Milky eyes locked onto his, solemn though the news appeared good. “She cannot take you all at once, however, so you must decide who will be left behind.”

A strange, tangible hush fell over them, each one observing the others for some kind of solution. Nico shrugged, deciding to be the first to break the silence. “I’ll just shadow travel the boys there, the other three can ride without me. Simple.”

Thalia furrowed her brow. “Unfortunately, Nico, that’s not really an option. You can’t leave those guys defenseless. No offense Will, but you’re in no shape to go protecting anyone, and Dendron isn’t capable of fighting off anything. You have to be one of the ones who go with.”

Will gave him a strange look before smiling. “I guess that just leaves me, then. I’ll stay, you three go.”

Nico scoffed loudly, folding his arms over his chest. “Like Hades you will, Solace, you heard Thalia, you’re in no condition to protect anyone, not even yourself. You’re coming along and that’s final. Besides, Dendron saw all four of us there, that means if I shadow travel, we can avoid leaving anyone behind.”

Will went to argue back, when Sabrina stepped forward, drawing the focus her way. Her violet eyes wandered over each of them before she presented her question to the goddess herself. “What about your chariot. Couldn’t we ride with you instead?”

Artemis shook her head, giving the girl a sad smile. “Unfortunately, I am unable to assist you further. It is not my place to interfere with a demigod’s quest. You must figure it out for yourselves.”

Sabrina chewed her lip in thought. “Then another swift animal, anything able to carry the smallest of us on its back.” She looked to Thalia and Dendron first, before turning her attention to Nico and Will.

Running a hand through his golden locks, Will sighed. “I mean, Laelaps never failed to catch what
she was hunting, but I don’t think a dog could run that fast, and would she be large enough to carry someone?”

Nico chuckled. “She couldn’t ever catch the Teumessian fox, which is why Zeus turned them both into stone and then constellations; because they were paradoxes and he didn’t like that.” A slow smile crept across Will’s face and Nico frowned, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “What, I thought everyone knew that story,” he mumbled, flicking his gaze across the company who were all giving him strange looks. “Did I say something funny?”

Thalia shook her head sadly. “I think you solved your own problem, but if everyone waited for you to realize that, you’d miss your chance. You really are quite dense sometimes.”

Will clapped him on the shoulder gently. “The Teumessian fox would actually work out in our favor. Mr. D could probably summon her since he created her, and we need to get the boys somewhere safe anyway, so camp is the best option. If you shadow travel the two of them there, you can ask for his help. It won’t be easy, but if anyone can do it, you can, Nico.”

“You really think a little fox can carry one of us on its back,” Nico asked incredulously.

Dendron raised his hand. “I’m the smallest, and I can speak with animals, so she can tell me if it isn’t working out. I don’t really weigh a lot, anyhow, and the Teusmessian fox was probably a little bigger than Laelaps was. I think it’s our best bet.”

Nico heaved a small sigh. “What if I can’t get him to agree to help? Dionysus isn’t exactly the most helpful of the gods. Not that any of them are, no offense, Artemis.”

Thalia glared but Artemis chuckled. “You aren’t wrong. Earning my half-brother’s help won’t be easy.”

The amused sound in her tone caused Nico to scowl. “So, this entire plan depends on my ability to bribe a fickle god into going against his very nature, and doing it with enough time to get back and head out before the gods all meet up tomorrow night? Yeah, totally doable.”

“No, that’s our best bet.” Artemis offered, quite unhelpfully.

Everyone nodded in agreement, and Nico groaned. “Fine, but someone else is going to break it to those boys that the mission is over and they’re getting dropped off at boring old camp while the rest of us go visit every single god on Olympus. I elect Solace.”

“I second that,” Sabrina mumbled, looking slightly sheepish. Nico shot her a devilish grin and she flushed.

Dendron’s eyes grew wide and he bleated uneasily. “I can’t do it, I can barely handle them when the news is good.”


Thalia clapped her hands together loudly, drawing the focus her way. “It’s settled, then. Unfortunately, we Hunters need to head out, but the Lady will remain with the group until you get back, di Angelo. Don’t be late, she can’t stay longer than tomorrow at seven PM.”

Nico nodded, scratching his cheek idly in thought. “I’m sure I can manage that. I’ll figure out something, regardless.”
“I guess we’ll be off then. Lady,” she gave a slight nod to the goddess then started off toward the camp.

Will hopped down off the rock. “Guess I’ll go break the news now. Give it fifteen or so before you swing by to take them. I’ll make sure they’re all packed and moderately subdued.” With a wink, he followed the dark-haired girl back to their tent, leaving the other three to share a skeptical look.

Chapter End Notes

I stopped because it felt like a good spot to end. 
I originally wanted to end the last chapter with 'only three, pick who stays,' but I wrote so much fluff it would have been a super chapter. 
Now this one is a little short to make up for that, and I added stuff that would have been another chapter, and now I'm just all kinds of mixed up. 
Oh well, so long as it all comes together in the end, right?

Your wonderful comments really make my day and spark that little creative fire. :3
Camp, sweet Camp

Chapter Summary

Nico takes the boys back to Camp Half-Blood, hoping to seek council with Mr. D. Things at camp take an interesting turn.

Chapter Notes

I meant for this chapter to be written long before today, but of course, nothing ever goes as planned.
Also, I cleaned up the first three chapters some.
Dialogue is the exact same, just added some actions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first indication things had gone wrong was the sudden fog that seemed to trickle in all around them, seemingly from out of nowhere. The next was that he heard Will and Jonas frantically shouting, while Jamie wailed somewhere in the distance. Nico took off at a full run, not bothering to wait to see if the other three would follow. The density became thicker the closer he got to the tent, but the words of the two frantic demigods helped lure him the remaining distance.

“Jamie, please,” Jonas murmured softly, trying to soothe his younger brother. “It won’t be so bad. I’m sure you’ll make new friends, and they’ll only be another day or so longer, so you’ll see everyone again real soon.”

Will’s voice seemed to radiate warmth somewhere not so far away, and the crying all but stopped. “This is just for your safety. It’s too dangerous out there right now, and we want you guys to make it there in one piece. There are even worse monsters surrounding the camp, so we wouldn’t be able to get you inside any other way.”

Nico found the opening in the fabric, pulling it apart to step inside. If he thought it was thick fog before, the interior was like standing inside of a cloud. He coughed a few times, feeling the damp particles as they tickled his lungs. A rustling sound caught his attention somewhere to his left, and a hand shot out from the stark whiteness, dragging him over to the two brothers sitting on the edge of a cot.

Jamie looked up at him with big doe eyes, red-brimmed from all of his tears. His little mouth opened up in a silent cry before the sound caught up and ripped from his throat. “I don’t want you to leave me,” he wailed, small body shaking with emotions.

Jonas rubbed gentle circles onto his brother’s back, murmuring quietly under his breath. “It’s okay,” he cooed, trying to curb the newest fit of sobs.

Nico took a knee before the boy, drawing the little hands into his own. “Hey, the camp is so much better than all of this walking. You’ll see. You can learn archery and sword fighting, there’s a canoe lake, and we roast marshmallows over a huge fire every night. The best part is, the plates in the
dining pavilion are magic, and you can have any food you want for every single meal.”

Jamie sniffed a few times, a single tear rolling down his cheek. “Even french fries and hamburgers?”

Nico smiled. “I think I eat french fries at least once a day.”

Will came up beside Nico and nodded. “It’s true, Nico has a terrible diet. You should have seen how angry he got that he couldn’t eat junk when he had to stay in the infirmary for a few days.”

Nico scowled at the memory, and the two younger boys giggled. The heaviness in the air seemed to lessen a little, even though the fog was just as thick as ever. “Will is right, though, and your brother. You’ll make lots of new friends; I bet you and Harley from the Hephaestus cabin will get along great. He’s around your age, maybe a little older. It’s just not safe out there anymore, so getting you two to camp as soon as possible is our number one concern.”

Jonas beamed at his little brother. “This is probably our only chance to get to shadow travel, you said you wanted to try it.”

Jamie’s eyes went wide with awe. “Is it scary? Does it feel icky? I wanna do it now!” The small boy bounced around on his bottom, vibrating with excitement.

Will grimaced slightly. “Oh, it’s… something. Definitely a new sensation.” His face looked a little pale at the thought, but he forced a reassuring smile to his lips. “If you hate it, at least you’ll never have to do it ever again. Be grateful.”

Nico snickered. “Alright, gather up your things. We can say goodbye to everyone and then head out when you’re ready.” Rising to his feet, he glanced around the white vapor filled room. “Can you even find anything in this stuff? How long is it going to last?”

Jonas shrugged. “He’s never done it like that before, but typically it only lasts a few minutes before it dissipates. Inside it takes a little longer, the walls trap its escape.”

Nico nodded thoughtfully, stumbling away blindly toward the door. He held the flap open and noticed that outside of their enclosure was already practically clear. Little wisps of white drifted out slowly until the majority of the fog had dissipated. The boys found their packs and slipped them on, then joined him at the entrance. With one last look inside the tent, they stepped out, followed closely by Will and Nico.

Their other companions were still standing inside the lining of the trees, half hidden by foliage and shadows. The second Jamie caught sight of the hind, he galloped away, ignoring the protests of his brother to leave the creature alone. She regarded him curiously with those deep, shining black eyes, but didn’t waver from the goddess’ side. Either Artemis had soothed the poor thing before their arrival, or she just wasn’t intimidated by the tiny demigod. As it was, the thing was almost as large as a moose, towering over all of them with her great muscled figure, treelike antlers sparkling brightly as they reached toward the heavens.

“I take it the fog was summoned by the boy,” Artemis murmured when they approached, eyeing the little guy as he reached out his hand for the hind to sniff. The squeal of delight made the goddess flinch back slightly.

Nico nodded his head. “Yeah, I guess it happens sometimes when he gets upset.”

Artemis turned her attention Nico’s way, humming quietly in contemplation. “As I suspected. The boy resembles the Anemoi Euros and has the same strange power over fog. He even shares the same dark, curly hair.” She smiled warmly at the boy, who was stroking the hind’s face gently and cooing
at the creature in gibberish.

Nico glanced at Sabrina, wondering if the goddess had gotten a feel for the girl after being around her for a few days. “If you can guess at their parentage, what about the girl’s?”

Silver eyes stared him down, unwavering in their cold assessment. In that moment, Nico remembered that this small, young maiden was actually a thousands of years old goddess, with more power than he could even comprehend. The fact that she had tolerated them all for so long was a miracle; the fact that she had agreed to help was beyond the realm of comprehension. Why he decided to push his luck, time and time again, was mind-boggling; even a little insane.

The corner of her mouth turned up slightly in a smirk. “I cannot disclose that, it isn’t my place. I will, however, grant you the knowledge that the chances of it being someone with tremendous power and influence are quite high. You would do well not to dwell on such matters, just focus on the immediate task. All will be revealed in time.”

With the two boys in hand, he stepped into the shadows, slipping them down into darkness. Jamie gasped as the cold sensation clung to their bodies, the sound becoming haunting as it stretched itself thin in the emptiness around them. Since it was still midday, he landed them on the porch of the Big House, thankful for the large overhanging that kept the sun at bay.

Upon glancing up into the dark, churning black clouds overhead, he realized they probably could have landed anywhere, because the sun was nowhere to be seen. A storm of epic proportions raged outside the protective barrier of camp; while inside, the air felt hot and sticky, almost like the breath of some giant creature looming above them. Nico shuddered at the thought, returning his attention to his companions.

Both boys wobbled slightly on their feet, but Jamie recovered the quickest, bouncing up and down happily. “That was really cool. Are we already done?”

Jonas groaned and leaned back against the building, shutting his eyes tightly. “I’m glad you thought so, I feel like I’m going to be sick.”

Nico rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, offering a meek smile. “Sorry about that. It’s different for everyone, but even I was a little dizzy my first try. It’ll pass soon.” Glancing around once more, curiosity bubbled up inside of him at the intensity of the eerie stillness.

For a spring afternoon, camp was practically void of campers. True, summer was normally their busiest of times, but since the war with Gaea, it was rare to see the place without a few demigods mulling about. Even the Big House looked quiet and calm, the interior dark through the large glass window. With another glance back at the swirling, blackened sky, he pulled open the front door and stepped inside.

As he suspected, the room beyond was dark and silent. A meeting of camp counselors could be to blame, but something told him they’d find the centaur inside somewhere. The two boys followed him through the foyer into the back of the house, where Chiron’s office was located. The door was open a crack, so he pushed it some and glanced in cautiously.

The centaur was staring out the far window, watching the hill and Thalia’s tree with arms folded over his chest, his horsetail swishing back and forth gently as his mouth formed a thinly pressed line. A slight frown creased his brow, one that indicated he might be deep in thought.

Nico was reluctant to disturb him, but Jamie peeked around his side and gasped, rushing into the
room to gape at the man. “You’re half horse,” he squealed.

Chiron peered down at the small child, raising an eyebrow in amusement. “I must say, I didn’t expect to see you here so soon, Jamie Parker.” He glanced back at Nico and Jonas, who was still standing in the doorway. “Nor the two of you. I take it you shadow traveled the boys here for safety?”

Nico nodded. “Artemis thinks we need to be at the meeting tomorrow, and I need to speak with Mr. D, so I took them on ahead since it’s safest. Is he around right now?”

Chiron stepped away from the window, herding the small boy along with him with a gentle hand. “Why don’t we go find someone to show these two around. They’ll bunk with the Hermes cabin until-“

“Actually, we know who their parentage is,” Nico interrupted, giving the two an encouraging smile. Both boys looked at him curiously.

Chiron hummed quietly. “I suppose the goddess informed you?”

Nico chuckled. “More or less, though their abilities helped. They’re both children of the Anemoi, different ones, but I don’t see a reason to dedicate a whole cabin to each. We still have a few empty that haven’t been claimed by anyone, right? Perhaps one of those could work.”

Jamie bounced up and down. “A whole cabin, just for us?”

Chiron laughed at the boy’s enthusiasm. “I don’t see why not. Head counselor would of course fall upon Jonas, then, if he’s up for the task?” All eyes turned to the reluctant looking boy at Nico’s side.

Jonas shifted his weight from foot to foot. “What would I have to do, exactly,” he mumbled quietly.

Nico clapped him on the shoulder gently. “I’m Head of Hades cabin, and Will is Head of Apollo cabin. It’s really quite easy, sometimes you have inspection duty, and occasionally we have counselor meetings you’ll attend to give your input on things; but otherwise, you just manage your own cabin. Jamie is too young to be a counselor, but if anyone else shows up that’s part of your group, you can always give them the title instead. Normally it’s the oldest’s job.”

Jonas pursed his lips. “Is there really no one else in camp that’s also a child of the Anemoi?”

Nico looked to Chiron, who gave a small shrug. “We still have a few unclaimed demigods, but it’s hard to know for certain. Usually, once we have a cabin dedicated to a certain god, they begin to claim their children, so I guess we’ll see.”

Jamie ran up to his brother, grinning up at him brightly. “You can do it, Jonas. If anyone can do it, you can. You’ll be a great leader! I believe in you.”

Jonas sighed, running a hand back and forth through his cinnamon hair, leaving little tufts that stood up all over the place. “Alright, I’ll try it out. Maybe I’ll enjoy it.”

Chiron smiled at the two brothers. “It’s settled then. Let’s find someone available to give you a tour.”

The first camper they ran into was Lou Ellen, coming out of the Hecate cabin on her way to the
dining pavilion. When she saw Nico there, she gave him a strange look, before offering the newcomers a warm smile. The second Jamie heard where she was going, he began jumping for joy, insisting the girl take him to see these magical plates that could give him whatever he wanted, though more specifically, ice cream sundaes.

Lou Ellen agreed, but only after the utmost reassurance that Nico’s presence sans Will Solace wasn’t a bad thing, and that her friend was perfectly fine. Nico left out the information that the boy was recovering from an injury, and thankfully, Jonas and Jamie were too distracted firing off questions about her mist controlling powers to bring it up. When she informed them she had pig bombs, they both squealed with glee.

The second the three were gone from sight, Chiron’s faux happy demeanor vanished, replaced instead with a stoic, if not slightly troubled disposition. Nico caught the mood change immediately and cocked an eyebrow at the centaur. With a long, drawn-out sigh, he folded his arms behind his back, inclining his head toward half-blood hill. “Come, there is something you should see.”

Nico didn’t question further, just followed behind as they made their way back to the Big House, and then past it, up the hill he had stood on only a few days before. A slight smile curled his lips, and he quickly reviewed the events from that point to this one, noting how much things had changed in just a short amount of time.

For one thing, the son of Apollo wasn’t quite as useless as he’d originally thought, having proven his worth on many occasions. For another, he didn’t exactly find the guy to be as much of a pain as he still tried to let on. He’d never admit it, but just thinking about Will made his head feel fuzzy and his stomach flip anxiously. As much as he’d like to pretend it was from loathing, he couldn’t seem to find the same blind anger he’d felt only a week prior at the idea of being near the guy for more than two minutes.

His happy musings turned to slight panic as he took in the sight just beyond the towering pine. A horde of monsters, far greater than those seen during the battle with Gaea, crowded the lower half of the hill, spanning out and down as far as the eye could see. From his vantage point, he noticed the patrols of campers skirting the edges, just out of harm’s reach, watching the monsters who seemed oblivious to their presence.

Chiron nodded at Nico’s questioning look, seeming to read the other’s thoughts before he even knew how to express them. “They’re still congregating here, more of them every day; but thankfully, they can’t see or hear beyond the protection of our barrier. It isn’t known if they understand where they are, but they appear to span all the way down our perimeter, almost the entire way to the water’s edge. We’ve been having teams of three or four monitor different points, but activity seems to stay much the same. Only when Demigods come near to enter camp do the monsters seem to acknowledge anything and attack.”

Nico frowned, staring down at a group of Empousa sharing a conversation only a few feet away. He couldn’t hear what they were saying, which was oddly terrifying seeing as how close they were. “It’s so silent, you wouldn’t know they were there unless you saw them with your own eyes.”

Chiron smiled humorlessly, crossing arms over his broad chest. “The noise was making it hard for the campers to feel at ease. We asked the Hecate cabin to bend the mist and nullify the noises coming into the camp. Sadly, this means we have to remain even more vigilant in our patrols, as once someone steps outside the barrier, neither can we hear their pleas for help.”

“They seem like they’re waiting for something,” he mused aloud, flicking his eyes between the various types of monsters. It almost reminded him of Percy and Annabeth’s recount of standing outside the doors of death. Even though the monsters normally fought one another, they had banded
together enough to remain relatively peaceful.

Chiron nodded. “It would appear that way, though, for what reason, we still cannot guess.” The centaur turned to Nico and clapped him on the shoulder. “Now, what brings you back to camp with only half of your party. I’m sure there is a reason you need to discuss something with Dionysus?”

Nico grimaced, having momentarily forgotten his mission to speak with the grouchy god. “Ah, yeah. I need to ask him if he’ll summon the Teusmessian fox so we can all make it to Mount Olympus in time for the council of the gods.”

Chiron hummed, seeming to understand the reasoning. “Very well, then. We shall go summon him at once. Be forewarned, he will not be easy to sway into helping.” He turned to leave, but Nico cleared his throat, stopping him mid-step.

“But it’s not unheard of, right? Dionysus helped Percy out, or his Roman counterpart, Bacchus, did. I was there for that. And Artemis is the one who sent me, so that should make it easier.” He tried to sound confident, but the words came out more like a plea.

Chiron seemed to mull things over, before giving a tight smile. “I suppose that depends on his mood this evening. Let us pray it is a good one, for your sake.”

Chapter End Notes

I haven't been feeling too well lately, so if I don't update this (or anything else I write that you read) for a while, that would be why.

Comments help make me feel better. :3
Chiron used his Iris Message fountain to summon the god, then the two of them waited patiently for the next hour or so, playing a few games of Pinochle to pass the time. Nico didn’t quite get the rules at first, but having played a lot of card games with his sister, and mythomagic for years after that, he got the gist of it relatively easy. It wasn’t long before he’d actually won a hand against the centaur, who had been an expert on the game for ages now.

The arrival of the chunky, angry god was met with a loud pop, and the unmistakable scent of grape fields on a hot summer day in Italy. Nico had to fight back the urge to close his eyes and inhale deeply, desperately missing his homeland, even if he had just visited the place a few months back. That, of course, had been for special circumstances, and he didn’t really do much except getting turned into corn and helping Frank escape the Catoblepas the first time around. The memory still made him wary of eating anything corn related, so he tried his best not to think about that little trip.

Dionysus caught the tail end of Nico’s first win and gave a low whistle of appreciation. “Not bad, Nicky. It took me a few weeks before I could beat old Chiron here.”

Nico frowned at the improper name but chose to ignore it. Correcting the god wouldn’t do him any favors. “Ah, thanks. I’m pretty good at strategy games.”

Mr. D waved a hand at him dismissively, already looking bored with the topic of conversation. “Make it snappy, there, kid. I haven’t got all day. What did you need me back for so soon, I was enjoying my time on Olympus for once.” He directed the second part of his question to Chiron, completely disregarding Nico’s presence.

Chiron glanced between the two of them, then collected the cards back into a pile. “Have a seat, Dionysus. Why don’t we play a hand or two?”

The god seemed to mull it over, before turning his watery blue eyes on Nico. “Go make yourself useful and fetch me a Diet Coke. They’re in the fridge inside.” Then he summoned a chair made from twisting vines and sat down.

Nico spared a look at the centaur, before quietly leaving the table. Somehow, he knew Chiron was
trying to lull the grumpy man into a better mood, so he didn’t argue the fact that the god could probably summon his own drink without help. Whatever it took to get on the guy’s good side. He could bring himself to submit, at least for a few hours.

When he returned, the two were happily chatting about some long-ago event, and Nico tuned them out. Mr. D didn’t bother to thank him for the beverage, but he didn’t expect the god to, so he took no offense. They played a few rounds, most of which Dionysus mysteriously seemed to win before Chiron brought up the topic of conversation once more.

“Ah, it would seem the council is meeting soon to discuss the strange turn of events happening as of late,” the centaur murmured, collecting the cards and shuffling them innocently.

Mr. D nodded his head in agreement, drawing a long sip of his drink. “Yup, though if you ask me, it’s all in vain. Father always was one to overly discuss futile matters, I’m sure he’s only itching for someone to blame. I say blame these demigods for not putting an end to the monsters quickly.” A smirk pulled one side of his mouth upward, blue eyes twinkling with madness. Nico wondered if the crazed god was imagining a slaughtering rampage, though he didn’t dare to imagine who it was being slaughtered.

Chiron cleared his throat awkwardly, shooting Nico a pitying look. “It would appear Artemis believes things are changing again, though for better or worse, we cannot say.”

Dionysus let out a bored sigh. “I suppose that’s one theory,” he relented, strumming his fingers impatiently upon the table.

Chiron pressed the matter further. “The Lady seems to think the strange girl is important and should attend the meeting. The young satyr Dendron had a prophetic dream whereupon his company was on Olympus, and the days and facts seem to align with tomorrow evening.”

The god flicked his gaze to Nico, narrowing his eyes momentarily, before returning his attention to the centaur. “Why do I get the feeling you called me here to ask me for something? You know I dislike helping these obnoxious children. Their failures are my entertainment.”

Chiron’s mouth became a thin line, brow creasing ever so slightly. “As Camp director, you should at least pretend to care about the well-being of our campers, Dionysus.”

Mr. D rolled his eyes and snorted, waving a hand dismissively. “Yeah. Right. I care. Satisfied?”

The centaur hummed in disapproval. “It would seem the company is located too far away to reach Olympus by the time necessary. Artemis has offered up her Hind for use, but another speedy means of transportation is needed for the small satyr. The consensus was-“

Mr. D cut him off. “Doesn’t Nicholas here use shadow travel? There, problem solved.”

Nico grumbled, folding arms over his chest. “It’s Nico,” he muttered under his breath.

“Yeah, whatever, Nate. My point being, that if you are done wasting my time, I’ll be taking my leave now. I have more important things to do, like exist away from this torturous place.”

Chiron looked to him for assistance, brown eyes weary. “Ah, the thing is-“

“I’m the only one that can assure everyone’s safety. Will is injured and can’t use his bow, so they need me with them. Believe me, I offered to go by myself and meet them there, but Artemis wouldn’t let them use the Hind without assuring Sabrina makes it there alive.”
Dionysus turned his cold, watery eyes back to Nico, sizing him up like he was something grotesque stuck to the bottom of his shoe. “Look, Nicolo, I feel for you; except I don’t. It’s not my problem, and you have nothing to offer to convince me it is my problem. I know what you’re going to ask of me, and quite frankly, I just don’t care. The Teumessian fox is out of commission, and she’s going to stay up there, permanently. Zeus put her up there, go bother him to bring her back.”

Nico felt the remainder of his patience snap, anger flaring up inside of him like an out of control Greek fire. “My name is Nico, not Nate, not Nicholas, never call me Nicky again, and Nicolo isn’t even a word. Your attention span really cannot be that short, and I know you know who I am because all of the gods know who I am. Not even in an arrogant, I’m so great, look at me kind of way. You’re terrified of my father, which means you’re terrified of his children. If you can’t do something, just admit it. Fess up, and I’ll beseech an actual god to help me out.”

Chiron groaned loudly, pinching the bridge of his nose in sudden distress. Dionysus looked shocked for a moment, before an angry sort of calm stilled his features, leaving them dangerously lethal, yet completely stoic. Blue eyes bore into his black ones, taking on a strange purple hue as his skin turned the color of wine. The temperature around them elevated, becoming muggy and thick like a sweltering, humid summer afternoon. Nico lifted his chin defiantly, refusing to back down to the obnoxiously infuriating god.

“There are worse things than death, boy. I implore you to remember that before you go around angering immortals with the power to make your life a living Hell. I could turn you into anything I wish, even another corn plant. I am a god of agriculture, mind you. Dolphins are my specialty, but something tells me you’d enjoy being a little closer to the Poseidon brat.”

Nico flinched at the mention of Percy, eyes narrowing in barely controlled rage. Dionysus smirked in satisfaction, taunting the son of Hades to argue back. Clenching his jaw, he took a deep breath in through his nose, releasing it in a calming wavelike sigh. He allowed his own features to turn condescending, lacing his fingers behind his head in a lazy sort of gesture, before he gazed at the god with heavy-lidded eyes.

“Alright, if you think you’re so powerful, I’ll strike a deal with you. But only if you swear on the Styx that you’ll uphold your end of the bargain.”

Mr. D cocked an eyebrow, looking somewhat intrigued, while still maintaining an air of superiority. “And what, pray tell, makes you think I’ll make a bargain with you, son of Hades? What could you offer me that would be worthwhile?”

Nico grinned wolfishly. “The chance to turn me into whatever your heart desires, without risking a backlash from my father, who I know you’re too afraid of to do anything to me otherwise.”

Mr. D snorted in amusement. “You think yourself so significant? Any punishment I’d receive would pale in comparison to what I can do to you, little demigod. We immortals live a long time; the fickle love we have for our half-human children is wavering at best, recedes in a few hundred year’s time at most. Your father would get over it, I assure you.”

Examining his fingernails in nonchalance, Nico hummed quietly in disbelief. “Alright, go ahead and do your worst to me, then. But I think you’re seriously underestimating the love Hades has for each and every one of his children, and especially one of Maria’s. He only cursed the Oracle of Delphi for years out of spite for Zeus killing her in an attempt to end my life in the past, not to mention the fact he has the power to judge any soul entering the underworld. Damning all of a certain god’s children who pass through to eternal suffering would be a simple feat.”

The strange wine-colored look was slowly returning to Mr. D’s face, and Nico knew his taunts were
putting the god right into the palm of his hand. If his plan failed, the worst that would happen is he might cease to exist. It wasn’t a comforting thought, but it wasn’t the same as being stuck someplace like Tartarus. Dionysus was wrong in thinking Nico would actually fear to lose the ability to retain human consciousness. It would be a blessing, considering his life thus far. Perhaps then he could finally be at peace.

The god clenched his jaw, looking a bit put off. He seemed to mull the idea over for a minute before his hand waved at Nico dismissively. “It isn’t worth my time, even with your end of the deal. Carry on, little demigod, find another to play your childish games.”

Nico nodded solemnly. “You’re right, it isn’t fair when we both know I’d win in a game of cards. Why, the only reason you even beat Chiron is that he lets you think you’re capable. Even I only took a couple of hits before I got the hang of the game. How long was it that you said it took you to do it?”

Nostril’s flared, but the god kept his cool. “Do you have a death wish or something; perhaps suicide by way of immortal wrath sounds intriguing enough to be worth your effort? You’re trying my patience to its ends, and I cannot be held accountable for anything I do upon being goaded into it so thoroughly. Even Hades will see my reasoning, I’m sure.”

Stuffing his hands into his pockets, Nico shrugged. He turned his attention to Chiron instead, cocking an eyebrow at the look of sheer terror on the centaur’s face. “Well, I guess I’ll be heading back now. I’ll inform Artemis she’ll just have to let us all take the Hind, and if or when it hurts her precious animal, that she can thank her half-sibling for his utter helpfulness. I’m sure she, too, is quite forgiving. See you whenever we get around to heading back.” He threw a hand up in salute and turned around, marching down the steps and out toward his cabin at a leisurely pace.

He didn’t make it very far before the sky rumbled and shook above him, a single bolt of lightning striking the top of a nearby tree. The air around him sizzled and crackled with electrifying energies, causing the hair on his arms to stand on end; possibly even that which was on his head, too. Keeping his obnoxiously slow pace, he didn’t even bother to glance back, knowing quite well how much it would anger the god of madness. An audible pop signaled his disappearance from the porch, so it was of no surprise when he reappeared before Nico, arms crossed over his chest.

“One game, and if you lose, you won’t even have a chance to beg for your life. It will be instantaneous, the madness will surely drive you to take matters into your own hands before too long. I struggle to think of a more satisfying punishment for someone so utterly arrogant and mouthy than to be the one to drive the final nail into their own personally made coffin.”

Nico smirked, putting out his hand to shake a deal. “Alright, one game of my choice, and when I win, you’ll summon the fox. I state here and now that should I lose, my father can blame my untimely end on my own stupidity, and I know he’s listening right now because he always eavesdrops on my conversations with other gods.” As if to prove his point, the ground shook slightly beneath their feet, shadows seeping up from little cracks in the dirt. “See, he accepts the terms.”

Dionysus inspected the presented limb like it might be infectious somehow. “I swear on the Styx, that should you best me, I will refrain from punishing you for your insolence, and I will summon my dear Teumessian fox.” He went to shake, but Nico pulled back.

“Ah, and promise that it won’t be mad and try to kill any of us. I know the tale, you sent her as a punishment. It would be a shame to die due to a loophole you hoped I wouldn’t notice.”

The god rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, fine. She will be a sound of mind and obey you until you reach
your desired destination, whereupon she will return to the stars. No loopholes, no chances for untimely deaths, at least, none implemented by myself. I can only hope my father will strike you down for being such a troublesome pain.”

Nico returned his offered hand and the two shook their agreeance to the terms. “Alright, give me a second and I’ll be ready to humiliate you.” He turned to walk away but paused when the god snorted in response.

“What, need to say your final goodbyes, knowing good and well you cannot beat a god?”

Nico smiled innocently. “Not at all, I need to go get my deck from my cabin. Go drink a Diet Coke while you wait or something, you’re looking a little parched.”

Mr. D frowned. “Do you have some preferred Pinochle cards you seem to think will grant you luck or something?”

He barked a laugh, throwing his head back and clutching his stomach as it shook. “No, no. We’re not playing pinochle. I’m getting my Mythomagic deck. I said one game of my choosing, did you honestly believe I’d try my luck on a game I’ve just learned this afternoon? Hold tight, I’ll be back in a jiffy, and then I can tell you the rules.”

Walking away with a spring in his step, Nico had to force himself not to relish the look of utter horror he’d caught a glimpse of twisting the god’s face. This was going to be almost too easy.

“Alright, so here is how you play.”

Nico proceeded to explain the rules of the game, going into unnecessary amounts of detail so as not to be called a cheater when he undoubtedly wiped the floor with the god in record time. Mr. D listened and nodded his head, even going as far to allow Nico to pantomime and throw down a few things for example, which should have been seen as patronizing to his intelligence, but the immortal took it in stride. When he was satisfied with his explanation, he allowed the other to shuffle the cards and deal them out into two equal decks.

“Now, there is absolutely no way I could have swindled you, correct?”

The god smirked and nodded in agreement. “Correct, I cannot even claim you offered me a weak deck to assure your own victory. Shall we flip a coin to see who goes first?”

Nico smiled back. “No need, since it is your first game, I will allow you the handicap of going first. It’s the least I can do.”

Mr. D hit him hard and fast, knocking his health down a full quarter before ending the round. Nico gaped at the god, mouth slack, unable to find the words to voice his skepticism. Dionysus chuckled merrily to himself, shuffling his hand around before giving Nico a pointed look.

“You move, di Angelo,” he sneered, voice dripping with venom.

Nico swallowed down the sudden panic he felt. “How… how did you manage to understand the game that fast? Some people play for months before they understand how to utilize each card to its full potential.”

“Remember when you told me years ago my card was the weakest in the game, but you thought my
powers were cool?” Nico nodded stiffly, and the god hummed in amusement. “Well, I took it upon myself to check out this game you enjoyed so much, see what got a little brat like you so excited. It’s pretty interesting. I sometimes sit down for tournaments when I have a moment to spare. I usually win.”

Nico drew his cards, instantly devising his plan of action. It helped to know which cards were available in his deck, and what the likelihood was that Dionysus held all the top hitters he had. If he played up his defensive, it might make the game take longer, but he was less susceptible to taking another grueling hit. A smile crossed his face. “No matter, it’ll only make things a little more interesting.”

Back and forth the turns went, each side playing it safe and remaining calm. Nico made sure never to hit too hard, knowing good and well some cards allowed the other player to turn the attack back, giving themselves a death blow more often than not. He never played anything that he himself couldn’t take, and it appeared Dionysus was playing much the same way. The god was less obsessive about raising his defenses, but all in all, he wasn’t a complete pushover. If Nico hadn’t played for seventy or so years, he’d probably have lost already. The thought didn’t comfort him much, it just meant he’d have to step up his game and use a failsafe.

Mr. D ended another round with a devastating blow, cackling evilly when he desolated Nico’s defenses to practically nothing, more or less assuring the next round would be their last. “Any last requests while you’re still cognitive? I could pass on a message, if you ask nicely and throw in a little bit of groveling. I might get it mostly right, though I can’t assure it’ll be within this century. My time is precious.”

Nico added up the numbers in his head, brow creasing slightly in concentration. The god grew impatient with his silence, tapping his fingers angrily along the surface of the table. At times he let out an annoyed huff, but the one saving grace of the game was that, so long as no player left the table during their turn, they could take as long as needed to think up a plan. Nico used his time wisely. One error and he’d lose the game for certain.

“Hm,” he made the sound without noticing, earning a snort from the restless god.

“You can’t just waste the day away. I won’t let you keep me here forever. The game will end whether you draw it out now, or quietly succumb to your fate. Honestly, it’s a little nobler to just accept and be done with it. Wouldn’t want talk of how you cried in terror as you attempted to forgo your own stupid mistake.”

Nico blinked a few times in confusion, clearing the gathered fog from his brain. “What? Oh, no. Sorry, I was just doing the math in my head. I space out a little bit when the algebraic equation goes beyond sixteen different steps, but I’m pretty sure I’ve got it all down correctly.”

Mr. D frowned. “What will math help a game of strategy and chance?”

Nico laid down his failsafe, smiling cockily as he did it. “Like this. With such a low defense, this card acts as a sort of last stand against your opponent. It will completely obliterate anything in its path, but the one consequence of using it is it also knocks your own health down to one. If you use it wrongly, you effectively end the game by signing your own will.”

He waited for Mr. D to grasp the concept before continuing. “Considering the fact there are four total artifacts available in my entire deck that can turn this card around on me, and we’ve used three of them already, that leaves only one left. By adding that information together with the number of available cards, less the number discarded, the chances of you having it be one of those three cards in your hand right now are .001%. Seeing as how it is the only chance I have to win, and how you will
probably end the game anyway the next round, I'll play it and call the odds in my favor.”

Silence stretched on betwixt the two of them, adrenaline pumping fire straight through his veins. Beads of sweat trickled down the back of his neck, heart fluttering wildly in his chest like a scared bird attempting to take flight. Even Chiron didn’t utter a single noise, everything hinging on whether or not Dionysus would accept things quietly or destroy his world in one fell swoop.

The god smiled in response, eyes flicking briefly back to his hand. Placing them down upon the table, he laughed a rumbling laugh. “Well done, Nico. I didn’t think you’d actually beat me. Bravo, I accept my fate.”

Nico released a long breath through his clenched jaw, feeling a wave of lightheadedness overcome him. Too close. He’d never again make the mistake of betting his life against the chances that he was better at something than a god. The look on Dionysus’ face said he understood Nico’s thought process, and for a moment, he thought he saw something shine in those watery blue eyes; something akin to a mild respect.

Raking a hand down his face, he chuckled. “If I never play Mythomagic again, it’ll be too soon,” he muttered, collapsing against the back of his chair in relief.

Dionysus snorted in amusement. “Serves you right, getting all cocky. I guess I’ll have to find a little entertainment elsewhere; it’s a damn shame, too. Well, at least it was fun while I watched you squirm a little.” He waved his hand and a bright light fell down from the sky, crashing hard into the ground.

Bits of grass and dirt pelted Nico, and he brushed them from his face, staring hard at the creature before him. Eyes shone like miniature constellations, black and swirled with tiny pinpricks of glowing light. Snowy white fur looked soft and thick as she pawed questioningly at the ground, tilting her head at Nico, awaiting her orders. Her long, muscled body was large as a greyhound’s, so he didn’t doubt her ability to carry the small satyr across the land. The only doubt in his mind was whether or not she could run fast enough to get there in time.

In a blur the creature was by his side, yipping quietly at his wide-eyed expression, sounding almost like laughter. He reached down a hand to allow her to sniff it, and she nuzzled her snout gently across his extended fingers, confirming the softness of her coat. “I didn’t know she was white,” he murmured, entranced by the fox’s whirling eyes as they gazed back at him with boundless intelligence.

“She wasn’t always. Being a scattering of stars will most likely do that to anyone,” Mr. D informed him in a bored voice.

Nico glanced toward the god, noting the slight look of adoration upon his features as he watched the fox watch Nico. “Thank you for your help, Dionysus,” he said quietly, and he really meant it. Somehow, he didn’t think the god was as uncaring as he let on, even when it came to cocky brats.

Mr. D frowned. “Yeah, yeah. Just go back to your friends, Nick.” He waved his hand, and with a loud pop, he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter name is indeed a Hobbit reference. I'm sure you can understand why I used
it now.
I'm not good with math, I don't know how you play mythomagic. I do know the basics of magic the gathering, but the available information doesn't really make it seem like they're exactly the same.
Creative liberties!
Hope it wasn't a snore fest. Tried to up the humor a little to make it tolerable.
Nico is such a shit.

Comments make me give you anything you ask of me.
Just saying. :)

The Fox and the Hind

Chapter Summary

Nico takes the Teumessian fox back to the others, before the company prepares themselves for the journey ahead of them.

Chapter Notes

I wrote this up, and since it really wasn't very action packed by the time I reached 3000 word count, borderline dull even, I decided to spare everyone and post it now, even though its bare minimum length. No point in putting it off. :)

Side note, if you follow this series, I'm changing it to give it its own series. I removed the series tag, then added it back to let people know. I'm unsure if anyone gets updates that way, but yeah, just a heads up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nico watched the spot the god had been for a moment longer, lost deep in thought. The sun had already started to set behind the trees, the dying light of day casting an orange tint over the land. Grey clouds had broken, revealing the sky was just as strange looking as ever; though he supposed for dusk, it really wasn’t that odd. The Teumessian fox sat watchfully at his side, quiet in her assessment of the world moving steadily around her. Nico knew it was probably best to be getting back, but a nagging sensation was digging at his gut, simultaneously terrifying and astounding him.

Reaching a hand across the table, he flipped over the three Mythomagic cards the other had held less than half an hour before. Fear washed over him, followed closely by a strange tingling sensation, working from his face, down, until it spread so far as to reach his toes. A bark of laughter erupted from his chest, and he gathered up the deck, wondering briefly if he should even keep the things any longer since there was no chance he'd want to play again after something like that. A sound at his right gave him pause, and he turned, staring up into the amused face of the centaur.

“While I wouldn’t recommend your method with any of the other gods, it would seem the best way to receive assistance from Dionysus is to win his respect. He’d never admit it aloud, so don’t tell him you know anything.”

Nico nodded stiffly, suddenly feeling exhausted. “I guess it makes sense, not wanting to seem like you’re helping. At least, not without being forced into it. The blame lays with me now should anyone get mad. Still, I don’t know why he tried so hard to win if he was just going to throw the game in the end.”

Chiron hummed in amusement. “Teaching demigods a little humility is one of the many perks of being immortal. While it’s true that we need your kind to fight our battles, there are still times, such as these, where you rely on someone with abilities that surpass your own. We keep the balance, giving and taking, even sometimes denying one another what they want most; which is still, in its own way, a form of balancing the light and dark. I’d say Mr. D just wanted to teach you a little
lesson, while also testing your abilities for his own entertainment.”

Nico gathered the rest of the cards together, before handing them off to the centaur. “You should keep them. I’m sure if you learned, Mr. D would be glad to play a game or two. I’ll bet pinochle gets boring after a hundred years or so.”

The centaur laughed, low and deep. “I’ll take good care of them,” he promised, horse’s tail swishing back and forth. “If you are finished, you should get going. You still have a long journey ahead of you, I’m certain of it. Having three of the gods on your side will be beneficial, but you’ll still need to appease Zeus. Even just showing up during a private council meeting is asking for death.”

Nico grimaced at the thought. “I think I see why Dionysus let me continue on with the plan. Probably a little more entertaining to watch us get electrocuted than it is to turn me into a houseplant.”

“The girl will keep you safe, otherwise I wouldn’t have allowed it. Thank you for protecting the group, Nico, and for getting two new additions back safely. You may tell the brothers goodbye if you’d like. They’re finishing up dinner now, then heading to the amphitheater.”

Shaking his head, he glanced back at the fox. Her ears turned his direction, but she kept her gaze out on the camp. “I probably should get back, let everyone know I didn’t get myself smote in the process. I’m sure Artemis is tired of babysitting. Just tell them we’ll be seeing them shortly, and not to worry.” Chiron nodded in response. “Do you think I can shadow travel with her, or should I just tell her to sniff us out, and whereabouts we’re located?”

“You could ask her yourself, she’ll let you know the answer.” Turning around, Chiron made his way back toward the dining pavilion, keeping at a leisurely pace.

Nico took a knee, pulling the fox’s attention toward him. Dark eyes danced and twinkled like the sky at night, mesmerizing him for a beat before he shook his head to regain his composure. “Well, what do you say, want me to travel us both in shadow, or would you prefer to get there on your own?” She tilted her head questioningly, then pawed him on the chest. He smiled at that, running a hand down the length of her smooth neck. “I’ll take that as an answer, I guess. Well, brace yourself, it isn’t a fun ride.”

Hooking an arm around her middle, he pulled them both into the shadows, keeping a tight hold so as not to scare the creature. When they slipped out again, he patted her side in a reassuring manner as she whined a little, shaking her head to rid it of dizziness. “You did far better than Will did his first time, at least. The guy vomited all over the place. I’d guess being turned to stone and then into stars probably feels worse than turning into shadows, though, so you’re probably used to uncomfortable things.”

“I heard that di Angelo,” Will murmured. Turning his head toward the sound, he watched the son of Apollo saunter up slowly, arms folded across his chest in a lazy fashion.

Nico hummed in amusement, rising to his feet. “It wasn’t intended to be a secret. You have the stomach of an infant. Very easily upset.”

Will chuckled, swiping a hand through his golden hair idly. “Yeah, I’m not very good with plane rides, either. Must be the speed or something.” He took a step closer, hesitating slightly when the fox turned his way. “I see you got Mr. D to agree somehow. Spare me the details, I don’t want to know how close you were to being a shish kabob.”

Nico snorted derisively. “Actually, it was a plant. I’ve already been one, though, so it wasn’t all that
daunting.”

Will gaped for a second, then shook his head. “See, this is why I’d like to be spared the details. I don’t think I can handle knowing how stressful it was before you narrowly avoided death.”

“Who said it wasn’t easy, that I wasn’t having a mini vacation before I came back,” he challenged.

Will gave him a pointed look. “For one, you took eight full hours, and for two, I know you. You’re not the most self-preserving person alive. More like you’ll do whatever is necessary to accomplish your goal. That’s how I knew, out of anyone, you could get him to comply. Whether or not you’d come back in one piece was a different story.”

Nico deadpanned in response. “I can’t quite tell if you have little faith in me or too much faith.”

Will smirked, lifting his good arm in a shrug. “Perhaps a little of both, depending on the situation.”

Glancing around the camp, Nico noted for the first time how empty it was. “Where is everyone,” he asked, spinning in a slow circle to look for the other three that should have been there. It was utterly quiet, save for the usual murmur of nightlife, and the faraway sound of children playing around in the nearby park.

Blue eyes danced happily as he locked back on to them. “Have you ever seen an ancient immortal play on playground equipment? Because I have. They’re still hanging out at the park, probably. I left some time ago to be here when you got back. Figured it looked bad if everyone was missing.”

Nico’s eyebrows shot up high in surprise. “I didn’t take Artemis for the playful type. She seems a lot more serious and composed.”

The blond nodded in agreement. “True, but I guess anyone can get swept up in the moment, let loose a little. After the hunters packed up, she seemed to become a little less stoic. Not that I’d push my luck trying to make friends; as a son of Apollo, she probably wants to turn me into an animal and then hunt me.” He chuckled at that as if the idea wasn’t completely morbid.

“You’re not all too much like him, to be honest,” he replied gently, offering what he hoped would be construed as a compliment, though could go either way.

Will beamed at him, and Nico had to stop himself from retracting the statement. That smile was as bright as the sun, and half as blinding. “I get that a lot, actually,” he mused, coming up and reaching out a hand for the fox to sniff. He absentmindedly scratched behind her ear, causing a low whine of appreciation to emanate from her throat. “I didn’t expect her to be white,” he mumbled.

Nico laughed, shaking his head at the similarity to his own comment. Unlike Dionysus, he didn’t feel the need to respond about living as a star. Will gave him a strange look, but didn’t broach the matter. Even in the dim light, his eyes were stunningly blue; crystal clear and impossible to look away from.

A beat of silence passed between them before Nico turned around and began to walk away. The Teumessian fox followed behind, keeping pace at his side. It was oddly satisfying, having the creature respond to his lead. His hand reached out and brushed the top of her head with his fingertips, enjoying the feel of soft fur.

“Have you eaten anything yet, it’s pretty late.” Will’s voice was soft and warm, sounding from somewhere close behind him.

Nico didn’t glance back to check, just assumed the son of Apollo was probably following him out.
toward the playground to look for their companions. He shrugged casually. “Not really, but I feel fine. To be honest, I didn’t have much of an appetite all day, considering.”

Will scoffed and grabbed him hard by the arm, stomping off ahead to pull him inside the tent, all the while ignoring Nico’s cries of protest. The fox remained just outside the flap as Will shoved the younger demigod forcefully into a chair, rolling his eyes at the look of annoyance on the other’s face. “Sit there, I’ll get you something,” he drawled, turning on his heels and strolling over to the pantry area to look for food.

Nico muttered obscenities under his breath, glaring daggers at the obnoxious boy. He didn’t dare vacate the chair, knowing it was futile to run. Experience had taught him you didn’t disobey Will when he was acting all concerned physician, but that didn’t mean Nico wasn’t usually stubborn. The only way he got any satisfaction out of the situation was to butt heads at every turn, relishing the way Will’s face turned pink when he got mad, or how his eye twitched after Nico stared right through him, pretending he wasn’t there.

Will returned with a bagel and some fruit, rolling his eyes once more at the look of defiance on Nico’s face. “Just eat, di Angelo. I’m not going to fight you on it if that’s what you’re hoping for.” Sitting down opposite him, Will laced his fingers together, propping them beneath his chin.

Nico huffed and crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to back down. “I said I’m not hungry.”

A strange look spasmed on the other’s face in response. “Why are you always so combative,” Will asked, looking caught between tired and disappointed outright. “Why can’t you just accept a little help now and then?”

Rolling his eyes, Nico cocked a brow. “Why are you always obnoxiously obsessive about my eating habits or lack thereof? I am quite capable of deciding when or if I need something, thank you very much.”

The blond’s jaw clenched slightly, but he kept rather calm considering he usually started lecturing by that point. “Fine, don’t eat, then,” he replied coolly. “Get sick and be unable to protect anyone should anything bad happen. See if I care.” He shot off a withering look, then stood back up and marched his way out of the tent.

Nico deflated a little, picking up the bagel and inspecting the object like it might hurt him somehow. Biting into it, he frowned hard at the place Will had sat only moments before, wondering why he felt the sudden urge to apologize, even as he struggled to understand what it was he’d done wrong.

Morning came, and the small company packed up their things, deciding to hit the road earlier than later. The hind could reach New York within a few hours time, but they felt it was probably best to split the journey into two separate parts; allowing the animals a moments reprieve, as well as a break for lunch before they had to face an entire group of terrifying immortals. The mood was tense, to say the least, no one really talking much from the moment they woke up.

Nico, especially, found his mood a little agitated, having avoided the son of Apollo for the rest of the evening, even as he wasn’t quite sure why. Not that Will paid him any notice, either, which didn’t help the matter, nor his temper. Just watching the blond pack up his bag with a few supplies, completely oblivious to everything around him, made Nico want to march right over and force the guy to bicker with him some more. Bickering was better than awkward silence, at least it was some form of acknowledgment.
Even Dendron and Sabrina picked up on the strange vibe surrounding them, shooting the two odd looks from time to time. They kept a wide arch around his person, looking reluctant to even eat their breakfast in a nearby seat. Nico sat in his chair and sipped his coffee with narrowed eyes, waiting for the son of Apollo to look at him. No one disturbed him, however, so he was left to grumble and pout in peace.

When Will was satisfied with his job, he turned to the two youngest with his usual warm smile. “Alright. All set, you two? I don’t think you’ll need much, but it’ll be easier to take more than is necessary than it will be to drag out the tent and retrieve something later.”

Dendron nodded stiffly. “Everything is good on my end.”

Sabrina mirrored his stiffness. “Same here,” she replied quietly, casting violet eyes Nico’s way.

Will strapped his bag over his shoulder gently, wincing a little from lifting his arm so high up. “Okay, so whenever Deathboy is finished, we can go.”

Nico spluttered mid-sip, choking on the hot liquid, and coughing hard as tears sprang to his eyes. Will snickered at the sight of him gasping like a fish out of water, earning a fiery stare when he finally caught his breath. “I told you not to call me that, Solace,” he growled, clutching his throat as if that would satisfy the burn inside of it.

Will hummed in amusement. “Meet us outside when you’re done,” he replied coolly. Then he left the room, not even bothering to summon the others. Sabrina and Dendron shared a look before the two of them grabbed their bags and shuffled out of the tent.

Nico heaved a sigh, blowing on the surface of his drink gently to cool it off. It bothered him, not knowing why Will was acting hostile toward him. In turn, it made him angry that he gave a shit, to begin with, reminding himself that the two of them were normally at odds and that the past few day’s weirdness were what was the unusual part. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder if an apology of some kind was in order, even if he wasn’t quite sure what he need apologize for.

Downing the rest of the coffee, he grabbed his bag and angrily stomped outside, wincing at the bright light that blinded him. Fuzzy dots clouded his vision, swimming behind his eyelids when he shut them tight. A brush of softness tickled the skin on his palm, and he looked down into the intoxicating gaze of the fox as she regarded him questioningly.

“You’re going to take the satyr on your back and keep pace with the hind, shouldn’t be too hard with how quick you can go. We’ll stop halfway to rest but tell the kid sooner if he gets to be too heavy. I don’t want you to be exhausted.” The fox yipped quietly, so he took that as confirmation.

Collapsing the tent back to its paper-thin form, he dropped it into his bag as another sigh tumbled from his lips. Dark eyes searched the area nearby until they landed on the three standing a little ways off in the trees, speaking quietly with the goddess one last time.

Nico was a bit surprised to see her there, considering she wasn’t needed any longer, but he supposed it was nice to be able to say goodbye and thank her for her help. It would give him something to concentrate on, other than stupid Will and the stupid issue the boy seemed to still have with him.

The goddess turned her silvery gaze his way, a slight smile tugging at her lips as he approached. “The hind will listen to your commands until you reach your destination. She shouldn’t wander off, even if you dismount; but try not to leave her alone for too long, in any case. Dendron can speak with her, as you know, so she’ll tell you if something is bothering her. Be safe, and good luck.”
Nico nodded. “Thank you, Artemis, for your help.”

“And thank you for yours,” she responded, before turning her attention to the girl. “Remember what I’ve told you, and do not doubt. You alone have the ability to control it as you please.”

Sabrina’s face turned a little pink from the attention, casting her gaze down to her feet. “Thank you for the advice, my Lady. I’ll try my best.”

Satisfied with the answer, the goddess turned to Dendron and Will. “Take care as well, and do your best to support your friend here, should you run into trouble. Always be cautious. Anything can happen, especially in times such as these when the balance seems to have shifted. These areas are filled with monsters, so never drop your guard.”

The boys nodded in unison, causing the goddess to appraise the four of them as a whole. “I take my leave, now. Have a safe journey, young ones. Until we meet again.” They averted their eyes as the small goddess disappeared with a pop.

Running a hand through his hair, Will sighed. “Well, best get to it, then.” He mounted the hind first, scooting back to leave space for someone to go in front of him.

Nico gave him an incredulous look, the other two taking their own places; one behind Will, the other on the fox. “I’m leading,” he asked skeptically, wondering why Will wouldn’t just take the reins, much like he did on the amphisbaena.

Will rolled his eyes. “You heard the goddess, the hind will listen to your orders. As will the fox, so it’s on you to lead the two of them. Hurry it up, we haven’t got all day,” he replied curtly.

Nico grumbled and climbed on, stiffening slightly when Will’s arms slipped around his midsection for support. Swallowing hard, he grabbed hold of the golden antlers, giving them a gentle tug to signal the creature to rise. Will’s grip tightened a little, pulling the two of them closer, causing Nico to close his eyes and hope desperately that the other wouldn’t notice the way his heart sped up due to the sheer proximity of their persons.

Pawing at the ground, the creature dipped her head in silent question. “Uh, right. Take us about halfway to New York, please.” No sooner had he gotten the words out, she shot off like a speeding bullet, the three demigods giving a startled cry as the world around them blurred suddenly in a flash of earthy tones.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, just a bunch of semi-filler. Next chapter will be a lot more satisfying, or it better be, I might just ramble a bunch and feel bad. I didn't expect it to drag on so much, but once I wrote it, I didn't want to cut anything out? I like the weird back and forth between Nico and Will, the realization that Dionysus threw the match, and saying goodbye to the goddess.

Ah, you can tell me what you thought, and it might help me hurry up and write the next chapter. :) Don't be too critical if it is boring. :3
Chapter Summary

The company heads to New York, stopping briefly along the way to rest.

Chapter Notes

I did it again. This is far longer than it was going to be, to account for the fact I can't keep from rambling.
Oh well.
Apologies in advance, I double space everything, and this computer actually recognizes it. I can't help it, it's habit now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wind whipped through his hair chaotically, stinging his eyes, and reverberating in his ears. He clutched on tightly to the golden antlers, fearful of falling off. It would seem he wasn’t the only one, the grip around his middle intensified and he felt the warmth of breath on his neck as Will ducked his head closer, using Nico’s body to shield himself.

If he had a moment to spare for embarrassment, his cheeks would be burning. As it stood, he was far too focused on trying to see anything at all to care that Will’s chest was steadily melting against his back in a warm embrace. In fact, if he was honest with himself, he didn’t hate it.

Shaking his head to clear it of lingering thoughts, he returned his attention to vision. They must have been going quite fast, though somewhere in his mind, Nico guessed the hind could go faster. If she could outrun an arrow, which zipped through the air like a speeding bullet, he was certain she could make it all the way to New York in less than an hour’s time. The hindrance of a couple hundred pounds of weight on her back, coupled with the fact he was still able to force air into his lungs, put her speed somewhere close to seventy miles an hour; which was fine by him, it only took a few hours to drive from Baltimore up to New York.

They raced through forested areas when they could, making their way around the larger populated regions when it was permitted. Somehow, he didn’t think normal passerby would see three teenagers riding a giant white deer with golden antlers, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t appear as something almost worse. Stories he’d heard from the others at camp, and especially those Percy had told them all, proved that the mist usually worked against the demigod, making swords into guns, and causing way too much uproar for those involved.

They leaped over a large river, the hind’s strong leg muscles propelling them further than Nico would have guessed. Hopefully, the fox was able to match, or Dendron would find himself left behind, which would be unfortunate, seeing as how he wouldn't know how to track the two. His worry faded shortly after it started when he caught sight of white fur zipping past them, the terrified looking satyr wrapping arms around the smaller creature’s neck, hanging on for dear life. The wind caught the laugh that shook his body, ears not even hearing the sound before it was ripped away in a
Houses and cars and trees flew by, all a blur before his mind could focus long enough to discern identifying shapes. They skirted around yards, climbed over hillsides, splashed through little creeks, all the while never losing an ounce of speed. After the first half hour, Nico felt his legs begin to numb, the vibrations from riding so long causing his grip to loosen slightly, sliding back even further into the firm and calming surface behind him.

A chin rested on his shoulder, warm air tickling his ear as he strained to catch the words that brushed against his side. “Don’t worry, I won’t let you fall off,” the other murmured softly, squeezing a litter harder to emphasize his point. “I’ve ridden horses most of my life, I’m used to the numbness.”

Nico gave an imperceptibly light nod, not trusting his words to reach Will, if he was even capable of forming them at the moment. At least the other was kind of acknowledging him, and not in a negative way. He supposed it would be difficult not to, considering how close they were, which was steadily growing closer the longer he rode. Who would have thought riding a deer would be so much different from riding a large hellhound, or that his thighs would lose all ability to grip and his hands would burn from clutching onto the hard cartilage sprouting from her head.

When it had begun to become unbearable, he bent forward toward the hind’s ear, calling out softly for her to slow to a trot. The difference in movement made his stomach lurch horribly, feeling the combined weight of Will and Sabrina knock hard into his back, the chorus of groans sounding strange in his ears. Other noises followed, the deafening roar of wind no longer drowning out the cars honking in the distance, or the usual hum of city life that now trickled in from all directions.

“Oh, thank gods,” Sabrina sighed, earning a chuckle from Will. From the relief in her voice, Nico guessed she, too, was having difficulty remaining upright on the deer.

“Where are we,” Sabrina's voice floated up from behind, and he felt the son of Apollo twist a little more to survey their surroundings.

"No clue," Will finally mumbled after a beat.

Nico shrugged, staring out at the unfamiliar terrain that looked like any other area somewhere on the northeastern coast. “I’ve never really been around here, so I couldn’t tell you, either.”

“39.6 degrees North and 74.8 degrees West, give or take a little,” the satyr mumbled, voice choked with nausea. A low groan followed after, and he buried his face into the fox’s fur.

“Oh, Hammonton New Jersey, then,” Will chirped, moving his arms to rest them on Nico’s shoulders. Nico wouldn’t admit it aloud, but he kind of regretted the loss of contact from his midsection.
“Where is that,” Sabrina wondered aloud.

“No clue, but I know latitude and longitude thanks to my dad,” he hummed happily. “We’re nearly halfway.”

Nico blinked in confusion, sliding his gaze down to the motion sick child. “How does Dendron know our coordinates?”

“The fox told me,” came the muffled reply.

Nico nodded, not really understanding how the fox would know, either. Probably something to do with animal instinct, or maybe being a constellation. Probably the animal thing. “Any ideas where we should stop and rest? I’d prefer a grassy park over hanging out on the side of the road. I’m just not sure how we’d find one.”

Dendron lifted an arm and pointed off to the right. “There’s a huge forest if we keep going that way. Lots of trees and wooded areas, great for deer. I even smell water, probably a lake or large pond.” He rose a little and sniffed the air, before groaning and laying back down against the fox’s back. “Yeah, that’s your best bet.”

Nico felt sorry for the kid, but leaned forward and told the hind where to go. She shot off once more, slowing down once they were inside the trees. “Anywhere you want to go is fine with me,” he offered, and the creature stopped beside a small lake, before kneeling down to allow them to dismount.

Will hopped off happily, reaching a hand up to his shoulder, massaging the area just above his scar. “Man, that ride was brutal,” he mumbled.

Sabrina slid off next, rubbing her bottom with both hands, face pained. “You’re telling me. Can you get saddle sores from riding without a saddle? Because I think I have those, or I will by tonight.”

Dendron rolled off the fox, not caring that he fell bodily onto the grass. A moan escaped his lips, and he dug his fingers into the earth beneath him with a grim expression. “I don’t ever want to do that ever again,” he croaked, sounding seconds away from being sick.

Nico released his grip on the antlers, wincing at the pain in his hands. “We’re still only halfway, so, unfortunately, you’ll have to.”

Dendron threw an arm over his eyes. “I regret saying I’d travel this way.” He let out a disgruntled bleat, before pulling himself upright. “I think a walk will help,” he mumbled, scrambling to his feet before heading down toward the lake.

“Don’t go too far,” Will called after him.

Sabrina gave the two of them a weird look. “I think I’ll go, too. Work out the stiffness in my legs.” She shot off after him, falling into step as they skirted the shoreline.

Nico slipped from the back of the deer, rolling his shoulders in small circles to work out a kink. Everything felt unbelievably sore as if he’d been running around all afternoon sparring. “How long do you think we should rest up before continuing on?” He watched the two animals wander over to the water, lapping up the liquid happily. If he was exhausted just from riding, he could only imagine how they felt, having carried them there. Turning back, he caught the flicker of something pass over the other’s face, before it was gone.

Will pursed his lip and shrugged. “At least an hour, I’d say. Everyone could use a break, I’m sure,
and we should probably eat before we go.”

Nico’s stomach rolled at the thought. “Ugh, I’m not really sure I could handle food at the moment. Perhaps later.”

Will frowned. “You probably should eat something, Nico. You can’t keep neglecting yourself like that, it’s not good for you.”

“I don’t want to,” he grumbled, crossing arms over his chest.

Will’s face flickered with emotions again, before he shook his head and sighed. “I can’t.”

“What,” Nico asked, thoroughly confused. Will shook his head again, before turning around and walking off the other direction. “Where do you think you’re going,” he huffed, hurriedly following after the son of Apollo.

Ducking under a low hanging branch, Will swiped a few small twigs out of his way, holding them a beat before letting them snap back into place. The leaves struck Nico right in the face, causing him to yelp in surprise. Glancing behind him, Will smirked. “Just taking my own walk,” he replied tersely.

Nico grit his teeth, brushing the bits of debris from his skin. “What the hell is your problem, Solace,” he growled, feeling the morning’s anger begin to flare back up inside of him. If the boy didn’t stop having these mood swings soon, he was going to scream.

Will turned on his heels, attempting and failing to lift his arms high enough to cross them over his chest. A look of pain flashed across his face before it was replaced with one of steely determination. “I’m not the one with the problem,” he replied, voice tight and laced with anger.

Nico stopped in his tracks, blinking back at the other in confusion and a bit of mild surprise. “Uh, yeah, you kind of are,” he pointed out the obvious with an incredulous tone. “Just tell me what’s wrong.”

Quirking a brow, Will shot him a withering look. “Nothing is wrong. I’m just going for a walk.”

Nico rolled his eyes, swiping a hand in his hair in frustration. “You’re such a pain,” he seethed. Stomping across the remaining distance, Will jabbed a finger hard into Nico’s chest. “You are the pain, di Angelo. Not me. You’re temperamental, stubborn, obnoxious, always looking to pick a fight, never let anyone help you, don’t know when to quit, always run hot and then cold, and you drive me completely insane.” His cheeks were pink in frustration, breath coming out hard and fast.

Nico swatted the offending finger away, glaring up at the taller boy with a clenched jaw and curled fists. “Excuse me? Who is the one picking a fight here? You’ve been pissy ever since last night. If you have a problem, try using your words like a big boy.”

Will barked a laugh that was eerily cold. “Oh, that’s rich, coming from you. As if you have room to talk when it comes to being moody and refusing to tell people why.”

Nico huffed indignantly. “Okay, your attitude is pissing me off right now, and I think you’re being ridiculous and should stop it. Either tell me why you’re upset or get over it already and stop being annoying.”

“If you weren’t such an idiot,” Will muttered under his breath. His stare turned cold, penetrating Nico’s chest like an ice pick. “Just leave me alone.” Turning back around, he made to leave.
Nico grabbed onto his good arm, halting his escape. “No.”

Blue eyes narrowed apprehensively. “Nico,” he warned, tugging at the wrist that was locked in an iron grip. “Let go.”

“No,” he repeated, lifting his chin defiantly. “Not until you at least tell me why you’re-“

Will closed the distance between them, standing so close their bodies almost touched. He stared down at the shorter boy, jaw clenched, mouth a thin line. “You really want to know why,” he asked, voice low and calm, showing no signs of emotion.

Nico swallowed hard, giving a stiff nod in response.

Will bent down, hovering just inches over Nico’s face. Eyes flicked to his mouth, before moving slowly up to gaze deeply into his dark eyes. Lips parted gently, little puffs of air caressing Nico’s cheeks in feather light touches. All remnants of anger left his features, replaced with warmth and tenderness, crystal blue and bronze and blindingly bright.

Nico’s breath hitched, grip loosening as he stared up like a scared animal trapped underneath the glare of headlights. Inside of his chest, his heart beat a rapid staccato; thrumming wildly against his rib cage, desperate to break through. He wanted to run, panic seeping deep into his pores, raking nails of fire up his body and into his throat; but his legs had rooted themselves into the earth, keeping him trapped and vulnerable and torn.

“Because I can’t keep fighting a losing battle,” he murmured, voice tinged with heartbreaking sadness. Pulling back, Will broke the spell, extracting his wrist from a slackened grip. “Don’t you ever get tired of keeping everyone at arm’s length?”

Before he could even absorb the words, a shrill scream pierced the silence. Nico staggered backward like he’d been struck, blinking fast, mind slowly churning to catch up. Will took off like a bullet, flying past him, back toward the lake. Shaking his head hard, he regained his senses, following quickly behind. Breaking through the clearing of trees, Nico stopped abruptly to take in the strangely horrifying creature that terrorized his friends.

It had the body of a leopard; lean, muscular form with four sets of deadly sharp claws that sank into the earth below its feet, poised and ready to charge. A long scaly neck and serpent’s head stretched up over eight feet into the air, fangs bared, forked tongue slipping out of its mouth to catch their scent. Glowing green eyes assessed the two smaller companions, outright ignoring the animals, who it must have deemed unthreatening; even as the fox growled a warning, fur raised high on her arched back.

“What is that thing,” Nico mumbled to himself, not even meaning to ask the question aloud.

Will made to pull his bow from his back, wincing slightly from the pain. “I’m almost positive it’s a serpopard, which is a half serpent, half leopard. Hence the name. They can spit poison, so be careful.”

Nico marched up to the son of Apollo, grabbing his good arm roughly to halt the attack. “What do you think you are doing,” he grumbled.

Will gave him a confused look. “Getting my bow?”

“Exactly! You’re injured, Solace, you’re in no condition to do anything. Just get the kids out of there, I’ll take care of the serpopard.”
The monster emitted a deep hissing sound, snapping the air with its jaws. Dendron stepped in front of Sabrina, shielding the girl with his small body, look of utter determination on his face. The two were backed up against the edge of the water with nowhere to run, and the monster looked at the pair like it might be hungry. What they needed was a distraction of some kind, something to allow the cornered two to get away, while Nico lured the monster off somewhere. If he went far enough, he could shadow travel back, and they could escape.

Picking up a rock, he hurled it at the thing’s body. “Hey, ugly,” he hollered, waving arms wildly about to make himself seem even more enthralling. The long neck turned his way, green eyes flicking around until they finally landed on him. The monster snarled and snapped its jaws in response, catlike tail swishing in agitation. Pivoting slowly, it turned its focus on Nico, seemingly forgetting the others. “That’s it,” he cooed. “Good ugly snake face. I’m who you want. No one here worthwhile but me.”

Will made it halfway to the lake before the monster whipped its head back around and hissed, spitting some substance the son of Apollo only narrowly dodged. The grass sizzled and turned brown, leaving a sizable hole of death where the poison had landed.

“Oi,” Nico shouted, tossing another rock and hitting the monster in the back of the head. It changed direction again, hissing angrily at the son of Hades. “Your fight is with me,” he seethed, raising his stygian sword up into the air threateningly.

Will gestured for the two to hurry up and get out of there, smiling sheepishly when the snakehead whipped back toward him and snapped at the air, clearly enraged. “Oops,” he mumbled.

The monster continued to assess both of them, swinging its long neck from side to side, trying to find the biggest threat. In the end, the son of Apollo must have seemed worse, because the Serpopard changed direction once more, charging at Will, trying to run him down in the process. He loosed an arrow at its face, gasping loudly at the pain the action caused. Metal pinged when it hit the hard scales on its chest, falling to the ground uselessly.

Nico took off running toward the creature without a second thought. “Will, you idiot, stop fighting back and get out of here,” he wailed, terrified for the other’s safety. Will grunted a response, but he was too busy dodging the wildly swinging tail to listen properly. Slashing with his sword, he nicked the Serpopard on one of its legs, red blood gushing out as the monster snarled and hissed, recoiling away from further attack.

Spinning around, it raked at his face with long, sharp talons, missing his eye by a fraction of an inch. Nico twirled out of the way, bringing his sword up to slice it across the soft pad of its front foot. The snake’s head snapped at the air, spitting poisonous saliva wildly about, little drops eating away at the ground wherever they landed. He dodged them easily enough, landing a few more blows to the beast’s legs and sides.

A terrible sensation shot up his right arm from somewhere on his hand, forcing Nico to drop his sword as he cried out in pain. Glancing down, he watched the drop of saliva bubble the skin there, eating the topmost layer instantly. In a flash, the scaly neck twisted around his body, squeezing him tight as two glowing green eyes narrowed, putrid breath gagging him as the beast opened its mouth to hiss directly in his face.

“Put him down,” Will shrieked, nocking another arrow to his bow. Pulling it taut, he whimpered slightly before letting go, the arrow striking the Serpopard in the leg. It snarled again but kept a tight hold, never so much as breaking eye contact. “Drop him this instant,” he cried angrily, reaching his arm up to grab for another arrow.
Nico struggled in the monster’s grasp, trying to break free. Will nocked the arrow to his bow, gasping again before he loosed it once more. “Cut it out,” Nico wheezed, feeling the creature’s hold tighten significantly, ribs starting to crack under the pressure.

“You’ll die,” Will shouted back. Staggering a bit, he fell to his knees, face contorted with pain as he reached for yet another arrow to shoot.

“You-” His words were cut short as blood spluttered out of his mouth, choking him with its sickeningly coppery taste.

Will’s blue eyes widened, and he scrambled shakily back to his feet. “No, Nico!”

Sabrina stepped in front of the Serpopard, arms spread wide, violet eyes blazing with raging emotions. “Put him down right now,” she said sternly, voice buzzing with a strange hypnotic power.

The hold around Nico’s body lessened, and he sucked in a large breath, coughing and gasping and shuddering all at once. His feet met the ground, unable to hold his own weight, and he sank into cool grass, watching the monster as it stepped away from him, slightly confused.

Sabrina’s voice maintained its strange tone. “Now you’re going to leave this place, and not bother us again. If you do, I’m going to be displeased,” she scolded the monster like an angry parent.

Without a second glance back, the Serpopard hung its head and bounded off into the trees, tail held firmly between its legs.

The girl seemed to deflate slightly, dropping arms back to her sides, expression changing to one of complete exhaustion. She heaved a sigh, raking a hand down her face. “That was close,” she mumbled, before sitting down in the grass, clutching her head gingerly in her hands.

Will raced to his side, placing shaking hands over his chest and concentrating hard. “Three cracked ribs, and some damage to your spine. Can you feel your legs?” Nico shook his head and Will grimaced. Digging into his bag, he pulled out some ambrosia. “Alright, take this, but I’ll still have to heal you myself.”

“What about… you…” he wheezed, finding it hard to draw enough air into his lungs to breathe, let alone speak.

Will smiled sadly. “I’m okay, just reopened my wound a little. It’ll be fine.”

Nico frowned up at him as he closed his eyes, lips moving silently in a healing prayer. His hands began to glow, warmth seeping down into Nico’s skin, tingling as his bones began to slowly mend. Breathing became steadily easier, the sensation in his toes returning after another moment or two. By the time Will’s lips stopped moving, he felt better than he had the whole day.

“How do you feel now,” Will asked, gazing down at him with tired, heavily lidded eyes.

Nico sat upright, taking a few deep breaths to gauge the damage. “I feel perfect,” he finally replied, smiling softly at the son of Apollo. “Now take some ambrosia before I force it down your throat.”

Will chuckled and obliged, rising to his feet and offering down a hand for the other to take. “We should probably get out of here, who knows if the monster will come back.”

“It won’t, not for some time,” Sabrina mumbled, peeking through her fingers to look at the two of them.
Nico picked up his fallen sword, reattaching it to his belt before walking over and kneeling down beside the girl. “How did you do that,” he asked, voice filled with awe.

Sabrina dropped her hands into her lap, releasing a long breath out through her nose. “The Lady told me if I really wanted to, I could make creatures bend to my will.”

“Like charmspeaking,” Will asked, coming up beside Nico.

Sabrina shook her head. “I don’t think so. She told me children of Aphrodite can do that with mortals, because of how appealing they become. This is more like… allowing someone to do something. Like with blocking your powers. I couldn’t help you to fight, so I just stopped allowing the monster to be here, instead.”

Will gave a low whistle of appreciation. “That will come in handy.”

Sabrina paled. “Please don’t make me try. I don’t think I can risk anyone getting hurt.”

Nico smiled reassuringly at the girl. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. But thank you, Sabrina, that is the third time you’ve helped us now.”

She pursed her lips, frowning slightly. “Technically the first, the other two times I was a hindrance because you couldn’t use your powers with me around.”

Nico chuckled. “Either way, thank you for helping.”

Smiling shyly, a slight flush brightened her pale cheeks. “Just glad I could do something, for once.”

Chapter End Notes

I just have to rough my boys up, it's no fun when no one gets hurt. :)  
Seriously, I hate this chapter, I don't like how it flows. At the same time, I don't want to figure out why I hate it so much, so I'm just going to post it and move on. Already wasted enough time staring at it.

Comments actually do make me write more, all the lovely responses you give me make me smile and run to my (brand new!!!) computer to quickly give you more chapters. As it stands, this is already far longer than I expected it to ever get, and I blame my inability to stop conversations to keep it on track. Can you believe the last chapter was going to end after their argument? That's like... over halfway in!
I promise nothing for the next chapter, because I'm always a liar in the end. :3
Mount Olympus

Chapter Summary

The journey continues to Olympus, racing against the clock to make it there before the gods hold council.

Chapter Notes

I am so exited about this chapter, and the next one.
It's wrapping up, I've already set an estimate, but we all know I can't shut up long enough to actually contain things. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lifting up the other’s shirt, Nico assessed the damage. Blood had already seeped through the soft grey cloth, staining it a hint of reddish-brown. The ugly look of flesh beneath actually made him wince slightly, feeling absolutely awful for the son of Apollo, and even worse about himself. Will got hurt, again, because of his growing inability to protect everyone.

His long bought of silence was all the confirmation the other needed, stepping away from him with a chuckle. “That bad, huh? Riding definitely won’t be fun.”

Nico pursed his lips, brow creasing at the idiot who was trying to laugh it off like it was no big deal. “You shouldn’t have done that to yourself, you knew it would hurt. And it’s not funny, Solace, so stop smiling like it wasn’t a dumb move.”

Will shrugged his good shoulder, eye twitching slightly at the pain the action caused. “Even with knowing the outcome, I’d still turn around and do it again. You would, too, so don’t act like you’re the only one with a martyr complex here.” His tone was soft; the stupid, infuriating smile never leaving his face.

Grumbling low in his throat, Nico rolled his eyes. “I hope the ride is horrible for you, it’ll serve you right,” he muttered, crossing arms over his chest and casting his gaze somewhere less cheery bright.

Will chuckled again, stepping closer and invading his personal space. “Don’t forget, all that matters at the end of the day is that everyone is safe. We all take a few beatings now and then. No matter how good of a fighter you strive to be, someone is bound to end up hurt.”

Looking up, blue eyes shown down on him, soft and calming. Heaving a sigh, he dropped his frigid pose, cocking a brow instead. “I’ll be so very glad when this is all over, and the lot of you are inside camp, safe. Until then, can you please refrain from getting yourself maimed, or worse?” Reaching a hand up, he flicked the taller boy right between those stunning eyes; gentle, but hard enough to make a satisfying sound.

Stuffing his hands into pockets, he sauntered away, ears burning red from the sound of soft laughter that accompanied him as he went.
Sabrina and Dendron were chatting high up on a large boulder, finishing up their food, tossing bits of meat to the fox and an apple core to the deer. He approached them quietly, watching fondly as the two typically quiet companions seemed to open up around one another, relaxed after the hectic mess they’d been through the last few days.

The fox perked her ears up, yipping quietly before trotting to his side. Swirling orb-like eyes regarded him in what he took as a pleased manner, muzzle coming up to nuzzle softly against his out-turned palm.

“She said she’s happy you’re alright, and sorry she couldn’t protect you,” Dendron translated, slipping from the rock and dusting himself off. He had taken off his hat, allowing his shaggy white hair to blow softly in the gentle breeze. With his pant legs rolled up, human feet bare, he looked more like a little nymph or elf than he did a baby satyr. The only evidence he wasn’t one was the tiny horns peeking through a mess of tangled locks, and his bronze sun-kissed skin.

Nico hummed in response, stroking her ear in gratitude. “I’m just glad you two are safe. Whenever you’re ready, we can continue on.”

Dendron paled, clutching his stomach and frowning. “Honestly? I’ll never be ready, not in a lifetime of preparation. But we’ve got to be there in the next five or so hours, so I guess I’d rather do it now and have a moment to rest before we get ourselves blasted off Olympus.”

Sabrina tucked a strand of pale hair behind her ear, casting her violet gaze out toward the direction they were headed. “I don’t know, I think we’ll be fine. Something tells me we’ll be more welcomed than we think.”

Nico shrugged. “Well, at the very least we have a few gods on our side. I’m sure Zeus will at least hesitate a little before starting another war with my father.”

Dendron didn’t look convinced, wrapping his small arms around himself and shivering at the thought. “I still fail to see how we’re going to be able to stop all of this strangeness. If we can stop it, or even figure out what it all means.”

“Well, if we can’t, then we’ll make do,” Will murmured, coming up beside Nico and giving the lot of them a warm smile. “No use wondering about what-ifs, we should get going and find real answers.”

Slipping from her perch, Sabrina landed in the grass with a soft thud. Her stoic features flashed with a look of hard determination, fingers curling up into delicate little fists. “Okay, we’ll get going now. Getting there sooner than later means we have more time to prepare, and who knows, maybe we’ll figure it all out along the way.”

The Hind knelt by her side, allowing the girl to climb upon her back, fumbling slightly, before righting herself. The fox trotted over to the small satyr, allowing him to tangle small hands in her soft fur, gripping tight in anticipation of what was to come.

Will mounted carefully, reaching a hand up to gingerly cup the shoulder he tried hard to keep limp at his side, then smiled down at him, scooting back slowly to once again allow Nico to take the reins.

He stared hard at his companions. The small satyr, who fought so hard the first part of their journey, fiercely protecting the others when he was barely able to protect himself. The strange girl, with her mind-numbing powers, afraid of herself, but determined to help out any way she could. And the idiot healer, braver than most, unyielding at times, while still managing to be gentle and kind.

A smile curled his lips, and he climbed atop her back, tugging the golden antlers to signify his
readiness to leave. “Take us to the Empire State Building,” he murmured, this time a little more prepared for the feeling of inertia as it threw them back in a chorus of grunts.

As prepared as he was, nothing could prepare him for the queasiness that bubbled up after the first thirty minutes of being jostled about. Will might have healed his entire body when he fixed his injuries, but that didn’t stop his hands from blistering against the rough surface of cartilage, or the sharp pain that worked up his spine as his tailbone beat incessantly against the rolling shoulder blades of the Hind.

Even if he slowed the creature down, took a fraction longer to arrive than however agonizingly long it would take to arrive currently, something told him the terrible sensations would end up being much the same, if not worse. At least the added time meant a second to breathe and regain bearings; not to mention figuring out how they were going to convince the man at the front desk to permit them up unannounced, hours before a private gathering.

No, he knew time was precious, even as he didn’t know why.

Will squeezed the life from him with one good arm, keeping their bodies pressed so close he swore he felt the other’s beating heart against his spine. The one he let dangle limply eventually found its way to rest the palm along his right thigh, distracting, even as it refrained from movement. He could even feel Sabrina’s smaller hands wrapped low around Will’s waist, probably afraid to go much higher lest she hurt his injury further.

Because of this, he noticed just how terrible it was anytime the Hind leaped high over a small gulley or took a strange swerve to avoid crashing them suddenly into a tree. All of the little wobbles and bumps caused the son of Apollo to dig nails into his leg, face buried against his neck, fist curling into the fabric of his shirt to keep from crying out in pain.

Part of him felt bad, but a stronger part felt grim satisfaction, and he hoped the next time Will was told to stand down or back off, no matter who would end up a casualty because of it, that the guy would listen. Probably not, but it was gratifying nonetheless.

He noticed the exact moment they reached the outskirts of town, the large buildings hard not to notice looming dark and ominous in the distance. The other unmistakable observation was the way the sky grew darker the closer they came, thick grey clouds obscuring the odd rainbow-colored sky in a perimeter spanning close to fifteen miles.

Perhaps the gods were tired of looking upon the sight; or else it was just coincidence that the blackest point void of all light sat directly above the place he knew housed Olympus, swirling arms of churning vapors spidering out from the ring in the utmost center. His companions noticed it too, Will giving him a quick squeeze, while Sabrina’s hands seemed to wring themselves against his back.

They crossed the Brooklyn bridge, heading into the heart of lower Manhattan. The Hind had taken them up the edge of the coast, past Long Beach and through Staten Island, sticking to the least dense parts she could find. Now the back to back traffic of the main downtown region found them leaping over honking cars and skirting around the crowds of bustling people, hopefully oblivious to their group racing through on the back of a giant deer.

“Take us to Washington Square Park,” he murmured in her ear, feeling the Hind shift directions subtly, before slowing to a trot next to the giant fountain, just before the Washington Arch.
People sat on the steps, watching as the water spritzed high into the air, children laughing as they ran along the shallow pool, enjoying the refreshing spray on the hot spring afternoon. Others lounged upon the grassy areas, hiding beneath the shade of tall trees; or sat along the benches that ringed the perimeter, resting their tired feet in the middle of their shopping sprees.

“You can let us down here, we can walk the rest of the way,” he informed her, slipping from her back once she kneeled upon the pavement.

Will struggled to get himself down, wincing when he had to stop himself from falling over by catching hold with his bad arm. “Why are we stopping here,” he asked, mirroring the look of confusion reflected on the other two’s faces.

Nico shrugged in response. “The city is crowded, we have plenty of time, its only like a half hour walk, and I’m sure I’m not the only one that could use a little stretch to work out all these stiff muscles. We have, what, three more hours to kill before seven o clock?” Will gave a nod of confirmation. “Exactly, so why not walk while we figure out how we’re even going to be permitted up to Olympus.”

Sabrina hopped from the Hind. “You don’t have to tell me twice,” she mumbled, rubbing her bottom again with a glum look.

Dendron grunted something illegible, but his tired face looked relieved, so Nico assumed it was probably something much the same.

Will gave a firm nod. “Alright, I can get behind a walk. And I kind of have an idea about how to get around the man at the front desk.” He glanced sidelong at Sabrina, making the girl shy back, trying to hide behind the deer as it rose up to leave.

“I hate to admit it, but I was thinking much the same,” Nico murmured, offering her an apologetic smile. The Hind gave him a questioning look, and he almost felt the words penetrate his mind. Reaching a hand out, he stroked her long throat. “Thank you for all of your help. We’ll be fine from here on out, so you can head back to wherever it is you came from.”

Antlers sparkled in the sunlight, casting golden shadows that rippled dazzlingly along the ground. With a sweeping bow of her head, she stood tall, then zipped off faster than his eyes could follow, leaving a blur of white before it ebbed into nothingness once more.

Dendron finally climbed off the fox’s back, looking worse than the first leg of the journey. “She said it was a pleasure to help the Lady and her friends, and wished you well in your quest.” Green eyes slipped shut, low groan slipping from his mouth. “I shouldn’t have eaten that trash I found. Remind me never to eat things I find in a park.”

Yipping quietly, the fox patiently awaited her own dismissal. Nico took a knee, allowing her to nuzzle warmly against his face. “Ah, and thank you so much for helping as well. I’m sorry your return won’t be to the wild where you should be.”

Black eyes glittered with thousands of tiny stars, swirls of white mist laced with stunning reds, blues, yellows, greens, and violets. She yipped again, and he knew without words that she was grateful for the experience, however fleeting it might have been.

“She wants you to know being a constellation isn’t terrible, and that maybe one day you’ll get to know what it’s like.”

Nico laughed, stroking along the sides of her face gently. “I would be quite lucky if I ever did.”
A warm glow surrounded the two of them, and he stepped back, allowing her to leave. It grew ever brighter, like the surface of a star, lighting up the area and casting shadows all around them. Through it all, her eyes maintained their stunning blackness, watching him there, rooting him to the spot. In a shimmer of glittering dust and an icy sigh like the deep depths of space, she vanished.

The walk was slower than they’d anticipated, their limbs protesting against the distance with agonizing aches. It wasn’t until they were already a third of the way through the town, having taken over twice the amount of time to get there than it should have, that Will remembered he had enough ambrosia for everyone to help speed their recovery straight along.

Even still, it took a little over an hour to walk the mile plus up to the Empire State building, stopping outside the glass doors. The building towered above them, imposing in its own right but more so when he thought about just what was there; six hundred stories high, concealed by the mist.

A shiver of anticipation ran down his spine, and he shot a questioning look the other’s way, receiving three nods of confirmation in response. “Well, we’re still early, do we want to try our luck now, or wait a little while until we’re sure all the gods are present and accounted for? Stumbling upon Zeus and Hera alone might be a bad idea.”

Will pursed his lips. “Well, there’s always hanging out just outside of the main palace, though I’m sure once we step through those elevator doors, Zeus will undoubtedly be alerted to our accumulative presence.”

“If he isn’t already,” Dendron muttered, sparing a wary glance toward the sky.

Sabrina chewed her lower lip, violet eyes staring vacantly into the reflective glass. “I think we should just get it over with already, you said the man behind the desk is usually reluctant to allow people through?”

Will and Nico nodded.

“Okay, so let’s just take it all one step at a time. I’m sure the Lady at least is already waiting, she did leave this morning.” Her tone was more hopeful than sure, but the group agreed to try.

Pushing open the door, they stepped inside the cool marble room, bypassing a tour group in the middle of their introduction speech. Shutters flashed, bright lights bouncing around the walls, momentarily blinding as they shuffled their way over to the man behind the main desk.

He was reading a novel, laying back lazily in a swivel chair, feet crossed at the ankle and propped up on the edge of the redwood desk. Eyes scanned the page, ignoring their presence in every way, save for the words that left his mouth. “Prices are listed in the ticket office, you can buy them there. If you’re here for the six o’clock tour, please have a seat and wait for the guide to show.” He flipped the page, never bothering to glance their way.

Nico cleared his throat, waiting for some sort of recognition. When the man continued to ignore them, he heaved a sigh. “We’d like admittance to the six hundredth floor, please. And before you go on about how there isn’t one, and how we need to leave, or how you’re not letting us up there, you should know that the Lady is expecting us and I’d hate to have to inform her how terribly troublesome you’ve been.”

Blue eyes glanced up, flashing gold as they scanned the four of them, before turning back to blue. The clock on the wall ticked a little louder, the air around them growing heavy and thick, almost like
they were submerged in water. All other sounds quieted, the shutter of a camera going off echoing outward like they’d stepped into a faraway tunnel, before the silence rushed in on them, time ceasing to flow.

“What business do you have with the gods,” he asked, voice taking on an echoing sort of hum.

Nico crossed arms over his chest, shooting the man a defiant look. “Does it matter the business when I’ve already said at least one is expecting us? More than that, even. I’m sure whenever Hades arrives he, too, will be expecting us.”

The man assessed them once more, pursing lips as he weighed the request. “I’m afraid I cannot let anyone up without a direct invitation from Zeus, and no one has been invited in some time.”

Sabrina pipped up, stepping forward to try her hand at convincing him. “Please let us up, we need to be there. It’s very important that we make it before the start of their council.”

“Your charming tricks won’t work on me, girl. I am not a human, nor am I a creature. The answer is still no.”

Will reached into his bag, pulling out a small sack of drachmas. “We can pay you if that’s what you want. I mean, what harm could come of letting us up? Even if we weren’t expected, surely Zeus would punish us alone.”

The man shook his head, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. “Your money does not interest me enough to incur the wrath of Zeus. How do I know you are not lying about the goddess expecting you? What proof do you have you’ve even spoken with her?”

Nico and Will shared a look, wondering what else they could do.

“I have this,” Sabrina murmured, pulling up a grey velvet pouch, filled with a powder so fine it looked like crushed diamonds. “The lady gave it to me to Iris message should we need it.”

He hummed in contemplation, running a finger across his chin. Waiting with bated breath, the sound was audible when he gave a short nod, all four of them releasing a soft sigh in unison. “Alright, I shall permit you access, but I will require the pouch as proof of your claim should you be lying.”

Sabrina handed it over, giving a small shrug. “I don’t really see the need for it, anyway. We have drachmas as payment.”

The man chuckled, stuffing the pouch into his pocket. “It’s not only good for messages, little demigod.” He grinned wickedly, handing over a key for the elevator. “There you go.”

All at once time started to flow, the man already returned to his position in the chair, reading his book like nothing had ever happened.

They shuffled over to the elevator, stepping inside and waiting for the doors to close fully before inserting the key. The ride seemed to take forever, going slower than if they’d decided to climb the stairs. When they opened again, it wasn’t quite what anyone had expected.

Sure, the ominous clouds swirling around the place gave off the impression that it might be a little glum; but up close, it was like walking inside of a storm. Masses of grey vapor permeated the space, static cling pulling at their hair. It was hot and muggy, burning wet and thick as it invaded their airspace, sinking deep down into lungs and making them cough.

The usual golden glow of buildings sat hidden behind a dark shadow, dull and lifeless compared to
their usual sheen. Even the palace high above them was cast behind the deep expanse of cloud, looking more like a replica of his father’s palace than vice versa.

Stepping off the elevator, the doors closed with a soft ding. The pathway up to the palace was vacant of the usual ambling entities, most of the residents hiding away, probably in fear of Zeus’ wrath or else something worse. They stuck close, ever alert, listening hard for signs of danger. A strange feeling sank deep into the pit of his gut, but he ignored the warning, pressing ever onward.

The throne room was empty, looming massive seats vacant of their godly occupants; not even Hestia there to sit near her hearth. It was an eerie kind of stillness, the one you felt before a major storm ransacked the land, leaving chaos in its wake.

Looking over at his companion’s faces, he saw they, too, wondered at the emptiness so close to the start of the council. Before anyone could ask what they should do next, the sound of rolling thunder reverberated around them, loud pops deafening as the gods all appeared, one by one, standing before the company with mixed expressions.

Zeus’ blue eyes flashed with anger, boring down on them with a palpable heaviness. A sound of discontentment left his throat, taking a step forward to assess the four of them critically. “What matter do you have with the Gods, today of all days, just before we hold council? Who gave you permission to enter the throne room?” His voice boomed out like a shouting cry, though Nico was sure he had spoken at a normal level.

Silence followed, one they found a struggle in filling with anything other than the rapid sound of pounding heartbeats, and the ragged intake of shuddering breath.

Sabrina stepped around him, violet eyes flashing with a strangely intense light. “I did,” she declared, purple light washing over her pale frame as a pair of balanced scales shimmered in the air directly above her head.

Chapter End Notes

AHHHHHHHHH.
Sabrina was claimed.
I had to end it there, I wanted to end it there,
I'm so glad I got to end it there!

I have been waiting for this forever!
The entire fic, centered around my ability to pick a freaking godly parent for this girl.
And I admit, this is the extent of my forethought and planning, so... let's hope the ending doesn't suddenly nose dive! :D

Comments are so awesome, and you guys are so awesome, and I love all the feedback, or even just the occasional hi. :)
<3 <3 <3
The image shimmered and faded, a strange hush falling over god and demigod alike. Sabrina swayed on her feet a little, clutching a hand to her forehead as her violet eyes blinked around in sleepy confusion. “Wha… what happened,” she asked, seeming to notice for the first time that she was standing in front of her companions, glaring down the King of Olympus like he wasn’t the intimidating, temperamental god he was, but a disobedient child throwing a tantrum.

A steady flush broke out like wildfire over her face, falling back into place with the others, trying to appear smaller than she was. Dendron placed a calming hand on her shoulder, offering a soft smile to let her know everything would be okay.

And so, they all waited with bated breath for the Lord of the Sky to react first.

Zeus’ blue eyes sparkled with strange emotions; something akin to fear, though somehow more intense, flicking his gaze around the room, searching for something. His mouth became a hard line, jaw visibly clenching beneath his neatly trimmed beard. His fingers twitched where they hovered, close to his master bolt, as if they ached to use it. Another discontented sound left his throat before he gave a stiff nod.

“Very well then. Pray tell, what business do you seek with us?”

No one spoke, the words dying in their throats. The oppressive nature of standing so very close to that many powerful beings felt like someone had thrown thick, wet blankets all over their bodies; stifling hot, obnoxiously heavy, making each of them feel like running off in fear.

Nico stepped forward, scanning the group of fourteen all-powerful gods, some familiar, some he’d never seen but could guess at, before returning dark eyes to their leader. “Lord Zeus, forgive us for the intrusion, but we come due to a prophetic dream that the satyr Dendron had, in which he saw us here, on this day. The Lady and Chiron agree, as do we all, that we are meant to sit council with you, though we aren’t sure why.”

Zeus’ solemn expression flashed with sudden rage, electric blue eyes reminding Nico of the color of
lightning striking; white in the center, but icy blue outward as it crackled with energy and heat. “I forbid it. No mortal has ever sat council among the gods. Not even the minor deities hold such a privilege and are forbidden from even coming near on such a day. Your very presence is an affront to our laws and order. Now leave, before I change my mind in sparing your pitiful lives.”

Dendron and Sabrina whimpered as the god released a show of power meant to intimidate, the air above them shimmering with electric energies; the sweet, pungent scent of ozone swirling around them in hypnotic, crashing waves.

Will stepped forward to join him, so close that their shoulders brushed, a look of fierce determination on his face. “We think maybe, together, all of us can find out why all of these strange things are happening, and perhaps we can figure out how to fix it. You need demigods, don’t blow us off like we’re not part of what keeps the balance.”

The King of Olympus took another step forward. “You dare to question my judgment,” he asked, voice booming around them. This time, his hand brushed past the bolt at his hip, unhooking it from the belt in a clear warning.

“And you dare to question mine,” a woman’s voice resonated around them, strong and terrifying, causing Zeus to visibly flinch back in fear.

He dropped the bolt, taking a step backward, eyes searching timidly around the room.

No one moved, the silence palpable as god and demigod alike stood rooted in place, wondering at the strange voice that had seemed so much like an actual presence in that moment. Will looked to Nico for an answer, but the boy only shrugged in response, unsure of whether or not their request would be overruled by Zeus or accepted by default due to the foreboding nature of their mysterious ally.

Hades stepped forward, placing a hand on Zeus’ shoulder, pulling the god’s attention away from his plight. “My Lord, I think we should kindly adhere to the request. Come, the council will not begin for some time. Let us finish our preparations swiftly before she arrives.”

Nico cocked an eyebrow at his father, having never heard the Lord of the Underworld speak with anyone in such a submissive manner. Black eyes flicked his way, offering a silent warning not to even think of further angering the temperamental being when he was in such a touchy state.

Zeus seemed to mull it over, returning his gaze back to the four children standing mere feet away. “Very well, then. I shall permit you to remain at least until the beginning of our council. At that time, I will discern what to do with you.” Turning his attention back to Hades, he offered a scowl. “Come, brother, we shall discuss our matter in a more private setting.”

Hades gave a firm nod, watching as Zeus disappeared in a roar of rolling thunder. He turned his focus then to Nico, giving him a strangely amused and slightly proud look. “I shall wish to speak with you before you leave, Nico. Until then, try to refrain from angering any more immortal beings.”

“Well, I can try,” Nico replied dryly, smirking as his father sighed dramatically in response.

The Lord of the Underworld vanished with an icy cold breeze, the moans of the dead ringing loudly in their ears.

Will turned to him, giving him an exasperated look. “I agree with H-uh, your father. Please don’t get yourself killed while we’re here.”

Snorting in amusement, Nico rolled his eyes. “Give me a break, Solace, it’s not like I’m trying to
Will shot him a pointed look, silencing the rest of the comment. “You know quite well you’re combative by nature. Maybe you should just avoid speaking to anyone, just in case.”

Nico was going to reply with something snarky, but a very familiar looking blond stepped forward, pulling their attention away. His sparkling sky-blue eyes appraised them, pouty lips pulling up into a brilliantly obnoxious rendition of Will’s exact smile.

“William! My boy, at last, we finally meet. Come, give your father a hug.” He held out his arms wide, eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

Will shuffled uncomfortably from foot to foot, eyeing the younger looking god with hesitation. “Apollo,” he smiled, reluctantly. “Last we heard you were being punished. Did Zeus forgive you, then?”

The god sniffed, clutching at his heart dramatically with one hand, the other coming up to press against his forehead with a sigh. “Alas, it was too terrible to speak of. It is over now, I assure you. No need to further worry about your dear old father.”

Smiling awkwardly, he heard Will mutter under his breath, “I wasn’t exactly worried.”

If the god heard, he didn’t acknowledge it. Cocking his head to the side, his brow creased in thought. “Dear boy, are you injured? Come, I will heal you.” Apollo offered out his hand, and Will shot Nico a pleading look.

Nico bit his lip to stifle a laugh. “Ah, you should go get healed. You’ll need it for later.”

With a groan, Will obliged, allowing the god to pull him into an awkward hug before laying hands on his back, a bright golden glow seeping deep into his body. When he was done, he wrapped an arm around Will’s shoulders, pulling him in the other direction, talking animatedly about the very punishment he deemed was too horrible to talk about. Will cast him another pleading look over his shoulder, but Nico only waved in response.

The laugh he felt bubbling up inside of him dissipated the moment he turned and caught sight of Sabrina’s unnaturally pale face. Dendron was murmuring words of encouragement to the girl, but her violet eyes remained unfocused, mouth turned down in a gentle frown.

He approached her slowly, waiting for the spark of recognition to flare in her gaze before he offered a reassuring smile her way. “Everything alright,” he asked, attempting to keep his voice soothing and calm.

She swallowed visibly, giving a small shake of her head. “I don’t even know what came over me. It’s like I was possessed or something. I could have gotten everyone killed, but I couldn’t stop myself. It was… unnerving, being out of control like that.”

Placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder, he smiled again. “Can you tell me anything about it? Anything you remember at all?”

Chewing her lip nervously, her eyes unfocused once more. “I heard… a voice. A woman’s voice and she was whispering to me, telling me everything would be alright. It made me feel light and full of warmth. It was like I saw everything from as far away as possible, and a calm washed over me, and I knew what needed to happen.”

Nico creased his brow in thought. “And the voice, was it the same one we all heard just a moment
ago?”

She tilted her head as if trying to imagine both sounds at the same time. “I think so? The first one was soft with affection, while the other one was cold and calculated. The underlying pitch was still very much the same.”

“I think you were claimed,” he admitted, and she widened her eyes in surprise.

“By whom?”

Worrying his lip between his teeth, he shook his head. “I’m not positive, I’ve never seen the mark before. At least, not quite like that. A lot of different people have the balanced scales as their attributed symbol of power, even Zeus is seen in some forms as a balance of justice and honor.”

Releasing a long breath of air, Sabrina seemed to deflate a little. “Well, no matter. I’m sure we’ll learn soon enough.” Her expression changed to one of happiness when the Lady Artemis approached the three of them, silvery yellow eyes flicking from the girl to Nico.

“I am pleased you made it safely, though I did not doubt your ability to do so. I trust everything went well?”

The girl seemed to twitch a little in response, and Nico chuckled. “Well enough. The Hind was a big help, so thank you, again.”

The goddess gave a gentle nod, humming in amusement when Will raced up, bending over and panting hard to catch his breath.

“Seriously, don’t leave me alone with him. I swear, I’ll find a way to make your life miserable if you—“

“Ah, William. Here you are. And who might these children be? Is this one your boyfriend?”

Apollo’s finger was pointed at Nico, but he still glanced behind himself, as if someone else might be there. When there wasn’t anyone to be found, he pointed at himself questioningly. “Who, me?”

Will’s face turned cherry red, hands coming up to hide it. “Please don’t make assumptions like that,” he whined, the sound muffled behind his fingers. Sabrina and Dendron snickered quietly, clearly enjoying the embarrassing subject matter.

Apollo tilted his head, brow furrowed. “I thought all of my children were partial to both genders? Surely you think he’s cute enough, son of Hades aside?”

It was Nico’s turn to blush, spluttering indignantly as he tried to form a coherent thought. Him? And Will? That was… well, it was actually kind of nice, but he wasn’t going to say that aloud. Besides, no one really knew what he was partial to, except maybe Annabeth, Percy, Piper, Hazel, and Jason. His father, too, but they’d never discussed it, much.

Artemis cleared her throat. “Apollo, might I have a word with you, for a moment? About… ah, this new bow technique I learned while you were away. It might be of interest to you, I should think.”

The god appeared to glow even brighter, grinning at his twin like she’d just admitted he was tolerable. “Of course, sister. Anything for you.” Hooking an arm around her shoulders, he pulled her off, talking incessantly about unrelated things. The goddess’ look soured significantly, but she kept him at bay for the time being.
“Sorry about that,” Will muttered, kicking at the ground awkwardly. He kept his gaze down toward his feet, the pink on his cheeks still slightly visible. “He’s just odd, I guess. Jumps to his own conclusions.”

Nico nodded, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “Ah, that’s alright. I recall he is rather… boisterous.”

Glancing up through a fan of dark lashes, Will chewed on the inside of his cheek. “Indeed,” he finally murmured, staring at him oddly, before casting his gaze somewhere else.

“So,” Sabrina drew out the word, breaking up the tension as she glanced around for something to talk about. “What should we do while we wait?”

Zeus and Hades returned just before seven fifteen, the former looking only slightly less irritated than before, while the latter looked about ready to take a nap. His father flashed him a tight smile from across the room but didn’t approach the four of them, now sitting in a small circle on the edge of the throne room.

The gods all took their places, sitting upon their large thrones, all save for the Lord of the Sky, who once again regarded the four like an unpleasant stain he wasn’t quite sure how to remove. Lips pursed, brow creased, blue eyes boring into Sabrina like she was somehow responsible for everything. “Come forth,” he finally decreed, and the four of them did, Will and Nico taking the lead, blocking the younger companions with their bodies, just in case.

When they were a few feet away, Zeus held up his hand to halt the approach. “That is close enough. Now, tell me, why do you bring these troubles upon us? What is your purpose, if not to cause discord?”

“We came because we were told to, my Lord,” Nico reiterated his previous statement, wondering if the god was just forgetful, or if he chose not to listen the first time around.

“By whom,” he asked, though he looked like he was already privy to the answer.

Nico glanced to the goddess Artemis, wondering if he should point out her place in the matter, or if he was indebted still due to all of her help. “Ah, Chiron thought it was wise to come, upon hearing about Dendron’s prophetic dream.”

“I see,” he mumbled, casting a strange look Apollo’s way. The god flinched and crouched lower in his seat, probably worried he would once again take the blame for a prophecy he couldn’t prevent. “And what is she doing here,” he finally asked, pointing a finger behind them, straight at Sabrina.

The girl gasped, and Nico knew without looking that she was shrinking beneath the immortal’s piercing gaze.

“I called all of them here, it was my own prophecy,” the voice announced, reverberating around them once more.

Zeus made a face like he was about to be forced to eat live slugs, cringing away from the group like they were the true culprits.

“Come, stand before me, my child,” she cooed, before appearing in the center of the room, pale blond hair tumbling over her shoulders and across her back in gentle waves. Arms outstretched in a
beckoning manner, her mossy green dress clung tightly to her delicate frame, until the fabric flowed outward from the knee, kissing the ground around her bare feet. Her intense violet eyes sparkled with thousands of emotions, features soft in a loving sort of way.

Sabrina staggered past the two of them, dazed as she approached the strange woman. “Who… who are you,” she asked, voice small and filled with wonder.

The beautiful woman smiled brightly, eyeing the girl like she was the most precious thing in the room. “My dear, do you not recognize your own mother?”

Will shot him a curious look, but all he could do was shrug in response. He’d never seen the woman before, not that he’d seen many of the gods, and there were so very many that used her symbol, she could really be any minor goddess or deity. Somehow, he felt that this woman was more powerful than most of the gods in the room combined.

Sabrina threw herself into welcoming arms, burying her face into the pale shoulder. Most demigods refrained from taking on characteristics from their godly parents, but this woman was the spitting image of his friend, or he supposed, vice versa.

“Lady Themis, I do not understand,” Zeus said hesitantly, approaching the pair like he was afraid of the goddess’ wrath. The name tugged somewhere in the back of Nico’s mind, but he couldn’t quite place its heavy weightedness.

Violet eyes flashed toward him with a cool appraisal, causing the Lord of the Sky to bow hastily to the woman, before taking a meager step back. “No, you do not. But you will. This child, like all of my children, is a harbinger for balance and justice. It is upon her shoulders that the balance between all things will continue to rest, ever delicate as it might be. She will judge your children, and wreak the punishment befitting should they be found to be a catalyst for discord.”


Themis stared down at the girl, coldly calculating in her assessment. “You do not yet have the power to do so swiftly, but you unknowingly decide whether or not another is allowed to use their power, or how to use it. It is a gift for balance, disallowing those to continue on destructive paths. If you wanted to, you could remove a power completely, should you deem someone in abuse of their own gift.”

“So, I’m like… a judge of some kind?”

The titan smiled softly in response. “Indeed, graced with the ability to cut away the lies in another’s heart, and judge only those worthy of upholding the balance. Like I create the divine law, like your sister Dike creates the justice of mankind, you are born to create the law of those who straddle the two worlds, previously uncontrolled by all except the hands of fate. You, my child, are the harbinger of justice for creatures, as well as demigods, like yourself.”

Zeus stepped forward once more, brow creased, blue eyes hard. “What game are you playing at here, Themis. We gods determine whether or not the demigods are upholding the balance in a proper way.”

“Game,” she asked, tone becoming flatly void of all emotion. It was an eerie reflection of the same way the girl spoke, though the words held a captivating kind of terrifying power. “You biased gods turn away when it is fitting, and honor things only you deem to be acceptable. You are not a proper assessment of the law and divine right. Justice is blind because it disregards the who, and only
upholds the truth in the matter. There is no grey when it comes to what is necessary. It is because you are biased that I have taken matters into my own hands, Zeus.”

“So, what does that mean for me, and what of my friends,” the girl asked, casting her gaze toward them, then back to her godly parent. “I have never once felt this ability to view anything in another’s heart. Who am I to judge those around me, when I don’t even feel worthy myself?”

Themis softened considerably, the smile lighting up her purple eyes. “You will when the time comes. You have yet to immerse yourself into their world. It is the reason your powers have lain so dormant for all this time. When you step inside of the camp’s barriers, only then will you know what to do.”

Nico frowned. “Are you the reason everything has been acting strangely? Did you lead the monsters to our camp as a form of punishment?”

The titan regarded him for the first time, sending a jolt of electricity down his spine. “It was not I, but they, who sensed the shift in the balance, and came to witness its fruition. All of it began with the prophetic dream I sent to the satyr; along with Sabrina’s pull toward those of her own kind, in an attempt to fulfill her destiny. All of my children felt this pull, it is the reason your weather acts up, for my children control the balances of our world. From the hours to the seasons, and even the very fate of this life. They give and take, while I set the order that guides their hand.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Nico muttered, earning a scowl from the boy at his side.

Sabrina took a step backward, frowning hard in contemplation. “Will it be bad, whatever happens, because of me?”

The titan quirked a curious brow. “No more than justice is. It is never more than what keeps things in proper balance. If the balance has shifted in favor of one side, you will be there to shift it back. Whatever that means, it will be what is necessary.”

“And if it has? Favored them, the demigods, more than it should?” Sabrina took one final step back, aligning herself between Nico and Will.

The goddess didn’t hesitate, even to think, her violet gaze level and even. “Then when you step inside the camp, the balance will right itself again, in whatever way it needs to so things can regain order. That is the will of divine justice, it is inescapable.”

Giving a firm nod, Sabrina released a long sigh like breath. “Alright then. I guess I have no choice.”

Themis smiled without humor. “My dear girl, there is always a choice.”

The image of her flickered and quietly vanished, much the way she had appeared. The presence in the room seemed to lessen significantly, but if Nico was honest, he felt like the goddess was always somewhere close by, watching the gods and rendering out her judgment.

Sabrina turned to him, face troubled, brow creased. “Will you still take me with you to camp, knowing that it might not end well? I don’t pretend to know whatever it is that is planned for me.”

Nico smiled, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. He watched as Will did much the same on her opposite side. “We’re going to complete our mission, no matter what.”

“Besides,” Will offered, smiling softly. “If you were meant to be a terrifying presence that caused harm, I don’t think you’d be struggling so hard with the right answer. The right path is rarely the one that feels easiest.”
She nodded her head, offering them both a small smile. “You’re correct, sometimes things are logical to do, even when we don’t want to do them. Like leaving my father for the sake of his safety.”

“Whenever you’re ready, I can take us there,” Nico replied, knowing the girl understood what he meant. There was no other safe way into camp, the horde of monsters was far too thick to hope to get in without a fight.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded again. “Give me a minute. We’ll leave after we’ve given proper goodbyes. There’s still something I’d like to ask the Lady Artemis before we go,”

Nico gave her a sour look. “You’re not going to-“

She laughed, the sound like little bells. “Don’t worry, I haven’t decided to run away. Not yet, at least. I just need to know something, that’s all. Go say goodbye to your godly parents, I’m sure they’d like to see you off.”

Turning around, the girl walked away.

Chapter End Notes

So, Themis.
She is the goddess of divine justice, mother of the fates and stuff, second wife of Zeus before Hera, second? oracle of Delphi, though maybe it was she just inherited it, and then she passed it on to Apollo to look after, uh, no council of the gods may begin without her, and her decree is final, even above Zeus'. So yeah, pretty scary Titan goddess.
Only one person got it right, not that I expected anyone to get it right. :) Mostly she was the best choice I could find when I backtracked on why Sabrina might have those powers.
Uh, I hope the ending of this doesn't suck?

Comments are always very much appreciated.
I like to know I'm not just failing hard at trying to actually use my imagination to come up with things.
Obstacles to overcome

Chapter Summary

The group prepares to head back to camp.

Chapter Notes

I took too long to update. D:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You wanted to see me,” he asked, catching the Lord of the Underworld as he was walking swiftly through the throne room, possibly in an attempt to flee.

Hades stopped to appraise his son, a small smile quirking the left side of his mouth. “I did, indeed. I just wanted to congratulate you on your mission, and let you know how glad I am that you are finally trying to make friends and be happy.”

Nico’s curious look soured instantaneously, brow sitting low on his face. “So, you’re like, what? Trying to have a fatherly kind of talk with me,” he asked, rather dryly.

Hades’ smile bloomed, a rumbling laugh spilling from his mouth. “Something like that,” he hummed in quiet amusement. “Though I’m not pleased that you bartered with your life against Dionysus.” He frowned momentarily, look turning awfully serious. Black eyes bore into Nico then, hard and cold as stygian iron. They softened after a beat, swirling with purple hues. “But I know it was less reckless, and more for the sake of your friends, so I’ll pretend you didn’t almost become another corn plant.”

Nico laughed, beside himself. “I don’t know, he might have turned me into something like a cactus. Seems a little more fitting than a harvestable crop.” The smirk pulled at his lips even harder when Hades chuckled lightly at the joke; it was a rare sight to see the god appear so… amused with anything.

“Indeed, a fitting punishment. Don’t tell Dionysus, he might be more inclined to follow through the next time you undoubtedly find yourself striking another bargain.” The look he gave his son was pointed, slightly icy, but at least the Lord of the Underworld acknowledged the fact that Nico was probably always going to be a little reckless when it came to his own life.

Grinning, he lifted one arm up in a shrug. “I’m not making any promises I don’t know that I can keep, but I’ll try and refrain from telling immortals the funniest ways to smite me.”

“That’s all I ask,” Hades smiled, clapping him gently on the shoulder. A strange moment passed between the two of them, something akin to familial. It an instant, it was gone. Clearing his throat, Hades pulled back, straightening up with an air of cool stoicism. “Well, I should get going now.” Casting his eyes off to a place somewhere behind Nico, he hummed low, sounding pleased. “Oh, and, don’t forget to stop by sometime soon. Maybe for dinner? Be sure to bring your… ‘close
friend.”

With a pleased look on his face, the god slipped into shadow, leaving Nico to splutter indignantly at the not so subtle hint about Will. Face burning hot, he glanced around, assuring the son of Apollo was far away and hadn’t heard the second most embarrassing comment spoken about the two of them.

He was in luck, Apollo was still chatting Will’s ear off while the poor guy nodded slowly in polite response, face stuck in a painful looking, toothy grin. His blue eyes searched around for an escape of some kind; meanwhile, the boisterous god appeared not to notice his son’s distress, waving his arms about wildly as he spoke. Nico watched for a little while, relishing the sight as Will grew even more tormented by the second.

Chuckling, he decided to spare the poor boy, sauntering up with a haughty smirk. “Hey, sorry to interrupt, but we really should get going. Still have to worry about the camp and all of those monsters that are hanging around.”

Apollo blinked at him slowly, like he didn’t quite understand the meaning of the words that spilled from Nico’s lips. After a beat, he seemed to gather the intent. “Oh, alright. Well, I’ll be sure to visit sometime, finish telling you about the time I was challenged to a lute competition against an overly arrogant satyr.” Fiery blue eyes sparkled maliciously at the gruesome memory. “Let’s just say, he didn’t win.”

Will’s eyes looked like he was internally groaning, but he flashed another radiant smile, voice level and calm as he spoke. “I’ll be looking forward to it. I’m sure Austin and Kayla would just love to join in.”

“Ah, yes, my other offspring.” Apollo sniffed dramatically, wiping a non-existent tear from his eye. “How tragic it is that we are not allowed to see our children more often. No matter, carry on, then.” He turned on his heels, wandering off to undoubtedly look for a new victim to torture with his rantings.

Will waved half-heartedly until the god was out of sight then heaved a sigh, massaging along his jawbone in small circles. “Thanks for that. I didn’t want to be rude and inform him I already knew all the stories. Not that that would have stopped him, I’m sure. He doesn’t seem like the type to care if you’ve heard it a thousand times, so long as the focus is on him.”

Nico hummed in amusement. “Yeah, he’s an odd one. Good thing his children are normal. Well, mostly.” He winked at Will’s sour look, feeling a smile curl his lips.

“Yeah, well, you’re less scary than your father, that’s for sure. Like comparing a little kitten to a full-grown lion.” Will folded his arms over his chest, hip cocked, an amused look splaying out across his face.

Smirking back, he twiddled his fingers wildly in the other's region in mock threat. “Yeah, but they both still have claws. Don’t forget.”

Will snorted in response, rolling his eyes, before batting the hand away playfully. “Alright, point taken. You’re a real prince of darkness, or whatever. Satisfied?”

“Hardly,” Nico laughed, enjoying the warm feeling that twisted around inside of him at their flirty banter.

“I guess I’ll have to try harder, then,” Will murmured, offering up a lazy grin as Nico returned the
look with ease.

Apollo’s words flitted across his mind, causing a slight flush to pinken his cheeks. Could Will, perhaps, think of him like that? Neither had ever disclosed their sexualities before, but he’d always just assumed that most men weren’t interested in other men. It wasn’t uncommon, but that didn’t mean he’d ever had luck in that department. It was hard to tell either way with the boy, he was nice to everyone at all times, except whenever Nico pushed his buttons just for fun.

In the end, it really didn’t matter. This was Will Sunshine Solace he was thinking of. The same person who nagged him incessantly just for existing. Even if there was a slight attraction forming between the two of them, even if the guy had managed to stop pissing him off at every turn, even if his knees were a tad bit weak and his heart vibrated in his chest like a small bird aching to take flight, things would probably return to normal once they were back to camp.

Could they honestly go very long without getting on the other’s nerves? He doubted it.

Running a hand through his shaggy hair, he glanced around the throne room, searching for their other companions. “We really should get going, don’t you think? It’s getting late, and I’m sure the boys will be worried if we take too long getting back after I promised we’d only stay for the meeting.”

Chewing his lip, Will nodded in agreement. “Right. I think I saw Artemis and Sabrina talking just outside. Worth a shot, to check it out.”

The sun had already set by the time they made their way to the girl and the satyr, the April air pleasantly warm despite the thick black clouds still covering the region in a dense, swirling fog. Above them, the nighttime sky was speckled with shimmering stars, the moon just a sliver hanging low in the east, glowing softly against a backdrop of twinkling orbs and ribbons of milky light; and for a moment, Nico wondered which of those might hold the essence of the fox, or if he could even see her from their positioning this time of year.

As they approached quietly, Sabrina paused her tense-looking conversation to stare questioningly at the two of them, before a tight smile graced her lips. “Are you two ready,” she asked, tone light, even as her jaw appeared to clench slightly.

Nico shot her a curious look, but she ignored it, turning her focus to Will instead. With a sigh, he relented to let the matter drop for now. “Yeah, whenever you two are. If you’d let us, I’d like to shadow travel, just to save time.”

The girl gave a firm nod, which was surprising, seeing as how just the day before she was insistent upon not trying. “I agree. The Lady is going to contact Chiron to warn him of the danger, see about alerting the campers to how it might become dangerous once we step inside the barrier. Once he knows all of the facts, we can head out.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t wait until morning,” Will asked, brow creasing slightly as his lips pursed. “I mean, it’s been a long day, and I don’t think giving everyone such short notice is the best strategy. I’m sure we could find a place to lay low, just until the sun comes up.”

Artemis hummed in agreement. “Yes, I think that would be best, as well. I know you’re anxious, but a clear mind will do everyone much better than an anxious one. A few more hours will not hurt, and you could all use the time to rest. No one will question you remaining just through the night.”

Sabrina seemed to shrink a little, looking suddenly unsure of herself. “I don’t want to lose my nerve. If we go now, I’ll be able to face everything head on. Waiting will only make it harder to
Dendron placed a comforting hand upon her shoulder, leaf green eyes holding fast to her violet gaze. “Everything will be fine, Sabrina. You need to have faith in yourself, and faith in all of us. Nothing bad is going to happen, not when we’ve tried so hard to get to this place. One night won’t hurt, but rushing everything without a sound plan, that just might. Think logically, I know you’ll understand.”

The girl nodded, flicking her eyes around the lot of them, looking reluctant and defeated. “Alright. Tell Chiron the news, make sure he is well prepared for everything. Come morning light, we’re leaving immediately.”

The sun’s golden rays kissed the midnight sky, throwing the world in hues of oranges, pinks, yellows, violets, and the gentle hints of soft baby blue. They awoke to clearer skies, the storm clouds previously engulfing the surrounding lands letting up enough to permit the fiery rays to brighten the landscape in a wash of shimmering white light.

Nico woke to a timid shake of his shoulder; the sea of bronze, gold, and azure swirling before his blurry vision, until Will’s soft smile pierced the haze in his brain, causing a warmth to flood into his cheeks. How in the world could he manage to look that cute, even after just waking up?

“Rise and shine, di Angelo. We’re going to head out soon.”

Blinking a few times, he gave a stiff nod and sat upright, feeling like he’d only just barely closed his eyes for a second before they were forced to open once more. Perhaps sleeping on top of literal clouds knocked you out harder than usual, although he didn’t necessarily feel any more rested than was matter-of-course. If anything, he felt the exact same as if he’d slept on a bed.

“What time is it,” he asked, yawning hard as limbs stretched high above his head. Probably earlier than he’d like it to be, which was usually the case, unless it was after ten AM.

Will chuckled, rolling to his feet in one swift and fluid motion, reminding Nico once more of a cat. “Six-fifteen. Sabrina really meant it when she said morning light. The sun only rose two minutes ago.”

Nico frowned, glancing around to shoot the younger girl a sour look. He gave up, but only after it proved to be too much effort. “Where is the she-devil, then? I thought she was keen on leaving already.”

“Keen,” Will asked, offering a hand to help Nico rise. He cocked an eyebrow in amusement, smiling down at the other boy until Nico rolled his eyes and acquiesced.

“I’m half asleep, you’ll have to excuse my strange language.” He took the hand as he spoke, allowing Will to pull him to his feet with ease. They shared a strangely intense look for a beat, before Nico pulled back, attempting to hide his blush. “Anyway, where did she go?”

“I think to talk with Artemis some more. She woke me up about an hour before sunrise and snuck off somewhere. Then she woke me again a few minutes ago, and said to make sure you’ll be ready to leave in ten, before going back off toward the palace entrance.”

Nico pursed his lips, brow creasing slightly. “What do you think she’s doing with the goddess?”
“Honestly,” Will asked, running a hand through his hair absentmindedly as his eyes skimmed the area, flicking back to him after a moment’s reprieve. “I think she’s trying to learn how to utilize her powers. The day you took the boys to camp, they did a lot of meditation and practice, and she told me they’d done stuff like that before. I’m sure she wants to feel useful.”

“No one said she wasn’t useful,” Nico grumbled, feeling that overwhelming sense of fear bubbling up inside of him at the thought. Sabrina was getting far too friendly with the sister stealers, and he wasn’t comfortable with it.

Will sighed, patting his shoulder gently. “I know you’re worried, but it’s her choice, in the end. Not everyone that joins the Hunters is in danger, and they do a lot of good out there, just like we do. I’m sorry that you have a… rocky past… but it’s not your fault. It’s…”

“Bianca’s. Yeah, I’m aware.” He smiled then, an attempt to reassure Will that he was fine. “Let’s just finish this mission, already. It’ll be nice to know we got everyone there safely, even if they don’t choose to stay afterward.”

Will nodded, returning the smile easily. “Alright, sounds good.”

He turned to leave, stopping short to press his mouth into a firm line. Glancing back, he noted the curious look on the son of Apollo’s face, before he gathered up all his courage and sighed. “Oh, and Will?” The boy tilted his head in question, blue eyes clear and bright. “I’m glad. I didn’t want to in the beginning, but I’m glad Chiron picked you. If he had to choose all over again, I’d definitely agree.”

The smile that bloomed across Will’s mouth caused butterflies to thrash about Nico’s insides. “Thanks, Nico. I’m glad, too. For everything.”

Spinning on his heels, he raced off, before other kinds of confessions could find themselves tumbling hastily from his lips.

Dendron was waiting for him just outside the palace gates, leaning up against the wall, somber expression playing out over his tawny face. Since they’d arrived, he’d taken to keeping his hat off to reveal the tiny horns in his shaggy white hair; although he still looked more like a little elf child than a goat man, in Nico’s opinion. Leafy green eyes flicked to him suddenly, back straightening as the older boy approached.

“Sabrina said to tell you she’ll be ready in a moment if you come before she gets back. I think she’s a little embarrassed about anyone watching her practice, so I’m waiting out here.”

Nico nodded, clasping hands behind his back. “Alright. I’ll just wait here with you, then.”

Dendron gave him a strange look but didn’t argue. They stood in silence, neither one feeling much like conversing due to the early hour they found themselves awake for. It wasn’t long before Sabrina was stepping through the large silvery white doors, jaw clenched so tightly it appeared painful, violet eyes steely and determined. She saw the two of them waiting, and her expression softened a bit.

“I think I’m finally ready to get us there without issue. I was afraid before of going an overly long distance, but the camp isn’t too far away, so I think I can manage it. Sorry that my powers are such a hindrance to you. I’m working on it.” She tuck a strand of pale hair behind her ear, dropping her gaze to her feet.
Nico huffed in response. “Nobody thinks of it that way, so stop feeling sorry for yourself already.” The girl stared back at him in shock, but his warm smile spoke louder than his unkind tone, so she nodded in understanding. “I’ve already told you that your powers don’t make you a bad person; that you cannot let fear control you. You’ll get this eventually, and everyone here is rooting for you.”

“Thanks, Nico,” she mumbled, a soft blush painting her pale cheeks. Chewing her lip, she gave another short nod, balling up her hands into tiny fists at her sides. “Okay, once we get down to the ground level, you can travel us away. The Lady says it won’t work from up here, the protective barriers only let the allowed gods to come and go as they please.”

“Alright, then we’ll head out when you say you’re ready,” Nico smiled.

Sabrina nodded again, releasing a long breath of air in a hiss through her teeth. “I’m ready.”

“Then let’s go get Will.”

He was already waiting by the door, the collective of their belonging piled up at his side. He offered the three of them a lazy grin, clapping the small girl on the shoulder as she came to stand just before him. “You’re going to do great. Have faith in yourself.”

Sabrina beamed up at him, matching Will’s sunny expression with one that was akin to staring into a full moon’s pale glow. If Nico didn’t know any better, he would think the girl a daughter of Artemis, or else some other moon goddess’ offspring. “Thanks, Will. I’m ready to get this over with. Chiron has everyone prepared as well, so there shouldn’t be any sort of nasty surprise.”

“You talk like you think the barrier is going to come down,” Nico joked, trying to lighten the mood. Sabrina looked at him with a solemn expression, and he stared quietly for a moment, eyes going wide. “You can’t be serious. That… that’s impossible, isn’t it? The barrier was placed there to keep the demigods safe from more than just monsters. It also keeps regular humans safe by keeping them away.”

“I honestly don’t know,” Sabrina admitted. Her expression darkened for a moment. “Themis wasn’t exactly forthcoming, and I’m not even positive if she, herself, knows what will happen. All I know is that my power has a way of deactivating things, and the monsters gathered like they knew something big was about to happen.”

“But deactivating the barrier? We’d…” he didn’t want to finish the thought. They wouldn’t stand a chance against so many without a safe retreat. Their home, their safety; surely it wasn’t too much to allow the demigods some small reprieve? They rarely had long lives, to begin with, it wouldn’t be fair to take away their only security.

“We’re just trying to prepare for anything. Worst case scenarios. Hopefully, it won’t come to that. Hopefully…” she swallowed hard, looking rather distressed. “Hopefully I’m not going to become a threat, but if I am, I hope everyone will take care of it. For my sake.”

Will and Nico shared a glum look, before nodding in agreement. It wouldn’t come to that. Nico wouldn’t let it. From the look on his face, Will was thinking the exact same thing.

The elevator dinged, doors sliding open to permit their entrance. Everyone grabbed their own bag, strapping it on tightly before stepping inside the metal box. If the ride up was slow torture, the ride back down seemed like agonizing torment. Not knowing what was going to happen was terrifying. Thinking you might know, but not being positive? It was somehow even worse.

Hands interlocked, the four standing in a row, with Nico and Sabrina at the very center. Will’s grip
on his was a calm reassurance, even as an overwhelming rush of lightheadedness overcame him, followed by a sharp spike in crackling energy, coursing through his chest like electricity.

The icy feeling of shadows tickled at his feet, begging him to pull the lot of them through, crying for satisfaction. It was stronger than normal, a possible side effect of the younger girl’s ability to bend things to her will. It almost felt like he had doubled his own ability, though it also felt a little like being controlled.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Sabrina mumbled, face a mask of painful concentration. Sweat began to dot her brow, jaw clenching as she fought to keep her power from nullifying his.

He didn’t want to cause her any more suffering, so he released the power outward, yanking them all down into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to make this longer, I reeeaaaallllllly was. And then I got anxious, because I don't know how long the next parts will be, but I'd rather they be super long and this one only hit around the 3000-word mark, than have this one hit like 4500 and then fall short on the end.
I really should just type it all up and be done with it, but I'm terrible.
Hopefully the anxiety is high, and everyone is intrigued with what comes next.
I already wrote like 400 words of it, then backtracked and said nah, I'll stop here.

Comments give me so much life!
I get so excited to continue when you people talk to me.
I enjoy discussions, but I also enjoy just a quick hello, or I liked it, or please write more.
Or even the "oh my god, post on this already!"
Sometimes I need a good yelling at to remain on track. :3
The moment they stepped out an ear-splitting screech reverberated around them, palpable as it shook the very Earth below their feet. Everyone dropped their hold, clasping hands tightly over their ears instead, hopeful to block out the terrible noise.

As Nico’s eyes scanned the area he saw a small group of other demigods, fully outfitted in bulky armor and armed to the teeth like he’d never seen them, doing much the same. It was strange and shrill, but in a moment the sound vanished, replaced with a chorus of new sounds; thousands of voices all talking at once, snarls and grunts and horrible cries tumbling from their lips.

“Who the hell turned off the sound protection,” an unknown camper shouted from amidst the little crowd.

“I don’t know, where the hell is the Hecate cabin?”

“Don’t look at me, I didn’t do anything,” a familiar voice huffed indignantly in response. Nico caught the way Will lit up at the sound, so he assumed it probably belonged to Lou Ellen, seeing as how she was the only Hecate camper the boy spoke with regularly.

“What should we do?”

“Can you just make it stop?”

“Never mind that, look over there! They’re here.”

A sea of eyes turned their way, faces mixed with varying emotions; from sleepiness to joy, grumpiness, even a bit of mild mistrust. He didn’t blame those looks, being dragged out of bed at six am because someone was about to potentially put your safety at risk would make anyone grumpy and mistrustful. Hell, he was a little grumpy, though it had more to do with the Titaness than it did her innocent daughter.

“What’s going on?”

“Make it stop!”
“Are we under attack?”

“Where is Chiron?!”

“He’s on the hill. Should we go get him?”

“Woah, everyone, take it easy,” Will said, holding out his hands in a placating gesture. The murmurs and questions stopped, the only sounds left the obnoxious wails of monsters from their place behind the barrier. “We’ll figure it out, just tell us what’s going on.”

Lou pushed through the small crowd of bodies, grinning brightly at her friend, green eyes sparkeling with relief. “Will! You’re safe!”

“Hey Lou, what’s all…” he gestured around with his hands.

The daughter of Hecate pursed her lips, frowning. “Well, that would be the monsters surrounding us. There are so many, and it seems like they’re trying to annoy us on purpose or something.”

Nico scratched his cheek in thought. “Are you guys having a hard time bending the mist to keep it out or something?”

She shook her head, crossing arms loosely over her chest. “No, it was working just fine until that loud noise, and then you guys were here.” She shot Sabrina a suspicious look. “I’d guess something is blocking the power.”

“Oh,” Will mumbled, coming over to stop the frightened girl from her attempt at an escape. Placing an arm around her shoulders, he smiled warmly down at her. “Don’t worry about it, that’s far better than you were thinking, right? So, it’s a little noisy for a second. We’ll form a plan, and eventually, it will… Sabrina?”

Nico turned a curious glance to the younger demigod, wondering at the strangely panicked note in Will’s tone. Purple eyes sat void and expressionless, pale features slackened and empty of all signs of life. Even her movements as she tried to gently pull from Will’s grasp seemed slow and stuttering, nothing like regular human movement should ever be.

“Nico, I don’t know what’s wrong,” he hissed, trying to keep his voice low enough that only their small company would hear. “She looks like she’s possessed or something.”

“Maybe she is,” he muttered back, brow creasing as his jaw clenched in unease. It was hard to know the best next course of action; letting her free and seeing what became of it, or trusting his gut instinct that it might not be safe for anyone. Releasing a long sigh-like breath, he solidified his resolve. “Alright, take her inside the big house, keep her there. I’m going to grab Chiron. Dendron, go and help Will. He might need it if she becomes violent.”

The two nodded, veering the small girl’s course up the steps of the porch and through the front door. He watched them go before spinning around and marching up to the other girl, gazing after her friend with concern.

“Lou Ellen, you’re coming with me. Maybe if you get further away, your power will work better.”

Green eyes blinked at him in confusion, index finger coming up to point at her own surprised face. “Moi?”

“Is there any other Lou here,” he asked shortly, feeling a minute amount of sympathy when the girl winced at his tone. “I need your help, so just come on.” Grabbing onto her wrist, he gently pulled
her off toward the hill.

She was quietly obedient for a moment, walking along dutifully in silence until they were far enough away from the crowd of restless campers that their conversation wouldn’t be overheard. “Do you think it’ll be as bad as they say,” she mumbled, sounding equal parts scared and concerned.

Nico released his hold, trusting the girl to follow. “I’m not sure,” he said after a beat, glancing sidelong at her worried face. “I don’t know what Chiron told you, nor do I know what Artemis said. I wasn’t privy to that information, and honestly, I don’t really care so long as we avoid a catastrophe.”

Chewing on her lip, she nodded in agreement. “That girl looked like she wanted to go to the barrier.”

“I know.”

“Do you think we should let her?”

“I’m not really sure. I intend to ask Chiron his opinion, once we get to him.”

The two walked a short distance in companionable silence before the girl cleared her throat quietly. “Nico?”

He paused his ascent up the hill, turning questioning eyes her way. “Hm?”

Lou twirled a lock of black hair around her finger, tugging on it nervously as she shuffled from foot to foot. “Thank you. For keeping them all safe. Jonas told me everything you did.” Green eyes bore right into his darker ones. “Everything. And I’m really glad he’s okay. Because of you, he’s okay. So, thank you.”

A slight flush painted his cheeks, causing his gaze to drop down to the grass. “Ah, don’t mention it. He would have done the same for me or any of us.”

“That’s probably true. Still. You’re a good friend, Nico.” She smiled at him warmly, then inclined her head up the hill. “Well, let’s get this over with, huh?”

The wall of monsters was even more daunting as the two reached the highest point, a seemingly endless sea of strange limbs and snarling sounds. He wasn’t sure which was worse, looking out at the crowd and hearing nothing of their wails, or looking out and knowing the exact moment they noticed your presence.

A frown creased his brow, mouth becoming a hard line. “I thought they couldn’t see us in here with the barrier in place,” he muttered, watching a group of Cynocephali lock their sights onto the two of them, cries of anger lost amongst the chorus of other sounds reverberating around. The only way he knew they were bellowing was from the horrid look of their open jaws, sunlight glinting off their pointed teeth.

“They can’t. Or, they shouldn’t be able to,” Lou responded, voice cracking slightly in panic. “What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know, but it probably isn’t good.” His eyes swept the immediate area in search of the centaur, spotting him down near the very edges of the barrier to his right.

Chiron paused in the middle of instructing the border patrol to give him a short nod of acknowledgment before sending the two demigods in opposite directions. His horse’s tail swished
back and forth as he trotted up, looking about as wary as Nico felt. “How is the girl,” he asked, getting straight to the point.

“She’s… acting strangely. I think you should come and take a look at her yourself.” Nico inclined his head toward the mass watching them from twenty or so feet away. “Any significant changes, other than the sight and sound?”

The centaur furrowed his brow. “I’m afraid the answer is still inconclusive for the moment. Just the things you’ve already mentioned, but only time will tell. Where is the girl now?”

“In the big house, she looked like something was pulling her toward the barrier.” Worrying a lip between his teeth, Nico voiced his true concern. “You don’t think she could really take it down, do you? Themis made it sound like just being inside would activate whatever was supposed to happen. Is it safe to let her do whatever she’s trying to do?”

“I’m not so sure myself,” Chiron admitted solemnly. “You shadow traveled inside, which means she didn’t exactly go through the barrier, to begin with.” He turned to the daughter of Hecate then. “Lou Ellen, can you tell me what the mist is doing right now?”

The girl gave a short nod, closing her eyes and holding out her hands toward the barrier. “It appears that it’s still wrapped tightly around this place. There’s a thick cloud formed around these monsters as well, but that’s probably due to their numbers.” Green eyes opened again, and she flicked them between the two of them. “I don’t understand how it can be that the mist is still manipulated, but not doing its job.”

Chiron hummed low in his throat. “Perhaps we should see the girl. If her power is counteracting, there’s a chance we can have her reverse it, as well.”

The two demigods nodded in silent agreement, following the centaur back down the hill. Chiron kept to a leisurely trot, but with four long legs, it forced the other two to power walk to keep pace. The crowd of demigods hanging around in front was still there, mulling about as they waited for orders.

The centaur smiled thinly as he approached them, the sea of eyes looking between the three of them with hopeful and curious expressions. “You may take this time to go and do as you please. The barrier is still holding, but be ever alert. If the signal sounds, prepare yourselves. You are dismissed.” With that, he turned to leave.

Lou Ellen led the way through the door, spotting Will and Dendron standing around the couch in the parlor. Seymour watched the small group with sad eyes, perking up his ears as the others approached them all, no doubt hoping someone was coming to feed him a snack. When no one acknowledged him outright, he growled angrily, ears pulling back tightly against his spotted head.

“Is she any better,” Nico asked, coming around to get a good look at the girl from the front. Her irises were still large and void of human warmth, pupils tiny pinpricks as she stared off with the same expressionless look on her face. It was a little creepy to look at directly, so he turned his attention to Will instead.

The son of Apollo shook his head, running a hand through his golden locks. “No, and I tried a few hymns, but nothing worked to snap her out of it. She’s just staring, for now. Hasn’t really tried to leave or anything. Yet.”

Chiron folded broad arms across his chest. “If nothing has changed for the worst, it’s best that we ignore this small problem for now and focus on the bigger picture. Lou Ellen.” The girl perked up,
head snapping around to give the centaur her undivided attention. “Go and fetch the young boys. They will remain with the girl, at least until we can discern what more there is to do.”

“Right,” she nodded, spinning on her heels and racing back out the front door.

“As for you three, we shall hold our own council to better decide what is necessary to remove the immediate threat. If you could begin summoning the campers, I will meet you in the rec room shor—“

The ground shook violently beneath them, walls vibrating all around with a low hum. Seymour snarled at the strangely new sensation, snapping at the air as if he could stop whatever it was he thought was happening to cause him such distress.

Windows rattled like they might break, glasses clinking inside their cupboards in the kitchen with sharp cries and little pings. In an instant, it was over, everything returning to normal as if nothing had ever been amiss.

Will and Nico shared a nervous look, Chiron’s mouth becoming a thin line as the four of them waited for any further disturbances to happen.

After a beat of silence, Dendron bleated uneasily. “Do you think it was an earthquake,” he mumbled, green eyes flicking about the place worriedly.

“I thought the barrier took care of those for us,” Will muttered, frowning hard with anxiety written clear on his face.

Chiron nodded in agreement. “That’s true, but we aren’t positive what functions are working and what are not. It’s best to err on the side of caution, perhaps you two should check it out, assure the campers are all fine.”

Without argument, the two fell into step, hurrying out the door to assess the surroundings. Campers raced about wildly, shouting things to one another as they readied themselves for the worst. Someone from the Hephaestus cabin ran past them suddenly, Will’s quick reflexes catching hold of his arm before he could escape.

“What’s wrong,” he asked, tone calm and collected, and Nico swore he felt the waves of reassurance flowing off the other’s body, wrapping them all in a cocoon of warm protection.

The boy’s big brown eyes widened for a moment, taking a deep breath before he shook his head slowly. “I don’t know, but there was this sound in the forest, and we heard shouting, so we’re guessing something bad might have happened.”

Nico frowned. “What kind of sound?”

Before he could respond, a low creak echoed from somewhere in the distance, sounding exactly like the sounds he’d heard as they sailed the Argo II upon the sea. Above them, the invisible barrier rippled with a soft pink glow, shimmering like diamonds in the early morning sun.

“Well, that can’t be good,” Will mumbled, releasing the frightened demigod so he could continue with his mission. Turning to Nico, blue eyes skipped back and forth across his dark gaze. “What should we do? Go tell Chiron, or go see for ourselves?”

Brow creased hard in thought, he spared a quick glance back at the big house. “Chiron will probably tell us to go anyway, I say we save time and get to it.”

Will smirked, eyes dancing with soft amusement. “I figured you’d say that.”
“Then why did you ask?”

Shrugging, he turned and raced off toward the groves, Nico following close behind. As they passed the armory, he noticed a few of the younger campers suiting up, faces frightened as they clutched onto weapons far too big to realistically do much good. An angry spark ignited inside his chest, and he pushed his limbs faster, passing Will with ease as they finally slipped through the dense cover of trees.

Voices could be heard shouting in the distance, the cries of monster and demigod alike drowning out all other sounds. He wondered briefly if he should just shadow travel straight to them, glancing over at Will as they dodged narrow trunks and sidestepped large rocks, but thought better of it in the end. It wasn’t fair to leave him behind, nor was it fair to force him along through the shadows without permission. With a sigh, he picked up the pace, lungs already burning from the exertion.

The first thing he noticed as they came through the other side was the body of an Empousa as she crumbled into dust. Three demigods stood in a semi-circle around where the ashes lay, panting hard as beads of sweat dotted across their brows. Behind them, the wall of monsters roared in anger, pushing up against the limits of the barrier with hatred burning brightly in the sea of multi-colored eyes.

Will clapped a familiar looking boy on the shoulder, pulling his attention away from the swarm of angry enemies. “Austin, tell me what happened here.”

The son of Apollo nodded, face flickering with relief before it hardened once more with determination. “We were over here patrolling the barrier like we have been for a few days. There was that freaky loud sound, then suddenly the monsters were able to see and hear us.”

“Yeah, we heard that, too. How did the Empousa get inside?”

Austin pursed his lips. “A bunch of them kept pushing up like they’re doing now,” he indicated the barrier with a flick of the hand, “and then one of them broke through. I don’t know how, but there was this new sound, like a floorboard creak, and she was inside. We fought her off, but they don’t seem very pleased about it.”

Will looked over at him then, eyes questioning.

“I don’t know,” Nico admitted hesitantly, fingers automatically reaching down to brush against his sword. “But it sounds like the barrier isn’t going to be able to keep all of them out if they keep trying to get in.”

Another creak sounded further down toward the ocean, voices crying out in surprise as the entire wall shimmered with the same strange light.

“I guess we know what that means,” Will frowned, turning back to his brother with a tight-lipped smile. “Austin, I need you to go inform Chiron that monsters are coming through the barrier. Inform everyone you pass that they need to head to different areas to ensure the camp’s safety. Can you do that for me?”

Austin gave a stiff nod. “Alright. What are you going to do,” he asked, handing over his bow to Will before quickly removing his quiver from its place on his back. Will slipped them both on, preparing himself for battle.

Nico chuckled softly, finally removing his sword from its place at his hip. “Don’t worry about Will, I’ll make sure he’s fine,” he promised, watching the relief flood the boy’s weary face. Without
another word, Austin raced off the way they had come.

“You two,” Will said, voice clipped and authoritative. The two Nike campers blinked at him in confusion before quickly standing attention. “I want you to go help those guys down there. We’ve got this area. After that monster is taken care of, make sure they space out a little and keep watch. We know the sign that something has broken through, so you’ll know it happened somewhere if you notice that same weird shimmer. Tell everyone to be on guard.”

“Right,” they chorused, scampering off toward the chaos at breakneck speed.

“Are we going to stand right here and wait to see if anyone else gets through over here again,” Nico asked, cocking a brow at the taller boy as he shifted his weight nervously from foot to foot. “I should probably shadow travel around, alert the others that are on the far side of what’s going on. At the very least I can get the different regions to send someone over to inform the smaller smattering of groups what’s happening.”

Will shot him a strange look, swallowing visibly as both hands fiddled with the strap around his chest. “It could be dangerous,” he mumbled, glancing down fleetingly at his red chucks before slowly lifting his gaze back up. A slight flush painted his tanned cheeks, making the soft dusting of freckles glow orange in the early morning sun.

Nico smirked, tilting his head to the side. “Are you worried about me, Solace?”

“Maybe a little,” he admitted quietly, glancing over at the sea of monsters still trying to push their way through. “I’m worried about all of us, to be honest. About what happens if the barrier does collapse, about who we might never see again.” Biting his lip, blue eyes flicked back to him, wet and shimmering like pools of liquid Azurite.

Nico’s smile softened, feeling a familiar pang inside his chest. Taking a step forward, he placed a reassuring hand over the other’s to still the nervous tick as the son of Apollo continued to mess with the strap. “Well, here is one less person you have to worry about because I’ll be fine. I promise I’m not going down without a serious fight.”

Will laughed, the sound warm and airy. “I think that makes me worry even more,” he admitted, humming low in amusement. Blue eyes softened exponentially. “Knowing you, di Angelo, you’ll try to take on the whole crowd by yourself.”

“Bet I could,” he teased, hoping to lighten the heavy feeling sinking all around them.

Will hummed again, and it suddenly occurred to him that they were standing less than a foot apart, his fingers still splayed out over the other’s atop his chest. Glancing down, he studied them cautiously for a moment, before looking up slowly to lock eyes once more. Breath caught in his throat, mouth going dry as he gazed on like a frightened animal at the boy watching him with such a tender gaze.

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“Please be safe,” Will murmured as he took another step closer, the words soft and warm as they caressed the skin on Nico’s face.

He nodded slowly, unable to force his thoughts from his heavy tongue, suddenly an iron weight pressing against his teeth.

With a smile, Will leaned down and brushed their lips together briefly, soft and gentle and sweet. A small sigh escaped his throat, pulling back to stare down with the intensity of a thousand suns. “Good luck, Nico,” he whispered, stepping back into less invasive space. Another smile tugged at
his mouth, and he gave a short wave. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

Blinking back his thundering emotions, Nico turned around and slipped into shadows once more.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to hold off, I really was.
Until the very end, most likely.
But then I thought about it, and desperate times, right?
Like, who wants regrets later if the person died before you let them know how you felt?
So maybe it wasn't the most straightforward way of doing things, but I'm sure Nico got the point.
Cue Nico freak out moment in 3... 2... 1...

I'll try to write more sooner than later. :D
Comments keep me slightly on track.
I mean, they at least make me feel bad if I haven't tried to write more.
The battle begins

Chapter Summary

Nico races to alert the campers about the breach in their safety.

Chapter Notes

Wow, I am so horrible for making everyone wait so very long.
To make it up to everyone for my almost two-month long wait, here is a massive chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were two singular truths that Nico knew in that moment as his body swirled through the void, merging with the shadows like he was made up of actual darkness instead of molecules and atoms and cells.

One was the notion that there was some great threat he was supposed to be warning everyone about, that he was on another mission to once again save… something. It sat like a heavy weight in his stomach, tense and taut with the need to move quickly before tragedy could strike, much like it always did in the past. It kept him grounded and focused, even as his mind was fuzzy and distant.

The other was a little more complicated. Less a thought, more a sensation bubbling softly around him. It thrummed through his chest like the pitter-patter of rain on a tin roof, vibrating around his being in a pattern of four short repetitive beats that sounded an awful lot like the spelling of a name.

Not just any name, but Will Will Will.

The shadows whispered it around him, mixing softly with his own chaotic thoughts. The skin on his lips, though numbed significantly by the frigid feeling of the void, still burned hot and tingled with a strange new energy.

Will Solace just kissed me? Holy Hades.

The memory alone sent a rush of blood from his heart to his cheeks, spreading like wildfire to coat his throat and chest. It had been his first, of course, and not at all what or with whom he’d expected. In the end, that wasn’t such a bad thing.

Kissing Will was like curling up by a crackling fire after standing for far too long in the icy cold. Warm, safe, welcoming. At the same time, it had the power to become intense, stifling, and dangerous. Perhaps he’d come to find the middle ground, at some point, learn to walk the narrow path balanced carefully on a dual-edged blade.

Slipping from the shadows, harsh reality began to trickle back in once more. Panicked shouting could be heard from all sides, the groan of the barrier rumbling as it flickered pink and gold in rippling waves of brilliant light. It would be breathtaking to behold if it wasn’t also horribly
terrifying once he knew the reasoning for it.

*The barrier isn’t going to hold much longer. Not if they keep pressing against it like this. I have to warn the others.*

Pushing his thoughts and feelings aside for the moment he sprang into action, rushing up the small hill toward the cries of demigods and monsters alike. Two young campers he didn’t know were standing back to back down by the barrier, spinning in small circles as they brandished their weapons at a pack of 15 or so Cynocephali. The dog-faced men snarled as they slowly encircled the frightened children, blocking off all chance of escape.

One lunged at the girl, her screams shrill as she threw her arms up in panic, dropping her sword onto the ground. The boy behind her spun around at the sound, dark eyes going wide with fear as the monster threw his companion down into the grass, pinning her there with ease.

In a flash, Nico cut through him and three others, thinning their numbers by a small fraction. Reaching out a hand, he pulled the girl to her feet, throwing her weapon to the slightly less anxious looking boy at her side. They watched him for a moment, eyes wary.

“Run,” he shouted, spurring the frightened campers through the open clearing he’d left, like a couple of timid rabbits, while the Cynocephali were still standing around shocked into inaction.

It didn’t last long, but the two made it safely over the hillside before the Cynocephali began to circle around Nico instead, murderous intent clear on their faces.

A smirk tugged one side of his mouth upward, eyes skipping around the group of infuriated creatures as they stepped ever closer. “By all means, go ahead and try your luck,” he taunted, lifting his sword up lazily to rest it over his shoulder and stuffing his free hand into his pocket. “I don’t even need this thing, and I could still take all of you on. In my sleep. With no hands.”

Howls of rage rained down on him, the barrier rippling and groaning as monsters of all kinds shouted threats and pushed up hard in wave after wave of assault. It was clear from their actions that they’d caught on to how to get through, but for the moment, it seemed as if none were granted further access. At least, not where he was standing. Further down, it was anyone’s guess.

The dog-faced men decided to charge then, features twisted up more grotesquely than he’d ever seen as their eyes sparkled with vehemence. He let them come, body nimble and poised, feeling the vibrations of their movements rippling through the dirt that crunched softly beneath his booted feet.

If there was one thing Nico knew about fighting while outnumbered, it was that emotions made you sloppy. In the heat of the moment, tempers blazing white hot in dizzying waves, it was easy to sidestep the deadly claws that reached for him, dancing fluidly around the steadily closing circle with very little difficulty.

Monsters began slamming into one another instead, turning their anger on their own like rabid dogs; all fight instinct and zero brains to realize he had yet to lift a finger against them. It didn’t even matter that he was standing feet away from some, once they’d let that rage explode outward, it decimated anything unlucky enough to get in its path.

A lone Cynocephali barreled toward him with a snarl, lips stretched back to reveal rows of shiny, jagged teeth.

Nico stood stock-still, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Just as he caught the putrid scent of rotten breath that rushed up to assault his nostrils, he spun just out of reach, landing behind the
confused monster and planting a foot on its backside.

Kicking hard, a yelp of surprise ripped from the creature’s throat, stumbling forward on unsteady legs until it crashed into two of its aggressively fighting brethren. Sharp claws raked down on it from both sides, cries of pain echoing hauntingly as its body burst into a cloud of glittering ash, twirling through the air as it was carried away on the breeze.

More and more bodies erupted on the spot until only a handful of the creatures were left. A strange silence fell over the little area, the sound of the wind kicking up through the tops of the trees slowly starting to drown out the roar of voices still bellowing somewhere in the distance.

Sanity seemed to claim their enraged thoughts, blinking slow, confused eyes around the empty clearing until they landed back on Nico, watching the sight with an amused curl of his lips. “Oops, guess I really didn’t need to lift a finger. Thanks for doing most of the dirty work for me. Hope you weren’t too attached to your friends.”

Growls of newfound anger ripped savagely from their opened mouths, charging toward him once more in an arch of blind fury.

Nico quirked a brow at their approach. “Oh? Did I hit a sore spot? Well, in that case, I can assure you’ll see them again real soon.”

Before they could get close enough to strike, the ground opened in a wide fissure at his feet that blocked their advancement, four skeletal fighters dragging themselves up on creaky limbs. The Cynocephali blinked in confusion, faces going slack as the skeletons charged forward, the metal of their weapons glinting in the early morning light.

Each lingering opponent exploded in a rain of dust, sprinkling the grass in a wash of sickly grey. A strangely heavy hush followed their demise, the skeletal warriors slinking back into their chasm as the ground closed behind them neatly without so much as a mark of evidence to what had transpired.

“There, now you won’t be lonely,” Nico quipped before turning calculating, dark eyes toward the group of monsters watching him silently with looks of trepidation. They no longer rushed at the barrier to break inside, seemingly weighing their chances against him in battle. “The same goes for you, too. I don’t need to do anything physical to send you back to Tartarus. In fact, I could open the ground beneath your very feet and watch you tumble there the long way.”

“What are you,” an Empousa hissed at him, recoiling away from the invisible wall when their gazes locked, the flame in her eyes strangely cold and fearful despite its glowing red curl. “You’re a monster.”

A strange sound ripped from his throat, part high trill of amusement and low thrum of something dark and vicious. Pulling the sword away from the place at his shoulder, he slipped it into the holster on his belt, folding arms across his chest. The hints of a smile turned his lips upward in the corners, voice sleek and smooth when he spoke. “Yes. I am. And don’t forget it.”

Turning on his heels, he sauntered off toward the far away sound of panicked shrieks and the unmistakable cry of terror that always rang out just before another monster combusted into dust.

Nico flitted from place to place, warning the sentries who didn’t already know what was going on to prepare themselves for the worst. Terrified faces nodded their agreeance, bracing themselves for an all-out battle, the likes of which none had ever seen.
His only comfort, small though it might have been, was that the barrier appeared to hold up for the
time being; even when the sea of creatures rushed it angrily like the swell of tide eroding the cliffs
that kept it in check. Few broke through, here and there, but the majority remained safely in place.

He didn’t allow himself the luxury of wondering whether it could keep it up indefinitely or not.
From the look of things, it was steadily changing from a question of \textit{if} to \textit{when}.

So, he pressed on, assuring that no area was caught unawares, that each monster was brought down
with as few mishaps as humanly possible. It was exhausting, but nothing compared to things he’d
done in the past. If he could sit inside a tiny jar, meditating on staying alive with nothing more than a
handful of pomegranate seeds and a fierce stubbornness spurring his actions, Nico could save this
camp from ruin.

He would, or he’d die trying.

Slipping out of the shadows near the entryway to the big house, he caught the familiar sight of Lou
Ellen in the thick of a crowd as the girl barked out orders to her brothers and sisters, sending groups
of two and three off in different directions to help the demigods fighting along the barrier’s inner
rim. Her green eyes were tired and sunken-looking as they flicked his way, strange emotions
rippling there when she noticed he was, in fact, alone.

“Where is Will,” she asked as the last of the group dispersed, tone betraying even more of her
weariness. It was anyone’s guess when the campers last got a decent night’s sleep, and for someone
like Lou Ellen, the head counselor of the Hecate cabin, the likelihood of long nights and early
mornings was great.

Nico felt the warmth of another blush spread across his face as he lifted one shoulder up in a shrug.
“I assume he is where I left him. Did Austin alert Chiron yet, I expected him to be the one out here
directing campers around.”

Lou scrubbed a hand down her face, shaking her head. “He’s busy at the moment, so he sent me out
in his place. You left Will alone, then?”

“He’ll be fine, Lou,” Nico promised in a comforting voice, quirking up one side of his mouth in a
reassuring smile. “He’s better at fighting than most of these kids.”

“I know, but I’d feel better if you were with him,” she sighed.

“Gotta spread the word somehow. It’s faster if I shadow travel.” After a beat, he inclined his head
toward the barrier. “So, how many areas have monster problems that you are aware of?”

Lou pursed her lips. “Too many. I thought with the fleece we wouldn’t have issues like this, but I
guess an entire army of creeps really isn’t much of a match for our meager protections. As it stands,
we’ll never find a reprieve in all of this. I’m just thankful it didn’t happen before you guys got back,
though I also wonder if it’s part of the issue.” She gave him a very pointed look, flicking her eyes
over to the big house.

“I don’t think it’s Sabrina’s fault, per say. Maybe the weakening in the Mist, but the barrier wasn’t
meant to keep so many out all at once. Everything magic has limitations, we’re bound to have a few
speed bumps along the way.”

The girl chuckled at that, though the sound was humorless. “Just another wonderful day at Camp
Half-Blood. It couldn’t have waited until we had more people to defend the place? I’d kill to have
Percy or Jason here, too.”
Nico bristled at that but refrained from commenting, reminding himself that the other two were far more liked amongst demigods than he would ever be.

Lou seemed to catch the imperceptible clenching of his jaw, tone softening. “Not that you aren’t a fabulous help, Nico. You really are, but most of us here don’t have powers like you three. We have to rely on our skills with a blade or bow to take down all the baddies. It would be nice to have a little more up our sleeve right now.”

“If you need more soldiers,” he began but was cut off with a look of fierceness he didn’t know the happy-go-lucky girl could possess. Slamming his mouth shut hard, Nico had to physically restrain himself from flinching.

“And have you overwork yourself to the point of fading away? As Will’s best friend, I’m going to have to say a hard no to that one. He’d kick both of our butts if anything happened because of it. Don’t even think about it, di Angelo.”

Nico shuddered, rubbing hands along his arms despite the tepid spring day. “Is it strange I heard Will’s voice when you said that?”

A blinding smile spread like sunshine across her face. “I hope that means you’ll actually heed the warning for once? No one wants you to disappear, Nico, we like you too much.”

Against his better judgment, he quirked a brow. “We?”

Lou scoffed. “Don’t be so dense, you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Another groan of the barrier echoed around them, fresh shouts accompanying it from somewhere not too far behind him. Lou blinked in surprise like she’d forgotten they were in the middle of an emergency, panic spasming across her features, blowing her green eyes wide.

Campers raced around them, some limping along with half-conscious companions in tow on their way to the infirmary, others hurriedly restocking their artillery before running back toward the sounds of grueling fights. It was just the sobering reality he needed to push himself back into action.

Nico placed a grounding hand on the girl’s shoulder, pulling her back to the present as their gazes locked. “Will is over by the fist, go make sure he has a decent backup. I’ll get there when I can, okay? Leave the rest of this to me. And hurry.”

With a stiff nod, she turned on her heel and raced off toward the cover of trees.

He watched her go for a beat, silently telling himself he wasn’t avoiding anything. There was more use for him elsewhere, that was all. Lou Ellen could watch Will’s back just as easily as he could, not that Will needed it. It wasn’t a lie when he informed the girl as much. He’d never truly believed the healer to be as incompetent as he’d stated before.

Probably should have told him that.

Swiping a hand down his face, he pushed the anxious thoughts aside. There would be time later to make up for his mistakes of the past. Right now, the present was demanding undivided attention. He wouldn’t allow a slip up just because he couldn’t rein in his bubbling emotions.

A strange commotion drew his attention back toward the big house, shouting voices sounding far more panicked than they should be given the circumstances. Fear gripped icy coils around his insides, feet slapping the ground hard as he booked it without a second thought. Rounding the corner, he stopped dead in his tracks.
Bodies were strewn about the place, though none appeared to be in mortal peril. A breath he didn’t know he was holding rushed out of him in a grateful sigh, kneeling down beside the closest demigod who blinked up at him with wide, confused eyes.

“What happened,” he asked, attempting to maintain a tone that was both soothing, yet held a sense of urgency. Some campers were still wary of him, given his freaky power, and he didn’t want to frighten anyone more.

The young boy, a son of Demeter he knew was named Charlie, flicked glossy eyes his way, pupils so small they were hardly pinpricks of black in a sea of mossy green iris. Opening his mouth, he let out a strangled sounding whimper. “T-that g-girl attacked us.”

“I’m going to need more thorough information than that. What girl?”

Charlie swallowed hard, pointing a finger to the wide open front door. “The one that was in there. The freaky one. Sh-she came out like a possessed person, with glowing eyes, and suddenly it felt like someone turned on the gravity so high you couldn’t even breathe. It stopped after she walked into the forest.”

Nico had a few choice words on the tip of his tongue but decided to keep them back. “And Chiron?”

“I don’t know.”

“Alright,” he mumbled, glancing around for signs of help. “Alright, you’re going to be okay. I’ll get someone and go after the girl.”

Without waiting for a response, he jumped to his feet, running along the side of the house until he made it to the infirmary door. A girl with two-toned green and ginger hair, Kayla, was busy bustling around helping patients in need, her big blue eyes snapping over to him when he threw open the door with a loud bang.

“People outside might need help, there are about seven of them, but I don’t have time to assist.”

Kayla handed off a square of ambrosia to a young child of about 8. “Okay, Mary. Give this to the next patient, I’ll be right back.”

Mary nodded, soft blonde curls bobbing around her face as she took up the role of head healer.

The two raced out the door as fast as he’d entered, Nico pointing to the fallen demigods who still looked completely dazed. “I don’t think they’re hurt, but you’re the expert. I’ll send some more people your way to help, but I really need to get going.”

“Don’t worry about it, Nico. Go save the day, yeah?” Her smile was just as bright as her brother’s, the family resemblance uncanny in that moment. “Oh, and tell Will I have it covered in there. He doesn’t need to stress the entire time that people need him. He’s a bigger help on the field than off of it.”

“I’ll tell him,” Nico promised, then took off in the same direction the boy had indicated, a sinking sensation pooling in his gut when he realized it was the same place he’d last seen Will.

Will watched Nico disappear into a void of darkness, feeling that familiar pang of fear in his chest as
the last traces of him vanished, leaving the son of Apollo all alone in the middle of the forest.

It wasn’t necessarily fear for himself. He was more than capable of taking care of things when it came to fighting monsters. After all, as the head medic, he was the sole person that hopped around a dangerous battlefield, pulling out injured campers while simultaneously avoiding a barrage of claws, teeth, swords, arrows, and Zeus knows what other deadly things.

No, the fear was for the raven-haired boy, the one who attracted trouble like honey attracts flies.

He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Nico was strong. No one else could get away with half of the things the son of Hades had accomplished and still turn around to face the next challenge with their head held high and a determined glint in their eye, despite the cards usually being stacked against them.

Nico was fierce and brave and loyal, and gods did that make it hard to refrain from falling irrevocably in love with the idiot. He was selfless and kind, especially when he thought no one was paying attention to him, and there was this warm light inside of him that even the depths of Tartarus couldn’t manage to snuff out.

He was gentle and considerate, with a laugh that sank deep into your bones and permeated the marrow there, if you were one of the few people lucky enough to hear it. Will was thankful to be one of those people, even if it was only for fleeting moments within the past couple of days. He wouldn’t give it up for anything in the world, not after things had finally come so far.

The sound of running footsteps pulled him from his thoughts, turning around just as a flash of chocolate skin and the flare of sunlight off silver metal broke free from the soft green of the towering tree line. Another bow was strapped across his broad chest, a small dagger dangling from the belt laying loosely along his hips.

Austin skidded to a halt a couple of feet away from him, bending at the middle as he panted hard to catch his breath. “I… knew… you… might need me,” his brother wheezed, the skin of his face glowing softly pink and beaded with sweat.

“You’re back way sooner than I expected. Did you tell Chiron the news?”

Stretching upright, Austin leveled him with a cheeky grin. “Of course. I ran as fast as I possibly could.” Glancing around the empty clearing, he sighed. “Where did di Angelo go?”

Will lifted one arm in a shrug. “Alert the others along the barrier. Probably help a little bit, too. He’ll be back.”

Austin gave him an incredulous look. “You trust him to come back? For you?”

A gentle frown creased his brow. “Well, yeah. Why wouldn’t he?”

“I don’t know, maybe because he sends skeletons after you when you grow too overbearing? Because he wasn’t too keen on going on the mission with you in the first place, and now is his chance to dump you off somewhere and go the last bit alone? Because he’s Nico?” Austin ran a hand across his cornrowed head. “Sorry, Will, but you two aren’t exactly the closest. Why should he come back?”

He opened his mouth to respond, snapping it shut once reality finally hit. What could he say? That it was different now? That they weren’t the same as when they both left? That things might be changing between the two of them, except maybe not because he kind of forgot to ask before he assaulted the poor guy with his mouth?
Austin let out a breathy laugh. “You didn’t tell him about your obnoxiously long crush on him, right? You do sometimes come on a little strong, even when you mean well.”

Will raked a hand down his face with a groan. “Can you please not bring that up? And it hasn’t been that long.”

“Only like two years,” Austin quipped, laughing again when Will sent him a sour expression in response.

“Nico will come back,” he mumbled, crossing arms over his chest.

“Maybe. But I’ll wait with you until then, just in case.”

Will was about to argue back about how he was perfectly capable when a low groan sounded directly behind him, turning around in time to catch a Scythian Dracaena slipping her way through the barrier like it was made from tissue paper.

Her glittering black eyes swept over the two of them, a terrible hiss of a laugh bubbling up from her throat. “S-s-s-sorry to cut the reunion short, boysssss.” Two giant snake-like trunks drew her closer, towering over them by a good foot. “I’ll be sure to make thisss painlesssssssss.”

On instinct, he drew an arrow, slipping the bow over his head in one fluid motion before taking aim at the place he hoped was her stomach. The sound of it splitting the air brought a smile to his face, though it was short-lived when the creature deflected it with the staff in her hand, not even bothering to use the shield still strapped across her back.

Austin’s arrow didn’t fare much better, bouncing off her breastplate with an audible dink.

Another hissing sound carried across from the other side of the barrier, mixing with the one that slipped past the creature’s teeth. “Archerssss. You’re no match for me, sons of Apollo,” she goaded, finally removing her shield and strapping it to her left arm. “Your arrowsss won’t hit.”

That didn’t stop the two of them from dancing around the long range of her attacks with her staff, nor from firing off arrow after arrow at the snake woman from both sides, hoping to catch her off her guard.

Will ran around to her left, loosing with deadly accuracy, annoyed at the creature’s ability to hide behind her giant defense. Even with such a large mass, the shield easily covered the most sensitive areas of her green flesh, allowing her attention to remain locked on Austin’s attacks on her right.

Arrows clattered to the ground as the staff spun nimbly through her fingers, the blur of metal and wood giving off the look of a windmill of some sort. Will and Austin locked their gazes for a moment, never breaking from their assault as they hatched out a silent plan.

With a nod, Austin’s attacks grew more intense, pulling the whole of the Dracaena’s attention pointedly his way.

Will shot off just enough arrows at the shield so as not to arouse suspicion, edging closer and closer to the tree nearby with its low hanging branch. In one swift leap, he kicked off the trunk, vaulted up into the air, landed quietly upon the branch, and loosed an arrow down through the small dip in the shield that now exposed her neck.

It hit with a satisfying hiss of pain, the monster flailing about wildly as bright yellow blood oozed from the wound in her shoulder. The arm that held the shield went limp, both boys taking the opportunity to barrage the snake woman in a rain of deadly metal, not daring to stop until her body
exploded into dust.

Will wiped at the sweat that now speckled his face. “Well, that was fun. But now I’m almost out of arrows.”

Austin glanced behind himself and winced. “Same, and I thought I’d brought enough to face half the army with no problem.”

“Yeah, well, can’t always foresee the kinds of enemies you’ll face. Go restock, I’ll see which are salvageable and make sure no one else comes through.”

“That won’t be necessary,” a familiar voice singsonged from a few feet away, Lou Ellen stepping out from behind a large bush with a full quiver strapped to her back. A brilliant smile spread across her pale face. “I thought you might run out. You never were the best shot,” she teased him.

Will spluttered as he leaped from his perch with a soft thunk, Austin laughing all the while. “Hey, I’m a much better shot than you and Cecil.”

“That’s true,” the girl hummed in amusement. “But we’re not children of Apollo.”


“I brought you something special, anyway,” she said with a sly smirk, pulling the quiver off and handing it to them. “Sleep arrows, just in case. Anything you even graze will drop instantly, which should come in handy if we’re surrounded. Just a precaution, of course.”

Will gave a low whistle of appreciation. “Thanks, Lou, you always manage to outdo yourself.”

“I try,” she said, batting her eyelashes. “Nico sent me on ahead, to assure you had the proper backup. Guess it wasn’t necessary, but I’ll stick around until he can get back. Three heads are better than one, right?”

Austin made a noncommittal noise in his throat. “Might be here for a while, then.”

Lou Ellen frowned. “You don’t trust him?”

“It’s not that, it’s just-“

The three of them swayed on their feet, a wave of pressure bearing down on them like someone had increased the gravity tenfold.

Will grit his teeth, struggling hard to keep himself upright. “What in the world?”

A pale figure stepped into the clearing, purple eyes glowing as she shuffled forward in jerky movements. Intense energy crackled around her in sparks of blue and gold, the grass around her feet bowing awkwardly as she moved, like her footsteps each weighed about a ton.

Sabrina swept her gaze over the three of them there, no hint of recollection shimmering on her completely stoic face.

“Sab…ri…na,” Will managed to choke out, knees buckling to the ground as his companions did much the same. The air in his lungs was far too heavy to breathe easily, but he sucked it in regardless, releasing it back out in a hiss through his teeth.

“Is she possessed,” Lou asked, her voice vibrating around him like they were in a tunnel of some
“Looks like it,” Austin muttered, collapsing onto all fours with a cry of pain. “We need to stop her.”

The bow in Will’s hands felt like it was crushed beneath a boulder, arm reaching out for the discarded quiver of arrows now resting a foot away in the tall grass. Fingers brushed against the tip of soft feathers, somehow managing to drag the arrow out and remain partially vertical in the process.

Sabrina crossed the distance slowly, hand coming out like she wanted to caress the barrier like a small animal, feel it ripple beneath her skin.

With the arrow nocked and ready to fire, he rose it shakily upward, taking aim at the calf of her right leg.

*I don’t have to do much. Just a graze, and she’ll go to sleep.*

The arrow loosed, wobbling as it fought against the gravity trying to contain it, spinning in slow motion before it skidded off into the grass at her feet.

The hand reached up, pointer finger stretching out. When it kissed the surface of the invisible force, the entire thing burned in waves of glowing purple before it shattered around them, raining down like pieces of falling glass.

Will’s heart clenched painfully in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise Will POV!!
That probably doesn't make up for my cliffhanger, though.
I'll try to wrap it up sooner than later.
Next chapter is the last unless it grows out of control, which it might. Because. It's me.

Comments really do help me to stay on track. Not that I did much of that last time, but...
I really do get excited whenever I get one. :D
Thanks for all the love and support thus far, it's sure been a journey! <3
Greetings, all my loveliest readers! Apologies for the extraordinarily long and horrible wait, and double for this not being a chapter update like you probably expected it was. Just a quick little note to let everyone know that I have gone back through this entire fic and tweaked/added content here and there to keep that lovely flow and fix all the little egregious mistakes I cannot believe I allowed to slip past my 800 or so read-throughs again and again. Oops. (No doubt there are tons more, I am only one human and, despite attempts at perfection, fall short.)

This fic is at its end, and now that I have the entire work freshly renewed in my mind, you can count on a chapter update (hopefully!) very soon. I'm not saying you should go back and reread all that horribly long content. The most I've added is around 2,000 new words, and they in no way change the story at all. That being said, if you started this thing back in December, or haven't read any of it since my last update in (sob) June, you might be fuzzy. Hell, I was fuzzy, and I wrote the damn thing. A nice, fresh perspective would be a lovely ending as I steadily write up however long this final chapter might be, and end this baby with a bang. Or a whimper, we shall see.

One billion thanks to everyone who stuck with me! I have no excuse for the wait aside from I am a lazy bum and can't be bothered to finish anything I start. I'm terrible at goodbyes and thus find it hard to finish works without copious amounts of stressing and worrying over not doing a good job. Alas, I cannot keep avoiding this one forever and don't want to, because this is my treasure and I want to see it bloom fully into whatever the hell it decides to become.

See you on the other side, and go ahead and pester me until that 21/22 becomes a completed work. ^^

Chapter End Notes

This chapter might be deleted later, depending on how that effects the bookmark update later on?
The sound of the barrier falling reverberated around him in a sickening cry as he raced through the dense patch of trees, spurred on by the blind terror that grasped hold of his thundering heart and squeezed it tight. Pieces of debris rained down on him, catching the rays of the sun and shimmering like diamonds as it shattered into smaller flecks all over the ground. It was beautiful, in a terrifying sort of manner, spelling out doom for them all.

Will was still out there somewhere, alone or with backup, he couldn’t begin to guess. The only thing that mattered to him right then was finding the son of Apollo and whisking him away to somewhere safe. Even if it had to be against his will, he would make sure that boy lived through this and many more days. Only then would he be able to focus on the perilous task ahead and face it head-on.

Concentrating hard, he released his powers out with expert ease, gritting his teeth in frustration when it proved to no avail. Sabrina was no doubt somewhere close by, blocking his attempts from further distances than she’d previously had; with or without knowledge of the fact she was even doing it.

The fear he’d seen in the young demigod’s eyes as he told of the feeling of an excruciating weightiness and glowing violet orbs flashed through his mind, and his legs responded in kind by working themselves even faster as the trees began to blur past. No one was going to die on his watch. He’d send the whole horde back to Tartarus if that’s what it took, even if it meant wasting his own life in the process.

The alarms sounded from all sides, a chorus of frightened voices reaching a budding crescendo as the entire forest was thrown into a terrible panic. A trickle of monsters whizzed past him heading in the opposite direction, nowhere near the sheer numbers he’d seen back on the hill. Few stopped to try and take him down, the majority ignoring him outright as they raced toward the woefully unguarded camp with malicious intent.

A small group of three Empousa circled and tried their best to finish him off, but he was too quick, pulling out his sword and slicing through the closest one with a low grunt of effort. Her body exploded in a burst of sooty ash, raining down to the ground and coating his shoes with an unpleasant grey.

The two remaining hung back from him warily, red eyes flashing with rage as he spun the stygian iron in his hand, waiting to see which would break and attack first. Unexpectedly, they turned on their heels and fled in a new direction, hissing curses under their breath as they went that he was sure meant they’d be back later with reinforcements.
“Figures,” he mumbled, strapping the sword back onto his belt. “I don’t have time for this anyhow.” Turning back toward the direction of the Fist, his eyes went wide in surprise, terror sinking into his gut as a sea of darkness closed in fast.

Nico had but a moment to register the unnerving sight, only narrowly dodging an oncoming attack from a nearby Telekhine, before the wave of bodies poured through the thick smattering of trees, cries of bloodlust and anger spilling from a thousand different snarling mouths. It was horrifying to behold, the sheer numbers alone sending a jolt of ice straight into his thundering heart.

They couldn’t win this battle. The camp wouldn’t make it. Everyone he’d come to care for was undoubtedly going to die that very day.

Will…

More of them came with no end in sight, the floodgates opened and spewing a torrent of demons like they’d desperately clawed their way up from the depths of Hell. Most of them didn’t even spare him a second glance, as if he was inconsequential to stop the annihilation of one of the only places he was able to call home. As if taking that single moment from their hate-fueled mission was nothing more than a huge waste of time.

The ground rumbled beneath his feet as a wail of dark emotion ripped from his throat; irrepressible rage washing over him like a vat of thickened honey, seeping down deep into the very depths of his marrow. Hundreds of skeletal bodies broke from the earth, dragging their way out of large fissures speckled in a wide arch around him as far as the eye could see. When the two sides first collided, it was an instantaneous roar of bones crushing beneath deadly claws, and swords clashing with the sickening ping of steel on steel.

Swinging his own sword into the mix, he charged into a group of Cynocephali, chopping through limbs left and right as their howls of pain made his stomach clench and twist horribly. There wasn’t time to waste fighting right then, he had a mission to finish, a person to return to. Resolve coursed through his veins like liquid fire, rooting his feet to the spot as he attempted to take down as many enemies as was humanly possible in the shortest amount of time.

“Is there no end to this madness,” he muttered to himself bitterly, dodging a swing from a Scythian Dracannae’s staff and kicking a Telekhine right into her next attack.

The poor creature dissolved into dust, and he had to wonder why they even bothered again after the fight with Kronos ended so horribly for most of them. At least rising up against the gods for their mistreatment made sense to him. Fighting the demigods because they merely existed was a needless slaughter.

He didn’t have time to think it over further as more and more enemies charged into their ranks, bodies exploding into dust or piles of bones that littered the ground around his feet. Each tuck and roll caused more sweat to bead his brow. Each sidestep and swipe with his sword was another ounce of strength permanently and irreversibly expended.

If things were so hard in this one small patch of trees, he could only begin to imagine what the rest of the campers might be dealing with. What Will might be dealing with without his help. It only made him fight all the harder, desperate to save them all that much sooner.

As the numbers pouring through the trees trickled its way into a slow drip, the half-formed army he’d summoned staggering around on their last good leg, literally as much as it was figuratively; he breathed a sigh of relief. Not because the threat was over. There was no doubt in his mind that the battle was still just beginning. It was because he could finally take that breath, loosening his taut
muscles and clipping his sword back onto his belt. For the moment, he’d done the best that he could manage. It was enough to urge him onward to the place he most wanted to be.

With a wave of his hand, the broken-down bones sank back into the ground where they lay, until the next time he’d call them up to help him fight. Turning to the remaining warriors at his disposal, he inclined his head toward the big house. “Go chase down as many as you can manage. Keep the campers safe. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Dozens of skulls nodded in response, turning on their heel and racing off into the slowly quieting forest. Rubbing an arm over his sweat-caked brow, he leaned back against the trunk of an oak, allowing the thumping in his chest to subside a little more.

Panic still gripped at his heart, spurred on by the abundant number of creatures he alone had the pleasure of sending back to the depths. If the fight had been so rough on him with numerous backup, he wasn’t sure he wanted the rundown of what it was like for the others. Still, he knew somehow, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Will was okay. If ever a demigod could push luck to the very limit, Will Solace was the one to do it.

With a tired smile stretching across his face, he slipped into the shadows once more.

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Will

The oppressive feeling around them suddenly vanished as the barrier around camp shattered into glittering dust. Sabrina wobbled unsteadily on her legs, dropping to her knees as a rush of wind shot out from her tiny form in a large pulse that swayed the tops of trees. The angry horde of monsters rushed past her without a moment’s hesitation, not even bothering to attack the girl, heading straight for the other three demigods still crumpled in the tall grass.

In an instant, Will was on his feet, scrambling to collect the fallen arrows littered about the ground. A Cynocephali charged at him with snapping jaws, hands swiping viciously at the air as it aimed for his most sensitive bodily areas with deadly precision. Kicking up an arrow with his foot, he caught it in his hand, nicking the creature across the arm in one swift motion and watching as it fell face first into the dirt.

“Well, that was ridiculously effective,” he mumbled to himself, ducking out of the way of a Harpies’ talons as she swooped in to rip him up, jabbing an arrow into her wing. She, too, tumbled into the grass, mouth still hung open in her slackened, silent screech.

“What are you doing,” Austin called out incredulously, loosing arrows left and right into the impossibly thick swarm of fiends. Thankfully, the majority of the monsters didn’t view the four demigods as much of a threat; Sabrina no doubt seen as an ally and the other three slim pickings that diverged from their true goal.

Will managed to prick a few more passing creatures before he turned to his brother with a grin. “It’s far more reliable than shooting, and I don’t have to worry about missing my mark and wasting my arrows.”

“Only you, Will,” Lou Ellen called from somewhere behind him, chucking a pig bomb into a large group of approaching Scythian Dracanae and cackling when seven ran away squealing. Dancing into view, the girl grabbed up her own arrows and proceeded to fence with them quite skillfully,
screaming out phrases like ‘en garde’ and ‘coup d’arret’ as she dropped the monsters around herself in a sweeping arch.

A group of Empousa stomped by and he raised an arrow to strike, jamming it down into one of their arms, only to wince when the entire head snapped off and fell to the ground without so much as fazing it. She turned on him with a deadly glare, baring her teeth angrily as her hand shot out to grab him up by the shirt and lift him a few inches into the air. Another arrow whizzed by and she dropped her hold, eyelashes fluttering softly before her body crumpled with sleep.

“That’s why we don’t cut corners,” Austin chided, hopping over sleeping lumps and racing over to him to stuff a handful of arrows into his nearly empty quiver. “You’re going to run out of luck sooner or later. Probably sooner, in your case.” Turning, he shot off another arrow at an approaching enemy with a scowl. “Now let’s get out of here, we can’t keep fighting these numbers realistically. We need backup.”

“But,” Will started, stopping short when Austin gave him an even more sinister look. Dark eyes blazed with resolution as his brother stared him down. “Nico isn’t coming, Will. You need to face facts. He’s probably too busy protecting the camp. We need to get back and help, or there won’t be a camp to protect anymore. Now come on.”

Lou Ellen tossed her last used arrow to the ground, holding up her hands toward the charging creatures and screwing up her brow in concentration. Faces went from enraged to confused, some of them stopping dead in their tracks to sniff the air while others just veered off course and continued on into the woods.

“That’ll buy us a little time,” she panted, wiping the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. “Austin is probably right, Will. I believe in him, too, but it makes the most sense that he’d stay where he’s needed. We should get back now, there’s no need to remain here anymore.”

“What did you do,” Austin asked the girl, frowning at their enemies in confusion. Even when he stepped far away from their little circle of clearing, the monsters still didn’t so much as glance his way.

“Used my power,” she replied with a shrug, eyes focusing somewhere in the distance. “Good thing crazy over there is out cold, or I wouldn’t be able to bend the mist to hide us.”

Will flicked his gaze over to the pale girl now lying face down in the grass, features just as stoic in slumber as he’d ever seen them in wakefulness. A strange feeling stabbed through his chest; part worry for the young girl he’d come to know and like, part betrayal over the actions she’d committed, even as he knew she was helpless to stop it. In a split-second decision, he took off at a run, sidestepping enemies that thankfully continued to disregard his existence.

“What are you doing,” Austin bellowed after him, sounding thoroughly vexed.

Crouching down beside the lifeless form, he placed a finger on the pulse point in her throat, breathing a sigh of relief when the steady thump responded in kind. “I can’t just leave her here, I’m taking her back with us.”

“Are you crazy,” Lou Ellen snapped, waving her arms emphatically. “She’s the reason we’re even in this mess.”

“It wasn’t like she had a choice in the matter,” Will hissed at his friend, throwing a glare at the girl for good measure. “You know that. Sometimes people make bad decisions, but that doesn’t mean
they’re bad people. And besides, how can I fault her for her power literally taking over her body? Do we just get to pick and choose which demigods are worthy of our compassion now?”

“I would,” Lou muttered, crossing arms over her chest like a petulant child. “Break the barrier that protects our camp, automatic boot out. Sorry, not sorry.” Blue eyes bore into her and she grimaced outright, throwing her hands up in exasperation. “Okay, fine! I’ll help.”

Will grinned as the girl stomped her way over to them, parting the wave of monsters with just a flick of her wrist. “Thanks, Lou Lou. I know Sabrina is going to be a bigger help to us once she wakes up again.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’ve got a soft spot for all living creatures, I’ve gathered as much. I’m surprised you aren’t out there protesting for monster’s rights as well.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” he deadpanned, smirking when his friend spluttered in response. Turning and crouching low, he picked up the unconscious girl’s legs with both arms, situating them around himself carefully. “Help me get her onto my back. I’ll carry her to camp, so you focus on bending the mist to keep us concealed.”

Lou Ellen nodded and hoisted the girl up by the underarms, grunting a little as her knees wobbled beneath her. “Man, what did this child eat? She weighs about as much as Cecil.”

“Since when have you ever tried to lift Cecil,” Will asked incredulously, thinking better of it the moment the words left his lips. “On second thought, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know what kind of trouble the two of you brew together.”

“Need a hand,” a familiar voice called out far closer than he expected was possible, causing him to yelp in surprise and fall backward in a heap in the grass. Nico stared down at him with an amused expression on his face, obsidian eyes sparkling with mirth as he offered up a hand to pull him back to his feet.

“You came back,” Will mumbled in a dreamy tone, awestruck that the son of Hades actually cared enough to return to him. Not that he didn’t trust Nico to stick by his side. It was just as Lou and Austin had said, it would make logical sense to remain in a place where he could protect the other campers.

The boy cocked a brow, looking like he was trying his best to stifle a laugh. “Did you doubt me that much,” he teased with a soft smile, hand still clasped firmly around his own. Nico made no move to drop it, so neither did he. “Knowing you, you’d stubbornly wait right here until I came for you.”

Will crinkled his nose, reluctant to agree despite it being the truth. “That thought might have crossed my mind a time or two, but we were actually just on our way back. How’s the camp holding up?”

Nico shrugged with an air of nonchalance. “Dunno, I heard Sabrina was headed your way and that’s the last I saw of anyone but monsters. I would have been here sooner, but I couldn’t shadow travel until just recently, and I got held up for a bit while I took care of a few things.” His eyes sparkled with malicious intent, the unspoken meaning clearly evident.

A warm sensation spread through Will’s chest at the other’s concern, beaming at the son of Hades with a dazzling smile. “So, it was a conscious effort on your part. You were worried about us.” Part of him wanted to say me, but he knew that was pushing into dangerous territory. Better to pretend like their kiss wasn’t at the forefront of his mind as he gazed at Nico dreamy-eyed.

The soft look replaced itself with a deep scowl and he released his hold, a subtle tinge of pink
painting the boy’s olive-skinned face as he took a large step backward. “Well, I was trying to stop this very thing from happening. It just made sense that I should assure everyone was safe after a stampede of monsters all charged in on you guys at once. I’m not that much of a dick, I wouldn’t leave you to fend for yourselves.”

Will hummed happily in response. “Glad to know we mean a bit to you, di Angelo.”

Nico rolled his eyes with a derisive snort. “Watch it, Solace, or I’ll shadow travel you to China and leave you there.”

“Okay, guys, as much as I love a gushy ending,” Lou interrupted the two of them, pointing down at the unconscious girl at her feet. “We’re kind of in the middle of a crisis right now. Don’t you think this all can wait for, oh, I don’t know, the conclusion of this fun little chapter in our lives? If we even all survive today?”

Rubbing a sheepish hand on the back of his neck, Will offered the girl an apologetic smile. “Right. We should probably get out of here and make sure the camp doesn’t get burned or trampled to the ground. If we can even stop that from happening.”

“About damn time,” Austin mumbled from his spot a few feet away, arms crossed over his chest. He wasn't looking their way, but it was clear by the slight purse of his lips he wasn't happy about being wrong.

Nico offered out a hand for Will to take, dark eyes focused out into the thick expanse of trees. “Come on, I’ll give everyone a lift. It’s probably our best bet for getting into the center of camp without hiccoughs along the way.”

Will didn’t argue for once, even as a part of him knew the other was already wearing himself thin. Just a slight brush of their fingers told him Nico was already running on empty, no doubt using his power past his breaking point without a single thought for his own well-being.

It pained him terribly, but he cupped their hands together firmly, smiling softly at the boy as Nico turned with a surprised look on his pretty face. “Take us to the infirmary, if you don’t mind,” he said with his usual cheeriness. “I think getting the group some ambrosia might help more than one of us.”

Lou Ellen grabbed onto his free hand with a slight grimace, hoisting up Sabrina’s limp arm and wiggling it about. “I’ve got hold of noodle girl over here.”

Austin obliged to join them without a single peep of protest, allowing Nico to grab onto his arm as he flashed his brother a glower that spoke volumes of his reluctance to shadow travel. Will couldn't blame him, it was perhaps the last thing he ever wanted to do again.

“Alright,” Nico murmured as their eyes locked, giving his hand a gentle squeeze of reassurance. “Here goes nothing.”

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the long wait on this, and also for not doing what I said and finishing the whole damn fic with one final chapter.
I wrote the whole of this about a week after my progress update, and then never touched the thing despite my intentions to finish this fic on/before its one year anniversary. Surprise surprise, I failed. So, if you've been reading since day one or close enough - thanks for sticking through an entire year with me! If you're new to this fic, thanks for giving it a shot, and I adore everyone for their patience and encouragement and everything. I really do love this fic and I really do want to go out with a bang. ((Am I off to a good start?))

I think this ends the short-lived Will POV I've added in the last two chapters. It was necessary to show what happened without Nico for those moments only, and I decided it was better to do everything this way than to have him running up at the last second trying to save the day.

I don't know when I'll manage to finish this, but I will get there.

Hit me up on Tumblr - Cherrypie62666

End Notes

Expect updates ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!