The Future Is A Dark Pit

by MelChan1003

Summary

The last part of the series ;) For newcomers, please read the Advent Calendar first and proceed from there, since the story won't make much sense otherwise. Thank you :)


Once more, it seems like the end of the world is just around the corner, though this time, there's no prophecy to guide them as our four guys and their team take it upon themselves to get the contract signed, while everything seems to be falling apart around them.

There are monsters, appearing out of nowhere and keen on killing.

There are the Camps, still suffering inner disputes and fighting their own battles.

There is Kyle, plotting in the background.

There are visions, but also the reluctance to share them.

And then there's Percy, Jason, Will and Nico, right in the middle of it all, trying to survive, trying to protect, trying to prevail.

But will they make it through this?
For anybody who wants to know, my Tumblr is mel-chan366
<3
Prologue: What The Future Holds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N: Hey Cupcakes!! :D Guess who's back from the dead ;)  
(Hint: It's me XD)

I hope you've all been doing well! I know it's been a while, but hopefully, it will have been worth it.

Currently, this story is still a work-in-progress, but I've decided that I'm not going to change any of the old chapters anymore, so I might as well upload them now.

Can't guarantee weekly updates, but there should be at least one chapter per month, if not even biweekly updates, depending on my schedule.

I hope you'll enjoy the story, and I apologize in advance for all the angst.

As before, I'll add trigger warnings to the beginning of the chapters. If there's anything else that ends up not getting mentioned in these warnings that you want/need mentioned, let me know and I'll change it and mark it down in future chapters, as well.
If there's a need for a watered down summary of the chapter, send me a message and I'll see what I can do.

Thank you so much for your patience and kind words.

Also: Special thanks to my amazing beta-reader, who has helped me SO MUCH with this story, and whose comments are always a delight! ;) You've become a great friend I wouldn't want to miss in my life for the life of me. I hope you know that.

I wish you all the best, and hope you'll enjoy this bundle of drama! :D

-Tári

Trigger Warnings:
- Death
- Implied/Attempted Suicide
- Angst
- Pain
- Suffering
- This is really just pure suffering. I'm sorry.

Prologue: What The Future Holds

"Will! No!"

Falling.

Will was falling.

His end began with him opening his eyes, which seemed ironic. Same as it seemed ironic that the first and last thing he saw before the darkness engulfed him, was Percy's horrorstruck face.

It was there, and then it was gone, and all Will had left was the memory of it as he fell and fell and fell.

Will wasn't sure how long he kept falling

He simply knew that he was falling, feeling it in the weightlessness of his body and the way his
hair flew around his face as he gazed up, up, up into nothingness, the light long lost and forgotten.

He knew this.
Knew what had happened.
Knew what came next.

Will closed his eyes again, feeling sorrow, pain and guilt mingling inside him, letting it take over freely.

There was nothing more to do now.
Nothing more to say.
Nothing more to dream.
Nothing more to take away.
Will kept falling until he didn't fall anymore.

*

The next thing Will knew, he was dead.
Will didn't even know when, couldn't even say whether it hurt or not.

He only knew it was dark, and then it was still dark, but he wasn't falling anymore, stuck in a place where he couldn't move either forwards or back.

But he wouldn't even have noticed that – if it wasn't for the screaming.

The screaming.

Nico's screaming.

Nico's screaming his name and the choked sob and Will's realization that this was it.

The realization Nico knew, which meant they knew, which meant it was over.

Will heard Nico screaming, heard his pleas, heard his sobbing and the disbelieving wails, full of sorrow and pain and disbelief.

He wished he could help.

Wished he could comfort.

Wished he could reach out and let him know it was okay – he had chosen this, after all.

But he couldn't move, and then the noise ebbed away, leaving nothing but darkness and silence once more.

He simply existed, his soul stuck between worlds, in a place that shouldn't exist.

Will closed his eyes.

*

When Will opened his eyes, he was gazing at a fire in front of him, but he wasn't surprised or afraid.

He wasn't feeling anything, to be honest, other than a form of apathy and detachment he had never known before now.

Will knew he was dead.
Will didn't know why he was here.
He turned his head, the feeling strange and foreign, as if he hadn't done so for millions of years.

His eyes fell on three people that were sitting together in front of the fire, their expressions blank and their gazes empty.

His.
They were his.

Will knew this, same as he knew his own name, and he reached out a hand automatically, remembering a time when he could comfort them and take away their pain.

But he couldn't reach them, and could only watch as they suffered, unable to let them know it was okay.

Will lowered his hand again, watching.

Watching Jason, with his hands on his knees and his gaze on the fire, dark rings under his eyes and his shoulders hunched and drawn together, making him seem so much smaller, powerless, and weak.

Watching Nico, with his arms wrapped around himself and his gaze bleak and tired, staring into the flames and whispering words under his breath nobody but he knew, trying to call Will's soul to him, trying to save him from the fate he had bestowed on himself, trying to get him out of wherever he was – but it was for naught, Will knew it.

Nico knew it, too, but he didn't want to accept it.

Then Will was watching Percy, with the guilt pouring from him so strongly it was visible to anyone who glanced his way, his gaze hollow and dead, his fingers idly picking at the healing skin on his injured hand – until he tore it open again, blood dripping to the ground between his feet.

Will looked back at Jason and Nico, trying to tell them to look.

They were too far apart.

They needed closeness, reassurance, love.
They needed comfort.

Why weren't they comforting one another?

He looked back at Jason, but Jason just stared into the fire, his body there, but his mind far away, in a place where happiness was more than just a word, and the world was full of colors.

He looked back at Nico, but Nico kept his gaze on the flames, trying to hold onto his last thread of hope, unable to let go, unable to move on, unable to accept.

He looked back at Percy, but Percy was lost to him, taking solace in the pain that reminded him of his mistakes, his faults, his guilt.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

*

Will watched them.

That was all he could do.

He watched them as they suffered through the days, travelling together through a world that seemed wrong.

He watched them as they suffered through the nights, holding onto each other always a little too tightly, kissing a little too harshly, touching a little too aggressively.

He watched them as they suffered through the fights, attacking and defending, but mostly just
trying to keep each other alive, unable to bear the thought of another loss.

There were so many fights.

Will watched as Percy threw himself into battle, always going all out, always all or nothing, his injury never healing, only getting worse, but the pain was meaningless to him now, not enough to erase the screaming inside his head.

Will watched as Jason rushed after him, fighting by his side and making sure he didn't get hurt, same as he made sure Percy didn't hurt himself, his promise to Will always at the forefront of his mind.

Will watched as Nico went savage in the midst of the enemy, tearing apart anything that crossed his path, no matter if monster or demigod, no trace of mercy in his eyes when he slaughtered them, disregarding their pleas and snarling and their begging for their lives.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

This was far from how it was supposed to be.

* 

Will watched as they returned to Camp, their numbers reduced and their spirits crushed.

He watched as the other campers came running, surprised by their arrival, and Will knew this was because his guys had stopped giving updates on their whereabouts.

He watched as joy turned to horror when they learned of the losses.

He watched as Percy raised his sword against Annabeth, the confrontation so sudden not even she had seen it coming, though she didn't seem too surprised, holding very still as the blade pressed against her neck.

He watched as Percy accused her of knowing all along, and he watched as she confirmed it under tears, whispering she had thought Will would tell – that he had been supposed to tell – and that he had forbidden her from telling them, that it wasn't her secret to tell.

She told them that, and she told them they should have known, too. That Will had made it obvious, that he had kept leaving hints, as if he had wanted them to find out, that it had even been in his song for them, and that they had simply been too blind and ignorant to see.

He watched as Percy battled his inner demons, denying her statements and baring his teeth as he increased the pressure against her neck, but she wasn't afraid of him.

He watched as Jason and Nico first told him to let her go, then fell silent once her words got through to them as well.

He watched as Percy ultimately pulled away from her without harming her, just to turn around and disappear towards the cabins, the campers around him dispersing to give him space, their expressions full of shock and fear.

Will followed, same as Nico and Jason did.

Will watched them enter their cabin, and he watched as Percy let out a loud, pained howl, and the water fountain in the corner exploded in reaction to his pain.

He watched as Nico and Jason tried to calm him, wrapped around him on the ground where he sat and rocked back and forth, trying to keep his sanity.

He watched as they spent their own eternity there, unable to go near Will's scattered belongings – his photo albums, his favorite movies, his clothing, his books he had left, his supplies in the bathroom.

He watched as they caved in and left at long last, unable to bear the remnants of Will's presence in the room, with Will's scent still on the sheets and in the air ever so faintly, and the memories too
much to cope with right now.

He watched as they were confronted by Alec, his face full of accusation and pain, and he watched them looking away in shame and guilt, confirming his unspoken words.

He watched his brother struggling with the news, watched him staggering backwards and stare at them, watched the tears streaming down his cheeks and dripping to the ground.

He watched as his guys stepped away from him without speaking, unable to look at him, unable to do anything but retreat.

Will followed his boyfriends, unable to do anything else, and he heard Alec crying out behind them, demanding an explanation, anything, anything to take the pain away that spread through him, but his guys couldn't do anything, and they closed the door of Jason's cabin behind them without another word.

Will watched as they stood there and listened to the sounds of Alec's crying, his frantic wailing, his screaming at their closed door, and they didn't move, didn't speak, lost in their own world of mourning and despair as Alec let the rest of the Camp know of Will's death with his loud mourning.

Will reached out for them again, trying to comfort, trying to ease their pain, encouraging them to let go and move on, knowing that this was what he would have done if he were still alive, and the reaction was automatic.

But he couldn't reach them, and they kept on suffering.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

Something must have gone wrong.

* 

Will watched them preparing his burial, even though there was no body, even though Nico hadn't found his soul.

His siblings had insisted on it, wishing to pay him their last respect.

Will watched them as they tried so hard not to blame his guys, knowing Will wouldn't have wanted it.

Will also watched his guys distancing themselves from the others, already blaming themselves enough.

He watched as Nico forced himself through the procedures, his voice cracking and his eyes full of pain and unshed tears, Jason right beside him to help him through it.

He watched his friends and family standing together, speaking words too kind for him, giving praise where none was due, telling the world of the Will they had known, and a Will he had never known he had been.

Will watched them mourn together as they burnt his shroud, the colors beautiful and vibrant.

Will watched as Percy pulled away and left the moment Nico and Jason didn't pay attention.

He followed him automatically.

He followed him, and they found their way to the sea shore, Percy stopping in front of it to cry by himself, the pain too great and the guilt too much for him to cope.

Will looked around for his guys – they should be here, too, should reach out to Percy and get him out of this.

But they weren't there, and Percy knew it just as he did.
Will watched as Percy stepped forward and into the water, his expression dead and his posture defeated.

Will watched as Percy kept on walking until he was engulfed by the water, but he wasn't controlling it, and he wasn't allowing his powers to help him.

Will knew what he was going to do.
Will also knew that if he were alive, this would tear him apart from the inside, but it had been so long since he had felt anything but apathy.

But even so, that didn't mean he could just let this happen.

This wasn't meant to happen.

He tried to reach out to Percy to stop this, then tried to call out for Jason and Nico, but nobody heard him, and Percy was drowning himself, though he shouldn't have been able to drown.

He watched as Percy struggled, and he watched as Dylan rushed past Will and into the water, knowing what was happening, because he had seen him leave, and he wasn't stupid.

Will followed him into the water, watching Percy struggle against Dylan's hold, the help only aggravating him and making him try to drown Dylan, too – but then Bill was there and helped Dylan, and, in his agony, Percy forgot he could control water.

Will watched them pull his Percy out onto dry sand, and he watched Dylan slapping Percy across the face, screaming into his face this was not what Will would have wanted.

He was right.

It was not.

Will watched as he kept shaking Percy by his shoulders, yelling at him to get a grip on himself and keep going, because anything else would be an insult to Will's memory.

He watched as Percy shoved him off him so harshly it nearly broke Dylan's shoulder, but Bill caught his fall.

He watched Percy snarl at them to stay out of this, that they knew nothing of what had happened or what he was going through, and he watched Dylan snap back at him without fear, telling him Will had chosen to die so they could live, that it was clear as day, and that he knew Percy would have done the same in his position.

Percy would have.

Percy didn't reply to him, the words breaking his heart even as he refused to comprehend them, unwilling to accept the fate Will had chosen for himself.

Will watched as Percy turned around and left, locking himself in the bathroom of his cabin to take a scalding hot shower that only pained him further, but he did it to be closer to Will, to remember how it had been, how they had been, how they would never be again, how nothing would ever be again.

Will watched as Jason and Nico pulled him out from under the spray and took him to bed, not knowing of his suicide attempt, but knowing he was suffering.

They treated his burnt skin with Will's cream, the silence in the cabin loud, and the embrace not warm enough to break the walls they were building.

Will watched as days of suffering turned into weeks, then into a month, then into two.

The pain dulled, but the sorrow remained, and even if they forced a smile sometimes, it wasn't the same.

They weren't okay.
Nothing was okay.
This wasn't how it was meant to be.

Why wasn't it?

Will watched them as they kept on going, kept on living, kept on surviving.

He watched Percy acting as if he was fine, just to provoke a fight where none was necessary, always hoping for each fight to be his last.

He watched Nico remaining silent and distanced, still calling out to Will's soul sometimes.

But even Nico had to admit defeat eventually, though it weighed heavy on his mind.

He watched Jason struggling to be there for them and support them through it all, laying awake at night with them tightly pressed into his sides as he let the tears fall; tears they weren't allowed to see, because he had to be strong for them now.

Will watched as the monsters started attacking the Camp and his guys went to defend it.

Will watched as they cut down the enemy cruelly and mercilessly.

Will watched as the campers grew scared of them, fearing they would stop differentiating between friend and foe.

Will watched as even closer friends like Annabeth and Piper retreated, unable to take the viciousness of their actions and not knowing how to reach out to them anymore.

Will watched as his siblings pushed themselves to their limits to reach out to his guys, healing them, helping them, trying to support them and speak up for them around others, but it was futile.

Will watched as his siblings gave up after Kayla and Austin fell.

Will watched as his guys kept to themselves, their days reduced to training, fighting and seeking solace in one another without ever finding it the way they had before.

Two months turned into three, turned into four.

This wasn't how it was meant to be.

Where had he gone wrong?

Will watched as all hell broke loose, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

He watched as Thalia's Pine fell along with Peleus, same as he watched Calypso fall, and he watched as monsters and demigods alike stormed into Camp Half-Blood.

Will followed his guys.

He watched as his guys fought together, battling the enemy with all they had.

He watched as his guys began to get separated from the other campers.

He watched as his guys found themselves having to make a decision.

He closed his eyes as Percy insisted he would hold the line and they should go.

He kept his eyes closed as he heard Nico and Jason argue, then reluctantly agree.

He opened his eyes to look into the face of his beautiful, wonderful boyfriend, who looked through him at the Camp, at his boyfriends, at his home.
He watched him turn his back to it all and face the monsters, wading into the water to call upon his powers.

Will watched him go.

He followed Nico and Jason, trying to reach out to them and tell them to go back, that they shouldn't split up, that they had to stick together, but they couldn't hear him, and they didn't know what he knew.

The sea was rising behind them to do Percy's bidding, the waters around Camp bending to his will and claiming anything in its path of destruction as Percy let his powers run wild.

Nico and Jason kept on fighting side by side, their expressions grim and their hearts full of fear, but there was a fight to win, and Percy was strong. Percy would make it.

Will gave up when the water began to collect and a loud humming filled the air.

Will closed his eyes as the sea seemed to explode, tearing everything close by down with it, the humming fading into a mournful tune as the sea stilled once more, as if never disturbed.

Will didn't look as he heard Nico cry out Percy's name and heard Jason holding him back from running towards the water, telling him it was too late, because Jason knew just as Will knew.

This wasn't how it was meant to be.

Will opened his eyes again, watching Nico's body trembling in Jason's arms, his eyes wide open and his mind blank with pain and rage.

Will watched him shove Jason away and throw himself at the monsters, the ground cracking open at his feet and the darkness dragging anything into the depths of hell it could grasp.

Will watched Jason trying to follow him, unable to let Nico go, too.

Will watched Jason protecting Nico from anything and everything he could.

Will watched Jason fighting with tears streaming down his face and the storm manifesting over the Camp, claiming the monsters Nico's shadows didn't reach.

He watched the monsters picking the weaker of the two.

Will didn't want to watch as they threw themselves on top of his Jason, tearing him down with them and not stopping even as he tried to cut his way free, even as Nico screamed and tried to get to him.

Will didn't want to watch as they kept attacking until the lightning bolts stopped hitting the Camp.

Will didn't want to watch as Nico cried out in agony, so loud and miserable the beings around him cowered and covered their ears.

The creatures squeezed their eyes shut, and the back of their eyelids was the last thing they saw before they dissolved into dust as Nico destroyed them.

Will swayed where he stood, staring helplessly as everything was falling apart, when there was nothing he could do to stop it.

He stumbled forwards, trying to reach out to Nico, trying to tell him to go, to at least save one life.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go...

This wasn't how it should end.

Will tried to touch him, to speak to him, to make himself heard, but Nico stood in the middle of Camp with darkness swirling around and inside him, realization slowly setting in that he was the last one left of the four of them.
The realization that they had all left him now.
The realization that he was alone.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.
This couldn't be how it ended.

The ground rumbled, shifted, moved and tore open, but it wasn't Nico's doing.

Will didn't know how he knew what it was, but he did.

He remembered fear, then.
He remembered it so vividly, he thought he could even feel it as he yelled at Nico to go, to run, to leave, to abandon Camp, to abandon it all and live.

But Nico raised his weapon and braced himself, the remnants of his home behind him.

Will couldn't bear to watch, but he couldn't look away, either.

This was his fault.

He had forced this fate onto them.

Will knew this, the same way he knew what would happen next, and Nico looked so small and weak in comparison to what broke through the ground and loomed over him, over them, over the Camp.

Nico looked around at him, though he couldn't see him, and Will watched his eyes fill with dead acceptance, before he rushed forward with his sword, even though all knew it was for naught.

Will watched his Nico die.

And the world died with him.

This was all Will's fault.

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Will sat bolt upright in bed in an instant, a choked sob escaping his lips as his hands clapped over his mouth to prevent a scream.

No.

That couldn't be…but…why…how…?!

Will felt his heart pounding in his chest, agonizing pain spreading throughout his body as if to catch up on all the things he hadn't been able to feel in his dead state.

He flinched and clutched his chest, falling forward slightly as he tried to catch his breath, his bearings, himself.

This couldn't be true.

It couldn't be.

Why?

They were meant to be okay! They were meant to live!

He was supposed to die, but they were supposed to survive and get through this hell and have a life together in peace and harmony.

They were supposed to go to New Rome together, find a nice house near a lake or sea, have some kids, live to old age, be happy!

They were supposed to live and live and live!

Why did they have to die?!
Why did they have to suffer so much?!

It was just him, why would they mourn him like that?

He wasn't Nico, he wasn't Percy, he wasn't Jason. They should have been fine without him.

They could have been fine without him.

They had chosen not to be fine without him.

Will whimpered and wrapped his arms around himself, trying to will the images away, trying to find a loophole, trying to find a solution to a problem he hadn't expected to exist.

"Will?" A sleep-laced voice slurred, and he lifted his head slightly to look at Percy, who shuffled closer and propped his head up to reach out to Will with one tentative hand.

"Hey, what's wrong, sun-bug?"

Everything.

Everything was wrong.

It was all completely wrong.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

"Just a nightmare, love. Go back to sleep." He replied weakly, but his boyfriend didn't listen, same as they hadn't listened when he had tried to get them to move on and let him go.

Instead, Percy shook his head and stroked along his bent leg gently, motioning with his other hand for Will to lay down with him.

Will didn't feel like laying down.

He felt like screaming and throwing something at the Fates for doing this to him, to them, to the world, to everyone and everything.

"It's okay. I'm totally awake, anyways. Want to talk about it?" Percy offered, though he still slurred his words and his eyelids kept falling shut, showing he was far from 'totally awake'.

"I really just want to forget it all, to be honest." He replied with a small huff, wishing life could be that simple.

Percy hummed quietly, and for a moment, he thought his boyfriend had gone back to sleep.

But then, he tugged on his leg and clicked his tongue.

"Lay down. I'll massage you?"

What a kind offer.

Will didn't really want a massage, though.

"Kiss me, instead." He suggested, and Percy forced an eye open to squint at Will with a frown.

"That bad?" He asked, an odd tone to his voice, but Will only shrugged evasively.

Then he reconsidered and nodded.

"Make me forget?" He asked, hoping against hope, and Percy studied him a moment longer.

Then he nodded and motioned for Will to lay down with him for the third time.

This time, Will obeyed, rewarded by Percy's skilled tongue and even more skilled fingers, before he was swept off his feet entirely by his wonderful, perfect boyfriend.
This couldn't be how it ended.  
This couldn't be what was in store for his guys.

There was no way Will could let that happen.  

There was no way Will *would* let that happen.

Fuck no.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:
http://sta.sh/055hx09e5r9 - perfect depiction of Kyle ;)  
http://sta.sh/0h2pt887zfi - adorable Will with flowers <3 
http://sta.sh/02yxy10gpdx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3 
http://sta.sh/0qy6lka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3  
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepe - Jason realizing how cute Will is ;)  
http://sta.sh/01m8r04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will ;)  
http://sta.sh/01b1irqkgjhb - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3 

- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well ;)

https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/148608464261/fanart-for-mel-chan366-s-awk-  
- A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater <3 This is and will probably always be my background, ljs  
- Will with blanket <3 
https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/150587339536/more-fanart-of-mel-chan366-s-  
- THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE FROM THE LAST SEQUEL!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!  
https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you  
- A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy, challenge-loving dorks <3 

http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patreon-tari  
- Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3 
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163931701986/just-finished-a-nico-di-  
- Nico in his winter outfit :')  
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-commission-for-my-amazing-patron  
- Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD 
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163998940481/jason-grace-gracing-us-  
- Jason and the leather jacket ;) 

I also commissioned a few pieces from the amazing Ari/Bex ;)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-
- New Years from Advent Calendar times ;)
- Our dorks in Christmas sweaters!! :D
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-for-mel-chan366
- The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;) http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-mel-chan366-now-i
- Ice cream time ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/156557714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-chan366-3-3-some
- <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160990996944/another-of-my-may-madness-commissions-a-fabulous
- The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss ;) http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-ever-fabulous
- ...Boxer Shorts XD ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-mel-chan366-3
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love them too much not to share them :)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-commission-for
- Jercy Soft Kiss <3

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my firstborn child :) (Mostly because there won't be one. Sorry. But you can have a cookie?)
Chapter Notes

Check the end for Fanart links <3
Will be updated whenever there's more :)

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my firstborn child :) (Mostly because there won't be one. Sorry. But you can have a cookie?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A/N: Hey Cupcakes! :D

Here the promised update :) Thank you SO MUCH for all the lovely feedback, I didn't even know how much I missed reading from you guys until I saw my inbox mere HOURS after uploading (seriously, you're the best!)

I sure hope the story will have been worth the wait.

Thank you so much, and I wish you all the best!
-Tári

No Trigger Warnings for this chapter, but there's mentions/implications (injuries, signs of depression, battles, Will being an idiot)

Chapter 01: Such Lovely Team Spirit

"He did what?" Percy called over in disbelief as he slashed through the empousai and turned around to stop the hellhound from tearing into his already injured shoulder.

"Stop sounding so surprised, Percy. You were the one who had me listen to the audiobooks, I'm pretty sure you know the whole story by heart already." Nico replied with a huff and a roll of his eyes, helping his boyfriend as they fought back to back against the horde of monsters that had jumped at their group out of nowhere.

It was disturbing how fast one got used to surprise attacks by vicious monsters.

But after a week on the move, this now more struck him as a quiet day, seeing as they had gotten through the majority of it without disturbance.

To be expected that the one moment they weren't in the middle of a city, they'd be ambushed.

Gods, how sick and tired Nico was of the monsters, already.

"But I forgot about that part! Did he really die? I thought he had some kids by the end of the story!" Percy wailed and they stabbed the hellhound in unison, watching it disintegrate before they searched for their next foes, rushing to help the rest of their small team.

"Guys, could you discuss Harry Potter after we are done killing these monsters?" Hannah yelled, her blonde hair flying as she jumped out of the way of the next hellhound, thus giving Nico and Percy an opening to take it down together.

When Nico glanced back at her, she already had her hair in order again and stuck her tongue out at Ash, who was busy laughing and teasing her about her make-up being ruined.

"Guys, focus!" Nico called towards them, then lost sight of them as he was forced to dive behind
a bush to escape a stray arrow.

Who had shot that??

"Liam! Stop shooting my boyfriend, damn it!" Percy yelled, and Nico had his culprit.

"Sorry! I was trying to save Hannah from the-..." Liam called apologetically, then broke off with a squeak, and Nico was pretty sure Hannah would have to be the one saving him.

(Again.)

"Jason, how many more?" Nico called, looking upwards in hopes to spot his boyfriend somewhere, but Jason was nowhere to be seen, though he knew he was there somewhere.

One of the venti soaring down towards Ash was struck by lightning, which confirmed Nico's belief Jason was still close by – and a moment later, he appeared next to Percy, seeming a bit out of breath, but other wisely fine.

"These should be all." He said, before turning around and stabbing another empousai, the same moment Percy slashed at it.

The monster disintegrated with a hiss and its fangs bared at them in a snarl, but they paid it no mind, already looking around for any left-over monsters.

"Guys!" Liam squeaked again, the son of Hecate running towards them with his brown eyes full of fear – while the smallest hellhound Nico had ever seen gave chase.

"Aww. Look, it almost looks like a puppy." Percy cooed, while Hannah already took off to save the boy.

The 'puppy' turned out to be the most vicious creature Nico had ever witnessed, and the three of them stood and watched a little awed how fast and agile it was as it zigzagged between Ash and Hannah and tried to snap at Liam's legs, before it turned around and nearly bit Hannah's face off.

"Think we should help?" Jason asked hesitantly, since their group members usually didn't appreciate them meddling with their monsters unless absolutely necessary – a means of training, as they put it.

Nico watched a moment longer, then sighed when Ash and Hannah were at each other's throats, Ash laughing and Hannah in another rage fit, while the hellhound watched in confusion, then took off after Liam again, who was near tears.

"I'll take care of it." Percy muttered with a sigh and took off, and Jason and Nico shared a pointed look.

"Your students." Nico then stated, and Jason let out a small groan.

"Come on, I reprimanded them yesterday. They always listen to you so much better, Nico..." His boyfriend complained, a clear sign how exhausted he was, but Nico was more exhausted than that, and if he had to deal with another argument between Hannah and Ash, he would tie them together and hang them over the fire tonight, in hopes that would make them come to their senses.

Maybe he shouldn't become a parent, after all.

One week with a bunch of teenagers was enough to make one reconsider a lot.

Had he been that moody and childishly rebellious, too?

Well, at least he hadn't tried to pick fights on purpose all the while, like Ash and Hannah were.

Mostly with each other, too.

"Nope. Your students. You decided they should come with, so you take care of them." Nico replied mercilessly, and Jason let out a deep sigh, before leaning down to give him a peck on the cheek, then he trudged off towards the two demigods – which were now on the ground, trying to
apparently throttle each other.

What lovely team spirit.

"You're just jealous because I look hotter than you!" He heard Ash yell, and Nico rolled his eyes, before he turned around and hurried towards the medic tent to check on Will and the rest of their team.

Sara left the tent just as he reached it, grimacing as she limped, though she put on a brave face once she noticed him.

"Hey. You should probably wait a minute or so. He's fixing Andrew's leg right now, and Rin's side is bleeding out." The daughter of Ares said, picking some dirt out of her short black hair, and he gave a nod to show he had heard, though he still rushed into the tent, anyways.

He simply had to check on Will and see whether he was alright, no matter whether he was busy or not.

Especially since Will seemed something like a main target ever time there was an attack and had already been injured before, just to cover up said injury until all the other healing of the rest of their team was done.

So, yes, Nico was intent on checking up on him as soon as the situation allowed – which was now.

"I'm fine." Will called the moment he entered the tent, and Nico knew immediately that he wasn't fine.

He took a deep breath and ground his teeth as he rushed over to help press the cloth to Rin's side, while his boyfriend moved back and forth between her and Andrew, who was pale as a sheet and clutched his thigh, shortly above what looked like a makeshift-cast.

"Thanks for the help. How are the others?" Will said in his doctor-voice, but Nico caught him limping ever so slightly when he moved back to Rin to take another look at the wound, before nodding to himself and moving towards one of the drawers lining the wall.

"Ash and Hannah are at each other's throats again, but otherwise fine. You'll have to check on Percy and Jason, yourself. What happened to your leg?" Nico replied in a stern voice, showing he wasn't going to take any of Will's excuses, should he think of any.

His boyfriend halted in his movement of pressing his hands to Rin's side, then let out a small sigh of defeat.

"Just a bruise, I promise. There was this tiny hellhound that came bounding past me when I got Rin inside. I saw it too late, though it luckily wasn't aiming for me." Will explained, and Nico studied Will's leg from the side, trying to gauge how big the hellhound had been and how much damage it might have done.

"Let me take a look at it, later." He said resolutely, and Will huffed to himself, before a small smile hushed over his face.

"You just want to see me naked, admit it." He teased, and Rin promptly groaned loudly and put her hands over her ears.

"Please. Don't make me hear this. You're all disgusting." The daughter of Nemesis grumbled, but Will merely cackled and winked at her, which she replied to with an annoyed roll of her eyes.

Nico sighed and leaned sideways to press his lips to Will's cheek, even if his lips were split and they were both full of dust and dirt.

Rin made a gagging sound, but since she was disgusted by every human walking the earth, they ignored her.

"Just let me take a look at it later, sunshine. And don't forget to check up on the guys." He reminded Will, and his boyfriend made a face as he bandaged Rin's side.
"I still don't see why you can't just all come visit me here so I can check on you right after battle, same as everybody else does." He grumbled, but Nico was sure he knew just fine why they were doing this.

It was their insurance that Will would actually leave the medic tent and join them in their bed.

Because, sadly, they had had to find out the hard way Will more often than not stayed the night in said medic tent to keep watch over their injured team mates or prepare creams or bandages or whatnot, sleep and rest be damned, unless they picked him up (again) or other wisely tricked him into going to them – like by indicating one of them was hurt, but refusing to visit him in the medic tent.

It was shameful it had taken them three whole days to realize their boyfriend wasn't spending his nights with them anymore, but that had only made them all the more determined to not let it happen again.

"So, this should be it. Rin, tell Ash they should set up your tent, so you can lay down a bit and rest your side. It should be good by tomorrow, but if you need anything, you know where to find me." Will summed up, and Rin gave a small nod as her pale fingers felt for her now bandaged side.

Nico shot his boyfriend a pointed look.

"You better mean our tent with that, sweetheart."

Will wasted no time in beaming at him brightly, which had Nico grumbling.

"Of course, love. What else would I mean?"

Mhm, sure.

Rin made another gagging sound and pushed herself between and past them.

"Whatever. Thanks."

Cheerful as usual.

"Need help with Andrew, too?" Nico asked, glancing over towards the blonde, who was still bent over and clutched his thigh with a pained expression, though he hadn't said anything so far.

"Nope, I'm good. I already fixed most of his leg, but the process is pretty painful, since Andrew refuses to take any of my super awesome medication." Will said loudly, and Andrew lifted his head slightly to glower at him in defiance.

"You haven't told me what's in them! What if I'm allergic? Plus, I doubt those drugs would be legal by any standards, so there's no way I'm going to take that stuff." The son of Athena grumbled through gritted teeth, and Will rolled his eyes.

"You do know I'm able to tell what you're allergic to, right? You have nothing to fear. Still, I have kept you alive for a whole week, do you really think I'll throw my hard work out of the window just to poison you now?" He deadpanned, and Nico watched them bicker for a moment longer, before excusing himself with another kiss to Will's cheek.

"I gotta go. Make sure to check on us later, okay?" He said quickly, knowing his guys would become too restless if he stayed here for too long, and he had better things to do than worry them unnecessarily.

"Sure thing, babe. Send Hannah and Ash once they're done getting reprimanded. Once Andrew takes his meds and his bones grew together properly again, I'll make sure to meet you, 'kay?"

Nico nodded and let Will pull him back for another peck, then a kiss on the lips.

Then, Will put their foreheads together and closed his eyes, and Nico knew from the concentrated look on his face that he was taking Nico's values, even though he should know already Nico was unharmed.
"Okay. Don't forget." He said quietly, and Will pulled away.

"Would I ever? Now, shoo with you. Give them some kisses from me." His boyfriend said with a small smile and a wink, but Nico merely huffed and trudged off towards the tent exit.

"Give them those, yourself." He replied, and Will's sigh told him he had expected that reply.

Hopefully, Will would come tonight.

Nico glanced back at his boyfriend, catching sight of a tired, exhausted look Will undoubtedly hadn't wanted him to see.

He wished they had at least one more healer to help Will, or at least less injuries.

With a heavy heart, he left to look for his other two boyfriends.

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"None of this would have happened if you hadn't insisted we take that one stupid turn! We lost three days because of you!" Hannah exclaimed and shoved Ash again, and Jason pinched the bridge of his nose, while Percy had one arm on his shoulder and watched Ash and Hannah argue with an amused look on his face.

"Guys, cut it out, already. You're supposed to fight the enemy, not each other." He tried to reason, but that merely made both of them glower at him defiantly.

"They are my enemy!" Hannah insisted and pointed at Ash, who snorted and gazed at their fingernails with utmost interest.

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, princess. Why don't you just admit you've got the hots for me and be done with it?" They said, then turned around and left, apparently done with the conversation.

Needless to say, Hannah seethed.

"I do not! I'm a lesbian, you bitch!" She yelled after Ash, but Ash made no move to show they had heard.

Jason wanted to tell her to just let it go and ignore them, but Percy patted him on the shoulder and spoke, instead.

"You know they're right, Hannah." He said with an ill-concealed grin, and Jason frowned at him, then back at Hannah, just to notice her looking after Ash with a conflicted look on her face.

Then, the daughter of Mars snapped her head around at them, glaring daggers at Percy as her nostrils flared, her pink lips pressing together into a dangerous line.

"Fuck you, Jackson! You're the last person I want to hear that from!" She snapped at him viciously and he raised his hands in a soothing manner, though his lips twitched the moment she turned away from them and rushed off without another word.

"Man, I sure am glad we didn't have such problems." Percy said with a small huff as he watched her go, and Jason rubbed at his face with a heavy sigh.

"I don't know what's gotten into them. Usually, Hannah is rather peaceful and easy to be around. I didn't know adding Ash to the team would change the dynamic quite this much." He mumbled, but Percy waved off.

" Eh, they'll get over it. Give it a few more weeks, and they'll surely grow on each other." Percy reasoned, and Jason hoped he was right.

They spotted Nico leaving the medic's tent and immediately perked up, glad when he didn't immediately call for them and didn't look too troubled, since that meant nothing too bad had happened, neither to Will or the team.
"Hannah, go visit Will for the check-up. Where's Ash?" They heard him ask as Hannah passed him, and the daughter of Mars gave a derisive snort, but didn't reply.

Nico's jaw set, but since she moved towards the medic tent, he didn't say anything, instead moving towards Jason and Percy.

"He seems to have an injury at his leg, but claims it's nothing serious. I told him to meet us later. Who wants to have the first night shift? Andrew is out of commission, this time because of his leg, so I don't think we'll manage any more travelling today." Nico explained, not beating around the bush, as always, though he did get on tiptoes to give Jason a peck on the lips and did the same with Percy, before looking at them expectantly.

Jason missed the lazy ease they had had back at Camp, when they could kiss for hours and just be close to each other and let the rest of the world take care of itself.

Now, they had nothing but quick pecks and kisses and a few touches, before talking business and planning and making the most of their free time to get on with their journey.

They still hadn't reached Washington DC.

In the beginning, they had made good progress and covered quite some distance, but then the monster attacks had started, and from there, things had only kept slowing down as monsters attacked more and more frequently the further they got.

Then again, in the beginning, Will had still healed them in a way that had them fixed and ready to continue immediately, but he had been forced to stop doing that once it showed the attacks were too frequent for him to keep that up, since it tired him out too greatly too quickly.

Jason was glad he had at least been honest about that.

"I will take the first shift, no problem." He offered, but Nico shook his head promptly.

"Not you. You already took that shift the past two days and I know you barely slept afterwards."

Jason made a face, then frowned.

"Wait, how would you know? You had the second shift both times." He asked, but when Nico glanced at Percy, and Percy looked away with a sheepish look on the face, Jason had his answer.

Great, so Percy had noticed he had been awake and he had told on him.

How kind of him.

Percy stuck his tongue out at him, and Jason ruffled through his hair in retaliation.

"I'll ask Ash if they can take over first shift. You should rest, Jason. Percy, what's wrong with your shoulder?" Nico asked with a small frown, and Jason studied Percy from the side in surprise, only now noticing he held his arm oddly.

Percy waved off with his other hand.

"It's just a scratch. Will is gonna patch me up later, no worries."

Nico's expression turned conflicted for a moment, but then he sighed and shook his head.

"If it hurts too much, go visit him now, Percy, okay? I'll go find Ash to tell them about the shift, so you two can go ahead and set up our tent, yeah?" He told them, and they both nodded in agreement, before Nico already made to leave.

Jason instinctively wanted to hold him back, wishing he could do something against the tension in Nico's body or his serious gaze, once more missing the ease they were used to.

But, right now, they didn't have the time to indulge in petty things like that, so he let him go, looking after him with a concerned look – before he felt Percy's fingers stroking along his arm tentatively.
"Don't look like that, Sparky. He'll be back in no time. Plus, if Ash actually takes the first shift, chances are we're all going to have some time to ourselves in the tent. All four of us and just the four of us. Sounds awesome, doesn't it?" Percy said brightly, all smiles and gleaming eyes, and Jason found himself leaning against him automatically, glad when Percy put his uninjured arm around him and tugged him to his side, his lips pressing against Jason's shoulder.

Jason soaked up the comfort like a sponge, feeling like he could finally breathe again.

"Yeah, you're right. That does sound lovely. Come on, let's go." He said quietly, before leaning down to give Percy a chaste kiss on the lips, even if both of them were full of dirt and dried blood.

He wished their tent could have a bathroom or at least a sink in it, but, unfortunately, they still had to stop by public restrooms for that, and currently, they weren't even completely sure of where they actually were, much less where the next restroom was.

So, showers and the like would have to wait, much like everything else.

Thanks to Leo and the gifted tents, they had been able to stock up on non-perishables and utensils for cooking and the like, but that didn't mean they particularly enjoyed eating the same thing all week long, or live off plain water they kept refilling at restrooms whenever they found drinkable water.

Nico had offered countless times to stop by a supermarket for whatever tickled their fancy, but the problem was that they never seemed to find a supermarket – and when they did, it was either closed, or they were ambushed by monsters and had to get away from mortals to avoid causing a scene, their supermarket right back out of reach.

Jason tugged Percy after him, lacing their fingers together as they went, and his boyfriend put on the very same smile he always had whenever they held hands, giving Jason something to hold onto and cherish.

It was one of the few things that hadn't changed.

The four of them were still the same, of course, but after a week of traveling together with others, their dynamic had changed a lot.

Before, the four of them had been equals in all aspects, which had allowed them to let their insecurities show and ask for affection whenever they needed some – even if they had rarely had to ask for any, since they had also been able to give all the affection they wanted.

Now, though, it wasn't just the four of them – they were part of a team of ten, and a leader was necessary to keep everything smooth.

In this case, everybody had assumed Jason to take that role again, but this week had shown Nico had become a sort of leader figure as well, stepping in whenever Jason was faltering or ran into issues with their team members and their sudden dislike for each other (like with Hannah and Ash).

Somehow, since Jason had never had a reason to truly reprimand them before, they didn't take him quite as seriously as Nico, who had shown to be rather resolute and authoritative if he wanted to be.

Jason would have thought Will would be the most talkative and befriend everybody in a heartbeat – and in a way, he had been that way in the beginning – but for reasons unknown to Jason, their boyfriend had more kept to himself than anything else after a few days into their travels.

He still talked to them, and if he ever showed his face in their tent, he always searched for physical contact and snuck into the middle of their embrace, but other than that, he rarely found Will chatting with any of their other team members anymore, unless they were stuck in the medic tent.

Percy wasn't much better, either, though.

He had tried to befriend the kids in, but had quickly given up with those apprehensive of him, instead rather sticking to Nico and Jason – not that Jason had minded, but it had struck him as
Then again, he also found it unusual for Percy to remain so silent whenever the group sat together for meals or planning.

To be honest, Percy seemed awfully quiet these days, which usually had Jason worrying and remembering Will's warning from oh-so-long ago.

But right now, he seemed perfectly fine to Jason, so that was at least something.

One had to appreciate the small victories as well, after all.

"Jason, are you listening?" Percy asked with a tilt of his head, and Jason blinked.

He…hadn't even noticed Percy had been talking.

Oops.

"Sorry, what was that?" He asked awkwardly as they set up their tent with practiced ease, and Percy's lips twitched, showing he at least wasn't upset with Jason for not paying attention.

"You were brooding again, huh? Will is not gonna be happy if you do that too much, you know how he gets."

Yes, Jason did know.

But in order to chide Jason for overthinking things again, Will first had to show up more regularly, and until that happened, Jason was going to brood all he wanted.

Percy stopped him from entering their tent, his hands cupping his face and stroking over his cheeks adoringly, his sea-green eyes gleaming with affection.

He was about to speak, when they heard Hannah screaming bloody murder and they pulled away from each other to look around for any danger – just to see Ash dashing away from Hannah's tent with an evil cackle, showing there was no danger.

"Ash, get your agender ass back here and give Hannah her stuff back, or so the gods help me! Rin is supposed to be resting, and you're supposed to be quiet and not lure another batch of monsters to us!" Sarah yelled through their hideout, and Percy and Jason shared a pointed look, before they both turned and fled into their tent hurriedly.

If they acted as if they hadn't heard them, maybe they would be left alone and the kids would work it out, themselves.

"What is going on now?!" Nico's voice sounded through their hideout next, and Percy and Jason both made a face.

Uh-oh.

"It's all Ash's fault!" Hannah exclaimed, and Jason buried his face in his hands, while Percy patted his shoulder.

"Next time, I choose the teammates, alright?" His boyfriend suggested good-naturedly, and Jason nodded with a deep sigh.

They had plenty of worries already, as it was.

Their team had to be stronger than this if they wanted to make it to the god/goddess in question and back.

"I don't care whose fault it is or who started it. Both of you, into your tents. Ash, give Hannah her stuff back. Hannah, stop screaming. Sara, I assign you to keep those two far away from each other. Am I understood?" Nico said in a voice that didn't allow a refusal, and Jason saw Percy's lips twitching out of the corners of his eyes, the two of them sharing a telling look, though they refrained from commenting.
There was grumbling and muttering, but all parties agreed and silence settled over their hideout once more.

Then, they heard footsteps approaching, and Nico pushed inside with a low groan.

"I swear, those kids are going to make me commit murder one day. Anyways, why exactly did you two take off at the first sign of dispute and went to hide in here, exactly? Don't think I didn't see you."

Uh-oh, they had been found out.

"I'm so sorry, my angel! I will never do it again, I promise! Don't punish me!" Percy instantly wailed, hopelessly exaggerating with both his words and his actions, but Jason was simply glad he could still show off his horrible acting skills.

Nico looked as unimpressed as ever, though Jason could swear his expression softened the tiniest bit, and he didn't reprimand them any further, instead throwing Jason a pointed look, before he tossed his Stygian Iron sword on the little desk and stomped over to their bed.

"Yeah, yeah. Alright, we have, like, thirty minutes until Ash is going to wreak havoc again, I just know it. Who's in for a nap?" He asked, and if it wasn't so sad, it would have been comical how quickly Percy and Jason were next to him and on the bed, pulling off their sullied shirts even if they didn't bother with their pants.

Nico already had his hands on the skull-remote Leo had built them and adjusted the A/C, before the three of them let themselves fall backwards in unison and snuggled together.

It wasn't the same without Will, but Jason was still grateful for this, and they simply had to hope Will would indeed come by later, as Nico had said.

If not, Jason was going to pick him up again – or maybe Percy would, since he did seem to have an injured shoulder, anyways.

Why always his shoulder?

This had to be the third or fourth time Will had to heal an injury there.

Jason frowned as he pondered that, but then he felt Nico's lips against the side of his neck and closed his eyes, his thoughts blurring together as he realized a nap sounded really freaking awesome right about now.

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Percy stroked through Jason's hair with a small smile, watching him sleep with his arms tightly wrapped around Percy.

His arm was still hurting, but he would be crazy to pull out from Jason's embrace now, especially when it was so rare they had some minutes to themselves during the day.

Nico had already left after ten minutes again when another argument between their teammates had started, and he hadn't shown up again, so Percy guessed he was either dishing out punishments, preparing dinner, or he was with Will and the rest of their group simply happened to be quiet for once.

Jason shifted slightly, a low hum escaping his lips as he inched closer to Percy, and he could even see him smiling in his sleep slightly, looking so wonderfully peaceful and relaxed.

Percy automatically smiled as well, moving to press his lips to the top of his head.

These travels were so exhausting.

Both physically and mentally.

Thanks to their training, they could deal with being on their feet the whole day just fine, but the monster attacks surely were tiring, and the constant paranoia and worrying and planning didn't do
them well, either.

Sure, Jason loved to act the part of the composed leader, but Percy knew he needed his rest just like the rest of them did, so he was happy if Jason had a chance such as this to catch up on some sleep.

Percy played with his hair idly, picking out dirt every here and there or trying to guess how much water and shampoo it would take to make it shine again in a less greasy manner.

He heard footsteps outside, but nobody stopped or spoke, so he focused back on Jason.

One week.

They were travelling for a whole week already.

Percy could barely wait to get back to Camp.

The tent was great, and travelling with his guys was no problem at all, but the constant fighting really annoyed him to no end.

How did the monsters even know where they were? The attacks always happened in such an organized way, he was beginning to think one of the monsters had somehow figured out where they were headed and systematically placed troops of more monsters in specific places.

The thought was laughable, of course, but also not, since Percy would be foolish to underestimate their enemy.

Especially since a certain asshole seemed to be in league with these monsters in one way or another, and they all knew Kyle was not to be underestimated.

The thought made bile rise in his throat and anger and resentment bubble up inside him again, just daring Kyle to pop up out of nowhere, just so he could finish him off and be done with this mess.

They might not know what position or influence Kyle had in the current happenings, but Percy was confident everything would be a lot easier once Kyle was out of the picture.

Footsteps sounded outside their tent, and Percy lifted his head to peek at the entrance.

Nico? Maybe?

The flap to the tent opened, and Nico walked in with a heavy sigh, his sword once more dumped onto the table unceremoniously, before he closed the flap again and trudged over to Percy with a tired look.

"Hey." Percy greeted him quietly, putting on a smile for his boyfriend to maybe cheer him up a bit.

Nico’s lips twitched into the faintest smile, then he climbed into bed next to them, probably extra careful to not wake Jason.

"Hey, yourself. You’re supposed to be sleeping, you know? Make the most of the free time?" Nico mused in a soft voice as he pressed his lips to Percy's cheek, though Percy captured his lips in a real kiss a moment later.

"I am making the most of it, though. I'm watching my lovely boyfriend sleep. Just look at how peaceful he looks." He replied and nodded towards Jason, who chose that moment to make a face in his sleep, as if he knew they were talking about him.

"Very peaceful. How's your shoulder doing? Feeling any better?" Nico asked, and now it was Percy's turn to grimace.

He had sort of hoped Nico would forget about his shoulder.

"It's alright. Still hurts a bit, but I'll just wait until Will comes and looks at it. What have you been up to?" He tried to change the topic quickly, and Nico gave a small shrug before his hand joined
Percy's in its task of brushing through Jason's hair, which had the blonde smiling in his sleep.

(What a sap.)

"I had a chat with Hannah and Ash, for the most part. They both just had to pick up water from the small stream at the exact same time, which ended with both of them yelling at each other. I have no idea what's wrong with them, but whatever it is, I hope it's settled in a week, or I will put them in the next taxi back to Camp and I don't care what they have to say about it." Nico rambled, gesticulating with his hands as he slipped from his serious, monotonous tone into a passionate one, which had Percy smiling automatically.

Aww, there was the Nico he knew and loved.

He had already missed this side of him.

He missed so much these days.

"So, I decided keeping them separated isn't going to work out. They're both in charge of dinner now. Sara and Liam are on guard duty to make sure they don't kill each other, but I'm more worried we'll be found again by monsters." Nico continued, now slumping slightly as he let his exhaustion show.

Percy stroked over his hand gently, wishing there was something they could do to make it easier on all of them.

In the beginning, they had considered using Nico's zombie chauffeur to simply drive them directly to where they had to go, but it hadn't taken long for them to scrap that idea.

Having a giant drakon attack a bus was a bit more intense than meeting it outside in the open with swords at the ready, after all.

Percy was still amazed they had all made it out in one piece, though it had strengthened his resolve that he hated busses.

No, seriously, he was never going to drive in a freaking bus again, in his life.

He rather walked, thank you very much.

"Don't worry, love. Jason said we got all of them this time, so there should be no way for anybody or anything else to know where we are right now. I'm more concerned about the food tasting horrible." He joked, and Nico shot him a pointed glance, though he smiled a moment later and relaxed against his side.

The contact made pain shoot through his arm and shoulder, but he tried not to let it show.

Instead, he tried to move in a way that allowed his lips close enough to connect to the side of Nico's head, while not waking Jason up.

"There we go. Finally, a smile. I'm feeling so proud right now." He told his boyfriend cheekily, and Nico huffed out a small laugh, before giving him a couple of light pecks.

"Of course you are. You're such a dork, Percy, have I mentioned that before?"

Only a few hundred times or so.

"As long as it makes you smile." Percy replied softly, and Nico did smile at him, in that way that made Percy's heart flutter and his worries disappear for a little while.

He let Nico rest his head on his chest, enjoying the intimacy of the embrace and the proximity of his boyfriends, even if his injured arm was going numb and it was getting annoyingly warm.

"Why don't you take your own advice and rest for a little while, Nico?" He suggested when he heard Nico's breathing even out a couple of times, though he always jolted awake again.
Nico huffed against his chest.

"And miss my chance of spending some time cuddling my boyfriends? Forget it. Plus, I'm hoping Will is going to show up any moment now, and I definitely want to check on his leg as soon as possible." He replied, and Percy smiled to himself.

"That, and you really just want to see him and hold him and make sure he's okay." He said quietly, and Nico huffed again, before rubbing his face against his chest.

"Yeah, pretty much." He admitted, and they both fell silent, following their own train of thoughts.

One week.

They were on the move for one week already, but it felt so much longer, like a month or two.

Percy wanted to go back home.

Wanted to get back that peace and quiet they had had.

He would even take up training again, if only it meant he could spend the rest of his time with his guys, all three of them, together, just doing random stuff in random places, or not doing anything at all, like now.

Nico's breathing evened out again, but this time, he didn't jolt awake, and Percy remained as still as possible to allow both his boyfriends to use him as a pillow.

His shoulder ached.

His breathing was difficult with two bodies half draped over his.

His body was annoyingly warm and uncomfortable and squished.

Percy gazed up at the ceiling and let out a small sigh.

He wanted to go home.

***

"Percy, you should have come to me right away. What were you thinking?" Will said with a hint of incredulity as he bandaged Percy's shoulder, his heart aching with the realization he couldn't patch him up in one go, unless he wanted to risk fainting.

And, since they didn't know when the next attack might be, he definitely didn't want to risk fainting.

Percy merely shrugged, gazing off into space stubbornly as he sat at the side of the bed, while Nico and Jason were still knocked out cold, the same way they had been when Will had finally managed to get out of the medic tent.

Freaking Andrew and his constant paranoia.

Usually, Will didn't mind reassuring patients or explaining procedures and medication to them, but Andrew took it to an entirely new level, and that each time he was injured.

To make matters worse, Andrew got injured in almost every fight.

So, yes, Will was a tiny bit agitated, okay?

Still, what agitated him even more was the fact Percy had spent hours walking around with a damaged shoulder, instead of simply stopping by the medic tent.

Fixing him would have taken no more than five minutes back when Will still had some energy.

But now that the sun was going down, he had to struggle for every last bit and hope it would be enough.
Will suppressed his sigh and patted Percy's uninjured shoulder once he was done, though he didn't immediately move away from between Percy's legs.

Percy didn't seem to want him to, either, instead turning his head and leaning forward to let their foreheads rest together tiredly.

"Thanks, sun-bug. I'll make sure to be more careful from now on." He said in a resigned voice, but Will was more concerned about his behavior right now than any wound he had so far had.

Percy had a lot of mood swings lately.

There were moments he was happy and cheerful as usual, but then, from one second to the next, he became quiet and distant, staring off into space with a blank look on his face – like right now.

Will looked him in the eyes, but Percy didn't meet his gaze, instead keeping his eyes downcast, even though their foreheads were still together.

"What's wrong?" He asked instead of replying, but Percy only shook his head minimally, his shoulders slumping.

"Just...tired, I guess."

Will hummed thoughtfully, though he was pretty sure lack of sleep wasn't what was bothering Percy right now – at least not all of it, anyways.

He stroked over his sides slowly, then moved to give him a peck on the lips.

"How about we go to bed, then, Gorgeous?" He suggested, but Percy merely shrugged and pulled back to climb back into bed with an indifferent expression.

Will watched him with mixed emotions, though he knew there wasn't anything he could do right now.

At least not healing-wise, and nothing permanent, anyways.

"How's your leg? Nico was worrying." Percy told him as he made to follow, and Will guessed he shouldn't be surprised Nico had told on him.

"My leg is fine. Just a bit bruised, that's all. Did you see the tiny hellhound?" He tried to change the topic, and his boyfriend smiled for the faintest moment.

"I did. So cute – if it hadn't tried to bite our faces off, that is." He mumbled, then reached out for Will to tug him closer, and Will happily let him, angling his body so his injured leg was spared from any pressure, before he relaxed into Percy's embrace.

His boyfriend pressed his lips to the side of Will's neck, the same way he always did, while his hand stroked down Will's side appreciatively.

It had been so long since Percy had gotten to hold him like this, even though it hadn't been that long, at all.

How many days had it been since Will had woken up from that horrible nightmare and sought solace in Percy's affections? He couldn't even tell, anymore.

He wasn't even sure how many days they had travelled, so far.

It all sort of blurred together in his head.

Percy seemed to relax, the hollow feeling inside him making way for gentle affection and relief, and Will found himself turning his head automatically to look for his lips, just as Percy searched for his.

They kissed without heat, just a gentle mashing of their lips, followed by a series of pecks, and Will rolled onto his back for more comfort, which had Percy leaning over him and trembling in awe and amazement.
Even after all this time, Percy still felt this way whenever he was allowed to get on top of Will, it was almost comical, though Will felt more awed right now than anything else.

Will contemplated for a moment whether this would lead to more, but then Percy already pulled away and gazed down at him with his soft gaze and even softer smile, and Will knew cuddling was more than enough for them right now, especially with the exhaustion and fatigue of the day making itself known again in their tired limbs and aching joints.

Some cuddling, and a really nice, long nap.

He grinned back at Percy, and they shared some more playful pecks, before Percy dropped down next to him again and Will snuggled closer, still watching out for his leg.

"This sure was a long day, huh?" Percy muttered quietly, and Will nodded against his collarbone with a sigh.

"Sure was."

He shifted, then winced when Percy's hand brushed over his thigh.

"Is your leg bothering you?" His boyfriend asked, obviously catching on immediately, though Will tried to save himself, anyways.

"Nah, it's fine. My foot is just falling asleep."

Well, it wasn't a lie, his foot really was falling asleep where he had squished it under Percy.

(When had he done that, anyways?)

Percy hummed thoughtfully, then fell silent, and Will allowed himself to relax again, glad he wasn't as persistent as Nico usually tended to be.

It wasn't as if Will couldn't take care of himself, after all.

If he required healing, of course he would get to that.

He simply didn't want to waste his energy when it wasn't necessary, that was all.

"Actually, mind if I take a look at it?" Percy asked suddenly, and Will stiffened to a board.

Oh, great.

Will opened his mouth to either complain or find a suitable excuse quick enough, but then Percy already shut him up with a kiss and moved down his body swiftly, clearly not allowing a no.

Already knowing what was to come, Will suppressed a groan and moved an arm over his face, as if that was going to help the situation in any way.

He allowed Percy to tug his boxer shorts down without complaint or fluster, and wasn't surprised when his boyfriend let out a deep sigh.

He also didn't have to glance down at him to know he was shooting him a scolding look.

"Will, this needs healing." His boyfriend stated seriously, but Will didn't react.

Did not.

He had already checked on it, and it was nothing but a bruise, he was absolutely not going to waste any energy on that – especially not when the next fight could happen any moment, and his boyfriends might need him for actual healing.

Or his teammates.

"Will." Percy said sternly, and Will stiffened, though he still refused to look down at him.
"Will, if you keep this up, you're going to drop dead before we get back to Camp, and what good would that do? This is the third time you're hurt and refuse to heal yourself." His boyfriend chided him, and Will made a face.

He would die, anyways, so what was the difference?

Remembering his second vision, Will tensed again and the bile rose in his throat, causing him to push himself up into a sitting position hurriedly.

No, he wouldn't let that happen.

He had no idea what to do about that yet, but there had to be something he could do to prevent that from happening.

"Percy, it's really just a bruise. It's going to be better tomorrow, I promise. Do you really think I'd risk my own health if it meant there was a chance I couldn't heal you guys in a crucial moment?" He retorted and tried to sound as exasperated as possible, but Percy's gaze was fierce and serious.

"Yes." He replied without hesitation, and Will felt his chest clenching painfully, though he knew Percy was right.

They stared at each other quietly for a long moment, then Will deflated and averted his gaze.

"Fine. I'll heal it. I guess. Though it's really just a waste of energy, and it really is just a bruise, no matter what you say, and it's totally not necessary, in any way, whatsoever, at all-..."

"Just pass me your medic pouch and let me put some cream on it. Weren't you the one telling me bruises only require one hymn at most? I'm sure you'll have enough energy to spare for some self-healing to make sure you're in top form for tomorrow's doctor duties." Percy cut in mercilessly, and Will had to interrupt his rant with a grumble and a sigh, before he leaned sideways to grab his medic pouch he had dumped on their bedside table when treating Percy's arm.

"Yeah, yeah." He replied sulkily, though he also let Percy take his self-made cream out of the pouch and apply way too much on that tiny bruise.

Sure, it kind of affected his entire thigh and splattered his skin in varying shades of purple/red/brown from the popped blood vessels, but it was only really bad at a fist-sized dark red/brown blotch in the front, where the hellhound's head had actually made most impact, so, in Will's book, it definitely looked worse than it was.

A few strained muscles and a bruise weren't going to put Will out of commission, no matter how much his boyfriend argued with him.

He watched Percy taking care of his leg, ever so gently massaging the cream into his skin and practically caressing every inch of skin he found, no matter if bruised or not – and Will couldn't help but smile.

Sure, the touch partly hurt, but Percy's look of concentration and the gentleness of his touch was simply too adorable.

"Just take better care of yourself, okay? Else I'll have to tell Nico, and we both know he will make you strip down for a check-up every day, after every fight, if that's the only way to make you see reason." Percy told him without looking up, but Will already knew as much.

"You know, if you wanted me to feel uncomfortable with the thought of undressing in front of you, you should have probably never brought up naked cuddles. In my opinion, you all just want an excuse to see me naked." He deadpanned, but Percy wasn't deterred, instead leaning down to place a timid peck on Will's knee, right beneath all the bruising.

The gesture was simple, sweet, and successfully made Will shut up and his heart skip a beat.

"Of course, love. Now, how about you sing me a little lullaby that fixes up your leg, so we can cuddle properly and Nico won't have a heart attack when he wakes up and demands to see your thigh."
Will shot him a dirty look, but couldn't fight Percy's logic, so he caved in and nodded, much to Percy's apparent satisfaction.

They settled down with Will huddled in his arms and his bruised leg out of harm's way, before he finally started humming his hymn and prayed to his dad for a little help, even though he was aware Apollo rarely answered anymore once the sun was down.

He was lucky this time, though, and even if he didn't want to admit it, he did feel a lot better once the pain in his leg started ceasing – and he knew Percy knew even without him saying anything, because Percy tugged him closer immediately and definitely started grinning smugly, Will could feel it against the side of his neck.

He let him, though, and let his hymn fade into comfortable silence once he was sure he had fixed enough to please his boyfriends, instead focusing on the warmth and comfort of Percy's embrace as they both started dozing off.

"Will! Will, guys, please, I hope I'm not interrupting anything, but Andrew told me it's an emergency and I have to get you ASAP. He claims you poisoned him and he's absolutely confident he's dying from the pills you gave him." Liam's voice tore them out of their almost-slumber and caused both Will and Percy to jump.

Ugh.

Will groaned and made to get up, just to get momentarily distracted by Percy, who tightened his grip on him and looked at him as if he wanted to hold him back and keep him close.

He felt the familiar rush of unease and the faintest hint of despair rushing through Percy, but sadly, there wasn't much Will could do…

"I'll be back in a bit, love. If not, we'll see each other at dinner, okay?" He whispered and placed a quick kiss on his boyfriend's lips, and Percy reluctantly let him go with a nod, though he definitely didn't look happy.

So much for some nice down-time with his guys.

With a last look at him (and another peck, because he was insatiable like that), Will slipped back into his jeans and shirt and made his way over to their tent exit, where Liam was still rambling about Andrew and how pale and sickly he apparently looked.

Of course.

"I'm here, I'm here. So, take me to our dying swan. You know, I'm really curious to see how I managed to poison Andrew with Vitamin C supplements."

***

"We definitely have to stop by a supermarket." Jason noted and the group nodded in agreement.

"And a pharmacy. A Walmart would be awesome." Will added, and Nico added it to their ever-growing To-Do-list of tomorrow.

"I can't believe we're eating noodles again. Why not some rice? Or potatoes? Didn't we have a bag of potatoes? What happened to those?" Andrew lamented, and Nico caught Will shooting him a dirty look, apparently still upset about being called to him for nothing.

(Because Andrew had apparently had some sort of issue with the vitamin supplements Will had given him to shut him up, for whatever reason ever.)

"Liam threw that bag at that empousai that jumped at us when we tried to fix dinner the other day, you forgot?" Ash put in with a laugh and a nudge into Liam's side, who looked down in shame at the memory.

"Sorry…" He apologized, but was mostly tuned out by Ash's laugh, Hannah's grumbling, and Andrew's renewed whining.
"Guys, settle down. Andrew, be happy there's anything to eat, at all. Hannah and Ash nearly killed each other preparing it. Also, they spilled all the rice when they just had to throw it at each other. From ten feet away. For no reason, whatsoever." Sara put in, her golden earrings dangling happily as she whipped her head around to glower at the two culprits in question, her brown-green eyes full of judgment and distaste.

Nico was glad they had her around – it saved him the trouble of scolding anybody during dinner, because she surely did the job for them.

"Hannah started it." Ash mumbled, but nobody bought it, and Nico sighed to himself as everybody started arguing again.

Percy pushed his food around listlessly next to him, and Nico glanced sideways at him with a small frown.

He was about to ask him what was wrong, but then got distracted by Liam falling backwards and spilling the contents of his plate all over himself, while Ash sat next to him and laughed loudly instead of helping him in any way.

"Guys, please." He grumbled with a huff, while Will and Sara went to help the son of Hecate.

"Seriously, can't we even have one meal in peace? This is such a kindergarten." Rin remarked with her usual expression of disgust, though Nico agreed.

"Can we get back to planning? If I read the map correctly, we should be near Baltimore, which puts us a lot closer to Washington DC than we were yesterday. If we take Nico's chauffeur, we should be able to get to…" Jason started, apparently oblivious that nobody was paying attention to him as he still had his nose buried in the map they had dug out of Andrew's backpack some days ago by chance.

Said map and Sara's well-placed 'I could have sworn Scanton is not on the way to Washington DC' were the only reasons why they had found out they were going the wrong way, in the first place, so Nico was more than glad for it – what he wasn't glad for, was the way Andrew still gloated every time he as much as glimpsed that map in any of their hands, as if he was their mighty savior, even though he was the one constantly in the medic tent, may it be because of an actual injury, or a cut on his finger.

"Do we have to take Jules-Albert?" Percy asked miserably and pushed his plate away from him without having eaten anything, and Nico shot him an assessing look.

Was he alright?

Percy always ate.

Will flopped back down next to Percy's other side and mercilessly pushed the plate back closer to him, though Nico caught him studying Percy with a worried look for a moment, too.

"Gorgeous, it won't be for long. Come on, you want to get there as soon as possible, right? If we go by foot, you know it's going to take us at least another week to get there, and we promised to pick up the two kids on the way, you forgot?" Will reasoned, knowing full well what arguments to use to make Percy reconsider, though Nico wished they had a different option than Jules-Albert, too.

He liked his chauffeur, but he had to agree with Percy that the bus wasn't the greatest idea when pursued by hordes of monsters at random times.

"Or we take the train again." Sara suggested, while her eyes were fixed on the fidget toy in Andrew's hands, her own hands fiddling with her golden bracelets now as if to mimic him.

Nico knew that feeling only all too well, which was why he usually refused to look at Andrew when he had his fidgeting moments.

"We could try, but the past times we've tried that, we were ambushed by monsters right before we reached the station. It's worth a shot, of course, but I think our chances would be better if we take
the bus.” Jason replied, though his expression showed it pained him to say it, and his eyes were mostly on Percy, mutely apologizing to him.

Unfortunately, Percy wasn't looking at him, instead staring into the small fire they had started – not big enough to attract attention (or monsters), but still something to remind them of Camp and grant some warmth and comfort.

Nico didn't like the resignation in his gaze, but Jason was right.

If they wanted to make some progress, taking the bus was the smartest move.

"But first, a pharmacy and a supermarket." Will put in and wrapped an arm around Percy, before nudging his plate closer again in an attempt to get him to eat.

Percy didn't take the bite, instead shrugging listlessly and leaning against Will, his face disappearing at his shoulder.

"Alright." His boyfriend said quietly, and Nico reached out automatically to stroke over his arm.

"I still can't believe you gave me Vitamin C supplements and told me they were pain killers." Andrew sulked, and Nico watched Will shooting him a dark look.

"I didn't. I told you the first pills you took were the pain killers, and then I gave you the supplements and told you to take one of them with every meal. How was I supposed to know you'd empty the entire bottle in less than two hours?"

"I eat a lot. Also, I was in pain." Andrew retorted, still fiddling with his toy, and now Nico caught Ash and Hannah following the motion as well with mesmerized looks on their faces, Ash's hands on their thigh, tapping away in a similar rhythm, while Hannah was playing with her hair distractedly.

Interesting.

Maybe Nico should buy the lot such toys, too, that might make them shut up more often.

He looked towards Liam to check whether he was similarly affected, but the boy seemed more mesmerized by Sara than Andrew's toy, his eyes glued to her face as if she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Rolling his eyes to himself, Nico glanced back at his boyfriends, pretty sure they were the most beautiful things in the world, though he surely was glad Liam didn't agree.

"Alright, let's sum everything up once more: Ash got first night duty, then Liam. Tomorrow, we'll look for a supermarket and a pharmacy first, then we take the bus for as long as possible. Rin, what's the status on the two demigods? Did you get through to them yet?" Nico asked to get all of this settled and enjoy the rest of the evening with his guys without any more brooding for once, though he knew Jason would undoubtedly still break his head over this.

"Yep. They're still alive and near some weird Air and Space Museum, ready to meet up with us whenever we get there." Rin recounted, and Nico wondered why he always had to pry information out of her.

Somehow, when Will talked to her, she could talk just fine without being asked for every detail.

Then again, Will seemed to get along perfectly fine with everybody but Andrew, so Nico guessed he shouldn't be surprised.

"I swear, if you come near my tent again at any point during your shift, I'm going to-…” Hannah started darkly, but Ash cut her off with a snort.

"Oh please, I'm not that desperate. Plus, I take my shift seriously, unlike a certain somebody. Don't think I didn't catch you flirting with Rin the last time you had the second night shift."

By the gods.
Rin rolled her eyes with an exasperated groan, and Nico was tempted to join in as he watched Jason rubbing his face with a tired sigh and Will closing his eyes with a look of exhaustion.

Needless to say, Hannah just had to take the bait and start another argument, and Andrew proved to be smart as usual, promptly excusing himself and disappearing towards the tents, closely followed by Rin and Sara, so Liam escaped in a matter of seconds, too.

Smart kids.

"Let's go to bed." He mumbled, and Jason shot him a grateful look and immediately made to get up.

"Hannah, you got the cleaning duty tonight. Ash, please behave tonight. And no more fighting, guys. We're a team, don't forget that." Jason declared, much to Hannah's dismay, though she actually started collecting the dishes with only minor grumbling, while Ash acted as if they hadn't heard a thing.

Nico glanced at Percy again, but he had left his plate untouched, and his expression was dull as he let Will nudge him towards Jason, who immediately wrapped an arm around him and coaxed him towards their tent with a look of concern, even if he started talking to him in a rather upbeat voice a moment later.

"Is he okay?" He asked Will the moment they were out of earshot and Ash was busy looking after Hannah as inconspicuously as possible, but Will only sighed and ran a hand through his messy hair.

"Physically? Yes. Mentally? Not so much."

Nico looked down and tried to stomach that info, while Will slipped his hand into his and started tugging him off to their tent.

"But mulling that over isn't going to do him any good. Being there for him and showering him in some affection might. Wanna give it a try? We've got a whole night to spoil him." Will suggested with a crooked grin, and Nico guessed he had a point.

"Sure. Just make sure you'll actually stay the whole night for once, alright?" He replied, and Will promptly stuck out his tongue at him, which had to be the most childish action of the day – which was usually Percy's line of expertise.

Nico flicked his boyfriend's cheek with one finger and they grinned at each other, before entering their tent to spoil the heck out of their boyfriends.

Hopefully, that would cheer them all up a bit and ease the tension that had built the past week.

Also, he really hoped Will would spend the whole night with them, instead of disappearing in the wee hours again to do gods knew what in that medic tent of his.

(If Nico had known this was what he'd do if he had a medic tent, he would have bribed Leo to keep it to himself and instead add something to their tent to allow him to do his medic work in there, so they could keep an eye on him at all times.)

"Percy, get ready for some loving!" Will exclaimed the moment the entrance to the tent was closed, and Nico watched with raised eyebrows how their favorite sunshine threw himself at a clearly unsuspecting Percy, who could only throw out his arms with a squeak to catch Will, before they both flew backwards and onto the bed with a crash – while Jason merely took a step to the side to stay out of harm's way as he watched it all happening.

"Seriously?" Percy mumbled weakly, but he didn't sound opposed, so Nico dropped his Stygian Iron sword on the desk for the last time today (hopefully), before making to join his boyfriends in bed, closely followed by Jason.

Time for some loving.

The week had been tough enough, after all.
Percy was awake when Will snuggled into his arms with a pleased sigh, after the four of them had cuddled and kissed and low-key made out until fatigue had won over.

He was awake when Jason wrapped his arm tighter around him from his other side and gave him a good-night kiss on the cheek.

He was awake when Nico felt too warm pressed against Will's back and pushed away from them to get some space.

He was awake when Will had his nightmare and started burning up, while Percy did his best to cool him down and wake him up with the help of their boyfriends.

He was awake when they settled down again, all four of them tired and exhausted, though each of them for different reasons.

He was awake when they fell asleep snuggled against him once more, their kisses making him smile again.

Percy fell asleep when he let his guard down and trusted them to still be with him when he woke up.

Percy woke up to Will leaving at 4am in the morning with a sniffle and a stack of books under his arms.

Percy didn't dare to sleep again, unwilling to let his guard down again.

Percy still woke up to an empty bed two hours later, his boyfriends already out and about to dissolve another argument and to pack up the other tents and get started on their day.

Percy curled into himself and hid under the blanket, his eyes burning with unshed tears and squeezed tightly shut to keep them in, and to keep the world out.

He hated this.

He hated this so, so much.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:
http://sta.sh/055hx09e5r9 - perfect depiction of Kyle :)
http://sta.sh/0h2pt887zfi - adorable Will with flowers <3
http://sta.sh/02yxy10gpdx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3
http://sta.sh/0qy6lka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing how cute Will is :)
http://sta.sh/01m8rf04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will :)
http://sta.sh/01b1irqkgjhb - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3

- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well >:)

- A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater <3 This is and will probably always be my phone background, ijs
http://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/148907674701/some-more-fanart-of-mel-
chan366-s-lovely-fanfic
- Will with blanket <3
- THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE FROM THE LAST SEQUEL!!!!!!!!!!!!!
https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you
- A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy, challenge-loving dorks <3
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patreon-tari
- Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3
- Nico in his winter outfit :) http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-commission-for-my-amazing-patron
- Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163998940481/jason-grace-gracing-us-with-his-smugness-sorry-i
- Jason and the leather jacket >:)

I also commissioned a few pieces from the amazing Ari/Bex ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-mel-chan366
- New Years from Advent Calendar times :) http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/154469941964/the-third-of-week-three-of-my-fabulous-five-dollar
- The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;) http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-mel-chan366-now-i
- Ice cream time :) http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/156557714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-chan366-3-3-some
- <3 http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160990996944/another-of-my-may-madness-commissions-a-fabulous
- The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss ;) http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-ever-fabulous
- ...Boxer Shorts XD ;) http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-mel-chan366-3
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love them too much not to share them :) http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3 http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3 http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-commission-for
- Jercy Soft Kiss <3
Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my firstborn child :) ( Mostly because there won’t be one. Sorry. But you can have a cookie?)
Traveling Could Be So Nice

A/N: Hey Cupcakes :D

Here is the next update ;3 Hope you'll enjoy the chapter! Thank you so much for all your wonderful reviews/comments and likes! They mean the world to me :)

Also: Special thanks to my amazing beta-reader! You're the best!

Wish you all the best-
-Tári

No Trigger Warnings for this chapter, but there's mentions/implications (injuries, signs of depression, battles)
Also, there's some smut.

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Chapter 02: Traveling Could Be So Nice

"I can't believe we just broke into a Walmart. I thought they're open 24/7. Why is this one not open 24/7?" Nico rambled next to him, and Will had to suppress a smile as his gaze trailed over the shelves he was currently inspecting, searching for…

"Ah, here we go. Alright, Nico, where is the calculator? Do you want to type off the prices, or want me to read them out loud and dump the stuff in the cart?" He asked as he snatched the packs in question and read the back of them.

Nico huffed, then tugged out the calculator they had picked up from the stationary section, together with the batteries Ash had carried around in their pockets for whatever reason.

(Will was still trying to figure out whether they had actually carried them before entering the store, but Jason had shot him a scolding look at the unspoken accusation, so Will tried not to be too obvious about his doubts.)

"I can't believe we broke into a Walmart and we are calculating the exact price we would have to pay if the store was open. Why can't Ash just hack the cash register or something and we simply type in everything, there?" His boyfriend argued, though he also took the medication from Will and started typing in the prices with a concentrated look on his face, so Will wasn't perturbed.

"Have you ever worked in a supermarket? Those cash registers aren't as simple as you might think. Figuring out how to work them and typing in all the article numbers or getting the scanner to work properly would probably take us longer than just adding everything up like this. Just hope that the others are doing the same thing. I'm not supporting any theft, I'm just saying." Will told him, before returning his attention to the shelves in front of him as he moved from section to section, before halting in front of a specific one.

Should he? Or should he not?

Tricky question.

Will contemplated his options as he stared at the various medication, thinking over the things he had read the past nights, and Percy's symptoms and behavior.

It might help. Or it might not.

It might also do more damage than good.

Then again, just because he bought it now, didn't mean he had to get Percy to take it now.

Maybe he should do some more research beforehand, though – just to make sure he wasn't giving
him anything that would cause more side effects than anything else.

Or he could buy it and research that to figure out how good it was, and then decided whether or not to give it to Percy.

"Is that…?" Nico asked behind him, and Will made a face, before pushing his cart further down the hallway and away from the shelf.

"Hm? Sorry, got lost in thoughts for a moment. Hey, let's pick up some more supplements, just for the hell of it. I want to see what Andrew comes up with if I give him Vitamin D pills without the label on it." He mused loudly as he spotted the supplement section, and Nico shot him a telling look as he went to pay for the prescription medication at the counter, laying out the money and a note saying what was taken and that they had a doctor's note (how sweet).

"Remember that he'll only end up interrupting your free time again if you give him any reason to."

Damn it.

Nico had a point, there.

Will still picked up some supplements, anyways, since he was pretty certain the kids wouldn't pick the healthiest things in this store.

Nico didn't comment on his actions, instead placidly typing in the new prices and following him through the aisles.

"Do they have fiddle toys? I want to get Hannah and Ash some, so they are busy and quiet." His boyfriend mentioned at the side as Will finished up his medication-shopping, and now it was Will's turn to shoot him a telling look.

"I think you just want one of those for yourself, first and foremost. No worries, though, Jason already said something similar, so I'm sure if there's any here, he'll find them."

Nico huffed indignantly, but Will knew he was right.

Though he was surprised he had never had the idea of fidget toys for the campers, before.

He would have to mention that to Chiron sometime, once they were back.

His vision flashed through his mind, and Will swallowed.

Or, well, he could also just mention it during their check-up calls they still had to do regularly, though he had so far missed all of them.

(However many there had been, so far. He had kind of lost track of the days, still, and had decided against asking for a calendar to prevent his guys from jumping to wrong conclusions.)

They made their way through the store, catching sight of Ash near the video games towards the back, while Sara and Rin were busy holding up various garments and giggling inappropriately loud, given that they had broken into this place.

But Nico waved his hand at them in a 'Go ahead'-motion when they looked around in question, so Will guessed he didn't mind their group doing some more shopping, even though he was pretty sure they shouldn't linger for too long.

Still, even if they had broken into the store, and even if they had originally come here only for medication and groceries, it was nice to see them all at a bit more ease than usual.

Especially when Will spotted Hannah at the jewelry section and she actually had a smile on her face as she looked at the various bracelets and necklaces and whatnot in the display cases.

"Found something you like?" Nico asked as he made straight for her, so Will now followed him, rather than the other way around, though he certainly didn't mind.

Nico was trying so hard to befriend the team, it was endearing to watch.
Even though he also found it impressive that his favorite bundle of darkness was the one constantly getting everybody back in line and acted like their guardian most of the time.

Jason might be the perfect father-figure to the rest of the Camp, and a leader through and through, but Nico was the one who would storm into a school and give them hell if he found out his kid was troubled in any way.

"Oh, plenty. Unfortunately, I spent all my money already, so there's that." Hannah replied with a shrug and looked back at some necklaces, though Will wasn't sure what she even wanted with those.

At Camp, even the Camp necklace got in the way of training sometimes, so any other jewelry was usually more of a hassle than anything else, so it was usually advised not to wear any.

Sara was the only one Will knew who constantly wore her golden jewelry, but since those were mostly family heirlooms, nobody argued with her about it.

"Well, I just paid for Will's poor sense of humor, and I'm pretty sure I'll end up paying for Rin's and Sara's clothing, so, if you want, you can pick something, as well. Just don't overdo it." Nico said with a shrug, and Will smirked to himself.

Nico was the one who would give people hell for mistreating his kids, and he was also the one who would spoil them to no end.

How sweet.

"Wait, what do you mean? I have a formidable sense of humor, mister." He exclaimed indignantly once he caught onto that, but his boyfriend merely shot him an amused grin over his shoulder, before he stepped closer to Hannah and looked over her shoulder as she pointed out some things she apparently liked.

"Jewelry? Wow, and there I thought you'd pick make-up, since your blush is running out." Ash called over as they walked past them, and Will threw them a chiding look, while they merely stuck out their tongue at him.

Then, he noticed the pile of games in their arms, and looked back at Nico with raised eyebrows, though his boyfriend wasn't paying attention, too busy frowning at the display case.

"My blush is only running out because a certain somebody spilled most of it, for no reason other than them being a dick." Hannah retorted with a disgruntled look on her face, but Ash acted as if she wasn't referring to them as they dropped the games into Will's and Nico's cart.

"Don't start a fight again. Ash, can you open this, so she can take her pick?" Nico asked without looking up, and Will had to bite his lip as Hannah looked ready to argue, though she immediately fell silent as she realized they would need Ash's help if they wanted anything from inside the glass display.

Ash, on the other hand, seemed to practically swell with pride as they walked over, smug grin already in place before they even as much as glanced at the display in question.

"Oh, sure thing. Which of these does the princess fancy?" Ash asked as they gestured at the various jewelry pieces inside the display with a fake grin, apparently trying to imitate a sales person.

Needless to say, Hannah promptly bared her teeth.

Weren't they just so nice to each other, again?

"The princess would like the best of the best." Nico replied for Hannah, clearly unimpressed by their behavior, and suddenly, Hannah seemed a lot less opposed to being called 'princess' than a moment ago, even smirking at Ash smugly.

Ash's blue eyes started gleaming with challenge, and the next moment, they leaned forward and put their elbows on the glass to rest their chin on their hand.
"The best of the best? So, what do I get for getting the princess the best of the best? I mean, that surely means a lot of work for me, doesn't it? Getting the display open without starting any alarm? With only my good looks and my formidable lock picking skills?"

Will saw Nico rolling his eyes and had to bite his lips to stop himself from laughing.

Oh gods, if this was Ash's idea of flirting, he so wasn't surprised they were still single.

Hannah glowered at them darkly, though Will also noticed she got closer to Ash, rather than distancing herself further.

Those two.

If Will hadn't felt the way both their hearts had fluttered when they had first laid eyes on each other, and knew they had been goners for each other from the first moment on, he might have been fooled into believing they truly disliked each other.

As it was, they had simply started out the worst way possible, with Hannah just finishing her standard flirting with Rin (which apparently was some sort of ritual, but Ash of course hadn't known that), and Ash of course promptly introducing themselves as the hottest agender person in the world, whose sole purpose in life was to make everybody question their sexuality.

Needless to say, that had made for horrible first impressions on both parts, since Ash had immediately assumed Rin and Hannah to be a thing (heck no) and Hannah had immediately brushed off Ash as a player (might seem that way at first, but no).

Will had long decided not to get involved and gladly left it to his mighty boyfriends to split up any fights that came from both of them being a tad too interested in each other, while simultaneously trying to keep up their hostility towards one another.

In short, they were making things difficult for themselves.

"How about you get my foot in the face if you don't do it." Hannah threatened in warning, and Nico glanced towards Will with a look that pleaded for some support.

Will merely held up his thumbs to show him he was doing great by just standing there and looking pretty.

"Or, you could give me a kiss if I do it. Don't princesses give kisses of gratitude?" Ash purred undeterred, and Will wasn't sure whether he was more amused by their flirting, or by Nico's suddenly horrorstruck expression.

He settled on Nico's expression, because his boyfriend also took a few steps away from them a moment later, his gaze wild as he looked back at Will.

"Am I supposed to do something?" He asked quietly, but Will shook his head and waved off, instead watching Hannah looking nearly outraged – though she also had a blush on her cheeks.

"Not unless you're a frog, no. Now, are you going to get me that necklace or not?" Hannah retorted as she threw her blonde hair back after a resolute nod at the display, and Ash let out a grave sigh.

"Fine, fine. Which one is it, again?"

Aww, no more horrid flirting? Will was almost disappointed.

"That one." Hannah stated seriously and pointed at one of the necklaces, while Ash leaned over the display once more to inspect it.

" Eh? That one? But this one would go better with your skin color. Gold stands out more than silver, especially on your pale-ass skin."

Will slapped his hand to his forehead.

"Why, Ash? Why did they have to ruin the power of an honest compliment by insulting Hannah's
It was a mystery.

Nico shot him a telling look.

"I'm so glad we didn't have such problems, I'm just saying." His boyfriend whispered, and Will heartily agreed.

"Though, now that I think about it, your flirting with Percy was just as bad as this." Nico added, and Will let out an indignant sound that was so unexpectedly loud, it reverberated throughout the store.

"That was not..." He started, positively offended by such an accusation, but then Nico's giggle already shut him up, because it had definitely been way too long since he had last heard him giggle like that.

So carefree and at ease.

"Yeah, well, I like the silver one better. Plus, what do I care about what you like? I'm not trying to be pretty for you, after all, but for myself. Myself, and whatever lucky lady will be mine one day." Hannah shot back, completely oblivious to anything around her but Ash, and Will wondered whether those two would someday manage to work past this stage, or whether they would still be at each other's throats in years to come.

For their sake, and the sake of their team, and the sake of his own sanity, Will hoped they sorted out their issues soon.

"Yeah, right. If you truly want to impress some ladies, take the golden one. Not only does gold suit you better, but the blue in the stones matches your eyes. Take it from somebody with taste, princess." Ash insisted, and Will started pushing his cart away from them, instead making his way towards Liam, who was at the other side of the jewelry section and seemed to study the golden earrings with utmost interest, though the son of Hecate didn't even have pierced ears.

"Are you saying I have no taste?!!" Hannah exclaimed agitatedly, and Nico hurriedly followed him.

"I'm saying you would look good in the stupid golden necklace, so just take it and be done with it! You've been staring at it since you first saw it, I was right behind you, after all. Plus, you only pointed at the silver one because I said earlier it looks stupid!" Ash argued, and Will wondered whether Percy and he would have been as aggressive with each other in a similar situation.

He couldn't picture it.

"You look stupid!"

Oh wow, Hannah.

"Wow, princess, is that your best comeback?"

Ash, please.

"Oh, screw you and the dumb necklace!"

To be expected.

Will and Nico glanced over their shoulders at the same time, just to see Hannah storming off towards the make-up with a face almost as bright as her lipstick, while Ash threw their arms up and looked fed up with the world.

As if on cue, Percy popped up from where Hannah disappeared to, and leisurely made his way over to Ash, studying the various necklaces and bracelets on display.

"You know, if you like somebody, you might want to be a bit nicer, instead of yelling at them."

He suggested as he tapped the glass, and Ash glowered daggers at him as they opened the display.
in a heartbeat, allowing Percy to pick whatever he liked.

Will and Nico shared an amused look as they watched the exchange.

Their Percy was giving advice on love and relationships.

If only Piper knew, she would be so proud.

Hopefully, Nico would tell her.

"I tried to! I even told her she's pretty! In a way. But, as you could clearly hear, she just can't stop bitching at me!" Ash exclaimed agitatedly as they took out the necklace Percy pointed to without even as much as looking at it.

"Mhm. And you insulting her of course has nothing to do with that, I assume?" Percy mused as he watched Ash putting the necklace into a small bag and sliding it over to him.

"I wouldn't have had to, if she had actually reacted to my pick-up lines, at all." Ash insisted, and Will wondered faintly where Ash could have possibly learnt such bad pick-up lines, because, damn, whatever their questionable statements had been, it surely hadn't been pick-up lines.

"Right. You know, maybe you should ask Jason or Nico for better lines. They're pretty good with such stuff. Me? Not so much. And, by the looks of it, you're even worse than me. So, how about you give up on the lines for now, and instead woo her with your otherwise sparkly and kind personality? Experience shows people like you a lot more when you're simply being yourself." Percy insisted seriously, and Will caught Nico looking at him pointedly, which instantly had him making a face.

Why did he get the feeling somebody was referring to him, right now?

He had always been himself, okay?

Sure, he might have been a tiny bit more boisterous and pushy in the beginning, but he had had his reasons for that, alright?

"Don't even look like that, sunshine. You're fooling nobody." Nico cruelly remarked, and Will was tempted to step on his foot in retaliation.

Instead, he grumbled and huffed and crossed his arms in front of his chest until Nico came inching closer to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"There, there, grumpy. You know I love you just the way you are. Even with your horribly awkward Truth or Dare questions and your bad sense of humor. Not to mention the aggressive flirting with Percy. That was bad. But I still love you."

Wow, Nico, thank you so much.

Will tried to act upset a moment longer, but then his boyfriend started giving him even more pecks on the cheek and remained permanently close, which made it practically impossible to stay upset with him any longer, at all.

"Aren't you a charmer, eh? Come on, caro mio, let's go check on Jason. Since Percy isn't with him, I'm worried he's going to get lost in the store, side-tracked as he is. I bet he's busy reading the map again for the hundredth time." Will stated as he gave his boyfriend a kiss on the lips and started pushing their cart forward again, and Nico hummed in agreement and followed, while Percy waved at them and stayed with Ash to either continue their conversation, or keep them from doing anything stupid.

"I heard that." Jason's voice sounded behind the next aisle, but Will was too delighted his boyfriend hadn't gotten lost to do much but coo and grin at Nico, who huffed out a small laugh and watched him hop on the spot to maybe catch a glimpse of their blonde.

Jason did them the favor of appearing a moment later with a cart full of groceries and a pout on his face – as well as the map spread out in the child's seat of the cart.
"Isn't Andrew with you?" Nico asked with a small frown, and Will wondered how he could possibly think of Andrew, when Jason was right there, in all his formidable glory and those ravishingly broad shoulders.

(Alright, Jason was wearing his leather jacket, and Will was a weak man, but hey, who could possibly resist that?!)

(Apparently, Nico could, because he now looked around him with a frown, rather than at the perfection that was Jason in that jacket.)

"No? I thought he was with you? He said he wanted to look at the medication, so I assumed he'd meet you at the pharmacy." Jason said with a shrug, and Will wondered how they could have possibly missed each other, then, seeing as he and Nico had been at that pharmacy for quite a while.

"Oh gods, please don't tell me he got lost on the way to the pharmacy." Nico groaned miserably, and Will dragged his eyes away from Jason with a heavy sigh.

Apparently, he was needed.

"Andrew?" He called through the store, but, while the rest of their teammates and Percy stuck out their heads from the various aisles they were in, there surely was no sign of the son of Athena.

"Monster attack?" Nico asked him worriedly, but Will waved off, straining his ears for any unusual sounds, or anything that could give him a clue to Andrew’s whereabouts.

He heard rustling, and what sounded like a pot falling.

Outside.

"Ugh, he locked himself out in the gardening area." He grumbled with a roll of his eyes and already trudged off towards the big double-doors that probably shouldn't open at all, at the moment, though he could totally picture a certain child of Mercury meddling with that if they noticed Andrew wandering around in that area, only to close them right after again, or make it that they only opened from the inside.

(Those two got along even less than Ash and Hannah did, after all.)

Nico and Jason followed, and he didn't have to look around to know they had their eyebrows raised, though he also knew they didn't doubt his words in any way.

His assumptions were confirmed the moment he reached the double doors and they opened automatically, revealing Andrew with a pink nose and blue lips, his arms wrapped around himself and his green eyes full of unshed tears and anger.

"You were going to leave me behind!" The boy accused them with a sob, and Will made a face at him, while Jason and Nico let out matching sighs of relief behind him, though neither of them seemed actually surprised.

He heard Ash cackle from where they were peeking at them behind a stand of magazines, and he was pretty sure that was all he needed to confirm his theory they were behind this, too.

Seriously, this group.

"Of course. Come on, get back inside. And maybe buy yourself a thicker jacket, while you're at it." He stated and motioned for Andrew to get moving, just to have him storm past him.

"I could have been attacked! Eaten by monsters! Tripped over those pots in the dark and broken my neck! And I bet none of you even missed me!" He lamented loudly and stalked off towards the clothing racks, while Will, Nico and Jason exchanged telling looks.

Then, Nico sighed and followed the son of Athena to keep him from going missing again (and maybe to placate him a little bit), while Will glanced back at Jason next to him.
Now it was just the two of them…

Will shifted closer, his eyes back on that jacket that looked way too good on his boyfriend.

"So…Handsome…” He purred, and Jason shot him a knowing look, though that didn't deter Will in any way from wiggling his eyebrows at his boyfriend.

"If you're thinking about hitting on me, you can save it. Kiss me now, while we still have the chance to.” Jason deadpanned, and Will wanted to sulk about his ruined plans, but who was he to deny his boyfriend any kisses?

Unfortunately, the moment he was in front of Jason and had his hands on those perfect shoulders and his lips inches away from Jason's, Rin and Sara rounded the corner.

"Eww! Seriously, do you always have to make out at any given moment? You're so sappy and disgusting.” Rin exclaimed with utmost distaste in her voice, and Will broke off his attempt of a kiss to let his head fall against Jason's shoulder with a fake sob, while Jason visibly deflated with a deep sigh.

"Told you so, Freckles."

"Shush."

Let it be known: These kids were the worst.

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Needless to say, the moment they left the Walmart (after Ash had felt the need to boast about their time jobbing in various supermarkets as they got the cash register working and thus rendered all their calculating irrelevant, thanks a lot) they were not only ambushed my monsters, but also had to run away from a police car that just had to pass that very Walmart at that very moment.

Nico couldn't even tell who had seen them first, the cops or the monsters, but he also hadn't waited to see who would give chase first, instead getting the whole group moving as fast as possible and out of any harm's way.

Which was easier said than done when they didn't even know where exactly they were, to begin with, much less where to best hide.

Andrew was the first to trip and slam into the ground, closely followed by Liam, who tripped right over him and accidentally slammed his knee into the back of Andrew's head, which of course promptly knocked him out.

Nico cursed under his breath and slid to a stop, sword already out and at the ready as he rushed to the two and positioned himself in front of them protectively.

Percy was at his side immediately, while Jason tried to get the rest of their group further towards what appeared to be a small park, probably hoping for some sort of cover.

As long as Will was with Jason and that group and wouldn't bother with the two demigods until the medic tent was set up—…

Nico heard Will's hushed voice behind him, and if it wasn't for the hellhound bouncing his way out of nowhere, he would have turned around and glowered at his boyfriend for being an idiot.

"Will, get out of here!” Percy yelled in his place as Nico cursed in Italian and raised his sword to slash at the hellhound, unable to jump aside since that would put Will and the boys into danger.

"Trying to, Gorgeous, but it's kind of difficult to run away when Andrew weighs a fucking ton!” Will grunted behind them, and Nico risked a glance over his shoulder as he impaled the hellhound on the third try, catching sight of his boyfriend dragging Andrew across the luckily empty street with a pained look on his face, while Liam seemed a bit too overwhelmed to do anything but stand at the sidewalk behind him and stare and gesticulate with his arms wildly, while his mouth opened and closed like a fish.
Nico risked a second glance at Liam, just to notice his face turning ashen, rather than his usual
darker tone.

Was he hyperventilating?

Seriously, *this group*!

"Nico, watch out!" Will yelled at him, and Nico whirled around just in time to slice off the arm of
an empousai that had been about to scratch his face off.

Where did these things come from all the time, anyways?

He would have thought most of the monsters would still be stuck in Tartarus after the whole thing
with the Doors of Death?

After all, he highly doubted his father let these things just wander out of the other entrance/exit in
the Underworld.

While he might have been inclined to believe Hades wouldn't care either way, by now, he *did*
believe his dad cared enough about him to not make life quite *that* difficult for him, after all.

Then again, maybe this was something his father couldn't interfere with?

The gods kept saying things like that whenever it was convenient for them, after all – even if
Hades hadn't yet done any of the sort with him, Nico had to give him that.

Nico cut the rest of the empousai in pieces with a hiss, then searched for Percy, who had
mysteriously disappeared from his side, though he figured out why a moment later, when he
spotted his boyfriend simultaneously battling three monsters at the same time a few feet away.

"Jason, we need an overview!" He called towards where Jason had disappeared to, but their
boyfriend was already back and joining in on the fun, first helping Will with Andrew, then
rushing to check on Percy and Nico, before nodding towards them and taking off.

Nico looked around at the houses and apartment buildings around him, hoping against hope it was
still early enough for the mortals to be asleep (and stay that way), even with them making such a
ruckus – else they would have the cops on them in no time again, on top of everything else.

Gods, Nico could barely wait to get out of this city, no matter which one it was or where they had
to go next.

As if he had jinxed it, he promptly saw several lights turning on and cursed under his breath when
faces appeared at windows and doors opened.

Oh, *great*.

There was angry yelling, older people telling them to get lost and take their circus somewhere else
(if only) and some super-brave assholes claimed they could make this nasty if they didn't stop their
noise.

Percy reacted very maturely and flipped the lot the bird, while Nico wished mortals could see
what they did, even if just this one time.

He heard a hiss behind him and instinctively ducked, narrowly missing an arrow shooting by his
ear and impaling what appeared to be an exceptionally ugly harpy that had soared down out of
nowhere.

"Thanks, Liam! Next time, *please* don't try to murder me along with it, though!" He called over
his shoulder, and the son of Hecate held up a weak hand in either acknowledgment or apology,
still looking rather sickly.

Liam was a great archer and even better with his magic, Nico knew, but he had this horrible issue
with nerves, and sadly, in the middle of battle, he tended to be at his worst.
The yelling of the random mortals now turned into screeching, and Nico could swear he heard the words 'guns' and 'terrorists', which was not a good sign whatsoever.

Seriously, he wished they could just freaking see the monsters, then they wouldn't constantly mistake demigods for the bad guys.

"Liam! Get back here! If the mortals call the cops on us, you're the first to get shot, and I'm not capable of reviving you once you're dead!" He heard Will yell from somewhere inside the park, which might not be the smartest thing to do, since that gave part of his hideout away, but also something Nico knew was necessary.

"Jason! Update!" Nico yelled at the sky, and Percy grunted next to him as he rushed back to his side, his monsters apparently taken care of.

For a long moment, there was silence, and the street around them seemed positively deserted, even though Nico could have sworn there had been at least two more empousai-like monsters lurking around.

Had they fled? Returned to their masters to tell on them?

Were they hiding to jump at them once they let their guard down?

Or had Percy or Jason simply taken care of them again?

There was a shadow in an alleyway ahead of them, there, then gone again, and Nico's instincts told him to give chase, so he did.

Percy hesitated next to him, then followed, and they exchanged a fleeting, wary glance before training their eyes on the poorly lit area, ignoring the left-over people that kept up their yelling, while the rest had locked windows and doors.

Their shadow started running, and Nico's heart sank when he realized it looked much less like an empousai and much more like a human.

Okay, this was going to be difficult, and Nico already thought this day way too difficult to begin with.

Was this friend or foe?

An innocent mortal running for their life, or a traitorous demigod in league with the monsters, ready to sell them out?

Percy started stumbling next to him, adding to Nico's distress.

"I'll pursue." He informed him, and Percy gave a small nod, momentarily keeping up with him, before suddenly shaking his head and slowing down.

"I'm going back. I don't like this. They usually target Will much-…"

There was a loud screeching, like car tires on asphalt, but louder and more animalistic, and both Percy and Nico instantly stopped dead and looked around in horror, their chase abandoned as their eyes searched for the source.

"Will." They both said at the same time, then started running back through the alleyway towards to open road.

* 

Luckily, Will was perfectly alright when they saw him.

Not so luckily, there was a giant freaking spider towering in front of him, in the middle of the freaking road.

Luckily, somebody had managed to cut off one of its legs, which was probably the reason for the screeching.
Not so luckily, that seemed to have only aggravated it as it clicked its pincers to either threaten/intimidate them or call for back-up.

Luckily, the rest of their group had enough team spirit and loyalty to bundle around Will and build a sort of protective circle around him to ward off incoming attacks from the beast.

Not so luckily, there was the sound of police sirens coming closer and Nico knew the cops were about to join in on the fun, too.

"Fucking hell." Percy summed up next to him, and Nico agreed with a grunt as he picked up speed and jumped up its long and hairy leg to get onto its back and charge.

At least they had gotten their shopping done before this.

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"You know, no matter what you all say, I still think it was awesome how di Angelo just freaking jumped onto the thing like a boss and attacked it. That was super cool. Sure, it was gross when Percy sliced its stomach – is it even called that? – open and di Angelo cut the head off and there were spider intestines everywhere, but it was still cool!" Ash insisted as they kept rattling the back of the seat in front of them, much to the dismay of Andrew, who was once more turning green in the face.

Percy watched them a moment longer, then looked back out of the window without interest, deciding to keep a lookout for any possible attacks, even if they had made good distance so far.

"Oh yeah, absolutely cool. Especially when the police came around the corner with, like, twenty cars. You know, I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do than run for my life from the police and spider intestines. Yuck." Rin remarked unimpressed, and Liam and Andrew grunted in agreement.

"I'm just glad nobody got hurt." Jason put in quietly next to Percy and his hand found Percy's thigh, though Percy didn't let that distract him from his self-imposed guard duty.

"You really had us worried. Next time, tell us before going on hot pursuit of something, okay?" Nico said sternly, though they all knew he didn't mean to chide.

Percy made a sound of agreement, and Jason sighed, his hand giving Percy's thigh a little squeeze.

"I know. I'm sorry. I just wanted to check what or who that was, but then I already found myself disturbingly far away from you guys, so I came back as fast as I could. I shouldn't have gotten distracted." Jason apologized, though he had explained this to them, already.

Twice.

Once when they had just gotten done slaying that spider and he had landed in front of them right as the police had shown up, and once after Nico had made Jules-Albert appear with the accursed bus to get them all inside and drive off at top speed, right through the park and some alleyways that bus shouldn't have even been able to fit through.

(Of course, the bus hadn't cared, and neither had anybody else, but Percy still hated driving in this thing, no matter its advantages.)

All three of them had gotten side-tracked so easily.

All three of them had distanced themselves from Will and the rest of their team.

All three of them would have been out of reach if Sara, Hannah and Ash hadn't reacted in record speed and attacked the spider before it had gotten to attack Will.

Why was there always at least one sneak attack on Will?

And who had the person been that had run away?

Or, rather, the people.
Percy hadn't mentioned it so far, but he had the distinct feeling Jason had followed somebody different than Nico and he had, given that he had come back from an entirely different direction.

Unfortunately, neither Jason or they had gotten close enough to catch a proper glimpse, so it was impossible to tell…pretty much anything.

Percy hated it.

But he hated a lot of things these days, it seemed.

Jason started stroking over his thigh as the conversation around them continued, and while Percy didn't care about the talk, he spread his legs a little and allowed himself to relax the tiniest bit into Jason's touch.

If he already had to endure this stupid bus drive, he might as well get something out of it.

Man, what would he give for a shower, though.

Or sex.

Or both.

Both would be awesome.

Preferably at the same time.

Yep.

Percy let out a low sigh and put his elbow on his arm rest to sulk properly as he stared out of the window, and caught Will shooting him an odd look in the reflection of the glass.

"Guys, can we arrange for a pit stop at a place with showers along the way? I mean, it would kind of suck if we arrive at the god or goddess in question just to have them disappear because we reek like the dead." Will said loudly the next moment, and Percy had the distinct feeling he had been found out.

Jules-Albert let out an affronted noise from the driver's seat, but they all pointedly ignored that as everybody started talking at the same time, most of them enthusiastic and all for it, while Andrew lamented about the risks loudly.

Since Jason and Nico agreed to the showers, said risks were universally ignored as everyone (except Andrew, who sulked) cheered loudly.

Percy didn't cheer, instead keeping his gaze on the traffic outside, though he could feel the hint of a smile hushing over his face, even if he didn't yet feel like smiling.

But his chest felt a little lighter, anyways, so he guessed that was a plus.

"Do you see anything interesting?" Jason asked quietly next to him, and Percy tilted his head slightly, though he didn't look around.

"Not really. Just a kid sticking their tongue out at me." He replied with a small shrug, and felt Jason leaning over, their shoulders brushing together, before Jason's head appeared next to his to get a better view.

"Oh really? That's not very nice. Did you do it back?"

Percy shook his head, his focus automatically shifting to Jason even if he didn't want to, though he kept his face averted and his eyes on the traffic.

The next moment, he caught Jason sticking out his tongue as well out of the corners of his eyes.

The small laugh that escaped him in reply was as automatic and immediate as it was freeing, the pressure in his chest lessening considerably.
"Since when are you one for childish actions, Sparky?" He teased, and that sneaky smile made its way back onto his lips, though he still didn't really feel like smiling.

Maybe it was simply something he was used to do because this was Jason, and being around Jason usually always made him smile.

Jason turned to look at him, his gaze warm and affectionate, while his grin was borderline smug.

"I'll have you know I'm always one for childish actions, Percy. Why else would I have gone along with your madness for so long, otherwise?"

To watch out for him and make sure he made it through said madness in one piece?

"And there I thought I'm simply so awesome that you couldn't resist my charm." He replied, and Jason shook his head slightly with that fond smile of his, before he fell back into his seat properly and let himself fall against Percy, his face rubbing against Percy's thin and mud-covered jacket.

"You're awesome, alright. My awesome boyfriend. Oh man, I'm so looking forward to a shower." Jason said with a deep sigh, and Percy was reminded of last night for a moment, of the way his boyfriends had come to cuddle and kiss him and acted as in love as always, making his heart flutter and his whole being soar with happiness for a little while.

These travels could be so nice, if only there was less fighting, less monsters, and less of a tight schedule.

He knew it was selfish to repeatedly think that way, but Percy couldn't help it, okay?

He loved these guys, and he would do anything for them, but he wished the world would also bother doing something for him and let him have some more time with them – some more nice time, with nice things, with more of those touches and kisses and reassurances and love.

And less fighting.

He was so sick and tired of the fighting.

Percy moved his hand over Jason's on his thigh to thread their fingers together somewhat, and he could see Jason smile out of the corners of his eyes, before his boyfriend leaned over further to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"Totally can't wait for that shower." Jason said softly, then gave him some more pecks, before snuggling against him as if he was a pillow.

Percy felt his lips twitching.

This time, he did feel a little bit like smiling.

"Same."

*  

Jules-Albert drove them to a truck stop with rentable showers, and for reasons he didn't know nor care about, they were able to get in and get everything settled without problems, which Percy was eternally grateful for.

Sure, his mood might have been damped by the fact that the bathrooms (not to mention the showers, themselves) were too small for the four of them together, but Jason hadn't given him much chance to mope about that before dragging him into the first room and locking the door behind him – and thus making it obvious he didn't care how small the shower may be, he still wanted Percy with him.

A shower with Jason might still not be quite as nice as a shower with all three of his boyfriends, but a shower with Jason was also a shower with Jason, so he was more than happy with that.

Especially once they were naked and under the spray of hot, wonderful, clean water, and Jason was practically glued to him due to the lack of space in the shower, and because he wanted to be.
Percy was sure of that, seeing as Jason was humming contently as he kissed along Percy's neck and tugged on his skin, while his hands stroked up and down his sides and made him shiver with pleasure and want.

"Are you okay with this?" Jason asked against his ear, and Percy wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the question.

"More than okay." He replied breathlessly and pushed back against Jason, enjoying the feeling of his wet skin against his own, same as he adored how Jason immediately pressed against him further, showing he wanted the same as Percy did.

Which was to say: More.

He turned his head so they could kiss, and it struck him as odd that the first thing they did upon having a bathroom to themselves was to make out in the shower, even though they hadn't brushed their teeth since yesterday morning (in a shabby restroom Percy never wanted to step into, again).

But he didn't complain, his heart and being soaring at the chance of getting this moment, at all.

They heard noise outside, a constant reminder that they weren't alone and that they weren't allowed to be too loud, unless they wanted to get into trouble with anybody.

For some reason, that made Percy instantly think of Will and his noises, and a part of him felt guilty that the blonde probably wouldn't get to enjoy his shower quite as much as Percy was going to enjoy his.

"You think Will and Nico are making out, too?" He asked without thinking, and Jason pulled away from his lips for a moment to blink at him, clearly thrown off by the question.

"I…don't know? Does it…is it important whether they are?" He asked back hesitantly, and Percy hastily shook his head.

"Just curious. But Will didn't set you up to this, right?" He asked skeptically, remembering the way Will had looked at him so oddly on the bus, just to bring up the whole shower-thing as if he knew exactly that had been one of the things bothering Percy.

Jason blinked at him, and his genuine confusion was enough of an answer for Percy to relax again, before he turned around so he could wrap his arms around his boyfriend and press their lips together properly – even if that did urge him to press his back against rather cool and not very comfortable tiles.

"Was he supposed to? Did you two talk?" Jason asked between kisses, and the way he looked so determined to give this matter some serious thought while he also tried to chase after Percy's lips, had to be the most adorable thing Percy had seen in a while.

He huffed out a small laugh and teased him a little while longer as he shook his head and hummed instead of replying, and Jason was quick to discard the topic in favor of going along with Percy's little game.

Then, Jason pushed against him more insistently and growled against his lips before claiming them, and Percy grinned into the kiss rather smugly.

"You know, if I had known we would end up making out while taking the shower, I would have put the lube bottle within reach." Jason murmured as Percy had his tongue running along the front of Jason's throat, though all talking was cut off by a soft moan when Percy used his teeth a moment later.

"Where did you think we were going to make out?" Percy asked curiously as he continued, enjoying it immensely to watch Jason react that strongly to something so small.

"Oh, I had a few ideas, let's leave it at that. Do you want me to get the bottle? Or do you want to wait?" Jason's voice trembled slightly, just enough to make Percy's chest swell with pride, and he nipped at his neck a while longer to lure some more sounds out of him.
He loved this guy.

Even though he always asked stupid questions.

Did Percy look as if he wanted to wait? No, no he didn't.

"Where is it? Your pants pocket?" He guessed, and felt incredibly smug when Jason gave a small nod and bared more of his neck to him distractedly, practically inviting him to continue ravishing him.

Will was right – if one knew how, one could turn Jason into a needy mess just by teasing his neck, alone.

Percy bit down at the side of his neck and sucked gently, relishing in the way Jason shivered and gasped.

Then, he glanced sideways through the transparent shower curtain towards Jason's neatly folded pile of clothing on the toilet seat, and decided to be lazy and simply flick his wrist as he momentarily focused on the usual tug in his gut that came with using his powers.

Since lube was a form of liquid, too, it was easy to have the bottle shoot towards him – though it wasn't as easy catching it, which was why it smacked into his out-stretched hand and promptly dropped to their feet.

Needless to say, Jason noticed, and Percy totally did not appreciate the amusement in his boyfriend's gaze – which was why he gave him a cocky wiggle of his eyebrows and made to bend down, even if the confined space of the shower meant he mostly ended up sliding down Jason's body.

He made sure to make Jason feel all of it, of course.

Especially when he snatched the lube and made his way back up, his lips 'accidentally' getting side-tracked a little when they just so happened to cross paths with Jason's very nice and hard dick on the way.

The moan Jason let slip was enough to both make Percy stay where he was, as well as wonder whether they might not have to worry about getting into trouble for making too much noise, instead of Will.

"Somebody seems desperate." He teased as he nipped at Jason's hip bone innocently, and his boyfriend shot him a telling look, though he didn't argue the statement, and only leaned back against the tiles to give Percy more space.

"I thought you wanted more from this?" His boyfriend asked, before Percy made him moan again by licking along the length of his dick with a satisfied hum.

"I do. But that doesn't mean I have to resist this." Percy pointed out, then wrapped his lips around Jason's tip, and his boyfriend let out a strangled sound of bliss and disbelief, while his hips jerked forward and his hands shot out to bury themselves in Percy's hair.

Jason hissed, then cursed, and Percy inwardly gloated, feeling more alive than ever.

He uncapped the lube bottle as his mouth got busy, and Jason only caught wind of what he was doing when he was already pushing one finger inside himself.

The way Jason's hips jerked automatically while his eyes narrowed and a soft gasp escaped his lips showed Percy he liked what he saw.

Especially since Jason kept his eyes open from that moment on and had them trained solely on Percy, much to his dismay and delight.

Dismay, because it meant Jason was watching him and his every move.

Delight, because he liked being watched, especially by Jason.
"Have I ever told you that I love you?" Jason breathed in what sounded a lot like awe, and Percy felt like the happiest person alive.

"Maybe once or twice. Feel free to tell me again, though." He replied cheekily, and his boyfriend huffed out a small laugh, before huffing for entirely different reasons.

And then, Jason did just that, and Percy never wanted him to stop.

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When Percy and Jason finally got out of the bathroom, Jason was a giddy mess and Percy had his typical 'I just got laid'-face.

Will smirked at his guys and wiggled his eyebrows at them knowingly, just to have Percy stick his tongue out at them.

Aww, he seemed so much at ease now.

The gleam was back in his eyes, too.

Apparently, Will had been right with his guess he needed some downtime.

Then again, they all did, so it wasn't as if his suggestion of a shower hadn't been partly selfish, as well.

Will suppressed a laugh when he heard Andrew and Ash arguing in hushed voices about who of them had topped this time (seriously, so nosy) and he was glad Jason and Percy couldn't hear.

Though Liam surely did, and his scandalized face did make Will chuckle against his will and wish Nico was here, but the Italian had disappeared to acquire a new map for them and to get some info on where the heck they were.

(Because they had found out Andrew's was very outdated, which hadn't been a pleasant revelation.)

"You can't talk about something like that! That is private! Intimate! Did you not learn that? It is impolite." Liam hissed agitatedly, and Will had to bite the inside of his cheeks to stop laughing.

Oh, he knew why they had Liam around, that guy was a sweetheart.

"Liam, everything is impolite in your book. Plus, we're just joking, anyways. Come on, we just had to wait half an hour on those two, let us have some fun. It's not like we actually care, either way." Ash retorted with a huff as they moved a hand through their still damp mop of hair at the top of their head, plucking at it unhappily.

"Maybe I should get a new haircut. The undercut is cool, but every time I shower my fringe curls and I look like a wet poodle."

"You don't. Poodles look cute. You just look stupid." Hannah commented as she walked over with Sara and Rin, and Will rolled his eyes and took this as his cue to return his attention to his boyfriends, who had gotten side-tracked by a vending machine, apparently.

Will went to join them with a grin, happy to see them so relaxed again.

"Hey, what are you two looking at, huh?" He asked as he tried to take the spot next to Jason, but then they both already moved and took him in the middle, so he could see the vending machine better.

"We forgot the snacks – okay, I forgot the snacks. It escaped my mind. Anyways, Percy demands I buy him everything he wants from this vending machine as compensation, but I don't have any change." Jason explained to him, and Percy let out an affirmative huff, though he was also grinning from ear to ear, and Will could feel he was mostly still in a state of post-orgasmic bliss, so they all knew he wasn't genuinely upset about anything.

"In that case, I might be able to help. Nico gave me all his small change earlier." Will pointed out
as he searched his pockets, and Percy's little squeal was like music to Will's ears.

He felt Jason getting all jittery next to him, too, and knew he felt the same way about Percy being adorable.

"How much do you need? Just as a heads-up, I'm demanding a kiss for every quarter." Will stated seriously as he pulled out his money and looked at Jason in question, though he nearly laughed when he saw Jason's unimpressed expression.

"What a generous deal, Freckles. In that case, I feel compelled to give you a heads-up that there'll be a lot of kisses." Jason replied as he took the coins from him and started putting them into the vending machine, while Percy started bouncing on his heels and tapped the various things on display he wanted with child-like joy – before sending Will a sultry wink and a wiggle of his eyebrows that told him he would pick as much as possible to get Will as many kisses as possible.

He surely had kind boyfriends.

"Do you want your kisses now, or when we're back in our tent or somewhere more private, in general?" Jason asked with a gaze that promised the best of the best, but Will had learned his lesson with their team, already, so he wasn't going to take any chances.

"Now. Though you're free to tip me later." He replied with a wink, and both his boyfriends shot him looks that said they _would_ do just that.

Will sent a prayer to the gods that they wouldn't be attacked anymore today – partly so these two would keep their good moods, and partly so he would get some spoiling, too.

(Especially since he was now freshly showered, which felt _amazing_, by the way.)

"What sort of business transaction am I witnessing right now? Is there something I need to know about?" Nico's voice sounded behind them, but Will had already heard him coming closer, so he only turned around and tugged his boyfriend towards them so he could look, too.

"Jason and I made a deal. He gets your money, and I get his kisses." Will explained, and Percy snorted out a small laugh, while Nico raised an eyebrow at them and shook his head with a smile.

"Surely sounds like a good deal. I knew Jason would make a good business man."

Jason did a little bow at the praise, while Will shot Nico a sulky look.

"What, and I'm not? You wound me, love."

Nico gave him a peck on the cheek to placate him.

"You're our doctor. The _best_ doctor. And a great business partner, of course, if we want money _and_ kisses." Nico elaborated and gave him some more pecks, successfully wooing Will to the point where he wasn't even listening to his words anymore.

Aww, they were all so kind and cute, he loved it.

They remained in front of that vending machine for an inappropriately long time, though their excuse was that Percy fancied a lot of the things on display, and Jason of course never said no (such an enabler), while Nico ended up giving him more money – and Will was a happy bundle of sunshine as he kept getting pecks and kisses from all sides.

Not quite what he might have first expected when he had made his deal with Jason, but, in a way, this was even _better._

It certainly helped to make all four of them all jittery and happy as they filed back into the bus with the rest of their team (with Sara and Ash giving them cheeky thumb-ups, while Rin and Andrew fake-gagged in exaggerated disgust) and continue their journey.

The stop might not have been the most important thing on their agenda, but it had definitely been a good thing they had decided for one.
Especially because Percy was a lot more cheerful than he had been in a long time.

Will prayed to the gods again – to anybody who was listening, really – that there wouldn't be any more monster attacks today to ruin it.

They might not make it to the god/goddess in question today, but chances were good that they might make it to Washington DC, which meant they could at least pick up the two demigods and respective satyrs, and worry about the rest tomorrow.

So, Will put all his hopes into that, and prayed the Fates had mercy on them for once.

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They reached Washington DC in one piece.

Jason was pretty sure none of them had seriously expected to, but that only made them all the more overjoyed once they realized they had finally arrived.

Sure, they had no idea where the god/goddess in question actually was, and none of them had any delusions about it getting any easier from here on out, but he had to admit it was a pretty good feeling to realize that they had, at last, arrived at their destination.

They huddled together in front of a McDonalds, taking shelter from the rain that had started the moment they had arrived, while Nico tried to get a sense of where exactly they were, and where that museum was they were supposed to meet the satyrs at.

"This is it. I'm getting myself a coffee. Anybody else want anything?" Ash piped up when Nico turned the whole map around again with a curse, and there were several murmurs of agreement.

Jason exchanged a look with Will, then his blonde nodded and followed them inside to watch over them, while Percy and Jason stayed with Nico.

"Do you want me to take a look?" Percy offered tentatively when Nico glowered at the map he had bought, but their boyfriend proved to be stubborn as usual.

"I know I saw it. Seriously, why can't we just let Leo build us a monster-proof GPS? Why do we have to have such a big group? Why did Jules-Albert kick us out next to a freaking internet-café for no apparent reason? I told him to get us to the god/goddess in Washington DC. I get that he won't take us there, but did he have to kick us out here?" Nico ranted and attempted to strangle the map for a moment, before he soothed it back out and buried his nose back in it with a grumble.

Percy and Jason exchanged telling looks.

Then, Percy stepped behind Nico and looked over his shoulder down at the map, while Jason glanced towards the internet café across the street.

It had sort of been weird for Jules-Albert to suddenly stop there, Nico had a point.

The zombie chauffeur hadn't made any move to break or take a turn before reaching this very point, when he had suddenly slammed the breaks and come to a screeching halt that had nearly made several other cars collide with them.

Thinking back, Jason couldn't remember Jules-Albert ever doing anything of the sort before.

He hadn't given the matter much thought, of course, since Nico had only seemed upset, not worried or bewildered, but now that Nico mentioned what he had told Jules-Albert, Jason couldn't help but wonder…

"Actually, I think I'm going to check out that café." He said quietly, just as Percy pointed at a blotch on the map that was labelled 'Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum' and Nico made a pouty face.

At Jason's words, though, they both looked up in surprise.

"What? Why?" Percy asked, but Nico's gaze already hushed to the building in question,
scrutinizing it for anything unusual.

Jason shrugged and looked past them to the rest of their group, who were busy ordering much more than just coffee, while Will stood by and watched it happen.

"I don't know, just a feeling. It might be nothing, but I at least want to know I checked. I'll be back in a moment." He excused himself and was about to take a step towards the street, when Percy snatched him by the arm and pulled him back.

"Wait, wait, wait. Hang on, who said you're going alone? You think I'll let you walk away by yourself, in the middle of a busy street, in an even busier city, in the rain, when we don't know what's around us and what might be in that café?" Percy's voice was stern and displeased, but more than that, Jason was taken aback by the reluctance with which Percy let go of his arm, and the way he immediately averted his face.

"I agree. Even if it's nothing, let's not split up unless necessary. By the looks of it, the group is buying lunch, so we might as well join them. Whatever might be in that café will surely still be there in half an hour." Nico decided as he refolded the map and nodded to the McDonald's, so Jason allowed them to drag him in there, though his eyes strayed back to the café.

He could only hope Nico was right.

Even if Jason highly doubted they would find a divine entity in something so simple like a café, there might still be some sort of clue there as to where they had to go.

Or maybe they wouldn't find anything, and Jules-Albert had just kicked them out because he had gotten tired of all the noise.

Jason glanced over his shoulder again as the glass doors fell shut behind him, his eyes on the café, though it still looked as simple and plain as before.

Somehow, he still couldn't shake the odd feeling inside him, though.

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"What the…"

Jason stared at the scene in front of him in confusion, then glanced sideways at his boyfriends for confirmation that he was seeing this correctly.

Empty coffee cups littered two high tables that had been pushed together.

Several chairs were stacked on top of each other so nobody could make the mistake of sitting down where they weren't welcome.

All the computers were running, each with a different social media website or similar pulled up, and all of them active.

And, in front of all of that, with a coffee in one hand and a bagel in the other, stood a tall, curvy lady in a black crop top and jeans, with long, pitch-black hair to her hips, thick-framed, black glasses, and indigo eyes that flicked between the screens as if a glance was all she needed to know everything there was to know.

It didn't take a mastermind to know that this was not a mortal woman.

While the rest of their team took a curious step forward, Jason caught Will taking one cautious step back.

The woman turned around, and the smile she sent them was more self-satisfied than friendly as she held out her arms at her sides, coffee and bagel still in her hands.

"Why, hello! I was wondering just when you would show up. Quite a nice home I've made myself here, don't you think?" She asked, the amusement palpable, though Jason didn't yet know what exactly she found so amusing.
He glanced sideways at his team to exchange wary glances, then he cleared his throat to reply.

However, the goddess had the bagel and coffee disappear instantly as she clapped her hands together before he could say anything, and the whole group jumped in surprise.

"Oh, where are my manners? I haven't even introduced myself properly yet, have I?" She suddenly exclaimed in an oddly exaggerated tone, which made Jason immediately wonder whether he had done something wrong, whether he shouldn't already know her, whether they shouldn't have…

She spread out her arms properly, as if to present herself and her 'home', and bared her teeth at them in a smile that seemed more aggressive than anything else.

"I am Eris, goddess of strife and discord. Welcome to my humble home."
Eris, Goddess of Strife and Discord

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N: Hey Cupcakes :D
Here the next chapter ;)
Thank you for all your lovely comments and reviews, they surely make my days!
Don't forget to check out all the amazing Fanart!! There's new links!!!!! <3
Wish you all the best,
-Tári

Mild Trigger Warnings for this Chapter:
- Mentions of/Implied issues caused by Kyle
- Angst
- Battles/Fights/Injuries/Blood
- Symptoms of Depression

Chapter 03: Eris, Goddess of Strife and Discord

While Jason tried to explain his peace contract to Eris, the goddess of strife and discord was managing her profiles and had a hell of a time posting questionable things on questionable websites that led to questionable replies and sound effects sounding from all over the place – and Nico was confused by everything and understood nothing.

He knew the gods were different and all, but why was the goddess of strife and discord…living in an internet café?

And why were there still mortals running around in this very internet café?

Nico pondered that as he looked around, but he soon realized that the staff he had originally perceived as mortals were actually a tad too see-through for that.

Spirits? Wind spirits? Anything but mortal, that was certain.

Oh. Wow.

This could have been a trap, an enemy sneak attack, and Nico would have happily walked his guys into it.

When had he let his guard down so much?

He could see Percy looking around in a similar manner, his lips forming a thin line as he stepped closer to Will with a displeased expression.

Nico was glad he took to Will's side, that meant he could focus on the rest of the group without worrying too much, while Jason did his thing.

"Oh yes, I know all about that contract of yours. Now, do you want to play a game?" Eris asked good-naturedly, and Nico didn't like the sound of that, at all.

Games and gods didn't mix well, history showed that only all too well.

Jason shot him a look that spoke of similar doubts.

"No need to look so worried, I don't bite. In fact, I'm sure you won't read anything anywhere about me devouring demigods or the like. All I'm asking for is a bit of a game. You must all be horribly bored after such a tedious journey, after all, am I right? Wouldn't you just love some
downtime? Oh, look, you're the one who punched my son." Eris said, before suddenly appearing in front of Will out of nowhere, much to the shock of everybody else.

Percy had his hand in his pocket in an instant and moved in front of Will protectively, but Eris took a step back with a small laugh.

"My, my. No worries, I'm not going to harm him. You're going to do that for me, after all, aren't you? Isn't that right, William?" She quipped, and Will flinched back automatically, while Nico and Percy let out small hisses in warning.

"Whoa, lady, don't call him William, that's just wrong." Ash put in with a grunt before anybody else could say or do anything, and, while Nico agreed, he also couldn't believe they had just said that out loud to a goddess.

Eris looked around at Ash curiously, then her eyes narrowed, and her grin widened.

Andrew took a step away from Ash, Hannah interestingly enough didn't.

"How so? Isn't that the name his mother chose for him? Why would it be wrong of me to use it?" Eris asked innocently, and Nico shot Jason a pleading look, hoping he could do something to keep the situation from going out of control.

"Because everybody knows not to call him that. Just because my mom calls me munchkin, doesn't mean anyone else has the right to." Ash retorted before Jason had the chance to, but Nico was more distracted by the fact Will was trying to get past Percy, looking more than ready to join in on the verbal fight.

Oh, hell no.

"It's impolite." Liam agreed with a serious nod, and Nico had the distinct feeling they should have left the rest of their team at McDonald's and come to this café alone.

"It is impolite to use a name given at birth, because one person messed up the meaning of it? That doesn't sound very fair, does it now? It seems like quite the hassle for everyone else, really. Then again, you enjoy being a hassle, don't you, Ash?" Eris continued, and for some reason, Nico could swear her voice was getting sweeter, nearly cooing now, and her grin was feral.

She seemed to have the time of her life, and at their expense, too.

"Eris, with all due respect, we have come to negotiate peace, not start senseless arguing…" Jason put in, but she wasn't deterred, and neither was Ash as they took a step forward, looking defiant and ready to fight.

"What's that supposed to mean? All I want is to be accepted the way I am. If you got a problem with that, you can-…"

"I can what, dearest? You want to be accepted, and everybody else has to live with you not fitting in the norm. It is rude to call you by your birth name or assigned gender, but isn't it rude of you to expect the whole world to bend to your wishes?" Eris cut in effortlessly, and Nico's chest clenched when he saw Ash flinch and pale.

He was about to cut in and tell Eris just where she could stick her fight, when Hannah stomped on the ground.

"Oi, leave them alone! Nobody expects the world to bend to any wishes, they just want common respect. If you can't manage that, then it's you who is a hassle, and it's you who doesn't deserve respect. Why bend the whole world the way you want it to be with your binary, when there's enough people outside said binary to show it's a faulty system?" She exclaimed heatedly, and if Nico hadn't seen this was Hannah speaking up for Ash, he wouldn't have believed it.

Eris laughed – an elated, happy laugh – as she clapped her hands together excitedly.

"Exactly! But, do you see it, now? There's always at least two sides, but rarely a way to appease them both. The narrow-minded ones refuse to change, the outcast ones refuse to give up. It's so
intense!" She exclaimed – then she whirled around and returned to the computers to begin typing again.

The team exchanged confused, unhappy looks, and Hannah seemed to belatedly realize she had actually moved in front of Ash protectively, since she now all but jumped away and went to hide with Percy and Will, who were talking in hushed voices.

Will looked even more unhappy than any of them.

"Why did you hold me back? She lashed out at our team, Percy. Our team. You should have protected Ash and Hannah, not me. Do I look like I need protection? Do I really look that weak to you?"

"I don't give a damn, Will. I'm not risking it. So far, all the gods have taken way too much interest in you, and I'm not going to have you thrown into an even worse mess than the one we're already in. Deal with it." Percy replied in a borderline angry voice, and Nico's alarm bells rang.

They couldn't argue now!

"What a beautiful lover's quarrel. Both sides are right, both for different reasons, and neither will back down, believing their argument is more valid than the other." Eris said right next to him, and Nico would have jumped in surprise if he wasn't already utterly fed up with the goddess.

"You sure like your disputes, it seems." He commented dryly, instead, and she bared her teeth at him in one of her grins, again.

"Do you know why I exist, Nico di Angelo?" She asked, and the question reverberated inside his head, though he wasn't sure what to make of that, other than that it was creepy.

"Maybe it would be better if we left." Jason said next to him as he got their group together from where it threatened to scatter, and they all looked around at him in surprise – even Percy and Will, who momentarily dropped their argument.

Eris chuckled next to Nico's ear, then she was gone, and when he looked around, he found her back in front of the computer screens once more.

"But the signature!" Andrew exclaimed in disbelief, but Jason shook his head.

Nico's heart ached, knowing how important the contract was to Jason, but also knowing why it would be better to leave.

If they stayed, chances were they would all start arguing about trivial things just as Percy and Will, or start a fight with Eris like Hannah and Ash.

"I'll have to find a different way. It's okay. The team is more important right now. We'll leave and get the two demigods, then set up Camp. I'll try and arrange a new meeting with her. Alone. That might work better." Jason explained, and it sounded so wonderfully possible and simple…

In fact, it sounded too wonderfully possible and simple, which was probably why Eris appeared next to them in an instant again, feral grin in place and her indigo eyes blazing with mirth.

"Nah." She said, then she was gone again, and Nico heard Percy letting out an agitated sigh.

When he glanced towards him, he found him grinding his teeth and with his eyes fixed on and around Will, who immediately caught him doing so and glowered back at him defiantly.

"I will sign your foolish contract, but what will you give me for it?" Eris' voice sounded from everywhere and nowhere, and now, Nico saw Will stepping closer to Percy with a look of uncertainty on his face, while Percy immediately wrapped an arm around him and tugged him against him, intent on keeping him safe.

Meanwhile, Jason looked fed up with the whole world.

Nico could understand that only all too well.
If he had to guess the gods' wishes each time, as well, he would burn the contract to shreds by himself, and tell the gods they could see how they preserved the peace among them by themselves.

Which was why Nico knew he could never carry the responsibility of the contract, unlike Jason.

"What is it you wish for, Eris? We already have plenty of signatures, so if you need support or assistance, I am sure that can be arranged…" Jason started, but Eris didn't seem interested in the slightest as she appeared back at the computer screens and started typing away merrily on three websites at once.

"Boring. I am not interested in war, and what would I need support or assistance with? I barely have anything fun to do anymore, as it is, and now I'm supposed to share even that? No thanks." She waved off, and Nico heard her voice in his head again.

'Do you know why I exist, Nico di Angelo?"

How the hell was he supposed to know?

Plus, what was this, was he supposed to solve her existential crisis now, or what?

He racked his brain for Eris, trying to remember the stories with her, or what he had heard about her, in general.

Unfortunately, he came up blank.

Somehow, he thought she might have been mentioned in the story about Helen and Paris and the Trojan War, but since he hadn't cared all that much for that, he also didn't know more about it.

There also had never been an Eris card or figure in his Mythomagic game, either.

'Do you know why I exist?"

To make life difficult for people?

To cause dispute and arguments and fights and play into Ares' wish for war?

To spite Nico?

Nico couldn't decide, though he was pretty sure none of his replies would win him any favors with her.

"Do you know how I came to be?" Eris asked without looking at them, but there was something in her tone that told Nico it was a question she was itching to ask.

He looked at Jason, hoping he would know the answer, but his boyfriend shot him a hopeful look that said he didn't.

Oh great.

They were so screwed.

"Well, the stories differ, don't they? Some say there's two gods of strife and discord, others claim there's only one, which I guess would be you? Some say you're a child of Night, others say you're a child of Zeus, though, so I'm not really sure what we're supposed to tell you." Andrew spoke up, looking unusually focused as he fiddled with his tangle toy, while Rin and Sara were to his left and right and held onto his shoulders.

It was difficult to tell whether they were doing that for comfort, or whether they were the ones that had pushed him to speak up, but Nico didn't care, glad they had any reply, at all.

"I know, right? It's a mystery. But it's also a mystery for another day. Let me tell you: I have been here from the beginning of time. And, so has discord and strife. It's in a human's nature, you see?" Eris explained, but Nico had no idea why.
Did it really matter?

Well, to her it did, probably.

"Then why did you ask whether we knew?" Percy asked skeptically, but Eris didn't even look at him, instead returning her attention to her screens.

"Because it makes my next question so much more fun. And to tease you a little. I rarely get any guests, you see…"

Oh, Nico wondered why that was.

Eris appeared next to him again, but he could only sigh and suppress the urge to punch her in the face out of reflex, instead meeting her indigo eyes with a defiant look of his own.

"So, now my next question: Why do I exist?"

What was it with her and that question?!

"I don't know." He replied honestly, and heard Jason and a few others of their team inhale sharply – but Eris didn't even blink, her grin only widening.

"I know you don't." She whispered, and his jaw clenched.

If she had known, then why had she asked?!

"Do you know?" She asked Liam next as she disappeared from Nico's side and reappeared next to his, which had the boy jumping and screaming bloody murder as he all but leaped into Ash's arms.

Ash funny enough caught him, though they also dropped him right away again to take two big steps back as Eris advanced on them, next.

"Enough." Jason suddenly said sharply, his voice authoritative and demanding, and everything in the café seemed to come to a halt.

The beeping from the computers, the shuffling of the staff, the movements and noises from within their team, everything died down as all eyes settled on Jason.

"Leave my team alone. I'm the one with the contract, and I'm the one who wishes to speak to you and find a solution that satisfies you and grants the rest of the demigods a chance for peace. So, either you talk to me and tell me what you want, or my team and I will leave, and you're on your own again." Jason stated in the same sharp voice, showing he meant it, and Nico wasn't sure he had ever seen him so…upset? Aggressive?

There wasn't even a word for it, at least he couldn't think of one.

Eris straightened her back where she had started towering over Ash, her gaze hushing up and down Jason's body with renewed interest, though Nico also noticed she didn't seem perturbed or intimidated in any way.

Then again, why would she? She was a goddess, she had nothing to fear from them.

They, however, had plenty to fear from her.

"I will be on my own sooner or later, no matter our actions, Jason Grace. I have been alone all my life. It is what has made me the way I am, same as you have become who you are by the past that has shaped you." Eris said without discernable emotion, and Nico shuddered at the sudden lack of a grin on her face, her expression instead impassive and sober.

"I understand that, but it's no excuse for bothering my team and making everybody uncomfortable. We have come in peace, so I would appreciate it greatly if you treated us accordingly." Jason said in a cool voice, and Nico was astounded his boyfriend really dared to speak this way to a goddess.

Though he was also impressed, even if he wasn't going to tell Jason that.
(He didn't want him to get killed for disrespect, after all. He loved Jason too much for that.)

Eris considered him a moment longer, then she inclined her head slightly and disappeared, just to reappear in front of her screens once more, sitting in her chair and tapping a pen to her chubby cheek.

"Alright, let's talk business then, Grace. Oh, right, you don't have anything to offer me. My bad. Well, alright, I start, then. Let me explain to you a little thing, okay?"

Jason looked back at their team with an apprehensive look, as if thinking about still sending them out, anyways.

Eris clicked her tongue impatiently.

"I won't pick any fights. We all know you'll do that by yourself soon enough. Isn't that right, Will? Oh well, everyone makes their own choices, I suppose. So, Grace, ready to find out more about an under-appreciated and generally forgotten minor goddess like me?" She asked and blinked her eyelashes at them innocently, though that certainly got her no sympathy after her earlier actions.

Nico glanced at Will, but his boyfriend had his face averted and remained pressed against Percy's side, who was out-right glowering at Eris with a look that spoke of murder if she dared to as much as touch Will.

Why did she have to say stuff like that, though?

Why would Will pick any fights with them?

Will could be stubborn, sure, and his self-sacrificial tendencies bothered all of them, but Will would never do anything to consciously hurt them or pick an actual fight with them – that simply wasn't how Will was.

He looked back at Eris, just to find her looking straight at him with a pitying smile, though she returned her attention to Jason before he could as much as frown.

What?

Oh, how he hated it when the gods knew more than they let on.

Eris smoothed down her crop top a little, and Nico only now noticed it had the letters F and U written on them in black glitter.

If Nico didn't already dislike this goddess, he would have probably asked her where she had gotten it, because he wanted one for himself and Piper.

(However, he disliked her to bits. So, yeah, there was that.)

"I'll tell you a little bit about me, and in the meantime, your team can work on the answer to my earlier question about my existence. That's fair, right? Of course, I'll only sign your contract if I'm pleased with the answer, but, hey, your team is smart, right? You don't doubt them at all, do you?" Eris asked sweetly, and Nico was fed up with her way of turning every sentence into a question, same as he was fed up with the content of said questions.

"I don't. I picked them for a reason, and they haven't disappointed me yet." Jason replied without hesitation, and Nico could see Liam and Ash exchanging surprised looks, while Sara and Hannah straightened their backs with pride in their gazes.

Though Nico could also see Rin with her hands on Andrew's jacket and rattling him behind the rest of their team and out of sight of Will and Percy, so that made Nico frown all over again.

How Jason could speak so highly of this team was beyond Nico, sometimes, though he had no doubts they were much more capable than they let on.

Though he still wished Rin would have refrained from strangling Andrew until after Eris turned her back to them, and if only to give Jason's words some more ground.
Oh well, nothing for it.

"To start off, let me tell you about this one thing roughly 3,218 years ago. It's not really important, but it's a fun story, you'll like it." Eris chattered happily, and Nico saw Percy rolling his eyes with an incredulous look on his face.

Apparently, they would be stuck here for quite a while.

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"I still think she exists solely to spite me." Nico grumbled, and Will let out a small sigh.

"I'm pretty sure that's not it." Andrew replied as he looked down at their scribbled notes.

"Oh, you don't say." Ash remarked sarcastically, then let their head fall back on their arms on the table they all huddled around.

"No fighting. Come on, we can do this, team. Will, what is she saying, now?" Percy put in, and Will strained his ears.

"She's telling Jason about some farmer's dispute and how it helped him get over the loss of his wife and work harder, thus giving his life new purpose and sending him on his merry way. Or something." He slowly pieced together from the bits and pieces he caught, and Percy gave a small nod, while Andrew started writing again.

"Alright. So…she says she exists to give people a new purpose? That doesn't sound right. Wouldn't that be something related to Hope?" Hannah mused, and Sara played with her loop earring thoughtfully.

Will followed the movement for a while as he tried to get through the jumble of noises around him and the mess of thoughts inside his head.

They were spending way too much time here.

While he could understand Eris might be bored after being without company for a while (at least fourteen years, he guessed, since that was Dylan's age as far as he remembered), he couldn't see why that meant she had to tell them her whole life story.

As much as he cared for history and as much as he was willing to listen to anything anybody needed to get off their chest, there was a difference when the person in question was a divine entity that was only supposed to sign something and then let them go to collect two probably scared and hopefully uninjured and healthy demigod kids.

In fact, he already had half a mind to interrupt her and tell her to simply look for a good therapist – but, unfortunately, he knew how much this meant to Jason, so he kept quiet, even if it became exceedingly difficult.

His headache wasn't helping, at all, either.

It felt as if his head was splitting open and somebody was trying to take a look inside – and it had been this way ever since they had entered Washington DC, but ever since they had entered the café, it had definitely gotten worse.

He hated it, same as he hated the constant remarks Eris threw his way.

What did she know of his choices?

He was doing what he was doing so his guys wouldn't be hurt, did she not realize that?

Will was pretty sure she was just trying to get the most out of having company, even if this was the sort of thing that led to never getting company, again.

Oh well, her problem, not his.

"Maybe it has something to do with what she said earlier. About there always being at least two
point of views." Sara mused, and Will glanced back at Eris, but she was now eating her bagel with a smug look on her face as she sat in that plain café chair like a queen.

“How would that be the reason for her existence, though?” Hannah asked doubtfully, and Will was pretty sure they were never going to figure this out.

“What I don't understand is why she doesn't just tell us. She can clearly see we don't know, so why doesn't she just tell us and sign the stupid thing and we'll work on getting her recognition or whatever. I mean, she’s been going on about this, so I'm pretty sure her conditions for the contract will be more knowledge on her persona and some more gratitude and recognition for all her hard work.” He summed up, and the rest of his team gave grunts of agreement, while Percy moved an arm around him again to keep him close.

Will was still fed up with him for keeping him from speaking up for himself.

Ash was years younger than him and had spoken up to a goddess on his behalf, and there was nothing he had done to protect them, even when said goddess had turned to attack them, instead.

But that argument could wait until later.

Now, they had to figure out why there was strife and discord in the world.

"Maybe she exists so people strive to be better." Rin suggested with a snap of her fingers.

"We already said that, like, five times." Andrew grumbled, and she crossed her arms in front of her once more with a frustrated huff.

"You know what, this is stupid. She exists because she exists, why does there have to be a reason for it? She simply came to be, and so strife and discord came to be, end of story. It's like Pandora's box. If she hadn't opened it, all the bad shit wouldn't have escaped, and we wouldn't have as many worries as we do. But it happened, so there's that." Ash exclaimed, though half of their statement came out mumbled as they spread out on the table, their forehead rubbing against the polished wood.

Will sighed again.

Behind him, he could hear Jason do the same, while Eris told him about all the things she was currently 'looking into'.

Will never wanted her to take any interest in him or his boyfriends, that much was certain.

(Though he was very well aware it might already be too late for that.)

Maybe he shouldn't have punched Dylan.

He didn't regret doing it, and he would so do it again, but, considering the circumstances, maybe it would have been better to wait until after they had Eris' signature before he went and punched her only son.

Then she might have been inclined to be a little nicer and forthcoming to them, even if she claimed she didn't care.

(The fact that she knew he was the one who had punched Dylan already showed she cared enough to look into the matter, after all.)

Andrew pulled back his notes with a disgruntled look down at Ash, but Ash obviously didn't see nor care, and the others simply pulled back their arms to give Ash more space, all of them too distracted by their task to truly care.

"Okay, I'm sorry, I can't concentrate with this headache. I'm out." Will finally caved in when the spiking pain in his head got the better of him, after all, and he pulled away from them and the table to move towards the cash registers with the bouncy wind spirits.

He had noticed them the moment they had set foot into the café, but since his guys had walked in, anyways, he had assumed they knew what they were doing, and hadn't questioned it until he had
come to realize they had, apparently, not noticed the lack of humans in this place.

At least he assumed so, since all three of them had looked around at the staff in bewilderment the moment they had realized Eris was not just a computer-addicted maniac in the form of a plus-size model, but an actual goddess.

"How much is a glass of water in this place?" He asked the first wind spirit, but didn't receive a reply – though, the next moment, he had a glass of water in front of him with a little paper umbrella in it, so he guessed that was fine, too.

"Aww, you shouldn't have." Will said with a grin, while also sniffing on his water skeptically.

Should he point out those paper umbrellas did not, in fact, go in every drink? Nah, probably not.

"Headache?" Percy and Nico asked at the same time as he turned to look at them, their expressions now borderline concerned rather than impassive, while Ash lifted their head off the table.

"A headache? You? I thought you can't get headaches because of your dad and all?"

Will huffed and waved off.

"I wish. It's rare, but I can still get sick, you know? But this is nothing. Probably just the air. Or a change in weather." He reassured them as he made his way back over, his free hand already in his medic pouch to search for his usual medication he gave patients whenever they had headaches or migraines.

Feeling another set of eyes on him, he caught Eris gazing at him with a sober look, before her eyes hushed to the door for the fraction of a second.

Hm, odd.

Will narrowed his eyes at her, and Jason fell silent, noticing the exchange, same as the rest of their team did.

"This is not a trap. You're safe from your pursuers as long as you're here. I mean, wow, talk about paranoia. What would I get from siding with them, huh? I clearly remember stating I have no interest in war." She said in a bored voice, but Will kept staring her down, anyways.

Wouldn't it play right into her hands, though?

Discord and strife, and that was exactly how he had so far proceeded.

Eris made a face full of contempt.

"That is not my child. Dylan is my only living child right now, and I have high hopes in him. Once he realizes the ideologies his grandparents have planted in his head are dumb and full of flaws, he'll grow to be a great diplomat or warrior, depending on the path he chooses. I have no ties to those people, and I will not be accused of such, not by you, nor anybody else." Eris said, and now her voice had an edge of warning to it.

Will straightened his back.

"Then why are you making this so difficult? Why drag out the signing?" He asked, and saw Jason give a small shake of his head, but he ignored it.

"Because I'm bored! Do you have any idea what it does to you when you're without a job, and there is nothing to do?! You just sit around, and you have all the time in the world, but nothing entices you! Nothing you can actually do that holds a meaning! Sure, I could check on some pesky humans and have them do weird things, but what for? Nobody values me or my work. Nobody even knows why I exist!" Eris exclaimed loudly and got up, her hair flying around her as she stomped over to the computers to type away at them again agitatedly, undoubtedly starting some sort of argument or dispute – or maybe finishing one, who knew.
For a long moment, there was silence, in which they all exchanged glances and tried to figure out how to deal with this situation.

Then, Jason took a deep breath and stepped up to Eris' side.

"I understand that must feel horrible. It is shameful that we have not yet found the right answer, but, if you want, you can tell us, and we will spread that knowledge. I have already arranged for a temple to be built in the honor of all the gods, and you will be part of it, as well. It is currently being planned out by Annabeth Chase, I'm sure you've heard of her." He said quietly, and Will wasn't surprised in the slightest that something like this was in planning – though he had to wonder where they wanted to build that thing.

It would have to be massive, with the number of gods there was.

Having the Hecate kids enchant it somehow would also only work if it remained in a place for demigods only, so he was curious to see how Jason thought of getting that done – even if he had no doubts Jason could do it.

Eris only let out a small huff and kept typing, seemingly ranting on a blog, by the looks of it.

Jason wasn't deterred.

"Also, I think you're thinking too much."

Andrew slapped his hand to his forehead, but Will had to suppress a smile.

Oh yeah, Jason so was one to talk.

"Excuse you?" Eris asked incredulously as she shot him a dark glare, but Jason merely shrugged, and Will found Percy tugging on his arm to get him moving towards the rest of the group again, his glass of water now in Percy's hands.

He let him take him with him, taking his headache pills without argument as he watched the scene in front of him.

"You question your existence. But why? The other gods don't question theirs, no matter whether people believe in them or not. Plus, it's what you do with your life that matters, not what you were born to do. Look at my father, for example. Why did he come to be? To reign the skies? To beat his father and free the gods? To be god of the gods? To scare my boyfriend and make it a pain in the butt to get him on the rooftop of my cabin? Who knows? Who cares? He exists, and that's all he cares about, and you should do the same. Your own existence cannot and should not be defined or explained by a simple sentence or two, nor should there be a reason to justify your existence."

Wow, that…was actually pretty deep.

Will realized all over again why Jason was the only person who could actually do this job.

Not that he had ever forgotten, but still. They would be screwed without Jason, seriously.

Eris was silent, gazing at Jason with the faintest hint of surprise in her otherwise impassive face.

Then, her lips split into a grin, and it looked surprisingly genuine, rather than feral for once.

"What kind words. I must say, I'm impressed. Yes, I suppose you are quite right." She said thoughtfully, and that had to be the nicest thing she had said since they had come here – at least there was no hidden venom in her words and it definitely counted as direct praise.

"Will you sign the contract, then?" Jason asked, and Will wouldn't have noticed the hint of hope in his voice if he didn't know his boyfriend as well as he did, so that was definitely impressive.

The rest of their team surely couldn't be more obvious as they all seemed to wait for Eris' answer with bated breaths and pleading expressions.
Except Percy, who still scowled, and still kept Will closely pressed against his side.

Eris seemed thoughtful as she began tapping the pen against her cheek again, her indigo eyes staring off into the distance.

Then, she looked down at her keyboard, putting down the pen and folding her hands with a sober look on her face.

"Discord and strife existed in this world from the moment of its creation, you know? It's what made gods push themselves to outdo each other, and what led to the humans splitting up and expanding as they settled down all over the world. I used to work with Nemesis and Zelos for a long time, but now, discord and strife has a different meaning, a different use. Now, it exists not to ensure survival, but to improve the living. Discord is there to question things, to give a new insight on matters others long believe settled. Of course, you need to differ, as you need to do with everything in life. Too much of a good thing can kill you just as much as too much of a bad thing might, and this is the same concept. It's the balance that matters. Fighting over the smallest things would be foolish, but so is never questioning anything and leaving old and outdated mindsets to rule forever." She said quietly, as if repeating a speech that she had at some point created, and undoubtedly repeated many times since.

Will frowned and listened, though none of this really seemed to answer their question.

Then again, maybe it wasn't meant to.

Eris looked up at Jason again, her indigo eyes gleaming behind the thick glasses.

"You have given me an interesting answer, and it has given me new insight on a matter I have believed settled. For that, I thank you. Of course I will sign your contract. It was my intent ever since I first heard of it. As for my requirements…” She said, then trailed off, but Will already sighed in relief that she was willing to sign it, at all.

She would probably just ask for them to spread the newfound knowledge on what Eris stood for, and there was that.

"I could ask for a lot of things. But…I think…I think I just want you to…to take care of Dylan. I know he is insufferable right now, but he's a good boy. I'm not excusing his behavior, but please don't pay his words too much mind. Even if he may act differently, he has a kind soul and his loyalty, once gained, knows no bounds. Please give him a chance to apologize and show he can be better than the has led you to believe, so far. It would mean a lot to him, and it would mean a lot to me." Eris explained at long last, and Will's eyebrows shot up.

Oh.

Unexpected.

Dylan.

Ugh.

Will automatically made a face, and didn't even bother to cover it up when Eris met his gaze, though she didn't seem surprised in the slightest.

Instead, her eyes hushed to Jason for the faintest moment, who just had to give Will that pointed, pleading look, and Will hated that Eris knew he would do anything for Jason, especially when he was giving him that look.

He struggled for another moment, then he caved in with a sigh.

"Fine." He huffed miserably as he massaged his temples, off-handedly noticing his headache wasn't easing up for whatever reason ever, the prodding instead becoming more insistent.

Eris clapped her hands together happily.

"Perfect! Then, of course, I shall sign your contract immediately." She exclaimed – and then, even though the pen was right next to her, she snapped her fingers.
"Done!" She called cheerily, and Will was impressed when Jason didn't even blink as he finished rolling out his contract, even though the notion was rendered pointless now.

Yeah, Will could never do this.

Eris grinned brightly and tapped at her apparent signature for emphasis, and Jason gave a small nod as he seemed to read over her conditions for confirmation, though Will could see the tension in his shoulders disappearing as he let out the smallest sigh of relief.

The rest of their team seemed to notice it, too, because suddenly, there was a collective sigh of relief sounding in the café as all of them relaxed.

Finally, one worry less.

"Thank you, Eris." Jason said sincerely, his smile kind as he rolled up the parchment and put it back in its case once more, and Will watched Eris smile back for a moment, before she rolled her eyes and made a shooing motion.

"Alright, we've sealed the deal, now go get going and collect the two youngsters. I wish you safe travels, and hope you'll avoid the monsters patrolling the South West Independence Avenue. Not that you know that from me, or anything." Eris told them with a wink, and Will's eyebrows shot up even higher.

Wait, first she claimed she was bored and didn't want to let them go because she would end up alone again, and then she was kicking them out seconds after signing?

Either they had done something very right, or this was one contradictive goddess to be around. From what he had gathered so far, he was pretty sure it was the latter.

"Thank you, we'll do our best. Are you sure you'll be alright, here? You said you don't enjoy being on your own." Jason said tentatively, a dangerous thing to say, but Eris only grinned and shook her head.

(Was it his imagination, or was the atmosphere of the café slowly changing into something more cozy and warm, rather than plain and dull and…weird?)

"I didn't say anything about not enjoying it. I don't mind, really. It just gets lonely sometimes. But you've given me something to ponder for a while, so I'll be fine. Now, get going, else the youngsters might get into trouble." Eris told them with a little nod towards the door, and this time, Jason didn't question her words any further, instead thanking her once more before bidding goodbye in the name of their group.

Latter was mostly because Andrew, Rin, Hannah and Ash were already in front of the door in a heartbeat, more than eager to leave, while Percy (the traitor) was ever so gently but insistently pushing Will to follow their lead.

"But I was thinking we could refill our water bottles here and stack up on some drinks!" He lamented, but Percy wouldn't hear any of it, instead shaking his head and coaxing him further towards the exit.

"We can stop by a restroom near the museum. Or a different café. Get moving, before she—"

"Oh, and Will?" Eris called, and Percy groaned and cursed under his breath.

"Oh, freaking great, of course this just has to happen. Why always you?" He grumbled, but Will ignored him in favor of looking over his shoulder back at the goddess – who, unsurprisingly enough – smiled at him in a much more feral way once more.

"I didn't want to mention it at first, but I want you to know that Dylan put in a good word for you guys. Even if you did punch him, he has a rather high opinion of you. So, don't be too harsh on him, yeah? If I recall correctly, holding grudges is not your fatal flaw, so don't let it become one." She said wisely, but Will only made a noncommittal sound and rubbed his temples again, the jabbing pain less incessive, but still ever so intensive.
It made him feel annoyed, though, at the same time, the headache seemed annoyed, too, which didn't make any sense, but he had no nerves nor patience left right now to ponder that.

"Yeah, whatever. Thanks a lot, Eris." He waved off more dismissively than intended, and Percy stiffened to a board next to him, before he started pushing him towards the exit even more insistently than before.

"You…that…and they call me reckless and stupid, what the hell, even…" His boyfriend rambled under his breath, but Eris didn't seem offended in the slightest.

"Yes, yes. Do get your sun boy to safety, Perseus. At least for as long as he'll let you keep him safe. Oh Will, I know it will meet deaf ears, but do reconsider your choices. So much more is at stake than what you believe." Eris insisted in the sweetest voice, and Will groaned – both because of her words, and because of the pulsing in his head, the constant prodding, as if somebody was trying to see into his mind and-…

Nico's hands clasped around his head, the pressure of his fingertips alleviating some of the pain, and the coolness of his touch like a blessing Will didn't deserve.

"Alright, what is she talking about, Will?" His boyfriend hissed as he massaged Will's head with practiced movements that felt terrific, though the pain still remained, even if it was dulled.

Eris let out a small laugh as the rest of them bid their farewell to her, and Will knew her eyes never left him, same as he knew without looking that they were full of mirth at the discord and strife that would undoubtedly unleash if he told his guys of his visions, his self-bestowed fate, their fate, his death.

"I have no idea. Whatever it is, though, I hope it got nothing to do with you massaging my head, because that's got to be the best thing in the world right now, and I'd hate to miss it." He lied, but Nico's expression told him he didn't buy it, even though he didn't press the matter further.

At least not now.

Will very well saw the way he exchanged telling looks with Percy and Jason, so Will knew they would try again.

He didn't want them to pry.

It was already difficult enough for him to cope, knowing the day was getting closer and closer, and his time with them was getting shorter and shorter.

Not only that, but with his second vision, he still had to find some sort of way to save them, to do something, to get them to life and be happy, the way they were supposed to be.

Time was running out, both for himself with them, and for him to find a way to make the impossible happen.

So, yeah, he couldn't tell them. For the sake of their own sanity, their peace of mind, their wellbeing.

He was making excuses, he knew, but he couldn't take the thought of them knowing – they would fight it too much, they would end up changing too much, they would end up getting into trouble worse than anything they had ever faced before, and he couldn't bear the thought of losing them, of them dying, of them dying because of him and his stupidity and his uselessness.

"Goodbye, boys. I hope to see all four of you again, one day. When all of this is over." Eris said behind them, but there was no more mirth in her voice, and she had that oddly sober expression again, Will could see it in the mirror next to the door as the rest of their team filed out.

"I just wish we knew what 'all of this' actually was." Percy mumbled under his breath, but didn't turn around to ask Eris, instead focusing on coaxing Will forward and outside.

"Oh, and Nico? You might want to teach him how to close his mind properly. It seems he's putting up a good fight, but since he doesn't know what he's doing, he's wasting a lot of his energy
to keep his guard up, you know?" Eris pointed out the moment Will passed the threshold of the café.

Sadly, it was also the last thing Will heard, because the next moment, there was a much more pronounced and precise stab in his mind, and he first toppled sideways into Percy with a hiss, then slumped forward into Nico's arms, a weak 'I'm fine' leaving his lips as his vision exploded into black and white and bright and dark.

Faces.

A dark place.

Dying plants.

Bated breaths.

The coiling of snakes and venom and the scent of something bitter heavy in the air.

An annoyed, angry expression on a strained face, pale blue eyes burning into Will's very soul.

Oh fuck.

***

They got Will inside the bus safe and sound, and Sara immediately balled up her lined jacket to use it as a pillow as Jason laid down their boyfriend ever so gently on the row of seats in the far back of the bus.

Jason pulled away reluctantly to make space for Nico, who immediately had his hands back on Will's face, probably taking his temperature, as the rest of their team still seemed to hold their breaths, just as Jason was.

What had that been?

Will had complained about a headache, yes, but nowhere in that had he mentioned it was bad enough to knock him out.

Then again, he also hadn't said anything about his headache coming from somebody actually trying to get inside his mind.

It was a horrifying thought, especially considering there was only one person they knew so far who could actually do that – and the thought of Kyle trying to actively get into Will's mind was more than just disturbing.

"Can you feel anything?" Percy asked Nico hesitantly as he stepped closer, his side pressing against Jason's, but Jason knew it wasn't to push him away, but to give them both something to ground themselves with.

"No. I have no idea what I'm doing. I told you, it was always Clovis getting me inside his head, not actually me." Nico replied, his voice shaking almost as bad as his hands as he stroked through Will's hair and seemed to massage along his scalp.

"Wait, hold up. Who's going inside whose head now? What?" Andrew asked, sounding between disgusted and horrified, while Rin (for the first time since Jason had gotten to know her) seemed positively intrigued, already inching closer.

"At the moment, nobody is doing anything or going anywhere." He said loudly, though that also made him look back to the front of the bus, where Jules-Albert was awaiting input on where to go next.

"Wait, hold up. Who's going inside whose head now? What?" Andrew asked, sounding between disgusted and horrified, while Rin (for the first time since Jason had gotten to know her) seemed positively intrigued, already inching closer.

"At the moment, nobody is doing anything or going anywhere." He said loudly, though that also made him look back to the front of the bus, where Jules-Albert was awaiting input on where to go next.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Sara asked uncertainly, her eyes hushing from Will to Jason, but he didn't even know what he should do right now, much less how they should proceed now.

If Kyle was truly trying to get into Will's head, the same way he had gotten to Percy and Jason
before, then they had to get away from here as soon as possible.

He had no idea what Kyle was trying to do, after all.

It might just be something to distract them, or he might try to possess Will and harm them through his body – or harm Will. Or make him leave.

Or maybe he wanted to know where they were.

They hadn't encountered any monsters since this morning, after all, and they were all confident that Kyle was to some extent in league with those.

So, it wouldn't be too far off to believe he was trying to gain information by invading Will's mind.

But…while he was awake? With them still around?

It seemed so contradictory, so strange, so…stupid.

Kyle knew Nico could ward him off, and his past attempts at accessing Will's mind through his dreams had all failed, so why would he consciously attack Will when he knew Will was with them and they were bound to notice?

Then again…would they really have noticed, if it hadn't been for Eris' last comment?

If she hadn't told them, would they have really been able to piece the pieces together and figure out Will had not just fainted due to overexertion, but because of Kyle or any sort of outside force?

Jason's heart ached as he knew his answer to that already, and he looked back at Nico helplessly.

Nico met his gaze with a similar look in his eyes.

Jason looked back at Jules-Albert, then outside.

They were in the middle of a city, far away from the Camps, their healer was knocked out, and they were all huddled in one spot – a closed vehicle, to boot – together.

Also, they still had to pick up two children at a museum that just so happened to be along the very road that was supposedly monster-infested.

None of that sounded good in any sort of way.

He shot Percy a look, and his boyfriend instantly tensed, his jaw clenching as he refused to meet Jason's eyes for a moment.

Then, he sighed and gave a small nod.

Jason wrapped an arm around him to squeeze him against him for a moment in silent apology, then he leaned down to murmur something into Nico's ear, who listened and gave a small nod in reply, before pulling away to hurry to Jules-Albert and relate the info.

Meanwhile, Jason turned towards the rest of their small team.

"Alright, listen up. We're going to split up. Jules-Albert is going to take us as close to the museum as possible. From there, Andrew and Rin will go with Percy to find the two demigods. Hannah, Sara and Ash, you'll stay with Nico and Will in the bus and drive to a safe-enough place to set up Camp. Liam, you'll come with me and we'll scout the streets around the museum to make it safe for the others to get out of there. Once that's done and we regroup, Jules-Albert can pick us up and take us to the hideout for the night. Any objections?" He declared, and wasn't surprised in the slightest when Andrew's hand shot up.

"Yes, Andrew?" He asked with an expression that dared him to let this be anything not important.

"Why do I have to be one of the ones running? Can't I stay in the bus, instead? I think my leg is still hurting from yesterday."
Ash rolled their eyes, while Rin looked at him with more than just mild disgust.

Jason suppressed a sigh.

"Andrew, your leg is fine. Also, that's the safest job of them all. We don't know if Will won the struggle or not, so we have no idea whether the monsters know where we are right now or where we're headed – but if they are going to target anybody, it will be Will. If you rather stay with him and protect him with your life, be my guest. Then Ash will go in your place." He replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, but Andrew instantly exclaimed it was fine, he could do it, and that his leg wasn't that bad anymore.

Of course it wasn't, Will had healed it, after all.

Jason looked back at his boyfriend as Jules-Albert started driving and Nico took his spot in front of Will once more, looking more than a little concerned.

There was muttering around them as everybody settled into their seats, though Ash, Hannah and Liam still had their arms over their backrests and were looking at Will just as worried as they were.

Percy motioned for Jason to move, so they sat down in the next-to-last row and huddled against each other quietly, their eyes on Will, as well.

Why always Will?

If Kyle had wanted information on their whereabouts, he could have tried to possess any of them, right?

Jason didn't know, and, frankly, he didn't care much, either.

Just the thought of Kyle made him want to rip something to pieces – preferably said abusive asshole.

Percy took a deep breath, and Jason glanced at him out of the corners of his eyes, his heart sinking when he saw Percy staring off into space blankly again.

He did that a lot lately.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken all of you with me in that café." Jason apologized quietly, pretty sure things wouldn't have ended up this way if he had insisted on going alone, or only with one or two of them.

He wasn't sure whether Will had been targeted because the goddess had somehow kept them from being found (Hades had mentioned on several occasions that was possible, after all, and it would explain why there were no monster attacks whenever Jason and his team had been meeting with gods, before), but he was certain it would have been easier on Will without Eris making snide remarks on top of everything else.

Whatever that had been about.

Jason had a hunch Will hadn't been completely honest with them when he had said he had no idea what she was talking about, but he also trusted him to speak up if he did know something – especially since this seemed to be about something big.

But Will knew he could trust them, and he knew they wouldn't judge him or the like, Jason was certain, so he saw no reason why he would still keep secrets from them.

"Not your fault. I was the one insisting we should go with you, after all. Plus, this way, we at least know beforehand where the monsters are. I think it would have been a lot worse if you had gone alone, and Will would have been with us and collapsed, while we also had to battle off hordes of monsters in the midst of mortals." Percy replied quietly, his tone bitter and his eyes dull, and Jason didn't even want to think about all the things that could have gone wrong.

"In that case, I guess I'm glad you came along, after all. Though I still think that turned out a lot messier and more stressful than necessary. I had hoped your first experiences with my job would
Jason admitted quietly, but Percy merely waved off, his gaze already back on Will and Nico.

"It's fine. What else is to be expected from the gods, am I right? It doesn't really matter, Jason. We all knew you're the only one who could deal with them, anyways, so it's not like we thought it was an easy feat. What's important now is that we get Will somewhere safe, get the kids, beat the heck out of the monsters that cross our path, and get back to Camp as soon as possible." Percy summed up, and Jason hated that he was right, though that didn't stop him from tugging him closer against him, anyways, as he watched the buildings pass by around them.

"I suppose you're right." He said quietly as he pressed his lips against Percy's temple, and his boyfriend gave a half-hearted shrug, before he slumped against him slightly.

"Be careful, though, okay? I know you're taking Liam with you because of his archery skills and because he's better shrouding others than himself. I know full well you're going to try lure anything away from us should the need arise. Still, be careful." Percy whispered, undoubtedly unwilling to be overheard by anyone but Jason right now.

Jason gave him another peck, not surprised in the slightest he had been found out so quickly.

"I'll do my best. You take care, as well, alright?" He whispered back, and Percy let out a small huff, before he rubbed his cheek against Jason's shoulder ever so faintly.

"Hey, I got Andrew as a guide and Rin to identify the demigods, what could possibly go wrong?" His boyfriend joked, but Jason knew they both knew a lot could go wrong, always and at all times.

He kissed the top of his head, satisfied when he spotted the hint of a smile on Percy's face, even if it didn't last.

"Just be careful, Percy."

"Always. What would you do without me, after all?"

"I would die." Jason replied seriously, and Percy threw him a scolding look, before he sighed and tipped back his head slightly to mutely demand a kiss, so Jason did just that.

"No joking about death, or I'll tell Nico." Percy chided once he pulled back again, and Jason's lips twitched.

What a mighty threat.

"You wouldn't. You still owe me for telling on me about the sleeping-thing. Remember that you love me and would never want our boyfriend to ground me, love." He replied, and Percy let out the quietest fake-cackle Jason had ever witnessed, though that kind of made it sound even more adorable than usual.

"Watch me, bro. My love for you is so great, it outshines the guilt of betrayal." Percy exclaimed, and Jason adored the gleam that made its way back into his sea-green eyes, making them seem so much more alive than they had been a few minutes ago.

Jason leaned down to kiss his nose, giving him his warmest and most affectionate look he could muster.

Then, he poked his nose repeatedly.

"You. Are. So. Full. Of. Shit. I love you." He declared, then swooped down to kiss his boyfriend before he could argue.

Percy made a small chuckling sound and grinned with his eyes squeezed closed and his ears turning red, and Jason let his head rest against his for a moment, relishing in the closeness and their little moment, even as his eyes traveled back to Nico and Will.

Nico was still stroking through Will's hair, but his expression looked more at ease now, same as Will seemed more relaxed than before, with the paleness finally gone and replaced by his usual.
skin tone and his freckles standing out as prominent as ever.

Percy looked around at them as well, but remained snuggled against Jason's side, and he was more than glad for it – though it made it a lot more difficult for them to actually let go of each other when Jules-Albert made a sound in the front of the bus and started slowing down, indicating they were going to get kicked out any moment now.

In fact, Percy kept holding onto his hand tightly even as the group filed out of the bus in the middle of a rather busy road, and he only let go when it became obvious they had to part ways.

"Be careful, Jason." Percy reminded him sternly, his gaze studying Jason as if he was trying to figure out whether Jason had any other crazy plans he hadn't yet told him of, though that was more a Percy-thing than a Jason-thing.

"You as well, love. We'll meet up the moment you got the kids, okay?" He replied, and Percy gave a curt nod.

They watched the bus continue on its journey with Ash's face plastered against the window and their hand waving at them exaggeratedly, then Andrew and Rin began walking towards where the Air and Space museum was supposed to be, forcing Percy to step away from Jason and follow, though he looked back towards him at least four more times.

Jason made a shooing motion for him to get going, then forced himself to look away from them as well to get an overview of where they were and where to go next, Liam next to him with his gaze fixed on him and awaiting instructions, though Jason knew he had to be more than just a little nervous.

"She said they are patrolling the South West Independence Avenue, so I'd say we stick to this one and poke around to see where else they are lurking around. As long as we know where Percy and the others are headed, it would be unwise to get too close so we don't draw any attention to them, but we still have to be close enough to notice if there's something wrong. Think we can do that, Liam?" He asked the son of Hecate, and the boy pressed his lips into a thin line as his eyes screamed no, though he gave a short nod, anyways.

Jason clapped him on the shoulder.

He knew the boy could do it, all he needed was more confidence, that was all.

"Alright, let's do it, then."

Hopefully, they would get the kids quickly and Jules-Albert would manage to find a safe place for their team and come pick them up as soon as possible, again.

Jason glanced back towards Percy's retreating form, then he gave Liam a nod and they began moving.

Hopefully, everything would go as planned.

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Why did nothing ever go as planned?

Percy pondered that faintly as he yelled at Andrew to stop screaming and hide somewhere, while Rin looked ready to strangle the mortals that just stood and stared, instead of getting out of their freaking way.

One would expect people to start running at the sight of a twenty-foot-long drakon with wings, but nooo, of course they didn't run, instead pointing at the three idiots running for their lives.

Luckily, their monster couldn't make too much use of its wings thanks to lack of space and apparent lack of skill, but it was enough to allow it to glide every time it pushed off the ground, thus covering much more ground than they would have preferred, and also making the ground shake every time the stupid thing landed again, which didn't make running any easier.

To make matters worse, they hadn't yet found the two demigods, either, and there was no sign of
Jason or Liam, which had Percy's nerves on edge like no drakon could ever dream to achieve.

Had there been an ambush?
Were the kids alright?
Was Jason okay?

Had Kyle somehow found out something from Will?
Was Will okay?

What if they were all getting attacked?
Maybe they shouldn't have split up.

Somehow, every time they split up, Percy came to regret it.

Maybe he should mention that to his boyfriends sometime, to see whether they felt the same way.

But that had to wait until after he got Rin and Andrew out of this hell and into the open, so they could get away from the mortals and kill the drakon before even more monsters came to check out what all the noise was for.

How did this thing even get inside, in the first place?

The mist couldn't seriously cover something that big, right?

That drakon was as big as some of the planes they had spotted in here! Maybe even bigger!

"Rin! IM the satyrs and ask where the fuck they are and to stay away from here! Andrew, dive to the right!" He yelled instructions, then dived to the left the moment Andrew dived down the hallway to the right.

As Percy had hoped, the drakon went after him instead of Andrew, and didn't even seem to notice Rin disappearing from its view as she made for the opposite direction to hopefully make the call that would give them some insight.

Percy focused back on running up the stairs for his life as the drakon snapped at him and roared its displeasure at being denied its lunch when he jumped out of the way of its fangs.

"You gotta be quicker than that if you want to eat me!" He yelled at it and looked around for some sort of sign to show where he was, but somehow, he seemed to more give the drakon a tour of the place instead of making his way to an exit.

Hadn't he also just rushed upstairs?

Shit.

Percy's blood was rushing in his ears, but he could still hear the drakon roar behind him, closing in once more, even though Percy was doing his best to take as many turns as possible to slow it down, running in and out of the various exhibitions he couldn't care less about right now.

Outside.

He had to get this thing outside.

Once they were outside, he would be able to pull out his sword and charge, and chances were that Jason would find him much quicker then, too.

Percy rushed into the next room, his concentration on behind him for a moment too long for him to register where he was going before it was too late.

Oh no.

No, not a fucking dead end now.
Usually, these things had two ways in/out!

He heard the drakon roar behind him, where the only entrance and exit was, but he kept on running, anyways, ducking and jumping around the planes to maybe – maybe – throw it off enough to make it out of this alive.

Unfortunately, the drakon was so fixed on him it wasn't deterred in the slightest, and Percy was forced to slide to a stop in front of the wall at the far end of the room.

Shit!

Maybe he could still dodge it? If he waited for it to strike, he could dive to the side and slip past it?

Percy whirled around to face the monster, but that thing was smarter than it looked, its snake-like body postured sideways to give him no chance of 'slipping past' as it pushed itself up to tower over him, its fangs bared and its acid drool dripping to the ground in apparent anticipation for a good meal.

"I'm so bitter, I'm sure I'd taste horrible!" He yelled up at it in a faint attempt to throw it off, but he was pretty sure drakons had never learned the human language, and it probably didn't care much for how he tasted, either.

The monster roared again, and Percy uncapped Riptide as it charged, pushing himself off the wall to meet it halfway.

His sword never made contact with its skin though, same as its fangs never tore into him – because that fucking thing whirled its tail around and slammed it into Percy's side out of his blind spot, making him yelp and fly off to the side, Riptide slipping out of his grasp.

He was still yelling after his sword when he very conveniently passed the next plane and instead smashed into the wall, his shoulder cracking at the impact, even if it wasn't his sword arm for once.

Pain seared through him, but he was far more concerned about being weaponless in front of a drakon that gave him no option to escape.

Shit.

Shit, he was going to die.

He was going to die, and the last thing he had done was argue with Will, give Nico a fleeting kiss, and tell Jason to be careful.

Well, he only regretted one of those things, to be honest, but he knew Will wouldn't be as upset about the argument as about the fact Percy decided to die the one moment Will wasn't watching over him.

Yeah, Will would be pretty damn upset about that, especially considering this was nothing but a drakon.

There Percy had stood up against gods and titans and giants, and he ended up dying in a battle against a simple drakon in a stupid museum.

Wow.

Percy laughed bitterly at his own fate as he clutched his aching shoulder and tried to get out of the way of the tail the drakon whirled around at him again, apparently deciding smashing him against things was much more fun than eating him outright.

Needless to say, he couldn't get out of the way in time, so the tip of its tail slammed against his knees and sent him face-first into the ground with another yelp, a loud crashing sound sounding next to him where one of the planes had been hit, too.

Percy's gaze automatically hushed towards the sound, and the next moment, he groaned and
pushed himself off the ground with one arm to start running, because that plane was definitely coming down, and quickly so.

The drakon's tail slammed into him from behind, this time, making his feet leave the ground as he was hoisted into the air and halfway across the room, where he collided with another, smaller sort of plane, clutching onto whatever he managed to grab a hold of to prevent plummeting right back down.

More crashing sounds sounded behind him, undoubtedly the drakon's path of destruction as he heard it closing in once more, its roar now a satisfied hiss as it pushed itself up to bring its nasty, ugly face closer to him.

Well, there went his faint hope it might have lost track of him.

Acidic fumes clouded his senses as it came closer, it's gleaming eyes with slit-like pupils focused entirely on him as it bared and parted its fangs, just for him.

Terrific.

No, seriously, this had to be the best way he could have possibly imagined for himself to die.

Percy felt Riptide reappearing in his pocket, but since he was still clutching the plane to prevent falling, he had no means of getting to it right now, much less use it.

He glanced down to gauge whether he had higher chances of survival if he let himself drop, but what met him was the sight of the rest of the drakon's body neatly curled up with its back spikes pointed upwards, so that answered his question.

Seriously, why was this thing so smart?

The drakon hissed at him almost lovingly now, its face looming closer and closer.

Great, he was seriously going to die.

"Just so we're clear, I hate you." He told the drakon, then braced for his end as it let out another roar and lunged.

The next moment, there was a loud yell and a hell lot of ruckus, and Percy saw Andrew's tangle toy bouncing off the side of the drakon's head, which stopped mid-lunge to look around in apparent confusion.

Percy looked around for the son of Athena, but instead, he found Rin crossing the room in seconds and jumping on top of the drakon's body, making her way up its back and neck before it even seemed to register it was being attacked.

"That's what you get for attacking our team dad!" She yelled and stabbed her dagger into its eye, before taking another leap and landing next to Percy on top of the now way too small seeming plane, just as the drakon surged back in pain.

"What are you doing?!!" He asked her in disbelief, because, if she was already crazy enough to run after him and attack a twenty-foot-long drakon, then why would she do something as suicidal as joining him on top of a puny aircraft that would either cause them both to fall to their deaths or meet their ends with the drakon's next attack?!

"Saving you, duh!" The daughter of Nemesis yelled back and pulled him up, so they both tried to find and keep their balance on the plane.

"By killing us both? That's a horrible plan, Rin!" He yelled, just as the drakon focused back on them with an angry snarl, before it suddenly lunged at them.

While Percy tried to keep his balance and pulled Riptide out, Rin let out a war cry and jumped off the plane and into the monsters face to attack its other eye.

Unfortunately, the drakon seemed to anticipate the attack this time and reared its head sideways, which threw Rin right back off with a surprised squeak.
Percy cursed and jumped at the monster with his sword raised and while refusing to look down.

Why did they have to meet at an Air and Space museum, anyways? Why not a water museum?

Or near the Lincoln monument, with all the nice and easily accessible water right outside…?

Instead, Percy just had to be on the second floor of an Air and Space museum, in a room full of WWII aircrafts, as if Zeus was waving a giant 'Fuck you!'-sign from above.

Maybe he should have been the one scouting with Liam, and Jason should have come here, instead.

Percy cursed again as he shoved the tip of his sword into the drakon's neck and sliced his way down as he fell, but then its tail appeared out of nowhere and knocked him flat down onto the ground, his sword still stuck in the monster.

Oh, for fuck's sake, today seriously wasn't his day!

"Get your poisonous spikes off team dad, you piece of shit!" Rin snarled and ducked under the just lifting tail as the drakon was more than prepared to flatten Percy into a pancake, and the next moment, she threw something small and round up at the monster, just to turn around with a guilty, yet very urgent look.

She snatched him by his already injured shoulder, which had him suppressing a cry of pain as his vision momentarily went black and white, but then she was already pulling him onto his feet and dragged him after him.

"Rin, what did you-…"

"We have to get out! That was one of Leo's!" Rin interrupted him as they both stumbled out of the exhibition, right before there was the unmistakable sound of an explosion behind them.

"Did you just throw a grenade at it?!" He yelled at her over the noise of the drakon screaming in pain and aircrafts crashing down all over the room, but Rin merely pulled him along, down the stairs and past all the people that now seemed all over the place, some running towards the noise (idiots), some running away from it, just to fall all over each other (even more idiots).

"Leo gave it to me for emergencies! Just keep running! I called the satyrs, and they're with Jason and Liam. Apparently, they were hiding from this drakon and had taken their chance earlier to get out of here, just to run right into Jason on their way to the Reflecting Pool to make their call to inform us. They didn't know it was us that distracted the drakon." She informed him as they made straight for the exit, luckily blending in with the other mortals running for their lives for once, even with their current, deranged state.

"Where's Andrew?" He asked her, thinking of the tangle toy, but she only let out a loud grunt.

"Freaking coward ran out in the open without looking and promptly alerted a whole bunch of monsters to our whereabouts. He's the reason why your boyfriend didn't come to your rescue yet – he's too busy keeping everybody else alive."

Well, damn.

That explained a lot.

"Are you calling him team dad, too? Or is he, like, the team mom?" He asked her as they ran out on the street and made their way towards the Washington Monument, though he couldn't see any signs of another battle yet.

Rin threw him a pointed look over her shoulders that yelled 'Now is not the time for this!'.

She replied, anyways.

"Neither! You're the team dad, Nico is the team mom. Will is the team doc. Hannah and Sara started it!"
Percy huffed out a small laugh, wondering when they had started that, not to mention why.

"Then what's Jason?" He asked amused, ignoring the burning of his lungs, the ache in his legs, and the pulsing pain in his shoulder as the adrenaline rushed through him.

"He's the big daddy. Ash insisted on it." Rin informed him, and if Percy survived this, he was so going to tell Jason this.

And Will. Will would have a laughing fit if he knew.

Percy would tell them all.

"Don't you dare tell the others that, though!"

He was going to promise no such thing.

"Percy!" Rin called over her shoulder in exasperation when she caught his grin, but he merely winked.

They heard police sirens, then Rin suddenly turned left towards a different building – probably another museum – and Percy could see people running from there, too.

"Isn't that the way to the very road we didn't want to go to?" He asked, but wasn't surprised when Rin nodded in reply.

"During the IM, they were still around here, but the monsters were very insistent about pushing the group back. I guess they succeeded." Rin told him, and Percy's heart sank further as he took in the first indicators of battle, like the damaged walls of the building, the torn-out lawn and the demolished path in front of them.

They hurried on, and the first sounds of battle reached his ears, along with the screams and yells of mortals that undoubtedly posed even more of a nuisance to their team.

Sure enough, the moment Percy and Rin turned the corner, they found their team engaged in battle, another drakon and several other monsters and venti circling and thus trapping Jason and the others in the middle of the road, while traffic had come to a complete stop and people either fled or yelled.

Thanks to all the cars and the damage, the police cars couldn't get closer, but that didn't stop policemen from exiting their vehicles and mingling with people from the Secret Service as they tried to make their way through the hordes of people towards the demigods.

Oh no.

No, Percy did not want any of them to get shot.

"Percy! Thank the gods you are alright!" Jason yelled, looking so utterly relieved even as he sliced through a venti and punched another shadowy shape in the face with the hilt of his sword, it was almost comical.

Percy gave him a small nod and threw Rin a last glance, before they parted ways and rushed to join their group from opposite sides.

"Jason, the police are closing in. We need to get out of here, and fast!" He informed his boyfriend the moment he pushed into the circle, but the first thing Jason did was grab him by his good shoulder and pull him out of the way of the drakon's next attack, his gaze hushing up and down Percy's body as if to make sure there wasn't anything missing.

"Your arm, again?" He asked, and Percy hated how attentive his boyfriends could be sometimes.

"Yeah, but it's fine. It's the other one, this time, so I can still fight without issues." He told him hurriedly, and Jason gave a small nod, though he didn't look happy.

They both charged into battle, both of them immediately making for the drakon to take out the biggest foe the fastest, but everything came to a halt as a loud crashing sound sounded behind
them and even the monsters turned around in confusion.

"It survived?!!" Rin exclaimed in disbelief, while Percy couldn't help but stare at the first drakon, the one from the museum, which must have seriously escaped and flown here, since it was now perched on top of several cars and its wings were still spread out.

"It can fly?!!" Jason asked in similar shock, but Percy was more disturbed by the fact that thing could still see, given that it was bleeding black blood out of the right side of its face and body, and its other eye had been stabbed by Rin before.

"Why can't it just fucking disintegrate?!" He yelled and whirled his sword around to attack that one, instead, but then Liam flew past him with a terrified scream and he decided to rather save his teammate's life for now, running after him and destroying the monsters that immediately went to tear into him the moment he crashed into one of the cars and toppled down on the other side of it.

"Are you alright?" He asked the boy as he jumped over the hood of the car to check on him, and Liam gave a weak nod as he uncurled from the fetal position he had adapted to protect himself, immediately making to reach for his bow, but it wasn't there anymore.

"Oh no, my bow…"

"This is the police! Drop your weapons and-…"

Oh shit.

"Liam, get down and stay down!" Percy immediately hissed and pushed Liam back to the ground as he glanced towards the policemen that were trying to circle them, even though the monsters already had them circled enough.

What the fuck, couldn't they see?!

Seriously, what did they see?!

Percy pressed Liam to the ground and motioned for him to crawl under the car and away, but Liam shook his head and motioned for him to come with him.

He couldn't! He had to help Jason and the others!

Percy saw movement out of the corners of his eyes and slid down under the vehicle next to Liam immediately, identifying the threat as cop rather than monster.

He was right.

"…it appears to be a group of teenagers, accompanied by a young man…they are shooting without aim…no, no civilians seem to be hit yet, but there is plenty of damage…open fire?" The man spoke quietly as he passed the car they were hiding under, and Percy clasped his hand over Liam's mouth as he heard the boy whimper faintly.

That didn't sound good.

That didn't sound good at all.

"There also appears to be two frightened horses and some other animals I can't identify from this distance. Maybe from the zoo or something." He heard the same guy say as he continued his path along the cars, and Percy had to exert all his self-control not to snort.

Horses? Yeah, right.

These things didn't even remotely look like horses!

"What are you doing?!" Liam hissed at him in disbelief when Percy began to crawl back out from under the car as swiftly and silently as he could with only one good arm.

"Protecting my team from getting shot. Stay down, and don't let either police or monsters see you, got it?" He ordered, and Liam swallowed thickly, before he gave a small nod.
In that moment, he reminded Percy a lot of his old-self.

Young and inexperienced and…

"Wait, where are the two kids and the satyrs?" He asked as an afterthought, remembering why they were even in this area in the first place.

"Jason hid them and kept the monsters going after us. Should I go get them?"

Percy weighed his options, not liking the thought of Liam running around when the police were this close, especially since they were sort of near the White House, and the Secret Service was around, too – but at the same time, if Jules-Albert made it here to pick them up, it would be counterproductive to split up again so they could collect everybody.

He heard some other policemen calling out in the distance to get the rest of the mortals gone, which was both great because it meant less onlookers and nuisance, but also bad, since that meant there was less of a way to mingle in with them should they attempt an escape.

Still, there might be a chance for Liam to…

"Okay, but make sure to stay down as much as possible, and don't draw any attention to yourself in any way." He instructed, then turned around and followed the police guy as sneakily as possible.

His sword may not be able to do any harm, and he had no intention of seriously injuring any mortal since his step-dad was already taken care of, but he had no qualms following the policeman and knocking him out with an experienced blow to the back of his head with the hilt of his sword.

There.

One problem less.

Percy helped the poor man down and placed him against one of the cars, then poked out his head to look for his next victim, even though he knew he was playing a game against time and the Fates.

If a monster spotted him, there was no way he could keep up his stealth, and the police were bound to fire soon, given that they couldn't see any of the monsters their team was currently battling.

He found another police officer hiding behind a car not too far from him and instantly made to attack, just to nearly get squashed by a flying car as one of the two drakons flung it in Andrew's direction, who squeaked and dived out of the way at the last possible moment.

Percy managed to evade the blow, but suddenly found his path blocked, and the police officer spotted him, too.

Well, shit.

Again, today definitely was not his day.

Deciding to first act, then think, Percy jumped over the car and crossed the space to the police officer, before leaping right at him and giving him a kick to the chest, sending them both toppling over the car behind the man and luckily knocking the guy out before Percy had to hit him again.

Percy looked around at the at least twenty more people trying to surround them with their weapons raised and their continued warnings, but then the roar of the drakons and Jason's yelp of pain cut through the air and Percy reacted automatically.

He turned, raised Riptide higher and was already rushing to help his boyfriend before he even had an actual understanding of the situation, but it didn't matter as he snarled at the already injured drakon that had almost made him its dinner – then he cut off its head the next moment, and the stupid thing finally disintegrated, leaving one less problem to deal with.
Percy whirled around to search for Jason, to check on him, check what was wrong, check how they should proceed next – but then Rin was flung into him and they both were thrown back over another car and he first had to make sure they were both still alive as he sucked in deep, erratic breaths, his head buzzing and his vision spinning.

"Ugh…" Rin moaned weakly, and Percy swallowed his pain and pushed himself up properly to check on her.

"I'm alright. It only…only struck my side again. Ugh, Will is going to be devastated. He always… always overexaggerates so much…" She pressed out, her breath labored and her hands clutching her side, and Percy watched in horror how blood spilled from an open wound and onto the ground beneath them.

That didn't look good at all – in fact, that looked really, really bad.

"Don't move. Stay down, Rin. That's an order." He said sharply when she seriously tried to get back up again, and his eyes immediately hushed around to check on the position of the policemen.

They were closing in, and he could definitely see them arming up and giving each other signs, which meant they were ready to open fire.

Shit, shit, shit.

The second drakon roared loudly, and Percy's heart nearly stopped when he realized how close it was.

"Stay down. I'm sending Andrew for you. You two have to get out of here and meet with Liam and the kids." He told her and waited for her to nod, which she only reluctantly did after reassessing her injury.

Then, he leaped back over the car and charged at the…at the venti that came soaring at him out of nowhere, though he had first intended to go right for the drakon.

He slashed at it, then continued his path, stabbing the fucking thing right in its tail.

It roared loudly, then whirled around with surprising agility and snapped at him, but then Jason was there, and Jason looked very angry, with blood running down the side of his face (oh gods, Will was going to kill them if they survived this), and the next moment, there was a very nicely aimed lightning bolt striking from the other wisely bright and sunny sky, hitting the drakon right on the top of the head and hopefully frying its brain.

Since it screeched and disintegrated a moment later, Percy was confident that it had.

"Why didn't you do that sooner?" He yelled to his boyfriend, who very lovingly held up his middle finger and stabbed another one of those shadowy figures Percy had not yet been able to truly…identify.

They weren't demigods, weren't spirits, but he also knew of no monster that looked like this…?

They didn't really 'disintegrate' either, instead they…faded…?

Percy was torn out of his thoughts as he heard the first shots mingling with the other battle sounds, and he instinctively grabbed hold of Andrew's hoodie the moment he spotted it out of his peripheral vision, hurling them both behind a sideways laying car.

"Jackson, what the-…"

"I need you to get to Rin and get her out of here. She's badly injured. Liam went to collect the kids, so take her there, as well. If Jules-Albert shows up, get everybody back to the hideout, do not wait for us. Nico will know what to do." He ordered briskly, and Andrew's mouth snapped shut as he stared at him with wide eyes.

"I…you…what?! Are you crazy?! Di Angelo is going to slaughter me if we show up without you! Plus, Rin and Liam would never allow this!"
"I don't care, tell them I ordered it. Now, go. I'll distract the police." Percy snapped at him and pushed, and Andrew made a frightened sound, before he did as he was told and crawled along the car, while Percy peeked around the corner from his side.

Immediately, he had to pull back in order not to get shot.

Just great.

Okay, what to do…

Percy took a deep breath and tried to sort his thoughts, but with Jason somewhere close by where he could very well get shot, Liam and the kids somewhere Percy didn't know and couldn't check on, Andrew about to embark on the mighty quest of saving Rin, and Rin still hiding out behind a car that the advancing police might get to any moment now, he seriously wasn't surprised when he couldn't concentrate very well.

And that was without even thinking of how Nico and the rest of their team might be faring on their end, and the fact that Will might still be knocked out and/or struggling with Kyle or whoever else trying to attack his mind.

Great, now Percy was thinking about that, too.

"Jason!" He yelled, mainly to hear whether there would be an answer.

"Not shot yet!" Jason yelled back, and those had to be the most beautiful words he could have said right now.

"Keep it that way! I'm coming out!" He called, and Andrew snorted behind him, though now was not the time for those jokes.

"That is a horrible—oh my gods!" Jason started, then groaned when Percy came dashing out from under the car and across the center of destruction, just to dive behind the next car, narrowly dodging the bullets aimed at him.

"Drop your weapons and surrender!" Somebody called, but whether that was the police, Secret Service, or some other agency, he didn't know, and Percy rolled his eyes as his back hit the car.

Seriously, they weren't even doing anything anymore, now that the monsters were gone.

Though, if they stayed too much longer, there might be new ones, soon, and he definitely didn't want that.

He glanced back towards Andrew, but, while most of the gunfire was where Percy was hiding behind, there were still at least two people advancing on the car Andrew was currently behind, so that was pretty bad.

He wished he had one of Rin's grenades, that would surely be handy right about now.

Maybe not necessarily to kill them, but as a means of distraction.

If there was at least some water close by…

"Next time, get them somewhere with more water, alright?" He yelled towards his boyfriend, reaching out with his powers to search for anything else he could control, maybe a public bathroom or a canister of water bottles.

Of course, no such luck. Everything remotely interesting was too far out of reach.

"We didn't have much choice, love. Trust me, if there had been a way, I would have done it differently." Jason called, and Percy grunted, though he believed him.

His boyfriend was smart, after all.

"I'm going to come for you." He announced, figuring they might be able to come up with a plan if they could talk in hushed voices, rather than yelling across the street.
Or, if worst came to worst, at least they'd go down together, he guessed.

This time, when he came out from his hiding place, a bullet grazed his already injured shoulder, though he didn't let that stop him from running for the sound of Jason's voice.

His boyfriend's arm shot out and pulled him to safety mere seconds later, pressing him against the tilted car he was hiding behind, his face disappearing at the side of Percy's neck as he took a series of deep, shaky breaths.

"Don't…don't do that again, Percy. Gods, for a moment I thought they would…they'd…" He whispered, but Percy waved off with his good hand as he resisted the urge to grab his damaged shoulder.

Now was not the time, and Jason was already upset.

"I'm fine. Rin isn't, though. I told Andrew to get her out of here, but he can't escape with them targeting his car. Any ideas?" He asked, successfully distracting from his own actions and injuries.

Jason still held him close and had his eyes fixed on his now bleeding shoulder, anyways.

"I don't know. A storm wouldn't do much, and I don't think it's a good idea to strike down mortals with lightning. That doesn't just knock out, but kill." Jason said reluctantly, but Percy already knew that much before.

He looked around for anything Jason might be able to strike, instead, that might lead to a small explosion and thus draw attention away from them, but the cars around them were too close together not to cause a chain reaction, and that would undoubtedly do more damage than good.

Maybe if he struck something further off, like one of the museums, or the Washington Monument, then it might distract them long enough for them to get away…?

Just as Percy was about to suggest that, already pondering the possibility of the Secret Service tightening security around the White House and the surrounding areas to prevent anything like a terrorist attack, they heard the sounds of a very fast approaching vehicle, much alike a motorbike.

What…?

Jason grabbed Percy and pushed him back against the exposed underside of the car, shielding him in case of an attack, but the next moment, the motorbike in question whooshing past them and navigated in record speed through the mess of parked and abandoned and demolished cars around them, the driver honking the horn and making straight for some of the policemen, before taking a sharp turn that shouldn't humanly be possible.

"Who the…" Jason started in confusion, and they both poked out their heads as cautiously as possible, noticing surprised how all the forces around them were now more focused on the motorbike than them.

Perfect!

Percy glanced back towards Andrew, but the boy was already halfway across their circle of destruction and rushed behind the car Rin should still be hiding behind.

A raised thumb signaled them he had reached her, much to Percy's relief.

He looked back at their unknown savior, noticing how they seemed to start a game of giving chase and fleeing from the policemen around them, the shots aimed at them never making it through whatever it was they were wearing underneath their leather clothing.

Percy didn't know who that was or why they were helping them, but he decided to ask questions later and accept the help now.

"Let's get out of here." He whispered to Jason, and his boyfriend gave a small nod, before they both dashed out of their hiding place and made for a different way than Andrew and Rin, just in case they drew attention back to themselves.
They did, but luckily, the moment the woman in question raised her gun and aimed for them, lips already parting to alert the others, their savior made straight for her and forced her to dive out of the way to save her skin, which in turn gave Jason and Percy the chance to disappear behind some other cars and make their way down the next road and almost right in the hands of an approaching media team that was trying to get closer to get some good shots of the scene.

Jason managed to get them out of their sight before getting seen, though that also had him grabbing hold of Percy's bad arm, and the tears that pricked at his eyes at the pain showed him his adrenaline high was slowly wearing off, which had him wanting to hurry even more.

They were distancing themselves from the museums, but since most of the attention had been on them and their faces, and they were full of blood and gore from the battle, mingling with mortals was out of the question, anyways, and would only draw unwanted attention and get their team in unnecessary danger if they regrouped right now.

Which…only left them with the option to keep on going this way and get Nico to send Jules-Albert to them whenever he had the chance, while hoping for the best for the rest of their group.

They heard their savior revving the engine and the news reporter shrieked, moments before there was the sound of screeching tires and a quickly distancing vehicle, signaling their surprise savior was making their exit.

Percy wanted to say something along the lines of 'We should totally thank this person for saving us, at some point', but instead, the throbbing pain in his shoulder and the ache in the rest of his body kept him too occupied to even open his mouth, his jaw clenched in an effort to not give up and drop to the ground and groan.

Gods, how he hated fighting.

"We need to keep going. They're bound to search for us, Percy. Come on, there's a park ahead somewhere, I think. Maybe there's a chance to hide there." Jason said quietly as if he knew what Percy was thinking, and he suppressed his sigh and gave a weak nod, while also beginning to stumble over his dead tired feet.

He had run too much.

And his arm hurt so, so much.

It was his left arm, he rarely hurt his left arm. Usually, it was always his right arm.

Percy didn't know why that mattered to him right now, but it annoyed him, somehow.

Plus, Will was going to be upset.

Gods, Will would be upset.

They had gone on this 'quest' while he was knocked out, and that was already enough of a reason for him to be upset, because of all the risks – but now, they would also show up beaten up and bloodied and covered in bruises and injuries.

Will would murder them, would revive them, then repeat that again and rant at them for being so careless.

Then, he would heal them and leave to sulk and blame himself.

Yep, that sounded exactly like Will.

Percy smiled to himself as his eyes fluttered shut, stumbling all over himself again as he slumped against Jason more and more, who didn't comment as he worked Percy's good arm over his shoulder and supported most of his weight, pushing them onwards.

"Stay with me, Percy. We're almost at the park. It doesn't look like we'll be able to hide anywhere, but a short break should be possible, then I'll fly us out. Sounds good?" He heard Jason's voice somewhere, but it seemed fuzzy and far away.
A break sounded great.

Flying not so much.

Percy hummed vaguely in reply, then pondered how Nico was going to react.

Maybe they shouldn't have split up.

Maybe they should have called the satyrs and told them they'd meet up once Will was up and running again, then they could have also settled on a different location, something closer to water.

Then again, hadn't Rin mentioned the kids had been stuck in that museum because of the drakon?

Would they have made it another some hours without them coming to their aid?

Percy frowned to himself, then his thoughts drifted off to their unknown savior, trying to gauge the person's build and compare it to anybody who might fit the role.

Usually, there were no strangers helping a bunch of apparently crazy kids shooting around aimlessly in the middle of a busy road, after all.

Especially not strangers with bulletproof clothing that came rushing in on a motorbike at the crucial moment.

That was something that happened in movies, not in real life, after all.

Percy mused that for a moment, humming to himself in agreement as he slumped against Jason further, who kept talking to him in a quiet, yet urgent voice, but Percy could barely hear him, much less follow what he was saying.

There was a rush of wind and he thought vaguely that he couldn't feel the ground beneath his feet anymore, but when he went through the excruciating task of forcing one eye open, he found out Jason had hoisted him onto his back and was carrying him at a quick pace across wherever the heck they were right now, still talking to him, even if Percy neither responded or understood.

A part of Percy wanted to pat him on the shoulder and tell him he was a great boyfriend.

The other part of Percy decided now was the perfect time to close his eyes and let go.

So he did.

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Jason was covered in blood and monster dust and gore, he was tired, exhausted and everything hurt, his team was gods knew where, help was even further away, he had no idea where he was, and Percy had lost consciousness.

All in all, Jason decided this was his worst travel yet.

He dived into the first alleyway he found to avoid getting spotted by the mortals buzzing around and the media trying to get closer to the apparent crime scene, but he knew full well they couldn't stay there for very long, not when there was bound to be a search for them.

Sadly, he had no idea where to go, what to do, or where to take Percy so he could take a look at his injuries, to see whether there was anything he could do until Jules-Albert or Nico managed to pick them up.

Would they even find them here?

They had to.

As beaten up as they were, there was no way they could walk on open streets for too long, if at all, and they didn't have their tents with them or any backpacks with clothes or the like that could be of use right now, either.
Jason let out a deep sigh, followed by a wince and a groan as his chest and head ached from the repeated blows he had received.

When his vision started blurring (again), he decided it was time for a break.

Better safe than sorry.

He let Percy down as gently and carefully as he could, leaning him against the wall and inspecting his shoulder, but with all the blood and dirt everywhere, it was difficult to assess the severity of his injury.

Right now, Jason was more concerned about the fact Percy was unconscious, though.

There was the sound of a car slowing down outside their alleyway, and Jason immediately surged forward to press Percy against the wall to keep him safe, already bracing for gunshots or the police to come running.

A door was opened, and he squeezed his eyes shut and pressed against Percy more, concentrating on his powers to strike if anybody dared to come at them.

Sure, he didn't want to hurt mortals, but if the alternative was their deaths or imprisonment, he knew he was willing to make that sacrifice, at least for Percy's sake.

"Jason! Thank the gods, you two are here. Come on, hurry up." Liam's voice sounded, and Jason's eyes shot open in surprise as he looked around, the brewing storm instantly disappearing once more.

What…?

Liam came rushing towards them with a relieved look on his face, and Jason could spot their bus behind him at the side of the road.

"Do you need any help? Is he knocked out?" Liam asked, sounding concerned and borderline disturbed as he spotted Percy slumped against the wall, but Jason didn't reply as he grabbed hold of Percy and hoisted him up to hurry towards the car.

First, they had to get out of here.

Andrew was at the open door, motioning for him to hurry up as he looked around for any signs of trouble or chance of exposure, but since he didn't say anything or motion for him to stop, Jason rushed straight out of the alleyway and all but jumped into the bus, Percy safely nestled in his arms and Liam right behind him.

"You made it! Thank the gods, Rin was worrying sick you might have gotten shot the one moment she wasn't watching." The son of Athena exclaimed once the door closed and Jules-Albert started driving, making inhuman sounds from the driver's seat and checking his rear window with an accusing look on his undead face.

Whether he was complaining about them surviving, or complaining about them splitting up, Jason didn't know, but right now, he was just glad they had gotten picked up, at all.

"How did you find us? What happened?" He asked as he let Percy down carefully, forced to spread him out on one of the two-seaters, since Rin was spread out in the last row with a bloodied cloth pressed against her side, her face contorted with pain and her breath labored.

Percy was right, she looked terrible.

Jason hoped they would get to the hideout quickly and manage to grab some ambrosia or nectar – and that Will could heal them, because the team definitely needed it right now.

Oh gods, hopefully, Will would be in any state to heal.

"Jules-Albert did that. After Percy told me to get the kids, I went to our hideout, but then the Secret Service put everything on some sort of lockdown to prevent any of the 'terrorists' to either hide anywhere or blow anything else up. Apparently, they thought it was mostly some sort of
distraction to get to the president, and everyone was freaking out." Liam told him, and Jason's gaze hushed over to the two new kids in the second row, a boy and a girl, who were clutching each other and huddled together in their seats, their satyrs in the row behind them to talk to them in hushed, reassuring voices, one of them making strange hand gestures to the boy, who watched transfixed, though he still seemed scared.

He had to go talk to them and calm them down (and hopefully cheer them up a little from what had to have been quite traumatizing events).

But first, he had to know what had happened.

"We managed to escape, and then there was Jules-Albert with the bus, driving across the lawn towards us and motioning for us to get inside. Then, he drove off super fast, as if we were in a sports car instead of a bus, and he even nearly ran over a few of the people that tried to shoot at the bus! Luckily, they all managed to dive out of the way…” Liam continued, the shock apparently enough to make the son of Hecate talk much more and much more emotionally than usual.

"I thought he would take us to the hideout and kept trying to make him go back for you, but then, he just parked the bus and left to climb onto a freaking motorbike, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. I swear, I have never been more...I mean...we were…pretty much locked in. It was…it wasn't nice. Really scary, to be honest. I mean, I reassured the kids that we were going to be fine, but…well, I'm just glad no monsters attacked us, I guess."

Jason could understand that only all too well.

He nodded distractedly, then frowned. Wait…

"A motorbike?" He asked, glancing back towards Jules-Albert, who was still glowering at them with an accusing look.

"He was the one who came to our rescue, Grace. The stranger? On the motorbike? I first didn't know, either, but it became obvious when he rushed off the moment you were gone and I got Rin away from the worst. I managed to get us down the road, hoping to find an opening to get inside one of the museums or something and make my way back to Liam and the kids, but with all the armed people and the crazed mortals running around, there was no way for that. Then, suddenly, Jules-Albert popped up out of nowhere with the bus, wearing the freaking same leather outfit the biker wore. So, yeah, pretty obvious, in my opinion.” Andrew jumped in, and Jason looked back at their undead chauffeur, taking notice of his clothing for the first time.

He was…indeed wearing leather clothes…

Wait, so Jules-Albert was their savior?

The stranger who had come to their rescue on that motorbike?

The one driving said motorbike in a horrifically crazy way while being shot at from all sides?

*Jules-Albert*?!

…Seriously, why had Jason's dad never given him an undead chauffeur?

Jason was about to say thanks to their apparent savior, but then Jules-Albert turned a corner too sharply and Rin cried out in pain, followed by Percy letting out a pained, weak groan, so Jason checked on them first, instead.

They were busy for the rest of their ride, first tending to Rin and Percy, then each other, until Jason sat down with the kids in the front and introduced himself properly and tried his best to be as warm and welcoming as possible, given the circumstances.

It took a long moment of the boy staring blankly at his lips for Jason to realize he couldn't understand him, and a confused look towards the satyrs had one of them informing him that the
boy was deaf and had lost his hearing aid in the course of their travels, so then Jason had the respective satyr translate his words into ASL (hence the gestures earlier, gods, he was an idiot), which was a strange experience.

It also left a bitter taste in his mouth for not being able to communicate with the boy (Toby, they said he was called) properly, since he was supposed to be the leader and diplomat and Pontifex Maximus, and he should know enough languages, including ASL, to assure he could carry out this role accordingly.

Neither of the kids spoke a single word, but Jason didn't push it and left them to themselves and their satyrs again as soon as he finished, to give them a chance to think his words over and relax a bit.

It still took way too long for his liking until they arrived at what he identified as an old cemetery and their tents came to sight.

It took even longer for Nico, Ash and Sara to come running for them and get Rin and Percy, while Jason could spot Will and Hannah disappearing inside the medic tent, undoubtedly preparing for the necessary healing.

At least Will was awake and they hadn't been attacked here, yet.

That was already more than Jason could have hoped for.

Jason still only allowed himself to at least begin relaxing when he was in the medic tent, himself, and could see both Nico and Will alive and well as they worked together with Hannah in treating their new patients, and Will let them know in a somewhat distanced, yet resolute voice that both Percy and Rin would make it.

He allowed himself to relax even more when he actually saw their injuries healing up, and even let out a relieved sigh when Will reached him and cupped his face in his hands, warm thumbs stroking over Jason's cheeks as bright blue eyes gazed at him in a mixture of concern, guilt and affection.

Nico stuck to his side while Will took care of the two newcomers, treating their bruises and putting them at ease with a few gentle nudges and reassurances, as well as a weak joke or two, before sending them off with Liam to get some food in their stomachs, which actually did wonders and made them a lot less apprehensive.

Jason observed the state their team was in, and the fact the sun was setting, yet Will wasn't even halfway done with all his healing, and he already looked weakened as it was, and they hadn't yet had a chance to talk about…anything.

Jason watched and pondered until his vision blurred again, then he let out a deep sigh and allowed himself to lean on Nico, who put his arm around him and stroked over his back reassuringly.

This was going to be a long day.

***

Will kept close to Jason and Percy, his hands on their thighs to watch out for any changes.

He had healed everyone to the best of his abilities, but Rin was stuck in the medic tent for the night and would need regular check-ups to make sure the last traces of drakon poison disappeared that she had belatedly infected herself with due to a cut on her leg and poison-soaked socks.

Rin had come dangerously close to death, and Will didn't like it whatsoever.

She always had that reckless tendency, and her negative attitude towards life didn't make anything any better, because she seemed to expect to die every time, and he knew from experience that those that accepted death too easily also were the ones dying much quicker than those that didn't want to die yet.

Andrew was fine, and the leftover bruises would either fade overnight or Will would heal them
tomorrow, once he had replenished his energies.

Liam was better now, though Will hadn't appreciated the fact that the boy hadn't made a peep about the rather large injury that had spread over his entire back, nor the fact he had used up almost all his energy to hide the kids and himself in the mist to get away – sure, Will understood it had been necessary, but, as a healer, he couldn't help but be irritated and worried, anyways.

The kids were alright, if a little shook. They had introduced themselves as Celine and Toby when he had spoken to them in his gentlest voice and with practiced signs (good thing he had learned ASL, he had always known it would come in handy one day), and they had let him treat their injuries and bruises, but the biggest issue had been their malnourishment, and that had been taken care of, so all was well now, and they were already sleeping in the small, spare tent they had brought.

The satyrs had been tended to, as well, though they had already left their hideout again to look for other demigods in the perimeter, assuring them they would be fine, since monsters didn't track satyrs even half as much as demigods.

Jason and Percy hadn't been so lucky, though. Not that Will had expected any less, but it still irritated him beyond reason.

There he had warned them to be careful, and those two had nothing better to do than provoke an entire nest of monsters, apparently.

Jason was lucky Will had still had enough energy left to heal his head wound, same as his cracked knuckles (again) and all the other dents and bruises he had carried, though he had luckily not broken anything else and gotten away with some pain killers and the promise of another round of healing tomorrow morning.

(Especially since this was Jason's head again, and Will could still feel spouts of dizziness hitting Jason, which unnerved him to bits and strengthened his resolve to read up on that again tonight.)

He had tried not to say anything or chide them while he had treated them, especially once Percy had regained consciousness, but he had to admit he still wanted to turn on them and rant at them for just willingly being so fucking stupid and run off like that.

However, he didn't, because he knew it was his fault they had been forced to do that, in the first place.

His fault.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them again and nudged the bowl of soup back closer to Percy, who was trying to push it away without touching any, again.

His body needed food, and Will could feel he was starved, so he was going to get him to eat, and if it was the last thing he did.

When they had gotten Percy in the medic tent, Will had almost suffered a heart attack, both at the sight of him, as well as his inner state.

His left arm – his heart arm – had been injured, his bone slightly cracked but not broken, and his muscle in his shoulder had started tearing, but Will had been able to prevent worse.

He also seemed to have been shot at, though no bullets had actually seemed to hit him, only graze – not that this made Will feel any better.

Percy had been covered in bruises Will could feel through his clothing, a couple of his ribs cracked and his head had taken a few blows too many, as well, it was a miracle the guy hadn't suffered from worse than a mild concussion.

But what disturbed Will the most was the fact that Percy had been quiet – he had regained consciousness, but there had been no comment, no remark, nothing. He had just laid there gazing at Will, then he had turned to stare up at the ceiling with pursed lips, only replying to Will with nods and shakes of his head or the faintest shrugs.
He still wasn't talking much now, either.

Percy pushed the bowl away again after two small spoonsful of soup, so Will pushed it right back towards him, his knee nudging against Percy's thigh gently.

But instead of eating, his boyfriend let himself slump against him and rubbed his cheek against his shoulder.

"I want to go." He said quietly, and Will blinked, confused by the discomfort he could sense inside Percy at the skin-to-skin contact.

"To bed?" He asked for verification, but Percy only shrugged.

"Away. From everyone. Too loud. Too much." Percy said with a grimace, his sentences unusually clipped and short, and Will moved his hand to stroke over his boyfriend's cheek.

Checking his values, he gave a small nod and tried his best to smile.

"Alright. Would you prefer to be alone for a while? Or would you like me to come with you?" He asked, and Percy let out a sigh of relief as he put the bowl of soup down for the last time and made to get up with a shrug, before he hesitated.

"Would it be okay if you came with me?"

What a laughable question.

Will didn't laugh.

Instead, he nodded and bid his goodnight to the others, sending Jason and Nico a pointed look that hopefully conveyed they should get to their tent soon, as well.

Though, with his luck, they'd join them much sooner than he might like, since they hadn't yet had a chance to 'talk'.

Oh, he knew that talk was coming.

Not only about the thing with Eris and her dubious statements and remarks, but also about…

about…

Will pushed the thoughts aside and focused on Percy next to him, on his values, on his hand inside Will's, on the way he still stumbled slightly as they both walked towards their tent and left the rest of the world behind as they entered their little safe haven in all this mess.

"Everything is going to be okay, Percy." Will said quietly when they sat down on the bed, though he wasn't sure why he said it, or why he would lie to Percy like this.

But Percy soaked it up as if it was the truth, anyways, and when he slumped against Will again, Will held him and held them and wished he was telling the truth, too.

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"Yeah, well, I didn't know!" Will hissed agitatedly, and Nico sighed as Jason immediately lifted his hands in a placating motion.

Maybe they should have called it a night and talked about this whole mess in the morning.

They were already tired and agitated enough as it was, he didn't want any more fights to start, and right now, things were already looking grim, even if Jason and Nico had only just managed to get away from the rest of their group and join Percy and Will.

"I didn't say you did. I'm just saying that I would prefer it if you informed us about such things before it gets unbearable and before you pass out on us. The contract could have waited for all I care, but your state of mind can't." Jason tried to calm Will down, though Percy and Nico winced at his choice of words automatically.
As did Jason, once he saw Will's offended expression.

"Wait, my state of mind?! What am I, crazy?!"

"That is not what I meant, Will, and you very well-…"

"No, don't even start, Jason. Fine, he tried to get to me, big deal. It's not like that hasn't happened before. But I fail to see how that has anything to do with my state of mind! If you recall, it wasn't me who ended up possessed, so maybe it's your state of mind you should worry about!" Will snapped back at him, and Jason flinched back so hard his glasses nearly fell off his nose.

Nico sucked in a sharp breath, while Percy closed his eyes, his body tensing next to Nico's.

For a moment, there was dead silence in the tent.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that." Will apologized quietly, his voice now meek and weak, all traces of anger gone, and he didn't meet any of their gazes.

"I'm just worried about you. Why can't you ever just see things the way we do and let us help you, Will?" Jason said in a defeated, tired voice, and Nico had to look away from both of them, trying to hold in his own opinion on this matter, same as he was trying to control the whirl of resentment and fear inside himself.

"Don't." Will whispered quietly, and it felt like a punch in the face to Nico, even though Will hadn't said it to him.

They had made so much progress, had managed to get Will to open up about so many things, and Will had gotten so much better, it had been visible, for gods' sake!

Why was it, then, that, right now, he felt further away than ever before?

"Why not?" Jason asked, but none of them seemed particularly surprised when Will only shook his head.

"Can you tell us? About the headache? If he tried with you, he might try it with us, so it would be better if we knew what to look out for." Nico spoke up in resignation, already knowing that Jason could as well talk to a brick when Will was like this, and the brick would probably reply sooner.

Jason didn't even look at Nico, and took the rejection as well as always, though Nico knew he was hurting.

"It felt like a normal headache, I guess. But maybe more like a prodding pain, I don't know. There wasn't anything suspicious about it, else I would have said something, you know? I'm not stupid, I wouldn't risk your lives like that." Will replied, a bit more bite in his last statement than maybe necessary, but all that did was make Nico snap back at him.

"No, just your own life, right? Because nobody could possibly care about that. Right. How could I forget." He remarked sarcastically, and Percy let out a small hiss that had Nico bare his teeth at him for a moment, before Jason cleared his throat and they both dropped it.

"How did I risk my life? I was fine, it was just a dumb headache that ended up not being a headache! I was already wondering why my medicine wasn't working, I'd have probably mentioned it to you any moment if a certain goddess hadn't been busy signing the contract and kicking us out."

"Thanks for mentioning that, else I would have surely forgotten. But, while we're already on the topic, think you are willing to enlighten us as to what she was talking about every time she talked to you?" Nico asked him, maybe more aggressively than intended, but he was tired, exhausted, his boyfriends had been hurt, Will had lashed out at Jason unnecessarily, Will was being a self-depreciating idiot again, and he was beyond fed up with Kyle and his fucking existence in this world.

As well as some other things, but these were the most prominent issues on his mind right now, and he'd like to fix all of them in one go.
Since that was not possible, it only added to his agitation.

"How would I know? She's a goddess, who knows what she knows or doesn't know or what she means or not? It's not like I'm something like Greek Jesus that knows all your answers, sorry to break it to you." Will snapped at him, and Nico grinded his teeth.

"Stop it. Both of you. All of you." Percy put in quietly, right when Nico was about to reply.

It was so quiet, he barely heard it, but it was exactly that which had him turning his head, and the other two looked at Percy, as well.

Their boyfriend had pulled his legs up and his arms wrapped around them, his face hidden at his knees, his hair a mess and his voice broken.

At the sudden silence, he lifted his head to look at them with sad, sea-green eyes that had Nico immediately feeling guilty.

What were they doing, fighting like this?

They should be happy they were all still alive, especially after today, especially after seeing the state of their team and boyfriends, especially after having to drag an unconscious, injured Percy from the bus and into the medic tent, especially after having their only healer knocked out cold and waking with a scream and his eyes full of terror and panic.

Nico closed his eyes and took a deep breath, before he turned to Will to apologize.

However, at the sight of Will, he also remembered his stubbornness and current attitude, Eris' words, and the fact that Will had absolutely refused to say anything on the whole 'Kyle-tried-to-attack-me-again'-matter – or any other matter, really.

The struggle between lashing out at him for being so stupid, and apologizing for lashing out before, was more difficult than Nico would have ever expected.

It wasn't as if he wanted to hurt Will or upset him or even pick a fight.

He just...he just wanted Will to understand.

Jason was right, they cared about Will, they cared so much, but somehow, nothing they ever did seemed to show Will just how much they cared, and that it hurt to see him hurt, to know he was hurting, to know he needed their help, yet refused to accept it.

But it had gotten so much better, why was Will being like this again, now?

Why couldn't he just let them in on his thoughts, his worries, his fears, same as he had before?

Why did he have to try and take on the whole world by himself and push them away whenever they tried to help him?

"I'm sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me. You know I don't want to hurt you. I love you too much for that." Will admitted with a sigh, once more looking down at his lap with his expression unguarded for a moment, allowing them a perfect view of the exhaustion and defeat written all over it.

"We love you, too. Just...don't push us away, Will. We want to help you. Sure, we have no idea how, but we want to try, anyways." Jason tried tentatively, and Nico could swear Will looked conflicted for a moment, maybe even defiant as his jaw set, but then he only gave a weak nod.

"I'll talk to Clovis once we're back at Camp. Maybe he can help with this form of attack." Nico added, remembering how terrified and useless he had felt when Will had been knocked out and pale and weak on the backseats of the bus, needing his help when Nico had been unable to do anything to give that help.

"I...don't think it really was an attack, actually. I mean..." Will started hesitantly, then broke off again as he shuffled uncomfortably, his eyes anywhere but on the guys.
“Yes?” Nico pried cautiously, and Will bristled for a moment, but as his eyes snapped to Nico, he slumped again.

“It didn't feel like he was actually trying to take over, or anything. He rather seemed to try and look inside my head, maybe...maybe find out where we were, or something. He...I...for a moment, I thought I saw something, him, somebody else, some...some other...things...but everything was gone again so quickly, and it didn't really make sense, so it might have just been my imagination, too. I don't know.” Will admitted quietly, and Nico wished he could have simply told them this in the first place, instead of feeling attacked immediately.

“So, he was trying to use you to spy on us?” Jason asked in confusion, and Will's face darkened for a moment, but then he swallowed whatever it was he wanted to reply and instead shrugged.

“I don't know. I can't even tell whether he got anything out of me. As I said, I thought I saw something, but then it felt like the connection broke off and I was completely out of it until I woke up and saw Nico's worried face. I didn't even really know I had passed out.” Will explained with a shrug.

Nico frowned.

“I love how you completely leave out the fact you woke up screaming and didn't even know where you were at first.” He remarked dryly, and Will winced and shot him a look that probably said something along the lines of 'Did you have to tell them that?!', while Percy and Jason both sat up a little straighter and exchanged a telling look.

Nico merely huffed and crossed his arms defiantly, definitely not feeling uncomfortable at all because of Will's sudden discomfort.

“Well, I'm not letting you get away with any more half-truths. You never let me get away with anything, no matter how trivial it seemed to me at the time, so expect the same treatment now, sunshine.” He deadpanned, but he couldn't help the knot of unease inside him growing as Will started shifting and averted his gaze again.

“I...it wasn't...I didn't lie. I don't. I...I just...” Will stammered, then took a deep breath to collect himself once more.

“I just didn't want them to worry even more. Excuse me for trying to be considerate of my patients when they need peace and rest and quiet instead of worrying senselessly over things we can't change.” He then stated resolutely, and Percy scowled.

“Patients.” Percy repeated, the same moment Jason rubbed his face with one hand and exhaled a long, pained breath.

“Patients.” Jason repeated, and Nico watched as Will stiffened to a board, before his defenses were right back up, the defiance in his eyes speaking volumes.

“Boyfriends.” Nico corrected in a vain attempt to fix the situation.

“Patients. Boyfriends, too, but, right now, you are hurt, you need rest, and I am not going to put my duty as doctor aside for my own selfish reasons when my job is not yet done. I am well aware I have failed with my healing today, but come tomorrow, I will-...”

“We’re fine.” Percy cut in, and Nico knew why he was saying it, but at the same time, he couldn't believe Percy would really stoop so low, especially right now, when it had been Percy to remind them to keep things peaceful.

Will predictably immediately bristled, which had Percy staring him down with a look that just dared Will to speak up right now.

Nico and Jason exchanged a pained look, watching Will visibly bite his tongue as his face contorted into a grimace at the apparent urge to say what was on his mind right now, while Percy stared him down relentlessly.

“I am your doctor. I decide when you're fine and when you're not. If this is all, I will be gone
now. Rin needs her check-up, and I need to bring Liam his medication for his back. You two need
rest, so go to sleep. That's an order. Goodnight." Will stated coolly and pushed away from them,
from the bed, climbing out on the opposite site with a forcefully blank expression.

Nico closed his eyes as his heart sank and his chest hurt.

"You…what…but..." Jason started, surprised and taken aback, and Nico felt him leaving the bed,
too, immediately making after Will, but Nico knew without looking that Will didn't let him.

"Goodnight, Jason." Will repeated, and this time, there was an edge to his voice that said 'Don't
push it'.

Jason didn't. Nico could hear him stop in the middle of their tent, and he heard the little flap
opening and closing, marking Will's exit.

Nico rubbed at his face and tried to push down the pain in his chest, but it didn't work as well as
he might have dared to hope.

Opening his eyes, he found Percy with his face buried in his own hands, his shoulders slumped,
his body language speaking of defeat and pain that no monster could cause.

"He just left. Like that." Jason said blankly, as if he seriously was surprised.

"He ran." Nico corrected, and the silence that followed his statement only seemed to give it more
space and severity.

"I hate this. I hate this so much. Why are we fighting? I don't want to fight. This whole thing is
just…just…” Percy whispered, then drew together even further.

"Just stupid." Percy finished, so quietly they could barely hear, but in the silence of their tent, they
still picked it up.

Jason moved back over to them, looking a lot worse than he did earlier, but he instantly went to
climb onto the bed and wrap himself around Percy to help cheer him up and be there for him, so
Nico went to follow his lead.

Of course it was stupid.

Everything was stupid.

Fighting was stupid, the whole day had been stupid, arguments were stupid, Nico just wanted to
be back at Camp already and have their ease back that they used to have.

Have the time back that they used to have.

Kick that misery out of their midst and make everything alright again.

"I'm going after him so he doesn't stay up all night again." Jason said quietly, but Percy shook his
head and immediately clutched his shoulders, keeping him closely pressed against him.

"Please. Don't leave me, too. You always leave. All of you do." Percy whispered, and Nico's eyes
widened as he searched for Jason's gaze, trying to ask what this was about.

But Jason wasn't looking at him, instead staring down at Percy with surprise and conflict written
all over his face.

Then, his expression softened again, and Nico watched as he leaned down to press his lips to
Percy's forehead, a simple sign of affection that meant the world to Percy as he allowed Jason to
push him and Nico into the pillows and tug the blanket over them.

"Nobody is leaving you, Percy. Especially not us." Jason said softly, and Nico nodded his
agreement as he stroked over Percy's back and sides from behind, causing him to shiver and relax
slightly.

"Will just did. Same as he does every night." Percy replied, but Nico shook his head immediately.
"He doesn't mean it like that. You know that, Percy. He just worries, same as we do. He just so happens to be just as stubborn and foolish as you are sometimes." He reasoned, and Jason nodded in agreement, while Percy huffed out the weakest laugh they had ever heard, undoubtedly wondering whether that was a compliment or an insult.

It was neither, merely a fact, a statement, the truth.

"He still loves you. Still loves us. We shouldn't let this get to us too much. It's been a long day, and a lot has happened. Tomorrow, things will already look much better, I'm sure of it." Jason assured them, and undoubtedly tried to reassure himself with his words, as well.

Nico simply had to hope he was right, but then again, this was Jason, and when was Jason ever wrong?

(He pushed the memories that begged to differ far out of his mind for now. Those had no business here right now, after all.)

"Will said that earlier, too." Percy said quietly, and Nico wondered how they could get Will to see reason and move his ass back in here, without any of them actually leaving to fetch him.

"Then you know it's gotta be true. The evil has been outvoted. Your boyfriends have prevailed." Jason stated seriously, and Nico snorted out a small laugh even before Percy let out his weak laugh again.

"You're laughing, but I'm dead serious." Jason remarked seriously, and they laughed at that, too, before Jason started smooching them, clearly trying to help ease the mood.

There was a ruckus in front of their tent, and Nico poked his head out from under the blanket Jason was trying to bury them under, watching in amazement how Will stuck his head inside. Nico was just struggling to get his arms out to motion to him urgently to get closer, but he needn't have bothered, because Will already crossed the space to the bed with a conflicted, rather sheepish and guilty look on his face, before Nico dragged him into the bed with his finally freed hand.

"What were you thinking, running off like that?" Nico hissed at him, still outside the blanket, while Jason and Percy were loud enough beneath the blanket to cover the sound.

Will grimaced and looked away, then tried to shuffle closer to snuggle up to him, clearly trying to regain his affection.

"I don't know. It got too much, I think. There's no excuse, I know. It simply was a long day. I'm sorry." Will confessed, but Nico already knew all that, so he nodded to him to get under the blanket and make his presence known to Percy and Jason, too.

"I still have to look something up later." Will whispered, but Nico shook his head and nodded sharply at the blanket.

"That can wait until tomorrow. You're needed here now, Will. As a boyfriend, not a doctor." He stated, and Will hesitated a moment longer, before the tension left his body and he gave a small nod, slipping under the blanket to join them.

"Will!"

"See? I told you he still loves us." Jason said in a soft voice, and Nico watched in amusement how the bodies shifted beneath the blanket, the sight too curious.

Then, he couldn't resist any longer and he slipped back under, too, more than ready to join in on the entangled limbs and squished bodies, at least for a little while.

(Until things would get so horribly, unbearably hot again, then he would ever so gently kick his boyfriends away and get some peace once more, but they didn't have to know he did that more or less consciously sometimes.)

"Of course I still love you. Come on, I know I was a dick, but how does that equal doubts to my
never-ending love for you? I'm gonna love you until the day I die and even past that, don't you doubt that for one moment, guys." Will remarked seriously, but Nico only pinched him in the side.

Will and his constant remarks about death.

"You're not going to die for a very long time, you know that, right?" He replied, and Will stilled for a moment, before he turned around to kiss his forehead in the darkness under their Christmas blanket.

"I know that I'll love you dearly and cherish you as much as I can for as long as I have. And I apologize in advance whenever I'm going to be a dick. Which might be quite often, since I seem to have a tendency to upset everybody around me once it gets past 11pm and I'm dead tired." Will stated with a nod Nico could feel against the side of his face, before Will gave him another sloppy kiss to his forehead.

"I think we're all a bit beside ourselves at the moment, not just you, Freckles. Let's get to sleep and replenish our energies, alright? Tomorrow, we're already going to be on our way back home." Jason said, and those had to be the best words possible.

Home.

Nico smiled and he heard Percy hum, clearly thrilled by those news, as well, and the four of them started shuffling closer together, Nico and Jason lending their arms as headrests to Percy and Will, who somehow must have climbed over Nico in the one moment he hadn't been paying attention.

Since Nico much preferred having Will on the inside of their cuddles so he couldn't disappear without any of them noticing, he happily wrapped himself around his boyfriend and buried his nose in his hair.

"Oh yes, before I forget: Petition to never fight again before going to bed." Percy spoke up the moment everything went quiet, and Nico shook his head and inhaled Will's scent, even if the fresh and summery scent was long overshadowed by a few layers of sweat and dust, their showers seeming years away now, even if they had only just happened today, before they had reached Washington DC.

"Agreed. No more senseless fighting, either." Jason chimed in, and Will huffed, though he didn't argue and didn't tense up in any way, so Nico was sure he agreed.

"And no more running away." He added mercilessly, and this time, it was Will who pinched him.

"I wasn't running away. Much. I really did have to give Rin a check-up and bring the medication to Liam." Will huffed, but Nico only searched for his shoulder to bite it, not fooled in the slightest.

"Maybe so. Still ran, though."

"Are you trying to pick a fight, you tiny, angry bean full of love and affection?" Will said with a hint of mirth in his voice, and Nico bit his shoulder again, luring a small wail and a laugh out of his boyfriend.

"Stop calling me bean, or I will fight you. Wonder whether you'll still laugh at me when you have to face Skullington Bones the First and compete with that." He boasted, and Will snorted right in his face as he turned to face him, making Nico regret quite a few of his life decisions as he let out an exaggerated 'Eww!' and wiped his face on Will's shirt, while Jason and Percy chuckled quietly and came closer.

"Who exactly?" Percy asked curiously, and Nico's smirk widened, though it was Will who replied with a groan.

"Nico named that skeleton he summoned back at Camp, because it apparently couldn't remember its name or didn't want to share it. Since it turned out to be a nonbinary pal, Nico thought very long and hard to find a suitable name, just to end up with that." Will told them, and Nico was glad they couldn't see his broad grin right now, though it was already getting kind of annoyingly stuffy under the blanket now.
"It's a great name for a brave soldier. I don't know what you're talking about." Nico defended his *superb* name, and his boyfriends promptly chuckled again.

Since chuckling was good, especially after their earlier conversation (read: argument and wasted time picking senseless fights with each other, rather than making love), Nico was more proud of himself than upset in any way.

"I'm talking about you being adorable. Now, sleepy time, guys. I can feel your exhaustion, and we've got a long day ahead of us. Don't expect me to be able to heal you all if you don't go to sleep in a timely manner so I can go to sleep in a timely manner." Will remarked, and there was a collective grumble of complaints, before they all gave in and let silence fill the tent once more.

Nico closed his eyes, trying to block out his thoughts as he focused on sleep, knowing full well how tired he was, though he also felt anything but ready for sleep right now.

The fact that it was becoming more and more stuffy by the moment only added to the difficulty to *sleep*.

But, hey, he could do this.

He could totally deal with this.

No problem, whatsoever.

Anything for his boyfriends, right?

Nico took a deep breath, then released it, pleased when he still caught the faintest whiff of summery scent in Will's curls.

He could do this.

Somebody shifted, and Nico felt like he was going to suffocate any moment.

Alright, screw this.

Without warning, Nico grabbed hold of the blanket and tossed it off them with a grunt, pleased beyond measure when fresh, blissfully cool air hit him and allowed him to breathe once more.

There was chuckling, and Will even turned his head to shoot him a knowing smirk, his face illuminated by the faint light of his jar of fire.

"Shush." Nico remarked, and Will's smirk turned into a full-fledged grin, his eyes sparkling with mirth in the warm light.

"I didn't even say anything."

"Yeah, keep it that way." Nico replied, and Will huffed in fake offense, while Jason and Percy watched them, each of them with one eye open and squinting at them.

"Sleep. We're going home tomorrow." Percy told them with a look that spoke of quiet joy, and Nico agreed as he closed his eyes and buried his nose back in Will's hair, wishing it didn't tickle quite as much as it did.

Home.

That truly sounded wonderful.

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This time, Percy really expected Will to stay the night, but he also wasn't surprised when he felt the weight on the bed shifting an hour after Will's nightmare happened, and he opened one eye to glance at Will's back as he stood, staring off into space blankly for a moment.

Then, Will shook his head gravely, as if shaking off a thought, and he let out a deep and tired sigh, before mumbling something along the lines of 'There's no way'.
Percy wanted to pull him back into bed, wanted to tell him to forget whatever it was he was thinking about and simply stay with them, just for one stupid night.

But then Will was already moving, picking up a book that had been dumped on the desk at some point, and even though Percy wanted to, his body didn't obey him and didn't let him speak.

As it was, he couldn't even make himself open his mouth before his Will was gone again, his barely illuminated shape disappearing into the darkness outside and the tent closing once more.

Percy looked after him for a long time, his mind a buzz of thoughts, some of them nonsensical, others awfully real.

It was okay.

Will was just trying to take care of them.

He knew that, and even if he didn't like it, he knew this was something that would likely never change.

They had started dating Will, knowing he was a healer and a doctor, and that he took his job very seriously.

It was obvious there would be days like these, where he would rather read up on something to make sure he did everything correctly when the situation demanded it – it made perfect sense, too.

And Percy knew this, and he accepted and respected that – but he still didn't like it, and he still wanted Will to stay with them, especially now, especially with all of this, especially when he much rather wanted him to be nothing but their boyfriend, and let them protect him.

Percy closed his eyes and tried to think of happy things, though he knew he probably wouldn't sleep much tonight, either.

But that was okay, too.

After all, they were going to go home tomorrow – or rather, later today.

Home.

He could barely wait for that.

If they took the bus again (even if Percy loathed that thing), then they might even make it back by evening.

Surely, after all the drama they had experienced with Eris and the monsters and the kids, the Fates would go easy on them for long enough to make it back, right?

Percy didn't want to believe in the Fates to do anything for them, but he still hoped for the best, anyways.

Home.

Once they were back home, everything would get better again.

He was sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:
http://sta.sh/055hx09e5f9 - perfect depiction of Kyle :)
http://sta.sh/0h2pt887zfj - adorable Will with flowers <3
http://sta.sh/02yxyl0gpdx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3
http://sta.sh/0qy6lka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing how cute Will is :)
http://sta.sh/01m8rr04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will :)
http://sta.sh/01bliqkgjhb - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3

- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well >;)

- A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater <3 This is and will probably always be my phone background, ijs
- Will with blanket <3
- THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE FROM THE LAST SEQUEL!!!!!!!!!

https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you
- A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy, challenge-loving dorks <3

http://artbybansheeender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patreon-tari
- Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3
- Nico in his winter outfit :)
http://artbybansheeender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-commission-for-my-amazing-patron
- Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD
- Jason and the leather jacket >;)

I also commissioned a few pieces from the amazing Ari/Bex :)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-mel-chan366
- New Years from Advent Calendar times :)
- Our dorks in Christmas sweaters!! :D
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-for-mel-chan366
- The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-mel-chan366-now-i
- Ice cream time :)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/156557714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-chan366-3-3-some
- <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160990996944/another-of-my-may-madness-commissions-a-fabulous
- The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-
ever-fabulous
- ...Boxer Shorts XD ;)

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-mel-chan366
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love them too much not to share them ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-commission-for
- Jercy Soft Kiss <3

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my firstborn child :) (Mostly because there won't be one. Sorry. But you can have a cookie?)
"After yesterday, I thought something might have changed, but nooo, of course not! Whyever would anything have changed, I can't see how I could have possibly assumed anything like that!" Ash ranted, and Percy made a noncommittal noise as he smirked to himself and nodded along, eyes hushing to the front of the bus, where Hannah was busy talking in hushed voices to Will – undoubtedly ranting about the very same thing, as well, judging by Will's amused expression.

These two.

"But if she hates me so much, why did she stand up for me? I just don't get it! I was even trying to…you know…talk to her about it, but she completely brushed me off!" Ash exclaimed, their hands wrapped around the backrest of the seat in front of them, apparently trying to strangle it.

Percy gave them a long, pointed look, trying (and failing, for the most part) to conceal his smirk a little and act serious.

"And I bet you completely didn't try another one of your horribly cringe-worthy pick-up lines, right?"

Ash stopped mid-rant, their irritated expression changing to a sheepish one.

"Well, she looked really nice when she had her hair tied up and was all serious, so I might have called her 'pretty lady' and asked whether she wanted me to kiss her now or later as thanks."

Oh dear.

No wonder Hannah was avoiding Ash since yesterday, then.

"What did I tell you about coming on too strong?" He reminded them with a chiding look, and Ash visibly shrank back in their seat, bottom lip pushing out into a small pout.

"But how else would she know I'm interested? My mom always told me to be clear about my intentions." They sulked, and Percy wondered whether Ash's mom would say the same thing now if she knew what her child was up to these days.

"Yes, but Hannah is a very reserved person that is surprisingly uncomfortable with PDA, unless
it's timid flirting. Compliment her hair, but in a less obnoxious way. Just be your usual self, Ash. Seriously, it's not as difficult as you keep making it out to be. You're a great person, so let it show. Woo her with your skill at poetry, for example. That's some Nico-worthy things you said, earlier.” He encouraged them with a wink and a little nudge, but Ash looked like Percy had given them a lemon to suck on, instead of his superb advice.

"She's going to think I'm a freak if I suddenly come at her with poetry. Come on, do you really think I have a chance with her? She's just so pretty, Percy. Did you see how she looked right after she stabbed that one monster with the horns? She had fire in her eyes, Percy. And her hair was like liquid gold in the morning sun.” Ash said dreamily, and Percy wondered faintly whether he had seemed similarly smitten when he had raved to Jason about Will in the past.

Since he realized he was giving Ash the very same expression Jason had given him back then, he was pretty sure the answer was 'Yes'.

"Well, I can't tell you whether you two will actually work out, but I can assure you you'll feel a lot better if you come clean with her. Completely. I told you before, it's not that she hates you, she simply doesn't know whether you're mocking her or being serious. That's kind of what happens when you keep coming on too strong before insulting your crush, you know?” He remarked wisely, and Ash made a face.

"But she is the one who is the player, here! I haven't flirted with anybody since we teamed up, whereas she seems to thrive on flirting with Sara and Rin, like, all the time! And they're not even interested in girls!" Ash then exclaimed and threw their arms up, and Percy was immensely glad he didn't have such problems.

But then again, he had different problems to make up for that, he guessed.

"Well, actually, Rin told me she's pansexual, so, you know, she actually is interested in girls, partially.” He pointed out with a barely concealed grin, and Ash slumped back into their seat with such a dark look on their face it had Percy biting his cheeks to rein in his laugh.

"But hey, no need to be discouraged right away. This is just their little thing, no need to be jealous.”

"I'm not jealous.” Ash insisted with a pout, and Percy glanced towards Jason, suddenly understanding him a lot better.

"Sure you aren't. Hey, look, Rin is trying to make the Move on Hannah.” He teased when he saw Rin yawning and stretching her arms, and Ash was suddenly nearly standing to look at the front with wide eyes and open mouth, expression one of utmost betrayal and incredulity.

"What?! She better not!” They exclaimed breathlessly, and this time, Percy couldn't suppress his laughter, much to their annoyance as their shoulders slumped, clearly realizing there was no imminent danger of Rin stealing their crush away from under their nose.

"You're a horrible team dad, might I mention.” Ash sulked, and Percy winked at them, before patting their shoulder in a hopefully less joking and more comforting manner.

"I do my best. No, but seriously, just be yourself, Ash. She's clearly not into the loud and boisterous version of you that you enjoy playing to impress her, so what's there to lose by being yourself? If she rejects you then, you at least have your answer and can move on, knowing you simply weren't meant for one another.” He reasoned, and Ash worried their bottom lip, before heaving a heavy sigh.

"I guess so. But, if she does reject me, you better be a good dad and get me, like, three tons of ice cream and comfort food. I'm going to get so freaking wasted.”

Wasted. With comfort food. Right.

"Sure. We'll let you stay over at our cabin and you and I can binge-watch a series or two of your choice. Sounds like a plan?” He suggested, and Ash's lips tugged upwards at the corners.

"Only if that includes the both of us wearing horribly childish and ugly onesies.”
Percy acted as if he gave the thought some consideration, though it was obvious he would totally do it.

"Will I get to wear a Squirtle one?" He asked, though he was pretty sure there was no Squirtle one, and Ash shot him a wry grin.

"I was more thinking of something along the lines of a pink unicorn. You would look as ridiculous as I would feel for getting my hopes up for no reason."

Wow, what a charming person, truly.

"Fine, whatever makes you happy. Now, why don't you fetch me one of my lovely boyfriends so I can smooch them and brag about how lucky I am to have them?" He suggested, and Ash flipped him the bird, before actually getting up and moving towards the front, even if he had kind of been joking.

Nevertheless, Nico instantly got up from where he had leaned on Jason near the two (very quiet) newcomers and made his way towards him, while Percy would lie if he claimed he had a problem with that – especially when Nico sat down closer to him than necessary to lean against him and hummed contently, which had Percy's heart missing a few beats and the giddy euphoria filling him once more that always came in moments like these.

"Did Ash rant to you about Hannah, too? Hannah did nothing but. Ash did this, Ash did that. Seriously, sometimes I think they truly dislike each other, but other times, it just seems like they don't know how to deal with their crushes on each other." Nico mumbled, and Percy grinned and let his head rest against Nico's on his shoulder.

"Yeah, they're hopeless."

Nico huffed in agreement.

"You gave Ash advice again, didn't you?" Nico asked after a beat of silence, and Percy tried to act nonchalant and innocent.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Nico turned to give him a long, telling look, and Percy grinned and shrugged sheepishly.

"What? Just trying to be a good team dad." He reasoned, and Nico promptly rolled his eyes, though his lips twitched, anyways.

Percy had told him this morning (in a vain attempt to keep Nico in bed with him a little while longer) about the titles their fellow teammates had come up with for them, much to Nico's initial dismay and following confusion.

"I still can't believe they call me Team Mom. I mean, how am I a mother?! First, Chuck calls me that, now, the whole team seems to see me like that! I am the one constantly getting everybody in line, why am I not the Big Daddy, and Jason is the Team Mom?!!" His boyfriend suddenly rambled, and Percy had to bite the inside of his cheeks not to laugh out loud at the look of incredulity on his boyfriend's face.

"Aww, but love, you make such a great Team Mom. I can completely understand why they chose that one for you." He cooed, and if he was being honest, he could understand why they had picked Nico as their team mom.

As a matter of fact, he would have probably done the same.

Nico merely huffed again, but Percy knew he wasn't really upset, so he allowed the silence to settle over them as he listened to the noise in the bus and gazed out of the window to watch out for any dangers again.

They had already been ambushed shortly before leaving Washington DC, but that didn't mean there might not still be monsters positioned somewhere.
Especially since they had no idea whether or not Kyle had gathered anything from Will, so he might know they would be on their way back towards Camp, or he might not know, and they might be safe just this once.

"Did you tell Jason yet?" Percy asked as an afterthought, but Nico surprisingly enough shook his head, a faint blush spreading on his cheeks that Percy could spot from his reflection in the glass.

Percy's eyebrows shot up, and it only took him a moment to come up with the most absurd and funny reasons why Nico had not yet told Jason he was the Big Daddy of the group.

"Anything you want to tell us, Neeks? Any kinks we should know about?" He teased, and Nico promptly made a sound and punched his shoulder, pushing away from him and huffing to himself indignantly several times.

"Don't be stupid, Percy! Seriously, how did you just…I didn't even say anything yet, and you come up with that?! I just…didn't find the right moment to…to bring that up. Without making Jason think I'm being weird." Nico stammered, and Percy's eyebrows shot up higher as he leaned over to Nico further, his grin only widening.

"Wow, so defiant over something that totally doesn't apply to you." He teased and wiggled his eyebrows, but Nico only punched his shoulder again and waved a hand in his face to shoo him away.

"Stop it, you dork. This is exactly why I didn't tell him. I didn't want Jason to assume anything. Why don't you tell him?" Nico stated defiantly, and Percy pushed out his bottom lip.

"Because I wanted to see his face when you walk up to him and tell him he's our Big Daddy?" He tried, and Nico's death-glare was as adorable as ever, sending shivers down his back as he laughed and glanced towards the front of the bus – just to find Will with his face buried in his hands and muffling his laugh, indicating they had been overheard.

Nico caught it, too, and Percy promptly had his shoulder hit once more – gently, of course, but he was still glad he was completely healed up again.

"You're horrible, Percy."

"You love me, Nico."

"I do, but you're still horrible."

They both shot each other pointed looks, then Nico's lips twitched and betrayed him, and both of them started grinning and leaning on each other once more, Percy's eyes automatically hushing back to the window to keep watch.

Hopefully, they would be back home soon.

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"Here, I thought you might like some snacks. Are you feeling better now?" Will asked as he sat down in the row next to their two new demigods, establishing eye contact with Toby first to allow him to read his lips and speaking as clearly as possible as he held out a variety of snacks and sweets (most still from the vending machine at the truck stop).

Celine immediately recoiled and shrank back against the window, though her fearful expression had changed to a skeptical one by now, so he counted that as small improvement, already.

Toby watched his lips warily for another moment, then reached out ever so slowly to take the snacks and nudge Celine to take them, but she didn't react.

The boy waited a moment longer, then he replied to Will's question with a light shrug.

To be expected.

"Are you in any pain? Is there anything we can do to help?" He asked calmly, signing the bits he remembered, though his ASL was more than a little rusty and he had only ever learned how to do
basic conversation.

Toby shook his head and looked away.

Will looked down at the ground for a moment, trying to think of something comforting to say.

He didn't know what had happened to them, only that they had been on the move for nearly a month now, which meant they had been in the same clothes and without a roof above their heads and without regular meals for just as long, away from their families, away from their friends, away from everything they had known and anything they had hoped for their futures.

It was rough, being a demigod, Will knew that firsthand, same as he knew it was rarely fair.

"We know this is all very new for you, and this has been a very bad start for the both of you to realize you have godly parents, even for our standards. I just…if there's anything I can do to help, just tell me, okay? If you need to talk about it, or you have any questions, or there's anything you'd like to get off your chest or do, just let me know. Or any of us, here. We're here to help you and get you back to Camp safely, okay? We're not going to hurt you." He told them quietly, once more signing the bits he knew, and hoping Toby could lipread enough to gather the rest.

The boy nodded and averted his gaze, but Will was more distracted by the way Celine sat up abruptly, her eyes snapping around at him sharply.

"A very bad start?! Are you kidding me?! My family is dead! I will never see my friends again! I was stuck with two half-goats for god knows how long, one of which had lied to me and made me believe he was my friend, just to get me into this mess. I had a life before all of this, okay?! A life that you and your crazy Greek Gods shit has ruined!" She exclaimed agitatedly, and Will automatically lifted his hands in a placating gesture, taken aback by the sudden outburst.

She had barely talked at all, other than to let him know her name was Celine, and that her ankle hurt, before he had sent them off to get some food, and while she had seemed scared and under the after-effects of shock, he hadn't felt this sort of resentment or anger at any given point.

Will felt a set of eyes on him and glanced towards Jason, who was a few rows behind them and had sat up straighter, probably catching the shift in mood, though Will shook his head minimally to let him know everything was still good.

Toby shrank back into his seat again with a conflicted look on his face, probably not hearing much (if anything, thanks to the missing hearing aid), but since his eyes were on Celine's lips, and he could undoubtedly see and feel her tension and rage, Will was certain he could gather what she was saying.

Will was about to try and calm her down, explain to her that they had come to help, not bring more trouble or pain for her, but then he stopped and frowned.

Wait…

"What happened to your family?" He asked bluntly, because, well, there was no gentle way of asking that, at least none that he could think of right now, especially with her already throwing a fit.

He caught movement out of the corners of his eyes and glanced towards Jason, who was struggling out of his seat, his eyes downcast on the IM-ing device that was apparently signaling an incoming call.

Will waited for a heartbeat to see whether Jason would need him, but Jason was already gesturing for him to remain in his seat as he made for the back of the bus, where Nico and Percy sat up with curious expressions.

Relaxing again, Will focused back on Celine, who seemed to be struggling between brushing him off and yelling at him, while Toby sat next to her with a helpless look on his face and fumbled with his dirty, torn shirt.

They had offered them some of their clothes to change into for the time being, but both kids had
refused, though whether that was because they wanted to cling to the last possessions of their old life, or because they would have been forced to wear much bigger clothing from strangers, Will didn't know.

"They are dead. My mother, my father, my brother. All dead. Because of you and your people."
Celine spat at him at long last, and Will blinked rapidly, trying to make sense of her words and match it with any explanation his mind could come up with.

Which wasn't much, considering this didn't make any sense.

"What do you mean? Who attacked your family?" He asked confused and looked at Toby with the mute question of 'Did this happen to you, as well?’, but Toby only shook his head and looked away with pursed lips and glassy eyes.

Was that a yes or a no?
But this didn't make any sense?

Monsters usually didn't go out of their way to attack the families of demigods.

Will had been one of the only exception in years until Percy had come along, and that had only happened because of the whole drama about the master lightning bolt.

If anything attacked or threatened their mortal families, it usually had to do with the gods, not monsters.

But then again, was Celine actually referring to monsters when she said 'you and your people’?

A rising suspicion had his heart thumping loudly and his gut filling with dread.

"You were attacked by demigods?" He asked, trying to keep his voice down as much as possible, though he could see Andrew turning his head into his direction with a frown on his face, indicating he might have heard.

Celine looked ready to jump at him.

"I don't give a damn what you call them, I only know they were bad people, accompanied by those beasts you fought oh-so-valiantly at the museums. They came to my house without warning, saying something about sensing me and that the half-goat's presence gave me away at long last. I was in my room at the time, but I heard the doorbell and I could hear them talking with my parents downstairs. I don't know what they wanted, but I bet you can tell me, seeing as you're one of them. All I know is that, next thing I know, my mother is screaming for me to run, and my older brother is running up the stairs to grab me and throw me out the window, where that dumb half-goat appeared out of nowhere to get me away, while I looked back at my house, my home, with that monster using that scythe of his to kill my parents and my brother as if they were nothing but flies!" Celine told him with so much pain and contempt in her voice, Will could feel it, his skin crawling both at the sensation and at her words.

As soon as her last sentence registered in his brain, though, Will found himself reeling.

No. No, no, no, no. No way.

"Guys!" He called through the bus, his grip on the seat so tight his knuckles were white, but it wasn't enough to keep him grounded as his heart threatened to break out of his ribcage, his mind a buzz of screams and questions and more screaming.

Kyle?!

But why?!

***

They had Celine tell them everything she knew, which had led to her crying and cursing them all to hell and back, but Will's horror seemed to have shown her that they were, in fact, not in league with the people that had murdered her family.
Jason was still confused as to why she had gone with the satyrs in the first place if she hadn't trusted any of them, but he assumed she must have not seen any alternative at the time, other than wandering the streets by herself, so he didn't question her about that.

Instead, he tried to communicate with Toby on any level he could manage, but the boy didn't seem to like him very much, so he was forced to give up and hope Will would be able to help him at a later point.

From what he had gathered, Toby didn't know how his family was faring, but he also hadn't been attacked at home – instead, he had pointed at a school buildings when they passed one, so Jason hoped for the best.

He looked back at Will, but his boyfriend seemed absolutely drained as he sat squished between Sara and Hannah, even if there were only two seats.

They had come immediately at Will's call, all three of them on high alert at the sound of unmasked panic in his voice, just to be taken aback by the appearance of their suddenly very pale and very shaky boyfriend.

But at least he had called for them.

That had to count for something, right?

"So, he's just walking around looking for demigods? What for? So the monsters have something to munch on for the time being?" Percy asked with a frown on his face, but Jason had no answer for him, instead watching Will a little while longer, while Sara and Hannah told him about gods knew what.

"He's…recruiting? But why? If he is in league with the monsters, what does he need demigods for? Especially untrained ones? That doesn't make any sense." Nico put in quietly, and Jason tore his gaze away from their boyfriend to join the discussion.

It had been Will's decision to sit with the girls so they had a chance to talk it out, and the fact that he had admitted to being out of it right now and that he needed a break only showed even more how much this was bothering him, so Jason shouldn't add to that by staring at him.

"Nothing he has done so far made any sense to us at first, Nico. But whatever he is planning, he'll have his reasons for it, and I already dislike them. For now, I think it's best to get back to Camp safe and sound and talk to Chiron and the others. Focus on the task at hand. Rin already said she'll try and contact the satyrs again to find out what they know and ask why they didn't tell us anything. Maybe that will grant us more insight." He stated resolutely, and his boyfriends exchanged dubious looks, though they both nodded and glanced back towards Will as inconspicuously as possible.

"I should have killed him when I had the chance." Nico mumbled under his breath, but Jason merely nudged him pointedly.

No talking about murdering Kyle when Will was close by, or their boyfriend would have a heart attack and freak out about the risks of them dying, instead.

"Or I should have let you kill him when you were about to do it, anyways." Nico added bitterly, and Jason's stomach churned at the memory.

He would have.

It was a disturbing thought, even after all this time, but Jason knew he wouldn't have hesitated and wouldn't have stopped if Nico hadn't dragged him off Kyle.

He would have killed him, and a part of him knew he wouldn't have regretted it in the slightest, even though he never thought he would be that sort of person.

"Then our only lead would be gone, though. This way, at least we know that, if we see Kyle, he's the bad guy. If he were out of the picture, we wouldn't have any idea what we're facing. He's not alone, you know." Percy put in, and Jason sometimes hated it a tiny little bit when one of them
had to be the voice of reason.

He already disliked being the voice of reason sometimes, but he disliked it even more when one of his boyfriends had to take that role.

Especially Percy, who had a blank look on his face as he spoke with a voice full of resignation and defeat, which only showed how much he wished Kyle was dead, too, but that somebody had to find something good in that asshole's existence.

"Let's just get back to Camp for now." Jason muttered, though he only said that to get away from the topic.

He looked back at Will, just to see Rin bent over the back of her seat to pat Will's head and ramble about a book she had seen in Will's medic tent that he should totally tell her more about.

In other words, their team was taking good care of the person that always took care of them.

Jason smiled at that realization and looked at Percy, who was gazing out of the window once more, same as he always tended to do.

He didn't look happy, but Jason knew that, this time, it wasn't just his usual dislike for bus rides, and it wasn't even just the fact Kyle seemed to be a bigger threat with each passing day.

Originally, their plan had been to stay at Camp for the time being until they had the next lead, but thanks to Annabeth's call earlier, that plan was now irrelevant.

Apparently, Reyna had contacted her to let them all know she had heard back from her troupes, and that they had a very loving message of 'Why did you visit that bitch first?! Consider me insulted.' from the apparently upset goddess of enacted retribution.

Why Nemesis hadn't simply let them know where she was if she wanted to be visited first (or, gods forbid, come to them, instead) was beyond Jason, but the constant kindergarten wasn't exactly new to him, so he had simply accepted it the way it was and asked for details on her whereabouts.

She seemed to be somewhere in or around Jackson in Tennessee – something which had led to Percy groaning and mumbling something about all the gods holding grudges against him and that he wanted to retire.

So, in other words, they were now supposed to stop at Camp Half-Blood, replenish, drop off the two kids, report back to Chiron…and leave for Nemesis ASAP, as well as pick up/join Reyna's group on the way, since there seemed to be complications, and Reyna wasn't able to send any help out with the current situation at Camp Jupiter (though they hadn't gotten any details on that due to Jason ending the call to check on Will).

Jason wasn't surprised Percy was upset – they all were, in a way, since they had all hoped for at least a bit of a break.

At least they were getting their signatures in a more or less timely manner, Jason guessed.

Once they had Nemesis, there were only a few more minor gods/goddesses missing, but thanks to whatever whim of nicety the gods had had, he already had the majority now.

Jason looked back at Will, realizing that he didn't know of their change of plans yet.

"We'll tell him later." Nico said next to him quietly, as if reading his mind, and Jason gave a small nod and leaned back into his seat once more, watching their team with concern.

He knew the traveling didn't really bother them, but the fighting had picked up greatly from his earlier travels, which demanded a lot more from his team than before.

They could do it, of course, but he didn't want to force them, all the same.

Once they were back at Camp, he would have to take them aside and speak to them about this, and see whether anybody wanted to stay back or switch with somebody else.
Another healer wouldn't be bad either, especially since Will was barely allowing his body to rest, but Jason doubted Chiron would allow it, since the centaur had already complained about Will leaving with them.

They would also have to talk about new options for water and food, since stopping at public restrooms had slowed them down greatly and allowed for more ambushes and more planned ambushes – it hadn't escaped Jason's notice that the monsters had always loitered awfully close to supermarkets and restrooms, after all.

He wasn't sure what Leo could come up with on such short notice and in such a short time frame, but he was confident there was something he could do to at least improve their situation.

Other than that...maybe a lock for their tent wouldn't be bad, so they could lock it after bedtime and keep Will in there overnight.

Jason wondered what Will would say to that. He was pretty sure he would have Percy's and Nico's approval immediately, after all.

Oh, and they had to make sure to remind Nico to talk to Clovis about the mind-closing thing.

They weren't allowed to forget that, especially since Kyle had already tried with Will, no matter how illogical it was.

Kyle didn't have to make sense to them, they merely had to outsmart him and be prepared – and kill him when the time came.

"You've got your brooding face on, Handsome." Will said quietly, not quite chiding, though he knew it was meant that way, and Jason blinked in surprise as Will sat down in the row in front of them and looked back at him with a sober look on his face.

"How are you?" He asked automatically, though it was a stupid question, and he half assumed Will to give a stupid answer to it.

"Pretty shitty, but it will pass. What was the IM about? Anything I need to know?" Will asked with a sigh, while Rin was now talking to Liam about daggers and earrings, and Sara, Hannah and Andrew were arguing about the benefits and disadvantages of using poison in battles.

A glance towards Percy showed their boyfriend in deep and serious conversation with Ash once more, something that happened surprisingly frequently.

Same as Nico seemed to have a soft spot for Hannah and Will seemed to favor Rin as a conversation partner (at least that was the impression Jason had gotten so far), Percy definitely talked to Ash the most.

Jason didn't mind – in fact, he was glad if their team got along this well.

"Annabeth called to ask how the pickup went and whether we have the signature yet, as well as to inform us of a new lead." Nico summed up, and Jason gave a confirming nod, glad if Nico wanted to be the bringer of the news.

"A new lead?" Will asked with raised eyebrows, undoubtedly understanding immediately what that meant.

What Jason didn't understand was the widening of his eyes and the slight blanching as Nico began to explain about Nemesis and Tennessee and Reyna's group, same as he didn't understand the way Will's eyes hushed to Percy as he swallowed thickly.

"Is there something wrong with that?" Jason found himself asking, though what he really wanted to ask was 'Did you see anything in any of your visions that is of importance right now and that you should definitely let us know about?'.

Will's eyes hushed to him, and for a moment, he could see the conflict in his boyfriend's ever so open expression – but then he shook his head and waved off.
"Nah, just hoping the weather will be good. I guess that means no break at Camp, huh?" He changed the topic immediately, and Jason felt Nico tensing next to him, but neither of them pushed the matter.

Later.

When they were at Camp, in their cabin, they could try again.

"Hey, Rin, we'll be meeting your mom, did you hear?" Will called through the bus, and Rin groaned loudly.

"Great! Grace, can I excuse myself from attending that meeting? I bet she's going to say something stupid and embarrass me in front of all of you. No, thank you." She lamented, much to the amusement of the rest of the team.

"No way. Plus, if you're there, you can stop her from telling us all your embarrassing childhood stories. If you're not there, who knows what she'll tell us…" Will trailed off with a telling grin, and she glowered at him darkly, before she huffed loudly and fell back into her seat.

"You make a compelling argument. I guess I'll have to attend that meeting, after all." She sighed, and Jason guessed that meant he knew she would be coming along, at least.

"Let's first focus on getting back to Camp. We can still discuss the meeting when it's time for it." Jason reasoned, and the team nodded in agreement, though he could still hear them talking in hushed voices about Nemesis and Tennessee and the lack of a break.

He looked back at Will, but Will had disappeared from the row in front of them and had flopped down next to Percy to lean on him and look out of the window with him, while Ash had joined the others in their hushed conversation, though they seemed a lot more excited about the traveling than the others, which quickly led to an argument between Rin, Hannah and Ash, but Jason pointedly ignored that.

What he didn't see, he didn't have to interfere with.

"Jason." Nico said next to him.

Damn it.

Jason pushed out his bottom lip in a pout, but then went to break the three up before they had the chance to seriously fight, since the kids were right in front of them and were already tense enough as it was, so they didn't need even more reason to distrust them.

"Thanks, daddy." Nico remarked with an amused huff, and Jason shrugged, only half-listening, while his attention was still on his team to make sure they didn't start anything again.

"I still don't understand why they call me a mother hen, when it's you who makes sure everybody behaves." Jason sulked and returned his attention to his boyfriend, and Nico huffed out a small laugh.

"Actually, you'd be surprised. But anyways, breaking up fights is your job, since they declared you Big Dad, so deal with it." Nico stated seriously, and Jason stopped, his mind catching up to what Nico had just said to him.

Then, he turned to look at him with a deep frown.

Wait…what?

Had Nico just called him…?

"Wait, did you just call me daddy? Nico, is there anything we need to talk-…"

Before he could finish his very confused and rather disturbing question, he could hear Percy and Will breaking out into loud laughter, while Nico's head snapped around so fast it was surprising he didn't break his neck.
"NO!" Nico practically yelled through the entire bus, while Will and Percy clutched each other and laughed even louder, and Jason was confused.

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They were almost back in Long Island when Percy gave a sound of warning and Jules-Albert swerved sideways sharply and off the road, seconds before they found themselves ambushed and had to get out of the bus in order to fight.

Or, in Will's case, to stand around uselessly and try not to be targeted.

Oh, how he hated it, but he knew his scalpel-wielding skills weren't exactly scaring the monsters in any sort of way, so there was that.

"Get down!" He yelled at Celine and Toby and threw himself over them as a hellhound (where did all of these come from, anyways?! Were there breeding grounds somewhere?!) jumped at them, but Nico luckily got to it before it could get to them, and he hurriedly dragged them out of the way.

He spotted a venti coming for him and immediately dived sideways to get it away from the kids, only to attract the attention of one of those as of yet unidentified and thus unnamed shadowy figures.

Needless to say, the next moment, Will was running in circles around the bus, trying to throw it off, but the thing seemed to multiply rather than disappear, because, somehow, there were suddenly three of them, and they were most certainly in no mood for games as they tried to corner him.

Uh-oh.

Will pushed his hand into his medic pouch, looking for something that could throw them off other than his puny scalpel.

Their appearance led him to believe they wouldn't be affected by any sort of scent or poison, since their shapes were too flimsy to be considered solid.

He stepped backwards as they advanced on him, and before the one from the side could grab him, he jumped out of the way, turned and ran for it.

Unfortunately, it took him a long moment to realize he had messed up his directions in his head as they had rushed around the bus, because he was now definitely running away from the rest of his team, rather than back towards them.

Oh shit.

This was exactly what he had wanted to prevent.

If he got too far from the group, he would be a much, much easier target…

As if the Fates had it out for him specifically, another shadowy form rushed at him, out of nowhere, and he had only the fraction of a second to react and dive out of the way.

This resulted in two of the shadowy figures colliding with each other instead of with Will, but he only had the chance to feel smug about that for a split second, before he had to focus on running, again.

They weren't armed, but he knew from looking that they had claws and knew how to fight, so he didn't even want to know what they would do him, should they manage to catch him.

But first, they would have to catch him.

"Will!" Somebody yelled in the distance, but whether it was because he had been seen, or because they were looking for him, he didn't know.

Instead of stopping to check, he decided to concentrate on running for his life.
He tried a couple of times to outsmart them and somehow get back to his team, but each time he tried, he was cut off and pushed further away, until he found himself so far away from the bus he could only guess where it might be.

Fuck.

"Percy! Nico! Guys!" He yelled at random, not caring which one of his boyfriends he was calling for, nor which one would come to his rescue, as long as somebody came to save him, at all.

Unfortunately, he was pretty sure he was too far away to call for help now.

He should have done that sooner.

Will had no idea why he hadn't, but he deeply regretted it now as he found himself cornered, pressed against the wall of a rundown, small building that had probably once been a pit stop or the like, since they were close to a rundown road that had been marked as off-limits if Will had seen that correctly.

The four shadows were advancing on him, and he could swear he saw one of them sneering as it reached out to grab hold of him.

As if on cue, Will's vision went fuzzy, and the next moment, he could see it grabbing hold of him, could see it not grabbing hold of him, could see himself whistling, could see himself not whistling, could see himself getting saved, could see himself not getting saved.

Could see himself getting dragged away from the wall, could feel ice cold hands around his arms, his throat, taking him with them, not to harm him, not to kill him, but to take him away.

Could see them dissolving into black shards as if that was simply what they did, not what happened when they died, and could see himself dissolving, too, just the same way, as if he was nothing.

Could see a smug sneer on a cold face with eyes full of hatred and hands reaching out to grab Will that were just as cold as the hands of the shadows, though the grip was harsher, harder, more dangerous.

Could see lips moving, speaking 'I got you now'.

Will pushed back against the wall so hard he wished he could fall right through it, his heart hammering in his chest and a despairing wail escaping his lips, before he forced his hands up to his mouth to whistle shrilly, hoping against hope, hoping against all odds, hoping, hoping, hoping.

The four shadows stared at him in mild confusion and apparent amusement, as if they couldn't believe he had seriously thought that would help him, and a small part of him couldn't quite believe he was being mocked by a bunch of shadows, but the rest of him was too full of panic and dread to truly care right now, his mind reeling and his heart trying to escape his rib cage.

A wispy, black hand reached out for him, and Will squeezed his eyes shut.

No! No, please, not Kyle!

The next moment, there was a gust of wind and something whooshed past him – and when he opened his eyes the fraction of an inch, he found Nico in front of him with his sword still outstretched as the four shadowy figures dissolved into those black shards, though it didn't seem to happen by their choice this time.

He stared at his boyfriend, who was practically wheezing, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his eyes full of ill-concealed anger and rage.

When Nico's gaze snapped to him, Will automatically flinched and recoiled, still pressed back against the building with his face averted and his eyes downcast, his heart still beating loudly and wildly in his chest as the first effects of shock set in.

"Sorry…" He whispered, and with the anger still rolling off Nico in waves, he was already
Nico moved his arm, and Will instinctively flinched and closed his eyes, but instead of getting hit, he found Nico touching his cheek unbelievably gently.

"Just run towards us next time, not away from us. Come on, let's get back." Nico said briskly, though his voice was surprisingly calm and steady, even though Will could still feel the anger inside him, and he found himself staring at Nico in bewilderment.

His boyfriend caught his look and frowned slightly, before letting his hand slide off Will's cheek and down to his hand to take hold of it.

"You can walk, right? They didn't get to you, did they?" Nico asked, and now concern outweighed the anger, even though Will hurriedly shook his head and pushed himself off the wall to let Nico tug him along with him.

His heart was still beating wildly in his chest and his mind was still a mess, but, while a part of him wanted to explain what had happened, what he had seen, and that he had wanted to get back to them, another part of him knew he didn't have to defend himself and that Nico wasn't going to hurt him.

He wasn't even sure where that thought had even come from, seeing as he knew perfectly well his boyfriends would never hurt him like that in the first place.

But it seemed like Nico hadn't noticed, so he decided to ponder his shock-induced impulses later and instead focused on stumbling along next to Nico, who hurriedly made his way back to their team.

"Will?" Nico's voice sounded next to him quietly as the bus came back into view, and Will found his head automatically turning towards him, just to find Nico practically studying his expression.

"You thought I was going to hit you, didn't you?" Nico asked, though it was more of a statement, which showed he already knew the answer.

Will couldn't prevent himself from flinching, which only confirmed Nico's assumption, though he still seemed to wait for an actual reply.

Even though Will didn't want to, he also didn't want to lie, so he gave a small nod and pursed his lips as he looked stubbornly down at the ground.

"I think it was just the shock catching up on me. I know you wouldn't. I just…you were angry, and…ah…sorry…" He mumbled, trying to explain himself so Nico knew it wasn't his fault or anything of the sort, but his boyfriend only shook his head.

He wanted to tell him of what he had seen, of the fact that these shadows didn't come to attack, but to take away, but the moment he thought of Kyle and his expression and his hands on Will's body, he found his throat constricting and his chest clenching, struggling to keep his balance and composure.

"I wasn't angry with you. I was angry with those things for managing to get you so far away from us, and angry with myself for letting them. I'm not going to hurt you, Will."

"I know that." Will stated weakly, but Nico didn't say anything else to him, instead lifting his free arm to wave at their team, who was just finishing off the last few monsters and moved towards them to meet them.

"You got him! Thank the gods. Seriously, I nearly had a heart attack when I looked back at him and he was gone. Will, never scare me like that again, okay?" Percy breathed out with a sigh of relief as he bent down and put his hands on his knees to catch his breath, his shirt soaked with sweat and blood from a slash at his arm that had Will's buzzing mind falling silent immediately as he made to grab it and inspect the wound.

"Percy! Your arm! Why always your arm?! Do you want to lose it? Because I can easily amputate it, if that's going to make you happy and keep you from senselessly endangering it in battle. Look
look at it, Percy! I like this arm, okay? Stop damaging it!" He rambled and tugged and pulled on Percy's arm until he could slap him with his own hand, which had Percy making a face at him while Jason let out a sigh of relief and the hint of a smile hushed over his face.

"At least you're unharmed, Will. You really did give us a scare. We already dreaded one of the monsters managed to kidnap you." Jason said with that voice of his that spoke of relief and affection, though Will dreaded just how close to the truth his words actually were.

"It was four monsters, and they were about to get to him if I hadn't gotten to them, first. It was a very close call. Much too close for my liking. Petition to put a bell around Will's neck to let us know where he is at all times."

"Yes." "Signed." "Why not simply put him on a leash?"

Jason, Percy and Ash replied, and they turned to look at the newcomer, who had their hands on their hips and was shaking their head at them.

"What? It's a superb idea. If it hadn't been for Celine and Toby telling me where those shadowy things took off with him, I wouldn't have been able to tell Nico, so you should heed my advice."

"They're not going to put him on a leash, that's just kinky." Hannah put in as she joined their little group as well, and Will scowled by default, while Nico buried his face in his hands.

"Only you would make it kinky, princess. I didn't say put him in a pink, fluffy collar with little bell and pretty leash and have him somewhere near a bed to await orders. I said put him on a leash so he can't run off without warning or without letting anybody know so we can help. That's not kinky, it's a survival strategy." Ash retorted, and the two made to glower at each other darkly, while Will felt the need to defend his dignity, glad for the distraction from his own thoughts, but disturbed by the direction this conversation was taking.

"Nobody is going to put anything on me, neither bell nor collar. Plus, what the hell, guys, that was way too graphic of a description. I want you to erase those pictures from your mind, or I'm not going to heal you. Ever. Again. Now, do we have the time to set up the medic tent so I can tend to you all, or do you want me to do that on the go?"

"Then again, a blue one would also suit him. With glitter." Ash mumbled thoughtfully, and Will glowered at them, while Jason cleared his throat to draw the attention to him, instead.

"I say we do it on the go. We're almost back at Camp, anyways, so I don't think it's necessary to put up any of the tents now."

Will shrugged, not really caring either way, and there was some more mumbling before they all started moving back towards the bus.

(To be honest he was more than happy for them all to leave this place as soon as possible, so he really wasn't complaining.)

Will kept close to Percy, still adamant about getting him to understand the severity of the issue at hand.

"Remember that you need this arm. It's your sword arm." He reasoned, and Percy turned to give him that knowing look of his, with that faintest hint of amusement that made Will grind his teeth inwardly.

"Then I'll switch arms and train with the other one."

Smartass.

"Don't argue with your doctor, you know you love me. Take better care of yourself, Percy. You're going to need these arms if you want to hold me, after all." He made his best compelling argument, and Percy considered him for a moment.

Then, his horrible boyfriend that had no sense of self-preservation and serious conversations
merely shrugged again.

"I'm confident you'll manage to patch me up again just fine, Will. Plus, I bet Leo would build me a prosthetic if I need one, and I can always hug you with just one arm. It's really no big deal."

Will knew he was only joking, but he still made a sound of despair and looked at Nico for help, but Nico only sighed and lifted his hands in a gesture that clearly stated 'Don't involve me in any of this'.

"Percy! What sort of attitude is that?! What are you going to do when I'm not around anymore, huh? Who'll patch you up, then? Come on, promise you'll be more careful, and actually try and be more careful, will you?" He ranted, but Percy only huffed.

"Will, you're always going to be around. You're our boyfriend and the best healer, so it's not like we'll really let Chiron keep you at Camp. And I'm trying to be careful, but the monsters don't really care when I tell them to stop attacking my arm, you know?" His boyfriend argued, and Will groaned into his hands, though he was also grateful that Percy hadn't caught on to his little slip-up.

Ugh, he seriously had to watch what he was saying these days, this had to be the third or so time he mentioned something like this in front of them.

Then again, he blamed the fact he was running out of time for his growing state of distress that caused him to slip-up so often (not to mention the fact he had just narrowly avoided being dragged back to Kyle, though he didn't yet want to think about that. At all.).

Percy's hair was growing, and even if he had gotten it cut again, Will could see that the hairstyle now perfectly matched the one from his vision, just a bit shorter.

Not that much shorter, though.

And they would have to travel to Jackson in Tennessee…

Why was it that Will just knew they would have to split up somewhere along the way?

Why was it that he already knew something big was going to happen, even though he didn't yet know what it was or how they should face it?

Why was it that Will simply knew this was the one journey he wouldn't come back from?

It had never been about the trip to Washington DC.

He had thought it might have been, but, in a way, he had known it wasn't, because it hadn't added up.

There had been no fields on the way, and even if Will couldn't tell how many days or weeks they had spent traveling, he knew it hadn't been long enough to warrant enough hair growth, and the monster attacks had more pushed them to stick together, rather than split up in any way.

Not to mention there had been other kids in his vision, too, people that were not in their current team, which meant they could be part of Reyna's group they were supposed to collect on the way.

It had never been about Washington DC.

It had always been about this.

But why?

And what did it mean?

What was Will supposed to do?

"Just take better care of yourself, Percy. You know I love you, and that includes your arms. No matter if I'm there or not, you better make sure to keep them unharmed, or so the gods help me." He told his boyfriend sternly, pictures zigzagging through his mind from his vision, with Percy picking his wounds, with Percy throwing himself into battles uncaring, with Percy trying to get
himself hurt on purpose.

Would this help prevent that?

Could Will still talk sense into Percy so he wouldn't do that once Will was gone?

Will didn't know, but he had to try.

He caught Nico eyeing him oddly and quickly grinned at him, just to realize there was nothing to really grin about, which meant he was only acting even more suspiciously, though Nico luckily didn't say anything.

Instead, his boyfriend gazed at him a moment longer, before glancing towards Jason and averting his face again with a small huff.

Looking at Jason, Will found him still shaking his head minimally, indicating the mute exchange those two must have had.

Bless Jason for being Jason.

They filed into the bus and waited for Jules-Albert to get it out of the ditch and back onto the small, abandoned road and get back on their way.

Will took his time patching everybody up and letting Ash wait until the very end as revenge, which had them lamenting loudly and begging for forgiveness and mercy.

Will knew they only had a few scratches and weren't seriously in pain, and thus he ignored their pleas for the most part – until his own boyfriend (Percy, that traitor) took their side and Will abandoned his hushed conversation about poison ivy with Rin to tend to the oh-so-sick patient, just to have Ash cackling all the way and exclaiming Percy was the best team dad in the world (freaking suck-up).

When he reached Celine and Toby though, he was surprised to find them a little less apprehensive of him and a lot more willing to let him check their values for any injuries or issues, and Celine seemed a lot less aggressive, too, so that definitely was one good thing in all the bad stuff that always happened.

Once done, he joined his boyfriends again and was glad when Percy tugged him into the seat next to him and the two huddled together a bit for comfort as they both looked out of the window to keep watch, while Jason and Nico sat in the row behind them and had a quiet conversation about the groundbreaking idea of portable showers.

(Though neither of them managed to come up with a solution for where the water was supposed to come from or go, but it was amusing to listen to, anyways.)

They were almost back at Camp, too.

Will rubbed his cheek against Percy's shoulder as he gazed out the window.

He was glad they were almost back home, he really was.

But at the same time, he also felt a sense of hollow sadness flowing through him.

It had never been about Washington DC; it had always been about this.

And this was coming to an end.

Will didn't know what to do.

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The moment they were back at Camp, they were ambushed by a horde of demigods that practically dragged them out of the bus and across the Camp border to grill them and demand details about the journey, the goddess, the monster attacks, and, of course, that giant battle in Washington DC that the media was still on a roll about, apparently.
Considering that Chiron had forbidden all sorts of electronic devices on Camp, including TVs and radios, it was impressive that the entire Camp watched the news, but then again, nobody had to let Chiron know that.

Percy was mostly amused by everybody's questions and comments, though he also wanted nothing more than to drag his guys to their cabin and take a long shower with all three of them (if they squeezed together, they would surely fit, he was certain).

Or they could go to the lake.

Since they were closer to the lake by now, as they were on their way to report back to Chiron, he was much more tempted to take them to the lake, to be honest.

It would be so much fun…

Surely, his boyfriends would agree, right?

Percy looked towards Jason hopefully, but caught Will's eye, who pointedly shook his head and crushed Percy's hopes cruelly.

"Later, Percy. First, we have to talk to Chiron." Will said placidly, but Percy still looked back at the water longingly, which glittered ever so beautifully in the setting sun, practically screaming at them to jump in…

Percy heaved a heavy sigh and reached out a hand as if he hoped it would grab him and pull him in – and, in fact, it totally could, if he wanted it to, but he would much prefer if his boyfriends were the ones grabbing him and dragging him into the water.

"Aww, Percy, don't look like that. You know we'd do it in a heartbeat for you if we could, but if we wait any longer with reporting back to Chiron, he's going to insist you and I stay here, and we can't have that, can we now?" Will reasoned, and Percy heaved another deep sigh, before he dropped his arm and sulked, shoulders bumping against Nico and Jason in turns, while Celine and Toby followed a few steps behind them and looked around in a mixture of awe and bewilderment.

"He wouldn't dare. With all the attacks, he's bound to realize we need you along with us, and why would he want to keep Percy here by himself? That's just stupid." Nico commented with a frown, and Percy whole-heartedly agreed.

He might not want to fight, but he would be damned if he let his boyfriends go alone.

He was never going to let them go anywhere alone, and he would make sure to keep them safe and sound, and if it was the last thing he did.

What good would it do if he was gone? How would he protect his boyfriends, then?

That was as stupid as taking Will away from them and then expecting them to survive.

Things simply couldn't work out that way.

They found Chiron in front of the Big House, already in deep conversation with Annabeth and Piper, though he put that conversation on hold (much to Annabeth's apparent dismay) in order to welcome the two new demigods.

Percy wasn't sure why he was surprised to find out Chiron knew ASL, but he was glad his boyfriends seemed as taken aback as he had been, though none of them said anything, instead watching the exchange curiously, while Annabeth and Piper lingered, as well.

It was obvious they wanted to listen in on the report, but Chiron put a damper on that plan by telling them to take Celine and Toby to the dining pavilion and let the Hermes cabin know they would spend the night there until they were claimed, which should either happen tonight or tomorrow.

So, Percy, acting like the little shit he was, promptly waved at Annabeth and Piper with a cheeky grin as they were forced to leave, both of them scowling at him darkly and sticking their tongues
out, before ushering the kids along and disappearing out of sight ever so slowly.

The cheeky grin slowly dropped again when Chiron turned to them, and Jason and Nico recounted their travels in more detail than they had done during their brief IM's, which had Percy remembering everything in vivid detail once more.

He knew his boyfriends were elaborating on the battles and the injuries to underline the need for Will and Percy in future travels, but he still hated how it made him feel, nevertheless.

Though he hated it even more when Chiron let out a grave sigh and remained quiet for the longest moment after they had finished.

"I can't let all four of you go anymore." He said at long last, and Percy's stomach dropped, while Will dropped his gaze, and Jason and Nico stiffened next to him.

Nico already opened his mouth to undoubtedly snap at Chiron, but the centaur held up a hand to signal he wasn't done yet.

"No. Annabeth has informed me of the new lead, and I understand the necessity of a healer in your group, but this is too much. Camp Jupiter has suffered severe attacks throughout the past week, and there have been more monster sightings in this area, as well, which indicates we'll be the next target. Even if we have the border protection, we can't expect it to last forever, and there are ways to trick it and bypass it, as you very well know, yourself. I understand that you have to do this, Jason, and as ambassador of Pluto and Hades, I have no right to tell you what to do, Nico, but Percy and Will have to stay here. Will is needed in the infirmary, and Percy has to train and lead the campers." Chiron explained, and Percy felt sick, his mouth awfully dry while the bile rose in his throat.

He would not stay here.

"No." He said stubbornly, and Jason's hand found his, his thumb stroking reassuringly over the back of his hand as if to say 'We won't let this happen'.

"You can't keep them here against their will! Plus, there are other campers, Chiron, sir. Have them train and lead, not Percy. Will is the only healer who has strong enough healing abilities to patch us up, and even he had to struggle, so there's no way you can replace him with anybody else. Not even three of our healers would be able to hold up with the amount of healing that was necessary the past week!" Nico ranted, his words almost too quick to make out, his voice full of agitation and disbelief.

Will remained silent, his gaze still averted, his expression conflicted.

"I cannot and will not risk the safety of the entire camp because of this, Nico. If the attacks have made it past Roman borders, they will make it here, and I won't send the three children of the Big Three as well as the best healer away to make it easier for the enemy." Chiron replied curtly, his tail swishing dangerously behind him as if battling away flies, but none of them were intimidated or bothered by that in the slightest.

"You will let us go. Will, tell him he'll let us go. It would be madness to split us up now." Nico argued and turned to Will, who had his eyes closed and seemed to struggle with himself for a moment, before he sighed and opened his eyes, though he didn't meet any of their gazes.

He didn't even look at Chiron.

"If you split us up, Jason and Nico won't be able to concentrate on the task at hand because they will worry about our welfare. Percy won't be any good at training or leading anybody if he has no motivation for it. The enemy is mostly after me right now because I'm what they believe to be the key, so keeping me here would only make them more intent on striking here, especially once they notice Jason and Nico aren't here for extra protection." He recounted without discernible emotion, as if reading the words off one of his text books he kept piling up everywhere.

Chiron opened his mouth as if to cut in, but Will spoke louder to tune him back out.

"Right now, the smartest thing to do is to let us go and announce it far and wide that we're gone. It
will cause at least half of the monsters to go after us, since they'll believe us to be an easier target, especially outside Camp. Meanwhile, you can work on the strength of the borders with the help of the children of Hephaestus and Hecate and provide support and additional safety measures for Calypso to keep her alive and her additional protection up, and have Clarisse and Annabeth be in charge of leading and training. They have just as much, if not even more training than Percy or any of us have had. As for the infirmary, my healers are in perfect condition to heal and patch up and protect, and any claim otherwise is a lie and an insult to their hard work and diligence.” Will continued, and there was an edge to his voice at the last part, showing there was no debate about this.

He still didn’t look happy about saying any of that, and a part of Percy was beyond confused about that, something nagging in the back of his mind, though he couldn't put his finger on it, and the rest of him was merely relieved Will had spoken up in their favor, and with such sound arguments, too.

Sure, he should probably feel insulted or upset Will thought him practically useless, but he didn't really care – it was the truth, after all. If they forced him to stay, he would make sure to let it show how much he did not want to stay, and the fear for his guys and the constant threat of losing them when he could do nothing to prevent it would probably kill him even before the end of the first week. (And if it didn't kill him, it would certainly kill any and all thought of fighting, since Percy would probably either attempt to run away and follow his guys, or bury himself under some blankets in their cabin and wait for Chiron to see reason and let him go.)

Chiron opened and closed his mouth, his tail swishing in agitation, and a deep frown on his face, but Percy couldn't think of anything he could possibly say that would beat Will's arguments.

"Did you see that, too? If you're so sure this is the smartest course of action, what can you tell me of the future?" Chiron asked, and Percy scowled in Will's place.

"He's not your oracle.” He grumbled, but Chiron seemed unfazed.

"I wouldn't have to ask such questions if he actually talked to me.” He stated, and Percy had to suppress his unimpressed laugh, same as his derisive 'You don't say!'.

They looked back at Will, but Will still wasn't meeting any of their gazes, though he schooled an indifferent look on his face and drew his shoulders up slightly, as if to seem bigger than he was.

"Since the enemy has ways of getting into people's minds, I prefer to keep any details about possible futures to myself. However, I can assure you this is better than the alternatives.” He replied, and Percy caught Jason shooting Nico a warning look as their boyfriend seemed about to open his mouth to argue that statement.

They had no time to fight right now, not with Chiron still about to break them up.

Will had surely not meant to imply he wouldn't share anything with them, either, but simply phrased it that way to brush Chiron off properly.

At least Percy hoped so.

Percy watched as Nico visibly struggled to keep quiet, then he returned his attention to Chiron, who had his eyes closed and a conflicted, but thoughtful look on his face, his tail still swishing in agitation, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"One last time.” The centaur said after a long pause, and Percy instantly perked up.

Chiron opened his eyes again to look at them, though he didn't look happy in the slightest.

"I'll allow you to leave. One last time. Once you return from Tennessee, Will and Percy will stay. No more exceptions. No more arguments. Am I clear?” He spoke with a voice that truly didn't allow for a no, demanding respect where respect was due, and Percy found himself bowing his head automatically, same as the others did.
"Fine." They agreed, though he knew none of them were happy with this.

There were more signatures missing than Nemesis', after all, which meant more travels were due.

Percy had no idea what he would do to change Chiron's mind the next time, but he was fairly certain his opinion won't have changed until then.

He would go with his guys until there were no more travels necessary, or he died, which hopefully wouldn't happen anytime soon.

They bid their farewell to the centaur and left to put their luggage down in their cabin, and it was pure chance that Percy glanced sideways at Will as they turned away from Chiron, finding him… oddly pale, and with an expression on his face that indicated he was about to cry.

Percy immediately slipped past Nico to nudge Will's arm with his own.

"Hey, it'll be fine, don't worry. He'll change his mind. We'll manage somehow." He tried to comfort him tentatively, but all that did was make Will look up at him in alarm, before he tried for a feeble smile, his hand snatching Percy's with a lot more force than his frail expression might have made him expect.

"Yeah, you're right." Will replied full of confidence, but Percy found himself frowning slightly.

Since when did Will ever tell him he was right? So openly?

Usually, he always claimed to be the one in the right, and if he wanted to praise Percy, he usually phrased it differently.

Weird.

However, before Percy could really think on the matter any further, they were ambushed by Annabeth and Piper, who had apparently left the kids with Leo so he could fix Toby a new (and undoubtedly 'improved') hearing aid and keep an eye on them, while the girls could exchange stories with the four in peace.

Percy had every intent to keep that thought in mind to ponder it later, but by the time they finally parted ways and left for their cabin, he couldn't remember what it was that had bothered him, and he was too tired and exhausted to truly care anymore about anything that wasn't their bed and his guys with him in it.

So, the moment he sat down on their small, yet wonderful and perfect bed that smelled like them and felt familiar and comfortable, Percy promptly reached out to grab his guys and tug them sideways into bed just as they were, with all four of them still dressed and their luggage untouched, and his guys let him.

Sleep caught up to them before dinner was even officially over.

***

Nico woke up to his arm vibrating, though it took him a long moment to realize this wasn't because of an earthquake or one of his boyfriends snoring in a really worrying way, but because his IM-ing device was going crazy.

He was getting called. At freaking…6am in the morning.

Nico groaned and rolled away from Jason's safe (and unfortunately horribly warm) embrace to climb over Percy and get out of bed, wondering for a moment where Will was, before he spotted him hunched over the desk at the other end of the room, his cheek on the open pages of some weird textbook Nico couldn't decipher from here, especially not at this ungodly hour.

Seriously, if this was his dad calling, he was going to get his name changed and give himself up for adoption.

But his father usually came in person whenever he wanted Nico's attention at the worst times possible.
Plus, Nico wasn't even sure his father could call him via IM.

Then again, Iris Messages weren't anything new like smartphones, so he guessed technically speaking his dad should be even better than him at these things.

Nico moved towards the bathroom swiftly to not disturb his sleeping boyfriends and accepted the call, both curious as well as apprehensive of who it might be.

To his surprise, it was Reyna, though he guessed that wasn't surprising, at all.

Maybe the ungodly hour was, but since Reyna was sitting cross-legged on a bed with her hair down and an exhausted expression on her face, he guessed she had been pulling an all-nighter the same way Will was doing so often lately, and must have either misread the time, or it was extremely important.

"Nico, hey, you look pretty tired, still? Well, anyways, I'm calling to talk business. About the group that you're supposed to pick up. I was talking to them just earlier, so now I can actually let you guys know where they are and why things are the way they are." She rambled while rubbing at her face with one tired hand, and Nico nodded inwardly.

Yep, she had definitely misread the time.

Reyna didn't give him much chance to speak, though, instead heaving a heavy sigh and beginning to babble, telling him in a rather monotonous and unimpressed tone about the adventures of a messed up team, including the full program: detours that ended up getting them lost, asking the way just to be 'purposely' mislead, monster attacks non-stop, fights within the group, mass-mutiny which led to the group splitting into two and parting ways, one half of them ending up dead less than 24 hours later, much to the shock of the other one, massive guilt and sorrow, even more fear than before, and much less fighting within the group, but in turn much more fighting against way more monsters than before.

It was like right out of a bad story, and Nico didn't like the sound of it, whatsoever.

(Plus, where did all these monsters even come from? Where had they been all this time, that they could simply appear everywhere out of nowhere? Monsters didn't even travel in packs like that, usually!)

It had taken their own team long enough to get along as well as they did now, and at this day and time, Nico trusted them with his life – but that didn't mean he was willing to risk his and their lives for the sake of a group that seemed more out for blood than Hannah on a bad day.

Plus, the open fear the group seemed to have now would make them much more vulnerable to acts of cowardice during battle, and thus endanger their own group of fighters even more.

But Nico knew Reyna was counting on them, and he knew from the way she was telling him all this that she was well aware of all these things and didn't like it one bit, either.

"I am so disappointed in them, I can't even begin to tell you. This is what happens when you let the senate decide anything, Nico. I told them not to send so many new kids, I told them not to mix cohorts and split-up partners and well attuned teams. But no, they didn't want to listen, and now we lost fifteen of them, and the other sixteen are hiding like cowards, snapping at each other like idiots and waiting with their tails between their legs to be picked up and carried back to Camp like little babies." She ranted, and Nico blew out a long breath and made a noncommittal noise, not quite sure how to reply to that without insulting her people or defending them when he didn't want to.

"We'll do our best to get to them before the monsters do. Jason said he wants to talk to our team at breakfast, to make sure they all want to come with us, or to look for suitable replacements and get Chiron's permission for those, if necessary. There's also some other things that need to be discussed, so, if all goes well, we should be able to leave by the early afternoon and should be on our way. If you want, we can keep you updated as regularly as the situation allows, or you give me a contact I can reach to check back directly with them. Whatever you prefer." He offered, and Reyna hummed thoughtfully, her eyes falling shut a couple of times, though she tore them open
again immediately and blinked rapidly to stay awake.

Nico wondered when she had last slept, but he knew asking her or mentioning her clearly tired state would only make her defensive – she was much like Will, in that regard.

Still, she would be no use to Camp Jupiter if she ended up pushing herself past the breaking point, so he knew he’d have to think of a compelling argument before the call was over, to make sure she would get at least some sleep before her duties as Praetor demanded her once more.

"No. Report back to me. I want to be in on any and all news, and that group is a mess, anyways. Is Annabeth around, by chance? Where are you, anyways? That doesn't look like the Big House or wherever you probably should be at this time of the day."

That depended solely on what time of the day Reyna thought it was.

"I'm in the bathroom, to be honest. It's 6am in the morning, Reyna." He said bluntly, and found Reyna blinking quietly at him once, twice, three times.

Then, she seemed to realize what he had just said and squinted at him skeptically, a frown on her face, before she suddenly tipped sideways out of view and there was the sound of several items crashing to the ground and a lot of grappling that seemed as if she was battling somebody.

When she came back into view less than a minute later, though, all she was holding was an alarm clock, not the heads of her enemies. 

"Wow, you're absolutely right." She stated with an air of incredulity as she gazed down at the digits glowing up at her, then she looked back at him with an almost impressed expression – which had him worrying slightly.

Maybe she was already past the breaking point.

"Will is being irresponsible." Nico blurted, and Reyna blinked at him, obviously confused how the conversation suddenly led to this topic.

"Huh?"

"He's not sleeping properly. He's the only healer we have, so he has great responsibility that he knows about full well, but he still refuses to rest properly, and I noticed he's starting to remain silent again when something is bothering him. It's bothering me." He explained quietly, and Reyna's expression changed to one of understanding.

"Ah. Well, I'm not surprised. Did you tell him it's bothering you?"

"I did. We all did. We try to get him to come to sleep with us, but he rarely stays. I mean, when you called, he was already out of bed, even if he seemed to have fallen asleep at the desk again. I think he's trying to read up on some medical things to make sure he has enough background knowledge to heal us. I mean, I don't really know how this whole healing business works, since I only helped out with the most basic things in the infirmary, but it seems like a lot more than just…I don't know, when I wield my sword, I guess? I always knew it required training just like fighting, but he's wearing himself out too much. He doesn't sleep, he doesn't eat enough, he's constantly healing us, and more often than not with his own powers, too. The same powers that leave him exhausted and drained after using them. How is he supposed to survive that, Reyna?" He asked, and made sure to keep his voice down as much as possible.

Sure, he was in the bathroom and the door was closed, same as Will was probably still asleep in the other room, anyways, but…well, in case he woke up, Nico was well aware his boyfriend still possessed extraordinary hearing, and this was something Nico didn't want him to overhear. Will knew they worried, but he didn't have to find out just how scared Nico was of losing him, not like this.

Nico wanted to tell him that, himself, while also dragging him back to bed and getting him to take better care of himself, instead of actively trying to kill himself while acting as if everything was alright.
Reyna was silent, but she seemed a lot more awake and alert now than earlier, and her expression was a grim one.

"I don't know, Nico. These are tough and tiring times as it is, and none of us are safe from death, you of all should know that. Nobody truly seems to know what's coming, though there have been countless indicators that it's bad. If Will is truly researching medical things, then he's doing it for the same reasons you are so concerned for him: He wants to guarantee the impossible, which is keeping you all safe." She explained patiently, and her voice was softer than usual, though she still looked grim as she spoke.

Nico averted his gaze.

"I know that. But does he have to do it like this? Can't he read up on these things during the day? While we're on the bus? Whenever there's some spare time? Or he could include us and have us read to him, or anything like that. Maybe I could even summon somebody dead who knows exactly what he wants to know, and he could learn from that, but he doesn't even think of any of that. He just does these things thinking we're not going to notice, or that we won't care, or that there's no other way, but…but…why does he just assume that?" He slumped, and suddenly felt a lot more drained than he should be this early in the morning, but he couldn't help it.

He hadn't actually voiced this out before, with none of his guys.

He would have, given time, but so far there hadn't been the possibility to, and he hadn't forced it due to everything else that was happening around them at the moment.

Reyna took in his defeated posture in silence for a moment, then she sighed.

"You'll have to ask him that, yourself, Nico, or anything we would come up with would be nothing but assumptions, too. Now, how about you go back to bed with your boys and sleep a few more hours, and I'll catch some sleep, myself? After all, knowing that pipsqueak is giving you such a headache with his destructive tendencies, I wouldn't want to add to that. Plus, I gotta best him. Also, some sleep probably wouldn't hurt. Could have sworn the alarm clock read 3pm earlier, though." She mumbled and studied her alarm clock with a suspicious look on her face.

"More like 3am, probably. Thanks, Reyna. The Camp needs you in top condition, after all, especially with that senate."

"Don't even remind me of that. Anyways, call me once your group departed, so I can give the troupe an update. Also, if you meet Annabeth at breakfast, tell her to give me a call. Now, off to bed with you."

"Yeah, yeah. See who's talking." He teased with a small smile, and Reyna made finger guns at him, which meant she really, really needed some sleep.

They ended the call on that note, though Nico remained in the bathroom a moment longer, just letting the back of his head rest against the door as he gazed up at the ceiling and tried to make up his mind as to what to do.

Should he wake Will? Should he let him sleep and bring over a blanket so he didn't get cold? Should he try to talk to him? Should he leave him be?

When he left the bathroom, he still hadn't made up his mind, but then he found he didn't have to come to a decision, at all, because Jason was already in the process of carrying a completely knocked out Will back to bed and tuck him back under the blanket, where a sleeping Percy instantly wrapped himself around him protectively.

"Morning." Nico whispered, and Jason turned to look at him with a questioning look, undoubtedly knowing full well there was no way Nico would wake up at this time of the day by himself.

"Good morning. A call?"

What a smart boyfriend.
"Yeah, Reyna called. Just some info about the troupe." He waved off to show this didn't need immediate attention, and Jason nodded his understanding, before lifting the blanket for Nico to slip under, too, and the two joined their boyfriends once more.

"If everything works out the way it should, we should be able to leave by early afternoon." Jason mused quietly and kissed the side of Nico's neck, and he gave a small nod.

"I told her that, too. Though I really don't want to leave." He admitted quietly, the past battles still looming over his head like a cloud.

They had gotten hurt so many times, and this time, it was supposed to be worse, because they would deliberately try and lure the monsters away from Camp.

Nico had a really bad feeling about that.

But his bad feeling was a sort of permanent thing by now, nagging on him ever since Will had first started getting his nightmares and sleeping more irregularly, so what else was new?

All he could do was hope for the best, he guessed.

"None of us do, trust me. I just hope the rest of the team will stick with us for this one, at least, so there won't be too much of a change. They only just got used to each other and built a sort of dynamic, it would be horrible to start from scratch again."

Nico smiled to himself at Jason's concerns.

Typical of Jason to think ahead like that and worry about things like their team dynamics.

Nico had been more concerned with not getting to sleep for very long when they were on the move, or the fact that they always got tired out so greatly that they barely noticed whenever Will left their midst.

Though he knew Jason had nothing to worry about regarding their current team – he was confident they would all agree to coming along again – so maybe that was why he hadn't really concerned himself with that.

"We'll ask them later. Just…five more minutes, yeah?" He mumbled and snuggled back into Jason's arms as the blonde hummed his agreement and wrapped himself around him and pulled him into his embrace, and Nico wondered how he could ever dislike this closeness and warmth.

Until it suddenly got unbearably hot again, then he escaped Jason's arms once more, but his boyfriend was used to that by now and only let out an amused huff.

Nico opened his eyes for a moment to squint at Will, taking in the exhausted expression even though the blonde was asleep.

Hopefully, Will would still be there once they woke up again.

Nico grabbed hold of his hand, just to make sure.

***

When Percy woke up in the morning, he was alone in bed.

The time on the alarm clock read 9:30am, and Percy guessed he shouldn't be surprised he was alone.

Will would probably already be with his siblings, as he had told them he wanted to be.

Jason and Nico would undoubtedly already be planning and arranging their departure and everything related to that.

Percy sighed deeply, feeling…rather hollow, really.

Tired. Exhausted. Tired.
He should get up. Wash up. Get dressed. Look for his guys.

Leave.

Percy didn't move, other than to bury his face in their pillow some more to inhale their scent.

He should get up.

He didn't.

He heard the clock ticking behind him, the only sound in the otherwise silent cabin, signaling time still passed, though everything around and inside Percy seemed to have come to a standstill.

Wasn't it strange that the water fountain wasn't making a sound? Maybe it was broken.

Percy mused that for a fleeting second, then stared back at the wall in front of him, not bothering to turn his head or move in any other way to check.

He should really get up and look for his guys.

Percy didn't move.

Somehow, it also felt as if he couldn't move.

Did he really have to get up?

What would happen if he didn't?

That would just upset everybody, wouldn't it? Percy didn't want to upset them.

He should just...get up.

He should get up, and look for his guys. Then everything would be better, for sure.

Percy moved, but instead of getting up, he rolled onto his side and disappeared under the Christmas blanket somebody must have pulled out of their luggage at some point.

Later.

He would look for them later.

Percy closed his eyes and wished he could sleep again, anything to get rid of this hollow feeling inside him.

***

"Percy?" Will asked as he poked his head inside their cabin, both relieved and confused when he found his boyfriend still in bed, rather than out and about.

It was nearly noon, after all, what was he still doing in bed?

Was he still sleeping?

Will frowned and closed the door behind him quietly, then moved to their bed to sit down at the side and take a look at his boyfriend.

"Percy?" He asked again tentatively when he found him awake and gazing at the wall without discernible emotion on his face.

His boyfriend didn't react.

"Hey, are you okay? What's wrong?" Will asked softly, reaching out to stroke some stray strands of hair away.

Percy did the faintest hint of a shrug Will had ever witnessed, but at least he reacted.
What was wrong with him? Was he still sleepy? It didn't look like it.

Maybe he was sick? Or in pain? It also didn't look like that, though.

"What's wrong, love?" Will asked again and moved his hands under the blanket to stroke over Percy's skin.

The next moment, he stilled.

Percy was... a mess.

"Do you want me to get Jason and Nico?" He asked when Percy didn't reply, but he only gave that faint shrug again, before he closed his eyes and turned his head a tad further towards the pillow, and away from Will.

"Want me to join you in bed?"

Not even a shrug.

Will's heart ached, and he leaned down to give Percy a kiss on the cheek, his hand back in Percy's hair to stroke through it gently.

"Is this because of the travels?" He asked quietly, though he wasn't surprised when Percy didn't react.

"I'll go and get Jason and Nico, okay? I'll be right back." Will whispered and leaned down to give him another peck, before he pushed himself up and hurried towards the door.

Percy didn't stop him and didn't react.

Will was just closing the door behind him when he realized the water fountain had stopped working.

It was a disturbing and sobering realization to have.

Will hurried to get the guys.

***

Nico rolled his eyes as Andrew started to ramble about all his great plans to make travelling so much safer, which involved a lot of very unlikely circumstances and went against everything they had just explained to Andrew, so he was pretty sure Andrew knew there was no way they would do any of the things he was attempting to convince them of.

But whatever.

Jason let him speak, so Andrew spoke, and Nico looked around the dining pavilion absent-mindedly, wondering faintly where Clovis was.

Now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen him yesterday, either, and he was pretty sure he had seen nearly everybody yesterday, because everyone had wanted to hear the news about the battle in Washington DC.

Hm, weird.

Maybe he was still in his cabin and they had simply missed each other yesterday.

Or maybe he was ill and in the infirmary.

Nico pursed his lips, thinking of Will's absence when he had woken up earlier to Jason getting up for breakfast and to talk to their teammates.

That idiot had seriously pried his hands out of Nico's death grip, he still couldn't quite believe it.

Of course, he wasn't upset anymore, once he had found out his boyfriend had left to visit his siblings instead of disappearing to work, but still.
He could have left a note. Or woken him up. Or simply stayed in bed until all of them were awake.

Then again, Nico guessed he had no right to complain, since he had left Percy in bed, too.

He had looked so tired, Nico hadn't had the heart to wake him, so he had left with Jason in order to help him track everybody down and ask them privately whether they still wanted to come along, and to give them an update of their departure plans in case they did.

Unsurprisingly, they had of course all agreed – with varying degrees of enthusiasm, maybe, but none of them had seemed reluctant or doubtful, so Nico was confident all was well in that regard.

Except Andrew's rambling – that wasn't well in any regard, and Nico had no idea how Jason could take it and still nod along quietly, though he admired his boyfriend's patience.

He certainly couldn't do it.

Nico spotted Hannah approaching Ash cautiously and watched curiously, surprised when the two actually began talking without immediately beginning a fight.

This had to be the first real conversation those two were having, at least the first one Nico witnessed.

He felt oddly proud, especially when he saw them both laughing and Ash even managed to clap Hannah on the shoulder before the daughter of Mars turned away and left again, a small, pleased smile on her face, while Ash seemed ready to whoop, their whole body brimming with excitement and joy, as Nico could see from all the way over here.

Aww, they were bonding.

He'd have to tell Percy that.

Ash looked around at him and caught him looking, though their smile didn't falter in the slightest, nor did they try to compose themselves whatsoever.

Instead, they did whoop and struck a victory pose that had Nico wishing Percy was here to see it happening.

He held up an awkward thumbs-up and his lips twitched into a small, uncertain smile, not quite sure how to express his support without seeming weird, but they seemed perfectly contented with that, grinning broadly and stomping off with puffed out chest and a look of utmost satisfaction on their face.

"Are you even listening? Hello? I'm talking survival strategies here, and your boyfriend isn't even listening, at all, Grace!" Andrew lamented, and Nico reluctantly returned his attention to him.

"I was listening. But we're in the dining pavilion, surrounded by countless others. Are you sure it's a good idea to talk about strategies here, of all places?" He shot back, and Andrew opened his mouth to reply – just to close it again, looking disgruntled.

Nico saw his hands moving to his pocket where he had usually kept his fidget toy, but since Washington DC, it had mysteriously disappeared, so Nico was pretty sure he must have lost it.

(Even if Andrew kept insisting either Rin or Ash must have stolen it. Because they were oh-so-envious of his intelligence, he claimed. Nico was pretty sure, that, if anybody had taken it, it had been for other reasons than that, though he had kept quiet.)

"Ugh, whatever. Grace, make sure to think over my words. I'll be with my girlfriend until you let me know when we're leaving."

And so, Andrew left, and Nico found himself staring at Jason with raised eyebrows, who looked back at him equally surprised.

"He has a girlfriend?" "Somebody can stand his attitude?"
They both asked each other quietly at the same time, and Jason shot him a stern look for his harsh words, but Nico did not like Andrew all that much – mainly because he made Percy feel stupid and because he kept being a bother to Will by refusing the majority of his treatments but complaining/whining/nagging all the while, even if Nico had yet to hear either Will or Percy complain.

"So, where to, next? They all agreed, so I'd say we either check the Apollo cabin for Will, or we let Chiron know there won't be any changes regarding the group." Jason suggested, and Nico shrugged, before thinking of Clovis, again.

"Actually, mind if we check the Hypnos cabin, first? I still need to talk to Clovis about the whole mind-closing thing. I'll definitely need his help, at this rate. I have no clue how to teach something I only managed to do while something already tried to possess me, but I'm pretty sure I don't want to revive Minos so he can try and possess the campers, you know? Nor do I think involving eidolons would be a very smart idea, so I'll definitely need Clovis to find some sort of solution. Maybe he and his siblings can help. Or maybe he'll have a different idea, altogether." He explained, even though Jason already started leading him out of the dining pavilion and towards the cabins after his first question.

However, they didn't get very far, both of them stopping dead at the sight of Will running towards them with a pale face and an expression full of worry and concern.

"Freckles, what's wrong?" "What happened?"

They both asked immediately, even before he reached them, and Will shook his head and grabbed their arms immediately to drag them after him, back to where he had come from.

"It's Percy."

***

Jason wasn't sure what he had expected when Will had told them about Percy and said that they probably wouldn't be leaving today, but somehow, he hadn't thought it would be this bad.

Maybe he had even thought Will was over-exaggerating a little bit in order to have them stay another day.

How stupid of him, really.

Will would never joke about anything health-related, Jason should have been aware of the severity of the situation before he had to convince Percy for half an hour to as much as sit up in bed and drink a glass of water, before he, Nico and Will managed to coax him into the shower.

The shower seemed to help, but only barely.

The water fountain in the corner seemed broken, too, which freaked Will out for reasons Jason only later understood, while Percy didn't even seem to notice.

Nico didn't seem to have noticed, either, all his attention on Percy, and his expression helpless and borderline overwhelmed.

None of them really knew what to do, since Percy barely talked to them, and if he did, it was only short, clipped replies or incoherent mumbling, accompanied by faint shakes or nods of his head.

They didn't even really know what was wrong with him, though he guessed Will had to know, even if the blonde didn't tell them.

Nico managed to coax some food into Percy, but five minutes after he had eaten, their boyfriend had suddenly started crying, and if Jason hadn't been devastated before then, he surely was right then and there, when Percy had started sobbing and curled into a ball and apologized profusely, even though Jason still wasn't quite sure why he had even apologized.

Will had done most of the comforting, reassuring Percy that it was okay, that they weren't upset, that he wasn't a bother...all the things Percy should already know, really.
Jason had wanted to speak, too, take part in the comforting, but he hadn't known how, and hadn't known what to say, so he had just stroked over Percy's back and coaxed him into his arms rather than the fetal position he had put himself in, and Nico had started a movie and IM-ed Annabeth to tell her to tell the others they weren't going to leave today.

Jason was glad Nico had thought of that, because he surely wouldn't have, and if anybody had knocked on their door, he probably wouldn't even have heard it.

Annabeth had at first seemed to think they were just acting, but Jason had heard the change in her voice when she had realized Nico was a tad too freaked out to be joking, and she had ended up cutting the call fairly quickly after that to get the message to the others, which he was also glad for.

In general, he was definitely glad they had each other right now, because he would have never been able to give Percy the reassurance and comfort he apparently needed, nor take care of everything around them at the same time.

It made him all the more aware of how Nico and Will dealt with the situation, and he swore to himself to be there for them in any and every way if anything similar ever happened again – though he also hoped it wouldn't happen again.

By evening, Percy had smiled three times, and had cried another seven times, just to end up too exhausted and shaky to even sit upright in bed anymore, so they had huddled together in one corner of the bed and stroked and caressed him and talked to him.

When the sun was almost completely down, Will even managed to convince him to go outside with them for a little while, just a walk around the lake, though they had then settled down on the front steps of their cabin, instead, watching the rest of the sunset together, while Nico had sent death-glares at anybody who had dared to look at them curiously in passing.

When they went to bed for the night, Jason felt more drained than he had in a long time, even though they technically hadn't done much all day.

But it didn't matter.

Percy was more important than their schedule, and Nemesis was already upset, anyways, so Jason couldn't care less about that.

As long as Percy felt better by tomorrow and knew he was just as loved as always, Jason was happy.

When Percy fell asleep between him and Nico with a small smile on his face, the water fountain in the corner started working again.

Jason never thought he'd be so happy to hear the sound of the water as he was in that moment.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:
http://sta.sh/055hx09e5r9 - perfect depiction of Kyle ;)
http://sta.sh/0h2pt887zfi - adorable Will with flowers <3
http://sta.sh/02xyy1gdpdx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3
http://sta.sh/0qy6lka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing how cute Will is ;) 
http://sta.sh/01m8n04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will ;) 
http://sta.sh/01b1iqkgjhb - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3
http://nicodamnangelo.tumblr.com/post/149016380617/fanart-for-my-favorite-fanfic-
love-dreams
- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well >;)

- A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater <3 This is and will probably always be
my phone background, ijs
- Will with blanket <3
- THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE FROM THE LAST SEQUEL!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you
- A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy,
challenge-loving dorks <3

http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patreon-tari
- Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3
- Nico in his winter outfit :)
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-commission-for-my-amazing-patron
- Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD
- Jason and the leather jacket >;)

I also commissioned some pieces from the amazing Ari/Bex ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-mel-chan366
- New Years from Advent Calendar times ;)
- Our dorks in Christmas sweaters!! :D
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-for-mel-chan366
- The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-mel-chan366-now-i
- Ice cream time ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/156557714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-chan366-3-3-some
- <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160990996944/another-of-my-may-madness-commissions-a-fabulous
- The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-ever-fabulous
- ...Boxer Shorts XD ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164308263854/let-me-just-take-this-time-to-say-that
- The guys admiring Jason in his leather jacket ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164426408554/another-fun-very-colourful-commission-for
- Pride ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-
mel-chan366
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love
them too much not to share them ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-
for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-
commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-
commission-for
- Jercy Soft Kiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164389230829/an-adorable-sketch-commission-
for-mel-chan366
- Solangelo Date <3

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my
firstborn child :) (Mostly because there won't be one. Sorry. But you can have a
cookie?!)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N: Hey Cupcakes!

First of all, I hope you're all doing okay! With the hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunami warnings, and even MORE hurricane warnings (wtf even!?) I really, REALLY hope you're alright wherever you are, and that things will finally settle down again all over the world.

Next, I am so sorry, but there's kinda nothing but angst in this chapter. I wished there was tons of fluff and positive stuff, but...this chapter doesn't have it.

Please see trigger warnings below, and don't hesitate to shoot a message if you rather want a watered down summary instead of reading the whole thing.

Thank you all for sticking around and for your wonderful comments so far.

I wish you all the best,
-Tári

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**Trigger Warnings:**
- Death
- Fear/Dread
- Mourning
- Lots of angst, pain and misery
- Helplessness, Crying
- Arguments/Fights
- Violence
- Guilt/Blame

Also: PLEASE CHECK OUT THE NEW FANART!!!!!!!!!! Ender-Rhian did a wonderful picture of the team, and I want all of you to see it >:|

There's also a super adorable redraw of Will in his comfort sweater!!!

So, yes, this chapter is super angsty and horrible, but hey, at least we got cute art :)

(It's all that's keeping me alive at this point. Seriously, do yourself a favor and check out the art.)

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**Chapter 05: It's Okay**

"Are they following us?" Nico called over his shoulder, and Jason turned to look behind them as their group ran from Thalia's pine down to the road and towards the spot where Nico had ordered Jules-Albert to pick them up at.

Behind them, the monsters they considered scouts were all abandoning their spots and paths to give pursuit.

"Yes!" He answered Nico's question, and he grunted in reply, before they tried to quicken their pace.

The plan was to lure the monsters away and have them follow them, yes, but that didn't include them having to fight the lot, especially not when they were still this close to the Camp, so they had to keep up a healthy distance between the monsters and themselves.

"I should have stayed at home!" Andrew cried when Jason grabbed him by his backpack and half hoisted him up to make sure he didn't lag behind, even though that also slowed Jason down.

"You were the one who was the most offended when Jason gave you the choice to stay!" Rin yelled back at him, and the two managed to somehow hold up their middle fingers at each other, while they also both started slowing down due to the distraction.
"Focus!" Jason ordered sharply and gave Andrew a little push, before he whirled around and attacked the hellhound that had been in the middle of pouncing on them, stabbing it right through the roof of its mouth and throwing it off to the side to let it disintegrate as he turned back around to rush after his team, picking up Andrew by his backpack again when he saw him trailing behind again.

"Put me down! I can run by myself!" The boy lamented and glowered at Jason from the side, just to screech and cling to him a moment later, and Jason didn't have to look around to know something else was attacking them.

An arrow whizzed past them, narrowly missing Jason's cheek, but something behind him howled in pain, followed by a loud thud, so he guessed Liam had managed to strike his target well enough.

"Still following?" Nico called from the front without looking around as he led them across the street and down the other side, further and further away from the Camp.

Liam looked around, an arrow already at the ready.

"All but one. Looks snake-related. Turned around again." He announced, and Nico glanced over his shoulder at Jason in question.

Jason knew what he meant.

If they killed it, they might be able to spare the Camp from an immediate attack when the other forces came and realized their scouts were gone – but that might also backfire.

If they let it live, it might tell the others that the guys had left, which might work in their favor, since Will had claimed they would definitely go after him – but it might also push them to attack the Camp first, in hopes of it being more vulnerable to an attack.

"Wound it." Jason called to Liam, and the boy gave a quick nod, before rushing off to the side and lifting his bow, his entire focus on a spot far away.

The arrow went flying, and they heard a faraway screech of pain, showing he had hit his mark.

"Shot it in the shoulder." He informed them, and Jason gave a nod and a thumbs-up as he passed him, then they hurried down the slope and to the waiting bus.

Jules-Albert sat behind the steering wheel with what looked like a newspaper and coffee in his hand, and by this point, Jason was pretty sure the zombie was messing with them, because he was certain zombies neither read the news nor needed coffee.

But Jules-Albert had always been a little extra – and as long as he kept saving them and driving them to places, he could be as extra as he wanted to be, in Jason's opinion.

Nico reached the bus first and ushered Percy and Hannah inside, closely followed by Sara, Ash, Rin and Will, before he looked around to check what was still following them, and how close they were.

"Hurry up!" He yelled over, and Jason grunted in reply, pretty sure he would be faster if it wasn't for Andrew still half-clinging to him and not running, anymore.

Liam was to his other side and sent arrows flying every few seconds, though whether he actually knew what he was shooting was questionable, but it seemed good enough to keep them unharmed until they reached the bus.

Liam jumped into the bus and nearly leaped into Jules-Albert, who grunted and didn't even put his coffee down, then Jason rushed in with Andrew still clinging to him, and Nico pushed the door shut and yelled at Jules-Albert to get going.

The zombie let out what almost sounded like a sigh, then he suddenly stepped on the gas so hard Jason found himself toppling over due to his poor balance with Andrew at his side.
They smacked into the ground and Rin laughed at their dismay, before whacking Andrew across the head for being an idiot, and helping Jason to his feet, Will instantly in his face to check for injuries, though he was fine.

"Okay, let's not do that again." Ash remarked as they were sprawled over their seat and panted heavily, definitely not used to running so fast or for so long.

Sara and Hannah made weak noises of agreement, and Liam collapsed into one seat weakly and rested his forehead against the backrest in front of him.

Jason looked around at his team, then at his guys, all of them as out of breath as he was.

Then, he looked out the window at the passing scenery around them, and at the monsters giving chase behind them.

At least they had made it.

That was all that mattered for now.

"If the plan works out, we won't have to." He assured them, though they all knew the plan, and they all knew they would need a lot of luck for it to work out.

They also all knew, that, as demigods, luck was a thing they usually didn't have.

But they had managed to leave the Camp and lure the monsters after them, so that was already enough for Jason to consider them lucky and their start on this journey a good one, for once.

He only hoped he wouldn't come to regret praising the day before it was over.

One should never count one's chickens before they were hatched, after all.

***

"Will! Medic tent! Now!" Nico yelled at his boyfriend, but when said boyfriend started running, it obviously wasn't to get to his medic tent, but into the opposite direction, into the middle of the battle, towards Jason and Percy and the rest of their team that was battling off monsters with all they had.

Typical.

"I hate you!" He yelled after the love of his life and ran after him to make sure he got there alive, slashing at everything in his way and shouting orders at their surrounding teammates, who reacted exceptionally quickly and did as he told them, Liam shooting down the two venti that tried to snatch Will off the ground, and Hannah thrusting her spear through three shadows at once to prevent them from going after Will.

He loved this team.

Especially considering they had been moving nearly non-stop towards Tennessee to meet up with Reyna's mess of a troupe for the past five days already, alternating between Jules-Albert and trains/on foot, with plenty of tricking and misleading and taking roundabout ways more often than not to avoid monster attacks, constantly on the lookout – and yet more often than not getting found.

Nico got distracted by three or four monsters at once trying to circle him, trying as quickly as he could to dispose of them and make for his boyfriend again, but by the time he stabbed through the last one, there were new ones, and he had lost sight of Will.

Why had he run into the middle of the battle, anyways?!

Will was reckless, yes, but not that reckless!

The next moment, Nico had his answer as he saw Will moving with surprising finesse as he zigzagged between the monsters and saved Liam from getting trapped, right before grabbing Sara's weapon and snapping it upwards before whirling them around, successfully keeping her
from running it into a tree and instead attacking the monster that would have undoubtedly
managed to pounce on her the moment she had struggled to get her weapon free.

Oh. He was saving their teammates.

That…okay, Nico guessed he could forgive him for ignoring his orders, then.

Nico saw the hellhound hushing between the trees by pure chance, but his alarm bells immediately
rang as he realized it wasn't running or attacking like the rest, but seemed to…sneak, really.

It was *sneaking*. Through the forest. Towards…Will. Who wasn't looking into that direction
whsoever, his whole focus on their team.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"Will! Hellhound!" He yelled, but the monster seemed to understand, too, because, right as he
finished, the beast growled and pounced.

"No!" Nico heard several voices at once, and he wasn't the only one moving towards their medic
immediately, nor was he the first one to get there.

It was Rin, her dagger slashing across the hellhounds face – enough to wound it, but not enough
to stop it mid-run – and it plowed both her and Will into the ground.

Nico felt his heart stopping in his chest as he watched its fangs trying to tear them apart, panic
rising inside him as he tried to move *faster*.

Hannah and Percy, both of them with white faces, reached them next and simultaneously grabbed
the hellhound by the back of its neck and threw it backwards and off the two, followed by Ash
jumping in front of their wounded teammates with their sword up and ready for attack as new
monsters started closing in to charge, but then Nico and Jason finally reached them, too.

"Will! Rin! Are you alright?!" Jason instantly asked and went down to check on them, while Nico
only risked one glance down before looking back at the monsters circling them.

Blood. There was blood. Whose, he didn't know, but there was *blood*, and he felt sick.

Then, he realized the monsters were *circling* them, which meant they were practically surrounded.
Cornered. Easy to attack from all sides should their formation break.

They didn't even *have* a formation, had rarely had the time to practice that sort of thing, though
Hannah seemed to know what to do, and they followed her lead instinctively.

Where the hell were Andrew and Liam?

He heard voices behind him, and was relieved to identify them as Will and Rin, which meant they
were still conscious, which meant they were alive, which meant they would be fine.

"Will, stay down. You're losing too much blood." Jason's voice hissed urgently, and Nico's hope
was crushed in an instance again.

So it was Will's blood.

"Fuck." Will hissed weakly, and then, there was a sort of glowing behind him, which Nico
guessed had to mean Will was healing himself.

Thanks to him knowing how that looked, he didn't turn around, which allowed him to catch
several monsters stopping dead and watching.

"The boy can do the thing! *The thing!* Have to tell him! *Tell him!*" One monster screeched to the
one next to it and turned, but an arrow pierced its head the very next second, followed by more
arrows flying and impaling the others that made to turn and bolt.

Nico reacted instinctively and charged at the Shadows with his Stygian Iron sword, slicing
through them before they could sneak away soundlessly.
His mind was buzzing.

Thing? What had it meant? Will's healing? Of course he could heal? He was a healer?

This didn't make any sense!

Hannah was by his side, wielding her spear and catching those outside his reach, and they battled side by side until they were separated again and he found himself closer to Percy, instead, who was fighting with a grim expression and a bleeding arm.

Nico had no idea whether Jason was still with Will, or whether they were even still behind him, but he did his best to take on any monster that came his way or tried to get past him, keen on protecting his boyfriends and team.

After some time, by sheer luck alone, he finally spotted Andrew and Liam, up high in one of the few trees here, and he was surprised, but pleased, to see them working together efficiently without issues, Liam alternating between firing at the monsters on the ground or the ones in the air attempting to swarm them and get them out of their hiding place, while Andrew kept an overview and told him how to shoot which one and which came next, keeping them all at bay as he could pick up patterns and moves that would have been lost to the rest of the team.

Nico risked a glance over his shoulder, and found Sara and Jason fighting side by side in front of Will, who had stopped glowing and hopefully stopped bleeding, but his face was ashen and his posture hunched, one hand playing with the opening to his medic pouch, as if he was considering taking something out, though Nico couldn't think of anything that would be of use in this sort of situation.

Sometimes, Nico did wish Will was better at fighting, or at least that monsters didn't have quite this much interest in him, because everybody could see they mostly went for Sara and Jason now.

Ash was the furthest away, but stood their ground and didn't let anything past them, and then there was Hannah with her spear, looking like she was in some sort of murder frenzy as she attacked with a ferocity that was both impressive and scary, so Nico returned his attention to his own opponents once more, a little relieved to have such a great team.

They were standing their ground well enough, and at this rate, they should be finished with these monsters in a matter of minutes, which meant they would be able to continue their way towards-

…

Nico heard a low growl, followed by something big bounding towards them, though he couldn't see what it was until it was nearly upon him.

There were yells, and Will screamed something he couldn't catch as he whirled around, sword at the ready, though nothing could have stopped the giant scorpion tail from ripping into him.

Nothing, except Rin, who Nico only now noticed hadn't been with the others, who Nico only now noticed must have seen the manticore coming, who Nico only now noticed must have figured it would make for Nico since he was the closest.

Rin, who threw herself in the way much like she had done for Will earlier, just that this time she struck the beast's tail, rather than its face, and her dagger dug into the only patch of penetrable skin between the sharp tail tip and the hard, shell-like covering behind it.

It wasn't enough to stop the manticore from its attack, same as Rin's attack earlier hadn't been enough to stop the hellhound from slamming into her, and Nico watched in horror as the manticore's poisoned tail tip tore into her side.

He heard her scream, heard the manticore roaring in pain, heard the sound of breaking bones and sharp intakes of breath and curses and yells and footsteps.

The world seemed to slow down around Nico as he stood there and stared, the shock of what was happening stopping his body from acting.

Rin.
Oh no.

***

Will wasn't thinking.

Will was running, and then he had her, and the next thing he knew, he had Rin in his arms and was in his medic tent, laying her down on the small bed and watching the white sheets turn red.

"Come on, you can do it. Rin, look at me. Yes, like that." He whispered feverishly as he cradled her face, his vision turning blurry as tears ran down his face, though they weren't important.

Rin was important.

His fingers shook as he rolled up her torn shirt, trying so very hard not to panic, trying so very hard not to think of what he was feeling as he took in her values.

He could do it.

He had to do it.

He had to save her.

Will swallowed thickly and pressed his hands to her wound, making her gasp and cry, but he had to stop the bleeding, so he didn't allow himself to stop.

Rin moved, but he tried to keep her still.

She looked up at him with her dark eyes full of pain, but no fear, and he dreaded what it meant, because he didn't want to believe it.

She whispered words he couldn't hear, but he kept her in his arms.

He had her in his arms, and her blood was on his hands. Her life was in his hands.

Will shook with fear and shock and exhaustion as he healed her, trying not to think of her torn spleen, trying not to think of her internal bleeding, trying not to think of how much he could feel her dying.

He had to be able to save her.

When Will looked back at Rin's face though, he saw Leah all over again.

In her defeated, accepting expression.

In her softly spoken words he refused to comprehend.

In her weak smile and the way she touched his arm.

"It's okay." She whispered, and that, too, was something Leah had said to him, and it was as if he saw his best friend dying for a second time.

"Rin, stay with me. Rin! Look at me! I can heal you, you just…you just have to hold on a little longer. Please, I know you can do it. I know it's painful, but you can do it! Don't just accept death, fight! Leah, please!"

Will pressed harder against the wound, trying to focus on his healing and ignoring her weakening state, her internal bleeding, the poison coursing through her body, everything, unwilling to believe the inevitable.

"It's not fair…" He whispered feebly, tears still streaming down his face and dripping down onto her, mingling with the poisoned blood.

"It never is. But it's okay. I'm not scared of death." Rin replied softly, but he didn't want to hear it.
Will practically climbed onto the bed and cradled her in his arms, his whole body glowing, but this
time on purpose, and he held her tightly, trying to heal, fix, save.

Rin looked up at him with a sad smile, her hand still on his arm, as if she was trying to stop him.
"It's okay, Will."

Will found himself staring at her as she said it, at the acceptance in her gaze, at the softness of her
features, at the way her chest rose and fell with shallow, labored breaths.

And he saw Leah again.

His heart ached as he knew, though he tried to tell himself he was wrong.

Back with Leah, he had healed her until he had passed out.

This time, that didn't happen.

This time, he just sat there and cradled her in his arms.

Watching her eyes falling shut.

Her last breath leaving her chest. Leaving her lips.

Feeling her values fading out.

Her heart falling still.

Her hand sliding off his arm.

"No…"

There was a deafening silence now.

Will had failed her.

***

They were silent as they stood in front of the medic tent, waiting with bated breath.

The team had practically torn the manticore to pieces, followed by all other monsters, but there
was no pride or victory in their group at the knowledge of how strong they had become.

There was nothing but silence and hope and fear.

Percy's arm was pounding, but even more so was his heart, hoping against hope Rin would make
it.

They had the best healer, she had to be able to make it.

Somehow, Percy already knew it, though, and he knew what it meant when Nico sucked in a
sharp breath and closed his eyes, his expression full of pain and guilt.

Jason knew it, too, as he lowered his head and his shoulders fell.

The rest of their team caught on when Nico gave a faint shake of his head.

The silence was the same, but now, the air was thick with pain and emotion, and Percy watched
Hannah and Sara turning towards each other automatically, falling into each other's arms as they
both started sobbing.

Liam shed silent tears next to them, while Ash reached out a hand to stroke over Hannah's back to
seek as well as give comfort, their eyes downcast and brimming with tears, too.

Andrew was crouched on the ground, his face hidden, his arms wrapped around his legs and
shaking like a leaf.
Percy watched their team suffering, and watched Jason and Nico, with Nico's head against Jason's shoulder and Jason's arm around him, hurting in silence along with them.

"I'll check on Will." He whispered quietly, though his voice cut through the silence like a knife, but while they flinched, nobody as much as looked up at him, other than his boyfriends with small nods.

He never had the chance to enter the medic tent though, because the moment he stepped forward, Will was already bounding out and past them, past him, and it happened so quickly nobody but Percy even realized what was happening.

He took after him, anyways, even before Nico called out after Will, and before his mind even knew what his body was doing.

Percy caught up to Will near the road, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him away from it just in case a stray car came by, but Will only sobbed and screamed at him to let him go and thrashed in his arms until they were both on the ground, Percy on top of him and Will a sobbing mess beneath him.

It hurt, seeing him like this.

But he knew his pain was nothing compared to the pain Will was feeling right now.

"I couldn't save her! I tried, but it wasn't enough! If it had been one of you, I would have found a way, but it wasn't, and I let her die!" His boyfriend bawled, his hands trying to cover his face, though he was shaking so badly and sobbing so much, that was impossible to accomplish.

Percy shook his head and leaned down, wrapping himself around Will and undoubtedly squishing him, but he knew from experience he wasn't heavy enough to hurt him.

"Shh, Will, you did everything you could." He whispered, but Will kept sobbing and bawling, his fists clutching Percy's shirt now that his face was hidden from view by Percy.

"I failed her. I tried, but it wasn't enough. This is my fault. I could have…I could have…there had to have been a way…"

Sometimes, there was no other way. Sometimes, bad things simply happened.

Percy didn't say that, though.

Instead, he kept his arms tightly around his boyfriend and managed to work himself into a sitting position to pull Will along with him and off the ground, constantly whispering soft words of reassurance in his ear and rocking them both back and forth slightly to soothe him.

Will hadn't failed anybody.

Percy knew his boyfriend, and he knew his healing abilities.

If Will hadn't been able to heal Rin, nobody else would have been able to, and Rin would have never blamed Will for her death, either.

Percy closed his eyes and buried his nose at his boyfriend's neck, and they both wept together as his mind slowly started wrapping itself around the fact that Rin was dead.

Just like that.

Without warning, without indicator, without anything.

Just yesterday, they had talked about summer at the beach, and how Rin could mix the best cocktails and would totally get things going between Ash and Hannah.

Just yesterday, Rin had joked about how much she was going to regret taking them to her godly mother.

Just yesterday, they had laughed together, and now she was dead, and there would be no beach
party with her, no cocktails for Ash and Hannah, and they would have to meet her mother with nothing but the message of her death.

It wasn't fair.

Will bawled it against Percy's skin, but he already knew.

He had always known.

Percy had never wanted to be a demigod.

Life already wasn't fair, but when one was a demigod, it seemed even worse, and he was so sick and tired of it.

So Percy clutched Will for all he was worth, weeping and mourning along with him on the uncomfortable ground, until there were no more tears and no more sobs, until Will fell silent and his body stopped shaking so badly in Percy's arms, until Percy could feel his heartbeat slowing to a normal, healthy speed once more.

Then, he still remained on the ground with him, stroking through his hair, over his back, along his sides, constantly whispering soft words of 'It wasn't your fault' and even softer I-love-you's, giving his boyfriend all the time he needed, though he knew this was nothing one could stomach in a few minutes.

They could have spent ten minutes on the ground, or it might have been a few hours, but since nobody came, and they weren't getting attacked, Percy didn't care.

He kept up his caressing until Will started shifting and pulled back, enough to look up at him with red, puffy eyes and a running nose, but not enough to leave his embrace.

"I'm sorry for running away. I didn't mean to. I just…I needed to get away. From…everything. Everyone. I don't know." He muttered, and his voice sounded raspy and vulnerable, so Percy tugged him back closer and shook his head.

"I understand. Are you ready to go back to the others now? They will worry." He asked quietly, and could feel Will's reluctance in the tensing of his body.

But then, his boyfriend gave a small nod, though he made no move to get up, and neither did Percy, instead burying his nose back at the side of his neck and keeping him close for a little while longer.

"If it had been you, I would have found a way. I just know it. I would have never let you…I couldn't have…but why did I let her…" Will whispered against his collarbone, but Percy shook his head again and kissed Will's skin gently.

"You didn't. I know you, love, and I know you've done everything you could."

"I should have been able to save her."

Percy thought of Rin's face when she had struck the manticore, the determination, the anger, the acceptance in her gaze.

She hadn't been surprised when the tail had pierced her side.

She had screamed in pain, but she hadn't been surprised, instead continuing her attack on the beast's tail and wounding it to the point it hadn't been able to use the poisonous tip any more to either strike or shoot spikes, which had made killing it a lot faster.

She had known what she was doing, and she had known the risks.

"There will always be people you can't save, Will. You know that." He said quietly, cautiously, and for a moment, he could feel Will stiffening in his arms, could see a flash of anger and indignity on his pretty face, and he was already expecting Will to push him away and snap at him – but then he didn't, instead slumping back against him.
"I like to try." He whispered, and Percy held him a bit tighter than necessary.

He knew that, too.

"She saved Nico." Percy said quietly, a statement, nothing more, nothing less.

He had seen the danger too late, and even though he had already been running for Nico, he would have never made it in time to protect him.

"I know." Will whispered back, and Percy thought to himself that, even though it was cruel and unfair, he was still glad it hadn't been Nico they had just lost.

It was a horrible thought to have, and it made him feel horrible and guilty and made him want to apologize to Rin, but at the same time, he knew it was the truth.

This was the second time he had nearly lost one of his boyfriends.

First Jason at the lava wall, now Nico with the manticore.

Percy pulled back a bit to gaze down at Will, his Will, his boyfriend, his.

He wouldn't let him be the next.

***

The team was silent when Percy and Will returned, and the only words that were spoken were between Will and Nico, in hushed voices, before they both entered the medic tent together and remained in there for what felt like forever.

Jason watched over the team in the meantime, and over Percy, who had puffy eyes just like the rest of them, but who also looked determined and ready to fight, which had Jason staying close to him to prevent him from running off and picking fights where no fights should be picked right now.

He was aware that they would have to let the Camp know, same as he knew they would have to continue travelling as soon as possible to both get away from this monster-infested area, as well as get to Reyna's troupe before it was too late for them, too.

But not right now.

Right now, the team was allowed to mourn.

The tent opened, and Nico hushed out and over to his side, looking grave.

"We need to bury her here, Jason. There's no shroud, we can't burn her the way it's custom, but I can give her a mortal burial now and set up a symbolic burial once we're back at Camp. I think she would agree to that." Nico whispered, and Jason gave a small nod for him to proceed.

Of course Rin would have agreed to that.

She probably would have huffed out a small laugh and waved off and told them to just leave her in some bushes and stop making such a fuss, before calling them disgusting for caring so much about trivialities.

Nico disappeared back in the medic tent for a moment, then rushed out again, buzzing about around them and stopping near the tree Liam and Andrew had been in earlier, gazing down at the roots and soil at his feet, before giving a small nod and disappearing back inside the tent.

Jason partly wanted to offer his help, partly wanted to be anywhere but here, so he turned to Percy and pulled him against his side.

He wasn't sure whether he did it to seek comfort or to give it, but Percy didn't seem to mind either way, wrapping an arm around him and leaning against him as they watched in silence.

Nico came back out and moved to the rest of their team, letting them know, too, and Jason could
see the pain in their eyes from all the way over here, the sight breaking his heart almost as badly as
the knowledge did that Rin wouldn't join them anymore.

Maybe he should have told her to stay at Camp.

Or they should have followed Andrew’s advice and created more diversions and traps to get the
monsters off their trail better.

Jason shook his head, refusing to let himself wallow in self-pity or question his decisions.

He couldn't change what had happened, so there was no point in breaking his head over it.

It wouldn't do them any good right now. The team needed him.

So Jason took a deep breath, squeezed Percy tightly, then turned to help Nico with his
preparations for Rin's burial.

One by one, the others joined in, while Percy waited a moment longer before disappearing into the
medic tent, joining Will.

Jason couldn't make himself do that, so he watched over the rest of them, instead, helping Nico
with picking the best spot beneath the big tree, helping Ash and Liam collect the small flowers
blooming a little further away, and lending a shoulder to Hannah and Sara, who both started
sobbing again when Nico summoned two skeletons to work the ground open for a grave.

Andrew stood a little off to the side, fiddling with his hands and watching them work, but he
seemed to be lost in his own world and own thoughts, so Jason left him to himself, knowing he
didn't like to be interrupted.

Will came out of the tent, but didn't look at any of them as he ran off to their tent and disappeared
inside that, and Jason tried not to think of the dried blood all over his boyfriend, most of it from
Rin, the rest his own.

They had not only lost Rin, but nearly lost Will and Nico, too.

Jason dreaded to think about it.

When Will left the tent, he had changed clothes and cleaned up a bit, but Jason didn't get the
chance to ask whether they should do the same before their boyfriend was already back in the
medic tent.

It was an odd burial, rushed and wrong, but Jason knew they had no other choice right now.

The silence stretched on as they all worked together, then Nico gave his sign they were ready, and
the misery in the air was almost palpable as he stuck his head into the medic tent and said 'Bring
her, please' in a quiet, detached voice that echoed through Jason's head as if he had yelled it.

Will carried her.

Jason would have thought Percy to be the one to do it, but it was Will carrying her, pressing her
against his chest with his gaze firmly set forward and his eyes brimming with fresh tears.

They had wrapped her in some dark cloth, though her head was free, and it was almost odd to
think of her as dead.

She was pale, but she had always been pale, and her expression was so relaxed and peaceful,
contrary to the pain she must have suffered, that she seemed more asleep than anything else.

Percy was right behind Will, keeping close to him and staring at Rin's face over Will's shoulder,
too.

Hannah and Sara started sobbing again.

They laid her down into their makeshift grave, and Nico began speaking, in a language that must
have been Greek, though Jason found he barely listened.
Their team was huddled around the grave and watched miserably how Nico finished his speech and put a few flowers and colorful grass on Rin's chest, then they joined in, one by one either whispering something or merely thinking their last words to themselves, before adding their flowers.

Sara unclipped one of her golden bracelets, something that had been passed down for generations, and she put it around Rin's wrist, clasping her hand for a moment longer before letting go and stepping back again to let Ash take her place.

Jason spoke his own words of farewell, though he wasn't even sure what he was saying, nor whether his words made any sense, and he needed Percy's help to put down the few small flowers that he had nearly crushed in his grip without noticing.

Andrew laid down one of his smaller, less-used fidget toys, muttering something only he could understand.

Will was the last, and even though he was crying, his voice was firm and strong as he began speaking, talking about Rin, about her character and her understandable disgust for humankind, about her bravery and their friendship, about the laughs they had shared and the bonds she had forged with all of them.

Jason found himself listening to that, mostly because Will made it impossible not to.

They watched in silence as Nico closed the ground above Rin, and Sara and Liam worked together to place the last flowers on top of her grave.

There was no more talking as they stood there another small eternity, and when Jules-Albert parked the bus next to them, they merely said their goodbyes and went to collect their tents and set out to continue their journey.

Jason watched the place disappear behind them, her grave soon gone from sight, in a location they would probably never find again.

It was a horrible day.

They journeyed on, anyways.

***

It took three days for them to reach the meeting point arranged with Reyna.

Three days for the team to stomach the loss of Rin and manage some easy conversation once more, though there was less joking now, and Nico saw his teammates turn around a lot for Rin's input, just to be reminded that she wasn't there anymore.

Three days in which Will barely left their side, spent the nights in their arms without complaint, and remained deadly silent for the rest of the time, either seeming lost in thoughts or in mourning, sometimes both at the same time.

"I don't care how you did things before, you're doing them the way we say from now on. We came to pick you up and accompany you back to your Camp, and you will remember your position and rank and follow our lead." Jason said coldly to the boy currently arguing with him, but Nico was more impressed that it had taken this long for Jason's patience to wear thin, rather than being surprised at the authority in his voice.

Reyna's troupe was a mess.

Truth be told, they were such a mess, Nico felt conflicted about even referring to them as Reyna's troupe, because Reyna would have never assigned these stubborn, immature fools to a quest like this, much less given them any rank to lead others or question an ex-Praetor.

Nico didn't want to take them along.

In fact, he would much rather tell Jason to leave them be.
They had better things to do than argue with these kids, and if they really thought they were so
great and smart, then they could get back to their Camp by themselves, and his group could
continue on its way to Nemesis to get that out of the way.

Unfortunately, he knew that they would sign these kids’ death sentence if they left them to
themselves, and as much as he wished he could be heartless enough to brush that off, he still
remained quiet and let Jason negotiate.

Nico glanced at Will, who was sitting at Percy’s side with their hands tightly clasped together
and his head against Percy’s shoulder, looking conflicted about something Nico didn’t know.

Something must have happened. Or maybe something was supposed to happen.

There was something, but Will refused to tell them, and it was driving Nico crazy, but Jason kept
telling him to give Will time.

How much time would he need?!

The last time they had tried to give him space and time, they had ended up finding out about Kyle
way too late and Will had nearly ended up getting raped and kidnapped and whatnot.

Who knew what would happen this time?

For all Nico knew, Will wouldn't tell them anything until he was one step away from dying.

“Okay, listen up, punk. If you don’t fucking lay off right now, I’m going to call up your praetors
and tell them you’re stubborn, immature prats and we refuse to help you. See how you get out of
this place alive without us. I’d love to watch you try. So, either you suck it up and comply to the
rules, or you get to writing your last will, cause you’re gonna be dead by tonight. Got it?” Hannah
suddenly butted in, sounding irritated and ready to decapitate the boy (who Nico had conveniently
forgotten the name of), and Nico was amused to see Jason merely crossing his arms in front of his
chest, but not reprimanding Hannah or renouncing her threats in any way.

The boy glowered at her darkly, and with visible disgust.

"Who allowed you to speak? If I remember correctly, you were one of the longest members of
your cohort, yet you never made it anywhere. You even had to run off with the Greek to finally be
somebody. Girls like you have no authority over me."

Wow.

Nico’s arms dropped to his side, and he felt…speechless, to be honest.

Speechless, and really fucking angry.

The ground shook at their feet faintly, and Jason immediately put his hand on his shoulder.

"Hannah will supervise your actions, so you better get used to her having authority over you.
What she says will be done, or you will have to answer to me, and my patience is wearing thin.
We may have promised Reyna to accompany you back to your Camp because you can't do it by
yourself, but we are on a tight schedule that you are interfering with, so I'm certain she would
understand if we had to leave you behind along the way." Jason explained calmly, but Nico still
fumed and shot Hannah a look that said 'Wreck him.'.

Hannah gave a curt nod that showed she would, her eyes blazing with anger and pride, and Nico
turned back to the boy, satisfied by his offended expression.

He even seemed to contemplate arguing about this, and Nico just dared him to, because, damn,
they could already be miles away from here and on their way to Nemesis and back, but instead,
they had to bother with this.

Sadly, the boy seemed to realize they would make true on their word of leaving them here,
because he merely cleared his throat, muttered something darkly under his breath, then agreed and
left to inform the rest of the troupe.
"I hope you don't mind, Hannah. If you want, you can 'promote' someone else from our group to
join you in your task of watching over them." Jason said quietly as he turned to Hannah, and she
immediately waved off with a satisfied grin.

"It's cool. He once hit on me and I told him I'm a lesbian and not interested, so I guess he never
got over that. All those years of him badmouthing me and treating me like trash, oh, he's so going
to get all of that back now."

And with that, she rubbed her hands together excitedly and wandered off to inspect the new
additions to their group.

"Should I send Sara or Ash after her to make sure nobody gets murdered?" Jason asked Nico as
they watched her go, and Nico tilted his head as he mused their options.

"Send Ash. Sara would help her with the murder and hide the body. Ash may be more likely to
pick fights or piss off Hannah, but both of them are still trying to impress each other, so that
should keep them busy from trying to do any harm to anybody else.Hopefully." He replied, and
Jason hummed in reply, though he was also frowning.

Nico wondered whether their boyfriend had yet figured out Ash and Hannah were interested in
each other, or whether he still worried about the team dynamics, but he decided not to ask, instead
looking back to Will and Percy, who still were exactly where they left them.

They were exactly where they had left them, and Percy was still comforting Will to the best of his
abilities, and Will still looked as if the world was ending in a reality they couldn't see.

Jason left to assign Ash to their new task, but Nico remained where he was for another moment,
watching Will looking heartbroken and conflicted.

He knew Will was mourning Rin, but this was more than that, he just knew it.

Nico glanced at Jason's back, knowing what he would say if Nico decided to push Will.

But how would they ever figure out what was wrong, then?

Somebody had to talk to Will and get him to open up, and if Percy and Jason refused to be that
somebody, then Nico would simply have to be the one to do it.

Having made his decision, Nico nodded to himself and went to join his boyfriends to inform them
and their team of their successful negotiations, and to think of a way to get Will somewhere alone
for a chat.

***

Over the course of the next few days, there were a lot of arguments, even more monster battles,
and quite a few sleepless nights spent on the go or standing watch while Will healed and patched
everyone up repeatedly.

They hadn't been able to cover much ground, and at one point they had even travelled in the
opposite direction all over again by accident, which they had only noticed because Jules-Albert
had shown up more than a little annoyed and taken them back to the city they had set out from,
though by now, Percy didn't even know what it was called anymore.

Learning the names of his fellow teammates was already difficult enough, he had no energy left to
care about where they were, as long as they would get to Camp Jupiter soon.

Well, and Nemesis.

They...kind of weren't sure how to best go about this, actually.

In fact, the teams argued about this nearly every day, but so far, Jason hadn't come to a definite
decision.
They were already in the area, so it would make sense to find Nemesis first and get her signature on the contract and then go to Camp Jupiter.

That way, they would also have more people to fight monsters with, and with the amounts they had to face these days, the more people they had, the better.

But the troupe was a mess, half of them scared out of their minds and paranoid, the other half boisterous and stubborn, and while it had gotten better (and more bearable), it was still difficult to work with them.

Their fighting styles also clashed wildly, since Hannah had adapted a more Greek and thus wilder style, just as Jason had, but the Romans refused to do anything but what they had learned, which often led to confusion and chaos in battle and did more damage to them than the monsters.

With all of that, Andrew and the others were convinced it would be wiser to first drop the troupe off at Camp Jupiter and look for Nemesis on the way back, since it technically wouldn't be a detour.

Nico and Will had stayed out of it so far, though Percy was fairly certain Nico agreed with them, seeing as he was still unusually apprehensive and rather brisk with them whenever he had to talk to them.

What Will's opinion on the matter was, Percy had no idea.

He had no idea about anything regarding Will anymore, to be honest.

Will was just...odd, these days.

He didn't say much, and kept close to them, constantly touching, constantly holding them, constantly trying to get closer as if he wanted to crawl inside them, as if he was looking for something, though Percy didn't know what, nor how to give it to Will.

He healed without complaint, even if he had to patch Percy's arm up after nearly every fight, and he stayed with them throughout the nights, so Percy knew he had nothing to complain about.

But...it was still weird.

The softness of Will's touch was weird, the way he would look at them as if he was never going to see them again, the way he sometimes looked close to tears, but Percy didn't know why, or what to do to help him.

The only thing normal about all of this, was that Will wouldn't talk about what was bothering him, and that he would brush them off whenever they asked what was wrong – and if that wasn't sad, Percy didn't know what was.

His only explanation for Will's sudden change in behavior was Rin, but there was nothing he could say or do to help him in that regard.

He had attempted to talk to Will twice, vaguely about her, just to see whether he needed to talk it out or needed a shoulder to just...cry it all out. But Will had changed the topic both times and talked about their new team members and that everything would be fine in the end, so Percy had no idea what to say or do.

"Maybe we should split up." Jason mumbled quietly as they sat together at their little fire they had started, and Percy tore his gaze away from Ash and Hannah bickering about the dinner they were attempting to fix across from them, instead looking at the exhausted expression on Jason's face.

"Split up?" Nico asked dubiously, and Percy had to agree.

That sounded like a bad idea.

He glanced sideways at Will to see his reaction, and froze when he saw Will with a pale face and his hands balled to fists on his lap.

"Yeah. Maybe it would be better to just split up. Half of us would go with the troupe and get them
to Camp Jupiter, and the other half would look for Nemesis and get the signature. That would
distract and confuse the monsters, giving both parties a chance to cover some more ground and get
on. We had four fights today, Nico. Four. None of us are going to be able to keep this up for
much longer." Jason explained, and it sounded all reasonable and nice, but Percy was too
occupied with wrapping his arm around Will and trying to see what was wrong with him all of a
sudden.

"Will?" He whispered barely audibly, but Will only gave a small shake of his head and took a
rattling breath.

He seemed about to speak, but then Nico did, instead.

"I get that, but I'm against it, anyways. How would you even split us up, Jason? No, we have to
stick together, especially with all the battles. The more we are, the higher the chance we can beat
them. If we split up and there's an ambush the size of the ones today, we'll be screwed. Especially
the team that will be looking for Nemesis." He argued, and that seemed to settle the matter
immediately, since Jason promptly lifted his arms and fell silent, though his expression said he was
still contemplating that option in silence.

Percy wanted to ask Will whether he wanted to go to their tent with him, away from all the people
and the noise, and maybe to find out if something was wrong, but then, they got distracted by
Hannah and Ash yelling – not at each other, but at some person from the other troupe which had
apparently said something derisive about their dinner-in-progress.

When Percy looked back at Will, Will was between Jason and Nico and seemed to be dozing off,
his hands holding theirs tightly in his lap.

He looked a little lost, but that wasn't anything new these days.

Percy frowned, but pushed the ominous feeling in his stomach down.

He wasn't going to let anything happen to him, or them, or anyone.

Not this time.

***

"This is getting ridiculous. We are too big of a group to go unnoticed, that's the problem."
Andrew grumbled, and Nico grinded his teeth as he slashed through the last of the shadows and
watched them disintegrate into their dumb-ass black shards.

"Then what do you suggest?" Jason asked as Will buzzed around and collected the wounded to
get them into the medic tent with the help of Sara and Ash.

"We should split up. Have Percy and Will accompany the troupe to Camp Jupiter, and we go with
you for the contract. That way, we'll be able to cover much more ground, and Will can make sure
they get there alive. It makes sense." Andrew explained, and Nico wanted to snarl.

They were not splitting up!

He was not going to let his guys out of his sight, especially not Will, especially not since he hadn't
yet managed to talk to him alone!

"Then who'll keep us alive? Will is the only healer, Andrew." He pointed out with a tad more bite
than intended, but Andrew only threw him a pointed look.

"I am aware of that. That's why I said you should come with us, didn't I? You can open shadow
portals, can't you? So, if there's a really big surprise-attack and we wouldn't be able to make it,
you're our ticket to safety. Sure, it's more like a last-resort sort of thing, but that's what emergency
plans are for, aren't they? For emergencies. For all we know, the monsters wouldn't even know
we split up and just go after the troupe. Then we'll be fine." Andrew reasoned, and sometimes,
Nico wanted to punch him in the face.

So that's why he wanted to send Will with them.
Because the team fully well knew the monsters were mostly after him.

"Do you ever care about anybody but yourself and your own life?" He snapped at him, but found Jason grabbing his shoulder to keep him from advancing on the son of Athena.

"Hey, I'm just stating the facts. It's not my fault you're overprotective and scared that your boyfriends are going to snuff it the moment you're not there to keep watch. Even though you're the one others had to save."

The last remark was like a punch in the face, and Nico reacted accordingly – and punched Andrew right back, with his fist colliding with the boy's cheek and sending him into the ground.

"Holy shit." Liam breathed, then slapped his hands over his mouth and looked more scandalized at his own words than the fact Nico had just punched Andrew, but Nico couldn't care less as he snarled at Andrew and only didn't throw himself at him because Jason pulled him away harshly.

"Nico, stop it! No fighting within the group! Andrew, that was horribly uncalled for. Apologize, and don't you dare say anything like that again." He stated sharply, but Andrew didn't apologize in the slightest as he sat on the ground and cussed Nico out, his hands pressed to his wounded cheek.

"What do you think you're doing?! Will already has enough healing to do as it is, don't add to it, man!" Ash exclaimed horrified as they rushed to them and shot Nico a reprimanding look – before kicking Andrew in the side with a foot.

"And you ungrateful piece of shit better get off the ground and help set up the tents. You're on dinner duty tonight. Also, what did you say to Nico to make him punch you? If he punched you, you most definitely deserved it. But I want to know what it was, anyways, because that will determine whether I will have to punch you, too." They ranted and dragged Andrew off, and Nico was both glad and disappointed about it.

"Nico, he didn't mean it." Jason said quietly, but Nico only pulled himself free from his hold with a huff.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. I'll be setting up the tent. You go check up on Percy and Will, will you?" He said dismissively and walked off, and he could hear Jason sigh behind him, though he didn't turn around, and told himself he didn't care, either.

There was too much other stuff to worry about right now.

Like his talk with Will that still hadn't happened.

Or the monster attacks that seemed to worsen day by day.

Or the fact he was so damn tired he could just fall asleep while walking, and he was pretty sure that was part of why he was so easily aggravated these days.

He'd probably have to apologize to Andrew later – if Andrew apologized first, of course.

Nico was well aware Rin's death had partly been his fault, he didn't need Andrew reminding him.

Grumbling to himself, Nico began setting up their tent, only taking small comfort in the familiarity of it and the sense of home the interior and scent of his guys gave him.

***

It would be so easy, saying something.

Will pressed his head against the cool, smooth glass, looking out at the passing traffic as he listened to his boyfriends around him, talking about what to do next.

About the troupe, about the travel, about everything and nothing, about progress they weren't making and places Will paid no attention to.

It would be so easy.
All it would take was for him to turn his head and say 'Hey guys, I had this vision, and if we split up, nothing good will come of it.' and that would be all there was to it.

Will pressed against the glass so hard he felt as if he might break it, his eyes stinging with unshed tears.

He couldn't do it.

Why couldn't he just do it?

He wanted to tell them.

He wanted to tell them what he had seen, what would happen, what he didn't want to happen…

But he had already accepted it, hadn't he?

He had already told himself he'd fall, it would be okay, they would be okay…

But he was scared, okay?

He was scared, partly for himself, but for the most part, he was scared for his guys.

What would happen once he was gone?

He hadn't been able to save Rin, but he had to be able to protect them!

There had to be a way to save them from their fate, right?

They couldn't just…there was no way they could just…not like Rin…he couldn't lose them…

But if he was dead, he wouldn't be able to heal them.

If he died, that would be like the beginning of the landslide, and his guys would suffer from it, he had seen it.

He had tried to get Percy to be more careful, but Percy wasn't being more careful.

Nico was getting more and more agitated, and Will just knew he suspected something, but there was nothing Will could do!

And then there was Jason, struggling to keep everybody in line and get the teams together and moving, but things weren't working in his favor, and Will knew Jason needed him now, too.

He couldn't just die now.

But he couldn't make himself tell them.

He just sat there, listening to them talk, and he was scared, and he didn't want to die, and he didn't want to lose them, and he didn't want them to die, but all he could do was grab Percy's hand next to him and hold it tightly, taking comfort in his values, because it meant Percy was alive, because it meant Will was still alive, because it meant there was still a bit of time.

But time was running out.

Will squeezed his eyes shut, everything inside him screaming, though no words escaped his lips.

"What do you think, Will? About splitting up the groups?" Jason asked, and Will pursed his lips, licked over them, kept his eyes closed and wanted to be anywhere but here.

It would be so easy!

'We shouldn't do that.'

'Please don't.'

'If we split up, you're all going to die.'
"I… I don't really care. If you think it's a good idea…” He mumbled, instead, and he wanted to cry.

"It's a horrible idea!" Nico vented and probably even threw his arms up, but Will didn't open his eyes to check.

Instead, he pulled away from the window to slump against Percy's side, cursing himself to hell and back for being so stupid.

It would have been so easy.

***

The next time Will was faced with a perfect opportunity to fix everything, it was even easier.

"Will, I can clearly see something is bothering you. What is it, sunshine? What's wrong? Talk to us, Will. " Nico whispered as he kneeled in front of Will with his face in his hands, and Will promptly wanted to cry again, his boyfriend so pretty in the faint light inside the medic tent.

'Time is running out.'

'I don't want you to die.'

'I'm scared.'

'I don't want to die.'

Will put his hands over Nico's and closed his eyes, feeling his body tremble, before it fell still again.

"It's nothing. I'm just exhausted, that's all." He replied quietly, the words bitter on his tongue.

Nico tensed.

Then he sighed and leaned forward until their foreheads touched, even though Will refused to open his eyes.

If he opened his eyes, Nico would see his pain, his fear, everything, and while that was exactly what Will wanted, while he wanted nothing more than to just get it all out, he still kept them tightly shut and everything inside, unable to let them know.

"Why? Why are you doing this, Will? We both know that's not the truth. What is it that you aren't telling us? Don't you trust us? Me?" Nico whispered, and he sounded and felt so hurt, Will's heart ached and his mind screamed again.

"I do, love. I trust you. Of course I trust you. I'm just exhausted. And… scared. I don't want to lose you like I lost Rin, after all." He reassured him softly, and it wasn't a lie, but it also wasn't the whole truth, and he felt like a monster for doing this.

Nico stroked over his cheeks, but Will knew that he knew this wasn't all.

He also knew Nico would admit defeat this time, because Will had brought up Rin, and had brought up being scared, and Nico knew Will didn't like admitting to his fears, and he knew he couldn't argue this, not right now, not like this.

"Please talk to us, Will. Please. You're hurting, we all know it. Let us be there for you. Let us help." Nico whispered again, his voice soft and full of sadness.

Maybe because he knew Will wouldn't talk, and it was pointless.

And Will was going to die.

It was only a matter of time now.

It had always only been a matter of time.
Will felt his eyes brimming with tears and wasn't sure whether to keep them squeezed shut or to open them.

"I'm sorry." He replied weakly, and Nico wrapped his arms around him and held him tightly, though whether he thought Will was crying because of Rin, or whether he knew Will was crying because he couldn't tell them, he didn't know, and he would be damned to ask.

They sat on the floor in the medic tent, surrounded by healing patients, and Nico was comforting him in all the ways Will didn't deserve.

It would be so easy to tell him.

Will sobbed, instead, and Nico was none the wiser.

It would have been so easy.

***

"Okay, I say we vote. Everyone in favor of splitting up, please lift your hand." Jason announced, and Will's heart ached when nearly all hands shot up.

"You're excluded from voting." Jason told Reyna's troupe sternly, and they all groaned and complained, but put down their hands once more.

Will still knew what side won.

Sara, Liam, Andrew and Hannah had their hands in the air.

Ash, Percy and Nico had their arms crossed.

Will wanted to cry as everything inside him demanded him to scream and yell and get them to see reason.

Will was the one sealing the majority and raising his hand slowly into the air, watching with aching heart how Percy looked at him incredulously, and Nico's mouth fell open in disbelief.

Jason lifted his own hand as well, and Will successfully kept his tears in as he gave his guys an apologetic smile.

"It simply makes more sense." He said quietly, though it was a lie.

Everything was a lie.

Will turned around and left the moment the others started discussing who would go and who would stay.

He didn't need to stay and listen, he already knew what would happen.

And he had just signed his own death sentence.

He had just signed his guys' death sentence.

He was a monster.

***

Will held them closely, for what felt like the last time.

It might as well be.

He held them, and he cried to himself, soundlessly, as he had learned by now.

He stroked through Percy's hair, knowing it had the perfect length and cut now.

He touched Jason's head at the spot he had healed all so long ago, wishing he had taken him on
some dates when he had had the time.

He caressed Nico's cheek, marveling at the beauty of his sleeping face.

This was their last night together.

Their last.

To them, it was their last night before they would split up and Nico and Jason would take Liam, Andrew and Sara with them to search for Nemesis, and Percy, Will, Ash and Hannah would take Reyna's troupe back to Camp Jupiter, to meet up afterwards.

To Will, it was their last night before he would die, and everything would be as it had to be, no matter if he liked it or not.

Will felt the bile rising in his throat and pulled away from them, unable to stay, unable to lay still, unable to breathe.

He got up and started pacing, pulling at his hair and crying to himself, rushing over to the desk three times just to push the drawer with the pens and papers shut each time once more.

What point would a letter make?

What would he even write?

'I am sorry, guys. '?

'Nothing will excuse this, and I know you'll hate me for doing this to myself, but you need to understand. '?

'Please know that I love you with all that I have. '?

There was nothing to write, nothing to say, nothing to do and nothing, nothing, nothing. nothing.

Just. Nothing.

Will curled up next to the small water fountain and rocked back and forth to calm himself, though it didn't really help.

He would die.

He would die, and then Percy would fall apart, and Nico would try to get him back, and Jason would blame himself.

They would be so hurt.

They would be so hurt, and they would keep getting hurt, and Will wouldn't be able to help them, heal them, fix them, be there for them.

Will sobbed and rushed out of the tent before he woke his guys, the cool air hitting him like a punch in the face, but that was okay, he deserved it.

He rushed to the medic tent and curled up there, panicking, dreading, crying and freaking out, but in the end, once it was all out, he found a new sense of calmness as he laid sprawled on the floor and stared up at the ceiling his siblings had glued glow-stars on to give the patients something pretty to look at.

He stared up at the stars, and he felt empty and exhausted, but also, in a way, free.

Free of fear, free of the pressure he had put on himself, free of all the emotions he had kept inside all this time.

Will closed his eyes as his last tears dried on his skin and there were no fresh ones.

His last night with his guys.
He should be with them right now.

He should make the most of the little time he had left with them.

He should cherish them and kiss them and hold them and feel their values for the last moments his fate allowed him.

He should smile.

He had so rarely smiled the past days, weeks, because of this.

He should have smiled more.

These weren't only his last moments with his guys, but also their last moments with him, and they should remember him smiling, if he already had to die.

But how would he protect them?

How would he prevent their deaths when he couldn't even prevent his own?

Will got off the ground and left the medic tent, making his way back to the dark beauty that was their tent.

Their tent.

That his siblings had made for them.

His siblings, who he would never see again.

Will had known this when he had left the Camp, but it felt as if he only now realized what it truly meant, and he wished he had done more with them.

Had hugged them tighter when they had said goodbye.

Had laughed more with them when he had the chance.

Had been around them more when he still had time.

Will glanced around at the other tents, thinking of Sara and Liam, and of Andrew, and how they would say goodbye to him tomorrow, and they would smile and think they would see him again, yet it would be the last time they saw each other, too.

And he thought of Ash and Hannah, their troublemakers, and he hoped they would someday settle their foolish issues and become proper friends, so they could someday maybe be more, if they so decided to.

Will thought of Rin, and he thought of what Nico had said, about her telling him to tell Will she wasn't upset with him, that she had chosen to do this, and that it was okay.

She had taken her option to go to Elysium, and he was glad for it, but it also saddened him that she was gone, and her lifeless body in his arms was an image he would probably never get out of his head.

She had chosen that, she had said.

He hadn't chosen this. He had accepted it, though he kept wishing he could change it, could fight it, could prevent it somehow.

Will entered their tent again, glad to find his guys still fast asleep.

They were all huddled up under their blanket, exactly how he had left them, and exactly how they should be.

They should always be together.

Should always be there for one another.
Should always be happy and safe and alive and well.

Will moved towards their bed as if in trance, back where he was before, touching their faces, stroking through their hair, caressing them gently, timidly, carefully.

Scared of waking them.

Scared of losing them.

Scared of letting them go.

Will sat there and watched them and wished and dreamed and dreaded and wished, until they began shifting, until they began waking, and then he pushed down everything negative, everything that had no place here, on their bed, on their last morning together.

Will smiled at them brightly.

"Good morning, sweethearts." He greeted them softly and kissed them and hugged them and held them for those five minutes longer that Nico always insisted on, and he wished they would never have to leave this tent, and would never have to start the day, and he would forever be here with them on their last morning, yet never be forced to leave them.

But he knew.

They didn't know, but he did.

And even though he smiled his brightest smiles and said his sappiest lines and professed his love more times than he could count, nothing helped the dark pull inside him, the guilt that gnawed at him from the inside, hollowing him out more and more as the sun rose in the sky.

Their last morning.

Will held them tightly.

***

"Are you sure about this?" Percy asked, and it would be so easy for Will to say no, to tell him to call it off.

He only had to break down and cry now, and he knew Percy would go to hell and back to get Jason to call everything off and not split up.

But there were no tears coming, and Will found himself nodding.

"Of course." He lied, and it was sickening how used he was to lying by now.

He was fidgeting, same as he had all day already, and he kept opening and closing his mouth with no words coming out, wanting to tell them, wanting to get it out, but nothing came, and it was too late.

The groups were already splitting up, the Romans getting into proper traveling formation, Hannah and Ash supervising them, and Jason and Nico were talking to Sara, Liam and Andrew about their tents, food, and which areas to explore first.

Jules-Albert was standing at the side, gazing at Will disapprovingly, but Will tried to ignore him.

This was it.

Will felt the adrenaline rushing through him, but at the same time, he felt more drained than ever before, and wished he could just slump against his guys and drag them down to the ground with him and hug them until the end of time.

Instead, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"I guess this is it." Jason said quietly as he came over, and Will gave a weak nod.
"Be careful. And take enough stops to rest, but not too many, so the monsters don't catch up. Try to stay out of the way, take some detours, leave some traps, and get to Camp Jupiter as fast as possible." Nico lectured them, his statements contradicting each other entirely, but Will knew how it was meant, and he smiled at him softly.

His Nico. His wonderful, perfect Nico.

"Of course, team mom." He teased him with nothing but affection in his voice, and Nico shot him that wonderfully dark and decidedly not-scary look that Will wished he could print out and keep with him forever.

"Nico is right. Take good care of yourselves and each other, okay? We'll meet up as soon as possible after you dropped them off. It will take a week, two at most." Jason assured them, and he looked nervous and uneasy, though it had partly been his idea, and he had supported it.

Will didn't want to think of the guilt his boyfriend would feel later for this very thing. Instead, he smiled at him and reached out to wrap his arms around those broad shoulders, wishing he didn't have to let go.

"You'll be okay. Promise me to look after them, yeah?" He whispered, but he didn't mean their team, and he didn't mean right now.

Jason didn't know that, though, and he agreed readily.

Nico and Jason held him, and then they let go, and Will felt his heart lurching and his mind spinning, though he knew he had readied himself for this very thing all day long already, same as the past days, the past weeks, the past months.

Ever since the first time he had seen that vision.

They let go, and they said goodbyes to Percy, and he watched them joke and smile and laugh and look at him with affection and love in their gazes, and their goodbye was a positive one, one that said 'I will see you again', one that was confident everything would be okay.

And Will was ready to do the same, but then they turned away from him, and he felt lost, and he felt scared, and he wanted to reach out and pull them back and keep them here.

Will stood there and watched them go, and with every step they took away from him, the tears came back to him, the dread, the feelings, the pain.

He watched them go, and he watched and watched and watched, and it was like his vision all over again, his second one, where he was nothing, where he only existed to see what was happening to them, and he wanted to run after them, but his legs didn't budge.

They looked around again, and there was his chance, he could tell them to stop, he could tell them he had changed his mind, he could tell them they couldn't do this.

Will didn't move, and didn't speak, and Percy waved for them both, unaware this would be the last time the four of them were together.

Jason and Nico waved back, also unaware, and then they turned away again, and Will started trembling.

This was it.

This was it.

Will closed his eyes, as if that made it any better, any less real, any less painful, but he started shaking more and more, but he was alone, Percy didn't notice, because Percy had turned away from him, too, to talk to somebody else, he wasn't looking at Will, and Jason and Nico were leaving, and Will would never see them again, and they would never know…
"Stop them." He whispered faintly, barely audibly, and he felt his hands shaking as he hid his face in them, unable to believe he had said it, though Percy didn't seem to have heard.

This was wrong.

All about this was wrong.

He couldn't do this.

He had thought he could do this, but he had been wrong.

He couldn't, couldn't, couldn't!

"Sun-bug?"

"Please." He whispered, pleaded, and Percy's hand found his shoulder, but he couldn't take it, and he brushed it off immediately again as he started sobbing.

"Will? What's wrong? Hey, they will be okay." Percy tried to reassure them, and Will wanted to scream.

"Stop them. Please." He whispered barely audibly, and Percy looked at him in confusion, his eyes big and not understanding as he leaned closer to hear him.

"Will, what is it? You need to speak louder, I can't…"

"Wait!" Will cried out, instead, and Percy jumped, as did a few of the people around them, but Will didn't care, his feet now deciding to move, after Nico, after Jason, after his boyfriends that had disappeared behind the trees, that had disappeared out of his sight, that were disappearing out of his life, because he was going to leave theirs.

And he couldn't take it.

He stumbled after them, and Percy was moving along with him, confused and bewildered, but he didn't stop him, and Nico was the first to turn and sense something was off, before both he and Jason came hurrying back to them to meet them midway.

"What's…" Jason started, but then Will already collided with them both, and he sobbed, and he bawled, and he shook so badly he could barely stand as he kept his arms tightly around them, around them both, so tightly it hurt both him and them, but he couldn't stop it, couldn't stop himself, and he was falling apart, and his mind was empty, but his tears didn't stop.

"Will, what's going on? What's wrong? Hello?" "Will, breathe."

Nico and Jason both talked, confused and worried, but he shook his head wildly and kept them close, unable to breathe, unable to pull away, unable to let go, because letting go meant letting them go.

"You can't. You can't. Don't. Please." He pleaded with them, knowing he was selfish, knowing he was cruel, but he couldn't do this, he couldn't take this, he just couldn't! He suddenly started crying as soon as you left." Percy explained behind him in a quiet voice, but Will only kept shaking his head and kept them close.

He couldn't do it.

Anything. He would do anything if only this didn't have to happen.

Please.

Anything to let his guys live.

Please.

"You can't go. Please. If you go…if…if you go…I…I…"
"You what? Will, what's wrong?" Nico pushed, and it was that push that made Will pull back, that made him howl in misery and despair, that made him clutch his head as he realized what he was doing, what he was doing to himself, what he was doing to them.

"I'll die!" He nearly screamed at them, and that was it, it was out, everything was out, and he had ruined it, he had ruined everything, this was going to have consequences, they were going to pay for this, and it was his fault, it was all his fault.

There was a deafening silence around him as he stared wide-eyed at the ground at their feet, and he wasn't crying anymore, the shock of what he had done too great to allow for tears.

They were silent.

So silent, Will would have thought they weren't there, but he could still see their feet, and he could feel them being there, but they were just as shocked as he was, maybe even more so, though for different reasons, he imagined.

"You'll...you'll...you're kidding. Tell me you're kidding." Nico said, and his tone was as desperate as it was pleading, and Will wished he could tell him what he wanted to hear.

He shook his head.

"I'll die. There's this...this field. And the pit. And Percy would fall, but I promised him I won't let him fall, and I couldn't let him fall, and I...I...I had to. There was no other way. I...I..." He tried to explain himself, and heard Percy's sharp intake of breath behind him, but his focus was on Nico in front of him, who was shaking his head rapidly and took a step back.

"No..." Nico whispered, then whispered it again and again, chanting it weakly to himself as his face paled even further.

Jason simply stood there and stared at Will, as if he saw him for the first time.

Will looked back down at the ground, unable to find any words, unable to do anything with himself, unable to believe he had just ruined everything.

"How long have you known?" Jason asked, and his voice was empty, hollow, and Will ached with the need to make him understand, but he couldn't find the words.

"A while..." Will whispered, and felt Percy reeling behind him, the sensation so intense he felt himself nearly losing his balance, too.

Nico snarled something, then he was in his face, grabbing the front of his shirt and pulling him forward as if he was going to beat him up.

"A while?! A WHILE?! You knew it all this time, Will! You knew it, and you could have told us, and you didn't?! I asked you! I asked you, Will! I asked you what was bothering you, and you didn't tell me! You even told Jason to go ahead and split up! YOU KNEW IT ALL THIS TIME!" He yelled, and Will felt a flash of fear, but then there was only Nico's pain and disbelief and horror, and Will wanted nothing more than to make him understand and to apologize and to give him anything he wanted and needed to be okay again.

"Let him go, you're hurting him." Jason said quietly, but Will felt more hurt when Nico shoved him away and bit his own knuckles in a faint attempt to calm himself.

"Oh, I'm hurting him, am I now? And what about him, trying to actively get himself killed, huh? Falling, he says. Falling. You know what that means, Jason. He was fucking going to...to...I can't...he just..." Nico bit his lip and turned away sharply as the tears began rolling down his cheeks, and Will wanted to comfort him, but he knew his touch wouldn't be appreciated right now.

"I'm sorry." Will whispered weakly, though it wouldn't solve anything, and it wouldn't take away their pain.

"Oh, I bet. So, what changed your mind, huh? What made you realize you should maybe tell us
about this, huh?” Nico snapped at him as he whirled back around to face him, and Will forced himself not to look away, even though Nico's gaze was full of resentment and anger.

He deserved this.

He deserved all of this.

"I thought I could do it. When it first happened, I...I thought I could do it. It would be okay, because this was what was meant to happen, and if it meant you were safe, I would be okay with this." He explained weakly, knowing they wouldn't understand, but they deserved the truth, didn't they?

They had deserved the truth all this time.

Nico huffed loudly, though it was interrupted by a loud sob.

"But I can't. I...I saw what would happen afterwards. How you...suffered..." He continued, and Nico made a weak sound.

"Oh, you don't say?! I wonder why we would possibly suffer after losing our boyfriend!" He snarled weakly, countless sobs shaking his body as he slumped against Jason further, who kept his arms around him and still stared, his face pale, his expression unreadable.

"It wasn't supposed to be like that, okay?! I wanted you to be happy, I wanted you to live, but you just...just...wouldn't move on! You chose not to! Percy would keep blaming himself, you would keep trying to get my soul, and Jason would keep trying to keep you together and throw himself away in the process!" Will exclaimed weakly, gesturing with his arms wildly as words failed him, but they didn't understand, and Nico only seemed to become angrier by the second.

"We love you! What did you think would happen when you just suddenly die?!" Nico yelled back at him, and Will howled and crouched down and grabbed his hair and wanted to scream.

"You were supposed to live! You were supposed to get over it, because it was just me, and you were supposed to stay together and make it through this and go to New Rome and have a house and jobs and pets and kids and be this happy family! I wanted you to live!" He exclaimed and buried his face at his knees, and Nico let out a string of incoherent words that weren't meant to make any sense as he shook his head wildly.

"You are the worst! This is not okay! This is...this is not okay. Jason, tell him this isn't okay. Tell him! Tell him he's...he's...he's a fucking idiot! The worst idiot. Tell him!"

Jason didn't say anything, and Nico sobbed again as he grabbed his shirt and tried faintly to rattle him, though Jason didn't even move an inch.

"Tell him he's a fucking idiot and that I hate him! Tell him! Look at him, Jason! Look at him! He has the indecency to say he's sorry! He's sorry! Now! After knowing all this time! He's telling us this now, because we die. That's his issue, isn't it? That we die? That life doesn't work out the way he wants it to for us. YOU NEVER ASKED ME WHAT I WANTED IN MY LIFE!" Nico first said to Jason, then suddenly turned and yelled at Will, who howled in response and pushed himself back to his feet to take a step back.

"Did you ever stop to think about what I would have to say to this? What Jason and Percy had to say to this? You see yourself dying, and you decide you don't mind, because hey, it's just you?!! When have we ever made you feel like you aren't our fucking everything?! I would have done anything for you, Will! ANYTHING! And I wanted you with me in New Rome, you fucking piece of shit! You were supposed to be with us, then! You were supposed to live with us and find that house with us and finish college with us and get pets and kids and whatever the fuck you wanted! HOW COULD YOU, WILL?!"

"What in the name of Tartarus is going on here?" Andrew asked in utmost confusion, somehow having appeared next to them, and his appearance made all four of them jump, and Nico and Will both howled in reply to his words.

"Go. Tell the others there's been a change of plans. Get the tents set up. We're not splitting up."
Jason ordered, and Andrew looked ready to argue, but then he didn't, too thrown off by their pale faces and Will and Nico's behavior.

"This is not okay. Will, this is anything but okay. No. No. Not okay. At all. I trusted you. I TRUSTED YOU!" Nico yelled at him, but he deserved it, and he merely stood there and let him yell and shove him away, and then, he watched Nico whirl around and storm off.

Jason looked after Nico, then he looked back at Will, pain and disappointment in his gaze that hurt just as much as Nico's words and actions.

And he knew he had lost him, too.

He had lost them both.

He would lose them all.

"We'll talk later." Jason said quietly, then turned to follow Nico, too, and Will's shoulders slumped as he watched them go.

They were leaving, but they weren't leaving. They were merely leaving him.

Will's heart ached, and he sobbed without tears.

Percy shifted behind him, but Will didn't turn around.

"You should go with them." Will whispered with closed eyes as he felt everything inside and around him swirling.

He was losing them.

He was keeping them, but he was losing them.

Percy didn't move behind him.

"Don't you hate me, too? Go, Percy. It's okay." He added, pushing Percy away before Percy could leave him like they had, but Percy still didn't move.

"They don't hate you, Will. They're hurt." He said softly, but Will didn't know how to deal with that, so he did the sensible thing and took a step away from Percy.

"So are you. Go."

"I'm not leaving you, Will. I promised I'd always be by your side, and I intend to keep that promise. I don't agree with what you've done, and I wish you would have told us sooner, make no mistake, but I don't think leaving you alone would do any of us any good right now." Percy replied and stepped closer to him again, though Will shook his head stubbornly and wrapped his arms around himself.

Percy covered the leftover distance and moved his hand on Will's shoulder – and Will didn't know how much he needed that gentle touch until he felt it, and the next moment, he was in Percy's arms, clinging to him and sobbing and bawling again, though he shouldn't have any tears left inside him.

The world was a mess around them, and the monsters would come again, and he had messed up, and everything was horrible.

But his boyfriends would live, because he wouldn't die, and he would keep them alive with all that he had.

He had lost them, but he had saved them, and it hurt, but it was okay, because it was what he had wanted, right?

He had begged for a different way, a way that would let them live, that would let him be able to
keep them alive.

It didn't matter what was asked in exchange.

He had lost them, but they would live, and that was good enough for Will.

Chapter End Notes

(Edit: *** marks new ones at the time of the chapter)

PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:

http://sta.sh/055hx09e5r9 - perfect depiction of Kyle ;)
http://sta.sh/0lh2pt887zf - adorable Will with flowers <3
http://sta.sh/02xyi0gpdx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3
http://sta.sh/0qy61ka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing how cute Will is ;)
http://sta.sh/01m8rr04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will ;)
http://sta.sh/01b1irqkgjh - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3

- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well >;

- A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater!! <3
- Will with blanket <3
- THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE FROM THE LAST SEQUEL!!!!!!!!!

***THE TEAM!!!! THE WHOLE TEAM!!!! I AM FOREVER IN AWE AND GRATEFUL AND AM ORDERING Y'ALL TO LOOK AT THIS RIGHT AWAY!!!!! PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THE GODS DO IT!!!!!!!

***A super cute redraw of our Will in his comfort sweater!! :D (Also, my new phone background XD)***

https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you
- A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy, challenge-loving dorks <3

http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patreon-tari
- Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3
- Nico in his winter outfit :)
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-commission-for-my-amazing-patron
- Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163998940481/jason-grace-gracing-us-
with his smugness - sorry :i
- Jason and the leather jacket :D

I also commissioned some pieces from the amazing Ari/Bex :)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-mel-chan366
- New Years from Advent Calendar times :)  
- Our dorks in Christmas sweaters!! :D  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-for-mel-chan366
- The guys in their outfits from Persephone :)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-mel-chan366-now-i
- Ice cream time :)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/156557714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-chan366-3-3-some
- <3  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160990996944/another-of-my-may-madness-commissions-a-fabulous
- The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss :)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-ever-fabulous
- ...Boxer Shorts XD :)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164308263854/let-me-just-take-this-time-to-say-that
- The guys admiring Jason in his leather jacket :)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164426408554/another-fun-very-colourful-commission-for
- Pride :)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-mel-chan366-3
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love them too much not to share them :)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-commission-for
- Jercy Soft Kiss <3  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164389230829/an-adorable-sketch-commission-for-mel-chan366
- Solangelo Date <3

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my firstborn child :) (Mostly because there won’t be one. Sorry. But you can have a cookie?)
A/N: Hey Cupcakes!

As promised, here the next chapter.. :3

Thank you so much for all the wonderful feedback so far, and I apologize in advance for this chapter. Make sure to check the Trigger Warnings before you begin reading.

Also: Special thanks again to my wonderful beta-reader and friend, who is and will always be the best ;)

Wish you all the best,
-Tári

Trigger Warnings:
- Angst
- Aftermath of Arguments (Doubts, Regrets, Fears, Disappointment, Anger, Resentment, Guilt, Avoidance, Loss)
- Bit of Transphobia
- Mention of suicide/intent of suicide
- Relationship angst in general
- Battles (Graphic Depiction of Violence, Fighting and Injuries)
- Possible MC Death

Seriously, this doesn't sound too bad, but it kinda is, I just don't know how to warn of what's to come. At any rate, read at your own risk, or shoot me a message to write you a watered down summary.

On the bright side, there's new Fanart though. It always helps me to look at pretty art to recover from all the angst, so maybe it will help you, too. Links are in the Chapter Notes at the end.

Chapter 06: The Consequences Of Our Actions

When Percy woke up in the morning, his muscles ached and his neck felt like it would break any moment, and Will was still curled up in his lap and fast asleep, clinging to him as if he was scared Percy would leave him, too.

He wouldn't.

Percy turned his head this way and that as he glanced around the medic tent, partly glad he had managed to coax Will into it at some point last night, but also regretting that he hadn't managed to get him back to their actual tent.

He wondered how Nico and Jason were faring.

It was strange to realize they hadn't come looking for them, but at the same time, Percy couldn't say he was surprised.

He gazed down at his boyfriend, his wonderful, but also horrible boyfriend.

Oh Will.

Percy sighed and stroked over his back slowly, trying not to think of last night, though his mind wandered there, anyways.
Why?
Why had Will not told them?
How long had he known?
Percy guessed it didn't matter anymore now, but a part of him still wanted to know.
A part of him wanted to understand.
Understand why Will hadn't said anything, why he had just accepted his death like that, why he hadn't even tried to fight it until the last possible moment.
But they had told him, right?
They had told him that they loved him, they had told him how important he was to them, how much he meant to them, how much they wanted and needed him in their lives, with them.
Had he forgotten that? Had he not believed them? Did he not realize how much he meant to them?
How could he possibly know he'd die and just…accept it? Work towards it, even?
Percy didn't understand.
But it didn't matter.
What mattered, what really, truly mattered, was that Will had told them last night, before they had split up, before it had been too late, before they had lost him forever.
He should have told them right away, should have not kept that to himself, same as he shouldn't have kept so many other things to himself, but at least he had told them at all, and now they knew, and they wouldn't let it happen, and they could keep him with them.
That was Percy's way of thinking, anyways.
Of course he was hurt.
Of course the thought of Will dying, of knowing he would have died, and of Will dying because of Percy, made Percy sick and his heart ache and his head spin, but Will had told them, and he might have done so late, very late, but at least he hadn't let it happen, no matter if he had intended to let it happen before.
Will stirred slightly, a frown appearing on his face as his hands started moving all over Percy, either enjoying the feel of his skin or taking in his values, and Percy wasn't surprised when they started glowing a moment later, followed by the pain in his body subsiding – at least the physical pain from his sore muscles.
"Good morning, sun-bug." He whispered quietly, and Will opened one still-puffy eye to look up at him as he remained with his face at his shoulder, his blue eyes dulled and full of guilt and pain.
He didn't return the greeting, instead sniffling again.
Percy wrapped his arms back around him properly to keep him close, wishing Jason and Nico were with him right now so they could let Will know it was good that he had told them.
But neither of them were here, so all Percy could do was hold Will tightly and try to comfort him as best as he could.
What a horrible start into the day.

***

"You do know he thinks that you hate him, right?" Percy asked quietly, and Nico turned his head away, pushing around the food on his plate without actually eating anything.
"I don't care." He snapped back sharply, though he very much cared.

Will.

Gods, never had he wanted to rattle somebody so badly.

Rattle and shake him and get a brain into that pretty, but stupid head!

How could somebody be so smart, yet so groundbreakingly stupid?!

Nico had never felt so angry before.

He had also never felt so hurt before.

Jason was silent next to him, same as he had been for the majority of last night.

While Nico had yelled and vented and screamed and cried and cursed Will to hell and back, Jason had just sat on the bed and suffered in silence, letting him get it out of his system until Nico had slumped into his arms and sobbed until he had apparently passed out at some point.

"He thinks you're going to break up with him." Percy said quietly, and Nico already opened his mouth to tell him damn right he would, but then he couldn't make himself say it, because that wasn't what he wanted.

He wanted Will to grow a brain, that was what he wanted.

He wanted Will to understand!

He wanted him to actually realize what he had done, what he had been willing to do, what this would have meant to them, because how dare he just do this to them?!

And Nico had asked him! He had asked him what was bothering him, even though Jason had told him not to push Will!

But he had pushed Will, yet Will had dared to brush him off, had told him it was nothing, and that everything would be fine!

Lies!

Will had lied!

Straight-out fucking lied, to him, to his face, he had just looked at him and lied.

And Nico had trusted him.

Nico had trusted him, and he had trusted Will to trust them, and Will had known he would die, and he hadn't said a single thing.

He had carried that knowledge around with him all this time, and it was just so sick, so wrong, Nico couldn't deal with this!

All this time.

Will had known all this time.

A field. A pit.

Nico remembered that.

Nico had been so stupid.

Nico should have known.

He had seen that place, in Will's dream, and it hadn't made sense to him, but he hadn't asked Will about it, and he hadn't comprehended.
How had he not realized?

Why had Will not told him?

Why had Will just…just…

Nico shoved his plate away and got up.

"I don't care." He repeated, spat it at Percy, and he felt a stab of guilt when Percy flinched back, though Nico still stomped off, anyways.

Away from Percy, away from breakfast, away from people, away from everything.

Where even was Will?

Then again, what did he care?

Will clearly didn't care how much they cared about him, since he had been one fucking step away from dying, but hey, no big deal!

He stormed into their tent, just daring Will to be in there – but he wasn't, yet Nico wasn't happy or relieved about it.

In fact, it only made him even more angry and hurt.

Why was he not here?!

Was this not their tent?!

Did he not want to 'talk this out' with him? Apologize for his fucked up actions and the even more fucked up reasoning?

He hadn't told them because he had realized what he would have fucking done to them with that.

He had told them because he had seen the apparently impossible, namely that they would be fucking upset, and Nico was so fucking done with him!

The tent opened behind him, and he whirled around to be ready to snap at Will, but it wasn't Will, it was Jason.

It wasn't Will.

Where was Will?

So, what, first he was ready to die, lying to them and acting as if everything was just peachy, then he finally came out to them, and now he didn't even show up anymore to see how much he had hurt them and to understand what he had done?!

Coward.

Will was a coward.

Nico felt the tears pricking in his eyes and rubbed at them furiously, before stomping over to their closet and ripping it open, tempted to tear out Will's clothes and throw them out, but instead, he merely grabbed one of Jason's sweaters and pulled it over his head.

He wasn't even inside it properly when he slammed the closet shut and let his head fall against it with a muffled thud.

Will was a freaking idiot.

This was not okay, okay?

He couldn't just…how could he have just…didn't he know how much they loved him?

How much Nico loved him?
Death was always just a step away for them, but to consciously…to *knowingly* work towards his own end? When he so well knew how much it would hurt them?

Nico didn't understand.

"I'll go and explain our change of plans to the rest of the team." Jason told him quietly and tugged the sweater down cruelly, forcing Nico's head back out into the open and urging him to face the messed up world around him once more.

"He joked about it, Jason. All these times he talked about dying and said stuff like 'What are you gonna do once I'm not there anymore, huh?'. He wasn't joking. He knew. He knew all this time." He whispered instead of replying, and he should be angry, but really, he just felt…hollow.

"I know." Jason said quietly behind him, and Nico turned around and reached out with his arms. Jason was there in an instance, hugging him, holding him, allowing them both to weep without their tears being seen.

Will was the worst.

***

"I can't tell you what you want to hear, Jason." Will said, and he sounded tired and exhausted, sitting at the edge of their makeshift camp and keeping watch for any monsters or mortals.

Jason wasn't surprised he knew it was him coming closer, not anybody else, same as he wasn't surprised about Will's blunt statement.

"What is it you think I want to hear?" He asked with a level voice as he pushed himself to keep going and close the distance so he could sit down next to Will.

He wasn't sure what to think or what to do, but he knew he had to at least attempt to talk it out. If talking things out actually did anything.

Jason wasn't sure anymore.

Jason wasn't sure about anything anymore.

"You want me to tell you that I'm sorry and that I wouldn't do it again. That, if I had another vision that showed me dying, I'd go to you and tell you about it immediately, so you can prevent it from happening. But that's not me, Jason. That's not what I'd do." Will said, and his words were as cruel as they were true, and Jason swallowed as he tried to push down the bile in his throat and the ache in his chest at the images Will was putting back into his head.

"Why not?" He asked, instead of all the other things he wanted to say, because the other things weren't nice and wouldn't get them anywhere, but this was something he had to know.

"Where there is death, there will always be death. If I don't die, somebody else will, in my place. I have now prevented this reality from happening, but there will be consequences for it, Jason. I don't know what that will be, but I know I'll accept it as it is, as long as it means you'll live."

That was his only concern, wasn't it?

"Have you asked us whether that's what we want?" He asked carefully, instead, and Will shifted next to him, though he made sure not to touch Jason.

Jason gazed at him a moment longer, taking in his reddened eyes and his disheveled state, as well as the fact he was still wearing the same clothes from yesterday.

Then he looked away, off into the distance, and opened his mouth again.

"I still remember this one time we talked. And you looked at me and complained about Percy being the way he always is, and how you would expect him to do this thing, but he'd do
something else entirely. How you never knew what to expect. Do you remember what I told you?” He asked, though that conversation felt like it had happened years ago.

"You told me not to expect things. Jason, I didn't expect you to be okay with it. With anything. I knew you'd be hurt and I knew you'd probably mourn me, but…"

Probably.

"Will, you just decided that it was fine for you to die, as long as we live. You expected us to simply accept it as it is, just as you did, and to move on. You said it yourself.” Jason cut in, and felt his chest ache in pain at the memory of Will's words.

"That's what people do! They move on! It was just me, Jason, it wasn't supposed to tear you three apart the way it had!” Will exclaimed agitatedly, and Jason had to bite his tongue not to snap at him.

He had to stay calm.

If he stayed calm, Will was more likely to listen, and he was more likely to understand.

Plus, if he stayed calm, he would be able to think better and not say anything stupid that would do more harm than good.

"So, if any of us died, you would simply move on, too?” He asked, though he already knew the answer.

'That's different.'

'That's different!'

Jason would have smiled if it wasn't so sad.

"It's not. We love you just as much as you love us, Will. When are you going to get that into your thick skull?"

"There are other healers. Other guys. You could have found somebody different if you really wanted to.” Will insisted, and that had to be the dumbest thing he had ever said.

Jason felt positively offended, but he forced himself to take a deep breath and first think over his reply a few times.

"Technically speaking, there are more fighters than healers at Camp, which means it would be a lot easier to replace one of us than you.” He then replied casually, and Will jumped up next to him, looking incredulous, hurt, and offended.

"NO!” He yelled, loud enough that the entire group must have heard, but nobody came to check on them, and Jason looked for any sign of monsters having heard, but there was nothing, so he merely looked up at Will with a serious expression.

"Exactly. That's how we feel right now, Will. You say you don't mind dying, as long as it means we live, but maybe we don't want to live without you? Nobody can predict the future, Will, and I know full well we might not all make it, and that there's a chance we die before we get to go to New Rome and live a happy, peaceful life. But, you know what the difference is, between that, and what you decided?” Jason asked, and Will looked like he wanted to leave, but then he didn't, instead sitting back down and fiddling with his hands, though Jason knew he was listening.

"Choice. We might die in battle, but it's our choice to join the battle and to fight for what's important to us. We might die, but it was our choices that led up to that. In your case, you didn't give us that choice. You just decided this was the best solution, because you thought it would keep us alive. I understand that part, Will. If I was faced with the choice of saving one of you by dying in your place, I'd choose that any day, because I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I just let you die like that. So I get that.”

"Then why are we even having this argument?” Will cut in, looking ready to fight, but Jason wasn't interested in fighting.
"Because I think you should have told us. Have you ever thought that you might have had that vision so you could change your fate? That the sole reason for that vision was that you prevented it from happening?"

"Jason, do you not understand? I wouldn't have changed it, if I hadn't been forced to see you die. Do you have any idea what happens when people mess with fate? It gets worse. They think they've gotten out of the bad stuff, and bam, something even worse happens. I wasn't going to stop my own death, just to have you all face the consequences for it. Forget it." Will argued, and Jason shook his head, wondering why he wouldn't understand.

"We would have faced any consequences willingly, if only it meant you stayed with us, Will. With all your expectations, how did you not expect that? The whole point of what I'm trying to say, is that we are supposed to be boyfriends, Will. All four of us. And that relationship is a choice, and I clearly remember us saying that we want to be there for one another, that we want to go through the good and the bad times together, Will. Together. How does running off to die by yourself relate to that in any sort of way?"

"That's marriage you're talking about, Jason! We're not married! If you haven't noticed, four guys can't even get married!" Will hissed agitatedly, but all Jason did was turn away from him, pluck a blade of grass, turn back to Will and grab his hand to tie the thing around his finger.

Will instantly fell silent, staring at him as if he had grown a second head.

"Same thing. Makes no difference. Here you go. Ring. We're married now. Fuck society. So, now, what part of we'll go through everything together do you not understand?" Jason asked and looked Will in the eyes, his hand still clasped in his own.

He hadn't noticed how much he had missed the feel of Will's warm skin, though he tried not to think of it, and tried not to let it distract him off his task.

"You're crazy."

"Don't make me tie grass around our boyfriends' fingers, Will. I will do it." Jason warned, and Will opened and closed his mouth with no words coming out.

"That's not how it works. That's not…"

"As I said. Fuck society. We had a deal, Will. We said we'd go through everything together. You signed the Ipod-contract. You agreed. We kept reminding you not to try carry all your burdens by yourself. This is what we were referring to, Will. You can't just decide for us." He reasoned, but Will still stared at him, so Jason guessed he had to resort to different means.

"Okay, let me put it into one of your horribly analogies. If you are on your way home and you stop by a pizza place to get us some pizza, then you're allowed to decide what to get for us without consulting us, because we've had so much pizza together by now, you'll know what to get. But if you're shopping for wedding cake, that's something we definitely need to be there for, too, and something you can't just decide for us. It may be your wedding, too, but it's also our wedding, and you can't just decide for us without actually consulting us. Yeah?"

"Where the fuck am I supposed to find a wedding cake?" Will asked dumbly, and Jason cupped his face in order not to grab his shoulders and shake him.

"Will. Focus. From now on, you put everything into perspective, and I don't care how much this disagrees with you. It's an early birthday wish and would make me very, very happy. Whenever you have to face the choice of 'Do I tell them or not', you will ask yourself: Is this pizza or is this wedding cake? If it's pizza, you should still tell us eventually, but as long as it's not life threatening, it doesn't have to be immediately. If it's wedding cake, you go to us right away. Got it?" He asked sternly, trying to put all of his authority into his voice and make Will understand, though he also noticed off-handedly how funny it felt to squish Will's cheeks together, and since his boyfriend was still staring at him incredulously, nobody could blame him for getting carried away a little with that.

"Stop that." Will mumbled, then pulled away from his hands, which was a shame, but Jason
guessed he shouldn't do things like that during a serious conversation such as this.

"Got it?" Jason repeated, and Will huffed.

"I guess. Though I stay by what I said. If I get a vision that shows what's going to happen instead, now, and it has me dying, but you living, I'm still going to do it. No matter what you say or do."

"Then I'm not worried in the slightest, because I'll tell Nico and Percy that, and, knowing this, you can rest assured any vision you have with us living after your death will be a lie." Jason retorted, and Will seemed to need a moment to catch the meaning behind Jason's words.

"You're not going to get yourself killed, Jason. Don't say something like that." He breathed, sounding horrorstruck, and finally, they were getting somewhere.

"Why not? You're so keen on it, after all. If you're allowed to throw your life away, why not us? Plus, once you're gone, it's not like you'll be in any position to stop us, right?" He asked nonchalantly, and Will looked ready to be sick.

"Don't. Jason, don't."

"Then don't die." Jason replied, but Will shook his head.

Stubborn fool.

"If it means you'll live-…"

"No."

"Jason!" Will exclaimed, but this time, Jason shook his head.

"We need you alive."

"Your ass needs me alive." Will snapped back, and Jason shrugged.

"That, too."

"Jason!"

Jason shook his head and snatched his hand again, pointing at the grass tied around his ring finger.

"Think of this, Will. This, and the wedding cake. And don't forget. Ever. Again."

"We're not married!" Will exclaimed, but Jason shrugged and got up.

"But I'll marry you one day. You, Percy, and Nico. Provided that you don't throw your life away along the way." He retorted, and Will gaped at him incredulously, apparently speechless once more.

Jason took it that his message was well received, so he leaned down to give his boyfriend a kiss to the side of his head.

"I'll be with Percy and Nico. He's still very upset, but you've hurt us quite a bit, so give him some time, okay?" He said quietly, and Will's expression turned grim again, though he nodded.

"He still loves you, Will. He's just very hurt. He spent half the night crying, and the other half venting. If I were you, I'd go to him." He suggested tentatively, knowing full well Nico yearned to see Will, even if he acted as if he wanted to murder him.

"He doesn't want to see me. But thanks. I guess. For...I don't know. Still being with me." Will mumbled, and Jason sighed and bent down to pluck some more grass.

"Remember our vows, Will. We're in this together. I'm still upset, and I'm not quite sure I can forgive you just like that, but I know your reasoning behind it, and you are smart enough to see ours. As long as you remember the wedding cake from now on, I'm sure we'll be able to work through it. All four of us." Jason said wisely, and Will's head snapped around as he walked away.
"We're not married!"

Of course not.

First, Jason would get them a nice, big house near a lake or the sea or something, and then they would get married.

But, until then, they first had to make it through this alive, and he dearly hoped Will would think twice before throwing his life away from now on, so the four of them could actually see that day.

Satisfied with his talk, and his belief of 'talking it out always helped' renewed and strengthened, he returned to Percy and Nico.

Time to tie grass around their ring fingers, too.

***

Percy walked in silence, knowing he was lagging behind slightly, but since Nico still refused to talk to Will, and Jason had fallen silent, too, it wasn't as if he missed anything, there.

Instead, he eyed the blade of grass around his ring finger, wondering what sort of talk Jason and Will must have had that had led to Jason declaring the four of them married on a whim.

It was an interesting thought, of course, and green looked fabulous on him, without doubt, but he had kind of thought they'd first go to New Rome together, before he would propose to them.

Typical of Jason to try and get there before him.

Percy would have at least gotten them proper rings first.

Not that he was really complaining. Green did look fabulous on him.

"You know what I don't get? If she's a lesbian, and you oh-so-accept that, why are you constantly ogling her like that? Hm?" He heard behind him, and glanced over his shoulder to see the self-declared leader of Reyna's troupe – Jack was his name, if he wasn't mistaken – talk to Ash, who looked as if they had just bitten into a lemon.

Then again, they had eaten an entire lemon just earlier without pulling a face, so Percy guessed that was a bad example to use.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, dude."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. You know, considering you're the one lecturing me that I don't have a chance with her because I'm a guy, it's interesting to see that you think you have chances with her."

"I'm not a guy." Ash replied with a shrug, and Percy knew gender was a touchy subject for Ash, so he decided to slow down a little further to listen in properly, ready to interrupt if necessary.

"Yeah, but not a girl, either. As you said, you're neither. You know, that doesn't mean you don't have a dick, though. I doubt Hannah would be interested in you if you did."

Okay, what the hell?

Percy looked over his shoulder with a disturbed frown, and found Ash looking rather confused.

"What…?"

"You know what I mean. Come on, do you have a dick, or do you not?"

"What's it to you, Jack? If you wanna compare sizes, I can assure you: You're the biggest dick around." Percy cut in smoothly and moved to put an arm around Ash, who looked positively disturbed, though at Percy's words, they huffed out a laugh, and the relief in their eyes was disturbing.
"What? I just wanted to know."

"Yeah, well, that's rude. We don't ask whether you have a dick, do we now, Ash?"

"Heck no. I don't even want to know." Ash immediately spat, and Percy gestured towards them with one hand and looked at Jack as if this explained everything.

"See? We don't care about what you got in your pants, because we don't want to bed you."

"I do not want to bed Ash."

"Good. Also, could you not talk about me when I'm literally walking two people behind you? What the hell is wrong with you?" Hannah put in as she caught up to them, throwing Jack a disgruntled look, though the fact she was out of breath indicated she had seriously hurried up to get here, which indicated she might have tried to save Ash from this conversation, as well.

Aww, they were growing on each other.

Percy was so proud of them.

"What? It's a legitimate question. If they had a dick, it would be my turn to lecture them to leave you alone, after all, right?" Jack reasoned, and Hannah looked so wonderfully disgusted, it was a delight.

"How so?"

Oh, he loved this girl.

"Erm, because you're a lesbian, duh?" Jack muttered, looking confused, and Hannah frowned as if she tried to decipher what he was saying.

"Yes? And? There are girls with dicks, too. I'm not not-dating you because you have a dick, dude. I'm not dating you because you are a dick. And because I don't feel romantically nor sexually attracted to men. That's simply all there is. Deal with it, and leave Ash out of it."

"But they're agender! You're not attracted to that, either!" Jack exclaimed agitatedly, and Percy made a face, tempted to trip him up so he would fall on his big mouth, but deciding to give Hannah a chance to speak up for herself.

"I can tell for myself who I'm attracted to, thank you very much. Now, if you excuse me, I have to go talk to Liam and rinse my soul off your soiled words. He is a true gentleman, and you would do well in learning to respect other people's privacy, choices and sexualities, without making everything your business. A good day." She quipped, and then, she disappeared between the people in front of them and towards Liam, who was looking around for monsters in concentration, his bow at the ready, though Percy also caught him glancing towards Sara every here and there with a small smile.

Jack grumbled and wanted to speak, but Ash was quicker as they grabbed hold of Percy's arm, looking at him with utmost excitement and joy in their gaze.

"Did you hear that, Percy?! Did you?! She didn't say she's not attracted to me! Do you know what that means?! Do you?! Percy, what if she actually likes me?!"

Oh dear.

Wasn't this what he had been telling them all this time?

"See? I told you that you could woo her with your poetry skills." He said with conviction, and Ash punched his shoulder playfully.

Ouch. They definitely hit harder than Will ever did.

"Ha-ha. I haven't told her any of my poetry. Gods forbid. She'd think I'm crazy."

"You are crazy, Ash. That's not a bad thing."
"Wait, so you think I should really show her my poetry?" They asked, their excitement seemingly making them reconsider Percy's words with a new perspective.

Percy gave them a long, telling look.

"Yes. Except the one where you describe her hair for, like, ten paragraphs. That's a little much to start out with. But maybe you could show her some of your general poems, see whether she likes them, and work your way up from there?" He suggested, and Ash looked ready to pull out their little notebook and make notes, though they luckily didn't.

"Okay. Got it. You know, I never really thought I'd get anywhere, but, hell, we even talked a few times the past days, Percy. It was amazing. Her voice is so nice. Especially when she's rambling. I still can't place her accent, though. Seriously, are you sure you can't ask her where she's from? I'm worried she'll misinterpret it if I ask." Ash rambled, and Percy was once more amazed by how much a person could change in a matter of seconds because of the person they were interested in.

"I'm positive. Just ask her, yourself. Let her know you're genuinely interested in her as a person. Who knows, maybe she has a question or two for you, too. Now, you at least know she doesn't care what your assigned gender was. You worried about that before, after all." Percy mused, and Ash looked so happy, it was as disconcerting as it was adorable.

"Yeah, but if she had asked, I'd have actually told her. Probably. This is better, though. Much better. Damn, Percy, I could kiss you, I'm so happy.'

Eh, maybe better not.

"Kiss Jack, instead." He mumbled and gestured over his shoulder, where Jack was visibly sulking with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Eww, no thanks. So, what's up with that grass around your finger? I take it that has a meaning to it? Did I miss something? Last time I checked, you four were fighting and we're traveling together because of that. So, now you're engaged?" They asked curiously, and Percy caught Jack craning his neck to see his finger.

Percy showed it off to both of them.

"Green looks fabulous on me, don't you think?" He said instead of replying, and Ash smirked and snatched his hand to 'inspect' his ring.

"Very fancy. I'm impressed. Yes, definitely your color and style. I mean, personally, I'd have chosen something more durable, but I suppose we can get you something better in the next city we pass."

"We are not going engagement ring shopping. You're supposed to get us back to Camp, not go on your honeymoon or some shit." Jack immediately put in, and Percy wondered whether there would always be a Dylan wherever he went.

If so, he wanted a place far away from others in New Rome, so there would be no neighbors he had to bother with.

"Get lost, Jack." Both he and Ash said at the same time, and they high-fived as Jack huffed and returned to his sulking behind them.

Of course, they wouldn't go ring shopping, and Percy knew they weren't actually engaged, but it was a nice thought, and he liked daydreaming of a time when they would be engaged, and would walk through the city together to look at rings and do all sort of stuff like that.

It was something nice to think about, and there weren't many nice things to think about these days.

First, Nico and Will had to somehow talk things out, though.

First, they had to be okay again, so the four of them would be okay again.

First, they had to get Will to understand how much they loved him.
First, they had to make it through this together, with all four of them alive and well.

First, they had to survive, then they could live.

Percy put his arm around Ash, looking back at the blade of grass around his finger, and he hoped they would all make it through this alive, and that this would be over soon.

"Just so you know, you're only invited to the wedding if you wear something super embarrassing."

"Now, that's just rude. I thought I'd come dressed up as pastor and spray every uninvited person with holy water. Not good?"

"Perfect. But where would the uninvited people come from?"

"Dude, don't ask me such difficult questions. I know I'm divine and all, but I'm no all-knowing god. Yet."

Percy laughed, and it felt so good, he wondered when the last time had been that he had gotten to laugh like this.

It also made him wonder when the last time had been that his guys had gotten to laugh like this.

He should work on that.

But first, Nico and Will had to work things out between them.

Until then, he could give Ash some more superb love advice, and they could keep telling him things that were bound to make his guys laugh.

Percy felt more motivated than he had in a long time.

***

Nico was still upset.

And Will still hadn't shown his face in their tent at all, even though the guys were talking to him and everything was oh-so-peachy.

Nico couldn't believe how quickly both Jason and Percy had apparently let this drop.

Will had practically tried to kill himself, yet Nico seemed to be the only one actually bothered by this?

Not only that, but Jason had apparently declared them married for some weird point he had wanted to make.

Not that Nico really minded, but still.

How did Will nearly killing himself deserve them getting married?!

Jason should tell him to get a grip on himself and stop being so stupid, then they could get married.

Before then, Nico wasn't going to say a single word to that idiotic guy with his idiotic freckles and his idiotic kicked-puppy-face that he had whenever he saw Nico.

Fuck that guy.

If Will didn't want to talk to him, then fine by Nico!

He had given him enough chances the past two days, after all.

He had waited in their tent, but Will apparently thought it beneath him to set foot in there anymore.
He had waited after their meals in case Will wanted to approach him, then, but Will had been one of the first to up and leave.

(Though Nico couldn't quite believe Percy and Jason had let that happen, considering Will had barely eaten anything. Had they not paid attention to that? Not that Nico cared, but Will was their only healer, so he had to eat enough to have enough energy to actually do the healing and such, okay?)

He had even tried slowing down during their travelling on foot, in case Will wanted to talk to him while on the move, but Will had either slowed down, too, to stay behind him, or sped up and rushed past him without a peep, so Nico guessed Will didn't care whether they talked or not.

He was still upset with him.

He would still yell at him and rattle him until he saw reason.

He still missed him so, so much.

Seriously, when would Will finally come to him?

Because Nico would not make the first move.

Will had fucked up. Will had been stupid. So Will had to come to Nico and apologize and make it up to him, not the other way around.

Percy and Jason might see that differently, but they apparently also didn't care as much as Nico did whether Will threw his life away or not, so they didn't count right now.

Nico still sulked, though, looking down at his hands unhappily as he sat on their bed, alone.

Percy had taken over the first watch for the night, and Nico made a wild guess that Jason was either with him, Will, or their team to discuss the plans for tomorrow.

They were slowly making progress, though the monster attacks were ridiculous by now.

Nico didn't mind a good challenge, especially since his rage and anger at Will made him a lot better in battle, apparently, but he knew how much of a strain it put on the rest of the team, as well as the troupe from Camp Jupiter, and he knew they wouldn't be able to keep this up forever.

It was a miracle there hadn't been more deaths by now, anyways.

But he guessed they had to thank Will for that.

The others had to thank him, that was. Nico refused to, because Will was an idiot, and the worst, and Nico hated him and loved him at the same time.

Why...why didn't he just come to Nico?

Nico balled his hands to fists and crossed his arms in front of his chest with a huff.

Fuck that guy.

Who needed him, anyways?

…Nico did.

Gods, how he missed him.

He was right there, but still, it felt as if he was miles away, and it had been so long since Nico had last touched him, touched his face, felt his warm skin beneath his fingertips, counted the freckles on his face, got lost in those bright blue eyes, seen his pretty smile...

Nico uncrossed his arms so he could bury his face in his hands, cursing Will to hell and back for doing this to him, to them, to himself, to everyone.

Idiot. He was a freaking idiot!
And Nico was so, so mad at him!

So mad!

But he still missed him.

For gods’ sake, he missed him so much, even that made him mad at him.

How dare he not show up?

How could he do this to Nico?!

 Didn’t he love him?! Didn't he care at all for how Nico felt?!

Maybe he thought he could wait it out.

Maybe he thought Nico would miraculously stop being upset and forgive him and never mention the whole vision-thing again, if only he waited long enough.

Well, then he was mistaken.

Very mistaken!

Nico was going to have his head, one way or another.

Not literally, of course.

Unless maybe in the sense of having Will's head on his lap.

Or cupping his face in his hands.

Or kissing him.

Or holding him, in general.

Nico would like that.

Nico would like all of that.

But he needed Will to actually move his sorry ass to him first, in order to yell at him, get some brain into that pretty head, and get him to understand never to do that, again.

Then, and only then, would Nico be able to forgive him, and they could hold hands again, kiss each other again, he could hold Will, and Will could tell him how much he loved him and they could ravish each other, and everything would be fine again.

Nico sighed deeply, deciding he definitely had to sleep more if he started daydreaming weird things like that.

Then again, now that he was all by himself, and the silence was so loud, he knew sleep was the last thing on his mind, so he didn't even try to lay down.

He didn't want to sleep alone.

Where was Will sleeping, anyways?

What if he wasn't sleeping, at all?

No, that was stupid. Percy and Jason would never let that happen.

Will surely slept in one of the small beds in the infirmary.

…But were those actually all that comfortable? Nico highly doubted it.

What if he didn't actually sleep in them?
Nico remembered him talking about refusing to sleep in the infirmary beds no matter what, because those were meant for patients, and unless he was on his deathbed, he would never consider himself a patient.

(Stubborn, idiotic fool. Yet, Nico still loved him.)

Percy and Jason had also let Will starve himself, because he definitely wasn't eating enough, so who was to say they made sure Will slept properly?

Gods, did nobody care about Will's welfare these days?

Not that Nico cared.

No, until Will came to him and apologized and let Nico yell at him and get him to see reason, Nico did not care what that idiot did.

…Or so Nico told himself, but now that the thought was there, he couldn't shake it off, anymore, and the thought of Will huddled somewhere in some uncomfortable and cold corner had him restless and his body itching to get up and check on him.

No. He would not make the first move.

If Will wanted to be stubborn, so be it, but Nico was in the right, and he was not going to crawl to Will, just because he missed him a tiny bit and was worried about him.

Nico managed to sit still another whole minute, then he jumped up, cursed, and got his jacket. Whatever.

He needed some Vitamin D pills. For Andrew.

Yeah.

He was fairly certain the boy had complained earlier about something, because Andrew always complained, so Nico needed some supplements for him to soothe his paranoid mind.

Yep. He was just taking care of his team.

It wasn't his fault the supplements were in the medic tent, and if he stumbled over Will, then that wasn't his fault, either.

He had a perfectly sensible reason to be there, after all.

Nico left their tent quickly and felt his heart beating in his throat as he crossed the distance to the medic tent, wondering what he would do if Jason was with Will.

A glance towards the guard post told him Percy had spotted him, but his boyfriend didn't move or say anything, merely looking at him, then looking towards the medic tent as if he knew his destination, then he returned his attention to his task of keeping watch.

Nico still felt like he had been caught, and for a moment, he hesitated, tempted to turn back.

But Percy wasn't looking at him anymore, so he wouldn't even notice if Nico went back, and thus, it didn't make a difference, anymore.

Taking a deep breath, Nico made his way towards the medic tent with all the confidence he didn't have.

He needed supplements. For Andrew. That was all he needed in there.

Nico tugged the zipper open and wasn't surprised to find the interior lit, though his heartbeat still did the impossible and quickened, as if he was doing something forbidden.

If Jason asked him what he was doing here, he had his reason at the ready. His perfectly sensible reason.
If Jason didn’t ask him what he was doing here, but looked at him with that smug look on his face, Nico was going to punch him first, and then run back to their tent.

Wait, no, that was a bad idea.

Nico was spared from messing up in that regard, though, because Jason was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, he was met with the sight of Will sitting on the ground with his back against the tent wall, eyes on his crossed legs.

Nico’s breath caught in his throat, both at the sight of him, as well as the fact he wasn’t looking at Nico.

A part of him wanted to walk over to that cupboard next to Will and see whether he would bother looking up, then.

Another part of him wanted to make straight for Will and get him off the cold floor.

What was he doing?! Was he trying to get sick or something?! If this was another way of him actively trying to kill himself, Nico was going to have no mercy on him. Ever. Again.

Nico steeled himself and began moving towards the cupboard, forcing his feet not to stray off course.

Will drew together slightly, showing he was well aware of Nico’s presence and that he was getting closer, though he still didn’t look up, and from what Nico could tell, he had his lips tightly pressed together.

So...he really didn't want to talk to Nico, huh?

So, what, was he upset with Nico? For being upset with him?

For not being like Jason and Percy and forgiving him immediately?

Nico felt the resentment rising inside him, wanting nothing more than to lash out at Will and give him a piece of his mind.

But he didn’t.

Instead, he made true on his word and opened the first drawer with the supplements, fishing out the first pack he found, before he slammed it shut again.

The sound was a lot louder than initially intended, and Nico watched Will jump out of the corners of his eyes, though he acted as if he couldn’t see.

Maybe he should say something.

Something that showed he was still upset and did not care about Will sitting on that cold floor.

‘Why aren't you in our tent’, for example.

Wait, no, that included ‘our’, which Will might misinterpret and think meant Nico wasn’t upset with him anymore, which he was.

So, no talking.

Better no talking.

Nico hovered in front of the cupboard for a moment, waiting whether Will was going to change his mind and speak.

Will didn’t.

Fucking idiot.

Nico was so done with him!
Annoyed, he turned around and started walking, though with every step away from Will, the fight left him.

He had come here to check on him, and he had done just that.

Why did it feel as if he was running away, then?

Why did it make him feel even worse than before?

Also, why wasn't Will in one of the small beds?

Why wasn't he in their tent?

Why wasn't he talking to Nico?

Why wasn't he even trying to make up with him?

Did he really…not care…? About Nico? About them?

Nico tried to fight the tears threatening to spill from his eyes, but then jumped when he heard a small sob, first thinking it was he who had let it slip.

It was Will, though.

Will was crying.

Wait, why was he crying?!

Nico wanted to snap at him for crying when it should be Nico crying, but as he turned his head slightly, he found Will looking like a small heap of misery, and any thoughts of snapping at him were replaced by the need to go and comfort.

But he was already at the entrance/exit of the tent.

Going back would look weird.

Plus, why would he comfort Will? It wasn't his fault that Will was an idiot and didn't want to make up with him, so he shouldn't care whether Will cried or not.

Nico balled his hands to fists, crushing the pack of supplements without really noticing.

He cared, though.

He cared, because, even though Will was an idiot, he was still his boyfriend, and Nico still loved him.

He hated him for being so horribly stupid and cruel, but he still loved him, and of course he cared about him, for him, and he definitely cared when Will cried.

Nico battled with himself another moment, then he heard another small sob from Will, and he made his decision.

Reaching out, he tugged on the zipper to the tent exit, and closed it, before turning around and marching over to his stubborn, stupid, horrible boyfriend.

Will had his knees pulled up now and his arms wrapped around them tightly to hide his face, though Nico could very well see how badly his shoulders shook.

Not knowing what to say, Nico sat down next to him, close enough for their shoulders to brush.

Whatever.

He wasn't making the first move.

They were merely…coexisting. Peacefully. For now.
Will stiffened, but didn't pull away, and Nico waited a moment longer, before he dropped his hand in the small space between them, deliberately looking into the opposite direction.

*Take it*. His mind yelled at Will, though he also wanted to yell countless other, definitely not nice things at him, concerning his choices and his stupidity.

Will stilled, but didn't move to take his hand, though he *had* to have seen it, right?

…Right?

Just to make sure, Nico tried to move his hand further towards him in a way that wasn't all *that* noticeable, but that would still force Will to *see* it.

Still no move.

Oh, *come on*!

Just as Nico was about to snap at him to *just do it*, Will ever so reluctantly moved his arm, and Nico held his breath as he watched his hand out of the corners of his eyes, as it slowly – *ever so freaking slowly, by the gods, Will, what the fuck* – made its way to Nico's, hesitating once more when his fingertips were inches away from Nico's.

Fed up, Nico snatched his hand and squeezed it, staring a point at the faraway wall to death.

Will gasped softly, then he fell silent.

Nico could feel him turning his hand slightly to take hold of Nico's properly.

There was silence around them as they sat there, on the cold floor of the medic tent, Nico still upset, and Will still with tears streaming down his face.

But their hands were linked, and Nico could feel the warmth he had missed so badly, and he could feel Will next to him, their shoulders brushing together and their bodies so close, it made him want to reach out more, to pull Will closer, to feel him the way he hadn't gotten to feel him the past days.

It wasn't perfect.

He still hadn't forgiven Will.

But this was a start.

And it felt good, holding Will again.

It felt good, feeling Will again.

Nico closed his eyes and let himself lean against him further.

It felt good.

***

Jason found them huddled together and fast asleep on the floor of the medic tent, their hands linked and their bodies pressed together, and the first thing he did was sigh in relief, because this meant they would be fine.

The second thing he did was fetch Percy, so the two could move their boyfriends back to their actual tent and put them into bed.

Even though they tried to be as quiet as possible, somehow, their entire team seemed to know, anyways, because suddenly, there was Andrew, looking triumphant and throwing Jason that 'I told you so'-look of his, and then there was Ash pointing finger guns at Percy and grinning crookedly, followed by Hannah and Sara high-fiving and giving them knowing thumb-ups and Liam just looked absolutely relieved when his head popped up from inside his tent as they moved past.
In a way, Jason was surprised the team seemed this invested in their matters, but at the same time, he was pleased to see how much they cared.

They really were a team by now, he was glad.

And he was even more glad Nico and Will seemed to be on better terms again.

The past days had been trying, with Nico refusing to talk to Will, and Will refusing to approach Nico, both of them too stubborn to listen to reason.

Nico had been too prideful and upset with Will to make the first move, and Will had been too scared and convinced Nico didn't want him to approach him to be the one to take the first step.

They were both idiots.

There was nothing else to say about that.

But now, Jason was convinced things would get better.

He put Will down on their bed gently, glad beyond measure once he saw him beneath their blanket once more, because it felt like way too long since Will had last been in here, and this was where he belonged.

With them, under that horribly colorful Christmas blanket that they were using in the middle of summer, just because.

Percy followed suite and put Nico down, and their boyfriend grumbled and frowned in his sleep, before squinting up at them with his beautiful, chocolate-brown eyes that seemed to gleam in the faint light of his jar of fire on their bedside table.

"We carried you to bed, Nico. Go back to sleep. You still have some time until the morning." Jason told him soothingly, and Nico made a small, pleased noise, before he turned around and searched for Will, patting the space next to him blindly until he found their boyfriend and shuffled closer to him to wrap himself around him happily.

Will hummed softly, and Jason and Percy exchanged soft smiles as they watched him snuggle back into Nico's embrace, looking a lot more relaxed than he had the past nights.

They moved to join their boyfriends in bed, placating them with kisses and touches when they started grumbling at the movements of the mattress due to the shift in weight.

This was how it should be. All four of them. Together.

Jason stroked over Percy's side softly and kissed the side of his neck, before his eyes fixed on Will's silhouette, remembering his words.

There'd be consequences, he had said.

Jason still wondered what those might be, but a part of him wanted to never find out.

For now, though, he contented himself with caressing his boyfriends, and both he and Percy laughed quietly when Nico grabbed hold of the blanket and tossed it off the bed without warning.

They'd be fine.

For once, Jason wanted to think that, anyways.

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"Watch out!" Nico yelled, and Jack screamed in terror, his black hair glistening with blood and sweat as he narrowly dodged the incoming attack and disappeared between a couple of other monsters and from sight to either fight or run away.

Nico didn't really care, busy battling off his own enemies and keeping the upper hand in the battle around him somehow.
So many.

They were surrounded, and they were twenty people, but there were just so many monsters.

Out of nowhere.

In the middle of nowhere.

Their team wasn't going to be able to make it.

But the team would have to make it, or they would all die.

Nico slashed through the monsters, uncaring for their remarks and jests and threats, not falling for their traps and not interested in their words, his eyes constantly roaming his surroundings for the next monsters to strike, for his teammates, for his boyfriends.

The medic tent was up and fiercely protected by Hannah, Liam and Ash, while Will and Andrew were on the inside, patching up their fellow team members as fast as possible, and Nico didn't even want to think of how much of a strain this had to put on Will.

But, so far, it was working.

He could even see a few people leaving the tent again to join the fight once more, which had to mean he was still holding up well enough to heal them properly, and completely.

But for how much longer would he be able to do that?

Nico didn't want to find out.

He snarled and attacked the shadows that were trying to get past him, somehow never interested in him, but always interested in where Will was, and he was sick and tired of seeing them, sick and tired of not knowing what they were, and sick and tired because he knew, deep inside, that they had something to do with Kyle.

Either they came from the same place, were related to him, or were his creation, but Nico didn't care about the details, he just wanted them dead and gone, same as he wanted Kyle dead and gone.

Jason landed next to him and lightning bolts struck several monsters around them, the storm around them getting worse the more agitated and worn out Jason became.

"There's just no end to them!" Jason called over, and Nico dreaded what that meant, though he was unwilling to give up just yet.

"Did you manage to find out where they come from? They have to come from somewhere, after all!" He called back and they both slash-stabbed through the next monster together, fighting side by side easily, though the attacks were nothing like their training before.

"No chance. It's as if they appear out of thin air. At this rate, we're not going to be able to hold out, Nico."

Jason's expression was grim as he said it, and Nico knew what he was thinking about.

He risked another glance around, trusting Jason to have his back.

Ash and Liam were fighting valiantly, Liam with the bow, Ash by his side with their sword, and Hannah was in the middle of a whole swarm of monsters, wielding her spear as if she had been born to do just that, but he knew them well enough by now to see the exhaustion in the smallest things, and their moves seemed perfect, but were truly nothing but sloppy compared to their usual skill.

The troupe from Camp Jupiter was holding up well enough, but many of them were scared, and the others were careless, not used to fighting so many monsters at once, and without proper lead by somebody like Jason or Frank or Reyna.
Nico didn't know enough to command them, and Jason was too busy fighting the monsters in the air and trying to get and keep an overview to do any commanding, so they had to rely on Jack for that, but Jack was gods knew where, and the troupe was left to their own devices.

It was chaos.

And there were so many monsters.

But they were twenty people.

Nico wasn't sure he could actually pull off what Jason wanted him to do.

Not even on a good day would Nico be sure he could do this, but after an on-going battle that already had him worn out and exhausted, and thus, weakened?

He spotted Percy, fighting against a whole mob by himself and slashing at the lot in wide arcs and with the craziest moves, but no matter how many monsters disintegrated, there were more coming.

"Get word around for them to get together near the medic tent, Jason. Then, come back to me and cover for me so I can conjure up the shadow portal." He decided, trying to sound confident, though he was more than a little reluctant.

Twenty people.

How was he supposed to transport twenty people?

He hadn't even practiced travelling by himself ever since the Athena Parthenos, and Will had told him to start out with small things like skeletons and the like, how was Nico just suddenly supposed to get twenty people safely out of here and to a different location in one piece?

Jason disappeared from his side with a grim nod, and Nico forced his doubts down.

He would have to manage.

It would work out.

It had to work out.

Nico fought through the monsters, cutting through them all without differing in kind or breed or whatever, only seeing monsters and killing them without second thought, his mind buzzing as he tried to focus on the task ahead, already trying to call upon his powers.

There were yells and screams all around him, but whether they were out of pain and from falling members, or whether they were war cries and battle screams, he didn't know, and he didn't check, his blade moving through the monsters, and his mind trying to focus on nothing but the powers inside him that he so rarely used anymore.

Then, Jason reappeared at his side, and Nico gave a nod and began moving back, letting Jason take the lead and fighting behind him, rather than by his side, and they began moving towards the medic tent that way.

It was going so well.

Too well.

Nico's jaw clenched, but he kept going, trying to push the ominous feeling in the pit of his stomach down.

"There won't be much time. Everybody has to go through as fast as possible." He told Jason, and Jason told somebody else who had joined their side for a moment, but was gone the next, undoubtedly relating the info to the others.

Percy joined them from the other side, looking dubious.

"Are you sure, Nico?" He asked, and Nico tried to look nothing but confident and certain, though
his heart was beating in his throat, and it wasn't because of the battle.

"We'll go last. The wounded first, then the rest of the troupe and our group, then us." Jason stated in front of him, and Nico made an affirmative noise to show he had heard.

He glanced back at Percy, and tried for a reassuring smile.

It would work out.

It had to.

Percy and Jason covered for him, and Nico allowed himself to drop his guard and reach out a hand, his eyes closed as he called forth his powers.

Almost immediately, he felt the telltale tug in the pit of his stomach, and felt the darkness flowing through him, threatening to consume him, but he was its master, and it had to obey him.

When he opened his eyes, there was his portal, and he felt nauseous, but he was still standing.

The moment he wanted to let them know they had to get through there now, he was swept off his feet by a harpy that came out of nowhere, together with more, and Nico hit the ground so hard the breath was knocked out of him.

No.

"Nico!" Will and Jason called, and he heard Percy cursing somewhere behind him.

"Go through the portal!" He hissed back as he sucked in a sharp breath to fill his lungs with air once more, and he tried to get off the ground, but the harpies were faster, and he found himself further thrown away from his portal and the others.

Everything was spinning and whirling and chaos, and then Nico was on his back in the dirt and there was nothing but color and darkness and harpy claws and feathers.

Then, he felt as if somebody was sucking out all his energy, and he knew they had started using his portal.

Jason charged at the harpies, forcing them back and giving Nico a chance to get his bearings and sit up to look into the vague direction where he thought the others were.

Yeah, there they were, rushing into the shadow portal he had created, first Jack and the troupe (cowards), then, with Sara's help and Will's guidance, the wounded, followed by Andrew and Ash, while Hannah and Liam used spear and arrows to keep the other monsters at bay and away from the portal.

Will ushered the last wounded demigod through the portal, then turned to look towards Nico with a concerned look on his face.

Nico motioned for him to go on and get through it, get to safety – but then Jason yelped and Nico's head snapped around, just to be attacked by one of the harpies, claws digging into his shoulders and scratching across his face and chest as he thrashed and tried to strike it with his sword.

"Nico!"

"Get through the portal!" Nico yelled as loudly and insistently as he could, feeling the tug that told him he wouldn't be able to keep it up much longer.

The next time he managed to look, Will was still there, and running away from the portal, but he had a good reason for it.

Drakon.

Where had that come from?!
It didn't matter.
Liam was helping a wounded Hannah through the portal.
A hellhound was bounding after them.
Will was running for his life.
Nico's body was swaying as he pushed himself up.
Jason yelled something behind him.
Percy yelled something towards Will.
Nico was stumbling numbly as he tried to focus, then got shoved into the ground again, but by what, he couldn't tell.
His powers gave out, and the portal closed.
There was a scream, Will's scream.
There was a yell, Percy's yell.
There was Jason, tearing through the monster on top of Nico and pulling him up, his face ashen, and his gaze not on Nico.
Nico's eyes focused, making out the drakon, making out Will, making out Percy.
Will was on the ground.
Percy had his sword halfway through the drakon.
Half of the drakon's fangs were buried inside Percy's shoulder and arm.
More monsters were coming, still.
Nico let out an angry howl of pain and fear, and he let his rage run free.

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Will was on the ground, where he had stumbled and fallen to after the drakon had charged at him.
Will was up and running for Percy, who had attacked it to protect him.
Just as he had promised he would.
Will caught his boyfriend and lowered him to the ground as the drakon disintegrated, and his mind was nothing but static as he took in Percy's values, felt the poison in his blood, felt the blood seeping from his wounds, felt the severity of the wounds.
Not his arm.
He would lose his arm.
Will had to do something, or Percy would lose it.
It was his left arm – his heart arm.
Will had to do something, or Percy would lose more than his arm.
Will looked into his boyfriend's face with wide eyes full of fear as his hands shook and pressed against his shoulder, and Percy cried out and looked back at him with those beautiful sea-green eyes of his full of pain, yet relief.
"Did it get to you?" Percy pressed out, and it was a foolish thing to ask, considering Percy's wounds, considering Percy's state, considering Percy.

Will shook his head and pressed his hand firmer against Percy's shoulder as his other hand pushed inside his medic pouch, searching for ambrosia, searching for nectar, searching but not finding, because all his stash was used up, and the rest was in the medic tent, and Ash had the medic tent.

Will needed water.

Percy could heal with the help of water.

He needed water.

They needed water.

Will felt a surge of darkness and misery and his head shot up, watching how everything around them turned pitch-black, Nico in the center, looking murderous and full of rage as he snarled and hefted his sword higher, charging at anything daring to come through the thick, black fog.

"That's good, then." Percy whispered, and Will looked back down, his mind spinning with the overload on values and information as he not only felt Percy, but Jason and Nico, too, his body and mind too over-sensitized.

Will's hand started glowing before he even found his words, but he had to heal him, he couldn't lose him, he had to do something.

"Percy, look at me. Don't close your eyes, love. Stay with me. I've got you." He whispered frantically, and Percy gave him a weak smile.

"'s just a scratch. I'll be fine. Just a bit tired."

Will felt the tears pricking in his eyes, but he forced them down and drew a rattling breath, instead, trying to focus on his healing.

"Help." He whispered, barely audibly, as Percy lost consciousness, and he repeated it again, louder, when he looked up to search for Nico and Jason, who were still fighting, but who both looked around.

"Help." He pleaded, and then Nico gave him that look that said 'Tell me what you need', and Will shook his head and pulled his Percy into his arms, trying to heal his shoulder, but getting the poison out of his blood was demanding too much of his attention to do both at the same time.

"Water. We need water, Nico. Please." He whispered again, barely audibly, but somehow, by some miracle, Nico seemed to hear him, and he looked at him with an indecipherable expression for a moment longer, before he nodded and turned back towards the monsters that broke through the darkness with snarls and hisses.

The next moment, Will felt another surge of power and exhaustion that left him reeling and nearly broke off his healing, and the ground broke open at their feet as Nico unleashed the dead, skeletons breaking through the soil to join the battle.

Then, his boyfriends were with him.

Then, Nico grabbed his shoulder firmly, and Jason, and they curled around Percy.

By the time Will realized what Nico intended to do, it was already too late, and his scream of 'Nico, don't, you're too weak!' was lost in the darkness that engulfed them.

*

He felt the drop in power as if it was his own, then they were weightless, then they smacked into the ground, which gave way, because it wasn't ground, and the loud splash and the roaring told Will it was water, it was the sea.

It was the sea, and the water was raging as if fighting its own battle, and they splashed into it, and
they drowned in it, and Will couldn't breathe, and he was losing his guys.

Jason's hold on him was desperate, but not enough to beat the strength of the water, and Will could feel him scratching his skin as his fingers began to slip.

Nico clutched them, but the shadow-travel had left him more than exhausted, and his gasp had him swallowing too much water to focus on anything but his desperate need for air.

Percy's values lurched, then improved, but he remained unconscious.

Will only had two arms.

Will couldn't hold on to all three of them.

Will held on to Percy and pushed Nico to where he thought the surface was, and air was running out for him, too, but somehow, he used up all his miracles and made it, and Jason was drawing blood with his hold, but they stayed connected, and Nico broke the surface, first.

The sea was raging.

The sea was raging, and Nico managed one desperate breath, then he was underwater again, and Will struggled to get to the surface, too, but Nico's elbow struck his head by accident, and his last air escaped him.

Jason's hold disappeared from his shoulder, and Will panicked, but then Jason's hands reappeared at his shirt, clutching it and pulling back closer to him, before wrapping his arms around him and Percy and trying to force them both further upwards so they could make it.

There was more struggling.

Nico's hands found his face.

Will's eyes opened, though he could barely see in the dark and the whirls of water and his own fear.

Nico's hands clasped tightly around his and Jason's arms.

Will felt him focusing, and he inhaled mouthfuls of water in a silenced scream.

Nico pulled them out of the sea and into the darkness, conjuring up a shadow portal for the third time today.

***

Nico was moving through the darkness, his lungs on fire, his mind snapping in and out of focus as he struggled to stay conscious.

He felt his powers draining away, but he forced himself to keep going, not wanting to think of what would happen if they got lost now, if he lost them now, if he wasn't strong enough, if he didn't make it.

Places flashed past them, some making sense, some not, and he saw Persephone's garden for a moment, a memory zapping through his mind, of the guys there, and it gave him something to ground himself on and keep himself going, though he could feel them getting off course.

Will's hand found his on his shoulder, squeezing it tightly, and he felt a burst of warmth and sunlight and energy.

He thought he saw his father's worried face.

He thought he felt somebody giving him a nudge.

They broke through the barrier and hit the ground, all three of them gasping for air, while Percy didn't, and Nico pleaded to all the gods he was merely unconscious.
His mind was reeling, his body shaking.

Will was in his face immediately, and Nico realized dimly he couldn't move, realized dimly he couldn't breathe, realized dimly his gaze became more and more unfocused the harder he tried.

"Nico! Nico, no! No, look at me! Stay with me!" Will was yelling, but his voice was far away, and Nico tried to focus, but then he saw his own hands moving up to Will's face so he could cup it, the way he always did when he wanted to reassure Will and reassure himself.

And he saw his own hands appearing and disappearing, there, then gone, and he knew what it meant, and the realization was worse than he would have ever thought possible.

No.

Not now.

Not like this.

Fear filled him, and he pushed himself to grab Will's face, but his fingers were there, then they were gone, and he could feel Will's skin, and then he couldn't, and he looked up at him with wide eyes, and watched wide, fearful eyes looking back.

Beautiful eyes.

Blue eyes.

Will's eyes.

Will's lips were moving, but Nico couldn't hear him anymore, and he tried to speak, himself, but he couldn't hear that, either.

But he had to tell him.

He had to let him know.

They hadn't yet made up, they hadn't yet talked.

Nico hadn't told him for so very long.

Tears dripped onto his face, Will's tears, but then he saw a tear falling that he couldn't feel, and he knew in his heart what it meant.

And he looked up and saw Will glowing, and he was so pretty, and Nico loved him so, so much, same as he loved Jason and Percy, but they knew, because Nico had told them, but he hadn't told Will in so long.

Nico tried to speak again, trying to tell Will of the blue of his eyes and the blonde of his hair, and of how much he adored those freckles on his skin and the smile on his face.

But Will couldn't hear him.

And Nico was fading.

And it was too late.

Nico saw his hands materializing momentarily again, and he pulled Will down as he pushed his body up, pressing his lips against Will's in a last attempt to show him.

Then he fell back and-…

Chapter End Notes
PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:

http://sta.sh/055hx09e5r9 - perfect depiction of Kyle :)  
http://sta.sh/0h2pt887zfi - adorable Will with flowers <3  
http://sta.sh/02xyy0gpdx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3  
http://sta.sh/0qy6lka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3  
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing just how cute Will is ;)  
http://sta.sh/01m8r04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will ;)  
http://sta.sh/01b1irqkgjhb - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3

- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well >;)

https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/148608464261/fanart-for-mel-chan366s-awesome-fanfic-that-you
- Will in his comfort sweater!! <3
- Will with blanket <3
https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/150587339536/more-fanart-of-mel-chan366s-lovely-fanfic-this
- THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE!!!
https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/164869065551/fan-art-of-the-contract-group-from-chan366s
- THE WHOLE TEAM!!!!! PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THE GODS LOOK AT THIS!!!
- A super cute redraw of Will in his comfort sweater!! :D
https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949094494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you
- A super cute selfie of the four

http://artbybansheeBender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patron-tari
- Will with the Perseus constellation
http://artbybansheeBender.tumblr.com/post/163931701986/just-finished-a-nico-di-angelo-commission-two
- Nico in his winter outfit :)
http://artbybansheeBender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-commission-for-my-amazing-patron
- Percy, shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD
- Jason and the leather jacket >;)

Commissioned from Ari/Bex:
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-chan366
- New Years from the Advent Calendar ;)
- Christmas sweaters!! :D
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-for-chan366
- The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-
- Ice cream time ;)

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/156557714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-chan366-3-3-some
- <3

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160990996944/another-of-my-may-madness-commissions-a-fabulous
- The guys in their dresses from WoB ;)

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-ever-fabulous
- ...Boxer Shorts XD ;)

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164308263854/let-me-just-take-this-time-to-say-that
- The guys admiring Jason in his leather jacket ;)

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164426408554/another-fun-very-colourful-commission-for
- Pride ;)

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/165225200564/a-cozy-commission-for-the-fantastic
- ***A peaceful moment in the Hades Cabin (so soft!!!!!! so peaceful!!!!!!! so cozy!!!!!!!) ***

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-mel-chan366-3
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love them too much not to share them ;)

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-commission-for
- Jercy Soft Kiss <3

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164389230829/an-adorable-sketch-commission-for-mel-chan366
- Solangelo Date <3

Another Commission, this time by CassDME:
- ***This was a very self-indulgent piece of the guys in their early thirties <3 (I just love thinking about them after all of this is over, just living a normal life in New Rome...now they just gotta survive long enough to make it there ;)) ***

(Oh man now my space ran out >:( )
(Edit: *** marks new ones at the time of the chapter)
(Edit2: Had to split this into top/end notes, so here's the first part, and rest is below. Still deciding how to organize them better, so that might change until next time.)

PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:
http://sta.sh/055hx09e5r9 - perfect depiction of Kyle ;)
http://sta.sh/0/h2pt887zfi - adorable Will with flowers <3
http://sta.sh/02yxyl0gpx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3
http://sta.sh/0qy6lka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing how cute Will is ;) 
http://sta.sh/01m8rr04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will ;)
  - Percy’s and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well >;)
http://sta.sh/01b1irqkgjb - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3
  - A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater!! <3
  - A super cute redraw of our Will in his comfort sweater!! :D (Also, my new phone background XD)
  - Will with blanket <3
  - THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE FROM THE LAST SEQUEL!!!!!!!!!!!! Immortalized Below By Ender-Rhian
  - THE TEAM!!! THE WHOLE TEAM!!!! I AM FOREVER IN AWE AND GRATEFUL AND AM ORDERING Y’ALL TO LOOK AT THIS RIGHT AWAY!!!! PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THE GODS DO IT!!!
https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you
  - A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy, challenge-loving dorks <3
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patreon-tari
  - Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3
  - Nico in his winter outfit :) 
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-commission-for-my-amazing-patron
  - Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD 
  - Jason and the leather jacket >;)

This was a very self-indulgent piece of the guys in their early thirties <3 (I just love thinking about them after all of this is over, just living a normal life in New Rome...now they just gotta survive long enough to make it there ;))

Aaaand here comes a Mini-Comic from WoB times, commissioned from the super sweet Alexandra:
- ***That one time Percy gave Will flowers... <3 ***

Check End Notes for more links!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A/N: Hey Cupcakes.. :3

Sorry for the last cliffhanger, I hope you've recovered by now and are ready to find out how things go from here.. :3

So, ready or not, here comes the next chapter!
Please check the Trigger Warnings, and also: Check the Fanart! :D It helps to look at fluffy things in trying times, trust me :3

Thank you for all the feedback so far, and special thanks again to my wonderful beta-reader!

Wish you all the best, and sorry for the angst!
-Tári

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**Trigger Warnings:**
- Fading
- Suicidal Thoughts
- Critical Condition
- Injuries / Blood / Surgeries
- Self-Destructive Behavior / Passing out
- Vomiting / Shock
- Fear / Angst / Dread / Grief / Suffering / Hopelessness
- Irrational actions
- Tad of mentioned/implied Homophobia / Sexism
- More angst and bad news

Make sure to check out the new Fanart! I had to split the links into top notes and end notes because of lack of space, but else everything is still there + new stuff!

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**Chapter 07: Dark Days**

Will felt Nico's lips on his, and then he was gone, gone, gone.

He screamed, he threw himself onto Nico, he howled in rage and pain and he felt his whole body glowing as he tried to fix, tried to heal, tried to force the darkness away and keep his boyfriend here, tried to get him back.

He pressed his hands against Nico's faded chest, knowing where it was because of the faint values he could sense, and he forced it to appear again, pouring all he had into his hands, into Nico's chest, into Nico.

Jason was behind him, staring, unwilling to believe, unable to comprehend, but Will howled his name, anyways.
“My pouch! Jason, my pouch!” He yelled, and Jason jumped and rushed forward clumsily, tugging on Will's pouch to get it open somehow, while Will pressed his hands as tightly against Nico's chest as he could.

Then, he threw his entire body down onto him again, wrapping his arms around him with a loud wail.

He was losing him.

_He couldn't lose him!_

Will yelled at Jason for the gum, and Jason made a sound of distress as he shoved his hand inside the medic pouch he must have ripped off Will's side, but he didn't care, as long as Jason got him what he needed.

His body was burning and aching and straining, his mind a mixture of static and text books he had read years ago, but he kept healing Nico, but Nico kept fading, and his body was there, and then it was not, and Will had never been so scared in his life.

Something was squeezed into his hand, and Will shoved it upwards towards Nico's face, letting out another desperate howl as Nico's body instantly disappeared from view again, his clothes falling flat on the ground.

Will shoved the gum inside Nico's mouth, and forced his mouth shut.

He knew his boyfriend blind, he knew how tall he was and how much he weighed, and he knew every inch, from his temple to his toes, and he used that knowledge now to force Nico back into the land of the living, his body reappearing where Will was touching him and pouring his energy into him.

All his energy.

But Will didn't have enough.

Will barely had anything left.

Will would have to pray to his father.

But it was night.

His father's powers were weakened at night.

Will cried out and closed his eyes, forcing those thoughts out of his mind, forcing everything out of his mind, but Nico, Nico and all the energy he needed to heal him.

Nico.

It had to be enough.

_Please_, let it be enough.

Will realized, dimly, that this was his punishment.

This was his fault.

This was happening because he hadn't died.

Will wished he had died.

***

The troupe was in tatters.

Jason's group in disarray.

Jason was pale-faced and frozen in terror.
Percy was unconscious on the ground.

Will was sitting on top of Nico, glowing and crying and screaming.

Nico was fading.

“What happened?” Reyna asked Jason, trying to pour all the authority into her voice to snap Jason out of whatever trance he was in and find out what had happened, what was happening, what she could do to help.

“Monsters. Everywhere. Monsters everywhere. There was no end to them. Nico got us out of there, but then the portal must have closed.” Somebody else answered, a girl Reyna recognized as Hannah, child of Mars, who was limping.

“He's fading.” A boy mumbled dumbly, looking struck and scared, and he was clutching some sort of tangled wire in his hands tightly, as if it gave him some sort of security.

“No! Nico! Nico, come back!” Will yelled frantically, his voice echoing around them.

“He doesn’t have enough power. He's weakened.” Another person whispered, and Reyna didn't know this one yet, but it didn’t matter.

Will was glowing a radiant gold now, pressed flat against Nico, and Reyna could see Nico's body reappearing where they touched, though it didn't stay.

Nico.

Reyna's heart sank, and she looked back at Jason, who kneeled on the ground and stared, Will's medic pouch still clutched in his hand tightly.

Then, she watched Will whine and press his lips against Nico's.

“What is he doing?” She asked, because the scene in front of her made no sense – and this, it seemed, got Jason out of his state.

“He's trying to heal.” He whispered, barely audibly, as if speaking too loudly would break the spell and Nico would disappear forever.

“How?” Reyna asked, because she could tell this was healing, but she didn't understand how.

She had great medics here at Camp. If there was a way to help, she would get it done immediately.

“He is using his own powers and energy and pours all of that into Nico, I think. He explained it, once, but I didn't understand completely.” Jason whispered, and Reyna frowned, because this didn't make sense, and she didn't know whether her medics could do that, too.

She had never heard of it.

Will broke away from Nico's lips, gasping for breath and his chest heaving, and she could see his skin paling beneath the glow.

Nico remained visible for a bit longer, this time, but then began fading once more, and Will's whine was so heartbreaking it felt like somebody stabbed a dagger directly into Reyna's heart, too.

Jason started trembling, and Reyna only noticed now his other hand was clutching Percy's tightly.

"He won't make it." The boy with the wire whispered, his voice blank, and Hannah shoved him away and shook her head wildly.

"No! He has to! He has to! We need to...to...to do something! Is there nobody who can help him?! Don’t any of the medics here use the same sort of power?!" She screamed at Reyna, but Reyna shook her head and instinctively knew it was the truth.
She had never seen this before, and had never heard of it, nor had Coach Hedge mentioned any other way of healing Nico's fading back when it had happened the last time.

"He's too weak. He healed us the past weeks, Hannah. He healed us throughout the past days, non-stop, and we all know he didn't get enough rest with all the shit that was going on between the guys lately. He's not going to make it. At best, he's going to overdo it, and then Jason will lose all three of his boyfriends in one go." The boy stated, and the next moment, Jason jolted and retched, and Hannah let out a loud, anguished scream, while the other person (Boy? Girl? Reyna had trouble telling) wrapped their arms around her instinctively and pulled her against their chest to keep her from murdering the boy on the spot, her spear cluttering to the ground uselessly.

There was yelling and cussing and somebody punched somebody else, but Reyna let them be in favor of looking back at Will, who was pressing his lips back over Nico's, in what she now realized wasn't a kiss, but some sort of CPR.

He was shaking and pale, and she knew the boy was right.

He wouldn't make it.

His glow was already subsiding, but Nico still started fading again the moment Will pulled away to suck in frantic breaths as quickly as he could.

Jason was lost to her as he sat there, trembling worse than she had ever seen anybody trembling before, and she was glad she couldn't see his face right now, both for his sake as for hers.

She looked at the team around her, at these injured demigods that remained with their leaders because they cared more for them than their own aching bodies.

And she looked at where the senate's troupe had been, but they had long disappeared to be tended to.

There were only a few campers from Camp Jupiter around.

Reyna decided she didn't care, either way.

"Nico! Nico, please!"

She moved towards Will and lowered herself into the grass next to him, laying her hand onto his shoulder.

"Will." She said, but Will didn't see her and didn't hear her and didn't realize she was there, all his focus on Nico.

Reyna hoped he wouldn't mind what she was going to do, though she knew it might very well save Nico's life, and that was far more important right now than her initial dislike for Will, or his personal space.

Trusting her instincts, Reyna closed her eyes and shared her powers with Will.

She tried not to pry, even if his pain and despair smacked into her only seconds later, anyways, making her glad she was already on the ground, because the intensity of his emotions nearly knocked her out.

Though they both seemed to agree that Nico was more important right now than anything else.

***

Time went on around them, but for Jason, all time had come to a halt, as he was with his boyfriends on the cold ground near the Camp, holding Percy’s ice-cold and damp hand, watching Will cry and glow, and dying on the inside as he watched Nico repeatedly disappear.

There were voices around him, but Jason couldn't hear them.

Jason couldn't breathe.
Jason couldn't even think.

All he could do was sit there and stare and watch and hold Percy's hand, until they were suddenly moving.

Somebody was moving Percy. Onto a stretcher.

Some medic from the Camp.

Jason needed a moment to register there was no threat, though he only reluctantly let go of Percy's hand, and only so he could turn towards Will – to make sure he was still there, to make sure he was still alive, to make sure he was still with Jason.

Will didn't like the medics, though, snarling and hissing and shoving at them the moment they tried to put Nico onto the stretcher they had brought, and not even Reyna managed to convince him that they were only trying to help.

Jason looked back at Percy, who was still unconscious and laying on that stretcher like dead, and he felt like he was going to be sick all over again.

He numbly made his way towards Will and Nico, more stumbling than anything else, and he was the one who somehow, miraculously, managed to coax Will off their boyfriend and into a bone-crushing hug that had Will clinging to him with just as much intensity.

Somehow, they got to the hospital, though Jason had no recollection of letting Will go, much less of them walking.

He simply looked around and suddenly found himself in a small hospital room, with Percy in one bed, and Nico in the other, and there were so many people in the room, and Jason still felt like he couldn't breathe.

Will still snarled and hissed and spat at everyone who touched either Percy or Nico, insisting he could heal them, himself, and that they had no right to touch them, since they didn't even know what they were doing.

The medics seemed to blame it on the stress and took it well enough, though Jason could see quite a few of them becoming annoyed.

In the end, Reyna sent them out and put an end to the matter, which was a relief to the medics, and seemed to please Will as he stopped hissing and his face relaxed a little, though he didn't stop hushing from Nico to Percy and back, touching their faces, grabbing their hands, his glow a lot more dimmed and subsided, but still there ever so faintly.

Jason didn't know whether he was still healing them or not, nor whether he intended to do so, but he couldn't find his voice, much less the right words, to ask.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there and stared, time passing by as everything inside him was at a standstill.

Reyna was speaking, but he couldn't hear her because of Will's small wail that drew all his attention, and when Jason remembered Reyna and turned his head to look at her, she was gone, and he was alone with Will, and outside, it was dark, but he was wide awake, and his heart was beating rapidly in his chest, and he was scared, and he was exhausted, and everything hurt.

Will's movements had turned sluggish, but hadn't lost their urgency.

Jason watched him for a long time, before he heard Andrew's voice in his head again, and he found himself moving towards Will as if on auto-pilot.

He couldn't let him overdo it.

Will struggled in his hold when he wrapped his arms around him, wailing and thrashing, but Jason only held him tighter, and in a matter of seconds that felt like an eternity, Will stopped and slumped in his arms, turning around to wrap his arms around his neck and sob.
"This is my fault, Jason. This is all my fault. This happened because I changed it, Jason. This happened because I told you. This is all my fault." He sobbed against Jason's collarbone, and Jason wanted to sob, too, wanted to speak and tell him gods knew what, but his voice didn't work, his tears didn't come, and he kept holding Will until they found themselves on the floor, between Percy and Nico, and Will was between his legs and pressed against him, and Jason had his arms tightly around him, praying he'd never have to let go.

Sleep seemed like an impossible dream, far away and unreachable, yet the battles had been tiring, and even though the ground was hard and cold, and his boyfriends were suffering, Jason's body was uncaring, demanding its rest where rest was due.

***

When Jason woke up, he was still on the ground with his back against Nico's bed, it was still dark outside, and Will wasn't with him anymore.

Panicking, he struggled to his feet, but then his mind caught up with what he was seeing, making sense of the sounds of machinery and the curtains around Percy's bed, and Will's controlled and forcefully calm breathing as he saw his shadow moving behind said curtain.

Jason wanted to ask what he was doing, but he didn't dare to speak up in fear of startling Will, and his mouth and throat felt like sandpaper.

He didn't know whether Will was awake again, or still, but he knew, that, either way, if Will thought what he was doing was necessary, and if he thought he was capable of doing it now, nothing Jason would say or do would stop him.

He moved, carefully, to maybe step around the curtain and look, but he couldn't make up his mind whether he really wanted to, and he stopped when he saw one of those medical carts, laden with tools – and blood-covered cloths that had him reeling all over again.

Jason sucked in a sharp breath, then turned around and decided he would fetch them something to drink, because, if his throat was dry, Will's might be, too.

It was only after he had left the room and was lost moving down the various corridors, that he realized there had been a small bathroom in the room, and that the water in there would have probably been drinkable, too.

But he told himself it didn't matter, dragging his aching body down the next hall and spotting two people in scrubs talking, though they perked up at the sight of him and rushed to help him, even if he wasn't sure what they thought he needed help with.

They were nice enough, getting him tea, and water, and cups and glasses and some pain killers, as well as sleeping pills should he need them, and, while he was grateful, he was also confused, and he only realized he was covered in dried blood (Percy's blood, mostly, he guessed, though he wasn't sure anymore), when he was already on his way back.

Will was still busy doing whatever he was doing with Percy, and Jason partly wanted to ask, but was also scared of the answer, so he put down their drinks on the small table next to Nico and stared at him, instead.

He was so pale, and looked so weak.

There were tubes attached to him, now.

Jason had forgotten what they were called, but it had been a long time since he had seen them used, since demigods usually either lived or died, and when they lived, ambrosia and nectar usually ended up being enough to get them back to their feet.

Jason touched Nico's hand tentatively, startled by how cold it felt, then he fetched the uncomfortable-looking chair from next to the table in the corner and sat down next to Nico's bed to stroke his hand and watch liquid (water?) drop down inside a hung-up bag that was connected to said tube.
He had no idea how long he stared at that, but he was aware of every sound Will made, every controlled breath he took, and every time he put down or picked up one of those tools.

What was he doing with Percy? Would he be okay? Why was Will the one doing that, and why was he doing it alone?

If there was the need for a surgery, shouldn't there be more people?

Shouldn't everything happen in a more controlled manner, after a night of rest?

Jason searched for the time, but there was no clock in this room, and he didn't know where their tent was, though he probably couldn't have made himself go inside said tent right now, anyways.

Just the thought was nauseating.

So he kept sitting there, holding Nico's cold hand in his own gingerly, and he wondered what they had done to deserve this.

Then, he prayed to the gods that his boyfriends would wake up soon, again.

There was no reply.

***

When Jason woke up next, the sun was high in the sky, the medical cart and curtain had disappeared, and he was bent over Nico's bed and still cradling his hand, a thin blanket draped over his shoulders.

The first thing he did was turn his head to look at Percy, to see whether he looked any different, or give him some sort of clue as to what Will had done, but his boyfriend still looked pale and unmoving, but otherwise as before, so he was none the wiser.

Maybe he had dreamt it.

Jason was inclined to believe that, but then he spotted the drinks he had fetched them, and knew Will would have never left the room to get himself anything.

He hadn't even touched the water/tea Jason had gotten him.

Jason frowned, then looked around for Will, just to find him huddled against the wall behind Percy's bed, legs drawn up and his arms wrapped around them, and he was so silent he could have been awake or asleep, Jason wasn't sure.

Getting up as silently as he could (which was near impossible, thanks to the cracking of his joints and the creaking of the truly uncomfortable chair), he moved over to Will's side carefully, to bring him the blanket, to sit down next to him, to be with him.

Will lifted his head immediately, a worn-out look on his impassive face that scared Jason, though he didn't let that stop him from sitting down next to him and draping the blanket over both of them.

His boyfriend didn't argue, and they didn't speak, merely leaning on each other for comfort and support.

Jason wasn't tired anymore, but he was exhausted, yet he hadn't been the one healing, he hadn't been the one probably not sleeping.

He couldn't remember Will having a nightmare, which meant either he had been spared, or Will hadn't slept, and by now, Jason was inclined to believe it was the latter.

They remained like that in silence, until Will slumped against him, apparently passed out.

Then, Jason took him as gently and carefully as possible, and took him to a small, third bed that must have been brought in at some point in the night, standing against a wall with integrated high shelves which Jason hoped nobody would need for the next hours.
He put him down on the white sheets, and tried not to think of blood, or blood-covered cloths, or death.

Jason still thought of it, anyways, and he found himself returning to Percy’s side the moment he had tucked Will in properly.

But Percy wasn’t bleeding anymore, and his clothes had been replaced with a hospital garment that didn’t suit him, even though it was a pale blue.

His hand was cold when Jason took it, but when he found himself searching for a pulse, he found it, and it felt good, knowing that he was alive.

He stroked through his hair next, still as amazed as always at how soft it looked, yet how dry and wiry it felt, as if Percy had just washed it in the sea.

Then, he stroked over his pale face, disturbed by how cool it was, but there was no pain in his expression, and no scratches or bruises anywhere anymore.

Jason hesitated a moment, then he rounded the bed to check on his other arm, the one that had been injured by that accursed drakon.

There was a tube in his arm now, too, but his arm was whole, and when Jason moved the blanket and garment, he found that his skin had healed for the most part, only showing a faint discoloring, like scaring, at various spots, and Jason frowned, but it seemed okay.

Percy seemed okay.

Jason tucked him back in and stroked over his cheek again, tempted to kiss his forehead, but he was worried he could tug on the tube by accident, or mess something else up, so he didn’t.

Instead, he made his way over to Nico, albeit reluctantly, and his momentarily fluttery feeling of hope he had regained from Percy was crushed when he realized there was more machinery now.

Something that measured his...heartrate? That, and some other things, but Jason had no idea what the graphs and numbers meant, had seen these things before in movies, but never cared enough to find out more – never had to care enough to find out more.

Now, Jason wished he had asked Will about it before, so he could tell whether the things he saw were good or bad.

He swallowed and tore his eyes away from the monitor, instead looking back down at his unconscious boyfriend, the tube still attached to him, and he was wearing an oxygen mask now, too, and he looked so pale, and so weak, Jason wanted to cry.

He took his hand, too, careful not to pull on the tube, and Nico’s hand seemed even colder than Percy’s, as impossible as it was, but Jason stroked over it gently, anyways, wishing there was something he could do to warm them.

It was wrong.

Everything about this was wrong.

They shouldn’t be like this.

Nico shouldn’t have faded.

Percy shouldn’t have been injured.

They shouldn’t be stuck in separate beds, so far away from each other.

They shouldn’t be unconscious and look so weak and pale and feel so cold.

Jason wished they weren’t attached to so many different things, then he could push the beds together, to get at least one issue out of the way, but they were, and he knew it was important that they were, so he didn’t dare.
Instead, he held Nico's hand and kept stroking it in hopes of warming it at least a little bit, but in the end, he had to give up, and he returned to Will's side with a heavy heart, watching him move restlessly in his sleep, a troubled, pained expression on his face.

Jason sat down at his side and held his hand, too.

He had never felt so lost.

***

The moment Will was awake, he was moving.

Moving towards Percy, who was stabilizing, but still unconscious, and Will checked his infusion first, then his values, then scribbled a series of pain killers on his arm with the only pen he had been able to find in his hurry earlier, knowing Percy would need them once he woke up.

If he woke up.

Will scolded himself for thinking that, and reminded himself Percy was already getting better.

He had performed a rather rushed surgery on his arm in order to keep it fully functioning, since the drakon's fangs had torn several nerves and muscles, not just broken the bones at several places, and, while the water had helped with the rest of the poison and a good portion of the bone-mending, it hadn't fixed him up entirely.

He still felt guilty for not healing him sufficiently immediately, but by the time he had realized the water might not have been enough, he had already been too drained to rely on his powers without threatening to do more damage and/or pass out.

Even with Reyna's help, he didn't want to rely on her too much, since her powers translated differently.

Will didn't want to think of that right now, though.

Instead, he checked Percy's arm again to make sure it was healing properly.

It was, and when Will moved it, he could feel the rest of Percy's body respond accordingly, but he would only know for sure whether everything was okay, when Percy actually woke up.

If he woke up.

No, he would.

Will was confident.

He cupped Percy's face and kissed his forehead, then stroked through his hair and left his side to check on Nico.

His Nico.

His pale, dying Nico, in continuous danger of fading.

Will steeled his nerves and took to his side, first checking the patient monitor for an update, though there was little to no change, then his IV, then the medical ventilator he had gotten him at some point last night in his desperation.

Considering that it had been the middle of the night, Will was impressed he had been able to find so many medics, especially that quickly, and they had been more than accommodating of his demands, immediately fetching him the required machinery and tools to do what he felt necessary to do.

He would have to apologize for his outbreaks throughout last night, but that had time.

Percy and Nico hadn't had that time.
Nico was still threading the thin line between life and death, and Will wouldn't let him cross it.

Will took his hand, and inwardly recoiled at the coldness of it, as well as the cold feeling of death emanating from Nico, even though he was still breathing, and his chest was still rising and falling, and he was still alive, and there, and Will would keep it that way.

He was still so weak, though.

Will glanced back towards Jason, who was in the bed Will had found himself in upon waking up, still asleep, or asleep again, but asleep, all the same.

He had already healed him, too, even before he had checked on Percy, which had been the main reason he had resorted to the surgery.

Of course, he was fairly certain Jason hadn't even noticed his injuries along his shoulder, back and arms, or his twisted ankle, or his tensed and cramped muscles, but that didn't mean Will could simply leave him like that, so he hadn't.

Will looked back down at Nico, then considered his own current state, the sluggishness of his movements and the concentration it took to focus on Nico's values properly.

He should preserve his energy in order to be capable of healing in case of an emergency.

But if he poured some more of his energy into Nico now, there was a lower chance of there being an emergency.

Will hesitated for a moment, then glanced back at Jason to check he was still asleep, knowing full well he wouldn't let him do this if he knew.

Since he was still sleeping, though, he would never have to find out.

Will sat down on Nico's bed and tugged the blanket down to get to his naked chest, placing his hands over his heart and closing his eyes to summon his powers.

Almost immediately, he felt ready to drop, but his hands started glowing, and he could feel Nico's state stabilizing a tiny bit more, so he kept going, anyways.

This was his fault.

***

Will refused to let any other medic touch Nico, though he allowed them to check Percy's state to the best of their knowledge and take notes – after Jason insisted they only meant well, at any rate.

Jason wasn't sure why Will was so defensive, since he had never seen him react quite like this whenever he had seen him work in the infirmary before, but maybe it was simply the fact that he knew his siblings, but didn't know these people here.

At any rate, Jason decided not to question it, trusting Will to know best and to consult help if he did need any, though he was glad when Reyna let him know she would send for regular check-ups to make sure they would be on hand in case there was any sort of issue or emergency.

Like when Jason had found Will passed out on the floor next to Nico's bed earlier.

Or had it been yesterday?

Jason had slept so much, he wasn't quite sure anymore, and the lack of a clock in the room was beginning to annoy him.

Unfortunately, whenever Will was asleep, Jason didn't want to leave him in fear of him waking up and doing something stupid, or having a nightmare, or any other sort of problem without anybody to help him, so he tried not to leave unless to go to the bathroom – but whenever Will was awake, Will was either healing Nico or buzzing from him to Percy and back, doing gods knew what and seeming lost in healing and thoughts, so Jason refused to leave him alone then, either, worried he'd overdo it until he passed out (again).
They still didn't really speak.

Other than the regular sounds coming from the monitor next to Nico, and the occasional noise reaching them from the window whenever Will had it open for a while, there was silence.

Until Hazel came bursting into the room.

"Guys! Nico!" She practically yelled, and both Will and Jason jumped in surprise and shock, Jason's hand already at his sword, Will already in front of the beds protectively with a snarl halfway past his lips, before they recognized her and realized there was no immediate danger.

Except when she lunged past Will and to Nico's side, because Jason was almost positive Will would shove her away, too, same as he had done with the medics.

He looked about to, too, but then his eyes met Jason's, and he took a step back with a miffed look on his face.

"Oh gods, he looks horrible! You all look horrible! What happened? Sara, Hannah and Andrew reported back to us already, as did Jack, but nothing really explains this!" Hazel exclaimed, much too loud compared to the silence Jason was now used to, and she gestured towards Nico, towards Percy, towards them, her expression frantic.

Jason opened his mouth, then closed it again, trying to think of what to say, of how to explain.

"This is my fault." Will said quietly, and there was a knot in Jason's chest, clenching and aching and making him both want to comfort Will as well as lash out in irritation at the pain.

"Don't be stupid." Hazel shot back with a frown, and he was glad that she did, because he should be the one saying that, yet he hadn't.

"It's the truth. If I hadn't been so selfish and changed it, this wouldn't have happened! This is the payback, these are the consequences of my actions!" Will insisted, and Jason stared helplessly how his boyfriend teared up and started clutching his hair, looking guilty, looking lost, looking helpless.

"What are you talking about?" Hazel asked, confused but still seemingly irritated by Will's words, but there was a sudden thought in Jason's head that bugged him and made him move forward until he was right in front of Will and had his face in his hands, forcing him to look up at him.

"Don't you dare regret it, Will! Don't you dare wish you hadn't told us! They'll make it through this, Will. They'll make it through this, and so will we, and everything is going to be okay!"

It was an empty promise, but Jason's voice was firm and full of conviction he didn't know he had, and now it was Will's turn to stare up at him with no words, before the tears ran down his cheeks and Jason pulled him into his arms, the same way he had done before, yet different, and Will soaked up the embrace as if he had needed it for eons already, though their last hug must have only been a few hours ago.

When they parted, there was Hazel again, and she pulled them into a wordless hug, herself, weeping a little along with Will, and comforting them a little like a mother might, though that was okay – she was Hazel, after all.

"This doesn't mean I don't expect you to tell me everything that has happened, and don't you dare leave anything out. Have you eaten properly? I highly doubt it, you look starved. And you desperately need a shower. You two look like you've been dragged through the mud. Several times. Is that a twig in your hair, Will?"

Was she truly surprised? With their boyfriends out of commission, showers had definitely been the last thing on their minds, and Jason highly doubted Will would actually leave their side for long enough to take one, at any rate, since there was no shower in the tiny excuse of a bathroom.

This was a lot like the time after their fight against Kyle.

Just that they had still had each other to hold onto and could tell themselves everything was okay,
while now, Percy and Nico were like dead in their separate beds, and nothing was okay.

Jason looked at Will, who already had his eyes back on the monitor next to Nico's bed as he tugged the mentioned twig out of his hair.

He did look starved.

Jason wasn't surprised, since he very vividly remembered his own reluctance of eating the porridge that Reyna's people had brought this morning, and he wasn't sure whether Will had actually touched his, at all.

He should take better care of himself.

And Jason should help him with that, too.

He might not be able to help Percy or Nico right now, but he could help Will.

"You're right. How about we get some food, Hazel? Then I can tell you everything." He suggested, and glanced back at Will, but he was already nodding and sitting down on the chair they shared, pulling it closer to Nico.

"That's a great idea. I'll keep watch in the meantime." Will said, and Jason had expected as much.

"Are you sure you don't want to come along?" Hazel asked skeptically, a frown on her face, but Will waved off, his focus already back on Nico.

"I want to be here, in case something happens. He's fairly stable now, but still very weak." He explained, and Jason saw the worry in Hazel's eyes as her gaze hushed back to Nico, though she didn't say anything else.

Jason was about to leave the room with her, but then reconsidered and turned around again, and he was back at Will's side a second later to give him a kiss to the top of his head, all grease and dirt be damned.

"I love you. We'll be back in a few." He muttered, and Will gave a small nod and squeezed his hand for a moment, then he let go, and Jason left, and then Hazel was asking him to tell her what had happened.

So he did.

And instead of feeling liberating, remembering seemed to make everything worse, more intense, more real, more absolute.

But he still had Will.

They would make it through this somehow.

They had to.

***

Annabeth was walking at a brisk pace, matching the rapid beating of her heart and the urgency of the situation.

"Chiron!" She called, even before she reached him, and the centaur turned around, Piper right next to him, immediately gathering from one look that something was very, very wrong.

Even more wrong than before, with the Camp under constant attack, and the incidents inside Camp borders.

"What is it? Have you managed to make contact with them? Where are they?" Chiron asked, letting his impatience show to have their team back.

But their team wouldn't be back.
Annabeth felt the knot in her throat, but swallowed it down stubbornly.

"There was an ambush." She explained, then remembered the incidents within the Camp, which meant there had to be a spy, or some sort of way to gain information from the inside.

She lowered her voice, and motioned for them to follow her.

Piper had gone pale at the word 'ambush', knowing full well what that meant, though Annabeth could see Chiron was trying very hard to not think of the worst.

"What sort of ambush? Where are they? When will they be back?" He asked, quieter, as if he, too, was aware of the unseen danger around them.

"They won't be coming back. Not for a long time. I couldn't reach them, but Reyna IM-ed me. Nico shadow-travelled the entire team, plus the Senate's troupe, out of harm's way and to the Fields of Mars. He nearly faded, Chiron. Reyna said he did fade, but they managed to get him back. He's currently in a coma, and his state is still critical. Percy was wounded and nearly lost his arm, and it's not yet certain whether he'll wake up, either, much less whether he'll be able to use his arm properly again. Will and Jason are with them, trying to keep them alive. The rest of the team suffered varying degrees of injuries, but Reyna refuses to let any more demigods leave the Camp for now, not with the continuous attacks." She explained, and her girlfriend looked ready to be sick, though she remained quiet, while Chiron looked grave and seemed to need a moment to stomach the news.

Then he lowered his head, a flash of guilt hushing over it for a moment, but when he looked up again, his expression was stern and controlled.

"I see. Then we will have to make do without their help, and pray for a quick recovery. How is Camp Jupiter itself faring? Have the attacks lessened at all as they increased in amount and numbers, here?" He asked, and Annabeth momentarily wanted to lash out at him for just brushing the guys aside like that, as if he hadn't been asking about them on an almost daily basis, as if he hadn't cared just as much as they had, as if he hadn't prayed for them to answer at least one of their calls.

It reminded her of Nico, and the way he had lashed out at her when she had remained distanced and focused during their conversation with Clovis.

Maybe she had judged him too quickly, then, considering she felt the same way, now.

But there was no changing of the past, only a better shaping of the future, and she hoped the future had Nico in it, too, with all his grumpiness and hidden intelligence and unexpected temper.

And then there was Percy.

*Percy.*

Annabeth felt her heart aching at the thought of him, hurt *again*, after all the things that had happened to him in the past.

Why always him?

What if he really wouldn't be able to use his arm anymore?

Was it his sword arm? Would he still be able to fight? Would he even *want* to fight with it anymore? Or what if using it would cause him pain?

Or, what if worst came to worst, and Percy wouldn't wake up?

What if Nico didn't wake up?

What if neither of them woke up?

Annabeth closed her eyes and forced herself to take a deep breath.

She hated what-if's. They only fed into one's fears and never held any control over the outcome,
so there was no point giving into thinking like that.

"Reyna noticed no difference, other than in the distribution of monsters, and her observations don't match with ours, either. There has to be some sort of nest somewhere, Chiron. How could these monsters just pop up out of nowhere, especially in these numbers? When Percy and I were in… when we were… there, we saw how they reformed, and it wasn't this quickly. There's no way the same monsters can come back practically overnight. Sure, the doors of death might have rebuilt at a different place, but how could it possibly be close enough to both of the Camps to warrant such an amount of attacks? Also, monsters were never this keen on getting past the Camp borders. So, why now?" She asked, trying to answer her own questions as she asked them, but it simply didn't make sense.

Nothing did.

And now, Percy and Nico were out of commission, too, which meant Jason and Will were, as well.

Gods forbid if their conditions got worse.

Maybe she should convince Chiron to let her and Piper and a few of Will's siblings go and travel to Camp Jupiter as quickly as possible to try and help… no, that would be suicide.

They would have to make it by themselves.

Annabeth would have to believe in them.

In the meantime, though, she could collect information and find out where the monsters came from, at the very least, to make things easier on all of them.

Also, she had to get the Stoll brothers to figure out who the spy was, if there really was one.

She should also check on Clovis again.

Somehow, he had escaped her check-ups again, lately, and the more time passed, the less she could remember the check-ups she had actually had with him, before, as if they were nothing but a dream or a faint memory from years ago.

It was an odd thought, one she didn't like whatsoever, and one that made her even more intent on checking up on Clovis.

"I don't know, Annabeth. For now, the most important thing is to keep the Camp safe and the border strong." Chiron reminded her as if reading her mind, but she didn't care.

She had always done what she thought was right, and if nothing had managed to stop her before, nothing would do it now.

She exchanged a telling look with her girlfriend, and Piper gave a faint nod, before they both excused themselves and left.

"Clovis?" Piper asked, and Annabeth smiled, proud to have such a smart girlfriend.

"You got it, babe. Also, the Stolls."

They would figure this out.

Same as Percy and Nico would get better.

She had to believe in that.

Determined and confident in herself and her Camp, Annabeth took Piper's hand and made her way to the Hypnos cabin.

They would get through this.

***
Dylan watched Chase and McLean walk towards the Hypnos cabin, then they disappeared inside.

What were they doing there?

Frowning, he was tempted to linger, maybe even peek through the window, but he knew others would think he was prying, so he decided against it.

There were enough other things to worry about.

Fae, for example.

Or Billy.

Where were they?

Billy was supposed to be training, yet he was nowhere to be found.

Of course, Fae and Dimitri were nowhere to be found, either, because they were always with Billy.

Why they never waited for Dylan was beyond him, but he hoped he would find them soon.

There were news to share.

He had definitely heard Chase saying something to Chiron about an ambush, and since Chiron only cared about Grace and...the others, that meant this must have something to do with that, which was definitely something Billy and Fae would care about.

"Looking for somebody, kiddo?" A voice called behind him, and he made a face.

Not her, again.

Dylan automatically moved his hand to his nose, which this demon had already broken twice.

Clarisse.

How Billy could stand his half-sister, Dylan had no idea.

"Have you seen Billy?" He asked, trying to sound polite as he pointedly ignored the self-satisfied smirk that hushed over Clarisse's face when she saw the way he felt his nose.

"Billy? I'd hope he's in the cabin, resting."

Resting from what? Again?

They weren't allowed to engage in the battles outside the Camp border for now, so all Billy had to recover from was training, what was his big deal?!

"Is Fae there, too?" He asked as innocently as possible, but Clarisse only gave him a hard look.

"How would I know? I'm not their babysitter. But if you have time to stand around like this, you can go and make yourself useful and train, so you can help out with the battles. Come on, let me take you to the arena, so you don't get lost on the way."

Oh, just great.

Dylan was about to complain, but then Clarisse clicked her tongue and her hand hushed to her spear, so he groaned and started trudging back towards the arena, though he had just been there.

Sure, he had only checked whether Billy was there, but still.

"I can find the way by myself, thank you very much."

"It's no problem, I'm happy to help the newbs."

"I'm not a newb anymore." Dylan retorted sulkily.
"Stop talking and start walking, kiddo." Clarisse replied unimpressed, and he sulked even more.

"But I was just...there..." He started in annoyance and turned his head, but then got distracted by Chase and McLean leaving the Hypnos cabin, looking...odd?

He frowned and started slowing down, which made Clarisse run right into him.

"Geez, don't stop walking! I don't care about your petty excuses, you still need tons of practice if you want to be able to stand your ground. Hello? Are you even listening? What are you looking at, punk?" She snapped at him, but he was too occupied watching Chase throwing her arms up and saying something to McLean, who looked confused and pale.

What was going on?

Who was in the Hypnos cabin that could get them this mad?

There were only, like, three kids living in there, and one of them was always sleeping, and the other one was currently at dinner, because he had passed the guy on his search for Bill and Fae.

So it must have been either the sleeping kid, or...uh...what had his name been, again?

Clovis?

Dylan frowned, something nagging at him, though he couldn't quite pinpoint it.

He thought he had...seen him...at some point.

Which...didn't seem very unlikely, since there were hundreds of kids here at Camp, so of course he must have seen him.

But this felt different.

And Dylan usually was good with stuff like that.

"You got a problem with Annabeth and Piper? What, I thought you're done being a homophobic asshole?" Clarisse asked, and there was an edge to her voice that told him she was ready to punch him again, which was just plain rude.

"No. Yes. Whatever. Actually, I just remembered I need to ask them something super important. So, uh, just go on to the arena and train your heart out, whatever, and I'll just go and...talk to them. Thanks a lot. Goodbye." He mumbled, then ran off before she could stop him.

Of course, he had no intention of talking to Chase or McLean, and he knew he wouldn't have to worry about them wanting to talk to him, because they both rarely even as much as looked at him.

He did, however, want to find out what was going on, because, somehow, nobody else seemed to care.

At least he didn't see anybody else actively trying to figure anything out.

He had hoped Chase would do the deed, but apparently, she rather walked into random cabins to get a bad mood.

Women.

His grandfather had definitely been right in saying nobody would ever understand them.

Dylan started slowing down the closer he got to the two girls in question, straining his ears to catch any of the words they exchanged.

"Yes, but...no, he can't just disappear, Piper...I know...but I was so sure I visited just last week, what do they mean, we haven't been in there for at least two months? It doesn't make sense!"

Who disappeared?
Why would she think she visited when she hadn't? Was her brain okay?

What didn't make sense?

Dylan jumped when he saw a shadow moving near the edge of the forest, and he instinctively dived out of sight between the cabins, dreading that whoever or whatever that was might give him away or lead to Chase or McLean noticing him eavesdropping.

Also, it felt like the right thing to do.

"It really doesn't. Something is wrong. Do you think Clovis is the...the...you know? I mean, he has never been the same after that guy..." McLean said quietly, and Dylan wondered just what they were talking about.

Clovis...he had seen him.

There was something, right there, at the back of his mind, so close, yet he couldn't grasp it.

"But he was getting better! I know Clovis, he has helped us plenty of times. If he is the spy, he's not doing it voluntarily, which means we have to help him. But first, we have to find him. How can they just not look for their brother, I don't get it?! Peter didn't even seem to realize Clovis wasn't there anymore until we explicitly asked about him, and only then did he stop to think and notice he hadn't seen him in over a month, Piper. Something is very wrong!"

Wow, that sounded bad.

"Shh, I know. Let's first visit the Stolls and get them on their task to find the spy, then we'll arrange for a search troupe for Clovis, okay? He has to be in the Camp somewhere. Maybe it's just a big misunderstanding and he's been staying at a different cabin. You know regulations aren't really that big of a deal anymore ever since Jason killed the cleaning harpies." McLean reasoned, but Dylan was fairly certain they wouldn't find Clovis in a different cabin.

How he knew that, he didn't know.

He did, however, wonder what that shadow had been that he had just seen, so he peeked around the corner from behind the cabin.

Unfortunately, whatever he had seen was gone.

Should he go after it?

Maybe it was something important.

Or maybe it was that Clovis guy, taking a nice stroll through the forest.

At that thought, there was that nagging in his head again, that feeling of a memory right at the edge of his mind.


He couldn't connect the pieces, but at the same time, it seemed important.

"This is all just stupid. The guys are out of commission, Clovis is gone, both Camps are under constant attack, there's a spy, and Kyle is probably gloating with glee wherever that deranged psychopath is hiding. I wish Nico would have let Jason kill him back when he was about to do it."

Wow, such harsh words, coming from Chase.

Dylan hadn't been sure what to think of Kyle, back when he had arrived at Camp.

He had been nice enough to him, and seemed to get along with everybody, so Dylan hadn't really cared much – until he had seen Jason punching the living hell out of him.

It hadn't made sense, and Dylan hated it when things didn't make sense.
Everybody had been so quick to judge and blame, and suddenly, Kyle had been hated by half of the Camp, and protected by the other half that denied the accusations of rape and abuse.

Dylan had to admit he had been on the latter side, until he had found out who had supposedly been the victim.

And, damn it, that weak-ass healer with his blonde hair and blue eyes should not have made Dylan reconsider, especially since he was apparently gay and a total weirdo and he was dating three guys. At the same time. And they liked that.

Yuck.

His grandfather would probably suffer a stroke if he heard such people were at this Camp.

Then again, this Camp was full of such people.

When Dylan had first realized that, he had been disgusted.

Now, he just wondered why everybody else seemed fine with it, seeing as how unnatural it was.

Also, it was kind of weird to see how...happy...they tended to be, even though it was unnatural and they should feel bad and want to be normal.

Dylan peeked around the corner again, this time to check on Chase and McLean, who were hugging and stroking over each other's backs, having some sort of whispered conversation Dylan couldn't catch, before they broke apart, took each other's hands, and left to visit the Stolls.

His grandfather had told him they were all damned and would suffer in hell for eternity for their perversion.

Dylan used to think the same thing, but by now, he had to wonder how something could possibly be so wrong that it required eternal suffering as punishment, when it also seemed...kind of good?

Or maybe the presence of these people was simply getting to him, after all.

Dylan lingered where he was until Chase and McLean were out of sight, then he strolled out of his hiding spot and glanced back at the forest.

Back to the actually important matters in life.

That shadow.

It could have been a draiad. Or a stray monster.

Or it could have been a stray Camper.

It could have also been Clovis.

Only one way to find out.

"Mission Find-out-what's-going-on is-..."

"Dylan? What are you doing here?" A voice asked behind him the moment he wanted to race off towards the forest, and Dylan shrieked in surprise and shock.

"Fae! Hey! I didn't hear- I mean hear, you! Or see you! I mean, hey, wow, I was looking for you- I mean, you guys, uh, so, what are you doing here? Like, uh..." He stammered as he whirled around to find himself face-to-face with Fae, the most definitely prettiest girl here at Camp, with her pretty hair, and her pretty eyes, and oh gods why was she scowling at him, what had he done wrong this time, it just wasn't fair!

"Well, you're right next to my cabin. In case you haven't noticed yet, I live here. Anyways, have you seen Billy? I can't find him. And why were you talking to yourself?"

Wait, she had heard that? Damn it!
"N-No reason. Why are you looking for Billy?"

Yeah, why always Billy? She seemed unnaturally obsessed with the guy.

Sure, Dylan had been looking for him, too, but that was because he knew he'd find Fae with him.

"Because he's my friend? Duh? So, have you seen him?" She retorted with a frown on her face, and, yep, she was annoyed at him, even though he hadn't even done anything.

"Clarisse said he's probably in his cabin, resting." Dylan told her so she wouldn't get even more upset, and her eyebrows shot up.

"You talked to Clarisse?"

Of course, she knew all about his animosity towards Billy's half-sister, since she had been there both times when that demon had punched him.

She had done nothing to stop it, either.

Though he guessed she and Billy (and Dimitri, at their insistence) had helped him to the infirmary afterwards, both times.

"She wanted to get me to train. Again. But then I saw Chase and McLean—…"

"You mean Annabeth and Piper. Wait, were you spying? Is that why you were hiding out behind my cabin?"

"I was not! I merely wanted to find out what was going on!"

"If 'finding out' involves eavesdropping and hiding out behind cabins, that is spying, Dylan!" Fae cut in, her tone a mixture of disbelief and exasperation.

"Whatever! Anyways, do you want to know what I found out, or are you going to go after your beloved Billy? Because I have something super important to do, okay?"

Okay, in his head, that had sounded much more impressive and much less accusing.

Fae scowled at him.

"He is not my beloved. And anyways, what's it to you? I was going to suggest we both go and knock on his cabin to see whether he's in there, then you could tell us what you found out by spying, but if you're oh-so-busy, you might as well leave."

Oh great.

She would have invited him to go with her.

He could have told both her and Billy, in one go, and have them both be impressed by what he found out.

Damn it.

"Or…you could come with me, and I tell you on the go what I found out and what I intend to do?" He suggested hopefully, glancing back towards the forest, even though he knew there was nothing to be found there anymore.

Maybe, if he was quick, he could still find a trace or lead that could help him solve this puzzle, though.

"What are you two talking about?" A familiar voice said behind him, and he would have turned around with a grin, if it wasn't for the fact that Fae's whole face seemed to brighten.

Ugh, she was totally into Billy.

Scowling, he looked around at Billy and tried to look as miffed as possible at his appearance,
though he couldn't help but notice Billy was beginning to fit his shirts a lot better these days, and his hair was extra messy, which indicated he must have been in bed until recently.

He and his stupid 'rests' that took forever and happened, like, after every training session.

What was wrong with him, anyways?

And why would he never talk about it?

Secrets. Dylan hated them.

"Where have you been? You missed all the good stuff."

"With that, he means to say that he has missed you so much he has been looking for you all over like an angsty lover, even checking in with his arch-enemy Clarisse, just to let you know he's been spying on Annabeth and Piper." Fae sold him out without blinking, and there were so many things wrong with her statement, he couldn't even find any words.

Billy looked from him to her, then he let out a long, deep sigh, and Dylan was right back to sulking.

"Not spying. Stupid Clarisse. No lover. Not gay. You're all stupid." He mumbled under his breath, but they ignored him.

Rude.

"Of course. So, didn't you have something super important to do?" Fae reminded him, and Dylan sulked even more, his eyes hushing back to the forest.

Was she trying to get rid of him to be alone with Billy? How mean.

Though, if he left now, how high were the chances he would still find that shadow?

Oh, that reminded him.

"Hey, did you know a guy is missing? The kid from the Hypnos cabin. I heard Chase and McLean talk about it. Also, there's supposed to be a spy at Camp." He told them quickly, because, who knew, maybe they would come and help him on his quest to find the truth.

Unfortunately, both Fae and Billy frowned at him.

Billy was also tugging on his shirt again.

Why did he keep doing that?

It was already a loose Camp shirt, why tug on it? He should be happy he was growing into it.

There, he did it again.

"You mean Clovis? I thought somebody was already taking care of him, given the last time we saw him. And a spy? Really? Well, I can't say I'm surprised." Billy mumbled, and Dylan gaped at him.

How could he just brush this off?

There was a spy at Camp! They had to find them!

And, wait, when had they seen what?

"What are you talking about?" Fae asked confused, and Dylan was glad she did, because he hated being the one asking stupid questions.

Billy frowned.

"Well, don't you think the attacks have been a tad too well organized? They have to be getting some inside-information. Plus, haven't you heard of the two incidents at the Bunker? Leo nearly
died during the second one. They can't have been 'accidents', if you ask me."

"No, yes, I mean, I know that. I meant with Clovis. When did we see him? I can't remember anything like that. Isn't he that pudgy kid that used to hang out with Mitchell so much?" Fae replied, and Dylan watched Billy's face fill with confusion.

"How can you not remember? We met outside my cabin, and I wanted to leave to rest, when he came out of the forest, all dirty and confused, talking to himself and stumbling across the Camp. You guys said you'd let Annabeth and Chiron know."

Dylan blinked and looked at Fae, who looked at him just as bewildered as he did.

"When was that?"

"Are you kidding me?" Billy said, and his voice turned an alarming high pitch that had Dylan frowning.

He hadn't known Billy could actually get that high with his voice.

Weird.

However, Billy didn't seem to care about sounding like a girl as he began pacing in front of them, seeming unusually agitated.

"What's the big deal? I mean, fine, then we saw him in passing, I guess. Point is, he seems to have disappeared. You think he's the spy?" Dylan asked, but the next moment, he had Billy way too close to his face, allowing him to see the faintest hint of freckles on his skin.

"What's the big deal?! The deal is, that he was acting really weird when we saw him, guys. He was talking to himself and didn't even seem to know where he was, nor what was going on. He didn't even react when we called his name, and he didn't even know where his cabin was. How can you not remember that? Please tell me you at least told Annabeth. Come on, guys. I asked you whether you did, and you assured me you settled the matter!"

Dylan blinked at him, something nagging at the back of his mind again.

Fae looked struck and ashamed of herself, though she didn't seem to remember, either.

"Guys!" Billy exclaimed in disbelief, and both Fae and Dylan moved closer together, their heads lowered in shame.

"I'm sorry!" "Uh…same…"

He glanced back towards the forest, his chance of finding whoever or whatever the shadow had been close to zero by now, though he still sort of hoped it might pop up again.

It didn't.

"Okay, let's go tell them now, then. I'll tell them. Seriously, guys, what if we could have prevented this? What if he was controlled by Kyle? And we just left him to himself!" Billy ranted, then turned on his heel and stormed off.

Fae looked struck.

Dylan was frozen to the spot, looking after his friend.

He had never ever seen Billy that angry before.

"This is horrible. I seriously can't remember. I don't even know how the guy really looks like, I only ever saw his back." Fae mumbled next to him, and he looked back towards the forest.

"I think I know how he looks like, but I can't remember anything like what Billy just said, either. Do you think there's something messing with our heads? I mean, they did say that Kyle sort of meddled with Clovis' head, right?"
The thought was, plainly, disturbing.

He didn't feel any different, or as if big chunks of his memory were missing or anything.

If anything, maybe something or someone had messed with Billy's mind, if he suddenly remembered things that hadn't actually happened.

Dylan frowned, but somehow, it didn't seem to match, and it didn't feel right, which meant that couldn't be the case.

Which meant that something had messed with their minds, somehow.

"I don't even want to know. This is horrible. What if Clovis got kidnapped again? Or what if he's dead, and we're the last ones who saw him? Oh gods, that makes us the main suspects! I can't go to jail. I need to get into college, first!" Fae suddenly exclaimed, her voice becoming higher and louder the more agitated she became, and he quickly put his hand over her mouth to not draw too much attention to them, even though there was barely anybody else around, much less within earshot.

"Hey, keep it down. We're not gonna be suspects. I'm sure Clovis is fine, wherever he is."

He had that nasty feeling in the pit of his stomach again, telling him this wasn't true.

Dylan decided to keep that information to himself.

Fae mumbled something in reply, but thanks to his hand, he couldn't understand a single word.

"What?" He asked as he pulled away, and she gave him a heartfelt glare, before letting out a deep sigh and moving a hand through her wild and pretty hair.

"Do you think Kyle is somewhere here at Camp? I mean, I know he's banned, but…what if he found a loophole?" She repeated, and he looked back towards the forest.

No, that hadn't been Kyle, he knew that much.

"No, I don't think so. Plus, what would he want here? Solace isn't here anymore, so I bet he has no more interest in this place than he would have in you or me." He reasoned, and that did feel right, though it also made him worry about…nobody in particular.

Grace and his group. Yeah. That.

_Damn it, that guy had punched him in the face, what did he care?!

"Don't say something like that! I don't even want to think of…oh gods, what if that's what Annabeth meant with 'ambush'? What if they were ambushed by him?!!"

Okay, she was back to hyperventilating.

"You don't know that. I'm sure they're fine." He said, but that also didn't feel quite right.

He decided to keep that information to himself, too.

Instead, he contemplated whether his intuition might be faulty.

After all, he also felt as if those guys 'dating' was an acceptable thing, when it clearly wasn't, so maybe he was wrong concerning this, too.

"We should go after Billy, shouldn't we? If we stay away, they might think we really killed Clovis. We didn't, though, right?" Fae whispered in his ear, and he'd be happy about how close she was to him right now, if it wasn't for the morbidity of her words.

"No! Of course we didn't!"

Or had they?

Dylan wasn't quite sure anymore.
All he knew was that there was a spy at Camp, Clovis was missing, and something had messed with his mind at some point, which rose the question of what other memories might be missing.

Not to mention the fact that Billy seemed unaffected by whatever dark powers were at large.

Mission Find-out-what's-going-on was far from finished, and even if he had to wait until later, he was intent on solving the mystery.

Who could really be a spy? Chase had said it wasn't Clovis unless he was being forced to, but Dylan couldn't see anybody betraying the Camp like that.

After all, the bad side had monsters, and who wanted to side with those?

It would only be a matter of time until they turned on one, after all, and Dylan definitely wasn't stupid enough to ever even consider that.

But he was going to find out who was behind this.

Absolutely.

But first: Billy.

Billy, and Fae, and who knew, maybe Chase would let it slip what happened to the guys, then that would be one worry less.

Then again, what was he even worried about, Mr. Punch-Dylan-in-the-face-and-not-accept-an-apology was a healer, after all.

They were bound to be fine.

Dylan felt like this wasn't true, but he pushed that knowledge far down and decided his intuition was stupid.

***

True to her word, Hazel stayed with them for the rest of the day, talking to them, sitting with them by Percy’s and Nico's sides, urging Will to explain his surgery on Percy's arm and all the numbers and graphs on Nico's monitor – and she made sure they ate and drank.

Jason was glad for it.

Her voice made the room more alive, and when Will started talking about medical procedures, Jason momentarily felt a sense of familiarity, which took away the tension in his shoulders for a little while, even if it came back the moment his gaze hushed to Percy and Nico again.

After that, Frank came to pick her up, and he, too, hugged them just like she had, though he didn’t ask for any details, and he left with Hazel soon after, promising to return the next day.

He did, same as Hazel, and Reyna, and the hourly knock on the door by the medics during daytime that became Jason’s only telling of time, together with the meals provided.

He took his shower, but Will didn’t, though Jason was just happy he had stopped knocking himself out, for now.

The days bled together like that.

Jason would wake up and find breakfast on one of the puny bedside tables, and Will would already be awake and at their boyfriends' sides, watching, touching, healing, and then Jason would coax him into eating and drinking, as well, and the day would somehow, miraculously pass, either with them getting visited, or with them not getting visited, depending on whether the others had the chance to.

Their team hadn't yet come, though Hazel had told Jason that was because Reyna had prohibited it for the time being, until Nico was out of his apparently still critical state.
Jason hadn't gathered much, but if he had noticed one thing, it was the fact that Will had said 'when Percy wakes up', while Nico had always been an 'if'.

If Nico woke up.

But what if he didn't?

What if he remained in this sort of…coma?

Jason shuddered at the mere thought, and pushed it far out of his mind.

"Hey, Will." He said, and it was still disturbing how loud his voice was in this room, even if he tried to keep it down.

Will hummed in reply as he tucked a strand of hair behind Nico's ear and scribbled something on his arm, even though Reyna had organized him some paper.

"Come here." Jason told him, and it came out just as soft as he had expected it to as he patted the space next to him on the small bed.

Will looked up, then he glanced back at Percy and Nico, undoubtedly thinking of all the things he could still do before calling it a day.

But then, to Jason's relief, Will came over and climbed onto his lap to slump against him with a deep sigh.

Jason put his arms around him and stroked over his back.

"Percy finally starts showing signs of improvement." Will whispered, and Jason was relieved to hear it, though he also noticed there was once more no mention of Nico.

"That's great." He replied quietly, and Will hummed again.

"Do you…think he'll wake up soon?" Jason asked timidly into the silence, his gaze anywhere but on his two unconscious boyfriends.

"I don't know." Will whispered, immediately crushing his faint hope once more, though he tried to keep it down.

"I hope so. Come on, lay down with me for a bit, okay? Tomorrow, you can heal Nico again, and we can take a shower together. You're still filthy, Will."

He couldn't believe he had just called his boyfriend 'filthy', especially Will, but seriously, he was filthy.

Will hummed in reply, a hand coming up to tug at a strand of his greasy, blonde hair.

"Don't want to. What if there's an emergency?"

"I'm sure there won't be an emergency for the ten minutes you need to take a shower." Jason replied pointedly, but Will didn't seem convinced.

"But the shower is so far away."

Their room was one of the closest to the shower rooms.

"I can keep watch in the meantime." Jason suggested, though he knew very well that he would be useless if there was an emergency.

"I'll consider it." Will mumbled evasively, though Jason still thought it sounded like a no.

Hopefully, Percy would wake up soon, now that he seemed to be improving.

Once he was awake, things would surely be easier on Will, and then Nico would get better in no time, too, he was sure of it.
Plus, Percy would be much better at taking care of Will than Jason, he just knew it.

"Thank you, Jason."

The words were quiet, just like everything else Will said, but they still reverberated inside Jason's head as if he had said them much louder, and it took him a moment to realize their meaning.

"What for, love?" He asked, and his boyfriend shrugged faintly.

"For being you? For being here? For taking care of me, even though I should be the one taking care of you? For putting up with me and letting me sleep with you in bed even though I stink?"

Jason wasn't quite sure what to say to all of that, though he did tug the blanket free from beneath them and maneuvered them further onto the bed, so he could wrap them both up and call it a night, even if he wasn't really tired, and he had no idea what time it even was.

"You're welcome. Just know that I love you, Will."

"I know you do. I love you, too."

That was good enough for Jason, and he found himself smiling as he gave his boyfriend a peck on his nose, then on his lips.

At least Will was brushing his teeth ever since Jason had organized toothbrushes (thank the gods for Hazel).

"Ready to go to sleep?" Jason asked as Will reluctantly got off his lap so he could lay down properly.

"No." Will replied, though he still laid down next to him and snuggled against his chest.

"Me neither." Jason said with a sigh, though they still cuddled together and closed their eyes, relishing the closeness and intimacy.

Jason listened to the even beeping and machinery noises in the room, and his boyfriends' even breathing, and in his mind, all four of them were together, somewhere far away from here.

His wrist vibrated as he got another IM-call, but he ignored that, same as he had ignored all the others, not feeling ready for even more bad news, and unable to be the bringer of bad news, either.

Will didn't seem to notice, already snoring softly against his chest.

Jason kept him safe and sound.

***

Jason was standing in their cabin, alone.

For a moment, he was confused as to why he was here, then he realized he must be dreaming – which was a rather strange realization to have.

Jason never remembered his dreams, but he was pretty sure people normally couldn't tell whether they were dreaming or not until they woke up (or were lucid dreamers, perhaps?).

He didn't have long to ponder that, though, because he wasn't alone any longer.

There was Nemesis, appearing out of nowhere, just suddenly there, and then she was in front of him, her pale skin gleaming in the faint moonlight coming from the window, her long, dark hair swaying behind her as she moved, her expression compassionate, yet stern.

Jason opened his mouth to speak, but found he couldn't, and she placed a finger against his lips to silence him, anyways.

There was something eerie about this, something surreal, but at the same time, it felt very real.
Nemesis’ lips moved, though he couldn’t hear the words, more feeling them inside him.

"It was not just.” She said, and for a moment, he didn't know what she was talking about.

Then, he wondered whether she was talking about the death of her daughter, the fact they hadn’t come to her, or the battle that had nearly claimed Nico and Percy.

But before he could figure that out, she pulled away from him, and he blinked, following her movements with his eyes as his body remained still.

"There have been so many injustices lately. Battles that cannot be won. Promises that cannot be kept. My daughter has fallen, she cannot help you anymore, now.” Nemesis said, and once again, her voice was inside Jason, confusing him, though the meaning of her words was even more confusing.

"I will not stand for it.” She said, and he stared at her in confusion and question, as she came closer again and cupped his face.

"You poor boy." Nemesis spoke softly, a hint of pity in her otherwise cool gaze.

"I will sign your contract. My price will be paid by the decisions you make, and by the choice your sun boy will have to face. Be warned, Jason Grace. There is much more at stake than the lives of your loved ones. Cherish the time you have. My daughter died for you to have that.” She said, and he stared at her, his mind spinning as he tried to comprehend her words.

Her face was too close for his liking, but he still couldn’t move, and he was glad when she pulled away once more without expecting a reply or confirming nod.

"I will take my leave now. Remember my warning, and heed my advice. Now…sweet dreams, Jason Grace.” She bid her farewell with the smallest hint of a smile, and Jason felt the strangest pull inside of him.

Then she disappeared, together with their cabin, and Jason was ready to go back to his undoubtedly dreamless sleep, when he nearly choked as he caught a glimpse of something much, much different, something warm and positive and wonderful, and he blinked down at the weight in his arms, gazing into bright blue eyes and dark hair that stood off as if electrocuted, reminding him of a small monkey, and tiny hands reaching out for his with a toothless grin.

Jason felt an inexplicable joy that didn’t quite seem like his own, a euphoria and relief he hadn't felt in so long, or maybe never felt, at all, and he only had the time to glance up and see his boyfriend for the fraction of a second, though they looked quite different from the way they looked now – then everything faded, and he did, as well.

He woke up with a start, the memory already slipping from his mind, though he tried desperately to hold onto it, same as he held onto that joy.

What the…what had that been?

He blinked and looked at Will, just to find him awake at his side, watching him with big eyes and a surprised look on his face.

"Are you okay?” Will asked him softly, and with Jason still feeling so inexplicably happy, that seemed like a laughable question.

He smiled softly at him and shifted to wrap his arms around him tightly, wishing he could share his emotions with him for just one moment.

"For once, I think I am.” He whispered back, and Will looked a bit confused, but didn't question him.

Jason couldn't resist temptation any longer and leaned down to kiss him – very much not like the pecks they had shared the past days, but a real kiss, which quickly deepened as Will returned it with more vigor than originally expected, and Jason wondered how they hadn't done this, before.

It felt terrific.
Jason felt terrific.

Will was terrific.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Jason allowed himself to feel good, and Will made that very easy to accomplish.

When they at last parted with many more pecks and cheeky fumbling beneath the blankets, there were smiles on both of their faces, and Will's gaze held more warmth than Jason had seen in a long time.

The last thing Jason thought of when sleep claimed them once more, was how wonderful that one moment must have been that Nemesis had allowed him to glimpse.

He'd do anything to have that become reality.

Anything.

That night, Jason dreamed of his boyfriends, and how they would be alright, again.

It was the best dream to have in times like these.

Chapter End Notes

2nd part of the Fanart links <3

ENJOY!!

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/1601023664149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-
    mel-chan366
    - New Years from Advent Calendar times ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/154469941964/the-third-of-week-three-of-my-
    fabulous-five-dollar
    - Our dorks in Christmas sweaters!! :D
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-
    for-mel-chan366
    - The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-
    mel-chan366-now-i
    - Ice cream time ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/156557714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-
    chan366-3-3-some
    - <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160990996944/another-of-my-may-madness-
    commissions-a-fabulous
    - The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-
    ever-fabulous
    - ...Boxer Shorts XD ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164308263854/let-me-just-take-this-time-to-say-
    that
    - The guys 'admiring' Jason in his leather jacket ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164426408554/another-fun-very-colourful-
    commission-for
    - Pride ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/165225200564/a-cozy-commission-for-the-
    fantastic
    - A peaceful moment in the Hades Cabin (so soft!!!!!!! so peaceful!!!!! so cozy!!!!!!!)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-mel-chan366-3
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love them too much not to share them ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-commission-for
- Jerce Soft Kiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164389230829/an-adorable-sketch-commission-for-mel-chan366
- Solangelo Date <3

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my firstborn child :) (Mostly because there won't be one. Sorry. But you can have a cookie?!)
Waking Up and Letting Go

Chapter Notes

(Edit: *** marks new ones at the time of the chapter)
(Edit2: Had to split this into top/end notes, so here's the first part, and rest is below.)

PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:
http://sta.sh/055hx90e5r9 - perfect depiction of Kyle :)
http://sta.sh/0h2pt887zi - adorable Will with flowers <3
http://sta.sh/02xyyl0gpx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3
http://sta.sh/0qy6ka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing how cute Will is :)  
http://sta.sh/01m8rr04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will ;)
http://nicodammangelo.tumblr.com/post/149016380617/fanart-for-my-favorite-fanfic-love-dreams
- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well ;)
http://sta.sh/01b1irqkghb - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3
- A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater!! <3
- A super cute redraw of our Will in his comfort sweater!! :D (Also, my new phone background XD)
- Will with blanket <3
- THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE FROM THE LAST SEQUEL!!!!!!!!!
- THE TEAM!!!!! THE WHOLE TEAM!!!!! I AM FOREVER IN AWE AND GRATEFUL AND AM ORDERING Y'ALL TO LOOK AT THIS RIGHT AWAY!!!!! PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THE GODS DO IT!!!
https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you
- A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy, challenge-loving dorks <3
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patreon-tari
- Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3
- Nico in his winter outfit :')
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-commission-for-my-amazing-patron
- Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD
- Jason and the leather jacket ;)

This was a very self-indulgent piece of the guys in their early thirties <3 (I just love thinking about them after all of this is over, just living a normal life in New Rome...now they just gotta survive long enough to make it there ;))

Aaaand here comes a Mini-Comic from WoB times, commissioned from the super sweet Alexandra: http://alexandralumetta.tumblr.com/post/165877138725/another-minicomic-commission-this-time-in-percy

- That one time Percy gave Will flowers... <3

Check End Notes for more links!! <3

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A/N: Hey Cupcakes!

Here the next chapter, as promised :D

Hope you're all well, and apologies for all the pain in the story at the current time :/

Thank you for all the lovely feedback, you're what keeps me going!
As always, special thanks to my amazing friend and beta-reader - you're the best!

Hope you'll enjoy the chapter, and see you in two weeks :)  

Wish you all the best--
-Tári

---

**Trigger Warnings:**
- Angst
- Pain
- Symptoms of SSD (Somatic Symptom Disorder / Somatoform Disorder / Somatic pain)
- Depression
- Confrontation / Mention of Rape/Abuse / Hopelessness

If there's anything else you want me to add in the future that I forgot to mention here, please let me know.

Also, please check out the wonderful art for this series. It really helps with the angst.

---

**Chapter 08: Waking Up and Letting Go**

"Will?" Jason said quietly as he watched Will tugging the blanket back over Nico correctly after his check-up.

"No." Will replied, undoubtedly already knowing what Jason wanted to say.

"Take a shower." Jason said, anyways.

"No, thanks." Will retorted, because he was stubborn.

Yeah, well, Jason could be stubborn, too.

"I'll watch over them. You need a shower, Will. Washing your face in the sink isn't going to cut it, and no, that was no permission to wash your hair in the sink. The showers are ten steps away from here, if there's an emergency, I'll get you immediately." Jason reasoned, but Will acted as if he couldn't hear him.

"I just don't think it's a good idea." Will mumbled at long last as he fluffed up Percy's pillow and set out to comb his hair.
(Because Will had no problems with washing them, apparently, seeing as this was the second time
Jason had woken up to the sound of a hairdryer, and his boyfriends smelled like soap and
shampoo and fresh sheets, while Will was a walking disaster.)

"Just do it, Will. The sooner you do it, the sooner you'll be done and can watch over them once
more." Jason reasoned, but Will only grumbled, clearly not interested.

"What's going on here?" A voice from the door asked, but he had already heard it opening, so he
wasn't surprised.

"Reyna, tell Will he needs a shower." Jason said without turning around, and caught his boyfriend
making a face and mimicking him talking in a rather derisive way that had him raise his eyebrows.

What a charming, loving boyfriend he had.

"You stink. Shower. Now. Do you think your boys will be happy to see you walking around like
a trash bin? All that would do is make them uncomfortable and worried." Reyna stated without
discernible emotion, and Jason crossed his arms in front of his chest to give Will his best 'I told
you so'-look.

Apparently, he should have seriously told him exactly that, because, while Will grumbled, he also
tossed his medic pouch on the bedside table next to Percy and stomped past Jason towards the
door.

"Fine! But I swear, if you don't get me the very moment something seems wrong, I'm going to-
...

"Don't even finish that sentence, Death Breath." Reyna cut in unimpressed, and Jason inwardly
winced at the nickname, though Will only huffed loudly and slammed the door shut behind him.

Jason frowned, then turned to look at the door, then sighed and counted down from three.

The moment he reached zero, his boyfriend opened the door again with even more grumbling and
a deep scowl on his face as he collected the towel and shower supplies Jason had laid out for him.

"For the record, I am deeply upset." Will clarified, and Jason crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Okay."

"How can you just say okay?!" Will ranted, but then Reyna clicked her tongue.

"Stop trying to procrastinate your shower, Solace."

Still scowling, Will stomped back out of the room, and Jason let out a deep sigh.

"Why is this such a big deal to him? I don't understand." Reyna asked quietly the moment they
were certain he wouldn't storm back in, and Jason shrugged.

"I'm not sure. For the most part, I think he really just doesn't want to leave them alone. I wouldn't
want to, either, if I was the only one capable of keeping Nico from fading, to be honest." He
mumbled, and he did feel a little bad for forcing Will to cope with that pressure, but at the same
time, there was nothing he could do, and Will needed to take care of himself, as well.

Even if it was just something simple like a shower and eating regular meals.

"Hm. If you say so. I don't know, it seemed like he was also a little reluctant about the shower,
itself, don't you think?" Reyna mused, and Jason hesitated, trying to analyze his boyfriend's
behavior.

It was difficult to tell what bothered Will, since the state of their boyfriends had both of them
rather beside themselves.

It was a little better now compared to before, of course, but having both of their boyfriends
unconscious with no idea when they would wake up again (or whether they would wake up, at
all) was nothing one could simply stomach in a day and be fine the next.
However, the more he thought about it, the more it felt as if Reyna might be right.

But why would Will mind a shower? He was the cleanest person Jason knew of.

Seriously, even back when he had been ordered bed-rest after Percy’s stunt of running through the Underworld because he was a jealous fool (good old times), Will had complained about the necessity of a shower after not getting to take one for one day.

It did seem unusual for Will to now be this opposed to showering.

Jason mused for another minute.

Maybe it was because the water reminded him of Percy?

Or maybe he had had some sort of vision that he hadn't told Jason about yet.

At that thought, he felt the unease returning, but he pushed it down determinedly, telling himself he had to be able to trust Will.

Will knew full well how important yet fragile trust was, and he knew he had messed up big time with keeping the truth from them, so Jason was confident that he wouldn't do the same thing again, especially not after seeing how much it had hurt them, both as individuals, as well as the relationship as a whole.

Reyna sat down on the chair between the beds, her gaze now on Nico's face, watching him breathing into his oxygen mask at a slow, regular pace.

Then, she tore her gaze away and looked around the room, just to frown and shoot Jason a puzzled look.

"Don't you have a clock in here?"

Finally, somebody else noticed it, too.

"No. I tell the time from the hourly knocks on the door." He replied, and she squinted at him for a moment, as if trying to discern whether he was serious or making fun of her.

Then, she rolled her eyes and looked back at Nico.

"I'll bring one, later. By the way, your team asked about you. Well, they keep asking about you. They want to visit you, and they're rather persistent. What do you think?" She asked, and Jason looked from her to Percy and Nico.

He…wasn't sure.

In a way, Jason wanted to see the rest of their team so he could assure himself they were alright, and he knew they needed to do the same.

But on the other hand, Will was rather sensitive about visitors, and Jason wanted to avoid a fight at all costs, same as he wanted to spare them the shock of seeing just how bad Percy and Nico were faring.

Of course, they were doing great, but Jason only knew that because he had seen how much weaker they had been before, and because Will seemed at least a little more at ease now.

For the others, this would be their first time seeing Percy and Nico since the night of the battle, and he was certain it would wreck them just as much as the past week had wrecked him.

However, they also deserved to know, and deserved to be part of this, same as Hazel, Frank and Reyna did.

Before Jason could make up his mind, he heard the sound of hurried footsteps, and the next moment, the door was ripped open again to reveal a dripping wet Will with shampoo still in his hair and a towel wrapped around him in the messiest way Jason had ever seen.
"Done." Will declared, and Jason resisted the urge to let his mouth fall open.

"You weren't even gone for five minutes!" He exclaimed, instead, but Will waved him off.

Reyna huffed behind him, but this time, Jason decided he didn't need her help to get Will to do what he had to do.

"Will." He said sternly, and Will tensed as he was about to turn his back to him to grab fresh clothes out of the backpack Hazel had brought them from Ash.

"Don't you dare use that tone of voice with me, Jason. I'm not your child."

Then he should stop behaving like one.

Jason bit his tongue, then stepped forward to take his boyfriend's hand.

Will permitted it, though he still scowled and remained tense.

"No, but you're my boyfriend. Come. You still have shampoo in your hair."

"I can rinse that off in the sink." Will argued, but Jason gave his hand a tug, and Will moved to follow, even if he looked far from pleased.

"Reyna, watch over them for a moment, please." Jason said over his shoulder, and Reyna huffed behind them, though whether it was in annoyance or amusement, he couldn't tell.

"Take your time."

"Fine, I'll go back and rinse myself off again. You stay here. Seriously, Jason, it's fine." Will argued the moment Jason ushered him out of the room and closed the door behind them as they made their way over to the shower rooms, but all Jason did was glance sideways at his boyfriend to gauge the discomfort in his expression.

"Apparently, it's not." He then said simply, and pushed the door to the empty shower room open to slip inside with Will.

"Jason, what are you even…it's wet in here, what do you think you're doing, marching in here fully dressed?" His boyfriend ranted, but Jason didn't let that stop him as he locked the door behind them and maneuvered Will backwards under the shower head, before he tugged off Will's towel to dump it in the dry corner, and turned on the water.

Will jumped, then hissed, then looked up at Jason in bewilderment and confusion as the water rained down on both of them.

"Are you crazy?!"

"Clothes can be dried, Will. Now, mind telling me what's wrong?" Jason asked, then moved his hands up to put them in Will's hair to wash out the shampoo, gently massaging his head.

Will instantly averted his gaze and fell silent, though he didn't stop him.

"What's wrong is that you're here, Jason. You're all drenched now. Go back to our boyfriends and put on some dry clothes, I'll be right there." Will declared after the silence between them got too unbearable, but Jason didn't move.

"Why not let me help you with your shower?" He asked, instead.

They had taken plenty of showers together in the past already, after all, so it wasn't as if this was something particularly new or different to them.

For inexplicable reasons, though, Will suddenly seemed to even blush a little.

"Why would you…just because I'm naked that doesn't mean…I mean…don't you think this is a little…uh…" Will trailed off, then crossed his arms in front of his chest somewhat, as if he was trying to cover up, and there was definite discomfort in his gaze now that Jason had no idea how
He wasn't quite sure what the problem was.

Of course Will was naked? He was taking a shower, after all? It would be quite difficult to shower with clothes on, he'd imagine.

But he had seen Will naked before, plenty of times, so why would he get uncomfortable now?

Will gave him an almost shy look for a moment, before he averted his gaze once more, and Jason watched in confusion how he started shifting awkwardly, still trying to ever so subtly hide from view while remaining right in front of Jason.

"I'm not in the mood for…you know…"

Jason stared at him.

No, he didn't know.

He had no idea what Will was talking about, to be honest.

"You're…not in the mood to let me wash your hair?" He asked hesitantly, because, while Will claimed this, he certainly did nothing to remove Jason's hands from his head, where he was still stroking through the blond strands and massaging him faintly.

Will looked at him as if he had grown a second head, but then his expression cleared, and his cheeks turned a darker shade of pink, while his gaze hushed back to the tiles next to them determinedly.

"Never mind. Just…do as you please, I guess. For a moment I thought you…never mind."

Jason blinked at him slowly.

Then, it clicked, and he wanted to hit his head against the wall, because, of course.

"Will, I'm not going to jump you. I can still differ between when a situation is sexual and when it isn't. Right now, it definitely isn't." He said, and Will looked more than a little embarrassed.

"I noticed. Sorry. It's just…I know it's been a while, so forgive me for sort of assuming you'd…"

Jason was glad Will trailed off right there, though he also couldn't quite believe this was what they were talking about right now, instead of all the other things that had to be talked about.

Like Will's sudden issue with showers.

Yeah, he still had to solve that mystery, somehow.

"I'd never do anything you don't consent to, Will. You know that, right?" He asked cautiously, just to make sure.

He knew Will technically knew this, already.

But he also knew sometimes people needed reassurance that nothing had changed in that regard, or they simply needed to hear it again as a reminder.

"I do. Sorry." Will mumbled, and Jason tilted his head with a small smile as he moved his hands from Will's head to his face so he could cup it and run his thumbs over his cheeks gently.

"Nothing to apologize for, love." He replied and stepped closer, even if the sensation of his drenched clothes clinging to him was more than a little uncomfortable, and he hated the feeling of wearing wet socks.

Anything for Will.

Will was holding his gaze, now, and Jason watched as his blush subsided, making way for a slightly conflicted look, before he could practically watch Will lowering his guard.
He didn't say a single word as Will stepped closer to him and tilted his head into the touch, nor did he comment when Will tentatively reached out to move his arms around Jason in a weak hug.

Instead, he pressed his lips to the top of Will's head and wrapped his arms around him, staying under the warm spray of water and keeping him close.

"I keep seeing them die. When I sleep. It's not visions, though. Just nightmares." Will whispered, and Jason forced himself not to tighten his grip so he wouldn't scare Will away.

If he had only let his guard down because he felt safe now that Jason had told him he wouldn't do anything, then he didn't want to ruin that by treating him too harshly and giving him reason to retreat back into his shell.

Will let out a small sob, and Jason stroked over his back to give at least a little comfort as he tried to think of the right words to say.

But what was there to say?

"They'll be okay. They're strong." He replied quietly, because this was what he kept telling himself all the time, amongst other things.

Will only sobbed again.

"What if it's not enough? What if I'm not good enough? If it hadn't been for Reyna, Nico would have...he'd have...I wouldn't have been able to..."

Will couldn't say it, but Jason didn't want him to, either.

"Like them, you're stronger than you think, Will. Even if you needed Reyna's support, that doesn't invalidate what you've done, and it doesn't make you any weaker. You are doing all you can, everybody knows that, and I'm confident it's more than enough, and they're going to be okay again. They'll be okay, Will." He reassured his boyfriend softly, though he wasn't quite sure whether this was actually Will's problem, or whether it was something else, entirely.

All he knew was that Will was full of doubts and fear, and he wanted to smother those negative feelings and replace them with something positive and reassure him until his view of himself changed for the better, no matter how long that task might take.

"I'm scared." Will whispered, and now, Jason did squeeze him a little, but all that did was make Will hold him a bit tighter, as well, his face hidden from view in Jason's wet shirt.

"I know, love." He said softly, because Will already knew he was scared, too, and there was no point in telling him not to be, because they both knew they couldn't help it, not with their boyfriends like this.

"I didn't want to take a shower because I was scared I'd break down like this all by myself, and I didn't want to be alone, but I also didn't want to let you see me like this. I'm the healer, so I'm supposed to be the one reassuring you and be the one confident in my powers and whatnot. I'm not supposed to break down and cry like a baby and feel sorry for myself."

There were a lot of things in life that were supposed to be different – yet life had a funny way of not giving a damn.

"It's okay, Will. I'm glad I can be here for you right now. Next time, though, just tell me, okay? Tell me you don't want to be alone, and I'll make sure to be with you. Especially if you think you might have a breakdown." He said quietly, though he knew they had had this conversation before, and Will should already know this.

For a long moment, the only sounds were the water raining down on them and Will's soft sobs.

Then, his boyfriend shifted and pulled his arms away from around him to rub at his face, even though his tears would be indistinguishable from the rest of the water running down their bodies.

"Jason?"
"Yes?"

"I'm sorry for making you come in here fully dressed."

Jason shook his head and tugged him back closer.

"Nothing to be sorry for. I always wanted to do that."

That was a lie. He still hated the feeling of wet socks on his feet, and wet clothes had a tendency to feel annoyingly cool and uncomfortable against his skin wherever there was no constant flow of warm water.

"You're a really shitty liar, Jason." Will mumbled, and Jason smiled.

"At least you'll always be able to tell that I truly love you with all my heart."

"And you're still a sappy fool, despite everything." Will added with a small huff, and Jason closed his eyes with a smile.

"Jason?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For being here now."

Jason shook his head slightly, but didn't open his eyes.

"I'll always be there for you, Will."

A beat of silence.

"Even if this happens again? Like, a lot?"

There were Will's insecurities and doubts once more.

"Always, Will. Through all the good and the bad times, until the end of time. Have you forgotten?"

Will huffed a small laugh against his shirt, which Jason could feel more than he'd have liked.

"We're still not married, Jason."

"Are you renouncing your vows?" Jason asked with a playfully scandalized voice and a smirk on his lips that Will couldn't see.

"I wouldn't dream of it." Will replied immediately, and Jason's smirk widened.

"Then I stand by what I just said."

"You're a sap."

"And you should finally let me wash you so you can get all the benefits from this shower, without immediately needing another one." Jason retorted smoothly, and Will let out another small laugh that made Jason's heart flutter a little.

"Fine, you giant mother hen."

Pleased to (finally) receive permission, Jason hummed and pulled away to set to work.

Seriously, he had to thank Reyna later.

But first, he had to take care of his boyfriend.

And change clothes, because wet clothes truly were the worst.
When Reyna came back a few hours later, she found Jason asleep on the bed, and Will next to Nico, stroking through his hair and looking lost in thought.

"Hey." She greeted him quietly as she closed the door behind her, glad to catch him on his own.

Well, as much on his own as the current situation allowed.

Will only hummed in response, and since he didn't glare daggers at her, she walked over to the other side of Nico's bed and sat down on the chair, her hand immediately taking Nico's cold one.

"How are you doing?" She asked, because she needed to start this conversation somewhere, and this was as good a place as any.

It was a dumb question, perfect for Will's dumb answer.

Unfortunately, he didn't react, instead stroking through his boyfriend's hair some more, before checking his infusion and staring at the monitor again, as if expecting there to be some sort of change.

"Will?" She probed tentatively, and he looked around at her with a questioning look.

"Hm? Oh, you meant me. Sorry, I thought you were talking to him." Will muttered and gestured towards Nico.

Reyna raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment.

Will had already explained to her Nico probably wouldn't be able to hear them, so she had refrained from attempting foolish monologues, even if the temptation had been great.

She studied Nico's face, still irritated as always by the mask, though Will must have had his reasons.

It still made him look so very weak.

Reyna urged her gaze back to Will, who now looked more lost than thoughtful.

Unwillingly, she remembered the intensity of his fear and despair she had felt when she had shared her powers with him, and a part of her wanted to recoil, get up and leave again, to talk to him at a different time.

But she remained where she was, determined to see this through.

He still hadn't replied.

Reyna waited another moment, then decided he had chosen not to reply, so she didn't ask again.

Instead, she watched him note down Nico's values on the papers, and the fact he was hovering encouraged her to try start a conversation, once more.

"Will?"

Will's head tilted a bit, though he made no sound.

Reyna sighed.

"I know we didn't have the best start, but..." She started, but was promptly interrupted.

"Understandable. I was pretty straight-forward and liked to overstep Nico's boundaries."

"You did." Reyna agreed automatically, then closed her eyes as silence settled over them again.

Okay, not the smartest move.

She took a deep breath and opened her mouth once more.
"Listen…"

"Thank you." Will suddenly blurted, and Reyna trailed off in confusion.

His gaze hushed over to her for a moment, then away again.

He looked uncomfortable.

"For helping. Without you, I wouldn't have had enough strength to keep Nico here. He wouldn't be alive if it hadn't been for you. I haven't yet thanked you for that." Will explained, and Reyna tensed at his words, unwilling to even imagine any of that.

"And if it hadn't been for you, all the power in the world wouldn't have been enough to save him. I hope you are aware of that." She said quietly, though Will remained silent.

Reyna took another deep breath, then steeled herself for what she was about to do as she let go of Nico's hand, and instead reached out for Will's.

Will's head instantly snapped to the side, his body tensing, but he didn't pull his hand away from the bed, and he didn't lash out at her in any way as she took it.

It was the first time they had any sort of physical contact ever since the time Will had sworn on the Styx not to speak of their meeting back all those months ago, unless one counted the moment Reyna had touched his shoulder to share her powers.

His hand was warm, yet she could feel him tremble slightly, and she was aware he could now sense her values and emotions – Jason had explained that to her before.

"This is not your fault, Will." She said softly, because Hazel had told her of Will's words, and Jason's gaze and concern showed her the same, and she had asked their team to tell her what had happened before that battle.

Will tried to pull his hand away immediately, but she tightened her grip.

"You don't know what you're talking about." Will brushed her off, and he sounded a little breathless, but that only showed her all the more that she was right.

"I know enough. You need to consider that I've been in contact with Annabeth, Will. She has made a few ominous statements before, and with the things your teammates have told me, I have a fairly good idea of what has happened, and what you have done."

Will paled, but he kept his face averted, and his hand was slack in hers, though she didn't even think about letting go.

"But this wasn't your fault, and beating yourself up over this repeatedly isn't going to do anybody any good, Will." She told him, but he only started trembling.

"Did Jason set you up to this?" He asked, and it sounded bitter and disbelieving.

"No, but maybe he should have."

"I'm fine."

"Yes, I've been told you like to claim that. However, I've learned to put more measure into actions rather than words, and you seem anything but fine to me." She argued, and Will straightened his back as if to appear taller.

"Well, if you simply dropped the topic and left me to myself, I would be fine, so maybe you should back off."

Reyna squeezed his hand. Hard.

"You mean to say, if I left you to yourself, you would be able to wallow in even more self-pity and lie to yourself and your loved ones? Be real, Will." She snapped back at him, and he visibly
recoiled, letting her see a flash of fear in his gaze that gave her pause.

She let go of his hand, and he stepped away from the bed, instead moving backwards into the corner between Nico's bed and the wall with the window.

Reyna took a deep breath, and tried to keep her voice as soft as possible.

She had known this conversation would be difficult.

She was fairly certain she had still underestimated it.

"What do you do when a broken bone mends itself in the wrong way?" She asked, because if there was one thing Jason could rant about, it was Will's morbid analogies, and if Will could do it, so could she.

Interestingly enough, that question made the fear in Will's gaze disappear, replaced by a skeptical wariness.

"Break it again and set it." He replied, and she smiled at him.

"Exactly. You have to face the things you fear and that bother you, in order to get over them."

"I am." Will exclaimed and gestured towards Nico and Percy, but Reyna wasn't deterred.

"You're beating yourself up over it, but you're not facing the issue at hand, Will."

"Oh, yes, because you are so good at that, yourself, aren't you?" He spat back defensively, and she was reminded of a cornered cat, hissing and spitting out of fear for its life.

"Far from it. It took Nico telling me I did the right thing back in my childhood, for me to come to terms with it." She told him flat out, and he deflated immediately.

Reyna wasn't going to tell him anything she didn't have to tell him, but she had the feeling that she wouldn't have to, either.

She gave him a moment to think over her words, then stood up, because it felt wrong to sit at Nico's bedside when Will was hiding in the corner, and she didn't want to talk too loudly to let Jason sleep, too.

Who knew what Jason would say if he woke up to Reyna bothering his precious boyfriend, after all?

Given the bits and pieces she had gathered from Annabeth and Piper, she had long decided she didn't want to find out.

"Then what do you propose I do?" Will asked with a look of utmost distaste on his face, but the fact he was asking meant he was at least willing to hear her out, which was already much more than she would have expected, considering the rest of their conversation so far.

Unfortunately, since she hadn't expected it, she was also a bit overwhelmed with the question, since she had never thought she'd get that far.

Nor that he would ask her for her input.

"You could talk about it, for once." She suggested, hoping her voice was as determined as before, though she inwardly faltered.

Reyna didn't know whether Will might have already talked it out or not.

She didn't know much, in fact, even if she might have said she did.

She knew he had visions, because Annabeth had hinted at it.

She knew there must have been something about a death, because Piper had let something along those lines slip, and the team had come to that conclusion, too.
She knew it must have been Will's own death he had seen, because that was the only death he'd just let happen.

She knew he must have changed his fate, because he was still alive.

She knew he thought this was all his fault because of him changing said fate, because she would feel the same way, too.

However, she was also certain Jason must have told Will enough times that it wasn't his fault, and if Will didn't believe him, he wouldn't believe her.

"Talk about what? You already know it all, don't you?" Will retorted, and why did this boy have to be so difficult?!

No wonder the goddess of love had told her she wouldn't find the love of her life in the form of a demigod.

So far, all demigods seemed stupid.

Then again, by now, she had come to the conclusion she truly didn't need a partner, she was happy enough as it was, and her friendships were more than enough for her.

"You think this happened because you tampered with fate. You knew what would happen, and deliberately changed it, and now you believe this is the price for your actions." She said simply, because she knew she was right.

Will looked like he was going to be sick, confirming her belief.

"And you're right. It happened because you changed your fate." She then continued, and Will flinched and took a step back, which had his back pressing against the wall.

Reyna moved around the bed and towards him.

"Of course it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't tampered with Fate."

He started trembling, his blue eyes wide and full of fear.

"They wouldn't be here right now. Nico wouldn't have nearly faded. Nor would he be in a coma now. Percy would be awake with an uninjured arm. Jason wouldn't have to worry about all three of his boyfriends." She continued mercilessly, because this was what Will wanted to hear, right?

It was what he thought he deserved to hear, at any rate – and maybe, he needed to hear it.

"But, do you know what would have happened, instead?" She asked, and he was trembling so badly, it was a miracle he was still standing.

Reyna stopped in front of him, giving him enough space to breathe, but also showing him he wouldn't be able to run from this.

Jason had told her that he liked to run away sometimes, after all.

"They…they would have been fine." Will whispered, but his face was ashen, and he knew that it was a lie, same as she knew.

"They wouldn't have been fine," Reyna said with a small shake of her head, and he swallowed thickly.

"They would have been devastated. Hurt. Lost. Scared. They wouldn't be here, but here, they can at least get help. Here, you can help them. It may be your fault that they are here, Will. If you wish to carry that guilt, then so be it. However, being here is not the end of the line. They can get better. You can help them get better. Would you have been able to do the same thing if you hadn't changed your fate?" She asked, and she was going on a whim here, but luckily, she seemed to have come to the right conclusion, because Will averted his face and his shoulders slumped in acceptance.
"No." He replied, and it sounded pained and bitter, but he said it, and Reyna was proud of him.

"They are alive, Will. You kept them alive. It might be far from ideal, but I assure you that they, too, will believe this to be far better than anything your old fate might have thrown at them. They love you, Will. They would rather face this a hundred times, than risk losing you. Are you aware of that?"

He kept his head down, but she knew he was listening.

"But what if this is the end of the line?" He whispered into the silence of the room, and Reyna shook her head softly.

"It's not. Percy is already getting better, and Nico's state is stabilizing. They'll make it, Will. You just have to believe in them." She reassured him, and risked a glance over her shoulder, glad to find Jason still fast asleep in bed, mumbling in his sleep and hogging the blanket like a body pillow.

"But I don't know what comes next! Who's to say this is the only thing that happens because I didn't die? Reyna, this is just the beginning of a landslide, I can feel it! So, what if they make it? They'll just live to die another day! Die because I didn't die!" He exclaimed, and now, he was getting louder, the despair audible in his voice.

Reyna grabbed his shoulders so he wouldn't rush past her, and she could feel him tremble in response.

"Welcome to life, Will. Nobody knows what day might be the last, all we can do is face today and make the best of it. You're scared of losing them, and they're scared of losing you. So is everyone. Everybody walking this godforsaken world is scared of losing what is important to them. You didn't die, and yes, everything will be different now, but who is to say it's your fault? How about you think outside the box for once, Will?"

He looked at her as if she had slapped him.

"Who is the one threatening the lives of your boyfriends? Is it you? Are you the one trying to kill them?" She asked, to make it a little more obvious what she was playing at.

He looked positively offended.

"Exactly. So, if you are so keen on blaming anybody, why not blame the monsters that attack you and pose the actual threat? Or even better, why not direct your blame towards the ones behind those monster attacks? The ones who want you to suffer, who want you to fail, who want to take everything from you that you care about?" She continued, and now, his face hardened.

"I don't know what has happened between you and that Kyle person, but from what I gathered, he is a key figure in what is happening right now, and if the monsters obey him for whatever reason, then it's likely that he was the one ordering them to attack in this way. If you wish to direct your hatred somewhere other than yourself, he's the one I'd focus on. He is the one threatening to kill your boyfriends. Not you. You have to protect them from him, not from yourself." She told him, but Will remained quiet, his gaze once more directed at the ground.

"So, let me offer you a different point of view: You believe your boyfriends are here right now because you didn't die. I believe they are here because he wants all of you dead, and we managed to make a cut through his plan and save their lives, anyways." Reyna said, and Will glanced up at her for the fraction of a second, before he looked away once more.

Then, he let out a low, bitter chuckle that gave Reyna pause again.

"So, no matter how you look at it, it's still my fault, huh?"

Reyna blinked at him, just to find tears spilling from his eyes and dripping to the ground.

Wait, now he was crying?

Why was he crying?
What had she said?

"He wants them dead because I didn't go with him. So, no matter what I do, it's never going to lead to them just being happy in peace, is it? If I had gone with him, they wouldn't have been okay. If I had died, they wouldn't have been okay. If I live, they're not going to be okay."

Reyna squeezed his shoulders to get his focus back on her.

"Then live, and work towards a future where all of you can be okay." She said simply, but he shook his head.

"He's too strong. They can't beat him. They tried, and he nearly made Jason and Percy kill each other. I can't protect them from him. He's not even the leader, he seems to be working for somebody, and if we already can't beat him, how are we supposed to beat whoever else there is?"

How did he know that?

Oh, right, visions.

Reyna wondered faintly just what he had seen.

Then, she decided she didn't want to know, and was glad she didn't have to deal with that pressure, even if it made her pity him a little bit.

"So, you're just going to give up and let him win?" She asked quietly, but he only let out a dry, bitter laugh as he rubbed his tears away sternly.

"I'm not doing anything but keeping them alive. Have you forgotten I'm useless when it comes to fighting? Because, just in case you need a reminder, I am."

This kid really didn't have a very high opinion of himself, huh?

Reyna wondered how Jason found the patience to deal with him. She knew she was already growing impatient.

"Funny, I think you're pretty good at fighting, considering you've been fighting to keep your boyfriends alive, and here we are." She said pointedly and nodded towards the hospital beds.

Will looked taken aback, then his expression turned cold once more.

"You know what I meant. It's pointless, Reyna. I can't face him. I can't protect them. I can run after them and pick up the pieces and try to set them back together, over and over again, but at the end of the day, he'll win."

"With that attitude, yes." She agreed, and there was a spark in his eyes once more that she'd like to see directed towards the enemy, rather than herself.

"You don't even know Kyle. I do."

"Congratulations. Maybe you should use that knowledge to find his weakness. I've learned that everyone has one." She retorted, and Will looked torn between snapping at her and recoiling.

"Like, for you, it's your low self-esteem and your love for your boyfriends. If I had to destroy you, I'd try to take them from you and make you think it's your fault. Oh, wait, that's exactly what Kyle did, isn't it?" She continued, and let go of his shoulders so he could draw them up defensively, his expression and posture turning aggressive.

"Stop it!"

"Then face it!" She snapped back, and he took one step towards her, though she didn't step back, and they both glowered at each other.

"Face what? Kyle? I already told you: I can't!"

"Why not? Nobody is asking you to face him in direct battle! Simply face the fact that he's the one
who is creating the fate of your boys in danger, and do what has to be done to make sure he
doesn't succeed."

"If it was that simple, don't you think I'd have already done it?!" Will snarled at her, but now, she
took a step forward.

Will instinctively stepped back, but with the wall still behind him, there was nowhere to run, and
now it was she who invaded his personal space.

"No, I do not. Because you're scared of him to the point where you refuse to dwell on anything
other than the here and now. Leave the past in the past, Will, and face the future. If you want your
boyfriends to make it out of this alive, if you want the camps to make it out of this alive, then you
have to believe in them, in all of us, and you will have to face your fear of Kyle and conquer it.
We need all the information on him we can get, and you're the only one who can provide us with
anything."

She wondered, faintly, how the conversation had turned from her attempting to comfort him, to
her urging him to help them in their attempts at winning a war they weren't sure was winnable, but
she had the feeling that she shouldn't be surprised.

The Camp was under constant attack, and the monsters and this Kyle person were always on her
mind, it seemed obvious now that she would return to that sooner or later, especially since she had
wanted to have that talk with Will eventually, anyways.

"Oh yeah, sure, let me just forget about being raped and beaten up repeatedly, so I can remember
the important parts, like...hmm, I don't know? His favorite weapon? No idea, he never let me be
around when he trained, because, again, I'm a healer. His fighting style? No idea, for the same
reasons, and it probably would have changed in the years he was gone, anyways. His weakness?
No idea!"

Okay, Reyna had not known that.

Now, Annabeth's reluctance to tell her about the connection between Kyle and Will made a little
more sense, though at the same time, Reyna would have appreciated a fair warning.

However, she could still deal with this.

"Then think, Will. You say you know him better than anyone, so use that to your advantage.
Analyze his behavior, compare things he has said, think of the things that used to be important to
him, and make connections. What does he want, Will? Why does he want it? How does
everything connect?" She asked, and realized that, in fact, she couldn't deal with this.

At all.

"How would I know?!" Will shot back, and he seemed devastated and disturbed, but Reyna didn't
know how else to react than to keep pushing.

"You say he's stronger than your guys. Why is that?" She asked, and he hissed as she came even
closer.

"Because he is!"

"How do you know?" She pushed, and now, Will was pressed against the wall with his face
turned to the side, though his gaze was fixed on her.

It had something submissive to it, though she wasn't sure whether this meant he was scared of her,
or whether he just wanted to run from this conversation.

"Because I do!"

"Because you're irrationally scared of him and make him out to be a bigger threat than he is. He's
a mere mortal like all of us, Will. If you cut him, he will bleed." She said sharply, and he hissed
again.

Then, before she could react, he pushed away from the wall and whirled her around, switching
their roles.

It was quite impressive, considering he was shaking like a leaf and seemed one step away from a mental breakdown.

She was curious to see this sort of anger and determination put to better use against their enemies.

"You have no idea what you're talking about! You don't know him. You don't know what he's done, nor what he's willing to do. And I know you're looking for somebody to find the answers for you, but that somebody is not me! I can't do it, okay? I can't face him, and I won't."

"Because you're scared." She said simply, and he growled.

"Yes, because I'm scared. Though you wouldn't understand."

"Oh, I do. I understand better than you might think." She said with a bitter laugh, and now it was his turn to pause.

"Do you really think you're the only one who had to face abuse in the past?" She asked, and his gaze turned defensive again.

"I, too, once thought that I'd never be able to face that person. I thought I was too weak, and there was no way anybody could ever beat that person. He was too strong. Stronger than anybody else, stronger than the gods, even." She said, and now, his expression turned apprehensive and wary, but he listened.

"But it was just my fear that gave him that power. He wasn't strong, at all. He was nothing. It was all just me and my fear, and he fed into that fear and made himself seem like so much more than he was."

"Kyle is strong. They fought him. I nearly lost them, if it hadn't been for Piper." Will cut in, but Reyna shook her head.

"I lost against him many times, too. And it made me even more scared, and made him seem even stronger than before." She explained, and he grimaced.

"Then how did you manage to beat him?" He asked, and she let out a weak huff.

"I stabbed him." She told him.

She didn't tell him that this person had been her father, nor that he had been a mania, rather than a mortal.

He didn't need to know that to understand her point.

Will was quiet, but she knew he was thinking over her words.

"You can't just give up, Will. Keep going forward. There's no way back, after all. If he's stronger than your guys, then train them to become stronger than he could ever dream to be. If you're not strong enough to save them, then train yourself to be capable of saving them. Train others to help you saving others. You can start by not kicking out my medics every time they offer to help." She suggested, and his nose twitched, which had to be the funniest thing she had seen him do ever since she got to know him.

Due to the seriousness of the situation, though, she tried not to smile.

"You make it sound so simple, but it really isn't." Will muttered darkly, and Reyna wanted to laugh.

"Oh, I know it's not. Nothing in life is simple, in case you haven't noticed."

"Thanks for the reminder." He huffed and stepped away from her, and she moved out of the corner with a small smile.

"You're welcome."
He shot her a dark look, then he turned away from her and moved back towards Percy, undoubtedly to get away from her.

She let him go, quite certain she had said most of what she had wanted to say.

"You know, I didn't know this talk would end with us snapping at each other. I more thought you might need a shoulder to cry on, since Jason said you don't like appearing weak in front of them." She mused, and instantly earned a deep scowl in response.

"So he did set you up to this."

"He didn't. I came because I wanted to. He did, however, talk about you on more than one occasions. You wouldn't believe it, but he's quite smitten with you." She told him, and Will turned his back to her once more, but she didn't mind.

"I'm aware."

"All three of them are rather smitten with you." She said, because that had been more than obvious during their last visit here.

She was never going to forget all the wistful looks and expressions full of yearning and despair, because those had to have been the most annoying days of her life.

"I know." Will said, and there was something soft in his voice now, which showed her the conversation had finally reached the point she had hoped they would reach.

"Then make sure not to forget it." She told him, and he turned his head to look at her again, his shoulders relaxed and his expression open and accepting.

"I won't."

Good.

Hopefully, that meant he'd think over her words, and help them in this war.

She'd have to test that theory immediately and send for some medics.

"I'm still going to do this alone, though. First of all, I don't know how your medics work, so I'm not going to let them meddle with something as severe as this. Second of all, Kyle is still out there, and since I don't know who is on his side, I'm not risking anybody harming my guys when they're defenseless like this." Will said conversationally, and she suppressed the urge to cross her arms in front of her chest as he happily ruined her plans.

"As long as you think about what I said." She conceded with a sigh.

Will only hummed vaguely in reply.

She decided it was good enough.

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The first thing he registered were muffled sounds, followed by a blinding light as he tried to pry his eyes open, just to close them again.

He shifted, but his body felt like lead.

He heard voices, but couldn't understand the words.

He tried opening his eyes again, and caught a glimpse of yellow and blue, then he closed them again, everything too bright.

There were too many questions buzzing inside his head.

Then everything was gone again.
When he next became aware of himself, Percy managed to move his head slightly and could feel his eyelids twitching.

The blanket was warm.

He felt weird.

It was still so bright.

He hadn't even opened his eyes yet.

He didn't want to, either.

"I'm sure they'll wake up soon, Will. Just give them time."

Jason?

Had to be Jason.

Nobody else could reassure with such a gentle voice.

Percy turned his head minimally towards the sound, but found the task too exhausting to see it through.

"I know."

That was Will.

Nobody else could sound so heartbroken with only two syllables.

Who were they talking about?

Percy tried to pry his eyes open, but it took too much effort he didn't have.

Maybe they were talking about him.

Percy thought of that randomly, and noticed it was quiet around him once more, which meant he must have zoned out again for a moment.

Then, he noticed a steady beeping sound, his hearing much clearer than before.

Where was it coming from?

Where was he, anyways?

What had happened?

Percy tried to remember, but his body felt so heavy, and he was so tired.

He heard footsteps.

Percy wanted to open his eyes to look who it was, but couldn't.

It wasn't bright anymore, which meant he must have fallen asleep.

Or maybe the light had finally been turned off.

Percy shifted, feeling uncomfortable, though he couldn't manage to turn to his side.

There was something in his arm.
It annoyed him.
Percy grimaced and pried his eyes open, blinking at the dark ceiling.
Then, he turned his head, determined to find at least some answers.
He was lying in a bed. Alone.
There was a simply nightstand next to him, with a glass of water and a clipboard and pen.
There was another bed.
Percy’s vision turned blurry, and he couldn't see who was in it.
He took a deep breath, and felt the soreness of his throat, craving that glass of water more than anything else.
Unfortunately, he couldn’t reach out for it.
Percy tried to move his head, then tried to at least move his arm up so he could brush his hair out of his face.
He didn’t manage to do either.

* 

Nico.
It must be Nico.
Percy tilted his head slightly, and gazed at the bed next to his, where the beeping came from.
An eerie emptiness filled him as the memories returned, and with them, the realization of what must have happened after he had lost consciousness.
He remembered it.
Nico opening that shadow portal.
Will getting chased by that drakon.
Percy rushing to save him.
The pain that had come with the drakon’s fangs inside his shoulder.
Percy could feel that pain now, too, and his fingers twitched again, though he didn’t try to move.
Instead, he looked back at the other bed.
A hospital.
They had to be at Camp Jupiter.
Percy wasn’t sure what to do with that information.
He closed his eyes again.
All he knew was that he wanted to cry.

* 

Fingers.
Brushing through his hair.
Stroking along his cheek.
Moving to take his hand gently.

Percy sighed and opened his eyes, fighting against the brightness to see his boyfriend.

Jason sat next to his bed, his expression thoughtful as he gazed at Percy's hand.

Percy waited until his eyes adjusted, then he turned his head minimally to spot Will to his other side, fiddling around with a transparent bag full of what looked like water.

Water.

He wanted some water, too.

Badly.

So badly.

Percy shifted, as if to sit up.

Then he groaned, and his throat had to be bleeding.

Suddenly, there was movement, so much movement, and Percy couldn't follow it quickly enough before both of his boyfriends had their faces way too close to his.

"Percy!" "You're awake! Will, he's awake!"

Loud.

Gods, so loud.

Percy grimaced, wishing he could bring his hands up to cover his ears from all the noise, while he tried to squint at them enough to make out clear features, but they were too close, and he would go cross-eyed at this rate.

Hands cupped his face, trembling against his skin, and Jason held his hand much tighter than before, also shaking.

Why were they so…surprised?

If that was even the right word.

Words flew over his head, the two talking to him, to each other, to themselves, he couldn't quite tell, but then Will let go of his face, and there was more movement, and he felt the top part of his bed moving upwards, as if to help him sit up somewhat.

Jason still held his hand, his expression between awed and terrified, and Percy had no idea what to do with that knowledge.

He tried faintly to squeeze his hand in reassurance, but then found he couldn't, so he dragged his gaze back to Will, who was tapping that bag of water again with one hand and rummaged in the drawer of the bedside table with his other hand.

Percy watched him taking a series of deep breaths, as if trying to calm himself, though the shaking of his body didn't lessen in any way.

"Hey there, beautiful." Percy rasped, and both of them stilled, eyes wide as they fixed back on Percy, and he tried for a small smile that required much more strength than he would have thought.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then felt lips pressing against the top of his head, so he opened them again, just to notice he must have fallen asleep for a few moments, again.

His boyfriends were still there, though, smiling at him, so he smiled back.

"Here. Drink as slowly as possible, okay?" Will said softly, and held out a glass of water, and Percy wanted to cry as he finally got to drink something, even if Will had to help him hold the
Percy wanted to cry as he finally got to drink something, even if Will had to help him hold the glass. The 'drink as slowly as possible'-part went ignored for the most part as he greedily tried to drown the entire glass in one go, but Will was adamant about stopping him repeatedly and clicking his tongue, though he still smiled.

His throat still felt dry, but a lot better than before, so he decided that was good enough for now. The moment Will pulled away, he felt Jason's hand on his cheek, stroking over it gently, his expression still so…awed.

"How long was I out?" He rasped, because, seriously, he had thought of a day, maybe two, at most, but their reaction made it seem more like months.

Jason and Will exchanged looks, their smiles faltering for a second, before they both shook their heads and started stroking through his hair and along his face.

"A bit over a week. But it's okay. Everything is going to be okay." Will assured him, but Percy was shocked, anyways.

"A week? Over a week, even?!" Percy tried to count the days and tried to push himself up, his lips moving, though he was at a loss for words.

Wait, wait, wait, that meant…that meant…

"I…I missed your birthday?! Oh gods, Jason, I am so sorry!" He exclaimed, his voice nearly dying on him, and Will was about to give him another glass of water, but then he froze, his eyes widening as he looked at Jason in utmost horror.

Jason stared back at them, looking bewildered and confused, before his expression cleared.

"Really, it's no big-…"

"Your birthday…" Will breathed, and even though it was barely audible, it made Jason break off, and Percy needed a moment to realize what was happening.

Oh no…

"It's okay. There were so many other things to worry about, Will. I didn't even notice. I didn't know, and it's not important." Jason insisted, and Percy looked at Will with big eyes, who had never forgotten any date before, especially not birthdays.

Will looked like he was going to cry.

Percy searched for something to lighten the mood, and came up blank.

He watched how Jason reached across the bed to touch Will's face gently, who tilted his head into the touch immediately, still looking at Jason with so much guilt and pain it made Percy want to cry, too.

"You kept them alive, Will. That's more than I could have ever hoped for. Don't beat yourself up about it. And you not, either, Percy. I dare you to." Jason stated sternly, and it was so ironic, that the first things he'd say to Percy would be said in a stern voice, when Nico and Will always got pampered with sweet words and flattery.

However, in this case, it made Percy smile and attempt a wink.

"We'll just have to throw you a belated birthday party. A really big one. With tons of blue cake. And blue pizza. Blue ice cream. Blue pasta. Blue-…"

"Could it be that you're hungry?" Jason asked, and now, his voice was soft, and as affectionate as Percy remembered it, and the smile came a lot easier to him now than it did earlier, his strength slowly returning to him.
"Honestly? I have no idea. I feel really, really weird. Like, my body is good, but I could so eat a whole banquet of food right about now. And drink. Gods, I would drink. My throat is killing me, guys." He lamented, and Will's conflicted look disappeared immediately and made way for a concerned one as he rushed to grab the glass and filled it with water once more to bring it to Percy's lips.

Jason only smiled at him and took his hand once more, stroking over the back of it in a way that both comforted Percy – and made him feel as if he was on his death bed.

"We'll have to give your reflexes a check, Percy, and see whether everything works the way it's supposed to." Will said quietly, though it sounded more as if he was talking to himself than Percy. Percy let him talk, busy drowning the water in greedy gulps, again.

"And belated birthday sex." He added when Will pulled the empty glass away from his lips, and Jason let out a choked laugh, while Will stared at Percy as if he had grown a second head.

"Most definitely not."

"But you said we have to check whether everything works the way it's supposed to!" Percy insisted, and when Will shot Jason an incredulous look, their boyfriend only shrugged, clearly suppressing a smirk.

Percy's eyes hushed back to the other bed in the room, but he tried not to ask about Nico just yet, nor about details on what had happened after he had passed out.

He was scared of what the answer would be.

So, instead, he tried to tease his boyfriends a little more, anything to get the worry out of their gazes and their postures relaxed.

Anything to keep them happy, and the seriousness of the situation at bay.

It was what Percy could do best, after all.

It was also one of the only things Percy could do.

But he decided not to dwell on that.

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"Remember, when Jason was wearing that Cinderella dress? He looked straight out of a fairytale." Percy mused with a serene smile on his face, and Will checked his infusion with a frown, wondering whether he had added a too high dose of painkillers earlier.

Percy wasn't as fit as he seemed to think, passing out again every few minutes for varying amounts of time, but he also appeared stronger and fitter every time he woke up again, so they didn't point it out.

Even if it was rather suspicious that Percy especially liked to fall asleep again the moment Will wanted to test his arm to see whether he had messed up in any way.

So far, Percy had made no move to lift it or move it in any other way, which was worrying Will, because it could also very well mean Percy couldn't move it.

But Percy didn't seem very willing to move, in general, happy to let them move the bed up and down and adjust it to his liking, his gaze always rather wistful when eyeing the remote, though he hadn't reached out for it once, yet.

"Of course I remember. He was so upset about it, though." Will replied, and Percy closed his eyes, his smile widening.

"Yeah. I bet blue glitter would have made him feel better."

Will highly doubted it.
"Do you want anything to drink?" He asked and gestured towards the water bottles Jason had gotten after Percy – stubborn, as usual – had refused to drink any tea.

(Poison, he had called it. Will was so going to tell Sally about that once Percy was better again.)

"Nah. Yeah. Hmm...hey, remember, when we were in the Underworld, and I made you an amazing flower crown that you never wore?"

Was he going to hold that against him for the rest of his life? Because it sure seemed that way.

Will helped him drink, urging him to sip at the water, rather than drowning it in big gulps, but Percy proved to be unteachable.

"Of course. I loved it. The only reason I didn't wear it, in case you forgot, was because Jason put flowers into my hair." Will replied, and Percy grinned at him again, his eyes barely open.

"Yeah, he was all over you. I wanted to punch him for that."

Will glanced at the infusion again, and made a mental note to reduce the dose of the painkiller the next time.

"You were a jealous fool." He retorted, but Percy only grinned wider.

"And you were horribly oblivious. He worshipped the ground you walked on, and you only had eyes for Nico."

Will shook his head and stroked through his boyfriend's hair.

"And you." He said quietly, and Percy's smile faltered slightly, his eyes opening properly so he could gaze up at him with a thoughtful look.

Then, he smiled again, and it was so soft and gentle, Will wanted to kiss him.

"But every time I looked at you, you were busy staring at Jason. I was always so upset, but was never quite sure why." He said quietly, and Will leaned down to press his lips to his forehead.

"Well, we figured it out, in the end, didn't we?" He mused, and Percy let out a small huff, before dozing off again.

Will waited patiently, stroking through his hair and along his relaxed face.

They had told him about what had happened, from the moment Percy had lost consciousness to the moment he had woken up again here.

They had told him about Nico.

Percy had taken it rather well, in Will's opinion, though he also thought Percy might just be putting on a brave face for them.

"Remember, when we were dancing?" Percy suddenly asked, apparently awake again, and Will couldn't help but smile.

"You'll have to be a bit more specific, sweetheart. We've danced a couple of times now." He said quietly, and Percy hummed, seeming rather pleased about that.

"I know. I'm just so good at it."

Will's smile widened.

"A true natural." He agreed, and Percy looked so adorable when he tried to look smug.

"Well, I had the best teacher." Percy pointed out cheekily, and Will shook his head.

"Why are you even talking about this, love?" He asked as he stroked through Percy's hair again, and Percy gazed at him with his pretty, albeit a bit unfocused, sea-green eyes.
"I want you to smile. I love it when you smile. Don't like it when you frown and look so upset, you know?"

Will halted, not quite sure how to reply to that, but then, he didn't have to, because Percy fell asleep again.

He sighed and stroked through his hair a while longer, then he tugged the blanket up to cover him correctly, his ears straining as he heard footsteps coming closer outside.

He knew it was Jason even before his boyfriend opened the door and stepped inside with a sigh, carrying a tray with dinner for them.

His birthday.

Will had forgotten Jason's birthday.

He didn't even know what day it was, today.

He didn't even know what day it had been when they had been attacked.

It had never occurred to him that Jason's birthday was this close, and he would have never thought he'd miss it.

Will couldn't even look at him.

He had kept the guys alive, yes, but he hadn't done anything for Jason, in the slightest.

Instead, he had unnecessarily worried him, troubled him, and required his help to keep himself alive and functioning.

There was nothing to excuse that, and nothing he could do now to change how horrible he had been to Jason.

"How is he doing?" Jason asked as he came up to him, and Will kept his eyes firmly on Percy.

"Just fell asleep." He mumbled evasively, and Jason stilled in the motion of reaching out for Percy's hand.

Then, he sighed.

Will grabbed the clipboard and studied his notes on Percy's progress intently.

"You're still hung up about it, aren't you? I told you, it's no big deal. Even if I had known, it's not like I would have wanted to celebrate or anything." Jason said and moved his arms around Will from behind, his nose disappearing at the side of his neck.

Will pursed his lips and dropped the clipboard back on the bedside table.

"It's not that. I should have known. I should have acted differently. I didn't even know it was June. Jason. I don't even know what month I thought it was. And all this time, you're this super supportive, sweet and caring person as usual, while I'm nothing but a dick. It's not even just the fact that I missed your birthday, but how little attention I paid to you, in general." He mumbled, and Jason sighed against his neck.

"Will, I don't know if you noticed, but our boyfriends desperately needed your help. I'm not going to be upset with you for keeping them alive, just because it means you're not showering me in attention day in day out."

"I could have still been different towards you. Less…dick-ish." Will insisted, and Jason sighed again, though he remained silent for a moment, as if considering Will's words.

"What about that one night? When we kissed? That was nice." Jason then mused out of nowhere, and Will stared Percy's blanket to death.

"Jason, you felt like a pot of euphoria. I woke up wondering what the hell was going on. That
wasn't really my doing, that was just you having strange dreams and being willing to share your excitement with me. Also, we only kissed." He pointed out, and Jason grumbled against his skin.

"Has anybody told you that you're horribly stubborn at times?"

"I have." Percy piped up unhelpfully, and they both looked at their once more awake boyfriend, who was looking at them with a cheeky grin and sparkling eyes.

"Thanks, Percy." Jason said with a pointed look at Will, and Will sighed, unwilling to argue right now.

"Good thing you're awake again, sweetheart. Let's get to those exercises, shall we?" He hurriedly changed the topic, and Percy looked downright disappointed, while Jason sighed against his skin and gave his neck another kiss before pulling away to give them space.

"Fine, I guess we'll postpone that talk until later. Don't forget to eat. Percy, make sure he eats." Jason ordered, and Will made a face, though he didn't know how to respond, other than to stick his tongue out at him.

"Aye, captain." Percy chirped way too enthusiastically, and Will huffed to himself, before he stillled and frowned.

"Wait, where are you going? You only just came back." He asked confused, and Jason frowned back at him.

"To…the talk? With Reyna? At 8pm?" Jason said in a hesitant tone, and Will looked at the time in utmost confusion.

Wait, it was this late already?

Ever since Reyna had brought them the small clock now adorning Percy's bedside table, he had come to realize his feeling for time was a little messed up, but, seriously, this badly?!

"Sounds cool. Tell her I said hi, yeah? Can't wait to see her and the others again." Percy chirped enthusiastically, giving Will a moment longer to compose himself once more.

"Oh yeah, sorry. I didn't think it was this late already. Have fun then, I guess?" He mumbled awkwardly, but Jason at least stopped looking at him with that concerned expression and moved to pull him into a half-hug that was over before Will even got to realize it was happening.

"I'll try and get back as soon as possible. There seems to be a lot going on around here at the moment, and she has yet to give me an update on the situation at Camp Half-Blood, which indicates it's bad. I'll tell you all I know once I'm back, or tomorrow, depending on how long it will take." Jason reassured him, but Will only made a shooing motion so he could get moving and make it to his meeting in time.

Reyna had IM-ed them earlier, both to apologize for not showing up yesterday, as well as to ask for Nico's and Percy's states.

Jason had done all the talking, telling her about Percy waking up and that Nico's state had finally stabilized enough to say he seemed to be out of the worst, and on his way of improvement.

Percy had sadly been asleep again at that moment, and had only woken up moments after Reyna had hung up again.

Will watched Jason lean over the bed to give Percy a kiss on the forehead, and Percy grinned like an idiot and looked after him with what could only be considered heart-eyes.

He didn't want to, but he smiled, anyways, unable to not be affected by such an open display of love and affection, especially since this was Percy, and he hadn't gotten to see him like this for so long.

Percy caught him at it and stuck his tongue out at him, before huffing out an indignant breath and attempting to sit up straighter.
"For the record, remind me to get Reyna, Hazel and Frank, as well as our team, to join in our preparations for a belated birthday party for Jason. It's gonna be awesome, and we'll do it the moment Nico is awake again. Now, what do you want me to do to get to that check-up you've been wanting to do all day long already, rather than giving me a proper kiss or making out with me?"

Will opened his mouth, first to tell him to remind himself, then to tell him Nico first had to wake up, and he closed it again when a part of him wanted to point out it still wasn't certain whether Nico would wake up, at all.

Percy, however, had the strange ability of changing topics so quickly and saying so many things at once, that Will was so taken aback by the second half of his statement, that he promptly forgot to respond to the first, at all.

"Percy, you only woke up today, I'm not going to make out with somebody who's still asleep 90% of the time, and is high on painkillers the other 10%. Not to mention, you're keeping your ureteric catheter until tomorrow, so definitely no." He replied, partly disbelieving, partly offended, but Percy only grinned at him.

"Aww, you care about my wellbeing, how cute."

Will gave him a long, pointed look, and Percy chuckled to himself, apparently immensely pleased with himself.

"But good that you remind me of that check-up. It should have happened hours ago already, what made you so reluctant about it?" Will asked and moved around the bed so he could get started with the exercises with Percy.

Percy only pouted at that reply, but ultimately shrugged, which already showed he could move his shoulders, and which Will filed away with satisfaction.

"I don't want to disappoint you, I guess." He mumbled, and Will frowned at him as he showed Percy what to do, and Percy mimicked him without any issues whatsoever.

"Disappoint me how?" He asked tentatively, and Percy shrugged again.

"My arms tingle a lot. I wasn't sure they'd do what I want, and I didn't want you to look all heartbroken again, so I didn't want to try move them, just to find out I can't."

His arms tingled?

Well, now Will's brain tingled, and not in a good way.

However, to prevent affirming Percy's worries, he remained where he was and only gave a small shake of his head.

"Please tell me about such things the moment you notice them. You took this long to wake up because your body was busy healing, but that doesn't mean everything healed up the way it should. If there's something wrong, I have to know, so I can help you get better, sweetheart."

The tingling could just be from the painkillers, though…or maybe because they hadn't moved Percy today, like they usually did, with the help of folded pillows.

Maybe his arms had simply fallen asleep due to the positioning.

Plus, why both his arms?

Oh gods, what if his other arm had taken damage, too, and Will had failed to notice?

No, he had checked, right?

Then again, he had also been a bit beside himself, so what if he had missed something?

This was exactly what he had been worried about all this time.
Percy mimicked his movements and tapped his fingers with his thumbs, then balled his fists.

"Ouch."

Will's heart sank as Percy flinched and the hand of his sword arm slacked again halfway through the motion.

Will had the hand in his in an instant, stroking over it as he felt for his values, focusing on the arm to see what was wrong.

He had messed up, he must have missed something, this was all his fault…

But Percy's arm seemed fine.

Will felt himself breaking out in sweat as he tried to find what had gone wrong, but, anatomically speaking, Percy was fine.

Every muscle was where it was supposed to be, and everything felt exactly the same way it had before, Will would know.

Will didn't understand.

Percy wasn't meeting his gaze, his shoulders slumped and his eyes downcast.

Will took a deep breath, then moved to take his boyfriend's chin to lift his head a little, again.

"Hey, you'll be fine, yeah? I promise." He tried tentatively, but Percy only looked at him for a moment, before averting his gaze again, only giving him a faint hum in reply.

Will leaned forward to give him a peck on the lips.

"No sulking. Come on, let's try some more exercises, and tell me if anything feels strange or hurts, okay? The more I know, the better I can help."

Percy gave him an odd look for a moment, but then he nodded, and Will was about to pull back to continue, when Percy held him back.

"Only if you give me a proper kiss, though." He piped hurriedly, and Will blinked.

Then, he huffed out a small laugh and did as he had been told, pressing their lips together gently.

It felt good.

They didn't really deepen it or go over the top in any way, but it felt nice and warm and familiar and good, and Will could feel Percy enjoying it just as much as he did.

"Like that?" He asked cheekily when they stopped mashing their lips together, and Percy let out a small sigh.

"Yes. Now, back to those exercises, I guess."

So much enthusiasm.

"For every exercise you finish, you get a kiss." Will chirped, and Percy's head shot up.

Then, he made a face.

"Are you trying to bribe me?"

"Yes. Is it working?"

"…Yes." Percy admitted with a pout and lifted his arms to mimic Will's movements once more.

Will was a genius.

***
When Jason came back shortly before midnight, he found Will with his head on his arms at Percy's side, fast asleep, while Percy had turned ever so slightly and had one hand on Will's arm, drooling onto his pillow happily.

Jason smiled and moved over to their side as quietly as possible.

Thank the gods, Percy was finally awake.

Jason still couldn't quite believe it, but seeing him like this helped greatly, because it was familiar and showed Percy was only asleep, not unconscious and slipping from their grasps any longer.

Will looked a lot better, too – a lot more at ease.

Jason stroked through his hair, then over Percy's hand, unable to resist the urge to touch and feel whether it was already any warmer than before.

It was.

It was nice and warm and soft and the hand of his boyfriend that he had held so many times before, but not nearly enough.

Jason would have to make up for that once Percy would be allowed to leave the hospital bed.

"Jason?" Will mumbled and shifted, prying one eye open to blink up at him drowsily.

Jason smiled and gave him a quick peck on the side of his head.

"I just came back. Sorry for waking you."

"How did it go?" Will asked as he sat up and rubbed his eyes sleepily, and Jason suppressed a sigh, wishing Will could have just fallen back asleep again.

The talk with Reyna had been…well, for one, it had taken much longer than expected, but with all the things they had talked about, Jason couldn't say he was that surprised.

However, he was reluctant to tell Will about his newfound information.

There were no good news.

The camps were in disarray.

Camp Half-Blood was under near-constant attack and even the younger Campers had to join the battles now, due to the older ones being stuck in an overfilled infirmary, where Will's siblings and the other healers were working non-stop to catch up.

Ambrosia and nectar were beginning to run low, along with all the other medical supplies, yet the Camp was completely cut off from the rest of the world, thanks to very well planned-out monster placements that could not be coincidental.

Clovis had disappeared, closely followed by a distressed Mitchell, who had apparently stormed off into the forest to search for him by himself when it had been decided to declare Clovis gone, rather than dispatching a third search group.

There were more disputes inside the Camp than ever before, everybody tired, exhausted, impatient and easily aggravated.

Calypso had retreated to the Bunker, her powers already strained, while the monsters just seemed to keep coming.

As horrifying as it was, there had also been attacks on demigod families – their mortal families – not by monsters, but by other demigods, which made Jason sick to his stomach.

The satyrs had stopped responding, as had the fauns, and both Camps had declared it highly unlikely to hear back from them at all, anymore.
And then, there was Camp Jupiter, which was also under constant attack, and the cohorts were worn out and weary.

They didn't have a magical border to keep them safe, the only true protection they had was New Rome and Terminus, but he couldn't protect them all against the onslaught of attacks.

It was like the battle against Gaea all over again, just without the giants yet – though Jason didn't even want to think that, else he knew they would make an appearance, too, and it was already horrible enough as it was.

Reyna had asked for his help.

This was what Jason was most reluctant to share with Will.

He hadn't agreed yet, and had told her he would need a day to think about it, but a part of him knew it was the only thing he could do.

Jason was no help to Will in the hospital.

He couldn't heal, and he had no idea about all this machinery or how to help, and he highly doubted he would be able to learn now, when he hadn't managed to learn the past week.

He was useless here.

But out there, he could at least help the Camps, and he could protect his boyfriends so they could replenish their energies here.

Will wouldn't like it.

Jason himself didn't like it, either, not when it meant leaving his guys here by themselves.

He stroked over his boyfriend's back and leaned in for another peck, but Will turned his head and kissed him on the lips, instead.

It was…surprising, to say the least, but Jason couldn't deny it also made his heart flutter.

It did not, however, make his decision any easier on him.

"It went well enough, I suppose. I will tell you tomorrow, okay? Let's go to bed for now." He replied quietly and gave him another kiss, and Will hummed quietly and turned back towards Percy for a moment, tucking him in correctly and stroking through his hair.

"How is he doing?" Jason asked carefully, unable to keep the question to himself until later.

Will let out a small sigh, and he didn't look too happy, which made Jason's insides churn with worry once more.

"He's…not so well, I think. I don't know. It's…complicated." Will replied, and Jason's heart sank as he sat down on the second chair they had organized, and took Will's hand in his own.

"His arm?" He asked cautiously.

"It doesn't make sense." Will whispered, looking crestfallen.

Jason stroked over his hand for comfort and reassurance, and his boyfriend began leaning against him ever so slightly.

"It's his sword arm, Jason. Physically speaking, everything is fine, yet he's in pain…" Will explained, and Jason frowned, but waited in case Will wanted to continue.

But Will only gesticulated with his hands faintly and let himself fall against his shoulder.

"So, you're saying he's making it up?" He asked confused, but Will shook his head.

"No. He is in pain. But…" Will began worrying his bottom lip, and Jason gave him a nudge to stop it.
That was exactly how he had managed to split his lips so many times the past week.

Will took a deep breath and moved, putting his elbows on Percy's bed and burrowing his face in his hands.

"I...I think it's a mind thing...like, his body is fine, but he...well, he kind of wants to not be okay..." Will's voice was a mere whisper, but Jason could hear him just fine, though his words didn't make any sense to him.

His boyfriend seemed to notice, because he took another deep breath and shook his head, lowering his hands once more, his expression between exhaustion and despair.

"It's his sword arm, Jason. What do you use your sword arm for?"

"Fighting." Jason replied, confused why Will would ask him something so simple.

"And what is it that Percy hates more than anything, lately?"

"Fighting." Jason replied without hesitation, because Percy hadn't made it a secret how much he hated the monster attacks and the constant fighting and the killing and everything related to it.

In the silence that followed, Jason realized what Will had just said, and what it meant.

"You're saying he is making up pain in his arm so he doesn't have to fight anymore?" He asked for verification, because, while he was fairly certain this was the answer, it didn't sound like anything Percy would do.

"No. I'm saying he is in pain because his mind is tired of fighting and is causing his body to act accordingly and bring forth pain that would physically not be there otherwise. Your physical state depends a lot on your mental state. If you're exhausted mentally, your body will be exhausted, too. He's not making up anything, he is in pain. It's just that I can't fix it. He has to do that, himself, and I seriously don't think he will. He never wanted this, Jason. Any of this. He will fight, even if it hurts him, because it has hurt him all this time, just not physically." Will explained, and Jason had the feeling he was going out of his way to tell him this in a way he would understand, which he was more than grateful for – though he still didn't understand.

"It hurt him?" He asked, because that was the part he was most hung up on, but Will didn't seem surprised, and didn't seem upset with him for asking, which Jason was also grateful for.

Instead, he shifted and gave a small nod.

"It has. He has been battling with himself ever since the first war, but it got gradually worse after Gaea, and has peaked ever since we left the Camp for Nemesis. A part of him wants to finish this once and for all and settle down and call it quits, but the other part of him knows that's not how it works. He's a demigod, he will always be a demigod, and there will always be monsters to fight. It's making him feel rather...hopeless."

Jason looked back at his sleeping boyfriend, trying to think of any indicators for this, trying to think of anything Percy might have said to him to tip him off.

But all he remembered was the talk he had had with Will all that time ago, when Jason had promised him to take good care of Percy and keep him from getting worse.

Somehow, he had the feeling he had failed him. He had failed them both.

"How can we help?" He asked, because there had to be something they could do, right?

"I don't know. Win the war? Beat all the monsters? Destroy Tartarus? Ban the gods from Earth? I don't know, Jason. I really don't." Will sounded so defeated, it made Jason's heart ache.

Then again, the realization that his boyfriend was and had been suffering like this made it ache, too.

He had thought Percy was happy.
Sure, he hated the monster attacks, and he had seemed a little odd a few times, but Jason had sort of assumed that to just be a bad mood, a bad day, something that passed.

He hadn't known it would be this bad.

Was it because of him? Because of them? Maybe they weren't there for Percy enough.

Maybe he needed more affection, more hugs, more attention, more…love.

More of anything Percy wanted from him.

"Being with us makes him happy, Jason. It really does. He does love us, and he wouldn't want to miss that for the life of him. It's not that we're not enough for him to be okay. It's just that there's more to life than the sweet moments he has with us. The battles take their toll on him the same way they do on all of us.” Will said quietly, as if reading his mind, but Jason wasn't surprised.

He nodded, and they sat together in silence.

"So, we can't do anything?” He asked at long last, feeling…defeated.

It made him wonder how Percy had to feel, knowing he would have to fight for the rest of his life.

"We can be there for him and support him to the best of our abilities. We can show him we love him just the way he is and that we will get through this together. Other than that, I don't think there's anything we can do for Percy, Jason, at least not right now. Except winning this messed up war as soon as possible and settling down somewhere far away, where we don't have to fear for our lives and can just live normally.”

It sounded like a dream, but that was because it was so unlikely to happen.

Their only hope was New Rome, but New Rome wouldn't be an option unless they destroyed Kyle and whoever it was he was working with.

Jason hated how everything always led back to Kyle.

He should have just killed him when he had the chance.

"We'll win the war, then.” He said resolutely, and Will huffed, but didn't laugh.

For a long moment, the statement hung in the air, and there was silence in the room except for the even beeping from Nico's monitor.

"I'll be right there by your side.” Will then added quietly, and Jason met his gaze, searching for an answer he didn't know the question to.

Then he nodded and took Will's hand, squeezing it gently as they both remained on their chairs instead of going to bed, rather spending the night next to their boyfriend.

They would win this war.

They had won the past wars against Kronos as well as Earth, herself.

This couldn't be worse than that, not even with Kyle helping and the Oracle of Delphi missing (or her spirit, anyways) and nobody really knowing what was going on.

They would make it.

And then Percy would get better.

That's what Jason kept telling himself, anyways.

***

"I can't believe he put me in a wheelchair. A wheelchair. I have one injured arm, and he refuses to let me walk.” Percy sulked, but Jason only hummed vaguely as he pushed Percy out of the
hospital in said wheelchair, so his boyfriend could get some fresh air and they had something to do while Will did some sort of scans with Nico.

Since he actually accepted the help of the other medics now, Jason surely hadn't complained, and if these scans helped them helping Nico, he was all for it.

Plus, Percy had been rather restless ever since waking up this morning, so some fresh air would be good for him. Will had taken him off his infusion and freed him of all the tubes and stuff attached to him, which had resulted in Percy drinking a lake's worth of water and eating flavorless and disgusting porridge (Jason knew this because he had been fed several spoonful's), just to then need the bathroom at least twice an hour and move around excessively whenever Will wasn't looking.

"He just wants to make sure you'll be okay. You gave us quite a scare, after all." Jason pointed out as he wheeled him through the nearly empty streets of New Rome, with most of the people at their jobs or out on the frontlines at this time of the day.

He still hadn't talked to Will about his agreement with Reyna.

Jason had told him vaguely of the current situation in both Camp Half-Blood and here, but he had tried not to make it sound too bad, and had quickly changed the topic, afterwards – which had been made easier by Percy waking up and lifting his blanket to check whether the catheter was still there, which hadn't been the case since Will had apparently removed it in his sleep.

(Jason hadn't even known there had been a catheter until those two had talked about it yesterday, and hadn't even really known what a catheter was, though it answered so many questions he hadn't even asked himself. It had been a very unnerving realization.)

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry for worrying you, though." Percy said quietly, but he had already apologized before, and they had already told him there was nothing he should be sorry for. He had saved Will's life.

Jason knew he would have done the same if he had just been a little faster to react.

"It wasn't your fault. So, love, where would you like to go?" Jason asked, and Percy let his head fall back to grin up at him with a warm gleam in his eyes.

"I love it when you call me 'love'. It's such a privilege."

Jason raised an eyebrow.

"I call you that the majority of the time, Percy."

"Lies. You refer to Will and Nico with that pet name at least twice as much." Percy insisted. Then he broke off laughing to himself, undoubtedly knowing he was making things up. His boyfriend was such a dork.

"Oh, let's go inside a flower shop." Percy suddenly piped up, and Jason was about to agree, when he paused.

"Why?" He asked skeptically, and Percy looked up at him again with a cheeky grin on his face.

"Remember when I gave Will those flowers?"

How could Jason ever forget? It was still one of the highlights of his life, and he cherished that memory more with each passing day.

"Yes. Are you planning on giving him some more?" He asked hesitantly, uncertain whether Will in his current state would be able to appreciate them as much as before.

Or maybe flowers would be perfect for him exactly because of that?
"No, but I still need something for you. You're the only one I haven't given flowers to, Jason. And now that I nearly died, I have decided that it's crucial that I get to that right away."

Wait, what?

"Percy, you don't have to give me flowers. They would only die in my care." He replied awkwardly, but Percy shook his head determinedly.

"I'm gonna get you flowers, Sparky, like it or not."

Jason suppressed a sigh and wheeled Percy further down the road.

"How about we go to the park, instead?" He suggested when he saw a sign pointing to the left for the park, and the right for the public bath.

He would take Percy swimming anytime, but since he had only just woken up, he decided against suggesting going there, because he was fairly certain Will wouldn't be happy about it.

"Depends. Are there flowers in the park?" Percy asked and looked up at him again, and if he didn't stop doing that, Jason would kiss him, because it was way too tempting, and Jason was a weak man when it came to his boyfriends.

"Is that really that important to you?" He asked hesitantly, because, seriously, he didn't need any flowers.

He just needed Percy, alive and well, by his side, together with their two alive and well boyfriends.

That was all he wanted.

"Yes." Percy replied without hesitation, and Jason resigned himself to his fate as he wheeled Percy towards the park.

He found the way easily, but was distracted by thoughts of the battles that had to be happening outside New Rome right now, wondering how many old campers had been called from here to help.

He still had to talk to Will.

The more he thought about it, the more he knew he had to help Reyna and the Camp, even if he hated the thought of going alone.

The last time they had wanted to split up, Will had nearly gotten himself killed, after all.

But fighting was simply the sensible thing to do – the only thing he could do – Will would understand that, surely.

Jason glanced back down at Percy, and found him with his head tipped back and his eyes studying Jason thoughtfully.

He blinked, but then Percy already looked away and started humming.

"Hey, would you say this counts as a date? It's just you and me, in the park, strolling around and about to have a good time. Totally sounds like a date."

Jason couldn't help but smile at that a little bit, even with his oppressing thoughts.

"If you want it to be a date, then it is one." He replied, and Percy seemed pleased with that.

He led Percy down the smoothest path there was, and they looked at the vivid colors of the grass and trees and flowers all around them in silence for a while, before Percy tipped his head back again to grin at Jason broadly.

"Remember that one time you and Will tried to go on a date?"
Wow, Percy.

“You mean the one that you interrupted out of jealousy, which then sort of ruined your own anniversary date with Nico?” He teased, and Percy stuck out his tongue to him.

“Lies. It more turned into a date of the four of us, and you know it.”

“Just because we kissed your neck, doesn't mean it was a date.” Jason argued playfully, and Percy acted scandalized, before he snorted out a laugh.

“Yeah, right. Admit it, you loved it.”

“I have never claimed anything else.” Jason replied softly, and Percy grinned back up at him.

This was it, he was going to kiss him.

Jason stopped and leaned down to press their lips together on an impulse, and Percy seemed startled, but not opposed.

Instead, he kissed back for a split second, before grinning against Jason's lips so much, it made kissing impossible.

“You're a little shit.” Jason commented drily as he was forced to pull away again, but Percy only cackled.

“You love me.”

“I do, but you're still a little shit.”

“Hm, can't argue that. Now, wheel me over to that patch of flowers there, please.” Percy demanded as he gestured towards where he wanted to go, and Jason shook his head to himself and complied.

Percy hummed to himself and waited until Jason stopped, before he bent over to intently study the colorful flowers all over the place, some planted with purpose, others seemingly growing wild and destroying the intended patterns.

Jason wondered whether the people in charge had simply not noticed yet, or whether they, too, were busy defending their home.

Or maybe they simply liked it this way.

“Nah, no good. I'm looking for something that just…screams at me, you know?” Percy told him and gestured vaguely, and Jason raised an eyebrow.

“Are you sure you're looking for flowers, then? If you want screaming, we could look for a zoo. Or a kindergarten. Or we check out the local college and see whether it's finals week yet.” Jason suggested, and his boyfriend very rudely pinched him in the arm with an indignant wail.

“You know exactly what I meant!”

Jason wasn't sure whether he did, but he guessed Percy simply meant he hadn't found the flower he was looking for, yet.

So he merely laughed and wheeled him over to the next patch – and the next, followed by another one, and another one after that.

Jason had all the patience in the world for his boyfriend – Percy, however, didn't seem to feel the same way, growing impatient and restless more and more with each patch of flowers he discarded.

“Hey, Jason, I know you're this rule-loving sweetheart, but, mind looking the other way for a moment, while I get out of this wheelchair and take a look around, by myself?” Percy's voice was like honey, as if he was trying to seduce Jason to do his bidding – and, while Jason would gladly do anything for his boyfriend, he knew instinctively this was *not* something he should be doing.
"Will forbid me from letting you out of that wheelchair, Percy."

"Yeah, but he doesn't have to know." Percy tried tentatively, and Jason made a face.

"This is Will, he will definitely know."

Percy sulked for a total of one second, then he huffed and smiled again.

"Probably, yeah. Meh, fine, then this will have to do. Wheel me over there, I think I found something."

He didn't find anything, even though he could have simply chosen _any_ of these for Jason, and he would have been more than happy.

"They're not good enough. I can't just pick _any_ flower, Jason. Nico's flower had a special meaning to it that I wanted him to know. Will's flower simply reminded me of him so much, it had to happen. I need something that screams 'Jason' at me. But this park is useless. Where's the next one?" Percy chattered as Jason wheeled him out of the park an hour later, and Jason shook his head to himself again, though he found his boyfriend horribly endearing right now, even if he was thinking about the most trivial things possible.

"Maybe I'm simply not a flower type of person, Percy. Seriously, you don't have to get me flowers."

"But I _want_ to get you flowers. Let me woo you, man."

Jason blinked, then smiled and stopped pushing the wheelchair, in order to move around it and crouch down in front of Percy.

"You already had me wooed when you kissed me back all that time ago, Percy." He said, then cupped Percy's face before he could start arguing, and kissed him.

This time, Percy first smiled against his lips, then kissed him back, which Jason was more than happy about.

The wheelchair complicated things a bit, since Percy seemed to want to get closer, but couldn't, not without repeatedly pushing the footrests against Jason's knees, anyways.

Jason solved the problem by pushing Percy's legs apart further and setting the breaks, so he could put his hands on the arm rests and Percy could wrap his arms around his neck, without either of them fearing Percy was going to roll away at any given moment.

The more or less gentle mashing of their lips soon became rushed and frantic, as if trying to make up for all the lost time in which they hadn't been able to kiss, and Jason felt practically drunk as Percy's body trembled against his, the two trying to get as close as possible.

There was no way they could take this any further, not when they were outside in a park in the middle of New Rome, and Percy was only just getting better, but Jason touched him, anyways, his hands shaking as they stroked over Percy's arms, his sides, over his thighs and back, settling on his back, settling back on his sides, moving back to stroke his hair out of his face and settle on his cheeks to pull him into the kiss further.

"I missed you so much." He whispered against his boyfriend's lips, and Percy trembled in reply and let out a small sound much like a mewl, demanding him to kiss him again.

Jason did, again and again, and the rest of the world didn't matter anymore.

"I'm gonna get you a whole freaking bouquet of flowers, just you wait for it." Percy told him breathlessly as they parted, and Jason huffed out a disbelieving laugh as he shook his head and leaned forward to let their foreheads touch.

This guy was unbelievable.

***
They had only just gotten back when Percy was promptly asleep the moment he was back in bed, and Jason couldn't do anything but smile as he tucked him in correctly and put the wheelchair in the corner so it wouldn't get in anybody's way.

Will was at the small table and must have been reading, though he had put his book down the moment they had come in, immediately asking them how the date had gone, which Percy had replied to with more enthusiasm than expected, right before falling asleep mid-sentence.

Somehow, Will hadn't been surprised in the slightest, but then again, neither had Jason.

He knew Percy would probably keep sleeping a lot more than usual for a while longer, though he was confident he'd be back to his top form in no time, especially with Will's help.

"Did he try to convince you to let him out of the wheelchair?" Will asked amused as he got up and moved over to put his hand on Percy's forehead, undoubtedly checking his values for any significant changes, though everything seemed fine.

"Once. He was very determined to pick me flowers." Jason told him, and Will's lips twitched into a small smile.

"That sounds like him. Did he find any suitable ones?"

"No. I would have been satisfied with any of them, but apparently, they didn't scream at him loud enough." Jason shrugged, and Will shook his head and sat down on Percy's bedside to look at Jason with an exhausted, but amused expression.

"I'm not surprised. So, what else happened?"

Jason shrugged and told him about the rest of the date, including the very short and unsatisfactory trip to another park and Percy's crestfallen attitude on the way back, which had improved greatly when Jason had gotten them ice cream and reminisced about that one time the four of them had shared that giant bowl of ice cream with each other.

Will smiled at the memory, too, though he still seemed to wait for more, which made Jason think of his talk with Reyna, and the things he still had to tell Will about but hadn't.

In a way, he knew he would have to join the battles sooner or later again, and it made sense to do it now.

He was uninjured, he was up and moving, he could fight.

Sure, he would run the rather high risk of being distracted by the thoughts of his guys by themselves in the hospital, far away from where he could protect or save them, but this was easily argued by the fact that they were in the hospital, in New Rome, what could possibly attack them here?

Plus, once he was fighting, he'd be fighting to protect them, and he'd be far better at it out there on the frontlines.

At the same time, though, Jason was reluctant to agree.

He didn't want to leave Will alone, not when he had already told Jason he was scared, not when Percy was only just getting better with his arm, not when Nico was still in a coma.

He wanted to be there for them.

He wanted to be there to watch out for Will and help him, and he wanted to be there to take Percy for more walks and make him laugh and help him get better, and he wanted to be there when Nico woke up, so he could hold him tight and tell him how much he loved him, because he hadn't told him in so long.

How could he even think about leaving them behind in a time such as this?

Jason fell silent, and Will gazed at him as if he knew more was coming.
Maybe he did.

Maybe he already knew.

Or maybe he had guessed it.

Will wasn't stupid, after all.

If he hadn't seen it in a vision or overheard the conversations outside, he'd probably still be able to put together the pieces, what with Reyna not showing up anymore, and more and more patients needing attendance.

It would certainly show him that Jason's very eloquent 'The Camps are facing some struggles' was exactly what it was: a hopeless try to downplay the severity of the situation.

Jason looked down, considering his options.

Then, he realized he didn't really have any, and he would never lie to Will, and he would have to talk to him sooner or later, especially about something like this.

Even if it was something he didn't want to talk about, because, for once, he had no idea what to do, his heart and head going two different ways.

"Will, I…we have to talk." He said quietly, and Will sat up a little straighter, not even cracking one joke at his statement, which showed he knew this was serious.

"I'm assuming this is about your talk with Reyna?"

He knew.

Jason let out a deep breath, then nodded and moved to sit down beside his boyfriend on Percy's bed.

Time to talk.

***

Will didn't like it.

Will knew the consequences.

Will didn't want to tell Jason what he knew he should tell him – but he did, anyways.

Will watched as Jason struggled with himself, before deflating and nodding, showing he had come to a decision.

Will knew what that decision was, even if he hated it with every fiber of his being.

"Keep Percy out of it, though, Jason. He's not ready yet." He warned him, and Jason nodded, promising him that he wouldn't let Percy follow him into the madness.

Will had known.

He had heard the whispers, had felt the hopelessness and fear, had sensed the tension only war could bring with it, and he had known from the way Jason had spoken ever so reluctantly about his conversation with Reyna that it must be a lot worse than he had let on.

It hadn't bothered Will, because he knew Jason only meant well, but it had also bothered him, because it meant there was more that Jason wasn't saying, and now he knew for sure what it was, rather than guessing and analyzing.

He was glad to know.

He hated to know.

Jason was pacing, then he moved to hug Will, holding him tightly pressed against him as if they
hadn't seen each other for forever – or might never see each other again.

Will hugged him back and stroked over his back.

"I'm sorry." Jason whispered, but there was nothing to apologize for.

"Just go, Jason." Will replied, maybe a tad more bitter than intended, but he couldn't help it, and he knew Jason would understand.

The last time they had split up, it would have resulted in Will's death.

This time, he wouldn't let anything happen to either the guys or himself.

Jason was a big guy, he could watch out for himself – and if he got hurt, Will was right here to patch him up.

He didn't like it, he hated and despised it, but Jason was right, it was the sensible thing to do.

They couldn't stay in their protective bubble forever.

The Camps needed help, and they would do their best, which meant Will would heal his guys and help them back on their feet, and Jason would be out there risking his life to protect them.

It wasn't fair, but lately, nothing was fair anymore.

Maybe it had never been fair to begin with.

Jason clung to him, and Will liked the way it almost hurt, yet he also hated it, because it made this moment feel like so much more than it should be.

"Just go." He repeated, but his voice was nothing more than a whisper.

"I'll be back as soon as possible." Jason promised, but he shouldn't make promises he couldn't keep.

They kissed, and Jason might act like this was the end of the world, but it was Will who clutched his face and tried to keep him with him just a few seconds longer.

He didn't like it.

He wanted Jason to stay.

But that would do none of them any good.

Jason wouldn't go far, he was still right here at Camp Jupiter – just that he wouldn't be with Will and their two injured boyfriends, but out there, happily getting injured, himself.

But Will was here to patch him up.

Jason would be gone, but he would come back, and he would still be with them the same way he was now.

Reyna knew Jason was distracted. She surely wouldn't put him in the center of the battle right away, nor would she let him fight until his last breath.

She was a competent leader that took good care of her people, Will knew that.

Will still didn't like it.

Will didn't have much choice in the matter.

Will let go of him and let him go, and Jason left with a last kiss to his forehead and the promise it would be fine.

Will returned to his reading, trying to drown out the feeling of hopelessness with more information on somatoform disorders and the physical symptoms of depression.
It didn't work, but it was something he had to do, anyways, so he kept on struggling with the words, the sentences, the pages, rereading paragraphs over and over again until he knew them by heart, even if he barely registered them.

Life was cruel.

If he had known any of this would happen, he would have dated them so much sooner, made them laugh so much harder, told them he loved them so much more often.

Now, all he could do was be there for them and wait for whatever blow life decided to deal them next.

***

When Percy opened his eyes sometime in the early evening, he realized he must have fallen asleep once Jason and he had returned from their 'date'.

He didn't mind that too much, except for the fact that Jason was nowhere to be found, and Will was at Nico's bedside, brushing his hair and humming to himself while his hands glowed faintly.

So, he was still healing him, huh?

Percy tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his heart, and instead sat up to go to the bathroom, hoping he'd make it there in one piece without needing Will's help again.

Technically speaking, his legs were fine, but according to Will, his body was still weakened from being knocked out for so long, which Percy guessed made sense, though it was still inconvenient.

He still stumbled a lot, and his balance still tended to be off whenever he got up (stupid dizzy spells), but once he was walking for a bit, it usually worked out alright.

Will still didn't like him walking, intent on having him do those exercises with his hands, arms and legs repeatedly, but Percy was certain he would be fine if Will just left him be.

Of course, he didn't tell him that.

Instead, he tried showing him through things like these that he was more than capable of getting back on his feet by himself – quite literally, too.

Percy pushed himself off the bed determinedly, moving on wobbly legs towards the small bathroom – just to feel a sudden rush of dizziness and nausea wash over him, causing him to stumble and clutch the wall.

Oh no.

"Careful." Will's voice sounded, and then his boyfriend was right there, in the very moment Percy hissed as a jet of pain shot all the way from his hand to his shoulder.

Shit.

Percy squeezed his eyes shut and tried to keep his expression as neutral as possible to keep Will from noticing as his arm began tingling and turned numb, but Will already had his hand clasped around Percy's wrist and there was a concentrated look on his face that told Percy he already knew.

Oh great.

Will was never going to let Percy out of the wheelchair at this rate, much less let him do anything until he deemed him ready for it.

Now Percy knew how Nico must have felt when Will had declared any Underworldly things off-limits.

And there he had planned on wooing Will into letting him out so he could go flower-hunting for
Jason and get the group together to talk business about what was going on, how they were doing, and whether they'd partake in Jason's belated birthday-party once Nico was awake, as well, because Percy had no doubts Nico would wake up soon – even if Will's healing put a small damper on his conviction.

"Percy, what were you thinking? I told you that you shouldn't overdo it right away. Come on, let me help..." Will muttered, a deep frown on his face as he moved an arm around Percy to help him keep his balance, and Percy averted his gaze in shame.

"I just didn't want to bother you..."

"Percy, you could never bother me. Now, I know you are healing up much quicker than others might, but could we come to the agreement that you at least try and take it slow?" Will asked him, and how was Percy supposed to argue, now?

"But I stayed in the wheelchair." He sulked for a lack of anything better to say, and Will huffed, the faintest hint of a smile tugging on his lips before his expression became stern once more as he led Percy over to the bathroom.

"Yes, and I'm very proud of both of you for following your doctor's orders for once. Now, how about you listen to me some more and let me help you and do your exercises with you, then you can be out and about in a matter of days, I promise."

Percy's eyebrows shot up.

"Days? So, you think my arm will be fixed again, by then? Do you know what's wrong with it, by now?"

He couldn't help but ask. It was no secret to him that his arm should have been fine, especially since it still wasn't the one that had actually been injured by the drakon.

Will hadn't really talked about it, of course, but Percy had gathered enough from his distressed expression and the fact that there were a new bunch of books littering the small table in the corner, as well as the floor around it, and all of them had to do with injuries and symptoms and terms that Percy didn't know of, but that didn't sound good.

(He had risked a glance into one of them when Jason had gotten ready to leave with him and Will had been busy talking to a few other medics, but even if the words hadn't slid off the pages, he knew he wouldn't have understood any more than that everything was confusing, health was a lie, and medicine was something he never wanted to major in.)

Will stayed silent as he opened the bathroom door for him, and Percy guessed that was answer enough, already.

"Your arm might take a little longer to get back to the way it was before, Percy. However, if you do your exercises and give your body enough chance to rest, you'll at least be able to move around by yourself. Who knows, I might even get Reyna's permission to take you swimming for rehab purposes." Will suggested, and that was entirely unfair, because he was definitely bribing him.

Unfortunately, it was absolutely working.

"You do know we're at war, right? Shouldn't I get back to top form and put everything into being able to fight again, so I can join the frontlines?" Percy asked bitterly, anyways, and noticed how his arm seemed to pulse with pain at the thought.

Will's face became oddly cold.

"No, Jason is doing that for the both of you, already. For now, you should just focus on getting better in your own time. You can't rush these things, Percy. Plus, I think a little break wouldn't hurt, neither you or me." Will told him, and Percy frowned and let him close the bathroom door to give him some privacy.

Swimming did sound nice.
A break sounded even better.

But he did have responsibilities.

Though Will was right, he guessed. One couldn't rush recovery.

But what about Jason…

"Wait, where's Jason?" He called through the closed door, but Will didn't reply, and Percy stared at the wall and strained his ears in case Will was whispering, but there was nothing.

Was that a bad sign? Should he be worried? What if Jason was out there, getting hurt?

Percy had been under the impression that Reyna had excused them for the time being, so they would have enough time to heal up, both physically and mentally.

Had that been renounced? Were things that bad in and around Camp that they needed Jason's help? Did they need Percy's help, too, but didn't dare to ask because of his arm?

But Jason would have told them, right? He would have told Will, and he would have definitely told Percy, right?

Then again, would Jason be any use on the battlefield right now? With Nico still being in a coma, and still requiring Will's healing?

Percy wouldn't be able to fight with that on his mind, and the gods knew it was on his mind the entire time.

Why else would he try to keep everyone's spirits up as much as he could, otherwise?

Percy huffed and went to the toilet, then brushed his teeth for good measure, since he didn't know when he'd next be able to do so, with his weird and annoying new sleeping habits.

Once he opened the door again, Will was there to lead him back to his bed.

"Where's Jason?" He asked again, certain Will must have heard him before, but Will didn't reply this time, either, instead pursing his lips and looking grim.

"He's out. Don't worry, Percy, he'll be back later." He said at long last as he helped Percy lay back down, though this didn't soothe Percy's worries in the slightest.

"What do you mean, he's out? Where did he go? I thought he'd be meeting up with the others or have another talk with Reyna. He's not fighting again, right?"

Will turned away from him sharply, and Percy instinctively reached out to snatch the back of his shirt – just to wince back at the pain coursing through his arm in response.

"Don't worry about it, Percy." Will replied, oblivious to Percy's attempt to keep him close, and Percy's heart sank as Will left his bedside to move towards the desk and probably resume his reading.

Percy clutched his hand in an attempt to stop the pain, tempted to call out to his boyfriend and ask him to stay with him a little longer, but he wouldn't know what to say, and he didn't want there to be silence between them, so he swallowed his words.

Instead, he laid down properly and turned to the side, acting as if he wanted to go back to sleep.

Maybe, if he simply didn't move for long enough, he might fall asleep, for real.

Percy felt hollow again, but, by now, it was a familiar feeling.

He closed his eyes, but sleep didn't come for a long time.

Jason didn't show up that night.
2nd part of the Fanart links <3

ENJOY!!

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-
mel-chan366
- New Years from Advent Calendar times ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/154469941964/the-third-of-week-three-of-my-
fabulous-five-dollar
- Our dorks in Christmas sweaters!! :D
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-
for-mel-chan366
- The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-
mel-chan366-now-i
- Ice cream time ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/15655714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-
chan366-3-3-some
- <3
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commissions-a-fabulous
- The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-
ever-fabulous
- ...Boxer Shorts XD ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164308263854/let-me-just-take-this-time-to-say-
that
- The guys 'admiring' Jason in his leather jacket ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164426408554/another-fun-very-colourful-
commission-for
- Pride ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/165225200564/a-cozy-commission-for-the-
fantastic
- A peaceful moment in the Hades Cabin (so soft!!!!!!! so peaceful!!!!!!! so cozy!!!!!!!)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-
mel-chan366-3
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love
them too much not to share them ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-
for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-
commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-
commission-for
- Jercy Soft Kiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164389230829/an-adorable-sketch-commission-
for-mel-chan366
- Solangelo Date <3

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my
firstborn child ;) (Mostly because there won’t be one. Sorry. But you can have a
cookie?)
PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:
http://sta.sh/055hx09e5f9 - perfect depiction of Kyle :)
http://sta.sh/0h2pt887zf7 - adorable Will with flowers <3
http://sta.sh/02yxyl0gdx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3
http://sta.sh/0qy6ka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing how cute Will is ;) 
http://sta.sh/01m8rr04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will :)

- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well >;)
http://sta.sh/01b1irqkgjh - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3
- A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater!! <3
- A super cute redraw of our Will in his comfort sweater!! :D (Also, my new phone background XD)
- Will with blanket <3
- THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE FROM THE LAST SEQUEL!!!!!!!!!!!!!
- THE TEAM!!!!!! THE WHOLE TEAM!!!!! I AM FOREVER IN AWE AND GRATEFUL AND AM ORDERING Y'ALL TO LOOK AT THIS RIGHT AWAY!!!!!! PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THE GODS DO IT!!!
http://sta.sh/01m7znhbfjil

- ***HAVE A PINING ASH FOR HANNAH!!!!!! (Seriously, look at this. Now we know why Ash got a crush >;) And omg do they have it baaaad ;)***

https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you
- A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy, challenge-loving dorks <3
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patreon-tari
- Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3
- Nico in his winter outfit :)
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-commission-for-my-amazing-patron
- Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163998940481/jason-grace-gracing-us-
Percy stared into space, feeling rather detached from the rest of the world.

What even was the point? Of anything?

If there was a point, Percy couldn't find it.

He felt something slide off his leg and looked down slowly, watching the book about flower meanings falling from his thigh, then off the bed.

Maybe he could have caught it, but he didn't try, instead watching it fall and hit the ground with a quiet thud.

What was the point of looking through it?

Why had he thought flowers would be a good idea?
Jason probably didn't even like flowers.

Hell, chances were that nobody liked flowers, and it was just something the flower shops had thought of to get money.

'Hey, look here, you might think you don't like flowers, but they are awesome, buy them here!' Nobody liked flowers.

Flowers were stupid.

Percy wondered how stupid he must have seemed to Jason when he had kept going on about them.

He had even made him take him to another park, and for what? For nothing.

Gods, Jason must have been positively embarrassed.

Not to mention Will, who had actually bothered getting Percy the book that was currently gracing the ground.

Percy gazed down at his hands listlessly.

They had to think he was nothing but a childish fool.

What was he doing, wasting his and their time with something so trivial such as flowers?

He should be doing something useful.

His exercises, for example, so he could get back into training and fight alongside Jason in the battles outside New Rome.

There was the sound of footsteps next to him, and Percy saw Will out of his peripheral vision as he bent down and picked up the book.

"Did you find anything suitable yet?" Will asked as he passed it back to Percy, but Percy didn't look at him, and didn't grab it.

What for?

It was all pointless.

Will kept holding out the book to him a moment longer, apparently still waiting for a reply.

Then he sighed and sat down on Percy's bedside.

"Hey, what's wrong? Is it no good? It's the only one they had on hand. If you want, I can send somebody to pick up a different one, thought."

Why would he bother doing that?

Oh, right, because Percy was a toddler that would undoubtedly be happy with some other stupid thing to keep him busy.

And there, he had thought if he only tried hard enough, he could cheer them up and get things back to how they were before.

What a wild fantasy, indeed.

Nico was still unconscious and didn't seem to be interested in waking up any time soon.

Jason was out there, risking his life without Percy, because Percy's arm was just as useless as the rest of him.

Will was busy healing them and the occasional camper from Camp Jupiter when there was an
emergency, but not enough medics on hand.

Percy must have been delirious when he had thought he could be there for them in any way.

Maybe he could blame the pain killers, though he knew his guys knew him too well for that.

They knew he was an immature child.

They knew he was useless.

That was why Will kept him from training, and why Jason hadn't told him about the battles outside New Rome until he had come back beaten and bloody at 4am in the morning, outpowered and exhausted and at the brink of consciousness, but alive and whole.

Percy wished Nico was awake, because Nico would have surely yelled at Jason for doing something so stupid.

He had kind of thought Will might do the deed, but Will had merely jumped off his chair and had half-carried Jason to the small bed at the wall to lay him down and assess his injuries and take care of them, even though there had been no sunlight around and Will shouldn't have had enough energy left.

He must have gotten stronger.

Everybody was getting stronger.

Everybody, except Percy, who seemed to become more of a dead weight with each passing day.

"Percy? Talk to me, Gorgeous." Will said softly next to him, but Percy averted his gaze.

He wanted to be left alone.

In a way, he didn't want to be alone – he wanted Will to stay with him and hug him and lay down with him and let him feel the warmth of his body for a little while.

But at the same time, he wanted to be alone, he wanted Will gone, he wanted everybody gone and wanted his peace and quiet and he wanted to simply keep existing in this bleak bubble of nothingness that seemed to engulf him.

Will touched his shoulder, and Percy tensed, tempted to lash out at him.

But then, he realized that would take more energy than he felt he possessed right now, so he merely exhaled and kept his face averted, deciding he didn't care anymore.

What was there to care about, anyways?

The world had already taken everything he cared about, there was nothing more.

"How about I look through the book with you? I'm sure we'll find something nice and pretty for Jason." Will suggested, and Percy scowled, pushing the book away when Will tried to put it back onto his lap.

"What for? It's just some dumb flowers. Nobody cares, Will." He snapped, then felt a tinge of guilt as he realized Will was only trying to help.

He saw his blue eyes widen in surprise, and quickly turned his head away again.

Whatever.

It didn't matter.

Will should just leave him alone, and if he was as good at reading Percy as he kept claiming he was, then he should have known that, so it was his own fault for sticking around and bothering Percy.

"I care. And I know you do, too." Will then said quietly, and Percy crossed his arms in front of his
chest, his sword arm promptly beginning to ache.

He ignored it, the pain just another testament to his uselessness.

"I don't. It's childish and stupid, and Jason won't care either way, anyways. He doesn't even want them, to begin with. Nobody would. It's all just bullshit." He ranted, and with every word, he felt more aggravated, yet when he finished speaking, he felt more drained than ever.

"I think it's a very sweet idea, and I know Jason would be very happy to receive flowers from you, especially after how much thought and effort you put into it." Will countered, and a part of Percy wanted to scream to drown him out, though he wasn't quite sure why.

He didn't care, either, though he didn't scream — instead, he turned his entire body away from Will.

Whatever.

Who cared?

Behind him, he could hear Will sigh, and the sound made his insides churn both in annoyance and hurt.

He hated it when they sighed.

It was just another way of telling him he had disappointed them.

Frustrated with himself and the world, Percy kept his back to Will, hoping he'd get the hint and leave, though he also kind of wanted Will to stay, anyways.

When Will did stay, however, he was only even more annoyed than before, though he simply gritted his teeth and kept his focus on the faraway window, trying to tell the time by the light outside — which was pointless and stupid, because the alarm clock was right next to him on his bedside table.

He didn't bother to look at it, though.

Instead, his focus shifted to the sound of turning pages behind him.

"I like that one." Will said quietly, and Percy scowled at the window.

Who cared what Will liked?

He was just trying to get Percy's attention so Percy wouldn't feel bad about himself.

Well, Will was out of luck, because Percy didn't even feel bad about himself anymore, he had already resigned himself to his fate and was just waiting for them to come to the same conclusion as he had.

"This one is also really pretty." Will mused, and Percy grumbled to himself.

Another page was turned, followed by Will humming thoughtfully, and Percy turned his head ever so faintly to maybe catch a glimpse of what he was doing.

Will wasn't paying him any attention, his gaze fixed on the book in his hands as he turned the pages and looked at photos of flowers, before intently studying the name and meaning beneath.

"Wow, I'd so get this one for you, Percy. You know, I never knew much about flower meanings. It was more of a thing for the Demeter kids, I only ever studied which ones were poisonous and which herbs to use for what. However, looking through this now, I definitely missed out. Did you know that the rose symbolizes love, but the tulip is supposed to be the declaration of love? Kind of unfortunate, because I don't like either." Will told him without looking up as he turned the pages until he was on the page for tulips once more, studying it with an almost pitying expression on his face.

Then, he went back to the page he was on before and turned it so Percy could look at it properly, even though Percy had clearly shown him he had no interest in that nonsense.
"See? It would be perfect for you." Will said, and Percy's eyebrow twitched as he felt the curiosity winning him over slowly but surely, his body turning back towards Will ever so inconspicuously.

Then, he grumbled to himself and caved in, moving closer to Will to take a look at what freaking flower he was talking about.

"Ha-ha." He huffed in disappointment and frustration and crossed his arms in front of his chest again, even if it made him wince.

Of course.

The snapdragon.

"Because I snapped at you?" He guessed drily, but Will only shrugged and grinned at him as he climbed onto his bed to sit down beside him, one of his legs promptly thrown over Percy's for no reason other than his comfort, apparently.

"That, too. And because of Festus and Peleus, because I know you like them. And because I thought you'd like the flower because it's exotic and has a cool name. Also, it apparently symbolizes graciousness and strength. So, definitely suits you." Will summed up, and Percy had to grudgingly admit that his reasoning made him feel a little better, even though he still thought all of this pointless.

Shouldn't Will be reading his textbooks that he usually devoured?

Percy didn't need a pity party, nor did he need anybody to entertain him.

He might behave like a toddler, but he didn't need the supervision.

"You know, I still have my flowers. They're in my photo album." Will said conversationally as he turned the pages once more, the book placed between them so they could both look inside, even though Percy hadn't said anything about wanting to look at it again.

"I still love them. They remind me of that day, and of us, and of smiles and sunshine and good things, you know? Good memories. You might think now it's just a small thing, something trivial, but then, you see those flowers and you just remember, and, sometimes, there's nothing better in the world than one good memory at the right moment." Will explained softly, and Percy tilted his head slightly, listening even though he had half a mind to discard his words immediately again.

He didn't, though.

Instead, he looked down at his hands – or rather, at his hand clutching his damaged sword arm, even though it wasn't really hurting right now.

Percy remembered, too.

He remembered seeing those little flowers and thinking of Will, and he remembered the way Jason had seemed so confusingly delighted once he had heard of his plan, and how he had crouched down next to Percy in the middle of the path, just to let him look at the flowers.

He remembered picking the prettiest ones and cradling them to his chest, worried they would die until he got them to Will safely, and he remembered the momentary rush of adrenaline and panic at the thought of Will laughing at him, or disliking the flowers, or brushing him off and sending him away.

Percy took the book from Will, remembering the surprise in his gaze when Percy had held them out to him, just those few little flowers that he hadn't even known the name of, much less the meaning, just something stupid and small that he had just found so unbelievably necessary in that moment that it couldn't have waited even an hour.

And he remembered the joy in Will's eyes and the happy grin on his face, same as he remembered the way Will had just grabbed and kissed him, and the world had seemed perfect for once.

It was a beautiful memory, and one Percy had only had a few days ago, when Jason had been by
his side and Percy had tried so hard to think of something nice to tell him, any good memory that could cheer him up.

Percy turned the pages of the book, trying to find the ones he had taken into closer consideration earlier.

That was why he had wanted to pick Jason flowers, wasn't it?

To cheer him up, yes, but also to give him such a memory, too.

Something that wasn't 'Percy picking flowers for Will while I was around', but something that was 'Percy gave me flowers because he loves me the same way he loves Will and Nico, and he wanted me to see that'.

Percy just found one of his pages, when he snapped the book shut again, a sense of shock surging through him.

What was he doing?

This was stupid! There was no point in looking for flowers, he had already established that!

Just because Will was playing babysitter, that didn't mean Percy could just fall back into this nonsense!

He had to exercise, practice, train, do something useful with his time!

Percy deflated and stared at the closed book in his lap, trying to solve his internal conflict, but it only seemed to get worse the longer he stared at the book and did nothing.

A hand touched his shoulder, and he glanced sideways at Will, who met his gaze for a moment, before looking down at the book and nudging it gently.

"Are you ever ashamed of me because of the way I am?" Percy asked, and it was a stupid question, and Will would undoubtedly be confused as to where that even came from, but it was a question Percy felt compelled to ask.

"No." Will replied without a hint of hesitation in his voice, and Percy's heart leaped for a moment, before the doubts were back, and he wondered whether Will was actually serious, or whether he was just trying to make Percy feel better.

They were in a hospital.

People were dying.

And Percy was looking up what orchids symbolized.

"I mean it. Why would I be ashamed, Percy? You're one of the kindest and sweetest people I've had the fortune to meet. We share the same humor, your sass is always appreciated, and I must have told you a hundred times already that I love you just the way you are, no matter if you snap at me, drool into my hair when you sleep, or try to convince me to go ice-skating with you in the middle of the night before the ice melts." Will told him, and Percy remembered that, too, a small smile hushing over his lips before it disappeared once more, together with the momentary hint of joy.

That was just another example of how immature he was, wasn't it?

"You know, there's nothing wrong with being a little different than others, and there's definitely nothing wrong with doing something that makes you and others happy, Percy. Don't let stupid stuff like that tear you down. You didn't let it get to you before, don't let it get to you now, yeah? If anybody gives you a hard time because you want to do something you enjoy, let me know and I'll spike their next meal with laxatives." Will told him with a confident nod, and Percy huffed to himself.

"What if I'm the one giving myself a hard time?" He asked against his better judgment, and was surprised that Will didn't seem surprised in the slightest as he shrugged and let himself fall against
"Well, in that case, I'd of course help you solve whatever inner conflict your facing."

Will said that so easily.

"And how would you do that?" Percy asked, intrigued despite himself.

Will leaned against him even more and let his head rest on Percy's shoulder with a thoughtful hum.

"How would you like to be helped? I can listen to what's bothering you if you wish to talk about it. I can hold your hand if you just need some physical contact. I can hug you and let you cry it out without ever mentioning it again if that's what you want to do. I could also kiss you and tell you repeatedly how much I love you and how badly I hope you're never gonna grow out of that childish joy you still possess sometimes." Will mused, and Percy hated how easily he said all that and still managed to get beneath his skin, making his heart beat a little faster and the rest of him tingle with hope and the faintest hint of joy again.

Percy let out a long, deep breath.

For a moment, he was so tempted to slump back against Will and tell him he didn't know what was happening to him, that this wasn't like him, and that he didn't know what was going on. But Will already knew all of that, and if Percy had the choice, he'd much rather take those kisses than whine about things he wouldn't understand, anyways.

"I'd like that." He whispered, and even though he didn't specify what he meant, Will seemed to understand, anyways, because he maneuvered an arm around him and gave the side of his head a kiss.

"So, what flowers did you consider so far?" Will asked him softly, and it was still stupid, and still pointless, and still trivial, but Percy reached out for the book anyways and searched for his favorites, showing them to Will with mixed emotions.

Will looked at them intently, as if trying to memorize them by heart, and Percy both anticipated and dreaded his opinion on them.

"Those are wonderful choices." Will said as he looked up to meet Percy's gaze, and it seemed honest, even though Percy was inclined to believe he was just humoring him.

"You think so?"

"I know so. They're beautiful. All of them. I can see why it's difficult for you to decide." Will told him, and Percy shuffled closer a tiny bit.

"I was…thinking of maybe getting him more than one. Because I can't decide." He muttered hesitantly, and Will started grinning.

"Oh, he'd love that. You know what a hopeless romantic he is. Hey, what if you make a whole bouquet of various flowers, and then have him figure out what they mean? Or! Even better! Write him a note, Percy!" He exclaimed, now seeming even more excited about the whole flower-idea than Percy had been, and Percy frowned at him in mild confusion.

"Why? He doesn't like reading."

"Percy, please, we all loved those notes you left Nico throughout December. You have no idea how many times I've fantasized about getting something cute like that, too — and no, you're not allowed to make fun of me for that. But, seriously, Jason loved that, even more than I did. Why do you think that I thought he was the admirer? He looked forward to those notes almost as much as Nico did." Will told him, and Percy felt betrayed.

When he had mentioned the idea of another Advent Calendar to Jason, Jason had been the one insisting it wasn't necessary, and that he would be happy with something simple like daily kisses — and now, Percy found out about this.
"But I wouldn't know what to write! I used up all of my creativity for that Advent Calendar, and back then, I couldn't just go and tell Nico all those things I wanted him to know. With Jason, he already knows!"

"Who cares? Gorgeous, you could write 'Percy Grace' in your messiest handwriting on a tiny piece of paper, and Jason would probably get it framed or put it in his photo album with roughly 300 hearts doodled around it, and grin like a maniac every time he saw it. Knowing him, you could draw two stickmen holding hands with 'Percy and Jason' scribbled over it, and he'd show it off to everyone and brag about how wonderful you are. That...sounds like a proud dad, to be honest, but you get what I mean." Will rambled, and Percy felt both flustered at the 'Percy Grace' part, as well as indignant about the assumption that he couldn't draw more than simple stickmen.

Of course, he *couldn't* draw anything better than stickmen, but it was still mean of Will to point it out like that.

"If anything, I'd write 'Percy Di Angelo Solace Jackace', just so you know." He sulked, and Will snorted out a laugh and let his head fall back against Percy's shoulder.

"Of course you would. So, what do you say?"

Percy contemplated his options, and how pointless all of this was, but also how badly he wanted to do it, and that it couldn't be all that bad if Will was encouraging it, too.

Then, he shrugged off his doubts and smiled at his boyfriend.

"Let's do it."

***

There was a loud knocking on the door, and a hiss.

"Hey, hey, is this the right door? Guys, shut up for a moment, I can't hear anything. Will? You in there? We wanna surprise you, but we don't wanna barge into the wrong room or catch you guys at something. Hello? Anybody there?" Ash's voice sounded much too loud for their intentions, and Will glanced towards Percy, who was sitting in his bed with raised eyebrows and an amused expression on his face.

"This is the right room." He called over, and there was the sound of several people sighing in relief.

Then, there was the sound of several people *arguing*, before there were several hisses from the staff that they should shut up because this was a hospital.

Then, silence.

Will shook his head with a smile, while Percy looked adorably puzzled.

"Did they change their minds?" He asked, but right as he finished, the door was thrown open and five demigods came tumbling in.

"Surprise!"

The medics outside hissed and groaned and slapped their foreheads, but Hannah merely kicked the door shut to block them out.

"Guys! Hey! What a surprise!" Percy greeted them easily, and Will was still shaking his head to himself, though he gave them a nod in greeting, anyways, while putting Nico's charts into his bedside table and straightened his blanket a little.

"I know, right? Reyna finally gave her okay. How are you doing? Gods, it's so good to see you alive, Percy. Your boyfriends might not have told you, but you looked like shit when you were half-dead and covered in blood." Ash told him cheerfully, and Will wasn't surprised that this was
the person Percy got along with best.

"Well, he was half-dead. I don't think anybody would look good in that situation." Hannah deadpanned, but Ash waved her remark off.

"You'd manage, princess."

Hannah opened her mouth to argue, then frowned and didn't, undoubtedly wondering whether this was meant as compliment or insult.

Will gathered from this that they still hadn't gotten past their issues.

"Gee, thanks so much for your brutal honesty, Ash. Much appreciated. Now, how are you five holding up? What are you doing? Where are you staying? Will didn't know anything." Percy said with a nod in Will's direction, and Will felt insulted, though it was the truth.

The only thing he had known about their team, was that Reyna was taking care of them and that they wanted to visit them badly.

Though he had also known they would visit them today, because Reyna had asked for his permission last night.

"Ha, tell me about it. The first few days, she wouldn't even tell us whether you guy were still alive. I'm pretty sure she doesn't trust us. Understandable, of course, but still." Ash rambled, and there seemed to be more to that story, though they only huffed and crossed their arms in front of their chest.

"You brought it upon yourself, Ash. I wouldn't trust somebody either after they tried to 'take a peek' at confidential material." Sara put in pointedly, and that explained it.

"I just wanted to know where they were! Plus, it was Andrew's idea." Ash sulked, and Andrew made a distressed sound in the back of his throat.

"Don't even try to frame me, Ash. I told you it was a bad idea!"

"No, you didn't! You told me to check the file if I really want to know where the guys are. How was I supposed to know Reyna has eyes on the back of her head?"

Will shared an amused look with Percy, who was grinning from ear to ear and seemed to vibrate with happiness – which was so much better than how he had been earlier, it already made their visit worth it.

Will had to admit he hadn't been sure whether to allow them here or not, but in the end, he had been forced to admit they had the right to see them, and it would be better for Percy, too.

It would have also been good for Jason, because Jason had worried about their team ever since the first day, but Jason wasn't back yet, so there was that.

Liam made his way past his arguing teammates and to Percy's bedside, a shy smile on his face and a small plant in his hands.

"We didn't know what to get you, because Ash said flowers are for lovers, and Hannah insisted that they are for dying people, but Sara still wanted to get you something. So…we settled on this. I hope you don't mind." The son of Hecate said hesitantly and placed the small blue pot on Percy's bedside table, while Percy looked ready to cry from surprise and joy.

"Thank you! You didn't have to get me anything, guys! Are those…stones? Not that I mind, they're pretty stones, and I guess that means I can't kill them, which is super considerate of you…yes, very pretty stones. Thank you so much, guys!"

Oh gods, Percy.

"It's a succulent, Percy." Andrew explained and shook his head with a disbelieving sigh.

"I knew that." Percy immediately claimed, though his eyes were full of question marks as he
looked towards Will with an expression he read as 'What the hell is a succulent, and is it going to kill me?'.

"It's a plant. Like a cactus." Ash said with a serious nod, and Will had a hunch this was all they knew about succulents.

Percy inspected the blue pot curiously, then checked the pot Sara was holding that was probably for Nico, right before she moved towards Will to undoubtedly put it on Nico's nightstand.

Will tensed as she neared the bed, protectiveness flaring up inside him, but she only glanced at Nico for a short moment, before her eyes found his, and she quickly retreated after that, clearly sensing she shouldn't linger just yet.

Nico was weakened, which included his immune system.

Will would not have him catch something from them right when he was beginning to improve.

Will scolded himself for tensing and for behaving so distant towards his fellow teammates, but he still stayed by Nico's side, while their team crowded around Percy's bed, and Andrew began explaining about succulents and how to take care of them.

"It came as such a surprise when we saw Jason today! I thought he's bound to stay with you guys, at least until Nico is up and running again." Sara explained, and Will and Percy both grimaced.

"Yeah, you were surprised. Imagine how I felt, trying to stab that Hydra before it got to eat me, just to have *Jason Grace* randomly joining the battle and saving me from certain death. Man, I still get the chills when I think of how Reyna yelled across the Fields of Mars for him to get back to her this instant. Think he got in trouble for saving our lives?" Ash asked thoughtfully, and Will tensed, though it was nothing compared to the utmost horror on Percy's face.

Since Jason had shown to be distracted too easily and turned out to be a preferred target, Reyna had assured Will just last night that she would try and keep him at the sidelines and with the strategists, rather than the frontlines, at least until he was back in top form.

So much for that.

"How about we talk about something else? Where are you staying? A hotel?" He asked hurriedly as he caught Percy's face going blank, worried what these news might do to him.

The last thing he needed was Percy attempting to run off and join the battle to help Jason out.

He was getting better with his exercises and could make his bathroom trips by himself by now (though Will had still kept him company in the shower this morning, while Jason had watched over Nico before leaving on his mighty quest of getting himself killed), but holding objects was still painful for him – and if he could barely hold a pen, Will would be damned to let him near a sword.

"Oh, you wish. Reyna had us in one of those in the beginning, where we all had to share one room together – but that was still better than the barracks we're staying in now. It's cramped, it's uncomfortable, and the sounds of battle outside really don't help with anything, either. You have no idea how nice it is to be back in New Rome for a short while." Andrew lamented, and pulled the chair towards himself right as Ash intended to sit down on it, which resulted in Ash uttering a startled sound and falling – closely followed by Sara's squeak as Ash tore her down with them in a faint attempt to regain their balance in time.

"Andrew!" Ash exclaimed from the ground, while Liam tripped all over himself to help Sara up as quickly as possible, and Will and Percy shared another telling look.

At least their team was the same as always.

"Oops. Didn't notice." Andrew replied in a dry voice, not sounding sorry in the slightest as he watched Ash getting themselves off the floor and giving him a punch to the shoulder, while Hannah stood next to Andrew's other side and had her arms crossed in front of her chest and a frown on her face, as if she wasn't sure how to react right now.
Yep, same as always.

"You two are such children." Sara huffed, but seemed fine otherwise, whereas Ash tried to reclaim the chair.

"At least you're okay. It's so good to see you guys again." Percy mused with a small smile, and Will guessed he was glad he had decided to give Reyna his okay, after all.

"You have no idea. We were worried out of our minds. When I say Reyna didn't want to tell us anything, I mean it. We must have asked her a hundred times how you guys were doing, and she was just dead silent. It was madness. Sara and I already dreaded you guys didn't make it." Ash explained, and Will felt a pang of guilt as he thought of how that must have felt, especially after they had already lost Rin.

"Well, I already told you, it was for security reasons. There still seems to be a spy-issue here, so she wanted to make sure not to give out any information to outsiders until their states had stabilized. I mean, seriously, next to us, Hazel and Frank, nobody but the medics know you guys are even here, much less which room. The others don't even know you got injured, in the first place." Andrew put in, and Will instinctively felt grateful for that, though it also made him wonder about the necessity of such secrecy, as well as the fact that Kyle would undoubtedly find a way to find out about this, anyways.

But he kept those thoughts to himself, and instead watched their team sitting down on Percy's bedside to chat some more, about the cohorts, the differences to Camp Half-Blood, the battles (much to Will's dismay), and the rumors they had heard from the other campers.

Will stayed with Nico, knowing full well that the team was waiting for his okay to approach his unconscious boyfriend, but Will wasn't sure he wanted to give that okay just yet.

It had already been difficult enough for him to allow other medics to help him, he wasn't sure he could deal with even more people touching his Nico, ogling him with those pitying eyes and thinking they could judge him and his progress.

Will grumbled to himself, but then caught Hannah looking towards Nico again with a concerned look on her face, and he knew they only meant well, he knew they cared, he knew they needed to reassure themselves that he was going to be fine just the same way Will still needed to reassure himself, too.

He still didn't like it.

Then again, these days, he didn't like many things.

He didn't like that Nico was still in a coma, for instance. Or that Percy was in pain the moment he tried to close his hand around anything. Or that Jason was fighting by himself, risking his life because of his annoyingly righteous character.

He also didn't like that they were at war, and that he just knew Kyle was somewhere out there plotting even worse things than this.

But those were things he couldn't change right now, only ponder at night when he finished taking care of Nico and tucked Percy in and waited for Jason to return so he could wrap himself around him and tell himself everything would be fine eventually.

"You should tell them about your plans for Jason's party, Percy." He suggested quietly when their team finished telling all they had to tell, and Percy promptly perked up again, a gleam appearing in his eyes that Will cherished every time he got to glimpse it.

"Thanks, sun-bug, I nearly forgot!"

Aww, he called him sun-bug.

Will couldn't help but smile, his heart thumping happily in his chest.

It felt like ages since Percy had last called him that.
He watched how Percy gesticulated wildly as he talked, telling their team about Jason's missed birthday, and how he intended to throw him a giant party, right when Nico would be awake again.

The team took it with varying degrees of surprise and enthusiasm, Ash naturally all for it, while Andrew began calculating the costs and factors such as guests and space, while repeatedly pointing out that there still were battles going on that had to be fought.

Hannah ultimately made him shut up by stepping on his foot and telling him he wouldn't be invited if he kept ruining the mood, much to Ash's delight.

Sara and Liam were more reserved about the whole ordeal, though they didn't seem opposed, much to Will's relief.

Percy was adamant about a party, and Will knew he enjoyed planning it out.

He didn't want that to be ruined by negative reactions from people he cared about, especially not right now, with Percy's random bouts of self-doubt and resignation.

Will knew he couldn't protect him from the world, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try.

"When will he wake up?" Andrew asked all of a sudden, and Percy, as well as the team, fell silent.

Will didn't have to look up to know they were looking at him, though he looked up, anyways. It was a question he had expected, though he knew his reply would be anything but satisfactory.

"When he's ready." He said simply, and Andrew seemed to sulk, while the others remained quiet for another moment, before returning their attention to Percy and urging him to resume talking about his plans for Jason.

The reminder that Nico wasn't awake yet seemed to put a damper on the conversation, but Will didn't know what to do to help that.

He had done all he could, and all there was left for him to do now was to keep giving Nico some of his energy, in the hopes it would keep the darkness inside him at bay and let him regain consciousness soon.

Physically speaking, Nico was okay now, all his injuries healed and the bruises gone from his body.

He still needed the oxygen mask, but it was already a lot better than before, and Will was confident he would be good without it once he was awake – whenever that might be.

Once he was awake, Will would be able to do more, starting with the normal rehab and ending with some more scans to make sure there was no permanent damage to Nico's brain due to the coma.

So far, though, he seemed alright – one might even think he was just asleep for a prolonged amount of time, like Sleeping Beauty.

(Just that Will's kiss couldn't magically wake him, he had already tried that.)

When Will looked up next, Hannah was on the other side of Nico's bed and looked from Nico's face to the monitor and back.

When she had moved, he had no idea, because the others were still talking, and next to the fact that Percy was looking at him now, rather than at them, everything was still the same.

Hannah made eye contact with him, the mute question of 'May I?' hanging in the air between them.

Will didn't like it.

Will gave a small nod and pulled away from Nico's side to give her a moment of privacy.
He tried not to regret it when suddenly, everybody was crowded around Nico's bed, while Percy kept his eyes on Will and seemed to try and gauge his reaction.

As if Will was going to do anything.

"He looks so weak." Andrew commented, and Will was tempted to throw the chair at him.

"He's in a coma, what do you expect? That he flexes his muscles? That he swings around a sword without looking? That he grunts in a manly fashion and declares war on-…"

"Okay, okay, I get it! Geez, calm your jets. All I meant to say is that he looks weaker than I hoped he would. But still a lot better than when he kept disappearing." Andrew interrupted him, and Will snapped his mouth shut, stepping further away from the team so he wouldn't be tempted to grab them and throw them out.

Instead, he made his way over to Percy, who automatically reached out for his hand and took it, which made Will calm down almost instantly due to the familiarity and gentleness of the touch.

He closed his eyes, allowing Percy to pull him closer a little as he tried to tune out the muttered conversation taking place at Nico's bed.

They were judging.

They had no right to judge.

Nico was doing so well already, compared to before.

Will knew he would wake up soon, his if now a when, and it had taken him so long to get Nico here, he wasn't going to let anybody ruin it now.

He wasn't going to let their judgment get to him, nor was he going to let it get to Nico.

Percy tugged on his arm, and Will peeked at him through one eye, humming in question.

His boyfriend patted the side of his bed with his free hand, and Will looked back at their teammates, all ogling Nico as if he was on display, though he knew they didn't mean it that way.

Then, he gave in and sat down on Percy's bedside to let him stroke over the back of his hand with his thumb, reassuring him in his own way.

"I don't like it." He whispered quietly, and Percy smiled in understanding.

"I know."

Will knew that, too.

He still didn't like it, though.

Will was glad when they left at long last.

***

"Will! Will, please, help!" Hazel yelled into the room as she tore open the door, ignoring the outcries and hisses from the medics around.

Percy woke up with a start, hand shooting out for his sword, though it wasn't there, and he hissed in pain a moment later, but Will couldn't rush to help him, because he was already at the door and with Hazel, cupping her face as she started breaking down and crying.

"What's wrong? Help with what? Hazel, calm down!" He urged her, trying to figure out what was happening based on her values alone, but she seemed to be perfectly alright, except for the fact that she was absolutely terrified.

A monster? No.
Injury.

Who? Jason? No, unlikely. Or was it?

No, not Jason, they would have brought him directly to Will.

Somebody close to Hazel, though.

Reyna?

No, unlikely, she had switched placed with Frank today and would be with the strategists, not the-

…

Oh no.

Frank.

Hazel was sobbing uncontrollably now, trying and failing to make herself understood, but Will only wiped her tears away and nodded hurriedly.

"Where is he? Get me to him." He said, and she looked so grateful it was heartbreaking.

"What's going on?" Percy called after him the moment she pulled on his hand to lead the way, and Will didn't know how to explain something he couldn't assess yet.

"Frank. Watch over Nico, Percy. I'll be back." He called over his shoulder, and Hazel sobbed again, pulling him after her with much more strength than one might have expected her to have.

They rounded the corner, then went down a flight of stairs, then turned another corner, and Will realized they were making straight for the ER, though that was reserved for only the worst cases ever since demigods had been tumbling into this place more and more thanks to the battles.

He swallowed, but tried not to assume – until Hazel threw a door open and he was met with the sight of six medics around one of the beds, sheets red, blood everywhere, and outcries of pain coming from the victim.

Frank.

Hazel stopped and had her hands over her mouth as she sobbed and looked at Will with silent pleas in her eyes, and Will was there in an instant, pushing past the medics (why were there so many, they would only get into each other's way!) to assess the damage.

He winced.

Yes, definitely Frank.

Frank, mid-transformation, with half of him still in the shape of what had probably been a bear, the other half human.

Part of his face was so bloody he couldn't tell whether all of it was damaged or whether it was just a very well-placed head wound that had caused so much blood, but what really got to Will was the wounds scattered all across Frank's body.

Also, the most prominent issue of all: He was missing an arm.

He heard the medics around him talk, arguing among themselves about how to proceed.

They didn't seem to be very experienced, but Will wasn't surprised, considering the number of wounded in this hospital, the ongoing battles, and the fact that the people here often had to struggle with insane shifts that also required enough breaks in order to not kill them.

In other words, this was probably the best they had right now.

"Make space. You, get me anesthesia, sterilizer and more gauges and bandages, now. You, the instruments. You two, help me keep him still. And you, where is his arm? I need it. Now, did you
"Give him anything already?" He asked sharply, pouring as much authority into his voice as possible, and they immediately did as they were told, rushing out of the room or forward to hold Frank down, who howled in pain and thrashed around, most of his words rendered incoherent thanks to half of his face still being morphed into that of an animal.

"He was brought here just moments ago, we didn't know what to give him. He might be allergic." One of the two said, and Will pursed his lips to bite back his remark, instead deciding to cut this short by grabbing Frank's intact arm.

Pain.

So much pain.

Will winced, but tried to focus on what else he could sense, though Frank's flailing didn't help one bit, and the fact that he was still mid-transformation only made things all the more complicated.

Where was the guy with the anesthesia?

Where were his needed supplies?

How was he supposed to do anything when there was nothing even mildly prepared?!

This was an ER, one would expect there to be all he needed, on hand.

Will pulled his hand back from Frank's arm and shook his head, trying to collect his thoughts, while Hazel still sobbed in the background.

"Hazel, leave. This is going to be very painful for him, and you don't want to see that." He ordered, and she shook her head wildly and cried even more, but when he shot her a warning glare, she left.

"Frank, can you hear me? I know this hurts, I know you're scared, but I need you to transform back. Can you do that for me?" He asked through clenched teeth as his fingers danced over his body, just to get thrown off repeatedly by the uneven patches of fur and bear.

He didn't know how to treat bears, only humans.

Frank didn't reply, instead screaming in agony, and Will pursed his lips and looked around the room for anything he could use until the others came back, wherever the hell they had gone.

So. Many. Cupboards.

Wait, something had to be inside those cupboards, right?

A moment later, he pulled open all the cupboard near the wall he could get to, and found nearly everything he needed, making him wonder whether those idiots had stormed off to find the storage room on the upper floor or something.

Under shock, people tended to do the strangest things.

Will shook his head and rushed back to Frank, setting to work with the IV and anesthesia.

"His good arm. I need his vein." He said without looking, trying to block out anything that wasn't his current task at hand.

"Still in bear form!" The girl exclaimed as she clung to Frank's arm, even though he still flailed around with it – and her – without any signs of restraint.

Will cursed whatever thing or being that had attacked him and wished it the most gruesome death possible.

"Do you have any inhalational anesthesia?" He asked, fed up already with this place and the people, though he knew they weren't at fault, and he knew from that one tour he had gotten ages ago that they did have everything, they had so much more then he had at Camp Half-Blood, but, for the love of all the gods, why did Romans have to be so organized and sorted and horrible?!
How was he supposed to know in which of those ten thousand cupboards and rooms was the stuff he so desperately needed right now?!

The two slackened their grips on Frank in order to look around, and Frank nearly leaped off the bed, but Will grabbed him by the front of his torn shirt just in time and shoved him back down.

Frank screamed in pain again, but, by some miracle, stilled for a short moment.

Will reacted instinctively and jumped onto the bed, grabbing hold of his intact half-bear arm to keep him down, while his other hand disappeared in his medic pouch to pull out the small square box with paralysis powder he had gotten as a gift from Coach Hedge ages ago.

Temptation was great to sniff at it to test whether it was still any good as he opened the box hurriedly, but he had to trust his instincts, and his instincts said he had no time to waste.

Will held the box right under Frank's bloody half-bear-half-human nose, and Frank inhaled sharply at the undoubtedly awful smell that had to hit him, especially with heightened senses.

Under normal circumstances, this would have never worked.

Under normal circumstances, he would have never dared to treat any patient this way.

Under normal circumstances, Frank could have also gotten himself killed if he had continued thrashing around like this and losing even more blood.

Frank stilled, his body tensing and slacking but not thrashing anymore, and his eyes stared up at him full of fear and pain.

He stared back, trying to mutely tell him he was sorry.

"You, check where the other guys went. You, pass me the tools I need, that will save us time." He told the two kids that stared at him with wide eyes as he climbed off Frank and the bed, pocketing his box once more and moving to his discarded IV to resume his work.

They stared at him a moment longer, but then, both nodded and rushed to comply, one storming from the room, the other one rushing forward to help him, holding open the IV bag pouch for him so he could pour part of the IV solution into it until there were no air bubbles left inside the tube.

It took nearly two minutes to get everything ready to go, including finding Frank's vein on his mostly-bear arm, and then another long, long moment before the anesthetic took effect, and he watched with an apologetic look as Frank struggled, before his eyes rolled into the back of his head and his body sagged together like a ragdoll.

Then, he took a deep breath and stepped closer to his now unconscious patient, and set to work, assessing the extent of his injuries and beginning to categorize them by severity and urgency.

The worst damage was at his arm, but until he had the rest of it on hand, he couldn't mend it, only stop the bleeding and keep it still.

The damage to his face was luckily minor, considering the amount of blood, but if Will didn't get to it soon, it would definitely scar, and Frank might lose part of his vision in his left eye.

There was a head wound as Will had expected, but not very deep, so that was already reassuring, in a way.

Frank also had a gash at his chest, which was definitely one of the more severe injuries and would need attending before others, to make sure there wouldn't be too much loss of blood, and to keep his heart and lungs functioning as best they could, given the circumstances.

The rest of his body was littered in cuts, bites and bruises, and his right leg had been broken several times at different spots, indicating a rather harsh impact.

Taking the burns into account, Will was going to make a wild guess and say there had been an explosion, and Frank in the middle of it.
Will kept his breathing forcefully calm and regular, knowing he had to keep a cool head if he wanted to save his life, though images of Leah, Rin, and all the others he had failed in the past, kept popping up whenever he closed his eyes to blink, and he could only hope Frank wouldn't join the seemingly endless list.

Will attended his arm, first, cleaning it up and working on stopping the bleeding, though he didn't attempt to stitch it up in any way, still hoping for the rest of his arm, though he knew that, if the guy didn't show up soon, he would be forced to make do with what he had, and Frank would be one arm short.

The girl who had stayed behind was helpful, and Will was glad for her quick reflexes and understanding when he asked for the various tools he needed as he moved on from his arm to his chest wound.

Even so Will found himself wishing he had more than two sets of hands so he could work on several things simultaneously.

On top of everything else, there was internal bleeding he hadn't yet managed to trace back to its source, though he was almost positive it was in his lower abdomen area.

He wouldn't be able to heal that from the outside, which meant he would have to resort to his own powers.

Will was a little reluctant to use his Greek powers on a Roman demigod, though he told himself there would be no difference.

His father wouldn't help him here due to the Greek/Roman difference, most likely (also, because he had completely stopped responding to his kids and prayers altogether, by now, so Will wasn't even sure the guy was alive anymore), but Will's own powers should technically just be a form of healing just like the rest.

He still didn't want to jump into action right away, though, knowing that, if he rushed things now, he wouldn't be aware enough to take care of the rest of Frank's injuries.

Back when he had healed Jason, it had been so urgent and with no other solution on hand, he had been forced to do all the healing with his powers.

Now, he had the ability to perform the necessary surgeries by hand and do the rest with his powers, which would be less intrusive for Frank and would also allow Will to keep some of his energy, in case there were more cases such as Frank that might need his help after this.

His hands began glowing as he focused on stitching up the wound at his chest, glad it was 'just' a puncture wound rather than a sucking chest wound, which would have most likely resulted in Frank's death by now.

It was still bad though, and all Will could do was keep going and thank the girl when she kept cleaning the skin around the wound to allow him to see properly.

He poured more of his energy into Frank, trying to stabilize him and checking that the infusion and anesthetic was dosed correctly. At the same time, Will was also trying to find the source of internal bleeding, even as he moved up Frank's body to his head, taking care of that injury, next.

As expected, it wasn't very deep, and had luckily not fractured his skull, but he still worried about a possible concussion.

He cleaned up the wound as best as he could as the girl stayed at the chest wound and checked back on the arm, now becoming more active than passing him the tools, though he could only hope she would stay focused enough to keep doing that, else it would slow him down.

Will noticed that he kept talking, mostly to himself, about Frank's injury, the extent of it, possible ways of healing it, and what he ultimately decided on.

He considered stopping, but it helped him focus, and the girl was listening intently and nodding along, so he continued.
They worked alongside each other well, and he cleaned up Frank's face next to stitch it up and heal it, focused on keeping the scaring to a minimum and securing Frank's eyesight.

Frank didn't make this very easy as he began jolting away repeatedly, but when Will checked again for the dosage, it seemed high enough to keep him knocked out, and he didn't want to risk going higher in case of an overdose, which would be lethal.

The girl helped him keep Frank still as he worked, stitching along the bridge of his nose and upwards across his forehead, giving him a rather Frankenstein look, but Will assured both Frank and himself that he would heal him later so it wouldn't stay that way.

First, he had to make sure the rest of him was okay, though.

His life was more important than a handsome face, after all.

The girl followed him as he battled the paths of destruction all across Frank's body, then he took his time inspecting Frank's twisted and battered leg, before he announced seven separate fractures, which had the girl looking sick.

In the past, Will had dealt with many broken bones, but the most fractures he had encountered had been four.

It would be hell to get this mended correctly.

"Compound fractures, damaged muscles. We'll have to set them, and see whether the muscles can be reattached properly."

"Wouldn't it be smarter just to amputate the leg?" The girl asked doubtfully, and Will looked up at her in confusion.

Why would he amputate a perfectly fine leg before even trying to fix it?

Sure, it would be difficult, and they would have to be certain everything was to a 100% set correctly before putting his leg into a cast, but it wasn't impossible.

"We'll do that if there's no other alternative." He told her, then returned to his work of trying to get Frank out of his torn pants.

How come he was still half-bear, yet he still had his clothes? It was a mystery to Will how their powers worked, sometimes.

Then again, he wouldn't want to run around naked after transforming back into a human, either, especially not in the middle of the battlefield, so he guessed he was glad Frank's powers worked the way they did.

Though he didn't appreciate the struggle his pants put up right now, and Will lost his patience a moment later and cut them off, deeming the fixing of his leg more important than the possibility that he was ruining Frank's favorite pair of pants or the like.

Again, his life was more important than trivialities like that.

He cut the fabric off right above his thigh, but then moved higher and cut the entire thing apart to check his hip, not surprised in the slightest that the first fracture started at the upper part of the femur.

This was where he had to start, then make his way down, he guessed.

Will took a deep breath, then set to work, and the girl helped him as best as she could.

She was a good assistant, and he was confident she would become a good doctor once she managed to gain more experience.

He set the bone, then checked for additional damage to Frank's hip, but was glad there was none. There was also no spinal damage, and he finally managed to rein in the internal bleeding, coming from a tear in the liver he hadn't been able to detect up until now. He tried his best to mend it.
properly, while also concentrating on the next fracture in Frank's leg.

This one was an open fracture, and far from pretty. The bone was broken in two places, and Will held the disconnected piece in place with his hand as he reached the wound.

The girl looked sick, but stayed with him and carried out his orders with still hands and impressive focus.

The femur was nothing compared to Frank's shattered kneecap.

Will told her as much, and she looked torn between wanting to laugh at his strange attempt at positivity, and wanting to cry as she checked Frank's knee.

They fixed everything to the best of his abilities, then moved lower, just to find the severed muscle that was going to be Will's main problem, along with his twisted and out of place leg.

If he didn't get that fixed correctly, Frank's body would attempt to do the deed, which would be all good and well, but experience showed that the muscles tended not to work as efficiently and smoothly after such injuries, often resulting in pain when used too much or in too straining ways.

For a demigod, that could very likely mean death.

To preserve the flexibility and strength of his leg, Will would have to get the scar tissue aligned and integrated with the muscle fibers correctly.

"Or, we could amputate it." The girl suggested again, and Will guessed she liked amputation.

He, however, did not.

"I still need that arm. If they can't get me the arm by the time I'm done with the leg, we'll have to close the wound at his arm, and he'll be one arm short already. Are you sure you want Frank to lose a leg, too? We're in the middle of war, there's no way he will have enough time to adapt to the change quickly enough to join the battle again anytime soon, as it is." He pointed out as he set to work on first fixing Frank's leg, first turning it back into its original position, then fixing the muscle, grimacing throughout the procedure.

Somewhere in the middle of his work, the door banged open and the two medics came rushing in with medical supplies he didn't need anymore, and Will was glad that he had found everything he had needed, because, at this rate, Frank would have been long dead.

He didn't tell them that, though, instead thanking them and sending them back out to get him the other demigod with the arm, though he mostly wanted them gone to keep the room as silent as possible.

The girl busied herself setting up the machinery to get a good reading on Frank's values, even though Will hadn't asked her to.

He didn't really care, knowing from the physical contact that Frank was still doing well enough, given the situation.

Will finished up as best as he could, then moved to the rest of the fractures in Frank's calf and ankle, but they were easy to deal with in comparison to what they had just handled.

He took a step back to assess his work, and once more noticed that Frank reminded him a lot of Frankenstein's monster right about now, with all his stitched-up skin and bruises and discoloring.

He was also still part bear, but at this point, Will didn't care anymore, and when he set out to patch up all smaller injuries, he simply shaved off the fur that got into his way.

If Frank woke up later to find half his chest hair shaved off, Will would simply tell him that had been the girl's doing.

Will must have said that out aloud, because the girl huffed indignantly, though she also told him her name – even if he forgot it a moment later again, due to a cut at Frank's side that made no sense.
No claw or fang would make such a clean wound...?

Will frowned and checked for poisoning again, but found none, and the wound wasn't deep enough to really worry him, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth.

That was no monster wound, that was from a blade.

Either a bigger dagger, or a thin sword, but a blade, all the same.

Which meant there must have either been an accident involving a fellow camper – or Frank had been deliberately attacked by a demigod, which meant either there were demigods joining the opposite frontlines now, or Frank had met the traitor in their ranks.

Will's mind worked frantically as he tried to think it all through, trying to put himself into Kyle's mindset just for a moment to see any possible reasoning behind that, but he came up blank.

It wouldn't make sense.

The camp was already busy enough as it was, so if distraction was what Kyle was aiming for, he already had it.

The spy was as undetected as ever, so having it take up arms against fellow campers and possibly outing itself would be more than a little stupid.

Unless Kyle was the one taking up arms and possessing campers in order to do more damage?

But wouldn't that put a strain on him, too? How far did those powers of his go?

Will remembered that moment in New Rome, when he had first heard Kyle say his name in a voice that hadn't been Kyle's, and he wondered how he had done that, how he had taken control of somebody without that somebody putting up a fight like Percy, Jason and Nico had.

But then, he was forced to let go of those thoughts in order to focus on the situation at hand.

One way or another, Frank was alive and would wake up, so he could tell them who or what had attacked him, unless he suffered from amnesia due to his very possible concussion, the head wound, and/or the anesthetic, since everybody reacted differently to that.

However, the chance he would be able to tell them what he did know was very high, which also meant that whoever had attacked him might not wish to take that risk, and thus, Will deemed Frank's life in danger and promptly told the girl to alert Reyna.

Better safe than sorry.

"Also, bring me that freaking arm! How difficult can it be? Didn't he come with it? Who would just leave an arm laying around somewhere?" He called after her, but she didn't reply, and gods, were Romans weird.

He had reattached so many limbs in his life, it should probably be disconcerting, but what he found disconcerting was this simple 'Oh well, guess he doesn't need that arm anymore if he loses it'-logic these people here seemed to have.

Will sighed and shook his hair out of his face, then looked back at Frank.

"Sorry, buddy. I really hope they'll find that arm. If not, I hope you're not going to be too upset with me." He said quietly, then proceeded in cleaning him up as best as he could and cutting him out of the rest of his clothes, the hospital gown at the ready next to him. Then he took a moment to reassess his work.

He really looked like Frankenstein's monster – or Sally from The Nightmare before Christmas.

Should he attempt to heal all of that now?

Will wasn't sure, and with the rather prominent risk of more attacks on Frank during his recovery,
he *definitely* didn't want power himself out too quickly.

Not when Nico was still in a coma, as well.

That thought made his insides churn, but he trusted Percy to keep him safe for the time of his absence.

He would also have to trust his own judgment regarding Frank's injuries.

There was a timid knock on the door, and Will draped the hospital gown over Frank's body to maintain his privacy.

"Yes?" He called, wondering why the medics didn't simply come barging in like before.

His question was answered when the door opened slowly and he felt Hazel's presence, though he wasn't sure since when he could feel presences that way, especially from so far away.

"Can I…help? Please, I can't wait outside any longer. Is he going to be okay?" She asked, and he was glad she had stopped crying, though she seemed more of a wreck than he had ever witnessed before.

He contemplated his options for a moment.

Generally speaking, he disliked having friends/family members around a patient when he wasn't yet finished, especially in a case such as this, because it usually didn't do any of them any good, leading to immense fear, nightmares, and often trauma for the friend/family member, discomfort for the patient once they were awake, and a nuisance to Will because nobody ever listened to him when he said to stay away or not touch something.

However, on a personal level, he could understand Hazel and her wish to be close to Frank, and he knew she had seen plenty of injuries in her life, already – not to mention that she had already seen the extent of Frank's injuries earlier, and he technically was better, now, with less blood covering him from head to toe and all the gashes stitched up.

Plus, since he had sent the girl out, he didn't have anybody else to help him out anymore.

"Alright, but I need you to stay calm and focused. If I feel like you're too unstable, you'll have to go. Understood?" He asked her, and she hurriedly nodded and came over, sucking in a sharp breath as she took in the appearance of her unconscious boyfriend.

Will watched her intently for a moment, but she didn't start crying again, and even if her hands shook as she started moving around the gauges and bandages on his medical table, she seemed capable of lending him a hand for a bit.

"I'm still waiting for his arm. If they don't come back with it, I'll be forced to sew the wound shut completely. Do you have any idea whether there are prosthetics in this place?" He asked, because that was his only other idea, even if he didn't know how this would work with Frank's transformations.

Chances were, the entire thing would malfunction and break off the moment he transformed, leading to only more pain and constant hospital visits.

In other words, he desperately wanted that arm.

"I don't know where it is. Dakota and Naomi were the ones who got him off the battlefield, I only helped getting him here as soon as possible. If they're looking for it, it's probably still somewhere on the Fields of Mars. I don't know about prosthetics. I've never seen one." She said with a shaky voice, and his hopes sank.

There was no way those medics would run out onto the battlefield to look for Frank's arm.

If anything, they would run to whoever was currently in charge, and try to get them to send somebody to look for it, instead, which could take forever.

Will didn't have forever.
However, using a prosthetic as a placeholder was unlikely, too, especially with the difficulties of getting it attached, and Will not being familiar with this hospital's models, or whether they had any, in the first place.

Which only left the option of sealing the wound.

He took a deep breath, then shifted the gown to put his hands over Frank's chest wound, beginning to heal it carefully, even though he knew he was just trying to buy time right now.

"Did they say what attacked him?" He asked, hoping for some insight to what had happened, though he deliberately used 'what' rather than 'who', just in case he was wrong with his assumption.

"No. Naomi said something about an explosion. I don't know any more than that." Hazel told him, and he gave a small nod, his eyes fixed on the ugly line of stitched-up skin that he was currently trying to mend.

"Does he often have issues with his transformations like this? I mean, does he get stuck mid-transformation a lot?" Will asked next, because it seemed strange to him that Frank hadn't turned back into a complete human after losing consciousness.

He had never asked, but this indicated that Frank also changed shape subconsciously and remained in said shape for a prolonged amount of time.

While it wasn't of importance to the current situation, Will couldn't help but wonder whether that meant he changed in his sleep, as well, because that could pose problems during his recovery process.

It would be counterproductive to have Frank suddenly turn into a limbless snake when his leg was meant to be in a cast, after all.

Though the fact he was part-bear also made possible bandaging more difficult in case he suddenly turned back into a complete human.

"No. This is the first time I've seen him like this. I'm sure he can transform back once he's awake, though." Hazel said hesitantly, her eyes hushing over Frank's patched-up face, before hushing back to Will.

"Are there any other ways to induce such a transformation? It will be very painful to him in his current state, and I'm not sure I can ask him to do that." He pointed out, but Hazel shook her head.

"He changes into a pug a lot when he's asleep, but as far as I know, he can only change back once he's awake and conscious."

A pug, huh?

Well, then Will was glad Frank was part-bear at the moment, not part-pug.

He continued merging skin and trying to fix the discoloring and bruises, but at long last, he returned to Frank's arm.

He had waited.

If he waited any longer, it would only make everything worse.

Will made eye-contact with Hazel, and she had tears in her eyes again, but she gave him a small nod, anyways.

"He's strong." Will reassured her, and she nodded again, wiping away her tears before they could roll down her cheeks.

It wasn't the end of the world, but it would certainly be a change for Frank.

However, he was confident Frank would manage.
With those thoughts in mind, he stepped closer to Frank to get started, Hazel right beside him.

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It took longer than expected until Will finished up everything he felt capable of doing for Frank, including putting his leg into a cast and mending the skin on his face to leave nothing but a faint hint of scarring that would hopefully heal up in time (or until Will possessed more energy to take care of it at a later point).

Hazel remained with him, as did the girl that returned to inform him they couldn't find the arm, and that it had most likely gotten lost in the explosion.

Due to the burns being on the other side, he highly doubted that, but left her in her belief and focused on his work, until, at long last, he was finished, and Reyna was with him to discuss what to do next as they moved Frank from the ER to the next floor, close to the room Percy and Nico were in, to make sure Will could check on him regularly the next few hours and monitor his progress, even though he had briefed the girl on what to do, and he was confident everything should work out in their favor.

Unless there was an attack on Frank, of course.

Will was reluctant to share his conclusion with Reyna, but once he left Hazel and the girl behind with Frank and had Reyna to himself outside, he did end up telling her about the blade wound, and about the very possible chance of a demigod behind the attack.

She took the news well, not even blinking twice as she asked whether he was certain, though he could feel her fear at that revelation, indicating that there weren't yet any demigods on the opposite frontlines.

It reminded Will of the two younger demigods they had picked up, and what Celine had told him about Kyle killing her family, which indicated he was recruiting.

He told Reyna about that, just in case she didn't already know.

She did, but she let him speak, anyways, while she seemed to think things through and come up with a solution.

"I'll tell them he is comatose. Telling the Camp that he is dead wouldn't do anybody any good and only result in more disputes when I refuse to announce a new praetor, but if it was known he was healing, that might attract unwanted attention. Comatose means out for an uncertain amount of time, which might lead whoever it was behind the attack to keep their focus on other things than taking him out." She mused, and Will agreed, though it was still risky.

It also made him worried for Jason.

Frank was a great fighter.

If they could get to Frank like this, they might also succeed in bringing Jason down, especially since he wasn't in his best shape at the moment, to begin with.

However, he knew he had to trust in him, even if he was still scared.

"If there is a demigod attacking fellow campers, though, we need to take them out. If they managed to get to Frank, that means they have to be in our closer circle of trusted ones, else Frank wouldn't have been close enough to be attacked." She said quietly, and Will knew how much this had to bother her.

"Did you try the planting I've talked about?" He asked tentatively, and she nodded.

"We have, but the thefts and rumors have stopped shortly after your group left the Camp, and I believe it matches with the appearance of Kyle at your Camp, indicating he was behind it. Or it's somebody from your group." She said and studied his face intently, and Will met her gaze with a cold one of his own.
Oh, she wouldn't dare to accuse his team.

"Who did you have in mind? Please take into consideration that I trust our team with my life, and with the lives of my boyfriends. I've already told you that Kyle can possess people to do their bidding, he has done so before. Chances are much higher that he has somebody inside your ranks, or that he possesses somebody from inside your ranks. Keep the team out of it."

"Ash has attempted to gain access to confidential material. On more than one occasion." Reyna pointed out, and Will made a face.

"Ash has proven themselves trustworthy on more than one occasion, too. They were worried and wanted to find out what's going on. Same as all of us try to. Just that they thought they might find out more by reading files they shouldn't have touched. I apologize for their behavior, but I stand by my word." He defended his teammate, and Reyna studied his gaze with a searching one of her own.

"Very well. I'll take your word for it. However, know that I'm keeping a watch on your group for the time being, not only to supervise their actions, but also for their protection."

Will shrugged.

"Fine by me. Jason has chosen them for a reason, and I've come to trust them. You won't find anything on them, and I'm glad for the extra protection. Especially when there might be an enemy demigod on the loose out there." He said, and she nodded.

He heard a faint shuffling, and turned his head towards the door of their room with a frown.

Reyna caught his look and shifted her focus, as well, her eyes searching his in question on how she should react, and whether this was a threat.

Will shook his head, identifying the limping as Percy, which meant he was either going to or coming from the bathroom.

Or, he was listening in on their conversation.

He heard the bathroom door close, and relaxed again.

Okay, no more talking about enemy demigods on the loose.

In the end, Percy would hear and see it as a reason to rush his recovery and jump into battle to help Jason.

"Will?" Reyna asked when he moved to open the door and return to his guys, and Will looked back at her in question.

"Thank you. You saved Frank's life." She said quietly, and he shrugged.

Frank was a friend.

Will had already started helping out the medics around here due to the sudden shortage of capable staff thanks to the battles, so it wasn't like he would have simply let anybody die.

He considered telling her that, or telling her she should look out for Jason, in return.

But, in the end, he said neither.

"It was the least I could do." He replied, instead, and Reyna searched his gaze again, before inclining her head and bidding him goodbye to return to Hazel and the girl that would supervise his progress for the next few hours.

Will watched her go, then opened the door right as Percy left the bathroom, though he promptly changed course to wrap his arms around Will and pull him close.

"How did it go? Is he alright? What happened? Nico is fine, but you have no idea how worried I was! Will he be okay? Are there others? Is Jason okay?" He bombarded him with questions, and
there was so much fear and dread inside him that it made it difficult for Will to breathe, and the bone-crushing hug wasn't helping, either.

"Percy, he'll be fine. He had a few injuries, and he'll need a hand when he wakes up, but otherwise, he'll be okay. Jason should be okay. I don't know of any more casualties or injured."
He explained hurriedly, and, while Percy sighed in relief, he was still scared, and still didn't let go of Will.

"Did you heal him? With your powers? Do you need to lie down? Are you very exhausted? Want me to get you something to eat? There's blueberry juice on my stand, you can have it. I promise I can walk without falling, I can get you something." His boyfriend babbled, but Will shook his head and hugged him back to soothe his worries.

"I'm okay, Percy. I didn't use too much of my own powers because I didn't want to wear myself out, so I'll be fine. We did a few normal surgeries, and he is all patched up now. I'm not hungry, and you're not supposed to be drinking blueberry juice." He pointed out, and his boyfriend pulled back with a grimace.

"Don't confiscate my blueberry juice. Jason went through such lengths to smuggle it to me."
Will gave his boyfriend a long, telling look.

"Gorgeous, you're not supposed to tell me that. I told you two before, anything I know of will be confiscated. Now, I'll go wash my hands in the bathroom. When I'm back, I'll confiscate that blueberry juice." He explained to his boyfriend, and turned towards the bathroom.

Of course, he had known about the glass of blueberry juice, same as he knew of the two bottles hidden beneath Percy's bed, but since nobody had deliberately pointed either out to him, he had elected to ignore it.

He would be damned to take away Percy's little joys in life, after all.

Though he was still against sugared or carbonated things for the time being, until Percy was back on his feet properly.

"Will you drink it?" Percy asked skeptically, and Will shook his head.
He didn't feel like juice. Water would be better right now.

"Then I'm not giving you a chance to pour it away!" Percy exclaimed and rushed off towards his bed, and Will smiled to himself and went to wash his hands, taking extra long to give Percy enough time to drink.

When he came back out of the bathroom, his boyfriend was sitting in his hospital bed, smiling innocently at him, and the glass that had previously held the blueberry juice was empty.

"And I bet you're so proud of yourself now." Will commented dryly, and his boyfriend's grin widened as he let himself fall sideways onto his bed.

"Yeah, pretty much."

Good.

Will went to check on Nico, but there was no change, so he moved over to Percy's side to give him a kiss on the forehead, his mind still mostly with Frank and the blade wound and the battles and Jason.

All he could do was trust Reyna, so that was what he was going to do.

Percy tugged on his sleeve, so Will sat down beside him and stroked through his hair as Percy shifted and kissed his lower back through the clothing.

"I'm so glad Frank will be okay." He said quietly, and Will smiled.

Yeah, he too.
Now, he only hoped Jason and the others would be okay, as well.

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"Hey, Will?" Percy asked quietly as he gazed down at his hands, unable to believe he was seriously going to ask this.

Only five hours ago, Will had disappeared to save Frank's life, and now, Percy was seriously going to ask this?

"Yes?" Will replied from his spot next to Percy's bed, his book immediately snapping shut so he could give him his full attention.

Percy swallowed, then shifted.

Then, he told himself this was far from the worst thing he had ever asked.

What was the worst that could happen?

Oh, right, Will could decline, and Percy would have to be mortified until the end of time.

Nah, it would be okay.

Again, it was far from the worst thing he had ever asked, right?

"Can we...uhm...can we make out? Just a little bit?"

Okay, he took that back.

This had to be the worst thing he had ever asked.

The timing was off, Will clearly wasn't thinking sexual in the slightest, he had only just saved Frank, which must have involved so much blood, he was certain, plus, Nico was still in a coma right next to them, the beeping wasn't exactly making for a romantic setting, either...

Maybe Percy should have simply asked for a kiss, and hoped to woo Will like that.

Too late for that now.

But, come on, it had been so long!

He just...he just wanted to...well...to feel again...feel those touches again...the intensity...the heat...everything...

Will blinked, seemingly taken aback by the question, and Percy already felt his face warming, though he also thought he saw Will licking his lips, which had to be a good sign, right?

"I...erm...sure? If you're sure? Do you have anything specific in mind?" He asked, but Percy was too relieved he had actually said yes to really register the rest of his sentence. He let out the breath he had been holding in a rush, laughing awkwardly, before biting his lip.

"Really? Ah, no, nothing specific. Just...it's been a while, I guess?" He muttered awkwardly, and, gods, considering all the things they had done in the past, this should be the last thing to make him blush – yet he did, and he knew Will had to notice.

Will got off his chair and was with him in less than a second, leaning over him with a quiet hum.

If...if Percy didn't know better, he'd say it had been a while for Will, too.

He'd also say Will wasn't opposed to this, in the slightest, which was a really great thought to have.

"What would you like to do?" Will asked. His voice had dropped to a near-purr that had Percy's skin tingling.
"Just…kiss, for starters? Kissing sounds nice." He replied weakly, unable to comprehend that this was actually happening.

Sure, he had just asked for it, but he hadn't really thought Will would go along with it.

Not with everything being the way it was, and with everything that had happened today.

But Will was in his bed now, straddling his lap, with his hands moving up to cup Percy's face.

Percy swallowed thickly, his heart beating in his throat.

Then, Will was leaning down to press their lips together, and Percy rushed to meet him, which would have probably made their heads crash together if it wasn't for Will's hold on his face, stilling him at the last moment.

Percy made a small sound in the back of his throat, though he wasn't sure whether he meant it to be an 'I'm sorry' or a 'Hurry up'.

But then, their lips finally met, and Percy was in heaven, pushing up against Will and somehow working his arms around him as a happy sigh escaped him, everything inside him feeling weightless and great.

Will smiled into the kiss, and now Percy knew what Jason had complained about the last time they had kissed, because, as nice as smiling was, it definitely got in the way of kissing.

Percy pinched his side to get him to stop, but that only led to Will pulling away momentarily to huff out a small laugh. Then he was back, lips pressing clumsily together and fingers moving from Percy's face to his hair, stroking through it and pulling him closer.

Percy let his own hands move over Will's back, relishing in the warmth and sneaking beneath his shirt to get to his skin, and he felt Will shivering in response, though he didn't stop him.

Will licked over his bottom lip, and Percy was melting in his arms.

He was pretty sure he mewled somewhere in the middle of their frantic kissing, but Will didn't laugh anymore. Instead, Will was pushing against him, kissing him and uttering pleased little sounds until Percy was pressed into the mattress with his legs wrapped around his boyfriend and his hands in his hair.

Will laid claim to Percy's his skin, using lips and teeth along Percy's neck and collarbones, driving him crazy in a matter of what felt like seconds.

This was better than Percy could have dared to hope for.

"How far do you want to take this?" Will breathed against his lips as he moved to kiss him again.

Without waiting for an answer, Will's hands moved under Percy's shirt (which was actually Jason's) to graze over his skin with his fingernails, making Percy swallow and arch his back into the touch helplessly.

It had been way too long.

He was reacting way too strongly to such simple things, as if he had never felt the touch before, and while it was amazing and felt terrific, it also made him feel oddly vulnerable and flustered.

Will, however, didn't seem to mind in the slightest, and didn't make fun of him for it.

"How far are you willing to go?" Percy replied weakly, because, wow, this bit of making out would already be enough to make him blow, but he would also love to take it further.

But then again, just the thought of Will making love to him right now already seemed like too much, so he wasn't sure he could even make it until then.

"How far do you think you can go?" Will breathed and pinched his nipple, and Percy had to bite his lip not to moan out loud, once more arching into the touch needily.
"While I'd love to do...so much more...I think...I'm not gonna last very long." Percy admitted in huffs, his face burning as he realized this always seemed to happen with him.

First with Nico in the shower, now with Will.

Next, he would fall apart beneath Jason in a matter of seconds.

Oh, the shame.

"Speak for yourself, I'm two touches away, myself. Just enjoy yourself, Percy." Will breathed into his ear with the hint of a laugh, then kissed down his neck again, while his hands pushed his shirt up and then moved down to his sweatpants.

Percy's heart seemed ready to explode in his chest.

Then, Will's lips closed around his nipple, and he palmed Percy through his pants.

Percy made a feeble sound in an attempt to keep himself together just a little while longer.

Two seconds later, he whimpered and came, and this had to be a new record.

Not even Nico had blown this quickly when the four of them had just gotten together and started figuring things out.

Such thoughts and more zigzagged through his mind while his body first tensed, then slumped back into the mattress, and everything tingled and felt amazing, especially with Will still kissing over his chest and nipping at his collarbone, though at the same time, Percy wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole, and his boxer shorts felt awfully sticky.

There he had asked for some making out, and then he blew before they even got to see each other naked.

"That was quicker than I had hoped." Percy grumbled in shame, but Will merely grinned up at him and had the audacity to wink.

"In your defense, it has been quite a while." His boyfriend pointed out cheekily, then moved up his body to press their lips together in a soft, gentle kiss.

Percy decided on a whim that this was outrageous, and reacted accordingly by bringing his knee up and rubbing it against Will's crotch.

The reaction was as instant as it was breathtaking, and Percy was more than pleased as Will's smile slid off his face, together with any hint of composure, before his boyfriend was the one clinging to him and letting out a rather unfiltered and absolutely delightful sound of pleasure and bliss.

Yep, this was exactly what Percy had been craving.

"You know, I don't think you're any better, actually." He teased, before biting his lip and moving his leg to lure some more sounds out of his boyfriend.

It worked, though his next moans were strangled and he brought his hand up a moment later to muffle the sounds, altogether, much to Percy's dismay.

Then again, they were in a hospital.

"Didn't Jason take care of you?" He asked, because, wow, Will was trembling like a leaf now, and he knew his boyfriend well enough to know that he usually didn't react this intensely to this sort of thing.

Nico, yes, and with the right foreplay, Jason (read: that one time Nico attempted to do a lap dance, and gods had it been a success), but not Will.

"We were...a little preoccupied...keeping you alive..." Will wheezed, then shuddered and moaned softly again.
Percy blinked.

Wait, really?

They hadn't…? At all?

No wonder Will was so tense, then.

This explained everything – at least in Percy's post-orgasmic mind.

He shook his head with a huff and pulled Will closer, promptly deciding that, if he ended up coming that quickly, Will would have to, as well.

With his new goal in mind, he tilted his head and nipped at Will's ear, and his boyfriend jolted in his arms, Will's arms shooting out to wrap around him (one of which smacked him rather harshly against the shoulder in the process, though by accident), and Will let out a low, barely muffled howl, which Percy took as confirmation of a job well done.

He held him and stroked over his back as he waited for him to catch his bearings again, feeling immensely proud and flattered for getting to turn Will into such a mess.

"I can't believe that…after all this time with you…we still are like this…"

Aww, a haiku, just for him.

(Yes, his wonderful boyfriends had pointed this out to him, and Percy had been a fool for not noticing, himself.)

If there was one thing he loved about his life, it was moments such as these.

"You know, I'm not surprised." A voice from the door sounded, and Percy's head shot up immediately, though Will merely held up his middle finger.

Jason shook his head at them with a grin, though Percy had no idea when he had come in, and could only hope they hadn't been seen (or heard, but he knew that was highly unlikely, even with Will muffling his sounds).

"If you had come sooner, you could have joined in." He remarked, his indirect way of saying 'Maybe you shouldn't have left, in the first place', but Jason didn't seem very perturbed.

"Ugh, I know I have to check on you, but give me a moment to catch my breath, yeah?" Will mumbled weakly, his head still resting against Percy's shoulder, but in his opinion, he could totally stay like this for the rest of the day.

"Take your time. Reyna had me go with the others to get checked, so you would be able to save your powers for actual emergencies. She told me about Frank. Let me get you some water." Their boyfriend announced and disappeared into the bathroom, and Will huffed against Percy's neck.

"Always so considerate. Percy, why is he such a dick?"

Percy frowned a little, not quite sure how 'considerate' translated to 'dick', but he was a little distracted by Will's exposed lower back, granting him a perfect view of sun-kissed skin and some of his favorite freckles, so he didn't blame his mind for not being able to keep up.

"Is he a dick, though?" He muttered thoughtfully without pondering his own question, and his fingers sneaked out to stroke over those freckles curiously, just to feel Will shivering in response.

"That tickles. And yes, he absolutely is. I want to wrap him up in a blanket and put a chain with lock around it to keep him here, yet I know I can't, because he has to make his own decisions. Horrible, isn't he?" Will complained, and now that made more sense.

Percy hummed, pleased to know what he was talking about.

Then, Jason came back with two plastic cups of water, and Will actually peeled himself away
from Percy's shoulder and sat up correctly, much to Percy's dismay.

He watched his boyfriend beaming up at Jason, and pouted to himself, wondering what would happen if he told Jason what he had just said about him.

Then, he smirked.

Time to find out.

"Jason, Will called you a dick."

"Percy, you have just lost your chance for any more make-out sessions, like, ever." Will remarked darkly, while Jason raised an eyebrow, but he didn't seem offended, nor surprised.

"Did he now? Well, I guess that's too bad. What do you think I should do now?" He asked, and Percy bit his lip, eagerly trying to think of something good, while Will wailed and slumped back into his arms, both because he was trying to seduce him into having mercy on him, and because he tended to need a while after climax to get his bearings completely again, which Percy always found endearing.

As if on cue, he remembered Will's constant punishment-ideas for Percy, and his grin widened.

"Ground him."

Jason laughed, Will cursed him to hell and back, and Percy grinned broadly, proud of himself.

Then, he glanced over at Nico's bed, where their boyfriend was still lying unconscious and oblivious to anything around him.

He wished he could partake in this right now, too.

Percy returned his attention to his two blondes, still grinning at them as he started complaining about the discomfort of his sweatpants now, thanks to Will (which had Will first defending himself, then priding himself for it, that dork).

Still, Percy's mind stayed with Nico, stayed with Frank, stayed with what he had overheard Will and Reyna talking about, and he knew what he had to do.

He tugged Will closer again and kissed him, and a part of him said 'I love you'.

The other part of him said 'I'm sorry'.

***

Frank looked like shit!

Percy stared at his friend, unable to believe what he was seeing.

When Will had told him he would be fine, he had assumed he would be fine, but damn!

And what the hell, when Will had told him 'Frank would need a hand when he wakes up', Percy hadn't actually thought he would be missing his whole freaking arm!

If this was how Frank looked after Will had taken care of him, how had he looked before?!

Jason exhaled next to him, and Percy didn't have to look around to know he was as shocked as he was.

"What happened?" He asked, because, seriously, Frank was an awesome fighter, what could have possibly gone wrong to lead to this?!

Also, that was one massive cast.

Percy had never seen such a big cast before.

Was his entire leg in that thing? Amazing.
Percy was pretty sure one could knock a giant out with that cast alone.

"I don't know. Reyna put me with the strategists, so I mostly had to deal with the distribution of the troupes and yell orders and formations. I only know he was near the Little Tiber, and that there seemed to be some sort of explosion due to unknown causes. It killed the monsters, and only a few of the troupe were injured but could still fight, so we assumed it to have been an attack move from one of our own. I only heard about Frank later, when our spots were taken by the next batch." Jason explained quietly, and Percy's mind traveled back to what he had heard Reyna and Will talking about.

An enemy demigod on the loose.

Maybe the same one that had set off the explosion?

It had to have been.

Percy wondered whether Jason knew.

He didn't tell him, though, because Jason would undoubtedly ask Will about it, and then Will would know Percy had overheard him talking to Reyna.

Will wasn't allowed to know that, because he was smart, and Percy knew he wouldn't let him out of his sight if he knew.

He approached the bed slowly, and Jason followed.

It had been Percy's idea to visit Frank, just to see how he was doing, while Will was with Nico. They had already met the medic that would be taking care of Frank for the time being, and she had explained to them that Frank had already woken up after the anesthesia had worn off, but that he would need a lot more rest, and would probably not wake up again for the next few hours.

Percy could understand that only all too well, knowing how often he had randomly fallen asleep on his first few days awake and alive.

He still looked like shit, though.

Percy inspected the heavily bandaged shoulder, and the lack of arm.

That could be him, right there.

Will had explained to him that he had performed a surgery on him in order to keep his left arm functioning properly.

(It was so ironic that it was his other arm that was causing him problems, seriously.)

If Will hadn't done that, he might be one arm short now, too.

Which would leave him with no arm at all.

Jason put a hand on his shoulder, keeping him close.

"Come on, maybe we should come back later, when he's actually awake." His boyfriend suggested, but Percy didn't want to leave.

He wanted to sit down by Frank's side and wait for him to wake up, because Hazel had left to get some suitable food as well as clothes for Frank once he was awake, and the medic had left to take a short break.

Nobody should have to be alone in a time like this.

Percy didn't say any of this, but he still hesitated, and Jason of course noticed, because Jason always noticed.

His boyfriend didn't say anything, but he did move over to the small table that seemed to be in
every room, returning with two chairs and motioning for Percy to sit down.

He really had the best boyfriend.

They sat down next to each other, shoulders pressing together as they watched Frank sleep, his expression relaxed and pain-free, which probably meant he was high on pain-killers (also something that Percy knew from experience, now).

He wanted to ask Jason whether he thought Frank would be fine, but of course he would think that, Will had told them so, after all.

Will didn't lie about things like these.

"When will you have to leave again?" Percy asked quietly, instead, and Jason glanced sideways at him, though Percy kept his gaze on Frank.

That could also be Jason.

The longer Percy sat around and did nothing, the higher the risk became that it would be Jason.

They had each other's backs. Always.

Who would have Jason's back now, when Percy wasn't around, the Camp was in dispute, there was an enemy spy, and there were different batches of demigods that were there for quantity, rather than quality?

Nobody would look twice at Jason, and the ones that would, would think he'd be fine, because he was son of Jupiter/Zeus.

"Tomorrow morning is the next switch. Reyna wants me with the strategists again, but I'm not sure it will work out this time." Jason said quietly, and Percy glanced at him, then away again.

A part of him wished Jason could stay with the strategists.

The rest of him knew it would be a waste, because Jason was stronger than that, and his strength was needed in the frontlines, where he could put it to best use.

"You should go to bed soon, then." He mumbled, and Jason smiled next to him.

"Are you worried for me?"

What a foolish question.

"Of course I am." Percy replied, and Jason turned to look at him, all soft smile and affectionate gaze, and Percy hated how he could make him melt like that with just one look.

"I'll be fine, Percy. Just make sure you take your time to heal up properly and do your rehab exercises like Will tells you to, yeah? Don't you go and rush things because you're worried about me."

Percy deliberately didn't meet his gaze as he gave a faint nod.

"Mhm." He replied vaguely, then reached out to poke at the tube sticking out from beneath the blanket, wondering where it led, though he didn't check.

Jason moved an arm around him and leaned over to let his head rest against Percy's shoulder.

"Thank you, though. For trying to take care of me, even though you don't have to."

Percy had a very different opinion on that matter, but he didn't argue, instead letting his head rest against Jason's.

"I'll always try and take care of you. Somebody has to have your back, after all, right?"

"Right." Jason agreed quietly, and Percy was satisfied with that.
They remained like that until Hazel came back with the medic, both of them surprised, but pleased to see them still with Frank, even if he hadn't woken up.

Then, they returned to Will and Nico, giving an update on Frank's progress to the best of their abilities, before Jason indulged him and went to lay down with him in his bed, rather than the one Jason and Will shared.

When Percy fell asleep in Jason's arms, it almost felt like he was back in their cabin.

But only almost.

***

That night, Will did a lot of check-ups on Frank, based on a simple hunch that proved right.

Frank woke up on an almost hourly basis, always confused when he realized he had been asleep, and more often than not rather disorientated.

His speech was still rather slurred, but by now coherent, so Will had declared it an after-effect of the anesthesia and side-effect of the painkillers he was still getting, rather than anything linked to his possible concussion or other injuries.

He was there every time, bringing him water to sip on, telling him where he was and that he was going to be fine, and reassuring him that Hazel would be back first thing in the morning, and that she was fine, too.

Sometimes, Frank asked about the other campers, murmuring something about the battle and names Will couldn't put faces to, but Will did his best to reassure and calm him, while also regularly checking the IV.

Since Frank kept jolting, he was running the rather high risk of ripping out the tube by accident if it was too short, too close to anything it could get stuck to, or too long and run the risk of wrapping around Frank's arm or hand.

The girl Will had assigned to the task (well, that Reyna had assigned, but since Will had told her to, he saw no difference) was currently at home, sleeping after her sixteen-hour shift, and would be back by morning, as well.

Frank asked about his arm a lot, too.

Will's heart ached every time, though he kept telling him he would be fine, and that he was sorry for not being able to save his arm.

Frank always sagged back into his bed, but never blamed him.

Then, at 2am in the morning, there was another crisis, because, right in the middle of waking up, Frank had suddenly transformed into a giant python, the IV of course breaking off, together with the catheters and cast, and Will was never going to forget the scream of utmost agony Frank had uttered as he had transformed back.

Will had healed him, then, unable to take it, even if it weakened him.

He had healed him until Frank had stilled, until Frank had fallen asleep, until Frank's leg had mended completely and the hole at his shoulder had healed over to the point that it would not need much bandaging anymore.

It left Will exhausted and on wobbly legs, but he had managed to reattach the IV and re-place the catheters, hoping against hope that Frank wouldn't transform again until he could make do without the tubes.

He hadn't set another cast, instead massaging Frank's leg to check for any more deformations or issues, and to make sure the muscles were working properly, especially the one he had been forced to mend.

In the morning, he would have to do the first exercises with him to assess the flexibility and assure
the proper functioning of his limbs.

He would have preferred it if Frank could have healed by himself, since it would have avoided a situation much like Percy's, where Frank's body would be okay externally, but he still had to catch up to the changes internally and adapt to the new situation mentally.

If Percy had had the chance to heal slowly as well, maybe things would have turned out differently, and for the better.

Will worried about that a lot, lately, same as he worried about Percy doing something stupid.

He was suffering from Major Depression Disorder, and what Will assumed to be a Somatoform Disorder. Will knew that much now, and even if Percy seemed fine for the most part, Will knew he was struggling, and he knew it could get much worse in the shortest amount of time.

He was doubting himself a lot more than before, especially regarding his arm, and Will just knew it was only a matter of time before Percy would ask him to start training again.

If he didn't just leave for the battle before then.

Will really wished Jason could stay with them, just until Nico was awake.

Once Nico was awake, Will knew he would be able to keep Percy here, because Nico would take one look at Percy's troubles holding a pen, and he would not hear another word of complaint on the matter until Will would assure him Percy was ready.

If Jason stayed, Percy wouldn't be so intent on rushing his recovery to join him on the battlefield.

If Jason stayed, Will could also make sure nothing happened to him, either.

He knew he could trust his boyfriends.

He knew they knew how to fight - he had seen them fight plenty of times before, after all.

But Frank also knew how to fight, and Will also trusted him to be smart about his actions, yet here they were, and he didn't want his guys in the same position, not after only just getting Percy back on his feet, to begin with.

Not when Nico was still unconscious.

Not when Will felt like everything could slip through his fingers at any given moment.

Will wrote a note for Hazel in case they missed each other in the morning, telling her of his healing and that she should tell Frank once more he should not perform any transformations for the time being, or at least try not to, in case he couldn't control it completely.

He also left a message for the girl on Frank's charts, so she knew about his healed leg and the very real chance that she might have to reattach the tubes and deal with Frank being in any non-human form.

He also documented his behavior after waking up throughout the night, so she knew what to expect, and that it was slowly getting better.

Will remained by Frank's side until shortly past 4am in the morning, after Frank woke up another time, then he left, certain the medic would arrive around 5am, if not even sooner than that.

He returned to their room, first checking on Nico and whether there had been any change (nope), then on Percy and Jason, who were still snuggled up in Percy's small bed together and sleeping peacefully.

Will collected the discarded blanket off the ground and folded it to place it on the chair next to the bed, then he moved over to the bed against the wall that he would now be sleeping in alone.

He pitied that for a total of one second, then he let himself fall facedown onto it and was asleep before he even registered his head hitting the pillow.
When Will woke up again, it was because of Jason, who was sitting at his side and stroking through his hair, before kissing his face.

What a dork.

Will huffed indignantly and grumbled, half-heartedly trying to turn his face away from that horrible person that kept covering his face in small kisses.

Then, Jason buried his face at the side of Will's and blew a raspberry, and Will squeaked – before he hummed contently as Jason nuzzled against his ear, all gentle and timid and loving again.

"Shouldn't you be leaving?" He mumbled as he peeked up at his boyfriend through one eye, but Jason only hummed and kissed the other one, before showering him with kisses all over again, until Will pulled his hands up to protect himself, rather high-pitched and embarrassingly flustered sounds escaping his lips.

That didn't really stop Jason, though, who only proceeded kissing his hands and fingers, before letting his hands sneak underneath Will's shirt to stroke over his tummy.

Will wasn't quite sure what to do, though he automatically giggled at the tickling sensation of Jason's fingertips, and he could feel Jason being rather proud of himself for whatever reason.

"You're a sap, do you know that?"

"Yep." Jason replied smugly, and Will pulled his hands away from his face to look up at his boyfriend with a scolding look, just to change his mind and lean up to give him a kiss on the lips, instead.

He smiled when he felt Jason being his usual bundle of happiness, all in love and euphoric about something as simple as a kiss.

They parted again, then came back together, before Jason started climbing into their bed and on top of Will, his hands back on his tummy and chest beneath his shirt, pushing it up further and further until it was up at Will's neck, exposing his upper body to Jason, who immediately abandoned Will's face (freaking traitor), in favor of showering the rest of his body in kisses.

Will wasn't sure where this was going, but he definitely loved it.

"You're unusually affectionate today." He commented wryly as Jason blew a raspberry on his tummy before pulling away to look down at him again, and his boyfriend smirked cheekily.

"I'm always unusually affectionate." He stated defensively, and Will grinned up at him before making grabby hands at him to come back down and give him another kiss.

Jason complied, then he lowered himself onto Will slowly, careful not to squish him, his arms wrapping around him to hold him tight.

Will held him, too, completely awake now, and aware that it had to be at least 6 or 7am, which meant Jason really did have to leave.

"You should leave, Handsome. You'll be late." Will said softly, and Jason hummed again to show he had heard, though he made no move to pull away.

"If you want, we can shower together once you're back." He suggested tentatively, and Jason huffed a small laugh against his skin.

"I'd like that." His boyfriend replied, and Will smiled, stroking over Jason's back and trying not to think of all the things that could go wrong.

They were demigods.

There would always be fights to fight, and his boyfriends were the fighters, that was simply how it was.
"I wish you didn't have to go." He admitted quietly, because Jason already knew, anyways, and he just wanted to say it once to know he had said it, at all.

"I know. Me neither." Jason replied, and Will sighed, but he let go of him, anyways, Jason kissed him again, gently, then showered his face in kisses once more until Will couldn't help but smile, before he finally pulled away and climbed off the bed.

"Don't forget about the shower." Jason told him cheekily, and Will made a shooing motion at him as he sat up.

"You know, I'd die for a bath, though." He remarked, and Jason's expression turned wistful for a moment.

"Bubble bath." They both said at the same time, then grinned at each other.

Then, they both sighed in unison, because they both knew there was no way they could take a bath anywhere.

Will should seriously get Percy into some water, though.

That would definitely help him with his exercises and training, and it would undoubtedly cheer him up.

However, Will didn't want to leave Nico alone at any given point if he didn't have to, so that would have to wait a while longer.

He had already mentioned the idea to Reyna before, and she hadn't seemed opposed, so he was confident he would get her okay when the time came.

"I'll get going, now." Jason said quietly, and Will made grabby hands at him until he stepped closer and moved his arms around him in a faint half-hug.

Somehow, their goodbyes always were like this.

Will would send him away, but Jason would linger just a little while longer, and both of them would try and cling to the other for as long as possible.

"Be careful." He said quietly, and Jason nodded and kissed the top of his head.

"I'll be back in a few hours. Take care of Percy and Nico for me. And Frank."

Will only hoped that list wouldn't grow any longer.

"I'll do my best."

"Same here." Jason assured him, and Will smiled sadly.

Then, they shared a last kiss and Jason tore himself away from him and left the room hurriedly, undoubtedly already finished with saying goodbye to Percy and Nico.

Will remained sitting on his bed for a moment longer, listening to his footsteps hurrying away outside, before he let out a heavy sigh and got up.

It was that moment that he noticed Percy seemed to be feigning sleep, laying very still in a sideways position with his eyes squeezing shut the moment he noticed Will looking.

Will eyed him warily for a moment, then smiled and decided to leave him be, instead checking on Nico's monitor and values.

Then, he rounded the bed and let his fingers dance up Percy's arm.

Percy tensed, then turned his head and peeked up at him innocently.

"Good morning?" His boyfriend tried tentatively, and Will gave him a pointed look.
"Good morning, my little eavesdrop." He returned the greeting, and Percy promptly sat up in bed with an offended expression.

"Not my fault you two act like it's the end of the world. Dude, that goodbye took like, what, ten minutes?"

Will only shrugged.

"Yeah? So what? Jealous?"

Percy snorted out a laugh and let himself fall back into his pillow.

"Nah. He kissed me first. Our goodbye took at least fifteen minutes. Ha. Take that."

Oh dear.

"What? Outrageous. You're making out with Jason before making out with me? I am disappointed, Percy. So disappointed. And there I thought you loved me!" He acted aghast and grabbed his heart in mock pain, and Percy tried very hard to refrain from laughing, which looked absolutely adorable.

Will dropped onto his bed, still clutching his heart and acting like he was dying, and Percy promptly turned towards him to take his hands and act like a distressed lover.

"Oh no, my love, I didn't mean it like that! Of course I still love you, my dear little…uh…flower. Yes, flower."

Will tried not to laugh, instead putting an arm over his eyes and lamenting some more.

"No, you love him more than me. Admit it, you scoundrel!"

"Scoundrel?! Excuse you, who was the one just making out with Jason for ten minutes? Don't think I didn't see him showering you in kisses. You got at least five kisses more than I did, which makes you the scoundrel." Percy retorted indignantly, and this time, Will did laugh, just to find out it was one of those laughs that wouldn't stop once they started, just intensify, and he turned towards Percy to hide at his chest as he kept laughing and giggling.

His boyfriend didn't fare much better, of course, laughing as well and holding his stomach for the most part.

Now this was a nice start into the day, if Will dared to think so.

They slowly calmed down, but once they looked at each other with matching tears in their eyes, they started laughing all over again, and this repeated for at least three more times, before they finally managed to fall silent, still next to each other in Percy's tiny bed with their arms between them and their gazes on each other.

Then, Will leaned forward and gave Percy a peck on the nose, which had Percy making an incredulous face, before he tried (and sadly succeeded) to tackle Will.

But Will didn't really mind.

He much rather had Percy in a splendid mood like this, than have him upset about not getting to fight.

This was much better, and made both of them feel great.

"By the way, I demand that you shower with me today, too." Percy declared as he started tickling Will, and Will wanted to groan and roll his eyes.

Apparently, he'd be getting two showers today.

And there, all he really wanted was a nice bath and Nico awake.

Oh well, he guessed he had to be happy with what he had, else the Fates would take that away.
from him, too, he was sure of it.

***

Kyle made a face.

The boy was reconsidering.

There he went through all that trouble to access that fool's dreams in whatever messed up location they were hiding, and this was his thanks?

Kyle wished he could get into the mind of somebody a little more focused than Percy Jackson.

But he would have to make do.

Kyle strained his toy's mind a little further, trying to see whether Clovis could still do his bidding when the boy was awake, but Clovis struggled same as he always did, even though his body's weakness posed the actual problem by now.

He wouldn't hold out much longer, unless he finally decided to leave the Camp.

If he only just left, Kyle could collect him and make sure he was fed, then he could be of so much more use.

But no, Clovis was trying to be a hero.

Of course he was.

That was the very thing that had gotten him here now.

All those thoughts of 'Why do others get to be the hero, but people like me don't?', and all that wishful thinking accompanying it had led the boy here.

Weakened, alone, battered and beaten by wind and weather and the unforgiving environment he had put himself in.

Kyle would be impressed that Clovis had managed to fight him off for long enough to get so deep into the forest not even Kyle had managed to lead him back out of it, not even when he had taken over completely.

But he had managed to keep the boy alive.

In a way, Clovis should probably be grateful.

Then again, considering what Kyle had in mind next, he probably also shouldn't be.

Kyle pushed him a little further, trying to access Percy Jackson's mind, but Clovis wasn't meant to access minds, only dreams.

It was such a shame.

Kyle would do it himself, of course, but unfortunately, in his current place, he couldn't.

Not without knowing exactly where those fools were.

It had to be the Roman Camp, but somehow, he hadn't yet managed to gain any more insight than that.

His placeholder there had seen Jason Grace, and there was talk about William in the hospital, but that didn't mean Percy Jackson and that accursed offspring of Hades was with them.

After Kyle's first attempt at finding out more through direct action, and the repercussion of William actually gaining insight from him, instead, he hadn't dared to risk it again.

He had used Clovis as a means to an end, nudging William's mind in his dreams, but there had been a whirl of text, of medical terms, of phrases and memories and wishes and dreads, and Kyle
had been forced to retreat when it had become apparent he couldn't get through that.

He had tried with Grace, next, but that fool had nothing but love and devotion in his dreams, entirely useless to Kyle, since he couldn't properly access anything that positive.

Nico di Angelo…whatever he was doing, and wherever he was, he had remained shielded from Kyle for mysterious reasons, and nothing he had done to Clovis had managed to change that, as frustrating as it had been.

He would have loved to get some sort of control over that boy, if only to show him he was nothing compared to Kyle.

Percy Jackson was his only chance at direct action.

He had been hard to find, but Kyle had managed, and now, Clovis was already much quicker in finding him once he was asleep, which seemed to happen more often these days, but for a lot less time, much to Kyle's continuous frustration.

He wanted to know where they were and what they were doing.

Unfortunately, Percy's dreams gave absolutely zero intel on that, because they were a mess of memories and mismatched faces and locations and things that might have happened or might have not.

More often than not, he dreamed a bunch of bullshit, and Kyle despised him for it all the more.

Clovis’ mind groaned as Kyle pushed him to keep trying, but all he needed was to make the boy go.

*Join that battle.*

*You're useless, otherwise.*

Clovis struggled against his hold, but Kyle pushed relentlessly, trying to get the message planted inside Percy's head.

If only he knew where he was, then he could do it, himself, and everything would be so much easier.

Then again, Kyle would lie if he said he didn't love a good challenge.

Unfortunately, this challenge also forced him to decide.

Either he retreated now and waited for Jackson to make up his mind and hopefully join whatever battle he was both anticipating and dreading to join – or Kyle kept pushing and made sure it would happen, but at the risk of losing his toy in the process.

Kyle smirked.

Well, that wasn't a very difficult decision, was it now?

***

Percy watched Will leave the room to check on Frank, telling him he would be back in a few minutes.

He didn't mind.

It wasn't as if he was alone, or anything.

He had Nico, after all.

Percy rubbed at his temple, feeling a slight stabbing pain.

Great, was he getting a headache, now?
Percy sighed and glanced towards the window, wondering how Jason was doing.

Hopefully well.

Percy’s stomach churned, but he just…

He wasn’t sure.

It seemed like a bad idea.

Both Jason and Will had told him explicitly not to go without Will’s okay, and that he should take his recovery seriously and take his time.

He didn’t want to sit around idly, but at the same time, he couldn’t just…leave, right?

Yesterday, that had seemed like a much…well, better idea.

Now, however, it seemed foolish.

He couldn’t very well sneak out, and Will was right when he said Percy couldn’t even hold his pen correctly at the moment.

What made him think he could seriously fight?

Of course he wanted to have Jason’s back the same as always, but what good would he be if he joined now?

Chances were, he would only get in the way.

Then Jason would only run an even higher risk of getting injured, and Will would skin him alive once he found out about his stunt – and, gods, Will would find out.

No, that seemed like a truly horrible idea.

How had Percy ever even had that idea, in the first place?

He shook his head and closed his eyes as he let himself fall back into his bed, listening to the even beeping coming from Nico’s side.

It always lulled him into sleep, so he had to make sure not to let that happen, this time.

He wanted to be awake when Will came back, so they could resume their rehab exercises, and Percy could continue to woo him with his horrible pickup-lines.

But you’ll be useless.

Percy stilled, the thought just suddenly…there.

Then, he turned to his side, away from the window, away from the room, trying to think of something different.

There was a lot to think about, after all.

Join the fight.

Bad idea. Horrible idea. Why would he do that?

He should much rather wait here for Will.

He thinks you’re useless.

Percy deflated, looking down at his sword arm.

He was useless, wasn’t he?

What was he doing, laying around here without doing anything?
Join the fight.

Maybe he could hold his sword.

Plus, the pain was bearable. He could just take some painkillers and do it.

What if Jason needed him?

He had to have his back, after all, right?

He needs help.

Maybe he did.

Percy mused this, then shook his head, because this was Jason, he would be fine.

But what if he won't be?

Unwillingly, pictures filled his head, of Jason hurt, of Jason getting cornered, of Jason dying.

No, he couldn't let that happen.

But Will…

Will is going to be fine.

Percy thought so with utmost conviction.

Of course Will would be fine.

He could heal. He was strong.

He wouldn't skin Percy if Percy ended up protecting Jason.

Percy made his decision, wondering faintly how he had ever doubted it, in the first place.

He hopped off the bed and slipped out of his sweatpants in exchange for one of his jeans he got out of the backpack, then rushed to his shoes.

The next moment, he was out of the room, then down the stairs, then on his way to the exit.

Nobody stopped him, of course.

They didn't even look twice at him, but in this case, Percy was glad for it.

Time to join the fight.

***

Kyle grinned to himself, trying to catch a glimpse of what Percy was seeing, but Clovis prevented it, the fool still putting up so much fight.

It was pitiful, really.

Unfortunately for Clovis, it was also annoying, and it promptly ruined his good mood.

"You're mine. Let me see what I wish to see, or you will pay for it." He let him know, but Clovis practically held up his middle finger in his face as he broke off the connection to Percy Jackson's mind, and Kyle retaliated instinctively.

He shoved forward, into Clovis' mind, and the screech and shattering pain that followed was one of the most satisfying things Kyle had witnessed today.

Clovis' mind strained, and he could feel the tension in the boy's body, even from this distance, and how he was struggling to keep his sanity.
How he was struggling to keep his life.

Kyle considered his options, for a moment.

He had given the Jackson boy enough of a push with his suggestions, his self-doubting nature making him so much more gullible and formable than initially expected.

From here on, the boy would join that battle, and if it was the same one Grace was fighting, then that meant he could get them both taken out at the same time.

Which meant, William would lose them both in one go.

Kyle knew what that would do to him, and knew it would be so easy to get him, after that.

Of course, if he still put up a fight at that point, Kyle would have to let them kill him, he guessed.

But Kyle was certain the blow would be big enough to turn William into the submissive tool Kyle wanted him to be.

And once he had William, Nico di Angelo or his daddy wouldn't be able to do shit anymore.

Kyle smiled.

In other words…

He pushed a little further, then retreated almost entirely, and Clovis sagged together in his hiding place, a small heap of misery and pain.

Truly beautiful.

Kyle bid his farewell to the boy.

He was no monster, after all, he knew how to be grateful for his service, though it could have been better.

Then, he let his mind cut through Clovis' like a knife, and the satisfying snap was enough to make Kyle shiver in delight as he lost contact with his toy, for the last time.

He had done well.

But he was useless to him now.

Kyle turned around and left his tent to walk over to Polybotes, who was tending the fire and waiting for that other good for nothing giant to get back here so they could plan out the next batch of monsters for both Camps.

Not that Kyle needed either of them, but he had been given orders, and he knew to follow them.

At least his orders, anyways.

"I have a job for you." He called up to the giant, and Polybotes looked down at him with his ugly face, clearly not impressed as he continued scratching at his backside.

Disgusting, crude creatures.

"I take no orders from a puny human like you." The giant replied in a bored voice and turned his back to him, but Kyle rounded him immediately, knowing full well who had the say here.

He was second-in-command.

Not the giants. None of them.

"You will do as I say, and you will hear me out. Have Enceladus contact our informant at the Roman Camp. Special focus on Jason Grace and Percy Jackson. They should be part of the battle right as we speak."
"Percy Jackson?" Polybotes repeated, clearly perking up at that name, though Kyle had no interest in his history with Jackson.

"Yes. And Jason Grace. I want them dead, and soon. Make it happen." He announced, and Polybotes seemed to struggle between wanting to follow the order, and the apparent urge to step on Kyle.

He only looked up at him with a determined, unafraid look, knowing he was the one in charge, no matter how much these fools liked to think different.

"I will take him out, myself. We still have a score to settle."

And, of course, he was only speaking of Jackson.

Kyle felt his patience wearing thin. There he had just had such a good mood, too. What a shame.

"You will tell Enceladus to contact our informant and get it done. I don't care what you do. Go join the battle yourself, if you wish. If you think you can make it there in time." Kyle couldn't help but tease at the end.

Who knew, actually, the thought of a giant joining the battle and making sure Jackson and Grace were taken care of wasn't actually all that bad.

In fact, it was quite amusing to think of the horror and shock everybody else would suffer from. Especially William.

That would serve him right for making things so difficult.

He could have just come with Kyle and spared himself all of this, but no.

He had just had to spite him, and now, he just had to keep posing problems.

Yes, this would teach him a lesson.

Polybotes bristled, then proceeded to yell at him about all the great deeds he had done, but Kyle wasn't paying attention, already picturing William back at his feet.

He would be his again.

No matter what his master said, he had no interest in killing the boy unless utmost necessary.

It would be such a waste, after all.

"Get it done." He repeated, and Polybotes cursed him in reply, but his honor and the fear of their master's wrath would ensure he did as Kyle had told him.

The boys would die, one way or another.

Nico di Angelo wouldn't even know what had happened, before they would be dead, and William would be his again.

Oh, he could barely wait.

***

Jason was yelling formations to his assigned group, when he saw it.

A glimpse of black hair between all the Roman helmets.

Orange shirt amidst armor and purple.
The gleam of Celestial Bronze, contrary to Imperial Gold.

It couldn't be.

Jason felt his heart beating in his throat for other reasons than the battle surrounding him.

No.

No, please no.

Two demigods jumped out of the way, followed by a hellhound on fire, and the next moment, Jason had a clear view.

Oh no.

Jason discarded his designated spot, ignoring he yells and calls that followed him, a buzz in his ears and cold dread in his heart as he started moving, towards the one person that shouldn't be here right now, but was.

Percy.

***

"Yes, just give him the dosage I wrote down, and it should be fine. I'll be back later for more exercises, but I stand by what I said, STR would do more good for him. I'm not schooled in that, I can only do what I know, so if you can find a professional, that would be much better for Frank in the long run." Will explained as he left Frank's room, and the girl (Dilek, as he now knew) nodded at him and made her own little note, so he bid his farewell (again) and closed the door with a sigh.

Alright, that had taken longer than expected.

Will shook his head and moved down the hall towards their room, wondering whether there would be any significant change regarding Nico now, though he highly doubted it.

But Nico would have to get better.

One day, there would have to be a change.

Or maybe there was a change, but it was so gradual Will hadn't picked up on it yet?

Will sighed again and opened the door, eyes downcast on the papers he had taken with him so he could read up on a few things regarding Frank, just to make sure everything was in order.

Also, he wanted to know how he would go about attaching a-…

Will stopped dead at the sight of Percy's empty bed as he looked up, his mouth already opened in greeting.

Then, his eyes hushed to the open bathroom door, showing the empty interior.

Oh no.

Will's gaze snapped to the discarded sweatpants on the floor, and the missing shoes.

No.

Will cursed and dropped his papers, before whirling around and running from the room again.

He saw a medic as he spun around the corner and down the stairs, and it was one of the ones he knew by now.

Nico flashed across his mind.

"Hey, you! Watch over my boyfriend while I'm gone." He called over, hoping against hope he would get to Percy before he got himself killed.
That fool.

What was he thinking?!

Will had told him not to go, and Percy hadn't given him the slightest impression that he would go against that, at least not today!

Yesterday, it had seemed like a very real possibility, but today, Percy had been cheerful and in good spirits and much more inclined to follow Will's advice.

He had even said they should do more exercises once Will was done with his check-up on Frank!

Had he seriously outright lied to Will?!

Will couldn't quite believe it.

He left the hospital in a hurry, running down the street as quickly as his feet would carry him.

How long had he been gone?

What if he had left right after Will had left the room?

He must have been gone for half an hour, at least.

Enough time for Percy to leave and get to the Fields or Mars, easily.

Enough time for Percy to join the battle.

But Terminus wouldn't give him his weapon, right? Terminus would have to know Percy was in no state to fight…right?

"Oh, why, hello? Third one of the bunch, huh? Your boyfriend came through twenty minutes ago, as well, to pick up his weapon and join the fight. Show that monster scum what you're made of, shall you?" Terminus greeted him easily as Will rushed through the exit of New Rome, and he slid to a stop to whirl around at him.

"You idiot! How could you let him go?! He can barely hold a pen with that arm of his and you give him his sword?!"

The limbless statue of the god looked as taken aback as he looked offended, but Will didn't care, and didn't wait for his reply as he stormed off towards the Fields of Mars.

Stupid Terminus.

Stupid battle.

Stupid monsters.

Stupid Percy!

Oh, Will was going to rattle him when he got to him – if he got to him before he got slaughtered!

If Percy died, Will was going to kill him.

Will heard the battle before he even saw the first traces of it as he ran in a straight line towards the battling demigods and monsters, the stench as sickening as the sound of clashing weapons and screams of agony and the roars of dying monsters.

As if on cue, the moment Will whooshed past the first armored demigods, his visions hit him, as if they had never left, in the first place.

He saw people, ones he knew and ones he didn’t, and he saw monsters, and he saw death, and pain, and his guys, back to back, then separated, and then there was pain, and death, and monsters, and people, and – not on Will's watch!

He zigzagged through the crowd of screaming demigods and roaring monsters, evading blows
from both sides as he trusted his instincts to bring him to his guys.

Will found Jason, first.

Jason, on the ground, grounded, surrounded, cornered, outnumbered.

There was thunder, then a series of lightning bolts, and the numbers diminished, but still left behind enough of a threat, and Will could see what could happen, but he wouldn't let it happen.

Will rushed past Dakota and leapt on the back of a passing hellhound to not get trampled beneath, his hand shoving inside his medic pouch as he leapt off its back once more.

He landed on an advancing empousa that didn't see him coming, and the next moment, his scalpel was in the side of her throat, her words dying before they could leave her lips, shortly followed by her disintegrating.

He was by Jason's side a moment later, whooshing past him as his boyfriend whirled around to meet the monster attacking him from behind, leaving his back defenseless to the hellhound that was advancing on him.

Will's scalpel cut across the hellhound's face, then he jumped back and grabbed hold of Jason's sword as he finished his blow, and Jason, in his stunned surprise, instinctively let go, his lips forming a silent 'Will?'

He ignored him, same as he ignored the heavy weight of the sword in his grip, knowing he could handle it for the one thrust he had to do with it as he shoved it into the monster advancing on both of them from another side, before passing it back to Jason hurriedly.

His hand disappeared in his medic pouch, searching for what he knew was in there, and his fingers promptly closed around the small tube he had been looking for, pulling it out and popping off the stopper, before tossing some of the contents at the once more advancing hellhound.

Jason yelled something behind him, probably at him, but Will paid him no mind as the hellhound yelped and tried to slide to a stop, but it got too close, and Will's scalpel met just the right places to cause it to disintegrate with a mournful howl.

He may not be a fighter, and he may not be very strong, but he knew all the weak spots on all known monsters, and he knew how to use that knowledge to his advantage.

His visions snapped through his mind, and it was confusing, but it was clear, and Will would never understand how he could comprehend so many things at once, but at that moment, he failed to care.

Instead, he whirled around to Jason.

"Sword!" He yelled, and his exhaustion from the run here made the edges of his vision blurry, but his anger kept him going.

Not his guys.

Not now. Not ever.

Not on his watch.

Even though Jason had never worked with him before, especially not like this, he still reacted instinctively and threw his sword towards him, so Will could catch it and toss it tip-first into the Shadow that had tried, and almost succeeded, to sneak up on them.

Then, he let Jason retrieve his sword himself as he pushed forward and through the crowd, running for his Percy.

Jason yelled after him, but Will couldn't hear what it was, though he knew he would follow him.

He found Percy, on one knee on the ground, his sword in his left hand, his body battered and beaten, but he was alive, and that was what mattered.
However, Will knew what would come, and he knew what would happen, and he didn't know what to do, but he wouldn't let them take his guys away from him.

It was one monster, it was many, it was a shadow that was there then gone.

It was quantity, and it was quality, it was well-rested monsters against weakened demigod.

It wasn't fair.

It was his guy.

It was in Will's hands.

There was a crackling in the air, a sign of more than there was, and Will felt the anger inside him numbing him, his chest still heaving with every breath he took, but the burning in his lungs stilled as all sound seemed to die around him, all his focus on his Percy, on the monsters advancing on him, on the sneers on their faces and the broken look on Percy's.

Time seemed to slow around them, but Will kept on going, fighting through it as his anger made his skin tingle and his worry for Percy his stomach clench.

Then, he was there.

He was in front of Percy.

There was a yell that was his own, a testament of 'You will not touch what's mine'.

Something inside him snapped.

A flash of white.

Monsters turning, trying to run in terror and fear.

A searing hot flash of pain inside Will, tearing him apart from the inside.

Not his guys.

Everything turned white.

Then everything turned black.

***

The Fields of Mars lit up white, a shockwave of unbearable heat knocking them back, and Reyna pushed herself to her feet hurriedly again to take up arms against that godforsaken Hydra before it got to claim any more of her men – but the Hydra wasn't attacking anymore, instead winding and unwinding and curling in apparent agony as it started disintegrating in its alive state, its skin practically burning off its body and dissolving to dust.

Reyna stared at it, then around at her legion, trying to assess the damage.

But the demigods that had fallen got back up on wobbly legs, looking around in confusion as the monsters all around them started screaming and howling in agony, meeting the same fate as the Hydra Reyna had been facing.

What…?

"No!" Somebody yelled, and she knew that voice, but that voice should not be here, that voice belonged to somebody stuck in a hospital bed with the direct order of not coming here.

Her eyes found Percy, and Jason, who must have been closest to whatever silent explosion had just occurred, and who were making straight for the very center of it.

The very center, with the grass scorched into oblivion, and a small heap of something laying there, instead.
"Will! No!" Percy yelled again, and Reyna stumbled, needing to hold onto one of her men to keep her balance as she tried to stomach the knowledge that something was a someone.

"Assess the damage. Get the troupes together. Reassemble." She announced, trying to sound sure of herself and in charge, and she was lucky the others around her seemed as stunned and beside themselves as she was, the majority looking around in confusion and poking the remnants of the monsters they had just been fighting.

There were none left.

None.

Nothing.

Reyna let her eyes travel the expanse of the Fields of Mars, but there was no sign of life other than that of her people, and the grass that had before been sullied with blood was now scorched to a pale yellow-brown, and burnt off entirely the closer it got to the center – to Will.

"Jason! Jason, do something!"

Reyna’s gaze snapped back to the boys, who were with Will now, who were holding him in their arms, but who hissed as they did so, and she saw their skin turning pink where they met Will’s, before it turned darker.

Burn marks.

Reyna had seen somebody die before, like that.

An overdose of nectar, mixed with an overuse of his powers, and Reyna would never forget the fearful eyes and the screams of pain as he had suffered, burning up from the inside out, his skin scalding hot and burning anybody who dared to touch him.

She had tried to help, back then, but there had been nothing she could do.

There was nothing she could do now, either.

"Water. Get him to the water, Percy. We need to cool him down." Jason exclaimed, and Reyna found herself moving towards them slowly, while the other demigods around her followed her orders and went to reassemble at their meeting point, not realizing what was happening, not paying enough attention, their focus still on the sudden lack of monsters, and the inexplicability of it.

She watched as Percy lifted Will up as if he weighed nothing, rushing off towards water – the lake, not the river, Reyna noticed, and she agreed.

The river was further away right now, and there might still be monsters outside this circle of destruction.

Jason followed right behind, his face ashen.

Reyna was still walking, her body wanting to follow, her mind still trying to comprehend.

Why were they here?

She watched Percy reaching the lake in record time, diving right in and disappearing from sight, together with Will.

Jason was there a moment later, standing knee-deep in the water, watching, hoping, dreading.

What had happened?

She watched Percy’s head breaking the water again, could hear his anguished cries and his pleas as he kept Will in his arms, stroking his hair out of his face and shaking him, trying to get him to regain consciousness.
How had Will done that?

Jason went splashing into the water to help Percy somehow, both of them holding onto Will as if their life depended on it, when it was the other way around.

Would he make it?

There was a gust of wind, making her hair fly around her face, and it picked up in intensity a moment later, the breeze leading towards the water, surrounding the water.

Clouds came appearing on the before clear sky, the distant sound of thunder making her shiver.

Reyna watched as they clutched their boyfriend, hands on his cheeks, hands in his hair, hands everywhere and nowhere, their words sometimes whispered, sometimes yelled, sometimes in between.

Rain came crashing down on her, ice cold and yet burning, and she watched them struggling to save him, struggling to cool him down, struggling to keep him with them.

What now?

Reyna didn’t know how much time must have passed, but she reached the lake, and they were still right there, both of them with their eyes closed and silent tears streaming down their faces, while Will was between them, still unresponsive.

From this close, she thought she could even see the water steaming, showing how hot he still had to be, even with the cold rain pouring down on them.

Reyna stared, hoping for the unbelievable, while dreading the inevitable.

"Help." Percy whispered, and when she looked at him, she found his gaze on her, his eyes full of fear and pain.

Reyna didn’t know how to help.

She turned her head to look towards where the troupes were, near the entrance to New Rome.

She thought of her medics, but Will was different from them, and she wasn’t sure what they could possibly do to help him.

She thought of Will's team he trusted so much, but none of them would be of help now, either.

There was nobody.

Nico might have been able to help, but Nico wasn't here.

Will might have been able to help, if it wasn't he himself who was dying.

Reyna looked back at Percy with a helpless look, and he closed his eyes again and turned his face away.

Jason had his arms around both of them now, keeping them pressed against him as the storm picked up around them, a feeble attempt at dropping the temperatures even further.

Reyna stepped into the water, herself, the wind billowing around her and the water feeling like countless needles piercing her skin.

She moved further into the lake, approaching them and undoing her cloak, remembering Athena's bestowed blessing.

She thought of Will, kneeling on the ground and trying to save Nico with all that he had.

She thought of Will, bossing around her medics as he collected everything he needed for a surgery on Percy to assure the functionality of his limbs.

She thought of Will, offering his help to her medics as the number of patients became
overwhelming, preventing the loss of even more skilled demigods.

She thought of Will, saving Frank's life and assuring his safety.

Reyna moved her cloak over him in the water, and Jason and Percy helped wrap him up in it without question or hesitation.

She didn't know whether it would help.

She didn't know whether they could save him.

All she knew was that they had to try.

Chapter End Notes

2nd part of the Fanart links <3

ENJOY!!

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-
   mel-chan366
   - New Years from Advent Calendar times ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/154469941964/the-third-of-week-three-of-my-
   fabulous-five-dollar
   - Our dorks in Christmas sweaters!! :D
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-
   for-mel-chan366
   - The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-
   mel-chan366-now-i
   - Ice cream time ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/156557714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-
   chan366-3-3-some
   - <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160990996944/another-of-my-may-madness-
   commissions-a-fabulous
   - The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-
   ever-fabulous
   - ...Boxer Shorts XD ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164308263854/let-me-just-take-this-time-to-say-
   that
   - The guys 'admiring' Jason in his leather jacket ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164426408554/another-fun-very-colourful-
   commission-for
   - Pride ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/165225200564/a-cozy-commission-for-the-
   fantastic
   - A peaceful moment in the Hades Cabin (so soft!!!!!!! so peaceful!!!!!!! so cozy!!!!!!!)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-
   mel-chan366-3
   - SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love
     them too much not to share them ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-
   for-mel-chan366
   - Solackson Dancing <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-
   commission-for
   - SolGrace Handkiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketchn-commission-for
- Jerce Soft Kiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164389230829/an-adorable-sketch-commission-for-mel-chan366
- Solangelo Date <3

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my firstborn child :) (Mostly because there won't be one. Sorry. But you can have a cookie?)
PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:
http://sta.sh/055hx09e5f9 - perfect depiction of Kyle ;)
http://sta.sh/0h2pt887zi - adorable Will with flowers <3
http://sta.sh/02yxylo0gdx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3
http://sta.sh/0qy6lka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing how cute Will is ;)
http://sta.sh/01m8rr04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will ;)
- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well ;)
http://sta.sh/01b1irqkgjh - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3
- A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater!! <3
- A super cute redraw of our Will in his comfort sweater!! :D (Also, my new phone background XD)
- Will with blanket <3
https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/150587339536/more-fanart-of-mel-chan366-s-pretty-fanfic-this
- THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE FROM THE LAST SEQUEL!!!!!!!!!!!!
- THE TEAM!!!!!! THE WHOLE TEAM!!!!! I AM FOREVER IN AWE AND GRATEFUL AND AM ORDERING Y'ALL TO LOOK AT THIS RIGHT AWAY!!!!! PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THE GODS DO IT!!!
https://sta.sh/01m7zhnbfjil
- HAVE A PINING ASH FOR HANNAH!!!!!! (Seriously, look at this. Now we know why Ash got a crush ;) And omg do they have it baaaad ;)!
- ***Leah and Will!!!! I swear I am in love!!! Just look at how happy they look!!!!!!! AND LOOK AT LEAH!!!!! AAAAAHHHHHH!!!!! ***
https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you
- A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy, challenge-loving dorks <3
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patreon-tari
- Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3
- Nico in his winter outfit :)
commission-for-my-amazing-patron
- Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD
- Jason and the leather jacket >-

- This was a very self-indulgent piece of the guys in their early thirties <3 (I just love thinking about them after all of this is over, just living a normal life in New Rome...now they just gotta survive long enough to make it there ;))

Aaaand here comes a Mini-Comic from WoB times, commissioned from the super sweet Alexandra:
- That one time Percy gave Will flowers... <3

Check End Notes for more links!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A/N: Hey Cupcakes :)

Sorry for the last chapter Q_Q But hey, at least the next one is finally here :) 

Thanks for all the Kudos and comments, you are the best!
Also, as always, special thanks to my beta-reader! ;) Still the bestest.

Also! Check out the new Fanart! :D (Links are in the Top and End Notes, new ones are marked with *** :) )

Hope you'll enjoy this chapter, and see you in two weeks!
-Tári

No Trigger Warnings for this chapter. (Enjoy it while it lasts, guys.)
(Though there's still mentions of battles, blood, injuries, etc. as well as symptoms of depression!)

Chapter 10: Getting Better, Getting Worse

"You're gonna be okay."

Dark hair, green eyes.

"He's cooling down too quickly. We need to get him somewhere warm."

"Quick, put him here."

Voices. Faces.

"Will, can you hear me?"

Blonde hair, blue eyes.

Blinding white, a flashlight.

More words.
More voices.
More faces.
Then, everything was gone, fading out of focus.

A dark place came into view, an angry face, distorted with rage.

Shouts. Yelling.

A giant figure, trying to reason.

"No! I gave clear instructions! All my hard work! For nothing! I got Jackson out there to die, together with Grace, and now our forces are gone?!!"

"The sun boy had powers we did not expect…"

"You are the giant of foresight, born to be the bane of Athena! How could you not tell me of the chance of this? Now, everything is ruined!"

More shouts, more yelling.

Everything faded again.

"What are you doing here?" A gentle voice.

Dark hair, dark eyes.

"You're not supposed to be here, sunshine. Go back."

A hand, taking his, squeezing it faintly.

Will tried to squeeze back.

Come with me?

Everything turned black.

***

Jason and Percy sat next to each other, waiting.

Percy was shifting, moving restlessly, forwards, backwards, sideways, jumping up and pacing before sitting down again.

Jason remained where he was, elbows on his legs, face in his hands, still and quiet, hoping, praying, dreading, pleasing.

Hazel came and went, as did Reyna.

He had no telling of time.

His mind replayed the battle again and again.

Will.

They had nearly lost Will.

First Percy and Nico, and now Will.

Jason felt his chest constricting, and it became harder to breathe.

Percy slumped into the chair next to him again.

Jason swallowed, trying to keep himself together.

Percy was already freaked out enough for the both of them, he didn't wish to add to that by losing his composure, as well.

The medics had done all they could to keep Will from suffering from hypothermia, and it was so
ironic *that* was what had nearly killed Will, when he had just been literally *burning up*.

Jason squeezed his eyes shut again, but that only helped bringing forth the images again.

Of Will, in their arms, unconscious and pale, his skin so hot it had burnt both Jason's and Percy's hands, arms, chests and faces.

Of Will, in the water, unresponsive and silent as they had tried to cool him down with all they had had.

Of Will, in Reyna's cloak, and the sizzling sound of the water as it steamed around them at the heat, but how it then stopped, showing Reyna's cloak had somehow – miraculously – helped.

That moment of relief, followed by the sudden dread as everything was happening too quickly, Will's body temperature dropping *too fast*, the fear making their bodies move just quick enough to get him to the hospital, while Reyna issued orders and got the things done, because Percy and Jason hadn't been able to think in their crazed states.

Now, Will was in their room, in the bed Percy had occupied before.

He was out of the worst, they said, and he would make it, but Jason would only believe it when he saw it.

Jason remembered the way Will's eyes had opened for those few seconds when they had brought him here, looking around with unfocused gaze, taking in their faces with an empty expression, before his head had rolled to the side and he had lost consciousness again.

He hadn't regained it since.

The medics said he needed some rest after the shock to his body, but they thought he had been *struck* by the explosion – they didn't know he had been the *source* of it.

Jason opened his eyes and grabbed Percy's hand next to him, who immediately stilled and drew a sharp breath.

"Breathe." He reminded him, and Percy nodded faintly and tried to focus, but his breathing was too fast, too hectic, and Jason could see and feel his body trembling.

He pulled him close and rubbed over his back in soothing circles, and Percy let himself fall against him like a log – and Jason would worry whether he had passed out, too, but his erratic breathing showed he was still conscious.

"Shh, it's okay. He's already out of the worst." He whispered quietly, but his eyes were on the bed, hoping he was right.

"I should have never gone." Percy pressed out breathlessly, and Jason kept rubbing circles on his back, though he didn't reply.

There was nothing he *could* reply.

"But I don't even know why I did? It just… I know I thought about it, Jason, but it was such a stupid idea, and I knew it."

Jason didn't want to talk about it, really, but he let him speak, because it gave Percy something to ground himself with.

"And I decided I wouldn't do it to not get in the way. But then… then… all these thoughts kept coming, and I couldn't help it. I just… I thought of you, and what if you needed help, and it sounds so stupid now, Jason, but *please*, you have to understand…" Percy whispered feebly, his voice dying on him a few times as he tried to suck in deep breaths, and Jason did his best to comfort him somewhat.

"This is all my fault." Percy suddenly sobbed, and Jason shook his head sternly.

"Don't start with that, Percy. Will has been blaming himself for Nico's and your states, don't you
go around blaming yourself, next. Bad things happen. We have to make the best of it.”

"Our boyfriend just nearly burned up, Jason! How am I supposed to make the best of that?!!" His boyfriend snapped at him as he pulled away, green eyes full of fury and guilt.

"By remaining calm and being there for him once he’s awake, the same way he was there for you.” Jason replied, and Percy deflated like a balloon, sagging together and looking down at the ground with a broken look on his face.

Jason shook his head and reached out to pull him closer again.

"It will be okay. They said he'll be okay.”

Percy shifted and pressed against him, seeking comfort Jason wasn't sure he could give.

Silence settled over them once more, only the even beeping from Nico's monitor filling the room.

"Did you…did you know? That he could do that?" Percy then asked, his voice not louder than a whisper, and Jason looked at the bed again.

"No. I didn't."

***

He wasn't sure what was worse.

The knowledge his boyfriend had nearly died because of his stupidity.

Or the fact that he had initially thought his boyfriend had blown himself up when Will had suddenly jumped in front of him and everything had turned white.

Percy had been pushed back by the shockwave of heat that had followed, even if it had mostly just passed through him, and for the longest moment, he had just laid facedown on the ground and dreaded looking up in fear of what he would see.

His fault.

Why had he left?

Why had he gone after Jason?

What had possessed him to make him so unbelievably stupid as to run out onto a battlefield with no armor and only his sword, which he hadn't even been able to wield properly?

He didn't understand, but at this point, he also doubted there was a reason left for him to attempt finding out what had gone wrong in his brain at the time.

They wouldn't believe him, anyways.

They would think Percy had simply been stupid, and maybe they were right to think so.

Percy stroked through Will's hair gently, while Jason was next to him, watching.

Jason was silent where Percy was loud.

He hadn't yelled at Percy when he had found him in the middle of the battle, like Percy might have thought after he had realized what a horrible mistake he had made.

Instead, he had rushed to his side and protected him to the best of his abilities, taking out monsters left and right and having his back, the same way Percy should have had his.

Percy's arm tingled, but he ignored it, unwilling to be deprived of touching his boyfriend to know he was alive, to know his body temperature was back to normal now, to know he was breathing, his chest rising and falling, and his skin tone healthy again, with his freckles properly on display once more.
Percy stroked through his hair again, feeling so unimaginably relieved.

At the same time though, he wished he could turn back time and prevent all this from happening.

His fault.

What would Will tell him once he woke up?

Percy knew Jason blamed him (and rightfully so), but Jason would never say it to his face, the way Will could.

But it hadn't been him!

Well, it had been, but…oh, he didn't know.

It had been weird.

He hadn't felt quite like himself, but he guessed nobody felt 'quite like themselves' when stuck in a hospital bed while everybody else was busy doing something important.

Percy looked down at the blanket, his shoulders sagging again.

Maybe he had just imagined it, and it truly had just been a dumb idea of his, nothing more, nothing less.

At least Will was okay now, right?

Yeah, he had to focus on that.

But…would Will forgive him?

For being so stupid?

He had risked not just his own life, but also Jason's, Will's, and, thus, also Nico's.

If Nico had started fading again while Will was out, nobody could have stopped it, and it would have been Percy's fault.

Everything always seemed to be Percy's fault.

Will would have fallen because of him.

Now, Will had nearly burned up because of him.

Percy pulled his hand back, not quite sure anymore whether he should even touch Will, in the first place.

He would be upset, undoubtedly so.

Maybe he wouldn't talk to Percy, at all.

Or maybe he would yell at him.

But, no matter how he would react, he would definitely be groundbreakingly disappointed in Percy.

Jason put a hand on his back again, stroking in soothing circles, as if he knew what Percy was thinking about.

Or maybe he didn't.

Percy glanced towards Nico's bed, wishing more than ever that their boyfriend could be with them right now.

He missed him so much.
Nico had that funny ability to just know him, even if it was ironic to think that, when Nico had believed Percy would be upset about his feelings for their other two now-boyfriends.

But Nico did know him.

And Nico would know what to say and what to do, he was certain, even if it was just a very blunt 'Percy, shut up'.

Percy would shut up.

He'd do anything for Nico.

He'd do anything for any of them.

But why had he been so stupid?!

It was crazy!

What had he thought would happen?

That the monsters would see him and turn around and flee?

Stupid!

Percy pulled away from Will's bed, and Jason let him go, watching him as he began pacing again restlessly, before he moved to Nico's bedside and sat down.

He wished he could just…lay down. Next to Nico.

That would be nice.

Just some physical contact, a sort of reminder of how it used to feel like with Nico next to him.

But Nico was still comatose and unresponsive, and Will had told them he couldn't feel any sort of awareness from him, so it was unlikely he would even know – and thus, it would all just be a lie.

"Will complained a lot. About you two having separate beds." Jason said quietly, though he remained by Will's side, holding his hand and stroking over the back of it with his thumb, clearly visible even from this distance.

Percy looked at him, then back down at Nico, wishing he at least didn't have to wear that mask.

"He said it simply wasn't right." Jason continued, and Percy looked back up, squinting at his boyfriend.

"Are you trying to make me cuddle up with Nico so I'm quiet and go to sleep?" He asked skeptically, and his boyfriend merely shrugged.

"All I'm saying is that I've seen the way you look at Nico, and I don't think either he or Will would have a problem with finding you next to him for a little while. You need to calm down, and this might just help you."

He did not need to calm down.

He was calm.

Perfectly calm.

Almost as calm as he had been when he had made the groundbreaking stupid decision to leave his bed and join a fight he wasn't ready for yet, endangering everybody around him because of reasons he couldn't understand anymore now.

Percy took a deep breath, then decided Jason might be right.

Maybe he did have to calm down.
"What if I pull anything out?" He asked skeptically as he glanced back down at Nico and all the various machinery and tubes attached to him.

If he moved that oxygen mask, what if Nico stopped breathing and died?

Or what if he nudged his other arm the wrong way and the IV fell out? Percy had no idea how those things worked, after all.

Will had kind of removed his before Percy had really managed to inspect it, so all he knew was that it had felt uncomfortable moving his arm with that thing stuck in it.

"Just lay down next to him, Percy. Don't move him, and you'll be fine." Jason said calmly, and Percy wondered where Jason got all his patience from.

He looked back down at Nico, wondering whether this was a good idea, but since Jason supported it, he guessed it had to be better than his last one.

Percy swallowed, then carefully laid down next to Nico, not even trying to go beneath the blanket, and only loosely putting an arm over him so he wouldn't risk tugging any tubes out.

The beeping of Nico's monitor was louder over here than from his side of the room, but it wasn't as obnoxious as Percy might have expected, and since the sound was even and regular, it managed to soothe him just the same way it used to before.

He had his head next to Nico's on the pillow, closer than he had been in so long, and he couldn't help but gaze at his boyfriend's face from this close, taking in the olive skin that still seemed so pale, and his relaxed expression that reminded Percy of their usual nights and mornings together.

He tried to block out the breathing mask as if it wasn't there, remembering all those mornings when he had woken up before Nico and watched him sleep for a little while.

It had something soothing to it.

Percy dared to shift closer a little bit, until his chest brushed Nico's arm, and he could feel the warmth of his body meeting his own.

He closed his eyes and blocked out the beeping, too, imagining this was just like when Jason had shared the bed with him last night.

Percy let out the breath he hadn't known he was holding, and relaxed against Nico's side.

A few minutes later, he was asleep.

***

When Will woke up, it was rather uneventful, in his opinion.

Yet, everybody seemed to make such a fuss about it.

There was Jason, nearly jumping off his chair when he realized Will was opening his eyes and blinking at him (because, seriously, why was Jason even sitting next to his bed, he was fine).

There were medics, checking in on him and talking to him before Will had even bothered trying to sit up.

There was the realization that he might not be as fine as he had initially thought, because the moment he tried to sit up, he felt like somebody had beat him up with a baseball bat (or kicked him really, really hard, because he could actually vouch for knowing how that felt, and this was definitely close), and he promptly found himself falling back.

It reminded him an awful lot of his time in the Underworld, after Percy's little stunt.

Which…only helped him remember Percy's stunt this time.

Oh, he would murder him.
For being so reckless.

Right after Will managed to get up and find him.

"If you're looking for Percy, he's sleeping with Nico." Jason informed him quietly after Will assured the medics he'd be fine and was just a little worn out, so they would get the hell out of their room and give them some peace and quiet.

Oh okay.

Wait, what?!

Will shot up against his better judgment, but Jason caught his shoulders and pushed him back down, while Will's face distorted in pain and regret as all his joints seemed to burn.

"Not like that! I told him he should lay down next to Nico for a while, so he calms down, and he fell asleep shortly after." Jason explained, but that wasn't Will's problem.

"No, I got that. But, did Nico wake up?" He asked, then wanted to cry, because his throat definitely still wasn't meant to be used for speaking.

Jason seemed to be able to tell by the look on his face alone, immediately passing him the glass with water once more.

He was probably reminded of that time in the Underworld, too.

At least they knew what to do, he guessed.

"Not that I know of. Why? Should he have?" Jason asked cautiously, but Will wasn't sure.

He thought he had seen…

Will stared off into the distance, before reaching out for the remote of the bed and letting that do the deed of sitting him up somewhat, even if his body still complained.

Drinking was a lot easier now, and Jason held the glass for him so he wouldn't have to do it, though Will would have totally been able to take care of himself.

"Can you tell me what happened?" He asked after Jason put the empty glass down, though he kept his eyes on a spot far away.

He knew Percy had run off.

He knew – thanks to whatever that had been, vision or just demigod-dream – that Kyle had something to do with Percy running off.

He knew he had run after Percy.

He could remember doing a series of rather impressive (if he may say so) stunts that he probably couldn't recreate in a billion years even if he tried every day.

He could remember throwing himself in front of Percy to protect him.

He…kind of couldn't remember anything past that, and none of that explained his current state, nor all the drama everybody seemed to make about it.

Sure, he could totally imagine his body being sore after running for so long and fast, after grabbing and using Jason's sword, twice, and there must have surely been an impact with one or several monsters when he had jumped in front of Percy, but…

Will bent his arms to pat himself down with his hands, the task painful but bearable.

He still had all his limbs, his organs functioned the way they should, no sign of bruising or even the smallest cut.
So…he was fine?
He had survived that?

Wow.

Will frowned when he rubbed at his arms, and when he looked down, he found his skin peeling off.
Dried, dead skin.
…Sunburn?
He never got sunburns.

His skin tone sort of prevented that, so the most that happened was that he turned darker.
But he didn't actually get sunburns, and his skin most definitely didn't peel off like that.

"You don't know?" Jason asked, sounding between surprised and apprehensive, and that made Will apprehensive.

"Don't know what? I remember running to you to help you out, then running to Percy to save him.
I guess I passed out when something rammed into me? I don't know."

Then again, he couldn't have collided with anything, because then he would be bruised.

What exactly could make his skin peel off?
Poison?

No, then he would feel leftover traces of it, and the medics would have had to inject something into him, which clearly hadn't been the case.

He studied the blanket that was draped over him, confused when there was a second one beneath.
He usually didn't need any blankets to sleep, especially not mid-summer, even if their room was rather cool.

"You…well, you blew up? Sort of? We're not quite sure, ourselves. You threw yourself in front of Percy, and I was about to suffer a heart attack, thinking you're going to get slaughtered right in front of us, but then…there was this explosion?" Jason tried to explain, and he seriously sucked at it, because now, Will was definitely worried.

He had exploded?!

That was impossible.

Both because Will didn't have anything on hand that could actually cause an explosion, and because there was no way he could possibly survive exploding.

Jason must have seen things.

Maybe the fight had made him hallucinate.

Oh! Maybe Jason had been poisoned!

Wait, then why was Will in the hospital bed with two blankets and his skin peeling off?

Okay, this was it: Nothing made sense.

"The monsters…they kind of just…well, disintegrated? I've never seen anything quite like it. They all seemed to burn up. Like you did. When Percy and I got to you, you were…burning. You were so hot, you started smoking. We thought we'd lose you right then and there." Jason continued, and Will stared at him, not quite certain whether the medics might have mixed something up, after all.
Maybe Jason should lay down for a little while, at the very least.

"What about the other kids? Did that…explosion…hurt them, as well?" He asked carefully, and his skepticism only grew as Jason hesitated and shook his head.

Rights.

So, Will had just walked out there onto the battlefield to magically explode without getting torn to pieces, incidentally killing off some of the monsters, but not hurting any demigods, and now, he was in the hospital, because he had been ‘burning up’.

Yeah, that sounded like Will was in a very confusing and rather delirious nightmare/dream-thing, and he didn't like it.

"Know what, I'm going back to sleep." He announced and grabbed the remote to flatten out the bed once more.

"I'm serious, Will. Do you really not remember doing that? You jumped in front of Percy and yelled something, and then there was just- white. Everything. Like…if the sun was a lot smaller and smacked into the earth, I'd have imagined it to look like that before everything gets torn apart and burnt alive. You were that sun, and everything in the radius of whatever it was you unleashed, managed to burn the monsters alive. We got knocked back from the force of it, but otherwise, it passed right through us. I don't know how you did it, Will. But I know you did it." Jason repeated, but Will still thought this made no sense.

He was a healer, not a fighter.

He had no special attacks or hidden powers like that.

Though he did think he could remember everything turning white…

And there had been that conversation…between Kyle and…some weird…giant…

"Kyle is working with giants." He blurted, because, eh.

Jason let himself fall back in his chair with a heavy sigh.

"Look, I get how it sounds, but-…wait, what did you just say?"

"Kyle is working with the giants. I…I don't know. While I was out, I caught a glimpse of him talking to one. The bane of Athena…Enceladus, I guess? Apparently, he was supposed to foresee something, but hadn't, and Kyle was pretty upset." He told him, then frowned.

There had been a lot of yelling, but thinking about it, why would a giant care?

He might have been inclined to believe this meant that Kyle was helping out the giants in whatever it was they were planning this time, but…

It seemed more as if they were working for him.

Which meant there must be an even greater force he was working with.

Now, it was Jason who stared at him in disbelief, and Will was tempted to point out that his story at least didn't involve magical explosions and fake suns.

"He got Percy out on the battlefield, I guess? There was a lot of yelling, so, mind you I don't know exactly what he said anymore, but from what I gathered, he got Percy to go, so they could…well, so he could die, but now, everything is ruined, because the sun boy…oh…"

Wait, he was the sun boy.

Jason immediately leaned forward again and grabbed his hand.

"Yes! That makes sense, actually! Percy kept mentioning he didn't know why he left. What if he hadn't wanted to leave, but Kyle somehow made him? We already know he can get inside
people's heads, right? So, Kyle made him leave, hoping he'd fall in battle. That would leave all of us crushed. Better yet, have me fall, as well. Two birds with one stone. Will, all he wants is to get at you. If Percy and I died, you would be worse than crushed, especially with Nico still unconscious. It would be so easy for him to get you, then. That must have been his plan." Jason exclaimed, sounding way too excited for the severity of his words, and Will frowned at him with a dark look.

He really didn't like how that sounded, though he guessed it would make sense.

"But you managed to prevent that. By exploding." Jason concluded, and Will's frown deepened.

"I did not explode."

Jason sighed again and gave him that look that said 'Yeah, sure', and Will wished he could scowl at him – but his skin felt too tight, as it was, and he didn't want his face to peel off, as well.

Stupid sunburn.

Will hesitated.


…Nah. Still unlikely.

"So, what happened next, anyways? I mean, if I was burning up, then why am I here now? With two blankets. Looks more like I was suffering from a sudden bout of hypothermia." He joked, but Jason looked grim when he stroked over his hand, and Will wondered whether he noticed he was peeling off bits of Will's skin in the process.

"You did, but that was later. When we found you, you were burning up, and we were scared that we were going to lose you. Percy carried you to the lake in the hopes it would cool you down, but you simply kept on burning. Will, you were hot enough to burn us." Jason resumed his telling, and Will wanted to brush off his words, but it was that moment that he noticed the actual marks on Jason's skin.

He hadn't really noticed them before due to his own pain and the fact that his boyfriend was full of grime and dirt, but now that Jason mentioned burning, Will thought he could detect patches of burnt skin along his hands, arms, and even along his jaw, though he had thought that was just a simple bruise, easily healed once he regained the ability to stand upright.

In an instant, he pushed himself up, all pain and burning limbs ignored as his hands cupped Jason's face and tilted his head sideways to inspect the damage.

"Jason!"

"No, don't you dare, Will. We're fine. Rest. No healing. Will, I said no. Healing."

Yeah, right, as if Will was going to let his boyfriend walk around with burn marks on his skin that were supposedly caused by Will.

He made a face and tried to focus on his powers, but the next moment, Jason snatched his hands and pushed him back into the bed, making Will whimper in pain and forget all about healing anytime soon.

"No healing. I'm serious. You were burning up, Will. Reyna said the last time she had seen that, somebody had overused their powers. You are lucky to be alive right now, and I'm not going to risk you overdoing it again right away."

He had…what?

"Jason, I don't have exploding powers." He pointed out, because, seriously, he just had to get this out.

Jason groaned and buried his face in his hands.
"And what's going on here?" A voice came from the door, and Will shrugged as Reyna came in and closed the door, though why she hadn't knocked was beyond him.

"He won't believe me that he exploded!" Jason lamented, and she huffed in apparent amusement.

"He didn't explode." She stated as if that was the most obvious thing in the world, and Will shot Jason a smug look.

"He did cause an explosion, though. One that miraculously gave us a whole day without monster attacks, so far." She then continued, and his face fell again, while Jason turned to look at him triumphantly.

"If you don't believe us, why don't you take a look at the Fields of Mars? They're scorched to the ground. If you have a better explanation for why that is, I'd love to hear it. Actually, we'd all love to know."

Will hesitated, glancing towards the window.

They had perfect view of the streets of New Rome, but he knew one could also glimpse a part of the Fields of Mars, though not where the battle had been happening.

Will knew this, because he had looked out of that window a lot whenever Percy had been asleep and Jason had been out there, and he had stood there with whatever book he had been reading and hoped against hope Jason would be fine.

Now, a part of him really wanted to check, while the other one really didn't want to know.

"But then why am I here?" He pressed, because it simply didn't make any sense!

"Because your boys did all they could to cool you down, and in the end, they managed. You stopped burning up, but in return, you cooled down too quickly, and we nearly lost you to hypothermia. My medics kept you beneath warmed blankets with heated packs for a while, while tending to your burnt skin. They gave you back to your waiting guys when it became clear you'd make it, and Jason moved you back in here. That's why you're here. Any more questions?" She answered simply, and Will made a face at her.

Somehow, he had preferred it when Jason had told him the story, because it had been so much easier to just brush it off and believe otherwise.

"Oh, plenty. Why was Jason fighting, for example? You said you would keep him with the strategists!" He bitched at her for no other reason than to change the topic, but she only stepped up to him and got dangerously close to his face, which wasn't fair in the slightest!

"Because your boyfriend is as stubborn as a mule, and he left his assigned spot to join the frontlines."

"To save Percy." Jason added, and Will wanted to kick him. And her. And Percy.

"To save Percy. Who was supposed to be here." Reyna corrected, and now, Will did scowl, which hurt his face more than he had hoped.

Gods, was this what other people had to go through whenever they had sunburns? Poor souls.

"Percy was manipulated to join the battle. We don't know the details yet, but he is not at fault. At least not entirely. Leave that to me." He replied pointedly, but Reyna only shrugged and pulled away from him again.

"Fine by me. As I said, your stunt has managed to give us an entire day to rest and plan, so far. If anything, we're grateful. I'd say I hope to see more of that in the future, but unfortunately, I wouldn't feel comfortable asking you to blow yourself up again repeatedly." She mused, and he wasn't sure whether to be happy about that, or disturbed.
"He's not doing that again." Jason said sharply, and Will shot him a dubious look, because, first of all, he could speak for himself, and second of all, he didn't even know how he did what he supposedly had done, so he doubted he'd be able to pull it off a second time, anyways.

Reyna didn't argue, nor did she say anything else on the matter.

Instead, she merely shrugged and turned towards Nico, just to halt and frown.

"Why is Percy in Nico's bed?"

"To keep him calm." Jason explained, and Reyna shot them a dubious look.

"Percy or Nico?"

Jason made a face and was about to reply, but Will cut in before him.

"Both."

There.

Though he could have sworn he had seen Nico…

He hadn't died.

Will knew Nico wasn't dead, same as he himself shouldn't have been dead at any point the past 24 hours.

Maybe he had come close, though.

Maybe he had also just fantasized.

"Why did you ask whether Nico had woken up?" Jason asked cautiously, but Will didn't want to elaborate that with Reyna around.

In fact, he didn't want to elaborate that, at all, because he knew how it might sound.

"Wishful thinking, I guess." He said with a shrug, and tried to ignore the look Reyna was giving him, before she returned her attention to Nico and Percy.

Then, she suddenly turned around and grabbed his arm, shaking him slightly.

"Look, look!"

Will nearly had a heart attack from the suddenness of that action, and tried to jump off the bed to check what the hell had Reyna going crazy, which was prevented by the pain flaring through his body that also made him lose his balance and crash off the bed and onto the ground.

Reyna looked down at him with both surprise and the hint of pity, but before he could do anything more than howl in agony, Jason was there to pick up the pieces (as usual), helping him up off the ground and moving the bedside table back to where it was supposed to stand.

"What is it?" He asked sourly as he grumbled and looked towards Nico and Percy, but couldn't see anything that should be of concern, other than that Percy was drooling on the pillow and Nico couldn't move away from the growing wet spot (poor guy).

"Look at Nico's hand." Reyna pressed, sounding annoyed that he didn't seem nearly as moved as she was.

Jason seemed to catch on, because he promptly stiffened, his hand flinching on Will's arm where he still held him.

Will frowned and looked at the arm squished against Percy's chest, undoubtedly numbed by now since Nico had no way of moving it.

What?
Irritated, he looked back at Jason with a questioning look, and his boyfriend gestured towards the bed again.

Towards Nico's *other* hand.

Which must have somehow, miraculously, moved and was now holding Percy's above the blanket gently.

Will was there in an instant, hand finding Nico's forehead to feel for his values.

"He's back..." He mumbled dumbly, the realization of *what he was feeling* slowly sinking in.

He looked back at Reyna and Jason.

"He's back." He said quietly, still stunned.

Jason and Reyna both shared a surprised look, then started grinning.

Will stroked over Nico's face, removing the ventilator carefully, and after a moment of adjustment, he found his boyfriend breathing properly by himself, even making a bit of a face, as if inconvenienced by Will's doings.

"He's back!" He exclaimed with a small laugh he couldn't suppress, then he whirled around to Jason, who met him in a crushing hug that had him groan in pain again.

"He's back! He's back- oh shit, I'm dying. I'm dying. Gods, it hurts. Jason, this is it. Get my tombstone ready." He lamented, and Jason immediately let go of him with a guilty hiss, though he was there again an instant later.

Will opened his mouth to complain a bit more, but then he already found himself picked up gently and wanted to both complain even more and sob from the ache spreading through his entire body.

But then Jason already placed him back on his bed carefully, and the pain ebbed away as he stilled his body as best as he could.

"I'm getting you some pain killers. Will Nico need anything? You know, if I had known letting Percy sleep with Nico was going to get him back, I'd have carried him over there the moment you said you didn't like them sleeping separately. How is this even possible?" His boyfriend ranted, but it was Reyna who blurted she'd get anything they needed and stormed from the room, and Will had no way of telling her he had his own pain killers if he truly wanted to take any.

He was tempted to tell Jason about his fleeting meeting with Nico, but then, he decided that this was much better.

The thought of Percy being the one getting Nico back by sharing the bed with him was as romantic as it was, in a way, true.

Will had no problem believing that, too.

"I know, right? Cuddles always save the day." He agreed with a broad grin, then scratched at his cheek, just to peel off a rather big patch of dead skin.

Eww.

"They sure do. Also, I don't know if you noticed, but your skin is kind of peeling off. Is there anything I can or should do?"

Will had *no* idea, so all he could do was shrug and scratch at his skin a little more, wondering what would happen if he peeled it all off.

Maybe he would be like a snake, coming back bigger and stronger, and with new special powers? No, wait those were Pokémon after evolving.

Damn it.
"Stop scratching at it." Jason chided when Will did just that, before peeling off another bit.

"But it itches." He lamented, and found his boyfriend having zero understanding for his cause.

"It looks like the after-effects of a sunburn." His boyfriend deduced, and Will gave him a pointed look that hopefully conveyed 'You don't say' with vehemence.

His boyfriend started smirking, and Will pushed him away sulkily for that insolence, though his aching limbs promptly complained again.

Man, this sucked.

Will smiled to himself the moment Jason wasn't looking, anyways.

Nico was back.

***

When Nico woke up, everything was loud.

Percy was next to him in bed, which was all good and well, but he was also so freaking close to Nico's face, he was going cross-eyed just looking at him.

Jason and Will were next to the bed, which seemed odd, but the bed was also smaller than he remembered it being.

This place was also neither the inside of their tent, nor their cabin back at Camp.

*And there were wires everywhere.*

In other words: Nico woke up in a hospital, and he wasn't happy about it. At all.

Everybody was talking, everything going in and out of focus, and there was so much light, and everything was warm and stuffy and ugh.

Nico's first words must have been something along 'Get out of my face' and 'What is going on', before he tried to sit up and was stopped by seemingly countless hands, though the wave of dizziness and nausea would have been more than enough to keep him from carrying out the action.

He let himself fall back and scowled at everybody and everything, his vision and hearing only slowly becoming more extinguishable and pronounced as the dizziness ebbed away, but he was still struggling with the situation until Will suddenly spoke louder than all the others, and after that, there was silence.

Nico had closed his eyes at some point, but opened them again, just to find Percy leaving his side.

That had been the only thing he had actually enjoyed.

Mourning the loss, Nico lifted his hand weakly to reach out for his boyfriend, and somebody must have caught the gesture, because he heard soft words being exchanged, before Percy turned around and looked at Nico in surprise, remaining seated at his bedside instead of leaving, altogether.

Nico reached out for his hand feebly, and Percy took it gently, looking confusingly relieved.

It took a while before Nico could hear them properly.

It also took a while before his vision cleared completely.

But, more than anything, it seemed to take forever until he remembered what had brought him here, in the first place.

Screaming.

Blood.
Percy on the ground.
The portal closing.
His guys stuck with monsters.
Nico getting them out.
Water.
Drowning.
Another jump.
Darkness.
So much darkness.
Will's eyes, full of fear.
And then…waking up here.
Anything in between?
No, nothing in between.

"Nico." Will said softly, and Nico blinked again, trying to focus his eyes on Will, who was leaning over the bed and looking down at him, and he looked…different.

His skin was darker than Nico remembered, but his freckles were lighter, and there was old skin standing off at places, as if Will was a snake, about to shed his old skin.

It was a weird thought to have.

It also made Nico wonder how long he must have been out.

What if it had been years?

What if Jason had grown even taller and Nico would never be able to catch up to him?

Did people still grow when they were unconscious?

Oh gods, he so didn't want to be the shortest one of their group forever.

"Nico, can you hear me?" Will asked, and Nico frowned, before giving a faint nod.

There was a collective sigh of relief, and Nico watched Will for a moment longer, before his gaze trailed off, back to Jason and Percy.

No, they didn't really look much older.

A bit dirty, though.

Wait, had Percy been inside his bed with those dirty clothes and his face full of…actually, those could also be bruises, not mud, now that Nico thought about it.

Had Percy been getting into fights? Better not.

Nico squinted at Jason.

He also had a fair share of odd-looking bruises. Maybe they had been fighting?

Oh, they better not, or Nico would have to sit them down and have a serious conversation.

Also, did nobody else ever clean Jason's glasses? Nico could see from all the way over here how
"Sweetheart, you need to talk to us. I fear I have no idea how to read your emotions right now. You seem...annoyed?" Will asked cautiously, and Nico's eyes flicked back to him, narrowing as he took in his peeling skin again.

Sunburn? Will didn't get sunburns.

"What did you guys do while I was out?" He asked, and his voice was raspy and strange, sounding foreign to him, though his guys didn't seem to notice or care.

Instead, they still looked so annoyingly relieved, sharing looks and gazing back at him with those soft expressions.

He didn't want sentiment, he wanted to know what they had gotten themselves into this time, and whether Nico would have to go and beat anybody up.

Who had burnt Will? Why were there bruises on his guys? Who had dared to lay hands on them?

Nico was going to send whoever responsible straight to the Fields of Punishment, right here, right now.

He tried to sit up again, but then realized his body seemed unnaturally...weak.

Okay, he would send whoever responsible straight to the Fields of Punishment...tomorrow.

Possibly the day after that.

Nico looked back at his guys, still expecting an answer/explanation, just to find all three of them looking between guilty and sheepish.

Not a good sign.

"Well, actually...funny story..." Percy started, then trailed off with an awkward chuckle, and Nico raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

Both Will and Jason shot Percy a pointed look.

"More like a story, there wasn't really much fun involved." Jason corrected, and Percy seemed to cringe ever so faintly.

"Actually, could we postpone this to first assess your hand-eye coordination really quick, as well as a quick test of your reflexes? I'm sorry, but that story is going to take a while, and I need to know now whether there's any complications. I moved your arms and legs to prevent any severe muscle damage, and we moved you at set times to avoid bedsores, but that was all we could do. So, you'll undoubtedly need some time to regain your usual level of skill and flexibility, not to mention rebuild the muscle mass that you lost. Just...take it slow, and don't worry about it, okay?"

Will cut in, explaining everything way too quickly for Nico to follow, though he thought he got the gist.

Will wanted him to move his arms and legs, and he would have to pick up training soon again.

Well, alright, he could do that.

Nico made an affirmative noise, and Will looked so oddly relieved again, as if he had expected him to argue.

He waited until Percy manipulated the remote to make the bed move into a more comfortable position for Nico, then he watched Will talking to him, explaining something while moving his hands, but Nico found it difficult to concentrate.

Instead, he found his attention drawn to the weird thing still taped to his chest, wondering what that was, and why it was there.

Not to mention where it went?
Nico turned his head slightly to follow the wire, just to find some sort of computer screen next to him, showing what he assumed had to be his heart rate.

Interesting.

"Nico? Hello? I hooked you up to that, so people would immediately be able to tell if there was an emergency. I'll remove it later." Will explained, and Nico hummed in reply.

Next, he looked down at his hand, where one of the tubes led.

"That's the IV." Will told him, and Nico lifted his hand to check whether he could move it normally, even with the tube in it.

He could, but it felt uncomfortable, and his arm began complaining, feeling a lot weaker than before.

"Okay, that's good to know. Can you move the other one, as well?"

Nico huffed and looked at his other arm, lifting it and checking his hand for tubes as well, but that one was tube-free.

Nico lifted his blanket, just to scowl.

"Why am I wearing light blue?"

He caught his boyfriends exchanging amused looks, and turned to glower at them.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just…your priorities are really interesting. Others wake up and ask 'How long was I out' – or, in Percy's case, they flirt with their boyfriends within the first few moments of being awake. You, on the other hand, are just as grumpy as always, asking us what we did this time, and then, instead of wondering about all the other tubes connected to you, your issue is the hospital garment. It's cute." Will said amused, and Nico huffed to himself, though he chose not to reply.

Yeah, he had seen the other tubes, and he could partly feel them, too.

No need to ask about them, he could already guess what they were for.

"No, but for real, you're doing really well, Nico. You were comatose for nearly a month, unaware and unresponsive. The majority of people this happens to can't even speak when they come to, much less attempt to sit up. They are usually disorientated and scared and can even get aggressive, believing they are being tied down because they don't seem capable of moving. So, considering all of that, you're doing remarkably well." Will commented with a nod, and Nico stilled, mulling over his words.

So, nearly a month, huh?

Comatose.

Well, better than death trance, he guessed? No, not really. Probably the same.

"Yeah, or they sleep a lot. Like me." Percy piped up, and Nico found Will smiling almost fondly in Percy's direction, before focusing back on Nico.

"Percy was out for roughly a week. The first few days awake, he kept falling asleep again mid-sentence a lot, and slept the majority of the time."

That sounded like Percy, alright.

Nico gave a faint nod.

"Still, you're doing rather well. Especially since I only felt you being aware of your surroundings again a few hours ago. Usually, it takes a lot longer for a person to regain complete consciousness."
Yeah, well, Nico had no time for that.

There were people to beat up for beating up his guys.

"Maybe my cuddles are simply so good." Percy boasted, but Will only smiled softly again.

"Maybe they are."

Nico eyed the three of them, noticing that Jason was once more the quietest out of all of them, though he also seemed lost in thought, hand at his chin and gaze on the window.

"So, what do you want me to do? Let's get this over with, so I finally find out why you three look so terrible."

"Wow, Nico, you sure know how to flatter us." Will commented wryly, before exchanging affectionate looks with their other two boyfriends, showing he wasn't upset in the slightest.

Nico only rolled his eyes and readied himself for whatever Will demanded of him next.

***

After his check-up, and another check-up regarding what he remembered, as well as a very detailed plan on how he would go about training from here on out (which Nico so wasn't going to remember in an hour from now, because, damn it, Will, stop talking so fast!), Nico finally got his answers.

Surprisingly enough, it was Jason who told him about Will saving him from fading, about the next few days full of dread and fear, about Percy waking up and being his usual dorky self, but also about Percy's problems with his arm.

Percy looked sheepish and uncomfortable as Jason talked, but that didn't make sense until after Jason told him about Frank, and about joining the fights again, and about Percy running off to join him.

Will cut in there, explaining what he had seen regarding Kyle, and the name alone was enough to make Nico's blood boil, which, thanks to that dumb monitor he was still connected to, was visible as well as audible to everyone, though none of them commented on it.

Percy seemed to not have known this yet, but after his initial surprise, he remained sheepish and quiet, which indicated he still felt bad, and which made Nico worry, but he first wanted to hear the rest of the story.

So, Jason told him about Will and the near-burning-up incident that nobody seemed capable of explaining, but this at least explained where his guys had gotten their injuries from.

In other words, Nico wasn't going to send anybody to the Fields of Punishment, after all.

Except Kyle, who already had a spot reserved there.

"I can never leave you three alone, can I? Always getting into trouble." He commented at long last, and his boyfriends reacted way too cheerfully as they loudly agreed and grinned at him and told him this meant that he would have to stick around from now on, no more fading, and no more comas.

Yeah, well, it wasn't as if he had wanted that to happen, but he knew they knew that, so he didn't bother pointing it out.

Eventually, Jason left to get them food, and Will left to find some books he apparently needed (even though the table in the corner was already overflowing with books, Nico could clearly see that), leaving Percy to remain by Nico's side.

They were quiet for the most part, but Percy's presence was reassuring, and Nico greatly preferred it to being all by himself.
Especially when Percy took his hand gently and stroked over it.

"It's good to have you back. We...we missed you a lot. I mean, of course we missed you, but..."
Percy started, then made a face and waved off, apparently unable to find the words for what he was trying to say.

Nico didn't mind.

"It's good to be back. I'm sorry for worrying you so much. It wasn't my intention."

He didn't elaborate that he had been certain he would fade.

He didn't need to, either. They already knew.

"So, what else is new?" Nico asked, because Percy surely had some other stuff to tell him that might not be as groundbreaking or horrifying as the battles and all the near-deaths, but undoubtedly entertaining enough to keep them busy.

Percy grinned at him.

"I made out with Will once. It was awesome."

Nico couldn't help but laugh at that.

Of course, Percy would tell him about that.

"What? It was great. Stop laughing, Nico. You're just jealous because I got laid."

Yeah, right.

Because being jealous totally made people laugh.

What a dork.

He gave Percy a pointed look, and Percy turned sheepish.

"Yeah, well, okay, we didn't really get laid. It was over pretty quickly – which so wasn't my fault, let me tell you."

"Mhm." Nico teased with a smirk on his face, and Percy nudged his arm with a sulky look on his face.

"Oh, hush."

Aww, now he was getting flustered.

Maybe Nico should point out Percy had decided to tell him this. He hadn't asked for any making-out info.

"Oh, and we also missed Jason's birthday. Since you and I were both out of commission, and Will and Jason were worrying themselves into the grave, nobody actually celebrated. I was thinking of throwing him a party the moment you wake up. Thoughts?" Percy suddenly piped up, as if he only now remembered.

Nico decided he had preferred the info about the making out.

True, they had missed Jason's birthday.

He wondered whether anybody had actually bothered giving him their gift, at least.

Then again, Nico had been the one hiding it in the safest place possible (beneath the mattress at the end of their bed in their tent), so he wouldn't be surprised if they hadn't managed to find it.

If they had looked for it, in the first place.

"Sure. I mean, I wouldn't recommend throwing one right now, but how about we do something
for him once I get freed from all these…tubes?" He suggested, gesturing around him for emphasis, and Percy immediately nodded, looking way too happy about something so simple.

"Perfect. Then I'll let the others know."

Nico perked up at that.

"How’s the team?" He asked curiously, since Jason hadn’t brought them up in the slightest during his storytelling.

"Relatively well, I’d guess. They came over a few days ago for a visit. It was quite nice. Ash and Hannah still have their issues, Sara and Liam still aren't going out for reasons unknown to mankind, and Andrew is still a smartass, so, all in all, I'd say everything is great. They’ll be thrilled to hear you’re back now." Percy told him, and Nico was relieved to know their team hadn't lost any more of its members in his absence.

At least he could depend on them to stay out of trouble, unlike his very own boyfriends.

"Also, I want to get Jason flowers. Will is all for it, but I thought I’d wait for your input, first. Do you think Jason would like flowers? Or is it childish?" Percy asked, and there was something odd about his tone that had Nico eyeing him from the side curiously.

Most of Percy’s ideas were childish and crazy, but he had never seemed to have an issue with that, before.

Nico wondered whether anybody had said anything – in which case, he was ready to fight them.

"Sounds great. I'm sure he'll be delighted." He said quietly, and Percy beamed at him brightly.

Nico studied his expression.

Then, he shrugged off his thoughts and smiled back.

It was probably nothing, anyways.

***

"Hey, Will?“ Percy asked hesitantly, not quite sure whether he should really bother Will with this right now.

Nico had finally fallen asleep after hours, which was entirely unfair, because Percy was pretty sure he had spent the majority of his first day asleep, and he had been unconscious for much less time than Nico.

He knew everybody was different, but usually, Nico was the one sleeping in and such, while Percy was the one on edge and keeping watch, so he couldn't understand why things would be reversed in a situation such as this – though he guessed it didn't really matter.

Jason had of course chased Will back to bed the moment Nico had been out cold, so their favorite blonde could get back to resting, since he had apparently not done so ever since he and Jason had found out about Nico being 'aware' again.

How that had happened, or why Nico had chosen this time to come back from the dead (luckily not literally) was beyond Percy.

Of course, he kept telling them it was because of his cuddles, and Will and Jason somehow even seemed to support that idea, but Percy knew that was just wishful thinking.

He'd have liked to know for real, though.

But that didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was that Nico was back.

(There were a lot of things that didn't matter anymore, yet they remained in Percy's mind, anyways. Stupid.)
"Hm?" Will hummed, staring up at the ceiling with a grim expression, apparently still upset about Jason putting him in bed.

Percy couldn't say he was surprised, though he was with Jason on this one.

Will might seem okay on the outside, but he had nearly burnt up not even 24 hours ago, so he should definitely take it slow for the time being, no matter how much he would rather be out and about.

The reminder of Will's near-death only made the knot in Percy's chest tighten, and he swallowed, trying to collect the mess that was his thoughts.

"I...I wanted to...I wanted to say I'm sorry..." He muttered quietly and quickly averted his face, uncertain whether he could bear Will's gaze just yet.

He had avoided it ever since he had woken up.

Sure, Will hadn't seemed very upset with him, but Nico had also woken up, which had sort of distracted from Percy's...mistakes.

He remembered what Will had said when he had interrupted Jason, about...seeing Kyle, however strange it had sounded, and about him manipulating Percy somehow to make him do that.

It sounded so wonderfully possible, too, but Percy was just...so scared of believing it.

A part of him rejoiced at the possibility that he hadn't really been that stupid to endanger his boyfriends.

The other part of him dreaded Will had just made it up to make him feel better.

Or, what if Will was wrong? Maybe Kyle hadn't done anything, but simply known Percy would fuck up?

He hadn't felt possessed, after all.

Sure, he hadn't felt quite like himself, but he had been possessed before, by Kyle and Eidolon alike, and it hadn't felt anything like the way he had felt back then.

At least he couldn't remember.

But that also didn't matter.

(In a way, nothing mattered anymore, really.)

Fact was, no matter what, it had still been Percy to mess up, and he had to apologize for that, especially to Will.

There was shuffling, then a hand touched his gently, and Percy glanced down at it with a conflicted look, before his eyes flickered to Will's.

Will's expression was soft and free of blame, his eyes fixed on Percy's, as beautifully blue as always.

"It's okay, Percy. I don't blame you."

Percy swallowed and averted his gaze again, though he couldn't make himself pull his hand away, everything inside him yearning for that bit of physical contact to just...take it all away.

All the doubts. All the pain. Everything, until Percy could breathe again.

"Yeah, well, maybe you should." He muttered darkly, and cringed at the bitterness in his voice.

Will gave his hand another squeeze.

"Well, I don't. I am aware that you were bored here, and that you longed to help Jason, and I know that you want to start training again as soon as possible, but also despise the mere thought
with every fiber of your being. I know temptation must have been great for you to just leave. But, and this is the important part, you still wouldn't have left. I know that. And you should know it, too.” Will said quietly, and Percy shrank together a little as he spoke, shame and dead acceptance coursing through him.

Of course, Will knew.

Will knew everything.

Why did Will always have to know everything?

It wasn't fair.

But Percy guessed that didn't matter, either.

"Do you know why?" Will asked him, and Percy wanted to reply, but then found he couldn't, because he couldn't remember why he wouldn't have gone, and couldn't think of why Will would think so, either.

Percy always had dumb ideas, so why not this one, too?

"Because you're smarter than that, Percy. You might have played with the thought of helping Jason, but in the end, you would have stayed here. You would have stayed so Nico wouldn't be alone, and you would have stayed to keep me from worrying sick about you, too. You knew your arm would pose problems, especially on the battlefield, so there's no way you would have really entertained the thought of joining Jason out of nowhere. Plus, Percy, you went out there without armor. I've known you for quite a while now, and seen you around for even longer than that. I've watched you join and fight many battles – and if there's one thing I know, then it's that you always make sure you have your armor on. I've seen you struggle with the clips, I've seen you put it on the wrong way around, I've seen Annabeth as well as Nico fix it when it ended up crooked, but you still always wore it. The only few times you weren't in full armor were while training against Nico and Jason, and I know that that was just to show off and to practice for worst-case-scenarios, so don't even try to come at me with that.”

Will's voice was so pretty when he rambled like this.

His words sounded so nice, too.

Percy still had trouble believing him, anyways.

Percy also had trouble focusing, because, hell, what did it even matter?

It didn't. Not really.

In the greater picture, nothing mattered but that they made it out of this alive.

And, in the greater picture, it had been Percy's fault they had nearly failed at that.

Percy thought of his picture, of his guys, and himself, and he wished he could seek some sort of comfort from that.

But all he could think of was that he was the stormy sea that destroyed everything, no matter how much the other forces tried to even it out somehow.

The sun could be oh-so warm and bright, the sky could be as blue as it wanted to be, and their safe haven could be as comforting and alluring as ever, nothing would stop the sea from crashing against the shore and beyond and tearing it all to pieces, anyways.

"Come here, you.” Will's voice was quiet, soft, but there was a hint of concern in his voice that made Percy feel even guiltier than before.

He had come to apologize, not to push himself and his issues on Will.

But when he tried to pull away and shrug him off, he found Will grabbing him by the shoulder with a much stronger and determined grip than initially expected.
In fact, Percy was certain this was the first time Will held him so tight it nearly hurt.

It was that surprise that allowed Will to pull him closer and into a hug, his body so comfortingly warm and his hands stroking over Percy's back so gentle it tore him apart.

"Talk to me, Percy. I can't help you if you don't tell me what's wrong." Will whispered as Percy tried to keep himself together.

"Nothing is wrong. It doesn't really matter, Will. Nothing really matters." He replied, and it sounded so bitter it made him sick of himself.

"Why would you say that? I think it matters a great deal, Percy. You matter to me, and if something is on your mind, then that matters, too."

Why did Will always have to say such things? They sounded so logical, and somehow, right now, it just…made Percy feel stupid.

Maybe because he was.

Annabeth hadn't been calling him Seaweed Brain for nothing, after all.

But what did it matter?

"Lay down with me?" Will asked with a hint of hopefulness in his voice, and Percy closed his eyes, struggling with himself.

A part of him knew this was stupid, and that he was just asking for attention.

Another part of him wanted nothing more than to throw himself at Will and let him smother him with all the attention and affection he was willing to give.

In the end, he realized he had sworn to himself to never refuse his boyfriends anything, so he caved in and got up to climb onto the bed and next to Will.

He intended to stay above the blanket like he had with Nico, but Will was already lifting it and basically inviting him in with no chance of refusal, so he went, momentarily overwhelmed from the warmth and the sensation of Will, this close to him, so close.

A part of him still insisted it didn't matter.

But the rest of him had shut up, and he was grateful for it as he shifted and got a bit more comfortable.

Will put his arm out for Percy to put his head on, and he dared to look into his boyfriend's eyes hesitantly, still overwhelmed by the sudden proximity, though it was a good feeling, too.

Will's gaze was soft, just how it had been before.

Percy swallowed thickly again and closed his eyes, because it was easier to just close his eyes than to let Will ask about the mess that was him at the moment.

Will shuffled a bit closer, and Percy could feel his lips against his forehead a moment later, warm and soft and as wonderful as always, even if he couldn't enjoy it the same as he had before.

Then, Will's free hand was in his hair, gently stroking through it.

"Want me to sing something?" He heard him ask, and that was a strange offer, since Will's voice was still rather raspy, showing he wasn't as fine as he kept insisting he was.

Percy knew how dry a throat could feel, and how uncomfortable it could feel, not to mention how much it could hurt to speak, much less sing.

"You shouldn't." He replied quietly, but Will only hummed and kept stroking through his hair.

"One song?" Will asked softly, and Percy wished he could smile at that, but all he did was curl
together a little to hide his face from Will.

"Okay." He relented, because, what else was he supposed to say?

Will didn't immediately start singing, simply stroking through his hair and letting his fingers run along Percy's head a little while longer, before he began humming a tune Percy didn't know.

And then, he started whispering the first lyrics to a song Percy hadn't heard before, and, while Percy still kept his eyes closed, he relaxed enough to not forcefully squeeze them shut anymore.

It sounded so nice.

Will's voice was so soft and beautiful, and only becoming even more so as he started *singing* rather than whispering, and Percy felt as if the music was inside him, rather than around him, calming him, soothing him, smothering his doubts and negative thoughts as he felt all traces of tension in his body disappear, turning him into putty in his boyfriend's hands.

Will came closer and kissed his forehead again, and Percy felt his heart flutter in his chest at the notion, his skin tingling and turning warm where Will had touched it, as if his presence lingered there.

His boyfriend sang for him, and Percy wanted to listen to all of it, but at the same time, he found himself being lulled to sleep, feeling warm, comfortable and protected.

There was a small voice complaining, saying *he* should be the one making Will feel all those things, rather than the other way around.

But Percy paid it no mind, because *that* didn't matter right now.

Will, however, did.

Percy found himself smiling softly.

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Jason came back from his talk with Reyna, to find Percy in Will's bed, apparently asleep, and Will's hands on his head, *glowing*, more than apparently healing him.

"What did I say about using your powers?" Jason chided with a frown, though he tried to keep his voice down as to not wake Percy or Nico.

"Shh. I know, but he needed it. He was a mess, Jason. I couldn't stand to see him suffer like that."

Will replied with an odd voice, and he looked pained, though it didn't seem to come from his injuries nor the healing.

Jason's frown deepened as he thought of Percy's wounds, and the fact that he hadn't behaved as if they bothered him all that much.

"I gave him some peace of mind, to the best of my abilities. It's not ideal. I'm not a psychiatrist, I don't know what to do, and this is not something I can just look up in a textbook. But I just...he's hurting so much, Jason. When he isn't doubting his very existence, he's got bouts of thinking nothing matters anymore. Do you know how *dead* that makes him feel? It's horrible. It's like..."

Will was rambling.

He looked shook, and he was rambling.

Jason was at his side in an instance, peeling him away from Percy to wrap his arms around him, and Will seemed to soak it right up, falling around his neck as if they hadn't seen each other in forever and he had to make up for lost time.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." He said hurriedly, but Will shook his head, and his heart was beating *so* fast, Jason was growing more than a little concerned.
"Do you need me to do anything? Get you anything?" He asked, but Will only kept shaking his head.

"No, it's all good. He's better now. Again, it's not ideal, and it's not solving anything, and I don't think I can do it every time, but it at least makes him feel a little better. That's…that's good, right?"

Jason pulled back and gave Will a hard look, and his boyfriend studied his expression, before taking a deep breath and giving a small nod.

"Sorry, yeah, I know. It's just…I think that tired me out a bit more than it was supposed to. You know how I get when I'm drained. Could you pass me the glass of water, please?"

Jason immediately turned to fill up the empty glass on the bedside table, then passed it to Will, helping him drink for good measure, because his hands did shake quite a bit.

"Does he know what you did?" He asked hesitantly, because he highly doubted Percy would just let this happen.

Unsurprisingly, Will shook his head.

"Of course not. It was already a miracle he came to bed, I would have never managed to convince him to let me heal him."

Yeah, Jason thought so, too.

"Is he still beating himself up about the battlefield-thing?" He asked, deciding not to point out they had promised each other to be completely honest and not attempt any tricking.

In this case, even if he didn't like seeing Will so shook, he also didn't want Percy to suffer, especially not enough to shake Will.

He just…wished that, if these things already had to happen, they happened while he was here to help, rather than out to talk with Reyna.

Percy had seemed okay when he had left him here with Will and a sleeping Nico – else Jason would have taken him with him to let him get out and about a bit, maybe talk it out if Percy wanted to, and let him in on the action he had previously missed out on.

Thinking back, Jason realized he shouldn't have reacted the way he had, when Percy and he had been waiting for Will to wake up.

He hadn't known about Kyle's role in this whole scenario then, but Percy had told him more than once that something had felt off, yet Jason had just…waved it off.

It had sounded weird, yeah, but he hadn't really given the matter any thought, instead thinking to himself that Percy had been wrong to leave, but that this was simply how things were and they would have to deal with the consequences.

Percy had needed real reassurance, and Jason had failed him.

He pursed his lips, deciding to learn from his mistakes and be better in the future, while also hoping nothing like this would ever happen again.

"Of course. I told him that it wasn't his fault, but he slipped from bad to worse so quickly, it felt like I couldn't reach him at all, anymore." Will explained, and he seemed to be calming down, which was good.

Still, this could have been avoided.

Jason shouldn't leave his boyfriends for a while, at least until Nico was better.

Somehow, even though Nico had only just woken up, he seemed to be in better spirits than either of his troublemakers here.

It was worrisome, to say the least.
Which…actually reminded him of his talk with Reyna, and he hated that he would have to tell Will this.

"There's been monster sightings again. They're apparently arming up again, which is, of course, not good. However, the situation at Camp Half-Blood seems to have worsened, and Reyna says it would be better if we go there. Like, soon. Before the number of monsters here escalates again as it did before. She's not kicking us out, and she said we should give Nico enough time to get better first, but she also said she expects the attacks to begin by the end of the week again, and steadily pick up until the week after this. That's how it was the last time, apparently." Jason told him, because Will was already giving him that look that said he was expecting news.

Will looked grim, but he nodded in understanding, anyways.

"Nico is already in a much better condition than expected, so I believe I'll be able to take him off his IV and such soon enough. However, I am a bit reluctant about the prospect of traveling. If we get attacked, both Percy and Nico will make easy and preferred targets until they can get back into training. I don't know how the overuse of Nico's powers will affect his powers now, Jason. It's a very real possibility that he won't be able to use them safely anymore, in which case, they will have to be declared off-limits for the time being. Percy still has his arm to struggle with, so we can't expect him to just pick up his sword and start fighting as he used to, even if he does start training now." Will mused quietly, the grim look not lessening in the slightest.

Jason gave a small nod.

"I told Reyna the same things. We'll be weakened, and there's no way she can spare any campers right now to bring us back to Camp Half-Blood – plus, the bigger the group, the likelier they'll target us. But in her opinion, it's either we try, or we'll be stuck here, and Camp Half-Blood will have to make do without us."

He had to admit, when he had heard that, it hadn't even sounded all that bad.

But then, he had remembered all the younger campers, who would have to take up arms against the monsters, as well, if the need for fighters was too great.

They didn't have a place like New Rome, where they could visit the hospital in relative peace and find some rest between battles, protected by the god of borders.

They only had the Camp Half-Blood border, which was linked to Calypso, currently, and guarded by Peleus and Thalia's pine.

But Peleus could fall, and Thalia's pine would be as good as dead without the fleece.

If something happened to Calypso, however, they would be as good as dead, because the border would be too weak to withstand the force of monsters the way Jason had seen arrive here.

Camp Jupiter had young warriors, too, but they had been with Lupa and the wolves first, which meant they were hardened and trained for battle already.

At Camp Half-Blood, the youngest campers were eight to eleven, and even if they managed to fight by now, they couldn't possibly reach the skill or expertise of the legionnaires here, nor would they be able to withhold all those monsters.

In other words, Jason knew he couldn't abandon the Camp like that, no matter how much easier staying sounded.

If he could make just a small difference, he would do it.

Will looked at him as if he knew the same thing, too.

"You know that we will not be able to leave the Camp again once we're there, right? That will be it, Jason." Will said so quietly, it shouldn't have been more than a whisper, yet his voice was strong and clear.

"It's home. Where else would we fight for our home, if not the place, itself?" He reasoned, and
Will looked away for a moment, his hand moving back to Percy's head to stroke through his hair apparently absent-mindedly.

"Home is not a place. Home is where the heart is." Will then said quietly, and Jason studied his expression, trying to read his reply in his eyes.

"My heart is with you three. Wherever you go, I will go, too. Very well. We'll talk to Percy and Nico about this when they're awake next, then you can let Reyna and the Camp know, while I will get everything ready."

Jason was about to nod, when he hesitated.

Will said they would talk to their boyfriends, yet he also said he would get everything ready.

"You know we will leave." He deducted, and Will's composed expression fell for a split second, showing an exhausted look with bitter smile.

"Of course I do. Camp Half-Blood is their home, too. They would go there even if it meant certain death. I don't need any visions for that."

"Will it mean certain death?" Jason asked, his eyes boring into Will's.

But he held his gaze, showing he had nothing to hide.

"Who knows? The future is unpredictable, and death lurks around every corner."

Jason wished his boyfriend would stop being a smartass in situations such as these.

But he liked his boyfriend being a smartass in other situations, so he guessed he could live with this.

"I see. Thanks, Freckles." He said with a sigh, and Will puffed out his chest a little in mock pride.

"Leave it to Greek Jesus to soothe all your worries."

And gone was the vulnerability, replaced by the fake cockiness his boyfriend loved to display so much.

Jason gave him an unimpressed look, but then decided not to comment, instead pulling out the bottle of moisturizer that Reyna had given him for Will's skin, to help it heal faster, even if he had no doubts by tomorrow morning Will would have already healed himself as well as Jason, no matter how much Jason might try to prevent it.

"Wait, what's that?" Will asked skeptically as he side-eyed the bottle with a dubious look, and Jason waved it in his face.

"Moisturizer. I'm going to put it on you."

Will gave him a blank look.

Then, he smirked.

"Oh yeah, put it on me, man. Lay it on thick."

Jason sighed and shook his head to himself, but smiled, nevertheless.

"Alright, your wish is my command."

"Wait, no, Jason, I changed my mind. Jason- Jason, no!"

***

When Nico next woke up, Will sat next to his bed with Percy, who was snickering and snapping pictures, while Will was making the grumpiest face Nico had ever seen.

Will was also shirtless.
He was also covered in a thick layer of some sort of white cream, making Nico think of the face masks he had seen the Aphrodite kids wear before (scary experience, by the way. Not recommended.).

"Why?" He asked with a sigh, and Will only scowled even harder, trying to cross his arms in front of his chest, just to curse and let them fall to the side again.

"Because Jason is an ass."

"Jason forbid him to get rid of the excess cream until you woke up to see it. He's been like this for the past half an hour. Jason had to redo it five times now. I love him so much." Percy explained with glee in his eyes, while Will only huffed and grumbled to himself, pushing back against his chair sulkily.

"Will, don't do that! You're making the chair dirty!" Percy cried, and Will nearly jumped off the chair, just to grumble even louder.

Nico could only shake his head – though, in all honesty, Will did look hilarious.

"I'm guessing this has to do with your dry skin?" He asked, but Will only made a face and looked anywhere but at them.

"It is. Not this much, though. That was just Jason being awesome." Percy replied for him, and Nico huffed out a small laugh, before looking around the room for Jason.

"He went to check on Frank for Will, because Will refuses to be seen like this." Percy explained as if reading the question on his face, and Nico gave a small nod, his eyes hushing back to Will.

He really did look funny.

A bit like a raccoon.

Nico could understand why he wouldn't want to be seen like that.

"So, Nico saw it now. Can I finally wash it off now, please?" Will asked sulkily, though the fact he hadn't just done so, in the first place, indicated he wasn't as upset as he might want them to believe.

Nico knew him better than that.

Percy held up the camera and snapped another picture, then smirked and waved off with his hand as he studied his snapshot.

"Yeah, alright, if you insist."

Will rolled his eyes, but immediately jumped up and moved towards the small bathroom.

Nico watched him go.

Then, he looked back to Percy, because it seemed unusual for him to pass up the opportunity to follow Will into confined space with the reasonable excuse of helping him out with his cleaning.

The water in the sink started, and Percy's head suddenly snapped up, eyes twinkling and a grin forming.

"Actually, I'll be right back."

Nico smirked.

Ah, there it was.

He watched Percy with a knowing smile as he rushed after Will and disappeared in the small bathroom as well, followed by a hushed conversation, Will complaining, Percy chuckling, and then silence, which indicated he was permitted to help Will clean up.
Nico gazed towards the window with a sigh, a small part of him wishing he could follow them, too.

Especially when he heard the unmistakable sounds of hitching breaths and small gasps and something that sounded *a lot* like one of Will's suppressed mews.

Yep, they certainly seemed to be having fun.

A few minutes later, Percy was kicked out again unceremoniously, but Nico wasn't surprised about that, either – and neither was Percy, it seemed, who came back with a satisfied smirk and took his seat next to Nico again with a little wink.

"His ears are still as sensitive as ever."

Nico only huffed out a small laugh.

"Thanks for the heads-up. I'll make sure to remember once Will lets me out of bed."

Percy laughed and they high-fived, then smiled innocently when Will stuck his head out of the small bathroom to glower at them.

"What was that?" He asked with a dripping wet face as well as some wet strands of hair that seemed glued to his forehead, making him look unnecessarily adorable.

"Nothing." Both Percy and Nico replied in a sing-song voice, and Will made a small sound that showed he wasn't buying it, then he disappeared from view once more.

Percy and Nico exchanged amused looks, then the door opened, and they both perked up.

"Jason!" They both exclaimed at the sight of their boyfriend, who seemed initially surprised at the loud welcome, but then he smiled at them, clearly enjoying it.

"Always so much enthusiasm when *he* comes walking in." Will grumbled as he came out of the bathroom the moment Jason had the door closed, but it was also Will who immediately leaned up to give Jason a peck on the cheek, so he certainly wasn't any better than them.

"Did you let Nico see you?" Jason asked immediately, and Will huffed and pushed him away sulkily as he stomped back towards his bed again, and Jason smiled and followed, not deterred in the slightest, just as usual.

"He did." Both Percy and Nico told him truthfully, and Jason smirked, before taking the book from Will that he had snatched off his bedside table, as well as taking another two that their blonde had apparently hidden underneath his pillow.

"Good. Then I'd say it's time for some more rest. It's getting late. Frank is getting better, by the way. He's still a bit shook, and he still can't believe he lost his arm, but I'll give you the full report tomorrow. You know, to prevent you running off in the middle of the night for any healing." Jason told them conversationally, though his last statement was directed at Will alone, and they all knew it.

Will looked ready to fight him, especially when Jason continued to pat down the rest of the blanket for any more hidden books, just to find two more.

What was it with Will and books these days? He hated reading.

He had told Nico plenty of times he hated it, yet here he was, constantly organizing more and more books, and it had been this way ever since they had left Camp, if not even before then.

If Nico remembered correctly, it had started when Jason had been injured, and only gotten worse over time.

There was no way Will could know about *everything* there was in the world, he knew that, right?

"I can rest *and* read, Jason. It's called multi-tasking."
"Then I'd like you to multi-task and rest and sleep at the same time, Freckles." Jason replied immediately and carried the books over to the already overfilled table, while Will let out a low whine, followed by a loud groan.

"You are impossible! I did everything you told me to. I let you turn me into a walking vegetable dip, I allowed Percy to take pictures for evidence, I waited for Nico to bear witness to my misery. Why not let me read?"

Yeah, why not?

Nico had to admit he wasn't sure he saw Jason's reasoning right now, either.

Even if Will didn't like reading, or if he had read a lot more lately than they had ever seen him do before, it was still kind of Will's decision to do as he pleased – and if he wanted to bury himself in books and drink up that knowledge like Dakota drank Kool-Aid, then Nico didn't see much of a reason to stop him as long as it didn't cause him any harm.

"Because you've been doing nothing but for the past weeks, and I want to sleep with you tonight without getting imprints of books on any part of my body. Plus, you nearly died yesterday due to overusing your powers, I'm not letting you near anything that might make you do any more healing until tomorrow noon at the very least." Jason replied, and Nico guessed that did make sense.

He shared a look with Percy, then glanced back towards Will, but their boyfriend surprisingly enough didn't seem upset in the slightest, instead pink in the face and his eyes darting to them and back, before he very intently studied the wall next to him.

What? What had Jason…oh…

"Not like that, though that can be arranged, too." Jason elaborated, and Percy snickered, while Nico's lips quirked up as he saw a light blush creeping up Jason's neck.

Aww, his boyfriends were such adorable idiots.

"Will wants Jason to sleep with him." Percy stage-whispered into Nico's ear, and Nico snorted out a laugh against his better judgment, while Will's head whipped around to glower at them darkly, his blush only deepening.

"Oh, hush, you two! I didn't say any such thing. Jason, you can sleep on the floor, for all I care. I had some very important things I wanted to read up on, and it will be your fault if I don't get to them in time before the information will be vital, just so you know."

"Okay." Jason replied easily, and Nico made a face, the same moment Will gaped at him and grabbed his pillow to throw it at the blonde.

"How dare you say okay to that?!"

Yeah, Nico had seen that coming.

"You know, I preferred it when he wanted Jason to sleep with him." He muttered towards Percy, and could see him nodding out of his peripheral vision as he kept his eyes on his two blondes.

Jason let the pillow hit him in the face, then caught it before it fell on the floor.

Then, he simply sighed and started moving towards Will's bed, motioning for him to move his head so he could put the pillow back in its rightful place.

Will grumbled, then huffed, then looked away and let Jason do as he wished, clearly upset.

The next moment, Jason let himself fall on top of Will without warning or words, and the creaking of the bed was almost louder than Will's groan and string of complaints and curses that flew from his lips faster than Nico could blink.

Oh dear.
Those guys.

He shared another look with Percy, then the two shook their heads and watched how Will kept ranting and half-heartedly nudging Jason's arms or his sides, while Jason started...what was he doing?

"No, you can't bribe me with kisses, Jason. Forget it. I am deeply upset. Just because you're acting all gentle and affectionate, doesn't mean I'm going to forgive you so easily. No, not even if you kiss down my neck like that. How dare you, even?"

Ah, so that was what he was doing.

Jason pulled back slightly to look down at Will, undoubtedly to check whether Will was genuinely uncomfortable.

But then, he leaned back down and started kissing Will all over again, and, for all of Will's complaining, he sure stopped pushing Jason away in any sort of way, and Nico could even spot his hand closing around Jason's arm to keep him close, instead.

So, yeah, he was pretty sure they were fine.

Returning his attention to Percy, he found him eyeing their boyfriends with a wistful look, though he made no move to leave Nico's side, his hands idly playing with Nico's blanket.

"Ten bucks that Jason manages to bribe him with kisses." He whispered quietly to get his attention, and Percy's gaze snapped to him immediately.

"Losing battle, no deal. But I bet twenty bucks that Jason's finishing blow will be kissing Will's hands and telling him how much he loves him."

Ah, damn, that was totally what was going to happen, Nico couldn't possibly go with that.

"Twenty-five bucks that Will blushes like crazy in response." He whispered urgently, and Percy leaned forward more, his eyes gleaming.

"Thirty bucks that they'll make out." He hissed urgently, but Nico could top that.

"Thirty-five bucks that Will would top if they did." He insisted, and Percy let himself fall back with a huff.

"No way. Deal."

They shook hands on it, then checked on their boyfriends, just to see Jason sitting on Will's lap and kissing his hands gently, his entire focus on their blonde, and Will likewise only seemed to have eyes for Jason, sitting there with a flushed face and his lips slightly parted to let out weak huffs of air as Jason continued his ministrations.

Percy and Nico grinned at each other knowingly, then Nico patted the space next to him for Percy to get in.

If Jason and Will were sharing spaces, Nico didn't want Percy to end up sleeping in that puny bed in the corner all by himself.

Percy didn't need him to tell him twice.

Yes, much better.

Now, the night could come.

And the rest of the world could wait.
ENJOY!!

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-mel-chan366
- New Years from Advent Calendar times ;)
- Our dorks in Christmas sweaters!! :D
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-for-mel-chan366
- The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-mel-chan366-now-i
- Ice cream time ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/15657714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-chan366-3-3-some
- <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/16099099644/another-of-my-may-madness-commissions-a-fabulous
- The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-ever-fabulous
- ...Boxer Shorts XD ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164308263854/let-me-just-take-this-time-to-say-that
- The guys 'admiring' Jason in his leather jacket ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/16442608554/another-fun-very-colourful-commission-for
- Pride ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/165225200564/a-cozy-commission-for-the-fantastic
- A peaceful moment in the Hades Cabin (so soft!!!!!! so peaceful!!!!!! so cozy!!!!!!)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/15845052859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-mel-chan366-3
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love them too much not to share them ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-commission-for
- Jercy Soft Kiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164389230829/an-adorable-sketch-commission-for-mel-chan366
- Solangelo Date <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/16750444572/three-super-sweet-commissions-for-mel-chan366-i

***Alright, here it comes: We have three (3) magnificent pieces right here, for all those with the Jasico and Percico feels. Jasico with Nico doing the mighty deed of cleaning Jason's glasses for him, Percy being cuddly while Nico is rambling™, and Jason blowing raspberries on Nico's stomach (Nico, now there's drawn proof that you LOVE it, no more complaints allowed.) ***

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my
firstborn child :) (Mostly because there won't be one. Sorry. But you can have a cookie?)
PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR THIS SERIES:
http://sta.sh/055hx09e5r9 - perfect depiction of Kyle :)
http://sta.sh/0h2pt887zfi - adorable Will with flowers <3
http://sta.sh/02yyxy10gpdx - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3
http://sta.sh/0qy66ka69y2 - our four dorks once more <3
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing how cute Will is :)  
- Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will ;)
- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well ;)
http://sta.sh/01b1sirqkgib - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3
https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/148608464261/fanart-for-mel-chan366-s- 
awesome-fanfic-that-you
- A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater!! <3
https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/165104687691/redraw-of-the-comfort-sweaters-
drawing-that-i
- A super cute redraw of our Will in his comfort sweater!! :D (Also, my new phone 
background XD)
https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/148907674701/some-more-fanart-of-mel-chan366-s-
lovely-fanfic
- Will with blanket <3
https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/150587339536/more-fanart-of-mel-chan366-s-
lovely-fanfic-this
- THE FLOWER CROWN SCENE FROM THE LAST SEQUEL!!!!!!!!!!!!
https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/164869065551/fan-art-of-the-contract-group-
from-mel-chan366-s
- THE TEAM!!!!!! THE WHOLE TEAM!!!!!! I AM FOREVER IN AWE AND 
GRATEFUL AND AM ORDERING Y’ALL TO LOOK AT THIS RIGHT 
AWAY!!!! PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THE GODS DO IT!!!
https://sta.sh/01m7zhnbfjil
- HAVE A PINING ASH FOR HANNAH!!!!!! (Seriously, look at this. Now we 
know why Ash got a crush ;) And omg do they have it baaaad :))
https://ender-rhian.tumblr.com/post/167424529996/leah-and-will-from-mel-chan366-
s-fic-they
- Leah and Will!!!!! I swear I am in love!!! Just look at how happy they look!!!!!!!!! 
AND LOOK AT LEAH!!!!!!! AAAAAHHHHH!!!!!
https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494-this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-
but-here-you
- A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy, 
challenge-loving dorks <3
http://artbybansheeender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-
for-my-patreon-tari
- Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3
http://artbybansheeender.tumblr.com/post/163931701986/just-finished-a-nico-di-
angelo-commission-two
- Nico in his winter outfit :) 
http://artbybansheeender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-
commission-for-my-amazing-patron
- Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD
- Jason and the leather jacket >:)

- This was a very self-indulgent piece of the guys in their early thirties <3 (I just love thinking about them after all of this is over, just living a normal life in New Rome...now they just gotta survive long enough to make it there ;))

Aaaand here comes a Mini-Comic from WoB times, commissioned from the super sweet Alexandra:
- That one time Percy gave Will flowers... <3

Check End Notes for more links!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Edit: Attention!! No update** on the 16th!! Due to unexpected changes I won't be home that week and nowhere near a laptop, so I can’t upload!!
Update on the 30th of Dec should still happen, but I'll keep you updated!!
Sorry about this, and I wish you all the best!!!!

A/N: Hey Cupcakes ;D

Wow, another two weeks have passed :o Time sure flies...
Now it's time to panic about all the Christmas gifts I DID NOT YET GET! D; I hope you're all faring better, and that you find some peace and quiet in these rather busy-seeming times, no matter what you celebrate/whether you celebrate at all or not ;)

So, here comes the next chapter! :D

Thanks so much for all the wonderful comments so far, they still (and always will) mean everything to me!
Also, as always, special thanks to my amazing beta-reader!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Wish you all the best, and see you in two weeks! (probably, tho I'm reluctant to upload angst during times that are supposed to be happy and cheerful...)
-Tári

No Trigger Warnings for this chapter (though there's the usual mentions/implications, especially regarding depression, and there's also (unrelated to depression) the f-slur in here once.)
(Oh yes, also, be prepared for smut.)
Enjoy!

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**Chapter 11: Progress, Peace and Parties**

"Get back here so I can punch you in the face!" Nico yelled after his cruel and horrible boyfriend, but Will kept on running, anyways.

Nico could even swear he heard him laugh, though maybe he was also just panting loudly.

He scowled after his boyfriend, trying to calculate whether or not he could still hit him by kicking one of Hazel's gems in his direction, but then he decided it wasn't worth trying.

Plus, his legs already ached enough.
Same as his body.

Gods, he was just. So, Done.

Four days.

It had taken four days for Will to let Nico go free from all the things he had been attached to.

Sure, Will had taken him off the IV after Nico had complained and whined about food the day after he had woken up, but, while Nico had craved the greasiest and unhealthiest McDonald's food possible, Will had tortured him by having him eat porridge.

The knowledge that Percy had been forced to eat the same food hadn't made him feel any better, either.

Still, he had hoped for better once that was gone.

Now, he was free of those tubes, but his body was weaker than he had expected, and they were on a tight schedule.

In a way, he wished he still had the excuse of those tubes to get away from this.

Nico tried to catch his breath, his hands on his knees as he bent over wheezing, while Will kept running away as if to prove to him how much better he was at running right now.

Under normal circumstances, Nico could have easily caught up with him (mostly because Will wasn't really trying).

Now, he felt as if he had already run a marathon, and his lungs burnt as if somebody was trying to pierce them with long, hot needles.

Not to mention the way his heart raced in his chest, his pulse pounding in his ears louder than any laugh Will could have let out.

In other words, Nico was dying.

Not necessarily literally, but it felt horrible enough.

"Let's take a break." Hazel suggested, but he only shot her a dark scowl, before he allowed his features to soften.

"Not yet." He insisted, trying to keep his voice even, but it was audible how exhausted he was, already.

They hadn't even attempted any power-training yet, only doing basic workout exercises, and now, running.

Will had insisted they should start small, and now, contrary to Nico's initial hopes and beliefs, that proved to be the right choice, after all.

Nico hated it.

They had no time for this.

Jason had explained the situation at Camp Half-Blood to them the very next morning after his talk with Reyna, and they had already decided they would leave as soon as possible.

Time played a crucial role in all of that.

But they couldn't leave until he mastered at least basic combat once more without risking fainting after five minutes into it (which had…already happened, as embarrassing as it was).

Nobody expected him to get back to his usual level of skill (except he himself, maybe), but that much would be necessary at the very least if they wanted to stand a chance in upcoming battles and sneak attacks.
He had to get better, and fast.

"Hazel is right, Nico. Take a break." Will's voice suddenly sounded next to him, and Nico jumped in surprise at his sudden reappearance – which only showed how dulled his senses were right now.

*Ugh!*

In retaliation, Nico threw the small ball he was kneading (stress ball, Will had said, and gods was it stressful to deal with Will right now) at Will – but that annoying offspring of Satan just freaking caught the stupid thing right before it hit him in the face.

Nico let out a rather loud and disturbing sound of anguish and frustration.

Then, he cringed and looked away.

"Sorry." He grumbled, because, hey, it was good Will had caught the dumb thing, Nico didn't want to hurt him, after all.

"You're always so easily aggravated when it comes to training. You should work on that." Will merely stated with a shrug, but that only made Nico grind his teeth.

"If you're hoping to provoke me the same way you did back when I summoned Skellington, then I advise you to stop now." He pressed out, but Will just shook his head and passed him back the stress ball.

"I'm not. I'm just saying you're going to make things harder for yourself if you keep that up, that's all. Now, sit down over there, drink your water, let Hazel distract you for a bit, then we can pick up where we left off."

Not with his sore muscles, no.

Nico let out a small, pitiful whine and stretched, his joints popping so much more than they had ever done before, and everything just freaking ached.

"Or do you want to stop for the day? Nico, take your time. Don't make the same mistake Percy made."

What was he referring to, exactly?

The fact that Percy had let Kyle in his head somehow, though they still didn't know for sure nor how?

The fact that Percy had run off to fight when he couldn't even use his arm right?

Or the fact that Percy was training with Jason at this very moment, using that arm that he couldn't use without causing pain, even though Will had repeatedly told him not to?

Nico sighed and trudged towards Hazel in defeat.

Who was he kidding, he knew the answer just fine.

He didn't like the thought of Percy training, either, after all, not when he still winced during acts as small as holding Nico's hand.

But they had gone through that argument just last night, in every possible detail, and, in the end, it had been decided that Percy could do as he saw fit, no matter if Will liked it or not, and Percy in return had compromised that Jason would be with him all the while whenever he did train.

It was a lousy compromise, even in Nico's humble opinion.

"I'm just…not used to so much exercise anymore, I guess. It's okay, though. After a break, I should be able to continue a while longer." He finally replied after taking two big gulps from his bottle, before taking the towel Hazel was offering him to dry off the sweat that was still running down his face and neck and arms.
Ugh, had he ever mentioned he hated summer?

Undoubtedly, the warm weather was at fault for his shitty condition too, in some weird way, he was sure of it.

"Just take it slow. Will is right, you're trying to rush it." Hazel said sympathetically next to him as she patted his shoulder, something that was meant well but only caused more pain for Nico, though he let her do as she pleased.

"And, seriously, control your temper. You're not usually like this." She added, and he promptly sulked again.

Scolded by his little sister. Great.

He wondered faintly what she would say if she had seen the way he had behaved the last time he had been forced to train with Will – then he decided she was better off believing he was usually better than this.

Nico drank some more of his water and did some stretching exercises with Hazel to humor her, while Will walked around the gym hall they were in and put everything that had been moved (mostly thanks to Nico tripping and toppling a lot in the beginning) back into place.

Then, his boyfriend came back with a bucket full of various balls.

"Here you go. Something to let off some steam." Will chirped, and Nico stared into the bucket with a frown, not quite understanding.

First of all, they were training, not playing around.

Second of all, he knew he had said he was capable of some more rounds, but he had not intended to play all sorts of ball games in one go.

Was Will trying to kill him? If so, he could have just waited for Nico to fade, that would have saved him time, nerves and energy.

Nico looked up at Will with a mingled expression that hopefully showed his disdain and confusion, and Will snorted out a laugh in reply, which wasn't very nice, in Nico's opinion.

"What's with that look? You just threw your stress ball at me, and your aim was pretty good, so we're practicing your throws, next. It's good for your arms, your aim, your focus, and it will allow you to let out your aggression in other ways than to throw random things at your boyfriend." Will explained as he put the bucket down in front of Nico, and now Nico was back to scowling.

Did Will have to keep mentioning that?

Plus, what good would this do? He couldn't very well carry these with him once they left, and even if he could, he highly doubted that monsters would be particularly impressed by being struck with a variety of balls.

Still, Will was his instructor for this, so he guessed he would have to get through it somehow.

Heaving a heavy sigh, and with Hazel giving him a sympathetic, but encouraging smile, he pushed himself off the bench and looked around for a target, measuring line, anything.

"What will I be hitting?" He asked vaguely, while Will tugged him with him further away from Hazel and more towards the center of the room once more.

At the question, his boyfriend threw him a bright grin.

"Me."

Oh okay.

Nico gave a small nod, guessing this explained the perfectly cleaned up space around them.
Then, he stopped.

Wait, what?

"I'm not going to hit you." He blurted, feeling positively offended that Will would actually think he'd want to do something like this.

"Oh, I don't doubt that, though I'm hoping you'll improve fast enough to at least land one throw. Just so you won't feel too discouraged, afterwards." Will replied with a serious nod, and now, Nico was back to scowling.

"Will, I'm serious. I'm sorry for throwing my stress ball at you, but I didn't do it to intentionally hurt you. These here weigh a lot more, I'm not going to risk hurting you." He retorted, but Will only hummed and put him in his designated spot, the bucket neatly placed next to him.

"Nico, it's okay. You're not going to hurt me. Plus, I have quicker reflexes than you might think."

Nico still scowled, not liking this idea whatsoever.

Instead, he crossed his arms in front of his chest and looked down at the bucket once more.

This was a bad idea.

What if he struck him too hard? What if Will ended up seriously injured?

Would he be able to carry him back all the way to the hospital if Nico knocked him out by accident?

Also, Nico had really not meant to hit Will.

It wasn't as if he actually wanted to hurt him in any way, after all.

He wasn't like Kyle or anything.

Nico's stomach churned with guilt at the thought of Will maybe thinking otherwise.

Of Will actually becoming scared of him eventually because Nico kept bristling like this.

Hadn't he also tried to throw something at Will the last time they had trained together?

What if Will really thought he meant to harm him, and was keeping his distance because of that?

But then, why would he give Nico a bucket full of missiles and tell him he was the target? Why would he actively seek out a situation in which Nico very well could hurt him?

Was this some sort of test? Was Nico supposed to prove him that he wouldn't hurt him?

Nico didn't understand.

"You look like you're overthinking things. Just do it, Nico. I promise you're not going to hurt me. Even if you do manage to hit me, which I highly doubt." His boyfriend called over, as rude as always.

If he thought he could tease Nico into aiming for him, he was very much mistaken.

"Come on, Nico-Neek-Neeks. Humor me." Will called over, and Nico's head snapped up, his hand already closing around the first ball he could find.

That. Name.

"Stop calling me that!" He yelled and threw the ball at him with a hiss, but his boyfriend merely cackled and hopped out of the way, grinning victoriously and wiggling his eyebrows at him when the baseball completely missed, while Nico only continued scowling at him.

"Nice throw, but hopelessly off. Were you even trying?"
Okay, this was it.

He had the worst boyfriend.

"Just you wait…" He grumbled darkly and grabbed the next ball from the bucket.

Will put his hands into his pockets and fixed him with a smug look that said 'You won't be able to hit me, anyways'.

That guy!

Hazel laughed behind him, but he ignored it in favor of focusing and throwing the ball at Will, even though he ended up missing that time, too.

And many times after that.

Oh, he was on!

***

They heard laughing and cursing and what sounded like a variety of things bouncing off floors and walls, and both Percy and Jason turned to look at the wall separating them from their boyfriends curiously.

"Seems like they're having fun." Percy mused, his lips quirking up slightly, and Jason hummed in agreement.

Then, he focused on Percy's hand, which was still trembling ever so faintly as he held onto his sword, trying to keep a firm grip on it.

His stance was impeccable as always, but, while his grip had greatly improved and he had even managed to land two blows on Jason in the past hour, it now seemed to get worse by the minute.

However, Percy didn't seem to let that deter him in the slightest, because he moved to strike Jason again a split second later, even if Jason managed to deflect the blow easily.

Even if his attacks looked good, they were still weak, especially considering how much force Percy used to put into each slash of his sword before.

But Jason was confident he would get better in time.

All he really hoped was that Percy knew what he was doing, and that he wouldn't overdo it and cause himself too much pain.

"Want to grab some ice cream on the way back?" He suggested hopefully as he sidestepped Percy's next attack, and his boyfriend threw him a wild look for a moment, clearly not fond of the fact that Jason was conversing so easily while he was short-breathed and was currently trying to decapitate him in the nicest way possible.

But then, as he pulled back to return to his former stance and let Jason come at him, he seemed to give the matter some more thought, and his irritation made way for consideration.

Jason aimed for his side, not as quickly or ferociously as he might have usually done, but Percy's reaction speed was still a bit slower than usual, so he didn't want to run the risk of actually striking him.

Percy deflected the blow.

"Are you asking me out?" His boyfriend asked, trying to sound cheerful and teasing as he shot him a small smirk, but Jason knew he was just trying to mask the way he had just winced at the impact of their swords.

"Kind of, yeah. Glad you noticed." Jason retorted, keeping his gaze on Percy's eyes to check whether he needed a break, but Percy was as determined as always as he let him pull back, just to rush at him again for his next attack.
Jason deflected it easily once more.

"Well, in that case, sure. But remember, it's only a date if you kiss me."

Jason gave his boyfriend a pointed look, but Percy merely grinned and tried to run him through with his sword.

"In that case, wouldn't this be a date as well?" He asked with a raised eyebrow, thinking of the kiss they had shared during Percy's first break earlier.

Percy huffed out a small laugh, then he brushed his hair out of his face with his free hand and gave Jason that adorable look of fake surprise and genuine glee.

"Why, yes, of course? Don't tell me you could think of anything more romantic than some sparring together, in the middle of a giant, smelly gym room in New Rome, for rehab purposes for your partner."

Jason rolled his eyes and parried his next attack, meeting his sword mid-blow with his own and getting closer just because he could.

"You think this is romantic?" He asked, humoring Percy by lowering his voice to a low purr, and Percy seemed positively delighted, his eyes sparkling as his grin widened.

"Absolutely. Seeing you in action like this certainly makes me want to…maul you." Percy replied seriously, though his voice was vibrating both with the urge to laugh and the lingering exhaustion he was trying to hide from Jason.

Then, Percy stepped on his foot and jumped away from him, just to strike again, this time a high blow to try and seriously decapitate him.

"Wow, so romantic."

Jason huffed out a small laugh and humored him by meeting his blow mid-swing, and wasn't surprised in the slightest when Percy deliberately came close enough for their chests to touch, their faces inches apart even with their swords raised above their heads.

Okay, was he even trying to train anymore, or was this his way of showing he needed a break?

Jason searched Percy's eyes for an answer, but only found glee and that typical challenging gleam, so he was none the wiser.

"I'm going to get you raspberry ice cream." He breathed against Percy's lips as he came closer, clearly aiming for a kiss, and Jason watched as he halted and blinked at the randomness of the comment, before he fell back and snorted out a laugh.

"Really? That's what you're thinking about, at a time like this? Wow, Sparky, way to go."

Jason grinned to himself and gave a small shrug.

"Well, it's been long enough to finally solve the mystery, don't you think? Was it truly raspberry ice cream you shared with Will and me that day? Or was it something else? Time to find out."

Percy considered that for a total of one second, then he beamed and nodded.

For all the complaining about more training and less breaks Percy had done the past hours, he surely didn't need Jason telling him this twice in order to pocket Riptide and bounce towards the door, motioning for Jason to follow him.

"Fine, fine, if you insist. I can't believe you're still onto that after all this time, though. I wasn't even thinking about that at all, anymore. Do you think we should pick something up for Will and Nico, as well? How far do you think they are with training? I swear, if Nico makes more progress than me, I'll blame you for it. Constantly distracting me. Seriously, dude, I love you, but you are such a worrywart. Not even going all out at me. Deliberately. Shamelessly being soft on me. On purpose. Scandalous. You should be ashamed of yourself. Though I still love you. A lot."
rambled non-stop, and Jason looked over his shoulder at the mess they were leaving behind.

But then, he simply decided he would have to come back later to clean up, and his hand moved to grasp Percy's (good) hand, holding it loosely in his own. He smiled at his rambling boyfriend and tried to follow what he was saying, no matter if he was raving about Jason's muscles or complaining about Jason praising him even when they both knew his reaction speed had been so much slower than usual.

"Jason, you're not supposed to look at me with so much adoration when I'm lecturing you." Percy pointed out, but Jason only kept smiling and stroked over his hand with his thumb as they walked towards the exit of the gym.

"But I love it when you talk. You're always so emotional." He replied innocently, and Percy's ears turned pink as he sputtered, though he composed himself way too quickly again.

"Are you trying to tell me I'm childish?" He then asked skeptically, and Jason frowned a little, before they were suddenly blinded by the sunlight from the outside world that Jason tried so badly to forget lately.

"I said you're emotional, Percy. Not childish. You're adorable when you're passionate, is what I'm saying. And I love you that way." He reinforced his statement once he could see again, and Percy eyed him warily for another moment, before he relaxed and smiled again, their shoulders bumping together lightly.

"Aww, thanks, man. You're so sweet. Now, off to get ice cream? I want a really big ice cream cone. The biggest one they have. And all the flavors. Hope you have the funds."

Apparently, his boyfriend was going to kill himself by overindulging on ice cream.

Well, he guessed there were worse ways to die.

"I'll buy you anything you want, but you'll be the one explaining to Will why you're having a stomach ache when the time comes." He told him simply, and Percy immediately reconsidered.

"I guess one or two scoops are good, too." He reasoned with an innocent smile, and Jason would die for that smile, even though he knew he shouldn't let Percy know that.

"Anything you want, Percy." Jason repeated, and Percy hummed happily to himself, before he continued a conversation they had had what must have been two hours ago, in the middle of their training.

How he could even pick that conversation up again out of nowhere was beyond Jason, but he didn't mind, instead joining in once he knew what his boyfriend was even talking about.

It was rather hot today.

Hot enough to dry their sweaty clothes before they even reached the ice cream parlor and allow for a new layer of sweat to form on their foreheads and arms, though they kept their hands together loosely anyways.

Jason had nearly lost him, there was no way something trivial such as heat was going to stop him from holding his hand for the rest of his life.

Unfortunately, Percy didn't seem to feel the same way, because, the moment they entered the ice cream parlor of his choice, he was gone from Jason's side to check out all the different flavors.

There also went his resolution of only picking one or two flavors, because Jason could see him eyeing at least four of them with looks of utmost want.

Wasn't it unfair that some simple ice cream got such wistful looks, while Jason was right here and only got half as wistful looks as that?

Maybe he should step up his game.

Will and Nico always seemed to like him in that one leather jacket, maybe he could bait Percy
with it, as well? Then again, wearing that leather jacket in this weather would sooner result in him having a stroke, rather than gaining him Percy's attention, he was certain.

"Jason. I have decided." Percy announced loudly and turned around to fix him with a dead serious look.

"Yes?" Jason asked with a raised eyebrow, knowing full well nothing sensible was going to follow that statement.

"I've changed my mind. I want all the flavors. All of them."

Jason breathed out a small laugh and shook his head as he stepped up to his side and looked at the sixteen different flavors on display, while the lady behind the counter looked at them with the scoop ready and a look of anticipation and curiosity on her elderly face.

Jason glanced at his boyfriend, and found him studying him with a hard look, as if trying to guess whether he would actually grant his wish or tell him off.

Sixteen scoops of ice cream were a lot.

Percy may be able to eat a lot, but this would surely be too much.

Then again, they could go back to Will and Nico, and those two might like some ice cream, too.

Especially Nico, who never did well in such heat, Jason knew.

"Alright." He replied with a shrug, and Percy's face lit up, the same moment the lady behind the counter started smirking knowingly.

"One of each of them, please." Jason ordered, and Percy cheered, before talking logistics with the lady, since there was no way to fit all of them inside one ice cream cone.

Jason left them to it and instead started searching through their shared wallet (Nico's idea, who was also the main contributor to the money inside the wallet, big surprise) for the necessary cash.

His boyfriend touched his arm, before he leaned up to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"Best. Boyfriend. Ever."

Jason couldn't help but smile, his insides feeling all fuzzy as his heart did a little jump in his chest.

He chased after Percy's lips to give him a quick peck, then he watched with the greatest satisfaction how his boyfriend blushed ever so faintly and hid his face in his hands with a small squeal, mumbling something about Jason being a dork, though it sounded pleased.

Jason shot the ice cream display a smug look.

Seemed like Percy still wanted him more than that ice cream, no matter the wistful looks.

Ha.

***

"Hey, Will?" Nico asked quietly as he stared up at the ceiling of the gym, pleased to find his breathing was finally back to normal after all his panting earlier.

"Hm?" Will hummed back in reply, lying on the ground as well, with their heads next to each other, but their bodies in opposite directions.

Nico heard Hazel moving around them, but in this case, he rather had her around than his other two boyfriends.

"I'm sorry." He said soberly, knowing it had to be said at some point.

Will moved the arm off his face and turned his head to look at him, but Nico kept his gaze on the ceiling.
"We never really got to...well, talk it out, I guess? You know? About your...well, the vision. The...the falling..." He muttered, shifting uncomfortably at the topic, even though he was the one bringing it up.

Will eyed him for a moment longer, then he, too, turned his head to look up at the ceiling.

Hazel had stilled wherever she was, showing she was trying not to disturb, though it also showed she was listening.

"I was scared. I mean, I was hurt, too. Really, really hurt. But...I think I did understand why you didn't want to tell us at first. Why you kept it secret for so long. And it just...it scared me, I guess? The thought of you not telling us, and what would have followed. The thought of something else happening and us just...one of us just not being there. It all scared me. And I was hurt. Gods, it hurt so much." He whispered, and now, he was the one who moved his arm over his face as he swallowed thickly.

He heard shuffling, and knew Will was turning towards him, though he didn't look at him, and kept his face firmly hidden beneath his arm.

"I'm sorry." Will whispered as he touched him ever so gently, and Nico could feel him coming closer.

He wasn't fond of the thought of Will closer when it was already this warm in here, but at the same time, he appreciated the sense of security his proximity gave him.

"Would you do it again?" Nico asked, though he wished he hadn't, because he wasn't sure he could take the answer.

His heart was back to racing in his chest, no exercise necessary.

Will remained silent for a way too long moment, even if it might have just been seconds.

"No." He then replied, and Nico didn't know how much he had tensed up until he felt himself relaxing again, letting out a breath he didn't know he had been holding.

"And I should be the one apologizing. I know what I did wasn't right. I shouldn't have made that choice for you, and I shouldn't have kept everything a secret. I just...I...I wanted to keep you safe, Nico. All of you. I've let so many people down, I've let so many people die...I didn't want to be responsible for your deaths, too. So, I thought that, if I fall, but you get to live...then so be it. I...I didn't think further than that, I think. Even after seeing it, even after seeing what would come after, it just...I guess it just didn't register completely. Not really." Will confessed, and his words pained Nico more than his silence had.

Mostly because he knew he would have been the same way in that situation.

"I just wanted to protect you and keep you from getting hurt." Will whispered, and Nico felt him curling around him slightly, though they were still barely touching, except for Will's breath against his skin and his hand in his hair.

"When, in the end, I was the one that hurt you." His boyfriend added barely audibly, and Nico's heart ached, though it was true.

"Why do we always want to protect each other so badly?" Nico asked with a humorless laugh, because, seriously, what else was there to do than to laugh?

He could cry, sure, but there was no point in it, not anymore.

"Because we love each other so much?" Will guessed, and now, Nico did look at him, and they both had teary eyes and bitter smiles on their faces.

"I'm sorry for treating you the way I did. I was a real dick, and even though I was hurt, I shouldn't have been like that." He added, because, while they were already this raw and open with each other, he might as well get this off his chest, too.
Will replied by closing his eyes and letting their foreheads bump together, his hair tickling Nico's nose.

"You had every right to, Nico." Will whispered, but Nico didn't agree.

He had nearly died without being able to tell Will he loved him, and without knowing for sure whether Will really knew he did.

There had been nothing in that moment that could have made him feel worse, and even though everything was 'okay' now, Nico never ever wanted to experience that again.

"Back then, I felt confused and betrayed why Percy and Jason would just brush the whole thing aside and talk to you like nothing happened. Now, I think I understand. They didn't do it to brush all that aside and show you it was no big deal, but to show you they still loved you, anyways, and that you did the right thing by telling us. And I should have done that, too, but I didn't, because I was too narrow-minded and stubborn." He admitted, and it felt good, letting it all out, especially after keeping it inside for so long.

It sounded bitter and self-depreciating, but it was how Nico had felt, and now, he was letting Will know, and Will accepted it the way it was.

Will touched his cheek gently, eyes opening to look into Nico's, and they just gazed at each other for a long moment, both of them close to tears, but both of them knowing there was no need for tears, anymore.

Then, Will sniffled and shuffled closer to press his lips to Nico's forehead, which was a bit awkward at this angle, but Nico couldn't care less.

"I forgive you. Can you forgive me?" Will asked meekly, and it sounded as vulnerable as Nico felt right now.

He smiled at the absurdity of the question, and moved to give Will a kiss to the forehead, as well, even if his boyfriend was sweaty and gross.

"I already did."

Hazel let out a sob from where she was sitting on one of the benches at the side, apparently moved by the little moment they were having, which let them both know she was still there and listening, even if Nico didn't really mind.

Instead, he shuffled closer to his boyfriend and started stroking through his hair and over his face, a little disappointed that he was upside down, because it made kissing a lot more difficult and probably uncomfortable, so he resisted the urge to.

Will closed his eyes and let him touch, clearly enjoying the proximity as much as he was, despite the heat.

It felt good, to get all of this off his chest and have Will actually listen and accept it.

He hadn't brushed him off, nor had he denied that Nico had treated him poorly – and somehow, that made him feel better, because he knew he had treated him poorly, but he also knew now that Will forgave him for it.

It was an important thing to know, and an even more important realization to have, because it made Nico reconsider a lot of things he had said in the past, and of many matters that had never seemed completely solved or settled.

At the moment, though, Nico put them aside for a later time, wanting nothing more than to relish in the intimacy of simple and innocent gestures such as his hand caressing Will's cheek and feeling his (now much smoother) skin beneath his fingers, his freckles as vivid as they should be.

"Thank you." Will whispered, and Nico smiled at him, even if Will couldn't see it with his eyes closed.

"I love you." He said softly, because it was true.
Then, the door to their gym room was torn open and Percy and Jason came tumbling in, quiet for their standards, but disturbingly loud considering the silence of the room.

"We got ice cream! You want some?"

Will and Nico, both now sitting upright thanks to the sudden interruption and undoubtedly with their hearts in their throats thanks to the shock (at least that was how Nico felt), stared back at them, while Hazel groaned and muttered something under her breath that Nico couldn't quite catch, which he was instinctively glad for, especially when he glanced towards Will and found him shooting Hazel a surprised, albeit appraising look.

Then, Will's gaze met his, and they both shrugged.

"Comfort ice cream?" Will asked, and Nico smiled and got up onto wobbly legs, though that didn't stop him from extending a hand to his boyfriend to help him up.

"Comfort ice cream." He agreed, and they went to join their boyfriends.

***

"Why, hello there, Frank. How are you doing?" Will asked cheerfully as he entered Frank's hospital room, though he had to admit it was mostly just an act.

If he was being honest, he had kind of tried to avoid Frank the past days.

He had been there for the check-up the very moment Jason had given his okay, of course, but had been disturbingly relieved when Frank had been asleep at the time.

He had tried to time his visits to happen when Frank was asleep from thereon out, as well.

It was shameful, but Will simply…didn't know how to deal with the situation.

He didn't know how Frank would really react, now that he was conscious properly once more, and had some time to adjust and…well, realize what Will had done.

Would he be upset about losing his arm? Would he blame Will for it?

Or would he not bring it up at all and act like nothing was amiss?

Will knew plenty of people with missing limbs, and he knew Frank wouldn't be hindered by this for very long, but he also knew from experience that every person reacted differently.

And he wasn't a professional, he was just Will, trying his best.

"I'm alright. It's nice to see you, for once. Dilek told me you came by the past days, but I guess I must have missed you." Frank said, and he sounded tired – which was understandable, since Will had come at precisely this time because Frank was usually asleep.

He must have stayed awake just to see Will, which Will deeply hoped wasn't a bad sign.

"I guess so. It's nice seeing you awake for once."

"I know you were avoiding me." Frank stated with a shrug, and Will deflated.

"Uh…" He…had no idea what to reply to that.

"It's okay. I get it." Frank said with another shrug, then glanced towards his shoulder and the lack of arm there.

"You know, in the beginning, it felt so weird. Knowing it wasn't there anymore. I thought it still was. I thought I could feel it, but that I just…couldn't move it. As if it was dangling off the bed, and I couldn't manage to move it back. I still forget, sometimes." He mused thoughtfully, and Will's heart ached, though he had known there was a very big chance that this would be the case.

In fact, it felt like most people he knew had felt this way in the beginning, even if their stories had
differed, and their perception had differed, and everything was different, yet it wasn't, and Will wished he could have done more for Frank than this.

But Frank was taking it so much better than a few others, he already knew that.

There had been yelling, screams of anguish and denial, talks about lives being ruined and having been better off dead, and Will knew there were some that still resented the loss to this very day, even after years.

Frank wasn't yelling or screaming, and his progress regarding the rest of his body had been gradual but impressive, same as his mental and emotional stability was something to be admired, especially by Will in his current state.

"However, that's not why I decided to ambush you like this." Frank said as he sat up straighter, and the doctor in Will automatically followed the movement and noticed how Frank automatically favored his left side now for support, which indicated that he had either practiced or grown used to the change already to some extent.

However, the part of Will that wasn't yet in doctor-mode recoiled at the prospect of whatever it was Frank wished to talk about.

Reyna had already let him know that she had asked Frank about the blade wound at his side, but Frank apparently couldn't remember, suffering from short-term amnesia that was way too convenient for Will's liking, though he couldn't very well assume anything without any sort of proof.

He knew Frank was speaking the truth because he was Frank and he always spoke the truth.

Still, that didn't make him feel any better right now.

"I wanted to thank you." Frank said simply, and Will blinked at him.

"What for?" He asked, because, if it hadn't been Frank, he would have assumed this to be a sarcastic remark on behalf of the missing limb...

But it was Frank, and that wasn't something Frank did…right?

Frank looked at him with a small frown, as if confused why Will was asking him something like that.

"For saving my life? Hazel told me how she ran to fetch you and that you immediately came to help, even though you should have been watching over your boyfriends. She, as well as Dilek, insist that it was thanks to you that I am here right now, alive. Also, Dilek may have told me about my leg. I also might have attempted to read my file. Which, thinking back, definitely hadn't been a good idea, and made me realize why I'm not Leo, and why I usually follow orders and don't do things I'm not supposed to do."

Frank looked mildly put off as he said that, and Will didn't know why, but he found his lips quirking up.

Frank was such a sweetheart.

Then, he realized what Frank had just said and what he was doing. He was thanking Will, even though Will had failed to save his arm, and the smile slid off his lips again as guilt spread through him once more.

"That was…I mean…it…I could have…I…of course I helped you, Frank. Friends save each other's lives, right? You'd have done the same for me, I'm sure." He replied lamely for a lack of anything better to say, and Frank tilted his head.

"I have no idea how I would have done any of the things you and Dilek wrote down, but I guess I'd have tried?"

Oh man, Will would have died.
"That's the spirit, big guy. So, how has exercise been going?" He asked quickly to change the topic, and Frank explained his progress to him to the best of his abilities, even if Will had already read all about it in his files.

However, he sat down next to him, anyways, and listened and watched as he showed him how well he could already work with his left hand rather than his right, and that his legs were functioning perfectly once more, as well.

"By the way, thank you for being there when I transformed that first night. I barely remember it now. I only know there was a lot of pain, but I do remember hearing your voice, and something warm, and then I felt better. Hazel said you healed me. I'm glad you did, even if you shouldn't have." Frank added as he got himself out of bed to move towards the bathroom, and Will had to admit he was impressed to see how steady he already seemed to be.

They were all making such great progress, Will was so proud of them.

Proud of Frank, proud of Percy, and proud of Nico.

They were doing so well in such little time.

Sure, ambrosia and nectar helped, as did Will's healing every here and there, but their bodies had to do the rest of it, and that was no easy feat.

"Don't mention it. I'm just glad I managed to help you, at all. I just wish I could have done more," He said, but Frank waved off, the gesture also rather automatic, which helped ease Will's nerves a little bit.

There had been enough cases with kids refusing to adjust and then having issues adjusting because of their mindsets. He was glad that Frank wasn't one of them.

"It's really not that big of a deal. You did as much as you could, and I'm grateful to be alive. Now, I'll just have to wait until I get the okay from my doctor to train, then I'll get to training my left arm, as easy as that."

He truly admired Frank's mindset, as well as the fact that he was such an easy and wonderful patient.

If only his guys listened to him half as much as Frank listened to his doctor, then Will would have three guys less to worry about constantly.

He looked through Frank's file while he was in the bathroom, checking whether Dilek had left him a message or anything, but other than a post-it with a smiley face, there was nothing, and everything seemed in order.

There also hadn't been any attacks, which Will found very important, albeit a little strange.

It already seemed awfully bold of somebody to attack Frank in the middle of the battlefield, but now that the campers knew Frank was 'just' comatose and going to recover, it seemed odd that they would trust Frank not to remember.

Or maybe, there hadn't even been an attack, at all, and Will had simply interpreted too much into the whole matter of the blade wound.

Will looked up when Frank came out of the small bathroom again, and watched him settle back into bed, not needing to offer his help, because Frank's focused look showed he wanted to do it by himself, and he managed well enough on his own, as it was.

"Is there anything you would like me to get you? Dilek wrote down that you don't require pain killers anymore. Was that your decision or hers?" He asked as Frank sipped at his water.

He certainly wasn't hiding blueberry juice under his bed, unlike certain other stubborn fools.

"Mine. I didn't like how they made me feel. It's already a lot better now, anyways. I'm not really in pain, I guess. Sure, sometimes I think my arm is hurting, even though it's not even there anymore, but Dilek and the doctor said that's normal." Frank replied with a shrug, and Will gave a small
nod, not quite knowing what to say to that, nor how to help.

In the end, he changed the topic and asked Frank what he was doing now, with all this free time on his hand.

He had sort of expected him to tell him of books he read (since that lucky fool had no dyslexia, gods did Will envy him), but instead, this giant teddy bear leaned over the side of the bed cautiously and ended up lifting a small basked filled with wool and knitting needles.

"Hazel has been teaching me the past months. She wanted to knit Christmas sweaters for everybody, but then decided she can't focus for long enough, so I offered to help. We changed it to socks, because sweaters are just. So time-consuming. And you need so much wool. You should see her stash. But now, we had to switch back to scarfs, because I haven't found a way to handle more than two knitting needles, especially the smaller ones." Frank explained and put the knitting needle between his thighs as he collected the wool on his good hand, and Will just sat there staring at him for a long moment, trying to comprehend.

Frank was knitting. He had all this free time, and he was wounded and recovering, and he was knitting Christmas gifts with Hazel for everybody.

Will forced himself to take a deep breath and he put on a small smile, before leaning forward to check on his progress.

"That is one fine scarf you're making. Looks cuddly and warm." He praised, though it didn't really resemble a scarf yet, more a square piece of cloth.

Frank seemed to glow with pride, his chest puffing slightly as he started knitting with one hand alone, one knitting needle still between his thighs as he held the other and somehow managed to work with that and the thread.

"I'm a lot slower now because of the adjustment, and because it's a little different than knitting socks. You should have seen how fast I was before. I only needed Hazel's help when it was time for the heel. A rather frustrating part. I guess now I don't have to deal with that anymore, though, so that's nice." Frank told him with a rueful smile, and Will smiled back, sitting down on the bed now rather than the chair, so he could watch him knit.

"That's pretty cool." He commented, and Frank's smile widened a little.

"You think so?"

"Dude, do you know how few guys actually know how to knit? I think it's amazing. You should totally teach me sometime."

Knitting could be useful later on, should they actually survive this war.

"Oh no, Hazel is much better at teaching than me. I'm just sort of winging it at the moment, anyways. She's the one you want to go to if you want to be actually good at it." Frank explained with a serious nod as he nearly lost one of his stitches, but managed to catch it again and put it back where it belonged.

Will stayed by his side a lot longer than intended, watching him work and the scarf getting longer.

"By the way, please don't tell Hazel I told you what you guys will be getting for Christmas." Frank said conversationally when Will finally decided that he should leave and get back to his guys.

"Wouldn't dream of it. Can you tell me what color mine will have?" He asked as he stood in the door, and Frank looked up to shoot him a small smile.

"No way. I don't want to spoil all of the surprise, after all."

Aww, mean.

"Aww, man, you wound me. How am I supposed to survive until Christmas, now that I know I'll be getting a super sweet scarf but not what color it will be in? Cruel, cruel." He lamented, and
Frank laughed a little, before he shook his head and looked back down at his work-in-progress.

"You'll manage, I'm sure. Thanks for stopping by."

"Thanks for staying awake." Will replied, and he meant it.

This talk had gone surprisingly well.

In fact, he wasn't even sure anymore how he could have expected anything else, since this was Frank, and he was softer than even Jason was.

A real sweetheart.

Hazel was so lucky.

Will hummed to himself as he bid his goodbye and returned to his room, listening to the laughter and noise coming from the inside with a soft smile on his face.

But he was luckier.

"Guess what we're getting for Christmas this year, guys!" He called into the room, and was met with Percy's and Nico's curious gleams and Jason's amused shake of the head.

He was luckier.

He had his guys.

***

It had been a hunch. Nothing but a hunch.

Dylan thought about that as he, Bill and Fae made their way through the forest.

They shouldn't be here, but it felt like he had to be here.

For some reason, his friends encouraged it.

"Are you sure?" Fae asked doubtfully, though she was the one in the front, looking around for any danger with her daggers at the ready.

"Of course I'm not sure. I told you, it's just...a feeling. I can't explain. Ever since I came to Camp, I've started getting these...oh, I don't know." Dylan started, but then broke off with a scowl.

He couldn't even explain it to himself, really.

All he knew, was that Clovis was in trouble – if it wasn't already too late.

He didn't know how he knew, it was just...a feeling.

The same sort of feeling he was getting so often lately, whenever he said something, whenever other people said anything.

It was like an additional sense, telling him which was true and which wasn't, and he knew he had felt it before, but he had never actually questioned it.

Now, however, he had no time to question it and instead trusted his 'instincts' by dragging his friends with him to find Clovis.

It had been a hunch.

Logically, there was no way Clovis could possibly still be here.

No matter if he was the spy or not, nor whether he was so voluntarily or not, nobody could survive in this forest without edible food or shelter, and this wasn't exactly the perfect place regarding either, even if the draiads may claim otherwise.
Dylan knew this, but he also knew Clovis was still here.

The only question was: Was he still alive?

With all the churning of his stomach and the tightness of his chest, Dylan wasn’t sure he wanted to trust himself with the answer his instincts gave him.

"Let's just keep going. What does your feeling say? Left, right, straight ahead?" Bill asked, and Dylan was so grateful for him right now, he would never be able to put it into words.

Bill was the one who had immediately believed him when he had hesitantly mentioned that he was feeling weird, and that he had a 'really strong feeling' that Clovis was still here – and that they should look for him.

Bill had believed him without a single question or ounce of hesitation, and it was Bill who had jumped to action right away, convincing Fae and Dimitri to trust him and give him a chance.

Fae had reluctantly agreed to tag along, while Dimitri was happy to stay in front of the Ares cabin for the time being, waiting for the one hour limit to pass that they had agreed on.

If they weren't back by that time, he would alert Annabeth and Piper of their whereabouts and thus send help.

(Hopefully, they would be back in time. Dylan didn't even want to know how Bill and Fae would react if this ended up being for naught and only got them into trouble.)

"Left, I think. No, wait…yeah, left." Dylan mumbled, and Bill gave a small nod as they adjusted the direction they were going in.

Fae glanced at the compass she was always wearing around her neck, mumbling something under his breath that he couldn't hear, though he hoped it was nothing bad.

His instincts said it wasn't, she was just trying to memorize their path so they would find their way back later.

"Is he conscious?" Bill asked, and Dylan frowned, because that was a strange question to ask when they hadn’t even found Clovis yet.

Then, he realized that the churning inside him yelled a definite 'No', while simultaneously whispering a mournful 'Yes'.

"Not…really. There's…something wrong with him, I think. I don't know." He replied, and the sense of dread only grew inside him.

How could somebody be conscious and unconscious at the same time?

"How is that power of yours working, exactly?" Fae asked with a frown, but Dylan could only shrug with a helpless look on his face.

"I wouldn't exactly call it a 'power', really. It's just…a feeling."

"Yeah, well, your feeling is telling us that Clovis is in this forest and where he is, so I'm pretty sure that's your godly power, Dylan. If you're telling the truth."

Why was she always doubting him?

…Because he deserved it.

Man, that was harsh.

"Fae, don't. I believe him. Let's keep on looking." Bill cut in without looking at either of them as his eyes roamed the eerie forest around them for a sign of life.

Wasn't it weird, how they hadn't seen a single animal or draiad or monster yet?
Dylan felt like this was something he should let Chase and McLean know later.

It either indicated the monsters had left to join the never-ending numbers of forces attacking their Camp border and the animals and draïads had fled because of the impending fight – or there was something much more horrible in this forest that warranted everything fleeing.

Before Dylan could get his answer to that, Fae came to an abrupt halt, and he immediately shook off all thoughts to search for the danger, while Bill hefted his spear defensively.

"Shh. I think I heard something." She whispered, even though none of them were talking.

Billy promptly seemed to hold his breath, so Dylan urged himself to still as best as he could as well.

Okay, he actually did hold his breath too, but only so Bill wouldn't feel too stupid.

Fae closed her eyes, a look of utmost concentration on her face as she seemed to try and grasp any sort of sound around them, anything that might give them a hint regarding Clovis' whereabouts.

Silence settled over them except for the rustling of leaves.

Then, there was more rustling, and the sound of a twig snapping in half, followed by a low groan.

The three of them were moving immediately, crashing through the undergrowth without care for stealth or composure, and Dylan knew his heart wasn't the only one pounding in his chest so hard it hurt.

There was no doubt that it had to be Clovis.

But was he alone?

The thought was random, intrusive even, but the moment he had it, he couldn't shake it off.

"Dylan, danger?" Billy asked breathlessly next to him, and Dylan shook his head instinctively.

"Not more than usual, no." He replied, because being inside a forest that should be overflowing with dangers and traps and monsters was never exactly 'safe' to begin with.

"There!" Fae exclaimed, pointing towards an odd shape moving behind an old, fallen tree covered in moss and forest foliage.

The next moment, there was a startled sound, and a head popping up, showing the odd shape was actually a person, carrying another person.

"Guys! I'm so glad I found you. I got lost. Been roaming this godforsaken forest for ages."

Oh, thank the gods.

Dylan let out a loud sigh of relief.

Mitchell.

And on his back was Clovis, knocked out and pale and skinnier than he had ever wanted to see him, but he was breathing, which meant he was alive.

Bill touched Dylan's shoulder gently, clapping it once before moving to help Mitchell, and Dylan felt an immense surge of pride that he seemed to have done something right, for once.

Thank the gods.

* 

Chase was livid, anyways.

She was glad when they brought Clovis to the infirmary (and Mitchell, who was malnourished as well, thanks to the forest not exactly being demigod-friendly and Mitchell only knowing the most
basic basics of which mushrooms and plants were edible and which weren't), but she was still livid they had left without notifying her first.

"What were you thinking?! You could have been attacked. You could have gotten lost, like Mitchell!" She ranted, mostly at him, and Dylan shifted his weight from one foot to the other as he kept his gaze on the ground, for once not defending himself.

Partly because Clarisse was right behind her and muttering something in a hushed voice to Bill, and partly because he knew she was right.

"That's why he took us along, though." Fae put in hesitantly, and Dylan's head snapped up.

What? Fae never stood up for him.

She was usually the one with that look of utmost disappointment that made him want to crawl into a hole and weep in misery.

"It was my idea. Dylan only said he believes Clovis is still out there, it was my idea to go search for him right away. Plus, we did tell Dimitri to inform you in case we hadn't been back within the time limit." Bill put in, waving Clarisse off repeatedly as he turned towards them again.

Annabeth looked miffed, but then let out a deep sigh and shook her head.

"Yeah, I guess so. No, I get it. The sad part is, I know why you did what you did. And I am glad you found him. Or rather, them. I just want you to know that I do not support the idea of three demigods sneaking out of the Camp, even if just to enter the forest, without letting somebody else – other than Dimitri, Bill – know beforehand."

"Why, reminds you too much of when you were younger?" Dylan asked, unable to help it.

Bill gave him a long, hard stare.

Fae closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Okay, he was pretty sure he had just fucked up all over again.

What a shame, it seemed like they had just started to like him, at least a little bit.

"Yes. In fact, it does. The only difference is that we miraculously survived, but I'm not sure it will be the same for you. I can't and won't stop you from doing it again, save all the lost campers you can or wish to save, but know that I would prefer to know about it beforehand. That way, I could have given you my cap for stealth or given you something else that might have helped you." She replied without discernible emotion, and Dylan blinked.

Oh.

So, wait, she was enabling them to sneak out?

What sort of leader figure did that?

Though he guessed he had no reason to complain – if anything, he should be happy.

He was just contemplating what best to say, when the unmistakable sound of a ringing phone made all five of them look around in confusion.

"That's…but I had my phone off…?" Annabeth mumbled, clearly puzzled as she started fishing an old-fashioned phone out of her pockets, causing Dylan's eyebrows to shoot up.

Rule-abiding and strict Annabeth Chase had a mobile phone? An actual mobile phone?

In the middle of the Camp?

"Hello? Who is this?!" Chase asked, clearly miffed again as she answered the call, and Dylan risked a glance towards Bill and Fae, who were staring at Annabeth as if seeing her for the first time.
Clarisse, meanwhile, clicked her tongue and stepped closer, her ear inching closer to the phone
Annabeth was holding up, as if she was trying to listen in to whoever was speaking.

"I…what? How did you…why would you…yes, he's here. Okay, just a moment." Annabeth said,
blinking rapidly and the confusion written all over her face.

Then, she did a very curious thing.

She held out her phone. To Dylan.

Dylan stared at it, then at her, now as confused as she was.

"It's for you." She explained with an odd undertone, and now, Dylan really was confused.

Who would call him?

He blinked at her, still not taking the phone until she snatched his hand and pressed the phone into
it.

"Answer it." She hissed, and he scowled instinctively, before swallowing and moving the phone
up to his ear, his eyes hushing back to Bill and Fae helplessly.

"Hello?"

Who was it? He didn't know of anybody who would call him, especially not on Chase's mobile
phone?

Maybe his grandpa? But where would he have gotten the number from? Was it on the card his
satyr had left at their place?

No, he didn't think so.

With bated breath, he heard a small, feminine chuckle coming from the other end of the line.

"Hello, Dylan. I thought I'd give you a call. Set an example to the others, you know?"

Dylan felt his heart jumping into his throat, swallowing rapidly as he tore his gaze away from Bill
and Fae hurriedly, trying to turn his back to them so they wouldn't see his face.

"M-Mom?!"

There was no mistaking it. He would recognize his mother's voice anywhere.

She was the one who had soothed him back when he had been scared to go with his satyr to get to
this Camp for the first time.

She was the one who had calmed him when he had first freaked out upon finding out about his
godly heritage that his grandparents had kept from him for so long, even though they had known.

She was the one who hadn't talked to him since the day he had found out she was Eris, just a
minor goddess that barely anybody knew about, somebody who was even considered bad or evil
by some people, causing him to initially feel nothing but shame after finally feeling like somebody.

"Yeah, that's me. I'm glad you recognize my voice, still. It's been a while." Eris said good-
naturedly, but Dylan wasn't quite sure how to reply to that, especially not with as much…
enthusiasm.

"I…but…why are you calling? I mean, calling? This is Chase's phone…" He asked, and glanced
towards Annabeth, just to find her making a face.

True, she didn't like it when he called her Chase. Maybe he should stop that.

"Yes, I took some liberties, I suppose. I just thought this would be more…how do you say
it…normal, than, you know, ominously appearing in your dreams, or leaving messages inside
your head."
"How…considerate of you." He mumbled back and began pacing, while Chase and Clarisse whispered back and forth, and Fae and Bill were watching with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

He wished he was somewhere more…private, right now.

His mom was calling him. In front of his friends.

His godly parent was going out of her way to call him.

Wait, why was she calling him, again?

"Yes, I have my moments. So, I bet you're wondering why I'm calling you." She chattered into his ear in a sing-song voice, and he paced further away from his friends, though they inched closer again, anyways.

"Erm…yeah, kind of?" He mumbled back when she didn't continue, though it sounded more like a question than a statement.

For a moment, there was silence, and Dylan checked the phone display to see whether the line had gone dead.

"I wanted to tell you I'm proud of you. You did well today, using your powers properly for the first time. Not many of us let their children know they are aware of their achievements. I thought I'd let you know." Eris' voice was quiet, and Dylan stopped pacing, staring off into the distance with wide eyes and a wildly beating heart.

"You did a good thing, searching for the son of Hypnos. The poor boy won't recover for a long time, if at all, but without you and your friends, there wouldn't have been any chance for recovery, at all. You should be proud. I know your mother would be, if she were still alive." Eris continued, and her voice was softer than any he had ever heard before.

He felt his throat constrict and swallowed thickly, instinctively wishing she could have said something like this back when he was younger, back when he was still with his grandparents, back when all he had was an old picture of his fa-…

"Wait, what? My…my mother? But I thought you're my mom?" He asked, now confused all over again, albeit for entirely different reasons.

"Not me, silly. Your other mom. Your mortal mom. I'm aware that her parents undoubtedly told you-…"

"I…I think you must mistake me for somebody else? My dad is…"

"Your mom was a wonderful woman, Dylan. She changed her name from James to Lily, and her parents very well knew of this. They just decided not to tell you. I, however, think it's about time you know." Eris said, and her voice was still soft, but there was an underlying tension there that showed Dylan she wouldn't argue about this.

His head was swimming.

He was pretty sure he was stumbling.

He was also stammering incoherently.

His gaze met Bill's, and he had no idea when he had gotten closer, but there was an odd sense of comfort in the way he reached out a hand and grabbed his shoulder – softly but firmly, to offer support, to steady him, to give him something to ground himself with.

Dylan still felt sick, anyways.

"I'm going to call you back in a moment." He blurted, then hung up, before realizing he had just hung up on a goddess.

Did she even have a cellphone? Would the number show on Annabeth's call log? Did it even
Dylan still swayed on the spot and moved a hand through his hair, letting out a loud sigh that didn't even help in the tiniest bit with the turmoil inside him.

If anything, it only made everything worse, because he started becoming hyper-aware of his surroundings.

Of his friends, so close to him, close enough to undoubtedly have heard.

Of Annabeth and Clarisse, who were still standing in the same spot and watching him, both with expressions he couldn't decipher right now.

Of the noise around him from other campers that were just running around or getting ready to join the battle right outside the Camp border.

"Dylan? Are you okay?" Bill asked, and there was a sort of apprehension in his voice as well as his gaze, as if he wasn't sure what Dylan was going to do.

Dylan responded with a shake of his head, before he lifted Annabeth's phone again and started dialing a number he knew by heart.

His father. His mother.

James. Lily.

His mother. He had a mother.

He had two mothers.

It couldn't be, right? It couldn't be right, right?

Dylan shook his head, knowing in his heart his mother hadn't lied. She wouldn't lie about something like this.

His grandparents, however, would.

He heard the call connect, and the familiar voice of his grandfather.

Now, he just needed to be calm about this, and get the last verification he needed.

He just needed to be calm and composed.

He could do this.

Dylan took a deep breath.

"WHY DID YOU NEVER TELL ME MY DAD WAS A WOMAN?!!" He yelled into the phone at the top of his lungs, and Billy flinched back, while Fae and Annabeth jumped in surprise, same as a few other campers around them did.

Clarisse, however, cheered.

He ignored them all in favor of pressing the phone to his ear.

"I…what…Dylan, what are you…where did you hear such nonsense, boy!" His grandfather snapped back, but Dylan clenched his fist and snarled back.

The stammering was enough to tell him it was the truth.

"When would you have told me?! All this time, I thought he was my father! We visited his grave! His grave! He wasn't even a he! He was a she, and she was my mom, and you never told me!"

He wasn't even sure why he was so angry, but he knew he was angry, and he wanted to yell and scream and cry.
Only, boys didn't cry, so he resorted to yelling and screaming.

"Now, listen here, boy! James was my son and no matter his...phase, that didn't change. He was born a man, and he died a-...

"Bullshit!" Dylan yelled into the phone, and Clarisse cheered again.

He usually hated her, and he still did, but a part of him felt strangely satisfied that he had her support on this matter.

"Hey, don't you dare speak to me like that, boy. Don't talk about things you know nothing about. Your father was a-...

"My mom, you mean! How could you?! All this time, you told me how horrible and wrong those people are, and now I find out my own dad was one of them!"

"He was not! He was confused, Dylan. That witch changed him, made him think he wasn't who he was. Before her, he was happy about being a man. It was only when she came that he started acting all...all crazy! Crazy, I'm telling you. Wanted to wear dresses, started trying on your grandmother's makeup. That witch brainwashed him, Dylan. I don't know who told you this, but it's a lie."

The sad part was, Dylan wanted to believe that.

He wanted to believe it so badly, because it would be so easy.

However, he knew from the bottom of his heart that it wasn't true, and he would never be able to brush this off.

"It is not a lie! You're a lie! All my life, you've told me nothing but lies!" He yelled, and felt his eyes stinging, though he tried so hard to hold back his tears.

Boys didn't cry.

Then again, that was also something his grandparents had told him, so maybe that was just another lie, as well.

"Dylan, listen..."

"No, you listen! You told me that gays were bad, that they were nothing but freaks, that they would try to brainwash me and that they were unnatural and disgusting – yet all the gays I've met, as well as all those with other sexualities you didn't even know of – they were all freaking nice to me, even when I was an absolute dick! You hear that? All those fags you kept ranting about? They are nice. They care for each other, and they love each other, just like how you love grandma. Maybe even more so. You told me they were disgusting, and I thought so, too, but they're not!"

Dylan was still yelling, but he was beyond caring.

"They're not even different! They're just people, and my mother was one of them, and if anybody is disgusting and wrong and confused, it's you!"

"Dylan! One more word, and you will not have a home here anymore. Listen to yourself, boy. I don't know what's gotten into you, but I am very concerned right now. What sort of people have you been around? I thought that Camp you go to would keep you from interacting with such folks."

Dylan laughed into the phone.

"Oh please. Our best fighters are three guys dating each other and the head medic. You would die if you saw how disgustingly affectionate they are out in public. This Camp is the best place to interact with such people, because, guess what, they're everywhere, because it's just who they are! And it took me so long to realize and accept this, when it really shouldn't have!" Dylan ranted into the phone, all the resentment and anger pouring off him, though he knew he was right.
This was why he had felt so weird all this time, ever since his 'powers' had started taking effect.

It wasn't wrong, at all.

And his fa-, no, his mother had been transgender.

He had a mom. He had two moms.

His grandparents had lied to him, and not only about this.

It made him wonder whether anything they had ever told him had been the truth.

It made Dylan question a lot.

But maybe that was the way it should be.

Eris was the goddess of strife and discord, and he was her son, so maybe it was his duty to question things and find out the truth.

Dylan would question everything there was to question and reform his opinions and views of the world.

"Now you're talking just like your father and his crazy girlfriend!"

"You mean my mother and her crazy girlfriend that oh-so happened to be a Greek goddess?"

Dylan corrected, and his grandfather made a sound that sounded a lot as if he was suffering a stroke.

"Stop with this nonsense, Dylan!"

"When you tell me why my mother's tombstone says James on it!"

"Because your father was my son and he was not a woman!"

"Was, too!" Dylan yelled back.

Then he hung up and was already in the process of throwing the phone away, before he remembered it wasn't actually his.

So, instead of tossing it to the ground, he controlled himself enough to calmly pass it back to Annabeth, who was somehow standing right next to him, while Bill was to his other side.

He could feel eyes on him, and not just those of his friends.

Shame, anger and disappointment surged through him, making him want to be anywhere but here right now.

"I'll be…in my cabin." He mumbled, his voice miraculously calm.

He even managed to turn away with somewhat grace, and the first few steps worked fairly well, as well.

Then, however, he could feel the first tears spilling from his eyes, and his legs reacted instinctively and got him running as fast as he could for his cabin.

"Dylan! Wait!" He heard somebody yell after him, but he didn't stop, and didn't care, and he just had to get away from everybody before they saw him like this.

His father. His mother. His father was his mother. He didn't have a father.

His father had never been his father.

He had two mothers, and one was dead, and one was immortal, and the dead one would never know that he knew she had been a she, and his immortal one was probably still waiting for him to call back.
Dylan fumbled with his keys and sniffled, and the mortification of having others know he was crying was enough to make him shove the key into the hole harshly, before ripping open the door and slamming it behind him, blocking out the world.

_Boys didn't cry._

Yet, the moment Dylan stared at the empty interior of his cabin, he still started bawling and slid down the door to the floor, crying to himself.

He wasn't even sure why he was crying.

He wasn't even sure why he was angry.

He wasn't even sure why this was such a big deal.

But it was.

Everything was a big deal.

His grandparents had lied to him.

He had powers he had no idea how to really make use of.

He was upset and angry and hurt.

He had been an absolute and utter dick to everybody.

That was what hurt him the most, he felt.

And nothing would excuse that, not even the lies his grandparents had told him.

He could have been different, he could have been nice, but he had been arrogant and horrible, and he _knew_ it.

He could feel it, now. Could feel how wrong he had been, how ignorant and _mean_ and _cruel_, and the realization and guilt hurt so much, he initially wished he was still ignorant, because life had been so much easier, then.

But he couldn't go back. Not after knowing this now.

And his father was his mother, and he had never ever told her that whenever he had been at her grave.

For gods' sake, he was even still referring to his mother as his father inside his own head!

Dylan bawled and cried and moved from the door to his bathroom, trying to force himself to stop crying by splashing water into his face, but all that did was make his face and hair wet, yet he still cried his heart out.

_Gods, he looked so ugly crying, too._

"Dylan?"

Dylan jumped so hard he must have nearly leaped to the ceiling, before he spun around and stumbled out of his bathroom, just to find _Bill_ standing in his cabin.

Just like that.

"Get out!" He exclaimed, hurriedly wiping his eyes and trying to find the bathroom door at the same time, horrified at the thought of being seen.

He couldn't find the door and cursed, looking away from Bill in order to find the dumb thing and slam it shut.

Unfortunately, when he did so, he was on the wrong side of the bathroom, and _Bill_ was still there.
"Why are you crying?" Bill asked, and his voice was soft, but that just made Dylan feel even worse.

Especially because he sobbed a moment later, and this had to be the worst.

"Because this is bullshit." He replied and wanted to punch the door, but it hadn't done anything wrong, so he didn't bother.

Instead, he rubbed his face furiously and tried to rein in his sobs.

A hand touched his shoulder, and Dylan wanted to shrug him off, but then Bill was already pulling him with him towards his bed, pushing him to sit down on it before he sat down next to him.

Dylan pushed down his sobs as much as he could, which resulted in even worse, suppressed yet high-pitched sounds and his body jolting repeatedly.

Bill awkwardly put his hand on his shoulder again, then on his back, apparently trying to give comfort without knowing how to give it.

"There, there."

Dylan gave his friend a pointed, watery look.

"You suck at this." He muttered, then sobbed, then clasped his hand over his mouth in mortification.

Bill looked at him with a look full of confusion.

"Dude, it's okay to cry. Don't you-…ah…"

A flash of understanding crossed his features, and Dylan instinctively pushed away from him and turned away, but he didn't get far.

Once more, Bill's hand found his shoulder, and Dylan found himself getting tugged back.

"Dylan, it's okay. Did you know that crying is actually healthy? Much healthier than bottling everything up. You know, that just makes people all angry and on edge, and that, like, all the time. You wouldn't want to be like that, would you now?" Bill told him, and Dylan wanted him to shut up, but at the same time, he never wanted him to stop talking.

"It's just so stupid." Dylan complained, but when Bill hugged him, he automatically put his arms around him and buried his face at the boy's shoulder, anyways.

"What is?" Bill asked, again in that soft voice that both irritated and comforted Dylan.

"Everything."

"That's not very specific." Bill commented, and Dylan huffed.

"You really are horrible at this."

"At least I'm trying." Bill defended himself, and Dylan guessed he did have a point there.

"It's just…I just…this wasn't how I thought the day would play out." Dylan mumbled, then sobbed again, though luckily his tears were slowly subsiding and he could finally collect his thoughts better, too.

"Does it ever play out the way you want it to?" Bill asked, and Dylan made a face, which was luckily lost in Bill's shirt.

"Fair point."

He was slowly calming down, but that didn't mean Bill let him go.

Then again, Dylan also wasn't putting up much effort to pull away, either.
Bill felt nice.

Soft, but also hardened from all the training he kept putting himself through.

He also smelled rather nice. Like lavender.

Didn't really smell like a man's brand of shampoo, but then again, not everybody had the luxury of their own bath supplies like Dylan did.

Who knew, maybe Clarisse was using lavender shampoo and forced Bill and the other Ares kids to do the same, just to assert her dominance.

Dylan found himself smiling at that thought, though he also knew it wasn't true, and that Bill had chosen that for himself and by himself.

"So...do you want to talk about it?" Bill asked hesitantly, and now Dylan did pull back, though he wasn't sure what to really...say.

"No." He replied, and Bill gave a slow nod.

Then, Dylan's shoulders slumped and he started rambling, anyways.

"It's just. I always thought my dad was a dude, you know? My grandparents would tell me loads of stories about him, and about his job, and his school life, and how good his grades were, and how cool he was. I always wanted to be like him, okay? And we visited his grave so many times, and my grandma would always put some flowers down, and my grandpa would explain to me about women and their sentiments, and that was just how the world was, okay?"

Bill nodded, until he frowned and shook his head, but Dylan waved him off.

"And now, I find out he's actually not...a guy. He's...a she. I mean, I get it. I think I do, anyways. I don't know if I do. He's...my mom. A she. She's my mom. I have two moms."

Dylan slumped again.

Bill patted his shoulder.

"That's...not really a bad thing, you know? I mean, Kayla has two dads." He pointed out cautiously, and Dylan huffed, rubbing at his face again to get rid of the last dried or not-so-dried tears.

"Yeah, but that's Kayla."

Bill gave him a long, pointed look, and Dylan winced.

"Sorry. I think that...came out wrong. I...I didn't mean it in a bad way, promise." He mumbled, and to his surprise, Bill actually seemed to believe him, his gaze softening again as he gave a small nod.

"It's just...a lot to take in at once, I guess. I always wanted to be like him...well, my dad, but it's my mom now, and I'm not sure I can be like that. I'm a guy. I mean, I think I'm a guy. Bill, am I a guy?" He hated how uncertain he sounded.

Boys weren't supposed to be uncertain, they weren't supposed to doubt.

Bill looked him straight in the eyes.

Then, he shrugged.

"Only you can say that, Dylan. Same as only your mom could say that she was a woman. Gender is a bit of a tricky matter, you know?"

Dylan noticed.
He had *been* noticing, ever since agender Ash had left the Camp to go with Grace and co, and ever since genderfluid Jess from the Hermes cabin was roaming the Camp grounds.

Not to mention that whole club of transgender people that met up every Wednesday for activities or just to chit-chat that he had accidentally stumbled over the other day, which was a weird thing to remember now.

Anyways, he had noticed gender was just as infuriatingly confusing as sexualities, and he still wished he could go back to the easier days when he had been ignorant and stupid.

The saying 'Ignorance was bliss' came to mind, and, *gods*, was it accurate.

"It just…I wish I had known. Before now, I mean. All these years, I talked about…about *her* like she was…not her. It's like I was talking about a completely different person."

"Not really. It was still her, Dylan. She's still your mom. Just that you were using the wrong pronouns and name. But hey, you didn't know." Bill replied quietly, and Dylan knew he was right, but he still felt bad.

He didn't like feeling bad.

He didn't like feeling this guilty.

"But, you're okay with it, right? That she wasn't a guy?" Bill asked again, and the caution was back in his voice that Dylan couldn't place.

"Well, I guess? I mean, I don't *understand*, because, like, how could somebody not be the same gender as their body, but…there's nothing I can do about it, is there?" He replied with a shrug, and Bill hesitated for a moment.

"It's much less being the 'same gender as your body' than being 'the gender other people assign you', Dylan. And that's pretty simple. Imagine you woke up in the morning and got ready and walked outside, and then there's guys calling after you, calling you a pretty girl. Imagine sitting down in class and the teacher calling you by the wrong name, sorting you with the girls. Imagine everybody around you repeatedly calling you a girl or using female pronouns, when you *know* you're a guy." Bill explained, and Dylan stilled, trying to picture it for a moment.

Then, he frowned.

"That's stupid."

"That's reality." Bill said quietly, and he sounded so sad, Dylan glanced sideways at him.

But Bill wasn't meeting his eyes.

"So, that's what my mom had to go through?"

Bill hesitated.

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe she also didn't know until later. Sometimes, you know something seems a little off, or maybe you don't question it at all, but one day you just…know. It's different for everybody, you know?"

Dylan frowned.

"You talk like you're one of them." He commented, bemused, because Bill *really did* talk like he was—

Wait…

No. No way.

Nope. No, absolutely not.

Bill sighed, gazing off into space for a moment, as if contemplating something.
Then, he shrugged and turned back towards Dylan.

"Well, that's because I am. I'm a trans guy, Dylan."

Dylan would love to say he took the verification of that sudden thought as well as he wanted. Instead, he fell backwards off his bed.

"Dylan! Are you okay?" Bill asked, sounding mildly horrified as he stared at him, but Dylan was too busy scrambling to his feet and staring at his friend.


"No way!" He exclaimed, and Bill's eyebrows furrowed slightly.

"No way, you're not okay, or no way, you don't believe me?"

"Either! Both! What?"

"Dylan, calm down. It's really no big deal." Bill stated matter-of-factly, as if coming out like this to Dylan at a time like this was totally nothing to freak out about.

Dylan's gut told him it really wasn't.

He elected to ignore it.

"You're telling me you're trans? Like, wait, does that mean you're…"

"Don't even finish that sentence. I still have my spear, and I'm not afraid to use it if you make me." Bill grumbled and nodded towards his spear, which was placed against the wall next to the cabin door.

Wait, he had brought that thing inside? How dare he? Dylan had a strict no-weapon-policy for his cabin, which was clearly visible for everybody who could read, since he had attached the sign right outside the door.

"How dare you." He blurted, and Bill gave him an unimpressed look.

"Are you talking about me threatening to castrate you, or about the weapon leaning against the wall?"

Wait, castrate? No! Dylan wanted to keep his private parts, thank you very much!

"Both. Definitely both. Both are absolute no-go's. Billy, what the heck?"

Bill merely sighed and rubbed his forehead, as if trying to soothe a headache in the brewing.

"Dylan, calm down. It's not really a big deal. I never wanted to make a big deal out of it, anyways."

"And then you choose now of all times to tell me?! Wait, why are you telling me?" Dylan asked, because, the more he thought about it, the less sense it made.

He had repeatedly treated everybody who wasn't cisgender and heterosexual like trash.

He had repeatedly started fights.

He had repeatedly gone ranting to Bill, even if the boy had repeatedly told him off for it.

"Because I wanted to tell you that it's not a bad thing. I wanted to, you know, give you some comfort. I know I'm not your mom, and I can't speak for her, but I know how it is to be trans, and I know how confusing it can be, as well as how horrible people can be to you. You, Dylan, have been a horrible person to the people at Camp, especially the guys."

Wow, Bill seriously sucked at comforting people, it was so amazing.
"So, if you want to feel bad and guilty about something, then feel bad and guilty about that, and work on yourself to be a better person from now on. However, beating yourself up about misgendering your mother isn't going to get you anywhere. You didn’t know. Now you know. Now, you can call her by her real name and pronouns, and when people ask you about your dad, you can tell them about your awesome moms, instead. Now you know, and you can make a difference. But you can't change the past. That's what I wanted to tell you, before you acted all dramatic." Bill ranted, and Dylan pouted, before crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"Well, it's not every day that your best friend comes up to you and tells you he's a-…"

"I'm not a girl! Don't make me regret telling you, Dylan!"

"I was gonna say transgender! Geez, chill, Bill. You're my best friend. Plus, you wield the spear like nobody else. Like hell I'm going to piss you off."

Bill looked genuinely surprised for a moment.

Then, he scowled.

"You do believe me though, right?"

This was Bill.

Bill, who was constantly working out and training.

Bill, who was seriously wielding the spear like nobody else could. Not even Clarisse.

Bill, who talked and behaved like a guy.

Bill, who looked like a guy.

Bill, who certainly didn't have any boobs, because Dylan would know.

"You just looked at my chest." Bill noted with an unimpressed voice, and Dylan made a face, his gaze quickly hushing to the wall.

"Did not. Don't know what you're talking about."

"You know, it's not really a big deal. I was going to tell you guys sooner or later, anyways. Never wanted to make a big deal out of it. I just…didn't want you guys to see me differently, I guess."

Dylan didn't say anything to that, because what was there for him to say to something like that?

"It's why I have to take so many breaks after training. I have a special deal with Clarisse. She lets me wear a loose binder for training, and in return, I make sure to take it off at set times and let my body rest." Bill explained, and Dylan gave a small nod, sitting back down on the bed next to Bill so he wouldn't feel stupid.

Silence settled over them.

"What's a binder?"

"Oh my god." Bill groaned, and Dylan felt the heat rise in his face as he jumped up again.

"Oh, shut up! I'm new to this! An hour ago, I had a dad and grandparents and a home to return to! Now, I have two moms, a headache, and an apparently transgender friend I didn't know was transgender!"

"Well, it's not like we are any different from cisgender people, you can stop putting so much emphasis on it, you know?" Bill muttered sulkily, and Dylan immediately shut up, guilt coursing through him.

Bill was his best friend.

He didn't want to upset him, even if this was super freaking confusing right now.
Bill sighed and patted the space next to him, so Dylan sat down for a third time.

"A binder is…well, it compresses your chest. So there's no…you know…"

"Boob." Dylan finished with an awed nod, and Bill punched his shoulder.

"I can't believe you just said boob."

"To hell with you, Billy, you can't just punch me!" Dylan exclaimed as he clutched his aching shoulder.

How high was the chance they would have to amputate his arm now?

"You deserved it."

"How?!"

"Oh, shut up." Bill sulked and Dylan studied his best friend.

Then, he realized it.

Bill was uncomfortable.

He didn't like having boobs.

Well, that made sense.

Dylan wouldn't like that, either, he guessed?

Or would he? Eh, he would ponder that another day.

"Hey, I'm sorry. If it's any consolation, I was thinking of other boobs, not any that could be attached to you."

That, as it turned out, wasn't any better than anything else Dylan had said, because Bill punched him in the arm again.

Yep, they would have to amputate it.

"I hate you." He wheezed out as he slumped sideways into his bed.

Bill merely laughed – which, by itself, was cruel as heck, but…it was also kind of cute.

In a not-girly way.

"So, you're wearing that binder thing right now?" He asked curiously as Bill let himself flop sideways into his bed, too, and the two looked at each other.

"Yep. And no, I'm not showing you."

"Aww. I'd have liked to know how it looks like. Is it like bandages? Or a top? I've never heard of such a thing before." He mused thoughtfully, his gaze this time not hushing down to Bill's chest.

Bill sighed.

"That's because you apparently had a shitty upbringing, no offense."

"I still feel offended." Dylan noted, and Billy grinned at him.

"Well, you deserved that one. First of all, think of all the people you've offended, and second of all, come on, your upbringing was shit if you didn't even know your mom was your mom."

Wow, what a low blow.

Dylan moved his hand to punch Bill's shoulder.
"Rude."

"You're rude." Bill retorted, and Dylan made a face.

"You're ruder than rude."

"You're the rudest." Bill insisted, and now, they were both grinning at each other.

"You're still my best friend." Dylan said suddenly, and Bill blinked.

Then, he smiled again.

"And, I don't think I'll have any issues still calling you a dude. My da- mother is a different matter, though. It just…is it okay if that takes a while? Like, I still slip up inside my head, like, a lot…"

And there was the uncertainty again.

Bill laughed and shook his head.

"Dylan, you found out less than an hour ago, of course you'll need some more time. You can start feeling bad when it's been a few months and you still slip up regularly. Also, if you misgender me once, I will make you regret it. Even if I know who I am, I won't have that be doubted by anybody, especially none of my friends."

Aww, he had called him a friend.

"Duly noted. Please don't castrate me. I'm pretty sure I'm a guy, so I wanna keep that." He said seriously, and Bill laughed.

"Wait, so you can say boob, but you can't say penis?"

Dylan gasped and shot up.

"You can't just say penis!"

"Now you said it, too!" Bill laughed, and Dylan gaped at him.

Then, he threw his pillow at him, just to have Bill throw it back.

"How dare you make me say that with my own mouth!" He exclaimed, then the two started the most vicious pillow fight he had ever witnessed.

It was also the first pillow fight he had ever witnessed.

"What are you even so upset about, everybody says penis! How old are you?! Nine?"

"Dude, I'm older than you!" Dylan shot back, and Bill whacked him across the face with the stiff and unused pillow from the bunk next to Dylan's, causing Dylan to topple off the bed again and see stars.

"So, wait, nine and three-quarters?" Bill smugly stated, standing on top of Dylan's bed with a triumphant look in his eyes.

Then, the slatted frame of Dylan's bed broke, and Bill was toppling off the suddenly uneven mattress, forcing Dylan to abandon his pillow and catch him.

The two stared at each other dumbly for a moment, then they both looked towards the now broken bed.

Then, they both started laughing again, and Bill whacked him across the head with the pillow again.

So unfair.

Though it also felt good.
Not the pillow, that was just unfair and savage, but laughing felt good.

"Oh yeah, also, boys can totally cry." Bill said conversationally next to him, and Dylan feigned a heart attack.

Though, maybe, it wasn't all that feigned.

He decided these were enough revelations for today.

Tomorrow, he would question the next things.

After all, he had set himself a new goal, hadn't he?

Now, it was time to look at things with a more neutral point of view and build new opinions based on the information he could gain.

Plus, it would be great exercise to get to know his powers better, and who knew, maybe those would be of use in the upcoming months.

Also, he really wanted to find out what the hell a binder was.

"But, we're good, right? You're not going to bring this up all the time from now on, right?" Billy asked, and Dylan grinned.

"We're good. No worries, if you wanna keep it a secret, nobody is going to know it from me."

"Not really a secret. I just don't feel like making a fuss about it. There's no plausible reason why I would have to tell anybody, since it doesn't really change anything. I'm still me, no matter what my body currently looks like. I was thinking of telling Fae and Dimitri at some point, though. But not today." Bill said with a shrug, and Dylan guessed he knew what he was doing.

"Sure. I bet they know more about that sort of thing than I do, so I doubt you'll have any problems. Anyways, if you do need some moral support – and I mean actually good moral support, unlike what you did, Bill – then know you can count on me."

Bill laughed and muttered something under his breath he couldn't quite catch, but then, his friend clapped him on the shoulder again.

"Alright, fair enough. I'll make sure to remember it. Now, how about we go back to the arena for some more sparring?"

"You just want to get away unpunished for breaking my bed!"

"Damn it." Bill muttered, looking like this had truly been his plan.

Then, the two looked at each other again, and Bill boxed his arm once more, but this time, Dylan did it back just as ferociously.

Bill grinned at him, seeming more than satisfied with that.

Yeah, they were good.

***

When Percy came back to their hospital room, Will was nowhere to be found, and Jason and Nico were only just ending an IM-call with Annabeth, if the fading rainbow screen and the glimpse of blonde hair and gray eyes was anything to go by.

He closed the door behind him quietly, just to have both of his boyfriends turn to give him exhausted looks.

Wow, there he left for five minutes (okay, thirty, but same difference) and the doom and gloom of course promptly caught up to them.

Couldn't they get just one day without peace?
"They found Clovis." Jason informed him, but Percy only looked at him puzzled.

"What do you mean, they found him? Where was he?" He asked, wondering why nobody had bothered mentioning that Clovis had been missing, in the first place.

Since when? Why? Was Kyle behind it? Ha, who was he kidding, of course Kyle was behind it, when was he not?

"He went missing sometime after we left, apparently. Maybe even before then, nobody is quite sure. But now, they found him, so I guess that's all that matters. His state is still critical. They're not sure what happened to him, but he is very malnourished and hasn't regained consciousness yet. They're not certain he will, either. There seems to have been something with Dylan, too, but Annabeth didn't elaborate and only said he's fine, so I guess there's that." Jason explained, and Percy gave a small nod.

Ew, Dylan.

"How's the rest of the Camp holding up?" He asked, because he honestly couldn't care less how Dylan was doing, and Jason shot him a look that said he knew and didn't approve.

Percy deliberately looked away and focused on Nico, instead, who was staring at his hands with a look of pain and resolve he didn't like in the slightest.

Somehow, it felt like life was catching up on them once more, the same way it always did.

Just that, the last time it happened, they had ended up embarking on a journey that had so far killed Rin, nearly killed Nico, Percy and Will, made Nico fall into a coma, got Percy possessed by Kyle in whatever weird way, and caused Will to explode into light.

He didn't even want to know what life and the Fates had in store for them, this time.

Couldn't they just live a few more weeks in peace? Some more weeks full of ignorance and bliss?

"Not so well, apparently. She didn't want to be obvious about it, but they want us back as soon as our recovery allows. The monster attacks have picked up in intensity, and the barrier is weakened. There was a series of attacks on Bunker 9, the last one causing a large part of it to collapse. Leo and Calypso barely made it out, though Leo ended up injured, and a lot of projects were lost, which apparently were meant to help protect the Camp. If something was to happen to Calypso or Thalia's pine now, Annabeth says the border won't hold." Jason told him in a low, defeated voice, and Percy's chest clenched.

Apparently, there would be no more weeks full of ignorance and bliss.

Of course not.

They were demigods, after all.

And demigods naturally only existed to fight for their lives, every day of their lives.

Percy closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to will those suffocating thoughts away, but his throat felt tight and his heart was aching, anyways.

His arm pulsed painfully at his side, but all he did was clench his fist to make it hurt even more.

It felt horrible, yet so horrible it felt good.

Silence filled the space between them, each of them following their own thoughts.

Then, Jason got up with a sigh.

"I'll…go and let Will know. He's with Frank." His boyfriend announced quietly, and both Nico and Percy nodded silently.

When Jason walked past him, a part of Percy wished he would stop and hold him, just for a little while – but another part of him didn't want to be touched by anyone or anything, so nobody
would know how he felt about all of this.

Jason put his hand on his shoulder and gave a little squeeze, ruining both scenarios, before leaving Percy and Nico alone in the white and disgusting hospital room that they now dubbed theirs.

It wasn't theirs.

Their cabin was theirs, and their tent was theirs, but this was nothing, and Percy hated that they had to be here, same as he hated that everything had to happen the way it had.

"This sucks." His boyfriend spoke his mind, and Percy gave an affirming grunt, making his way over to Nico's bedside, because Jason's touch had only made him crave physical contact and some sort of reassurance again, even if he didn't want to actively seek it, either.

"Did you find the team?" Nico asked into the silence, and Percy made another affirming noise as he sat down on the bed, glad when Nico's hand immediately snatched his and gave him a gentle squeeze.

It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

It didn't satisfy Percy's need for closeness, but it was enough to make the numbing pain inside him less intense.

"What did they say?" Nico prodded, though he luckily didn't seem annoyed with Percy yet for not just telling him everything right away.

Percy just felt tired of talking right now, that was all there was to it.

"They're all for it. We can go anytime." He told him, and Nico gave a small nod, before he sighed and gave Percy's hand a tug.

"That's good to know. Now, come on, sit down next to me properly. You make me feel like I'm on my deathbed." Nico complained, and Percy suppressed the urge to remind him that he had pretty much been on his deathbed.

Instead, he gave in and climbed onto the bed properly to drop on top of Nico and flatten him into the mattress, even though it was only afternoon.

Ever since waking up, Percy found he had trouble keeping up on what time of the day it was, but his boyfriends didn't seem any better, so who cared?

Nico groaned, but didn't utter a complaint, so Percy took advantage of the situation and wrapped himself around his boyfriend, selfishly taking the warmth and comfort he needed.

He buried his face at his boyfriend's neck and inhaled, trying to fight the tightness of his chest and the dryness of his throat.

It wasn't enough. Not without Nico knowing what he needed.

"Percy?" Nico asked quietly, but Percy didn't respond, his eyes tightly shut and his hands roaming Nico's back, before pushing beneath his shirt to feel his warm skin and fight the numbness inside himself.

He didn't want to leave.

He didn't want to be a demigod.

He didn't want to fight.

He didn't want anything, really.

All he wanted was to be with his boyfriends and live, was that too much to ask?

"It will be okay, cuore mio."
Small hands touched his head, before stroking through his hair gently.

So gently it hurt, but it also felt good.

Despite the comfort Nico's touch offered, it felt like too much, because Percy's eyes were tearing up before he even knew what was happening.

He swallowed repeatedly as his chest clenched and ached and his body curled around his boyfriend helplessly, wishing he could end his misery like this.

He wanted more, but at the same time, he wanted nothing at all, and a part of him wanted to die, while the other knew he really just wanted to live differently than this.

"We still got a few days. Gotta make those count, okay?" Nico said quietly, as if he knew what Percy was thinking, but he couldn't possibly know, because Percy didn't know, himself.

It felt like he didn't know himself anymore.

And if he didn't, then how could anybody else?

"Let's talk about something nice, yeah?" Nico said, as if he didn't notice Percy's shaking body and his mute breakdown and the lack of response, but maybe he didn't, maybe Percy was just imagining everything, too.

Who knew, maybe all of this was nothing but a very long and detailed dream.

Maybe Percy was actually still in Tartarus, even.

Maybe he had never left with Annabeth, maybe she had simply left him behind and he was still stuck there and dreaming one dream after another, just to have all of them turn into nightmares, into torture and pain and more torture.

Maybe none of this was real.

"Tell me more about the Advent Calendar. There's still some mysteries there. How did you think of the mini-Parthenos?" Nico's voice cut through the whirl of thoughts, and Percy was forced to focus again, trying to think of what Nico was talking about.

He took a deep breath, but then merely exhaled again, unable to form the words he wanted to say, much less the ones Nico deserved to hear.

"You always put yourself down. I wanted to show you you're so much more." He mumbled against his neck, and he knew he was getting uncomfortable, and this position made it difficult to breathe, but a part of him didn't mind suffocating, and the rest of him wanted to know what the Fates would say if Percy simply died right now, due to a lack of air from refusing to part from his boyfriend.

It was a nicer way to go than to die in any heroic battle he had no interest partaking in.

Nico made a cut through his plans by shifting away from him slightly so he could turn his head to look at Percy properly.

Percy peeked at him, then closed his eyes again, though he knew blocking out the world was an impossible thing to do.

"You succeeded." Nico said quietly, and for a moment, Percy didn't know what he was talking about.

But then, he remembered the Parthenos and smiled bitterly to himself.

At least one thing had gone right, huh?

"Why the Parthenos, though?" Nico pried, and Percy shrugged.

Percy knew. He still remembered racking his brain for the best way to convey his message to somebody stubborn like Nico.

"It was the one thing you would have to accept as being true. I was also thinking about the time you forced me to do the thing with the Styx, but then didn't know how to make anything out of that, especially not a figure. Plus, you would have known it to be me instantly, then." He explained, and Nico's fingers started leaving his hair and stroking along his back, until his fingertips brushed against Percy's former mortal spot.

Percy shivered, as sensitive as always, but right now even more so, if that was possible.

Nico kept stroking there, apparently lost in his own thoughts and/or memories.

Then, he pulled his hand away and gave Percy a little push until he was off him and the two were side by side.

Peeking at his boyfriend, he found Nico studying him intently, so he shut his eyes again and gave a small shrug.

"How did you make it?" Nico asked curiously, and Percy shrugged again, turning his face further towards the pillow.

"Leo helped. Calypso pointed out mistakes. Preparing the mold was already difficult, but nothing compared to actually painting the thing. Calypso did the face and finer features, in the end. Leo did most of the mold because I kept messing up. So, yeah, you should probably thank them, not me." He mumbled and gestured vaguely with one hand, before letting it fall back onto the bed.

Coincidentally, that made him realize he wasn't touching Nico anymore, rather slumping against him like a log and acting like a dying whale.

Wow, Nico had to be so tired of him already, to be honest.

They all had to be.

Maybe they were, but they didn't want him to know, because they didn't want to make him feel bad.

"I think you did a great job. And your message was well conveyed. It doesn't matter whether you had help, it was still you who did it, your idea, and your message. I love that figure. I love what it means. Also, I love you."

Percy was breathing one moment and falling apart the next.

He wasn't sure how it happened, much less why, but suddenly, he was crying (again), and Nico was jumping, and Percy was curled into a ball, and he had no idea whether Nico was talking or whether that was just Percy's head as he cursed himself out and tried to regain his composure.

He didn't regain his composure.

To Nico's credit, he didn't run away – he did, however, apologize profusely and tried to frantically calm and comfort Percy, undoubtedly thinking this was his fault somehow, though Percy was certain it wasn't.

"Percy, what's wrong?!" Nico asked, his voice trembling faintly with the hint of fear, and Percy snatched his arms and pulled him back into the bed, back against him, hogging him and holding him so tight it hurt them both, but Nico didn't as much as flinch.

Percy was trembling.

Nico was holding him.

Not as nicely as Jason could, who could just wrap his arms around him and make him feel all protected and safe from the world – but in return so much more protectively, as if Nico was going to slaughter anything in the blink of an eye that dared to harm him.
"I can't do this." Percy whispered.

Nico's hold on him became crushing, but, gods, did it feel good.

"It will be over soon, cuore mio." Nico whispered back with a strained voice, and Percy slumped against him in defeat, knowing it was just a nicer way of saying 'I know, but you have to'.

It was also a lie.

Percy wanted to die.

***

Will woke up because Nico shifted in his sleep and punched him in the side, but he stayed awake because Percy wasn't in bed.

Frowning, he sat up and checked whether his boyfriend had fallen out at any given point of the night, but there was no sign of him on the ground or beneath the bed, either.

Did he leave to get himself something to drink? Unlikely, he was still stashing juices in Nico's bedside table with Jason's help, so he should have enough.

Maybe he was getting something to eat? Percy had barely eaten anything for dinner again, after all.

(Which greatly bothered Will, to begin with, but he hadn't yet managed to find a way to help him in that regard, because Percy was exceptionally stubborn as always.)

Will slipped out of bed and into Jason's plain and ugly (but oh so comfortable and loose) shirt, already making his way to the door with every intention of finding Percy and solving the mystery.

He might be a little paranoid, but this was his boyfriend, and these were trying times.

He didn't want to know what Percy was eating or when or why, as long as he got his nutrition and gave his body what it needed, he couldn't care less.

He didn't want to know where Percy was to scold him and drag him back.

He wanted to know where Percy was to make sure he was alright, to make sure he found what he was looking for, to help him if he needed help, and to make sure he got back alright.

Plus, he had to make sure Percy slept.

He was feeling weird again, a bad-weird, so it was Will's self-imposed job to keep Percy from spiraling back down that hole he was so difficult to get out of again – which included proper sleep.

It would also include proper nutrition, but he guessed that was a work-in-progress.

Will just reached the door, when a quiet sigh made him freeze in his tracks, all senses immediately on high-alert.

Intruder? Monster? Spy? Danger?

Will moved his hand over his medic pouch as he stepped closer to the closed bathroom door, ears straining to catch more sound.

The next moment, he relaxed again as he heard Percy's voice, quiet but distinctly Percy's.

No danger. Just his boyfriend. In the bathroom. By himself. Talking...?

Now, Will was back to frowning, and he hovered in front of the door, unsure whether to knock and announce his presence or not.

So...Percy wasn't getting any food for himself, and he hadn't actually left the room.
Will wasn't sure whether or not to be relieved about that.

First, he had to find out why his boyfriend was talking to himself in the bathroom in the middle of the night.

Suddenly, Will heard another voice, and his hand was immediately at his medic pouch again, his body crouched and ready to barge in and attack.

What the-…

Will recognized the voice as soft, soothing, female, and familiar, though it took him another confused moment to place it.

Sally.

Percy was talking to his mother.

Will had never felt so stupid before, but he also couldn't help the sigh of relief that escaped him as the tension left his body and he shook his head at himself.

Percy was just talking to his mom.

He had promised to call her more regularly, but ever since the whole thing with Percy's arm and Nico's coma, Will wasn't sure he had actually called her at all.

So, yeah, it was great Percy was actually letting her know he was still alive – the only thing now disturbing Will was the fact his boyfriend was doing this in the middle of the night, and all by himself.

Why?

He could have called her earlier? Or mentioned it? Or woken Will up? Or Jason, at the very least, since Percy had shown earlier that he needed Jason a little more right now than Nico or Will.

(Which was another sign that he was getting worse again, but Will still didn't know what he could do to help him other than to be by his side and offer all the support he could.)

Maybe Sally had called him, and Percy hadn't wanted to wake him, so he had retreated to the bathroom.

That sounded like the most logical explanation, to be honest, and Will decided to stick to this one unless further evidence indicated otherwise.

He hovered in front of the bathroom door a moment longer, torn between wanting to eavesdrop and wanting to give Percy his privacy, though he threw all of that out the window the moment he heard a small sob from the other side of the door.

Percy was crying.

Will had his hand on the doorknob before his mind even fully comprehended what was happening, and the door opened wonderfully silently, granting him perfect view of the tiny, lit bathroom and Percy sitting huddled together next to the small sink, the IM-ing device placed on the ground in front of him and Sally's worried face looking back at him.

Will found himself faltering again, the urge to comfort Percy clashing with the urge to give Percy the privacy he needed.

"I just…I don't know if I can do this, mom…” Percy whispered, and Will's heart ached, knowing these words were not meant for him to hear.

He knew, of course, same as Nico and Jason knew, and same as Percy knew that they knew.

Will lowered his head and pulled back a little in order to close the door again, though everything inside him yearned to barge into that tiny bathroom and wrap himself around his boyfriend to make him stop crying and protect him.
But how could Will possibly protect him? He couldn't even protect himself.

He closed the door quietly again, hearing Sally replying to Percy in a quiet, comforting voice as she reassured him to the best of her abilities, though Will knew it wouldn't be enough.

Will hovered in front of the door, then tore himself away from it to return to the bed they were sharing tonight, where Nico laid sprawled out on top of the blanket and Jason was forced to make himself smaller somehow in order to stay on the last bit of the mattress without falling off.

It would have been a comical sight, if only Will wasn't still preoccupied with thoughts of his third boyfriend, trying to find a way to help him, to cheer him up, to show he was there for him.

Water.

Percy loved water.

Will had wanted to take him swimming for a while already, maybe it was time now to make it happen.

While he doubted he would get permission to take Percy swimming, who said he wouldn't be able to get permission if it was for rehab purposes? Reyna surely wouldn't be able to argue that.

Determinedly nodding to himself, Will nudged Nico so he would make space again, then he sat down on the bed, his eyes back on the bathroom door as he waited for his boyfriend.

He wouldn't disturb him during his call with his mother.

He wouldn't interrupt when he was clearly having a private moment with her.

He wouldn't push himself onto him when he didn't want him to be there.

But he would be there for him once he was back, and he would offer a hug if he wanted one, and he would take him to bed and cuddle him and try to help him sleep, to let him find at least a little peace after this trying day.

Will nodded to himself again.

Then, he waited.

Percy ended up needing the hug more than expected.

***

"I'm first!" Percy yelled, and Will laughed as he watched his boyfriend run past him towards the edge, just to slip on the wet tiles and crash into the water of the pool with a lot less grace than undoubtedly intended.

"You know it's forbidden to jump in from the side, you dork!" Will called after him, though he only did it in case there was a camera around here, since he had gotten permission to use this place for rehab purposes, as Percy's doctor, so, yeah, he had an image to uphold. Or something along those lines, anyways.

Will shook his head as he reached the giant pool just as Percy's head broke the surface, his face and hair perfectly dry and a broad grin reaching from one ear to the other.

"What am I gonna do with you, huh?" He asked amused and sat down at the side of the pool, allowing his legs to dangle in the cool water as Percy laughed and splashed around, acting like a seal that had been deprived of water for way too long.

It was good to see him that cheerful.

Much better than when Will had come back to their hospital room yesterday to find Percy and Nico snuggled up in bed, which wasn't all that unusual, but the gloomy atmosphere around them had been enough to tell him something was wrong, even without Nico sending him that pleading look of 'I don't know what's happening and I don't know what to do, please help'.

"I'm here!" Will yelled, and Will laughed as he watched his boyfriend run past him towards the edge, just to slip on the wet tiles and crash into the water of the pool with a lot less grace than undoubtedly intended.

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Not to mention the fiasco at dinner.

Or the nightly conversation with Sally that Percy hadn't mentioned yet, but that was okay, he didn't have to.

He was just glad Percy seemed to feel so much better at the mere sight of water, and even more glad that Reyna had given him permission to do this.

She had even cleared out the building, so all the other Romans that lived in New Rome and decided today was a good day for a bath were all outside and in those pools, leaving enough space in here to let Percy roam and splash around and do whatever he wanted to do.

There was a lot they could do, ranging from normal swimming to a whole bunch of waterslides, so Will was certain they'd be busy for a few hours.

He had originally intended to take Nico and Jason along, too, but Nico had ended up saying he wanted to try and train with Jason, and Jason had agreed to accompany him back to the gym, so Will hadn't wanted to deter them from their plans.

Maybe some downtime with Percy alone might not be too bad, anyways.

"Come on, Will! Get in as well, you slowpoke. I say we do a race. I bet I'll win." Percy called over and splashed water in his direction, and Will snorted out a laugh and kicked with his legs to splash back.

Of course he would win, he was a much quicker swimmer than Will, after all.

"You wish, Gorgeous." He huffed, anyways, and hopped into the water, momentarily shivering when the cold water hit his warm skin, though he kept moving, anyways.

Percy didn't even seem to hear him, uttering a delighted sound and instantly disappearing beneath the surface at the sight of him in his realm, and Will already knew what was going to happen before it did.

He sighed and rolled his eyes with a smile tugging at his lips, and he wasn't surprised in the slightest when he could see Percy swimming over very sneakily in that absolutely clear water that of course shrouded him from sight completely (or not).

The next moment, Percy's hand snatched his ankle and Will snorted, trying to at least act surprised when Percy's dark mop of hair broke the surface and his face appeared inches away from Will's.

"Boo."

Will tried and failed to hold in his laughter, and resorted to pushing away from Percy and splashing him in the face, which had Percy squeal and splash back, before giving chase the moment Will tried to swim away.

"Hey, hold it, who told you that you could just run away from me?!” His boyfriend called after him, but Will wasn't deterred, merely kicking with his legs more ferociously to swim faster, which didn't work quite as well as he wished.

"I did. I make my own rules, you know?" He called over his shoulder, but then Percy was already with him and snatched his sides, lifting him up sideways and making him squeal, before Percy dunked both of them into the water with a laugh.

Will probably would have been concerned about drowning, if it wasn't for the fact he breathed out underwater as he laughed, just to notice there was no water rushing into his lungs, and the knowledge his boyfriend would protect him from certain death had him at ease again before he even tensed up in the first place.

Percy grinned at him cheekily, his face again mere inches away from his own as he swam right beneath Will, and Will found himself grinning back, before he moved and gave Percy a peck on the nose, for no other reason than that he wanted to.
Also, he loved the way Percy looked positively stunned for a moment, eyes wide and blinking while his ears and cheeks turned a faint pink.

Will snorted out another laugh, then he used Percy as support to push himself off and swim away again hurriedly, trying half-heartedly to escape him.

Percy complained behind him loudly, then gave chase again, though he seemed deliberately slow to give Will at least a bit of a chance.

They laughed and chased each other around the pool a few rounds, then Percy dramatically caught him and pinned him to the ground for no other reason than to kiss him senseless, and, honestly, Will could get used to this sort of thing.

He should have brought Percy here so much sooner.

Maybe they should stay here forever.

He should have brought their boyfriends.

They could stay here with them.

Percy kissed him again, this time at the side of his jaw, and Will could feel his ease and euphoria, as well as the urge to share it with Will.

Will grinned at him, pecking him on the lips a few times before allowing a kiss to deepen.

They were supposed to be doing rehab exercises for Percy's arm and body.

"You know, I think I saw one of those love cave thingies over in the other pool…" He purred, and Percy hummed against his lips, before claiming them once more.

"Oh really?"

"Mhm." Will hummed back, and Percy smirked into the kiss.

"Would you be interested in taking this somewhere more…romantic, then?" Percy asked, his voice a low purr, and Will felt shivers running down his back in arousal and anticipation.

They could still do rehab exercises later.

"Depends on how quick you can get us there." He replied cheekily, and his boyfriend didn't need to be told twice.

Oh, he already knew he would get in trouble with Reyna.

But it would be so worth it.

Plus, this definitely had Percy feeling better than he had in days, so, it was most definitely worth it.

***

The next few days passed quickly.

Percy pondered that as he walked with a little bounce in his step, humming a merry tune to himself.

He was in a splendid mood.

Had been ever since the time Will had taken him to the pool, to be honest.

Seriously, that had been close to the most fun he had had in ages.

He wished his guys could have been there, too, but at the same time, he was happy to have been alone with Will.

And the sex…gods, why had Percy never done anything with his guys underwater, it had felt so
Percy suppressed a giddy grin, tempted to just use his IM-device at his wrist to give Will a call and tell him he loved him.

Sure, Will wouldn't even know what he was talking about anymore, but Percy sure as heck wanted to let him know (again) how much he had enjoyed that.

It had been Will's idea to go inside the darkened and more private-seeming cave, but it had been Percy's idea to take things underwater in case of cameras, and the water had luckily proven deep enough for such activities, as well.

Gods, Will surely had spoiled him.

He had even let him *top*, and when did *Will* ever let them top just like that?

Percy was in love.

Percy was also on a mission.

A mission that he wasn't allowed to lose focus of, no matter how much he *still* thought about his time with Will in that little cave, even if it had been *days* ago.

It had been *so* good.

They should have sex more often. Definitely.

Sure, now that Nico was regaining his strength and becoming more active, he knew it was only a matter of time, but seriously, how had *Percy* survived these past months with nothing but a messy time with Will in the middle of the night in the beginning of their journey, a half-asleep time with Nico, a lazy handjob with Jason, that *one* time with Jason in the shower, and then the horribly embarrassing make-out with Will and this time with Will?

How did *Jason* survive it? He seemed to be perfectly fine not getting *any* action, to be honest.

Sex drives were so strange, sometimes.

Percy hummed to himself, then shrugged and picked up his merry tune again.

It didn't really matter, Jason was going to get all the loving soon, anyways.

Right when Percy was done running his errand, they would take him to their friends and have their little party, and *he* already knew how said party would end.

His lips split into a smirk again.

Oh, Jason was going to be *so* surprised.

This was going to be so good.

Clutching his notes to his chest, he looked at the signs at the intersections he came across, though he already knew where he was going.

Would Jason like *his* surprise?

It did seem a little lame, especially since Percy (the idiot that he was) had already told him what he would be getting him, but at the same time, he couldn't wait to see whether Jason would like his gift, anyways.

Percy had spent most of last night searching through the flower-book again, noting down names and colors and meanings and combining them, just to scratch most of them off the list again because they didn't bloom at this time of the year, or were so exotic he doubted he would find them anywhere.

In the end, he had his list though, and Will had been so kind as to call the flower shops around
Percy wished he could have plucked the flowers himself, like he had done for Nico and Will.

But this was just as good. In a way, it was even better, because now, Percy had the chance to actually get a professionally made bouquet of flowers, rather than a bunch of wilting flowers he had plucked on the way.

And he could give that to Jason, who definitely deserved all the flowers in the world.

(Percy might be biased here, of course, since his boyfriend had spent the entire morning snuggling up to him and kissing his face and putting Percy in such a good mood he hadn't been able to stop grinning ever since – something that, of course, was only supported by his memory of Will in that love cave, as well as Nico being cute and cheesy during breakfast and feeding Percy the pancakes Hazel had brought them.)

Oh, this surely was such a great day.

And he was almost at the flower shop, about to get him some flowers.

Hopefully, he had made the right choices regarding the flowers.

There were so many, and all of them seemed to mean something he wanted Jason to know, but how many usually went in a bouquet?

Percy glanced down at his list, even though he already knew it by heart.

Hopefully, the flowers looked as pretty in real life as they did on the photos he had seen in his book.

He also hoped he would manage to pick the right ones once he was there, and maybe the florist could help him turn the whole thing into something nice and pretty.

Something worthy of Jason. Maybe handsome like him. Could flowers be handsome?

Percy didn't care, still humming to himself as he crossed the street and made straight for the flower shop Will had found for him, already finding it open and welcoming, with plenty of flowers already on display, and the prettiest bouquets imaginable all around.

He could even spot some of those…succulents…that their teammates had gotten him and Nico, and his lips twitched even more at that memory.

What nice teammates they had. Maybe he should get them something sometime, as well.

Probably not flowers, though.

Succulents, maybe. It could be a group thing.

Or simply chocolates.

They could give Andrew some with alcohol and see whether he'd get tipsy, though Percy knew it didn't work that way.

(However, Andrew was also the one who got 'poisoned' by vitamin C supplements, so one never knew, right?)

Percy entered the bright and colorful store, looking around in wonder at all the flowers and wondering vaguely how these people managed to cut flowers and not have them wilt immediately.

Must be some sort of wicked magic – maybe these shops were all owned by Demeter and Hecate kids? Or, well, the Roman equivalent of those, anyways.

"Ah, hello. You must be here to pick up some flowers." Somebody called from the back, though he couldn't see them yet, and Percy tilted his head slightly.
Well, yeah? Why else would people come inside a flower shop, if not to pick up flowers?

Percy decided not to question it and tried to catch a glimpse of the person in question – though, truth be told, most of his attention was on the bouquets near the counter, hoping to spot something suitable among them.

But he had studied the pictures in his flower-book intently enough to know his choices were not among them.

These were mostly yellow and red and pink and orange.

Percy’s flowers were mostly blue, purple or white.

This was not starting well, was it?

Percy took a deep breath, then glanced back down at his note, refusing to let himself feel discouraged already.

"I wanted to ask—" He started, but then broke off as his eyes fell on a bunch of small, light blue flowers.

He knew those.

They were the ones he had written down several times, but then discarded again, because only the perennial ones bloomed around the summertime (whatever perennial meant, anyways), and they just seemed so, well, sort of lame.

Percy moved towards them now, worrying his bottom lip as he touched the small buds timidly.

Forget-me-nots.

But they were so simple! Jason deserved something bigger than that, something better than that!

A big, burly man came hurrying from the back and smiled brightly at him, though his lips nearly disappeared in his red-brown beard.

"Welcome! So, what can I do for you, boy? Looking for a gift for your mother? Family member? Significant other? Are we talking about something for a birthday? First Date? Anniversary? Special Occasion? Or, for the brave ones, proposal?"

Percy tore his gaze away from the small flowers to look at the man, but his reply fell short as he noticed the short-sleeved, checkered flannel he was wearing, giving him even more of a lumberjack vibe, rather than anything related to a florist.

"Uh…flowers. For my boyfriend. I have a list of possible flowers- here. I was sort of hoping for a sort of bouquet? something nice and pretty?" He muttered awkwardly as he shook off those thoughts and passed him his note, hoping he would be able to read his scribbly handwriting.

The man studied his list curiously, before putting it down and rubbing his hands together as he rounded the counter and began looking around, his beard seeming to vibrate with enthusiasm.

Percy wondered faintly whether Jason would one day have such a beard, too.

Well, it would be blond, right? And probably not curly in the slightest.

Jason with a beard though…

Percy cleared his throat and tried to force himself to focus back on the matter at hand as he started fanning his face as inconspicuously as possible.

"So, let's see…we have some baby's breath and daisies in the back, but I fear we're fresh out of primroses, especially in the creamy-yellow color you wrote down. We do have plenty of phlox though, if you look over here…" The man told him and led Percy through the store, pointing at the various flowers he did have.
Needless to say, he had a lot.

Unfortunately, Percy didn't like the Agapanthus, and the Lisianthus flowers didn't have the color Percy wanted, while the carnation was so freaking big that Percy decided that could never look good in any bouquet ever. At least not in the one he had in mind.

He asked sheepishly about lavender, since he liked the symbolism (come on, 'Grace' for Jason Grace, it was perfect) and it smelled nice, and the man did have some, but by this point, Percy couldn't picture anything looking nice anymore.

To make matters worse, he kept glancing back to the Forget-me-nots.

"But it seems so…simple. I want him to know how much I care about him, how would I do that with just a bunch of Forget-me-nots? They grow everywhere!" Percy complained, but Howard had no sympathy for him as he let out a loud and booming laugh.

"But it's the thought that counts! Tell you what, if you're so apprehensive about giving him 'just' Forget-me-nots, why don't you pair them with some of the phlox and some greens? I have some white phlox over here as well, not just the light pink ones, and I'm sure it would look lovely to mix those and the pink ones with your 'simple' Forget-me-nots." The man suggested as he nodded back towards the phlox, and Percy gave in with a sigh and another glance at the Forget-me-nots.

Howard set to work, allowing Percy to pick out exactly what he wanted and arranging it into a much smaller bouquet than Percy had originally hoped for, but in the end, even he had to admit that it didn't look bad.

It wasn't as boisterous or impressive as intended, and didn't yell 'I love you and want you and will cherish you forever and ever', but the soft colors and the fragility of the little flowers had a certain preciousness to it that reminded Percy of how gentle and affectionate Jason tended to be.

So, while it wasn't what Percy had originally had in mind, it was also exactly what he had wanted.

Percy mused this as he paid and tipped Howard (whose name might have also been Rupert, name tags were confusing), cradling the flowers cautiously to his chest and hoping he wouldn't squish them until they were safely in Jason's hands.

The way back felt…surreal.

His heart was beating loudly, but in his ears, and his hands felt sweaty but weren't, his gaze mostly on the flowers, his thoughts everywhere at once.

Would Jason like them?

He didn't regret his decision, these flowers were beautiful, but would they convey what he wanted Jason to know?

Then again, Jason was a sap, he'd undoubtedly like them.

Plus, Percy could very subtly hint at the meaning of the flowers to help Jason get the gist.

Yes, perfect.

Percy entered the hospital, amazed at how quickly he had made it back here, considering that the way to the flower shop had taken at least twice as long, but he might have just imagined that. He bounced up the stairs, knowing full well this was not how he had planned on giving Jason his flowers, but this couldn't wait.
Originally, he might have wanted to first get Jason to his friends and then give him the flowers, but...he had to know whether Jason liked them, and he had to know that now.

This was also the reason why he didn't even stop to think as he ripped open their door and barged into their room.

"Jason!" He practically yelled through the room, successfully causing Will to fall backwards over a chair in surprise, while Nico promptly went into a defensive stance, ready to fight.

Jason, meanwhile, seemed to be in the bathroom, if the clattering coming from behind the closed door was any indicator.

"Percy, what are you doing?!" Will hissed at him as Nico let out a relieved sigh and helped him off the ground, and Percy stood in the doorway like an idiot, pondering how he had imagined this to work out.

Then, he heard hurried footsteps from the tiny bathroom and knew Jason was going to be in front of him any moment, ready to see his flowers, and Percy immediately brushed off any other thoughts rushing through his mind.

The moment his boyfriend opened the door with a questioning and concerned look on his face, Percy already held out his flowers to him, feeling eager, anxious and euphoric at the same time.

His boyfriends were mumbling something from where they remained near the beds, and he could swear he heard Nico snicker, but it didn't matter.

Nothing mattered but Jason's face, which Percy couldn't see, because his flowers were in the way, but Jason had to look at them, and he wasn't going to risk him not seeing their beauty and misinterpreting his gift.

"They're Forget-me-nots and Phlox flowers. Forget-me-nots symbolize true love. Phlox are used to convey a union of souls, meaning you're my true love and soulmate, and I love you to death and back. Which is conveyed by all the grass around it, because the Circle of Life from The Lion King teaches us our bodies—...." He started rambling, ready to explain the world to Jason because his boyfriend wasn't reacting, he was just standing there, and why was he doing that?!

But then, Jason was reaching out, and he was taking the flowers, and his other hand touched Percy's cheek and put a finger on his lips to silence him, and Percy did fall silent, but more because he saw Jason's face, rather than because he was trying to make Percy shut up.

On Jason's face was the softest smile he had ever witnessed, and his eyes were sparkling like stars on the morning sky, which seemed impossible, but was also the most beautiful sight Percy had ever seen, and he was more than a little awestruck.

"They are beautiful, Percy." Jason said softly, and Percy found himself swallowing, watching as his boyfriend looked at his flowers with a look of utmost adoration, before he gave Percy the very same look and came closer.

It was that moment that Percy realized what Jason was even wearing, and now, he had to swallow again, because Jason was wearing that leather jacket again, and that tight shirt, and gods, did he look good, though he would have to ditch that jacket the moment they were outside, because it was way too hot.

Wait, what was Percy even thinking?

There was no way Jason would make it out of this door with that jacket on.

He wouldn't even make it out of the bathroom – because Percy sure as heck wouldn't let him.

Percy's hands darted out before Jason even managed to lean forward to kiss him, and his fingers hurried under his shirt and up his body before either of them even knew what was happening.

The next moment, Will took the flowers from Jason with a small laugh to keep them safe, while Percy pushed against Jason as if his life depended on it, and Jason's lips found his as he allowed...
himself to topple back into the tiny bathroom, hands moving to grab Percy's shoulders, but to keep him close, not to push him away.

Jason's back hit the wall, and Percy took full advantage of the situation to pin his boyfriend to the wall properly, delighted when Jason let him.

He seriously spoiled Percy too much.

"Well, this afternoon is off to a good start, I daresay." Nico commented with an amused huff, while Jason let out a rather content sounding sigh as he exposed his neck for Percy to ravage, which was the best treat possible.

They all knew how sensitive Jason's neck was.

And now, it was Percy's.

Apparently, they'd run a little late for Jason's party.

Oh well, bad luck for them, good luck for Percy.


Yep, they'd be late.

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Considering that Percy had practically thrown his flowers at Jason the moment he had gotten them, and that Will had then urged them to hurry up and ultimately interrupted their lovemaking-in-progress, Nico was surprised to see how surprised Jason was when they finally arrived at their destination.

"Happy belated birthday!" Several people shouted and cheered as Nico, Percy and Will ushered their boyfriend into the remodeled room that they had once held the meeting with the senate, all those months ago.

Now, it didn't look like that at all, anymore, instead it was decorated with balloons and confetti, with a giant table loaded with all sorts of food, courtesy of their friends and Nico's credit card.

Jason stared, apparently stunned, and Nico and Will exchanged an amused look, trying to refrain from laughing at his expense, though his expression surely was priceless.

"You're late. Happy belated birthday, Jason. Guys, you're late. Why are you late? You had one job, damn it." Andrew ranted as he moved towards them, but then, he was nudged to the side by Ash, who came shooting forward with a gift in their hands, Hannah right behind them.

"Oh, be quiet, Andrew. I'm sure they had their reasons for being late. Plus, the party wouldn't have started without the actual birthday kid, anyways. So, Jace, happy belated birthday! Hannah got you a gift. Here you go." Ash piped, and Nico raised an eyebrow at the fact that Ash was giving Jason Hannah's gift, though he decided not to question it.

"Which you took from me two minutes ago because you don't have one for him. I hope you're proud of yourself." Hannah grumbled under her breath behind the child of Hermes, and that explained everything.

"Very." Ash replied with a smug look on their face.

"It's not even gift exchanging time yet!" Andrew sulkily exclaimed behind them as he threw his arms up in exasperation.

Ash and Hannah both ignored him in favor of bickering over the gift, even though Jason was already gingerly taking it from Ash and mumbled his thanks.

He looked so adorably overwhelmed.

"Seriously…guys…this is…" He mumbled, and Nico found himself smiling at his flustered
expression, while Will and Percy exchanged amused looks and put their arms around Jason from
the left and right.

"Oh, come on, don't tell us you thought we were joking when we said we'd throw you a party." Will said with a lopsided grin, and Jason seemed at a loss for words.

"Well, no, but I also didn't think you'd...I mean, there's so much else going on right now, why would you..."

"Because you're super important to us? Bro, didn't you understand my amazing flower poetry? We love you, and I love you the most, and of course we're going to throw you a party. Look, even Reyna made it. Ah! There's Hazel. Okay, guys, I gotta go over there real quick and leave very subtle hints about my favorite colors. There's no way she knows I like blue." Percy excused himself hurriedly, and the next moment, he was gone, disappearing between a group of people from Jason's old cohort.

Nico looked after him with a sigh.

Right.

"How did you even plan this? And when? This must have taken so much time..." Jason asked with a hint of awe in his voice as he looked around.

"Well, Percy was very adamant about throwing you the biggest and 'bestest' belated birthday party possible. As was Will. So, we put our heads together and informed Reyna and Hazel of our plans. They, in turn, took it to the cohorts, and Percy tipped off our team. From there, everything kind of went rather smoothly." Nico explained with a little shrug as he swiftly took Percy's discarded spot to Jason's right side, pleased to wrap an arm around Jason and have his boyfriend lean against him promptly.

"Well, as smoothly as it can get, I guess." Will put in from Jason's other side, and Nico promptly sent him a warning look.

"We do not speak of the location issues, Will." He pointed out, and Will poked his head out to shoot him an unimpressed look.

"I wasn't going to, but you bet Jason is going to ask about location issues now. Way to go, sunshine."

Oops.

"What location issues?" Jason asked promptly, and Will raised a mocking eyebrow at Nico, to which Nico replied by sticking out his tongue and then smiling up at Jason innocently.

"Nothing. How about we give the others a chance to congratulate you?" He quickly changed the topic, and Jason shot him a skeptical look, before letting out a small sigh and nodding.

Jason was such a wonderful person.

"Okay. I'll just ask Reyna."

Nico took it all back. Jason was horrible in a horribly nice way that fooled others into believing he was a wonderful person.

He heard Will laughing at his dismay and went to pinch him as inconspicuously as possible, which caused his boyfriend to flinch and gasp and jump away, and Jason shot them both skeptical looks.

They both put on their most innocent looks.

"You should totally say hi to the others." They both insisted in unison, and Jason raised an eyebrow, but then he smiled and reached out for them both.

The next moment, they were tugged closer to their boyfriend, and he gave each of them a quick peck on the cheek.
"Thank you for this. You really didn't have to, but I'm happy you did, anyways." He whispered, and they both hugged him back and gave him a little squeeze.

"As long as you like it." Nico said quietly, and Jason pulled away with a grin.

"I do. Now, lemme say hi to the others. Don't get into trouble while I'm gone."

"We would never." Will assured him with a serious nod.

The moment Jason turned away from them, though, Will leaned closer to Nico and pinched him in the side as revenge for earlier.

Nico squeaked, though he tried to mask it as a cough when Jason glanced over his shoulder at them.

Will promptly put on his most innocent expression, which fooled nobody, though Jason luckily got distracted by Sara assaulting him, and dragging him off towards the others.

(True, where had Ash and Hannah disappeared to? And when?)

Once he was far enough away, they turned to each other again, poking and pinching and laughing as they tried to get the upper hand, though they both knew there would be no winner today.

There were many other matters to discuss and solve, after all.

"Did Reyna get the permit for this place until evening?" He asked, because he had been in charge of distracting Jason until noon, while Will had taken care of Percy's flower problem and the location issue they had been trying to work out the past days.

They hadn't wanted to use the hospital room as location for obvious reasons, but also hadn't been able to agree on a different place.

Hazel's and Frank's place was too small, as was Reyna's, and the barracks were too big and crowded.

The locations around New Rome had been nice, but then, food had been an issue since they would have had to pay for a specific menu, when each of the guests had different ideas on what they wanted to eat.

In the end, Reyna had proposed to use this room, and had set out to convince the senate, which had taken its sweet time.

"Yep, she said she slammed her fists on the table and repeated how well we did on the battlefield even though we were 'just' two Greek kids and supposed to be healing, and how much more of a difference Percy and I made compared to their prided legions. She also repeated how much effort Jason had always put into everything he had done for Camp Jupiter. That seemed to convince them all, so we'll be good." Will told him, and Nico let out a sigh of relief.

At least they wouldn't have to relocate the moment somebody outside their group found out about this.

"Did you tell her about what we plan to do…afterwards…?" He asked hesitantly, and Will shot him a pointed look, before grinning like a Cheshire cat and wiggling his eyebrows.

"You mean…"

"Yes, that. Does she know we'll need the place tonight?" Nico cut in, refusing to admit his face was warming as he looked around for anybody listening in, though thankfully everybody seemed busy.

"She does. I didn't need to tell her anything or make anything up, she seems to have guessed it already. We can stay the night, and the walls are soundproof. Perfect for…you know, music."

"You know, somehow, this feels like we're doing something bad, like plotting a murder." Nico mumbled under his breath, and Will snickered as he put an arm around Nico.

"Good thing we're not. Murder wouldn't be nearly as enjoyable as what we're plotting. He's going to love it."

Oh, Jason would love it.

At least that's what they were hoping for.

"Are we still on for leaving tomorrow? Does Jason know about that?" He asked as an afterthought, and Will's face fell for a moment.

He still didn't like the idea of them leaving – which was understandable, of course, but it still pained Nico to see him still so strongly against it.

Sure, Percy and Nico were still nowhere near as fit as before, but it had improved enough to warrant them leaving and returning to Camp Half-Blood.

Mostly because they all knew that, if they didn't do it now, they wouldn't get another chance.

"He doesn't. I didn't have the heart to tell him. I didn't even tell Percy. He was in such a great mood the past days, I didn't want to ruin the party for him." Will said quietly, and Nico looked towards Percy, who was leaning against the wall like he was either trying to be cool or flirt, chatting animatedly with Hazel, who frowned at him with a look that said she was suspecting something.

Then, he glanced at Jason, who was laughing at something Dakota was telling him as he repeatedly patted his shoulder, and Nico looked down to the ground.

Yeah, he could completely understand Will's reasoning.

This was why he had hoped Will would do it.

"I'll let them know...later." He muttered, and Will tensed next to him, before letting out a small sigh and nodding, his hand on Nico's side stroking soothingly.

"I'll...help you with that. Later."

They shared a look.

Both of them knew they probably wouldn't get to this matter until tomorrow, until the party was over and their guys got to have a nice and peaceful and beautiful night.

But hey, tomorrow didn't sound half bad, right?

As long as one didn't consider they'd be leaving tomorrow.

Gods, so many things could go wrong…

What if they didn't even make it back to Camp?

What if this was the last time they would all be together?

Nico shook his head and leaned up to give Will a peck on the lips, which had Will tugging him closer and putting their foreheads together, both of them keeping their eyes closed for a moment.

No, it would be okay.

They simply had to make the best of the here and now, right?

Yeah, it would be okay.

"Time to celebrate?" Will asked quietly, and Nico took a deep breath, trying to regain his composure.
"Time to celebrate." He agreed, and they shared a quick kiss before letting go of each other, though their hands remained linked as they began their quest of mingling with the other people present.

They had a party to take care of, food to try, and a few more things to plan out until evening, so their thing would work out as intended.

No time to feel blue.

"You know, I've always loved the sky. So many blue colors. Have I mentioned that I love the color blue? All shades of it, really. I seriously don't own enough blue clothes, in my opinion. What do you think?" They heard Percy babbling, and a smile hushed back over Nico's face.

"Let's go save Hazel first, alright?" He suggested, and Will was also smiling as they promptly made a beeline for their very-much-not-subtle boyfriend.

Nico selfishly wished things would always be like this.

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Jason was still floored.

Sure, Percy had told him they would throw him a party as soon as possible.

Yes, his boyfriends had been acting a little strange ever since Will had very ominously requested a private talk with Reyna, without Jason around for no discernible reason.

And yeah, Percy had given him what could probably be considered a sort of belated birthday gift with that absolutely lovely bouquet that was currently safe and sound in a vase in their room.

(Even if Jason had been more than tempted to take those flowers with him for no other reason than to touch them, smell them, and let everybody know his boyfriend had gotten him flowers.)

However, he had still not expected this.

The room was nearly overflowing with people, all friends of Jason, and, while it seemed crazy to have all these people in the same place, Jason couldn't explain how great it felt to catch up with them again.

There were people from his old cohort, as well as people from other cohorts and friends he had made in New Rome, even a few fawns (no, satyrs, wait, yes, fawns – ugh, whatever) and, while most of them helplessly exaggerated on their congratulating, he still found himself laughing a great deal and enjoying their company.

There was a difference in meeting them on the battleground or here, and he didn't know how much he had missed the chit-chat and tidbits of crazy gossip until Dakota pulled him aside and insisted the barracks were haunted, before Sara pulled him aside only a few minutes later and explained that Ash had been playing tricks on Andrew the past nights and now the campers thought there was a mania on the loose.

His boyfriends left him to himself at first, watching him from afar and waving whenever Jason looked over, until Will and Nico suddenly disappeared from sight and Percy popped up at his side, taking his hand and joining in on the conversations easily, making people laugh and smile, or changing the topic effortlessly whenever topics were breached that he knew Jason didn't like elaborating on.

He was momentarily dragged off by Gwen and some other girls he vaguely remembered, but Percy ended up by his side in a heartbeat again, practically glued to his arm, which Jason had to admit he liked a lot.

He liked his boyfriends close, in general, especially in crowds like this.

Which was probably also why he felt a lot more at ease when Will and Nico once more appeared at his side, especially when Nico rubbed his head against his right arm and Percy kept holding onto his left, while Will took over the talking for the most part and shot him a few of his beautiful
smiles every here and there.

His friends talked and talked, telling his boyfriends all the stories he had not wanted them to know about (thanks so much, Dakota, you traitor), but he also didn't bother interrupting them and simply laughed along.

Who cared about pride, after all? These were his boyfriends, they knew him at his best, and knew him at his worst, so knowing he used to trip over his own feet after hitting his growth spurt, or the fact that he had frequently used the wrong bathrooms by accident and snuck into places he hadn't necessarily been allowed to be in, shouldn't make much of a difference, anymore.

"I can't believe you were such a rebel. My law-abiding Jason? Breaking the law? How ungraceful." Percy joked and tipped his head with a teasing smirk, but Jason merely shrugged.

"I never said I was perfect. Plus, I only abide the laws I agree with. The others I aspire to change. Why do you think I wanted to become praetor?"

"Uh, workaholic?" "To exceed expectations?" "Because you're crazy?"

Will, Nico and Percy replied in matching deadpan voices, and Dakota nearly choked on his pack of Kool-Aid as he and a few others started laughing, while Jason just shot his boyfriends a sulky look.

"That's not a very nice thing to say to the birthday kid." He pointed out and pushed his bottom lip out, and promptly had his boyfriends tripping all over themselves and each other to reassure him and regain his affection by telling him the sweetest things.

So adorable.

Jason tried to hold back his smile to see how long they would keep the compliments coming, but ultimately, he had to cave in, falling victim to the way Nico nuzzled his nose against Jason's neck and whispered how much they loved him being crazy and rebellious.

Why always his neck?

"Is it gift-time yet?" Percy asked impatiently as Dakota started a conversation with somebody else, but before Jason could reply, he already found himself dragged off by somebody else for more talking and jabs at his past, so all he could do was wave at his boyfriends with a overfilled plate and immediately wrapped up in a conversation about their travels (again) and how the contract was going.

People kept trying to get him to drink the weird fruit punch, but he was pretty sure that thing was spiked in one way or another, so he politely declined repeatedly and mentally checked everyone's ages of the people present. Just in case.

His boyfriends waved from afar, making no move to interrupt, and soon after, Jason noticed that Will and Nico had once more disappeared, while Percy was walking around with an overfilled plate and looking like a child on Christmas Eve.

He went to investigate that matter, and found that Reyna and Hazel had disappeared along with his two boyfriends, so he snuck up on Percy and tried to get some information out of him.

Unfortunately, his boyfriend just so happened to stuff his mouth with food repeatedly to get out of talking, so he was none the wiser.

Where did they keep running off to? Was something the matter?

Just as Jason was beginning to worry, Percy dragged him off towards the food table and started piling the weirdest things on a plate for him, insisting he had to make the most of his party and feast, and Jason became too occupied with trying to convince him he wasn't hungry enough to eat all of that to focus on anything else.

Percy of course didn't care, completely in his element as he selected the best portion of each of the plates and helplessly overfilled Jason's plate, just to grab another one.
"You'll be fine. You're the biggest, you can eat the most. That's how it works, right?"

Jason was pretty sure that wasn't how it worked.

"You're just trying to distract me so I won't look for our missing boyfriends." He pointed out to show him Percy he very well knew what he was doing, and his boyfriend had the audacity of looking up at him with an innocent expression.

"Hmm? Our boyfriends are missing? Don't be foolish, I'm sure they're just...making out in the bathroom. Or something." He waved off and returned his attention to the task at hand, while Jason raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

Right.

"Maybe I should check on them to see whether everything is okay." He said quietly with another glance around, but before he could move, Percy had already dropped both tables onto the table and snatched his wrist to hold him back.

"Definitely not!" He exclaimed loudly, which had a few people looking around at them curiously, but Jason could only frown at him.

"What?"

"I mean, you'll do no such thing. This is your birthday party, Jason. Go and live a little. Stop worrying about everybody. I'm sure they're fine, wherever they may be, and I'm also sure they'd much prefer you enjoying the party. Don't make me get the games, because I will if you make me. And I don't know about you, but having this many people playing Twister sounds like it will end in a lot of twisted limbs and trouble." Percy insisted and gave Jason a searching look, as if trying to determine whether this was what he wanted.

Jason merely shook his head and tugged his boyfriend against him to give him a peck on the nose.

"Okay, no Twister. This is nice. If you say they know what they're doing, then I'll believe you. Though that doesn't make me any less curious, I'm just saying." He said diplomatically, and Percy winked at him with a little smirk that made Jason want to kiss him again.

"Eh, you know what they say. Curiosity killed the cat." His boyfriend teased as he pulled back, but Jason wasn't deterred.

"Yeah, but satisfaction brought it back, you know? So, can you at least give me a hint as to what they're doing?" He asked hopefully, and Percy stared off into space with his eyebrows raised.

"Wait, that's how the saying goes? Wow, I feel betrayed. When I was a kid, I didn't do half the things I wanted to do because I thought I'd be killing cats if I did. My life is a lie." He murmured, and Jason had to suppress a laugh.

Why...did that sound so much like something Percy would do?

"I'm sure the cats are grateful for your sacrifice. So is your mom, for that matter."

Percy shot him a skeptical look, but then smiled and nudged their shoulders together as he picked up Jason's plate(s) and passed them on to him.

"Come on, eat. They're fine. Can't tell you more than that, it's a surprise."

Jason immediately perked up.

"A surprise?"

"Oops." Percy mumbled and put his forehead in his hands.

A surprise? What sort of surprise? Why? But he had thought the party was the surprise? What else could they possibly have in mind?

"A surprise for...for who exactly?" He asked tentatively, because it just didn't make sense, but his
boyfriend only gave him a long, pointed look.

Then, he looked away and started stuffing his mouth again to undoubtedly get out of talking.

Alright, the surprise was for him.

But why?

"Just forget I said anything. They wanna make this perfect." Percy said around a mouthful of… whatever he was eating, and Jason suppressed a sigh.

Make what perfect?

He looked around again for his boyfriends, or a clue to their whereabouts, but Percy caught him at it, and the next moment, he found something decidedly way too sweet pushed past his lips.

"No brooding, love. And no guessing, either. Come on, just let them surprise you. It will be good. You'll like it, big promise." Percy assured him, and before Jason could manage to reply, Percy already fed him something else.

Jason shot him a pointed look, but his boyfriend merely grinned back at him cheekily, so Jason resigned himself to his fate.

"Fine. But only if you keep feeding me. It's nice."

Percy's smile turned into a wide grin.

"Knew you'd like that. Alright, here we go."

And with that, his boyfriend started feeding him and kept him occupied with random bits of flower trivia, which had Jason wondering just how much thought Percy must have put into his bouquet.

(It was such a pretty one, too.)

(Jason wished he could have taken it with him to show to his friends.)

Jason let him talk, watching how his eyes gleamed with emotion as he rambled and raved, even gesturing faintly with his hands.

It was so good to see Percy like this again, after seeing him struggle for what felt like way too long already.

He was so beautiful.

So passionate and carefree, joking and speaking with his lips tugging upwards at the corners repeatedly, like he had to suppress a laugh all the time.

Will had already warned them that this might not be permanent, and that Percy was still struggling same as before, even if he was feeling better right now.

Jason wished this was permanent, though.

He also wished he could do more to make this permanent.

Arms wrapped around him from behind as he was fed another bite of birthday cupcake with way too much icing, and Jason turned his head to find Will behind him, smiling at him and giving him a small squeeze.

"Hey there. I see our birthday boy is being taken care of correctly. Good job, Percy."

Percy beamed at the praise, then frowned at Jason, who had been about to look for Nico in the crowd, but now found himself looking back at Percy with a questioning look.

What?
Did he have something on his…

Percy snatched his chin as Will started chuckling, and the next moment, Percy ruined all the praise Jason was going to give him by licking his nose.

"Sorry, you had icing there." Percy said good-naturedly, while Will kept chuckling, and Jason just stood there, staring at his boyfriend with an undoubtedly incredulous expression on his face.

"Percy, why?" He asked at long last and rubbed at his face, but neither of his boyfriends graced him with a reply as they both started laughing.

"What are you two doing to Jason this time? Remember, this is his birthday party. Treat him well." Nico chided, and Jason looked around at him, wondering where he had just suddenly come from, and immediately looking him up and down to check for any sign or what that 'surprise' might be about.

But he still looked same as before, just like Will.

Oh wow, this was going to bother Jason until they would finally tell him – and he couldn't even ask them about it, because Percy had made it clear it was important to them.

"You know, considering I'm supposed to be the birthday kid, I'm surely missing all my birthday kisses from my wonderful boyfriends." He put in for self-indulgent reasons, and promptly had all their attention.

Yeah…okay, he would just have to be patient about that 'surprise'.

They were so eager to please him with all the kisses he could wish for (and he wished for a lot of them, okay?), he guessed he could let them surprise him, if that pleased them.

"Jason! Make it be gift unwrapping time! I can't take it anymore, I need to know what is in those packages!" Ash suddenly exclaimed as they came crashing through the crowd and cruelly interrupted his boyfriends in their quest of showering Jason in kisses, just to hang onto his arm like a child.

A heavy and very noisy child.

"Dude, why aren't you even tilting a little bit to the side, I'm quite literally hanging off your arm here. Man, how much do you work out? Anyways, gifts, Jason! Please!" They begged and pleaded, and Jason could see Nico burying his face in his hands, while Will chuckled and shrugged, and Percy eyed Jason's arm as if he contemplated hopping onto it like Ash had done, too.

Oh, heck no.

"Fine, it's gift unwrapping time. Though, I'll have you all know, none of you should have felt obliged to get me anything. I already got all I could possibly wish for." He said and gestured towards his boyfriends with his free arm, while they let out matching, flattered coos, Ash merely huffed.

"Sap."

"It's his birthday party, don't insult him." Nico chided, though Ash acted as if they couldn't hear him. "And Jason, we may not have had to get you anything, but we wanted to, as did the others who got you something. So, no complaining, just go and open your gifts." Nico continued, and Jason sighed and smiled.

"Alright, I will. Ash, mind letting go of my arm now?"

Ash muttered something about wanting to try something out first, and Jason was about to ask them what that something, was, when they suddenly actually hopped onto Jason's arm, clinging to him for dear life as their feet left the ground, and Jason let out a loud huff as he was forced to adjust to the sudden weight added to his side, feeling as if his arm was going to be ripped out any moment.

Gods, Ash, seriously?
Jason balanced himself out again and twisted his arm until he could support Ash properly, before shooting Percy a look that said 'Don't do it', because Percy was now definitely looking intrigued.

"Dude!" Ash exclaimed, clearly amazed, which both flattered Jason and disturbed him.

"Ash, why are you like this?" Nico asked mournfully, while Will merely kept laughing and seemed to be nearing tears.

Jason didn't say anything, but he was glad when Ash slid down his arm again and set their feet back on the ground, giving him free.

Percy was still giving him that odd look.

Jason contemplated his choices, then shook his head in defeat.

"Fine, Percy, come here."

"Yes!"

He couldn't believe he was doing this.

Then again, it was his birthday party, he could do whatever he wanted.

And, apparently, what he wanted to do was carry Percy over to the small table with the gifts and cards he had received from his friends, while Nico led the way and Will laughed his heart out and begged everybody for a camera together with Ash.

Jason smiled to himself.

Eh, could be worse.

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"Alright, this is the third stapler. Know that, while I'm grateful I will never run out of staplers, you're all still dead to me!"

"Oh, come on, superman. You know we love you!" Was the universal reply he got, but that was only an acceptable reply from his boyfriends, and those three were busy laughing their asses off next to him.

Well, Nico tried to be nice about it and didn't laugh, but his body was stiff and trembling, his expression stony, and there were tears forming in his eyes from the apparent restraint, so that was no better.

Jason huffed indignantly, though he still put the stapler (a pink one, this time. Very original) next to the other two carefully, before opening a few of the birthday cards he had received, and if only to make the others whine in protest and beg him to open the rest of his gifts.

So far, he liked the cards the most.

They were fun to read, especially thanks to the hilariously horrible handwriting some had bothered with, as well as the wish to be 'as original as possible to not have it seem like a cookie-cutter quote', and the designs ranged from classy and elegant to your usual 'You're great at getting old' ones.

Then there were also those very 'comical' ones, such as the one Jason was holding right now, which he didn't even want to put into words.

The giver had refrained from writing anything inside, so the world would never know who gave him this, but Jason decided he didn't want to find out, either.

Instead, he very pointedly put it beneath the other birthday cards and checked the next one, which had a bunch of cute animals on it.
Aww, adorable.

"Open the next gift, Grace! Come on, don't leave us hanging!" Somebody called from the back, but Jason took his sweet time reading the very short and poignant 'Happy Birthday, dude.', before he finally put down that card as well and took the next gift.

It would probably be a stapler again.

He should have never told Percy that story. Or Piper.

Then they wouldn't have told Leo, and Leo wouldn't have told Hazel, and Hazel wouldn't have mentioned it right when Dakota was around, and Dakota wouldn't have told everyone.

But, yeah, now it was too late to change that, so he would probably have to deal with receiving staplers for the rest of his life.

At least he would always have one at the ready, though he wasn't quite sure what he would do with it.

Maybe Leo could tinker with them and turn them into some sort of weapon against monsters, that would be useful.

Thinking about it, Leo totally would.

Jason mused this as he tugged open the fancy ribbon and tore off the wrapping paper.

"It's a box!" Somebody yelled dramatically, and now, Nico did break and started laughing, which was adorable, because by now everybody else had quieted down to see what this gift was.

Jason looked around with a smile, while Percy and Will promptly started laughing as well, because Nico's laugh was just so cute and contagious.

Plus, his face turned the loveliest shade of pink at the sudden attention of everybody in the room that he half-heartedly tried to hide it in his hands and muffle his laugh, which only intensified everything.

Jason decided to distract from his dismay by opening the box in his hands, which instantly got him the attention of his friends once more, who all tried to sneak closer and get a good look.

"It's paper! To staple!" Dakota announced loudly, and there were cheers, but Jason was already exchanging a telling look with Hazel, who gave a small nod and smiled warmly at him.

"It's photos." He corrected as he took out the bundle of pictures and put the box down in order to file through them curiously.

"Photos?"

"Show me, show me!"

"Martin you selfish bastard, tell him to show them to all of us!"

Jason ignored them in favor of smiling at the pictures in his hands.

He was in barely any of them, but his cohort and his friends were, and even if it wasn't more than maybe fifteen, he was still amazed there were any, at all.

"Thank you." He said as he made eye contact with Hazel, and she waved off with a shrug.

"I know you guys love taking pictures since Nico got his camera, so Frank and I figured that might be a nice idea. Reyna helped a lot, as well." She explained and he nodded as he looked them over again.

"It was a great idea. I'm going to cherish those forever."

Especially the last one, with Reyna, Hazel and Frank all making faces at the camera.
It must be recent, since Jason could partly detect Frank's hospital room in the background.

He grinned and passed them over to his boyfriends, much to the dismay of the rest of his friends, who loudly complained about him picking favorites, though that should have been obvious.

Jason shook his head and spread his arms to give her a hug, and Hazel came jumping into his arms almost immediately, for what had to be the third hug today already.

She seemed to like hugs.

But that was okay, he did, too.

"Mine next! Open mine next!" Hannah yelled from the back and hopped up and down as Jason reached out for the next gift, and he detoured to grab the small gift Ash had given him earlier.

Hannah cheered in response, shaking several people to point out he was about to open her gift.

She also shook Sara, who had her face buried in her hands and muttered 'I don't know her. Never seen her a day in my life' repeatedly, though the fact Hannah addressed her with first and last name sort of ruined that.

Not to mention the tiny fact that they were wearing the same outfit in an attempt of a partner look.

Ash, however, seemed thrilled to see her like that, standing two feet behind her with gleaming eyes and an almost fond look on their face as they repeatedly nudged Liam and whispered something to him that Jason couldn't catch.

It didn't matter though, because Ash and Hannah made no sense to Jason ever since he had introduced Ash to the team.

Had they worked past their differences now? Were they getting along? They certainly seemed to have stopped bullying each other.

Jason watched them warily as he tugged open the fancy ribbon on his gift, then undid the pink wrapping paper with a tad too much glitter for his liking (Percy was the actual glitter fan of the group, after all).

Curious and a little apprehensive, Jason pried open the lid of the box he was now holding, and promptly found Percy and Nico peeking in from his left and right.

"Aww, that's sweet." Percy promptly cooed, while Nico snorted out a small laugh and pulled back to let Will take a look, too.

Jason shook his head with a smile as he pulled out the mug Hannah had gotten him, the words 'Best Team Daddy' written in black on white, though the 'Team' had definitely been added by hand, undoubtedly by Hannah, herself.

"I figured since you're always acting like a proud dad, we'd get you a fitting mug to show off to the world. Also, they didn't have a 'Big Daddy' one, so this one had to make do." The daughter of Ares explained with a smug expression.

Jason lifted the mug up for everyone to see and nodded at her.

"Thank you. I guess that officially makes me father of five troublemakers. Unexpected, but I'll try my best to act the part. Which is to say, I'll brag about your achievements, support you through your failures, and, most importantly, embarrass you at every social event like any proud father would. On this note, I feel compelled to tell you all about that one time Hannah ran after—…"

"No! Grace, if you tell them that, I'll never let you live it down! Bad Team Daddy! Nico, stop him!" Hannah immediately screeched, and while everyone else laughed and cackled, Jason merely put his mug back in the box with a smirk, to hide it and keep it safe, so he could treasure that mug for longer than the next few hours.

Nico inched closer to his side, a conflicted look on his face, and Jason already tilted his head so he could whisper in his ear before Nico even motioned for him to do so.
"We didn't just really adopt them, though, right? I don't think this is the right time to think about kids. Plus, they already have parents? I don't understand." Nico whispered, sounding so adorably confused it made Jason want to coo and wrap his arms around him, though he knew that was also partly because he was feeling more than a little elated from all the gifts he was receiving.

Why was he receiving gifts, anyways?

His friends from Camp Jupiter and the people from his former cohort had celebrated many birthdays with him, but aside from very few exceptions, they had all agreed that gift-giving was something unnecessary, since they didn't have much space for possessions, and didn't really wish for many things, in the first place, due to the constant training and battles.

Not that he was complaining, though.

He was going to use this mug every time he could.

"Don't worry, love. It's just for fun and giggles. What she means to say, is that she cares greatly for us as her team leaders and partners, and that she and the others really like teasing us about the roles they assigned us within that team." Jason explained quietly, and Nico visibly relaxed.

"Oh, good. I was worried about suddenly being responsible for Andrew’s upbringing. That would have been hell. Glad that's not the case." Nico muttered, staring off into the distance distractedly.

Oh wow.

Jason shot his boyfriend a pointed look, and Nico froze and looked back at him with a scowl and a faint blush on his cheeks.

"You didn't just hear that. Oh, would you look at that, another gift. This one says 'From Sara' on it. Bet she'd love you to open that, like, right now." His boyfriend hurriedly tried to distract him, but Jason already moved an arm around his side and tugged him against him to press a quick peck on his cheek.

"You're too adorable for your own good. But fine, let's open it. Sara, I'm opening your gift!" He called out to her, and Sara was in front of him immediately to watch it happen.

The gift Nico pushed into his hands was squishy, and he was already guessing clothes when he opened it to find a set of three brightly colored shirts inside.

"I heard the guys mock your poor fashion style, and thought I'd help out. Liam and Andrew helped pick them out. Now, you have three unblemished shirts in vivid colors to show off." Sara explained, and Jason heard Percy whistle appreciatively behind him as he held up his new shirts for them to see.

A dark, yet strong shade of green.

A bright and vivid blue.

A deep, wine red.

They were beautiful.

Jason was never going to wear them solely because he wouldn't want to ruin them.

"Oh no, he will look so hot." Will whispered behind him in shock and awe, and Jason folded the shirts again cautiously to place them back on the table.

"They are beautiful. Thank you, Sara. And Liam and Andrew as well, of course."

"He's never gonna get to wear that blue one. That's mine now." He caught Percy whispering to Nico, but so did Sara, and she promptly shot his boyfriend a look that mutely screamed 'You will do no such thing, or so the gods help me', which had Jason laughing inwardly again.

Three new shirts, an amazing mug, tons of staplers and the nicest birthday cards he had ever seen.
This surely was the best (and biggest) birthday celebration in his life, that much was certain.

Sara smiled at him brightly, seeming relieved and proud that he had liked her gift, and Liam and Andrew seemed pleased, as well.

He was surprised to receive gifts from them, or to hear they had bothered helping Sara pick something for him, but it only showed how close they had grown as a team, and he was proud of their progress, all the same.

He was also flattered.

He also decided he was going to get himself a calendar to mark down all of their birthdays so he wouldn't forget them.

Jason looked at his cards again and chatted with his friends, thanking them again for their kind words and the staplers (though he also repeated that he didn't need any more of those at any given point in his life, because, seriously), his boyfriends right by his side and indulging him with holding his hand or stroking up and down his back – or, in Percy's case, hogging his arm again.

Yep, best birthday party ever.

Now, if only he knew what his guys were up to considering that 'surprise', he knew he'd be much more at ease, and much less curious and apprehensive of what was to come.

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"So, time for our gift." Will suddenly announced with a pat on Jason's back, and Jason looked back at them in confusion.

"What gift?" He asked, wondering whether this was the surprise Percy had mentioned earlier, though he hadn't expected that to actually result in an actual gift.

Had they left to look for something?

They shouldn't have gone through all that trouble.

He was happy just having them here with him and being able to call them his boyfriends, he didn't need anything else in his life, honestly.

"Of course. Percy was supposed to place it with the others on the table, but then we feared it would get lost beneath all the cards, so we decided to wait a little while until you were done with those and all the commotion died down a little. You know, for a bit more privacy." Will explained, and Jason glanced around the room, where the rest of his friends were now chatting with each other and drinking more of that punch that Jason still refused to try.

He wasn't sure about privacy, exactly, but if Will thought so, he wasn't going to contradict him.

"You didn't have to get me anything." He said quietly, just to have said it, but all three of his boyfriends waved off immediately.

"Of course we did. We love you, after all. Let us spoil you a little." Percy insisted, though Jason could think of plenty of other things they could do to spoil him, and none of them had anything to do with getting him anything.

"It's just something small. It took a while for us to think of it, but then Percy found the perfect one, and we...kind of went along with it. We hope you'll like it." Nico said shyly as he held out a small package to him, wrapped in rainbow colored wrapping paper.

"It's rainbow because it's gay." Will said with a serious nod, and Nico elbowed him in the ribs.

"It's rainbow because you got it even though I told you to get the other one, sunshine."

Jason didn't care why it was rainbow colored, he loved it, anyways.

He gingerly took the gift from them, gazing down at it in a mixture of awe and excitement.
A gift from his boyfriends.

He…sort of really didn't want to open it.

Could he get away with just staring at it for forever and cherishing the fact that his boyfriends had gotten him something so beautifully wrapped?

"Just open it, you sap. You don't even know what's inside, yet. Percy did such a great job picking it out." Will told him, and Jason succumbed to temptation as he tugged on the pretty bow on it, his heart aching a little as he undid it to tear open the wrapping paper as carefully as he could.

Inside, there was a jewelry box.

"It's not an engagement ring. Just so you know." Nico blurted, and Jason shot him a wry smile.

"I'd have loved that, too, though."

"Bet you would have. Go on, open it already." Will nudged him again, showing how impatient he was to see his reaction to it.

Fine, fine.

Jason focused back on the little box in his hand, aware of his boyfriends inching closer and watching with bated breaths.

Deciding to end their suffering, Jason tugged open the jewelry box, just to still again, staring.

"Well? Do you like it?" "Don't just *look* at it, Handsome! Take it out." "Please say something, *tesoro mio*.”

Jason had no words as he ever so cautiously took out the thin, fragile looking golden chain, his eyes still fixed on the small locket attached to it.

He wasn't even sure whether he was breathing at all as he gingerly opened it, revealing a tiny picture of the four of them, all of them grinning, undoubtedly the best picture of all time.

It was so tiny.

It was so beautiful.

It was his.

Jason's thumb moved over the protective layer on top of the photo, and next to the fact that he was practically overflowing with emotion right now, he still couldn't find any words, simply looking up at his boyfriends and hoping they would understand his silence, anyways.

Their sighs of relief told him they did, and he gazed back down at the locket in awe, closing it once more and inspecting the delicate engraving on it, giving the round shape even more charm.

His boyfriends moved closer, and he was glad to feel them leaning against him to take part in his joy at this moment.

"Do you want to put it on?" Percy asked softly, though Nico took the necklace from Jason before he even had the chance to reply, and the next moment, his boyfriend put the necklace around his neck and closed it, letting the cool chain and locket rest against his skin.

It felt great.

It looked beautiful.

Jason was very much in love.

"Thank you." He breathed, hands already back to touching the locket gingerly, afraid to break it, but unable to keep away from it, all the same.
"Percy was the one who found it. He picked it up when we went shopping that one time in that closed Walmart. Will and I picked out the picture, though Will did the printing and cutting. His hands seriously don't shake when he's focused, it's scary as well as cool. I was the one putting the picture inside and getting everything wrapped up." Nico told him with a hint of smugness in his voice, but he could be smug all he wanted, because this was the best moment in Jason's life, and they should very well be proud of that.

"It's beautiful." He whispered, still in awe.

Will let out a small chuckle, while Percy and Nico beamed at him.

"Well, you're beautiful, so, if the shoe fits..." Percy stated with a shrug, though Will and Nico promptly shot him pointed looks.

"That's not how the saying is meant to be used, Gorgeous." Will pointed out, but Percy merely shrugged again and stuck his tongue out at him, before stepping forward and touching the locket around Jason's neck, himself, eyes gleaming as he inspected him.

Jason held very still as he waited for his judgment, though he luckily didn't have to wait long.

The next moment, Percy started smiling again, his eyes hushing up to Jason's, before he leaned forward and gave him a gentle kiss on the lips.

"As I said. Beautiful." He stated with a convinced nod, and Jason found himself smiling, though his lips seemed to be trembling.

Everything inside him was still mushy and full of too much emotion he didn't know where to put or how to express.

He didn't feel like he would cry, but he did feel as if he had to do something, like climbing on top of the table and yelling his love to the world, or chasing his boyfriends around until he could get them in a nice corner or bed and cuddle the heck out of them.

Oh yes, that sounded fabulous.

Cuddles were always awesome.

Before Jason could make his plan become reality, Will wrapped his arms around him from the side and rooted him to the spot with a few pecks to his cheek.

"I'm glad you like it, Jason. Percy is right, it suits you." Nico said softly as he started hogging Jason's other side, and his boyfriends hummed in agreement.

This was all nice and well, but unfortunately, it didn't help with the fact that Jason was already brimming with joy and love and euphoria.

"Aww, you should feel this. He's so happy right now, guys. Jason, if you need to get away from here for a little while to let it all out and break our bodies with some bone-crushing hugs, just let me know and I'll create a diversion." Will suggested with a contented sigh, and Jason let out a small, helpless laugh, because that just so sounded like something Will would seriously do.

Percy and Nico promptly hummed in agreement.

He had such amazing boyfriends.

Jason decided he didn't need to run away from here to hug them, though, so he did just that, wrapping his arms around Nico and Will to his left and right, before tugging them together to catch Percy in their midst as well, happily squishing them against his body.

"Thank you, guys. I love it. I love you. So much." He whispered as he held them tightly, and he could hear them huffing, laughing, breathing against his neck and chest and skin as they struggled a little to get their arms around him and each other to return the hug to the best of their abilities.

Jason let out a satisfied sigh, and the world seemed wonderfully perfect for once.
Nico shook his head in wonder as he watched chaos unfold in front of him.

Who had brought up SingStar? He was pretty sure it must have been Percy, because it sounded like something Percy would come up with, but his boyfriend was far away from the commotion and instead attempted to wrap up all the food he could get to while nobody was looking.

Nico frowned in his direction, then returned his attention to the roughly twenty demigods fighting for the two microphones.

Who had even set up all of that? If Leo had been present, he'd have understood, but now, all Nico could do was ponder who of Jason's friends was another tech genius.

Gods, the noise was deafening, though.

With all this noise, they wouldn't even manage to hear the songs playing.

Nico took a sip of his drink, then decided that there was no way he would possibly participate in that madness.

Instead, he leisurely made his way over to Will, who was leaning against the small gift table and seemed to watch the commotion with amusement, himself.

"Where's Jason?" He asked once he reached his boyfriend, and Will's smile grew bigger as he nodded towards the swarm of demigods.

"Somewhere in there. Ash and Hannah gave him no chance to escape." He said with glee in his voice, before taking a sip of his pack of orange juice Percy had found for them.

Nico glanced back at the chaos.

"And you didn't come to his rescue?"

"He'll be fine. In fact, I'm glad they'll keep him busy for a while. You and I still need to do one little thing, after all. Unless you changed your mind?" Will's voice had dropped to a whisper (or was it a purr?), even though there were no other people close enough to overhear, especially not their boyfriend.

Nico felt his face warming and his skin tingle, but determinedly shook his head.

"I'm still up for it. But…are you sure now is a good idea? I mean, they don't seem willing to call it a night for at least a few more hours. Wouldn't it make more sense to wait until later?" He asked hesitantly, and Will looked past him at the commotion again with a contemplative expression.

"If you want to, we could. As I said, that's the only thing missing. We got the room set up, we got the playlist done, we have the moves down for the most part. Did Percy say anything whether he wants to join in now or not?"

Nico shook his head, glancing back to their other boyfriend, who was looking around skeptically before putting all his gathered and wrapped up food beneath the small gift table to apparently hide it.

Very nice, Percy.

"He still insists it's okay and he wants us to do it alone. I have no idea why. Usually, he'd be all for this sort of thing…” Nico trailed off, studying their boyfriend as he picked up some of Jason's cards curiously and squinted at the writing inside them to apparently read it.

He seemed to be in a great mood, Nico really didn't know why he refused to take part in their surprise.

It had mostly been his idea, as well, to begin with.

But they weren't going to force him.
"Eh, I think he just doesn't want Jason to suffer a stroke from over-indulgence or the like. You know how Jason can get. I mean, have you seen his face when we gave him his gift? He was so happy, Nico. That was almost more euphoria than when he's enjoying his afterglow." Will told him with a shake of his head, his expression between awed and disturbed, and Nico huffed out a small laugh.

"Yes, you've told me this five times already, sunshine." He pointed out with a grin, and Will let out a small sigh.

"He felt so good."

Nico rolled his eyes at the now dreamy expression on Will's face.

"I bet he did. So, do you still want to go now, or…?"

"Nah, let's wait a little longer. Now would be great because he's distracted, but I suppose you're right. Rushing it wouldn't do any of us any good, and our work would be for naught if the party takes some hours longer. I just hope they'll call it quits before midnight. Didn't really fancy surprising Jason when he's half-asleep already, after all." Will mused, and now it was Nico's turn to shrug.

"I doubt it. Reyna knows we have something planned for later, so I'm sure she'll kick everybody out if the need arises."

Will shot him a wry look.

"You just want her to do it so you don't have to be the bad guy." Lies.

"Never. I was just thinking it would be a lot less suspicious if Reyna kicked everybody out, rather than one of us. We want to surprise Jason, after all." He reasoned hurriedly, and Will's grin widened.

"What a beautiful excuse. You've learned well, my dear."

Instead of replying, Nico shoved him away playfully, and the two pinched and poked each other in the side a few times, giggling and playfighting just because they could.

"And what are you two beautiful beings doing on this chilly summer night?" A voice sounded next to them, and they both halted in their doings to glance sideways at Percy with matching grins.

"We're courting each other, obviously." Will stated in his best deadpan voice, and Nico nodded in agreement, before poking Will's stomach again.

"Stop that, you, or I'm not going to go easy on you later." Will threatened, but it was an empty threat, so Nico stuck his tongue out at him and poked him again, anyways.

Will whined, and Percy laughed next to them with a shake of his head, sneaking closer to get included, so they reached out and poked him, too, before tugging him closer.

"Where's Jason?" He asked as Will tried to flee behind him to escape Nico's clutches, but Nico let him, instead gesturing vaguely towards the bundle of demigods that was now busy screeching into the two microphones.

"In there? And neither of you went to save him?" Percy asked with raised eyebrows and a disbelieving expression on his face, but they merely shrugged.

"He doesn't really need saving." "Will says he'll be fine."

Percy's scolding look made them both pull a face.

Then, their boyfriend sighed.

"Alright, I'll go save him, or at least be by his side to suffer along with him. Did you two do your
"thing yet?" He asked as he already made to go, though he stopped again and looked them up and down quickly.

"From the looks of it, no. Come on, get going. Make use of the time. He was already asking about you earlier when you disappeared twice. Don't force me to make up excuses for you again." He then stated dryly, and Nico stuck out his tongue at him, too, this time in defiance.

How would he even know whether he and Will had done their thing already?

Rude.

It wasn't as if it was going to be written all over their face that they…

"You know what, let's just do it now. We'll get Reyna to kick them out the moment we think it's time, alright?" Will suddenly blurted next to him, and Nico promptly felt the heat rising in his face again, though he only nodded hurriedly and let Will grab his hand and tug him after him towards the door.

"Have fun!" Percy called after them with a definite hint of glee in his voice, and Nico turned his head to stick his tongue out at him a last time.

"Will do." Will called back, and Percy winked at Nico a last time, before unlocking the door hurriedly to get them inside their prepared room for the night.

Oh gods, they were seriously going to do this.

Jason better loved this, or Nico was going to die in shame.

"Okay, you first or me?" Will asked, and Nico had never hit the ground faster to show him he wanted to be first, because there was no way he could just do that sort of thing to Will out of nowhere.

To Will's credit, he didn't laugh, though his lips did twitch into a small smile, before he was there with Nico, and Nico relaxed against him, knowing he had nothing to worry about.

Will smiled at him in reassurance.

Then, he gave him a soft, slow kiss, and Nico relaxed a little more.

"This is going to be fun." Will promised him in a low purr.

Nico closed his eyes and hummed, hoping he was right.

As it turned out, he was.

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Jason watched Will talking amiably with Reyna, taking in his flushed face and gleaming eyes as he smiled and laughed and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

Then, Jason turned to look at Nico, who was chatting with Hazel, his cheeks pink and his smile a little shaky as his eyes gleamed very similarly to Will's, his stance a little odd.

Jason glanced between the two another few times.

Then, he turned to Percy, who was hogging his arm ever since he had so valiantly battled every
oncoming force and protected Jason's virtue by beating all his friends at SingStar to free Jason from their midst.

"Did they have sex?" He asked, and Percy promptly choked on his orange juice, coughing and wheezing and requiring his help to survive.

"What gave you that idea? Who? What? What are you talking about?" Percy asked the moment he regained his composure (somewhat), and Jason eyed him warily.

Then, he nodded towards their boyfriends.

"They glow." He stated the obvious, because, come on, it was visible from all the way over here. Percy squinted at their boyfriends with a dead serious expression.

Then, he shrugged and shook his head.

"Nope, don't see it."

"Percy. They do. Look at them. Look at that self-satisfied smirk on Will's face. And that seemingly permanent blush on Nico's face. You can't tell me Nico looks like that just from talking to his sister." He insisted, but Percy only squinted at them again, before taking another long sip of his orange juice.

"I think you're seeing things. When would they have even done that? Plus, they would have told me, right? You think I'd let them have all that fun without me? I mean, us, of course. Wouldn't want to leave out the birthday boy, would I now?" Percy told him with a dirty grin and some nudges to his side, but Jason wasn't convinced in the slightest, instead studying his boyfriend a little more intently.

"Your eyebrow is twitching. Are you lying to me?" He asked sternly, and Percy promptly acted aghast.

Jason crossed his arms in front of his chest, already knowing what would come next.

As expected, Percy made a show.

He was wailing, he was clutching his chest, he was clutching Jason's chest, he was moving his arm over his face and howling to an imaginary moon in agony, telling him of his lost love and the preposterous assumption of his boyfriend that he would lie to him.

In other words, Jason was pretty sure his boyfriend knew something he didn't want him to know.

"No, but seriously, they didn't. They wouldn't. Not without us, at least not today. I told you, they're planning a surprise for you. Come on, don't spoil it for yourself." Percy added the moment he was done with his acting and noticed Jason wasn't moved, and Jason frowned.

"But I thought the gift was the surprise?" He asked and touched the locket around his neck again, still not used to the feeling, and still unable to help the urge to touch it repeatedly and open it to check whether the picture was still safe and sound and beautiful like before.

"What? Nah. That's two entirely different things, man. Though we hope you'll like the surprise just as much as the locket. If not even more." Percy waved off, though Jason's frown didn't lessen.

He highly doubted that was possible; he loved this thing.

Jason looked back at their boyfriends.

"But then why are the glowing?" He asked unconvinced, and Percy huffed.

"Maybe because they love you very much? Maybe because they're excited to show you your surprise? Maybe because they simply feel like it?"

Jason tilted his head as he contemplated those options.
Then, he watched Will and Nico exchanging a quick glance full of adoration and soft smiles from both sides, and he turned to shoot Percy a telling look.

Percy only made a face and gestured vaguely with his hands.

"Don't look at me like that, I can't tell you anything! Maybe they got handsy, how would I know?"

Jason raised an eyebrow at him, and Percy looked ready to spill, but then, his expression changed and he suddenly smirked and got closer.

"Then again, why do you want to know so badly? You aren't usually this curious when it comes to our boyfriends making out with each other. Could it be you're feeling a little…pent up…?" He purred, his fingers dancing up Jason's arm, but he wasn't impressed by that, either.

"Not really. I'm all for it if they enjoy themselves. However, I'm a little concerned about our current location, and the possibility of them making a mess. It's not like this is our cabin or tent. I don't think Reyna or anybody else would be very happy if they came to witness anything or found leftover traces of their doings anywhere." He explained, and Percy seemed to visibly deflate.

"Seriously? That's your concern? Okay, I guess I shouldn't be surprised, but, seriously?"

What? It was a valid reason to be concerned.

Before he could defend himself, though, Percy was already back closer, his fingers stroking up and down his arm again.

"But…I do have to ask…if I were to take you somewhere else right now, for a little…privacy…what would you say to that? Would you be up for it?" His boyfriend purred again, and Jason was a little surprised about the sudden shift in mood, though he'd be a fool to voice that out.

Instead, he moved his arms around Percy and tugged him against him, taking note of his quickly darkening eyes and the widening smirk on his face.

"That depends on what place you have in mind, and what our boyfriends have to say on the matter, of course." He whispered back, and Percy hummed softly, clearly pleased with that reply.

"Of course. So, let's say, hypothetically, if I were to—"

"Percy, stop seducing him. Jason, don't let him rile you up, he's just being a tease." Will's voice sounded next to them, and the magic of the moment was broken, leaving Jason a tiny bit disappointed, though he collected himself again in a heartbeat.

Percy, who had jumped away as if stung at the interruption, now seemed to sulk as he crossed his arms in front of his chest and shot Will a dark look, before trying to motion to Jason that he hadn't meant it like that at all and that Will was a liar.

Or so he gathered from the insistent looks and gestures, anyways.

Jason sighed, feeling the tension inside him subside again.

So, no privacy with Percy somewhere nice and quiet, huh?

Shame, he'd have liked that.

Will leaned up to give him a peck on the cheek, then he pressed another fair few against his neck, promptly making Jason tingle all over and his pulse quicken.

Will, why?

"But don't you worry, we'll make sure to make you feel so good later."

Will, WHY?!

He held very still as Will kissed along his neck again, while Percy's hands started stroking over his
arm again.

Were they…seducing him?

If so, they might as well just take him somewhere else right now, because he already felt seduced enough.

"What are you two doing? Are you molesting my Jason?" Nico asked with a scolding voice, and Jason let out a deep sigh as both of his boyfriends pulled back.

"Yeah?" "Duh?"

They both deadpanned, and Jason shook his head, unable to fight the small smile making its way onto his face.

"You're such dorks, you know that, right?" He asked quietly, but they only shot him teasing looks full of mirth, showing him that they already knew and also knew that he loved it.

"Well, you better stop that. If anybody gets to molest him, it's me. So, make space, here comes the Ghost King." Nico announced, and Jason only had the time to raise his eyebrows in surprise at the determination in his voice, before their boyfriend already pushed past Percy and Will and tugged Jason down by the front of his shirt to get his rightful kiss.

Wow, since when was Nico this bossy?

With Percy, yes, but with Jason?

"Somebody is getting a little impatient, I think." Percy teased next to him, but that didn't make much sense.

Nor did the way Will snorted out a laugh and excused himself a moment later, saying something about having something very important to discuss with Reyna.

"Forget about them, they're being mean. How about you kiss me some more, instead?" Nico suggested as he let his fingertips stroke over Jason's skin where he had snuck his hands under his shirt, his voice low and insinuating.

Jason had to admit he was a little baffled by suddenly finding all three of them making rather blatant moves on him, though he certainly wasn't opposed.

A little confused, but definitely curious what the night might bring at this rate.

He gave Nico the kisses he had requested, and was repaid with Nico's body pressing against his, a little more insistently than usual.

Jason tried to speak, but Nico didn't let him, his behavior most definitely a lot more pushy and dominant than usual, so Jason tried to react in kind.

Maybe he shouldn't have, though, because suddenly, apparently encouraged by Jason's reaction, Nico had him pinned to the wall and was shamelessly pushing his hands further under his shirt, his fingernails dragging over Jason's abs the way they knew he liked it.

Well, damn.

It seemed to him like they would have to forget about that 'surprise' after all, because there was no way he would let them stop him from getting ravished by his apparently very hot and bothered boyfriend.

Their size difference was the most prominent, but something they were already used to, and Jason had no issues with lowering himself a little to not make it quite so difficult on Nico's part, even though the way Nico pressed against him and clawed at his sides showed him he didn't give a damn how difficult this might get.

"Well, Jason is surely getting some loving tonight, it seems." He heard Dakota say with an appreciative whistle, but only waved him off vaguely with one hand, before quickly cupping
Nico’s face to make him continue kissing him.

Not that Nico seemed to have had any intentions to pull away, but he was just trying to make sure.

"Wow, and there he tells us we aren't allowed to rile him up. Percy, I feel betrayed." Will muttered somewhere to their left, but Jason tried to wave him off, too, feeling like he'd much rather be somewhere more private right now, with nobody interfering.

"It's your own fault. You overdid it with Nico. I told you not to get carried away, and you clearly didn't listen. Now, suffer." Percy countered unimpressed, and Jason frowned into the kiss, trying to make sense of what they were talking about.

"I didn't. If anything, Nico overdid it with me! You have no idea how-…"

"Guys, shush. Let me seduce my boyfriend." Nico growled as he pulled away from Jason abruptly, much to his dismay.

"I'm seduced enough. Can we take this someplace else?" Jason hurriedly asked, uncaring whether he sounded desperate, because, come on, his boyfriend was ravishing him, there was no way he wouldn't want to show how much he wanted that.

Will's teasing 'Ooooh' was drowned out by Reyna calling something loudly, which Jason only couldn't catch because Nico also chose that moment to tackle him again and make his whole world spin as he felt his lips mashing against his own, Nico's fingers raking over his abdomen again.

"Mine." Nico growled, and that was all Jason had to hear in his life, so his ears tuned out the rest.

"This is our cue!" Will suddenly exclaimed way too loudly right next to them, and Nico pulled away again, much to Jason's utmost dismay, though he let him go, anyways.

"What cue..." He started, but didn't get much further before two sets of hands snatched his arms and tugged, and he was forced to leave the wall behind that Nico had so wantonly pushed him against, instead finding himself moving through the room, towards the door.

Then down the hall.

Then towards a different door.

Wasn't that the door to the room Will and he had held that second meeting-of-sorts in with Reyna and Frank, all those months ago?

It was disturbing to realize it had only been months ago, rather than years.

Jason had no chance to ponder this further as Nico's hands snatched him away from Percy and Will and pushed him right against that very door, uncaring for Will's complaints and Percy's amused but impatient comments.

Lips pressed against his hungrily again, their bodies rubbing together as he hummed, trying and failing not to smile a little into the kiss, which made Nico bite his lip lightly in retaliation.

"Nico, let us get him inside first. You can ravish him later. Come on, stick to the plan." Will reasoned, and Jason still didn't understand, but Nico seemed to, because he pulled away again, this time with a loud and clearly displeased groan.

"Fine! But it better be quick, or so the gods help me."

Jason only blinked at him in confusion, then Will gave him a quick peck on the cheek that made him feel a little better, though he knew Will only did that so Jason made space and let him unlock that door.

Where had he even gotten the key from?

Why did he have a key, in the first place?
Why was it so important that they got inside this room? Weren't they supposed to return to their hospital room?

The door was pushed open, and then Nico already ushered Jason inside impatiently without even turning on the lights, so Jason couldn't see anything until he was roughly in the middle of it and Percy had mercy on him, switching on the light the very moment Nico started pushing Jason down.

This allowed Jason to see the chair before he was sitting in it, but why there was a chair was beyond him.

Same as it was beyond him why the room looked entirely different from the last time he had seen it.

The tables had disappeared, instead making space for this chair (?) a small table with their laptop (?) and what looked a lot like the pillow corner they used to have in the Underworld, just…well, disturbingly, it looked even bigger than the last one.

Jason looked around him in wonder, vaguely noticing Nico and Will watching him intently for a reaction, while Percy snickered in the background and closed the door, the small 'click' signaling Jason that he had just locked them in.

"Erm…what?" He asked, because, honestly, he was a little at a loss. Again.

Will and Nico shared a look, their lips simultaneously twitching into small smiles.

"We got a little surprise for you. Hope you'll enjoy it." Will then purred, and Jason sat up a little straighter.

The surprise? He was all ears.

Especially when his boyfriend was purring, that was always good.

"Ready?" Nico asked, and his voice was still low, but he seemed more willing to control himself now, which was a shame as much as it made Jason curious for what was to come.

"I…guess?"

He was not ready, of course.

Then again, there was no way he could have possibly ever been ready.

Jason swallowed thickly as he found himself pushed back into his chair, the order of 'No touching' looming over him like a death sentence as he heard Percy clicking around with the mouse, before music started playing.

Music he very well knew.

And then, there were his boyfriends, and their 'surprise', and Jason had to swallow again.

Oh gods.

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Percy watched with utmost amusement how Jason swallowed repeatedly, sitting in his chair as if he was tied up and staring at Will and Nico as if he saw them for the first time.

So precious.

Percy glanced down at the playlist to check whether everything was working in order – which was to say, he peeked at what song was up next – then his focus was right back on his guys.

Will and Nico were amazing, though.

Their movements weren't as practiced as they could be, but they had only decided on doing a lap-
dance for Jason last night, and had only started *practicing* a few hours ago, so this was more than good enough.

Will was sex on legs as always, no matter whether he was trying or not, but Nico was making up for what he didn't know with much more vigor.

This showed a moment later, when he impatiently snatched Will's arm and pulled him into a rather ferocious looking kiss that was undoubtedly *not* part of the choreography, but certainly seemed appreciated by Jason, who was watching them with dilated pupils and parted lips, hands still clutching the armrests as if his life depended on it.

Gods, he was such a sucker for lap-dances, it was almost comical.

Percy would love to be in his shoes right about now, too, but he doubted he'd even be half as affected.

He knew how alluring and sensual his boyfriends could be, but he was more into *touching*, into *moving*, into having them on top or beneath him for him to explore and ravish and pleasure.

Seeing them dance like this and present themselves was *nice*, but that was kind of it.

For Percy, at least.

Jason clearly loved it.

Gods, yes, Jason loved it.

Will and Nico broke apart again, and while Nico continued his dance as if nothing had happened and with a self-satisfied grin on his face, Will was now the one stumbling and fighting to catch his bearings, which had Percy grinning to himself.

Needless to say, Will didn't take long to get back into his role, and Percy watched how he started taking over the back of Jason's chair, moving his body in ways Percy would dream of tonight, while Nico was in front of Jason, self-satisfied smirk still firmly set in place as his fingers danced over Jason's thigh just to tease.

Aww, now there was a blush creeping up Jason's neck.

Oh dear, now his hand was twitching.

The poor guy didn't even seem to know where to look, whether to look at Nico leaning over him, or whether to glance over his shoulder to where Will's fingers or lips occasionally made contact with his neck, clearly driving him crazy.

Percy almost pitied him.

But this was only just the beginning, so the pity would have to wait until the next song.

Oh, there was the next song, already.

Had it been five minutes already? Time sure seemed to fly.

Percy smirked to himself and leaned back, watching with glee how both of his boyfriends stepped away from Jason, leaving him shifting in his chair and looking near *desperate*, but when Will had said 'No touching', Nico had added 'No talking', and Jason was always such a good boy, he clearly didn't want to break the only two rules there were.

Poor Jason looked so tempted to, though.

But hey, he didn't have to wait long.

The moment the next song started up properly, his boyfriends were next to each other and in front of Jason again, moving simultaneously as they started stripping off their clothes, one piece at a time.
Now, Jason looked ready to combust.

Percy kind of wanted to record this.

Unfortunately, even though he had played with this thought before, he knew he needed all their consent for that, and he hadn't wanted to spoil the surprise by asking Jason whether he'd mind being recorded.

He should ask once this was over, though, so he knew for future reference.

Oh dear, now Nico was improvising again by opening Will's pants with his teeth and working them down his hips, looking like he was ready to blow him right then and there.

Checking on Jason, Percy was pretty sure that would have been perfectly okay by him, though he still looked like he was going to explode any moment now.

Now Will was throwing all caution to the wind and went on his knees, too, capturing Nico's lips with his own and showing him his place.

Nice.

Jason made a small sound akin to a needy whine, and Percy's eyebrows shot up.

Who'd have guessed his boyfriend could make such sweet sounds when faced with such temptation?

Will and Nico promptly scrambled off the floor, too, and Percy could practically feel the hopefulness he could detect in Jason's eyes.

But, nope, his boyfriends weren't indulging him yet, rather set on teasing him even worse than before, because now they were only in their underwear, and, damn, was that nice underwear.

Who'd have thought Nico would actually find those lace panties again?

They left close to nothing to imagination, least of all Nico's leaking dick, but hey, Percy wasn't going to judge, and Jason was clearly infatuated beyond measure.

Will looked very nice, too, of course, but in terms of clothing, Nico was definitely rocking it.

As if hearing his thoughts, Will picked up his moves again and started teasing Jason from the side, coming dangerously close and breathing against his neck, but Jason still wasn't allowed to touch, and Percy could see him fighting with himself to stay strong.

Oh man, Percy could watch this all night long.

Nico was straying a little, coming dangerously close to practically sitting on Jason's lap, and Percy could tell by the way his eyes were focused on Jason's lips that he was more than tempted to kiss him, but before that could happen, Will was already behind Nico and tugging him away and against him, instead, shamelessly rubbing against his back and backside.

This made both Nico and Jason groan, interestingly enough, though Percy had to wonder whether Jason was groaning because Will had prevented things from escalating already, or because he liked the idea of watching Will and Nico having sex in front of him.

Since Jason looked ready to drool as Will grabbed and squeezed Nico's backside in those lace panties, he settled for a simple 'Both' and brushed the topic aside to enjoy the view.

Hey, now Nico was on his knees again.

Damn, but this time, it seemed intentional, because he was definitely making straight for Jason and Will wasn't stopping him in the slightest, instead taking his place behind Jason again.

He seemed to be there to make sure Jason stayed put, while Nico mercilessly advanced on him, hands and lips raking up Jason's still clothed legs that fell apart quicker than Percy could curse the gods up above.
Wait, was Nico going to…

Yep, Nico was totally teasing the evident bulge in Jason's pants.

How cruel, and he was wearing jeans, too.

His jeans from Persephone, too, which meant there was no space for that magnificent dick of his in there.

Oh man, now Percy did pity him, at least a little bit.

Jason suddenly keened, and Percy's eyebrows shot up, before he realized this was due to a mixture of Nico's teasing and Will nipping at his neck at the same time, both of them sharing dirty grins over Jason's shoulder as Jason let his head fall back, now openly panting.

Maybe Percy should tell them to have mercy on the guy.

He hadn't even known what was going on until Percy had turned on the music and the guys had gotten started, so they couldn't exactly blame him for being this affected by everything.

Then again, that was sort of the point, wasn't it?

Now, Jason was trembling.

Nico was opening his pants and freeing his dick from its confinement, and Jason was shaking so badly it was a miracle the chair didn't topple over right then and there.

But maybe that was just because Will was still behind him, now with his hands on his shoulders and his lips at his ears, either whispering reassurances into his ear or dirty-talking him through every little thing they were going to do to him if only Jason let them.

Jason sucked in a sharp breath, and Percy noticed Nico had abandoned ship to go straight for his dick, licking up the length of him in one long stroke, and, damn, Percy felt his own pants growing tight just watching that.

Wait, were things still going as planned? Because there was more music, but Nico didn't seem very interested in more dancing and teasing.

Percy tried to catch Will's eye to get some input on the matter, but Will had his face buried at the side of Jason's neck and Percy could see him bite, so he was pretty sure the dancing was over.

It ended up not mattering, because the next moment, Jason's hands snapped away from the armrests and instead buried themselves in Nico's hair as he started blowing Jason, and it was obvious he had reached his limit when a low, loud groan escaped his lips.

Then, Percy bore witness to something truly beautiful, which was to say, he watched in delight as Jason pulled Will into a kiss, before pushing them both away, jumping off his chair and tackling them both, making right for that pillow corner they had so wonderfully arranged this afternoon.

It didn't matter that Jason was still mostly dressed, or that he was stumbling because his opened pants slid down one leg but not the other, or that he was trying and failing to get rid of his shirt as he went.

All that mattered was that he wanted his guys in that pillow corner that instant.

"Percy. Come here." Jason's voice sounded through the room, and Percy found himself jumping up and rushing over as fast as his feet could carry him.

Anything for Jason.

And, damn, that guy sure loved lap-dances.

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Will felt like he was falling apart and being put back together all over again as he let Jason push
him down, their lips pushing against each other needily as his legs parted and wrapped around Jason's hips.

Something nagged at the back of his mind, but he brushed it off as he gasped and let his head fall to the side, allowing Jason to trail kisses from his lips to his jaw then to his ear, nipping at it and making him whimper.

He should have been the one seducing Jason, but thanks to Nico's impatience, things were quickly escalating, but in all the right ways.

Jason was quickly losing his last pieces of clothing, and Will knew Nico was helping Percy with his while Jason was focusing on Will.

Which was great, because it let Will focus on Jason.

Though it was also bad, because he wanted to keep Jason all to himself right about now, relishing in the way those fingers touched him with confidence at all the right places.

"Color?" Jason's voice was low and raspy and beautiful, and Will shivered at the mere sound of it, though he also urged himself to reply.

"Green. Go on. Please go on."

The nagging at the back of his mind got a little louder, making him twitch momentarily at the knowledge he was begging, again, but he had other concerns right now.

Like Jason's leaking dick between his legs, twitching against his inner thigh as they moved and tried to find a comfortable position that allowed for the most pleasure.

He already knew what position that would be, if only he already lost that last layer of fabric still on him.

"Want me to free you?" Jason asked, and it sounded teasing even though he seemed genuine, but all Will could do was huff and arch his back as Jason nipped at his ear again.

"I want you to do many things, Jason. Getting me naked is, like, the first step to all of them. So, yes, free me."

"Bossy." Percy commented somewhere behind Jason, but Will blatantly ignored him in favor of gasping and groaning as Jason bit his earlobe, his hands dancing down Will's chest and stomach to his groin, tugging at the offending fabric.

"Your wish is my command." Jason purred, and, by the gods, who had allowed this guy to sound like that?

Will lifted his hips, but found he was forced to first unwrap his legs from around Jason's in order to make this work out in any way whatsoever, much to his dismay.

Jason made sure to make him feel better with ravishing his ear and turning Will into such a mess he could feel pre-cum trickle onto his stomach just from that.

He should probably be flustered or ashamed of that, but he honestly couldn't care less, instead kicking his foot impatiently to get the stupid thing off completely, before he moved and maneuvered his legs right back around Jason's hips.

"Are you sure?" Jason asked as he let go of his ear and pressed a series of kisses against his neck, and Will frowned a little as he clutched him harder.

"Sure about what, Handsome?" He asked dazedly, whimpering again when Jason bit and sucked on his favorite spot at the crook of his neck, though it was nothing compared to what his ears had done for him.

"Are you aware of what position you're putting yourself in, Freckles?" Jason asked softly as he pulled back a little, first admiring his work (that was going to be one hell of a hickey, Will could tell), then gazing into Will's eyes and thus forcing him to open his own eyes completely once
more.

It took a moment for his words to register, but once they did, he found himself glancing down their bodies, taking note that he was on his back, he had his legs parted, he had said legs wrapped around Jason's hips, Jason was on top of him, he was practically inviting Jason to top him.

Will swallowed, the nagging in the back of his mind making a lot more sense now, though he wished it didn't.

He had bottomed for Nico and Percy before.

Jason would always stop if it did get too much.

It shouldn't be a problem, really.

But Jason was big, which was bound to hurt at least to a small extent, no matter Nico's excellent prepping.

Jason also had the unfortunate fate of...being a lot taller than Will. And...being blonde.

Will felt bad just thinking that, and promptly averted his gaze, though Jason didn't give him much time to feel guilty, instead starting to trail kisses along his neck and face again, just to move down the other side and ravish his second ear.

"Don't force yourself, love. You don't have to. I just want you to be aware of things before we end up doing something you might regret." His wonderful boyfriend whispered as he let go of his ear for a moment, but then Will was already nudging against him again and got him to continue, once more needing a moment to catch up on the meaning of his words.

"'s okay. I want to." He whispered, undoubtedly surprising them both, though he felt an inexplicable rush of excitement and euphoria rush through Jason a moment later, showing he had not been as unbothered about the prospect of making love to Will as he had tried to make it seem.

Will turned his head to give him a little peck, and he couldn't help but smile when he felt one of Jason's hands take his own gently and threading their fingers together.

This reminded him a bit of their time in the pillow corner, to be honest.

Just that that had been entirely different and he didn't want to think of that right now.

He would much rather enjoy the present.

"Hundred percent sure?" Jason asked again as he started kissing down the side of Will's neck to his collarbones, but Will merely pinched his side with his free hand in reply.

"Stop questioning my words, blondie."

"Just making sure. Wouldn't want you to force yourself to anything."

Will would always have to nudge himself at least a tiny little bit, but Jason didn't have to know that.

So, instead of talking, Will merely squeezed Jason's hips with his legs and tugged him a little closer, trying to make him understand he was ready for more.

Jason seemed to get the hint, but he clearly didn't care, since he much rater continued kissing along Will's collarbones and nipping at his favorite spots as if to mark them for later reference.

"Jason, come on..." He whined when he tried to lift his own hips in order to get some friction going, but due to Jason determinedly kissing down his body now, his body was quickly moving out of reach.

"No rushing. We have time." Jason insisted, and Will huffed.

Like hell they did.
Will wanted a lot of things tonight, and he knew Percy and Nico were hoping for some action with Jason, too, so there was no way he was just going to lay back and—

Jason's hands started dancing over his skin as his lips found his sensitive belly, and Will let himself fall back like a bag of potatoes, eyes closing in bliss as he huffed in both pleasure and complaint.

Okay, fine, maybe they could take it…a little slower, he guessed.

He could feel Jason smirking against his skin and promptly opened his eyes to glower at him, but Jason merely blew cold air against his belly and Will was a goner again.

Freaking rude, using his weaknesses against him like that.

"May I?" Jason asked, and Will pried his eyes open again to look down in question, wondering what Jason was asking for this time.

Couldn't he ever just…do things without asking first? Or couldn't he be a little bit more specific?

Jason was looking up at him with those beautiful eyes of his and his glasses askew, his expression open and hopeful, his hand stroking along Will's inner thigh.

Will still had no idea what he was talking about.

He was about to say as much, when Jason gestured with his hand, and Will caught the hint.

Well…there wasn't much reason to, since Nico had already…

"Just do anything you want, Jason. I'll tell you if I'm not okay with it." He muttered vaguely and felt himself shifting nervously, but Jason was already leaning forward to place a small kiss to his hip.

"Okay. Color updates?"

Will stuck out his tongue at him in reply, as mature as ever.

Jason huffed out a small laugh, then he nipped at Will's hip bone and shifted his weight, one hand touching Will's leaking and neglected dick, the other one straying to where Will much rather wanted to feel Jason's dick right about now.

Will gasped as Jason stroked him in slow, even strokes, apparently aiming to take his mind off his other hand, but he needn't have bothered – Will was more than fine with this.

"Lube?" Jason asked somewhere near his navel, but it didn't seem directed at him, considering he was naked and beneath him and couldn't very well magically conjure up a bottle of lube.

"Won't need it. I'm prepped enough, Jason." He mumbled back, anyways, amazed that this statement had his face warming, when there were so many other things happening right now that should make him blush ten times harder.

Jason promptly stilled.

Then, Will could feel his fingers against his hole and he whined softly, wishing Jason could be a little bit more like Nico right now, because Nico would have mercy on him already, he was sure of it – or Percy, because Percy always had mercy on him.

Jason took a startled breath, then he let out a low moan, and Will could feel his skin tingle in response, pulling his knees up a little to give Jason better access.

"So that's what you and Nico did earlier. I knew you were glowing. Oh gods, Will…"

Hey, he had not been glowing, how dare Jason imply that?

Nico chuckled behind them somewhere, his voice low and beautiful.

"Oh, you have no idea. I'm prepped too, in case you're interested, tesoro mio."
Will felt Jason shiver, and was pretty sure he was interested.

"Forget it, Nico. I'm first. Jason, now that you know, would you please stop stroking me like that and get going? I have been ready for more since the moment Nico basically fingered me into oblivion, so, if you want me to survive, you'll—..." He rambled, then had to break off because Jason moved up his body and pressed their lips together, his body dropping onto Will's without as much as a warning.

Will groaned, kissed back, shifted, and wrapped his legs back around those hips, trying to angle his own hips to maybe get things moving a little.

"You want me to?" Jason asked against his lips, the question a stupid one, but his breathy voice wonderful enough to make Will forgive him.

"No, I totally want to suffer more and get riled up even further until I blow before getting to feel you inside me, Handsome. Of course I want you to do it." He vented, and Jason had the audacity to snicker and peck his nose, before he shifted his weight and adjusted their positions, watching Will's face intently as his hand disappeared between their bodies.

Okay, here went nothing.

Will kept his eyes on Jason, too, on his eyes, on the glasses that looked ready to fall off any moment, on his parted lips and his furrowed eyebrows.

Even his bobbing Adam's Apple as Jason swallowed.

Then, he felt the tip of Jason's dick against his hole, and he let out a small gasp and closed his eyes, mutely reaching out for Jason, and feeling Jason holding him with one arm immediately, adjusting to the new position easily.

He pushed in slightly, and Will tensed, never quite able to get used to the sudden feeling of intrusion, though he knew it would pass.

"Color?"

"Too early for a color update, you hopeless fool." Will bit back with clenched teeth, and felt Jason's lips against the side of his face a moment later, before they made their way to Will's ear.

"Never too early to ask whether you're okay, love." His boyfriend purred against his ear, but all Will could do was gasp and whimper, and he felt Jason pushing further inside him.

Even with Nico's superb work, he still felt the strain to accommodate Jason's size, though he tried not to let it show as he gasped and shifted a little to make it easier on both of them.

"I'm more than fine, worry about yourself." He grumbled, but Jason didn't listen as he kept teasing Will's ear in a rather obvious attempt to put him at ease.

Will retaliated a moment later by thrusting up against Jason, and, gods, was it worth it.

"I'm more than fine, worry about yourself." He grumbled, but Jason didn't listen as he kept teasing Will's ear in a rather obvious attempt to put him at ease.

Will retaliated a moment later by thrusting up against Jason, and, gods, was it worth it.

Jason gasped and broke away from his ear to groan, and Will was back to whining needily, needing more of this, no matter if it still stung and burnt a little or not.

He tried again, but then Jason's hand shot to his hip to keep him in place, and Will was left to whimper and wriggle.

"Jason, plea--..."

"Okay." Jason cut in, and Will was only just breathing out in relief when he felt Jason thrusting into him, a little less hesitant and with a little more intent.

Then, he did it again and again, making Will gasp and moan and fist the pillows around him in a desperate try to keep himself grounded.
Jason had pushed himself up for better control over himself, but now he was lowering himself again, wrapping his arms around Will as his hips kept thrusting, his dick pushing in and out of Will at a steady but oh-so-pleasing pace.

"More." Will still begged, and Jason accommodated his needs, picking up in speed and pushing further in, though it felt an awful lot as if he was trying not to push his entire length into Will yet. Couldn't have that.

"If you don't fuck me like you mean it, I'm going to make you." He grumbled, though it was an empty threat, since he was already rendered to a shaking mess that probably wouldn't even be able to sit up right now, not without help.

Jason huffed, an air of defiance making itself known.

"Fine, have it your way." His boyfriend retorted, and there was something soft and teasing in his voice that made Will smirk.

The next moment, Jason switched to much harder and forceful thrusts, and Will had no time to smile anymore as he let his head fall back and arched his back with low groans and soft cries. Fuck, that felt good.

"Color?"

"The one that says fuck me harder."

"Do you always have to sass me during sex?" Jason asked breathlessly, but Will had no chance to reply as he started crying out more, Jason's thrusts only picking up in intensity and speed.

One of Jason's arms pulled away from around Will, and Will didn't understand that whatsoever until there was a hand around his dick, and now, he definitely was dying.

He was certainly falling apart.

But that was okay.

Jason was there to catch him.

***

Jason came with a low groan, though he was quick to continue reassuring Will, who was an absolute mess beneath him, panting and crying and letting out the sweetest (albeit also a little worrisome) sounds as he came down from his own climax, still trembling like a leaf and clutching Jason's shoulders as if his life depended on it.

He whispered all the praise he could think of (which was a lot), glad when Will seemed to regain enough composure to let go of him, so he could get rid of the condom, at the very least.

While he was certain Will hadn't even noticed him putting it on, he knew it was only a matter of time until Will would notice if it slid off Jason's softening dick and dropped onto Will's hot and sticky skin, so he was keen to prevent that from happening.

"Shh, it's okay. You're not in pain, right?" He asked when Will wiped at his eyes anxiously, though Jason had already wiped his tears away.

Why he had cried, he didn't know, but judging by Will's expression, neither did he.

"I am fine, Handsome. Feeling great, actually. This was amazing."

Yeah, Jason agreed.

He smiled and leaned over his boyfriend again to give him a soft kiss on the forehead, before nuzzling his face against him with a satisfied sigh.
Now *that* had been a great way to celebrate his birthday.

At this rate, he totally couldn't wait for next year to roll around.

"Seems like you two enjoyed yourselves." Nico's voice teased behind him as he settled down next to Will, and both of them turned their heads to watch Nico and Percy sneak closer with smug grins on their faces.

Jason merely smiled and gave Nico a lazy kiss, before returning his attention to Will, peppering his skin with kisses and dimly aware he had to grab some tissues for clean-up eventually, since there was no way he was going to get up to look for a wet cloth anywhere now.

He wouldn't want Will to get uncomfortable, after all.

He trailed more innocent kisses along Will's cheek to his neck and shoulder, and Will giggled softly when he started nuzzling his face against him again, his hand coming up to stroke through Jason's hair softly.

"Such a sap. I love you."

Jason hummed in agreement, then felt Nico's lips against his back, timidly kissing his way up his spine.

Mmh, yeah, that felt nice, too.

Jason closed his eyes and hummed again, then let out a small chortle as Nico blew a raspberry on his shoulder.

"Aww, I love it when he makes that sound. It's so cute." Percy cooed somewhere behind him, and he wanted to stick his tongue out at him, but then decided it was too much effort, so he much rather continued kissing Will and shifted to allow Nico closer.

Nico wrapped himself around his back, hands stroking over his sides and lips repeatedly pressing against his shoulder blades.

This was so nice.

Jason vaguely felt like he was being seduced, even though he was only just coming down from his climax as it was.

He kept nuzzling against Will, keen on showing him just how sappy and affectionate he could be, until Percy showed up with the tissues Jason should have organized and started cleaning up the mess on Will's stomach, which obviously involved a lot of teasing remarks and light tickles.

Nico started teasing the side of Jason's neck, and Jason promptly stilled and closed his eyes with a hum, deciding to let Will out of his embrace so he could play around with Percy for a little while.

Now that he thought about it, had Nico and Percy actually made out, too?

He would have thought so, but at the same time, he couldn't remember hearing them make much noise, and Percy was usually *very* expressive, and always intent on making Nico show he liked it, too.

Wait, they hadn't… *waited* for Jason, right…?

Nico nipped at his neck, and Jason jolted a little in surprise and pleasure.

Then, he felt his boyfriend pushing against his back a little further, and, yep, Nico was definitely still hard.

Jason leaned forward to give Will a last kiss on the cheek, which was met with Will's giggles and a shooing hand, as well as a teasing 'Nico is desperate to get laid, go get going already, blondie' that confirmed Jason's thoughts.

Nico made a small sound of complaint behind him, undoubtedly displeased with Will just selling
him out like that, though he stopped the moment Jason turned around to kiss him.

"Oh man, guess Jason is already good to go for round two. Unbelievable. I feel betrayed, my cooldown time is a lot longer than that." He heard Percy complain, but was too distracted by Nico’s hands trailing down his back to his butt to reply, rather holding his breath to see what Nico thought he was doing.

"Well, he did just recharge by getting all affectionate with us. If you took your time to cuddle us properly after your climax instead of playing around, you'd be much quicker to recover and start another round, too." Will deadpanned, and while Jason agreed, he also tuned them out to focus on Nico, who apparently had no ulterior motives other than to squeeze his butt and tug him closer.

"Guess it’s finally my turn now." His boyfriend whispered in a rather satisfied tone, and Jason wasn’t sure whether to smile or shake his head, so he kissed him again, instead.

Will cackled next to them, though Jason also dimly noticed he and Percy were distancing themselves a little and still seemed to cuddle and play around.

"Your own fault. As if I was going to pass up my chance like that. Plus, you could have snatched him from me at any given time, but didn’t."

Were those two going to argue now?

Nico shot a dark look towards their boyfriends, then huffed and opened his mouth to reply, but Jason was quick to reach up and tug him down to seal their lips again.

There were better things to do right now than to argue.

Like kissing.

Nico seemed to hesitate for a moment, clearly pondering whether he should go along with this or rather bicker with Will, but then, he relaxed against Jason and his hands clutched his shoulders as he deepened the kiss, so Jason knew what he had decided for.

"I'm yours now." Jason mumbled up at him, and Nico started smirking against his lips, before pulling back to look down at him with dilated pupils and a wanting look on his face, whispering a quiet 'You better' at him before kissing him again.

Nico could probably kiss his boyfriends all night long, to be honest.

Nico had very different plans, however, as became evident as he started shifting and nudging his hardening dick with his own erection.

It also showed when Nico nonchalantly took Jason's hands and moved them to his hips, clearly trying to get Jason to touch him.

Oh, Jason could totally do that, too.

He moved his hands to above Nico's hip bones and gave a little squeeze, appreciating the bit of fat Nico had put on again after losing so much weight during his coma.

Then, he started stroking along Nico's sides, over his back, down to his butt, one finger teasing along Nico's entrance just because he could.

Nico promptly grunted and nudged against his hand, clearly demanding more as his lips left
Jason’s to tease his neck, offering pleasure in return.

Who was Jason to deny him anything?

Jason shivered and closed his eyes as he let his head tip to the side for Nico, while his fingers got busy teasing his boyfriend, just to realize with a surprised, yet pleased jolt that he could easily push inside Nico.

Oh gods, so it was true, Will and Nico had…

Jason groaned as Nico bit his neck, though it wasn't just the pleasure from that gesture that was getting him riled up now.

Had they seriously planned for this? For Jason?

He had to admit, he was a little blown away by how direct they were being, first with the dance, then with Will letting him top, and now Nico was practically seducing him.

Jason wasn't used to have them so openly…want him.

Though he'd be a liar if he claimed he didn't love it.

Gods, yes, he loved it.

"Like what you feel?" Nico teased him, his voice low and sultry, and Jason noticed he had gotten carried away with fingering his boyfriend in the lightest and undoubtedly not very pleasing way possible, just to inspect and get off on the fact he was already wet and hot and ready for much more than Jason's fingers.

"Sorry, but you just feel so nice." Jason admitted as he started paying more attention to what he was doing, curling his fingers a bit to hit Nico's good spot and make him feel good, too.

The reaction was as sweet as it always was, with Nico jolting and huffing out a small moan, his hands on Jason's shoulders now clutching him as he slumped over a little.

"You know what would feel even nicer?" His boyfriend panted as he pushed back against Jason's hand needily, and Jason thrusted into him a little harder to make him moan again.

"What?" He asked, though he wasn't prepared for the way Nico leaned down and bit his neck, before moving up to level his lips with Jason's ear.

"If you pushed me down right now and did me at least twice as hard as you just did Will."

Oh damn.

Jason felt himself shivering in response, and if he hadn't been turned on before, he certainly would have been now.

"Nico, remember that I called dibs on riding him. I helped you two by suggesting the lap dance, so you better give me my reward." He heard Percy's urgent hissing next to them, followed by one of Will's snort-laughs, while Nico only shot them both a dark look, momentarily stilling on top of Jason.

"Pah, ride him all you want, did you just see how he did Will? You bet I want that. Now shush, I'm trying to seduce Jason."

Oh, Jason was already seduced enough.

And wait, what was Percy talking about regarding riding anybody?

Wait, the lap dance had been Percy's idea? That explained everything.

"Jason, you're in for a long night." Will told him sympathetically, and Jason had a hunch he was right.
He still flipped Nico over and pressed him into the pillows, much to Nico's apparent delight, and the two started moving and shifting and searching for a position that suited them both, until Nico turned over and very blatantly pushed his backside into Jason's crotch.

"Yes, this is good. This one." Nico demanded in a breathy voice, and Jason felt a bit as if his brain had just short-circuited, staring down at Nico in wonder and amazement.

From his arched back and the bit of his flushed and wanting face he could see, to his unruly hair that was all over the place thanks to all their moving – not to mention that sweet backside that was basically inviting him in right here and now.

Then, Nico pushed back against him again, and Jason automatically clutched his hips, once more distracted and awed by the wonderful softness he found there.

Ah, wait, condom.

Somebody nudged him, and he glanced sideways to find Percy wiggling his eyebrows at him and holding out a condom.

"You better do him good, he's been so patient for you, Jason."

Oh, Jason didn't need to be told that twice.

"Thanks. You better be good and patient for me, too, then. If you want your reward." He replied as he took the condom from him and tore the pack open with his teeth, before sliding it down his length, and he noticed with utmost satisfaction how Percy's ears promptly turned red and he seemed to struggle for something to say, lips opening and closing repeatedly.

Jason couldn't resist temptation and leaned sideways to give him a quick peck, before Nico let out a low whine and pushed back against him again.

"Jason! Don't get distracted now, I need you inside me, like, five minutes ago!"

Will cackled in the background, while Percy just sat next to him with a flushed face and made no move to leave, so Jason shot him a last smile and returned his focus on Nico, who was by now writhing as he rubbed back against him.

Yes, his patience had definitely reached its limit.

Jason reached out to stroke over him appreciatively again, then he set out to give him what he wanted.

Will was right.

This was going to be a long night.

But gods, did Jason love it.

Best birthday celebration ever.

***

It was so ironic.

Jason mused this with a happy sigh as Percy – his wonderful, amazing Percy – indulged him beyond measure, kissing along his neck softly as his hands caressed his body.

It was so ironic, that it was Percy who was all soft and sweet with Jason, when they were usually the ones rolling in the sheets without care or control.

But now, Percy was the one taking things slow.

He was on top of Jason, straddling his hips but ignoring his still soft dick to give it the chance to recover in peace – and instead, he was now slowly kissing his way down Jason's collar bones, dragging lips, teeth and tongue over his skin as if they had all the time in the world.
As if he had all night to please and be pleased by Jason.

Jason loved it.

He loved it a lot.

Lifting a hand to touch Percy's cheek to get his attention, he found his boyfriend abandoning his path down his chest immediately to come back up for a languid kiss, even though Jason hadn't gotten to the point of asking for one.

Rather than complaining, Jason moaned and tilted his head for a better angle.

Oh, this felt so nice.

"I'm gonna spoil you so good." Percy breathed against his lips as he pulled back, and that promise alone already had Jason shivering in anticipation and hopeful want.

Percy, as it turned out, seemed very intent on keeping that promise.

While he made it obvious he was the one taking most action tonight, he allowed Jason to touch and grope and grind, kiss and lick and bite, and he gave him the satisfaction of the longest foreplay they had ever had, before turning it into the gentlest lovemaking the two of them had ever had.

Jason loved every single moment, moaning and gasping along with Percy and moving his hips to find a rhythm with him to move to, and his wonderful, beautiful boyfriend went along with it immediately, indulging him even further with his expressiveness and unfiltered sounds.

Gods, Jason loved this guy.

Percy was so good to him.

Jason told him as much, and babbled about how good Percy had been for him, waiting so patiently for his turn, and how much Jason adored him and loved him and how beautiful he was.

He told him of the sea-green of his eyes and the blush on his ears, of his words and his voice and his laughs, of his smirks and his grins and his quirks, of the small of his back and the way his chest felt against Jason's, and he kissed him and pulled him down and against him to put more weight into his words.

Percy let him, merely seeming even more determined to please him, and Jason could totally live with that.

Gods, this was the best thing in the world.

Jason should celebrate his birthday more often.

Percy hummed in that totally blissed out way of his and dragged his lips over Jason's neck up to his lips, giving him a long and lazy kiss as he climbed off him awkwardly, all shaky limbs and uncoordinated movements.

His Percy, who had been so good for him.

Jason could only sigh contently and let his arms fall to the side, wondering whether he'd even be able to reach out for his guys to tug them closer for cuddles.

To be honest, he wasn't even sure whether he'd be able to move, at all.

Jason decided he'd simply stay right here, exactly the way he was, forever.

Percy disappeared from his side, and Jason wanted to open his eyes to check where he was disappearing to, but then he didn't, instead sighing again and letting out a faint, pleased hum as his heartrate started slowing again, the pleasant buzzing in his head ever so slowly subsiding, too.

Man, that had been…there were no words for it.
Jason mourned the fact that he couldn't even put a name on how amazing his boyfriends were, but other than that, he was fine.

Also, Percy appeared again, armed with damp tissues that felt funny on Jason's skin, so that eased his worries greatly, as well.

"I think I broke Jason." Percy's voice was laced with amusement, and his words were met by chuckles that spoke of agreement.

"If anything, we broke Jason. Oh man, look how blissed out he looks. We did a superb job right there. Just look at him. He's in heaven." Will cooed, and Jason felt them coming closer.

He'd love to tug them against him and pepper their faces in kisses, the same way he always did.

He also wanted to hold them tight and tell them how much he loved them and show them how much he adored them with every fiber of his being.

Instead, Jason remained where he was as his body refused to comply, and he could only manage to pry open his eyes to at the very least see his wonderful boyfriends.

His wonderful boyfriends, who didn't mind him not tugging them closer, and instead came to settle against his sides, by themselves.

His wonderful boyfriends, who didn't mind him not kissing them, and instead moved to pepper his face and neck and arms and chest with kisses.

His wonderful boyfriends, who didn't seem to mind that Jason was dead right now, and instead set out to pamper him in the best ways possible.

There was Percy, with his lips pressed against the side of Jason's face and hogging his arm to his left.

There was Will, with his face nuzzled against Jason's neck and one leg already thrown over one of Jason's to his right.

There was Nico, who was the only one not yet laying down as he sat cross-legged by Jason's head and leaned over to push Percy out of the way and kiss Jason's face all over.

Jason let it all happen with a blissed-out grin on his face, his eyes falling shut again as he hummed once more.

This was it, nothing would ever be able to top this.

"You look so far gone, bro." Percy mused, sounding slightly awed, and Jason hummed to show him he was that far gone.

"Oh, he is. You should feel this. He feels amazing. A bundle of endorphins and love." Will told them, and Nico huffed out a small laugh before he started peppering Jason's face with kisses again, this time making him chortle helplessly at the odd sensation.

"Aww, he's so adorable like this. Maybe we should bliss him out this way more often." Percy promptly cooed, and Jason totally wouldn't mind.

"He can't even move anymore, Percy. He probably can't even talk. Usually, we get at least three love confessions before he kisses us senseless to show us how much he means it." Will retorted, and Jason had to agree with that, too.

"That's okay. I love seeing him like this. Plus, I think it's time we give him at least three love confessions now." Percy stated seriously, and Jason couldn't resist peeking at him, wondering how he deserved such a wonderful boyfriend.

Three wonderful boyfriends, in fact.

Percy pressed his lips against Jason's cheek in a way too loud and exaggerated kiss.
"I love you. You still look so blissed out. Are you sure you don’t need, like, an ambulance or anything?"

Aww, he was worrying about him.

Jason merely smiled a little wider and shook his head lightly.

He was more than fine right now.

In fact, he felt a little as if he was floating.

Will placed a kiss on his bruised and bitten neck gently, before huffing a small laugh against it.

"So blissed out. So pretty. So full of love. I love you, Handsome." He chimed in, and Jason's heart fluttered a little as he sighed happily.

Nico started peppering his face in kisses again, before giving him a drawn out upside-down kiss on the lips that had him humming again.

"I love you, too, tesoro mio."

Aww, three beautiful confessions from his three beautiful boyfriends.

Jason had no idea what to do but to smile happily to himself.

"I love you, too." He whispered back, his voice raspy and weak, and all three of his boyfriends promptly cooed and came a lot closer again, giggling and chuckling and laughing against his skin and showering him with kisses once more.

Jason was the happiest man alive.

His body slowly started responding to him again, so he promptly made use of that to maneuver his arms around his boyfriends left and right and pull them against him better, already turning his head for some more lazy, mostly open-mouthed kisses that satisfied him in ways others would probably never understand.

His boyfriends were happy to give.

Percy moved away momentarily, but came back to work Jason's legs back into his boxer shorts and tug them up, leaving him with one worry less, though he also wouldn't have been opposed to just sleeping naked.

Will tugged Percy back to Jason's side so they could resume their cuddling asap.

Nico started searching for his place in this mess, and Will pulled back to let him take his place, instead nudging Jason to let him between his legs to lay down on top of him, his warmth so wonderfully alluring once more, now that Jason was cooling down again.

Oh yes, he had such wonderful boyfriends.

They were still showering him in kisses.

"I should be doing that." He mused quietly with his raspy voice, but his boyfriends merely huffed and chuckled and continued their doings as if he hadn't said anything.

"We love you. Let us pamper you just this once." Nico insisted, and they never denied Nico anything.

"Okay." He breathed, instead, and let his eyes fall shut again, glad for his boyfriends, glad for them being the way they were, glad for the pillow corner they had created, glad for getting to feel this way right now.

"I love you, guys." He breathed again with another blissed out sigh, and his boyfriends chuckled and laughed again.
"Anything for you, Handsome." "We love you, too, man." "Goodnight, tesoro mio."

He truly had amazing boyfriends.

"Best birthday party ever." He said, and felt them beginning to kiss him again, which had him chortling quietly again.

Truly amazing boyfriends.

Chapter End Notes

2nd part of the Fanart links <3

ENJOY!!

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-
mel-chan366
- New Years from Advent Calendar times ;)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/154469941964/the-third-of-week-three-of-my-
fabulous-five-dollar
- Our dorks in Christmas sweaters!! :D  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-
for-mel-chan366
- The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-
mel-chan366-now-i
- Ice cream time ;)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/156557714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-
chan366-3-3-some
- <3  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160990996944/another-of-my-may-madness-
commissions-a-fabulous
- The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss ;)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-
ever-fabulous
- ...Boxer Shorts XD ;)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164308263854/let-me-just-take-this-time-to-say-
that
- The guys 'admiring' Jason in his leather jacket ;)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164426408554/another-fun-very-colourful-
commission-for
- Pride ;)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/165225200564/a-cozy-commission-for-the-
fantastic
- A peaceful moment in the Hades Cabin (so soft!!!!!! so peaceful!!!!!! so cozy!!!!!!)

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-
mel-chan366-3
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love
them too much not to share them ;)  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-
for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-
commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3  
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-
commission-for
- Jercy Soft Kiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164389230829/an-adorable-sketch-commission-for-mel-chan366
- Solangelo Date <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/16750445724/three-super-sweet-commissions-for-mel-chan366-i
- Alright, here it comes: We have three (3) magnificent pieces right here, for all those with the Jasico and Percico feels. Jasico with Nico doing the mighty deed of cleaning Jason's glasses for him, Percy being cuddly while Nico is rambling™, and Jason blowing raspberries on Nico's stomach (Nico, now there's drawn proof that you LOVE it, no more complaints allowed.)

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my firstborn child :) (Mostly because there won't be one. Sorry. But you can have a cookie?)
The Battles We Face

Chapter Notes

(Edit: *** marks new ones at the time of the chapter)
(Edit2: Had to split this into top/end notes, so here's the first part, and rest is below.)

PLEASE LOOK AT THESE AMAZING FANARTS THAT EXIST FOR
THIS SERIES:
http://sta.sh/055hx09e5r9 - perfect depiction of Kyle ;)
http://sta.sh/0h2pt887zfi - adorable Will with flowers <3
http://sta.sh/02yxy10gpxd - our four dorks, back when happiness was more than just a word! <3
http://sta.sh/0qy6lk6a69y2 - our four dorks once more <3
http://sta.sh/0145j1edvepc - Jason realizing how cute Will is ;) http://sta.sh/01m8rr04z97n - Percy's and Nico's reaction to Jason being all smitten with Will ;) http://nicodamnangelo.tumblr.com/post/149016380617/fanart-for-my-favorite-fanfic-love-dreams
- Percy's and Nico's reaction when Will actually seems smitten with Jason as well >;)

http://sta.sh/01bl1irqkgjhb - WILL IN HIS FLOWER DRESS!!! <3
- A super adorable Will in his comfort sweater!! <3
- A super cute redraw of our Will in his comfort sweater!! :D (Also, my new phone background XD)
- Will with blanket <3
- THE TEAM!!!!! THE WHOLE TEAM!!!!! I AM FOREVER IN AWE AND GRATEFUL AND AM ORDERING Y’ALL TO LOOK AT THIS RIGHT AWAY!!!!! PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THE GODS DO IT!!!
https://sta.sh/01n7zhnbjil
- HAVE A PINING ASH FOR HANNAH!!!!! (Seriously, look at this. Now we know why Ash got a crush >;) And omg do they have it baaaad ;))
- Leah and Will!!!! I swear I am in love!!! Just look at how happy they look!!!!!!!! AND LOOK AT LEAH!!!!!!! AAAAAHHHHH!!!!!
https://vityuari.tumblr.com/post/163949084494/this-took-wayyy-too-long-to-finish-but-here-you
- A super cute selfie of the four, with Percy and Will being their usual sassy, challenge-loving dorks <3

http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163636112161/a-will-solace-commission-for-my-patreon-tari
- Will with the Perseus constellation on his back! <3
- Nico in his winter outfit :')
http://artbybansheebender.tumblr.com/post/163958457166/this-is-another-
commission-for-my-amazing-patron
- Percy, the shameless hoodie thief and hoarder XD
- Jason and the leather jacket >:)
- This was a very self-indulgent piece of the guys in their early thirties <3 (I just love thinking about them after all of this is over, just living a normal life in New Rome...now they just gotta survive long enough to make it there ;))

Aaaand here comes a Mini-Comic from WoB times, commissioned from the super sweet Alexandra:
- That one time Percy gave Will flowers... <3

Check End Notes for more links!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A/N: Hey Cupcakes! :D

Aaand here comes the next chapter! A little later than initially planned, but now we should be back on track ;)

I hope your holidays went well, and that those that celebrated had some nice and peaceful moments with their families/friends/SOs/alone (and ofc awesome gifts ;)).

As always, I want to thank all of you for all the support and kind words you've given me so far, and hope you'll enjoy the rest of the series :) Also, special thanks to my friend and beta-reader! (Still the bestest.)

Best wishes, and Happy New Year!
-Tári

Trigger Warnings: (You knew it was coming, guys...)
- Graphic Depiction of Battles / Fighting / Blood / Injuries
- Angst
- Death

Chapter 12: The Battles We Face

The walk back to their hospital room in the morning was long, and an adventure for itself.

Nico guessed he shouldn't be surprised, yet here he was, drowsy, in love, and a little surprised, anyways.

They were walking slowly, the sun only just beginning to rise, and Nico wondered whether one day they would walk these streets again, together like this, to watch the sunrise together and start into a peaceful day.

Jason hummed again and started wrapping his arms around Nico from behind, slowing him down even further the same way he had done with Will and Percy, and the next moment, Nico felt the additional weight of him as he slouched over him, face buried at the side of Nico's neck.

Nico chuckled and shook his head, but didn't fight him, rather slowing down a little more as he tried to attune his steps with Jason's and make walking less awkward.

It was a miracle they were moving at all, to be honest – with Jason this affectionate, he wouldn't
have been surprised if they hadn't even made it out of that room.

Even after waking up with aching limbs and sore bodies, Jason had still kept the same affectionate and cuddly mood he had had last night, and he wasn't shy about showing it.

If anything, he was trying to catch up on a missed night full of cuddles, because they had actually slept the majority of it for once.

But hey, in a way, Nico much preferred this to anything else his groggy mind could have come up with.

Especially considering Will had finally relented and told Percy and Jason that they would all leave today.

Will had also been the one coaxing them out of that room after checking that everything had been put back into place in both rooms.

Though none of them felt like returning to their hospital room.

They also clearly didn't feel like packing.

Packing was so much more tedious than cuddling, after all, and with his body this sore, Nico would really rather be cuddled.

Oh man, that pillow corner surely hadn't been nearly as great and comfortable as the one in the Underworld had been.

But, gods, the sex had totally been worth it, even if he was going to live with an aching back and sore limbs now.

Jason hummed and started kissing along his neck, before grumbling something against his skin and pulling back with a deep sigh, apparently ready to assault the next victim, which happened to be Percy again.

Eh, Percy loved it, he didn't need rescuing.

Nico smiled to himself as he glanced sideways at them, then shook his head at the fact that Jason really didn't seem to care about anything right now but being affectionate.

He hadn't seemed to care when they had gotten dressed either, much rather touching them and tugging them back into the pillows or onto his lap to kiss and make out.

In fact, he had cared so little that he had really only tugged on his jeans haphazardly and left them unbuttoned, before slipping into his shoes and following them out of the room shirtless, much rather wrapping himself around Will, who he claimed was his 'beacon of warmth', and thus 'all he needed'.

Since then, he hadn't cared about how they made it down the stairs with him slouching over them, nor had he cared about being seen like this on the street.

He didn't even care that Nico was the one holding his glasses, because Jason had been so close to losing them way too many times the past few minutes.

Now that they were nearing the hospital, he still didn't seem to care about any glances they got, much rather stroking over Percy's sides appreciatively and whispering all sorts of praise into his ear that had Percy giggling with a flushed face and red ears, while Will and Nico shared an amused look with each other.

"Come on, let's get you two upstairs and in bed. Nico and I will do the packing." Will suggested as he coaxed them inside the building, closely followed by Nico, but Jason merely hummed vaguely in reply, before his hands moved to cup Percy's butt through his pants.

"I want all three of you in bed with me. Forever." His boyfriend stated with a low voice and an audible pout, and Nico could only shake his head.
Seriously, what had happened to their composed and organized boyfriend?

He was a wreck, and all it had taken was a lap dance and some sex.

Sure, it had been amazing sex, but still.

"Oh man, I love him like this. Guys, we definitely gotta do this more often." Percy called over his shoulder with a wide grin, and Nico made a face.

Most definitely not.

"He can barely even walk, Percy." Will put in amused, and as if on cue, Jason and Percy both stumbled, which had Percy wailing and Jason grumbling, before they shifted and coordinated their movements once more to make it up the stairs in one piece.

"Yeah, so? He doesn't need to walk to cuddle me."

Nico wasn't sure Percy could actually call it cuddling anymore when Jason really just flattened them onto the ground and covered their bodies with his own, but who knew, maybe that's how Percy liked it.

Nico smiled at that thought, until they opened the door to their hospital room and he and Will found themselves dragged over to Percy's bed instantly, nudged right into it and promptly flattened by Jason's weight as he unceremoniously dropped on top of them.

While Percy laughed an elated laugh, Will and Nico groaned in unison.

"Gods, Jason. Why you gotta be so needy?" Will wailed, but then also succumbed to his fate as he stopped trying to wriggle free and instead laid there like a dead man, arms spread out and eyes closed.

Nico could even see him smile, that traitor.

Was nobody thinking of the packing, anymore?

Usually, Jason would think of the packing and get to it right away, and he would back Nico up in saying it had to be done right away, seeing as they were on a sort of tight schedule.

Now, however, Jason was the very person keeping them from doing any packing.

Nico tried half-heartedly to escape his crushing embrace, then he sighed and slumped again – partly because he didn't mind as much as he wanted to make it seem, and partly because Jason was hovering over him and giving him that intent look before leaning down and showering his face in kisses.

"Sorry, guys. I can't help it. I'm a big guy, I need all the love and cuddles, you see?" Jason insisted on top of them, and Nico rolled his eyes while Percy snickered.

"Oh, I bet." Will snorted, but, again, he wasn't fighting him in the slightest.

"You know we gotta do the packing, right?" Nico pointed out, but was met with deaf ears as Jason hummed a little louder to undoubtedly tune him out, now turning his attention to Will to smooch him next.

"In a bit. First, kisses." Jason insisted, and Nico could only shake his head again.

Seriously, this was the mighty Jason Grace, the ex-praetor so many looked up to and admired.

Amazing.

"Jason, I love you." Percy stated seriously, and Jason promptly abandoned Will to shower Percy in kisses, undoubtedly in return for that confession.

How rude, always picking favorites.
Nico sulked and stuck out his bottom lip, pouting to himself at that.

Then, Jason suddenly turned his head and started smooching him, and Nico's pout immediately dissolved as he broke into a fit of giggles, squirming beneath him at the tickly feeling, though he didn't want him to stop.

Jason didn't. Instead, he hummed contently and continued, before his lips found Nico's in a feathery-light kiss that didn't last nearly as long as Nico would have liked.

Eh, he guessed he was Jason's favorite, too.

"You're all so full of affection and love, it's beautiful." Will sighed contently, and Nico wished faintly he could feel what Will was feeling, though he also knew that would change once they weren't feeling all warm and fuzzy like right now.

"We still need to do the packing." Nico pointed out again, but was hushed by Jason giving him another kiss on the lips, soft and sweet and still much too short for Nico's liking.

"Let me woo you first, my mighty Ghost King." Jason purred, and Nico immediately perked up.

Damn right he was the Ghost King.

Nico felt the smug, triumphant grin tug at his lips, and he guessed staying in bed a while longer wasn't all that bad.

They would have enough time later, for sure.

Will snorted next to him, but Nico decided to ignore him, instead feeling rather pleased with himself – especially when Jason kept placing timid pecks over his cheeks and along his neck.

Then, Jason tugged the three of them closer and rested his head against Nico's chest with a happy sigh.

"I'm just gonna keep you here with me." He stated, and Nico heard Percy letting out a wistful sigh, clearly liking that idea.

Who knew, maybe he really liked this.

Maybe this was the sort of thing he needed – not somebody crushing all the bones in his body like Jason was apparently set on doing, but somebody to hold him like this and shield him from the rest of the world.

Maybe it was Jason being this way that kept Percy in such a good mood right now, to begin with, especially considering that they had told him they would have to leave today.

Nico pondered that, then he closed his eyes and decided to just enjoy Jason's open display of affection for the three.

This was much better than packing, anyways.

Yeah, they could still pack later.

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"Oh, Jason, you're wearing one of the shirts! It suits you so well!" Sara exclaimed upon seeing them, the same moment Andrew turned towards Liam with a triumphant look.

"Ha! I told you it's the right size! Alright, pay up, mate."

Liam opened his mouth to argue, but then only sighed and shook his head as he searched his pocket for some change.

Nico eyed his teammates warily, wondering whether he'd ever be able to make sense of them.

Then, he looked around for Hannah, frowning when he couldn't spot her.
"Where's Ash?" Percy asked, and Nico guessed they were missing, too.

"Checking out the party bus with Hannah." Sara told them, and Nico's frown deepened.

"Party bus?" He, Percy and Jason asked at the same time, while Will snorted out a small laugh.

"Oh dear." Was the only thing the blonde said, though Nico wanted to chime in when they filed through the exit of New Rome and found themselves face to face with...a party bus.

Quite literally.

"Jules-Albert!" He exclaimed in disbelief, feeling equally angry and embarrassed as he noticed all the people staring, while his zombie chauffeur leaned against the brightly colored vehicle like some sort of celebrity.

What the hell?!

Jules-Albert fixed the dirty remnants of his leather jacket he was wearing, then groaned and pushed away from the bus to move towards the open door, clearly ignoring Nico and his outburst.

"Why?!" He called after him, while his Boyfriends merely laughed, and the other people around them muttered.

They had traveled in a bus before, and it had looked perfectly normal, why did they have to use this one this time?!

Where did this one even come from?!

Oh gods, had Jules-Albert stolen it?!

Would they have to run from the cops again?!

They had enough other worries, most of them being monsters and people wanting them dead, how could his father agree on letting them travel in this thing?!

"You know, I don't think it's all that bad, to be honest. It's...certainly got its own charm to it, I suppose..." Percy muttered with his lips twitching, and Nico glowered at him, before stomping off after his zombie chauffeur.

He spotted Ash and Hannah, the latter yelling at the former, who was apparently trying to climb the bus from the outside, but if they fell, Nico was certain Hannah would be kind enough to catch them, so he ignored them as he hammered on the bus door that Jules-Albert just closed. Undoubtedly to keep him out.

Freaking zombie.

"Don't make me get the skeletons to drag you out!" He threatened loudly, but then his zombie chauffeur already visibly sighed and rolled his decaying eyes, before the door opened and allowed Nico to hop inside.

"Why can't we have the other one? The normal one? You remember, the silver one, with boring logo and writing on it that nobody looked at twice? Come on, how could my dad allow this? Did you steal this thing?!" He asked, not even trying to keep his frustration down, and his skin was crawling as he felt what seemed like everyone staring, though he knew it was partly just his nerves.

Jules-Albert merely shrugged again and let out a deep, nonplussed groan.

Nico's eyebrow twitched.

"What do you mean, my dad told you explicitly to use this one?"

Another groan, then Jules-Albert reached out for a cup of coffee, though he was already dead, he didn't need any damn coffee.
"How does this seem like a good idea?! We are going cross-country, back to Camp Half-Blood, while there's monsters on the loose and possibly enemy demigods that want to skin us alive. How is driving in a brightly colored bus with neon paint a good idea in that scenario?! We need stealth, not extra attention!" He exclaimed and threw his hands up, but Jules-Albert merely fixed him with an unimpressed look and took another sip of the coffee he didn't need.

Then, he groaned again.

Nico threw his hands up and kicked at the plastic covering next to him, before turning around and storming out.

Freaking zombie!

Freaking Hades!

Freaking everything!

"Nico? What did he say?" Percy called after him, but Nico only waved him off and stomped to the back, where Jason and the others were already busy putting in all their belongings except for their tents.

In case of an attack, they had come to learn that it was better to have the tents with them at all times, after all.

And now, thanks to his father's stupid ideas, Nico was certain they'd end up getting attacked at least twice as much, if not even more.

Great.

"Oh, come on, grumpy, don't look like that." Will tried conversationally and put an arm around him, but Nico only shot him a dark look.

"Do you not see how this thing looks?" He asked bitterly, and his boyfriend looked up at the swirls of pink and purple and blue and green and yellow with a contemplative look on his face.

Then, he shrugged and looked back at Nico with a smirk.

"I do, and it's definitely nothing I'd advise demigods to travel with, but…"

Nico gave him a long, hard look and crossed his arms in front of his chest, just waiting for what he had to say in this thing's defense.

Will nodded at something behind Nico, and Nico hesitated with a skeptical glance, before he turned his head.

But all he saw was Percy, laughing and nudging Ash with a wiggle of his eyebrows, before he hopped onto the bus and yelled something about reserving the best seats.

What?

"This is the first time I've seen him setting foot inside a bus without grumbling or complaining or looking paranoid. He thinks it's funny."

Oh.

"Also, monsters found us in plain busses before, Neeks. Chances are, they're gonna take one look at this thing, say 'There's no way demigods are gonna be that stupid' and leave us be to look for another snack someplace else." Will continued with a shrug, and Nico's arms fell to his side again as he stared off into space, thinking over Jules-Albert's last comment of 'Your dad decided this is the best stealth you can get'.

Oh.

Will patted him on the shoulder with a smug grin, and Nico sulked, still upset about the party bus.
Though, if it made Percy feel better…

"Fine. But if we get attacked, they better scratch the paint off." He grumbled and kicked some
dirt, then stomped off to get inside the bus, as well, ignoring the onlookers.

They had already bid their goodbyes earlier, so there was no reason to dwell.

Especially not when Reyna had assured them she'd clear a path for them to get out of this place in
one piece.

Monster attacks were still not as bad as they had been before, but they had picked up quite a bit
again, so he didn't want her efforts to be wasted – even if it meant traveling with a freaking
eyesore.

The moment he was inside, Jules-Albert closed the doors and started the engine, as if to make sure
he didn't change his mind.

Nico shot him a last, dark look, then he was distracted by Percy waving exaggeratedly from the
seats he had chosen.

He sighed.

Fine, they'd be traveling in this eyesore.

Will patted his shoulder again, then dragged him over to their boyfriends.

"Isn't this the coolest bus you've ever seen? You know I hate busses. Come on, it's hilarious." 
Percy said elatedly, and Nico turned his face towards the window immediately, if only to hide his
lips twitching into a small smile.

Fine, maybe the bus wasn't all that bad.

At the very least it still looked fairly normal on the inside.

He caught a small, amused groan from the front and glared at Jules-Albert, just to catch that
damned zombie chauffeur smirking his rotten-teeth smile at him through the rearview mirror.

Nico gave him his most venomous look he could muster, before returning to his sulking and
staring out of the window.

What a way to start their trip home.

Oh well. At least Reyna was keeping her word, because they made it out of the Camp grounds
and onto the highway in record speed, and without interference.

Now, he only hoped she'd be able to keep it that way and keep her Camp safe.

Nico closed his eyes with a sigh, then let Percy distract him with his splendid mood and bright
smiles.

They were going home.

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"I need to pee." Ash announced, and Nico looked ready to strangle them, so Jason put an arm
around him just in case.

"We asked five minutes ago when we passed the gas station whether anybody needed a break.
The next toilet won't happen for at least another hour, Ash." He explained to them patiently, but
all they did was move a hand through their unruly mop of hair at the top of their head and push
out their bottom lip.

"Yeah, but I didn't need to pee back then. I need to pee now."

"Maybe you should have tried to pee back then, though. We can't just hop off the highway now,
just because you need a toilet.” Nico grumbled, and Jason sighed and moved his hand over his eyes beneath his glasses, nearly nudging them off in the process.

"Would it help if we stopped at the side of the road?” He suggested, but Ash promptly shook their head, arms crossed defiantly in front of their chest.

Of course not.

"We got this far without monster interference, and you expect us to take the next exit and go back? Just because you can’t control your bladder?” Nico asked in apparent annoyance, and Ash groaned.

"Fine! Then stop at the side of the road!”

Well, that solved that problem, Jason guessed.

"No, we’re going back. Have it your way, Ash.” Nico grumbled and turned to march off to Jules-Albert.

Or not.

Jason sighed.

"I just said I'm fine with stopping at the side of the-…erm, guys, are you seeing what I'm seeing?”

Jason frowned at the sudden change in Ash’s voice, following their gaze as they stared wide-eyed at something ahead of them.

Nico grumbled, but stopped as well to check what they were talking about, though his face said he expected it to be a prank.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t a prank.

"What did you just say about hopping off the highway…?” Jason said quietly, and the sudden silence in the bus showed that the others had seen, too.

Monsters.

A whole bunch of them.

Right ahead of them, and everywhere.

They just sort of…stood there? It looked almost as if they were watching the cars go by, like they were hoping for a stray demigod to hop out and jump into their waiting mouths.

Nico rushed to Jules-Albert, while Jason moved to the rest of the group.

Ash only groaned.

"And right when I need to pee. Fantastic.”

Jules-Albert groaned loudly, too, but whether that was just to reply to Nico, to warn them, or because he was as exasperated as Ash, Jason couldn’t tell.

What he could tell, though, was that this thing could, in fact, hop off the highway.

Because that was exactly what they did.

One moment, they were driving on the fastest lane, then on the slowest, and then, Jules-Albert tore the wheel around and the bus went crashing through the guardrail and off the road.

Percy cursed, and Jason mourned the fact his boyfriend would undoubtedly not keep his good mood after this, but then he had bigger worries, because Andrew lost his hold and fell from his chair onto the floor, which wasn’t the best place to be right now with the bus shaking and jumping and tipping from one side to the other.
Jason tried to keep his balance as best as he could, feeling his entire body shake along with the bus, which felt horrible, but Andrew was more important.

Picking the boy off the floor, he maneuvered him back into his seat, only nearly knocking himself out in the progress when Jules-Albert veered to the left sharply and he lost his footing.

Andrew was clinging to him, then to his seat, his skin pale and looking slightly greenish, which wasn't a good sign, though Jason hoped he'd wait until they were a little steadier before ridding his stomach off its contents.

"Isn't this just attracting more attention?!" Andrew yelled up at him, but Jason couldn't reply, the jolts from the bus making his jaw clack shut again whenever he tried, and he didn't want to bite his tongue off.

His glasses slid off his nose, and he tried to catch them, but that only led to him losing his balance and stumbling to the side, the bus veering sharply again.

The shaking was horrible.

Pain seared through Jason suddenly as his vision dissolved into black and white splatters, and he dimly noticed he wouldn't be able to catch himself.

"Jason! Guys, brace for impact!" Nico's voice sounded, just as Jason hit the ground, and the next moment, there was Nico, throwing himself over him and keeping him down protectively.

A moment later, the whole bus seemed to crash into something, the noise deafening, the jolts shaking Jason to the core and making both him and Nico momentarily leave the ground before crashing right back into it harshly, knocking the breath out of both of them.

There was screaming, there was yelling, Percy was back to cursing the gods, and Jason was pretty sure he could hear Ash whimpering.

Then, the noise died down, and the shaking stopped, and Jason sucked in a deep breath to fill his lungs with air again, while Nico slumped on top of him.

"Is everybody alive?" Will called immediately, which was met with several groans.

"No, I'm dead. Ha-ha." Andrew deadpanned, and Jason blinked a couple of times, trying to glimpse his glasses somewhere on the floor around him, though he didn't feel capable of moving just yet.

But everything was a blur, and his whole body hurt.

"Okay, Andrew is dead. Everybody else alive? Good. We need to get out of the bus. If the monsters didn't see us before, the crash is bound to attract them. I'll treat your injuries the moment the situation allows it." Will called, and Jason felt Nico moving on top of him, followed by a low groan and his weight lifting off Jason, though that had been the least of his worries.

"Jason, are you okay?" Nico asked, but Jason wasn't quite sure, everything inside him still vibrating as if the bus was still moving.

He was feeling rather sick, to be honest.

His body wasn't responding to him properly, and his head felt funny.

Or, at least, he thought so?

"All good. Just…lost my glasses." He pressed out and tried to push himself up, feeling dizzy and rather shaky as he got back on his feet, though he managed not to sway too much.

He caught sight of Ash storming out of the bus, followed by Percy and the others, while Will lagged behind, his eyes on them.

"Your glasses?" Nico repeated in surprise, then started looking for them, while Jason still struggled with his balance.
Had he hit his head? He couldn't quite remember.

Everything had happened so quickly…

"Go with the others. I'll find them, Jason." Nico assured him and nudged him towards the front, where Will was waiting for them, and he stumbled towards him to the best of his abilities, taking in as much of the damage on the bus as he could.

They must have struck the only boulder in the area, but they had struck it so badly he knew the bus was irreparable.

It was a miracle they had made it out in one piece, to be honest – or that the door was opening, in the first place.

Then again, it hadn't been a frontal impact, but a side one, though it seemed like Jules-Albert had taken the most damage out of everything.

The zombie chauffeur still sat in the driver seat, undoubtedly stuck, and it looked as if most of his limbs were twisted this way or that, his head turned at least twice.

Or at least that's how it looked like to Jason, who had to squint to make out any sharper features.

He needed his glasses.

Will's hand snatched his arm and tugged him after him out of the bus.

"I lost my glasses." He explained, though Will hadn't asked, and his boyfriend shot him a look he sadly couldn't see.

"You've got a concussion and a bad case of whiplash, Jason." Will then said, and Jason guessed that meant he must have hit his head, after all.

"But I lost my glasses." He repeated, though he wasn't quite sure why.

"Nico will find them. Percy, watch over him, he's gonna need a moment." He heard his boyfriend saying, then a different set of hands was on him, tugging him against a familiar body.

His head was killing him.

Actually, he only now noticed how much his head actually hurt.

There was this constant buzzing in his ears, too, it was really annoying.

Jason let himself slump against Percy, and Percy held him, patting him on the back lightly and coaxing him further away from the bus.

There were more voices around him, though it took a while for him to be able to focus on them properly. Ash was saying something about the best relief imaginable, Hannah commented on that, Andrew whined about their mode of transport being broken, Sara pointed out they could have been broken, instead.

Then there was Will saying something that shut them up, followed by a low groan that sounded like Jules-Albert.

"Where are we, even? Does anybody have the map?" Andrew asked, and Jason frowned and rubbed at his head, though that didn't help the headache in the slightest.

Percy nudged his hand away and shook his head sternly at him, though he didn't say anything.

"Wherever we are, we have to keep moving. Like, I don't want to cause any panic, but the bus is starting to burn." Sara pointed out with an odd undertone, and Jason looked around at the bus groggily, realizing dimly that Nico was still in there somewhere.

"Will." He said, but Will was already breaking away from the group and rushed towards the bus, while Percy's grip on him tightened to keep him from stumbling after him.
Sara was right, the bus was beginning to smoke and burn.

They had to leave if they didn't want to be assaulted by a bunch of monsters.

"Come on, let's get moving." Nico's voice filled the perimeter, and Jason dragged his eyes up again to look at both him and Will rushing towards their group, his glasses safely in Nico's hands, then back on his nose.

Since when were they so fast?

Or maybe Jason was just unusually slow.

"The luggage?" He asked dumbly as Percy moved Jason's arm over his shoulder to support him, but his boyfriends didn't stop.

"Already collected it." Percy told him, and Jason gave a small nod, before noticing he was right.

While Hannah and Sara had their weapons drawn, the others from their team and Nico were carrying their tents and luggage.

Will looked back at him quizzically, as if he considered stopping to heal him, but then they could already hear the telltale sound of wings fluttering and something bounding closer, so there was no time for that.

Instead, they started running faster, which proved a real pain for Jason, who stumbled more than he ran, and poor Percy had to support him much more than he should have.

It took him a moment to realize Jules-Albert wasn't with them anymore.

It took him another moment to realize it was probably Jules-Albert who was opening fire on whatever it was that had decided to check out the source of the crash, because there was the sound of screeching, grunting, shots, and the sound of more monsters coming.

He was distracting them, for their sake.

Nico seriously had the best zombie chauffeur in the world.

"Hurry!" Nico called from the front, but Jason really couldn't go any faster than he already was, even if he knew he was slowing Percy down.

"Run on ahead." He told him, already out of breath and his head just hurting so much, but Percy ignored him and only held him a little tighter than before.

"Why is there no place to hide?! What sort of place is this?! All there is are these dumb fields!" Hannah exclaimed, clearly agitated, but Nico just led them on.

"We're going to have to go inside those corn fields, Hannah. There's no other way. Maybe we'll lose them in there." He suggested, but that sounded like a horrible idea.

Corn fields.

Jason couldn't even keep his head up for long enough to check their surroundings properly, he wouldn't have known there to be fields if they hadn't pointed it out.

Fields were a bad idea.

Sure, they could sort of hide in them, but chances were much higher they'd end up being attacked by monsters in there, and they'd be much more vulnerable because they wouldn't see the attack coming until the last moment.

Fields were always bad news.

"We're going in." Will announced, and so they did.

"Fucking corn." Hannah spat in disgust, but that was all Jason could make out, trying to lift his
head again to look for the rest of his team, but the more time passed, the worse his head and neck were feeling, along with the rest of his body, and now his vision blurred even with his glasses still on his nose.

He let his eyes fall shut again, knowing full well Percy was carrying most of his weight by now, but his legs just wouldn't support him anymore.

"Jason, stay with me. We'll be fine. We're just not allowed to get separated, that's all." He heard him reassuring him, but when Jason forced himself to lift his head and look for the others, he could already tell they were much further ahead, and it would be foolish of them to stop and wait for them.

"You should go on without me, Percy. I can hold my ground if there's an attack." He mumbled, but Percy only shot him a dark look.

"Don't even try. I'm not leaving you behind. Stop creating unnecessary drama."

Wow, such harsh words for somebody so pretty.

Jason felt himself panting, now beginning to feel light-headed as the exhaustion really kicked in, and the air around them suddenly didn't seem enough for his lungs.

Still, he tried his best to move his legs, his vision blurring again, though he settled on looking at his boyfriend, taking in his dark hair and pretty skin and those lovely eyes Jason adored so much.

"I love you, man." He said, just because, and Percy shot him a confused look, eyebrows knitting together.

"I…I love you, too?" He replied, and Jason smiled at him.

Then, he passed out.

***

"Jason!"

Nico heard Percy yell, and while he flinched at the volume and dreaded this would alert monsters to their exact whereabouts, he also stopped instantly and looked around for their boyfriends, shocked to find they weren't right behind them anymore.

The rest of the team looked back as well, looking stricken as they came to realize the same thing.

Will cursed and already made to run off, but Nico held him back by the wrist.

"Don't!" He hissed, and Will was about to argue, when he suddenly didn't, instead rushing forward to clasp his hand over Nico's mouth and motion for the others to be quiet.

They immediately obeyed, all their hands on their weapons, at the ready.

Will was completely still, his face one of pure concentration, before his head snapped sharply to the side, staring off into the corn field to their left.

What…?

Nico tried to strain his ears, but he was completely unaware of anything around them – until he saw something big moving past them, maybe a foot or so away, but vaguely visible through the rows of corn.

Oh no, that did not look friendly.

That looked a lot like a monster, to be honest.

And what was worse, it was coming from the opposite direction as the one they had just come from, which meant there was an even higher risk of getting attacked now.
Oh no, and Nico could barely fight.

Will couldn't fight, either.

Jason seemed out of commission, wherever he was with Percy—oh gods, what if something happened to them?

Percy could barely hold his sword correctly, much less protect himself and Jason, and there was no water around here. They would make such easy prey.

"Will..." He pressed out, but Will shook his head sharply and pushed against Nico's chest until he lowered himself to the ground hesitantly, the others following suite.

"Shh. There's more." Will whispered, and Nico shuddered.

There was no way the monsters wouldn't be able to smell them, not when they were in such a big group, and not with them undoubtedly already aware of there being demigods.

Oh gods, a fight was inevitable, wasn't it?

But they had made such good progress!

Why now?!

Since when were monsters even freaking positioned at places such as these?!

Everything about this situation yelled Kyle again, and Nico hated it so, so much.

Will kept his hand on Nico's mouth, his look of concentration not changing, and Nico felt himself holding his breath as he started hearing more noises, spotting more shapes and bodies moving past them.

He glanced towards their teammates, watching with a sinking heart how they looked back at him fearfully, awaiting orders.

Andrew looked ready to cry, fiddling with his hands and mouthing what seemed like numbers, which indicated he was counting, and Nico dreaded just what it was he was counting.

Their team was good, but if they were helplessly outnumbered, not even that would be enough, and they all knew it.


Oh gods, hopefully Percy was keeping still like they were.

Maybe they would move past them and towards the bus, maybe they could get away safely, after all...

Nico closed his eyes, trying to school his breathing as he felt his pulse quickening with fear.

Will was still on top of him, and it was ironic he was the one trying to protect Nico when it should be the other way around, but all Nico could do was clutch his wrist and keep him close, while there was more and more movement around them, monsters coming from all directions and passing them, mere inches away from them now.

It was a miracle they hadn't yet been spotted.

But that miracle seemed to come to an end when Nico heard and saw a Shadow moving through the crops, right towards them, not having seen them yet but once it broke through the last row of corn, it was bound to, because it would be right in the middle of their group.

Nico swallowed thickly, his hand leaving Will's wrist to clutch his sword, readying himself for the inevitable.

Will had his eyes firmly closed and his lips were a thin line, his body shaking, same as Andrew's,
and Nico didn't want to know what they knew.

This was not how he wanted to die. This was not what he wanted for his team.

'May you find safety in my midst.'

Will's eyes snapped open the same moment Nico's widened, and they both stared at each other, staring at the golden-brown glow seemed to emanate from both of them.

The next moment, several things happened at the same time, but the most unbelievable one was that nothing happened.

Their team let out startled noises at the sight of them.

There was a loud cracking noise further away, followed by several of the monsters immediately bounding towards it.

The Shadow, followed by several others and a few lower monsters, broke through the last row of corn.

But while Nico expected to be attacked, the monsters just continued on their way, not looking down, not looking at them, not taking any notice of them in any way whatsoever, even though they were right there.

Instead, they just kept on going, breaking through the next row of corn and distancing themselves again, one or two of the lower ones looking off to the side curiously, as if tempted to follow the others to check out the source of the noise.

But none of them strayed, following the Shadows like obedient pets.

And then, everything fell silent again as they found themselves alone in their makeshift hideout, still holding their breaths and staring at each other in disbelief.

"What. The. Fuck." Andrew said what they all had to be thinking, but Nico felt irritated, anyways.

"Don't say the f-word, Andrew." He chided, much to Will's apparent amusement as he relaxed and sat up, finally letting go of Nico completely and looking around, before giving them a sign to show the coast was clear.

"Yes, mom." Andrew mocked, but then continued cursing under his breath as he got up and brushed off the dust and dirt off his clothes.

"Fucking bugs." Hannah grumbled as she picked at her hair and rubbed her arms in apparent disgust.

Andrew shot Nico a pointed look, but Nico ignored him, instead turning away from them to look after the monsters.

"We have to look for Percy and Jason. No matter what just happened, we have no means of telling whether the same thing worked for them." He stated, but Will gave him a funny look that gave him pause.

"What?" He asked, worried there was another vision or the like that Will hadn't told them about yet.

"Isn't it obvious? Don't you remember? Underworld? Your grandmother?" Will said with an odd look, and Nico blinked at him.

What…?

"The blessings?" Will continued, and Nico stared at him, trying to figure out what he was talking about.

Then, he remembered Persephone and Demeter, remembered the golden-brown glow around Demeter as she spoke with a voice he had never heard her use before, words he had long
forgotten, or maybe never known.

Blessings.

They had just glowed.

That had been her blessing.

She had protected them.

Which meant she must have protected Percy and Jason, too.

"We still need to find them. Guys, stay close to us, just in case. Also, keep your weapons at the ready. I don't know how long that protection lasts, much less whether we'll be blessed with it again." He told his team hurriedly, and they nodded in agreement, though he still looked back at Will for confirmation before he led them back to where they had come from.

"Whatever lured them away seems to draw more and more attention. More of them are moving away from us now, moving west." Will told them, still turning his head this way or that to apparently catch any and all sound around them, and Nico had never been more grateful for his boyfriend's splendid hearing.

"What about the rest of them?" Nico asked, and Will knitted his eyebrows together and pursed his lips.

"Still at the bus, far enough away to warrant us moving. Let's grab Percy and Jason and get out of here asap."

Now that sounded like a good plan.

Unfortunately, Nico had no idea where their boyfriends were, because he was pretty sure they had come from this direction, yet the guys were nowhere to be found.

"Wait! There's something coming from the left! Nico, get-…" Will suddenly exclaimed and shot forward the same moment Nico whirled around, and whatever he was going to say was cut off as something came jumping out between the grains and threw itself at them.

Andrew shrieked, Liam jumped into Ash's arms, Hannah and Sara raised their weapons at the same time to strike and struck each other's weapons instead, Nico pulled his sword out but took too long, and Will… Will only held out his arms and the thing jumped right into them, knocking him backwards into the ground and making Nico's heart stop in his chest.

"Will!" He wasn't sure whether he was the one screaming his name, or whether it was one of the others, but the next moment, he was there and snatching the thing off Will, ready to hurl it into the sun for all he cared – anything to get it off Will, get it away from him, get him safe!

But as his hands closed around the creature, he felt the shifting of its skin, of its body, and Nico froze to stare at the thing as he pulled it off his boyfriend.

"Don't hurt me! I'm your friend!"

Nothing that looked like a monster and said that had ever turned out to be a friend, and Nico wasn't going to risk it.

"I am Corn. Spelt is the one currently distracting the monsters. Ceres ordered us to protect you. We're karpoi. You need to leave. It's only a matter of time until they figure it out and come back." The thing told him insistently as Nico tried to shake it off, confused and disgusted and a little overwhelmed, but the thing just clung to his arm and looked at him with big, green eyes that made his skin crawl.

"Spelt? No, I don't want to know." Andrew muttered and looked ready to puke, while Ash had dropped Liam and moved closer to inspect the creature – the karpoi – curiously.

Nico's mind was whirling, trying to place the creature or its name, until he remembered Hazel telling him of her travels with Frank and Nico, and of the pile of shist that had saved her.
"Don't you guys hate Ceres, though? Aren't you children of—…"

Tartarus and Gaea, he wanted to say, but found he couldn't, because those names still made his skin crawl and his mouth turn to sand even when he didn't say them out loud.

Corn only looked up at him with an expression that might be considered scornful.

"Ceres has done many bad things in letting humans cultivate us. But she has also spoken to Corn and Spelt, and she is trying to get humans to stop poisoning and mutilating us. Corn and Spelt are grateful for her efforts, and will repay her by fulfilling her wish. Now, come. We need to go." The karpoi said, then finally let go of Nico to land on the ground, not bigger than a small child.

"We still need to find Percy and Jason." Nico stated before the thing could run off, but Corn shook its head.

"No time for that. They will be fine. Ceres takes her blessings very seriously."

Nico didn't care whether Demeter was serious or not, he wanted to see his boyfriends right now to reassure himself they were safe and alive.

"We need to go now." Corn stated sharply, and the corn around them started vibrating, as if in response to it.

The next moment, the karpoi turned around and disappeared between the crops, and Nico clenched his fists, torn between following it and turning around to look for Percy and Jason.

Will stood next to him, a conflicted look on his face, while the others looked after the karpoi, before also turning to look at him, expecting orders.

Why were they turning to him, anyways? They should be asking Jason.

Jason was their team leader, not Nico.

Nico glanced back to where he thought they had come from, but he knew they were lost, and he knew the chances to find Percy and Jason anywhere in this maze were slim, especially without also announcing their presence to every other being in the area.

The karpoi had promised them safety, and even if he didn't know whether he could trust it, it was still a better bet than to lead his team further into this maze and into the claws of a bunch of hungry monsters.

Nico took a deep breath and closed his eyes, praying with all his heart that Percy and Jason would be okay, and that there would be a way for them to reunite.

Then, he gave his team a curt nod and followed the grain spirit.

Will took his hand, but didn't speak.

"If you've had any vision that might be of help, now is the time to mention it." Nico said quietly, but Will only shook his head.

"There's nothing. I don't think I've had any of those since the day I supposedly exploded." Will told him, and Nico wasn't sure why he felt both relieved and disappointed at that news, though there were more pressing matters right now than that.

"Do you think we can trust…them?" Nico asked, instead, but Will only shrugged lightly.

"If it wanted to kill us, it could have done so. We're in the midst of its realm, after all. It seems genuine enough."

Nico hoped he was right.

The last thing he wanted to do was lead his team into a trap.

Then again, he also didn't want to leave Percy and Jason to fend for themselves, yet here he was.
Nico closed his eyes again and took a deep breath.

Then, he steeled his nerves and pressed on.

They would be fine.

Nico wasn’t allowed to doubt that.

They would be fine.

***

Percy ran as fast as his feet would carry them and as silently as he could, though he couldn’t help the cracking sounds that came whenever he broke one of the corn plants in his path.

Jason was safely on his back, still knocked out, and Percy could only pray that he would be alright.

The monsters had come so close to finding them, Percy was certain he had never been more scared than at that very moment, with the Shadow mere inches away from them.

But it hadn’t found them, and the monsters had rushed off to some other place in the distance shortly after, alerted by a loud crashing sound that hopefully hadn’t come from the team.

Percy grimaced and pushed on, trying to find his goddamn way out of this field, but there seemed no end to the plants, and everywhere he looked it looked the same.

He was lost.

He had gotten lost, when Jason was in clear need of healing.

What if Jason died because of him?

He had already watched him nearly die because of him once, he couldn’t bear to see it happen again.

Percy felt his chest clenching painfully and he choked back a sob, crashing through more corn and trying to stick to one direction, knowing he had to come out of this place eventually, if only he managed to go far enough…

But there was no end.

Only corn.

Gods, he hoped the team was okay.

Then again, they had Will and Nico with them, of course they would be okay.

Plus, Percy had full faith in them.

They would be able to hold their ground.

Percy stumbled and nearly crashed into the ground, though the knowledge Jason might get hurt had him collecting himself and balancing himself out again.

His lungs were aching as he wheezed for breath, his body still far from its former abilities, and his arm tingling as if numb already, even though he hadn’t even used it for fighting, yet.

The team would be able to hold their ground.

Unfortunately, Percy wasn’t sure whether he would be able to do the same.

There was rustling somewhere behind him, and he tried to speed up, but Jason was heavy, and Percy was running out of breath.
He had to…had to protect him…

The rustling was getting louder, **nearer**, and Percy swallowed thickly, looking around him in hopes of finding something, **anything**, that could help him right now.

But there was nothing but corn.

Percy snatched one of the corncobs as he barreled past and turned his body to throw it at whatever it was that was following him, though he didn't get to see whether he hit it.

There was a thud, but whatever it was, it didn't slow, and Percy was left to curse and keep running on, no matter if his lungs were burning and his palms were sweaty, Jason slowly but surely sliding out of his grasp with every jolt that went through his body.

No, he couldn't let anything happen to Jason.

Not his Jason.

Percy tried to adjust his hold on him, pushing himself to his very limit as he tried to frantically outrun whatever it was that was behind them.

Then, he rushed right out of the corn field and onto a path, though he didn't linger, letting out a startled breath before pressing on and jumping over the small ditch before making right for the forest.

Maybe he could find a hiding place for Jason there and lure their pursuer away…

There was a low, animalistic sound that sounded a little like a laugh and a lot like bad news, and Percy risked a glance over his shoulder, just to feel his heart dropping to his knees.

Not one monster.

Many.

And becoming more by the moment.

But why?!

Percy stumbled thanks to his shifted focus, and he cursed vehemently as he hit the ground, not quick enough to as much as catch his fall, though he managed to keep Jason from the worst.

Then, his battle instincts kicked in and he swiftly moved out from beneath Jason and on top of him, growling defensively as he uncapped Riptide, ignoring the tingling and shaking of his hand as he clutched his sword.

"At last." One of the monsters spat, and Percy swallowed.

Then, he pushed down anything that wasn't going to help keeping Jason safe, and charged.

He wasn't going to let them touch his boyfriend.

Over his dead body.

***

It was so many.

Too many.

No matter what way Percy swung his sword, he hit something trying to lunge at him.

Every time his blade connected, there was a jolt shooting up his arm, and every time that happened, it immobilized him for the fraction of a second due to the pain.

It wouldn't be long until they knew how to exploit his weakness.
Percy stumbled back, then lunged sideways at the Shadow trying to get to Jason.

He wasn't allowed to have a weakness.

Not when Jason needed him.

Percy snarled and forced them back again, unable to get a proper overview over what he was attacking, as long as nothing got to Jason.

Something – maybe an empousai, maybe not – attacked him from the side while another came from the front, and Percy swung his sword at both, his vision exploding with pain of the impact.

Then, he switched his sword to his other arm, knowing he could work with it, though it wasn't nearly as good as the other one.

Right now, it was all he had.

The monsters seemed initially surprised at the new range of his attacks, but quickly adjusted, and Percy's jaw clenched as he realized there still was no end in sight.

No matter how many monsters he cut down, there were simply new ones coming.

Where were they coming from?

Why were they here?

Percy had to focus, but it was just so hard.

The noises around him were nothing but a blur, just like the monsters themselves, and Percy pressed on, fighting the drumming in his chest and the burning of his throat.

Jason.

He had to protect Jason.

He wouldn't let these things harm him.

Jason was counting on Percy to keep him safe.

Percy wouldn't let him down.

Or so he thought, but with his next attack, Riptide was torn from his grip, and he found himself thrown to the side, smacking into the ground so harshly everything went black for a moment.

No.

Percy's head shot up, making out Jason's blurry outline in the grass.

No.

There was cackling around him, movement.

No.

One of the shadows was there, Percy could see it lean over his boyfriend.

No.

"Get away from him!" He yelled, roared, anger and fear coursing through him and making him push himself off the ground, lunging for the creature.

There was a shift in the wind, a shifting of the trees.

Percy couldn't hear anything but the roaring in his ears that could be his voice, could be the blood rushing through his veins, and he saw nothing but the immediate danger in front of him.
He felt for the tug in his gut, uncaring where he was going to take his water from.

There were trees. Corn. Plants. Plants had water.

He was going to take whatever it took.

The next moment, there was a loud crack, followed by lightning striking the Shadow about to touch Jason, and Percy slid to a confused stop, his concentration wavering, the tug in his gut disappearing once more.

What…?

Lightning? But Jason was still--..

"Percy?!" A voice – a familiar, female voice – called, and Percy's head snapped around, at the same moment a whole bunch of demigods appeared and started attacking the monsters with plenty of flying arrows.

"Thalia?" He asked when he spotted her running towards him, and her confused and concerned expression made way for a smirk.

"Long time no see." She said, before gutting an empousai.

Percy let out a sigh of relief and there was an urge to laugh at the absurdity of the situation, though he decided that would have to wait until later.

First, they had to get rid of these monsters.

Percy felt for Riptide in his pocket, glad it had reappeared, then he uncapped it and went to join Thalia in battle.

Now, Jason would be safe.

***

Will followed warily, his eyes on Nico as the Hunters of Artemis led them through the corn field, into the very direction they had come from earlier.

Corn had led them north, away from the monsters, but also away from anywhere Percy or Jason might have been, and while Will hadn't liked the thought of leaving his boyfriends to fend for themselves, he knew better than to question Nico's judgment.

Then, Spelt had appeared, followed by the Hunters, and while their appearance hadn't made sense to Will, he had welcomed their help.

Nico, however, seemed to have some sort of beef with them, judging by his dark and gloomy expression.

Will glanced at their team. All of them were exhausted from running and the dread of nearly being found, but okay for the most part.

He still hadn't healed them from the bus crash, but that would have to wait.

First, they had to find their boyfriends.

Spelt had told them of a battle where they would find 'the rest of their group', which they guessed had to be Percy and Jason, and so the Hunters had offered their company.

Nico hadn't liked it one bit.

In fact, Will had never seen his boyfriend look so…resentful.

Nico made no qualms about showing his disdain and dislike for the girls, scowling at the lot and even hissing in warning whenever they got too close to their team members (which was to say, Hannah and Sara, since the others went ignored for the most part), but he had agreed to follow
them, and had given the group the sign to move along.

Will could still see his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, as if seriously ready to fight the moment one of the Hunters as much as looked at them the wrong way.

But why? Was this still because of Bianca?

One of the girls turned her head, and Will could see his boyfriend scowling at her darkly, which had her scowling right back.

Terrific.

"I hate boys." She stated drily, and Nico's expression only darkened.

"Good for you." He spat back, and she grimaced in distaste before turning her head away again.

Oh boy.

Will reached out for Nico's hand, trying to soothe him at least a tiny little bit, and Nico very reluctantly allowed the touch, before ever so slowly relaxing.

There.

Will stroked over his hand gently, and Nico gave a little squeeze that he read as a silent 'Thank you'.

If Spelt and Corn were right, then the Hunters had come to help and save Percy and Jason.

It would be unwise to seek trouble with them, especially since they could seriously use the extra help.

Sure, Demeter's blessing had miraculously protected them, and Will was forever grateful, but he had no idea whether it would take effect again, and they had to leave this field eventually to move on and get back home, after all.

They broke through the last rows of corn, and Will could feel Nico hesitating, their team reacting accordingly and beginning to slow, as well.

Will could understand his reluctance, and knew his reasoning behind it.

However, when his boyfriend turned to give him a quizzical look, he gave him a small nod and motioned for him to keep going.

They followed him and the Hunters out of the field and up a short, mostly trampled path to a small forest, where a bunch of girls were already waiting for them, their bows by their sides and their postures relaxed, showing whatever battle had taken place here was over.

"Guys!" Percy's voice sounded, and Nico immediately perked up, his head turning to look for their boyfriend, but it wasn't until Percy came rushing out behind a bunch of bushes and made right for them that Will could feel the rush of relief flooding through Nico, followed by him tearing away from their group to meet Percy midway.

Aww.

Will watched as they threw their arms around each other and Nico pressed Percy against him, as if they hadn't seen each other for months – but that was okay.

Will was as glad as Nico that Percy was alive and well.

That was, until Will spotted a rather sloppily done bandage on Percy's arm.

"You weren't even separated for a whole hour!" He heard Andrew complaining, then whine loudly right after, but Will ignored him as he appeared at Percy's side in an instant, arm already snatched for inspection.
"Percy, what is this? Not your arm, again! What did I tell you?" He ranted immediately, and could hear Andrew complain behind him about being injured too and Will not making a fuss about that, but Will ignored him again.

"What happened? Where's Jason? Is he okay?" Nico asked while Will grumbled and undid the bandage to check the nasty cut beneath, though it was by far not the most worrisome injury he had ever seen.

In fact, it was nothing compared to Percy's usual injuries.

Eh, he guessed Percy was making an effort.

"He just collapsed on me, and before I knew what was going on, you guys were too far away, and there were monsters everywhere. I didn't know what to do or where you had gone, so I tried to get out of the field. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Percy told him, and Nico shook his head, trying to get him to stop apologizing, and Will felt a pang of guilt at snapping at Percy right away.

The Hunters stood around them, clearly wishing to speak to them, but Nico blatantly ignored them and let Percy lead them to Jason, who was still behind those bushes and knocked out, his head in the lap of a girl with black hair and blue streaks and torn leather jacket and jeans.

Wait, wasn't that…

"Thalia." Nico greeted Jason's sister with an indifferent voice, and she looked up to meet his gaze with a cool one of her own.

Uh-oh?

"Nico."

Oh boy.

"Okay, while you talk out your hostility issues, I'm going to treat my boyfriends and team." Will said loudly with an expression that hopefully conveyed that he wanted no part in this, before he took Percy and sat him down next to Jason.

Thalia raised an eyebrow at him, but moved when Will clicked his tongue at her impatiently.

Sister or not, he needed his space, his boyfriends were injured.

Clasping Jason's wrist to get an overview, he soon breathed out a sigh of relief.

Okay, nothing too bad.

Just the whiplash and concussion, mixed with an unhealthy amount of shock from the crash.

Will huffed to himself, knowing that a year ago this sort of thing would have given him a heart attack, but by now, he had truly seen so much worse.

Reaching out to cup his boyfriend's face, he started healing, humming a small tune to focus properly and to tune out the rest of people present.

He didn't bother with his dad. Hadn't bothered in a long while.

Instead, he focused on his own powers, feeling for that tug in his gut before it flowed through his body and into his hands, flowing into Jason.

Will knew he was glowing, but opening his eyes, he noticed with a hint of pride that he finally managed to make just his hands glow, the golden hues stopping around his elbows.

He was getting better at this.

"Percy, you're next." He said, and Percy jumped slightly next to him, before reaching out his hands for him to take, so Will gave Jason another quick check-up, before nodding in satisfaction and letting go of him to snatch Percy's hands, instead.
All just minor injuries and exhaustion, he was glad.

He finished patching his boyfriend up, then he smiled and leaned forward to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"You did so well. I'm proud of you."

Percy looked at him with wide eyes full of surprise and confusion, then his ears started turning red while his lips started quivering into a frail smile, soaking the praise up like a sponge, and Will tugged him closer hurriedly to pat his back and keep him together.

Oops.

Maybe he should first tell his boyfriend what he was thinking about before suddenly throwing out lines like that.

Percy seemed a little overwhelmed already, anyways, what was he thinking, making him even more emotional like this?

"Erm…can…can somebody explain what the hell I am seeing right now?" Thalia asked, sounding absolutely bewildered, but they only looked at her with questioning looks.

"What do you mean? Oh, they're always like that." Hannah waved off, while Nico crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"We're dating. Didn't Jason tell you?" He said nonchalantly, and Will halted in his patting, before Percy pulled back to exchange a wide-eyed look with him.

_Had_ Jason told her…?

"You do a _what_?!

Ah.

He hadn't.

Will motioned for his team to come closer to get started on healing them.

This was going to take a while.

Will glanced towards Nico.

Good thing his boyfriend was going to do the explaining.

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"You know, I can't say I'm surprised." Thalia rambled, but Nico only kept giving her the same nonplussed expression as before, his arms still crossed in front of his chest, and his mood in no way better than before.

"Yeah, your brother is all grown up now. Quite the shock, I'm aware." He deadpanned, and she shot him a dark look, before shaking her head and pinching the bridge of her nose, the same way Jason liked to do sometimes.

"I'm not shocked! It's cool if that's what he chooses. I'm just…eh, whatever, I guess I _am_ surprised. I mean, _seriously_?"

Was she…asking him whether he was sure they were dating?

Nico couldn't quite tell.

"Yeah, we're dating. Been dating. For months now. I'm surprised you don't know."

_"I'm surprised I don't know! How come he never told me this? Damn it, I should have told him to IM me more often. Scratch that, I should have IM-ed him more often!"_ She lamented, but he only
grunted in reply, not sure what else to comment on that.

Should he mention she had missed his birthday? No, that would probably only rub salt in the wound.

Nico’s eyes flicked to the other Hunters, most of them watching them with dark, disgruntled looks, as if unable to believe Thalia would stand this close to a boy and freak out about her brother.

"So, wait, I join the Hunters of Artemis and swear off guys, and he goes and dates three at once? Wait...yeah, that sounds about right. What was I expecting, actually? Of course he'd go and do that." She then said with a shake of her head, and Nico scowled.

"He's not dating us because you swore off guys. He's dating us because he loves us."

She immediately held up her hands.

"Dude, chill. I know. I get it. He's my brother, of course he's not dating anybody he's not serious about. I get that. Dude."

Nico was still annoyed, though his scowl lessened a little.

He glanced towards the other Hunters again, taking note where they all were so he knew his team was safe from them.

He still didn't trust the Hunters.

First, they took his sister from him and failed to protect her, then they kidnapped Reyna (for which he still hadn't forgiven them entirely, though the rational part of his mind knew that they hadn't meant any harm).

He didn't want them anywhere near his team if he could help it – and gods, could he help it.

Sure, they had helped Percy and thus saved him and Jason, but couldn't Nico simply say his thanks and get his team on the way back to Camp?

"No, honestly, I am completely supportive of my brother and his love life decisions. Just give me a moment to stomach all that, will you? The last time we saw each other, he was talking about seeing erm...what was her name...the pretty one with the choppy hairstyle? Super sexy eyes?"

Nico raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

"Piper. She's dating Annabeth now."

Thalia snapped her fingers.

"That's the one! Wait, what do you mean, you mean my Annabeth?!"

Was there...another Annabeth?

Nico tried to remember whether there was another Annabeth at Camp, then wondered whether the daughter of Athena was actually 'Thalia's' Annabeth.

Well, they had been traveling together back when his professor-turned-chimera had kidnapped Annabeth...

"I guess so." He replied with a shrug, and she gave him a pointed look.

"You know, you don't have to reply to all my questions. Especially not the rhetorical ones."

Well, how was he supposed to know which ones were the rhetorical ones?!

His boyfriends kind of made it a lot more obvious by changing their tone of voice or giving him a certain look!

Thalia just looked the same way and flailed with her arms and screamed the whole time!
An arm moved around him, and Percy appeared at his side.

Finally. His knight in shining armor.

“I love you.” Nico said before Percy even said anything at all, and spontaneously decided, that was going to be all he said today.

Percy looked taken aback for a moment, then he smiled at him and looked back at Thalia.

“Be nice to him, he's an angel, Thal.”

“Don’t ever call me Thal again.”

“I'm dating your brother now, you wouldn’t dare to harm me.” Percy retorted with a smug grin and a shrug, and Thalia glowered at him, lightning in her eyes.

Eh, Nico guessed he could see the family resemblance now.

Instead of starting a fight, though, Thalia merely shrugged and grinned.

“Seriously, it's good to see you again. Though it's still weird. You're so much taller than me now. And older. And just…different. Crazy.” Thalia said with a shake of her head, and Nico was confronted with the sudden thought of how Bianca would be like, if she were here now.

She wouldn't have aged. Wouldn't have grown.

How strange it would have been for them to meet.

Yet, no matter the strangeness, Nico could feel his heart aching at the mere thought of seeing her again, even though he had long accepted her death.

Would she have approved of his boyfriends? Of his decision to date them?

He liked to think so.

“How’s immortality going for you? Still the way for you?” Percy asked good-naturedly, and Thalia wiggled her eyebrows at him.

“Oh, it's amazing. Can only recommend.”

“Not to my team you won't.” Nico grumbled darkly, then noticed he had just broken his own resolve not to speak for the rest of the day.

Oh well. Worth it.

Percy shot him an odd look for a moment, but then smirked and tugged him a bit closer, while Thalia merely huffed and shrugged.

“Chill, Nico. I'm not recruiting. Plus, we left some cards and flyers at Camp Half-Blood, anyways. If anybody wants to join, they're free to do so, but we’re not going to force anybody to. It's a choice, not a punishment.”

Yeah, a choice his sister had paid for with her life.

Nico bit his tongue and averted his gaze, instead spotting Liam, Andrew, Ash and Sara huddled together a bit further away, apparently done with their medical check-up.

Good.

Once Will was done with Hannah, they would surely be able to leave, and then they would have their peace and quiet and everything would go smoothly until they made it back to Camp.

“So, since Lady Artemis herself has ordered us to look for you here and accompany you on your journey, I suppose we—…” Thalia started, and Nico nearly suffered a heart attack right then and there.
"You what?!"

"Man, you really don't like us, do you?" Thalia noted unimpressed, but Nico could only stare at her in utmost shock, before turning towards Percy.

"I have to go. Like, right now."

"Go where?" Percy asked taken aback, but Nico already pulled away and turned to leave.

"Far away."

"Nico!" Percy called after him in disbelief.

Nico wasn't listening, and wasn't stopping.

He had to go.

Right now.

Before he could even make it out of the clearing though, Will popped up and snatched him by the arm, cruelly dragging him back while whistling a happy tune.

"Let me go. I have decided. I must run away. You do it all the time, let me get away with it just once, you cruel person!" He ranted, but Will didn't listen. Instead, Will guided him away from Thalia and Percy, towards where he had temporarily set up his medic tent and treated the team and Jason, who was now safe and sound and sleeping in the small bed.

"Sit down, Neeks." Will told him, gently but forcefully.

It was clear that refusal wasn't going to be an option,

So, Nico sat, but made sure to show how unhappy he was about having to do so, slouching and crossing his arms in front of his chest and pulling his best grimace.

"Who said they could just invite themselves to join us?!" He ranted, while Will turned his back to him to fetch something from one of the drawers along the wall.

"I mean, who do they think they are?! Sure, they helped Percy and Jason, but still! From the way they're behaving, you'd think they're our freaking heroes." He continued, and Will came back, snatching his chin and tilting his face this way and that as he studied him quietly, before letting out a vague hum and turning away again to walk over to the small table that for once wasn't littered in books. Mainly because the books were scattered across the floor next to the table, instead.

That was not the right way to treat books.

Nico turned his head away.

"They're definitely no heroes of mine." He added darkly, then Will's hand appeared and gave him a bunch of small pills that he knew were vitamins.

"What are these gonna do?" He asked doubtfully, while Will sat down on his work chair, the only one with wheels, and thus the one Ash always tried to steal.

"They're gonna give you a moment to think and calm down. Take them." Will ordered as he rolled over, stopping right in front of Nico.

Nico made a face, but then did as he was told, knowing not to disobey Will when he was in doctor mode.

He took the pills, all at once, which was a horrible thing to attempt without a glass of water.

He coughed, sputtered, then managed to swallow them and felt them moving down his throat, which was disgusting.
However, it did give him a moment to think it all over inside his head again.

They were stranded here until Jules-Albert picked them up with a different vehicle. But then what?

Would there be more monsters on the highway? Or were all of them gone now?

If there were more, how were they supposed to fight?

With Jason still out of it, they were bound to spend at least the night here, and then leave in the morning, hoping for the best.

But if there truly was a battle…

With Nico and Percy weakened, there was no way they would be able to contribute much to the battles, and there were so many things that could go wrong.

Even if nobody ended up seriously injured – or, in the worst case, dead – there was still the fact that they had tried to keep Nico's and Percy's states secret for the most part, and if the monsters noticed they weren't capable of fighting like they usually were, it was only a matter of time until Kyle knew.

And what if this was all Kyle had been waiting for? For them to be weakened, so he could strike and snatch Will from their midst again?

No, Nico couldn't let that happen.

He thought of the Hunters again, pushing aside his grudge for a moment to see them not as the people that had taken his sister from him, but as possible support for their journey back.

With the Hunters around, they would be much better off in case of battles, and it would be much easier for them to hold their ground.

The mode of transport was still debatable, seeing as the Hunters usually went on foot, but Nico would simply have to wait and see what Jules-Albert (or his father) came up with.

Nico sighed deeply.

"Better?" Will asked, and Nico only now noticed his boyfriend had his hands on Nico's knees, not stroking, just holding, but Nico felt a certain warmth emanating from the touch that seemed… different from Will's usual warmth.

It wasn't healing, per se, but…there was a certain something to it that he couldn't place right now.

Instead, he nodded weakly.

"I guess so. I just…I just don't like them much. I'm sorry. I know, grudges are bad and all, but…"

"Bianca." Will summed up for him, and Nico stilled, before giving another small nod.

"Yeah. I just…really don't like them. I know she made her choice herself, but…she was so young. So new to everything. And they just…they just sent her to her death. Just like that." He whispered, pulling back a little, but Will kept his hands firmly on his legs and kept him from retreating completely.

"I know. I'm sorry you have to go through this, Nico." Will said quietly, but Nico only shook his head.

"It's okay. It will pass."

Will gave him a long, sad look, and Nico guessed they both knew he was lying.

There were some things in life that would simply always hurt, even if the pain might lessen over time.
Nico would have to live with this, same as his guys and his team had to live with other things.

"Will you be okay with them accompanying us? I feel like it's the safest thing to do, but if it bothers you too much, I'll think of something to distract them and we can be on our way." Will suggested, and Nico couldn't help but smile at his words as he shook his head.

His boyfriend surely was the best.

"It's okay. This isn't about me. This is about getting the team back to Camp safe and sound. Back home. I guess I can put up with them for that long."

He wouldn't like it, but he guessed he would be able to endure it.

Will studied his expression, then gave a small nod and leaned forward to give him a kiss on the forehead.

"That's my guy. Selfless and adorably stupid. Gods, how I love you."

Nico felt insulted, though the last part had all his anger evaporating again as he automatically smiled at his boyfriend.

Then, he frowned, wondering whether he had just been played.

"Aww, you're so adorable when you look like that." Will cooed, and Nico pushed him away with a small wail.

"Be serious! We were having a serious conversation, Will!"

"We were?" Will asked, acting aghast, and Nico gaped at him, before throwing his arms up to gesture around them and between them.

"Yes! Look, you even sat me down, and you're sitting in front of me, all doctor-y and alluring, and we were having a serious talk about my feelings!" He exclaimed, then stopped and frowned even more.

Then, he groaned.

"I wasn't supposed to reply to that, was I?" He asked miserably and buried his face in his hands, but Will didn't let him pity himself.

Instead, he tugged his hands away and kissed them, before leaning forward again to give him another kiss on the forehead.

"What makes you think that? I love it when you talk. Plus, when I say something, of course I want you to reply to it." His boyfriend reassured him, and Nico relaxed a bit again, even allowing himself to smile a little bit.

At least his boyfriend was nicer about this than Thalia.

"Plus, you're so adorable when you get all defensive over something so small. So cute. Do you really think I'm alluring when I'm behaving like a doctor?"

"I'm not cute." Nico sulked, deliberately ignoring the rest of Will's statement.

Maybe it was a rhetorical question. Yeah, he was just going to assume it to be. Yep.

"Aww, you do! Oh man, that opens so many doors. You know, I still have a pair of scrubs hiding somewhere in this room, I'm sure I can find them if you wanted me to…"

Oh gods!

"Will! We're not having sex when Jason is knocked out and the Hunters of Artemis are right outside this very tent!" He exclaimed, the heat rising in his face as he was unable to comprehend how Will could think of that now, of all times.
But his boyfriend only grinned and held up his hands, looking oddly triumphant.

"You know, I was just talking about putting on a piece of clothing, and you go talking about sex. Is there anything you'd like to tell me, Nico? Anything involving certain...kinks...?"

Nico wanted to sink into the ground and return to his room in the Underworld to play the most gruesome games and forget this conversation had ever happened.

"No. I'm good, thanks." He retorted, looking anywhere but at his boyfriend, but Will did that thing again where he simply snatched his chin and turned his face back to look at him.

Nico didn't want to see how Will looked at him right now, but when he did peek at him with one eye, he found Will wasn't even gloating or laughing excessively at his expense.

Instead, he was looking at him softly, with his expression full of adoration.

"Nico, you know I wouldn't judge you. How are you still worried about that, after all these months?" He asked, but Nico strongly felt like he was just keeping this conversation up to distract him from the other one they had earlier.

Freaking Will and his dumb plans that always seemed to work.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He retorted sulkily, anyways, unwilling to just...give Will what he wanted.

But Will didn't seem to mind, cruel as he was.

"You know I'm right, Nico. Plus, I've told you, just tell us about your fantasies and such. The worst that could happen is that one of us isn't into it, but that's it. Don't you remember what happened the last time you dared to let at least a tiny little bit slip?" Will asked, and Nico hated him for it, because his mind instantly supplied him with memories of their night on Jason's rooftop, and that totally wasn't fair.

"I can't believe we're having this conversation right now." He stated instead, and Will chuckled lightly, his hands back to squeezing Nico's knees gently.

"Yeah, that's because I'm self-indulgent, and because I think you need to be reminded that we really want to know about such things. Especially me. I love knowing the kinks of my boyfriends."

"I hate you." Nico sulked, the heat right back in his cheeks.

"Except you don't. You loooove me. Enough to want to see me in a sexy nurse outfit and get you all hot and bothered."

This time, Nico shoved him away hard enough to make his chair roll back a little bit.

"I do not! You...seriously! You are the worst!" He exclaimed as he jumped up, but his boyfriend merely cackled and let himself whirl in his chair.

"Aww, but there I already had plans, Neeks."

"Well, suck it up! Maybe Percy will want to see you in that. I definitely don't."

Will shot him a look full of mirth, then he kicked with his feet to roll back towards Nico.

"You know I can tell when you're not completely honest with me, right?"

Okay, this was it, Nico was leaving.

His face was burning as he struggled for words, then decided he didn't have to justify himself at all.

Before he could storm out of the tent, though, Will held him back. Again. He also wrapped his arms around him and started stroking him, which was just plain cruel, because it only made him
relax, and that only made him feel even warmer.

"But, you do feel better now, right? About all of this?"

Freaking Solace!

"I knew you only started that talk to distract from the Hunters." He grumbled, infinitely more pissed now, though he also felt that fluttery feeling in his gut again.

"Yes, that's because you're my super smart boyfriend. But, you're gonna be okay, right?"

Nico grumbled under his breath, then crossed his arms in front of his chest.

Will put his chin on his shoulder and intensified his stroking.

Nico slumped.

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, I still don't like it, but I know it's the smartest thing to do. Let's do it."

"That's the spirit, my favorite Ghost King."

Nico straightened up a little at the nickname, then shot Will a pointed look over his shoulder.

"I'm also the only Ghost King, of course I'm your favorite."

Will started grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

"Aww, you caught me. Still, we're good? Else I will look for those scrubs. They gotta be here somewhere."

Nico promptly pushed him away again.

"We're not talking about that!"

"But honey…"

"Don't you 'honey' me, Solace. I'm not talking about my sexual fantasies with you just to get my mind off things."

"So you do want to see me in…"

"I'm leaving." Nico cut in, then turned around and walked right into Percy, who was just stepping inside the tent, blinking rapidly at them both.

"Who's talking about sexual fantasies?"

"NO!" Nico exclaimed loudly, while Will laughed behind him.

"O…kay. So, are you feeling better now? Thalia apologized again if she ticked you off with her rambling. She really doesn't mean any harm, and seems super cool with Jason dating us. She just needed a moment to process it, that's all." Percy told him as he started rubbing up and down Nico's arms, as if Nico needed comfort and reassurance.

What Nico needed was to get away from his crazy boyfriends who were making all the wrong assumptions.

"Well, I would hope so. It would kind of suck if Jason had to deal with her complaining about us all the while. Plus, we should try to get along with her, shouldn't we? She's Jason's only living family, other than the big guy up in Olympus." Will said behind him, and Nico stilled, his face and body cooling down again as he thought about that.

Oh gods, Will was right.

Thalia was Jason's only sibling, and the only alive member of the small family he used to have, before Camp Jupiter and Lupa.
Nico glanced at Percy, knowing he was already sort of friends with her.

Then, he glanced at Will, who never had any problems befriending people, anyways.

Great, that meant he was the only one who would have to somehow…find common ground. Or whatever.

Nico already wasn't fond of the idea.

"I suppose so." He relented, anyways, because they were right.

This was not going to be a fun journey.

Percy squeezed his arms gently, smiling down at him reassuringly.

"Don't worry, she's easy to be around. You managed to enchant our team with your adorable personality, I'm sure you'll be able to get along with her in no time."

Nico highly doubted that.

"Percy is right, it's gonna be okay. And if it does get too much or you need a break, come to me, okay?" Will offered, coming up next to Nico so he could see his genuine expression.

However, Nico promptly squinted at him skeptically.

"That better not involve anything…doctor-y, or so the gods help me."

While Percy frowned at him, then at Will, Will merely grinned back at Nico with a look that could very well count as seductive.

"You know you'd like it."

"Okay, I'm getting the feeling this has to do with the 'sexual fantasies'…" Percy muttered as he averted his face with a dirty grin, and Nico felt called out, immediately stepping away from both of them.

"No!" He exclaimed, but both of his boyfriends merely cooed, which didn't make him feel any better.

"Aww, it's okay, Neeks. Will has a thing for being called 'Doctor', as it is, so I'm pretty sure he's just teasing for self-indulgent reasons."

"Excuse you, I do not have a thing for…actually, I might have. Eh, sue me. You like it when Jason growls during sex." Will retorted, and Nico, who had his back turned to them both, was so very tempted to peek at them over his shoulders, because, what the hell?!

"Yeah, so? You're into being complimented."

"Well, you're into praise! Don't think I didn't notice how much you loved it when Jason told you how good you were for him. You were an absolute goner!"

"And you like it when people kiss your hands!"

"It feels nice!"

"Are you…calling each other out…?" Nico asked, turning to look at them at last, the confusion too big to ignore.

They both looked back at him, then grinned and shrugged.

"Not really."

"We're really just checking whether we know how to please each other, and showing you it's really not that hard to talk about this sort of thing." Will told him, and Nico scowled.

"By…arguing about it?"
"Well, that's for Percy and me. But it would already be good enough if you just finally came out with all those fantasies you've been harboring in that pretty head of yours. Don't think I forgot what you told us on that rooftop. 'Everything', you said, and never elaborated." Will pointed out, and Nico made a face.

"Okay, I'm gonna go and talk to Thalia now. Get your heads out of the gutter, now is not the time to talk about stuff like that." He retorted, and both guys let out matching disappointed 'Aww'-s that only made Nico glower at them.

"But we just did!" Percy tried, but Nico shook his head determinedly.

"Guys? What are you doing in here? Ash is going crazy. They say they just saw a snake, but nobody else saw anything. Anyways, the Hunters want to get going, so I'm supposed to get you to discuss the best route." Andrew's voice sounded from the entrance to the tent as he stepped inside, not even knocking first, though he should know better.

Both Percy and Will sighed, but Nico ignored them both in favor of nodding at Andrew and following swiftly out of the tent.

Alright, time to leave those topics behind, and instead focus on the team, the journey home, and, most importantly: Jason's sister.

He just had to be nice and friendly, that shouldn't be too difficult.

"We're not leaving until Jason has recovered." He stated the moment Thalia was within earshot, and Thalia turned her head to give him an unimpressed look.

"Hello to you, too. Yeah, we already figured as much. I was going to suggest something, but since you seem adamant about doing things your way, I'm all ears to hear what plan you've come up with." She shot back, and he scowled.

A plan? He didn't have a plan.

His plan was to get his team safe and sound to Camp and see where to go from there.

"We should set up the tents and rest, give everybody a chance to eat and drink and unwind. Then, once Jason is up and ready to go, we can pack up and get moving. Jules-Albert should hopefully be able to provide us with a new bus or vehicle by then to make the rest of the travel smooth and short." He suggested, trying to keep all his focus on Thalia instead of the other Hunters that looked at him like he was vermin.

Would his sister have looked like that, too, after a while?

Would she have started seeing him as nothing but one of those men these girls scorned so much?

Or would she have been different, still happy to see him, no matter whether he was a boy or an adult or an old man?

His heart felt heavy, but now was not the time to ponder these questions.

"Who is Jules-Albert? A bus or vehicle of any sort sounds like a terrible idea. We've been scouting this area for a while now, and monster activity has been rather constant and ever-present. I'm pretty sure they wouldn't overlook a whole bus full of demigods."

The fact she said that was perfectly okay.

The way she said it, as if speaking to a child, when she was the one looking like one, however, was not.

Nico tried to keep his face neutral and his posture relaxed, though it was a losing battle.

This was not off to a good start.

***
When Jason woke up, everything was blurry, but that was because his glasses weren't on his nose.

He groaned and rubbed his face, then pushed himself up into a sitting position, dimly aware something was wrong.

Then, he realized the only thing that was wrong, was that nothing was wrong.

He was feeling perfectly fine.

Will must have healed him.

Jason sighed and rubbed at his face again, then blinked at the interior of the medic tent.

What had happened?

Oh, right, the bus crash.

Gods, he must have fainted again.

Hopefully, nobody had ended up hurt because of that.

Jason searched for his glasses with a sigh, finding them neatly placed on Will's desk, which looked tidy for once.

If he ignored the books scattered across the floor around the table, of course.

Jason halted, then guessed he couldn't ignore it, picking them up and stacking them back on the desk neatly, just because.

Then, he took another deep breath, and moved towards the exit of the tent.

If he woke up alone, that meant the others had to be planning, and he wouldn't want them to suffer too much of a delay because of him.

When Jason walked out of the medic tent, he found his team conversing agitatedly with…the Hunters of Artemis?

That was definitely Thalia, so it had to be them.

Confused and curious, Jason walked over.

"We're not putting him on a stretcher and carrying him off like that, are you out of your mind?!" Nico snarled, and Thalia growled right back at him, making Jason frown as he stopped next to Liam, who was repeatedly shaking his head and worrying his bottom lip.

"We don't have the time to just spend hours wasting away in this place. Any minute, there could be a monster sighting us, and where there's one, there's many. You might not have seen the numbers we've had to battle, but we really don't fancy doing that again just because you don't agree with our plan!"

Wow, she sounded angry.

"I have to agree with Nico on this, though. We should wait until Jason wakes up by himself, that's important. Carrying him around on a stretcher and then getting attacked would only put him in unnecessary danger and keep at least two more people from engaging in battle right away, which could have fatal consequences." Will put in placatingly, but the Hunters immediately complained.

"Well, we've also just spent plenty of time arguing, and that didn't lure any monsters here, so I don't see the problem with staying for a while longer." Percy pointed out, and Jason watched as Thalia grinded her teeth.

"How long has this been going on?" Jason asked Liam curiously, who was still shaking his head to himself, not even glancing sideways at him.

"Half an hour? An hour? I can't even tell. It all started with Nico and Thalia, but suddenly,
everybody was talking and arguing. It's horrible. I hope Jason wakes up soon and puts an end to this."

Jason sighed and looked back at the squabblers.

Yeah, same.

Wait, he was Jason.

Great.

"Yeah, well, how about I put you on a stretcher, see how you like that?!" Nico snapped at Thalia, and they were so close to each other that they could probably put their foreheads together if they wanted to.

However, it was clear as day that they didn't want to.

It was such a shame. He had hoped Nico would get along with his sister.

Sure, he knew about his dislike for the Hunters of Artemis, but he had hoped his sister could show herself from her better side and convince him that she wasn't all that bad.

Apparently, no such luck.

"You wanna pick a fight, kid? Cause that can be arranged!"

Yep, definitely no such luck.

"Nobody is going to fight anybody. Nico, remember what we told you." Will tried to placate, but all that did was make Nico turn and give him a look of utmost betrayal.

"But she started it!"

"Then be the one to end it." Will replied and Nico glowered so darkly that Jason could feel the temperature dropping a few degrees.

Then, his boyfriend closed his eyes and took a deep breath, before turning back to Thalia.

"We're not moving Jason." He then stated coolly, and she threw her arms up, while the rest of the Hunters let out a series of complaints and seemed equally pissed off.

"He's my brother, do you really think I like proposing this? But we can't all have what we want!"

"I'm his boyfriend, we're leading this team, and this team has universally decided not to move Jason, so we're not going to just because you tell us to, sister or not." Nico snapped back, and by now, Percy had his face buried in his hands, while Will had his eyes closed and his finger tapping his lips.

Sara and Hannah were by Nico's side, too, glowering at the Hunters and talking to each other in hushed voices, clearly sharing Nico's view on the matter.

Andrew was behind them and unusually quiet, but he was also staring off into space, so who knew where he was with his mind.

Ash was behind Percy, also unusually quiet, but they were fidgety and restless, sometimes looking at Percy and the guys, sometimes the Hunters, and other times, they let their eyes travel over their surroundings, as if looking for something.

All in all, he'd say their team was a little stressed right now, and he should help them out.

"How about we all take a step back and take a moment to cool down, and then we come back together to discuss a new plan? I'm awake, guys. Sorry for worrying you." He announced his presence.

Nico and Thalia looked around at him at the same time with matching looks of surprise, before
Thalia beamed and came running to him, while Nico averted his gaze with a conflicted look and stayed where he was.

Jason frowned a little at that, but then went to meet his sister, a bit taken aback when she simply hopped into his arms to wrap her arms around his neck and practically crush him with her hug, but he responded in kind.

She looked exactly the same way as the last time he had seen her, though she also seemed so much smaller now than he remembered.

"Jason!" She called his name through the clearing, and he couldn't help but laugh at her obvious delight.

"Thalia. Long time no see."

"Gosh, tell me about it. We haven't seen each other in, like, almost a year now. You've grown taller, haven't you?" She said as they let go of each other and she looked him up and down, though Jason could only shrug, not quite sure whether he had grown or not.

"You still look the same." He replied at long last, and she snickered.

"Duh. Probably weird, isn't it? Bet it's gonna be even weirder once you're all old and wrinkly. Make no mistake though, you'll always be my tiny baby bro."

"Wouldn't want it any other way. So, I take it you've met my boyfriends already?" He said when he noticed Percy and Will coming closer, though Nico was still at the same spot as before, still with his face averted.

"I did. You know, you should have told me! Though I gotta say: Did you have to pick Percy? It was already weird when he and Annabeth started being a thing, but now you gotta start something with him, too?"

"Hey!" Percy exclaimed, sounding offended.

Jason rolled his eyes, but his smile didn't lessen.

"Yeah, it had to be him. Him, Will and Nico. You'll love them, Thalia. They're amazing." He assured her, and looked towards his boyfriends full of pride, noticing with greatest satisfaction that both Percy and Will seemed adorably flustered at the unexpected praise.

Had they really thought he wouldn't brag about them first chance he got?

He was going to tell Thalia all about them, from the way their smiles brightened his day to the fact that they made him the happiest person alive.

There was no doubt in his mind that Thalia would understand why he was as smitten with them as he was, once she knew what he knew.

"Oh, I bet they are. Though I still think you should have told me sooner. How long have you been dating? How did all that even happen? Tell me everything." Thalia pried, and he chuckled, though he also noticed the dark looks the Hunters shot them.

He also noticed how Hannah's head snapped up and she looked at them with an incredulous expression.

"So, wait, when Nico says we stay and replenish, you argue and try to rush and make us drag Jason with us no matter if we want to or not – but once he's awake, you're okay with chilling and sitting down and having a nice chat?" She asked, her voice accusing, and Jason glanced back to Nico, who was still standing where he stood, hands in his pockets and an odd look on his face as he kept staring at a bush next to him.

What was wrong with him?

Thalia shot Hannah a sulky look.
"I didn't say anything about sitting down and having a nice chat. In fact, now that Jason is up and ready to go, I'd say it's time you guys pack up and we finally get on our way. I'm certain Jason can tell me everything while on the go."

Hannah didn't seem pleased with that reply in the slightest, though she only huffed and looked at Jason expectantly.

Jason noticed a moment later that they were all looking at him expectantly, the only exception being Nico.

Even Will was looking up at him, though he was also looking towards Nico and tilting his head a little in his direction, as if trying to minimally nod towards him.

What…?

Seriously, why did it feel like this was some sort of power display between Thalia and Nico, with Jason being the one to give the final order?

Oh, right, because it totally was.

Great.

Nico kicked at some dirt listlessly, then turned to walk towards the medic tent, and Jason knew what he thought.

Unfortunately, he was also right.

There was no point in sticking around here, especially if there were as many monsters around as Thalia had said. It would just provoke an attack, and they had better things to do.

Jason glanced back at his team, about to speak, when he noticed the small things he hadn't picked up on before.

Andrew wasn't fidgeting.

Ash was squirmy and unnerved.

Sara and Hannah were clearly enraged and ready to fight.

Liam was still shaking his head, looking unhappy about everything.

Percy looked like he had taken a mud bath and only haphazardly cleaned up afterwards.

Will was still looking after Nico with a rather sad, almost disappointed look.

Jason hesitated.

They hadn't travelled long enough for his team to be tired, especially since they had spent the entire time driving.

However, they had just gone through a bus crash, and they had just been running for their lives from monsters, and if all of that had been enough to knock Jason out, it had to have been hard on his team, as well.

No wonder Nico had wanted a break for them all.

But instead of taking that break, they had spent the time arguing.

Jason shook his head with a sigh.

"No, I stay with what I said, and I agree with Nico. We take a short break, replenish, give everybody a chance to calm down. Eat, drink, chat. Then, we leave." He decided, and Thalia looked disappointed for a moment, though she gave a nod to show she agreed, while the rest of the Hunters only rolled their eyes or grumbled something under their breaths, before stomping off.

Nico stopped where he had moved towards the medic tent, though he didn't turn around.
Then, he continued on his way and disappeared inside the tent.

What…?

But Jason had sided with him!

Oh, come on, he wasn't angry with Jason, right? What had he done?

Was this because he had interfered? Would Nico have preferred if Jason had remained silent until he had come to an agreement with Thalia, himself?

Or was it because Jason had fainted? It was nothing new to Jason by this point, he had fainted so many times in his life it was as comical as it was worrisome, but maybe Nico was fed up with him for it…?

There was chattering around him, his team talking to him, but all he noticed was that neither Percy or Will were saying anything, and he took it as another sign to excuse himself and follow Nico.

Thalia called something after him, but by then he was already by the tent, then inside.

"Nico?" He asked, just to spot his boyfriend in Will's chair, rolling around listlessly with his back to Jason.

The only reply that came from him was a faint 'Hm', then he rolled over to the desk and pulled his legs up to wrap his arms around them, very obviously sulking.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked, but Nico only shrugged.

Sighing, Jason slowly made his way over, looking for a sign whether Nico rather wanted to be alone, but he wasn't stopping him.

"Are you upset with me?"

"No." Nico mumbled in reply, and Jason stopped behind him.

"Then what's wrong? I'm sorry if I interfered. I just wanted you to stop fighting."

"I know." Nico replied, his voice as listless as he appeared.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked again, but Nico only continued sulking.

Jason sighed and leaned over the chair, wrapping his arms around his moping boyfriend.

"Come on, I can clearly see something's wrong. Talk to me, love. You know I can't read your mind." He tried again, and Nico mumbled something incoherently.

"Hm? What was that?" Jason pried, and could spot Nico looking a bit disgruntled, though it didn't seem directed at Jason, per se.

"I…I wanted to get along with your sister. And I messed up. I'm sorry."

Jason blinked at him, needing a moment to process his words.

"You…huh?"

Wow, how eloquent. Good job, Jason.

He had to work on that.

Nico wriggled out of his hold to jump up, looking unusually tense and agitated.

"I wanted to get along with your sister! You know, because you still have one. Percy is friends with her already, and Will is apparently also buddies with her because of her time at Camp, so I
wanted to do the same! So your sister likes me, but she doesn't, and she just...she just looked at me, and I just...I got so angry. And I know it's not fair, and I know I'm unfair, but I just...it's just...it's all stupid.” Nico rambled, faster than Jason could even comprehend what was happening.

Then, Nico's shoulders started trembling and he averted his gaze to rub at his face harshly, and Jason shook his head and stepped forward, back into his personal space.

"Nico, calm down, I'm sure it's not that bad..." He tried, but Will was much better at this sort of thing than he was, at least in his opinion.

"I just keep thinking about Bianca even though I shouldn't, and it just...it's so unfair..." Nico pressed out – then he started sobbing, and Jason had his arms around him in an instant, tugging him against his chest and stroking over his back.

Bianca. Of course.

Oh dear, this was going to be one hell of a journey for Nico, if the Hunters were truly going to tag along.

That's what Jason had gathered, anyways, though he'd have to ask the details later. Maybe from Percy or Will, though.

"Shh, it's okay." He tried to reassure, but Nico just kept crying.

About his sister, about messing things up with Thalia, about disappointing Jason, about-...wait, what?

"I'm not disappointed, Nico. Do I look disappointed to you? Come on, you know better than that. Of course, I'd have preferred if you got along, but I'm not going to force you, nor am I going to force her."

Nico merely bawled.

"Love, don't cry..." He tried again, stroking over his back and trying to calm him down somehow.

"But I told Will I could do this, that I'd be fine travelling with the Hunters!" Nico exclaimed, sounding angry at himself again, pulling away from Jason, though he tugged him right back against him.

"Nico, you can't force that..."

"Will forces himself to all sorts of things all the time." Nico snapped back, and Jason sighed deeply.

"Yes, and we both hate it when he does that, remember?"

Nico didn't reply to that, though he clutched Jason's shirt again.

Jason continued trying to calm him, and continued stroking over his back, until Nico finally stopped sobbing.

Instead, he started hiccupping.

Oh gods, this was just like that one time in the park.

Jason tried to fight his smile, knowing there was still some serious talk ahead of them before he could coo at his boyfriend's cuteness.

"And I even made you turn against her and have us take a break. I'm sorry, Jason." Nico mumbled weakly between hiccups, but Jason wasn't having any of that.

"Nico, I decided for the break because it was the right thing to do. The team needs the break, and you needed a chance to let this out. The Hunters will deal with it, and Thalia won't hold it against
you, especially when she realizes you only had the best for your team in mind.” He reassured him quietly, and Nico looked up at him with teary eyes, before hiccupping again.

Oh gods, he was so cute. Why was he so cute? It was so unfair.

Jason resisted the urge to squish his cheeks, instead stroking Nico's hair out of his face gently.

"And, you know what? Leo messed up his first meeting with her, too. We nearly died because of it. But she still forgave him in the end. She knows you mean the world to me – or she will know, once I'm done telling her about how amazing you are and how much you mean to me. She wouldn't just write you off and dislike you because of something small like this.” He told him quietly, and Nico sniffled, before hiccupping again.

"But what if I mess up the next time, too? I just…I look at them, and I think of Bianca. How am I supposed to talk to her when I want to scream at them for letting my sister die?"

Jason had no idea.

He could understand Nico, of course, but at the same time, he couldn't, because he hadn't been there, because he had only heard the story from Percy, because he wasn't Nico, and it wasn't he who had lost his sister.

When Bianca had joined the Hunters, Nico had been a child, and it had felt like betrayal to him.

When Thalia had joined the Hunters, Jason had already been much older, had been at Camp Jupiter for years, had already had his own life. He had never had that close of a bond with his sister, either, because they had been parted for so very long. Her decision hadn't touched him in the way Bianca's decision had touched Nico.

But Jason could still understand how it felt to lose somebody close to him, and to feel helpless and overwhelmed, especially when faced with people who could have prevented it.

"Then don't, Nico. As I said, don't force yourself. They'll help us, and then we'll go different ways again."

"But she's your sister."

"Yes? And you're my boyfriend. My horribly adorable boyfriend, who hiccupps after crying." He teased gently and poked Nico's nose, which had him going cross-eyed for a moment, before he half-heartedly glowered at him.

"Stop it, Jason. Don't you be like Will, too."

Jason raised an eyebrow.

So…Nico had cried before now? About the Hunters?

That couldn't possibly be good.

"He took me in here once we found out they want to accompany us to Camp. I was…behaving like an idiot, complaining and whining a lot, but Will ultimately calmed me down and distracted me. Not the way I'd have liked him to, but…I mean, you know how he gets when he wants to distract people."

Jason gave a slow nod.

So…Will had tried to seduce Nico in the medic tent, huh?

"And did that help?” He asked, and Nico hesitated.

Jason noticed mournfully that his hiccupping had stopped.

"I…for a short while, I guess it did. But once I was back out there, and saw them, I just…it was all back so fast. I looked at them, and you know how they are, always looking at you like you're vermin, just because you dare to be male."
They did that? Oh man, Jason should start paying more attention to people around him again, not just his friends and boyfriends.

"And I just thought about whether Bianca would look like that, too. I started thinking about how things would have been if she were still...you know...alive. And from there, everything just went downhill. But I just don't know how to help it!"

Neither did Jason.

"She'd have never looked at you like that, Nico. She loved you. No matter if she joined the Hunters or not, you know she loved you dearly, and she'd have been overjoyed to see you. I'm sure of it." He told him quietly, and Nico looked down with a pained, yet also yearning look.

Jason wished there was something he could do.

Instead, he just tugged Nico back against his chest, letting his chin rest on his boyfriend's head as he stroked up and down his back again.

"It's gonna be okay, Nico."

"I don't wanna mess up. She's your sister. I want her to like me."

Jason shook his head, but since his reassurances hadn't changed anything, he decided a different approach.

"Would it help if I talked to her and you stayed next to me? You don't have to participate in the conversation, just be around. Maybe you two can find some common ground then. Plus, if we walk on ahead with her, you won't have to see or interact with any of the other Hunters." He suggested, not surprised when Nico didn't reply immediately, and not pushing him to, either.

"Yeah, I guess we could try that." Nico agreed after a long moment of silence, and Jason let out a small sigh of relief as he smiled and gave his boyfriend a little squeeze.

"Good. Then it's a deal."

"And this is why we always need Jason." Will suddenly said behind them, and they both looked around to see their boyfriend standing in the tent entrance with Percy, both of them watching and smiling.

When had they come in? Jason hadn't even noticed.

"Do you always have to eavesdrop?" Nico asked with an unimpressed voice as he rubbed at his face again, though he didn't really seem upset.

"Yes. How else would I know when I'm allowed to barge in and interrupt to let you know Ash and Hannah are at it again?" Will retorted with crossed arms and a shrug, and Nico groaned loudly, pulling out of Jason's embrace to stomp towards the exit.

Jason looked after him with a raised eyebrow, though he'd be damned to stop him.

If he wanted to take care of the situation, that meant Jason wouldn't have to do it, and he always liked not scolding his teammates.

"Jason, you're coming with me."

Damn it.

"Yes, love." He said with a sigh and followed, but not without giving Percy a peck on the cheek and ruffling through Will's hair.

"Talk to you in a bit?"

They both nodded, and Jason left to follow Nico.

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"All I did was compliment her hair." Ash sulked, and Percy gave them a pointed side-ways glance.

"Sure you did. What did you say, exactly? A subtle 'Oh, I like your hair today'? A more direct 'Your hair looks great today'? Or did you, by any chance, insult her along with your compliment?" He asked, though he already knew the answer.

"There's nothing insulting about telling her I'm glad she got all the dirt out of her hair! I am glad she managed to get all of that out. I swear I still find bits of dirt in my hair, and I have an undercut." They exclaimed, then studied a few strands of their fringe with a pout. "Though, in all honesty, I'm gonna need to cut my hair soon. It's growing out of bounds. Not much of an undercut anymore, is it?"

Percy only rolled his eyes.

"You know, I'm pretty sure she thought you were trying to insult her with that. I'd be pretty upset too if Jason walked up to me and told me it's good I finally cleaned up somewhat. Makes me feel like I must have looked horrible before." He reasoned, and Ash studied him from the side.

"Dude, you do look horrible. You still got mud on your cheek and all."

He did?

Percy rubbed at his cheeks, then realized Ash was right.

True, he had meant to clean up earlier, but then he and Will had gotten sidetracked with watching Jason and Nico and making sure they were okay.

"Well, see? Jason didn't care, he still gave me a peck on the cheek earlier." He insisted, and Ash shot him a scandalized look.

"You expect me to give Hannah a peck on the cheek? Are you trying to get me killed?!"

Percy rolled his eyes again, just to catch a glimpse of Nico moving his hand through his hair anxiously and beginning to talk, apparently to Thalia.

Oh gods, it was happening.

His boyfriend was trying to converse with her.

Percy smirked, then watched how Jason also turned his head to smile at Nico, encouraging him to continue when Nico seemed to falter.

Yes, good. Jason was always good at encouraging them.

"Aaand you're back to making heart eyes at your boyfriends. Great. Well, team dad, I don't wanna say anything, but your plan sucks."

"Not making heart eyes, just looking out for my boyfriends. Also, that wasn't what I meant when I told you that. Don't try and get yourself killed, Ash. Just...try not to insult her. Even if you didn't mean it as an insult. If anything, you should explain that you meant it well."

"But that should have gone without saying!" Ash sulked, and Percy shook his head to himself as he put an arm around them loosely.

"Let me give you some sound dad advice: Nothing in life goes without saying. I thought I'd be able to show Nico without saying that I'm more than fine with him loving Jason and Will, too. But because I didn't say it, Nico didn't know, and it only confused him and made him more scared than he should have been to admit to his feelings. So, take it from somebody who's been there, and say out loud what you want others to know." He stated wisely, and pointedly ignored Will's gaze as his boyfriend turned to look at him from ahead of them.

Ash was silent next to him, though Percy could see them gazing at Hannah's back thoughtfully.
Hannah was trailing close to Nico and kept giving the evil eye if any of the hunters got too close to Nico, Jason and Thalia.

"Eh, yeah, I guess you're right. Alright, I'll go try again." They finally relented, and Percy gave their shoulder a reassuring squeeze before letting go.

"That's the spirit." He called after them with a thumbs-up, then noticed Will slowing down to walk by his side as they both watched Ash hurry towards Hannah.

"You do know they'll probably forget everything you just said the moment Hannah looks at them, right?" His boyfriend said quietly with a hint of amusement in his voice, but Percy only made a face.

"Nah, they'll be fine. It will work out for sure, this time."

"Nerves always get the better of them, and you know it."

"Not this time." Percy insisted, though he also kept his fingers crossed that he was right.

"I believe in the power of love." He added with a confident nod, mostly because Ash had finally reached Hannah and…oh gods, no, why did Ash have to tap Hannah on the shoulder?

Hannah hated that, as far as Percy knew.

Oh dear, now Hannah was scowling. Not good.

Maybe Ash should abort the mission and retreat.

And…Ash wasn't retreating. Oh dear.

Will and Percy watched, transfixed, while Andrew walked past them with an unimpressed expression on his face.

"You're so pathetic, guys." He stated, but they ignored him, instead gasping in unison when Hannah and Ash stopped walking, with Ash gesticulating wildly with their arms and Hannah staring at them with a mixture of annoyance and skepticism.

Then, suddenly, Hannah jolted in surprise, and her face turned a bright, vivid pink.

Oh gods, Ash had made her blush.

Oh gods, Ash was going to get murdered.

Ash…was just standing there now, staring dumbfoundedly back at Hannah.

What were they doing?!

"What did they say?" He whispered to his boyfriend, because this mystery needed to be solved right now.

"That they really like her hair and that they love her eyes because they twinkle so beautifully, even when she's angry. Especially when she's angry. She's beautiful, and Ash just wanted her to know that they really, really like her hair, because it shines so wonderfully in the light. Poetry-worthy hair."

Aww.

He was just feeling the swell of pride in his chest, when suddenly, Ash just turned around and walked off.

No! What were they doing?!

They couldn't just leave! Not after saying all that!

But Ash did.
Percy gesticulated with his hands frantically, trying to get them to stop and make them turn back, but Ash didn't even look at him, instead looking slightly overwhelmed as they practically stormed past Percy. Instead, they disappeared between some Hunters and joined Liam and Sara, who formed the end of their group and had been chatting quietly up to that point.

"You know, that went surprisingly well…for their standards." Will said, sounding impressed, but Percy was too busy looking back at Hannah, who was still standing there and staring after Ash with the blush still clearly visible on her cheeks.

"But…but…they could have…" Percy stuttered, because, *come on*, this would have been Ash's chance to talk things out, maybe even confess!

"Nah, don't push it. Just let them work things out at their own pace. Moreover, lemme do some damage control, before Hannah concludes Ash just made fun of her to get to her somehow. Go join Jason and Nico, will you?" Will told him with a pat on the arm and a pinch to his side to make him jump, then he moved past him and towards Hannah, leaving Percy by himself.

But…

Percy sighed, then decided Will was probably right.

He looked over his shoulder back at Ash and gave them a thumbs-up when their gaze met his fleetingly.

It *did* go well for their standards, after all.

Proud of them, Percy went to join his boyfriends, just to feel even prouder, because Nico was now the one walking next to Thalia, while Jason was off to the side, and their Italian *was talking*.

Jason really had the best ideas.

Percy sneaked closer, not quite wanting to interrupt them in any way, especially since the conversation seemed to be going well – but he needn't have bothered, because Jason already reached out for him and took him to his side, threading their fingers together and sending him a soft smile.

He was about to ask him quietly how things were going, when he caught a snippet of what Nico was saying.

"Are they...are they talking about *Mythomagic*?" He pressed out, just to confirm, but there was no doubt that they were, in fact, talking animatedly about the card game.

"Oh yes, I actually got the new expansion pack, too. Percy got it for me as gift in his Advent Calendar."

"Really?! Oh man, you lucky guy! We've been trying to get our hands on it, but with the Amazons still trying to recover and rebuild their numbers, we didn't want to put any additional pressure on them for something like that. We should totally play sometimes, though!"

Oh gods, this was really happening.

Thalia – the punk Thalia with her leather jacket and torn up jeans and Medusa-shield and fierce eyes – was telling Nico – his Nico, his wonderful Ghost King Nico – to play Mythomagic with her.

Wait, how did Thalia even *know* of the game? She had never mentioned it back when they had first met Nico all those years ago, and he could *clearly* remember Nico talking about it back then. A lot.

"Well, as long as it's only you and me playing, I suppose I can tolerate that. I've been teaching the guys, too. Jason isn't too bad at it, actually."
"Jason can play? Oh, now we definitely have to play. Baby bro, you're going down." Thalia immediately insisted.

Percy grinned to himself, wishing he could feel at least a little offended that Nico didn't consider him a good player, but…

Well, he knew he sucked at that game. At least he had tried.

(He would never understand why the Poseidon figurine couldn't just wash everybody else off the board, though.)

(It just didn't seem realistic.)

(Not that he was going to complain to Nico about the rules of his favorite game.)

(…At least not out loud.)

"We should all play. Percy and Will are still learning, but they got the basics down. It's really fun to play with them, actually." Nico put in, though Percy didn't know whether he said that because he meant it, or because he had just noticed Percy was there, too.

"Only if I get to invite one more Hunter. She's the one who got me into the game, so I'd love it if you let her join." Thalia insisted, and Percy and Jason both immediately looked at Nico in question, studying his suddenly conflicted expression.

He didn't look like he wanted that.

Maybe Percy should say something.

No, Jason was better at this sort of thing, he should let him make the call – well, technically, Nico should make his own call, but Jason should be the one to cut in if necessary.

Or Will. Will was always good with things like these.

Man, Will was great at everything.

Percy…not so much.

But that was beside the point.

Nico still hadn't replied, and still looked rather conflicted, but even though Percy sent Jason very pointed looks, his boyfriend only watched and waited, giving Percy's hand a little squeeze to mutely tell him it was going to be okay.

Well, if he said so…

"I…suppose I could live with that. But only for one game." Nico relented at long last, not looking very happy, but also not as upset as Percy might have dreaded.

Thalia cheered, and Percy thought he could see the ghost of a smile hushing over Nico's face at her rather open display of emotion.

Percy grinned, then looked at Jason, who was watching his sister and Nico with a pleased expression as they picked up their conversation again.

Something about the expansion sets they were still missing, and what sounded like a stats comparison of their favorite cards and figurines.

Percy didn't really know, to be honest.

"I have no idea what they're talking about anymore, but I love that they're getting along." Jason commented quietly, only loud enough for Percy to hear, and he turned his head to chuckle against his boyfriend's shoulder again, the two of them walking with one arm loosely around the other.

"Of course, they get along. I didn't doubt that for one moment." He stated smugly, and Jason
shook his head with a smile.

"Oh hush. I know you and Will were already discussing emergency plans in case they wouldn't get along."

*How did he know?!!*

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Percy insisted and looked anywhere but at Jason, because, well, *somebody* had to look out for monsters, right?

"Of course not. But yeah, I'm glad. So, what was that with Ash and Hannah about? They just came and snatched her away, right after talking to you." Jason asked, and Percy started grinning from ear to ear now.

"Oh, you know, Ash just realized they had to spell things out sometimes."

"Oh yeah?" Jason asked, sounding amused.

"Yeah. They managed to compliment Hannah. Without insults, this time."

"That sounds like quite the feat. So, I'm guessing this means they are…interested in each other?" Jason asked, a hint of hesitation in his words.

Oh yeah, Percy had forgotten that Jason was the only one in their team that didn't know yet.

It was simply so ironic, considering Jason had noticed immediately when Percy had started falling in love with Will, and he was *pretty sure* by now that he had been…a bit like Ash.

Maybe.

A tiny little bit.

…Okay, a lot, most likely.

"Very." Percy confirmed, and Jason gave a slow nod, apparently thinking over that new piece of information.

"That…explains a lot." He mused, and Percy grinned at him.

"Sure does."

Nico next to them laughed loudly, and they both looked at him in surprise, finding him doubled over, while Thalia had her arms crossed in front of her chest, having stopped walking to tap her foot on the ground in apparent frustration.

"Stop laughing! While you were studying your cards and collecting your figurines, *I was a tree!* I'm allowed to confuse two cards!" She exclaimed, but Nico didn't stop laughing, and Percy and Jason gave each other matching looks.

It seemed that Nico had made a new friend.

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"But they're really great." Jason said softly as he watched his boyfriends walking up ahead with their heads together, talking animatedly about whatever.

"So you've said. At least thirty times. And as I've said at least thirty-one times, I'll take your word for it." Thalia replied amused, but Jason was certain she still hadn't gathered just how great they really were.

"Remind me to show you my photo albums." He told her, and she let out a loud sigh, though she was also smiling.

"Of course. Let me guess, there'll be tons of pictures just like the one in your locket."

Jason nodded and felt his fingers automatically moving to his neck to touch the small golden chain
and locket, just to make sure it was still there.

He had shown her, though it had taken Nico's raised eyebrow for him to actually let her touch it, too, so she could see the little picture better.

He really didn't like it when others touched his locket.

"We took them over the course of the year, so you'll have everything in there. From Will and Percy scowling at each other with arms crossed and a foot apart, to Will and Nico practically making out in front of the camera with Percy cheering them on."

"I did not need to know that, and I definitely don't want to see it." Thalia commented, but Jason waved off.

"Don't worry, my albums are mostly PG13."

"I am relieved, yet also a little concerned about the 'mostly' in that sentence." Thalia replied with a mingled expression, but Jason knew his photo album, and knew the pictures they had taken in the past, and there was nothing she had to worry about.

"But I am happy that you're happy. You're certainly a lot more talkative than the last time we met." She added, though he could only shrug.

"Well, we didn't have much time to talk the last time, and my memory was still a little fuzzy, too. Though it does feel a lot better to talk about my boyfriends rather than about how I managed to survive with the wolves and worked my way up at Camp Jupiter."

She was about to reply, when they heard some rustling up ahead, followed by all the Hunters stopping in their tracks and raising their bows.

Thalia and Jason stopped, too, and Jason could see Nico stepping in front of Will and Percy protectively.

More rustling. Something was coming closer.

Jason glanced around, but knew there was nowhere to really hide.

Would it be a monster? Or just some stray mortals?

They hadn't exactly covered a lot of ground because their team had to carry all their tents and supplies, and running in this heat would only tire them out too quickly, so a monster attack was much more probable than he'd have liked.

Something stepped out from behind the bushes, and it took Jason a moment to recognize who it was.

The next moment, five arrows went loose and shot Jules-Albert straight in the chest and neck, making the zombie chauffeur stumble back and grunt in apparent annoyance.

"What the-…" Somebody exclaimed in horror, while Jason only let out a relieved sigh, and he heard Nico snorting out a small laugh before rushing to his chauffeur.

"Don't shoot! He's a friend. Well, more or less." Percy called a little late, but Jason guessed it was the thought that counted.

"What is that?" Thalia asked, and Jason noticed the confusion and mild disgust in her voice and face.

Jason nodded for her to follow him as he made his way over, where Will was already pulling the arrows out of the zombie's chest, while Nico conversed with him in a low voice.

"This is Jules-Albert. He's Nico's zombie chauffeur." He introduced, and Jules-Albert shot him a look that ominously felt like a mute 'How dare you introduce me to somebody who just wanted to kill me?'. 
Jason smiled at him apologetically, hoping he wasn't one to hold grudges.

"Our zombie chauffeur, Jason." Nico corrected, though he didn't look around.

"A…zombie? Chauffeur?" Thalia asked and stepped closer curiously, but Jules-Albert seemed to be the sort of undead to hold grudges, because he promptly let out a much louder groan than usual and stumbled forward, hands outstretching in a way Jason had never seen him do before, but which reminded him a lot of those video games Will and Nico had played a few times.

Thalia, of course, jumped back immediately, followed by the sound of the Hunters drawing their bows again, though they luckily didn't shoot.

Especially because Will already leaned forward to pull out the last arrow, and with their luck, the Hunters would have shot him, instead.

"Oi, behave! At least towards her. She's alright." Nico scolded Jules-Albert, and the zombie shot him a sulky look, before letting out a dubious sounding grunt.

Jason's lips twitched as Nico shot the zombie a dark look, before crossing his arms in front of his chest and looking away pointedly.

"You heard me."

He was so adorable when he talked to Jules-Albert.

The zombie groaned again, and Nico gaped at him.

"You will do no such thing! That's Jason's sister!" He exclaimed outraged and stomped his foot.

"Okay, now I'm disturbed, what did he say?" Thalia asked him, sounding a little distressed.

Jason could only shrug, as clueless as she was.

The zombie looked between him and Thalia, then back at Nico with a small groan.

Nico scowled.

"Yes, of course I'm sure. Anyways, you're not telling my dad anything. Other than the usual, of course." He told the zombie sternly, then turned to look at Jason. "He got a bus ready, but first wanted to check whether we're taking the Hunters with us or not. I'll go with him to fetch it, and we'll meet at the end of the road, alright?"

Jason didn't like the idea of splitting up, so he did the obvious thing: He turned towards Will, same as Percy and Nico did.

Their boyfriend was still inspecting the arrow tips curiously, but looked up with a dark look when he noticed their gazes.

"I hate it when you appoint me the decision maker. Sure, Nico, go. Be quick, though. I thought I heard something earlier, so there might be scouts nearby." He told them with a shrug and a dismissive wave of his hand, and while Jason frowned at that info, Nico already nodded and told Jules-Albert to move it, who only grunted again.

"No, you're not telling my dad that, either. How dare you, even? Is this why my dad expects me to show emotion whenever we meet? Because you feed him lies? How could you, Jules-Albert?"

Another groan.

Nico replied something, but it was lost in the noise of their team shuffling about to continue on their way, and Jason tore his eyes away from Nico's back as he disappeared between the trees.

Then, he turned to look at Will.

"You heard something earlier?"
Will promptly rolled his eyes, while Thalia excused herself to talk to her fellow Hunters.

"I said I thought I did. But it was gone immediately again, and I haven't caught anything ever since, so it could have just been my imagination."

"Yeah, but with our luck, it wasn't." Jason replied, and Will stuck his tongue out at him, before walking past him and making his way to the front of their group.

"No worries, we got the Hunters with us. You saw how quickly they shot Jules-Albert, we're gonna be just fine. You know what you should be much more concerned about?"

Jason took Percy's hand and went to join Will at the front, leading the way.

"What?"

"A zombie apocalypse. Did you see that? They shot him right in the heart, three times, and twice in his neck, yet he didn't even flinch. I am so tempted to analyze this goo to check whether it's rotten zombie blood or weird Hunter's poison. Who knows, maybe it's a mix and is gonna have some helpful effects…" He mused and held up his arrows to show them, just to have one of the Hunters pop up behind them.

"Can we have our arrows back? Thanks." She said in a clipped voice, clearly disliking talking to them, though Will only sighed and held out the arrows to her with a shrug.

"I guess no analyzing. If there's gonna be an apocalypse, we're all gonna die." He mumbled sulkily as she snatched them and left without another word.

Jason looked after her with a frown.

They really weren't very friendly towards males, huh? Nico had been right about that. He had never really paid much attention, always too occupied with making sure everybody else was alright, or working on plans to survive whatever battle was ahead of them at the time.

Jason returned his attention to Will and his messed-up priorities, letting him know what he thought of that with a raised eyebrow and a nonplussed expression.

Will merely shrugged in reply and started walking.

"Your loss. I'm not gonna be the one making the great sacrifice to save the rest of us from the enemy forces, I'm just saying."

Jason rolled his eyes, pretty sure a zombie apocalypse was the last thing they had to worry about at the current time.

"Sure, Freckles. Whatever you say."

"Why would you have to sacrifice anything? We have Leo, right? He'd burn the zombies to the ground with Festus." Percy mused thoughtfully, and Jason made a face.

"Percy, please don't encourage him." He said quietly, and Will promptly punched his arm, as gently as usual.

"Oh, shush, Jason, let us play this through for a little while. Actually, Leo is a great idea, Percy. Just think about all the inventions he'd come up with to help us out. I bet he could come up with something for any—oh gods. Oh. Gods!" Will suddenly broke off and stopped walking, staring off into space with a stunned look on his face.

Percy and Jason stopped as well, sharing a confused and slightly concerned look before watching their boyfriend again, trying to figure out what was happening.

"What? Did you see anything? Or remember something?" Jason asked, hoping against hope this might have something to do with Will's visions and the nightmares he used to get.

"Monsters nearby? Do we have to hide? Is Nico getting attacked? Ambush?" Percy asked,
sounding more agitated than curious.

Will shook his head at both of them, before rubbing at his face with both hands and uttering a loud, frustrated sounding groan.

"No, no. I'm just…gods, I'm so stupid! How did I not think of that before?" He mumbled, and, while Percy promptly relaxed, Jason could only frown.

"Not think of what? What is it?" He pried, and Will shot him a miserable look.

"Frank! His arm! Leo would have been able to fix him a prosthetic in a heartbeat and have it sent in one way or another. You know him, he'd be able to pull it off. Gods, I'm so stupid. It never occurred to me. I only checked the info they had on the prosthetics at Camp, and figured they'd be pointless seeing as Frank's abilities involve shapeshifting. But with Leo in the mix, there would have been so many possibilities…"

Will was rambling now, clearly agitated about this, but Jason and Percy merely frowned at each other.

"But…can't you still do that now?" Jason asked hesitantly, not because he was scared of Will snapping at him for not knowing, but because he didn't want to agitate him further by rubbing it in he had apparently…messed up? If one could even call it that?

None of them had thought of Leo, at least not regarding Frank's missing limb.

Jason had been too happy that Frank was alive to really think about prosthetics or the like, at all – especially since Frank had never said anything about wanting one, at least not around Jason.

Will stopped in his rambling, looking a little conflicted.

"Well…I could, but if I had known before, I could have asked Leo over an IM message whether it's possible in the first place, then asked Frank whether he'd be interested, and then Leo could have made and sent it and I'd have attached it, and everything would have been done. Now, I'd have to check back with both of them, but even if Leo made one, I'd have to wait for the next time Frank and I meet so I can attach it. It's not all that simple, either."

Oh. Well, that made sense, Jason guessed.

Eh, who was he kidding, he had no idea, but Will undoubtedly knew what he was talking about.

"Can't he just, like, transform into one of those things that regrows its limbs and wait for his arm to pop up again?" Percy asked with a thoughtful expression, and when he met Jason's gaze, they both shrugged in unison.

Will started walking again, so they followed, and Jason glanced over his shoulder to find the Hunters apparently arguing among themselves, while the rest of their team was either in front or behind them, chatting or looking around in case of a sign of trouble.

"Not that simple. Until he's healed up properly, I don't want him attempting any transformations. We did briefly talk about that possibility, since Hazel had a similar idea, but Frank said he's not certain it would work out. It would require time, and from past experiences, he said it gets difficult to maintain a human mindset the longer he's transformed. Apparently, along with the physical transformation, he seems to show psychological changes as well, and he's not confident enough to remain in a different form for a prolonged amount of time until his arm might regrow. If his transformed self would even know it needs to be regrown permanently, not just for that form. He does grow more limbs if he transforms into a bug, for example, yet when transforming back, they disappear again, so…there's still many uncertainties there that made us decide against that option for now."

Yeah, Jason could see why they hadn't given that a try yet.

"But will it impact his transformations at all, then? I mean, as you just said, he managed to transform into any species before, including ones without any limbs at all or with many more than he has. Now that he's missing an arm, shouldn't he still be able to do all that?" He asked, but Will
"We don't know. I only saw him transform once after the initial healing, but that was a snake, so I have no idea, and neither does he. We'll have to wait until he's fully healed to find out more, I guess."

"But does he have that time? I mean, as Reyna said, the battles are picking up again, and it's only a matter of time until he'll have to get back into training. I can imagine it being quite stressful to train with one arm alone, while continuously hoping to transform into something and see whether your arm is gonna come back or not." Percy put in, and there was something in his voice that led Jason's gaze to Percy's sword arm, which still pained him even now, though Will insisted there was nothing physically wrong with it.

"Frank is rather accepting of his situation. It's not uncommon for demigods to lose a limb or two, and he knew that before. While he surely wouldn't be opposed to have a fully functioning arm again, he doesn't dwell on it and is currently trying to make the best of the situation. I'm certain it won't interfere with his training." Will replied, and Jason hummed thoughtfully.

"But…will he even need a prosthetic, then? If he's fine like this, then there would be no point urging him to have one, right?" He asked hesitantly, and Will shrugged.

"That's why I'd have asked him. But that's also my whole problem with this. Before, Frank could have decided for one and immediately gotten it, then he'd be able to use this time to get used to it and train. Now, however, he would decide for one, but train without, and who knows how well he'll be able to adapt to the changes whenever I'll be able to attach it."

"Attach what?" Andrew asked behind them curiously, and Will jumped, which had Percy and Jason reaching out to put their hands on his left and right shoulders immediately.

Will being startled by somebody coming up from behind was never a good sign, after all, and it clearly showed he was very agitated about this matter.

"A strap-on to my foot so I can give a whole new meaning to kicking people's asses. It's gonna be my new signature move." Percy explained lightly, and Jason's head snapped around.

How had Percy just randomly thought of that?!

Andrew looked ready to puke, his pale complexion promptly turning even paler and slightly green as he hung back and gave them more space once more.

"You. Are. Disgusting." The boy stated disapprovingly, but Percy merely cackled and shrugged, while Will gave him a similar look to the one Jason was giving him.

He was probably wondering about the same thing as Jason.

"Really, Percy? That's super unsanitary." Will pointed out, and Percy promptly hung his head with a 'defeated' sigh, while Jason rolled his eyes.

Never mind, he obviously had to go along with it.

The team didn't know about Frank, as requested by Reyna.

Nobody but Hazel knew, unless one counted the medics that were sworn to secrecy.

Though Jason doubted this amount of secrecy was necessary around their team, especially since none of them even knew much about Frank to begin with, and none of them had asked anything related to him or pried in any other way – except Andrew, of course. Or Ash, when they had gone through the confidential files in order to find out where the guys were, worried sick about somebody trying to cover up their sudden and inexplicable deaths. (Bless their wild imagination, seriously.)

Jason glanced over his shoulder to his sister again, but she was still arguing with the Hunters, with many of them scowling and gesticulating and apparently fuming at whatever it was they were discussing.
His boyfriends, meanwhile, began arguing about where to best attach a variety of things for maximum damage, and Jason decided to tune them out for a little while, instead trying to catch a glimpse of Ash and Liam in the very back of their group.

Was it just him, or were they beginning to spread out a little too much? The Hunters stuck together, but there was quite the gap between them and Jason and the guys, so Ash and Liam hanging back put them very far behind.

"Hey, Will. Update on any noises?" He interrupted Will's way too graphic explanation about unexpected intrusions, and the two immediately stopped their bickering to look around.

"Nothing. Eerily quiet, actually. Earlier, there were animals around. But yeah, nothing is there." Will mused, and Jason frowned, not quite sure whether to feel reassured or worried.

"Guys, stick closer together." He called over his shoulder, though he also wanted to keep his voice down.

But if Will said there was nothing close by, then there was nothing close by.

"You know what? This reminds me of something. I just…I can't think of what…" Percy suddenly mumbled, a frown on his face and his finger tapping against his lip thoughtfully.

Will was frowning, too, but then his expression changed to a mildly amused one as he suddenly tugged on Percy's and Jason's arms and pulled them to their designated meeting spot.

When Nico had said that they'd meet at the end of the road, Jason had pictured a turn or that they simply continued until the bus came to pick them up.

Instead, in front of them, the road simply stopped, and the rest of the forest started, no road in sight anywhere anymore.

Great.

So, how would Jules-Albert manage to pick them up here, exactly?

He shot Will a questioning look and was just opening his mouth to ask him what he was even so amused about, when he heard what sounded ominously like a fast approaching vehicle.

Wait…

Will's grin widened, while Percy straightened his back with an alarmed look on his face, and their team and the Hunters reacted in the last possible moment, jumping to the side and out of the way as a giant bus came crashing through the thick undergrowth to their left.

How that bus didn't crash into any of the trees, or tear them down along with it was a mystery to Jason, but he was very glad that the thing managed to stop in front of them without causing too much damage.

He let out a shaky breath, noticing dimly that he had grabbed Percy and Will and pushed them behind him protectively by apparent instinct, his arms still outstretched as if he had thought of stopping that bus should it have come any closer.

He probably would have tried, too.

"What. The. Hell." Andrew stated for all of them, and the Hunters' shocked expressions just turned into angry ones when the door opened and Nico jumped out, still loudly scolding Jules-Albert.

"Sorry about that, I don't know what's wrong with him today. He seems pissed about something. Or maybe it's just his way of showing off." Nico apologized with another dark look at their driver, then turned to look at their team, though his gaze skipped over the Hunters except for Thalia, and Jason had the dim expression his boyfriend wasn't all that sorry for spooking them out.

"Your stupid noises are going to get us found by monsters again in no time, do you not realize that?" One of the girls immediately complained, but Nico acted as if he couldn't hear her, helping
Andrew and the others loading their belongings into the back of the bus.

Jason decided to leave the placating to Thalia, and instead turned to give Will a stern look, who was still trying to suppress a laugh.

"Not funny." He chided, but Will only grinned even wider.

"Kind of is. Especially once you realize Jules-Albert is doing this because he knows how upset Nico is. Just think about it, Jason. He's being an ass on utter purpose, and his only reasoning behind it is: You mess with my boy, I mess you up. Gotta love Nico's family."

Percy's eyebrows shot up, and Jason halted for a moment, before nudging them both to get up and into the bus.

Oh.

"Aww, so you do have feelings." Percy promptly cooed at the zombie, which might not be the smartest thing he had ever done, but Jules-Albert luckily only turned his head slowly to give him a dead, unimpressed look and let out what seemed to be a sigh.

"Maybe you two should reserve us some seats in the back. I'll go check on Nico and the others and make sure everything goes smoothly." Jason suggested, and wasn't surprised in the slightest when his boyfriends immediately agreed and tried to get to the back quicker than the others, accompanied by lots of screaming, name-calling, and cursing.

Ah, yes, his ever so mature boyfriends.

Jason smiled and shook his head, then he noticed Jules-Albert watching him with what could almost be considered a knowing smirk.

"What? I'm allowed to look at them like that. They're my boyfriends." He stated pointedly, and Jules-Albert leaned back in his seat and let out a small grunt that Jason had no way of interpreting in any way whatsoever.

He hovered a moment longer, almost expecting something else from the zombie, but Jules-Albert merely smirked to himself and looked in his rear mirror, so Jason decided to give in and hop off the bus to check on the others and Nico.

As expected, the Hunters refused to part with their belongings and still seemed to argue among themselves about boarding the bus, but at least Nico didn't seem very perturbed by any of that.

In fact, he looked rather cheerful, and Jason wondered just how much his boyfriend disliked the Hunters.

Well, at least he didn't seem upset about the bus.

It didn't have neon colors like the other one, but it was still rather colorful and vibrant, yet Nico didn't even glance at it twice.

"Alright, everybody, get in the bus. We're leaving. Jules-Albert said he knows a way out without detection, which should also take us past that checkpoint we saw earlier." His boyfriend ordered loudly, instead, and Jason watched Thalia nudge two of her fellow Hunters before the group huffed and went to board the bus, though they didn't look happy.

Their team looked happy, though – gleeful, even.

Jason sighed.

Of course, they would be just like Nico in that regard.

Jason would have to sit them down for a talk about grudges, and open (as well as masked) hostility towards others.

"Wait! No way I'm letting those girls steal my favorite seats!" Ash suddenly exclaimed, followed by a dramatic gasp from Hannah, then both stormed off to cut the Hunters off and hop onto the
bus, and Jason could swear he could see both of them high-fiving Jules-Albert before tripping all over each other to get to the back first.

Why was he getting a weird sense of déjà-vu right there?

"They're just like Percy and Will." Nico remarked with a huff next to him.

Ah, so that was why.

Nico hung back a little, so Jason did, too, and they stood there quietly as everybody else filed into the bus and got seated.

"Ready?" Jason asked and tentatively took Nico's hand, and Nico let out a deep sigh.

"No, but nothing for it. Let's go."

Jason wished there was something he could do to help, but since he couldn't think of anything, he let Nico tug him after him and back into the bus, where Jules-Albert was already waiting impatiently.

The doors snapped shut behind them, and Jules-Albert gave him a pointed look – and Jason was glad their zombie chauffeur waited until Jason and Nico were properly seated before he suddenly revved the engine and started speeding off at speeds a bus should not go. Especially not inside forests.

The Hunters collectively cursed.

Their team cheered.

Nico's lips twitched into the faintest smirk.

Jason sighed.

This was going to be one hell of a road trip.

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Nico gazed out of the window listlessly.

Why did the Hunters have to come along, again? He still didn't see the reasoning behind it.

Sure, Thalia seemed alright, and he guessed he'd like to get to know her better not just for Jason's sake, but the other Hunters were still annoying him to no end.

Jules-Albert had gotten them out of the forest and onto some less frequented roads that seemed mostly monster-free, so the Hunters didn't get to complain about his superb zombie chauffeur anymore. But that hadn't stopped them from complaining about other things.

They weren't talking to him, and mostly weren't even acknowledging his existence in the first place, but they were talking to Thalia loud enough for everybody to overhear – no matter whether they wanted to or not. Nico had to know, since he had tried to tune them out most of the time, but to no avail.

He just couldn't see why – if they were oh so opposed to this – they didn't just leave.

Why did Artemis even order her Hunters to accompany them back to Camp?

Where was Artemis?

Was she still with Apollo? If so, where was he?

Did he get exiled, or had Zeus punished him in a different way?

Nico didn't particularly care, but he'd still like some answers, anyways.

Anything to explain what was happening around them, and whether it was just related to the gods
being gods, or whether it had to do with Kyle.

Nico tensed, and Will's hand found his thigh.

Taking a deep breath, Nico dragged his eyes from the window to his boyfriend, who was sitting between him and that window.

"How are you feeling?" Will asked quietly the moment their eyes met, and Nico averted his gaze again promptly, instead taking note of Percy drooling against the window on the other side, and Jason acting deaf so he wouldn't have to go and split up Ash and Hannah, who were loudly arguing about spinach and dragging Sara and Andrew into their screaming match, as well.

"It's alright. Just...bored, I guess." He replied with a shrug as he looked down at his lap, unable to look back out of the window because Will was leaning forward now.

He wouldn't necessarily call his current mood 'bored', but the lack of something to do and occupy him was the reason why his mind was wandering, in the first place, so he blamed boredom for everything, anyways.

"We'll be back at Camp soon enough. I just hope we're not going to be met by as many monsters as Camp Jupiter is currently struggling with." Will mused, and Nico glanced at him from the side, before looking back down at his lap with a noncommittal hum.

In their last IM with Annabeth and Piper, they had told them of the constant battles at the Camp borders, but there had been no mention of numbers.

Camp Half-Blood didn't care for numbers.

One monster was as dangerous as many if they only had youngsters to fight them off because the others were stuck in the infirmary.

At least there hadn't been any deaths, so far.

Nico closed his eyes and prayed it would stay that way.

"Guys, I need a pee break." Ash piped up as they hopped on the seats in the row in front of theirs, and Nico lifted his head to shoot them a dark look.

"Again? Seriously, Ash?" He scolded, but Will immediately nudged him in the side.

"Nico, you can't scold them for needing a toilet."

He could and he would, because this was Ash's fifth pee break, in the matter of a few hours.

Needless to say, Nico still got up and moved down the length of the bus to relate the info to Jules-Albert, who let out a loud sigh (undoubtedly as fed up with another pitstop as Nico was) and tapped the turning signal to maneuver the bus from the fastest lane to the slowest.

They had only just gotten back on a highway, too.

"Are we taking another break?" One of the Hunters asked incredulously as he passed, but Nico blatantly ignored that and kept moving.

He was just readying his gloomiest expression in case any of the Hunters dared to call after him, when he was suddenly confronted with Thalia's face looking up at him in question, asking what was going on.

Her eyes really were a lot like Jason's, it was a little unnerving.

Had Bianca's eyes been like Nico's, too?

Nico glanced towards the back, where Jason was poking Percy's shoulder curiously and not paying much attention, but Will was, sitting up straighter with his eyes fixed on Nico.

Nico swallowed, then focused back on Thalia and tried for a small smile.
No, her eyes were more electrical and stormy than Jason's, which were more like the clear sky after a storm.

"The team needs a pitstop. It shouldn't take long." He told her, hoping he sounded friendly enough, and while another girl complained, Thalia merely gave a nod and smiled back at him.

"I want ice cream!" Hannah suddenly yelled, followed by a drawn out 'Noooo' from Andrew and the various exclamations of other sweets and snacks from the rest of their team, and Nico shot them a scolding look.

"Ice cream? I want ice cream!" Percy exclaimed from the back as he shot up from his slumber, and Nico's shoulders fell as he hung his head.

"And...I guess we'll be getting ice cream." He added quietly, but Thalia seemed to take it with humor, her lips twitching into a smile as she studied his face and glanced back at his team.

"Are they always like this?"

Oh, she had no idea.

Nico caught the murmurs and disapproving looks of the other Hunters, and his defenses were right back up.

They had no idea what his team had gone through, so they had no right to judge them for still finding enjoyment in silly things such as ice cream at pitstops.

"Only on good days. I'm glad to see them this way again." He stated pointedly, and found Thalia glancing sideways at her group, undoubtedly noticing his shift in mood.

"I'm sure they deserve a break after such a tiring journey." She tried carefully, and Nico wished he was better at talking with people.

However, he wasn't, and his back hurt from staying stiff for so long, while his hands were sweating and his thoughts kept darting from Bianca to the Hunters to Jason's sister and back.

"They do. Since the Camp is under attack as well, this might very well be the last break they can get. Might as well make it worth it." He replied shortly, and that shut the other Hunters up as well.

They might not be the kindest bunch, but they weren't stupid, Nico guessed.

Thalia said something in agreement he couldn't quite catch, but it didn't matter, either.

He had socialized enough.

Feeling rather drained and with the tension only slowly leaving his shoulders, Nico stumbled down the bus back to his boyfriends again, where Will immediately slid over and made space for him at the window seat.

Thank the gods, now he would be able to hide his face until the pitstop, easily.

"That went well, don't you think? Told you she'd like you." Will whispered in apparent encouragement, but Nico only blew out a breath and let his head drop against the window.

"Pretty sure she just puts up with me because of Jason."

"She would take offense to that statement." Jason commented as his head popped up behind Will's, which looked as funny as it looked weird.

"You weren't even supposed to hear that." Nico shot back, unwilling to let his face warm because of something stupid like this.

"I heard it, too." Percy piped up, and Nico shot the three of them a dark look.

Then, he huffed out another breath and returned to staring out of the window.
“Whatever. Why is talking to people so difficult, anyways? ’s not fair.” He grumbled, and his mood only worsened as he could clearly see his boyfriends exchanging amused looks behind his back, their faces reflected in the glass.

Freaking traitors, laughing at his dismay.

“You’re doing great, Nico. I think you’re just overthinking things.” Jason said reassuringly, but Nico only huffed.

Jason was one to talk. He was the actual overthinker of the group.

Freaking hypocrite.

“All you need is some practice. You managed to talk to us, after all.” Percy insisted, but Nico was pretty sure they knew that Nico had only ended up being able to talk to them because they had constantly been around him and not given him much of a choice to do anything but.

“You’re not bad at talking to people. You’re just bad at talking to people you don’t know very well. Lots of people have that problem.” Will told him in that understanding voice of his, and Nico grumbled to himself.

Maybe so, but none of his boyfriends or friends seemed to have that problem.

Especially not Will, who could of course get along with anybody in a matter of seconds and never had any issues talking to anybody, ever.

“Is the team mom sulking?” Andrew asked with a frown as he popped up out of nowhere and settled in the row in front of theirs, and Nico turned his face even further away from everybody.

“Andrew, don’t bother the team mom.” Ash put in as they joined Andrew and crossed their arms over the backrest to stare at him, Nico could both feel it and see it in the reflection.

Would the team stop calling him team mom already?! How was he the mother?!

“Guys, Nico is just a little tired. Give him some space, will you?” Jason said calmly, which Nico was glad about.

Though he was also upset, because he could hear Percy and Will snickering.

Those. Freaking. Traitors.

“Oh, so we’re picking up coffee, too? Nice.” Ash exclaimed and rubbed their hands together, while Andrew groaned.

“Not coffee. You’re going to be unbearable.”

“Excuse you, but I’m always unbearable, coffee or not!”

“Truer words have never been spoken, surely.” Hannah’s voice piped up, and Nico opened his eyes a tiny bit to check who else was now here, instead of their respective seats in this giant and empty bus.

Needless to say, the whole team was there.

Andrew, Ash and Hannah were squeezed into the two-seater in front of them, and Liam and Sara in the one in front of Percy, rather watching than participating in the argument waiting to happen.

“Excuse you!?” Ash exclaimed positively offended, grabbing at their chest in dramatic way, just as Percy usually did.

Oh gods, they were so much alike, it was disconcerting.

Nico rolled his eyes and looked back out of the window.

He couldn’t wait for that pitstop.
"Alright, everybody, off to the toilets first, or so the gods help me. Andrew, you as well. Here’s your hand sanitizer. You’ll be fine.” Nico ordered in a brisk voice as he herded them all out of the bus and towards the gas station, while Will hung back and tried to rein in his laughter, his face aching as he tried to keep his lips from splitting into a wide grin.

Oh gods, Nico was such a mom.

"Ash, don’t even think about it. Remember, I. See. Everything!” Nico called after Ash as they drifted off towards the ice cream, rather than following the rest of the team down the stairs to the toilets, and Ash let out a loud groan and corrected their path.

"And leave the vending machines alone!” Nico added as an afterthought, hands on his hips and his eyes still glued to where Ash’s unruly mop of hair disappeared down the stairs.

Then, he sighed and shook his head, before turning to glower at his boyfriends darkly, which had Will shrinking back guiltily.

"Seriously, why am I always the only one saying anything? This was our team, last time I checked.” Nico complained, though he turned towards Jason mid-rant, rather than Will, which Will was immensely glad about.

"But sweetheart…”

"Pouting isn't going to get you out of this. And stop calling me sweetheart, it's not going to help you. Our team, Jason. You take your part in that, or so the gods help me.”

Oh man, poor Jason.

Will inched away carefully, and found Percy doing the same with an innocent expression across from him.

"Yes, dear.” Jason agreed immediately with a voice that spoke of submission and the urge to fix everything again.

"Good. Now, Percy, Will, don't even think about hiding. I can see you just fine, and you're not getting out of this, either.”

Will gasped and went still, while Percy let out a small squeak and decided to run for it, excusing himself to go to the toilet, as well.

Freaking coward!

Nico looked after Percy with a scowl, and Will used his chance to dive into the next aisle of snacks and escape, which earned him confused looks from another couple that was frequenting the small shop, as well as a frown from one of the cashiers.

He ignored them in favor of running from his boyfriend.

"Will! How…you…I swear, I'm surrounded by a bunch of toddlers!” Nico called after him and seemed to stomp on the ground in frustration, and Will decided to better be safe than sorry and stay away.
There was no way he wanted to promise Nico anything along the lines of telling the team anything.

Jason could do that, because he was technically the team leader.

Percy could totally give it a try, because Will would love to see their reactions.

Nico could do it, because he actually did do it and was pretty good at it.

Will, however, preferred to stay out of that, thank you very much.

"Why don't we go and pick up some snacks, dear? And the ice cream. I'm sure Thalia would appreciate some ice cream, too. Want to go ask her?" Jason immediately tried, and Will was both grateful and felt sorry for him.

Nico made a grumbly sound that sounded anything but pleased, then he huffed and Will could hear him stomping off, so he guessed he was going outside to ask Thalia.

Wait, but weren't the Hunters out there, too?

Oh no, Nico would definitely not ask them, and if they uttered some sort of snide remark, there might very well be blood, considering how defensive Nico was behaving already.

Will tried to signal Jason to get moving, but Jason seemed to recognize the threat as well, already groaning and rushing after their favorite bundle of grumpiness.

The moment the sliding doors opened, though, Will could already tell the telltale hissing and snarling of two parties with particularly bad moods.

"I don't care what you think. This is my team, and it's none of your business how 'childish' they're behaving. You're the ones who look like a bunch of kids, I really don't think you get to judge."

Ah. Too late.

There was the sound of pure outrage, and Will caught the cashiers looking around with a frown, clearly wondering what was going on and whether they would have to step in.

"Oh, boohoo. Go buy yourself a lollipop, will you? That is, if you're even legally allowed to do your own shopping without guardian."

Alright, Will should have faced Nico's wrath back before he was exploding like a coke that had a Mentos dropped into it.

The doors slid close, and Will put his hands to his face and tapped his foot on the ground, trying to think of how to diffuse the situation.

Chances were, Jason would take care of it.

However, the Hunters had provoked it, so it might also be better to let both parties vent and yell and get it out of their system.

Then again, they had to get along for the rest of the ride, at least well enough not to rip each other's heads off, which was a lot easier when one only thought of the things that bothered them, rather than yelling them at the other party outside a gas station store.

The doors slid open again, and Will looked up, half hoping it was Jason and Nico.

Needless to say, it wasn't them. It was Thalia, looking inexplicably older as she apparently had no interest in participating in the screaming match outside.

"Hey Will." She greeted as she passed, and he was painfully aware that he was standing in the middle of the aisle with his hands in his face but his eyes peeking through, his foot still tapping the ground as if that was going to solve anything.

Outside, the noises picked up, words blurring together as voices were raised and insults thrown
around, some outdated, some new, some in other languages.

"Hey Thalia." He returned the greeting, and they both sighed in unison as she continued on her merry way.

"What are you getting?" He asked her conversationally, mainly because the cashiers were beginning to shift and look uncomfortable, clearly not wanting to break up any fights.

Maybe, if they acted normal enough, they'd leave them be.

"Oh, I'm getting myself some sweet, sweet ice cream. Nico said he'll pay."

The doors slid closed again, muffling the noise once more, though it was sadly still audible.

Will hummed in response, not knowing what else to say, and he finally lowered his hands and stopped his tapping, though he was no further with his struggle.

"Shouldn't you be out there?" Thalia asked as she strolled through the next aisle to check the snacks, before moving over to the ice cream.

"Could say the same thing about you." He replied as he decided to abandon his spot and join her side, staring down at the variety of individually wrapped popsicles.

Thalia snorted.

"You and I both know both parties had it coming. He was behaving like a dick, and they kept provoking him. I don't know what's wrong with them. They're not usually this bad. I mean, I can't deny that they can get a little…weird about boys, but this was a direct order from Lady Artemis. Usually, they pull themselves together and act accordingly." She stated with a sigh, then hesitated, before sighing again.

"I guess it must have been the monster attacks we had to endure the past weeks. It ruined a lot of hunts, and thus cut our supplies quite a bit. Going hungry over irregular periods of times tends to make anybody testy."

Will raised an eyebrow, then looked back down at the popsicles.

"Why not just tell us? We could have gotten you some food easily. Percy harbors all sorts of candy and snacks, and we stopped at four, now five, different gas stations with stores. If money is your concern, Nico would gladly cover the costs. He might not behave the part right now, but he is a giant softie who would do anything to make everybody happy."

He would say 'heart of gold', but ever since he had heard of Midas, the expression always made him think of petrified golden statues, and a heart of gold sounded just as unmoving and cold.

Thalia let out a dry chuckle and leaned forward, resting her arms on the glass.

Will mimicked her.

"They're too proud. We're the Hunters of Lady Artemis, meant to be the very best and worthy of the hunt. Do you have any idea how embarrassing it would be for us to ask a bunch of boys to provide us with food we should have been able to catch ourselves? Or something along those lines, anyways." She explained with a shrug and a dismissive wave of her hand, and Will let out a deep sigh.

"Yeah, I guess I can see that being difficult. But still, shouldn't you put the safety of the team before your pride? Starvation and dissatisfaction makes people unfocused and easily distracted and provoked. That could have severe effects." He pointed out, and Thalia smirked to herself as her eyes danced with amusement.

"Yeah, I told them the same thing, but they insisted they're still in top form. Now, just look at them. Fighting like little kids because Nico dares to ask whether they want something so silly as ice cream."

Will didn't have to look to know, he could hear them just fine.
"Nico asked them, too?"

Thalia pursed her lips a little with a contemplative look on her face.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. Well, he asked me, and then seemed ticked off when Angie huffed derisively, so he turned towards them and asked in a rather passive-aggressive voice whether there's anything they want, too, or whether they're good with the sticks up their asses. Hm, actually, that doesn't sound very passive-aggressive, so scratch that."

Ah, that explained the war taking place outside.

"I'm back. The toilets are okay, I guess. At least they look like they were cleaned not too long ago. Still disgusting, of course." Andrew informed him as he strolled up to them, and Will wondered faintly why Andrew always felt the need to tell him about the various restrooms, though he still nodded and filed that information away for...whenever he might need it.

The boy seemed satisfied with that, before he started frowning, his eyes roaming the store, undoubtedly searching for Jason and Nico.

Will was about to explain, but then he already seemed to pick up on the noise, and, being a son of Athena, he put the pieces together fast enough to spare Will the trouble.

"Ah. I was wondering when di Angelo was going to break. He lasted a lot longer than expected though."

Will and Thalia both shrugged and sighed in unison, before pulling back to look back down at the popsicles, though they seemed nowhere closer to a decision.

"Babe, where's Nico? Well, good thing he's not here. I have good news and bad news. Good news: There's free condoms for anybody who wants them. Bad news: Ash broke one of the vending machines." Percy's voice piped up as he also came strolling over, and Will could only sigh again.

Great.

"It wasn't my fault! The thing was technically already broken!" Ash immediately exclaimed as they came rushing up the stairs and towards them, too, and Will caught the cashier frowning at them, before he got up and started moving towards the stairs to undoubtedly check on the bathrooms.

Oh great.

Hannah and Sara came dashing up the stairs, with Liam close behind.

"I didn't have anything to do with it!" Hannah immediately insisted, which meant she had probably dared Ash to do something stupid that had set everything off.

"I tried to stop them!" Sara defended herself, and Liam nodded wildly to show she was speaking the truth – which was nice, but useless.

Will blew out a deep breath, feeling somewhat uncomfortable now that he was faced with all of them looking up at him and awaiting his judgment.

Nico and Jason were much better at this than he was.

He was a medic, a doctor, meant to tell people what was wrong with them and what to do to fix it.

He was no leader and most definitely not in any position nor mindset to scold.

Thalia snickered next to him, then she finally took her pick of the popsicle she wanted and wandered off.

Will looked back at the team, who were looking up at him and clearly awaiting a reaction, maybe even a battle plan of sorts.
Why weren't they looking at Percy, he was right there!

"Alright, here's what we'll do." Will stated as he resigned himself to his fate and leaned forward a little, just as they came closer.

"We're gonna pick our ice cream super fast, and everything else we want – and then Percy stays at the cash register with the snacks and waits for Nico, while the rest of us runs for it. Deal?"

The team started nodding eagerly, while Percy gaped at him incredulously.

"Will! No! You can't just abandon me like that!"

Lies. He wasn't abandoning him, at all.

Will hesitated.

Okay, maybe a little.

He leaned over and placed a quick peck on Percy's cheek.

"Payback for abandoning me and running for the bathroom earlier." He said simply, and Percy whined, though he also seemed to resign himself to his fate, dragging his feet as he snatched his popsicle and picked some more snacks on the way to the cash register with a defeated sigh.

The rest of the team parted ways and rushed through the store in record speed, all the popsicles already picked and left with Percy, and by the time Will had taken his pick and added it to the pile, the others were already finished with their shopping.

"Okay. Now, don't be surprised, but out there is a warzone right now. Don't stop, don't falter, and most of all: don't interact. Go straight for the bus – no, Ash, this is not the cue for you to announce your sexuality. If anything, I get to do that."

"Rude." Ash muttered, already having been about to speak, but Will wasn't having any of it.

"Go right for the bus, understood?"

"I feel like this sounds way too serious, given the situation." Ash mumbled and seemed to sulk, but Andrew promptly shook his head.

"Team mom is having a yelling match with the Hunters. You don't wanna underestimate that."

"He is doing what?!!" Percy cut in, sounding shocked, and Will put on an innocent expression immediately.

Alright, it was time to leave.

"Hey! What did you do to the vending machine?!" The cashier that had left to check on the bathrooms exclaimed as he came back up the stairs, looking furious.

Will made a high-pitched noise and started herding the team out.

Yep, definitely time to leave.

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"If you were taking your leadership duties seriously, we would already be at Camp by now!"

The audacity!

Nico snarled and had to forcefully keep his hands off his sword.

Jason was still talking in the background, trying to negotiate, trying to stop them from yelling, but for once, he got a taste of what it felt like to go ignored.

"Oh, I'm sorry, are we not going fast enough? How about you walk to Camp, then? Bet you'd be so much faster!" He snapped back, and the girls hissed.
He could hiss better.

"With that abomination as your driver, we'd certainly be safer travelling on foot. Unfortunately, you wouldn't be able to keep up." One of them spat back, and Nico felt his entire body tremble.

Behind him, there was more noise, and he thought he could see part of their team hushing past some potted plants and towards the bus.

He couldn't find it in him to care.

"One more word against Jules-Albert, and I'm going to-..."

"Do what, di Angelo? You can't even lead your team, pampering them at all turns like some sort of mother, rather than the leader you're meant to embody. We're not scared of any of your threats."

There was a gasp and a softly whispered 'Holy shit, she went there', but Nico ignored it in favor of straightening his spine and giving the Hunters of Artemis a cold, hard look.

The air around them turned icy, the potted plants wilting under the force of Nico's anger.

"Nico, please..." Jason whispered behind him, sounding agitated, but Nico ignored him.

They had been unfriendly.

They had been rude.

They had undermined his authority.

They had repeatedly insulted Jules-Albert.

They had disparaged his team.

They had let his sister die.

"You speak of my leadership skills as if they are not only your concern, but as if you are any better. Yet I don't see a leader among you. I see a bunch of little girls, unable to cope with the fact that their leader has left them." He spoke calmly, coldly.

The air around them dropped further, the grass around them died.

There was a sound of outrage, but he cut through it.

"You mock me, insult my team and badmouth my driver. You question and fight my decisions. You Hunters speak of unity and obeying the rules of your Lady, of being strong-willed and brave and deserving of the Hunt, yet you are none of those things. You are immature, you are disrespectful and rude, and you are a disgrace to the Hunters my sister thought she would join."

There was a flash of pain in some of the girls' eyes, but he didn't care, nor did he care when he saw hands flicking towards bows.

Oh, let them come at him.

He just dared them to draw their weapons – it would give him an excuse to draw his own.

There was a nagging at the back of his mind, an urgent 'Bianca wouldn't have wanted this', but he ignored that, too.

"Oh, you think you are so much better, don't you? Think mistakes don't happen to you? Think that you're going to get your team back to Camp safe and sound without a single death just because you are oh-so amazing?" The girl in the front spat, and Nico grinded his teeth.

She had no idea what she was talking about.

Jason drew a sharp breath behind him, and fell silent.
Good. Nico could fight his own battles.

"Do you really think you can protect them all? Make sure all of them make it? What are you going to do, glower at the monsters? Snap at them like a toddler? Don't think we haven't noticed you're weakened. You're out of shape, scared of your powers. Call us what you want, we all know who the coward is." The girl continued, and Nico snapped.

The next moment, several things happened at once.

Bows were drawn, Nico grabbed his sword, somebody groaned, and there was hissing and cursing from all sides.

The most prominent thing that happened, though, was the dirty orange Camp-shirt that suddenly blocked his vision of the Hunters, followed by him looking up into Will's face angrily.

"Not now, sunshine." He snapped at him, trying to get past him to continue where he had left off, but Will wasn't having any of it.

"Nico, this is important. It's an emergency." Will insisted, and he sounded serious enough to give Nico pause, though he knew he was still shaking with anger, his sword firmly in his hand.

"What?" He asked sharply, because he had no time for Will's jokes right now, nor his distractions.

"It's Hannah. She's having really bad cramps. You know, it's that time of the month for her." Will said quietly, and Nico, who had been expecting anything but that, found himself stilling, staring straight ahead unseeingly.

Cramps…? That time of the month…?

Wait.

Oh.

All at once, Nico could feel himself deflating, his anger making way for realization and defeat, before he knitted his brows together and put his sword away.

Then, all at once, his face darkened as he realized something else.

"So that's why Ash needed all those pitstops."

He had known there must have been more to that, especially since Ash hadn't exactly seemed in any rush to use the bathrooms most of the time.

That little shit.

"Yeah, kind of. I didn't want to tell you, because it's not exactly any of our business, but Hannah is kind of in a lot of pain right now, and the bus is locked. Also, they're all still waiting on their popsicles, which will melt at this rate, so it would be great if you could lend me your card."

Oh, true, he had forgotten about that.

Nico blew out a long breath, then nodded and patted his pockets for his wallet.

"Yeah, sure. Is there anything she needs? Hot water bottle? Pain killers? Any more supplies? A voodoo doll?" He asked as he passed Will the card, and Will shook his head.

"No, she seems to have everything she needs in her bag, once she can get to it. Though…I have to ask, what would she need a voodoo doll for?"

Nico merely shrugged, choosing not to reply to that.

"Also, Ash broke one of the vending machines." Will mentioned in a rather hurried tone as he turned away, and Nico's eyebrow twitched, his scowl only deepening.

"I told them to stay away from the vending machines! ASH!"
"I'm sorry! It wasn't my fault!" They instantly yelled from wherever it was they were hiding, and Nico groaned, before looking after Will as he hurried back into the store.

Nico thought he could glimpse Percy inside, with his head bowed, while one of the workers there seemed to speak to him, gesticulating wildly with his hand as the other held a notepad.

His frown deepening, he looked back at the Hunters, who had lowered their bows and were glowering at him darkly.

He had no time for that nonsense.

"Get in the bus, we're leaving. That's an order. If you're not in the bus by the time I'm back, you can explain to your Lady why you're stranded at a gas station." He said coldly, then nodded towards Jules-Albert, who had been watching from afar.

Then, Nico turned on his heel and rushed after Will.

This time, there were no huffs or snorts, and nobody called anything after him.

Nico smirked to himself.

Then he remembered that Ash had broken a vending machine and his scowl was right back.

He was still angry.

He still resented the Hunters.

But right now, there were other things – more important things – to worry about.

That vending machine, for starters.

Or the giant pile of snacks and popsicles that greeted him, together with a sheepish Percy.

Most of all, though, he had to focus on getting the group back home safely.

Nico steeled his nerves and clenched and unclenched his fists as he took over the talking and paying for everything.

The Hunters didn't know anything, and they had no idea what their team had faced these past weeks, nor anything else they had been forced to go through.

However, Nico would be damned to let himself get provoked quite like this again.

Not at the expense of his team.

They were right, he was weakened.

They were right, he wasn't as much of a leader as he could be.

But he would protect his team to the best of his abilities, and he would very damn well spoil them as much as he wanted.

When they left the gas store, loaded with bags and having left a fake name and address (but in return a generous amount of money) to deal with the broken machine, the first thing Nico did was check whether any Hunters were still outside.

Sadly, they had all boarded the bus, and were huddled in their usual corner, near the middle, while the rest of the team was in the far back.

Nico nodded at Thalia, then moved past them without second glance to get to his team, stopping in front of them and studying them in turn.

There were a lot of things to say.

He should be scolding Ash for breaking another machine.
He should be scolding the lot of them for buying so much rubbish, because at this rate, they would never learn how to work with their money.

He should be scolding Andrew just for looking at him the way he did right now.

"I'm sorry you had to witness that. My outbreak was unnecessary and foolish. I hope you can see past it." He said, instead, and all of them looked up at him in mixtures of surprise and confusion.

Percy and Will moved past him, smiles on their faces, while Jason leaned forward a little, placing his arms on the backrest in front of him, his expression sober and his eyes studying Nico.

Nico addressed him, next.

"I want to apologize to you, as well, Jason. What I did was uncalled for, and I should have listened to you or let you take over the…conversation. I'm not going to lie, I doubt I'd do anything different if I could turn back time. However, I understand my actions were wrong and I will try and refrain from letting anything like that happen again." He apologized to him, next, and Jason gave a small nod.

Nico nodded back, then sighed and turned around to go back to the Hunters – just to be held back by Andrew.

"Wait, you're not gonna go and apologize to them, right? They provoked you! Plus, they don't even…they don't know…Rin…they had no right to say what they did!" The boy exclaimed, sounding both aghast and offended at the notion of Nico apologizing to the Hunters.

"Yeah, you're doing your job just fine. They haven't seen you battle off all those monsters or getting us to safety all those times in the past, who are they to judge?" Ash chimed in, and Nico blinked, feeling…rather taken aback.

"They really don't get to judge. You did so much for the team. Sat us down, made sure we all behaved, checked up on us repeatedly to make sure everything was good. I don't see how they get to mock your leadership when they haven't even been around a whole day yet." Hannah agreed, and Nico felt the heat rising in his face, not quite certain how to respond to any of this.

"I agree. If anything, they should apologize to you for all those shitty assumptions. It's not your fault that they've been ordered to help us, nor is it your fault that we have an amazing zombie chauffeur." Sara added, and Liam nodded with a wide grin.

"Yeah, who could possibly dislike Jules-Albert? He has saved our lives so many times already, and he's such a great driver. Just like how you're a great leader, Nico. You and Jason both."

Nico stared at their team, a little speechless, rather dry-mouthed, and very overwhelmed.

Swallowing repeatedly, his eyes hushed to his boyfriends, but they only looked back at him with matching soft smiles.

Jason gave a small nod, and Percy leaned back with a telling look, while Will leaned forward with a little wink.

"See? There you have it. Your team thinks you're awesome, darling. So, are you really going to let a bunch of strangers get to you?"

The tone was playful, the message one Nico already knew, having had the realization just earlier, himself.

It was enough to make him pull himself together and shake his head.

"I...thanks. Thanks, guys. That's...really nice of you. For once. But...I wasn't actually going to apologize to them. I was just gonna bring them their stuff. I couldn't care less what they think of us or my leadership skills." He said awkwardly and held up the bag that Percy had emphasized three times contained Thalia's stuff.

"That's the spirit!" Ash exclaimed and clapped him on the shoulder, and even though Nico had not forgotten about the broken machine just yet, he guessed he could let them get away with it just
"Go eat your popsicles, or they'll melt." He told the faces beaming up at him, mostly because he
couldn't think of anything better to say.

There was an outcry of a variety of 'Oh no! My popsicle!', but Nico was already turning away and
moving down the bus swiftly as Jules-Albert started the engine and left the parking lot.

His heart was still beating rather fast, and his face still felt warm, but on the whole, he was feeling
rather…happy.

Maybe even a little cheerful.

The Hunters were right, he might not be the best leader there was.

But at least his team liked and respected him, in their very own way.

Nico tossed Thalia's bag on the free seat next to the one that had snapped at him the most, then
clapped Thalia on the shoulder.

"You know, if you still want to play Mythomagic, I have a deck in the back we can use for some
practice rounds." He offered easily, and she promptly grinned up at him and hopped out of her
seat, her popsicle long finished already.

"Why didn't you say so earlier? Oh, you're on, di Angelo."

Nico grinned and took her to his guys, and his group.

He still thought of Bianca, and he knew he would do so for a long time.

But that was okay.

If his team could like him, and his boyfriends could love him the way he was, then Bianca would
have accepted him just the same way, as well.

And that was all that mattered to him.

***

Kyle looked at the remnants of the burnt-out bus in front of him.

What an eyesore.

He noticed the last traces of paint at the side, figuring this thing must have been even more
hideous before now.

So, that's how William got around, huh? No wonder that sorry excuse of an outpost hadn't
managed to catch him or the rest of them.

Kyle clenched his jaw, then walked around the wreck slowly, trying to see whether he could find
anything useful.

But nothing. There was nothing.

Kyle's fists clenched.

If only the bus had gone a little further on the road, it would have run right into his trap…

Sure, they might have been able to trick the monsters, but nothing would have passed the
spellwork he had ordered done, just a few feet from where this eyesore must have swerved.

That driver of theirs must have felt it, though Kyle had gone through such lengths to get it hidden.

Kyle opened his fists again.

It didn't matter.
He knew where they were going.

They might have gotten out of this, but from here, there was only one possible route inside the Camp.

Kyle turned away from the wreck, and looked at the burning fields around him.

He smirked as he saw something hushing between the corn rows, the howls of agony sounding almost like a trick of the wind.

But the wind wouldn't fill him with this much glee.

Kyle turned back towards Enceladus, who was standing uncomfortably between his skiés, his perfect creations of misery and darkness.

It didn't matter that they got away.

His forces would be awaiting them, no matter where they went.

"Ready everything as planned. Let's get them properly welcomed, shall we?"

Time to crush their spirits a little.

If they died? Fine by him.

And if they didn't?

Kyle's smile widened.

Even better.

***

They took another three pitstops, but this time there were no comments or remarks.

Everything went rather smoothly, except the one time they had nearly forgotten Andrew, who had done gods knew what behind the bus instead of boarding it with the rest of them.

But they had noticed in time to stop before hitting the highway, and Andrew – who had been forced to run after the bus and scream bloody murder – might have been upset, but Nico had made up for it by buying him some more tangle toys they happened to find by chance during the next pitstop.

Now, the sun was just beginning to set when Nico could make out familiar roads and intersections, followed by him spotting the telltale signs of battles and monsters – and he knew they were nearly at their Camp.

Their home.

Nico smiled.

He was aware there had to be monsters close by, and that they would have to watch out not to be jumped, that this would be the hardest part of their return.

But at the same time, he couldn't help but feel warm at the thought of finally being home again.

They had made it.

Percy stirred next to him, having fallen asleep an hour ago, and Nico turned his head to watch him wake up, from the twitching of his eyelids to him closing his mouth to stop drooling against Nico's shoulder. (Eww.)

"Are we there yet?" His boyfriend asked drowsily as he sat up properly and rubbed at his eyes and mouth, before blinking first at Nico, then staring out the window.
"Almost. We should get ready to make a quick exit, in case of an attack." Nico said, and Percy seemed instantly more alert as he turned and woke up Will and Jason, as well, who were knocked out against the other window.

Jason was up in an instant, while Will took his time blinking and stretching and grumbling, effectively causing the rest of their team to stir, as well.

"Eww, Andrew, stop cuddling with my arm." Ash complained, and the peace and quiet of the bus was instantly disrupted and destroyed, because suddenly, everybody started talking and grumbling and moving about.

Nico sighed, but accepted it, instead patting Percy on the shoulder before moving down the length of the bus and past the Hunters to ask Jules-Albert about possible ways into Camp.

During their last chat with Annabeth, she had referred to attacks at the Camp border, specifically, which indicated that most of the monsters had to be there.

Unfortunately, that was also the very area they would have to cross, unless there was another way in that Nico didn't yet know of.

The forest was out of question, because even Jules-Albert wouldn't be able to drive through the undergrowth.

The sea was a possibility, but only a very slim one, because it would require a big detour, and rely a lot on Percy's powers, since they didn't have a boat on hand.

Nico would still prefer that to being forced to engage in battle again right away, though.

"Did my dad have any idea on how we're going to get inside?" He asked Jules-Albert as he joined him in the front, watching familiar trees and signs go by.

It felt like forever since he had last seen them.

Yet he also still remembered the time Percy had taken him out on that not-date in December as if it had happened just yesterday, past these very signs and trees.

Jules-Albert grunted, effectively pulling Nico out of his nostalgia.

"What do you mean, he said drive right in?! That's a horrible plan! Is he trying to get us killed?!"

In response, his zombie chauffeur merely shrugged.

Nico stared out of the front window nonplussed.

"Wow. I can't believe he kept me alive all those years, just to now kill me off in the least flattering way possible. Next time you see him, tell him I'm offended."

Jules-Albert grinned a rotten smile, then grunted again.

Nico scowled and boxed his shoulder.

"You're the worst. Who says I'll speak to him after I'm dead? So, yeah, you tell him."

Another grunt.

"You're supposed to be on my side, Jules-Albert. Come on, you know you like me more than my dad!"

Jules-Albert gave him a slow once-over that had Nico making a face and crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"I'm never going to defend you again in my life."

Jules-Albert merely snickered, and Nico grinned to himself.

Footsteps sounded behind him, and Thalia and Jason joined him.
"So? What's the plan?" Jason asked, and Nico turned his head to beam at them.

"Jules-Albert is going to dive right in. We're all going to die." He announced cheerfully, and their zombie chauffeur let out an almost bark-like sounding laugh as they both took in Thalia's and Jason's shocked expressions.

"That's…Nico, you're not supposed to laugh about that." Jason pointed out hesitantly.

Nico wasn't quite sure what else to do though, since it was either laughter or tears, and he much preferred to go down smiling.

Years of scowling and feeling miserable did that to a person.

"Well, unless you can think of anything better in the next two minutes, that will be what he's going to do." He explained, and Jules-Albert let out an affirming grunt.

Thalia still looked stunned, while Jason blew out a loud breath and moved his hand over his face and through his hair.

"Alright. I'll just…I'll let the others know. I mean, I'll tell them to…prepare for battle. Impact, if worst comes to worst." He said, then turned around and rushed back to the others.

Oh man, good thing he was the bearer of bad news.

Nico turned back towards Jules-Albert, his smile sliding off his face as he turned serious once more.

"Is there really no better way? I was contemplating the sea as possible way in. It'll require a detour, but—-

Jules-Albert shook his head and groaned, and Nico tilted his head, alarm bells ringing.

"What do you mean, all the paths to the ocean are blocked off? How would you know? Also, how would something like that be even possible to organize?"

He knew the answer, of course.

Kyle.

Nico's hands twitched and his gut tightened, but he pushed it down.

Not now.

Jules-Albert gave him a pitying look, then groaned again, and Nico's shoulders slumped.

"What did he say?" Thalia asked, though Nico had forgotten she was still behind him.

He hesitated, then turned to look at her with a sober look.

"Demi gods."

She understood immediately, and he watched her face blanch a little.

There were demi gods involved.

People like them.

No, people like Kyle.

But why? What was their goal? What good would it do them to block off entire roads?

That 'checkpoint' at the highway had already given him the creeps, but now, he was beginning to feel legitimately scared.

If Kyle had enough followers to not only do that one checkpoint, but many more, yet still
managed to attack both Camps with forces previously unheard of, then how many followers did he have?

How long had this been in the making? What was the purpose behind it? Why was all of this happening?

Jules-Albert let out a grunt and took a turn, and Nico lifted his gaze again, his lips twitching feebly.

How strange it was, to be comforted by an undead zombie chauffeur.

But, if anything, it should motivate Nico not to let it show this much how much these news bothered him.

Jason came stumbling back towards them, and when Nico looked towards their team, he found them buzzing around in the back, collecting their things and talking to each other in hushed voices, expressions grim.

Looking back out of the window, Nico knew they were close, and that they had to get ready for a quick escape – or an attack – any minute now.

"How to best proceed?" Jason asked, and Nico looked questioningly at Jules-Albert, who only turned his head to give him a long look, before he nodded curtly.

Nico nodded back.

"Alright, get everybody more towards the front. Thalia, you take care of your Hunters. Weapons at the ready, but not drawn, so we don't run the risk of injuring ourselves or each other in case of a crash." He ordered as he turned away from his zombie chauffeur, and he could spot him gripping the wheel tighter, his undead eyes set firmly on the road ahead.

Both Thalia and Jason immediately nodded and went to relate the info to the others, while Nico hovered where he was a moment longer.

"No suicidal moves. The last crash was hard enough on you as it was." He said quietly, only for Jules-Albert's ears.

He didn't react, though Nico knew he had heard.

Nico hesitated a moment longer, then went to help the others.

Percy looked grim, but Will was with him, and the rest of their team met his gaze with determined looks of their own, their backpacks and tents strapped to their backs and their weapons at their sides.

Andrew was a little fidgety, but not even he was saying anything regarding their 'plan' – and neither did the Hunters, instead they took their respective places next to the team without complaint.

Jason and Nico exchanged grim looks, then Nico felt him brushing against his hand feebly as they sat down in front of the others.

Nico took it, gripping it tightly.

Jules-Albert gave a groan from the front, which was all the warning they got before the bus left the road.

Nico looked out into the darkness settling over the area more and more as the sun disappeared to make way for the stars, and he wished feebly that they had set up Camp somewhere else for the night and come here during the day.

However, he didn't get to think long about that, because they already spotted the first monsters, which seemed too surprised to see them to act before Jules-Albert whizzed past them. He was picking up speed, though some of that was lost as he swerved around another monster and started going uphill. Jason gripped Nico's hand tighter when they saw even more monsters.
Jules-Albert wasn't leading them directly to Thalia's pine as he might have expected, but more from a sideways angle, undoubtedly hoping to avoid the worst of the monsters.

The first attack happened a moment later, in the form of something crashing down on top of the bus and causing the entire thing to shake and vibrate as they all gasped in unison and clasped their seats for support.

"Nico?" He heard Jason, but shook his head.

"Not yet."

They weren't close enough to the border yet, engaging in battle this far off would be suicide.

There was screeching on top of them, the sound of claws sinking into metal, and Nico looked up to see the first indents and tears in the ceiling.

Then, Jason moved his body in front of his protectively as something big and heavy collided with the side of the bus, right where Nico was sitting, and there were a series of yelps behind them as their team flinched away from the glass windows.

Nico was about to tell them to get down and more towards the Hunters, when the same thing happened on the other side.

He tried to catch a glimpse of what was attacking them, but in the growing darkness and with all the motion happening around them, it was too difficult to tell.

There was cursing from both sides, and Jules-Albert gave a warning grunt.

"Down!" Nico yelled, and everybody obeyed immediately.

Then, the bus was assaulted from both sides again.

Glass shattered.

People screamed.

Monsters screeched.

Something got in, but then Jules-Albert swerved sharply, and it was promptly thrown off course and smacked into the still intact windows towards the back.

More glass shattered.

Something else seemed to collide with the bus, clearly trying to veer them off their course and tip them over.

Jules-Albert swerved again.

The thing inside the bus was struggling to get up.

Nico tried to follow its movement, but he was also trying to keep an overview of his team and the Hunters, as well as the state outside.

They were nearing the Camp border.

He could feel it, rather than see it.

"Nico?" Jason asked again, but Nico grunted back a negative, again.

Not yet.

The thing – a harpy? Something with wings, at any rate – tore its claws into the seats for a better hold, shaking its head before settling its eyes on them and uttering a loud screech.

Nico was already off the ground and moving towards it before it even lunged for an attack.
Jules-Albert let out a distressed yelp, the first one Nico had ever heard him utter, followed by Jason and Will yelling his name at the same time.

Nico's sword tore through the monster the same moment another one came crashing through the window the first one had cracked, the same moment Jules-Albert was forced to veer to the side, the same moment something else collided with the back of the bus and made the whole thing jolt and momentarily leave the ground.

Nico went airborne for a split second, then he and the second harpy crashed into the rows of seats on the other side.

Pain shot through his back and side, but he merely grunted and clenched his teeth, sword defensively in front of his face as he tried to hold off the claws trying to gut him.

"Get away from him!" Somebody yelled, and Nico felt like he was having a heart attack when he realized that was Andrew, and by all the gods, what was the idiot doing?!

The answer came in the loud screech as the harpy on top of him jolted and managed to claw at Nico's shoulder, before it turned and tried to attack whatever was behind them.

Nico rushed to stab his sword upwards even as the pain ripped through him, gutting the stupid thing before it could harm Andrew.

The thing got its retaliation by stepping on his abdomen before disintegrating and giving him a mouthful of dust.

Andrew was in front of him, a puny dagger in his hand that reminded him of Rin, and his heart ached as images zigzagged through his mind.

He was about to yell at him to put that thing away, but then Jules-Albert groaned again and Nico's heart stopped.

He lunged for Andrew, tearing him to the ground with him just in time to dodge the fangs of a stray hellhound shoving its ugly snout through the window, followed by the rest of its head and front paws.

Jules-Albert broke sharply, and the thing found an early end by getting the remaining glass shards from the broken window shoved into its neck as it collided with the metal frames.

Nico curled himself around Andrew protectively, who was gripping him tightly, his entire body shaking with fear as he whimpered.

"Now?" Jason yelled, but Nico couldn't tell, unable to get an overview of where they were and what was around them.

Were they close enough?

Would they make it if they engaged in battle now?

Would they make it if they stayed down?

Would they make it, at all?

They were so close!

Jules-Albert groaned from the front, and Nico squeezed his eyes shut.

"Not yet!" He yelled, hoping that their zombie knew what he was doing.

Thanks to the breaking, they had lost speed.

It made them so much easier to attack.

The monsters knew it.
More thuds came from the rood, more indents and tears appeared.

More hissing and growling, so much louder than before.

So much nearer.

They were so close.

Something attacked the back of the bus again.

The metal tore, exposing them even further.

Nico thought he could see something coming in, though with all the shaking and other monsters drawing his attention, he couldn't be sure.

There was something wet at his chest, and he realized Andrew was crying.

"Stay down." He ordered briskly.

Andrew whimpered and clung to him.

"Don't." The boy whispered, and Nico hesitated.

But then he pulled away, anyways.

"Stay down. Try to get back to the team. I need to check on the back."

"Don't leave me..." Andrew pleaded, but Nico was already on his feet and on his way towards the back, crouched down low to avoid being jumped by anything from the windows.

There were no lights in the bus anymore.

Nico wasn't sure when that had happened.

"Nico! Get back here!" He heard Will hiss, sounding agitated, but Nico ignored that, too.

If there was something inside the bus, he had to get rid of it, and do it fast, or else it could endanger the team, and the team was already endangered enough.

Something was attacking the back again, trying to stop it, trying to get it off track, trying to dismantle it from the outside.

Nico ignored it, because there wasn't much he could do about that.

Instead, he scanned the rows, keeping his body low to the ground to avoid being seen and to avoid losing his balance.

Above him, there was so much screeching and clawing.

Around him, there was so much growling and snarling.

He squinted at the next rows, his steps cautious as he got closer and closer to the back.

"Watch out!" Andrew screamed, and Nico whirled around, finding himself face to face with a Shadow.

But how-...!

Jules-Albert swerved so sharply that everybody screamed, and the Shadow – albeit unaffected by the movement – ended up lunging at nothing as Nico lost his balance and was thrown off to the side, colliding with another row of seats and feeling his body complain.

He ignored it and pushed himself away and past the Shadow, slashing at it in passing before running towards Andrew, who was struggling to get back on his feet.

"Back to the team, now!"
"But…"

"Go!" Nico yelled, but he wasn't Jason, and he couldn't just pick Andrew up and toss him towards the rest of their team, even when he heard the telltale sounds behind him that told him the Shadow was making straight for them, while Andrew was still struggling to get up.

Nico slid to a shaky stop in front of him and turned to attack, but then, a gnarly black hand already snatched his throat, bringing him to an abrupt stop.

"Nico!"

He wasn't sure who yelled, whether it was Andrew, Jason, Will, or somebody else entirely.

All he knew was that the Shadow's touch was *surreal*, the feeling cold and what he might have expected one of those Dementors from Harry Potter to feel like.

But those didn't exist in this world.

These things shouldn't exist, either.

The Shadow gripped his throat harder, and he felt himself being lifted off the ground.

He remembered that he had been about to attack it, but then realized both his hands were around the creature's grasp, which meant he must have dropped his sword.

There was a grunt, a yelp, the bus jolted and shook again as monsters attacked left and right, but Nico couldn't feel any of it.

The Shadow was absolutely still and steady, and seemed to have all the time in the world as Nico could see it raising its other gnarly hand, a lot more claw-like than he remembered.

Oh great, he was going to die.

They were almost home, and he was going to die.

Suddenly, the thing flinched and uttered a loud, surreal screech that reverberated in Nico's very skull, before he was dropped onto the ground and saw the thing dissolving into dark shards.

What…?

Nico stared at his own sword embedded in the thing's groin area, then turned his head to stare at Andrew.

"You just castrated a Shadow."

"Gee, you could just say *thanks* for once, you know?" Andrew shot back, and Nico thought he looked rather pleased with himself.

Nico lifted his sword again and they helped each other up so they could move back towards their team.

"Thanks." He said quietly.

Andrew huffed, though Nico could see him grin to himself, seeming rather proud.

Yeah, Nico was proud of him, too.

Jules-Albert groaned in warning, but Nico was too slow to react.

The bus swerved and collided with something, causing both of them to topple over and hit the ground, Nico on top protectively.

There was a horrible screeching sound, like fingernails on chalkboard.

Another loud crash.
Glass shattered.
The Hunters cursed.
Thalia yelled something.
Monsters yelped.
Andrew whimpered.
Nico lifted his head to see the right side of the bus demolished, missing chunks of metal and showing claw marks where monsters must have tried to hold onto.
The Hunters had fled to join the rest of their team in the middle aisle, but there was only so much space there.
Nico still had to get Andrew there, too.
They would have to engage in battle.
There was no way around it.
Their bus was too demolished to make it, and if they attacked now, they might still stand a better chance than if they allowed the monsters to overrun them.
Nico pulled Andrew up with him and tried to find Jason's gaze, but the motion and the darkness made it difficult for him to make anything out.
"Jason, we-…" He started, but never got further.
The bus swerved. Tilted.
Tipped over.
Nico was standing, then he was falling, then he was flying.
There was screaming.
Monsters got crushed beneath the bus as it hit the ground upside down.
Nico smacked into the ceiling, then he was back to floating.
Everything was spinning.
Andrew sobbed.
Nico tried to protect him.
They hit the ground again a second time.
Nico hit the seats this time. Andrew crashed on top of him.
Somebody yelled his name.
The bus hit the ground once more.
Nico curled around Andrew as best as he could.
They hit the ground.
His body throbbed, the blood roaring in his ears, and his quick breaths carried more dirt than air.
The bus kept sliding, then finally came to a halt, laying upside down.
Nico pushed himself up by pure willpower alone, trying to check on Andrew, who was curled into a ball and pressed against his chest, shaking and whimpering, but alive.
"Guys?" He called, trying to get Andrew to get up, too.

There were thuds.

Monsters. They were going to attack.

"We're alive." Will's voice sounded weakly, and Nico could make out their shapes dimly.

They had to get out of here.

Something collided with the bus.

Too late.

The bus started turning, and so did they, threatening to fall out due to the missing windows.

There was a groan that Nico dimly registered was Jules-Albert.

He wasn't able to catch his words.

He clung to Andrew, clung to the seats.

There was cursing.


A muffled thud.

Whatever was pushing the bus suddenly pulled away.

Nico went airborne again.

This time, there was the unmistakable sound of bones cracking, followed by a loud cry.

One of the Hunters.

They had to get out of here.

Nico tried to get to his feet, but everything hurt and he was shaking and couldn't hold his balance very well.

Andrew wasn't off much better.

Nico started herding him towards the shapes he could make out, anyways.

"Alive?" He asked, his voice breathless and feebly.

He hadn't felt anybody dying, but at the current time that didn't have to mean anything.

"Alive." Will told him with a groan, and Nico felt a wave of relief.

Then, he realized it was too soon for relief, because the bus was demolished and open on all sides, and they were trapped.

"We need to get out of here." He stated the obvious.

"How?" Percy asked, and his voice sounded dull, defeated.

Nico hadn't heard him among the screaming, nor the cursing.

He swallowed, but tried to stay focused on the situation at hand.

The monsters didn't give him the chance to think of anything.

As if they had only just realized their advantage, there was hissing and snarling, monsters scratching along the torn metal in the back, more monsters coming from the exposed sides, and
they were right there in the middle, forced to see themselves getting even more cornered.

Nico raised his sword, same as the others raised their weapons.

The first arrows went flying, aiming for both sides, and Nico used the opportunity to get Andrew and himself back closer to their team.

"How far until the border?" He called loudly, for anybody to answer, but none of them replied, instead grunting and shooting and undoubtedly hoping for somebody else to know the answer.

An arrow whizzed past his ear and his gaze promptly followed Liam's aim to the back of the bus, watching the arrow bury itself in a Shadow's chest and causing it to dissolve, just to make way for more.

Oh no.

Nico swallowed and peered back at their team, who looked battered and beaten even in the little light.

They were hopelessly outnumbered.

He knew they were.

They all knew they were.

But they were so close!

The Camp border had to be mere feet away, there just had to be a way!

But there didn't seem to be.

There was no way out of the bus.

Nobody would come to save them.

Not in this darkness, not at this hour, not with these quantities of monsters.

The first monsters got past the flying arrows, and Nico charged with his sword, killing one, two, three, but it wasn't enough.

There were more.

There were always more.

Nico momentarily reminisced about the good old times, when there were only one or two monsters to deal with, and they simply died and stayed dead.

Then, he tore into the next one, and called out to his team.

Jason replied, this time.

Nico couldn't catch the words.

Will called something.

Nico couldn't catch that, either.

Jules-Albert let out a feeble moan, and Nico whipped his head around to see their zombie still in the driver's seat in the front, pointing straight ahead to a faint source of light that had to be their Camp, before his hand fell limp.

Oh no, not Jules-Albert, too!

There was a sudden jolt, then the bus started creaking and groaning, and Nico realized with horror that something was on top of them.
The same moment he realized that, he saw with a growing sense of dread how the metal frame started bending and breaking, the plastic covering splintering and flying everywhere as the ceiling (or rather, bottom) of the bus came pressing down.

"We're all going to die." Sara whispered next to him, sounding struck, but Nico shook his head and tried to frantically think of a way out.

It was one thing if he thought that they were going to die. It was a different thing altogether if his team thought that.

Maybe, if he took to the front and charged at the monsters head-on, he could push them back and the others could escape…

There was a loud crash, and the ceiling came down even further as one corner gave way entirely, crushing a hellhound right beneath it.

There was a last shattering sound that came from the front.

The front window.

Nico wondered how much of it had still been intact, then another rush of dread surged through him as he realized Jules-Albert had been in the front.

There was another loud groan on top of them, and they momentarily ceased their attacks as the monsters around them pulled back hurriedly, right before the ceiling came down even further, forcing them closer together to escape the seats.

At this rate, they were going to get crushed.

Nico heard Andrew whimpering again.

A hand grabbed his.

He realized it was Percy's, and squeezed back.

"I really hate busses." His boyfriend whispered, but it didn't sound angry, nor bitter.

It sounded defeated.

Nico shook his head and raised his sword higher, but he knew it wouldn't protect them.

He tried faintly to call upon his powers, but there was no tug, and he couldn't focus enough.

They were going to die.

Nico stared numbly as the monsters started attacking again, as the Hunters started firing again, as his team fought valiantly, even as the creaking and groaning around and on top of them increased.

He stared as the Shadows came from the back once more, the same time the other monsters pulled away.

He knew what it meant.

Nico turned to look at a hellhound positioned right in front of him, just outside the bent window frame.

If he charged just right, he might be able to push it back.

The monsters would surely go right for him, he could be the distraction they needed.

He might be able to grant his team an escape.

The Shadows were coming closer.

The monsters retreated further.
The bus would collapse and kill them if he didn't act now.

Nico hefted his sword.

A whisper reached his ears, and Nico froze, before whipping his head around.

Somebody whizzed past him, charging at the Shadows, and Nico nearly choked as he realized who it was, and what was happening.

He wanted to call out, wanted to stop it.

"Get them out of here! Now!"

No.

There had to be another way.

Nico felt his heart break as he knew this was their only chance.

"Everybody, run towards the front. Now!" He ordered sharply, and it was amazing how quickly everybody reacted, or maybe his own senses were just unusually slow.

The groaning on top of them got louder, more insistent.

"Through the front window, then keep running! Just keep running!" He called as the first people reached the front and started slowing, seeming uncertain.

At his insistence, they bent down and crossed the threshold between bus and freedom.

The rest followed, team and Hunter alike.

Nico looked back.

"If you just-…"

"Go! Don't let this be in vain!"

"But-…"

"Just do it, di Angelo! Can't hold them off forever!"

It was the truth. The Shadows were already trying to maneuver past now, and they were winning.

Angry eyes found his, and Nico shook his head helplessly.

The gaze softened.

The words were quiet, but Nico could hear the way the voice trembled with fear.

No.

Nico took one step forward, back towards the Shadows.

He had to-…

A hand grabbed his and pulled him out of the bus, and then he was running, Will and he were running, and Nico was yelling for him to stop, but Will didn't.

And Nico tried to pull away, but couldn't, tried to run back, but couldn't.

And then, there was the sickening CRACK.

Nico's tears spilled from his eyes as a sense of hollowness filled him.

There was fluttering and snarling and hissing all around them, but Will kept on pulling, and they kept on running, and Nico could see their team up ahead, sprinting the last few feet towards the
Camp border, where there was light, where there were people, where there was safety.

They made it.

Moments later, Will and Nico made it, too.

Moments later, Will had Nico in a crushing hug as Nico started sobbing uncontrollably.

Moments later, Nico looked over Will's shoulder at the wreck of a bus he could only catch the faintest glimpse of, swarmed by monsters that were still hoping for a snack.

Moments later, Nico buried his face at Will's chest.

"Who stayed behind?" One of the Hunters asked, breathless, disbelieving.

Somebody cried out.

Nico thought it was Ash.

Will kept him tightly pressed against him.

Nico couldn't feel it.

"Andrew."

***

He could have prevented it.

He should have prevented it.

If he had been stronger. If he had been faster. If he had been better.

If he had been able to shadow-travel them.

If he had been able to find a different way.

If he had been a better leader.

If he had only let Andrew know once that he actually didn't hate him.

'I understand Rin now', Andrew had whispered.

Right before charging into those Shadows.

'I'm the only replaceable one', Andrew had said.

Right to Nico's face.

He should have prevented it.

He hadn't prevented it.

He should have gotten him out of there.

He hadn't gotten him out of there.

Nico squeezed his eyes shut as Will kept him pressed against him, carrying him through the darkness, while Jason stayed with the team, and Percy stayed with Jason.

Nico had let him die.

"It wasn't your fault."

Will had let him die, too.

"He was just a kid." Nico replied blankly, though everybody at Camp was 'just a kid', yet nobody
"I know." Will said softly, but Nico didn't need his pity.

"We got to let Annabeth know." He said numbly.

"Jason will tell her." Will assured him, but Nico didn't want him to tell her.

He wanted nobody to tell anybody anything.

He wanted to walk back out there and get Andrew out of that bus, safe and sound.

But Andrew wasn't safe and sound.

Nico opened his eyes to stare blankly at Will's shirt, then out into the darkness.

His fault.

Andrew's death was his Fault.

Not the Hunters', not Jules-Albert's, not the team's.

If Nico had acted quicker, if he hadn't dragged out engaging in battle…

They might have been able to make it.

There had to have been a way.

He shouldn't have listened to Jules-Albert.

He should have told him to take a roundabout way.

Who cared how many small monster attacks they might have had to endure, as long as all of them would have made it back safe and sound?

The Hunters had been right.

He was a lousy leader.

Why had he ever thought he could help Jason?

Why had Jason ever let Nico become some sort of second leader?

Jason was the leader.

Jason could have gotten them all to safety.

This was all Nico's fault.

"It wasn't your fault. There was no other way, Nico." Will said softly, but Nico shook his head.

"I'm death." He whispered, and it hurt.

"You're not. Nico, you're not." Will insisted, but Nico only kept shaking his head, new tears rolling down his cheeks.

"First, Rin died because of my inattention. Now, Andrew-d-died because of my incompetence, Will! What's gonna happen next? Who's gonna die next because I exist?!" He snapped at him, and for a moment, he actually thought he was capable of pushing Will away and walking off by himself.

The next moment, though, he just slumped back against his boyfriend as all fight left him once more.

"Jules-Albert died, too, by the way. Just that he has the chance to come back if my dad lets him. Andrew is going to get judged and if he doesn't choose rebirth, there's not gonna be any way out
of there again." He whispered bitterly, and Will was silent for a moment, before he walked up the steps to their cabin and started fiddling with his keys with one hand.

"Nobody is going to die because you exist, Nico. You weren't incompetent, and you're not responsible for either death. They made their choices. I know this sounds cruel, but you and I both know it's the truth." Will replied as he pushed open the door with his foot, and Nico couldn't help but glance into their home, though he couldn't quite admire it as usual.

There was a bitter taste in his mouth, and he felt the strong urge to check out the bathroom.

It was Will who usually vomited, though, not Nico, so he left the urge be.

"He thought he was replaceable." He whispered, and let Will carry him over to the bed, before he was lowered onto it gently.

Nico didn't even have to reach out for Will, the blonde was already right there on top of him in an instant, anyways, holding him, warming him, comforting him.

Nico wanted none of those things, though he also craved them more than anything else in the world.

"I'll have to prepare his burial. And Rin's. We won't have bodies for either." He said quietly, his voice hollow as thoughts of the rites and traditions snapped through his mind.

"You have time."

He should have taken more time to talk to Andrew.

He should have let him know he was proud of him.

Andrew had complained a lot, and he had had a lot of fears, but he had also come along every time.

He had also climbed that tree to help Liam.

He had also helped the others when he had been able to, in his own way.

He had also read the map and figured out where they were and where they had to go.

He had also gotten so much braver, speaking up around Eris, and taking his vitamins without triple-checking everything and still doubting them.

He had also just sacrificed himself for the sake of the team.

"If it had been one of you, I would have somehow found a way." Nico whispered, and he clung to Will as shame coursed through him, knowing he was right.

Will shook his head slightly and kissed the top of his head.

"You did all you could." He told Will, because he knew it was the truth.

"So did you." Will replied softly, but Nico only wished that was the truth.

"I did nothing but endanger the team. If I had just-…"

"We would have died." Will cut in, and Nico's words died in his throat, eyes widening as he pushed Will away a little so he could look at him properly.

"Did you have a…" He started, though Will's face already told him all he had to know.

"Fleetingly, yes. When they first hit the bus, everything just zigzagged through my mind. It was too quick and too much at once, so I couldn't immediately tell what was what. Now, however, I know this was one of the only ways for the rest of us to make it, Nico."
One of the only ways.

That meant there had been more.

"Andrew wasn't stupid, Nico. Do you really think he would have sacrificed himself if there had been even a remote chance something else would have worked, instead?"

"He thought he was replaceable." Nico repeated feebly, and Will leaned down to put their foreheads together.

Will was heavy.

Will was warm.

Nico was uncomfortable.

Nico didn't move.

"I'm sorry." Will whispered back, but there was nothing for him to apologize for.

Nico should be the one apologizing. To Andrew.

There was a ruckus at the door, then it opened, and Nico and Will both turned their heads to see not only Percy and Jason walk in, but also the rest of their team, all of them somber and quiet.

They hovered there, just inside the doorway, and Nico met their gazes, taking in their tears, taking in their unspoken question.

Nico gave a small nod, then he and Will were moving.

It was a little like auto-pilot, getting up.

Moving about the room to pull mattresses off the bunks and put them on the floor.

Collecting pillows and blankets.

Laying down with the others.

Holding a sobbing Hannah against his chest as Liam whispered how he couldn't quite wrap his mind around it just yet.

Hearing Sara cry softly to herself.

Feeling Jason wrapping himself around him from behind and whispering a broken 'I'm so sorry' against his back.

They had never had a sleepover, not one like this.

It felt like the right thing to do though.

Nico searched for his other two boyfriends, and found Will and Percy on the other side of their group, Percy with Ash curled into a ball in front of him, and Will behind him with his face hidden at Percy's shoulder.

Nico gazed at his team, watching them hurting.

Then, he closed his eyes and shook his head to himself.

The Hunters had been right.

Chapter End Notes
ENJOY!!

http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160102366149/a-digital-painting-commission-for-mel-chan366
- New Years from Advent Calendar times ;)
- Our dorks in Christmas sweaters!! :D
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162106509169/one-of-my-sale-commissions-8d-for-mel-chan366
- The guys in their outfits from Persephone ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158942865189/an-adorable-pjo-commission-for-mel-chan366-now-i
- Ice cream time :)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/156557714214/a-cute-commission-for-mel-chan366-3-3-some
- <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/160990996944/another-of-my-may-madness-commissions-a-fabulous
- The guys in their dresses from Weeks of Bliss ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/163069241139/a-fabulous-commission-for-the-ever-fabulous
- ...Boxer Shorts XD ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164308263854/let-me-just-take-this-time-to-say-that
- The guys 'admiring' Jason in his leather jacket ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164426408554/another-fun-very-colourful-commission-for
- Pride ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/165225200564/a-cozy-commission-for-the-fantastic
- A peaceful moment in the Hades Cabin (so soft!!!!!! so peaceful!!!!!! so cozy!!!!!!)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/158450527859/a-sweet-pair-of-commissions-for-mel-chan366-3
- SolGrace and Solackson sketches, not necessarily related to this series, but I love them too much not to share them ;)
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162318909149/one-of-my-sketch-commissions-for-mel-chan366
- Solackson Dancing <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162365022229/an-adorable-jasonwill-sketch-commission-for
- SolGrace Handkiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/162772123804/a-percyjason-kiss-sketch-commission-for
- Jercy Soft Kiss <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/164389230829/an-adorable-sketch-commission-for-mel-chan366
- Solangelo Date <3
http://arianwen44.tumblr.com/post/167504445724/three-super-sweet-commissions-for-mel-chan366-i
- Alright, here it comes: We have three (3) magnificent pieces right here, for all those with the Jasico and Percico feels. Jasico with Nico doing the mighty deed of cleaning Jason's glasses for him, Percy being cuddly while Nico is rambling™, and Jason blowing raspberries on Nico's stomach (Nico, now there's drawn proof that you LOVE it, no more complaints allowed.)

Also, if you want to draw something, PLEASE DO IT!! I will gladly offer you my
firstborn child :) (Mostly because there won't be one. Sorry. But you can have a cookie?)
Chapter 13: Breaking Point

Will had a nightmare that night.

The burning-up kind.

Jason had hoped they were past those, but apparently, he had hoped in vain.
The team was there, witnessing the effects for the first time, though they didn't ask or comment, instead rushing to help and watching them support and comfort their boyfriend with understanding in their gazes.

They didn't question them later that morning, either, instead bidding their goodbyes to face the world once more.

And what a world it was.

Jason gazed into the dull gray around them, the fog unusual for this time of the year, but so were the monster attacks at the border.

He got his boyfriends to breakfast, all three of them fighting demons of their own in battles he couldn't partake in.

Jason still wished he could, but he had to make do with the things he could influence, so breakfast it was.

It was barely 5:30am in the morning, but there were already a few campers up, or maybe they simply hadn't slept – but nobody bothered them, which Jason was glad about.

They had enough things to do today, including two burials that would very likely take an even bigger toll on his boyfriends and team.

Jason made them eat.

He told Will how important it was for him to eat, and he told Nico he needed his strength, and he rubbed over Percy's back and fed him his own breakfast when his boyfriend listlessly pushed around his own, and they ate, and Jason was glad they did.

They saw Annabeth, with her arms crossed and her expression grave, but she left them be, and he was glad about that, too.

He took them to the lake next, mainly so they wouldn't return to the cabin right away again, and because all three of them usually liked the water.

They watched the sunrise together, just huddled on the ground with their shoulders pressing against each other.

There was silence all around them except for the faint sounds of battle up at the border, but that wasn't their duty right now, and Jason wanted to keep it that way a little longer.

Will said something about having to check the infirmary, but Jason kept him there.

Nico whispered he would have to get started on the preparations, but Jason kept him there.

Percy said nothing, and Jason kept him there, too.

He wished nothing, and Jason kept him there, too.

He wished he could keep them there forever.

Their team joined them, sitting down with them and watching the sun rising into the sky together, all of them with the same haunted looks on their faces.

Ash was the first to leave, whispering that it wasn't fair.

Sara left next, saying she would be in the arena to train.

Liam followed her shortly after, saying something about archery practice, so he would be of better use to the team in future.

Nico momentarily bristled at that, barking out an unnecessarily loud 'You're fine just the way you are, Liam', that more made the boy jump than reassure him, but Jason was certain he got the message Nico had been trying to convey.

Hannah was the last to leave, whispering she would let Andrew's girlfriend know.
Jason had forgotten Andrew had a girlfriend.

He found himself looking after Hannah, then he looked at his boyfriends, trying not to think of how it would feel to receive such a horrible message, himself.

Death was always just around the corner for demigods, Jason knew that. They all did.

But it still hurt, and Jason knew it would always be that way.

They left the shore only when the fog disappeared to give view of their Camp, their home, and the bright colors seemed dulled as Jason led them towards the Big House.

None of them wanted to recount their travels, but they had to get it over with eventually, so Jason wanted to get it out of the way.

His boyfriends followed him without complaint.

What followed was the longest hour of Jason's life, full of too long pauses and lowered heads, gazes either full of pain or eerily empty.

Percy remained silent throughout the conversation, clenching and unclenching his fists.

Jason wasn't man enough to move an arm around him, knowing he wouldn't be able to let go of him again.

Chiron wasn't swishing his tail anymore like he usually did. He also barely asked anything.

There was no annoyance or impatience, just pain and sorrow in his gaze, and he seemed older again, the color of his fur once more muted, dulled like the rest of the Camp.

Jason had to do most of the talking, helping when his boyfriends faltered.

Nico joined Percy's silence once they reached his coma.

At some point, Annabeth was there, too, though Jason couldn't tell just when she had joined.

Percy turned his head away when Jason told them about his arm, and about the battle. About Will burning up.

He didn't tell them that Will had 'exploded' and caused the deaths of those monsters, rather than healed, but he said Will had overexerted himself.

He left out Reyna's cape, but not Reyna.

He told them of their recovery, and their departure, and the battles they had faced on the way.

When he ended up faltering as they reached the first bus crash, Will helped him, filling the gaps that Jason couldn't.

Then, he, too, fell silent, and Jason took over again.

He didn't want to talk about this.

He didn't want to think about this.

But somebody had to do it, and better him than them.

He had to be there for them right now, in any way possible.

So, Jason talked.

He told them of the Hunters, even of the pitstops, until he couldn't hold off the last part of their return, and he started speaking of their second crash.

Jason felt Nico trembling next to him, and he knew Nico blamed himself.
He shouldn't, but he did.

Jason told them of Andrew's sacrifice.

Then, there was silence, and Jason lowered his head, too.

"I am sorry." Chiron said softly, but his words felt empty, even to Jason.

Sorry.

They had lost two members of their team, two wonderful people, children, who had still had their whole life ahead of them.

Sorry.

Chiron hadn't even wanted to let them go.

How many more would have died, if Will and Percy hadn't come along?

Sorry.

Would he have been sorry, too, if Will had died? If he hadn't told them about his vision and fallen?

Sorry.

What was the point of Chiron being sorry?

There was no point to it.

All it did was make Jason angry, and it took him a moment to contain that anger, to push it back down to think it through at a different time.

Anger only caused irrational thinking, rash actions, and mistakes. He had no time for any of that.

Percy had stopped clenching and unclenching his fists, instead staring blankly into space.

Nico had his eyes closed and looked ready to break down.

Will shoved his hands into his pockets, his eyes squeezed shut and his shoulders hunched up as he trembled.

"If there's no further questions, we will take our leave now. There's much to do." Jason excused them quietly, because there was, and even though Jason didn't want to let his guys go out of his reach, he was aware of their duties.

Chiron gave a nod, letting them free.

Nico would have to prepare the burials, maybe Percy could help.

Will would have to check on his infirmary and siblings.

Jason would have to join the battles at the border.

Will trailed behind as they left, so Jason ushered Percy and Nico out, then stopped to wait for Will.

"Are you happy now?" He heard him ask, and looked back, just to find Will staring coldly at Chiron.

Chiron seemed surprised.

Annabeth, however, did not.

"This is what you wanted, right? Now, we won't leave anymore. You have us right where you wanted us all along. Here. I'll be your best healer, and Jason will be your best fighter. Nico, you
have never cared about in your life, and Percy? Your favorite? The boy you oh-so hoped would fare better than the heroes of the past?” He spat, and Jason felt his skin tingle as the air around them became warm.

He glanced back at Percy and Nico, but they were already outside, walking slowly towards the cabins.

Jason closed the door.

"You destroyed him, Chiron. I told you what to do. You didn't listen. I told you the risks, you didn't listen. Now look at him. Look at what you caused with your ignorance." Will continued, and there was disgust in his voice. Anger. Hatred.

This time, Chiron's tail did swish.

Annabeth leaned against the wall, her arms crossed in front of her chest. She remained silent.

"I had to think of the Camp, first. Percy is grown now, more mature than many others his age. He will get better. The Camp only has the here and now." Chiron said quietly, and Jason felt himself bristling against his better judgment, even though this wasn't his argument.

"You used him like a doll. You have been using him like a doll. Going to his school, making him think of you as a person he could trust, just to then shove a prophecy at him. Just to tell him he's going to die. Just to make use of the fact that he didn't die. Just to have him fight even though you know how much he hates it!" Will exclaimed, and the air now turned scalding hot around them, a testament to Will's anger.

"He is a demigod, he has to fight to stay alive!" Chiron replied, and he was raising his voice, which made Jason twitchy and defensive.

Nobody yelled at his boyfriend. Not in that tone.

"Shouldn't it be your job to keep us alive?! Why aren't you out there, trampling monsters or shooting them with your arrows?! Why are the kids out there? Why do you let them get hurt on purpose? 'Oh, you have to fight, you're demigods'? Really?! That's the best you come up with? We're demigods, and he was just a kid! He needs treatment! He needs counseling! He needs help!"

Jason was reminded of that conversation they had with Chiron all those months ago.

Will had told him about the talks he had with Chiron before, how much he had to fight for every little thing, like that free day for Percy after Tartarus had plagued him in his sleep.

"He will recover," Chiron insisted, and Will stomped his foot on the ground.

"He's on the verge of breaking! Do you have any idea what you've done to him?!"

Chiron's tail swished again.

"I wanted to keep him here. It was you who insisted on taking him along on your travels."

There was a low growl filling the room, and Jason needed a moment to realize he was the source of it, his teeth bared the same way he used to do back with the wolves, to show them to back off.

Annabeth had pushed away from the wall, but she was still only watching.

Will, however, seemed to lose all the tension in his body as his shoulders fell and the anger left his eyes, making way for a blank, cold look.

"He would have gotten himself killed three days into being kept here. We have done all we could to keep him up, but it's not enough. It can't be enough. You've demanded too much of him, and now, he is suffering from it in a way you can't ignore any longer. His arm will never heal if he doesn't allow his mind to. And I want you to know what you're responsible for." He stated, and Chiron's tail swished again, though he didn't reply.
"I asked you to pull him from training. I told you not to take Nico away from him. I pleaded that you'd let him have more free time. But you didn't listen. You pushed and pushed and pushed, until he learned the only way to have peace is when he's incapable of fighting. Now, he is. So, are you happy now?" Will asked, and Jason saw Annabeth lowering her head, a pained look on her face.

"I am not. Far from it. I wish things could have gone differently, I really do. But we're at war. There was no way I could just send him somewhere for treatment. He was the best swordfighter, of course I needed him to train the campers." Chiron spoke up quietly, and Will's face twisted.

"There were other campers. You know there were other campers. And we're always at war! I told you this would happen, and you didn't listen!"

"You said his mental health would get worse, and that it would be a struggle for him to keep going. You've never said he would purposely cause himself to be incapable of fighting!" Chiron shot back, and Annabeth flinched, the same moment Will's eyes widened, his expression one of stunned shock.

Jason wasn't quite sure what had just happened.

All he knew was that the temperature in the room was suddenly rising again, and Jason's skin started tingling uncomfortably.

"So, that's how it is, huh?" Will asked, and his voice was unnaturally cool, especially considering the scalding heat in the room.

Chiron's tail swished again.

"Will, I want you to calm down."

Will ignored him.

"As long as it's just Percy's mental health, it's no big deal, is it now? No need to change anything, no need to throw him a bone. After everything he's done for you, after all your claims of how much you care about him and how he's your biggest hope. His mental health is not important enough to worry about, because, the Camp of course comes first. But then, how dare he get worse? How dare he develop somatic pain that renders him incapable of fighting, right? How dare he get himself out of fighting, right? Totally unexpected! I mean, how strange, that somebody who is falling apart from the inside out is actually going to show symptoms of it on the outside, too, huh?! Totally never happened before!" Will was raising his voice again, looking angrier than Jason had ever seen him.

No, that wasn't quite right.

He looked as angry as he had been when appearing on the battlefield in Camp Jupiter to save Percy's life.

Chiron actually took a step back now.

"That is not what I said."

"It is." Both Will and Annabeth snapped back, and Jason noticed that Annabeth, too, seemed livid.

He still wasn't quite sure what was happening.

He did, however, know that Will would tire himself out if he kept spilling his powers like this, intentional or not.

"I think we should all take a moment to step back and compose ourselves." He cut in, his voice loud and even, and all three heads snapped around to him.

Annabeth's eyes were cold and stormy, while Chiron's seemed almost grateful.

Jason half dreaded Will to argue, to glower at him and accuse him of siding with the centaur, but he didn't. Instead, he was grinding his teeth and looking back at Chiron with another look of
But he was also making an effort to take a deep breath and allow his shoulders to relax a little.

He also let Jason step up to his side and speak.

"Percy will help Nico with the burials. After that, he will decide what happens next. There's no more point in talking about what could have been prevented in the past anymore. Instead, we should focus on what we can learn from it, and how to make things better again from now on." Jason reasoned, and the heat slowly disappeared again around them, though he knew Will was still upset.

"With all the monster attacks, Percy will have to fight. There's been too many injuries of late, and the border is already weakened." Chiron told them, and Jason pinched the top of his nose, unable to believe the centaur had seriously just said that.

"You will pull Percy from the battles, or so the gods help me," Will snarled immediately. "He is injured, he needs treatment and time to recover, same as the other wounded in the infirmary. You wouldn't send anybody out there with a broken leg, so you can't expect Percy to go."

"I won't risk the lives of countless campers just because of an injury that's not actually there!"

Annabeth made an indignant sound – then she stomped past them and out of the door without another word, hands balled to fists at her sides.

"You are risking the lives of countless campers, no matter what you do, and I won't have Percy among those casualties!"

Will was yelling now. Jason didn't like it when Will yelled.

What he liked even less, though, was the way Chiron was moving like an agitated horse, hooves pawing the ground as his hind legs kept moving left and right, though he remained fairly rooted to the spot.

"This is why I told you to step back! You're too attached!"

"I'm just trying to minimize the casualties! If I had it my way Percy would be far away from here where he can have treatment, peace and all the love we can give him, but that's impossible, and wouldn't do any of the rest of us any good. This is the least I can ask for him, and the least you can do for him. If you don't act now, it's gonna be too late. Do you really want to have his blood on your hands, too? Because it's not gonna be a monster that gets to him!" Will exclaimed, and when Chiron's hoof slammed into the ground, so did Will's foot, both of them straightening their backs to look more imposing than the other.

Chiron was twice as big as Will, and half-horse – and yet Jason thought Will won this round, because the unmasked anger in his face and the clear message of 'I will make you regret this until the day you die' even caused Jason to shudder.

"Percy may help Nico with the burials. Then, I will speak to him. Alone. After that, we shall see what happens next." Chiron replied after a moment of silence, and Will clenched his fists, still trembling from head to toe.

Then he turned around without another word and stomped towards the door – just to stop with his hand on the doorknob.

"If anything happens to Percy…" He started, and there was a quiver in his voice that made Jason's heart ache.

Will turned his head to look back at Chiron, eyes burning the same way the room had burnt earlier.

"If anything happens to Percy, you will regret it. I will make you regret it."

And with that, he left, leaving behind an eerily cold room, a sighing centaur, and Jason.
Jason looked after him, then back to the centaur.

It was the first time he had ever heard anybody threaten Chiron.

Back with the wolves, or at Camp Jupiter, that would have been like signing a death sentence.

"By far not the first time somebody has threatened me." Chiron said with another sigh, though his swishing tail showed he was still agitated.

Jason considered his options, his fingers moving up to touch the locket around his neck, hidden beneath his shirt.

"With all due respect…" He started, hesitant.

Chiron gave him a questioning look.

Jason met it with a determined, challenging one of his own.

"Will won't be the only one making you pay." He finished coolly.

Then, he took his leave as well, following his boyfriend the same way he always would.

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When he came back to their cabin, Will was only two steps ahead of him, and they found Percy and Nico all over each other.

Jason wasn't surprised, exactly, though seeing how rough they were with each other did make him uneasy.

Nico treated Percy as if he wanted to break him.

Percy reacted as if he wanted nothing more than to be broken.

Jason found himself standing in the doorway, not quite sure how to handle the situation, whereas Will immediately made for them and pulled them apart, demanding to be included.

Jason closed the door behind him, then looked back at his boyfriends.

They were hurting so much. All three of them.

He watched a moment longer, yearning for the intimacy and affection they had shared barely two days ago, though it felt more like a lifetime ago now.

Then, he started moving through the room to collect the luggage they had discarded in various corners last night, searching for their lube and condoms so his boyfriends wouldn't have to.

He placed them on the bedside table next to them, flinching a little when Percy let out a low whine, though he knew Percy had let out much worse sounds during past times with Jason.

Nico glanced up at him, as if waiting for him to join in, but he didn't demand it, and Jason found himself relaxing in relief when Nico gave him a small nod and returned his focus on Percy.

Jason lingered a moment longer.

Then, he left to take a shower.

They were in so much pain.

So much pent up anger, so much pent up guilt.

Of course they needed an outlet for all of that.

Jason wished he could help, though he also knew this was nothing he could do for them.

He didn't want to hurt them.
Percy was the only one he ever truly wanted to push down, but lately, with Percy seeming so fragile, even that urge had somewhat subsided, making way for Jason just…wanting to be soft.

Wanting to cherish.

Wanting to make love.

There was so much pain around them already, why would he want to cause even more?

Jason thought about that as he showered, the door ajar to show the others they could come in at any time once they were done, though he blocked out their noises for the most part.

Will was the first to come in, looking exhausted, but pleased, and Jason much preferred seeing him like that than when he had been angry, especially when Will came over to give Jason a quick peck on the cheek, ignoring the water raining down on them.

"They've calmed down now. Finish up if you want cuddles."

Jason didn't need to be told twice, immediately rinsing out his hair and stopping the water, before shaking his head to make the water fly everywhere, which had Will wailing.

"Dork." He insulted him as affectionately as always, and Jason took the towel he was offered gratefully to dry himself off somewhat.

"So, cuddles?" He asked hopefully, and Will snorted.

"You're still dripping wet."

"Yeah, but cuddles…" Jason pouted, and Will rolled his eyes, though he also tugged on Jason's hand and pulled him after him out of the bathroom.

"Such a softie." He complained, but his voice was soft, so it didn't sound much like a complaint.

"Guys, look who I brought."

Jason didn't wait for permission to flop onto the bed, pleased when Percy and Nico let out matching wails.

"Why is he _wet_?!! "Will, make him stop!"

Both Nico and Percy complained, but Will merely cackled along with Jason.

They seemed more relaxed, more at ease, and Jason made use of that to get closer to them, to touch, to kiss, to nuzzle against their cheeks and necks and show how much he adored them.

There. That was so much better than causing pain.

"I always thought that clingy attitude of yours was linked to orgasms." Nico remarked with a skeptical look on his face, but before Jason could reply to that, Will already snorted out a laugh.

"You'd be surprised, Neeks. Climax only makes him even needier to pamper us. If he could, he would be showering us in affection _all_ the time."

"I wouldn't mind that." Percy said quietly, and Jason nudged his way between Nico and Percy to wrap himself around his boyfriend, trying to chase away the sad look that was trying to take over again.

His Percy.

His wonderful, beautiful Percy.

Jason didn't want to think about what Will had said earlier, nor did he want to think of the battles, or Chiron, or the future.

What he wanted was to keep Percy here and with him, with them, to keep him safe from trouble.
and to protect him until he was fine again.

Until he would smile the way he used to.

Percy smiled softly now, just for him.

Jason kissed him, wanting this to last forever, though he knew nothing did.

Jason held them tightly in his arms, all three of them, and he smiled to himself as he realized he was blessed to be the tallest with the longest arms, perfect for his need to hold them.

Then, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, because there was no use in crying, and he had to be strong now for their sake.

He would keep himself together to keep them together.

It was the least he could do.

***

Will made his way across the Camp grounds swiftly, trying to ignore the sounds of battle and the muttering of the campers around him.

The news of their arrival had traveled fast – just as fast as the news about their losses, but more than the usual gossip, people were scared.

The newer campers were scared because of the constant attacks, and the older campers were scared because of the constancy of the attacks.

The monsters had already claimed Peleus, too, which crushed spirits even more.

It was crazy. Simply crazy. Everything was, from the monster attacks to the monsters themselves to the act that they still didn't know where they came from.

But Will wasn't on his way to figure out where they came from or where they went – he was on his way to get his first overview of the infirmary.

Also, he just really wanted to see his siblings again, so he could reassure himself they were alright.

Will felt his stomach clenching uncomfortably as he realized he would have never been able to see them again if he hadn't changed his fate.

But then, he was already moving up the front steps and the door banged open and he spread out his arms, assaulted by what felt like all his siblings, at once.

Will laughed, then wailed, then laughed some more as he was confronted with a lot of noise, a lot of hands and a lot of teary-eyed faces that tried to push themselves into his line of view, Kayla and Austin at the very front and holding him the tightest, followed by Alec.

"Come on, guys, I haven't been gone that long!" He called into the embrace, though there was promptly that nagging at the back of his mind, telling him the 'I would have never returned' that he still didn't want to think about.

"Way too long! I did all the reports and it nearly killed me!" "You could have died and left us with this mess!" "It's so good to have you back! The patients are all yours!"

Alec, Austin and Kayla wailed, and Will loved their priorities.

"I am deeply offended. So, you only missed me because of all the work you had to do? I am heartbroken. So heartbroken. Put me to bed, I need treatment." He exclaimed as he acted exaggeratedly scandalized.

He knew full well his siblings had missed him for more than that – he could sense it in the air as well as their touches, not to mention from the way they looked at him, genuine relief and joy in their gazes.
"There's no bed to spare!" Kayla whined, and Will found himself being dragged into the building as they rambled about the lack of space, before beginning to update him on everything.

Will had to smile at their behavior and eagerness to tell him of everything they had managed to do on their own, though the situation inside the infirmary soon put a damper on that.

He had known what to expect, both from the talks to Annabeth, as well as the whispers around Camp, and the fact the youngsters were the ones currently protecting the Camp border.

But it was different to think about the numbers, and then seeing the real thing right here.

All the rooms were taken, several bunks having been added from less-frequented cabins, and the rest of the place was packed as well.

There seemed to be plenty of minor injuries, but even those could easily turn nasty if not treated properly, and the numbers made even Will stagger a little.

His siblings had done such a good job so far, though.

He had known he could count on them.

"Wait, hang on, Alec wrote the reports?" He asked in mild horror, only now catching that, and Kayla and Austin promptly acted innocent, while Alec put on a sheepish face.

"I did my best to keep it English. Or Greek. Sometimes, maybe a little bit of both. And a tad Latin, which is totally not my fault."

Oh no, Will would never be able to decipher those.

He sighed loudly, then when Alec hung his head, he reached out and ruffled through his hair, before putting an arm around him and tugging him along.

"Oh well, I guess you'll simply have to read them out to me while I start on the paperwork. The rest of you, please continue with the minor injuries, and I'll take over the rest once I have a proper overview." He told them, and found them grinning at him widely and nodding eagerly, before continuing their duties.

Alec also tried to sneak away by stretching and trying to escape Will's hold, but he only tugged him right back and after him towards his room at the end of the hall.

"Nope, no way, you're coming with me."

"But Will…" Alec whined, drawing out Will's name, but that had never worked before and surely wouldn't work now.

"Hm? What? Sorry, can't hear you. You know, got bad hearing and all."

"You've got near-perfect hearing!"

Yeah, Will did, though he was still going to mess with his half-brother as much as he wanted to – especially after they entered his little room and he saw all the work waiting for him.

Oh gods.

No wonder his siblings would have been devastated by his death.

It seemed he was going to be here for a while.

A long while.

Will regarded the unsorted piles of papers and files, then turned to open the door again.

"Kayla, Austin, I'm never letting you handle my infirmary again!"

"Remember that you love us!" They both called back, and Will grunted, leaving the door ajar in
case of an emergency.

Then, he turned around and motioned for Alec to come along, who groaned loudly but followed.

Time to get this party started.

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Percy gazed into space blankly as Nico hushed about, finishing the last preparations for the ritual they would hold later tonight.

Nico had let him help collecting the food and other various items he had claimed were necessary, but by now, he didn't really need him anymore.

Then again, nobody ever needed him.

Percy shook his head to himself, but it didn't change his thoughts.

Rin. Andrew.

Percy had let them both down.

He was letting them all down.

Percy lowered his head.

He wasn't even sad, or angry. Not anymore.

He had felt angry earlier, maybe even scared, but by now, he couldn't feel anything anymore.

Everything just happened, and it was just...so easy to let it happen.

Percy wasn't sure when it had happened, but at some point, he had simply...taken a step back, somehow.

He had taken a step back, and now life was moving by like a show on TV, and Percy wasn't an actor in it any longer.

He was just the bystander, the watcher, watching it happen without having to let any of it touch him.

He was nothing to the show, and the show was becoming nothing to him.

"Percy? Are you listening?" Nico asked a little louder, and Percy minimally turned his head into his direction – but even though he was right in front of him, he felt so far away.

Percy kind of wished he could still be in bed with him.

He had liked that, earlier.

The way Nico had pushed him down, the way he had made him stop thinking, the way he had managed to make him feel, even for just that little while.

Percy still bore the marks, now, but they were barely noticeable due to the odd tingling of his skin.

He still felt so far away.

He wondered whether he had ever felt different.

The more time passed, the less he could remember, it seemed.

"Hey, are you okay?" Nico asked, and his voice was soft, but Percy couldn't see why.

He was fine. He was great.

Not feeling felt amazing, because it didn't hurt.
Percy couldn't quite manage to tell him that, though.

Instead, he tried to lift his head a little further and tried for a small smile, though he could feel the fatigue gnawing at him already.

He'd like to lay down.

There was nothing here for him to do, anyways.

There was nothing for him to do, anywhere.

Percy felt tired, though he also felt awake, and he would feel confused, but he didn't waste his time thinking about it.

Instead, he watched and waited.

Nico reached out as if to touch him, but then somebody called his name, and Percy watched him pull his hand back, before he turned away.

Percy watched him talk, watched him gesture with his hands, watched him showing some other kid Percy didn't know how far they had come in their preparations.

No. How far Nico had come.

"Percy?" A voice behind him said quietly, and Percy turned his head, watching Piper looking at him with a concerned look on her face.

"Hm?" Percy hummed vaguely, feeling…tired.

Exhausted.

He wanted to go.

He was of no use here, they wouldn't miss him if he left and went back to their cabin.

"You look a little pale. Are you doing alright?"

Percy wanted to open his mouth. Wanted to tell her he was great.

He shrugged, instead.

Nico was back, looking at him with the same look of concern that Percy was beginning to be familiar with.

Nico shouldn't be worrying about him.

Nobody should.

They had just lost Andrew, what were they doing, worrying about Percy?

He was great. He was fine. He was just…a little tired.

"Maybe you should go and see Will." Nico said cautiously, and Percy's throat suddenly felt thick, the tingling in his body increasing.

So, Nico wanted to get rid of him, too.

Percy gave a small nod.

He wanted to apologize, wanted to tell Nico he would be of more help next time, but he couldn't find the words, so he simply started moving.

One foot in front of the other, over and over again, and he was stumbling away, his throat burning, his body trembling.

There was a pulsing pain in his arm again, but Percy welcomed it – it gave him something else to
focus on, other than…whatever this was.

Was he feeling? Was he not feeling? Who knew? Who would care?

Percy stumbled across the Camp grounds, not quite seeing the campers as he passed them, not quite hearing the talks until his befuddled mind caught up to various snippets afterwards, though nothing made sense to him, anyways.

He wasn't sure why he was going to the infirmary.

He wanted to go to their cabin, to bed, far away from people and his boyfriends and the world.

He didn't want to bother Will, didn't want to force him to accommodate Percy, and he didn't want even more of those looks of concern.

But Nico had told him to go to Will, so Percy kept moving, anyways.

On and on, then up the steps, then past the door.

There was noise all around him, more people hushing from one room to the next, but Percy didn't even look up.

He just walked on, not comprehending the risk of a collision, but nothing happened, and he reached the end of the hall, anyways.

The door was ajar.

Percy forgot to knock.

He only remembered he should, when his foot already nudged it open and he stumbled in, arms reaching out automatically as he spotted blonde hair and blue eyes.

"Percy? Hey, what's wrong?"

Percy wasn't quite sure.

He had his arms around Will, feeling exhausted and tired and empty, but the next moment, he was crying, anyways.

Though he didn't even notice that until he felt the tears running down his cheeks and the way his lips trembled as he buried his face at Will's shoulder.

"Alec, leave us alone for a moment, please." He heard Will say, and there was a series of sounds, as if somebody was jumping up and knocking something over, then a door fell shut.

Percy tried not to feel guilty about making Will kick out his own sibling.

"I'm sorry." He choked out, anyways.

Then, he started sobbing.

He couldn't even say why.

He simply was.

And to Percy, it felt like the most pathetic thing that had happened, yet.

Though that was no surprise.

Percy was good at being pathetic.

It was the only thing he was good at.

***

Will stroked over Percy's back, whispering soft words of comfort and encouragement.
He was such a mess.
Why was he such a mess?
What could Will do to make it better?
He wished he could heal him, somehow.
He would do anything to help him, to take this pain away from him.
But he couldn't, so all he could do was show Percy he was here for him.
"Talk to me, love." He tried again, hoping against hope Percy could somehow give him some sort of insight to what was happening, what had happened, what was causing him to feel this way.
But Percy couldn't seem to find the words.
He couldn't seem to find any words.
Will didn't know what to do, so he lowered them to the ground carefully to make it a little easier on Percy.
He was shaking so badly.
He was still in so much pain.
Will breathed out a helpless breath and squeezed his eyes shut, stroking over Percy's back repeatedly to somehow soothe him at least a tiny little bit.
It was fruitless.
"It's gonna be okay." He whispered, but it was an empty promise, and Percy didn't believe it anymore.
Percy didn't seem to believe anything anymore.
He seemed stuck in his own little bubble, but it was a horrible bubble full of toxic thoughts, and Will wasn't sure how he could get through to him.
"Everything is gonna be okay." He repeated, but he didn't believe it anymore, either.
"I've got you." He tried, because he did, but Percy didn't react, and didn't calm down.
Will held him tightly pressed against him, pressing kisses against his shoulder and neck, pressing kisses to the top of his head, pressing him even tighter against him.
Will looked up at the ceiling helplessly, but there was no solution or brainwave waiting there, either.
"You are wonderful, strong, and beautiful." He whispered softly, remembering the time he had heard those words, all that time ago.
"You have the prettiest laugh." He continued with his own words, and clung to Percy nearly as much as Percy clung to him.
"You are always so cheerful, and always go out of your way to make others feel better."
Percy didn't seem to be listening.
Will kept talking, anyways.
"I love your dramatic acting." He said quietly, his eyes closed once more. "And the way you sigh so contently when Jason smother us."
Percy was still crying.
Maybe he was listening. Maybe he wasn't.

"You're so important to us." He whispered, but Percy only sobbed again, and Will's hand found his hair, stroking through it gently, while his other hand remained on his back.

"We love you so much, Percy. I love you so much."

Percy's fingers dug into his skin, but Will let him, just hoping that he heard him, that he was listening, that he understood.

"I'm sorry, Percy. I'm so sorry." He whispered, because, in a way, this was his fault, too.

If he had reacted sooner, if he had been a little more dominant towards Chiron, if he had done better research, if he was just a better healer, the doctor Percy needed him to be…

But he wasn't.

He was just Will, and depression and mental health wasn't his area of expertise, far from it.

"Do you remember when you barged into my cabin to ask me for help regarding Nico's birthday?" He asked when Percy's sobbing finally started slowing.

Maybe he was finally calming down.

Or maybe he was simply running out of tears.

"I still remember how you dragged me out of my cabin, barely dressed and halfway across Camp before I even managed to wake up all the way." He told him quietly, focusing back on stroking him soothingly.

Will closed his eyes, thinking back to that day, all that time ago, and a small smile tugged at his lips as he remembered Percy's nervous pacing.

"You took me to your cabin. I remember thinking your bed looked so comfortable. It smelled so good, too. Like you. Don't tell anybody, but I'm pretty sure I was already crazy for you back then." He said quietly, as if letting Percy in on a big secret, though he wasn't sure Percy was even listening.

"And you were so nervous, rambling about a birthday gift. It was so trivial, but so important to you." Will reminisced with a soft voice, his smile a little wider.

Percy sniffled, but stilled, hands clenching and unclenching in Will's scrubs.

"I complained so much. Partly because it was so early in the morning. Mostly, though, I complained to cover up for feeling like you were the most precious thing in the world. You always care so much about such small things. I love that about you." He continued softly.

Percy moved his head slightly, rubbing his face against Will's chest, as if listening to his heartbeat. Will took it as a good sign.

"When I'm upset or feeling down, I like to think about moments like those. Those small things that others wouldn't think about twice, but that you care about so much…they really stick, you know? You always remember them. And they make me smile. You make me smile." He told him, and Percy shivered a little.

Was that because he was listening, or because the floor was cold?

Because the floor really was cold – and uncomfortable, too.

Will tugged him up a little, hoping Percy could find some comfort in his warmth.

"Do you remember when you first called me 'sun-bug'?" He asked as he stroked down Percy's spine.
"We were arguing about pet names, and I don't even know whether I complained about not having one, or whether I was just crying about it on the inside, but it doesn't matter. You gave me one, that night. And such a beautiful one, too. I've often doubted I deserve it, but every time I hear it, it makes my heart flutter a little. It's cute. I like thinking about that a lot, too." Will told him, and Percy shivered a little, again.

"What do you like to think about?" Will asked gently, hoping Percy would reply.

His boyfriend remained silent, but he had stopped clenching and unclenching his fists, so maybe he was lost in thought.

"I don't." Percy croaked at long last, and Will tried to keep himself composed enough not to pull Percy up and crush him in a bone-shattering hug.

Oh Percy…

"I think you think a lot. You're one of the smartest guys I know, after all." Will said carefully, and Percy started shifting, a sense of discomfort and unease washing over him.

He didn't believe Will.

Will made a mental note to mention more often how much he appreciated Percy's brains.

"Can you tell me what made you feel this way? The way you're feeling right now?" He asked cautiously, not quite wanting to corner Percy or upset him all over again, but if he knew what triggered these responses, he might be able to help Percy get past them.

Percy didn't react except for shifting a little more, and the discomfort grew.

"Was it something somebody said? Or did anything happen?" Will probed tentatively, and Percy hesitated, before he shook his head minimally.

A reply.

Will had gotten a reply.

"Was it a thought, then?" He tried, and Percy hesitated again.

Then, he tugged his shoulders up in a little shrug, feeling…ashamed.

Will shook his head and rubbed over Percy's back in more determined strokes, momentarily abandoning his hair.

"Shh, it's okay, Percy. Please don't feel bad. Thoughts can be horribly cruel sometimes, and they can be as ruthless as the monsters you battle with your sword." He tried to reassure him, and Percy trembled again, a small sniffle escaping him.

Will didn't want him to cry again, but he also didn't want to stop him from crying if it was better for him to let it out.

"But it's important that you fight these thoughts, the same way you fight those monsters, love." Will told him, and Percy tensed a little, before he slumped again.

"How?" He croaked, and it sounded so weak, so defeated, Will wanted to cry a little, too.

And Chiron wanted to send him out there to join the battle.

Will would murder those monsters himself if that was what it took for him to protect Percy from that fate.

"By realizing they're wrong and setting them right, Gorgeous." He tried, trying so hard not to sound like this was obvious, much less easy, because he knew it wasn't.

Gods, he knew.
Percy suddenly jolted, and Will flinched as Percy dug his fingers into his chest again, a choked sound escaping his lips.

"But I am no good, Will! I can't even protect you anymore. I'm useless. If it hadn't been for the Hunters, the monsters would have gotten Jason. If it hadn't been for you, I'd have died in that battle at Camp Jupiter. If it hadn't been for Andrew, I'd have just...I'd have just stood there and watched you die, right in front of me, just because I couldn't...I couldn't..."

Percy sucked in a sharp breath, and Will used his chance to wrap himself around him and pull him back closer, wishing he could be Percy's bubble.

"Shh, it wasn't your fault, Percy. And you're far from useless. You're so wonderful, Percy. You're strong and kind, and..."

"I am nothing. Not anymore. Maybe I used to be. You just keep me around out of pity, now."

Will's chest clenched painfully at both the words and the bitterness they were spoken with, his voice momentarily escaping him as he struggled with the pain that zigzagged through him.

"We love you, Percy. We're with you because we love you, and don't you ever doubt that. You're so much more than you think. So much more than 'nothing'."

Percy only shook his head feebly, and Will wanted to cry.

"Please don't think like that, Percy. Those thoughts aren't true. They just want to tear you down, so don't let them." He tried again, but Percy only kept shaking his head, though the momentary anger he had felt had long disappeared again, making way for exhaustion and defeat once more.

"I don't know how." He rasped out helplessly, and Will rubbed up and down his back again.

"Start by thinking about something happy, love. Anything. And once you feel a little better, you can still return to that bad thought, and think about it with a clearer head. Or better, come to us, Percy. Let us help." Will tried, but Percy didn't immediately react.

"I...I can't find happy thoughts when...when those thoughts are there." Percy whispered, and he was feeling ashamed again, weak, even though this was a sign of strength Will would have never been able to show in his situation.

"Nothing at all?" He asked carefully, and Percy shifted.

"It...it doesn't...it just...it feels like...like I don't feel anything. It's...it kind of...scares me, a little."

It would scare Will, too. It did scare him.

"Can you feel this?" He asked, and rubbed his hand down Percy's spine again.

"Yes, but...it's not the same..." Percy whispered, but Will only shook his head.

"Can you focus on it?"

Percy fell silent again, and Will rubbed soothing circles into his skin.

"I...I guess so."

"How does it feel now?"

Percy shrugged feebly.

"Does it feel a little more like usual?" Will asked, and his boyfriend hesitated, before shrugging again slightly.

"A bit."

That was a progress.
"Your thoughts are the same way. You need to focus on them, Percy. On the good ones. You have to let yourself focus on them." Will tried to explain, and he tried to stomach the irony of being the one telling Percy all of this, when he himself had plenty of issues with his own head most of the time, too.

One would guess he would know better, but giving advice and following it were two entirely different things.

"What if I can't?" Percy whispered barely-audibly, but Will could hear him just fine.

"That depends. Do you think I can help you?" He asked, and Percy nodded again ever so slightly.

"Then come to me, Percy. Come to us. Let us help you. I know I can ramble about you for hours, I'd gladly do so to remind you of how wonderful and amazing you are, Percy." Will told him, and Percy was quiet again, but he seemed to think over his words, so it was okay.

"I'm sorry." Percy said at long last, but Will promptly shook his head.

"There's nothing to be sorry for, Percy."

"I didn't want to bother you."

"You could never bother me, love. Though I know how you feel. I beat myself up about such things all the time, too." He tried, and Percy shifted his head a little to look up at him.

His eyes were puffy and red, but he had stopped crying, and the sea-green of his eyes seemed a little less subdued than before, so Will hoped that meant he was feeling at least a little better now.

"What do you do to…to not be like this?" Percy asked, and it sounded…shy. Sheepish.

Will moved one hand back up to Percy's hair, knowing how much he liked to have it stroked. To be honest, he was still struggling with that.

Jason knew best, since Jason was usually the one insisting Will didn't have to apologize.

But even before Jason, it had been Percy and Nico constantly comforting and reassuring Will, and when you kept hearing the same words spoken with so much honesty and affection, you start to believe them eventually.

However, that wasn't what Percy needed to hear right now, it wasn't what he was asking.

"I remember that I have you three, and that you love me even though I'm the way I am. You love me with all my flaws, so why shouldn't I be able to do the same?"

Percy gazed at him quietly, then, but it felt different. It felt as if he was analyzing him, checking for a lie, but he wouldn't find any.

"But you're…" Percy started after a while, though he then trailed off, and Will smiled.

"I am many things, just like you. And sometimes, we feel things we shouldn't feel, or think thoughts that shouldn't cross our minds. We doubt ourselves, and we crave to be different, to be better, but that's okay, it's something we all go through at times. What matters is that we don't let those thoughts take control of us, and that we don't lose sight of all the good things life has given us, even if the thought may seem laughable at the time."

Percy was back to watching him, but Will only smiled back at him encouragingly.

"I'm still sorry for keeping you from your work over something stupid like…this."

Will shook his head and pressed his lips to Percy's forehead.

"I'm glad I can be here for you right now, Percy. Work can wait. It's not stupid at all. In fact, could you say that, for me? Out loud?" Will asked, and Percy shifted again, not meeting his gaze anymore.
"Say what?"

"That it's not stupid. Can you tell me out loud that your problems aren't stupid?"

"M-My…I…I mean…” Percy started stuttering, and Will was worried he had pushed for too much at once, watching and feeling Percy struggling with himself.

But he needed Percy to understand – and who knew, maybe saying it out loud would help him remember it.

Or it would scare him off.

Will prayed it was the former.

"I…my problems…aren't stupid. My problems aren't stupid.” Percy pressed out, then suddenly slumped on top of Will, and it took him a moment to realize it was relief that was flooding through Percy.

Will smiled at him widely.

"Exactly! Percy, that was great. Could you do one more for me?” He asked, trying not to sound too eager, though he also tried to let it show how proud he was of Percy, and that none of that pride was acted.

Percy hesitated a moment, but he seemed hopeful, and a moment later, he gave a small nod.

"Say that you could never bother me. Because that's something I want you to know with every fiber of your being. I will always be there for you, Percy. Same as Jason and Nico. We will help you, no matter when or how.”

Percy was silent, his face buried at Will's chest once more.

He seemed hesitant, but contemplative, and Will waited hopefully.

"I…I couldn't…I don't…” Percy started, his voice barely a whisper, but it was a start, and Will felt proud of him.

Percy moved his head to the side, his face firmly averted from Will as he seemed to stare off to the side, still struggling with his words.

Then, he took a deep breath.

"I'm not bothering you. I couldn't. Bother you. I have three amazing boyfriends who love me the way I am, and my problems aren't stupid, and I'm not bothering when I ask for help." Percy pressed out, and now, Will did cry a little, but it was tears of joy as he pressed Percy against him with a small, high-pitched sound.

He had known Percy could do it.

Percy was amazing, after all.

Oh gods, Will was so proud.

This might not fix Percy's problems, but it was a start, and so much more than what Will had dared to hope for, before.

It was a start.

Will felt the flutter of hope, and was happy to realize it wasn't just his own.

***

That night, they held the burials, and Nico tried not to look at the faces around him, the sound of the weeping and crying already bad enough, as it was.
He did, however, risk a glance towards his boyfriends, glad to find Percy in the middle, safe and sound.

Nico had felt bad for sending Percy to Will, but at the same time, he knew he wouldn't have been able to help Percy as much as Will had managed to.

Not right now.

Not when he could barely keep his voice even for the burials.

The shrouds were beautiful, which felt a little morbid, but they also didn't have any bodies, which was even more morbid, he guessed.

Nico tried to focus solely on his lines. His duties.

But even as he did, his gaze lingered on Piper for a moment, her words coming back to mind once more. He'd been pondering them over and over the last few hours.

'That thing with Kyle, with the possessing…we need to stop that from happening again. Annabeth said you might be able to train the campers to prevent it and fight back. When can you start with that?'

It wasn't as much a matter of when he could get started, but more about how, and what he would need to make it happen.

He had originally hoped for Clovis to help him, but…for obvious reasons, that wasn't possible.

Nico closed his eyes for a moment, then focused on the rituals once more, because Andrew and Rin deserved better than half-assed work.

He hadn't visited Clovis yet, and he wasn't sure whether he'd ever be ready to.

Another thing he could have prevented.

Nico spoke a little louder, trying not to think of Clovis when thinking about death, and he could feel a tug at his mind that let him know his dad wanted his attention as soon as possible.

Probably for Andrew and his judging.

Hades always liked to inform Nico when it was their turn, for some reason.

Maybe Andrew wanted to talk to him the same way Rin had, after her death.

Nico tried not to feel too queasy at the thought, instead clearing his throat and continuing his speech.

He was still relieved when he finally finished his part of the ritual and was allowed to move back to his boyfriends, glad when they tugged him in their midst easily – even Percy, who did look a lot better than before, though his eyes were still rimmed with red.

He had stayed with Will for the rest of the afternoon, undoubtedly helping him out with the bandages as they had done before, or maybe even with the paperwork Nico had heard Alec whining about when he had come to pick them up.

Nico wished Percy could stay and help Will permanently.

He seemed a lot happier with that than with training or fighting, and it would give him a chance to rest his arm.

Nico glanced at Jason, who had an arm around all three of them and looked around with a grim look, as if watching over them in case of an unexpected threat.

Jason also might have told Nico about the argument between Chiron and Will, though he hadn't been very detailed, the conversation happening in the short timespan between Percy taking a shower and Clarisse coming to pick up Jason.
Since then, Nico hadn't seen him until half an hour ago when the burials had started, and judging by his dirty clothes, grimy hair and grim attitude, Nico could guess where he had been.

The knowledge that his boyfriend had been pulled to join the battle when they were barely back at Camp half a day had Nico balling his fists, though he knew there was no use in getting angry over it.

It was to minimize the losses, and to give the kids a break.

Still, Nico was annoyed, anyways.

About everything.

About Jason having to fight already, about Percy struggling so much, about Chiron apparently being a dick, about Will picking fights without letting them partake, about Andrew dying, about himself letting him die.

There was another tug, and Nico gritted his teeth, before he sighed and caved in.

"I'll be in the cabin. My dad wants me to be there for Andrew's judging, I think." He whispered to Jason, but it was Percy who turned his head and snatched his hand.

"Can I come, too?"

There was something odd in his voice, and Nico blinked when he looked back at Percy and found him looking…sheepish, and rather uncomfortable.

Oh. So, he wasn't all that well yet, after all.

"Actually, let's all go. Tomorrow will undoubtedly be a long day, and some peace and quiet wouldn't do any of us any harm." Will put in as he got up and brushed off his pants. Percy instantly shot up, too.

Jason gave Nico a questioning look, but Nico didn't really mind, so he just shrugged back at him.

"Will you still be able to do the thing with your dad?" Jason asked as the four of them left the rest of the Camp to mourn, and Nico waved off hurriedly.

"Yeah, no big deal. I'm assuming it will be like with Rin, so I don't even have to leave. Dad seems to be as reluctant as Will to let me use my powers, after all."

"For good reason." Will huffed quietly, but Nico decided to ignore that.

Instead, he rubbed at his head when he felt another nudge from his dad.

With Rin, Hades had contacted Nico in his sleep, nudging his mind repeatedly until Nico had caved in and sought out the Underworld, much like when he had visited Clovis in his dreams all that time ago, in the war against Gaea.

This time, Nico hoped his dad would wait until he was at least laying down somewhere before demanding his attention, because he surely seemed insistent.

Jason and Percy were walking ahead of them now, and Nico noticed Jason was still looking around with a grim look.

He hoped whatever was bothering him would pass soon, because he wasn't used to seeing Jason so serious – not when he was alone with them.

Will put a hand on Nico's shoulder as he walked, and Nico found his gaze hushing over to him automatically, just to frown when Will started frowning, his lips a straight line.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just…the way he goes about contacting you feels a lot like when…back with Eris…" Will said evasively, but then trailed off with a conflicted expression.
Then, he remembered Will's headache, and his fainting, and Kyle being behind it, and he stopped dead in his tracks.

"I mean, it's not him right now, of course. I can feel nothing malicious from it, so I'm sure it's your dad, Nico. I just... it just reminded me of that for a moment, so I thought I'd let you know. That's how it felt." Will rushed to explain himself, and Nico was glad for it, because he had already been in the process of panicking.

The last thing he needed was Kyle trying to possess him right now. (Or ever, for that matter.) He deflated with a sigh, then started walking again. When Will fell into step next to him, Nico reached out for his hand.

"Thanks for telling me. Now I get why you didn't immediately tell us, I guess. If I wasn't already used to this being his way of contacting me in my sleep, I'd have never thought of it as more than the beginning of a headache." He muttered quietly, and Will let the ghost of a smile hush over his face.

"Told you so. Sorry for momentarily freaking you out, though. I should have phrased it differently right away."

Nico huffed.

"You really should have. I was already dreading the worst and thinking of how I'm gonna get away from you as quickly as possible to keep you safe. Not nice, Will."

Will stuck out his tongue in retaliation, and Nico tugged on his hand to get his cheek close enough to place a peck on it.

"Though I'm glad it's just my dad. And a little disturbed that you can just feel the difference with one touch alone. It's so impressive. You're getting better at this, aren't you?"

Will made a small noise, then he started glowing faintly, and Nico couldn't believe he had just managed to get his boyfriend flustered with nothing but a peck and the hint of praise.

"You know, I'm not surprised. You've become so much stronger in the past months, too. Your healing is superb, and I saw you pick up on that one kid's values before you even looked at him completely. You've really grown into your powers, sunshine." He continued, just because he could, and Will averted his face with another bunch of faint noises, his glow only intensifying.

Aww, he could be so adorable.

"Oh, stop it, you. I've still got plenty to learn. I might have... gotten a little better, but it's far from what it could be, if only I trained more. Plus, it's not gonna help much if..."

"It's helping greatly, and I'll have you know that I have full faith in your abilities. The kids in the infirmary are going to be patched up in no time again, with you and your siblings working together." Nico smoothly cut in, and Will tried to argue, but then didn't. Nico squeezed his hand gently, smugly tugging him after his guys and towards their cabin.

His dad gave him another nudge, and Nico sent out a nudge back, just because.

Hades retaliated by letting the door to their cabin fly open as if to tell them to hurry up.

Freaking gods, being impatient all the while when they were immortal, to begin with.

Nico would never understand.

However, the thought of Andrew waiting on him with nobody but Nico's dad for company did make him rush up the front steps a little.

"No worries, just my dad." He told Percy and Jason as he passed them, who had stopped dead with matching looks of horror, undoubtedly spooked by Hades' little trick.
Will merely cackled behind him.

Hades let Nico take a seat on their bed – then Nico found himself out cold, not even capable of wishing his guys a goodnight.

Freaking gods.

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Nico looked around the dark and gloomy room.

Nope, the Underworld surely hadn't changed in his absence.

"Finally." His father scoffed, and Nico turned his head to glower in his direction.

"Excuse me for having a life, dad." He retorted, and Hades' lip twitched.

"Fine, you may be excused." His dad said, before he moved past Nico and beckoned towards one of the skeletons near the door.

Nico rolled his eyes, but then he got distracted when the skeleton left through the door, undoubtedly to fetch Andrew.

It wasn't the skeleton that caught his attention, but more the fact that Nico caught a glimpse of the rather empty looking hall outside, which immediately threw him off.

Huh? The last time he had been here, the place had just swarmed with dead people anxiously waiting for their judging.

Odd.

"Don't look like that. I've been trying to clean up this place at your stepmother's insistence." Hades grumbled as he caught his glance, though Nico thought there was something odd in his expression.

Nico squinted at his dad, and his dad squinted right back at him.

"What?" Hades prompted, and Nico huffed, before admitting defeat and averting his gaze.

"Nothing." He muttered as he kicked at nothing, well aware of his father's eyes on him.

The silence stretched on, but Nico wasn't quite sure what to say.

He wasn't even really here, this was more… a projection. Or something along those lines.

It felt as if he was here, though.

What an unnerving thought – though the unnerving part was how much Nico didn't mind the thought of being back here.

In the Underworld.

With his father.

And the dead.

To be honest, he wouldn't mind, at all. As long as his guys were with him, he was fine with being anywhere, even in this gloomy place.

"It's good to see you on your feet again. I was worried about you." Hades said quietly, and Nico's head snapped up.

He was about to speak, when the door opened, and Nico snapped his mouth shut as guilt cut through him like a knife.
Andrew.
Accompanied by the skeleton.
Andrew.
Who was dead.
Andrew.
Who had died because of Nico's failure.

"Nico!" Andrew exclaimed, eyes filling with joy as he spotted him, and the next moment, he was already rushing right past the god of the Underworld to greet Nico.

Nico found himself rooted to the spot, confused by this reaction and a little concerned, because Andrew had never been one for...open displays of affection.

"Uh..." He tried to find any words, anything appropriate, anything to let Andrew know he was sorry, and that he would do his best to get him the best possible deal regarding his judging – but then Andrew was already hugging him.

Hugging him.

Nico had gotten him killed, and dead Andrew's first idea was to hug him.

Nico couldn't think.

"That was horrible! Dying sucks. Seriously, it was morbid. Do not let those Shadows get anybody else, dude. They're the worst. I was so relieved when the bus got crushed and I had my peace." Andrew babbled, and Nico wanted to move, wanted to hug him back, wanted to speak – but he just stood there and stared at nothing, trying to comprehend.

Hades cleared his throat, but Andrew ignored him – as if Hades was the projection, not Nico.

Nico stared into the distance, his mouth opening and closing uselessly, his arms and shoulders trembling.

Andrew was hugging him.

Andrew was talking – rambling, even.

To him. To Nico.

Andrew would have never done any of those things if he had still been alive.

Nico's shoulders slumped, and he moved his arms around the kid in front of him, finally returning the hug.

"I'm so sorry." He whispered thickly, and Andrew stopped mid-sentence, stilling in his arms.

Then, he pulled back.

"Sorry? Did the team mom just apologize? To me? Man, now I definitely know I'm dead." He remarked with a nonplussed expression and his hands already back at fidgeting.

Nico's jaw automatically clenched at the jab, but then his gaze hushed to the lack of tangle toy in Andrew's hands, and he instead averted his face.

"I'm sorry. I should have..." He started, but then wasn't sure where to start, and his words trailed off into a deep sigh as he moved his hand through his hair helplessly.

But Andrew merely waved off.

"It's okay. I did some calculations, and I knew chances were high that somebody would have to die."
Nico tensed, though he knew there was no use in arguing with the dead.

"There had to have been a way." He insisted, anyways.

Andrew stilled again, his eyes hushing over Nico's face, before his lips tugged into a small, sad smile.

"Maybe, maybe not. What does it matter now?"

He was right, of course.

Nico refused to admit it.

Instead, he turned his face away, taking in the empty hall around them.

Andrew clicked his tongue.

"I saw it, you know? You were planning to do the exact same thing I did. It was written all over your face; it was in your stance; in the way your hand settled on your sword. But you have a bigger role to play in all of this, everyone knows that. So, I did what was necessary." Andrew explained, and Nico's stomach filled with acid, bile rising in his throat.

"Your death was not necessary. And you're not replaceable, either." He pressed out thickly, and Andrew blinked, looking a little taken back.

"Are you…are you going to cry? Nico? Hey, team mom, no crying…" Andrew started, his voice higher than usual, and his expression turning a little frantic when Nico averted his gaze and tried to keep his lips from trembling.

He felt his father's concerned gaze on him, but ignored that, too, instead busying himself with looking around him again and swallowing repeatedly.

"Not crying. Just. Just saying. The…the team misses you. They…they stayed over last night." He told Andrew without looking at him, and saw him shifting out of the corners of his eyes, still fiddling with nothing.

"Really? Wait, you guys had a *sleepover*? Because of me? Wait, did Ash cry? I bet Ash cried."

Nico shot him a chiding look.

"Everybody cried, Andrew."

Andrew's lips formed a surprised 'Oh', and silence filled the dark hall.

"Everybody?" The boy asked quietly, as if to make sure he had heard correctly.

"Everybody." Nico confirmed, and now, Andrew was the one averting his gaze and looking to the ground, suddenly seeming sheepish.

"Oh."

Nico gave a faint nod, wondering what he was supposed to say or do now.

But then, Andrew already hugged him again.

"You know, you seem a lot more affectionate now that you're dead. I thought you hated touching people?" Nico couldn't help but ask, but mostly because he felt rather overwhelmed by having the boy in his arms again.

Which obviously didn't stop him from hugging him back, wishing stupidly that he could just shadow-travel them back to Camp and act like Andrew had never died.

"Oh hush. I'm dead, you're not real, so this obviously doesn't count."

Obviously.
Nico hugged him a little tighter, and this time, it was Andrew who started sniffling.

He let him cry against his chest, determinedly not looking at his dad.

"Wow, would you look at that? I'm dead and still get emotions. Despicable." Andrew huffed weakly into his shirt, and Nico shook his head with a small smile.

"Don't know what you're talking about. I was under the impression you just got something in your eye." He said quietly, and Andrew let out a feeble laugh, though he didn't pull back, and didn't look up, and still sniffled.

"Yeah, that's totally what's happening. Got some…Underworld dirt into my dead eyes. Yeah."

"That's what I thought." Nico agreed, and patted Andrew's back for a while longer. Until he was ready.

Andrew took another long moment, then he let go off him, wiping his tears away with the back of his hands.

"So much dirt here."

"I know right?" Nico agreed easily, and caught his father rolling his eyes out of the corners of his eyes.

He decided to ignore it.

"So, you're here for my judging, right?" Andrew asked a little louder, as if to lead the conversation away from their little heart-to-heart.

Nico gave a hesitant nod, eyes hushing to his dad.

Hades had his face averted from them for the most part, as if to give them some privacy, though he knew he had heard every word, even if he hadn't caught that eyeroll a moment ago.

"I think so, yes. Coming to think of it, where are the judges?" He asked and looked around again, though the room was as dark and empty as before.

True, where were those judges? He had never particularly liked them, and wasn't fond of the judging as it was, but he knew that they were necessary.

It seemed odd that his father would summon him before getting everything set up and ready to go.

Unless this wasn't about Andrew's judgement, at all, and Hades had just wanted to give him a chance to have a last conversation with Andrew, especially since it was his fault the boy had died.

"They're busy. I'll be doing the judging myself, in this case. You should consider yourself lucky, kid." Hades explained as he turned towards them, his eyes hushing over Nico again as if he had forgotten what he looked like.

Nico wasn't sure what to make of that, but even more so, he had no idea what to make of his words.

"I thought you're not allowed to do the judging alone? Wasn't there this whole ordeal with-…" He started with a frown, but his dad cut in.

"Yes, but that was back then, and now is now. Also, I would hardly consider myself alone. You are here as well, after all." Hades insisted with a pointed undertone, and Nico blinked.

Wait, he was supposed to partake in Andrew's judgement?

"But I thought only dead people can-…"

"Nico, he's the god of the Underworld. I'm pretty sure he can do what he wants," Andrew told him with an amused expression on his face, as if seeing Nico this confused was the best thing in the world.
Nico was about to glower at him and tell him to stop being a smart-ass – but then he remembered Andrew was dead, and he let it slide.

"Indeed. So, now, are we ready? Have you talked about everything you needed to talk about? Because, once we begin, I cannot allow for more personal conversations and exchanges." Hades explained, and Andrew and Nico exchanged a questioning look.

"Are we? Done?"

"I think so?" Nico replied uncertainly, and they both shifted awkwardly.

There were a lot of things Nico wanted to say to him, but most of them had already been said, and for the rest, he didn't know what words to use to best convey what he meant.

"I…can you tell the others that I'm sorry? I mean, I guess that's what people usually say, right? That they wanna apologize for leaving them behind and all that crap. I'm not really sorry. I did the right thing, I know that. But…maybe don't tell them what I'm sorry for. Then they can pretend I apologized for whatever it is I should have probably apologized for. Like the many times I tripped Ash, or that one time I called Sara a suck-up. Or when I told Hannah make-up wasn't going to fix her ugly face. I mean, it's not like I meant all that, anyways. Probably should have apologized."

Andrew rambled, suddenly seeming a little frantic again.

Nico raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, you really should have." He agreed automatically, and Andrew stopped to glower up at him.

Then, however, his expression softened again, and he averted his gaze awkwardly once more.

His hands were fidgeting with nothing again.

Nico gazed at Andrew's hands as he spoke again.

"We burnt one of your tangle toys."

Andrew looked up at him, all discomfort and awkwardness forgotten as his lips twitched with mirth.

"What a waste. Plus, you shouldn't burn plastic."

"We realized that, too. I don't even know who put that in the fire, though I'm pretty sure it was Ash."

"Probably. See? I told you they took one of my tangle toys. You didn't want to believe me." Andrew promptly insisted, and Nico made a face.

"Or it could have been one of your siblings, just trying to be nice." He put in hurriedly, and Andrew raised his eyebrows.

"My siblings? The ones from the Athena cabin? The super smart ones that would never do something so stupid like burning a tangle toy, even if in my honor?"

Nico crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"You make a compelling argument."

"I know. That's why I was on the team."

"Has anybody ever told you that you're a smart-ass?" Nico grumbled, and Andrew laughed.

"What? Me? Nope, never heard of it. I think you're imagining things."

Freaking Andrew.

Nico caught his father still standing in the same place a few feet away from them, hands in the
pockets of his robe (that thing had pockets?) and gaze on the faraway wall once more.

Oh. Right. The judgement.

Andrew seemed to remember the same thing, and the laughter subsided, making space for awkward silence again.

Nico looked down at his feet, his thoughts once more returning to all the things he wanted Andrew to know.

"I…I will tell them. That you're sorry, I mean. And…and I want you to know that I…I really am sorry. For letting you die, yes, but also…for how I was towards you." He pressed out, hoping against hope that it sounded better than it felt.

Andrew was silent in front of him.

So was his father.

Nico thought of Will always encouraging him to speak his mind, and took a deep breath to keep going.

"I mean, yes, you were pretty annoying, and petty, and oftentimes unnecessarily dramatic – especially whenever there was any medication involved."

Andrew huffed, but let him speak.

Nico still kept his gaze on his feet.

"But I…I shouldn't have been so harsh towards you. I did…I did value you a lot. As a member of the team. And…as a…friend. I'm…I'm proud of you. For what you've done for the team, and…and for being you." He continued, and there was shuffling in front of him, but now that he was already here, he might as well see this through.

"You helped us find our way when we got lost, and you did everything you could to keep us alive on more than one occasion. You might have insulted Liam's aim, but you helped him get better. You might have claimed to hate Ash, but you stood up for them. You might have tried to act distant from the rest of the team, but you took your time to get to know them and bond with them in your own way. And…yeah. I'm proud of you. You did well, Andrew." Nico finished, though there were so many other things he could have said, so many other things he still wanted to say, but the words didn't come to him, and he didn't want to drag this out even longer.

Though, at the same time, he would love to keep going, just so they wouldn't have to get to that judging, and he wouldn't have to say goodbye to Andrew again.

He waited in awkward silence for Andrew's reaction, his shoulders pulled up a little, his body stiff.

When Andrew didn't speak, Nico forced himself to look up.

The blonde was looking at him with wide eyes, tears pooling in them before running down his cheeks, and Nico felt his heart aching.

He really should have been nicer to him.

The boy might have been annoying at times, but he was just that: a boy.

A child, just as Nico had been.

He held out his arms, and Andrew hugged him for the third time, but it didn't matter.

"Thank you." Andrew whispered feebly, but Nico only shook his head and held him.

There was nothing to thank him for, he was merely telling the truth.

The hug didn't last very long before Andrew already pulled back again with a rattling breath.
"Okay. I'm ready." He said determinedly, then hesitated. "Are you ready?"

Nico hesitated, then gave a curt nod.

"If you're ready, so am I."

"So, you're ready?" Hades asked them both as if to tease them, and they both shot him matching looks.

Hades' lips twitched, then he gestured for them to follow him.

"Very well, if you say you're ready, we shall get started."

Nico still couldn't believe he was supposed to be part of the judging. He had watched many judgements before, sure, but that had been years ago, and they had always seemed rather…well, cruel.

In Nico's opinion, it was cruel; to review a person's life in front of them and judging their decisions and mistakes and impact.

Now, Nico was supposed to do the same thing. For Andrew.

For somebody he knew.

Wasn't he too close to the case to be included, in the first place?

Couldn't his father just do it by himself?

Nico didn't even know Andrew's past, how was he supposed to actually 'judge' anything but the time Andrew had spent with him and the team?

Hades led them to where the judges usually sat, and had Andrew stand in the little circle in front of the seats, while motioning for Nico to sit.

Nico didn't want to sit.

Couldn't he stand by Andrew's side? Maybe hold his hand through this whole ordeal, to make it a little easier on him?

He was trembling, Nico could clearly tell.

He had to be scared. Or maybe he was just feeling cold. Who knew what the dead could feel?

Nico wished he could have had more time to prepare for all of this, then he could have packed a tangle toy and some warmer clothes than the ones Andrew had died in.

Sure, the dead weren't allowed to carry possessions with them into the afterlife, but he was certain he could have bribed his dad to let it happen now, when Andrew was already in the afterlife. Sort of.

Nico hovered next to Andrew, but the boy put on a brave face for him.

"It's okay. Kind of curious to see how you'll do, team mom."

Of course, Andrew would say something like that.

Nico still hesitated a moment longer, before he dragged himself away from his side and reluctantly moved closer to the stone seats, settling for the one to the left.

His eyes hushed to his father, who gave a reassuring nod and sat down beside him.

Then, his gaze was back on Andrew.

"Have mercy on me, this is my first judging." He blurted, just so he could say he had apologized for whatever was going to come from this.
Andrew grinned at him.

"Really? Mine, too."

Next to him, Hades face-palmed.

Nico had never seen him do it before, but it looked disturbingly humane, and he wanted him to stop that immediately.

He was about to tell him as much (along with telling him this whole thing was stupid, and why couldn't he just send Andrew to Elysium right away, anyways?), but then his father already cleared his throat loudly.

Nico promptly snapped his mouth shut.

"Alright. Andrew Basil Cooper, are you ready to face your judgement?" Hades asked loudly, and Nico's eyebrows shot up.

Andrew promptly shot him a look that told him not to say a word or he would regret it.

"Yes, sir."

Andrew's last name was Cooper? His middle name was Basil?

Seriously?

Why had nobody ever told Nico?

Hades waved his hand with practiced ease, and Nico watched in amazement and unease how a black, smoke-like screen appeared between them and Andrew – reminding him a little of Iris messages, but much bigger.

Also, on the empty space next to Hades' other side, a golden scale appeared.

"Then we will now see the key moments of your life. This will show your smallest mistakes and your biggest struggles, your greatest accomplishments as well as your worst moments. The Scale will objectively sort these key moments, and offer the third voice necessary for this judgment. Be prepared."

Hades' voice was quiet, and unusually kind.

Nico watched how Andrew steeled himself, his back straightening a little as his hands stopped fidgeting, his body tense as his eyes hushed from the scale to the black screen.

Hades waved his hand once more, and the screen exploded into color.

Nico had thought he wouldn't want to look, that he would be able to avert his gaze.

However, the moment he saw the first images, he was unable to look away.

He had seen judgements before. He had never experienced one quite like this.

Andrew, barely a toddler, standing at the side as the other kids played together, ignoring him.

Andrew, a little older, waiting to be picked up in the cold, but nobody came, and the kids laughed at the way he sneezed and shivered.

Andrew, sitting in front of what seemed to be a director's office with a back eye and ice on a bruised arm, while there was yelling behind the closed door.

Andrew, turning his face away as he saw another child being harassed and pushed around.

Andrew, yelling at his father and slamming the door in his face.

Andrew, in what appeared to be the nurse's office, a blonde woman dabbing something against a new bruise on his face, while he looked at her as if she had hung the stars in the sky.
Andrew, trying to spend more time with the woman somehow, clearly infatuated.

Andrew, huddled in a corner, facing his first monster in the form of an empousai, and forced to outwit her all by himself in order to survive.

It took Nico a moment to realize that the empousai hadn't come out of nowhere. It had been disguised as the woman.

Andrew, opening up to a boy his age who seemed nice, just to have him leave him behind in favor of hanging with the cool kids, joining in on the taunting.

Andrew, trying to find friends, but either finding monsters or assholes.

Andrew, pushing away the awkward boy who kept trying to talk to him, snarling at him and insulting him.

Andrew, getting saved by the boy he had repeatedly rebuffed, who turned out to be a satyr.

Andrew, getting to Camp and not calling his father, unwilling to speak to him.

Andrew, lashing out at the kids in the Hermes cabin for getting too close.

Andrew, puking his heart out when one of the kids retaliated by putting something in his food.

Andrew, trying to run away from Camp, just to get dragged back by Clarisse, even as he screamed and thrashed and bit her arm.

Andrew, in the infirmary, sulking as Will talked to him in a quiet, soothing voice, Clarisse standing right behind him with her bandaged arms crossed in front of her chest.

Andrew, getting claimed by Athena after outwitting Malcolm per chance during a Capture the Flag game.

Andrew, immediately showing off to the Hermes kids and rubbing it in he was somebody, after all.

Andrew, trying to connect with his newfound siblings, just to find them either busy or uncooperative, rebuffing him like everybody else had.

Andrew, watching the other kids with envy as they practiced and played together, while also snarling at everybody who tried to approach him.

Andrew, seeing Ash for the first time and promptly picking a fight.

Andrew, sitting in the infirmary with a broken nose, while Ash sat across from him with bite marks on their arms.

Andrew, calling his father at Chiron's insistence, just to blame everything on him and hang up.

Andrew, sitting at the Camp Fire away from the others, watching an older girl laugh and brush her hair back.

Andrew, trying frantically to get better at everything at once to apparently impress her.

Andrew, trying to pick a fight with Liam and instead finding a friend, though he keeps pushing him away, anyways.

Andrew, still trying to impress that girl, approaching her tentatively.

Andrew, getting his first date because she said yes.

Andrew, getting taunted by a bunch of kids for showing interest in an older girl, just to have Rin step up for him, though she makes it obvious she hates his guts.

Andrew, hanging out with Rin because of their mutual dislike for each other; training with her
and being frustrated when he can't beat her.

Andrew, going on another date with the girl, trying to impress her with all sorts of things, though she doesn't seem impressed.

Andrew, crying to himself at night.

Andrew, watching Jason asking around for members for his contract journeys, and mocking the people interested in going out of spite.

Andrew, trying to run away from Camp again, just to time it so badly he stumbles right into the contract group, and quickly declares himself a member to cover up.

Andrew, staying away from the rest of the group and minding his own business, the only familiar people being Liam and Rin.

Andrew, returning to Camp and watching in envy how Jason gets assaulted by Nico, Percy and Will.

Andrew, looking for the girl again to ask her out another time, just to have her agree once more, much to his apparent confusion.

Andrew, yelling at her in the strawberry patches because he was scared she was just toying with him.

Andrew, getting hugged by the girl and allowing his guard to drop for the first time in a long time, crying against her shoulder.

Andrew, now having a girlfriend, trying to be a little friendlier.

Andrew, still getting teased and deciding he rather snapped at people than be friendly.

Andrew, getting his pills switched with laxatives by some kids from the Hermes cabin as a joke.

Andrew, throwing a tantrum at finding out Ash was joining the contract group.

Andrew, watching warily how everybody in the contract group immediately bonded.

Andrew, looking intensely satisfied when Hannah and Ash seemed at each other's throats.

Andrew, constantly getting approached by Liam and Sara, while he sought out Rin.

Andrew, still finding it difficult to trust pills and Will, but trying, pacing in front of the medic tent and talking to himself as if he tried to build up the courage to go inside, apparently wanting to apologize, though he decided against it in the end.

Andrew, watching the team fight and trying to help somehow.

Andrew, saving Nico's life by making Liam shoot a monster none of the others had seen.

Andrew, saving Jason's life at the museum by screaming, just so Jason would come running for him, instead of running into the trap only Andrew recognized.

Andrew, watching Rin sacrifice herself.

Andrew, crying to himself in his tent, just to have Ash come in and sit down next to him, not speaking, yet offering comfort, all the same.

Andrew, punching Jack in the face behind the cohorts, after hearing him talking bad about Ash and Hannah to others.

Andrew, staring at the succulents when the whole group went through a flower shop.

Andrew, watching Nico a lot and trying to approach him repeatedly, just to retreat at the last possible moments.
Andrew, clearly trying to gain Nico's approval, just to get rebuffed.

Andrew, staring at the monsters on the highway with wide eyes full of realization, before the crash and the corn fields.

Andrew, looking ready to kill but getting held back by Sara when Nico and the Hunters had their argument at the gas station.

Andrew, IM-ing his girlfriend behind the bus, looking at her as if it was the last time he was going to see her.

Andrew, watching Percy watching Nico as Nico looked around the battered and beaten bus, looking ready to die.

Andrew, watching Will with his eyes glazed over, before they cleared and their eyes met, just to have Will quickly avert his gaze.

Andrew, rushing at the Shadows, throwing himself at them with nothing but a tiny dagger and his fists, looking back to see Nico hovering.

Andrew, being left behind with the Shadows, snarling at them and trying to keep them from going after the team.

Andrew, being dragged back and covered by the Shadows, screaming bloody murder and thrashing as much as possible, before the bus got crushed.

The screen abruptly turned black, and Nico jumped a little at seeing the real Andrew across from him.

His mind was blank.

His heart was hammering in his chest.

His mouth felt incredibly dry.

Nico was aware he was gaping.

Nico tried to close his mouth and look away, but he couldn't.

Andrew wasn't meeting his eyes.

Nico glanced towards his father, feeling helplessly overwhelmed.

He…he had never known.

He had never known any of that.

He had been around Andrew for months, yet he had never bothered to ask about his past or whether he had any friends.

He…hadn't really asked him anything, to be honest.

Nico swallowed thickly, and found his father gazing at him with a questioning look, as if he was asking whether Nico wanted to step away for a moment to regain his composure.

He swallowed again, but gave a faint shake of his head, anyways, his eyes hushing back to Andrew hesitantly.

Andrew was shuffling a little, but otherwise didn't move, and didn't look at him.

Hades sat up a little straighter.

"You have just seen the key moments of your life. Is there anything you would like to add to that?" His father asked, and Nico looked back at him, unable to see how he could be so composed after seeing all of that.
"No, sir. That's all." Andrew said quietly, and Nico's focus snapped back to the boy.

"Very well." Hades said with a small nod, and Nico wasn't sure who to look at.

He was completely out of his comfort zone.

During the judgements he had witnessed, there had never been a screen like this one, and Nico had never seen anybody else's life summed up like this.

There had been lots of arguing and petty quarrels between the judges as they loudly consulted each other right in front of the person being judged, but they had simply known what had happened in that person's life. Nobody else had to go and see it.

Hades looked at Nico again, but Nico didn't look away from Andrew, even though the boy still wasn't meeting his gaze.

"You have been rejected by those you approached, yet you have also rejected those that have approached you. Your life was filled with anger and resentment at the injustices you have experienced, yet you have shown the same injustice to others. You have condemned your father to a life of worry for his son, wishing for his safety but never knowing whether he was even still alive, all over a fit of pride and the urge to be more than you are, coupled with the disappointment and resentment at not getting your will." Hades started telling him quietly, and Nico's head snapped to the side, staring at his father in disbelief.

But…but…

Hades glanced at him briefly, then continued.

"However, you have also accomplished great things. You have gained vital knowledge to support your team, you have defended those important to you, you have saved lives, and you have made sacrifices for the sake of others. Those are no easy feats, Andrew," Hades explained, and Andrew glanced up at them briefly, before glancing to the scale, then looking back down at his feet.

The scale.

Nico was a little apprehensive of looking towards it, even though he argued with himself that Andrew had nothing to fear. He might not have been that great of a person, but he had done great things!

He had saved lives! That had to count extra, right?

Nico still felt queasy as he urged himself to look past his father at the golden set of scales.

His stomach plummeted.

They were even.

But how?!

"What do you think, Nico?" Hades asked him, and Nico stiffened to a board.

What was he supposed to say?!

Why did he have to partake in the judging, anyways? This was horrible!

And why were the scales even?! Andrew had saved lives! He had sacrificed himself for the sake of the team! That stupid scale should be tipped all the way in Andrew's favor!

"I…I think that…the…uh…the good…outweighs the bad? I mean, he saved all of us, repeatedly, and…and saving lives is…uh…really good?" He tried awkwardly, annoyed when his tongue seemed intent on gluing itself to the roof of his mouth repeatedly and causing him to make weird sounds as he spoke.

Hades eyed him from the side quietly for a moment, then he gave a small nod, before returning his attention to Andrew.
"Very well. Andrew Basil Cooper, you have one judge in your favor, and the scales determine your life as balanced. Are you ready for your third and final judgment that shall decide your afterlife?" Hades asked, and Nico's head was swimming.

What was going to happen?

Was this going to send Andrew to the Fields of Asphodel?

Balanced, the scales said balanced, and if his father would say the same, then Andrew would be rendered to an aimless soul in the plainest plains.

Nico stared at his father with a pleading look, wishing he could get his mouth to open, but his jaw was clenched too tightly for that to happen.

"Yes, sir." Andrew muttered feebly, his voice weak and frail as he started shaking again.

Nico wanted to walk up to him and hug him.

Instead, he kept staring at his dad, trying to mutely plead with him for Andrew's mercy.

Hades, however, didn't look at Nico, instead studying Andrew in silence for another long moment.

A way too long moment.

When he did open his mouth to speak though, Nico was the one jumping and wishing his dad took a bit longer, just to make sure he wasn't rushing his decision.

"I agree with my son. I also believe your feats outweigh your misdeeds." Hades said, and Nico didn't even know how tense he had been until he found himself slumping back into the stone seat with a relieved sigh.

Thank the gods.

Andrew's head snapped up, too, looking at them with wide eyes full of surprise, and Nico managed a weak laugh at the sight.

"Excuse me?" Andrew asked, his voice high-pitched and disbelieving, and Nico caught his father smiling for the fraction of a second.

"You have saved more lives than you have influenced negatively. Your feats outweigh your misdeeds. Are you aware of what this means?" Hades asked patiently, and Andrew stared at him owlishly, his mouth opening and closing without saying a single word.

Nico found himself grinning now.

Hades gave a little wave with his hand, and the screen disappeared between them as he stood.

"Andrew Basil Cooper, you may choose between Rebirth or Elysium for your afterlife." Hades announced loudly, and Andrew jumped a little, before his lips split into a wide, elated grin.

He was shaking again, but this time, Nico was certain it was from excitement.

"Seriously?!! Awesome!"

Yep, excitement.

Nico couldn't blame him.

In fact, he was tempted to whoop along with him as he stood up as well to stand by his father's side.

Hades glanced at him with a clearly amused expression, and Nico beamed back at him to show him that he fully approved of this judgment.
"Rebirth, rebirth, here I come!" Andrew exclaimed and made a bunch of moves that were apparently supposed to resemble dancing, and Nico had to restrain himself not to laugh.

Hades watched the blonde wiggling his hips with raised eyebrows, then shot Nico another look.

"You certainly have peculiar friends, son."

Nico grinned at him.

Yeah, he sure did.

Nico watched amused how Andrew danced around a while longer, before hurriedly trying to put on an indifferent expression once more and nodding along seriously as Hades explained to him what was going to happen next.

Then, he and Nico hugged again, and Nico tried to keep up his smile, even as his heart ached a little.

Rebirth.

This would be the last time they saw each other.

But that was okay, it was Andrew's choice.

He still held him a little tighter than necessary though.

"Enjoy your new life." He whispered, and Andrew pulled back with a smirk.

"Oh, I will. Hopefully, I'll keep my superb brain. But maybe without the whole demigod-business."

Nico certainly wished him the best of luck.

He accompanied him to the door and patted his hair for a last time, something he had never been allowed to do before.

Something he would never get to do again.

Hades shot him a knowing look, but didn't comment on it, and gave them another moment for their last goodbye.

Then, he took Andrew with him, and Nico remained behind in the empty hall at his father's wishes, alone with himself and his thoughts, and the knowledge he would never see his friend again.

***

When Nico woke up next, he felt sluggish and exhausted.

Andrew's judging certainly had been more draining than initially expected, but Nico knew the main reason for his exhaustion was the fact that he had only managed two hours of fitful sleep between Will and Jason, thanks to Will's nightmare.

Nico wasn't as unsettled by said nightmares anymore as he used to be, but they still bothered him.

Seeing Will that distraught bothered him, and they were nowhere near solving the mystery of his nightly visions.

They were nowhere near solving any of the mysteries.

It bothered Nico, making him twist and turn in his sleep and ruining his dreams, but other than taking his chance for rest from him, there was no change in the situation.

He didn't suddenly figure anything out.

He didn't have some sort of sudden idea or brainwave like Will had back in the Underworld with
Hades and the contract.

It was maddening.

Will stroked through his hair and kissed his forehead, leaning over him while Nico remained on the bed, unwilling to get up.

Nico merely huffed and turned his face to the side.

"Don't be like that, grumpy. Come on, smile. We have a long day ahead of us, better lift our spirits at least a little to face it."

What a mindset.

Nico grumbled, then shifted and moved his head under the pillow, successfully pushing Jason's head off it, who was only just waking up.

He heard a low growl, then shifting, and the next moment, cold hands found their way under the shirt he was still wearing.

"Jason!" He screeched and shot up, before slamming his pillow into Jason's face full-force.

Freaking cold!

Will snorted out a laugh, while Percy whined and tried to escape the bed as precaution.

Unfortunately, Nico snatched his arm and pulled him right back in.

No way would he escape this.

'This' of course turned into an all-out pillow fight that had them put enough force in their throws to knock Nico backwards off the bed, just to retaliate by jumping back into it with a loud war cry and the promise of death.

Needless to say, nobody died, but they sure had their fun.

Until there was a knock on the door and a camper asking for Jason, so he could be briefed and put back on the border, followed by the girl asking what she should tell Chiron because of Percy and Nico and their training schedules to get them back in shape.

Nico was pretty sure he had never seen the mood drop so quickly than at that moment.

Especially when Will threw a mute tantrum and slammed the door in her face, before storming off to the bathroom and slamming that door, too.

Jason was back to looking grim as he put on clothes hurriedly and moved a hand through his hair, apparently not staying for even as much as a shower.

Percy was sitting on the bed with his face in his hands and his shoulders hunched up, no trace of his earlier smiles left.

Nico’s heart ached, but Percy hit him the hardest, because he had just stopped looking so upset, and now he was right back there, and Nico wanted to punch a wall if only it helped him let out the anger bubbling up inside him.

There was a loud thump in the bathroom, and he was pretty sure Will was feeling the same way.

"I'll be back." Jason told him as he moved his arms around Nico in a short hug, and Nico met his lips in the quick peck he knew he would get, though he didn't stop frowning.

"Be safe." He said, though it was a pointless thing to say, because there was no safety here any longer.

Jason gave him another peck, then he let go of him to move over to Percy, who hadn't moved an inch.
Nico watched how Jason crouched down in front of him and reached out to cup his face, whispering something Nico couldn't catch.

Then again, he also wasn't trying to catch what they were saying, too distracted and upset about how miserable Percy looked.

He still nodded, though, and Jason gave him a couple more kisses than he had given Nico, but he didn't care.

They hadn't even eaten anything, yet.

They hadn't even brushed their teeth.

It was 6am in the morning, and they were supposed to already be out and about to fight and train to be ready to fight.

Nico clenched his fists.

He hated this.

Oh, he hated this so much.

"Will?" Jason asked as he moved towards the bathroom, but the door remained shut.

"I'll be going now." Jason called, but there was no reaction.

"Take care of them for me, and don't overwork yourself, alright? I'll see you later." Jason bid his goodbye to the closed door, and Nico looked down at his feet.

Jason sighed, but then left, anyways, hovering in the doorway for another moment, just in case Will changed his mind.

Will didn't.

Nico couldn't blame him, either.

As a matter of fact, he'd like to be locked in that bathroom, too.

Better yet, how about they all locked themselves in that bathroom?

He would have to remember that for tomorrow – nobody would be able to fetch them if they weren't there, after all.

Jason closed the door behind him, the girl long gone already, and silence settled over the Hades cabin.

"This is bullshit." Percy said at long last.

Nico agreed.

***

Will was testy and agitated, pacing in his infirmary to keep it down, but the fact that Percy had been taken from him a few minutes ago for that accursed talk with Chiron didn't make anything any better.

After locking himself in the bathroom hadn't helped, he had insisted on Percy coming with him instead of following Nico to the training arena, hoping against hope that he would somehow be able to hide him away there, safe from the rest of the world.

But that had failed, too.

Will walked down the hallway again, trying to at least make it seem like he was checking in on the patients left and right, instead of just pacing aimlessly.

When he passed the only closed door for the third time, he halted in front of it.
Clovis.

He wasn't ready to see him just yet.

His siblings had explained to him to the best of their abilities what had happened, and Will had read through the file Alec had filled out, but Clovis was the only one he hadn't yet visited personally.

Mostly because he was scared of what he would find.

He could pick up on values, much better than he used to, and he could feel the pain and the concern and the fear of all the patients in the infirmary right now.

The only thing he could sense from behind that door was a feeble heartbeat and a struggling body.

There was nothing else.

Will closed his eyes and blew out a deep breath.

Nico had made it. Nico had woken up from his coma, and he was fine now.

There was no reason why Clovis wouldn't be able to do the same.

Will shuddered, then he started pacing again, until Austin called for him and Will helped heal a bunch of cuts and bruises and a broken ankle.

He should go and see Clovis.

He owed that much to him.

Will was still reluctant, anyways, so he busied himself for another thirty minutes with fixing more broken bones and open wounds, until the waiting area in the front was empty for the first time since Will had come back.

He knew it wouldn't last, but he also knew he couldn't just stand around and wait for new patients, so he heaved a heavy sigh and looked back towards the closed door at the end of the hall.

The irony of it, that they would put Clovis in the very room that Will had managed to let himself get cornered in, before.

Will took a deep breath again, wishing Percy could be back with him already, or that Nico would show up to check on him.

Anything so he wouldn't have to go alone.

He could ask his siblings, but they seemed so happy about not having to do anything right now, he didn't want to take that from them.

So, Will went alone, walking up to that door like a man walking to the gallows.

He didn't knock, but he was slow in opening the door, as if hoping for somebody to yell at him to stop and leave Clovis be.

But nobody did.

Will stepped inside and closed the door behind him, trying to ignore the beeping from the only monitor they had in this place, trying to ignore that this was the only room that didn't have three more beds crammed into it to make space for more patients.

Trying to ignore the feeling of death that was so much stronger in here than the hallway.

Will steeled his nerves and took a step towards the bed, but he was trembling, anyways.

His hands were sweating when he finally reached the bed, looking down at Clovis' unmoving form.
For a moment, Will saw Nico again, defenseless, unconscious, weak. Out of his reach.

Then, there was nobody but Clovis, and he looked so much worse than Will could have imagined.

He was ashen, pale as a ghost, and he had lost so much weight he seemed almost unrecognizable.

Gone were the baby fat and the pudgy face, his cheeks instead hollow and his arms like twigs.

Will automatically went to check on the IV, glad his siblings knew how to use the scarce equipment they had at this Camp.

There were flowers on the bedside table, and a blanket was draped over the back of the chair next to the bed.

Will didn't sit down, instead walking around the bed to pick up the clipboard that tracked Clovis' progress – or, in this case, the lack thereof.

His heart sank as he looked back at the boy.

Then, he swallowed thickly and reached out to take his hand.

Will forced himself not to recoil, even as he gasped and choked out a small sob, the tears escaping his eyes, after all.

"I'm so sorry." He whispered, though it made no difference.

Will let himself fall into the second chair next to the bed, his hand tightly grasping Clovis'.

He had never felt anything like this before, but he never wanted to feel it again, either.

"I am so sorry." He repeated, his words echoing in the small room a little.

Clovis was like that echo, too.

Fractured, weak, a feeble memory of what once was.

Will dropped forward onto the bed, weeping because he didn't know what else to do.

There was nothing he could do.

Clovis was out of his reach.

"I'm so, so sorry." He breathed out between his sobs.

Clovis couldn't hear.

Clovis wasn't there. Not anymore.

***

Kyle stood at the edge of his makeshift Camp, arms crossed in front of his chest as he watched the battles from afar.

Mr. Jealous was back. He could see him flying every here and there, though he knew the boy wouldn't be able to spot him.

"Are you sure?" He asked again, though he knew the monster wouldn't have dared to bother him if it wasn't a hundred percent certain.

"I saw it with my own eyes. He did the exact thing with the glowing, as said by the-…"

"Don't speak of that here." Kyle cut in as he turned his head sharply, and the monster scurried back in fear, just to move back into the center, eyes hushing anxiously to Kyle’s skiés and back.

Kyle rolled his eyes and looked back to the battle taking place at the border.
This changed things.

He had wanted to play a little with William, a small game of give and take, just to see how the boy would react.

However, if William really did possess those powers they had heard of…

Kyle tapped a finger against his chin in contemplation.

"Get out." He ordered sharply, and the monster hurried off immediately.

How boring.

Oh well, at least the air was free of fear and the stench of rotting meat once more.

Kyle turned and walked towards his table, looking down at the overview he had created of the area, the Camp, and his resources.

He could strike now.

But that incident a while back at Camp Jupiter had taken its toll on them, so he would be forced to pull forces from that Camp to make sure to have enough backup here.

Nobody had yet managed to explain to him what had happened back then, either.

Some stupid explosion.

Kyle grimaced, but resisted the urge to flip the table.

An explosion.

What sort of explosion killed his forces, but apparently none of the demigods around?

His informant had been spared, too, that cowardly piece of trash.

Kyle had taken care of him already, especially after learning how he had acted out, carelessly injuring one of the praetors.

The damage he could have done if they had caught the boy…

Kyle shook his head and took a steadying breath, then studied the position of his subordinates some more.

What if he took out the girl?

It would be easy, to possess one of the campers. He wouldn't even have to tell their spy.

If he took out the girl, they could break the border easily, and then Kyle could sweep in and get what he wanted.

Oh, he would just love to see William's face if he appeared out of nowhere to take him with him.

Would he scream? Would he cry?

Oh, he had always made such sweet sounds…

Kyle smirked to himself, then pulled away from the table to move back to the edge of his Camp, looking for Mr. Jealous.

If Grace was there, Jackson and the Hades offspring had to be there, too.

They were so sickeningly in love, after all, they wouldn't dare to separate.

Kyle's smirk widened.

It would be a shame if something…happened to them.
"We have new intel!" A boy screeched somewhere next to him, and Kyle's smirk slid off his face immediately, replaced by a scowl.

"Don't yell around, kid." He scolded, but the boy seemed too hyped up to listen.

Kyle faintly recognized him as being one of the new kids, the ones they were using only for infiltration and information.

And, sometimes, to warm Kyle's bed at night, when he felt like it.

"But there's new intel! I met with the informant, and there seems to be a lot of stuff happening."

The boy rambled, and Kyle shook his head at the _skia_ that was trailing closer to the boy.

No, this one was of no interest to Kyle.

Dark hair and dark eyes. Boring.

"Yes, that's what happens when there's a war. A lot of 'stuff' happens." He replied in a bored tone and walked back to his table, wondering whether he would get away with engaging in battle to take out William's 'boyfriends'.

He had been told to lay low until they reached the third stage, but if William posed a threat, Kyle of course _had_ to go and do something about it, right?

"Apparently, this one guy knows how to 'seal the mind' or something, and he wants to teach the rest of the Camp. Also, there's this boy in the infirmary, and I swear he must have single-handedly healed the lot of them, because all the wounded are running around again. The informant was very concerned about that." The kid rambled on, and Kyle froze.

Then, his expression darkened.

The Hades kid.

_Di Angelo._

Kyle grinded his teeth, then turned to look at the boy, who wasn't looking at him at all, instead hopping on the spot and looking around with curiosity burning in his dark eyes as he kept blabbering.

Maybe Kyle should bed him just once, so he would learn to shut up.

"When are those lessons supposed to take place?" He interrupted him, and the boy jumped a bit, wide eyes settling back on Kyle as he seemed to notice the anger and impatience.

"Uh, I don't know. It's supposed to be a short-notice thing, and all the informant said was that it was gonna be taught as soon as possible."

Then Kyle had no time to waste.

He gestured for the boy to get lost, then started pacing, going through his options and quickly discarding those irrelevant to him.

Then, he looked back out at the battle, watching as Mr. Jealous struck down some of his monsters with lightning.

"Go. Keep him and those other fools busy." He ordered his _skiés_, before he left, himself.

He couldn't get into Camp.

But he had _other_ ways.

Now, it was only a matter of luck whether he would first stumble across the girl, or his William.

Kyle smirked to himself again, then felt for his powers before he slipped away into the darkness.
Percy stared at his hands as he left the Big House.

What was he doing?

Will was going to murder him.

It was obvious Will didn't want him to fight.

It was obvious Jason and Nico didn't want him to fight, either.

But then what was Percy supposed to do?

Stand by and do nothing?

Fighting was the only thing he was good at!

Percy turned his hand this way and that, moving his arm and trying to ignore the pain that was pulsing through him.

He wished he could just get used to it.

Maybe he would, if only he kept going.

He had tried to rest it, but it hadn't made any difference, so why bother?

The Camp needed him to help, so he would have to, no matter whether he liked it or not.

Will would understand. Eventually.

Percy felt his shoulders slumping a little and took a deep breath, his arms dropping to his side as he tried to focus on something else.

But what was there to focus on?

He looked at the Camp, this day a lot friendlier than yesterday, the colors a little stronger and the sun shining a little brighter.

It was a pretty Camp.

The lake was glittering, and the flowers were blooming, and Percy was certain that he would be able to hear birds singing if only it wasn't for the sound of clashing weapons and screaming and monsters roaring.

Percy glanced towards Thalia's pine, but he knew he would first have to talk to Will and Nico before he left to join Jason.

He took two steps towards the infirmary, then stopped again, feeling the unease inside him grow once more.

They would be so angry.

Especially Will.

Will had already been livid about Jason leaving this morning, not to mention when Percy had been fetched for this talk with Chiron.

Honestly, Will had looked ready to murder, and that had been before Percy had agreed to take up his spot on the battlefield again.

Maybe he should go talk to Nico, first.

Nico might be a bit more understanding, and he would surely help Percy with Will.

Percy changed direction towards the training arena, then stopped, again.
He…didn't want to go there.

He touched his damaged arm hesitantly, a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He really didn't want to go there.

Then again, he had to.

He wanted to join Jason at the border, right?

…No. Not really.

The last time he had joined Jason, he had nearly gotten them killed.

What if this time he would really get them killed?

With this attitude, he surely wouldn't be of much use.

Percy was aware that he was just standing uselessly in the middle of Camp, and he could feel eyes on him, though he didn't check how many kids had to be watching him right now.

He had to go somewhere, now.

Either to Nico, or to Will. To let them know.

So he could go and fight. With Jason. To protect the Camp.

Percy took a deep breath, but then, he changed course a third time, this time going towards the cabins.

He was just…going to fetch something, first.

Maybe a new shirt.

Maybe just some courage.

Percy hung his head, buried his hands in his pockets, and trudged off towards their cabin.

***

It would be so easy.

Kyle considered that as he stood there, smirking to himself as he saw the boy.

He was already so miserable, it would be so easy to possess him.

Just how much damage would it do to the Camp to see their favorite hero turn on them and attack them?

Oh, it would be so delightful.

Or even better, what if Kyle gave him some more…ideas?

The last time had failed, sure, but that had been because Kyle had left it to others to do his job.

Now, he could make sure Percy Jackson would do just as he wanted.

It would be so, so easy.

Kyle felt his vessel struggling a little, and immediately pulled back and switched with the next kid, a boy much closer to the Big House, perfect for watching Jackson a moment longer.

It was almost too easy.

Kyle looked back towards the forest, contemplating his original plan, but this one seemed so much better.
Who'd have guessed Jackson to be here, rather than at the border with his beloved?

But Kyle shouldn't play. He had a job to do, and he was on a tight schedule.

If di Angelo really intended on teaching the campers how to fend off Kyle's attacks, then he would have to solely rely on his informant, and when had that ever gone well?

No, he needed to strike now.

Kyle thought that, but then, just as he made the boy move towards the forest, he found himself stopping again, something else catching his attention.

Blonde hair. Blue eyes. A rather adorable scowl on his face.

William.

Kyle smirked and started moving, the kid too young to fend him off, already buried deep inside the realms of its own mind, unaware of what was happening.

Kids were so easy to manipulate.

One just had to make them see their fears, and they would recoil into themselves in a heartbeat and stay, cornered by the monsters under their bed.

Kyle grinned at that and bent down, acting as if he was picking something up as he watched his William walk from the infirmary towards the Big House, di Angelo right beside him.

Interesting.

So, Mr. Jealous was by himself, huh? How unusual.

Kyle watched Will rambling about something, looking wonderfully agitated.

What could possibly be so upsetting? Kyle hoped he had something to do with it.

Oh, how he wished he could just walk up and snatch him right in front of di Angelo's eyes.

If that boy really thought he could one-up Kyle by training the kids to fight him, then Kyle would just love to watch him bleed in retaliation.

He always got what he wanted.

And, looking at Will now, he definitely knew he still wanted him.

Kyle straightened his back and turned away from them, smirking to himself as he followed his original plan.

This boy he was using was no good for kidnapping, he wouldn't even be able to break a nose with those tiny fists.

He would, however, be good enough for what Kyle needed him for.

And now that he knew where Will was…

Kyle quickened his pace.

Oh, he could barely wait.

***

"What do you mean, he already left?" Will asked incredulously as he found himself face to face with Annabeth.

She shrugged, looking a little confused, herself.

"Well, he did. A couple of minutes ago. He looked like he wanted to be left alone, so I did, and I
figured he'd go right to you to tell you." She explained, and Will started tapping his foot on the ground impatiently.

"Tell us what? I swear, if Chiron made him—…"

"He did." Annabeth said quietly before Will could even finish, and his blood ran cold.

"He didn't." He said, in a surprisingly calm voice, considering the curses and images zigzagging through his mind of just what he was going to do to that centaur's hide.

"He did. I wasn't allowed inside either, so I listened in from outside. Granted, it wasn't difficult to persuade Percy, I think he intended to go with Jason, no matter what might be more sensible. But yes, he did."

"But he can't! Percy can barely even hold his sword, much less swing it! Sure, he can use his other arm, but he hasn't trained enough for that! He needs a break, he needs rehab, he needs time!"

Will exclaimed, disbelief and anger making him throw his arms up and wish for common sense to rain from the skies.

Unfortunately, it was a rather bright and sunny day, so no such luck.

"I know. Will, I know. But you know how Percy is. Of course he'll try to fight. It's all he thinks he's good at. You and I both knew he would jump the moment somebody told him he's needed. It's who he is. He will fight or die fighting."

"He will die fighting if he's sent out there right now. Does nobody realize this is murder?!

"More like assisted suicide."

"Could you two stop talking about death?" Nico grumbled next to them, and both Annabeth and Will crossed their arms in front of their chests.

"So, what's the plan now?" Annabeth asked, and Will huffed.

Oh, he had a few ideas, alright.

"No murder. Percy agreed willingly, there's not much we can do about that, Will."

"Watch me." Will snapped.

"This is stupid. We should go and look for Percy." Nico cut in as he grabbed Will's arm, and Will reluctantly followed him and Annabeth down the front steps of the Big House, away from the centaur Will wanted to scream and yell at.

_Seriously_!

"He probably went to the arena to tell you, first, Nico. With Will behaving like this, I wouldn't have willingly walked into the infirmary to tell you anything, either." Annabeth put in, and Will instantly deflated.

That…she was probably right, yeah.

He would have stormed out of the infirmary and skinned Chiron alive if Percy had walked up to him and told him 'Oh yeah, I'll be fighting again. Sorry and goodbye.'.

Oh man, he was _still_ going to murder Chiron, just for disregarding everything Will had told him _just yesterday_.

Didn't the centaur have eyes in his head?! Couldn't he see how badly Percy was faring?

How much he was struggling?

They had other campers!

They had Clarisse, they had Annabeth, they had Piper, they had all the cabins full of demigods
capable and willing to fight!

Why Percy?!

"I'm not sure. He would have had to pass the infirmary to go there, and I didn't see him from the window." Nico put in, and Will looked up to Thalia's pine.

Worry and dread coursed through him, overriding the anger easily.

Was he up there already?

Would Jason be able to keep him safe?

Was he at least wearing armor, this time?

"He wouldn't have left without telling you." Annabeth reassured him, but Will wasn't quite sure.

"He did before, though." He muttered, though it was unfair of him to say it, because Percy hadn't been himself back then.

"You mean when-..." Nico started, when suddenly, there was an ungodly screech, followed by the air around them feeling too tight, and an explosion-like sound coming from the border.

"What the..." Annabeth started, and Will gasped as he swayed on the spot, grasping at his chest as he felt an immense pain, though it wasn't his own, and nowhere close by.

Then, he picked up on values that definitely shouldn't be there, and he choked out a startled cry as he stumbled back.

Nico was in front of him in an instant, sword drawn and his expression between frantic and confused.

"It's the Camp border! It's..." Annabeth started, but then she, too, saw what they were seeing, and her words died in her throat.

A few feet away from them, in front of the Big House, limbs started appearing as if out of nowhere, dark glass shards fusing together to form a body that had Will's heart drop to his feet and his pulse roaring in his ears.

"Run." Nico said, but Will didn't comprehend it as he stared, his eyes wide and his mouth dry.

"Run!" Nico repeated as Kyle stepped out of whatever that darkness was, his scythe ready and the smirk on his face cocky and triumphant.

"William."

No.

Gods, please no.

"Run, now!" Nico yelled and shoved him, and Will snapped out of his stupor, immediately turning on his heel and running as fast as his feet could carry him.

He tried to look over his shoulder, but Annabeth blocked his view, running right behind him with an ashen face.

The next moment, he thought he could hear what sounded like the clashing of metal, and his chest clenched, his pace faltering a little.

Please, no, Nico was nowhere near his normal shape, he would be no match for Kyle!

Annabeth's hands found his lower back and pushed, keeping him from slowing or turning around and running back.

"But-..."
"No! You know he's here for you, don't let him have what he wants, Will!"

But what about Nico?!

Will automatically made for the cabins, but then realized a closed door would be no hindrance to Kyle, so he changed direction to the forest, instead.

They were just rushing past the first trees, when Will heard Annabeth curse, though when he tried to turn his head, she gave him another shove.

"Keep running! Don't look back, and keep running!"

He understood a moment later, when he could hear Kyle's laugh as he pursued.

No.

"Nico…” He whispered frantically, already out of breath and his heart beating so hard and fast it hurt, but the fear inside him was worse.

"Keep on running, Will! Don't let him get you!" Annabeth ordered sharply and this time, he did turn his head, because she wasn't pushing him anymore, and when he looked back at her, she was slowing down and pulling her cap out.

What was she-…

He nearly collided with a tree and only managed to dodge at the last possible moment.

When he next looked over his shoulder, she was gone.

Will wanted to stop, wanted to turn around, wanted to protect her from getting hurt because of him, too.

"Keep going.” He heard her voice, and Will swallowed thickly as he turned his head and continued running.

He didn't know where he was going.

He didn't know what he was doing.

All he knew was that he was alone, and Kyle was somewhere behind him.

Will kept on running through the undergrowth, his heart in his throat and his pulse in his ears, but there was no place he could think of that could possibly protect him.

Then, he heard Annabeth's scream, and a choked sob escaped his lips as his eyes teared up.

This was all his fault.

What was he supposed to do?

Will couldn't hear Kyle yet, but it was only a matter of time until he would, and there was nothing Will could do about it.

He couldn't outrun him. He had never been able to.

He couldn't outsmart him. He had never been able to.

There was nobody here who could protect him. There never had been.

Will stumbled, pain shooting up his legs though he tried his best to ignore it as he kept on running, zigzagging between the trees and trying not to make too much sound, but it was futile.

Kyle would find him. He always did.

What had Will been thinking? That he could actually escape him?
He should have stayed with Nico. That would have protected Annabeth, at the very least.

He should have jumped into Kyle's arms the moment he had appeared. That would have saved both Annabeth and Nico.

He should have gone with Kyle, all those months ago. It would have saved all of them from this.

Will tripped over some roots and crashed into the ground, his lungs aching as he struggled for breath.

He tried to get up, but everything was blurry from his unshed tears, and he felt dizzy.

Kyle would catch him.

Will should have known.

Will stared off into space unseeingly as he sat there, unable to move forward, unable to go back.

It was over.

Will could hear the telltale sounds of twigs snapping, of something getting closer.

He could sense it being Kyle without looking.

Will let another tear run down his cheek, then he pushed himself off the ground, though he knew in his heart that it was pointless.

Still, he had promised, right?

He had promised his boyfriends he wouldn't let Kyle win.

They were counting on him.

Another tear ran down his cheek, his lips quivering as he struggled to keep going.

He had to keep going. For them.

He had promised.

A laugh reached his ears, and he sobbed helplessly as he knew how much closer Kyle already was.

He had always been faster than Will.

Will should have never thought he could outrun him.

He stumbled and caught himself on one of the trees, glancing over his shoulders against his better judgment.

There he was. Already so close.

Too close.

Will pressed on, dimly recognizing the trees around him, though he wasn't sure why until he broke through a couple of bushes and was in their clearing.

Their clearing.

This was just like his dream, all that time ago.

Maybe that had been a vision, after all.

Will sobbed again, then he tripped and crashed into the ground.

His body was shaking, his legs aching, his lungs screaming.
His mind was static.

Will heard footsteps slowing down, entering the clearing.

He had him.

Will pushed himself up and off the ground, turning to face Kyle as a sense of hollowness filled him.

"At last." Kyle said, almost softly, and Will took a step back as Kyle took one towards him.

There was no escape. There had never been.

Will still took another step back, anyways. Then another.

Kyle didn't seem perturbed in the slightest, grinning at him in a way that showed he knew he had won.

Of course he had. He always did.

Will heard splashing as he took another step back, water soaking through his shoes and socks almost immediately, but he didn't care.

"Stop running, William. You know it's a foolish thing to do, and you always wanted to be so mature." Kyle said sweetly, and Will stared blankly back at him as he took another step back.

Maybe, if he threw himself into the water, he could drown himself before Kyle could get to him.

In Will's mind, it would be a victory.

"Finally, you'll be mine again." Kyle said with a triumphant smirk, and now, he was reaching out for Will.

Will closed his eyes and let another tear run down his cheek as he accepted the inevitable.

It was over.

*

He heard the whooshing sound first, before he heard the snarl.

He felt Kyle's fingertips grazing along his arm, before he felt another set of hands grab him and pull him back further into the lake.

A body pushed itself in front of him, and Will's eyes flew open just in time to see the water surging left and right past him, straight for Kyle and knocking him back several feet.

"Hands off him!" Percy snarled viciously, though he didn't rush after Kyle, standing his ground in front of Will as the water moved around them like a shield.

"You!" Kyle snapped back as he got off the ground, but the moment he stretched out his arm and seemed to try and summon his scythe, Percy moved his arms and the water attacked him again, knocking him right back down.

Then, it kept attacking.

Will found himself staggering a little at the onslaught of values and emotions and pain, watching in horror how Kyle was thrown from left to right and back, hitting the ground, hitting the trees, stuck in the water that Percy commanded.

Will knew what he was seeing, but at the same time, all he could think about was, that, at this rate, Percy would die.

Kyle would never let him get away with this.

Kyle always got what he wanted.
Will's legs gave way as he shook from head to toe, and he slumped into the water, staring, watching, pleading, praying.

Kyle looked like he was drowning, but then he wasn't.

One moment he seemed at Percy's mercy, but then he wasn't.

Instead, he suddenly had his scythe, and Will watched incomprehensively how he cut through the water, just to have the water crashing to the ground as if it was...nothing but water.

Percy stiffened in front of him, and Will knew he had to know they were doomed.

But Percy was stronger than Will. He kept fighting.

Jets of water shot out at Kyle, but Kyle merely swiped at them with an almost bored expression, as if swatting away an annoying fly.

"You know it's pointless. Give me William, and I might spare you."

"Fuck off!" Percy snarled back, and Will could feel the water moving around him, nudging him, trying to get him to move.

Percy was trying to get him to go. He was trying to get him to safety.

Will didn't move, instead tearing his eyes away from Kyle to stare up at his boyfriend, taking in his drawn-up shoulders, his defensive stance, the way his right arm trembled.

The water kept pushing at him, then Percy turned his head to shoot him a pleading look that had Will's chest clenching again.

He couldn't go.

He had already abandoned Nico, he couldn't do it again. He couldn't abandon Percy, too.

"Oh, how sweet. Trying to protect your loved one, even though you already know you'll fail."

Kyle taunted, and Percy's gaze left Will.

He was so close already.

It would be so easy for him to attack Percy, especially since he didn't even have his sword out, yet.

Why didn't he have his sword out?

The water shifted around them protectively, and Will could feel it building an extra circle around him, but Kyle was right.

It was pointless.

Will should surrender, then Percy might survive.

Will found he couldn't move, much less talk.

"You won't touch him. I won't let you." Percy spat, and he tried to attack with the water again, but Kyle swatted it aside once more, not deterred off his path.

"So brave. Full of misery and despair, with no way to cope, yet so brave when it comes to your lovers. You know, my mother used to hate you. Now, I think she would call you beautiful." Kyle said with the hint of a laugh, and Will felt himself reeling even though he was sitting.

Percy twitched, but otherwise didn't respond to Kyle.

Kyle didn't seem perturbed, instead smirking at Percy like a man who knew he had won.

Because he had.
"Yes. Nearly perfect, even. You know, the only thing missing now, is…"

They didn't find out just what it was that was missing, because the moment Kyle raised his scythe and Percy adapted a defensive stance, there was the sound of twigs breaking, and Kyle barely had enough time to jump back as Nico appeared out of nowhere, practically leaping at Kyle.

Will stared in amazement and horror how Nico swung his sword in a wide arch, missing Kyle by inches as they both growled at each other aggressively, then his boyfriend landed swiftly on his feet, the epitome of elegance as usual as he already whirled around to meet Kyle's scythe with his own blade.

They started slashing at each other, Nico's movements quick and precise as if his coma had never happened, while Kyle's attacks were ruthless and his defense seemingly impenetrable.

"Do you really think you can beat me, Nico di Angelo?" Kyle sneered, and Will trembled, still kneeling in the water like the fool he was.

Percy turned to look at him, his expression concerned and a little frantic, before it turned grim. Will felt the shift in mood and trembled even worse, opening and closing his mouth as he tried and failed to find the words to make Percy stop whatever he thought he was going to do.

"I can and I will." Nico snarled, and when he next lunged at Kyle, he rebuffed the scythe, whirled his body and sword around, and struck Kyle right at the side of his neck, only short of decapitating him because Kyle once more managed to move away at the last possible moment.

Blood spilled from the wound – not much, but enough to make Will's world turn upside down, his skin crawling as he felt hot and cold at the same time.

'Cut him and he will bleed.'

Kyle snarled viciously as he jumped back and moved a hand over the wound, icy blue eyes staring at Nico with contempt and hatred.

"You will regret that, boy." He threatened, and Will's blood ran cold again, only faintly noticing that Percy was moving.

"Not so high and mighty now, huh?" Nico taunted, clearly not afraid, but all Will could do was whimper as he felt the attack before he saw it.

There was a whooshing sound, and then Kyle was already in front of Nico, moving quicker than before, quicker than their eyes could follow, and his scythe was already raised to strike, to cut, to kill.

Will pushed himself up with a silent scream on his lips, but he would never make it.

Percy, however, did.

Percy was between them, Riptide raised to block the scythe and shove it back, before he shifted his weight and slammed one foot into Kyle's abdomen in a near-perfect side kick.

Kyle toppled back with a pained snarl, but Percy didn't attack again, instead snatching Nico's hand and moving back towards the water, which seemed to develop a life of its own once more as it shot out and past them towards Kyle, forcing him even further back as he caught his balance.

Then, Percy had Nico in the water, with Will, and Will automatically reached out for Nico, needing to touch, needing to feel, needing to heal.

But Nico didn't let him touch, instead immediately turning around with his sword raised, ready to protect, ready to fight, ready to kill the same way Kyle was.

Percy whirled back around towards Kyle, and the water shot up in front of them, the whole lake bending to Percy's will.
"I won't let you." Percy repeated coldly, and there was something off about his voice, but Will didn't know what, and then his eyes were already drawn back to Kyle, who was back on his feet and glowering at them with a dark scowl.

Then, he charged, and Percy flicked his wrist immediately.

It was still shocking to see how close Kyle got in that short moment, his scythe nearly touching Percy before one jet of water met it and shoved it upwards, before another jet hit Kyle square in the chest and forced him several feet back again.

There was a short pause, then Kyle attacked again, and Percy kept defending them.

Kyle's scythe still managed to cut through the water easily, but now, Percy didn't give him the chance to make any progress, attacking nearly constantly, the water obeying his every twitch and flick.

For the first time, Kyle wasn't smiling anymore, and there was no air of triumph around him either.

When Percy stomped his foot on the ground and the water lunged at Kyle and shoved him all the way to the edge of the clearing, Kyle remained there, dripping wet from head to toe, and his expression one of bottomless anger.

"Get out of our Camp." Percy spat, and Will saw Nico tensing, a hand moving to his hip.

Will only now noticed there was blood dripping down from a long gash.

Oh no, he was injured.

Will swallowed and tried to reach out for him, but then Kyle started laughing again, and he found his body freezing once more.

"You think it's over? That you've cornered me? You can't beat me, Jackson. If I truly wanted to, I could easily make you do my bidding, and then not even your water could save you." Kyle taunted, and Will dreaded he would follow up on his words, that he would possess Percy again, that he would finish what he had started.

Nico seemed to expect the same thing, immediately hefting his sword higher.

"You will do no such thing. Not as long as I'm here."

Kyle only looked at him with an expression akin to pity.

Then, he sneered again.

"How precious, always protecting each other. But, I do have to wonder…who do you think will protect your other beloved?"

It took a moment, for his words to sink in.

Then, Will choked out a horrified cry as his head snapped around, away from Kyle and Percy and Nico and their clearing, and towards the little he could make out of the rest of the Camp.

Of the hill. The border.

Jason!

Suddenly, everything happened at once.

Nico was moving, expression fearful as he seemed ready to swim all the way back to the border.

Kyle scoffed and hefted his scythe.

Percy let out a low growl and charged, the aura around him changing to something foreign to Will as the water slashed forward, snatching Kyle mid-attack and consuming him, tossing and whirling him around before seemingly squeezing the life out of Kyle.
The earth started cracking.

"You will not. Touch. Jason." Percy growled, and his voice was eerily low and vicious as he had both arms outstretched and so tense they trembled along with the entire rest of his body.

There was a sudden drop in his powers, and Will found himself staggering in response.

Then, there was an ear-shattering explosion coming from the border, followed by the entire hillside lighting up in a blinding white.

Nico gasped, Will stared, and Percy lost his focus for the split second it took Kyle to regain control of himself and his scythe, freeing himself from his confinement faster than any of them could have expected.

But, instead of attacking, he, too, looked towards the Camp, a dark scowl on his face as his form started flickering.

"The bitch is still alive." He muttered, as if to himself, then his head snapped back to them, and Will instantly recoiled further when blue eyes fixed on him.

"I will get you, William. Mark my words. This isn't over, yet."

Percy snarled, and the water shot out again, but before it could reach Kyle, he was already jumping back and dissolving, the darkness that built around him so much like Nico's shadows, yet so different.

Nico cursed and tossed his sword, but by the time it reached Kyle, he was already gone, and the blade impaled one of the trees, instead.

"Fuck!" Nico yelled in utmost frustration, but Will could only close his eyes with a sigh of relief as he felt himself staggering and falling, the water splashing loudly when he hit it.

"Will!"

Kyle hadn't gotten him.

Will had gotten away.

Will wouldn't get away again.

Kyle had found a way in.

Kyle would find a way in, again.

Will was safe.

They were safe.

Somebody was dying.

It wasn't Jason.

Will felt Nico's and Percy's hands on him, and he knew he said something, but he wasn't sure what it was.

Only that his guys reacted by Nico lifting him up and rushing from the clearing, Percy right behind them.

Somebody was dying.

Will could feel it, and he knew Nico could, too.

It wasn't difficult to guess who it was.

But Will didn't want to guess, and didn't want to know, and he lived in his bubble of denial until they broke through the trees and ran back towards the Big House.
His siblings were already crowded around a person on the ground, Dylan and Bill standing next to the group with pale faces and their shoulders pressing together.

Somebody was dying.

Nico let Will down, and Will stumbled to join his siblings, Alec instantly making space when he saw him.

Will tried to focus on his powers, but found he couldn't, so he chimed in with his siblings' chanting.

Calypso was dying.

And the border protection right along with her.

Will couldn't breathe.

***

Dylan paced in front of the infirmary, arms crossed in front of his chest and his eyes on his feet as he tried to think.

Hopefully, they had gotten Calypso here in time.

He shook his head.

Wrong thing to think about.

Well, not wrong, but…not what he wanted to think about right now.

What had that been?

It made no sense.

Dylan glanced at Billy, who was huddled next to the stairs of the infirmary, a small heap of misery.

"We did all we could." He said, unable to leave him be.

"I know. It's just…it was all so sudden, Dylan. One moment we're at the Camp border, fighting; the next, you grab me and we run off and find Calypso nearly bleeding out, just in the middle of the woods. Like, how did you know?!" Billy asked, but Dylan shushed him, looking around hurriedly to check whether anybody was nearby to overhear.

Then, he sighed and moved over to his friend, sitting down beside him.

"I don't know. It's just…it was a hunch. There was this snap in the air, and I just…I knew it was the border, so my next thought was: Something must have happened to Calypso. And I just…well, I just went with what my gut told me. I guess. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?! Dylan, it's thanks to you she has a chance to live, why would you apologize for that?!" Billy snapped at him, and Dylan flinched away a little.

"Well, you seem upset about it…" He mumbled defensively, but then shrunk away further when Billy straightened out his back and legs and glowered at him.

What? What had he said?

"I'm not upset about saving her! I'm upset because she nearly died! Because I don't know what's going on! Because you are seriously beginning to scare me with your freaky powers!"

As soon as Billy said it, Dylan saw the regret on his face, though it didn't help the pain in his chest.

He was still having trouble understanding his powers.
He knew they were…unusual. He knew he was scared of them sometimes, too.

But…he had kind of thought Billy, of all people, could accept them. Could accept Dylan.

"I'm sorry." Dylan muttered quietly.

It was strange, how often he apologized these days. But somehow, after a while, it had become easier to say the words, even if the meaning hadn't lessened.

"I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry. It's just…I didn't know what you were doing. You just grabbed my arm and ran away from battle, and I just…I didn't know…" Billy whispered and withdrew back into himself again, and Dylan watched him quietly from the side.

"I thought you were running away. That you were abandoning the border. But then, there was Calypso, on the ground, and the way you immediately made straight for her, as if you just knew she was there, it just…it just felt like…like you…"

Billy didn't have to say it for Dylan to know what he meant.

Funnily enough, he couldn't even feel offended.

"You thought I was the one that attacked her." He summed up, and Billy flinched.

Then, he pulled his knees up further and buried his face in them.

"I wasn't sure what to think. I couldn't think. I know you would never…but…it just…"

And with that, Billy started sniffing, and Dylan found himself in the rather uncomfortable position of having to give some sort of comfort.

"I'm sorry. I promise I had nothing to do with it. I really just went with my gut and dragged you into it. I don't know why I did it. Next time, I'll just go alone…"

That, apparently, was the wrong thing to say, because the next moment, Billy leaped to his feet and looked ready to strangle him.

"Don't you dare! If Calypso, a goddess, can get injured like this, what do you think they'll do to you if they find you?!" He snapped, and why was he so angry?

Dylan blinked up at him, feeling more than a little uneasy at all the anger directed at him.

Then, however, he found his gaze traveling down from Billy's face to his chest, confusion flaring through him.

Billy immediately wrapped his arms around himself, letting out a strangled sound as he turned away from Dylan.

"Don't. It…it tore. During the last attack, before you pulled me away. I had to take it off earlier. Don't look. Please."

Billy's voice sounded so vulnerable, it made Dylan's chest ache in an entirely different way.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. Is there anything I can do to…" He tried tentatively as he pushed himself off the ground, but Billy only shook his head briskly.

"Just. Don't look. I'll deal with this later. I just…I have a few loose shirts, and my chest plates, it's gonna be fine."

He didn't sound very fine to Dylan, though.

"It's really not all that noticeable." He tried, but Billy seemed more uncomfortable by the second.

Dylan lowered his head, along with the hand he had apparently moved towards Billy's shoulder, as if he had intended to touch him.
"How about you go back to your cabin? I'll stay here, and once I know anything new, I'll let you know, okay?" He suggested, and already knew Billy would agree when Billy was still contemplating his words.

"Yeah…okay. But you'll come right away, yeah?"

Dylan was about to reply with an immediate 'Of course', but then found a tinge of…guilt, which gave him pause.

He…wouldn't tell Billy right away? But why would he not?

That made no sense.

"Don't worry, you won't be left in the dark." He replied instead, trying to get behind the odd feeling in the pit of his stomach, though it seemed pointless.

Billy eyed him a moment longer, then he sighed again and clapped Dylan on the shoulder with one hand, the other arm still covering his chest, though there really wasn't much to see there.

Just…a bit of boob, Dylan guessed. If one looked closely.

Oh man, he had made Billy uncomfortable because of something so stupid.

"Alright, thanks, man. And…I'm sorry for what I said. Your powers do freak me out a little, but…I trust you. You and your powers, I guess. I just want you to know that." Billy said quietly, and Dylan tried for a smile.

"It's okay. I freak myself out on a regular basis, too. You should hear my frantic screech whenever I look in a mirror."

That was a lie. Dylan had never screamed when looking in a mirror. He never screamed, at all – well…okay, maybe sometimes.

Billy still smiled though, so Dylan was glad for his obvious lie.

He waved, and Billy did half a wave back, before he trudged off towards the cabins with his arms wrapped around himself, looking a lot less confident than usual.

Dylan watched him go, then crossed his arms in front of his chest again, before he began pacing once more.

It still made no sense.

What had that been?

Why had Calypso been attacked? To weaken the Camp border, yes, but why?

The monsters hadn't seemed to know what was happening, so the effort had been wasted, for the most part.

By the time the first hellhound had accidentally passed into the Camp grounds, Calypso had already been in the process of getting healed, so the border had strengthened again, and the next monster had slammed into it while the hellhound had been struck down.

It still made no sense.

Even if some of the monsters had managed to get inside the Camp, there hadn't been enough monsters in the battle to really make much of an impact.

If the border had been swarming with monsters, which had happened before, then Dylan would understand how much damage it would do to the Camp and campers if they got inside.

But…this…?

It made no sense.
Also, what had the guys been doing?

Dylan could have sworn he had seen Will running through the forest with a horrorstruck face when he had run through it with Billy.

Had he been the one to…no, that was stupid.

Dylan didn't need his gut to tell him Will had nothing to do with Calypso's wounds.

He did need his gut though to give him some sort of clue about what Will had been doing in the woods, at all.

They had come from the woods, too.

Will and Jackson and Nico, all three of them looking like they had just seen a ghost.

What had happened? Why the forest?

Grace had been fighting at the border, so why would they be so far away?

It was too unusual for them, to get sidetracked by anything and just…leave like that.

Dylan stopped pacing and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and trying to make sense of the things flooding through his mind, looking for the solution.

"Hey, kiddo." Clarisse's voice interrupted him, and he opened one eye to glare at her as she left the infirmary.

"Hello."

They got along better since his rather embarrassing outbreak on Chase's phone, but only marginally so.

"So grumpy. Anyways, I heard you and Billy got Cal here just in time. Good job, kid. Always knew you had it in you." She said and bumped her fist against his shoulder, and Dylan wished people would stop doing that.

Billy was always doing that, and he swore his shoulder was going to permanently bruise at this rate.

"It was just luck." He replied, but Clarisse merely shrugged and stood next to him, looking down at him with half a smirk on her face.

"If you say so. So…you and Billy, huh?"

Dylan felt his face heating involuntarily as he jumped away from her by at least a foot.

"W-What? What makes you say that?!" He exclaimed, unable to comprehend how talking about saving Calypso suddenly led to this.

"You and him, alone in the woods? Come on, that's not something you just do. And don't tell me it was 'just luck' that you ran into each other there, because I'm not buying it."

Dylan was going to murder Billy's half-sister.

"It wasn't like that! We…erm…we just…I heard something weird, so we went to check it out."

"Sure." Clarisse agreed with a serious nod, but Dylan had the very strong impression that she didn't believe him one bit.

"Whatever. We're not like that. I'm not gay." He insisted and crossed his arms in front of his chest again.

"Of course you're not. You like that other girl, too, right? If anything, I'd guess you're bi. Possibly poly, too."
Dylan made a strangled sound and clapped his hands over his ears.

Those were things he was still trying to figure out, himself, and he didn't need her talking about them and confusing him even more when there were so many much more important things to figure out right now.

"I can't hear you! Get away, demon, before I drench you in holy water!" He exclaimed, but Clarisse only laughed loudly, her hands on her hips and her expression one of glee.

Freaking monster, she was.

"Where are you going to get holy water from? Oh man, I'd love to see that. But fine, you're still in denial. You do you, I guess."

Dylan acted as if he couldn't hear her.

Clarisse merely punched his shoulder again.

Oh man, he needed to get some sort of brace. Or armor. Yes, armor would be awesome.

"Oh well, I got to go. Lots of stuff to do, now that Annabeth is out of commission, too."

Dylan immediately perked up.

"Annabeth? What happened to her?" He asked, perplexed, because she hadn't been at the border, and where else could anything have happened to her?

Unless…unless Calypso's assaulter had also found Annabeth…

Dylan felt rather nauseous when he realized that this did feel like the truth. A lot like the truth.

But…how…

"Still a bit sketchy, because the guys are a bit beside themselves right now. I mean, just look inside and you'll see what I mean. But from what I gathered, that Kyle-guy got inside the Camp somehow, and he went after Will again, for whatever reason. Annabeth tried to stop him, I guess. She'll make it, but she got injured rather badly. Jason brought her in earlier. I'm surprised that you didn't see it."

That must have been when Dylan had been inside the infirmary to maybe get a chance to talk to Will, just to have Billy exclaim he couldn't stand this and rushing outside.

He had known it was Jason who had passed him when he had run out after his friend, and he had known he had been carrying something, but he honestly hadn't stopped to think about what or who that could have been.

So, Annabeth had been wounded by Kyle.

And Annabeth had been attacked by the same person that had attacked Calypso.

Dylan frowned.

Okay, that made no sense again.

Kyle might be behind the attack, seeing as it explained the big why – a weakened or nonexistent border would of course allow Kyle inside Camp even with his ban, and it would pose a wonderful distraction to keep the rest of the Camp busy.

However, it wasn't possible for Kyle to be the attacker both times, because, he was banned.

Dylan had asked about that ban several times, he knew Kyle wouldn't be able to take one step past the Camp border.

How would he possibly be able to get in here and injure Calypso?

"You still with me, kiddo?"
He really wished Clarisse would stop calling him that.

"Just thinking about some things." He muttered evasively, and she tilted her head a little as she regarded him, but then she only shrugged.

"Well, alright. Don't break your head over thinking so hard. See you around, yeah?"

"Yeah, see you." Dylan mumbled with a faint wave in her direction, then put his hand to his lips as he frowned at the ground.

There was something else there that wasn't adding up.

Why would Kyle go through the hassle of getting inside the Camp, just to pursue Will again?

Hadn't he done that before and failed? Why would he try again?

What was so important about Will, anyways?

Dylan thought of the blonde healer, and felt his face warming, though he tried to push it down.

_He had to be neutral about this. Also, he definitely did not have a thing for that guy. At all. Ever._

_He was not gay!_

Unbiddenly, he thought of Jason, and started grinding his teeth. Not gay for _him_, either.

Dylan thought of Billy, and threw his hands up with a loud groan.

"Wow, what a manly display of emotion." Fae deadpanned behind him, and Dylan screeched and jumped away in terror.

"F-Fae! W-What are you doing here? I mean, it's great to see you! Billy left for his cabin, though. I'm just standing here, pondering nothing. I mean, I'm doing nothing. I mean, I'm doing _something_…"

Yeah, he was making a fool of himself. Again.

Fae raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him, then tossed her hair back with a practice nudge of her head that made Dylan want to sigh.

Now, _that_ girl he did have a crush on.

She was just…so pretty. And nice. When she wasn't scowling at him, that was.

"You're rambling again, Dylan."

"Yeah, I am…" He agreed with a nod and a dreamy smile, before realizing he was making an even bigger idiot of himself.

Fae didn't seem surprised in the slightest.

"Anyways, Dimitri said that Kayla said that Will said that Calypso will make it. She's still very weak and hasn't regained consciousness yet, but apparently, she's out of the woods. Just thought I'd let you know." She summed up, and Dylan let out a sigh of relief – both because of the info, and because she spared him the fate of making even more of a fool of himself.

"That's great!" He said a little louder than necessary, but Fae only gave him a questioning look.

"So, will you tell Billy, or should I? He seemed apprehensive while he was in there, so I didn't want to bother, and he clearly wanted _you_ around more than me." She stated, and there was something almost _bitter_ in her voice.

Wait…

Wait, was she _jealous_?
Dylan cringed inwardly, knowing this was just another proof that she was not interested in him in the slightest, but completely into Billy.

He was about to assure her Billy would love to see her, when he hesitated.

Billy's binder was broken. He was uncomfortable and unhappy.

Fae didn't yet know about Billy being transgender.

What if Billy didn't want her around right now? How would Dylan know whether it was okay to let her go to him?

Then again, wouldn't this be perfect for them? It would bring them closer together, right?

It had certainly brought Dylan and Billy closer, after all.

Now, if Billy confided into Fae, she would undoubtedly be able to ease his worries and make him feel better, and then, those two would be closer than ever, and undoubtedly…start dating…

Dylan felt his chest aching, and he swallowed down the lump building in his throat.

"You can go and tell him. I'll stay in case there's any more news." He decided, and Fae blinked, seeming surprised.

"You…what? But what news? Calypso will make it, isn't that what you and Billy wanted to know? What else would there be?"

Yeah, what else would there be?

Dylan wasn't sure, but it felt wrong to leave just yet.

Not when he hadn't yet figured out what had happened.

"Just go talk to him, please. He's…a little upset, I think." He muttered evasively again, and she gave him an odd look.

"Did something happen between you two, Dylan?" She then asked skeptically, but he didn't meet her gaze as he shook his head and kicked at some stones on the ground.

Oh man, the path to the infirmary was so worn down there wasn't even anything growing here anymore.

Just stones and dirt. How ugly.

"Not really."

"Then why would he be upset?"

Yeah, why would he be? Dylan felt a bitter taste in his mouth as he thought of the discomfort in Billy's gaze, and the way he had covered himself so frantically.

"Maybe you should ask him about that, yourself. Anyways, if he asks, just tell him I'm gonna stay here a while longer. Just…yeah." He replied at long last, though he wasn't sure why he bothered.

He already knew Billy wouldn't come looking for him, at least not today.

Same as he already knew he wouldn't stay here for too much longer, though he didn't yet know why.

"Well…alright. If you say so. But…are you sure you're alright? You seem…weird." Fae said hesitantly, and Dylan rejoiced a little at the knowledge she did care for him, even if only a little.

"I'm great. Just…thinking over some stuff." He replied, and it had sounded way cooler in his head than when he said it to her, because that just made him sound borderline dismissive, which wasn't his intention at all.
"Well, alright…I just thought I'd ask, because of the whole thing with the possessing, you know? I heard Nico di Angelo is going to give lessons soon, so we can ward off future attacks and protect ourselves. Then again, I doubt anybody would want to possess us, right? We don't even know anything." Fae mused, and Dylan stared at her.

Something in his mind clicked.

Ah. That's how *that* connected, then.

"Yeah, you're right. I think we're safe for now, but I do think those lessons sound really cool. We should totally go. I mean, unless we're separated in groups and won't be able to go together – or, I mean, if you rather go without me, or with Billy- I mean, of course you're going to want to go with Billy, but I hoped I could come along, if you don't mind – or he, for that matter. Oh, who am I kidding, you probably *do*, and I'm just-…"

Oh no, here he went, making a fool of himself all over again.

Would that ever stop? His gut cruelly told him no.

He was freed from his torture when Fae chuckled, the sound like music to his ears and instantly making him shut up to listen.

She was so pretty. And kind. And sweet.

Such a lovely girl.

Oh man, he had it bad for her.

"Oh, you're yourself, alright. Nobody else could possibly ramble like that. Anyways, I'm sure Billy would be okay with you coming along, in case we can go together. I'll be going now, alright?" She told him, and there was a smile on her lips, just for Dylan, and Dylan was the happiest boy alive.

"Sure. Tell Billy I'm sorry for not coming over to tell him about Calypso, myself. I told him I would, but I think he'll prefer your company right now." He told her, and she rewarded him with a bright, hopeful smile.

"You think so? Well, I'll let him know you're here, just in case he wants to see you."

He wouldn't, but Dylan didn't tell her that.

Instead, he nodded and held up a thumb, like the idiot he was.

"Thanks a bunch, you're the best."

She winked at him.

"Don't I know it. Have fun thinking."

Oh, he wouldn't have any fun with that, but her smile surely brightened his day.

"Will do. See you later."

"See you." She said, then left, and he watched her go with a sigh.

Wow, he had really sent her to Billy. He couldn't quite believe it.

But hey, this would give Billy a chance to come out to her like he had wanted to do, and once that was done…oh, whatever.

Dylan ignored the ache in his chest as turned his back to her and the cabins, instead pacing once more.

There were more important things to worry about right now than that.
Like this thing with Kyle.

So...he had possessed someone to hurt Calypso, then, once the border was weakened, he had slipped inside to...go after Will. Again.

Why?

Dylan paced in front of the infirmary, knowing it was pointless to ponder all of this without more intel, but also feeling like this was the right time and place, so he lingered.

People came and left the infirmary, mostly limping or bleeding on their way in, and all patched up by the time they got out.

Dylan saw them out of the corners of his eyes as he paced, though he didn't pay much attention.

"It's amazing, though. A couple of days ago, that place was packed. Now, Will has only been back two days and everything seems so much more organized. I heard they even managed to empty out some of the beds." A kid said to his friend, and Dylan glanced over his shoulder with no interest, watching both of them hop down the steps.

"I know! I bet it's because he can do that thing with the glowing. He heals injuries so much faster than the others. I heard that he's using his own powers for that. I mean, how cool is that? I wish I had healing powers like that, too." The friend replied, and Dylan rolled his eyes, before pacing again.

What was it with these people, always wishing they had different powers than their own?

Dylan should wish for other powers, something that made him better at fighting or more useful to Billy, but no, he had weird powers that weren't actually powers.

More like...an enhanced and improved gut feeling, he guessed.

It would be great for filling out questionnaires, but battles? Not so much.

Now, Dylan rolled his eyes to himself.

No, he was good with his powers. They were his mother's powers, and he would cherish and hone them to the best of his abilities, if only to let his other mother know that he had tried.

He was always trying, these days. Trying to be a better person, trying to atone for his past behavior, trying to help people, trying to be more open-minded.

Dylan felt his concentration wavering, and pulled himself back to the matter at hand.

Why had Kyle come back for Will?

If he had wanted him, he should have snatched him while he was out and about with the guys.

If Kyle really thought he couldn't catch Will when he was on the move with Grace and the others, then there was no way he could have expected to catch Will once he was back in Camp – which meant something must have happened that forced him to take action.

From what Dylan had gathered so far, the man was smart.

He wouldn't just do something for the hell of it, so he must have had a reason.

If only Dylan knew the whole story of why he had wanted Will, to begin with...

It couldn't just be because of that fucked up background of theirs, it just didn't make sense.

Sure, Dylan's gut told him that Kyle's feelings did play a part in the whole, but it wasn't all there was to it.

Dylan groaned and buried his face in his hands.

Then, he started becoming annoyed by all the people leaving the infirmary, because they all got to
Then, he started becoming annoyed by all the people leaving the infirmary, because they all got to bear witness to his open display of dismay.

Wait…

Dylan turned around and looked at the infirmary, thinking over the conversation he had just overheard.

Then, he started walking up the front steps and slipped inside, expecting to see all the chairs filled up and medics rushing about.

But the waiting area was mostly empty, and other than Kayla, there wasn't even any Apollo kid around.

There was Jackson, though, cowering in one of the chairs with his arms on his knees and his face in his hands, looking unusually defeated.

Grace was also there, pacing.

He was still dirty from head to toe, but the injuries on his arms and face had apparently been taking care of.

Dylan couldn't even see a scratch on him anymore.

He squinted at them, though they luckily didn't take notice of him.

Neither did Kayla, so Dylan walked down the hall to the open doors, peeking inside out of curiosity.

There were only a few kids, a marked change from the many injured campers that had been stuck in here the past weeks. Most of the kids that were still here were already done, just sitting there chatting with others or inspecting the lack of wounds on their arms and legs.

Then, Dylan came to the next to last door, and watched Nico di Angelo with his arms crossed in front of his chest and his pants gods knew where, just standing in the middle of the room in his underpants, which was something Dylan had not needed to see.

However, that wasn't where his focus was, anyways.

It was on Will, who was kneeling next to Nico with his hands hovering over what Dylan assumed was Nico's hip, where he could also spot what looked like dried blood.

Will's hands were glowing a warm gold, and his expression was one of concentration, though Dylan couldn't hear him chanting.

"This won't take long, Nico. I'm more than fine with this."

"I don't care. You shouldn't wear yourself out so much, Will. I know you're on the verge of breaking down, especially after all that earlier. I don't want you straining yourself unnecessarily. Preserve your powers." Nico replied, and his voice was unusually soft, much softer than Dylan had ever heard before, much less expected to hear now.

"I'm fine."

"I hate it when you say that, sunshine."

Yeah, he really did, Dylan could tell.

He wondered what the background behind that was, but had a hunch, all the same.

Then again, it wasn't important.

His little revelation was, though.

Dylan stepped back, and saw Will turning his head to shoot him a questioning look, so Dylan instantly stilled to give him a chance to get a good look of him.
He didn't want him thinking he was sneaking around or doing anything sketchy, because that was the last thing Dylan needed.

Will's eyes narrowed a little, and Dylan made a face.

Great, he was still upset with him about the whole thing with Jason. Typical.

Dylan should probably try and apologize to him at some point. (Again.)

He gave him a tentative nod, trying to show he meant no harm, while also trying to signal that he didn't want to talk or bother him in any way.

Will eyed him warily for another moment, then he nodded back with pursed lips and a slight frown, before he averted his gaze again and focused back on his healing.

Nico didn't take any notice of Dylan, but that was okay, Dylan didn't care about him, either.

Instead, he took this as his cue to leave, so he did.

When he got back to the waiting area, Grace had stopped pacing and was crouching in front of Jackson, his hands resting on Jackson's knees and their faces pushed close together, a silent conversation taking place.

Seriously, what was wrong with Jackson, anyways? He seemed so…down, lately.

It would worry Dylan, too, but he guessed he couldn't solve all mysteries today.

Dylan nodded towards Kayla when she glanced at him, but she wasn't paying much attention, already back to watching the guys.

He didn't care, instead hurriedly leaving the infirmary.

So, Kyle had come to Camp to get Will…because Will could heal without godly help?

No, that didn't seem quite right. Because Will was more powerful than originally expected, maybe.

Yeah, that was closer.

Dylan watched a couple of kids that were on their way to the cabins from the arena, weapons still strapped to their sides.

Maybe Kyle was concerned that Will's powers could be used offensively, not just for healing.

From what Dylan had just seen, it was basically light.

Kyle seemed to mostly consist of dark stuff, similar to Nico. It would make sense for him to fear Will the most.

But then why try and take him, rather than just killing him? Just because he still wanted him?

Dylan pondered that, then decided to push it aside to focus on the next question.

Why now?

Was he in a rush? It hadn't seemed like it.

Dylan thought back to what Fae had said, and started nibbling on his bottom lip as he hopped down the steps of the infirmary, eyes still far away.

Because Nico was going to give lessons that would prevent Kyle from possessing people.

That was why he had acted now.

But had Kyle been doing that until now, then? Possessing people? Was that how he got his intel?
No, there was still the spy…

The spy…

Dylan looked back at the kids running around, some on their way to the arena, some coming from there, some moving up to the border, some coming from there.

The spy.

If Kyle had known about Nico's lessons, that meant the spy must have told him.

Dylan had to ask Fae later who had told her about those lessons, because this had been the first time Dylan had heard of it.

All in all, the spy had to be somebody close to them, most likely a friend of Chase or McLean, since they were the brains here.

But how did the spy communicate with Kyle?

Iris-Message? That required so much money, though. Money nobody here had.

So, private talks?

Dylan felt a twinge in his gut and started frowning again, feeling annoyed and frustrated with himself.

He wished his gut could just tell him things, rather than forcing him to ask himself a hundred different questions an hour.

But he guessed everyone had to make do with what they had.

He looked into the distance again, taking in the lake and the sun reflecting in the water.

Nobody would be able to just leave Camp and come back, unless they were fighting at the border – and there, everyone kept a close eye on each other to prevent any kidnappings or the like, so there was no way anybody could sneak away, either.

But then how did they talk? Did Kyle have any special way of communication that they didn't yet know of?

No. No, that wasn't it.

Dylan huffed out a frustrated breath and tore his eyes away from the lake, instead looking at a bunch of kids huddled together and muttering.

So many new kids these days.

So young, too.

Dylan was pretty sure the youngest camper was now a six-year old, which was insane.

What family allowed their six-year old to just leave and stay at a Camp for such long amounts of time without other people their age? Not to mention, at that age, monsters usually showed no interest unless the kid was especially powerful.

Which…wasn't the case for this six-year old, as far as Dylan could tell.

Dylan frowned a little.

There really were a lot of younger kids here these days.

He thought back to that girl that came a while back, the one with the deaf boy.

Dylan only remembered her because she had been so angry and resentful in the beginning, snarling at everybody who dared to attempt talking to her, including Billy.
(Dylan could never sit still whenever Billy was upset, and man did he look heartbroken when that girl bitched at him.)

She hadn't made it a secret why she hated them all, though Dylan had never heard the whole story.

Something about her family, and demigods attacking them, which had sounded like a bunch of bullshit to Dylan.

Now, however, he found himself contemplating whether…

Dylan looked at the kids, then towards another bunch that were near the lake, then towards a single boy running around near the woods.

The youngsters were too young and inexperienced to fight yet, so they didn't have to bother with too much training.

There were also so many by now that it was hard for Dylan to keep track.

Dylan started moving.

They would be perfect for carrying messages.

Nobody would notice one of the youngsters missing for a bit, but moreover, nobody would know if there was one that didn't belong to Camp.

What if Kyle was using kids as messengers?

Dylan's heart started beating faster as he started walking faster, not quite knowing where he was going yet, but knowing his feet would carry him to the right place.

It would explain so much. If Kyle or his people had truly attacked that girl's family in order to get to her, chances were, he had tried to get other demigods, and who would want to recruit little kids for their army?

However, for spying, they would be so perfect it was laughable that Dylan hadn't immediately thought of it.

Now, for the spy…

Nobody would suspect somebody to be sketchy just because they hung out with kids every here and there.

Nobody would look twice if they saw someone talking to one of the youngsters.

It had to be a friendly, open person, easily approachable.

It had to be an older person, old enough to either be friends with Chase and McLean, or with somebody who was close to them, and their group of trusted tended to be rather tight.

(Dylan had to know, seeing as he wasn't in it.)

It had to be somebody who supported Kyle's motives – and Dylan didn't know these yet, but everything about Kyle seemed mysterious and dark, so his plans for their future certainly weren't ones Dylan was interested in, he could already tell that much.

Dylan felt so close to the answer, he could feel the tingling spreading from his gut to his entire body.

But then, he also found himself faltering.

What would he do once he knew? Tell Chase? She was out of commission. McLean? Then what would she do?

Nico hadn't taught anybody anything yet, Kyle could still possess people.
Once he knew his spy had been caught, he would undoubtedly try and dispose of the spy as quickly as possible to prevent them from finding out anything.

And worse, he could just send a new spy in, have one of his youngsters sneak in here and mingle with the others.

It would be so easy, too, because they barely had any way to keep track of campers anymore, and Dylan had seen how quickly these kids accepted new ones without question.

Most of the satyrs had gone missing as it was. Dylan wouldn't be surprised if Kyle's people held some of them hostage somewhere, just in case.

It would be so simple to let one of those go free and bring a kid to the Camp with a dramatic story of near-death and battles. They could even wound the satyr and threaten to kill the kid to prevent the satyr from talking, and if the satyr ended up dying from its wounds, even better.

Dylan stopped walking and moved a hand through his hair with a deep breath.

Okay, but something had to happen.

He had to find the spy.

If he didn't find the spy, then they would keep sending info to Kyle, and the Camp would be doomed.

How could he find the spy and stop this, all without exposing the spy?

Dylan thought through the various scenarios in his head, trying to find the one way that eluded him so far.

Then, he found himself thinking of Clovis, who was still in the infirmary, and who still hadn't regained consciousness.

Mitchell still visited him daily. Dylan knew, because he sometimes visited, too, and there were always fresh flowers on the bedside table – and, sometimes, Mitchell was still there, sleeping on the chair or sitting at the small table in the corner with a lost look on his face.

Nobody knew whether Clovis would recover.

Nobody but Dylan.

But sometimes, it was better to let people hope.

Dylan looked up at the sky again, noticing the clouds that were building just past the border, indicating another storm.

If anything, Clovis' fate showed him not to get too involved, because this wasn't a movie, and he wasn't the main character of the story.

If he got too involved, a fate much worse than Clovis' might befall him.

Dylan looked towards the cabins – mainly the Ares one.

However, if he didn't get involved…was he really willing to sit by idly and do nothing? Was he willing to risk Billy's and Fae's lives, just out of fear for his own welfare?

It was dangerous thinking, of course.

One always had to look out for themselves, else they would die without sense or reason, and that wouldn't do anybody any good.

Throwing one's life away was never good, after all.

Dylan looked down at his hands, contemplating his options once more.
Then, he made his decision.

If he couldn't expose the spy…

He could still find it.

He could follow it.

He could manipulate what the spy found out, and thus manipulate what Kyle knew.

And if he ended up getting too close to Kyle in the process…

Dylan looked up and started moving again, following his instincts.

Then he could still become the spy.

***

One step. Then another.

A broken nose to heal.

An arm to bandage.

Will tried not to think.

He was…calm, for the most part.

On the outside.

On the inside, he felt hollow. Empty. Like a shell. About to break.

In his mind, he was still outside, ankle-deep in the water, and Kyle was in front of him.

Will blinked and continued with his job.

A cracked rib. Will healed.

A sprained ankle. Will healed.

His boyfriend's worried face. Will healed.

"This is it, we're leaving, sunshine." Nico snapped at him, and Will guessed he shouldn't be surprised.

He let Nico tug him with him though, out of the room he was in, and past the others.

Will would let them do anything.

He saw his siblings' faces flashing by, all of them full of worry, all of them full of understanding.

What were they even worried about? What did they think they understood?

Percy and Jason were next to the door, apparently just waiting for them.

What were they even waiting for? Will was still out there, about to be snatched from their midst.

It was a dream.

This was nothing but a dream.

What was he doing, staying with the guys? He should run, run as far as he could, where they couldn't find him, where only Kyle could find him.

So they could be safe.

Will stared forward unseeingly, wondering faintly what he had been thinking these past weeks.
Months.
Maybe even years.
Escape Kyle? *Fight* him?
Laughable.
Will was nobody. Will was Kyle’s.
Kyle would never let him go.
Will's gaze moved down, watching green blurs of grass.
He should be scared.
But he wasn’t.
Once one accepted their fate, they didn't need to fear it anymore.
A hand squeezed his intently.
He didn't react.
Somebody said something.
He didn't hear it.
A door was pushed open, and Will was tugged inside.
He let it happen.
"Will, look at me." Nico said, and Will dragged his eyes up, though it was difficult to focus on the face in front of his.
"I'm fine." He said, because it was so much easier to lie, than to articulate what was going on inside him.
"Don’t." Percy hissed, but Will didn't know what else to say.
"I still haven't gotten a chance to heal you." He said instead as Nico made him sit on the bed, but Percy immediately recoiled.
"Don't. I'm not injured." He insisted through clenched teeth, too far away for Will to reach.
Will gazed at him, but his eyes kept drifting, rather settling on Percy's cheek than his eyes, and rather on the faraway wall than Percy's face.
He dimly knew Percy was struggling, that he needed reassurance and love.
But Will couldn't give it. He couldn't give anything.
"What happened?" Jason asked, and the way he said it showed he must have asked this question a lot in the past hours.
"Kyle." Nico spat, and Will didn't even flinch, merely letting his shoulders fall as resignation filled him.
Kyle.
He was everywhere.
Always. At all times.
Will would never be able to escape him.
Nico’s hands grabbed his shoulders, and Will tried to look up at him with more than the emptiness he felt inside.

"Will, snap out of it. He won't get you. We won't let him."

Will couldn't help it.

He smiled.

"But don't you see? He'll find a way, Nico. He always gets what he wants."

Nico looked like he had been slapped.

Will half expected to be slapped, too.

"What. Happened." Jason asked again, and now, his voice was low and threatening, but Will wasn't scared.

He couldn't find it in him to be scared.

His worst fear was already coming true, there was nothing else anymore.

"He won't get you. Will, you saw us fight. We can fight him again! And next time, we'll be prepared. We'll be stronger." Nico insisted, but Will only closed his eyes and shook his head with a small smile.

He had seen them. The way they had suffered, the way he had hurt them.

There wouldn't be a next time.

Will couldn't let it happen.

"I'm sorry." Percy said, so quietly it was barely even audible, but the Hades cabin was always a little quieter than quiet by itself, so they heard.

"You did great, Percy. You stood your ground, you fought back, and you were amazing." Nico instantly insisted, and Will knew he should nod, knew he should agree.

He didn't.

Instead, he put his face in his hands and kept his eyes shut, trying to ban the images from his mind.

"Can somebody please tell me what happened?!" Jason repeated, but Nico didn't do it, Percy couldn't do it, and Will was beginning to rock back and forth a little, finding the motion rather soothing.

Hands snatched his shoulders again to keep him still, but Will didn't bother looking up.

"Will! Look at me!" Nico repeated his earlier demand, and there was something near frantic in his voice that should have made Will react.

However, he didn't.

"Will, please…"

Please was a horrible word. A weak word.

Will would never get away with saying please, again.

Then again, had he ever?

"You can't just give up like that. Come on, where's your willpower? You said you trusted us, you said you believed in us. Where is that now?" Nico asked, and he sounded hurt, yet hopeful.

Will, however, was still out there, and he would never come back.
"You said you would fight him, Will. That you wouldn't let him control you anymore. Why are you trying to make it easier for him now? You should be plotting against him, Will. You should look me in the eye and tell me you're stronger than this, because I know that you are. I know it, Will. I know you. You've gone through so much, and he is nothing. He's nothing, Will. You hear me?"

He heard him.

But Will had seen the way Nico had struggled, and he knew how weakened he was, and he knew how much stronger Kyle had been.

It was pointless.

He had signed their death sentence.

"Will, don't do this to me. To us. Come on, look at me! Look at yourself! Is this what you want? Do you want to be back there? Do you want him to get what he wants?"

It had stopped being about what Will wanted a long time ago.

Had he ever wanted anything? He couldn't remember.

"Well, I don't want it, Will. Do you hear me? I don't want that. And neither do Percy or Jason. We need you here, with us. You hear that? We. Need. You."

Nico could talk so beautifully. The way he punctuated his words, the way his voice turned higher when he was scared.

He was scared.

Of course he was. He hadn't accepted his fate, yet.

"What did he do?" Jason asked, still not giving up.

It didn't matter.

He would give up eventually.

Hands pried his away, followed by his face being pushed upwards, but he didn't flinch, merely trying to focus on Nico's face.

He was sidetracked by the light on their ceiling, such a bright contrast to the rest of the world.

"Will, don't do this! Snap out of it! Smile, laugh, cry, but, for the love of all the gods in the world, stop looking like that."

He was so scared.

Didn't he understand?

They were already dead.

"Do you want me to heal you?" He asked, because it was all he could think of, and all he could do.

Nico shoved him away.

"No! I want my boyfriend back! My sassy, loud and obnoxious boyfriend, who smiles brighter than the sun and carries his heart on his sleeve!"

Now he was crying.

Will had made him cry.

Will lowered his head, but there was nothing he could do to help him anymore.
"Can we just talk, just for one moment?" Jason asked, and his voice was strained.

This time, Nico did him the favor and reacted.

"What do you want to know, Grace?! While you were forced to fight off monsters, some asshole injured Calypso and the border broke. Kyle got in, immediately went after Will, I failed to contain him, Annabeth nearly got cut in two, Will got pursued, I ran after them, found them in our clearing with Percy fighting him off, joined the fight, he threatened us with hurting you, you and your sister pulled the lightning-stunt the same moment Calypso regained some energy, the border got put intact again, and he was forced out. Happy now? Is this what you wanted to hear?" Nico yelled at him, and Will should be the one calming them, telling them everything was going to be okay, that there was no need to yell.

Instead, Will started rocking back and forth again.

"Will is going crazy, and Percy looks like he wants to commit suicide any moment now. I really have other things to worry about that keeping you updated, for fuck's sake!"

He was going crazy, Nico said.

But didn't he know that Will had been crazy all along?

He had seriously believed they could do this.

That they could win the war.

That he could find a way to protect his guys.

"I'm sorry." Percy whispered again, and he could feel what Will couldn't, because he was crying, and Will wasn't.

"There's nothing to be sorry for, Percy!" Nico exclaimed in frantic agitation.

"It's already over, anyways." Will said quietly, and suddenly, there was silence again.

"Do you really believe that?"

Nico's voice was quiet, almost a whisper just like Percy's, a breath in the wind.

Will dragged his gaze back up to him.

"Don't you?"

Nico's bottom lip quivered, though he was shaking his head, looking at Will as if he saw him for the first time.

"Do you really have so little faith in us?" He asked, and his voice was so fragile, it would have torn Will to shreds at any other point of his life.

"I'm sorry." Will said blankly. It was all that came to mind, though he wasn't sure whether he meant it.

Nico stared at him with a pain in his gaze that would undoubtedly haunt Will for the rest of his days.

"Then go."

"Nico, no!" Jason snarled, but Nico held up his hand, his eyes on Will as if he saw him for the first time.

Will met his gaze with an empty one of his own.

"Then go. Make it easy for him, Will. Be his again. Let him mistreat you, let him abuse you, let him rape you the way he promised he would. Go." Nico said, and his voice was cold and calm, but Will could see the tears streaming down his cheeks and the way his Adam's apple bobbed as
he swallowed repeatedly.

Will closed his eyes for a moment.

Then, he got up.

Percy let out a sound Will would never be able to put into words, heart-wrenching and cruel.

Jason drew a sharp breath.

Nico only gave Will a cold stare, even as he swallowed thickly.

Didn't they see?

Will was already dead.

One step. Then another.

"Will..." Percy breathed, pleaded, prayed.

"If you truly want to go, we're not stopping you. If you truly think you're better off with him, then do it. Abandon us. Leave us so you can heroically throw your life away for nothing." Nico said coldly, and Will stared blankly past him at the door, seeming so far away, and he felt so heavy.

Another step.

"He's being delirious. You can't seriously do this, Nico." Jason tried to negotiate, but Nico shook his head.

"Are you going to force him to stay, Jason? You and I both know he's going to leave the moment we let our guard down. You and I both know he's going to run away. What will you do, tie him to the bed?"

"If it's what keeps him safe, then so be it." Jason growled, and Nico growled right back.

"He won't understand. In his mind, he's already back with Kyle. He's a puppet, Jason. If he doesn't snap out of it by himself, he's going to do everything he can to get back to his master."

Another step.

"So, what, you're just going to let him go back?! Are you out of your mind?! In what world does it seem like a good idea to let him get himself tortured and killed?"

"Like this, he's already dead!" Nico yelled back, and Will passed him.

Then, he left him behind.

He left them all behind.

Will lowered his head, though he tried not to think.

Was he even capable of thinking?

"I'm not letting you do this, Nico!" Jason snarled, and Will could faintly hear the sounds of a struggle behind him, though he didn't turn to check.

Instead, he stumbled onwards, towards the door that seemed so impossibly far away, while his body screamed at him in agony.

"Enough." Percy whispered into the sound of snarls and thuds and crashes.

Will took another step.

"You're not doing this!" Jason yelled.

"Watch me!" Nico yelled back.
"Enough." Percy whispered, a little louder.

Another step.

It was so far away.

Why was the door so far away?

This was supposed to be easy.

The easy way out. The only way out.

He had to do this, if he wanted to keep them alive.

Will struggled, his body working against him at every move.

Gods, did he want to keep them alive.

It was all he wanted.

It was all he had ever wanted.

He had to do this. It was all he could do.

Behind him, there was a loud crash, two bodies slamming into a wall, then the ground.

"Enough!" Percy yelled, and suddenly, the world came to a halt in one long, blissful second.

Then, the light exploded, followed by the water fountain in the corner, followed by the sound of ceramic bursting in the bathroom, followed by somebody screaming outside, followed by the roar of the lake and the sea.

Followed by Will turning his head, just to find Percy standing in front of the bed, his hands balled to fists at his sides, his eyes obscured by his bangs.

Jason and Nico were on the ground, staring at Percy with wide eyes, though they didn't say a word.

Then, Percy moved forward, towards Will, and Will averted his gaze to the ground, eyes closing as he readied himself for the blow.

It didn't come.

Instead, a hand took his, fingers threading together with his own.

"Where you go, I go. I promised not to leave you unless it's to let you go. I can't let you go."

Percy said, and Will knew he meant it.

'Promise me you won't leave me unless it's to let me go.'

He had asked Percy to promise that, all that time ago, after he had first had that vision of his fall.

He had been a fool.

He should have taken that fate the moment it had offered itself to him so kindly.

Will turned to look at the door, but found he couldn't move.

Not when Percy was there.

He couldn't take Percy with him.

He was doing this for him, too.

He was doing this for them.
It would hurt now, but one day, they would understand.

His throat started burning.

"Then we might as well all be dead." Nico said blankly, and Will gazed back at the ground once more.

"Is that what you want, Will? Will it make you happy?" Nico asked, but Will didn't respond.

Happy?

What was his happiness, compared to their lives?

What was his life, compared to their welfare?

He would gladly throw all of himself away for them, until there was nothing left of him.

And he would do it over and over again, if only to save them.

It was all he had. It was all he could do.

Will took another step, trying to let go of Percy's hand, but he held his in an iron grip.

Something wet ran down his cheek.

"Do you really love us so little?" Nico asked, and Will stopped, blinking, once, at the absurdity of the question.

"So little?" He asked, and there was an air of incredulity in his voice as he turned his head, another tear joining the first.

"I love you." Will continued, and he knew he was beginning to shake, but his body was just so tired.

"I love you more than anything in the world, Nico. I love you so much that it physically hurts me, at times. I love you so much, I don't even know whether I've ever loved anything else quite like I love you. I love you so much, I don't even know how it felt like when I hated myself. I love you so much, I would rip myself apart if only to keep you safe. I would go to hell for you. I will go to hell for you. I will do whatever it takes if only it keeps you alive. I will protect you with every fiber of my being, no matter what he says or does. No matter what awaits me, I will face it, if only to keep you out of it, if only to keep you safe and alive, even if it's not with me."

But Nico was only shaking his head.

"But then who will go, Nico? Who will give him what he wants?" Will asked faintly, but Nico

The room didn't have enough oxygen.

Will felt his lungs struggling for air as his body seemed to abandon him entirely, but he had to keep going.

He had to do it.

It was the only way.

Why did nobody understand?

"But then who will go, Nico? Who will give him what he wants?" Will asked faintly, but Nico
only kept shaking his head, his shoulders slumping.

"Nobody, Will."

Will didn't understand.

"He always gets what he wants. He will slaughter you, Nico. He will take everything from you. Everything." He tried to get him to understand, but Nico kept shaking his head.

Why was he doing that?

"If you leave, he already has everything, Will." Nico said softly, and Will looked from him to Percy, then to Jason, but they only looked at him with the same sad looks that were on Nico's face.

Will looked down at the ground.

"I can't let you die." He whispered, but then Nico was in front of him, one incredibly gentle hand touching his cheek as if he was a jewel, not a broken chain.

"Then stay with us and fight, sole mio. That's what I told you to do last time, and it's still what's necessary now."

But Kyle was too strong.

They would never make it.

"We would die." He whispered, and Nico moved his chin upwards so he could meet his gaze, though Will's vision was too blurry.

"Then we will die. But we will do so standing tall and standing together, with you in our midst, Will. No sacrifices. No giving up. Just fighting until we can't fight anymore."

But now, it was Will shaking his head.

His shoulders shook, too.

As a matter of fact, he was pretty sure his entire body shook.

"But I can't fight, Nico." He whispered helplessly, and Nico stroked over his cheek again, so crazily gently, it made something inside Will strain and crack, and his tears only intensified as the helplessness increased.

"What do you think you've been doing all along, sole mio? You're a fighter, just like us. You've been with us all this time, do you really want to abandon us now?"

Will bit his lip, though it took another moment of struggling for him to shake his head the faintest way possible.

"I want to keep you safe."

They were standing so close, even Jason, but Will couldn't feel them, stuck in his own vortex of feeling and not-feeling.

"Then keep us safe, by staying here. With us." Nico insisted, and Will kept staring at the ground, sniffing to himself.

They would die.

He was signing their death sentence.

They were as good as dead.

Was this truly what he was going to do, just for the sake of a few more days or weeks by their side?
"I can't…" He whispered with a soft shake of his head, because he couldn't do this.

He couldn't do nothing.

He couldn't wait around.

He had waited around now, and Kyle had gotten him, and it was already over.

"Do you want to go, Will?" Nico asked again, but it was such a foolish question, why did he keep asking it?

"I would die for you." He replied weakly, but Nico again decided to shake his head.

"I would rather you lived for us, sunshine."

Why would Nico ask this of him?

 Didn't he see what Will being alive did to everybody else? To them?

Will wanted to scream.

Will started wailing, instead.

Nico flinched back in surprise, but Jason moved, instead.

One moment, he was behind Percy and Nico, watching Will with that indecipherable look on his face.

The next moment, he was behind Will, wrapping his big arms around him in a bone-crushing hug that kept him in place, that kept him grounded, that did all the things he didn't want it to do.

He didn't want to be calm, he didn't want to stand still – he wanted to scream and yell and thrash around, anything to get rid of Nico's words inside his head, of Kyle under his skin, of the pain bubbling just beneath the surface, beneath the apathy he was hiding in.

Will did start thrashing, wailing and howling, screaming bloody murder as he tried to get away, away from Jason, away from them, away from the crushing grip on him that hurt but felt so good, away from everything that was making him feel.

"Let go! Let go, let me go, let me! No!" He screamed, cried, scratching at Jason's arms and throwing his head back against Jason's chest, but Jason held him, one leg moving between Will's as Will started trying to kick around, and the next moment, he could have sworn he wasn't touching the ground at all, anymore, but Jason kept holding him, anyways, not wavering, not faltering, and not letting go.

He couldn't do this.

He couldn't.

It was too much.

Will felt every bone in his body ache and burn and scream along with his screams, his voice cracking and his face burning everywhere his tears touched.

And then, it was like tipping over a glass of water, and Jason uttered a surprised sound when he was pulled along as Will curled forward in agony, everything coming crashing down on top of him.

Kyle. His boyfriends. The fights.

He had left Nico behind.

The fear. The dread. The not-knowing.

He had left Annabeth behind.
The doubts. The pain. The static in his mind.

_He had failed them._

Slurs filled his mind, abuse he had long forgotten, punishments he had blocked out.

_He was going crazy._

To add salt to injury, his mind chose that moment to _split_, to let him see the ground at his feet at the same time he saw the battle before him, a battle already fought, a battle not yet had.  

He saw Kyle's sneer, he saw Percy's hollow gaze, he saw Nico slashing at Kyle, he saw Percy in the eye of the storm.

He saw Jason being scared, he saw Jason on the ground bleeding and broken, he saw blood pouring from Annabeth's chest, he saw a storm building of the likes he had never seen before.

He saw anger, he saw hatred, he saw Nico fighting, he saw Nico screaming.

He saw Percy…

Will slumped in Jason's arms, his breathing fast and loud and painful, his entire body trembling so hard it only added to his pain.

No.  

It couldn't be. That couldn't happen.

He couldn't _let_ it happen.

He had changed their fate once, he had to be able to do it again…

Will wasn't sure whether he was screaming anymore. He couldn't seem to hear anything.

His eyes were wide open, but the moment the visions stopped, he couldn't see.

Jason held him, keeping him tightly pressed against him for centuries longer before he lowered them to the ground carefully.

Will stared at the ground, not sure he even blinked.

"Will?" The voice was Nico's, and it was quiet, tentative, fearful.

Will could hear the sounds of a storm outside, rattling their windows and shaking their roof.

"I'm sorry." Will choked out, and a hand moved to his shoulder, making him flinch.

_What had he done?!_  

"It's going to be okay." Nico told him quietly, his hand lingering on his shoulder for a moment, before he crouched down in front of him and carefully moved it to his face.

Nothing was going to be okay. Not anymore.

Nico's hand was cool and smooth, a striking contrast to Will's burning cheeks, and he felt as if he had been slapped, though it felt so good at the same time.

_This was his doing._

Jason curled himself around him from behind, and there was something wet dripping into his neck where Jason's face was, but he kept holding him, and he didn't speak.

Images zigzagged through Will's mind, and he found himself lifting his head, looking up, up, _up_.

Until he was looking at Percy, the way he just stood there, arms loosely at his side, his posture drained, and his face…
Will choked out another weak, brittle sob that tore at his throat.

"I'm sorry." He repeated, because it was all that was left.

He was looking at Percy, and Percy was looking back.

Somehow, it felt as if he knew.

***

It was a fitful night, full of tossing, turning, crying and screaming.

Nico had never been in so much pain as when he was watching Will fall apart between them.

He tried his hardest to calm him, to somehow get him back to his old self, but Will's eyes remained wide and haunted whenever he had them open, and his body kept shaking.

The storm outside was restless, a testament to Jason's agony he tried not to let them see.

Jason was the one holding them.

He was holding them, he was crushing them, he was doing the grounding Nico couldn't do.

It was Percy who started talking, sometime past midnight, words whispered into the rare moment of silence.


Nico felt Will and Jason shift a little.

"Nico's blush. Hot Chocolate. Will glowing from happiness."

Nico closed his eyes, listening.

"My mom's candy, Nico trying to look scary, Jason's looks of utmost affection." Percy continued, then his voice broke and he curled together with a small sob.

Nico opened his eyes again, sad and lost.

"Five minutes more in the mornings, comfort sweaters, breakfast together." He whispered, and Percy stilled behind him, before he held him a little tighter than before, nose buried at his spine.

"Smiling into kisses, Percy's gleaming eyes when he's happy, Will's diet plans." Jason continued for him, and when Nico tried to get a glimpse of his face, his expression was softer than before, less grim, less serious.

A beat of silence as they waited for Will.

Another beat of silence when he didn't speak.

Nico lowered his gaze again, staring back at the pillow they were laying on.

"Ice-skating at night, pillow corners, showering together." Will whispered barely audibly, and Nico's hands twitched, while Percy started nearly crushing his hip with his hand, the other clutching the back of Nico's shirt.

Percy spoke again, and they began trading thoughts, trading memories, pointing out all the positive things life had given them, even as the storm around them raged on and the darkness seemed eternal.

"I know who his godly parent is." Percy whispered, hours later, when they had finally fallen silent.

Nico turned onto his back to look back at Percy better.
"Who?"

Will shifted and let out a low whine, curling into Jason's embrace as the blonde kept him safe.

"We met her before, Nico. That's why he seemed so familiar to me. It's the same aura." Percy said, and Nico frowned.

What was Percy talking about?

Who had they met? When?

Eris? She had said Kyle wasn't her son, though. It wasn't the right aura, either.

A memory started resurfacing in his mind, a face long forgotten, words long rejected and discarded.

Nico sat up sharply.

No.

"That's impossible." He said, giving Percy a hard stare as he felt his mind reeling.

It couldn't be true.

It couldn't be! She...she wasn't just a goddess, she was...she was...

"Who is it?" Jason asked, even as Will whined and told them not to say it, not out loud.

Nico looked at Percy, pleading mutely, but in his heart, he already knew the truth.

Percy's expression made him close his eyes, before he turned his head towards Jason.

They both did. They both spoke.

"Akhlys."
Chapter Notes

Check out the FanArt for this series!!
I have made a new page for all of them, so everything is a little more in order without the risk of running out of space!

Here's the link:
http://mel-chan366.tumblr.com/fanfic-fanart

Seriously, it helps with the angst!! :)
Enjoy~

A/N: Hey Cupcakes!

Here comes the next chapter! So...to start this off correctly: I am so sorry.
Please heed the trigger warnings.
Consider yourself warned.

Thanks for all your support, you're all amazing and I'm forever grateful uwu
Also, as always, special thanks to my beta-reader!

I wish you all the best, see you in two weeks for more suffering, and don't forget to check out the wonderful fanart to help with the angst!
-Tári

P.s.: Heed the trigger warnings.

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Trigger Warnings:
- Death / Murder
- Apathetic Behavior / Numbness
- Depression
- Angst
- Relationship Angst (Like, it's BAD)
- Graphic Depiction of Battles / Fighting / Blood / Dying / Severe Injuries
- Fear / Dread
- D e a t h

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Chapter 14: Reap What You Sow

Annabeth regretted the day she had wished the guys would stop being all over each other.

That they would stop being so obnoxious and obvious with their love for one another.

Right now, she wished more than anything that she could turn back the time, back to those days.

Anything was easier than the days that followed Kyle's attack.

Anything was easier than seeing Will, usually all sunshine and smiles, working with an impassive face in the infirmary, not speaking, not smiling, not looking anybody in the eye.

Anything was easier than seeing Percy, usually so cheerful and devoted, sitting by himself in random places, staring into space or at his hands with a blank look on his face, unapproachable and unresponsive.

Anything was easier than seeing Jason, usually so composed and in-charge, walking around with
a haunted look on his face and always looking for his guys, as if trying to herd them back together like a flock of sheep.

Anything was easier than seeing Nico, usually right in the middle of it all, distancing himself from his boyfriends and his Camp, a grim look on his face and death in his wake, easily aggravated and rarely calmed down.

Annabeth would do anything if only to give them back what had been taken from them.

She looked at Will, now, how he sat next to her, the blue of his eyes subdued as his hands hovered over her chest, a dim, golden light healing the remnants of the wound Kyle had inflicted with his scythe.

Annabeth knew Will blamed himself for it, but he also knew she had done this willingly, so neither of them spoke of it.

Instead, she reached out to touch his arm.

"You should be with your boyfriends, Will. Take the day off. You've done enough healing." She tried, but he didn't reply, and didn't acknowledge her touch until he was done with healing, where he brushed her off by leaning back.

"Kayla will give you some more cream for the scarring. By the end of the week, the skin should have healed." He told her, before getting up and turning to go.

Annabeth snatched his hand before he got out of her reach.

"Will, you're falling apart. If you don't stick together now, it will be so easy for Kyle to strike." She tried to reason with him, but he merely pulled his hand away.

"Don't." He said, and that was all he said, before he left the room.

Annabeth stared after him, wondering what she could possibly do to fix this madness.

Then, she sighed and got off the small bed, trying not to scratch at the scar, though the urge to had already lessened greatly over the past days.

Will had originally wanted to keep her here, but she hadn't wanted to leave it to Piper to keep an eye on everything, so she had assured him she would be fine.

He had reluctantly agreed and let her go with the promise to return for daily check-ups, but the fact he had let her go at all already showed how unusual he was behaving.

Annabeth was about to slip back into her shirt, when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, her eyes automatically moving to the scar now reaching from her left hip bone to her right shoulder – a jagged pink line, standing out against her tanned skin.

A bitter taste filled her mouth.

Kyle was ambidextrous. She hadn't known that.

She hadn't even known he would be able to sense her even though she had been invisible, yet he had immediately raised his scythe to attack, the moment he had been in reach.

When she had attacked him with nothing but one of the simple daggers that fit at her side, she had hoped that striking that scythe out of his hand would give her enough time to cut his throat.

Unfortunately, he had immediately caught it with his other hand and struck her without even being able to see her, before kicking her in the gut and thus shoving her into the ground, just to continue running after Will, merely scoffing at her pathetic attempt.

It had all happened so fast, she hadn't even comprehended it until she had already been on the ground, air knocked out of her lungs and an excruciating pain flaring through her entire front, making her scream before she had passed out.
When she had come to, Jason had been there, picking her up and flying her to the infirmary, talking to her in a soft, worried voice.

She had no idea what he had said. She didn't even know how he had found her, or how he had known he needed to look for her, in the first place.

Annabeth thought about that as she tugged her shirt back over her head, before patting herself down out of habit, annoyed all over again when she felt her hair falling past her shoulders, her hair tie discarded and forgotten gods knew where.

She immediately had to think of the time the guys came over to the Aphrodite cabin for haircuts. What wouldn't she give to have that happen now?

Annabeth left the room and saw Will in the next one, the open door granting perfect view of him healing a girl's shoulder, his face as impassive as earlier.

She moved down the hallway to where Kayla was behind the small counter the Hephaestus kids had put together a while back.

Kayla looked the same way Annabeth felt.

"Hey. Here's your cream. You should apply it at least once daily, that should take care of the scarring. Exercise-wise, it's the same as before: Avoid extreme stretching for a while longer, else you should be fine. If you need anything or notice anything off, don't hesitate to come back immediately." The girl said, her tone one of routine and habit.

Then, she slumped forward slightly, her eyes tearing up as she buried her face in her hands, elbows on the table.

Annabeth reached out to give her a weak hug across the counter, patting her back.

"I've never seen him look like that before." Kayla whispered and trembled a little, and Annabeth had to agree with her.

Will looked terrible.

They all did, in fact, and it only seemed to get worse by the day.

"It's okay. Just give him some time to stomach all of this. They'll be okay." She reassured her weakly, though she wasn't quite sure anymore, herself.

"I want to just…just find that asshole and just…just…" Kayla pressed out, clenching her fists and moving them faintly, and Annabeth only knew all too well how she felt.

"We all do. He managed to surprise us this time, but we won't let it happen again. The next time he shows his sorry face, he'll regret the day he was born." Annabeth promised her, and this was something she could promise.

Kyle had caused enough suffering at this Camp.

They were going to make him regret all of it.

"You bet. I'm going to save my best arrow for that monster's heart, if he has one." Kayla spat, and Annabeth patted her on the back again.

"We'll get our chance at revenge. Until then, take good care of your brother, okay?"

Kayla huffed weakly, the tears still rolling down her cheeks.

There were so many crying campers lately, both in the infirmary and around the Camp.

"I'll try." Kayla promised at long last, and they comforted each other a moment longer, before she composed herself again and they bid their goodbyes.
The moment Annabeth was outside the infirmary, her mind zeroed in on the things they still had to do now.

First off…

"Nico! A word." Annabeth called out when she saw the Italian walking past the Big House a few feet away, and he slowed down his pace to shoot her a questioning look.

"What?" He asked, and while it sounded rather sharp, he at least wasn't scowling yet, so that was a plus.

"You need to start those lessons, Nico. Every day that passes that you don't do it, we run the risk of an attack from somebody in our midst." She told him the moment she was closer, and his curious look changed to a dark and gloomy one.

Whoops, there it was.

"I told you, I don't know how. You want somebody like Clovis, not me. He could reach people's minds. I can't."

Annabeth wasn't deterred.

"But you are the only one who managed to fight Kyle off."

Nico flinched at the name.

She ignored it, instead stepping closer and deliberately invading his personal space, knowing he hated it.

Whether it had been intentional or nor, Nico had avoided her these past several days, but she had to get this over with someday – which was to say, now.

"You're the only one who could fight him off and kept your wits about you. You're the Camp's only hope. So, either you get over yourself and start those lessons, or you can wave goodbye to your loved ones." She said darkly, because, by now, she right about had it with the lot of them.

"Are you threatening me?" Nico asked, and there was an edge to his voice as the grass at their feet started withering and died.

Annabeth threw her hair back.

"No, but Kyle is. What are you going to do about it?" She asked, and watched how he grinded his teeth.

"Fact is, you need to get a grip on yourself, Nico. All four of you do. Look at you, you're falling apart!" She continued, repeating what she had already told Will.

But Nico only averted his gaze, still glowering, but now rather glowering off to the side than at her.

"Whatever. I'll see what I can do about those stupid lessons." He said at last, then turned around, the conversation clearly over.

Annabeth looked after him with a loud sigh.

Then, she started looking for her girlfriend.

Piper had to be around here, somewhere, right?

…Or so she thought, but instead, she found Percy, standing at the foot of the hill and looking up towards Thalia's pine with an unreadable expression on his face, Riptide in his injured hand.

Annabeth hesitated, but then approached him, anyways.

"Hey." She started quietly, and Percy stiffened, before he capped Riptide and put the pen back in
his pocket and turned to her.

"What's up?" He asked, and he sounded…tired. Just tired.

Annabeth looked down at the ground, then she moved to his side to look up at the Camp border with him.

"Just got done with my daily check-up. Your boyfriend is doing a great job at keeping the infirmary empty." She tried conversationally, and he let out a small hum of agreement.

"He's great at many things."

At least Percy still talked the same way about his boyfriends as before.

"He doesn't seem to be very well, though." Annabeth tried carefully, and Percy stiffened next to her.

"None of us are. But we're trying." He then said curtly, and she turned her head to look at him instead of the border.

"I know, Percy. What I'm saying is just…"

"What you're saying, is that it's not enough. You want everything to be perfect. I saw you talking to Nico. I know you must have tried talking to Will. Leave them be, Annabeth. They're not your toy soldiers you can push around on your imaginary battlefield." He snapped at her and stepped away, and she threw up her hands in disbelief.

Seriously?!

What had she said?! She hadn't said or done anything to imply any such thing!

"That's not what I meant! I care about you, Percy. About them. I just want you to be-…"

"What, Annabeth? 'Okay'? Does that even exist?! Leave them alone." Percy called over his shoulder, sounding unusually pissed and on edge, and Annabeth huffed out a frustrated breath as she watched him go.

Great.

What was his deal, anyways? She was just trying to keep them alive. She was just trying to help.

She huffed out another frustrated breath, then looked back up towards Thalia's pine.

She wondered whether Jason was up there, protecting the border.

With Calypso still weakened and recovering, there had been more cases of monsters slipping through the past days, Clarisse had told them all about it.

Annabeth glanced over her shoulder, but Percy was long gone.

She wondered whether he had thought about joining the fight, though she was glad he hadn't.

After waiting another moment in case any of those three decided to pop up again, Annabeth swiftly made her way up the hill, the sounds of battle becoming louder and more distinct, though she didn't think much about her lack of a weapon until she was already at the top, next to a bunch of younger campers that held Leo's flashy grenades and formed the last line of defense in case of a breakthrough.

"Is Jason out there?" She asked the boy next to her, but he merely shrugged dismissively, his eyes fixed on the monsters moving just a few feet away from them.

At their request, Calypso had made the border visible from the inside, so they could see how far they could go until they risked their necks, but it was really just a light, semi-transparent film that seemed as fragile as the flowers that weren't blooming here anymore.
Outside the border, there was nothing but bloodshed and monster remains.

“He’s over there, with Clarisse.” The girl next to the boy told her, and Annabeth’s gaze followed the direction she was pointing to.

Ah. Wait, that was Jason?

Maybe Annabeth should have checked up on them more regularly the past days, but she had simply been too busy taking care of the rest of the Camp and breaking her head over the information Piper and she had compiled so far, trying to see through the mess and figure out what was truly happening.

Now, she was met with the sight of a grounded Jason, his movements sluggish and his attacks lacking their usual blow, his entire demeanor screaming ‘distracted’.

Jason couldn’t fight like that! He would get himself killed, and then who knew what would happen to the other three?

First off, Annabeth cared about them greatly, and second off, Will was the best healer, and Nico and Percy were children of the Big Three.

If they gave up on Camp entirely, Annabeth did not want to be there.

"Is there a way to pull him from the battle?” She asked, and all three kids whipped their heads around to stare at her as if she was crazy.

Yeah, well, she did have some stuff to discuss with him, and he clearly needed a break, so she guessed she had an excuse.

"It's very important.” She insisted, and the girl let out a loud sigh.

Then, she put her sword between her legs (Don’t do that, girl) and cupped her mouth with her hands.

"Grace! You're out!"

And with that, the girl grabbed her sword again and rushed out, abandoning her spot to take Jason’s in battle, who started moving towards them with a look of utmost confusion on his face.

Clarisse took one look at Annabeth and cleared a path for Jason without a word.

Good thing she could always count on her.

“What's wrong? Did anything happen? How come you're here? Is Will alright?” Jason asked the moment he was within earshot, and Annabeth inwardly sighed in relief that at least he still seemed as always.

Except for his abysmal fighting style, apparently.

“Nothing happened, but I need to talk to you. It's important.” She said seriously the moment he was inside the Camp border, before she nodded at the two kids left and gestured for him to follow her down the hill.

Jason followed immediately, looking rather unnerved, but she didn’t say anything until they were far enough away to not be overheard.

"Your guys really aren't doing well.” She then stated, because she had always been rather blunt with Jason, and it had always worked out in her favor.

Jason immediately slumped.

"Oh. Yeah. I…yeah, they aren't.” He muttered, and his gaze hushed off to the side, that haunted look on his face once more.

"I understand that Kyle's appearance took its toll on all of you, but in times like these, you need to
stick together more than ever, Jason.” She tried to sound less chiding and more comforting, looking around in case Percy was anywhere close by to snap at her for talking to Jason, after all.

But he was nowhere to be seen.

"I mean, you're still dating, right? Because I don't even see you holding hands anymore, and you always did that, Jason. It's like you're just falling apart. The entire relationship is."

Jason didn't reply.

When Annabeth turned to look at him in question, she saw him hunched over even more, hands in his pockets and his expression rather…hurt.

Oh.

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to lecture you. We're just worried about you. It's bad enough Kyle got into Camp once, but if it did happen again, splitting up like this would only make it all the easier for him to strike." She tried to explain as she carefully reached out and put her hand on Jason's shoulder.

It might have just been her imagination, but Jason seemed to lean into her touch a little.

Just how bad were things between those four?

"You need to talk to them, Jason. Talk some sense into them. They're clearly not listening to me, but they love you, so I'm sure if you-…"

"It's not that easy. There's…just a lot going on right now." Jason cut in, looking so grave it made him momentarily look much older than he was.

"Kyle's appearance really got to Will – understandably so, but he's…he's really struggling right now. Percy just…he just keeps getting worse, but he doesn't want to talk about it. And Nico is just plotting Kyle's murder for the most part. Ever since we found out Kyle's mom is the goddess of misery, he's just-…"

"What?!" Annabeth interrupted, her hand on his shoulder turning into an iron grip as she shook him in disbelief.

That freaking offspring of Hades had figured out Kyle's godly parent and hadn't told her?!

The audacity! The nerve! And what did Jason mean, it was Akhlys?!

"When were you thinking of telling me that?! What else do you know? That can't be, Jason, she can't leave that place! How would she meet any human to have a child with?! Jason, that's not how it works!"

"I know! It's what's tearing at Nico, too, but he won't talk to me and won't let me help! Nobody is telling me anything! I can't help them if they don't talk, but they just…they just…all of them just want to fight their battles alone, and the only thing I can do is watch it happen!"

Annabeth's irritation immediately disappeared as she witnessed Jason Grace nearly tearing up next to her.

"Jason…"

"No. Just…I'm going to look for them. I have to make sure they eat. Don't worry, it won't take long, I'll be back at the border as soon as possible." He assured her as he composed his face once more, though he still looked horribly worn-out.

"Take a break, Jason. I'll find somebody else to take your place. Talk to them, be there for them, then actually take the time to rest, too, okay?" She offered, and she thanked the gods he wasn't like them, because Jason didn't wave her off or storm off, but actually hesitated, before giving her a grateful look.

"Thanks, that would be great. I hope you'll do the same. Piper is with the Hephaestus kids, by the
way, just in case you're looking for her."

Thank the gods for Jason Grace.

"Thanks, I was already beginning to worry where she went."

He smiled a little at that, but then the haunted look returned once more, and he lifted his arm in half a wave before hurrying off.

Annabeth looked after him for a moment, then shook her head to herself and made her way towards the cabins.

Seriously, these guys.

And what did Jason mean, Kyle's mother was Akhlys?!

How did that even work out? When would she have left Tartarus? How would she have left Tartarus?

Could she even leave Tartarus? But Kyle was so old already, how would that have worked out? If it had been a recent thing, then Annabeth might have been inclined to believe that she had left through the Doors of Death somehow, but…like this?

Plus, who in their right mind would be attracted to Misery?

Annabeth shuddered at the memories hushing through her mind unbidden, though she didn't try to suppress them.

It would explain the familiar feeling she had gotten from Kyle's aura, though.

It would also make Kyle much more powerful than initially expected.

Akhlys wasn't just a goddess like Athena, or minor like Nike – she was a primordial goddess.

Annabeth thought back to her tear- and blood-stained face with those sunken eyes and runny nose and framed by stringy gray hair, still hearing her weepy voice rather clearly inside her head, even after all this time.

Then, she thought of Kyle, with his light blonde hair and ice-blue eyes, his voice always either sickly sweet or dark and threatening.

Annabeth tried to do the math in her head, but it didn't make any sense.

The only thing they had in common was that they were both extremes in everything they were doing.

However, Jason seemed convinced of this, and she knew Nico would never get this worked up over something that he didn't believe was true.

He also didn't strike her as the type to blindly believe anything.

Which meant nothing good for them, and even more headaches for Annabeth.

She sighed.

At least she had Piper to help her.

Annabeth glanced over her shoulder, though Jason was long gone.

Hopefully, the guys would be fine again soon, too.

***

Percy was hiding in their cabin.

It was his favorite pastime, of late, and he hated every second of it.
Percy sat between the cupboard and the movable table with Nico's TV, hiding there just in case Jason would come looking for him for whatever reason, and he hated himself for that, too.

Jason only wanted to look out for him. But Percy didn't want to be looked after.

Percy wanted Jason and Nico to get along again.

Percy wanted Will to smile again.

Percy wanted everybody to be a little less on edge and a little more in love.

Percy wanted.

He slumped, staring at his hand listlessly as it tingled, as if it was mocking him, reminding him of the fact that he was useless.

When Nico had left the arena yesterday, and the others had been preoccupied, Percy had tried training again, by himself.

Somehow, ever since the battle at the corn fields, and especially since Kyle, his arm didn't cooperate at all anymore, his hand constantly dropping his sword, and his reflexes horribly off.

It was discouraging, to put it mildly.

He had already been out of shape back when he had sparred with Jason at Camp Jupiter, but now, he was just pathetic.

But maybe he wanted it that way, too.

He had finally been able to decipher some of the notes Will had scribbled down on the papers stuck in his many books, and even though he was no expert on the field, he was beginning to understand what Will thought he had.

Or a part of it, anyways.

But Percy didn't want this.

He wanted to help. He wanted to protect.

Why would he want to deliberately pull himself from the battlefield when he knew he was needed?

Percy squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face at his knees.

The pain was real, he wasn't making it up! He knew he wasn't!

How could Will think that?! How could he say he loved Percy, and then believe he was making everything up, that it was all just inside his head?!!

Percy started trembling, then pushed himself up to stomp to the bathroom, past the still broken water fountain.

He had done that.

Same as he had shattered their entire bathroom.

Luckily, Hades must have taken pity on them, because by the morning, the broken ceramic had been repaired and looked brand new once more – or maybe it was, Percy wouldn't know.

All he knew was that it was fixed, and all was well.

All, except for the water fountain, which Hades had left untouched.

Percy couldn't blame him.
He wouldn't have fixed it, either.

Who needed a water fountain, anyways?

Will had managed just fine without it, even with his recurring nightmares.

Percy faltered, standing in the doorway of the bathroom, and when he clenched his fists, he felt like tearing it apart all over again.

Will's nightmares the past days had been hell.

Mostly because they never seemed to stop, his visions just as bad as his normal dreams as he thrashed and groaned and cried.

Percy didn't know how to help, and a part of him was scared to, the image of Will leaving still zigzagging through his mind whenever he reached out to touch him.

He would have left.

Percy moved his arms around himself, wishing he could give himself the comfort he so desperately craved, though he knew he was the one pushing Jason away constantly.

He didn't want to be comforted. Yet he craved it so much it hurt.

He didn't want to be touched. Yet he would die for a gentle hand on his shoulder, on his chest, on his face.

Percy closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then stepped inside the bathroom to walk over to their mirror, immediately remembering the hundreds of cracks his outburst had put into it.

First, Jason had to make up with Nico.

Percy needed to see that before anything else.

He had never thought he would see the day Jason and Nico would fight, yet it had happened.

They loved each other so much, yet when Nico had told Will to leave, they had fought.

Not argued. Fought.

Percy never wanted to see anything like that, again.

They weren't mad at each other, but Percy knew Nico was avoiding Jason, and he knew Jason was dying from guilt – even though Jason had originally wanted to move past Nico, and Nico had been the one shoving him back, first.

Percy looked into the mirror, taking note of the dark circles under his eyes and the grease in his hair, but he didn't feel like showering.

He didn't trust himself with water, not right now.

Percy looked down at his hands, his knuckles white and his veins standing out against his slowly paling skin as he gripped the sink.

His right arm was still trembling, and the throbbing was getting worse the longer he held on, but Percy didn't want to stop.

This was real. He wasn't imagining it!

Percy waited until the pain spiking up his arm got unbearable, then he let go, feeling even worse than before.

Positive thoughts.

Will had said that.
Now, not even Will was thinking positive thoughts anymore.

Else, he wouldn't look so lost.

He wouldn't look like he still contemplated leaving.

Percy started grinding his teeth and stomped out of the bathroom, though he didn't know what to do or where to go.

Nico was out and about, he wouldn't let Percy near the arena, and Jason was either at the border fighting, or looking for them to make sure they were okay – and Percy wasn't okay, so he didn't want to be found.

It was childish, it was immature, and that was how Percy was.

Maybe Jason would realize the same thing soon, too.

Maybe they all would.

Maybe they would grow tired of him.

Who knew, maybe they would even break up.

Percy felt the pain throbbing in his chest, though he knew, for the first time, that it was a very real possibility.

They were barely talking to each other, much less touching.

Will remained distant and quiet, staying away from all of them and only throwing Percy those looks that Percy didn't know how to read, though he knew it wasn't good.

Nico was constantly moving, a bundle of endless energy and resentment as he seemed to make plans but discard them again, and he, too, was distant.

Then there was Jason, who seemed to seek closeness, but in a way Percy couldn't give him right now.

They still shared a bed at night, but the mood was different. Quiet and tense.

They held each other, but it felt off – and once Nico was asleep and needed his space, they fell apart like jackstraws, somehow managing to put enough space between them to make Percy feel miles away, even though their bed wasn't that big.

Percy paced through their room, not quite certain what to do.

He didn't want to leave, but he also didn't want to stay, that would just make him try to read Will's books again, and he had read enough of that.

He could look at their photo albums, but that would probably only make him feel worse.

He could lay down and sleep, but what good would that do for everyone else?

So, he kept pacing, until he grew tired of it.

Then, he settled into his corner again and stared back at his hands on his knees.

Percy still felt restless, but at the same time, the thought of joining the fight at the Camp border filled him with dread and kept his body from moving.

Why couldn't he just join Jason? Why couldn't he do the one thing he wanted to do?

He wanted to help Jason. He wanted to protect the Camp. He wanted to protect his boyfriends.

Yet here he was, wasting the days away hiding like a coward.

Percy wasn't sure he had ever despised himself more.
Was there really *nothing* he could do?

Anger started bubbling up inside him again, and he only just felt the tug in his gut, when there was the sound of a key fumbling with the lock.

Percy immediately jumped and cowered in his corner, dreading it was Jason.

He didn't *want* to go outside. He didn't *want* to talk. He didn't *want* to be touched with those big and gentle hands and be forced to look at the gentle yet worried expression on Jason's face.

The person at the door figured out that the door was already unlocked, and Percy was surprised that it wasn't Jason, at all.

It was Nico.

Nico, who was scowling and muttering to himself.

"Stupid Annabeth. Stupid Camp. Stupid Kyle. Stupid *lessons*. How am I supposed to know?! It's not like I can just snap my fingers and go 'Oh yes, I can totally possess people now, yay'. Seriously, what is she thinking?!!"

Percy frowned, watching him apprehensively as he slammed the door shut behind him and started pacing, just like Percy had done.

Just that Nico was a lot louder and more expressive, gesticulating with his hands and throwing them up in his apparent agitation.

Then, he let out a loud groan of frustration and let himself drop facedown on the bed.

"Stupid *everything*!" He exclaimed, though it was muffled by the pillow.

A moment later, said pillow got tossed through the room.

"Stupid *Will* and his stupid issues!"

Another pillow got chucked through the room.

"And stupid *Jason* and his stupid caring attitude even though I *know* he has to be upset!"

And the next pillow went flying.

"And where the *fuck* is Percy?!"

Percy tried to make himself even smaller, though Nico wasn't looking up, anyways.

He hated it when Nico used the f-word, because Nico was the only one who so rarely did it.

If he resorted to it, that meant he was really, *really* upset, and Percy wished he had left earlier, because this was even worse than sulking by himself.

Nico let out another muffled groan, then he kept cursing under his breath, but Percy couldn't make out anything thanks to the bed.

Even Nico was throwing tantrums these days.

Percy looked back down at his hands, wishing he could turn back time, though he didn't know what he would change.

"I just can't do it. I can't teach them anything. I don't even know how *I* did it! Then she goes and lectures me about the guys. Like I can do anything about that. I can't just magically fix people. Will needs to drink a cup of self-esteem, Jason needs to chill out, and Percy needs to stop running away. Also, therapy. Will said he needs therapy. *Fuck Will*, I don't care what he says!" Nico ranted as he suddenly sat up, and Percy very intently stared at anything but his boyfriend.

Therapy.
The only thing that came to mind with that word was Smelly Gabe and what he had to say about Percy being stupid and crazy.

So, wait, Will not only thought he was making things up, he also thought he was going crazy?

Well, newsflash, it hadn't been Percy who had tried to leave and walk back into the arms of a crazy, pedophilic, sociopathic rapist, and he surely hadn't started thrashing like a madman in Jason's arms and screamed bloody murder, either.

That had been all on Will, and Percy would probably have nightmares of that evening for the rest of his life.

Nico was off the bed now and started pacing again, his hands mostly in his hair now as he kept venting to himself, before stopping in the middle of the room and groaning again, his voice becoming hushed and quiet as he tried to frantically think of something because of the campers and Annabeth and lessons.

Lessons. It was always about those lessons.

Percy wanted to tell him to just drop it.

What was the point, anyways?

Percy had been possessed by an eidolon and it had felt pretty damn different than when Kyle had invaded his mind the first time.

And the second time – which Percy still wasn't sure had actually happened for real – he hadn't felt it, at all.

Chances were, the rest of the Camp wouldn't be able to tell either whether they were getting possessed or not.

Wow, who knew who might already be possessed, at this very moment?

They were all going to die.

Percy decided that thinking like that both made him bitter and stop caring altogether, so he tried to push it down.

Instead, he looked back at Nico, and suddenly, he tensed.

Wait, what was he thinking?!

"If I just had somebody to practice with. I know how it felt when Clovis did the thing, and I know I can dream-travel if I try hard enough, maybe I could pull it off if I had some practice…” He trailed off, and Percy started shifting.

But then, Nico only threw his hands up again.

"Why can't Clovis' sibling do the thing?! Argh!"

Nico was so angry all the time, lately.

Percy looked back at his hand, happily shaking where it clutched his knee and throbbed with pain.

What if he…

"You can practice on me." Percy suggested, and only remembered that Nico didn't exactly know he was there when his boyfriend already jumped away with a startled squeak, his sword out in an instant – and promptly flying a good foot away from him as he accidentally let go of the hilt.

"Percy! H-How long have you been here? Wait, what are you doing in that corner? Percy, don't tell me this is where you've been hiding the past days whenever we were looking for you." Nico promptly scolded the moment he seemed to catch on, and Percy made a face as he dragged himself out of his hiding place.
Damn it.

He really hadn't thought that through. At all.

Great, now he would have to look for a different place, because he just knew that Nico would tell Jason that, albeit being on bad terms with him.

It was so unfair.

"You can practice on me. The mind-thing. I mean, I already know how it feels like, so I should be able to tell once you're doing it, right?"

It was his chance to be useful.

He would have to join the battles at the border, because he had promised Chiron he would, but this might give him an actually valid excuse to drag that moment out a little further.

Plus, this whole ordeal might tire Nico out, and then Percy could sneak off to do more training in the arena by himself, without Nico dragging him back out and insisting he had to wait for Jason.

Percy should have never made that deal with Will to always have Jason around for training.

What he didn't understand was why Nico was the one so adamant about him following through on his promise, when Nico was also the one who had complained the most when Will had prohibited any Underworld-ly stuff. Twice.

Plus, Nico had just said he didn't care about what Will said, so why did he have to be such a hypocrite?

"I…you weren't supposed to hear any of that, Percy. Listen…" Nico started, looking highly uncomfortable as he blatantly ignored Percy's offer for the second time.

"It doesn't matter. Now, do you want to practice on me or not?" Percy cut in, and Nico stiffened.

"I…I guess so. If you're really okay with it. But, listen, what I just said…"

"It doesn't matter. Come on, let's do it, then." Percy said and gestured towards the bed.

Nico would want to be comfortable, after all, right?

His boyfriend didn't move.

"Well, it matters to me, so let me explain."

Percy didn't want to hear it. He didn't want to hear what Nico had to say, and he didn't want to hear any excuses, and he didn't want to know what Nico meant by what he had said.

"The past days were stressful on all of us, it's only understandable that you'd be upset and vent eventually." He brushed him off as he flopped down on the bed, not in the mood for talking anymore.

"Well, yeah, but…" Nico started, but Percy only patted the spot next to him.

"Are we going to do this or not?"

Nico shot him a mingled look of conflict and apprehension, but then his shoulders slumped and he came over, clearly giving in.

"Alright…"

Finally, they were getting somewhere.

Finally, Percy might be able to be of some use.

Somehow that thought didn't reassure him as much as he had hoped. If anything, it made him even
more testy and irritable, because, *why did he even have to be useful?!* Couldn't he just *be* and be done with it?

Nico sat down next to him and took his hand.

Percy stilled at the touch, both tempted to pull his hand away or let himself fall against Nico.

He didn't do either, but he did find it easier to calm down, especially when he glanced sideways at his boyfriend and found him with his eyes closed and a look of concentration on his face – which meant he looked like he was pouting a little.

If Percy forgot what they were trying to do, he could almost pretend this was just a normal day, and Nico and he were simply having a quiet moment together in their cabin.

Almost.

Sadly, Percy couldn't forget.

***

Jason was waiting.

Waiting for Will to look at him, waiting for Will to stop moving from one patient to the next as if he had millions more to work off before he could call it a day, waiting for Nico to show up again after he had so blatantly run off earlier, waiting for Percy to stop hiding from him so they could talk, so Jason could make him eat.

Jason was waiting for many things, yet none of them seemed to have any interest in him, at the moment.

Percy was avoiding him. Nico was avoiding him.

He watched as the girl Will had been treating left the room and moved to Kayla, her bleeding arm from a training accident all healed up once more.

Will left the room a moment later, but didn't look at Jason before he disappeared down the hall and into his own room, the door falling shut in his wake.

…Will was clearly avoiding him, too.

Jason glanced towards Kayla, who seemed even more upset about Will's behavior than he was, then he decided to push just a *little* bit.

The past days, Jason had simply left Will some food and a bottle of water, trusting him to take care of himself while he had to return to the battles.

Now, thanks to Annabeth, he had the rest of the day off, which meant he could finally attempt a conversation.

Jason moved down the hallway quietly until he was in front of Will's door, where he contemplated whether to knock or not.

But Will ought to have seen him, and he had to know Jason would follow him, because when had Jason ever not?

Jason decided to let himself in, and, while Will had his back to him, he certainly didn't seem surprised.

"I brought food." Jason tried conversationally as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him, but Will didn't look around.

"That's great. You should eat it."

Jason tried not to let the rather blunt dismissal get to him as he put down the wrapped sandwiches he had brought.
"It's food for you, Will. So, when will you be done for the day?"

"When work is done."

Jason tried not to deflate, and tried not to feel too hurt.

Will had been this way the past days already, of course he wouldn't just randomly change back into his old self out of nowhere, no matter how much Jason inwardly wished for it.

"Maybe we could do something together. A lunch break, of sorts? There's no patients right now, and the weather is nice outside, so…” He tried hopefully, but Will was already shaking his head, cruelly crushing Jason's hopes.

"Can't. There's a lot of stuff here I still have to get to. The longer I wait, the bigger the piles get. Maybe another day."

He still had his back to Jason, too.

Jason wished he could be brave enough to walk up to him and hug him from behind, just to hold him and be close to him, like they used to be.

However, he didn't dare, too worried he might freak him out or push him too far. In a way, Jason feared the rejection, too.

They seemed so fragile at the moment, all four of them, like their relationship was just hanging by a thread. Jason didn't want his actions or clinginess to be their downfall.

"I'm worried about you, Will." He said quietly, instead, and watched Will tense for a moment, before he reached up and tugged out one of the many folders.

"Don't be. I'm fine. Still here, after all, right?"

Jason flinched, and Will stilled in his movement of carrying the folder to his table, regret flashing across his face for a moment, before it became impassive once more.

He didn't apologize.

Jason looked down.

"I'm glad you are. Doesn't mean I'm not scared that you might change your mind, though." He said carefully, and Will remained silent for a long moment.

Then, he turned to look at Jason.

"You should worry about Percy, instead. Stop looking after me and start looking after him. I can't do it, not anymore. He needs you two, now more than ever."

"We all need each other, Will. He doesn't want me around, he wants all of us. He needs you. You're the one who he ran to, did you forget? You're the one he always ran to, Will. Whenever he needed advice, whenever he knew something was wrong, he didn't come to me, not even Nico, but he went looking for you, knowing you can help him."

"I can't help him. I'm the reason why he's like this now, Jason. I wasn't thinking, I was stupid and delirious, and he got scared, and now he's retreating into his shell and turning into a ticking time bomb. I can't help him with that, I'd only make it worse."

Jason had no idea what he was talking about, but he didn't like the way Will was acting like Percy was dangerous.

"You're making it worse by being like this, Will. You're distancing yourself, and when has that ever done any good to you or anybody around you? What has to happen for you to understand that you can't face every challenge in life by yourself?"

"Now you sound just like Nico." Will snapped, and Jason was vaguely aware that they were both talking much louder than necessary.
He didn't want to yell at Will. He didn't want to fight.

He just wanted him to take a break, he wanted him to feel a little better, somehow. To make him feel better.

"Maybe you should listen to him, then." He tried more calmly, but Will was still agitated, and when he snapped back at Jason, Jason already knew it would hurt before he even heard the words.

"Funny, last time I tried, you started a fistfight with him. How about you simply mind your own business, Jason."

Guilt and pain cut through Jason like a knife, the memory of his hands in Nico's shirt as they both tried to shove each other out of the way forcing itself to the front of his mind.

Nico had snarled. Jason had growled. Nico hadn't wanted to let him go, Jason hadn't wanted to back off.

If it hadn't been for Percy, who knew what would have happened.

What if he had hit Nico? What if he had seriously hurt him?

He knew that Nico's arm had bruised where he had squeezed it, because he had seen the darkening spot the next morning when Nico had hurriedly put on his shirt, and that alone was enough to make Jason want to crawl into a hole in shame.

He had hurt his boyfriend. He hadn't meant to, not really, but he had.

Maybe he was like Kyle, after all.

Jason tried to swallow away the pain as he looked at Will, at his struck face and the regret in his gaze.

Then, he turned towards the door.

"Maybe Annabeth is right. Maybe we're really just falling apart now." He said quietly, more a statement to himself than Will, but Will didn't say anything, so Jason left it at that and left, not looking back.

***

When Jason stepped inside their cabin, the door was unlocked, but nobody was inside.

The guys were simply gone.

All of them. Gone. All the time.

Why did Jason even bother?

In good as well as bad times.

Only he seemed to believe that.

Maybe he had been too pushy.

Maybe he had asked too much of them.

Jason felt something warm trickle down his cheek and knew he was crying, but he was alone, so he let it happen.

There was nobody around he had to comfort or reassure or act tough for.

Jason let his tears fall as he stood there, gazing at their room, with Nico's and Percy's things strewn about, and Will's books everywhere, and Jason's sweaters everywhere but where they were supposed to be.
It was a mess, yet it was beautiful, because it was theirs, and it was just the same as always.

Jason looked at the remnants of the water fountain next to the door.

Almost. It was almost the same as always.

Jason sniffled, then brushed his tears away as he moved closer, crouching down next to the broken bits and pieces to check what would have to be done.

It was Percy's fountain. They all liked this fountain.

Maybe, if Jason fixed it, they wouldn't run away from him anymore.

Maybe, if he fixed it, Nico would give him a chance to apologize.

Maybe, if he fixed it, they had a chance at fixing the fissure between them, too.

Jason had no idea how to fix it.

But he had a whole day to figure it out, right?

He had to make it count.

***

When Nico and Percy got back to their cabin after their rather short and frustrating trip to the Hypnos cabin, they found Jason sitting on the floor and holding the broken pieces of their water fountain as if he wanted to reassemble it.

Nico would have found an excuse to leave again, if he hadn't seen the red-rimmed eyes behind Jason's askew glasses.

His stomach twisted, his chest clenched, and he found himself hovering on the spot, before he slammed the door shut behind them with a little too much force.

"Need any help?" He asked, though he had enough other worries right now that were much more important than the fountain.

"I…yes. Please." Jason said quietly, and Nico didn't like how surprised he sounded, his voice so breathy and vulnerable.

Percy still moved before he did, stepping around Jason and sitting down next to him without touching, before he reached out to grab one of the bigger chunks of the fountain, too.

He hadn't said anything since Nico had dragged him after him to the Hypnos cabin for help and advice, not even when it had proven to be a waste of time.

Nico watched them both sitting on the ground, then he thought of all the things he still had to do. Then, he started rummaging through the cupboards around him to see what he could find to help them with.

His success with Percy had been non-existent, he simply couldn't access minds, but he still had to find a way to help the Camp, because they were all counting on him.

He also still had to find out what to do about Kyle, now that they knew he just had to one-up them in regard of their parentage, too.

Well, Nico knew what he would do with Kyle if their paths crossed again (and they undoubtedly would), but this made him more dangerous in different ways, especially to the Camp.

It could also explain why Kyle always had that air of superiority around him, and why he had managed to wound Calypso so easily, who was technically a minor goddess, herself, even if she was more mortal ever since she had left her island, and her blood was red.
Nico stopped searching for a moment as he tried to ban the pictures from his mind, of her on the ground in front of the Big House, of the blood spilling from her chest and tainting the grass red as the Apollo kids tried their best to save her.

She was still recovering, too.

Alec had mentioned something about poison, but Will wasn't speaking about Calypso, so Nico didn't know.

That would also fit Kyle, though. Poison. Akhlys was into poison, too.

Nico returned to his task of searching for anything useful, though he ended up returning with nothing but a variety of glue bottles, though he had no idea when he had bought those, much less why.

Maybe his father had put them there, or maybe Nico had simply forgotten.

He sat down next to his boyfriends, and they started tinkering on the water fountain together, even though he didn't know why Jason wanted to do this, why they were helping, why it seemed important.

But if Jason cared and wanted their help, then Nico would help.

Nico glanced sideways at the blonde, automatically thinking back to their quarrel, with Jason on top of him and pinning him to the ground, eyes full of guilt and anger at the same time.

Then, Nico looked back at the fountain, trying to focus on the gluing.

It hadn't been Jason's fault. It had just happened.

Nico knew this.

Nico still didn't want to talk about it.

Not now, anyways.

***

"We're ready." Enceladus said, and it was all he had to say for Kyle to understand.

However, even though he would usually be overjoyed at the news of their progress, he had other things on his mind right now, so he only gave a curt nod and turned his back to the giant.

"Good, good." He muttered distractedly.

It had been a few days since his attack.

Somehow, he would have expected…more.

He had been forced to leave, yes, and things surely hadn't worked out in his favor, but he would have thought his efforts would have been good enough to warrant a bit more fun than this.

Hoping William would come running into his arms might have been a little far-fetched, but he knew he had inflicted enough damage to warrant the hope, to begin with.

Those lovers of his must have stopped him.

Pity.

Kyle would have liked to spare William the fate that would await him if he didn't see reason.

Though, if he truly had those powers…Kyle brushed off those thoughts.

This was just William, how much damage could he possibly do?

If he truly possessed those powers, then why hadn't he made use of them to protect himself? Or
tried to use them to protect his beloveds?

Kyle hadn't sensed any special power in him, just fear and dread and the growing misery that was like balm for Kyle's soul.

It was a shame William hadn't come to him.

How much fun it would have been to see the faces of his lovers. How much fun it would have been to take William apart. How much fun it would have been to break him into pieces to set him back together, make him Kyle's again, make him forget ever believing he could make it without Kyle in this world.

But oh well.

William wanted to be foolish, and Kyle had other worries than to keep pursuing him, at least at the current time.

There was movement behind him, and Kyle turned his head in annoyance.

"What?" He asked Enceladus sharply, wondering faintly why the giant was still there.

Couldn't he leave him be? Didn't he see Kyle was busy?

He had plans to pursue.

Somehow, he had the nasty feeling their spy was being tailed, though he hadn't yet found anything that would indicate such, other than his gut feeling.

Also, he had heard Jackson was wandering the Camp alone quite often these days, and Kyle was certainly hoping to make good use of that.

Jackson was so wonderfully pliable right now, after all.

"We're ready. Everything has been prepared for the next step. Which means that you and I have to be at…" Enceladus started talking, and Kyle immediately grinded his teeth.

He knew what it meant.

"Then you go on ahead. I'm not finished here, yet." He snapped at the giant, and Enceladus promptly stiffened, before drawing himself up to his full height – which was a foolish thing to do, because he already knew Kyle wouldn't be intimidated.

"It was ordered so. I will not be punished because you are too invested in your former bedmate."

Enceladus grumbled, and Kyle bared his teeth for a moment, before he composed himself once more.

"My former bedmate? William has no place in my mind at the current time. However, the Camp is of interest to me. And it will be of interest to the others, as well. You've heard the intel, and you've heard the prophecy first-hand, you should be able to do the math." He told the giant impassively as he leaned back against his table, glancing sideways at the figures on his map.

He had known they were close to their goal, so he had already redistributed his forces for maximum damage.

It was all planned out to perfection.

This was one of Kyle's favorite parts: Planning out the bits and pieces, then leaning back and watching his opponents destroy themselves.

Oh, it was truly beautiful.

They were such fools.

There the Camps were, still wondering about such foolish things like where the monsters were coming from, and frantically trying to protect their flimsy borders, yet none of them thought
further ahead than that. Yet none of them had the chance to get any further than that.

Just as Kyle wanted.

This was how he liked it best – when he could do as he pleased.

The Camps thought they were doing a good job at surviving, but they had no idea their downfall was on its way.

They would be so wonderfully unprepared.

Same as the others had been unprepared for Kyle's success, and Kyle still thrived on it.

He knew his plans had been flawless, and even with his momentary throwback due to whatever had transpired at Camp Jupiter, he had still accomplished so much more than the others had thought possible.

They were such fools. Just like the Camps.

Kyle couldn't wait to get rid of them, too.

But that would have to wait until later.

"I am aware. However, this order came from the top, and I would have thought you were smart enough not to intentionally anger the one thing that keeps us from slaughtering you on the spot." Enceladus said quietly, and that did catch Kyle's interest.

He was in front of the giant in an instant, meeting his gaze with a cold one of his own.

"Do you really believe you could as much as lay a hand on me? I would have thought you smarter than that." He spoke coolly, and Enceladus grimaced.

"Don't get too cocky. You may be strong for demigod standards, but you're a demigod, all the same."

Kyle sneered, but swallowed his reply.

He had no reason to explain himself to a disgraced giant like Enceladus, and there was no gain in doing so, either, so why bother?

The time and breath for that could be put to use so much better.

"You would be surprised. However, I do not wish to anger anybody. I am merely pursuing what I've been ordered to pursue, and I don't like leaving my forces here unsupervised. They might get ideas." He said in a bored tone as he turned his back to Enceladus once more.

He heard the giant drawing a loud, deep breath, and knew without looking that the giant was fuming.

Giants hated it when they were treated like lesser beings, and turning one's back to them was the biggest insult possible, because it meant one knew they wouldn't touch one.

It was one of the reasons why Kyle went out of his way as often as he could to do exactly that.

Not only did it annoy the giants and show them just who was in charge, it also made the monsters and other recruits more fearful of Kyle.

Who was he to command the giants, after all?

Kyle could barely wait until his plans worked out and the future he had chosen for himself would become reality.

"Let them have their ideas. The Camp is as good as lost, no matter whether they stick to your sorry excuses of attacks, or not. You are needed elsewhere now."

Kyle tried not to let his frustration with the giant show.
Kyle tried not to let his frustration with the giant show. Was he seriously that intent on ruining his day? He had intended to have some fun with Jackson once he had the new intel from his spy (and possibly managed to confirm his suspicions about said spy being tailed or not).

Kyle considered his options, then looked down at his beautiful map again. It was true, the Camp was as good as lost. All it would take was one huge attack, and Kyle knew their magical border would shatter, leaving the rest of them defenseless.

If timed right, one strike would be all it took to eliminate the entire Camp. But then where would the fun be? Who would still be left to admire Kyle's handiwork and planning?

Also, pulling back all his forces just to strike at the Camps right now would just warrant unnecessary losses – and while Kyle couldn't care less about them, he very well knew he could still impress, and he would be a fool not to do so.

Plus, it was Camp Jupiter's turn, first, anyways. Let those Romans fall like they deserved. Kyle smirked down at his map, then nudged the tiny figure that symbolized Camp Jupiter, watching it wobble before it toppled over with a small, satisfying click.

Very well. Kyle turned away from the table, though he still felt immensely pleased when he heard the figure roll off the map and clatter to the ground.

"Fine, have it your way. I suppose this will be as good an opportunity as any to see who knows how to follow orders, and who still thinks they can rise up." He relented at last, and Enceladus seemed to breathe out in relief, which was a pathetic sight.

However, Kyle had better things to do than to taunt the giant, especially when he was in the process of giving up the perfect opportunity to mess with the Camp and William. Jackson was so close to his breaking point. It would have been so much fun to push him over the edge and see how William and his fools coped with that.

But he guessed that opportunity would still be there once he returned.

"I will inform the others." Enceladus said, but Kyle shook his head.

"No, let me do it. That way, if anybody acts out, they will be defying me directly, and I can punish them to my heart's content once I'm back." He said in a sweet voice, already looking forward to that.

Enceladus looked at him in disgust, but he wouldn't dare challenge him. Not when Kyle had so very nicely secured his spot as second-in-command, untouchable by any of these pitiful failures.

"Very well." The giant said and stepped aside, letting Kyle pass. It was time for Stage Two of his formidable plan.

Everything was slowly falling into place.

***

Will came back to the cabin in the early evening, though it was still a little earlier than usual, for his standards.
Nico heard him making a ruckus in front of the door, as if he was trying to give them a chance to run in case they didn't want to see him — which was stupid, since Will was usually the one running.

They still weren't done with the water fountain.

They had made great progress, and it had something soothing to it, working together on something so trivial with his boyfriends, and breaking their heads over which piece went where together, but they still hadn't finished.

Mostly because the whole thing had tumbled right back down halfway through, all their hard work for nothing.

Nico looked up as Will opened the door and poked his head in, looking conflicted and even more uncomfortable than usual.

With a frown, Nico glanced towards Percy and Jason — and, while Percy was completely engrossed in putting together some small pieces to create a bigger piece, Jason was very fleetingly glancing up at Will and then hurriedly away again, looking...tense.

Ah. Something had happened.

That explained it.

"Hey." Will greeted them in a quiet voice, and Percy grunted in reply, not looking up as he had his tongue between his lips and his eyes fixed on the part he was currently gluing to his hand, rather than the rest of his fountain-part.

Jason also didn't reply, only nodding vaguely.

"Hey. We're repairing the water fountain. Want to help?" Nico asked, because somebody had to do it.

Will looked at them oddly, then at the water fountain, then back at Jason, but he didn't immediately speak.

"Let me wash my hands first." Will then said quietly, and disappeared towards the bathroom.

Well, there went that.

Nico looked after him, then stared at Jason as blatantly as possible.

They might not be on speaking terms, but that didn't mean Jason could just not tell them if anything happened between him and Will.

Nico was counting on things being okay between those two.

Mostly because Will clearly wasn't talking to him, and he knew Will seemed to be avoiding Percy, so he was definitely counting on Jason being on better terms with their most worrisome blonde.

"We...had a bit of a fight, I guess." Jason muttered evasively, not meeting Nico's gaze.

Now, Percy looked up from the mess he was making.

"Wait, what? But I thought you're the one he lets close."

Ah, so Percy had been thinking the same thing Nico was.

"None of you let me close," Jason replied quietly, and Nico and Percy flinched — both at the words, as well as the guilt that coursed through them.

"It's just-..." "Listen..."

Both Percy and Nico started at the same time, but they never got to finish their sorry excuses.

Instead, all three of them shot up simultaneously when there was a crash and a yelp in the
Nico was at the door first, and when rattling the doorknob and yelling Will's name didn't get him an immediate response, he was also the first ready to kick the door in.

Fortunately for the door, Will ripped the door open from the inside fast enough to give Nico the chance to stop in time.

"What happened?" Jason asked, but Nico was more concerned about Will himself, because he was ashen in the face, and the way he moved indicated he more wanted to rush past them than into their arms.

"No! The Camp, the border! Demigods!" He exclaimed when Nico instinctively snatched his wrists and stopped him.

What about the Camp? What was he-…

Vision.

"A vision? Will, what-…"

"Yes, vision, now! We need to go, we need to stop-…" Will pressed out frantically, terror in his eyes and his expression pleading as he tugged on Nico's grip.

The next moment, Will was already at the door and outside, before Nico even fully comprehended that he had let him go.

When he did, though, he was the second one out of their cabin, followed closely by Jason, and lastly Percy.

They saw their blonde mop of hair running on ahead towards the hill and the border, but before he made it there, there was the sound of a sickening crack in the air, and Nico's insides filled with dread.

"Will! Don't!" He yelled as Will bounded up towards the noise, towards the sudden screaming and the snarls of monsters – and, for whatever reason ever, Will obeyed.

He stopped in his tracks, his head snapping back to look at Nico, and, while Nico couldn't make out his expression from this far away, he could still see the nod he gave, before he turned and ran off towards the infirmary.

Yes. Much better.

Jason took off next to him, taking to the skies to be faster and see just what it was that was happening, and Nico wished Will would have given them some sort of hint.

Nico ended up not reaching the top of the hill, because the battle found him first – in the shape of a drakon that chased a younger demigod that seemed to be running for his life.

Nico changed his course and waited for the beast to plow into the ground behind the boy before jumping on its claws and then leaping up onto its head, driving his sword right through the skull.

"They're everywhere! First just a lot of monsters, but now-…" The boy screamed up at him as the drakon hit the ground with a deafening roar, before it started disintegrating and Nico freed his sword once more.

"What are you talking about?" Nico asked in confusion, but the boy only shook his head and turned away again.

"Hey!" Nico called after him, but he was already running.

"I have to tell Annabeth!"

Tell her what?
Nico looked back up at the border, just to curse when there was more screaming and the sounds of metal on metal.

Wait…

Nico ran up as fast as he could, and the first thing he saw was Percy, just standing there and staring, his sword in his hand and his expression one of disbelief.

Nico reached the top and felt his heart dropping to his feet.

Oh no.

But how?!

Why?!

Nico shared a look with Percy, who looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here, though he raised his sword, anyways, and Nico did the same.

Then, they both charged through the fading Camp border and at the attacking monsters – and the attacking demigods.

Demigods.

Teenagers.

Children.

Nico felt sick.

***

Jason was flying, staring down at the battle taking place, though he had trouble processing what he was seeing.

When Will had run off with a look of utmost horror on his face, he had expected there to be an unusually high number of monsters, or somebody trying to kill Calypso (again).

What he hadn't expected, was to find their campers engaged in battle with other demigods, next to the monsters that were still attacking, as well.

It was a dirty move.

Wasn't it enough to slowly wear the Camp down by constantly having the border under attack to weaken it? Did Kyle really have to send in demigods, too?

Where did he even get them from? Were they former campers? From this Camp? Camp Jupiter?

Or had he found them elsewhere, had he recruited them, had he taken them and killed their families like he had done with Celine?

Jason felt sick just thinking about it.

Then, he felt sick for entirely different reasons when he saw a child that couldn't be older than eleven or twelve trying to sneak past the last two people before it would be inside the Camp.

Since the two people in question were fiercely engaged in battle, they didn't notice, which meant Jason would have to…

Jason felt all sorts of queasy when he called upon his powers.

But then, the lightning struck in front of the child, not the child, itself, and he only rebuffed it, rather than frying it alive.

He couldn't kill a child.
He just couldn't.

Jason swallowed thickly when the kid jumped back in terror, clutching a tiny dagger in its hands like that was going to protect it.

How could Kyle do this? How could anybody send children into battle like this?

How could anybody be so cruel?

They didn't send their youngsters here. Sometimes, a kid or two would wander close to the border, or try to sneak past Thalia's pine as if to get a closer look at what they would have to face one day, but usually, the others watched out and somebody would take the kid back to safety.

How could Kyle do this?!

The kid continued on its way towards the border, and Jason glanced towards the others helplessly, hoping that one of them would notice so he could focus on getting an overview once more.

But no such luck.

Jason swallowed again, then caved in and urged the winds to take him down, landing between the child and the border.

"What are you doing?" He asked it, because, what else was there to say?

The child looked even younger up close, his eleven promptly changing to a ten at most as he took in her eyes, wide like saucers and with fear written all over her face.

"I have to do this." The girl said, her voice shaky and her hands even more so.

"You don't have to do anything. We can protect you." He offered, knowing there was a battle going on around him and knowing they all depended on him to keep an overview, but...he couldn't.

He couldn't.

The girl shook her head and raised her dagger, the fear still in her eyes even though her expression turned determined and grim.

"They will kill mama if I don't do this." She said, and Jason felt his heart ache in his chest.

Then, he came to the realization that children would do anything with the right motivation, because the girl charged at him without further warning, dagger raised high as if to ram it into his chest.

Jason caught her wrist, which had her shrieking, and he immediately found himself letting go, his entire being compelled to protect, rather than hurt.

The girl thanked him by slashing her dagger across his side, before she tried to push past him and run towards the border.

"Stop! Listen, we'll look for your mother, okay? We can find her and protect her, too. You don't have to fight." He tried frantically to reason with her, and she stopped to look back at him.

He took it as a good sign.

Jason was facing the girl and the border. He didn't see the hellhound until it was already leaping at him, and by then it was nearly too late.

He slashed at it, growling right back as it snarled at him fiercely and tried to tear him to pieces, just to be met with his sword in its throat.

When he glanced back towards the girl, she had turned around and was already inside the Camp border, on her way down the hill.
Oh no…

Jason glanced over his shoulder, back to the others, and he spotted Percy and Nico, back to back, fighting off a bunch of monsters together to keep them away from the others.

At least they weren't forced to fight demigods yet.

Jason felt like he shouldn't be this happy about that, because, as he thought it, he saw demigods hushing past the campers now, leaving the monsters to deal with those as they made directly for the Camp.

With everybody distracted, and at this hour, and with them wearing the same armor, it would be impossible to distinguish between who was camper and who was foe.

But what was their intent? Stealth? Sabotage? Cold-blooded murder?

Jason decided he didn't want to find out, he only needed to stop them.

He went airborne again.

"They're trying to get inside Camp. I'll try hold them off." He called to the nearest camper, and heard them grunting in reply.

Then, he rushed after the girl, letting lightning strike next to the other demigods to keep them from getting very far, hoping to buy himself some time.

He tried not to look too closely, in the faint hopes it wouldn't get to him quite as much as the girl was getting to him.

She was already at the bottom of the hill, and Jason realized in mild confusion that she seemed to know her way around already, not taking in her surroundings at all as she made straight for the infirmary.

Oh no, not the infirmary.

Jason moved to cut her off again, and she howled miserably when he landed in front of her.

"What is it that they want you to do? Please, let us help you."

"No! They're going to kill my mom! Get out of my way!"

"I'm sorry. I can't let you do this." Jason replied, but he couldn't make himself raise his sword, not even when she cried out and lunged at him again.

She couldn't even fight.

How could Kyle do this?!

He snatched her wrist, then her other wrist, and her dagger fell to the ground as she cried out again, though he didn't let go this time.

"We can help you! I promise-…" Jason never got to finish his promise.

There was a thud.

She cried out, her body tensing, the same moment Jason's eyes widened.

Then, she slumped in his arms, and he was left to stare at the arrow tip sticking out of her chest.

Why…

Jason looked up, and found one of the other, enemy demigods with his bow raised, a second arrow already in place.

Why?
Jason willed the sky to do his bidding, and the demigod in question was struck down.

He let the girl down gently, her eyes still wide open, though there was no light in them anymore.

Why?

She had just been a child!

Who could murder a child in cold blood, especially if they were *on the same side*?!?

Jason looked up to see more demigods and monsters alike barreling down the hill, and he took off again.

He was about to see whether he could alert anybody for additional back-up, when he already saw fellow campers rushing from all directions, already armed up and ready to fight, so somebody must have already gotten to that, at least.

Jason didn't feel reassured.

He felt sick.

Jason spotted the Hunters joining the fight, his sister at the front, and he wished he could warn them of what they would have to do.

But they would find out soon enough, much faster than if Jason landed and tried to explain, so he left the situation to explain itself and flew back up to the border, to the rest of the battle – and then, he flew *farther*.

Demigods. Children. Nothing but children. They had to come from somewhere.

If monsters started appearing out of nowhere, that was one thing. Demigods, however, was another.

Jason had to find out where they came from.

He tightened his grip on his sword, and the sky above him seemed to roar with anger, another storm brewing.

Jason half hoped *Kyle* would be there, too – and if only so Jason could kill him in the same cold blood that Kyle was killing those children with.

Children.

Demigods.

Children.

Jason spotted movement down below and halted, spotting another human figure moving towards the Camp slowly, as if trying to remain hidden. This one was older.

Jason still couldn't manage to strike them down, instead searching for any clues to where the person had come from.

The answer presented itself a moment later, when Jason went lower and hid behind a taller tree to stay out of the kid's sight, just to spot *tents*.

For a long moment, Jason could do nothing but stare in stunned shock.

Then, he saw movements, *activity*, and he recognized a variety of shapes, of monsters and demigods alike, all of them seemingly having all the time in the world, and definitely used to being around each other.

It was the strangest thing Jason had ever seen.

It was also the scariest thing he had ever seen.
Jason contemplated getting closer, but then decided that was a foolish thing to do when there was still a battle raging at the border and possibly inside the Camp, when nobody even knew where he was or what he was doing.

So he turned around, sneaking away carefully and searching for the kid again that had practically led him there, though he couldn't find it anymore.

Jason made his way back to Camp with a heavy heart, though his mind was split between what he had just seen, and the girl that had died in his arms.

He could have protected her.

He had to protect the Camp now.

Jason reached the border and joined the battle, unable to remain airborne and distant, not after all of this.

Kyle would pay for this.

Jason felt the reluctance in his people around him when they were faced with the demigods, none of them used to attack humans outside their training, no matter if child, teenager or young adult.

A girl was crying as she struck one of the attacking demigods with her spear and the kid went limp, falling to the ground and not getting up again.

Demigods didn't disintegrate like monsters did. They only bled and died.

Jason closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then bared his teeth at the monsters lunging at him and charged.

Kyle would pay for all of this.

***

They fought well into the morning, and then even more.

The border protection kept flickering on and off, granting more monsters access than it kept out, but it wasn't the monsters that were taking a toll on Camp.

It was the demigods.

In the beginning, it had been mere children, kids that were incapable of fighting correctly, their purpose being to throw them off and to keep them entertained, distracted, while other, older demigods tried to make it past and get inside the Camp unnoticed.

Percy didn't want to know what they were planning.

All he knew was that he hated this with every fiber of his being.

There was simply no end to them, demigods or monsters alike.

More often than not, Percy risked attacking his own people, because in the darkness and with everybody looking the same, one didn't know who was friend or foe until they wielded their weapon in one's face.

Percy cut through an empousai, just to find himself face to face with a boy, maybe a few years younger than him.

He automatically hesitated, catapulted back to that one time he and Beckendorf had been on that ship, all those years ago, and he had been faced with Ethan.

Percy had tried to negotiate with these people here, too, but the children were too scared, and the older ones only sneered at him with looks of glee and pity.

They seemed to be with Kyle and the monsters willingly.
Percy tried to focus on that as his excuse when he met their blows with his sword and attacked back, aiming to wound, not to kill, though the ground was littered with bodies already.

He wasn't sure whether he had caused any of the deaths, and he didn't want to know, either.

He only wanted to survive, and to keep his boyfriends and Camp alive.

He was failing at that.

Percy snarled as the kid ducked, just to have a giant snake lunge at Percy as if it had been their plan all along, and Percy momentarily remembered when he had thrown himself in front of Will to cut that drakon in two.

Then, he forced the memory down as he angled his body to the side and narrowly missed the beast's fangs.

But it didn't stop to attack him again – instead, it slithered on towards Camp, and if it could snicker, it probably would.

Percy wanted to give chase, but then he already heard the telltale sounds of footsteps rushing closer and a sword cutting through the air, and he barely managed to whirl around and meet the blow.

His arm *throbbed*, but he tried his best to keep a firm hold on Riptide, knowing he would be dead if he dropped it.

There was movement in his peripheral vision, and his head snapped around, shock coursing through him as another demigod rushed at him, already swinging a club.

"Oh no, you won't!" A voice yelled over the sounds of battle around them, and a spear moved into Percy's field of vision, the stick smacking into the kid's stomach and hurling it out of the way.

Percy tried to spot Hannah, but the demigod that was already at his throat made no move to give him a break, so he was left to yell his thanks at nothing in particular as he tried to disarm his opponent.

He wished the kid would only try to disarm him, too, yet every blow it tried to land was one aimed to kill.

Percy wasn't sure how much longer he could do this.

The kid suddenly used the blunt of his sword to strike Percy's wrist, and Percy cried out in pain, Riptide going flying.

Oh no.

He tried to jump back to avoid the next attack, but then stumbled over something on the ground, which proved to be a body.

Percy let out a startled cry before he fell, looking up at the demigod now practically towering over him, sword already moving to kill him.

Oh gods, his guys were going to be so upset with him.

An arrow whizzed past and struck the kid right in the chest, his triumphant look making way for a shocked one as he stumbled back, sword dropping to the ground as his hands clutched at the wound.

Then, he fell, and Percy could only stare at him a moment longer.

Footsteps sounded behind him, then a hand clutched his shoulder.

"Are you alright? Oh gods, I killed him. I killed a person. Oh my god, I didn't mean to. I just saw that he was going to kill you and I just…oh gods…"
Percy turned his head numbly to look at Liam, taking in his wide eyes and frantic stammering as he tried to tug Percy to his feet, his eyes constantly hushing back to the body of the boy.

"Thank you. For saving me." He said quietly, though it sounded hollow, because, how could you thank somebody for killing another person?

This was murder. This was madness.

Liam was shaking, hand moving through his short curls as his other hand clutched his bow tightly.

Percy wished he could offer some sort of reassurance, some sort of comfort.

But no words came to mind.

They heard a loud screech, and both of their heads shot up as Festus flew past them, circling over them for a moment before flying back into the Camp and crashing into the ground, roaring loudly before the sounds of battle reached their ears from there, too.

Percy felt his entire body tingling, and a cold wave of dread washed over him as he realized too many monsters and demigods alike must have made it past the border.

The Camp. They were inside the Camp.

What if they made it to the cabins? What about all the children that couldn't fight yet, that were left defenseless? That they couldn't protect because of the battle taking place here?

But what were they supposed to do? Should they abort the border? Could they abort the border? Then what would stop the other monsters and demigods from pouring into the Camp?

But what use would it be to protect the border when the Camp was being torn apart?

Percy and Liam exchanged telling looks, then they both took off towards the Camp.

Something barreled past them, but then Liam already shot it down, the monster disintegrating as they jumped over it and rushed down the hill.

It was like a separate, second battle, with just as many forces as there were at the Camp border, and Percy dreaded to think of how many more people Kyle might have on his side.

Come to think of Kyle, where was he?!

It seemed highly unusual for him to stay away from a battle like this, especially when it would give him such a great chance to snatch-…

Oh no.

Percy only just pulled Riptide out of his pocket and uncapped it to join the battle, when he whirled around to look towards the infirmary in horror.

What if this was a distraction to get to Will?

Percy started moving, but then he got cut off by Festus' foot missing him by inches, closely followed by a bunch of monsters and demigods alike trying to get to him and the dragon, both.

Where was Leo, anyways? And where were Percy's boyfriends?

Gods, how he hated this.

It was becoming lighter as the night made way for day, but the storm that had started last night was still raging, thunder and lightning all around them even though there was no rain, and barely any wind.

Percy battled on, but the longer he fought, the more unbearable the pain in his arm was getting.

He wouldn't be able to keep this up, and he was dreading to think of what that meant for his boyfriends.
For Nico, who wasn’t even allowed back on the battlefield yet.

For Jason, who had just been on the battlefield and hadn’t gotten much sleep the past nights, to begin with.

For Will, who had been healing most of the time the past days, and would now have to continue doing so.

Percy felt the resentment inside him grow as he snarled and slashed at his opponents viciously.

He wouldn’t be able to keep it up.

But he had to.

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Too many.

It was just too many.

Percy was shaking, his breath burning in his lungs as he looked up towards Thalia’s pine, where the monsters and demigods just came rushing in now.

Their protection had failed.

They were on their own now.

This was already going on for so long.

Percy swayed on the spot before staggering onwards, trying to raise his sword, though his arm hurt so, so much.

Everything hurt.

But he had to keep going.

He had to find Nico, and Jason.

He hadn’t seen them in so long. What if something had happened to them?

Percy barely managed to deflect the blow of a rather insistent spear that kept thrusting in his direction, then he heard Ash’s loud war cry before there was a yelp and a thud.

At least he could count on their team.

Percy stumbled again, everything inside and around him burning like he was on fire.

He couldn’t do this.

He had to, but he couldn’t.

He was exhausted, he was tired, and he was pretty sure he was bleeding, his hands constantly covered in blood, though he wasn’t sure where it was coming from.

Percy wished he knew where his boyfriends were.

Something collided with him harshly and he went flying, smacking into the ground and overturning a couple of more times until he landed on his back, all air knocked out of him, and his sword gods knew where.

Percy groaned faintly to himself, squinting up at the gray and murky sky above him.

There were still lightning bolts every here and there, maybe even thunder, if the battle wasn’t too loud to hear it.
Percy breathed out a weak breath, before his lips curled into a small smile.

Jason was alive then. He would be okay.

He tried to peel himself off the ground, regretting that they hadn't been able to put on any armor at all when they had run from their cabin.

Somebody rushed past him and a shoulder collided with his injured arm, catapulting him right back into the ground with a small cry.

Percy was so tempted to just stay there.

He was so, so tired.

What wouldn't he give to just close his eyes and let the others fight…

But Percy pushed that thought out of his mind, instead struggling back to his feet once more and feeling for Riptide in his pocket.

Nico. He had to check on Nico. He had to find him, had to make sure he was alive.

Will. He had to know whether Will was still in the infirmary, whether he was okay.

They had so many things to do, still.

Jason and Nico still needed to make up.

Will had to stop being so stubborn and let them in.

Percy had to tell Jason that he loved him and that he was sorry for hiding from him the past days.

Percy pulled Riptide out, but his hand shook too badly to uncap it, so he struggled with that for a moment, while the battle went on around him uncaringly.

It was madness. It was war.

It was worse than anything Percy had ever faced before.

He had faced Luke, had faced Kronos and his army, had faced titans and giants alike, and he had faced Gaea and everything the gods had thrown at him.

But he had never felt this helpless before. This overpowered.

The monsters died, but new ones kept coming. Demigods fell, yet new ones kept coming.

Percy wondered whether he would live to see the end of it.

He swallowed and uncapped Riptide, the sword so heavy he nearly dropped it.

Then, he looked at the faces around him, at the grimaces of anger and triumph and fear, of campers and enemies alike.

He was so tired.

Something came rushing towards him in slow motion, and Percy moved to defend himself, feeling strangely detached as he sliced across the person's chest and watched them drop to the ground, joining the other bodies already there.

Percy stumbled on without looking down.

He had to…had to find Nico. And Jason. And Will.

His head was pounding, and he realized it was his pulse, so loud it drowned out the sounds of battle around him.

Pain flared up in his other arm, and he cried out and whirled around, but then Sara was already
there with an angry cry as her spear pierced another demigod whose dagger was now stuck in
Percy's upper arm.

He pulled it out, swaying a little as he looked at Sara.

She had tears in her eyes, looking at him full of unmasked fear, hand already reaching out to touch
him.

But then they were separated by more monsters attacking, and he lost sight of her as he got pushed
around between monsters, demigods and campers alike.

He looked up at the sky again, wishing he could fly like Jason, so he could go up there and search
for his boyfriends, search for a way out, search for a way to end this.

But Percy couldn't fly.

He couldn't even fight anymore.

He could just be, and it would never be enough.

There was a loud crash behind him, and Percy turned around sluggishly, just to find a giant
drakon standing right there.

Percy knew that drakon.

It was the one from the museum. The one with wings.

It looked as if it recognized him, too.

Percy raised his sword weakly, just to realize he wasn't holding it anymore.

He must have dropped it again.

He couldn't feel his hand anymore.

In fact, he couldn't feel anything anymore.

Percy just stood there, his hand outstretched, but there was nothing to do.

The drakon considered him with what could almost be considered pity.

Then, it crouched down and roared.

A typical power display.

Percy stared back at it blankly.

There was nowhere to run to. Nowhere to hide.

Percy straightened his back weakly, looking into the eyes of what might very well be his death.

The drakon roared again.

Then it charged.

Somebody screamed.

It wasn't Percy.

***

Jason zapped from the sky like a lightning bolt, himself.

There was a loud clash of thunder, and he seemed to summon all he had to strike the drakon,
lighting it up as he landed before it, shielding Percy from harm.
Percy gazed at his boyfriend, a little awed and very much in love, before he started swaying again, coughing into the back of his hand as tremors shook his body.

Ash came running, colliding harshly with his side, but he could barely feel it.

"I thought you were done for!" They screamed into his face as Jason turned to look at him worriedly, eyes full of fear as he seemed to take Percy in.

Percy tried and failed to meet their gazes, his attempt at a smile undoubtedly more grimace than anything else.

Jason was a lot closer suddenly, cupping his face with big, gentle hands that trembled slightly, thumbs stroking across Percy's cheeks and making him tear up automatically.

Jason was always so soft.

Percy leaned into his touch, opening his mouth as if to speak, but no words left his lips, even though there was so much he wanted to say.

Jason looked about to speak, too, but then, there was a low rumble and a muffled roar, and Ash let out a disbelieving gasp, staring past the two with wide eyes.

Percy gazed up at Jason, not wanting to look, not wanting to see, wishing he could remain in this moment forever, this moment of peace amidst the battle.

But Jason was already pulling away and turning around, sword raised and expression grim as he stood in front of Percy and Ash protectively.

Percy closed his eyes, wishing it wouldn't be real if only he didn't allow it to.

However, when he opened his eyes, the drakon was still rising once more, anyways, wings flapping angrily as acidic goo dripped from its nostrils and open mouth, fangs bared in a snarl.

Percy didn't even ask himself why it was still alive.

He just let his shoulders falls, and the moment was over, the battle resumed.

Ash was next to him one moment, then they lunged at two demigods coming their way.

Jason was in front of him, then he was fighting the drakon.

Only Percy remained, standing where he was and unable to move, unable to think, unable to continue.

There was a crack inside of him, in his very being, that only seemed to be widening by the moment.

He couldn't feel his arms, his legs, he wasn't even sure he was alive, at all, anymore.

But at the same time, he yearned.

He yearned for peace, for quiet, for the sun to shine and drive the clouds away, for the monsters and demigods to leave and the war to be over.

He yearned for his boyfriends, for the touches he had been denied and had denied himself, for the affection in their gazes and the time they used to have.

He yearned for a life where he didn't feel the way he was feeling now.

He yearned for everything to just stop.

Percy coughed again, and he watched how Jason fought the drakon for him, sometimes airborne, sometimes grounded, slashing and hacking away at it and its wings, though it seemed pointless.

Maybe it was pointless.
Percy didn't care.
Percy just wanted to end this.
End it all.
Percy forced his feet to move, first one step, then another.
There was no pain, only hollow emptiness that echoed inside him as he heard nothing but his own heartbeat in his chest, and the rushing in his ears.
He walked towards the drakon, and it promptly discarded Jason as it looked back at him.
_It had come just for him._
Percy pulled out Riptide and uncapped it.
The crack inside him started tearing.
Percy charged.

***
Nico slashed at the hellhound, but it narrowly evaded his blow and jumped back, disappearing into the crowd of battling demigods and monsters around them with a low snarl, off to find another meal.

"Are you sure?" He asked for verification as he looked out for any other immediate threats.

"Positive. It's our only chance." Thalia insisted as she remained behind him, using him as her human shield while shooting down approaching enemy demigods, while Nico took care of any monsters.

It was their silent agreement.

"What do you think, Leo?" Nico asked, and risked a glance at Leo, who had first been in the heart of battle with Festus, but had now retreated to their sides as he was frantically tinkering away at something.

Hopefully, it would be something that could finish this battle and grant them a break.

This was Camp Half-Blood, not Camp Jupiter.
They didn't have any people they could just call upon once they were exhausted and tired.
Else, none of them would be here anymore, because they were all exhausted and tired.
But so were the enemy demigods. At least some of them.
The only problem was that there were new ones coming.
But where were they coming from? From the same place as the monsters?

"You need to ask? Of course I'm all for it." Leo replied, and Nico shot him a sour look.

"Think about it again. If she becomes dependent on it, she will not be able to survive without." He reminded him, and caught Leo grimacing before Nico hurriedly turned his head away again to raise his sword at the approaching demigod.

Luckily, Thalia took care of it, and a moment later, Nico felt the telltale tug that told him of another death, though it was quickly followed by another.

"I know, but I rather deal with that than not have her survive, at all, you know? Everything becomes kind of pointless to argue about when the alternative is death." Leo grumbled, and Nico weighed that statement in his mind.
Well…

"So, we're doing this? Because if so, we got to start moving." Thalia said sharply, and Nico didn't like that plan one bit.

Mostly because they were near the infirmary, and thus the last thing standing between the war and the only sanctuary they still possessed, where Will and the other healers were tending to the wounded that had the fortune of being brought in.

Nico tried to spot his boyfriends in the raging battle in front of him, but no such luck.

Maybe they were at the border again.

Or maybe they were merely hidden behind that giant drakon that still seemed to give a bunch of campers some trouble.

"Just a few more minutes. Once I'm done with this baby, we'll hopefully be able to keep any newcomers out for a while." Leo stated, and Nico shot him another glance, trying to sneak a peek at whatever it was he was building, but then the hellhound from earlier came bounding back.

This time, Nico bounded three steps towards it, already knowing it would try to leap over him, because this thing was smart, and it hadn't targeted Nico the first time, either.

The moment it pushed off its hind legs to jump, he slid to a stop and angled his body sideways to thrust his sword upwards and right through the hellhound's ribcage.

It howled miserably, then managed to whack his hind paw across Nico's face, which had him losing his balance and crashing into the ground along with it, though he got up again, and the hellhound didn't.

"Nice move. Alright, let's roll." Leo announced, and Nico shot him a dirty look as he rubbed at his cheek with one hand, not surprised in the slightest when it came back muddied and dirty.

Great.

But hey, at least they were still alive.

Nico felt another tug, signaling another death, and all he could hope for was that it wasn't a camper.

It was still horrible, though.

Horrible, and wrong.

Demigods shouldn't be fighting one another.

They already had so many hardships to face and deal with in life, one would guess they would learn from that and stick together.

Leo started moving and Thalia followed suite, which meant Nico had to, as well.

He shot a last conflicted look towards the infirmary, just as Liam was carrying one of the Ares girls up the stairs – and then he spotted Will, taking the girl from him hurriedly with a grave expression, before he lifted his head and their eyes met.

Nico felt the urge to tell him, to let him know he would stay and protect him until his dying breath, but that this was something that might give them a break, that might allow them to survive, that might allow Calypso to get better quicker.

Will's eyes hushed to Leo and Thalia, then up towards the border, and it felt like he already knew, his gaze back on Nico.

Then, he gave a small nod, and Nico nodded back, before the moment was broken and Will carried the girl inside to heal her and hopefully save her life.
"Nico, come on!" Thalia called, and Nico forced himself to move, hurriedly following them even as he felt worry gnaw at him and tell him to stay.

He tried once more to catch a glimpse of Jason and/or Percy, but no such luck, and then he had to focus on getting them across the battlefield alive.

Battlefield. It truly looked nothing like the usual Camp grounds anymore.

Nico cut through the monsters in their way, and Thalia already had her shield and spear out to do her part, while Leo was more or less following between them, clutching his creation tightly as his eyes kept hushing up to the border, where Festus was taking his last stand.

By the looks of it, he was losing.

Nico glanced back to the battlefield, hoping his guys were faring better.

Then, he found himself frowning as a sudden thought occurred to him.

Where were the Shadows? During the attacks the past days, he knew there had been those shadow creatures among the monsters, but looking at the battle now, there wasn't even a single one.

Strange.

"Nico, stop daydreaming and come on." Thalia called and he tore his gaze away from the multitude of monsters and demigods to follow them up the hill hurriedly.

They were intercepted by monsters, but Nico made quick work of them, slicing through them without qualms and taking the lead once more.

At the top, Festus was the only thing guarding the weak remnants of the border, now fully reliant on Thalia's pine again, though it couldn't sustain this level of attacks.

He heard Leo inhaling sharply behind him, and was pretty sure it was because the mechanical dragon was already looking a little taken apart, plenty of metal plates already missing or scattering the ground, though it was fighting valiantly.

It was also currently roasting a bunch of monsters, which Nico appreciated greatly.

"Alright, here's the plan. Leo, you do your thing with whatever you got there. Nico, you go with him and watch his back. I'll go grab the fleece." Thalia told them, and Nico nodded and raised his sword, while Leo only kept looking at Festus with a grim expression.

Then, Thalia took a deep breath and ran off towards the pine tree that was their last protection next to Festus right now.

Nico tugged Leo along with him, his heart hammering wildly in his chest – partly because of the run, partly because of the monsters, and partly because he was still uncertain whether this really was a good idea, to begin with.

It was their last protection right now, and even if it was a weak protection, worn down by the many attacks and the lack of Calypso's support, it was still better than no protection, at all.

They all knew Thalia's pine would die as soon as the fleece was removed.

But Thalia herself had been the one to suggest it, and Nico guessed she had to know what she was doing.

It still didn't sit well with him, anyways.

"You know Calypso will never be able to leave the Camp again, right? She will be the only thing keeping monsters out, the Camp will depend on her. Are you sure that she would agree to that?" He asked as Leo tugged on his arm to signal him to stop, and they both cowered in the grass as the boy began working on his weird construction, which so far only looked like a weird cube.
Leo shot him a dark look.

"You think she'd rather die?" He asked sourly, and Nico cringed.

"That's not what I meant. But I thought you guys wanted to leave Camp and open that shop of yours? I don't really see you selling many flowers if your only customers are going to be kids that can grow their own via magic and whatnot."

Leo ignored him.

Nico rolled his eyes and focused back on keeping a lookout, his gaze hushing over towards the pine tree, where he could already spot Thalia climbing up the trunk.

"We'll make it work somehow. For now, the most important thing is that she will live. It doesn't matter what happens afterwards, right?" Leo said quietly, and somehow, his words reminded Nico a bit of Will.

Nico didn't like that thought, so he merely made a noncommittal sound and checked on Thalia again.

Then, he thought he saw the shadow of something moving near the trunk, and Nico promptly tensed.

"Be right back." He told Leo hurriedly, then he was off, rushing back towards the tree with his body crouched low so to not attract any unwanted attention.

Thalia just grabbed the fleece and hopped off the tree, when a dracaena snatched her, and Nico couldn't think of anything better to do than to throw his sword at it, which struck it in the shoulder and pinned it to the pine tree.

The next moment, Nico threw himself at it, too, kicking at one slithering leg (could it even be called that?) and his hands snatching the hilt of his sword, before he rammed it deeper into its shoulders, both of them snarling at each other viciously.

Then, the dracaena dropped Thalia from the headlock she had been in and started scratching at Nico's face, but he merely angled his body to shove his feet into the creature's midriff and push himself off, his sword coming out easily.

He barely hit the ground before he leaped forward again, this time aiming for the chest.

It evaded the blow and hissed at him, before one of the snake trunks somehow managed to trip Nico and make him fall.

The snake lady was on him immediately, but he managed to roll to the side, kick it in the face, snatch his sword, and ram it into one of the snake trunks, making it scream in agony.

Nico jumped up and out of the way of her clawed hands, just to find his back pressed against Thalia's pine tree.

The dracaena hissed again, and Nico snarled back, though her snake trunks didn't exactly allow for an easy escape.

At least not off to the side.

Nico glanced up, then smirked, and the next moment he had his sword sheathed and was halfway up the tree before the monster even knew what was happening.

Good thing he had always been rather good at climbing things.

The dracaena snarled viciously and spat something up at him as it tried to snatch his ankle, but he merely kicked at the hand and settled on one of the first branches that could hold his weight.

He felt the tree groaning, anyways, and Nico felt a twinge of guilt that he was the one putting a strain on it now, when he had been the one who had wanted to protect it from damage as much as possible.
The fact that his mind very helpfully pointed out that it was his sword that had pierced the trunk a few moments after losing the fleece's protection didn't improve his mood, either.

"Oi, snake-face!" Thalia called, and both the dracaena and Nico looked at her in surprise.

An arrow went flying, and the monster screeched in pain as it fell against the trunk, the entire tree wobbling in response and nearly making Nico lose his balance.

"Thanks." He called to Thalia, and she held her thumb up with a cheeky grin.

"You're welcome. Thanks for getting her to drop me, even though it made me fall on my butt. Gonna feel that one for a while."

Nico wasn't sure whether he was supposed to apologize for that or not.

But then, the decision was taken from him when they heard Festus roar loudly, both of them turning their heads to watch in a mixture of confusion and horror how the mechanical dragon spread his wings and took off.

Wait, what?

But the border!

Nico was just turning his head towards where Leo had been, when everything exploded into a blur of orange and white, followed by a wave of heat that knocked Nico back against the tree he was still standing in, then he was airborne.

Then, he hit the ground, the same moment an earth-shattering BOOM sounded around him, and he guessed something had just exploded.

Nico sucked in a sharp breath and felt a few more deaths tugging at him, though he hoped Thalia and Leo weren't among them.

He kept blinking his eyes, but it took a moment for him to make anything out again as he rolled over and pushed himself up. Immediately, he tried to figure out what had happened, where Thalia was, and whether Leo had intentionally tried to kill them right there.

He found Thalia first, also on the ground, though she seemed unharmed – but that might also be because she was still clutching the fleece in her arms.

"Are you alright?" He asked, anyways, and she thanked him by snapping her eyes open and punching him in the arm.

"Gee, thanks." He grumbled while she sat up, but she didn't bother apologizing.

"What was that?! Where's Leo?"

How was he supposed to know? He had been in a tree! He had just fallen out of said tree!

"That should buy us some time. What do you think? Alright, let's get this thing back to the infirmary." Leo's voice sounded as the Latino ran towards them, and Nico and Thalia gave him matching dark looks.

"What?" He asked with a hint of confusion in his voice as he reached them, and Thalia and Nico huffed in unison.

"A warning would have been nice, Valdez."

"Yeah, you almost got us killed, that's what. Nico fell out of a tree." Thalia sold him out cruelly, and Nico crossed his arms in front of his chest with a scowl.

"Oops. Sorry, man." Leo tried sheepishly, but Nico only shook his head.

Whatever. They didn't have time for this.
"Let's get back to the others." He said, instead, and the three of them swiftly moved down the hill to where the rest of the battle was still taking place, just as if they had never left.

A hellhound came bounding towards them, but Leo first threw a wrench at it, then set it on fire, and the three ran on.

At least, until their path was blocked by a bunch of dracaena, as if they could sense they had just killed one of their kind.

"Leo, you take it and bring it to your girlfriend. We'll hold them off." Thalia decided immediately and thrust the fleece into Leo's hands, before conjuring up her shield.

Nico and Thalia nodded at each other, then rushed forward to strike at the snake monsters, while Leo slipped through the middle and ran on.

The moment he was gone, Thalia and Nico pulled back and he functioned as her shield again.

He struck the dracaena but remained fairly rooted to the spot, while she pulled out her bow to shoot at anything that might be pursuing Leo or get in his way.

Nico had to admit, they made a good team.

Especially since Thalia seemed to have a knack for knowing what attacks eluded Nico and called out warnings to him, even though she had her eyes trained on Leo's retreating form.

Nico finished off the first two dracaena, but the other two were a little trickier, because they worked together.

Thalia breathed out a sigh of relief behind him, and the next moment, her spear whooshed past his ear and impaled the first one's neck as Nico struck the second one.

"Leo made it. I guess that means mission accomplished?" She said in a questioning tone as the two monsters disintegrated with a bunch of curses and hisses, and when Nico turned his head, he found her holding up her fist at him.

Nico hesitated, then lifted his own to bump them together.

"Mission accomplished." He muttered, and she grinned at him.

Then, she did the unspeakable, and reached out to ruffle through his hair.

Nico felt personally attacked, though he was also rooted to the spot.

"Jason is right, you're too adorable. Anyways, see you around." She said, then left him to himself as she disappeared between a bunch of battling demigods to pick her next battles.

Nico stared after her, then huffed and went his way too, deciding this was as good a chance as any to search for his boyfriends in this madness.

He pushed through the crowd, fending off monster and demigod attacks, though he kept his own attacks to a minimum, trying to focus on his task at hand.

If only that drakon would stop moving around so much and trampling everything in its wake that didn't jump out of the way fast enough, then Nico might actually be able to get a proper look around!

Who was fighting that thing, anyways?! Why was it still alive?!

Nico got pushed around again as people and monsters alike tried to flee when the drakon came crashing into the ground again, either for fun or because of an attack, but whatever it was, Nico had enough.

Growling and pushing everything off him, Nico raised his sword and moved through the crowd towards it.
Fine, if nobody finished the thing off, then he would have to do the deed.

The thing pushed itself back onto its stubby legs, then it roared and spread its wings – and even though they looked battered and beaten and too small for its body, it managed to lift off, anyways.

Nico stared up at it, then caught sight of Jason.

Relief washed over him.

The next moment, the drakon attacked.

The next moment, Jason met the attack.

*CRASH!*

The next moment, Nico wished he hadn't seen Jason, because it made denial so much more difficult.

Nico was forced to watch helplessly how the drakon collided with the Big House, the building groaning at the impact and giving way a moment later.

And for a moment, it felt to Nico as if all time had come to a halt.

No.

Nico stared, but then he was moving, shoving through the masses of monsters and demigods who only had a glance to spare before continuing their battle.

Something attacked him, but he just kept on running.

Nico kept feeling the tugs that alerted him of the deaths, but he shoved them out of his mind the same way he shoved the empousai back when it advanced on him.

Jason. Will. The infirmary.

Nico swallowed thickly and ran on, just to find Thalia doing the same with an ashen face.

She must have seen, too.

But maybe Jason had managed to get away…

Maybe they just hadn't seen it right, maybe he had managed to duck out of the way, maybe he had been able to escape at the last possible moment, *before* it had crashed into the building…

Nico choked out a small cry when he pushed through the last of the crowd, trying to tell himself it wouldn't be that bad, trying to tell himself the deaths he was feeling were only on the enemy's side, not theirs, not his boyfriends, not his…

"The infirmary! Nico, the infirmary!" Somebody yelled, and Nico was *on his way* to the infirmary, to the Big House, to where Jason had to be somewhere in the rubble, but he had to be alive and well, to where he had seen Will just earlier, but he had to have made it out, they had to make it out, they had to-…

Nico let out an inhuman cry as the Big House collapsed into itself, and suddenly, Thalia was becoming his worst enemy, because she wasn't running with him towards the infirmary, towards his boyfriends, but she was in his face, arms wrapped around him and pulling him away.

"No! Let me go! I have to- no!" He screamed and kicked, tears flying from his face as he fought her, but she was just like her brother, she had an iron grip.

The next moment, the bricks and rubble and roof began hitting the ground, and he knew he wouldn't have survived, but that didn't matter.

What mattered was that his boyfriends were somewhere in there, among the wounded and their healers.
They had to be fine.
They had to be.
There must have been a way out.
But it had happened so fast…
No, they must have made it out.

Nico was still thrashing, and Thalia let him go with a small sob, and Nico was running, running towards the infirmary, running towards the Big House, running towards what was left of it.

Nico jumped onto the first stones and window frames, tripping a few times, but he kept going, until he fell and smacked into something wooden on the ground.

He was about to push himself back up and keep going, keep searching, when he realized what he was laying on.

Nico stared down with wide eyes, hands moving over the smooth surface to brush the dust and dirt away, before his tears dripped onto the wood.

It was the infirmary door.

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Percy stood there, in the middle of the battlefield, but nothing touched him, and he couldn't do anything but stare, his sword clattering to the ground, his eyes wide open.

No.

He saw the Big House collapse, but in his mind, he still saw Jason next to him.

He still heard him telling him to stay down, that he would finish this.

He still felt him squeezing Percy's hand, a simple, swift gesture before he took off.

But Jason wasn't here.

The drakon had been too smart.

It had come for Percy.

And it had realized what it had to take from Percy to destroy him.

Percy still saw that, too.

He still saw the two in the air, saw Jason with his sword, saw the drakon regarding him, then look down at Percy.

It had known full well what it was doing.

Percy had known, too, but he had realized it too late.

He could still hear his own scream of Jason's name, seconds before the beast's head had collided with him.

Seconds before it had crashed Jason and itself into the Big House.

Percy stared at the Big House now, at what was left of it, the last walls caving in, the dust only slowly settling.

There was nothing left of it.

Percy felt the lump in his throat, but he knew no way to fight it as he kept on staring.
He was shaking.

There was an ache in his chest, in his gut, in his body, and it tore at him, tormented him, tearing him apart from the inside out, and he swayed, coughing into his hand again, not surprised when it came away with blood.

He didn't care.

Percy lifted his head again, staring emptily through the battle.

The drakon had already taken his life.

Percy stepped forward. One step, then another.

*The same way Will would.*

Will, who had been in the infirmary.

Percy kept walking, uncaring for the monsters and demigods around him.

In his mind, he saw Will.

In his mind, he saw Jason.

In his mind, they were with him.

He swallowed, and it tasted like blood, and bile, and metal.

But in his mind, he was back in New Rome with Jason, and they were getting ice cream.

He stumbled and fell.

But in his mind, Will caught him, chiding him and telling him to be more careful.

Percy felt something hot trickle down his cheek.

But in his mind, he was with them in the water park, and they were smiling, and they were happy.

He continued walking, and in his mind, he was walking towards them, and they were there, waiting.

There were so many things he still had to tell them.

There were so many things they still had to do.

Jason had promised, hadn't he? To help Percy with school? To help him get a job?

And Will had promised, too. Had promised to be there for Percy, had promised to be with him until the very end.

*This was the end.*

Percy's mind seemed to come crashing down around him when there was movement in the rubble, followed by a low roar.

There was shifting around him, screaming, a faint, whispered *'No way'.*

But to Percy, there was only the monster in front of him, the drakon that shifted and moved and got up, trampling the debris around it as it turned around to look at him.

Percy thought it looked rather smug.

Percy stared at it, stared at it standing there, in the rubble, in the remnants of its doing, in the destruction it had caused just for Percy.

In his mind, he saw Jason's face, grimy and blood-stained and determined, yet still the most
handsome face he had ever seen.

In his mind, he saw Will's face, with his freckles subdued and the blue of his eyes a little dulled, yet still the prettiest in the world.

Percy looked to the side, away from the drakon, and he saw Nico, standing there with his hands hanging at his sides and his expression one of broken despair, tears streaming down his face and a choked sob on his lips.

To Percy, Nico would always be the best thing in his life.

The drakon roared, louder this time, more insistent.

'I'm still here,' it seemed to say.

Percy dragged his gaze back to it, and his feet began moving once more.

The drakon stepped out of the rubble, wings flapping as if to test their ability.

It regarded him, only him.

There was something mocking in its gaze.

'Are you going to fight me now?', it seemed to ask him.

Percy looked back at Nico.

He would not let this war take him away from him, too.

Images zigzagged through his mind, of Jason, of Will, of what had been, of what was, and of what could have been.

The ache inside him only grew, the crack only widening, tearing at him until it seemed to consume him whole, until he was nothing but cracks and tears and the shattered remains of what would never be again.

Percy stared up at the beast, and a sense of calm filled him, a sense of not caring.

A promise of peace.

Percy was going to end this.

He was going to end this all, and if it was the last thing he did.

Percy reached out his arm, though he wasn't holding a sword.

Everything inside him was tense, and ready, and waiting.

*End it all.*

Percy let go.

And then, everything was gone.

***

There was screaming, there was howling, there was the sound of monsters and demigods alike scattering in terror and fear as Nico watched the storm unleash in front of his eyes.

One moment, Percy was standing in front of the drakon without a weapon.

The next moment, Percy was surrounded by a vortex of water and blood and debris, and the drakon was screaming in agony.

Nico realized with a jolt of terror why it was screaming, too.
He started moving, trying to run forward, trying to reach Percy, but then his boyfriend was already gone, surrounded by the whirling water, a tornado of its own kind, with Percy at the heart of it.

And the drakon was still screaming.

Screaming because it was being torn apart and drained alive, poison and blood alike pouring from its many and widening wounds and from its wide-open mouth to join Percy's storm.

Nico tried to keep his hair out of his face as the wind whipped around him, frantically trying to think, trying to figure out what to do.

He felt himself getting dragged closer and immediately jumped back, just to see a bunch of monsters not being quite so lucky as they lost their footing and got dragged into the vortex.

Nico watched in horror as they were thrown around in the whirls of water and wind and blood and debris, until they, too, were drained.

Everybody was running, monsters, demigods and campers alike, but the winds were unforgiving, and the lake became alive, and Nico thought he could hear the naiads screaming.

"He's destroying everything!" Thalia yelled at him, and he didn't know where she had come from, but now she was here, clasping his shoulders and shaking him as she looked into his face with fear in her blue eyes.

Eyes like Jason.

Nico squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head.

"Nico, you have to stop him, or he will kill us all! Everybody! Everything!" She screamed over the roar of the storm and the waves.

But Nico couldn't stop him.

Jason was the only one who could have stopped him.

But Jason wasn't here anymore.

Jason couldn't be there for Percy anymore.

And Nico would never be able to stop him.

"Nico!" Somebody called his name, and he turned his head to see Hannah running towards him.

What was she doing? She shouldn't come any closer, not when she would be so much safer further away!

Hannah didn't seem to care, coming closer anyways and latching onto his arm when the wind threatened to knock her off her feet.

"Nico! Will sends me, he says—..."

"Will?" Nico choked out, a whisper, a prayer, and his heart fluttered with the faintest hope.

"He's alive?" Thalia asked, and she, too, sounded hopeful.

Hannah nodded wildly, impatient as always.

"Yes, he had some sort of sudden freak-out and practically shoved us out of the windows. We were so shocked we went along with it, and the next thing we know, the whole thing just crashed.

But anyways, that's not important. Listen..."

Not important, she said, while Nico swayed on the spot and felt waves of relief and gratitude wash over him.

*Will was alive.*
Will must have had a vision, and he had gotten the others out, and he was alive.

"Listen to me! It's about Percy!" Hannah yelled at him, and he focused back on her, but now, everything seemed different.

Because Will was alive, and they hadn't lost everything yet.

There was hope.

"Will says Percy won't be able to make it through this, Nico. You have to stop it. He said you have to find a way. He can't leave. He's currently trying to save Jason, and it's not looking good. He says you have to do it. If you don't, the storm is going to destroy everything until it destroys Percy. Are you listening, Nico?"

Nico was, and he still rejoiced at the fact that Will was alive, that they hadn't lost him yet.

That Jason might make it.

That everything could be okay again.

But then, Nico looked back at the raging storm, and he saw demigods getting sucked into it. He saw them dying, felt the telltale tugs that sealed their fate.

How could he possibly stop this? How could he possibly stop Percy?

"You got to find a way, Nico. Will says you're the only one who can do it now." Hannah repeated, and Nico stared at her, then at Thalia, then back at the storm.

Another demigod got sucked into the vortex.

Nico thought he could see a hint of orange.

Hannah stiffened next to him, then she let go.

"I have to go. I need to find Ash. And the others." She muttered, and then, she was gone, stumbling off towards the Camp.

Nico looked after her, then back at Thalia, but Thalia was looking to where Hannah had come from.

"I…" She started, and Nico nodded.

"Go. Help Will. I'll…I'll think of something." He told her, and she gave him a long, grim look.

Then, she nodded.

When she turned to leave, Nico held her back once more.

"Listen, if I...if I don't make it…get them out of here, okay? I know you can't do miracles and save them all, but…try. As many as you can." He told her, and she took his hand and gave it a small squeeze, much like the tentative squeezes Jason sometimes gave.

"You'll make it." She then said, her voice full of confidence.

Then, she let go, and he watched her disappear.

Nico turned back towards the storm, and when he found himself pulled in once more, he was forced to put even more distance between them.

He looked at the Camp around him, at their home, but all he could see was fleeing monsters and demigods and the lake forming its own, second vortex of death, while the sea seemed to rise in the distance.

There was no escape, for any of them.

Nico clenched his fists, then he started running.
He wasn't sure where or what he was running to, but he ran.

The monsters were trying to flee after a bunch of enemy demigods across the border, but then Percy's storm got too close.

The monsters were mercilessly pulled in, and the vortex only seemed to grow and expand.

Some enemy demigods tried to run towards the woods, but the lake claimed them.

Campers crowded together where the cabins were, screaming and crying and dying.

Nico felt a growing sense of helplessness as he watched the first wave hit the beach, then go past it, a flood with a mind of its own claiming those that thought to escape that way.

Nico kept running, snatching one of the youngsters that was being dragged in by a particularly strong current.

The water threatened to pull Nico in, but he persisted, pushing on and getting the kid to the others, though he knew they were trapped, and it was only a matter of time until either the lake or the sea would claim them, too.

He put the kid down, and found himself facing Chiron.

The centaur was in front of the campers, holding a protective crouch while the smaller campers held tightly onto his legs. He looked grave and scared, just like the rest of them.

Nico stared at him, and memories forced themselves to the front of his mind.

Memories of Jason's words, of Will's angry ranting, of Percy's vacant looks, of Chiron demanding, and Percy yielding.

"Are you happy now?" Nico asked, staring Chiron down; his voice sounded as bitter and angry as he felt.

Chiron looked back at him, and there was defeat in his eyes, along with regret.

It wasn't enough.

Nico turned his back to him and started running again.

There had to be a way.

A way to save Percy, and a way to get the campers to safety somehow.

But Nico didn't know what to do…

He looked back towards the sea.

The water was already much closer, tearing down the climbing wall as it went.

He looked towards the lake.

It was still roaring and sucking in stray monsters and demigods that got too close, or stayed in one spot a little too long.

He looked towards the Big House, where Percy's vortex of misery was growing, spreading, threatening to claim them all.

Nico squeezed his eyes shut and tried to think.

If only he could get to Percy, somehow.

Maybe, if he could talk him, if he could reach him, and get him to stop this…

There was a neighing sound, and Nico's head shot up, eyes flying open as a black shape
whooshed past him, materializing into a horse as it landed a few feet away from him.

No, not a horse, a pegasus.

*Blackjack.*

***

The death kid stared at him like he was crazy.

And yeah, maybe he was.

But they didn't have time for that now.

'Come on, kid, we gotta go!', he told him, stomping with his hooves and flapping his wings to get the boy out of his stupor.

Unfortunately, the boy couldn't understand him.

Blackjack neighed again.

The boss needed him now, he needed this boy.

This was the one he had told Blackjack about so many times, whenever he had come visit him, rambling about gifts and calendars and things Blackjack had never heard nor cared about before.

In his opinion, he should have just given the kid a donut; that should have shown his devotion just fine.

'Come on! We need to save the boss!' He repeated urgently, and now, finally, the boy was moving.

Blackjack lowered his wings and one front leg to make it easier for him to get on his back, but the boy still took a horribly long time, and he was so clumsy.

He needed more exercise.

Why had the boss never taken him to Blackjack? He would have gladly given him some lessons.

'Alright, hold on tight,' Blackjack told him, then spread his wings.

The next moment, they were up in the air, and the boy clung to Blackjack's mane like his life depended on it.

Probably because it did.

Everything depended on Blackjack and the boy now.

His boss wasn't going to make it, he was already falling apart, Blackjack could sense it.

He flew higher, trying to avoid the deathly currents that had already claimed so many.

They both looked down at the Camp beneath them, the water going wild and the vortexes of death growing yet bigger.

His poor boss.

"Any ideas?" The boy on his back asked, and Blackjack huffed.

'I'm gonna fly right in, and then you gotta make the boss snap out of it,' he told him, and when he looked back, he found the boy staring back blankly.

Oh, yeah, right.

"Sorry, I don't speak horse."
Hey, Blackjack was a *pegasus*.

Blackjack huffed, but decided to forgive the boy, because what was the world without forgiveness?

’*Hold on tight, kid,*’ he told him, then he dived down. The boy on his back let out a startled cry and clung to his mane again.

Blackjack tried to pick up speed as they shot towards the ground, trying to build up as much momentum as possible before angling his body to fly them right through the vortex.

Then, suddenly, there was a bunch of air monsters, and Blackjack was forced to spread out his wings and rear back.

*No!*

The things – *venti*, Blackjack thought they were called – were trying to grasp them, trying to hold onto them for leverage, but then they were sucked back in to the two storms that seemed to begin to fuse into one giant one, and Blackjack was forced to retreat.

His wings flapped agitatedly at his side as he tried and tried to get away, but it took horrifyingly long for him to get the boy and himself back up and further away, back to safety.

"What was that?! Were you *trying* to get us killed?!" The boy on his back exclaimed in apparent disbelief, and Blackjack snorted and turned his head back towards the vortex.

Well, what had the boy expected?

He had to get in there *somehow*, right?

The boy seemed to realize the same thing, suddenly going still and quiet on his back.

"Oh."

Blackjack snorted again.

Yeah, *oh*.

Oh man, if only the others could see him now.

He had promised the boss to always help him, to always fight by his side.

This was him keeping that promise.

The others would be proud.

Hopefully, his efforts wouldn't be in vain.

The boy took a deep breath, and his grip on Blackjack’s mane tightened again.

"Alright, let's do this.” He said, and Blackjack guessed his boss's taste wasn't all that bad, after all.

Sure, the kid still smelled a little funky, but eh, maybe it would wash out.

Rolling in some fresh grass or hay would undoubtedly do the trick.

Blackjack looked down, searching for any more monsters that might get into their way, but the storms had already claimed them.

It was time.

’*Let's do this,*’ He agreed, then he dived down again.

The boy held on tightly, his face close to Blackjack's neck as they whooshed down towards the ground, and Blackjack kicked his legs and flapped his wings as much as he could to build up speed.
If they hit the storm with enough speed, they could break through it.

Blackjack had to get them through it.

The ground was coming closer, but he kept kicking, and then, he tilted his wings, and they weren't flying downward anymore, instead flying straight for the angry whirls of water and death.

'Hang on, boss,' Blackjack uttered.

Then, they hit the storm.

They were flying one moment, and drowning the next.

Blackjack instantly felt himself torn along with the current, his wings plastered against his side from the force of the water and wind around them, and the boy was clinging to him, but his hands quickly lost their grip.

His heels were digging into Blackjack's sides painfully, but Blackjack was more occupied with trying to keep moving, moving against the tide, against the storm.

There was a pain spreading through him the likes he had never felt before, and when he turned his head to look at the boy, he could see tears appearing on the boy's body as well as his own, blood seeping out and joining the swirls of death around him.

Blackjack struggled, and for a moment, he could feel a rush of air, a rush of peace, a rush of freedom, as both his and the boy's head broke through – but then, the boy was dragged back and sucked off Blackjack's back.

Blackjack called out for him and turned, unable to let him go.

The boy was their only hope.

The boss loved this boy.

The boss would surely listen to this boy.

The pain surged through him, an ache settling into his bones as if he was an old mare, but Blackjack kept on pushing, fighting the current and the feeling as he pursued the boy and coaxed him back onto his back.

This was his boss' pain.

If his boss could take it, then so could he.

The water tore at them, shoved at them, and a screaming filled his mind that seemed to take him apart from the inside out.

But then, right when Blackjack thought they would drown after all, he managed to break through.

There was air, and freedom, and then, they were falling, and the boy was beneath him.

Blackjack called out to him, flapping his wings hurriedly to be faster, to surpass the boy, and he saw the ground rushing closer to both of them, the distance too big for the boy to survive the impact.

No, no, no!

He had to…had to…

Blackjack stretched as far as he could.

They both hit the ground.

Blackjack stared towards the shape he knew was his boss, standing in the center of the end.
'Sorry, boss.'

It seemed this was the last time he would be able to help him, after all.

***

Nico heard the sickening cracks and a loud snap at the impact, and he remained where he was for a long moment, fighting for breath and trying to come to terms with the fact that he was still alive.

It took until his body stopped shaking for him to realize that it hadn't been his bones that had just broken.

It took another moment for him to realize what he was even laying on, recognizing Blackjack's wings and body.

The pegasus seemed to have taken the full brunt of the fall to protect him.

There was a dead calm around them.

The storm still raged on, but there was no wind in here, no water, nothing but an eerie emptiness.

An eerie emptiness, and Percy.

Nico looked up at him weakly, standing in the very center of the vortex, the very eye of the storm.

Then, he looked back down at Blackjack, but the pegasus wasn't moving, even though he was still breathing. His eye seemed fixed on Nico.

Nico stroke over his neck and whispered an apology, but he had no idea whether Blackjack would understand, much less whether he had any right to apologize, in the first place.

He couldn't make himself check the damage the fall must have caused, the fact that Blackjack wasn't moving at all told him all he needed to know.

Instead, Nico pushed himself up with a heavy heart and wobbly legs. He swallowed thickly as he gazed at his boyfriend.

"Percy." He said, and his voice was coarse and dry, even though he was dripping wet from head to toe.

But Percy didn't reply, nor did he react.

He was just standing there, arms outstretched, and Nico found himself moving towards him shakily.

His skin was burning, and his lungs seemed on fire, but Nico wasn't sure whether that was from the battle or the water he had inhaled.

"Percy." He repeated when he reached him, and the closer he got, the more details he could make out.

Like the many cuts and bruises littering Percy's skin, blood seeping from his arms and his chest and his sides, not to mention his legs.

Like the way Percy's body was shaking, his outstretched arms trembling faintly yet noticeably, and he looked exhausted, overpowered.

Like the way Percy's eyes were glowing a cold golden color.

It was the eyes that unnerved Nico the most, and he felt himself shuddering as he stepped closer, both drawn in and repulsed by Percy's aura.

It was Percy, but at the same time it wasn't Percy.

"You have to stop this, Percy." Nico tried softly, but Percy didn't react in the slightest, and Nico wasn't sure he could even hear him, at all.
He certainly took no notice of him, even when Nico moved to stand right in front of him.

Nico wanted to reach out, wanted to touch, but at the same time, he was reluctant to do so, the immense power rolling off Percy in waves still making his skin crawl.

Nico swallowed, then stepped closer, between Percy's arms, and his hands reached up to touch Percy's face, anyways.

Cold.

He was so cold.

Percy was never this cold.

Nico forced his breathing to remain calm as he cupped Percy's cheeks, trying to find something in his eyes or expression that showed he even noticed him, at all.

But his boyfriend didn't react, as if he was stuck in his own world.

Maybe he was.

"Come back, Percy." Nico tried, and he felt something wet trickle down his cheek, though he knew now wasn't the time to cry.

A monster got sucked into the vortex, the screams making Nico stiffen automatically, though it was over disturbingly fast.

Nico thought back to the pain he had felt, the pull at his heart that seemed to tear him apart from the inside, the feeling of being nothing, being a disappointment, being a burden.

Was that how Percy felt?

There was a low rumbling, and Nico knew from the suddenly increasing amount of debris that Percy's vortex was sucking in the rest of the Big House.

He was destroying the Camp.

Their home.

"I know you want to end the war, Percy. We all do. I know you're tired of fighting, and that you just want it to stop." Nico told him, fingers still caressing Percy's face, though he didn't as much as blink.

"But you have to stop this, Percy. This is not the right way. You're destroying the Camp, Percy. You're not only hurting the enemy, you're hurting your friends, you're hurting us." He continued, but for nothing.

Nico closed his eyes and sucked in a shaky breath, trying to push down the sense of hopelessness that began to gnaw on him.

He had never been the one good with words.

That had been Jason.

Jason could have helped Percy. Jason could have stopped this. Jason could have prevented this.

"They're alive, Percy. Will escaped, and he's healing Jason. It's gonna be okay." He whispered.

Another monster got sucked in and Nico flinched, turning his head to watch it getting tossed and turned around in the vortex, before disintegrating.

It was at that moment Nico realized that Percy was disintegrating too.

There were small cracks appearing on his skin, like he was made of clay, not flesh.
Nico watched with growing horror as Percy seemed to begin to crumble apart, the cracks growing wider.

Nico had his hands on his face again in an instant, drawing closer to him, whispering his name as he frantically tried to think.

What could he possibly do?

He was no healer like Will, and he didn't have Jason's skill with words or bear hugs, either.

"Percy, they are alive. We didn't lose them, not yet. But if you don't stop this now, we're going to lose you." He tried to make him understand, but Percy was like a statue, unmoving, unresponsive, uncaring.

Percy's golden eyes reminded him of Eros, of the time he was forced to see the god of love with his cruel smile and those blood-red eyes that still freaked Nico out to this day.

He wanted Percy's sea-green eyes back.

"Please." Nico begged him as he wrapped his arms around his boyfriend's neck and moved his head to Percy's chest.

He was so cold.

Why was he so cold?

"Percy, I know you're still in there somewhere. I know you. You don't give up, you never do. Only you can put an end to this."

Nico hugged him a little tighter, wishing he could be like Will and give Percy a bit of the little warmth he had to offer.

"You don't want to destroy the Camp, Percy. You love the Camp. You love the people, and the lake, and the strawberry fields. You wanted to take me to those, remember?" He asked helplessly, but all he saw was the cracks on Percy's arm widening and parts crumbling away.

Another tear ran down Nico's cheek.

"They're gone, Percy. The monsters that are still here can be fought off easily. There'll be peace, Percy. We'll have time to rest, to sleep. To cuddle. Wouldn't you like that? We could go skinny-dipping in the lake like you've been wanting to do." He tried.

It was pointless.

"We could go for a night-time swim in the ocean. Or a nice stroll along the beach. Just the four of us. Something nice, something calm."

Percy was dying.

"Don't you want to dance with Will, again? You always looked so happy when you did."

There was a flicker, and a demigod was sucked into the vortex.

Nico squeezed his eyes shut as he heard the pained screeching. Then he felt a sickening tug, and the voice fell silent.

"They're alive, Percy. Will made it out. He's probably just finishing up healing Jason as we speak. You know how strong he is. They are waiting for us, I'm sure of it. Waiting for you." He muttered, trying to sound more confident than he was.

But Percy was still stuck in a world that wasn't theirs.

Nico reached out again, and he went on his tiptoes in order to put their foreheads together.

"Please. This is not who you are, Percy. You're no murderer. You're no destroyer. Stop this,
Percy."

He closed his eyes and moved his hands from Percy's cheeks to his neck, feeling the skin tearing and crumbling away.

He tried to keep the pieces there.

"This is killing you, Percy. I can see it, and I can feel you slipping away. Don't make me lose you, Percy." He whispered.

Then, he had to fight the urge to hold Percy tighter, because this just wasn't enough, nothing was enough; he needed his boyfriend back, and he needed him back now.

He had just thought he had lost Will and Jason, and even though Will had made it and Jason had to make it, he couldn't bear the thought of losing Percy, too.

He couldn't lose them.

"I know you want to end it all, but it's never going to end. You know it won't. But that doesn't have to mean we can't be happy, anyways. Sure, life sucks right now, but you still have us, right? You still have me. We can make it through this, and then we'll go to school. We'll punch Kyle in the face and send him to Tartarus for what he's done. Then we'll go to New Rome, okay?"

He buried his face at Percy's chest again, but it was cold, so cold, and his skin was paling as if the life was being sucked out of him.

Nico felt the strain of death, and his hands were shaking, praying it wasn't Percy's, though he already knew it was.

"Let's go to school, Percy. You wanted to show your mom that you could finish college, right? We wanted to go job-hunting together. We wanted to get a house and, and children. We wanted to make more memories together, fill up those photo albums I keep buying."

Nico was running out of things to say.

But what was there to say?

The storm was howling around them, and Nico heard Blackjack neighing feebly.

He was dying.

Percy was dying.

The Camp was dying.

They were all dying.

Nico started crying silently, and now, he did pull Percy against him further, his body trembling as he clutched his boyfriend helplessly.

"I'm sorry." He whispered, squeezing his eyes tightly shut.

"I'm sorry that it came to this, that we couldn't prevent it. I'm sorry that all of this has happened, that we never got the break you wanted." He pressed out, accompanied by many more tears.

Nico pulled back to look at his boyfriend's face, but the golden eyes remained cold and otherworldly, even if the rest of him was now dulled and fading.

Nico cupped his face again with shaky hands, moving his face closer to rest their foreheads together once more.

"I'm sorry that they made you fight. I'm sorry that I made you fight. I'm sorry for the expectations and decisions we forced on you. I'm sorry, Percy. I'm so, so sorry."

This was their doing.
This was the landslide that had started a long time ago.

This was the result of pushing, of urging, of forcing the weight of the world onto the shoulders of a single person, of using a single person as means to save what others should be saving, of pushing a person past their breaking point and disregarding them when they cried for help.

This was what the gods had made of Percy, what Chiron had made of Percy, what the world had made of him, and what Nico had made of him, too.

"Will wanted to get you away from all the fighting, did you know that? He was trying to convince Chiron to let you help him in the infirmary, away from the battlefield."

Will had always threatened that it was going to get worse, that exposing Percy to the very thing he despised the most was going to end up being his downfall.

But nobody had listened, and Nico had let it happen.

He should have forced Chiron to listen.

They should have talked to Percy about it, too.

"Will said you have depression, but he didn't know what to do about it, and he was worried that you would react badly if you found out. Your injury seems related to it. He said he didn't want you fighting it or trying to prove you're okay, because it would only drag you down even more."

Nico should have insisted on it, anyways.

They should have told Percy, they should have dragged him off to wherever Will thought was a good place for him to be.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you the way I should have been." He said quietly, and opened his eyes, staring at the cold golden glow that greeted him.

It reminded him of the gods, and of how bitter and resentfully Percy spoke of them.

Nico gazed at him, and he thought of Percy, of his smiles and his scowls, of his laughs and his quiet tears.

He thought of Percy's gentle words and his loud shouting, of his cockiness during training and his ferocity during real battles.

He thought of Percy's warm embrace and Percy's distant behavior on bad days.

He thought of Percy, and he thought of their time together, the things they had done, the things they wanted to do, the things they joked about and the things they disagreed on.

He thought of Percy at his best and his worst.

Nico loved him, anyways.

Nico had always loved him, just the way he was.

No matter if he was loud and obnoxious sometimes, or a little childish, or had the worst ideas in the history of mankind, and his plans sucked more often than not.

No matter if he was a little clingy and needed a lot more affirmation and attention than initially expected.

Nico loved him just the same, because this was Percy, and he loved Percy.

Nico looked around him at the raging storm.

This was Percy's pain.

And Nico couldn't take it from him, he couldn't make him just forget about it and push it back
down to address later, he couldn't just make Percy not hurt.

But maybe he could ease it, maybe he could make it a little less on Percy, and a little more on both of them.

Nico closed his eyes, and the tension in his gut loosened as he zoned out everything around him, focusing on Percy, focusing on them.

He was reminded of the many times he had visited Camp in his sleep and stumbled over Clovis.

*Sleep was a lot like death.*

They weren't sleeping now, but Percy was dying, and Nico was death.

It was the same thing, he told himself.

And then, it was.

And then, he felt the soft gasp escaping his lips as he felt the same tug that he had felt back when Clovis had taken him to Will's dreams, back whenever he, himself, had tried to sleep-travel.

And then, he was confronted with gray and murky skies and thunder in the distance.

A small wooden cabin – and a boy standing in front of a raging ocean, looking lost.

_Percy._

* 

Nico moved forward, walking through the blackened sand at his feet, and he dimly thought he recognized this place, even though he didn't immediately know why.

He thought of Percy's picture, and he wondered whether this was what he meant – until he remembered the photos Sally had sent them, of a younger Percy at the beach, of the many toothy grins with that sense of joy coming from each of them.

He walked towards Percy now, stopping next to him and looking out at the raging tides.

"This isn't you." He said quietly, and Percy turned his head a little, looking tired, exhausted, weak.

He was Nico's Percy, but he was pale, and he was fading, just like the Percy Nico was still holding in the center of the storm.

"Then what am I?" Percy asked, and his voice sounded faraway, lost in the roar of the sea.

Nico took his hand, and it was cold as ice, but Nico didn't care.

Instead, he thought for a moment, trying to find the right words.

"You're the sea, but you're soft. Gentle. You're the tide that brings life to the shore, and that takes away the bad. You're the calm after the storm, the soft, hopeful feeling that things are going to be okay again." He told him, because Percy may be stormy, may be loud, but he was kind, and he was forgiving, and he always tried to make sure nobody got hurt because of him.

He always protected.

He protected the campers, and the kids, and his boyfriends, and complete strangers, and he did what had to be done to save everybody he could save.

He was much like Will, in that regard.

Percy turned his face away from him again, gazing back at the sea.

"I don't see it." He said quietly, and his voice sounded even further away than before.

Nico squeezed his hand gently, the same way they always did.
"Want me to show you?"

Percy looked at him again, and his sea-green eyes were dulled, but they were sea-green, and Nico reached out automatically with his free hand, touching his cheek, leaning in.

The kiss was nothing but a peck, a brushing of lips, and Percy was cold, but Nico would keep him warm.

In Percy's picture, Nico was the hearth, and the hearth warmed and protected when the others needed a break.

Nico was going to be that hearth now.

He focused on the pictures in his mind, and tried to project them on their surroundings, the same way he had bent Will's dreams to his wishes all that time ago.

He felt Percy struggling for a moment, hesitant and reluctant, but then, he let go, and he let him in.

Nico felt a lurch in his powers, a shudder running down his back as he felt Percy's grief and his deep-rooted pain, but he accepted it, because it was a part of Percy.

He pushed on, giving a little of himself to Percy and letting him see Nico for who he was, as their powers and beings merged for a short moment.

The storm around them seemed to explode, the ground shaking and breaking as the Camp around them groaned and yielded.

But Nico was with Percy, and they were at the sea.

There was light in the cabin and the sea was calming, the sun rising and bringing back the colors that had previously been lost to the storm.

And Percy was holding him back now, and Nico could feel their hearts hammering together in their chests.

Nico knew his own skin was cracking, that he was crumbling and fading just like Percy, but that was okay.

He was with Percy now, he could shoulder some of this, and they could get through this together, the same way they had promised to.

Percy seemed to feel so many things at once, it was both amazing and unnerving, but most profound seemed his surprise and thrill that Nico didn't recoil.

Nico could only smile at that, and he pulled back a little to look into his boyfriend's sea-green eyes once more, relieved beyond measure to find them looking at least a little more vivid and hopeful.

"Let's end this, okay?" He suggested softly.

He knew the war was far from over.

He knew there would be more battles they would have to face.

But they still had each other, and together, they would make it through that.

Percy looked reluctant for a moment, looking around at the scenery, with all the soft colors and warmth and sense of peace.

Nico knew he wanted to stay.

But it wasn't his time yet, and Percy knew that, too.

He squeezed Percy's hands again, tightly clasped in his own.

He was about to tell him that there were still plenty of beautiful and peaceful moments waiting for
them, but Percy was already smiling at him softly.

"I know." Percy said, and Nico smiled back at him.

"Let's go home."

Percy closed his eyes and nodded.

***

Annabeth had her girlfriend in her arms, protecting her from the strong winds around them and trying to shout orders to the others, so they wouldn't get too close to the rising water or the deadly pull of the now fused vortexes.

If Nico didn't stop this, they were all going to die.

So far, they had managed to protect the campers present, but she had no way of telling whether any other campers had fallen victim to Percy's vengeance.

She knew he would never intentionally hurt them, but she also wasn't sure whether he was himself anymore, at all.

Her only hope was that Nico had somehow made it through, though it might very well be that he had met the same fate as the others – in which case, they were doomed.

Sadly, Annabeth couldn't even find it in herself to blame him.

She looked around at the other campers again, watching how they huddled together helplessly, some crying, some screaming, others already resigned to their fates.

Siblings held each other, couples tried to shield each other, and she saw Ash and Hannah finally finding each other in the crowd, both laughing in relief and falling into each other's arms.

Annabeth smiled slightly at that, then looked back down at Piper, her smile disappearing as she stroked through her wet hair gently.

Piper had taken a rather nasty blow to the head by some flying debris earlier while trying to get a boy to safety, and even though they had managed to somewhat stop the bleeding, Annabeth knew the injury weakened her greatly.

She hoped at least some of their healers had survived, though with Percy so close to the Big House, she already knew the chance of survivors was a slim one.

There was a crashing sound, and Annabeth's head shot up again, watching how the forgery was beginning to crack and succumb to the pull of the storm.

She held Piper closer against her, then heard more screaming behind her, showing the water was slowly but surely closing in, the cabins closest to the sea already creaking and groaning.

*Please, Nico.*

Annabeth yelled towards the back for the people to move closer together, but it seemed impossible, and they couldn't move forward any further without risking to get pulled in by the strong winds.

They were trapped.

Annabeth tried to keep her breathing calm as the realization sank in.

They wouldn't make it.

It was so ironic, that the Camp wouldn't fall to the enemy's forces, but to its own hero's breakdown.

The storm lurched, moved, and Annabeth squeezed her eyes shut and clutched Piper, preparing
for the worst as the campers around her screamed in terror.

But they weren't sucked in, and no water pulled them in and drowned them.

Annabeth waited another moment, then blinked her eyes open in surprise, just to see the storm beginning to dissipate.

What…?

Did that mean Percy had…

She let out a small sob of relief when she saw Percy, alive, standing in the center of destruction, with Nico hugging the living hell out of him.

Nico had made it.

Annabeth looked over her shoulder, and saw the sea retreating, leaving them and the remnants of their Camp be.

Oh, thank the gods.

She looked back to find Percy ever so timidly reaching out to hug Nico back, before said cautious embrace turned into what looked like a rather painful crushing of ribs, and she winced in sympathy.

Campers around her started realizing they were out of danger, too, rejoicing loudly and moving cautiously out of their small circle of protection.

Annabeth found herself caught up in watching Percy and Nico, watching how they held each other, watching how Percy's shoulders shook as he bawled his heart out.

Then, her gaze snapped to the side.

"I hope you're happy now." She snapped rather aggressively, then turned to address the Camp.

"Everybody, collect the wounded and check the damage. Do a headcount. Head counsellors, I expect you to come meet me at…meet me at the Campfire, in thirty minutes." She told them loudly, then shot Chiron another icy look, before she carefully lifted her girlfriend and carried her off towards the guys and what was left of the Big House.

Maybe, there was at least one healer that had survived…

Else, even with the Camp safe from destruction for now, things would look very grim very soon.

As if things weren't bad enough already.

If there was just one more attack by Kyle's forces…Annabeth didn't even want to think about it.

"'s gonna be okay." Piper mumbled quietly, and Annabeth glanced down at kaleidoscope eyes, as charming as always.

"I know." Annabeth replied, and Piper smiled a little, before she winced and hid her face at Annabeth's chest, and Annabeth looked around once more for anybody who could help.

She nearly dropped her girlfriend when Thalia came running from behind the wreckage, from the direction of the strawberry fields, closely followed by Alec and co.

No way.

But how…?

She spotted a blonde head making right for Percy and Nico, and Annabeth couldn't help but laugh out loud in relief.

Oh gods, that boy.
Him and his crazy visions!

She looked down at Piper again, and Piper looked up at her with a small smile, though she clearly didn't seem to know what was happening.

"We're gonna be okay." Annabeth promised her, and Piper blinked slowly, the small smile still on her lips.

"Told you so, mon chou."

Annabeth shook her head with a small smile and hurried on towards their healers.

Gods, these guys.

***

Nico was still holding Percy when Will came rushing towards them and collided with them harshly, breath hitching and his hands shaking as he held them in an even more crushing embrace than Percy had.

"I thought I had lost you." Percy breathed in disbelief and joy as his hands frantically moved all over Will, as if trying to make sure he was really there, whole and alive.

Nico could understand the urge, having to restrain himself from doing the same.

Will only shook his head and kept holding them close, looking exhausted and haunted and scared.

Nico looked away from them, and promptly saw Blackjack, with one of Will's siblings kneeling next to the pegasus, though his expression was grim.

He got up a moment later with a small shake of his head.

Nico's heart ached in his chest, but he tried not to cry again.

Instead he watched as the boy hurried towards Annabeth next, who held a bleeding and half-unconscious Piper in her arms.

Nico dragged his eyes away from them, too, and tried to look around the Camp, tried to take in the damage.

It looked horrible.

But at least they were alive.

They could rebuild this place.

It would take time, but it was possible.

"I'm sorry." Percy whispered, then repeated it, again and again, but Will only kept shaking his head, choked sobs still racking his body.

Nico swallowed thickly, then he hesitantly opened his mouth, asking the question he was most reluctant, yet most desperate to ask.

"How is Jason? Were you able to..."

Will looked up at him with teary eyes, and for a moment, Nico's heart plummeted to the Underworld – but then, he rubbed at his face and gave a faint nod.

"He'll live. He...the crash...it...he broke a lot of bones. We used the fleece to...to keep him alive, then I helped healing him to the best of my abilities."

Nico didn't care how many miracles Will had made happen to save him, the fact that Jason would live was enough for him.

More than enough.
They had survived another day, and they would keep doing so.

Everything was going to be alright.

Percy had his hands on his face, and he was still crying, but he seemed more than relieved by the news, too.

Then, he suddenly assaulted Will again, wrapping his arms around him tightly and lifting him off the ground.

"I thought I had lost you! Both of you! And you were so stupid, and we were fighting, and gods, Will, never do that again! Never distance yourself like that again!"

Will was sobbing all over again, but he was nodding and shaking his head at various intervals, and it seemed like he agreed with Percy, much to their relief.

Nico felt a twinge of guilt, thinking of the past days, and thinking of the quarrel with Jason. He had nearly lost him, again, and the last thing he had done was trying to avoid him at all costs.

Gods, what a fool he had been.

What fools they had been.

Annabeth was right, this was the time where they should do everything in their power to stick together, not let themselves fall apart.

Nico looked around again, watching how demigods moved through the Camp in bundles and searched for any survivors in the wreckage the storms had caused.

He saw plenty of fearful looks in their direction, but he couldn't say he was surprised.

Nico reached out for Percy's hand, and Percy immediately entwined their fingers, his gaze also on the campers around him with an expression that told Nico he knew, too.

"Let's help them assess the damage, okay?" Nico suggested tentatively, but Will shook his head again.

"No, help me with the wounded. I need…I'm not very strong right now, I used up a lot of power. But…there's still a lot to do." He said, and Nico's eyes widened.

Had Will just…but he hated coming off as weak…

"Then we'll help you." Percy said immediately, and Nico nodded in agreement.

They stumbled off towards the few remnants of the Big House, both Will and Nico steadying Percy for the most part, who wasn't nearly as well as he might have liked them to think.

(Which, given his injuries and the storm he had just nearly died for, truly didn't come as a surprise to Nico.)

Near the strawberry fields, Nico spotted Will's medic tent, and he had never thought he'd feel so relieved to see it, especially when they stepped inside and moved past the other patients towards Jason.

Jason, who was breathing.

Jason, who looked terribly pale and rather worse for the wear, but who was alive, and Nico couldn't thank the world and his boyfriend enough for it.

They would need a lot of healing, a lot of time, and a new plan on how to deal with the threats outside the Camp, now that it was in tatters.

But they were alive, and they were together.
And that was all that mattered to Nico right now.
Chapter 15: Redemption

When he blinked his eyes open, he found himself in what appeared to be the medic tent.

Jason frowned, blinked, squinted up at the glow-in-the-dark stars, but it really was Will's medic tent, which had him wondering why.

"Hello there, Handsome." A voice greeted him softly, and he shifted, tilting his head backwards to spot Will sitting behind the head of his bed, looking down with a small smile on his face.

He looked rather tired, but beautiful at the same time.

He also looked rather dirty.

Jason closed his eyes and took a deep breath.
"Is the battle over?" He asked, and his voice was rather raspy, though he felt perfectly fine.

Too fine.

Will must have healed him. Again.

A warm hand found his head, fingers brushing through his hair.

"Long over, Handsome. How are you feeling?" Will's voice was quiet, soft and beautiful.

Jason could listen to that voice forever.

"I'm feeling great, undoubtedly thanks to you. Can you tell me what happened?" He asked, trying to keep his voice down the same way Will was.

His boyfriend let out a small, amused-sounding huff.

Then, there was shifting and rustling, and Jason opened his eyes to find his boyfriend climbing into his bed awkwardly, trying and failing to be as quiet as possible.

Jason held up the blanket for him, using the moment to take in his surroundings.

There wasn't much to see.

Next to his bunk, there were two more with Calypso and Clovis in them, and Percy and Nico were huddled together on the ground next to the tent exit, fast asleep with a blanket wrapped around them.

Something must have happened to the infirmary, then.

Jason couldn't remember anything like that, but his boyfriend would undoubtedly explain everything.

Once he finished his mighty quest of wiggling into the little space between Jason and the wall, of course.

"Where do you want me to start?" Will asked quietly, accompanied by a small sigh, which indicated there was a lot to tell, and Jason undoubtedly wouldn't like any of it.

He turned to face Will, and Will promptly shuffled as close as possible, snuggling against him and burying his face at Jason's naked chest.

Jason smiled and moved his arms around him, his chin against the top of Will's head, keeping him there.

There was no way he would be able to tell him anything in this position.

Such a cunning boyfriend.

"You do know that if you don't tell me, somebody else will, right?" Jason pointed out with a small smirk, and Will huffed against his skin.

"Oh, don't I know it. Just…give me a moment. To collect my thoughts." Will said quietly, and Jason let him have all the time he wanted, though he was aware Will just wanted to drag out the conversation for as long as possible.

"That bad, huh?"

"You have no idea." Will replied bitterly, and Jason sighed, stroking over his back and kissing the top of his head.

"Just a quick summary, then?" Jason suggested, but that only had Will snorting out a derisive laugh.

"What if you only tell me what happened to the infirmary, and I'll hear the rest later?" Jason tried
again, because his boyfriends seemed well enough, and there were no other patients around, so that had to mean something. He could keep the rest of his questions for later.

In response, Will just kept on laughing, and Jason deflated with a sigh.

"That bad?"

"Oh, worse. So much worse. Gods, everything is just…” Will gestured faintly with one hand as he trailed off, then he dropped it and hid it between their bodies again.

Jason kept stroking over his back, waiting in case Will wanted to finish his sentence.

"Do you know what happened to you?" Will asked softly a moment later.

Jason hesitated, his memory was fairly hazy.

He remembered fighting that flying drakon with Percy, and that he had tried to get it away from his boyfriend because he had already seemed so overwhelmed and covered in injuries.

He remembered the dumb thing taking off and attacking him.

He couldn't quite remember how he had managed to fend off the attack, though, so he guessed he must have either fainted or gotten knocked out.

"You died." Will whispered, and Jason stilled, his heart missing a few beats.

There was the impulse to pat himself down, to check his own pulse, to frown and ask Will whether he was sure, to ask a hundred more questions…but in the end, Jason did nothing of the sort, instead continuing his stroking with a rather nauseous feeling in his stomach.

Will shifted slightly, curling together as his hands clutched Jason.

"The drakon…it…it collided with you, then crashed into the Big House, effectively breaking nearly every bone in your body. When I managed to get you out of the debris, you just…you pretty much slipped right through my fingers. I felt your heart stop beating."

Now, Jason was full-out feeling sick.

But he merely sucked in a deep breath and swallowed thickly a couple of times, trying to keep himself together, because, even if he had…even if he had died, he was still here now, so…he must have…survived?

"We used the fleece. Leo brought it for Calypso, before the crash, and it was the only thing I could think of. We put it over you. I didn't tell the others that you…I didn't tell them. I didn't tell Percy or Nico, either. I'm just telling you, because…” Will continued, then broke off and curled further together, and Jason sucked in another deep breath as he stroked big circles onto Will's back and tried to tug him closer.

"It's okay. Let it out. I'm sorry that you had to go through that." He tried to comfort him, and Will promptly huffed and pulled away from him to sit up.

Jason immediately noticed the way his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"Jason, I'm supposed to do the comforting here, not you. Seriously, how can you be like this after just hearing what happened to you?"

It sounded almost like an accusation, and Jason automatically smiled at Will's grumpy expression.

"Well, I'm alive now, right? That's all that matters to me. I'm sorry you had to go through that, but other than that, there's not much I can do except be there for you, right? Since I can't remember anything, this must have been a lot more traumatizing for you than for me." He said hesitantly, and Will gave him a blank look for a long moment.

Then, he let himself fall back down onto the bed and came snuggling closer once more, much to Jason's relief.
"Let it be known, you're impossible."

Jason smirked at that, though he still felt rather sick.

"I…I healed you to the best of my abilities. Once the fleece started working properly, I did all I could to support the process of mending your bones and muscles and…well, everything. We…we're gonna have to do some tests later. I mean – please let me check that everything is working as it should."

Jason held him close and buried his nose back in Will's hair. His body and mind finally seemed to be catching up to what Will was really, truly telling him.

He had actually died.

If it hadn't been for Will and that fleece, Jason would have never woken up again, and he would have never been able to lay in this bed right now with Will, feel his skin beneath his fingertips, or smell that summery scent of his.

It put everything in a very different light, and Jason promptly decided he would have to cherish these things all the more because of that.

"Sure. Though I really do feel perfectly fine." He replied, and Will let out a small sigh of relief that wasn't lost on Jason.

"I know. I can feel it. I can also feel that you're not as composed as you're trying to make it seem."

Jason smirked and kissed the top of Will's head.

"Don't worry, I'll get over it. Plus, I think I'm handling this a lot better than that one time my head cracked open. At least I'm not puking my heart out, yet." He pointed out, and Will rewarded him with a small giggle.

"True that, though maybe don't jinx it. We only have this place now, I'd like to keep it vomit-free."

"Eww, you said 'vomit'." Jason teased him, and Will's head snapped up to gape at him incredulously.

"You're such a-…" He didn't get any further, because Jason moved down to give him a peck on the nose, effectively shutting him up.

Since he was already there, he gave him a peck on the lips, too.

Then another one.

Then, right as he was pulling back with a smirk and an apology on his lips, he found Will's hands shooting up and cupping his face, pulling him right back in for an actual kiss.

Oh man, he had missed those.

Sure, they might have kissed before Jason had died, but technically, he had just died, so all those kisses were literally a lifetime ago now.

Jason prided himself for that logic, then wondered how he could possibly think about that when Will's lips were so wonderfully soft against his.

"I'm sorry." Will whispered into the kiss, before tilting his head and deepening it.

Jason had a hunch he wasn't talking about the kiss.

"I was so horrible to you." Will said next, confirming Jason's hunch.

He kissed Will's words away, chasing him when Will tried to retreat, and Will let out a small sound of complaint, though he was also the one clutching Jason like his life depended on it.
"It's okay. I know you didn't mean it." He breathed against his lips, and Will's fingernails dug into his skin lightly as he let himself roll onto his back and tugged Jason on top of him.

Jason wasn't sure whether they should be making out like this while there was so much to talk about, and they were in the medic tent with other patients and their asleep boyfriends, but hey, he had died earlier, so he might as well indulge.

Who knew when he would die again? Clearly, they couldn't risk waiting.

Unfortunately, Will seemed to think differently, because he ended the kiss a moment later and pushed him back a little, so Jason immediately pulled back.

"But I was still horrible. I just…I thought…I thought that maybe I could…"

Will hid his face in his hands and sniffled quietly, and Jason hesitated, not quite sure whether he should give him space or stay close.

"I just wanted to prevent all that from happening, because I knew I was part of it. But I didn't know it would…that…ugh."

He grumbled, groaned, then started wiggling around beneath Jason, who was in the process of rolling off him when Will accidentally pushed his arm away, and Jason flopped on top of him, instead.

Will promptly groaned again, though his arms also shot up and moved around Jason before he could attempt to get off him again.

Jason stilled and let Will use him to hide himself.

"Jason, I messed up." Will whispered, and Jason contemplated his options.

Then, he nudged Will's legs apart and settled into a more comfortable position on top of him, cruelly pulling away from his boyfriend so he could cross his arms over Will's chest and put his head on them.

Will didn't stop him, though he still looked close to tears, and rather lost.

"Maybe you should tell me what happened, Will." He suggested quietly, because he already knew he wouldn't like it, but Will's behavior wouldn't make sense to him until he knew.

"You're gonna get mad." Will sulked.

Jason raised an eyebrow.

"Me? Mad? At you? Unlikely."

Will only huffed and looked away, looking rather guilty.

"What if I…ignored the wedding cake? Okay, I didn't really ignore it, I was more…trying to prevent it from becoming one? In a way? And messed up?" Will tried sheepishly, and Jason frowned.

Then, he let out a long, deep breath.

"Let me guess. You had a vision."

"Don't get mad." Will immediately begged, and Jason frowned a little.

First, he wasn't mad. Second, he couldn't remember ever doing anything that could make Will so scared of him being mad.

"I'm not going to hurt you." He replied carefully, but Will only shook his head and looked away again.

"No. Worse. You're going to be disappointed. And mad."
"Well, if you had a vision and didn't tell us about it even though you knew it would be important, I can't promise I won't feel at least a bit disappointed." Jason admitted, and Will groaned into his hands as he started hiding his face in them again.

"It's…listen. Percy…" Will started, and Jason's eyebrows shot up, gaze immediately hushing over to his boyfriends.

"What's with Percy?"

Will huffed out a loud, frustrated breath.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Jason."

Oh, right.

"Sorry."

Will only let out a long sigh, his hands still over his face.

Then, he peeked through between the fingers.

"How would you react if I told you Percy was a little very upset about you crashing into the Big House?"

How was he supposed to react to that?

"Concerned, with a growing amount of dread. Does he have anything to do with the apparent lack of an infirmary, or are we in your medic tent for fun?" He replied cautiously, but Will promptly waved a hand in his face.

"Nah, that was all the drakon and you. Well…I suppose rebuilding the Big House might have been a little easier if Percy's breakdown hadn't sucked up most of the debris and catapulted it everywhere it wasn't supposed to go…" Will mused with a frown on his face, and Jason stared at him, while forcing his body to remain still.

"Percy had a breakdown?"

That did not sound good.

Especially considering Will had just said something about debris being sucked up and catapulted somewhere else.

That sounded like a small catastrophe.

Or a big one.

Jason was hoping for a small one.

Will looked away again, eyes full of pain and guilt.

Okay, it was a big one.

"He…he thought you didn't make it. He thought we both didn't make it. It…he…he took that as well as you might imagine. He unleashed a storm of the likes you've never seen before, Jason. I couldn't see much of it because I was mostly busy trying to save you, but I saw…in the vision… I…"

Jason dimly realized a few things were starting to make sense now, though it didn't stop him from feeling like the ground had been pulled out from beneath him.

"How is he?" Jason asked, his voice a mere whisper, though he didn't dare to glance back at his boyfriends just yet, trying to keep his composure at all cost.

Will was back to hiding his face in his hands.
"Better. Nico…Nico managed to get him out of it. It was…it was tearing Percy apart, much like it was tearing everything else apart. It was…really bad…"

Jason took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly.

"How bad?" He asked, though he wasn't sure whether he wanted to know.

Who was he kidding, he didn't want to know.

But he had to know, all the same.

Will didn't meet his eyes.

"They're still assessing the damage. Some cabins got damaged, the Big House is far beyond repair, and we lost the climbing wall. They're still trying to determine whether the forge will be salvageable or not. The rest of the Camp is either in tatters or still a little flooded, depending how close to the lake or sea you get."

Okay, that…wasn't too bad. It could be a lot worse.

They still had their cabins (for the most part), and they were alive, right? That should be all that mattered.

"The naiads that survived have fled in fear, and the lake is currently a death pit due to all the residue blood and poison. The campers are still shook, but other than the few we lost to the storm, and the many we lost in the battle, there were no more casualties." Will continued, and Jason reeled a little, sitting up and staring down at Will in confusion and horror.

"Wait, what do you-…"

Percy would never-…

"He didn't have any control over it, Jason. As I said, he had a breakdown. He just let go and his powers took over. He just…wanted to end the battle. The fighting."

Jason deflated, and now, his eyes did hush over to Percy.

For a moment, there was silence.

"How are the campers taking it?" Jason asked as quietly as possible, and Will let out a small huff, hands moving over his face again.

"What do you think? They're terrified. There's already been talking about how Percy – or any child of the Big Three, for that matter – is too strong and could pose more of a threat to the Camp than anything else. It's horrible. Clarisse already wanted to punch somebody again, though I managed to stop her. We've got too many wounded, as is." He explained, and Jason gave a slow nod.

Then, he stiffened.

"Wait, what about the monsters? The demigods? Did Percy also…"

"Many, yes. But there were also a lot that got away, especially demigods, and you know monsters come back rather quickly these days. Calypso is recovering from the poison, and already much better thanks to the fleece, but until she regains consciousness, we're mostly defenseless right now. If anything, Percy bought us a few days, but then I assume there will be more attacks again."

Jason's heart sank, but he nodded, anyways.

It made sense. If the opposite side was weakened like this, he also wouldn't wait until they had recovered completely, but strike as soon as possible.

He moved a hand through his hair, then let out a long sigh.

"What a mess…"
Will let out a humorless laugh.

"Tell me about it."

Jason looked down at him, then sighed again, before he let himself fall forward and flattened his boyfriend once more.

"First, you tell me about that vision you hinted at, and why exactly you didn't tell us about it – especially if it had to do with Percy going on a rampage."

"Ugh, Jason, you're heavy, how can you keep forgetting that?!"

Oh, Jason knew it just fine.

Jason simply elected to ignore it.

"Can't risk letting you out of my arms just yet. Last time I did, I died." He replied with a faint shrug, and Will groaned loudly.

"Why are you like this?"

Because he had died, and he was still trying to cope with that.

Because his boyfriends had suffered so much, and he had died, and he wouldn't have been able to protect them like he had said he would.

Because he wanted to be close to Will right now.

Jason pinched his side, and Will squeaked.

"The vision, sweetheart."

Will slumped, then Jason could feel his hands moving to Jason's chest, right where his heart was.

Silence settled over them as Will seemed to listen to his heartbeat.

"I didn't know. That you would…that he thought we would die. It was different, this time. Like watching a movie where everything was edited together, and you saw stuff from five different movies, and everything was confusing and a mess. I saw…I saw past battles, and I saw Percy, and I saw us, and…I don't know."

Will's voice was quiet, hesitant.

Jason waited patiently for him to continue.

"Rather than seeing an actual scene, it was more like I saw all the things that connected to it. As if I was seeing what led up to that moment, rather than the actual thing. And…I don't know. I didn't know that Percy would think we're dead, and that this would trigger the rest of it. It didn't look like that, at all. Maybe it didn't actually show that, but a different reality altogether in which Percy would still break down, I don't know."

Jason didn't like the sound of that, but he didn't interrupt Will, even when he started rambling about all the various nuances of what he had seen and apparently trying to fact-check with what had actually transpired.

Now, Jason was beginning to understand why Will never really talked about what he saw.

It seemed to be more confusing than anything else, and if it didn't give them the chance to change what would happen, then he would have greatly preferred not knowing anything.

"So, you wanted to keep Percy away from all of that, and your great plan was to…distance yourself? From him? From us? Just…okay, Will, may I just ask why you thought that would help?" He asked at long last when Will trailed off again, and blue eyes looked up at him full of guilt.
"Well, as I said! I saw us a lot. Me. He got upset because of me. A lot. So, I figured that whatever had to happen, it probably had to do with…Kyle. And I thought that, maybe, if I pulled away from you, you’d…you know…”

Jason had an inkling that he knew where this was going, though he certainly hoped he was wrong.

"I mean, I didn't want us to break up or anything, but I thought…maybe…if all else failed, I could still…you know…”

Okay, that was it.

Jason moved off him and got up, and Will cursed under his breath.

"I didn't see much of an alternative!"

Yeah, no.

"Jason…” Will whisper-called after him, but Jason only shook his head and made right for the exit, even though all he was wearing were his boxers.

Unimportant.

"Where are you even going?!” Will hissed as he followed him hurriedly and tried to hold him back, but Jason merely tugged his hand free.

"I'm gonna go and kill Kyle." He replied as he nudged a pair of shoes with his bare foot, before trying them on.

Percy's. A little too small.

Eh, they would have to make do.

"What?! It's 2am in the morning, Jason!"

"Sure is.” Jason shrugged, then snatched Nico's discarded jacket next to the tent flap.

"You can't do this, Jason!"

"Watch me."

"But why?!"

Jason stopped in his tracks, then turned to look at Will with a raised eyebrow.

"Why? Because I've been wanting to do that ever since I knew of his existence, and he's the root to every issue we have faced so far. I don't know about you, but I've had enough."

Will stared back at him, looking positively speechless.

He still snatched Jason's hand and tried to talk, his mouth opening and closing though nothing sensible came out.

Then, his eyes hushed to their boyfriends, and Jason was already turning away when Will spoke again.

"Then what do you think I'm supposed to tell them, in the morning? 'Oh, hey, I know I patched him up last night and assured you that he'll be fine, but, you see, he left and got himself killed again, anyways. Sorry about that'? They just nearly lost you, are you seriously going to risk the same thing again? How do you think they're going to take that?" Will asked heatedly, and Jason turned to face him again, crossing his arms in front of his chest and looking him up and down deliberately slowly, his expression stern.

"I imagine they'd take it as well as we take it when you try to throw your life away for stupid reasons just because you're stubborn and rather die than believe in us."
Will looked at him like he had just been punched, and a part of Jason felt bad, making him want to reach out and apologize, comfort, reassure.

The rest of him was feeling rather resentful right now, though, so he remained where he was, waiting for Will's next reaction.

It didn't come.

Will merely kept staring at him with the same shocked face, and Jason didn't want to leave, but he also didn't want to drop this. Not yet.

He waited a moment longer, then he shook his head and dropped his arms to his side.

"Will, you have to stop this. No more self-sacrificial tendencies. Seriously, you can live those out with Percy when you make the mighty sacrifice of being his body pillow for the night, but not like this. I need to be able to trust you, and that includes trusting that you won't run off the moment you deem it necessary."

Now, Will looked like he had just eaten something very sour, though he also hung his head and let his shoulders drop.

Jason had to resist the growing urge to hug and hold.

"I just wanted to..." He tried half-heartedly, but then only sighed and deflated further.

Jason hated seeing him like this, but he would rather see Will like this than tortured or dead.

"No more, Will. Please."

Will was hugging himself now, looking like he was receiving the worst scolding in his life, and Jason wished he would just say it, that he'd just tell Jason he would stop this, so Jason could hug him and comfort him the way he desperately wanted to do right now.

But Will wasn't saying anything, at all.

"Will? Can we trust you?" Jason asked quietly.

Will tensed for a moment, then slumped again, and nodded faintly.

"I need more than that, love. That just looks like you're trying to appease me, not like you understand that we love you, and that it tears us apart whenever you try to run away."

Will looked ready to cry.

Jason shook his head.

"Will, I know life is hard. I know you want to take the supposedly 'easy' way out, the one that you think gets us the least hurt. But the way you keep trying to take is the one that hurts us the most. And not just us as people, but our relationship as well. You chose to be with us, right? So, let us be with you, and don't try to pull away at every turn. You love us, right?"

Now, Will was crying, and Jason felt his heart ache in his chest, his hands shooting out automatically to pull Will against his chest, unable to take it.

He hated seeing his boyfriends cry.

He hated seeing his boyfriends hurt.

He hadn't died just to keep seeing them like this now.

Will sobbed, though he tried to suppress it, and Jason felt his tears against his chest as Will pressed against him.

"It's okay, love. I'm not gonna leave, but you have to promise me that you won't, either, alright? No more self-sacrificial tendencies. If you can pinky-promise that, I'll carry you back to the bed
and keep you safe and warm for the rest of the night. Sounds good?" He suggested, stroking his back reassuringly and letting him sniffle against his chest, before he started giggling weakly.

"That's…a horrible deal. I hate being carried, and you know it."

Oh, so his boyfriend could still speak, huh?

"You say that, but you don't even know how I intend to carry you. Maybe you'll like it." Jason replied with a small smile, pleased when Will seemed a little less tense than before, even pulling back so he could wipe his tears away with the back of his hand.

Usually, he wouldn't have let Jason see even that much of his face while he was crying.

"So, can I have your word?" Jason probed again, and Will looked up at him with teary eyes, studying his face for a long moment.

Then, he lowered his gaze and nodded again.

"Okay. I'll…try."

"So, you're not going to run off the first chance you get?" Jason repeated for emphasis, and Will started fidgeting with his hands.

"I won't."

"And we can trust you?" Jason asked again, and Will's gaze hushed up to his, holding it as he tried to hold still.

"Yes."

Jason eyed him a moment longer, then he relaxed, and stepped closer to his boyfriend to hug him and kiss the top of his head.

"Perfect. Then I'll take your word for it, love. That, and a pinky promise."

Will huffed, then seemed inappropriately scandalized when Jason held up his pinky next to Will's face.

"Maybe not as binding as a promise on the Styx, but hey, still binding in my eyes." Jason told him with a shrug, and Will's face scrunches up for a moment, before he linked Jason's pinky with his own.

"I still can't believe I survived the last promise on the Styx I made, I much prefer this, thank you very much."

Jason raised an eyebrow.

"You made a promise on the Styx?"

Will's eyes widened, and his face blanched, and Jason's expression darkened.

Oh no.

Oh no, that fucker did not…

"Okay, you know what, never mind. I'm going to kill him this instant!" He growled, then turned to leave all over again, but Will immediately wrapped his arms around him from behind and pulled him back with surprising strength.

"No! No, it was a long time ago! I survived, didn't I? Please don't go get yourself killed, we just pinky-promised!"

Jason shot him an unhappy look, but then sighed and gave in.

For now.
Because Will had pinky-promised, and Jason guessed he had to keep his promise, too.

"Fine. But first thing in the morning, I'm going over to that Camp and fry him."

"What Camp?" Will asked, though Jason was fairly certain he was just trying to change the topic as quickly as possible.

Jason was so going to get behind this, though.

Will had never mentioned a promise on the Styx before.

"When those children started attacking the border, I went to see where they came from. Apparently, they've made Camp further down, quite a bit into the forest. Demigods and monsters alike. Unnervingly many, too." He explained, and Will shivered in his arms.

"I see…"

Jason wanted to ask about the Styx-thing again, but then, he watched his boyfriend barely suppressing a yawn, and he decided to let it go for now.

He could still ask later, and Will had already been cornered enough for now, considering their conversation.

"Come on, sleepyhead, let me make good of my promise and get you to bed." He suggested, and Will immediately looked up at him with a wary expression.

"I can walk by myself."

Yeah, Jason was aware.

"So, you're not even going to let me show you what I had in mind?" He asked innocently with a little pout, and Will's eyes immediately hushed to his lips.

Ha. Always worked.

Jason smirked a little, then leaned forward, knowing full well he had already piqued Will's interest.

"Well?" He asked teasingly, and Will's eyes hushed back up to his, before he licked his lips nervously.

"If it's stupid, I'm going to cuddle with Percy and Nico instead. Just so you know."

What a cruel threat.

Jason smirked, knowing he had nothing to fear.

Instead, he made sure to do all the things Percy usually did when he was attempting to flirt with him – though Jason tried to be a little subtler about it.

He dropped his gaze to Will's lips, took half a step closer, brought his hand up to Will's face though he wasn't quite touching it yet – and Will already seemed positively mesmerized.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll come to enjoy it." Jason's voice was like a quiet purr, and he mentally patted himself on the shoulder.

They had done enough fighting for the night, now it was time to comfort and cuddle and drown Will in affection.

Will's eyes were still rimmed red from his crying, but his pupils were already dilating. There was only curiosity and want in his gaze, everything else seemingly forgotten for now.

"You know…if I didn't know better…I'd think that you're trying to seduce me, Jason…” Will said softly, his eyes glued to Jason's lips as he leaned closer, his fingers finally making contact with Will's cheek.
"That's because I am, Freckles." Jason whispered back, and Will's lips curled into a small smile, before he swallowed thickly.

"Then why, pray tell, aren't you getting on with it, Handsome?"

Always in such a rush.

Jason shook his head with a small laugh, then he cupped Will's face and pulled him into the kiss.

Will reacted remarkably quickly, meeting his lips needily with his own and throwing his arms around him instantly – which made it all the easier for Jason to move forward until Will's back hit the tent wall.

Gods, he loved Will, and he loved these magic-infused tents that had proper walls, because it made loving Will so much easier.

"Eager." Will breathed against his lips, but Jason only smirked and pushed against him a little further, lips mashing together as his hands started roaming Will's body.

Will made a small noise, and Jason faltered, focusing on Will's behavior to see whether he needed more space – but then Will let out a needy whine and tugged on the leather jacket impatiently, and Jason focused back on the kissing.

"Take that off." Will ordered, and Jason huffed out a small laugh against his lips, before his fingers brushed under Will's shirt and over his wonderfully soft stomach.

"Says the one completely dressed." He teased, and Will let out a disgruntled sound as he tugged on Nico's jacket again, trying to get it off Jason, although Jason would much rather keep his hands on Will's stomach, where it was warm and soft and wonderful.

"Jason…" Will drawled out in complaint, and Jason cackled against his lips quietly.

Then, he abandoned Will's stomach in favor of stroking along his sides and his lower back, just to drop onto his butt.

"Are you *groping* me, Handsome?" Will asked, but his voice wasn't accusing – if anything, he sounded pleased, and Jason started grinning, even though Will was still trying to kiss him between talking.

"Yeah, kind of. Thanks for noticing." Jason whispered back before he moved to nip at Will's ear, and his boyfriend let out a rather cute sound between a snicker and a hiccup.

"You know we're in the medic tent, right? This one isn't even half as sound proof as the cabin. Also, patients. Also, Boyfriends. Turn me on any more, and I'm going to punch you for getting me all worked up for nothing." Will warned him in a dark voice, though he was also the one tilting his head to the side for better access, and it surely wasn't Jason's fingernails that were digging softly into his shoulder blades.

He smirked as he gently tugged on Will's ear lobe, his hands still busy kneading Will's butt, before he shifted and hoisted his boyfriend up to press him against the wall properly.

Will gasped, then groaned, but since Jason had pulled back from his ear in order not to hurt him, he wasn't sure whether the groan was one of excitement or frustration.

"Do that again." Will openly whined, and Jason would be damned if he disappointed him.

He noticed faintly that he was growling quietly, though it was still a rather loud sound in the otherwise quiet tent, and rather possessive too, just like Jason's lips and teeth that roamed Will's ear, his neck, every favorite spot he could find and mark until he abandoned his mission in favor of Will's lips, already turning his way to demand attention.

Oh, how he had missed this.

*Much* better than their fighting.
Will was trembling, but he didn't seem cold or scared, instead letting his head fall back against the wall to get Jason to ravish him again.

Jason did, this time moving down the other side as he pressed his body against Will's, feeling his legs wrap around him a little tighter.

That felt so nice.

When was the last time Jason had felt him wrapped around him like this?

When was the last time Jason had pushed him against a wall to kiss the living hell out of him, anyways?

A lifetime ago. Everything was a lifetime ago.

Jason had so much catching up to do.

"Let me touch you." He breathed against Will's lips, not quite certain whether it was a request or a plea, but it didn't matter.

"You already are." Will replied, a soft gasp escaping him as Jason's hands moved beneath his shirt once more.

"More. Let me touch you more." Jason insisted, opening his eyes slowly to gaze at the wonder that was his boyfriend.

Will had his head tipped back still, a blissful look on his flushed face as his arms and legs trembled around Jason. Jason pushed his hips further against him to keep him steady.

"Do it, then." Will whispered.

Jason loved the dazed blue that met his, the dilated pupils, the warm expression and the trust and love he knew it held.

Jason leaned forward and kissed him again, softer this time, yet more intense, and Will moved his lips in sync with Jason, letting out a faint hum.

Will always made the best sounds.

Jason still remembered the first time he had heard them, back in the pillow corner and the bathroom in the Underworld.

That, too, was a lifetime ago now.

When Jason pulled back, he tugged on Will's bottom lip, and Will let out a soft breath, almost like a laugh.

His eyes were closed again.

Jason loved his eyes, but he also loved it when Will had them closed, because it showed how much he was enjoying himself, and how much he trusted Jason.

"I love you." He whispered, then kissed him again, and Will smiled against his lips.

It was a beautiful smile, Jason could feel it.

This time, it was Jason who hummed, before he let his hands move from Will's stomach to his sides, to his back, securing his hold on him before he started moving.

Away from the tent wall.

Away from the exit.

Away from all the drama and negativity and pain, and back to their bed, back to the bliss of a loving embrace, back to the comfort and reassurance everybody needed in their lives.
It was difficult, maneuvering through the mostly dark room, especially with Will in his arms, but so was life, and Jason knew if they tried hard enough, they would make it.

Will's lips were pressing against Jason's, then they trailed along his jaw to his neck, but Jason didn't stop him – instead, he came to a halt near the desk he had tried to round.

He let Will down on it, just so he could cup his face and kiss him again, before his hands closed around the hem of Will's shirt and tugged it off over his head.

Will let him, then he mutely demanded again that Jason take off Nico's jacket.

Jason did, closely followed by Percy's shoes, and then, he unbuttoned Will's pants for him and demanded those off, too.

They both worked them off his trembling legs in unison, before Will flung his arms around Jason's neck and they kissed again.

Jason was addicted to kissing.

He was also addicted to seeing Will in this dim light, wearing nothing but those boxers.

His hands moved up and down Will's body, stroking and squeezing and claiming, before he lifted Will up again and continued their journey back to the bed, unable to fight the need for more.

Will moaned softly, his nails digging into Jason's shoulders slightly; but that was okay, Jason loved that, too.

He stopped another two times before they finally reached the bed and Jason leaned over it to gently lower Will onto the mattress.

Will looked up at him as if he had single-handedly hung the stars in the sky.

Jason kissed him again just because of that, while climbing into bed himself and promptly getting tugged back on top of Will.

"Will..." He breathed, and Will shivered as he wrapped himself around him and pulled him in, barely any space between their bodies.

But that was okay. Jason loved that, too.

Jason loved everything.

"I love it when you say my name like that." Will whispered, and Jason smiled into the next kiss, and then, they were both smiling.

"Will." Jason repeated, and Will nipped at his bottom lip, before his grin widened and he gazed at Jason full of adoration and awe.

They both kept whispering each other's names, just because, and they were kissing, and they were touching.

They rubbed their bodies together, cherishing the intimacy and the lack of clothing.

Will was the one who draped the blanket over them at some point.

Jason was the one disappearing below said blanket to map out Will's body with his lips, unable to live with the knowledge the last time he'd done so had been a lifetime ago, too.

They didn't have sex.

They didn't make each other scream.

They didn't fight for dominance or push each other over the edge.

It wasn't what they wanted.
Instead, they made love.

They worshipped each other's bodies, giving pleasure and receiving pleasure in return.

They were soft with each other, taking turns in who was on top of whom and always returning to their kissing, until their lips were swollen and their breaths were beyond labored.

Their legs entangled, and their hands seemed everywhere at once.

It felt like hours before they reached their climax, just from Jason's lazy strokes on their dicks and their even lazier kissing, full of smiles and whispers and small laughs.

Jason was watching Will when he came, watching the way he bit his bottom lip with a look of flustered bliss, for once not screaming or crying out, just shivering and letting out the softest gasp, the same way Jason did a moment later.

It felt different from usual.

Not like a gradual build-up to the bliss, but an ongoing wave of bliss that simply happened to reach its peak right at this moment.

Jason wouldn't have wanted it any other way, and made sure to let Will know that by kissing him again, moving a hand through his hair to muss it up on purpose.

"I love you." He breathed, and Will grinned against his lips again, his eyes still full of love and awe.

"I love you, too."

They both giggled giddily when Jason used tissues and some water from a water bottle to clean them up, then Jason peppered Will's face in kisses again, holding him until he fell asleep.

When Jason checked the time, it was 5 in the morning.

Smiling to himself, he looked towards his boyfriends, then back at Will.

This was going to be a long day.

Jason would make the best of it.

***

Alec was about to walk into the medic tent to tell Will he was there and he should get to sleep, when he was suddenly confronted with a chiseled, naked chest right in front of his face.

He did a double-take, squeaked, and jumped back, looking up at Jason Grace, standing in front of him in nothing but his boxers.

"Shh, don't wake them. Sorry, Alec, I didn't mean to startle you." Jason whisper-hissed with a concerned look over his shoulders, but Alec was too busy staring at Jason's still-naked upper body, noticing off-handedly that he really looked like a buff underwear-model.

Also, what the hell! The guy was littered with love bites and scratch marks, and Alec could only hope that Will had waited for Jason to be awake before he had mauled him.

Not to mention that he was now dreading ever stepping inside that medic tent again.

"Erm..." He uttered, at a loss for words as he still blinked at Jason's chest, then down at his abdomen.

How did people even get those muscles?

Oh man, this guy could probably crush Alec's head with those thighs.

Not to mention his arms.
As if to add insult to injury, Jason sighed and moved a hand through his hair, making Alec's chest clench and his mind scream 'UNDERWEAR MODEL' even louder than before.

Oh man.

Oh gods.

Oh dude.

How did Will not drool all over this guy on a daily basis?

Heck, he probably did. That was undoubtedly why Jason was littered in marks. Because Will couldn't keep his hands off him, and Alec completely understood why.

"Are you alright?" Jason asked, sounding concerned, and Alec swallowed thickly and nodded, his eyes glued to Jason's chest once more.

Oh man, it kinda looked like it would be cool to the touch. Would it be cool to the touch?

Alec felt the mighty need to reach out and find out.

"Will is sleeping, in case you came to check up on him. I was just going to fetch some clothes for us." Jason explained, and Alec's eyebrows shot up.

"You were going to walk through Camp…like this?" He asked, and it was amazing his voice still worked, not to mention his brain.

He glanced down to check whether Jason was even wearing shoes (he was), but then promptly found himself distracted by those toned calves.

Oh man.

Wow.

No wonder Will had it bad for this guy.

He seemed perfect from head to toe.

Alec noticed his mouth was hanging open a little, and promptly snapped it shut to swallow again, afraid he'd start drooling any moment now.

When he glanced back up at Jason's face, he found the guy with his head tilted to the side, still looking a little concerned.

Oh shit, he had probably said something, and Alec completely hadn't caught it.

"Erm, what?" He asked sheepishly, and Jason frowned a little.

Oh no, he looked so concerned.

Alec was both amazed and devastated by the realization, because, wow, Jason Grace was worried about him, even though he didn't even really know him.

They had talked, like, two times. Maybe. If even.

Wow.

What a guy.

"I said I have no other choice, since my clothes were apparently beyond repair. Are you sure you're alright? Did you come for a medical check-up? I'm not sure Will is going to wake up anytime soon…" Jason trailed off with a glance over his shoulder, and Alec swallowed at the guy's profile, especially when the corner of his lips twitched into a small smile for a moment.
Okay, but who had done the mauling?

Then again, did Alec truly want to know?

"No! I'm good, I'm good. It's just…there's…uh…puddles! Wet! Everything is flooded and wet, so…you probably shouldn't walk around like this. I mean, not that there's anything wrong with walking around half-naked! It's just…uh…you see…" Alec rambled, then cursed himself for rambling, because what was he even doing?!

Oh no.

Wait.

Was this supposed to be his bisexual awakening?

If so, this was a horrible timing!

Oh man, Kayla would laugh her ass off if she knew.

Alec was never going to tell her.

Instead, he flung his arms around like an idiot as he struggled for words, before a truly magnificent idea crossed his mind and he lunged forward, clasping Jason's hands in his own.

"I can do it for you! I can get you clothes! No problem at all!" He exclaimed hurriedly, and wow, even Jason's hands seemed so big and strong, just like the rest of him.

Jason looked a little taken aback, though he wasn't pulling away or stepping back, at all.

"You…want to bring us clothes?" He asked hesitantly, and Alec nodded wildly.

Of course he did!

Will would undoubtedly murder him if he let Jason walk around Camp like this.

Who knew what might happen?!

Definitely not safe.

"Yes! It's really no problem whatsoever! Just tell me what I have to get, and I'll do it! Then you can stay with your boyfriends, and I keep my sanity!" He explained, then frowned to himself, because he was pretty sure he had just said something very stupid.

Jason gazed at him with a look of confusion, but then nodded slowly.

"Okay…if you're alright with that, then sure. That's…very kind of you, Alec." He said hesitantly, and Alec felt a rush of pride.

Oh man, Will was going to slaughter him for having his bisexual awakening with none other than Will's boyfriend.

Jason kept talking, telling him where the spare key was and what to get, and Alec tried to listen as best as he could, though he also found himself rather distracted by Jason's throat, littered in hickeys and with his Adam's apple moving so mesmerizingly.

Wow, what a guy.

"Are you sure that you're okay, Alec?" Jason asked again with that oddly concerned expression, and Alec smiled brightly at him.

"Of course! I'm doing splendid! What makes you think otherwise?" He asked him, a tad louder than necessary and also a tad higher than his voice was meant to go.

Jason's lips twitched a little.

"Well, for one, you're still kind of holding my hands."
Oh.

Oh!

Alec hurriedly pulled his hands away from Jason's and put them behind his head with a laugh that hopefully sounded less awkward than it was.

"Oh! Sorry, my bad. It's...erm...an Apollo-kid thing, I guess. Runs in the family. So sorry." He babbled, and Jason merely tilted his head again.

Man, he should totally stop doing that.

"It's alright, I don't really mind. So long as you're doing okay. Thanks again for your help. It really means a lot."

Alec laughed awkwardly, then assured Jason it was fine, and he gladly helped, and a bunch of other bullshit that he was certain he didn't even want him to know, but whatever.

When he finally managed to pull himself away from the epitome of hotness in front of him, he immediately regained his senses though, which had him storming off with a loud, drawn-out 'Fuuuck'.

Which...really wasn't improved in the slightest when he spotted Kayla barely five feet away with her hands over her mouth to somewhat suppress her laugh, showing she must have witnessed everything.

He was never going to live this down.

Glancing back, he was glad to see that Jason had already disappeared from view again.

"Don't you dare tell Will anything!" He called towards her with an undoubtedly beet-red face, but she merely dropped all pretense and started laughing loudly, her arms now around her middle.

He huffed indignantly and ran off as fast as his feet could carry him, all the while cursing Kayla and his siblings and his dad and thinking it couldn't get any worse – until he was in front of the Hades cabin.

Wait, did Nico's dad know Alec was allowed to go in here? Did Jason even have any authority to let him in?

Oh gods, he was going to get blasted to pieces, and all because of Jason Grace's half-naked body.

Hesitating a moment longer, he fiddled with the spare key, then decided he had no choice but to go through with this – he had promised, after all.

Pushing the key into the lock and nudging the door open, he looked at the dark and rather gloomy looking interior, swallowing thickly before clearing his throat.

"Uh...son of Apollo here, just passing through. Please don't murder me, I just wanna fetch some clothes." He called into the empty cabin, then gulped and stepped inside.

There was a moment of resistance, and he immediately squeezed his eyes shut and braced for the worst.

But then, nothing happened, and he was permitted inside.

Though he could have sworn that he heard a quiet sigh and a mumbled 'I don't even want to know', even though nobody else seemed to be here.

Alec decided not to question it, instead rushing to the closet and marveling at the fact that it held so many clothes.

He wanted to find a person to share a closet with and have so many clothes to wear.
Alec tugged at a few things to peek, then wondered who had organized all these clothes, because Will certainly wasn't the sort.

Maybe Jason.

Yeah, Jason seemed like the type.

Oh man, no wonder Will loved that guy.

He looked hot, and he kept everything in order.

"Please just get the clothes and leave." A voice behind him said glumly, and Alec nearly suffered a heart attack, screeching and jumping at least a foot or two into the air before whirling around.

The god of the Underworld stepped out of the shadows as if he was part of them, wearing dark robes and an impassive expression as he studied Alec.

Alec sub-consciously crossed himself.

Hades' eyebrow twitched, but so did his lip.

"You pray to God while inside my cabin? Interesting."

Oh shit, Alec was going to die.

"I only need clothes! Please don't murder me!" He yelped, his voice a lot higher than it should be, and Hades visibly cringed a little, even raising one hand to touch his ear faintly.

"I am aware. Get on with it, then. I have no reason to 'murder' you – what good would it do me? You'd just end up in my realm even faster than otherwise. No thanks." The god said with a small shrug and turned his back to Alec, who wasn't quite certain whether he should be grateful or affronted.

Man, this guy was as rude as Nico di Angelo before the guys had come along to make him drop his guard a little.

Alec studied Hades a moment longer, watching how the god looked around the cabin with an odd expression, before he hurriedly turned back to the closet and started picking out the clothes Jason wanted him to get.

It was weird, knowing the god of the Underworld was right behind him somewhere, especially since he made close to no noise.

Peeking over his shoulder, he found the god still in the middle of the room, still studying the cabin interior.

Did Will and the others know Hades liked to look around the cabin sometimes?

Because Alec had just seen a half-naked Jason, and it had him wondering what Hades must have seen in the past.

Then again, maybe it was better if the guys didn't know.

Alec cleared his throat to clear his mind, and noticed Hades immediately glancing towards him with a gloomy look.

Oh, he should probably be dead quiet.

Dead…quiet…

Alec tried to suppress his giggle, because it wasn't funny, and now wasn't the time, but then he laughed, anyways.

Hades let out a frustrated breath behind him.
"Do...do all gods check up on their cabins sometimes?" Alec asked so he wouldn't have to explain to the god of the Underworld why he was giggling like an idiot, and Hades let out another deep sigh.

"I don't know."

What, why not?

"Why do you do it?" He asked curiously, and the god turned his head ever so slowly in his direction, now looking positively miffed.

"Because I want to."

Okay, Alec should really stop asking questions.

"Why?"

Alec apparently had a death wish he hadn't known about until now.

Hades gave him a long, hard stare.

Then, he abruptly turned his back to him once more, striding over to...what looked like the shattered remains of some sort of statue?

"Are all children of Apollo this obnoxious? Despicable."

Wow, rude.

"Your son is dating my brother, you know." Alec reminded him sulkily, and Hades stopped in front of the pile of debris, arms crossing in front of his chest as he stared down at it.

"I am aware."

"Will isn't obnoxious. He's cool. He does all the healing and stuff, and he's the best at it." Alec continued, feeling rather annoyed that Hades would imply anything but.

The god slowly turned his head towards him again.

"Didn't you come here for clothes?"

Oh, right.

Alec hurriedly returned to his task, tugging out a bunch of sweaters as Jason had instructed, though it seemed weird he was supposed to bring four of Jason's sweaters.

Were all of them wearing his sweaters?

Alec felt the fabric, but it didn't seem extraordinarily soft or anything.

Strange.

"Does my dad also come visit the cabin sometimes?" He asked curiously, because, hey, that way he could leave something there for him, right?

He'd like to leave his dad something, so Apollo knew his kids still cared about him – even though he hadn't really...been around lately.

Healing was pretty difficult because of it, but Alec was sure his dad must have his reasons.

"I doubt it." Hades said in a cool, monotone voice, and Alec sighed.

There went that hope, then.

"Oh."

When he glanced over his shoulder, he found Hades studying him again, before he returned his
attention to the broken statue, which was still the same as before – broken.

"Your father has been exiled. He can't very well leave and come here just to humor you or himself." Hades explained without meeting Alec's gaze, and Alec wondered why he even bothered.

"I still think it's stupid he got exiled, in the first place." He grumbled under his breath, and Hades' head shot up.

"I wouldn't say that too loudly, if I were you. My brother has never been known for being very mature, especially concerning criticism."

Alec merely turned away and looked for some sort of bag to put all the clothes in, because there was no way he could carry all of this through Camp without losing something along the way.

There was a sigh behind him, and Alec glanced over his shoulder back to the god again.

Hades was still staring at the dumb broken statue.

What was his deal with it, anyways?

"Are you going to fix it?" He asked, because, well, Hades might as well do it, if he was so bothered by it.

"I'm waiting for you to get out, so I can make up my mind whether or not I will." The god replied in a tense voice, and Alec found his lips twitching a little in amusement.

Somehow, Hades really was a lot like Nico.

Easily irritable and ever so tense, but actually an absolute softie that didn't know how to intimidate people.

Hades lifted his head and started squinting at him, as if trying to decipher what he was thinking, and Alec hurriedly put on an innocent face.

"You probably should. I'm sure the guys would be really happy about it." He told him, though he had no idea whether any of the guys would actually care.

Will had never been into statues, as far as he knew.

Though he had once heard Jason's cabin had a giant Zeus statue, so maybe this was something important to him?

"I suppose so." Hades replied in the same monotonous voice as before.

Alec finally found a plastic bag, which was filled with what had to be another fifty plastic bags.

Wow, where had Nico gotten all these from?!

"Yeah, I mean, Percy's storm really destroyed a lot, so I'm sure they'd be happy if their own cabin was still intact, at the very least." He reasoned with a shrug as he stuffed the clothes into the biggest bag he could find, and Hades studied him again with narrowed eyes.

"Why is everybody assuming my cabin is their cabin?" He asked tensely, and Alec hesitated for a moment, before he shrugged and continued with his task.

"Well, is it not their cabin?"

Hades eyed him warily, then sighed and looked back at the debris.

"I suppose it is."

Alec wasn't sure what his problem was, then.

He checked that he had everything, trying not to dwell on the many, many clothes left in the closet, then he let the doors fall shut and heaved the bag up, ready to go.
"What's that thing supposed to resemble, anyways?" He asked and nodded towards the debris, because, no matter how he thought about it, he couldn't see Hades wanting a statue of himself in his cabin, but he was also pretty sure he wouldn't have any other statue in his cabin, either.

"Percy's water fountain. It shattered when they fought, and they haven't yet managed to rebuild it entirely." Hades explained, and Alec was amazed by how softly he said Percy's name.

Everybody knew the stories, after all – and Percy had always made it sound like Hades hated his guts, to be honest.

"They fought?" Alec asked, because he hadn't known that, though it would explain their weird behavior the past days.

He had kind of assumed it was the thing with Kyle that had taken such a toll on them.

"They did." Hades confirmed, and Alec frowned at him a little for the lack of an explanation or detail.

"But they made up again, right? I mean, they certainly seem fine now."

Well, they had also just nearly died, especially Jason.

Alec himself was only alive because Will had gotten them out of the infirmary in time.

Percy was currently feared by half the Camp, and Nico seemed a little out of it as well, but…other than that, they seemed perfectly alright.

Jason had also been full of hickeys, so he was pretty sure at least Jason and Will were as happy as always in their relationship.

"They will be. Jason Grace is not one to give up easily, and neither is my son. They will push through this." Hades replied, and now, his voice wasn't monotonous at all, but full of confidence and pride.

Alec wondered faintly whether his dad would also be this proud if Alec was dating three people from different cabins.

He looked back at the debris, noticing the discarded glue bottles next to it.

Who had the bright idea of using glue? There was no way that would stick. Not with that brand, anyways.

Oh man, the guys were hopeless.

"I like Nico. He's a bit awkward, but a nice guy. He cried when we told him he's part of the family." Alec told him with a little shrug, and Hades eyed him oddly from the side.

"I would imagine so."

Alec frowned a little at that, but decided not to question it.

It was a miracle the god hadn't yet struck him down for bothering him, anyways.

"You know what, I'll just…leave you to yourself now, alright?" He awkwardly excused himself, since he kind of did have all he needed, and he didn't really have a death wish, either.

"Please do." Hades retorted, and Alec tried not to feel too offended.

Hades was merely as blunt as Nico, nothing wrong with that. He probably didn't even mean it in a bad way, either.

Or so Alec kept telling himself.

He turned to go once more, and was at the door, when Hades spoke up again.
"Alec."

Alec promptly froze on the spot, and could feel himself break into cold sweat at the realization that the god of the Underworld actually knew his name.

Somehow, it shouldn't surprise him, but at the same time, what the fuck?!

"Y-Yes…?" He asked hesitantly as he ever so slowly turned his head, wondering why Hades was stopping him now, when he had just wanted to get rid of him.

Oh gods, what if Hades was as slow on the uptake as Nico, and it had taken up until now for him to realize Alec had been a tad too disrespectful and/or bothersome for his liking?

Oh no, Alec was going to die.

"Thank you for accepting Nico into your family and letting him know he has a home with you."

The god of the Underworld spoke quietly, as if weighing his words as he said them, and Alec stared at him blankly.

Then he felt the mighty need to scratch at his nose awkwardly, but since the bag in his arms required both his arms, he could only keep staring.

"Uh…you're welcome? He's Will's boyfriend, of course we're making him part of the family. I mean, that doesn't mean he doesn't view you as his family, of course! He talks about the Underworld like home, too, so we're not, uh, trying to steal him away, or, erm, well, nothing like that. Nothing at all. Not that I'm trying to say-…" He started rambling, feeling rather put on the spot all of a sudden as he realized he was making everything worse the longer he talked.

But Hades' expression didn't change as he considered him.

"Please take good care of him." Was all he said, and now, Alec stopped rambling, but only so he could pour all of his concentration into blinking at the god owlishly.

He was supposed to…take care of Nico?

Why, was he sick?

In that case, Will would be much better at patching him up, Hades had to know that.

"I'll…sure. Will do." He mumbled, and for the first time since Hades had appeared, the god smiled.

It was an odd smile.

In a way, it reminded him of Nico, back when he had been a bundle of darkness and teenage angst that had only just figured out lips could tug upwards.

But it was soft, too.

"I'll take your word for it, Alec."

Alec cringed inwardly.

Oh no, had he just signed some sort of contract with the god of the Underworld?

There went his plans for a peaceful afterlife.

Alec laughed awkwardly, and now he was glad his hands were full, because it kept him from doing finger guns at the god as he moved towards the door a little faster than before.

Hades didn't say anything else, though he helped Alec out in his own way by letting the door of the cabin swing open with a wave of his hand.

"Goodbye." Alec mumbled in the threshold, and Hades hummed behind him.

"Farewell. Tell Jackson not to destroy the bathroom by accident again. I won't fix it the next
Percy had destroyed the bathroom by accident? Cool.

Uh, not cool, of course.

Bad Percy.

Oh man, it surely seemed to be an adventure for itself to date Percy, not to mention Jason Grace (wow) and Nico.

How did the guys do it? Remarkable.

"Uh…sure, will do." He told the god, then gave an awkward nod, before taking off.

He only realized he could have very well asked Hades how he knew his name once he was already several feet away from the cabin, and Hades had already let the door fall closed once more.

Wow, he had just met Nico's dad.

He had just met a god.

And he had survived.

Cool.

Alec started grinning, feeling like this might just trump the whole bisexual-awakening-story that Kayla was bound to blabber about to their siblings.

Eh, who was he kidding: It would top that story, easily.

And thanks to them being children of Apollo, they would know he wasn't lying.

Oh, thank the gods for Nico's dad, the unexpected savior Alec hadn't known he needed.

Alec grinned, gripped the bag a little tighter, and hurried back to the medic tent.

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Hades looked around the cabin again, glad all the distractions were gone now, though he also noticed this place looked rather gloomy and lost without anybody in it.

Even if it was just one of the sun boy's many siblings.

In this case, Alec.

He had guessed the kid must have been Alec, because he had only heard Nico talk about two male kids from the Apollo cabin other than Will.

Since the boy hadn't had any cornrows, he couldn't have been Austin.

(Which was a shame, because Hades had never seen what cornrows actually were, but he was certain he could have teased Demeter with it.)

Then again, it didn't matter who it was, all that mattered was that he was gone now, and Hades had his peace.

He gazed back at the shattered water fountain, and the bits that the boys had attempted to glue together again.

That Jackson kid.

What was Hades supposed to do with him?

He didn't know.
The boy was still obnoxious, and boisterous, and loud, and, frankly, very annoying.

Yet he was Nico's boyfriend.

Hades could say all he wanted, but he knew he had already accepted this fact a long time ago.

He sighed, then leaned down to touch one of the pieces, watching the entire thing begin to glow a silvery hue before it set itself back together once more.

It should be them doing this, fixing what they had broken and taking responsibility for their actions.

But Hades guessed everybody could make do with a little help, sometimes.

And the boys would need all the help they could get.

His son would need all the help he could get.

Hades closed his eyes, then opened them once more to take in the home Nico had made for himself and the partners he had chosen.

He gazed at the dark curtains, and the little flower Jackson had given him, the one Hades had already inspected a long time ago and approved of.

He looked at the desk, with started and discarded letters, papers, and open books that he knew belonged to the sun boy.

No, to Will.

He had become more than just the sun boy, after all.

Hades looked towards the closet, way too small to hold all their clothing, yet nobody had asked for his help yet, so he wasn't sure whether it would be appreciated if he changed it.

He still did it, anyways, replacing it with a much bigger and roomier version.

Persephone had picked out such nice clothes for the boys, after all, it would be a waste if they never got to see any of them because of the lack of space in their closet.

Hades looked towards the bed, with the hideous blanket and the strange plush dog and all the pillows that usually ended up chucked across the room rather than being slept on.

The cabin was still dark and gloomy.

But it was also cozy. Homey.

Hades could see why they liked it.

He could see why it was theirs.

Hades took pride in it, too.

He may not want to show it, and he disliked it when it was automatically assumed to be theirs, when it was clearly his cabin, but at the same time, he was proud, all the same.

Hades looked to their discarded travel bags, partly still filled, and he saw their laptop poking out from beneath a sweater on a chair near the TV.

His gaze lingered on the tiny excuse of a TV, but he guessed he couldn't completely refurnish Nico's room without at least warning him, first.

Instead, Hades moved towards the table to inspect the books – just to nudge something with his foot by accident.

He looked down curiously.
Ah. One of their photo albums.

Hades' lips twirled, then he bent down to pick it up and inspect it.

Light blue. Neat, golden writing along the side and the top.

Undoubtedly Jason's, then.

Curiously, he opened it, and his lips tugged into a small smile as he looked at the pictures inside, showing his son with grumpy looks and crossed arms, glaring into the camera or looking rather red in the face, maybe from the apparent cold.

Then, it showed his son and the guys, and Hades was impressed to see that each photo had a date and a little caption to it, sometimes even a small summary of what was happening in the picture or what had led up to it.

Hades turned the pages slowly, taking his time to read all of it and study all the pictures, and it was interesting to see how much more affectionate Jason's writing became, the same way the photos seemed to become more affectionate.

The guys were not only smiling with their arms awkwardly around each other, they were leaning against each other, leaning on each other, and they seemed happier, the further he got in the album.

His son seemed happier.

The first time Hades noticed the change in his son's appearance and the difference in his smile was after 'Christmas', on the picture that showed the four of them on what Hades assumed to be the New Year's celebration, followed by many pictures with just Jackson and Nico.

The second, much more dramatic change, was when he reached a part further towards the end of the album, showing the four of them once more, this time on the bed, all of them with gleaming eyes and giddy grins, and the caption 'I'm pretty sure I just went from one boyfriend to three, and I think I'll combust from happiness'.

Entirely and unnecessarily overdramatic, of course, but endearing, in its own way, Hades guessed.

But the joy was palpable in this photograph, same as the ones that followed, and he kept staring at the last picture for an inappropriate amount of time, taking in how at ease his son seemed to be in it.

He had found happiness.

Even though he was his son, he had found happiness, and he wouldn't let it go anytime soon.

Hades closed the album reluctantly, placing it on the desk with Will's many books to protect it from any damage.

He was tempted to look for the other albums, knowing there had to be more – but then, he didn't.

He hadn't come here to look at pictures.

He had come here to get a good look at his cabin and assess the damage Jackson's storm had taken.

That, and other reasons.

Hades sighed and looked around again, though he knew he had already gotten all his answers.

He still dwelled, anyways.

Even though there was no point in it, Hades moved back towards the window, gazing at the small flower in the glass, before he cautiously picked it up.

_Hope._
It was an important message.

One Jackson would do well to remember, himself.

Maybe Hades should have told Alec to let Jackson know not to be so hard on himself.

Maybe Hades should have told him that, himself.

It didn't matter, it was too late for either, now.

Percy would have to come to that realization, himself.

Hades was certain his son and his boyfriends would help him with that.

He hesitated for a moment, then he took the flower with him as he walked away from the window, and he looked around the room once more, before he placed it on the stand the tiny TV was on.

There.

Now, he was finished.

Hades glanced towards the photo album one last time, the images of Nico smiling widely into the camera flashing through his mind once more.

He would be fine.

They would be fine.

He believed in them.

Hades closed his eyes, then he stepped back into the shadows.

His job here was done.

Now, it was all on them.

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"Just let me look at you, Percy!" Jason tried to negotiate, but Percy very clearly wasn't interested, moving away from him in unmistakable hurry.

"No! I told you, I'm perfectly alright!"

"Then why won't you let me look at you?" Jason whisper-called after him as he gave chase, catching his boyfriend before he could escape the tent.

"Because I don't want you to!" Percy hissed back agitatedly as he tried to squirm free, and Jason couldn't remember Percy ever behaving this way before.

"Why not? Percy, I-…"

He just wanted to make sure he was okay!

Also, Percy behaving this way kind of showed he couldn't be as fine as he claimed he was, which was all the more reason for Jason to check on him!

"Because there are scars!" Percy snapped at him, this time in full volume, and there was a pain in his gaze that gave Jason pause.

They were both still for a long moment, then Percy tried to step back and pull away from Jason, but Jason didn't let him go.

"You never cared about scars before, Percy." He stated quietly, because it was true.

They had tons of scars, all of them did.
Percy had never seemed bothered by it before, so why now?

"Those are different. I don't want you to see them, Jason. Now, leave me alone." Percy grumbled, and Jason was confused, and a little hurt.

"Why not? Percy, I really don't mind…"

"Yeah, well, I do." Percy cut in, and Jason tensed.

"You let Nico see them." He said quietly, and it was a low blow, he knew that, but he also couldn't believe Percy was flat out refusing to let Jason see him.

To let Jason see what toll the storm had taken on his boyfriend.

To let Jason make sure he was okay.

"Yeah, but Nico was also there." Percy snapped, and Jason immediately flinched back, pain flashing through him at the words.

This time, it was he who moved away from Percy, and Percy was the one whirling around with wide eyes and a look of shock and regret.

"No! I didn't…that…that came out wrong! I didn't mean…" He hastily exclaimed, but Jason kept retreating, anyways.

"I…I'm sorry…" Jason pressed out thickly, trying to stomach the hurt.

He hadn't meant to die.

He hadn't meant to hurt them.

Percy caught up with him, his hand closing around Jason's arm and stopping him from moving back to Will's bunk, where their boyfriend was still utterly knocked out beneath the blankets.

"Jason, no. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that, I promise. It's just…what I meant was…" His boyfriend trailed off in his explanation and took a deep breath.

"He was there. He…he saw what I did. He saw what I was. You didn't. You didn't see how I…how I…killed…" Percy's voice became strained, and Jason's shoulders fell as he kept staring at Will's bunk, listening to Percy sniffling behind him.

Then, he turned around and wrapped his arms around Percy to hug him.

Percy fell against his chest immediately, and Jason could feel him trembling.

He wanted to offer some sort of reassurance, but he wasn't sure what to say.

'It's okay'? But was it, really?

'It's over now'? But when was it, ever?

'I don't blame you'? But would Percy accept it?

"I know who you are, Percy." He said quietly, instead, and Percy stiffened in his arms.

"I killed campers, Jason. I don't even know who or how many, but I know I did it."

Jason closed his eyes.

"I know."

"Blackjack died." Percy whispered, and Jason could feel his tears on his naked chest.
"I'm sorry." He whispered back, but Percy shook his head with another sniffle.

"It wasn't you who killed him, Jason."

Maybe not, but Jason was still sorry, anyways.

"If it wasn't for Nico, I would have torn the whole Camp apart." Percy continued, and Jason wished he could shake his head and tell him he wouldn't have, but they both knew better.

"I just…I didn't care anymore. About any of it. I just wanted to end that stupid battle, end everything, and I didn't care what had to happen to make it so."

Jason wished he could have been there for Percy to help him.

But he couldn't change the past, and there was nothing to gain by saying it now, so he remained silent, keeping Percy in his arms and letting him cry.

"Will couldn't heal the scars. They wouldn't fade. They're like a testament of my actions. Like visible proof to show what a monster I've become." Percy shook as sobs racked his body, and Jason pulled him against him tighter, trying to give him something to ground himself with.

"You're not a monster, Percy."

"Weren't you listening? I slaughtered our friends, Jason!"

"But would you do it again?" Jason asked, because he couldn't tell Percy he hadn't killed, he couldn't tell Percy to blame it all on his breakdown, he couldn't insist Percy hadn't been himself, when Percy believed otherwise.

It would all meet deaf ears.

But this wouldn't.

"Of course not! I would never…I couldn't…I..." Percy sobbed, and Jason moved his hands to his shoulders to push him away gently, just enough to make him look at him, and to look at his boyfriend's face.

Jason took in the tears, the red-rimmed, swollen eyes and the runny nose and quivering lips, and even though Percy was anything but pretty right now, he was still pretty to Jason.

Gorgeous, with all his flaws and imperfections.

"And that's why you're not a monster, Percy. You may have done something bad, you may have lost control, you may have done things you now regret – but that doesn't make you a monster. We all make mistakes. We all lose control sometimes. We all hurt people we don't mean to hurt, no matter whether it's an accident or something we meant to do at the time. It happens. But that doesn't make us monsters. It means we're humans, and we're imperfect, and flawed, but we have the chance to get better. To be better."

"But I killed them, Jason! They're dead. Nothing is going to bring them back, and it's my fault!"

Jason stroked away the tears on Percy's cheeks, though there were new ones escaping his eyes, anyways.

"I don't blame you." He said earnestly, and Percy stared at him with big eyes and a quivering bottom lip.

"You should." He whispered barely audibly, but Jason shook his head.

"But I don't. There was so much happening, so much pushing at you, it would be foolish to blame you for a breakdown you had no control over."

That made Percy cry again, and Jason pulled him back against his chest, his eyes on the dimly glowing stars glued above them as he stroked over Percy's back.
"If I had been stronger..." Percy sobbed, but Jason shook his head.

"You were strong, Percy. You were so strong, you pushed through it."

"Only because of Nico."

"I don't believe that." Jason insisted, and Percy sniffled and squeezed his shoulders as if to shake him, though he didn't.

"I believe it."

"You also believe that I wouldn't love you just the same if I had witnessed the storm. But I would. So, learn to be wrong." Jason countered gently, and Percy retaliated by snorting against his chest, which was, frankly, disgusting, though Jason merely pursed his lips and kept staring at the glow stars above them.

If he had endured stepping into a shower with his clothes on to comfort Will, then he would endure snot on his bare chest to comfort Percy.

"Let me see the scars, Percy." He said quietly as silence settled over them, and it wasn't quite an order, but it wasn't a question, either.

Percy tensed again, still sniffling, but he seemed a little calmer.

"They're ugly."

"Let me be the judge of that." Jason insisted, because he highly doubted anything on Percy could possibly be ugly.

It was the person's character that made them beautiful or ugly.

A person who was ugly on the inside could be the most magnificent creature in the world, they would still be ugly at the end of the day, and at some point, it would show.

Percy was beautiful, and he could be littered in scars from head to toe, be deformed, miss some limbs, or wear the most hideous outfits possible, he would never be any less beautiful.

Not to Jason.

Percy took a long, rattling breath.

Then, Jason could feel him giving in.

"Okay."

Jason gave him a last, comforting squeeze, then he let him go, and Percy pulled back to rub at his face. When his eyes met Jason's again it was a look that spoke of apprehension and reluctance, before he averted his gaze and started tugging up his shirt.

Jason saw the first scar immediately, even with the dim light and the distance between them, but he still stepped closer, hands reaching out to touch and inspect.

It was a jagged line, stark white against Percy's darker skin, and Jason didn't like the cracked look of it, tracing it where it cut across Percy's abdomen.

There were many more, though all of the others were smaller and finer, yet just as noticeable thanks to their paleness, and Jason touched every single one of them.

They weren't pretty.

But they were a part of Percy, and Jason knew instinctively why they hadn't faded when Will had healed him.

They weren't a testament to Percy's failure, and didn't mark him as a monster.

They were a testament to Percy's pain, a visible reminder what it meant to push somebody past
They were a testament to Percy's pain, a visible reminder what it meant to push somebody past their breaking point repeatedly.

Jason thought it unfair that those marks had to be on the victim, not the culprit.

It was always the victims that ended up marked, while the culprits could escape unblemished.

Jason pulled Percy's shirt further up, until he tugged it off, and Percy kept his face averted throughout the ordeal, his eyes closed and his breathing forcefully even.

He stroked over his boyfriend's stomach, over his chest, taking in the cracked line that slashed across his chest, right where his heart was.

Then, his fingers moved over the scars across his shoulders, stopping at his neck, where another bigger scar was hiding.

Percy obediently tilted his head to the side for him to see better.

The scar was a lot bigger than initially expected, only the tip of it snaking along Percy's throat, while the rest of it zigzagged across his back.

It reminded Jason of broken ceramic that had been glued together again haphazardly.

Jason sucked in a long, deep breath.

"I told you." Percy whispered shakily, and Jason hurriedly shook his head – but Percy still had his eyes closed, so he couldn't see.

Jason took his boyfriend's chin and turned his head to face him, before giving him a small peck on the nose.

"You're beautiful, Percy." He whispered genuinely, and Percy's eyes snapped open immediately, his expression so doubtful and accusing and fragile that Jason felt his heart ache.

"Don't lie, I know it's-…" Percy started, and he sounded so hurt, but then Jason had his hands on his cheeks already and pulled him closer.

"Percy, you're beautiful. I mean it."

"If you're into broken terracotta pots, maybe." Percy huffed, his eyes anywhere but on Jason, and Jason was reminded of Will a little.

Of course, out of all the things these two could have had in common, it had to be the self-depreciation and the poor self-image.

He let Percy pull away from him, but then followed him as he retreated.

"They are just like your other battle scars, Percy. Proof of another battle you survived. Another battle you won. I don't see anything wrong with that." He told him, and Percy turned his head to glower at him, before stopping at Will's desk and picking up random books to look at the back of them.

"Oh yeah, sure, nothing wrong with that." He spat, then put his hands on the table and let out a loud, long breath, just standing there with his head bowed.

Jason took in the many scars covering his back, old and new ones alike.

Then, he stepped up to Percy, waiting for a sign from him that told him to stop – and when that didn't come, he reached out to stroke up his boyfriends back, right over those scars, before he wrapped his arms around him, hugging him from behind.

Percy tensed momentarily, then he blew out another breath.

"I was disintegrating. During the storm. Did Will tell you that? Everything that was sucked into it got torn to shreds, and it started doing the same with me." He whispered, and Jason hadn't known, but now he did.
Percy nodded faintly towards his chest and arms.

"I was literally falling apart. Broke apart like a terracotta pot. Pretty crazy, huh?"

Jason thought it was more disconcerting than crazy, but he didn't argue, instead leaning forward to place a timid kiss on Percy's shoulder.

"Stop it with the terracotta pot, love. You're not broken, and you need no fixing. You made it through it, you will get better, and scars or no scars, you're still my wonderful, loving, gorgeous boyfriend." He told him determinedly, and Percy huffed, his lips quirking up a little bit, though it looked more bitter than amused.

"Will said the scars might not even fade with the cream. What if they don't? It took the rest of his powers and the ambrosia for my skin to mend, at all. What if that's how it's gonna be from now on? What if this is as good as it's gonna get?"

Jason kissed his shoulder again, his hands moving to stroke over Percy's sides soothingly.

"Would it really bother you that much?" He asked quietly, and Percy turned his head to look at him with a look that spoke of bitterness and resentment.

"Doesn't it bother you?"

Jason frowned a little.

Hadn't he just told him that it didn't bother him?

Jason wanted to tell him as much, but then he didn't, instead pulling back to give him another critical once-over.

The scars were as before.

Stark white and unforgiving. Cracks all over Percy's back, and sides, and chest, and undoubtedly the rest of his body, too.

Jason watched as Percy moved, turning around and leaning back against the table as he awaited his judgment, though he gazed at him with a look that said he thought he knew Jason's reply already.

But his expression also told Jason that he didn't know anything.

Jason still took his time to look at every inch of Percy's visible skin, each ever-so-little jagged white line, and he only moved closer once he was finished.

"No. It doesn't." He said truthfully, and Percy stilled, the bitter smile sliding off his face.

Then, he closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not, though. And you know it." Jason told him as he kept stepping back into Percy's personal space. Percy only kept shaking his head and leaning back further.

He wasn't reaching out to push him back though, and he didn't tell him to stop, and even though he was leaning back, he was also spreading his legs, so Jason stepped between them and leaned over him, his hands moving over Percy's, their chests brushing together.

"You know I would never lie to you, love." He said quietly, though he wasn't surprised when Percy kept shaking his head as if he tried not to hear him.

"You would. To not hurt my feelings, you totally would."

"Why would I? Lying to you would only hurt you more. I don't mind them, Percy. I love you all the same. I'll love you if they fade, and I'll love you if they stay. They're a sign you were pushed too far, and proof that you were strong enough to pull through, anyways. They're battle scars, just
like mine. Scars of sacrifice and pain and the will to survive. And I will love each and every single one of them, because they're a part of you, and I love you," Jason told him.

Percy was still shaking his head, but now his bottom lip was quivering again, and his hands were trembling beneath Jason's.

Jason watched Percy struggle with himself before he opened his eyes and looked at Jason with glistening, sea-green eyes.

"You can't really mean that." Percy whispered, stubborn as always, and now, it was Jason who shook his head.

"But I do." He whispered back.

Then, he leaned forward, because the first thing he had wanted to do when Percy had woken up was kiss him, and now it finally seemed to be the time to get to that.

He gave Percy the chance to pull away, but Percy didn't, though he also didn't move to meet him midway, the way he usually did.

Instead, he held still and waited. Jason couldn't remember Percy ever doing that since the first time they had kissed.

But the moment their lips met, Percy was gasping, and Jason was moving his hands to cup Percy's face — and then, Percy was pushing against him and returning the kiss with vigor as he moved his arms around his neck, much to Jason's relief.

His Percy.

His wonderful, gorgeous, responsive Percy.

It had been a lifetime since he had kissed him, and, by the gods, just this one kiss was making him addicted all over again.

Jason failed to see the bad in that, so he moved his hands from Percy's cheeks back to his sides, stroking over them appreciatively as Percy nudged his tongue against his and tilted his head to the side tentatively.

Such an amazing kisser.

Jason wanted to get closer to him, wanted to press their chests together further and feel Percy's skin against his, but the desk got in the way, and the angle was off, too.

He solved the problem by dropping his hands to Percy's backside and lifting him up, seating him neatly on top of the table.

His boyfriend laughed against his lips, a breathless, amused sound that had Jason's heart beating even faster than their kissing already did.

"Did you just lift me up? Just like that?" He asked him with the faintest hint of amazement, and Jason smirked slightly as he chased after that grin, kissing it a couple of times before letting out a small growl to show he wanted more kisses.

"Of course. Want me to do it again?" He asked in a low voice, and when Percy parted his lips to speak, he used his chance to kiss him again.

Percy, that tease, only started smiling again.

But smiling was good, because Percy had cried more than enough.

Jason kept pecking his lips impatiently anyways, hoping for more real kisses.

When those didn't happen, he pulled back a little and whined — which, surprisingly enough, was wonderfully effective, and had Percy's hands tugging Jason closer by the back of his neck, and their lips mashing together again.
Jason hummed contently, which had Percy huffing and tilting his head a little further, and Jason decided now was the perfect time to get a little handsy.

It would be a shame not to touch Percy's wonderfully warm skin, after all.

Plus, he had already mapped out Will's body all over again; it was definitely time to do the same with Percy.

Pleased with that plan, Jason pulled away from those sinful lips to kiss down the side of Percy's neck, deliberately dwelling on the jagged scar there.

Partly because he wanted to put weight into his words, and partly because it oh-so happened to be exactly where Jason's favorite spot used to be.

Percy tensed, then relaxed again with a gasp and a shiver, and Jason took it as silent permission to continue.

He kept one hand securely on Percy's back, keeping him steady so he wouldn't lose his balance at any given point, but his other hand was all over Percy, anywhere he could reach, anywhere he could touch.

The last time he had touched Percy had been a lifetime ago, too.

Jason still wasn't quite over it, but Percy didn't know, and Jason preferred it this way.

He was clearly already blaming himself for enough things; Jason didn't want him to feel worse because of something that he couldn't possibly have changed, and which didn't need any changing anymore, because Jason had survived.

Or been revived.

Whatever.

It didn't matter.

What mattered, though, was that Percy's stomach felt wonderfully warm near his waistband, and Jason took utmost enjoyment in pressing his cool hand flat against it, just to have Percy shudder and quietly curse him under his breath.

"You're such a tease." He whispered darkly, but his gaze remained affectionate, and Jason smirked at him cheekily.

Then, he tilted his chin up to kiss the side of Percy's jaw.

"Speak for yourself. I clearly remember you putting my hand in this exact same spot back when you wanted to warm my hand. Are you telling me you don't want to keep me warm anymore?" Jason whispered back teasingly.

That, too, had been a lifetime ago.

Jason tried not to dwell on it.

Percy huffed softly, then rubbed his thigh against Jason's side as he lifted his leg a bit higher, clearly tempted to wrap it around Jason.

Oh, Percy should totally do that.

Percy should also take off his pants, because Jason wanted to see the rest of his scars and show Percy he loved him with or without them.

Jason growled against Percy's neck, and while he wasn't quite sure why he did it, Percy surely seemed to like it, shivering and spreading his legs and finally wrapping them around Jason the way he liked it.

"Possessive." Percy remarked with a hint of amusement, and Jason growled again and nipped at
"Yes."

"Hey, I'm back! Sorry, had to stop by my cabin for a-holy fuck, Jesus freaking Christ, there's patients in here, you filthy animals!" A voice suddenly screeched behind them, and Jason and Percy immediately froze, before turning to look towards the tent entrance.

Alec.

Though Jason didn't see much of him other than a beet-red face and a scandalized look of horror and disbelief, before the boy already tossed a bag in their general direction and stormed right back out of the tent.

Oops.

Okay, Jason should have probably waited for him to come back, first, before deciding to get handsy with Percy.

Though he wasn't quite certain whether they deserved to be called 'filthy animals', just because he had Percy on the desk and was kissing him.

They both remained silent and stiff for a moment longer, then Percy was the first to slump back with a small laugh.

"Oh wow. That went well, I daresay."

"I guess he thinks we're defiling the medic tent." Jason muttered with a small shrug, and Percy shot him a wry grin.

"Oh yeah? Like you and Will didn't already get to that." He teased, then tapped against Jason's neck, and Jason guessed the hickeys were still as visible as they felt.

He took pride in that.

"Jealous?" He asked his boyfriend with a smirk and a playfully raised eyebrow, and Percy huffed out a small laugh, before giving him a rather sultry look.

"Of my boyfriends? For having fun? Only if you're not gonna have any fun with me because of it, Sparky." It was meant playfully, Jason knew, but his voice was so low it sounded more seductive than anything else, and he felt himself inching back closer automatically, as weak as always when it came to Percy's charm.

"Fun with you sounds delightful, darling. I'd never say no to that." He breathed, and Percy's lips tugged upwards in amusement, before he leaned forward to meet his lips, eyelids fluttering shut even before they were kissing

"I would hope so." Percy replied cheekily against Jason's lips, and this time, it was Jason who couldn't stop smirking.

Mostly because it was so good to hear Percy talk like his usual self again.

But also, because Jason just really, really loved this guy.

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After Nico woke up to see Percy and Jason acting like a lovey-dovey couple right next to him (with handholding and cute giggles and everything related to it), he would have loved to think the day would be a good one.

Unfortunately, breakfast quickly crushed any such fantasy.

Since Jason had insisted on letting Will sleep until he woke up by himself, they had left him in the medic tent with his siblings watching over him. But Nico would have much preferred a grumpy boyfriend by his side, instead of facing the hushed voices and mutterings around him without said
boyfriend.

Not to mention the fearful or even resentful looks they were getting.

Nico knew how it felt to be the outsider, the weird one, the one nobody liked; and it stung to be back there again, but what was even worse, was watching how Percy and Jason had to deal with the same treatment.

They shouldn't be looked at that way.

People shouldn't badmouth them the way they did.

Jason reasoned that they were scared, and that they didn't mean what they said, that it was the fear talking, but Nico hated it, anyways.

He hated it, because it was unfair, and Nico had been treated unfairly for way too long to let it happen to his boyfriends, too.

When Percy noticed his gloomy mood, he suggested they leave, but Nico refused.

This was just like back when Kyle had been at Camp, and Will had been the receiver of looks and mutterings like these.

Nico wouldn't stand for it.

Nico wouldn't cave in, wouldn't give up, wouldn't retreat and hide away like a culprit admitting to his misdeeds and wallowing in guilt.

He would sit there and eat breakfast with his two amazing boyfriends, and he didn't have to feel bad for it, and he didn't have to be ashamed of his boyfriends, or of Percy's actions.

Percy remained by his side, and with combined efforts from Jason and Nico, they even managed to make him eat a whole piece of toast.

The muttering didn't stop. Nor did the looks.

Nico was about to say something after all, Jason's reasoning be damned – but then, he didn't have to, because Clarisse and Annabeth came whooshing through the dining pavilion.

Clarisse was first, yelling and ranting and snatching people left and right, telling them to stop loitering around uselessly and instead getting them back to training and the fixing of the place.

Annabeth was next, chiding everyone for their gloomy attitudes and reminding them that this wasn't a time to be pointing fingers, but to work together to get this place up and running as soon as possible, in preparation of what was to come.

Nico admired her ability to think of 'what was to come' with such a calm and determined expression, because he certainly dreaded every moment of the future, considering the past.

Jason and Will had nearly died last night, and Percy had nearly destroyed the entire Camp in the process of getting himself killed, as well.

All of that had happened without Kyle so much as showing one ugly eyebrow.

Nico had no idea how they were ever supposed to beat that guy; much less win a war they didn't even understand.

Was this the war? Or was this just the beginning?

Nico decided not to dwell on it.

After breakfast, Jason left to check in with Annabeth and get an update on the state of the Camp, while Nico and Percy returned to the medic tent to check on Will.

But Will was still fast asleep.
"Are you sure he's still alive? I mean, sure, he's breathing, but it's already 9am, Will never sleeps past 8:30. Ever." Percy insisted next to him as they sat at Will's bedside, and Nico watched him poke their boyfriend cautiously.

Will grumbled and frowned in his sleep, then he rolled over to turn his back to them.

Nico sighed.

"I think he's catching up on all the sleep he has missed out on the past few months. Just think about it, there has never been much time for him to…to take a break." He muttered, and his eyes hushed to the side of Percy's neck, where a white line indicated the beginning of a scar Nico still loathed to think about.

Percy immediately put a hand over it, as if sensing Nico's gaze, though his eyes remained on Will's blond curls.

"Can't blame him." The words were quiet, bitter, and Nico looked down at his hands, where scars just like Percy's marked his skin.

Nico closed his eyes and leaned against Percy.

"Once all of this is over, we're going straight to New Rome." He told Percy confidently, and his boyfriend let out a small laugh.

"That sounds nice. I mean, I highly doubt it will work out, but it's a nice thought."

"I mean it. We've done enough. After we sent Kyle to his deserved eternal punishment and punched some more monsters back into Tartarus where they belong, we totally deserve to go through the horrors of college and have a torturously normal life. They owe us that much." Nico insisted, and Percy gave him a kiss on the forehead.

Somehow, Nico had the feeling that Percy wasn't taking him seriously.

Nico saw the same cracks on his skin that were on his own, though they were so much more prominent due to Percy's much darker complexion.

"I know you're still bothered by the fight in the cabin. I saw it, you forgot? You saw me; I saw you. Come on, talk it out with him. He's just waiting for you to bring it up." Percy reassured him confidently, but Nico merely huffed and turned away from him slightly.

Just enough to show him he was moping, but not enough to make him feel rejected.

"If he's just waiting for me to bring it up, why doesn't he bring it up?" He asked sulkily, and his boyfriend had the audacity to chuckle.

"Because this is Jason. He wants to talk it out with you, trust me on that, but he's also trying to give you enough space to make up your mind about when and how that talk will happen. You know him, considerate to the bone."

Ah, Percy was making heart eyes again, Nico could tell even without looking.

"I feel like you're pretty biased, considering you two defiled the medic tent." He grumbled pointedly, and Percy let out a dramatic gasp.

"What? Me? No way! I would never- he totally defiled it with Will first." He retorted defensively, yet with a grin on his face, and they both watched Will grumble and pull the blanket over his head.
at all the noise.

Nico considered the wrapped-up bundle in front of him quietly, mulling over Percy's words.

"Go to him. You know you want to." Percy repeated quietly, and Nico bit his lip uncertainly.

Then, he sighed and nodded.

"Very well. Will you watch over our sunshine in the meantime?"

Percy smiled and nodded in affirmation, his gaze soft as he looked at Will's blonde curls poking out of the blanket burrito.

"I won't leave his side. Now, shoo with you. Woo that overly-considerate and kindhearted fool, will you?"

Nico huffed as he stalled a little longer, taking his time getting up and giving Percy his rightful kiss on the cheek, before he leaned over the blanket burrito to give the blond mop of hair a kiss, too.

The blanket burrito made a satisfied humming sound, and Percy and Nico exchanged an amused look, before Percy tugged him back for a quick peck on the lips.

Then, Nico gave up and left to find Jason.

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In the end, Nico found Jason in the arena, though it was barely recognizable as such.

There was rubble everywhere, cracks in the ground and small puddles every few steps, and an entire wall had caved in and buried most of their training supplies, including the dummies.

What a mess.

Jason was right in the middle of it – not cleaning up or offering motivational speeches as Nico might have expected – but with his sword out and standing his ground against Clarisse, who kept advancing on him with her spear.

Wasn't Jason supposed to still be resting? And there, he called them reckless and impatient.

Nico watched their weapons clashing as they circled each other, and his eyes narrowed.

They were way too focused on each other, and way too vicious with their attacks.

If Jason wanted to let off steam so badly, why wasn't he doing so with Nico?

Oh, right, because he was probably still waiting for Nico to approach him because of that quarrel.

Unfortunately, Nico had never been particularly good with approaching people or bringing up topics such as these.

Nico's hand moved to the sword at his side, wondering whether he could…

Smirking, he drew his sword.

It was worth a try.

Nico moved past the many other campers that had collected in the sorry excuse of an arena, some looking through the rubble half-heartedly, some watching Clarisse and Jason with faint interest, and the ones that took notice of Nico stepped out of his way hurriedly.

Clarisse was the first to notice him of the two, and she smirked and gave him a nod in welcome, showing she knew what he intended to do.

The next time she attacked and Jason blocked the blow, she side-stepped and moved past him, allowing Nico to take her place, his sword clanging against Jason's as he brought it around reflexively.
“Spar with me?” He asked hopefully, trying to keep his smile on his face.

If Jason was surprised, he didn't let it show, instead considering him quietly for a moment.

Then, he nodded and pulled his sword away, moving back into his usual fighting stance.

“If you wish.”

Nico mimicked him.

They gazed at each other expectantly, and Nico guessed he had to be the one to make the first move.

Very well.

Nico shifted his weight and moved forward.

Jason met his blow and countered, and they moved back and forth a few times experimentally, checking each other's shape to make sure there wouldn't be any unwanted injuries.

Then, they picked up their pace to a level comfortable for both, and the dance began.

Nico kept his gaze fixed on Jason's as he parried his blows and sidestepped him, just to advance again.

He wished he was better at this whole talking-thing.

Of course, he had tried to be better, but dropping hints on the side or trying to be more straightforward were entirely different things compared to approaching his boyfriends about something like this.

He might not have hurt Jason, but it had still been the first time they had fought, and he knew it had pained Jason, same as it had pained Nico.

Nico brought his sword around in a wide arch, and Jason blocked the attack with ease.

He could still remember Jason's face, shocked and angry as he tried to move past Nico, just to turn wide-eyed and stunned when Nico had shoved him back.

Nico made a small sound and ducked under Jason's next attack, moving past him to attack from behind, though Jason instinctively moved with him.

It had been Nico who had started the brawl, he knew that.

Jason had kept trying to get past him, and he had repeatedly stopped him and shoved him back, until they had both become fed up.

He still remembered the snarls and growls that had come from both of them as they had collided with the wall, though Nico couldn’t remember which one of them had pressed whom against it, nor who had brought them to the ground.

He did, however, remember how Jason had rolled them over with ease to pin him to the ground, showing just how much stronger he was than Nico, even though he had never let him feel it as much as at that moment.

Nico slashed with his sword, and Jason met his blow with so much force that sparks went flying.

He hadn't been scared of Jason, but he remembered his refusal to admit defeat, and the struggle that had followed.

He had been so angry.

He had been angry with the world, with the gods, with Will, with the Camp, with Kyle, with himself.
With anything and anyone, except Jason; yet he had unleashed his anger on him, anyways.

Jason was studying him, his sky-blue eyes hushing over his face with that expression of his that always made Nico feel…exposed. Naked. Like an open book for him to read.

Nico met his gaze, mutely telling him to go ahead.

No secrets from his boyfriends, right?

Jason hesitated, and Nico used his chance to strike, his blade stopping inches from Jason's neck.

They were both panting already, but Nico knew they were far from done.

Jason's eyes narrowed at him as he knocked his sword away from his neck, and Nico smirked.

The next moment, their swords clashed again as Jason attacked quicker than Nico had expected, and his smirk turned into a grin as he rose to the challenge.

They evaded and blocked each other's blows, each more powerful than the last, trying to find each other's limit.

Just that neither wanted to give in and have anything be the limit.

There was muttering around them and people scurried out of their way as their attacks started becoming more vicious, each block now causing sparks to fly as they kept advancing on one another.

Nico snarled instinctively when Jason got dangerously close to cutting his arm, and Jason replied with a low growl as Nico reacted in kind and nearly gave him a new haircut.

"Fight me like you mean it." Nico snapped at him when he caught Jason hesitating, and Jason's eyes promptly narrowed.

It was an unnecessary taunt, of course.

Jason was already going harder on him than they had ever done in any previous sparring session.

Nico didn't care.

Their swords met in front of their faces, with so much force in the attack that people around them gasped, and the muttering grew louder, more insistent.

Nico ignored it.

They pulled back, then struck again, and this time, Nico saw an opening he was eager to exploit.

Jason seemed to sense what he was going to do, and Nico guessed he shouldn't be too surprised by what happened next.

One moment, their swords met.

The next moment, both their swords went flying out of their hands thanks to the force of the impact and the unfavorable angle, clanging to the ground a few feet away.

Jason and Nico stared at each other, panting loudly and with sweat running down the sides of their faces, hair clinging to their skin.

Then, Nico growled and charged, not needing a weapon to beat him.

Jason caught his fist and pulled, intent on making him lose his footing, but if there was one thing Nico was proud of, it was his balance.

He planted his feet on the ground and moved, ready to use any part of his body as a weapon against Jason, but Jason proved swifter than anticipated, and managed to evade both his elbow and then his foot.
At least Nico managed to tug his fist free.

They advanced on each other again, and when Jason seemed dangerously close to gaining the upper hand, Nico immediately put more distance between them.

Needless to say, Jason promptly tried to erase that distance.

Nico grinded his teeth and moved to kick Jason in the side, but Jason managed to surge backwards just in time.

Kicking at air, Nico found his balance swaying as he had expected Jason to at least *catch* his foot, and Jason promptly tried to use this to his advantage as he advanced.

He only managed one step closer before Nico's attacking foot found the ground and he whirled his entire body around to strike Jason with his other foot.

He landed the blow, and Jason let out a small grunt, much to Nico's satisfaction.

Then, they were back at their cat and mouse game, escaping and advancing, until Jason managed to corner Nico in the one moment he wasn't entirely focused.

He sensed the wall behind him before he felt it, gulping when he realized Jason had been the one pushing him against the wall in their cabin.

Nico had been the one who had hit the wall.

Jason had been the one who had hit the ground.

Nico reacted instinctively and lunged forward, grabbing hold of Jason's arms and bringing up his legs.

One moment, he was airborne, Jason's stunned expression pure perfection.

The next moment, his legs locked around Jason's side and chest and he pulled him into the ground with him.

Sure, Nico's back hit the ground first, and it kind of hurt, but it was so worth it when he rolled them over and had Jason sprawled out beneath him, still locked in the iron grip of his legs.

There were loud gasps, people needing a moment to catch up with what had just happened, but for Nico, there was only Jason.

He was about to grin and tell him he had won – when that traitor pinched his inner thigh and Nico flinched, distracted for the tiny fraction of a second it took for Jason to turn the whole thing around.

His sweet moment of triumph was quickly squashed when he found himself on his back, Jason towering over him and holding him pinned on the ground as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

Just like during their brawl.

They were both panting, even harder than before, and Nico was pretty sure there was no patch left on them that wasn't drenched in sweat.

Nico stared up at him, and Jason stared back down.

Then, Nico's hands grabbed hold of Jason's shirt with a small sound, the same moment Jason rushed down, and their lips collided in a harsh, nearly painful manner, their teeth clacking together accidentally, though neither pulled back.

"By the gods." Somebody exclaimed with a groan, while others snickered, but Nico didn't care, his grasp on Jason unwavering as he kept him close.

Jason had his hands on Nico's face, cupping his cheeks and deepening the kiss, and everything
was sticky and hot and disgusting, but Nico only let out a small whine and pushed up against him further.

"I'm so sorry." He pressed out as he managed to let go of Jason's shirt, though only in favor of wrapping his arms around his boyfriend, clawing into his back for a better hold.

Jason locked their lips again, tilting his face for a better angle, and Nico gladly went along.

"Fighting, Nico? Really? That's how you...gods, I know I shouldn't be surprised, but..." Jason suddenly muttered as he very abruptly pulled back from Nico, and Nico made a small noise of complaint, eyes blinking open to shoot his boyfriend a reproachful look.

Jason immediately stopped and leaned back down to peck his lips again.

Once, twice, then he smirked and angled his head again for them to kiss properly, just the way Nico liked.

"I'm sorry, too." His boyfriend put in between kisses, and Nico already dreaded he was going to stop again.

"Noted. Now shut up," he shot back before Jason could get any ideas, and his boyfriend let out a small huff of laughter before following his command.

"So, wait, what was all that? Their foreplay? Seriously? Somebody take me to church, I need to wash out my eyes with holy water." A girl muttered in a derisive voice.

"Can't offer a church, but there's a sea right around the corner; can't miss it." A boy told her unimpressed.

Nico heard her huffing indignantly, then there was more muttering and talking, much to his annoyance.

Jason, however, didn't seem perturbed in the slightest as he kept giving Nico countless pecks on the lips, smiling too much for proper kisses.

Nico wouldn't care, either, if it wasn't for the fact that he became increasingly aware of the countless eyes on him, and even though he wanted to keep kissing Jason, he also couldn't fight the discomfort rising within him.

Jason didn't seem to notice the people, but he certainly seemed to notice Nico's shift in mood. He pulled back to look down at him with those sky-blue eyes and that expression of understanding that Nico both loved and hated.

"Let's go somewhere more private?" His boyfriend suggested in a low, quiet voice, and Nico was glad he didn't have to articulate himself, instead only nodding at him with a small smile.

Jason helped him up and collected both their swords for them, nodding at the people around them in faint acknowledgment, before his eyes settled on Nico again and he took his hand.

Nico couldn't look away from him, merely smiling and letting him tug him along, out of the remains of the arena and into the open, making right for the cabins.

"I'm sorry." He repeated, because, even if Jason had made it obvious he knew what Nico was talking about, he wanted to make sure he knew that Nico was serious.

"Me too. Let's not let that happen again, okay?" Jason agreed, and Nico smiled, eyes glued to the back of Jason's head.

It was always so easy to make himself understood with Jason, as if Jason just had to look at him to know all he had to know.

Jason glanced over his shoulder at him, then stopped walking with a small smile as he moved his hand to Nico's cheek and leaned down for another peck on the lips, which quickly turned into two more.
“Maybe we should take a shower. What do you think?” He suggested, even though Nico was only just opening his eyes again, gazing up at his boyfriend with an undoubtedly lovestruck expression.

"Sounds great."

Jason kissed him again.

Nico wondered vaguely whether they would even make it to that shower.

* 

They barely made it to their cabin. Jason only managed to slam the door shut before he had Nico pressed against it, lips mashing together as their hands tugged at their sweaty clothing.

"Jason…the shower…” Nico felt obligated to point out, but Jason merely hummed and let his lips trail down Nico's neck.

"Gonna have to wait." His boyfriend muttered against his skin, and Nico shivered as Jason's fingers danced along his waistband.

"Fine by me." Nico breathed, and felt Jason smirking against his skin.

They kissed again, then Jason tried to make him move towards the bed, though they gave up on that thought midway through the room, and Nico found himself on the ground, instead.

They tugged each other's clothes off, and Nico couldn't suppress a small laugh at the sight of Jason's chest.

"They really went all-out on you, huh?” He remarked as his fingers stroked over the many love bites and faint scratch marks.

Jason glanced down at himself for a moment, and Nico thought he looked rather proud.

"Do you think Will is gonna let me keep them?” He asked, and Nico bit his lips as he leaned back a little further to take him in properly.

Then, he gestured for Jason to come closer, and closed his eyes to show him what he wanted.

Jason was grinning against his lips as he kissed him, and Nico tugged him down with him to the ground.

"I suppose I might be willing to put in a good word for you.” He offered playfully, and Jason's hands felt wonderful on his skin as he moved them up and down his sides, before returning to his waistband.

Usually, Jason was the one dragging everything out as much as possible.

Now, he seemed unusually intent on getting Nico undressed as quickly as possible.

Nico saw no problem with that, letting Jason do as he saw fit, though he made it obvious that Jason would have to keep kissing him a while longer.

Jason fulfilled his requirement without complaint.

Nico moaned softly, then smiled to himself when Jason started kissing down his neck and body again.

To think he had been worried about approaching Jason.

Laughable.

Jason was the best thing in the world.

Percy had been absolutely right.
He would make sure to tell him later.

Nico gasped and groaned, hands moving into Jason's hair instinctively.

"Shouldn't I be the one doing that? Seeing as you bested me at training?" He breathed, though he had no intention of stopping Jason, whatsoever.

Jason looked up at him with mirth in his eyes and pulled back to grin at him.

By the gods, how could his ever-serious, law-abiding Jason have such an illegally sexy smile? The impudence.

Nico would have to file a complaint at some point.

"I don't know what you're talking about. This is clearly my reward." Jason teased and returned to his self-imposed task, and Nico let his eyes fall shut with a soft sigh and a moan.

What had he been thinking about, again?

Oh yes, the complaint.

Nico let out another gasp and arched his back, victim to Jason's ministrations.

Forget the complaint.

***

Will was dreaming.

There was their clearing, and his guys were with him, and the sun was setting.

Everything was beautiful.

Will sighed and closed his eyes, feeling warm, safe, at peace.

He felt Percy stroking through his hair, and knew that was something that really happened, outside of his dream.

Will smiled to himself and leaned into the touch for a moment, before huffing and rolling away from him, getting lost in his dreams once more.

They were battling some sort of giant serpent now, high at sea, and Nico was wearing a pirate's hat with utmost pride.

Then, they were in New Rome, and Percy was trying and failing to dye his hair blue, much to Jason's amusement and Nico's confusion.

Will grinned and laughed his way through his dreams, some making sense, others not, but that was the beauty of dreams, wasn't it?

He purred when he was turned into a cat by some goddess without a face, and scratched the curtains to bits when Jason told him to stop behaving like a deranged monster so he could brush his fur properly.

He flailed his arms frantically when Percy tried to propose to him in the worst way possible, with the cake burning and Nico working to get a stuffed dog out of a paper airplane, while Jason was swimming in what seemed to be a giant pot of blue Jell-O.

He still said yes, and they ran after over-sized, purple pigs that sang 'I believe I can fly' in a variety of off-tune voices, the red ribbons around their necks matching the colors of the sunset in the distance.

Will watched a ticking clock curiously as it built up in front of him, seconds before midnight (or noon?), everything around it completely dark.

It had something...ominous to it.
Will tilted his head, then he turned and walked away.

Nope, not doing that.

He had better things to do than to let anything negative inside his head again.

Will returned to their clearing, sitting at the water with crossed legs and his hand in the sky, watching the sun peek through between his fingers.

There was that ticking again.

Will made a face and let himself fall through the ground, instead moving through another one of his dreams, watching Jason and Percy baking a cake for Nico's birthday.

They were doing everything wrong, of course, but Will merely leaned against the counter and smiled, knowing full well Nico was going to love anything they made, no matter its flaws.

Plus, there was a perfectly fine cake in the fridge already; everything was going to be fine.

A clock chimed behind him, and he turned his head in annoyance.

What was that?

The next moment, he felt himself sucked from his peace of mind, and instead found himself in the field, the gaping hole next to him trying to pull him in again, demanding what it had been denied.

Will struggled against it, grinding his teeth as he crawled away from it, far enough away to be save from its pull.

What…?

Unbiddenly, his mind started replaying bits and pieces, showing Kyle appearing at Camp, showing Will running from him, showing the fight in their clearing.

Showing the healing of Calypso, and the healing that had followed, before Nico and his guys had pulled him away and to their cabin.

Showing his breakdown in said cabin.

Will struggled, feeling a strain in his mind he couldn't initially place.

When he did, though, his eyes snapped open, just to see Kyle stepping out of nothing.

Will immediately stepped back, mouth opening to scream, but then he remembered his surroundings, and he knew there was nobody around to help.

It was a dream.

Nothing but a dream.

…Right?

Will hesitated, and Kyle sneered at him.

"Hello, William."

Will froze at the sound of his voice, memories and fears crashing over him like waves, suffocating and drowning him in what he knew was going to happen.

Kyle reached out for him, and for a moment, Will wanted to resign himself to his fate.

His shoulders were already slumping, his eyes already closing in defeat.

But then, he remembered his boyfriends, and Reyna's words, and his eyes hushed to Kyle's neck, where a thin line indicated the wound Nico had inflicted.
Will took a step back, out of Kyle's reach.

No.

This was a dream, and even if it wasn't, Will was aware that this wasn't entirely real.

He noticed that memories were still playing around him, showing tidbits of the battle that he had witnessed, and he realized it was Kyle who was making these happen.

He wanted to find out what had happened.

Will stepped back further.

Kyle regarded him with a hint of surprise, then his face darkened.

"William." He said in warning, and Will shivered.

"No." He said determinedly.

Then, he turned and bolted.

He slipped through his dreams, forcefully causing the scenery to change, and he felt immensely satisfied when he found himself in whatever park Percy was proposing to him to.

When Kyle made to snatch him with a snarl, Will tossed a piece of burning cake at him.

"Get out!" He yelled at him and noticed with greatest satisfaction that Kyle looked positively stunned.

Well, this was Will's mind and dreams, and he was about done with letting Kyle hurt his boyfriends.

His boyfriends were there for him here, too, immediately stepping between him and Kyle protectively to stop him, though Kyle wasn't deterred.

He snarled, wiping his face clean from the burnt goo and stretching out his arm.

The next moment, Will felt himself reeling as his entire body shook and the world around them seemed to tilt and twist.

Then, Kyle had his scythe, and Will had to watch his boyfriends fall victim to it.

"No!" He yelled, then switched to the clearing, unwilling to let his boyfriends come to harm, not even inside his dreams.

"William, stop!" Kyle called after him, and Will's feet tried to comply to two different orders at once, making him trip and fall.

"Get out!" He yelled again, but Kyle wasn't getting out.

He was advancing on him.

"Show me what I want to see, William. You know you are no match for me. And neither are your boyfriends."

"Fuck you!" Will screamed at him, then froze in terror as he became aware of his actions.

Oh gods, what was he doing?

Kyle was going to murder him.

No, he was going to murder his guys, and then torture and kill Will.

Then again, who was he kidding, the worst torture would be to lose his guys.

And his guys weren't here.
This guy had nothing on him.

Kyle snatched him off the ground and slammed him against a wall, and Will's hands closed around the pale fingers at his throat, scratching at them and wincing at the raw anger he felt from the touch.

"Stop this, William! You can't seriously think you stand a chance against me."

He didn't.

Kyle was absolutely right.

Will would never stand a chance against him.

The memories started again as Will struggled against Kyle's hold, and he saw through barely-opened eyes how the battle replayed again, showing the border breaking, and the enemy demigods rushing in, before Will disappeared into the infirmary to help.

Will snarled as he felt Kyle searching through his mind, and found himself punched in the face in return.

"Shut up!"

Will snarled again and scratched at any part of Kyle he could find.

"Get out of my head!" He screamed at him as, and when Kyle tried to punch him again, Will let it happen, just to bite his hand as he pulled it back.

Kyle dropped him to the ground, and Will just kept falling and falling, until he landed in their cabin.

"I'm not yours anymore, Kyle!" He yelled at nothing, because Kyle wasn't there, but then the door slammed open and there he was, looking at him with murder in his eyes.

"You don't know what you're talking about, William. Do you think this is a joke? Just a simple dream you can wake up from and pretend it never happened? You would never dare to speak to me this way. Or are you that delirious, now? Have they befuddled your brain with so many empty promises that you decided to believe them?"

His expression changed to one of pity, and Will felt himself reeling again.

"I would have thought you were smarter than that, William."

Will remembered Jason's protective stance and mimicked him, growling darkly at the threat in front of him.

Kyle sneered back at him, the anger palpable.

But then, his expression suddenly changed to one of glee.

"Oh, you're still so immature. You honestly think you stand a chance, don't you? You honestly think they can win. Let me show you different, then, little one." He said sweetly, and Will's eyes widened.

But Kyle didn't step inside the cabin.

Instead, he turned around and walked away.

Will hesitated.

The cabin meant safety.

It was the Hades cabin, and Hades would never let anything inside that meant them any harm.

Will knew this the same way he knew his own name, or that his guys loved him.
In here, he was safe.

The unmistakable sounds of fighting reached his ears, and Will moved towards the still open door hesitantly.

But outside was nothing but thick fog and darkness.

Will was tempted to slam the door shut and keep it out.

But then, he heard a pained cry, and his fingers twitched as his heart ached.

Percy.

But was it just an illusion? Was it real?

What if Percy had fallen asleep by his side, and Kyle had dragged him here?

Was Will even in his own mind anymore?

What was real? What wasn't?

Will didn't know anymore.

"I wonder what will happen if I take his life right in front of you…” Kyle's voice sounded from the fog, sickly sweet as always when he knew he had won, and Will swallowed thickly.

The cabin meant safety.

That fog out there, that darkness…it wasn't Will's.

No matter whether this was his mind still, or Kyle's, that part was definitely Kyle's.

Will would be stupid to go out there.

Percy cried out again.

Will's heart ached, and he took a step towards the door.

"If you go, nobody will be able to help you.” A voice behind him said, and Will whirled around, just to gasp, his face blanching.

*Clovis.*

But…

"That's his realm." The boy said quietly, his expression hollow, his form flickering.

Will tried to reach out for him, but then he already dissolved, before reforming again a moment later.

"If you step out of that door, you will be on your own.” Clovis warned him again in the same, monotonous voice.

Will shook his head, a tear running down his cheek.

"What if he has Percy? What if he's hurting him?"

Clovis only looked at him with the same, impassive gaze.

"You will be on your own.” He repeated, and Will's shoulders fell.

Percy cried out a third time, and the sound of metal clashing was getting louder.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Will said quietly.

Then, he turned around and ran through the open door, into the darkness.
"Good luck." Clovis said behind him, his voice as faded and dead as the rest of him.

When Will turned his head, he was gone.

Then, everything else was gone, too.

*

Will fought his way through the thick fog, following the sounds of battle.

It was cold here. So very cold.

Will was scared.

He kept wanting to look over his shoulders to check for their cabin, but he knew it wouldn't be there anymore, and he was done running away.

Percy was in danger. Will would do everything in his power to help him.

"See? Such a fool." A voice purred into his ear, and Will whirled around – but then he was already pulled through the ground and thrust against a wall.

Will cried out and slumped to the floor, recognizing it as the area behind the armory.

Ah. That place.

Will remembered it well.

Will also hadn't been there ever since Kyle had left the Camp all those years back.

"Do you remember?" Kyle asked sweetly, and Will looked up at ice-blue eyes looking down at him with pity.

How could he forget?

"Where's Percy?" He asked, instead, and Kyle's expression changed to one of sympathy.

"Of course, asking for your incompetent beloved right away. What did I expect?"

Will didn't care about what he expected.

He just wanted Percy, so that they could get the hell out of here.

Wherever 'here' was, anyways.

Suddenly, Kyle was right in his face, and Will momentarily forgot how to breathe.

Close. Too close.

Will tried to get away, but the wall was still right behind him, and Kyle grabbed his chin forcefully to tilt his head up.

The memory of Kyle forcing himself onto him in the infirmary resurfaced, and Will flinched back, hitting his head against the wall so hard he saw stars.

Kyle chuckled.

It was a dark, malicious sort of chuckle that went right under Will's skin.

"Stop struggling, little one. You're only going to make it harder on yourself."

"Stop touching me." Will spat and tried to pull himself free, but Kyle's fingers turned into an iron grip on his face, pulling him forward.

Closer.
Will knew what Kyle wanted to do.

Will wasn't going to let him.

Defiance rose in him, momentarily overruling his fear, and Will made use of it and slammed his forehead into Kyle's jaw.

"I said no!" He yelled loudly, and heard Kyle hiss in pain.

But Will didn't care, instead jumping up immediately and making to run away.

Running away had never helped, though.

He should have known that.

Kyle snatched him by the scruff of his shirt and pulled him back, and Will let out a feeble cry before he hit the ground.

"Enough!" Kyle snarled, and the white-hot anger was back, slashing through Will like a knife.

Or a scythe.

Will was still processing this, when he already found himself pressed into the ground face-first, one of Kyle's hands on the back of his neck, the other one running down his body.

"You have no right..." Will spat into the ground defiantly, and Kyle paused, looking down at him with a look of pity.

"Oh, but William, are you really so dense? I have every right. You see, you willingly came to me, did you not? So, even if you think you're still fighting, you know full well who you belong to." He purred, moving dangerously close to his ear.

Will saw images around them, memories of his breakdown in the cabin, of how he told his guys that Kyle would always get what he wanted, how he knew it was already over.

No.

"They will beat you." Will said darkly as he stopped struggling.

Kyle raised his eyebrows.

"Oh really?"

Yes.

Will turned his head to look up at him properly, daring him to see the truth in his eyes.

Kyle sneered down at him.

The punch to his face didn't even hurt all that bad – at least it couldn't outweigh the immense feeling of satisfaction surging through him.

"In that case, you leave me no choice." Kyle said darkly, and Will was just checking whether his cheekbone was broken, when Kyle grabbed him by the hair and pulled him up.

Will yelped, but it was nothing to the way it felt when he was thrown across whatever place they were in, landing in a heap on the floor.

Shit!

Not even when Kyle had still been with him had he ever tossed him around like this!

Will groaned and pushed himself up, blinking in confusion at his surroundings.

Camp.
The Camp grounds.

A battle.

Will frowned, trying to make sense of what was happening, but there was so much happening at once, it was difficult to follow.

People screaming.

Fighting.

Annabeth yelling orders.

The cabins a sea of flames.

Will felt his stomach drop and instantly looked around for his boyfriends.

He found them fighting right in the middle of it, facing Kyle and the monsters with looks of determination.

But they were tired. They were exhausted. They were wounded.

Will stared with a sinking heart, swallowing even though his mouth was bone-dry.

"You see? They stand no chance against me." Kyle's voice sounded behind him, sickly sweet as always.

Will tried to run for his guys, but Kyle snatched him before he could even take one step away from him, holding his arms behind his back with one hand and forcing his face straight ahead with the other.

"Oh no. You're not going to run around screaming. You're going to stay right here and watch. It's the only thing you'll be able to do when the time comes, after all." Kyle said in a low, threatening voice, and Will swallowed again, his heart beating in his throat as he watched his boyfriends struggle and fight.

There was Percy, his expression grim and his sword a blur of motion as he slashed at everything that crossed their path. But he was covered in wounds, and there was blood running down the side of his face from a head injury.

There was Jason, supporting Percy and stabbing monsters left and right, while also trying to get to Kyle somehow. But he, too, was wounded, and every time he tried to take to the skies, he got grounded again.

Then there was Nico, formidable as always with his black blade and his eyes full of challenge and hatred, and he was so brave, so wonderful. But it wasn't enough.

Will was forced to watch as Kyle advanced on them, slashing through Percy's water until he couldn't summon it any longer, slashing through Jason's winds until he was on his knees, slashing across Nico's chest as if he didn't have all his defenses up.

He let out a small whimper, everything inside him screaming for him to go to them – but Kyle kept him in his iron grip and didn't budge, no matter how much Will struggled.

"Do you see it now?" Kyle whispered into his ear, a silent promise.

Will felt his eyes watering, his vision blurring as he saw his guys on the ground.

He saw Nico struggling to get to his sword, one hand holding his chest in a faint attempt to stop the bleeding.

He saw Jason trying to cover Percy as they both hit the ground, too far away to help.

He saw Kyle, staring down at them with cold eyes and his scythe at the ready.
Will felt cold dread wash over him as he watched Kyle moving forward, his pace slow and determined, one foot in front of the other. Scythe raised. A triumphant sneer on his lips.

He saw Jason and Percy trying to help each other up, staggering forward together as they somehow tried to help.

He saw Nico looking up with a broken look on his face.

Will watched them die, and the tears running down his cheeks were just as hot as the pain inside of him, slashing through him and consuming him as he struggled and thrashed in Kyle's hold.

Kyle held him tightly pressed against him, practically purring into his ear as he made him watch, as he forced him to look, as he made him witness all the things he dreaded so much.

"Do you see it now?" Kyle repeated, his voice silkily soft.

It was over.

Will stared at the battle in front of him, but Kyle's side was winning, and Kyle stood right in the middle of it, blood dripping off his scythe onto the ground.

Will stared at his boyfriends, motionless, lifeless.

Will stared back at Kyle, who was looking at him with that same sneer on his face, before he reached out a hand to him.

The Kyle that was holding him back vanished, and Will stumbled as he got free, promptly falling to his knees.

His eyes didn't leave the man in front of him.

Kyle smiled, his hand still outstretched.

"You can prevent this, you know?" He told him, in that sweet and promising voice of his.

Will stared at him.

His gaze hushed to Kyle's hand, then the bodies on the ground.

His.

They were his.

He looked back at Kyle, and pushed himself off the ground.

Enough.

"You are wrong." Will said, his head held high and his hands balled to fists.

Kyle's smile slid off his face.

"You can't harm them. If you want to see them dead, you will have to go through me first. I will not let anything happen to them." Will said, loud and clear for Kyle to hear, and the scene around them faded, leaving nothing but darkness behind.

"You will not take them from me. You will not make me run to you any longer. I am my own person, and I will protect them. I will fight you with every fiber of my being, and if it's the last thing I do," Will promised with a deadly calm voice, and Kyle looked at him with a look of contempt.

Will mirrored it back at him, and Kyle snarled.

"Don't make me laugh, William. What can you do? You are nothing. You can't even hold a sword. You say you'll stand in my way? That will only make it easier for me to strike you down."

Will held his head high.
"Feel free to try."

For the first time, Kyle seemed speechless.

Then, he snarled, and charged.

Will growled, remembering Clovis, remembering Reyna's words, remembering his boyfriends on the ground, bleeding and dead.

This was still his dream, and his mind, and everything here was his, too.

"Get out!" Will screamed and slammed his hands forward, right into Kyle's chest.

The next moment, there was a burst of white as Will exploded into color and warmth.

Kyle's eyes widened in shock.

Then, he disappeared, moments before Will woke up.

* 

Will sat upright in bed, eyes wide open and his breath coming out in irregular huffs.

Somebody was dabbing something cold and wet against his forehead, and he flinched, but then he realized it was Percy, and a wet cloth.

"Hey..." Percy said quietly, a concerned, soft look on his face.

"You started burning up out of nowhere. Was it one of your nightmares? I'm sorry. You were rather quiet up until now." He continued, and Will gazed at him, taking in his whole and unmarred face, free of blood and Kyle-inflicted injuries.

Then, he let out a long, deep breath and smiled weakly.

"It's okay. There was just a battle I finally had to face. But it's okay now." Will assured him, and Percy smiled back at him softly.

Gods, what a gorgeous boyfriend he had.

"Hug?" He asked tentatively, and Percy blinked, before his smile widened and he eagerly climbed into bed with him.

"I said hug, not crush me!" Will wailed with a small laugh as Percy let himself fall against him like a log, successfully pushing him back down into the thin mattress.

Percy merely cackled.

Will waited for him to get comfortable as they both shifted and adjusted, and when he glanced around him, he caught his siblings buzzing around, though they only shot them amused looks and left them to themselves.

Good.

Will would need another moment before he could get back to work.

He moved his arms around Percy and pulled him closer, burying his face at his neck and inhaling the sea-like scent that was so typically Percy.

There was a hint of earth and death on him still, but it wasn't as prominent as before, so Will pushed it aside.

"It's going to be okay now." He whispered, and Percy hugged him back, stroking over his back and keeping him close, just the way Will needed.

"With the four of us together? I would hope so. Your siblings said the power of love is
unbeatable. I look forward to slamming the giant hammer of love into our enemy's faces." Percy told him determinedly, and Will chuckled.

"You don't have a hammer, Gorgeous." He reminded him, and Percy huffed.

"We'll see about that. I'm certain if I ask Riptide nicely enough, it will accommodate my needs."

"Do you even know how to use a giant hammer?" Will asked him, and Percy pulled back to give him a pointed look.

"Has not knowing something ever stopped me?"

Will smiled back at him, then leaned forward to give him a kiss on the lips.

"No. It's one of the things I love about you. But, you know, I was hoping to teach you something else, first." He told him, and Percy immediately perked up with interest.

"Yeah? What's that? Are you going to do exercises with me to fix my arm?"

No.

"To fix your arm, you first need to have the rest your body demands, before we can see whether there's anything we can do about it." He told him, because he should have never kept any information from Percy, to begin with.

Percy's face fell a little, but Will's hands cupped his cheeks quickly and gave him a peck on the nose.

"However, I was thinking you could do something different. Something that might be more to your liking." He continued, and Percy was all ears again.

Will glanced towards his siblings again, knowing full well they were listening in, because it was way too quiet all of a sudden.

Those nosy bastards.

"I want you to help me in the infirmary. That way, Kayla can finally focus on her archery. She's been gnawing my ear off about it, but we never had enough people. Now more than ever." He told him, and Percy initially seemed hesitant.

Well, that's where Will's siblings came in.

"Yes! Gods, Will, yes! Finally! Percy, I love you!" Kayla promptly exclaimed loudly, followed by several of his other siblings cheering.

Percy blinked in surprise at the positive outburst, then started looking sheepish as his ears turned pink.

"Oh gods, yes, please! I always wanted one of your boyfriends close enough to tell them all about your mishaps and accidents!" One of his brothers called, and Will made a mental note not to leave Percy alone with him too long.

"That means I can teach him how to do the reports, so I don't have to do them anymore! Sweet!" Alec cheered.

"You'll do no such thing, Alec. You're going to write those reports in a readable manner, and if I have to make you redo them a million times. Percy will be trained like all of you, and he'll get his own area of responsibility afterwards." He announced, and had a bunch of them sulk, but the rest still cheered.

Austin gave him a thumbs-up, and Will nodded at him with a pleased grin.

He knew there would have been better ways to announce this to his siblings than while sitting in bed with Percy and still half-embracing him, but in his opinion, this was more than fine.
Percy still seemed a little flustered, quickly turning overwhelmed.

"Area of responsibility?" He asked breathlessly, and Will promptly turned back towards him, giving him a reassuring smile.

"Yeah. Preferably, you'll become my second-in-command, since that's the position Kayla had until now. But it really depends on what you enjoy doing, and what position you'd be comfortable with." Will assured him, and Percy relaxed a little.

Then, a small, yet doubtful smile made its way onto his face.

"I would love to work by your side. But…do you think Chiron will allow it?" He asked hesitantly, and Will's nose twitched.

His siblings fell silent, and Will felt the shift of mood in the room.

Good to know his siblings agreed with him on this matter.

"Percy, I don't care what Chiron has to say on this matter. As you see, my siblings have already agreed, so that's how it will be. Right, guys?"

"Yep. You're one of us now, Perce." Austin announced, and Will had to admit he felt rather proud.

"Want me to teach you how to prepare simple ointments? I'm doing that right now, so you just need to watch." Alec told him, and Percy promptly perked up.

Will laughed at the speed with which Percy fought his way out of the bed and towards Will's siblings.

Then, he watched with greatest satisfaction how they clapped him on the shoulder and Alec immediately started explaining to him what he was doing, letting Percy step closer and showing him all the different components, while the others either watched or returned to their work with big smiles on their faces.

Percy looked eager to learn, his face still a little flushed with excitement and curiosity.

There. That was better.

The perfect foundation for a healthier mindset, in Will's humble opinion.

Will thought back to Kyle, and his hands clenched to fists.

This might have all happened inside Will's dream, but he knew Kyle had been real, and he knew his defiance would have consequences.

But Will would keep his word.

He wasn't going to let anything happen to his guys.

Will looked back at Percy, watching him nod along eagerly at Alec's explanations.

He was going to fight Kyle with every fiber of his being, even if it was the last thing he did.

***

Kyle stared at the faraway wall in disbelief.

Then, he snarled and flipped the table in front of him.

His carefully laid-out plans went flying, but Kyle didn't care.

Instead he kicked at the flipped table and whirling around to pace.

This changed everything.
Kyle couldn't let the others know.

Kyle couldn't let him know.

Oh, he was going to murder whoever was behind that foolish attack on that Camp.

"Ever thought about taking a course on anger management?" Somebody drawled behind him, and Kyle's face turned stony as he turned his head to look at Enceladus.

What was that good-for-nothing giant doing here, where Kyle could see his ugly face?

"Get out." He spat, then remembered William telling him the same thing.

His hands clenched to fists at his sides.

How dare he?!

That fool.

Did he really think he could face Kyle? Did he really think he could protect those idiots?

Kyle sneered as he turned his back on the giant.

He was keen on returning to the makeshift-camp, if only to kill the survivors himself.

This was all their fault.

Kyle had ordered them not to attack!

"Still upset because your subordinates decided not to follow your orders?" Enceladus asked him with a hint of glee.

As if Kyle didn't already know how they laughed about him behind his back.

"I told you to get out." He snapped back at him, and heard the bane of Athena laugh.

Kyle turned his head slowly to shoot him a murderous look.

"Remember your place." He growled darkly, and Enceladus promptly stopped and straightened his back.

"Maybe you should remember yours, little human. You may be in his favor now, but that might not always be the case. You wouldn't want to forget that we are invincible, whereas you are just a tiny human that can easily be crushed."

Kyle's expression changed to a bored one.

"Yet, you have all fallen victim to the very demigods I've been fighting all this time. Doesn't really speak for you, you know? Now, get out, unless you have something actually important to say." He drawled, and Enceladus looked at him with an expression full of contempt.

Kyle was once again reminded of William, those blue eyes gleaming with defiance and contempt and hatred.

Kyle's jaw clenched.

He still didn't know who was responsible.

He still didn't know what had happened.

Apparently, they had worn out the border and charged right in, fools as they were.

Then, William had shown him Percy Jackson, and there was something with his arm, some sort of wound that might be exploitable.

Kyle would have to relate that info to the others.
However, he first had to find out what amount of damage that good-for-nothing attack had done.

He had already heard of the losses in his troupe, but nobody had yet managed to give him an update on the state of camp.

If those fools hadn't even managed any proper damage before running like cowards, then Kyle would smite them all upon sight.

"Actually, I have come to inform you that your messenger is here. The kid is ruining our appetite with all the fear radiating from him, so I thought I'd be kind enough to let you know." Enceladus said in a bored tone, and Kyle turned his head again.

Why hadn't he just said so, to begin with?

"Very well. My skiés will take it from here. Now, go." He said with a dismissive wave of his hand, and Enceladus let out an annoyed huff, though he stepped away, anyways.

Kyle let one of his skiés go after him to fetch the boy.

If he couldn't get his intel from William, he would have to make do with the messenger for now.

He would consider going for a different camper, but from this distance, and without knowing whether the camper in question was still alive, it didn't feel worth the effort.

Kyle kicked at the table again, wondering what he was going to do now.

Did William even know what he had done?

Was he capable of those powers outside of his mind, too?

Kyle brought his hand up to his neck, feeling the scar that he now carried thanks to Nico di Angelo.

No. It didn't matter.

William was still much too young and too weak to be a real threat to Kyle or his plans.

Nico di Angelo had more of his attention right now, seeing as he was the one who could pose an actual threat.

But William? William was nothing.

Kyle gazed at the faraway wall, knowing what this meant.

He would have to kill him.

It was a shame, he would have liked to spare his life, but…

A threat was a threat, no matter how small.

Plus, what better way to crush the spirits of the children of the Big Three, than to take away their sunshine?

Kyle felt something stirring inside him, but he pushed it down.

Now was no time for sentimentalities.

There was rustling behind him, and he turned his head to look at the messenger, a short boy that seemed unusually old for the task.

Light blond hair, pale eyes.

Kyle narrowed his eyes and studied him a little more intently, trying to place him, though he couldn't remember seeing him in his troupe before.
His face did seem a little familiar, though…

Kyle turned around and moved closer to the boy, who looked fearfully to the ground, bowing a little in the same fashion that the others did upon seeing him.

Hm.

Kyle promptly lost interest in him.

"Tell me what you have come for." He ordered sharply, and the boy flinched a little, before stammering a bunch of nonsense.

This one was just like his old messenger.

How boring.

"Speak up, kid. I don't have all day."

"I'm sorry. I was saying the attack has taken great toll on your troupe, sir, and-…"

"I care nothing for the troupe. Tell me about the Camp and do so quickly. You are trying my patience."

The boy stumbled over his words again, then took a deep breath and seemed to steel himself.

Ah, so there was some fight inside him, after all.

Kyle might be able to make good use of this kid after all.

"There have been twenty confirmed deaths, but the search for survivors is still on-going. Two aged fighters are down, the rest were younger campers. There is no confirmed number for the injured, I'm sorry, sir. But the…the big building was destroyed, as was their infirmary. The medics are currently working inside a small tent. Medical supplies are confirmed to be low." The boy told him, and Kyle studied him once more.

What curious intel.

"What about Percy Jackson?" He asked, and the boy blinked in confusion.

"W-what about him?"

At least he knew who Kyle was talking about.

"I heard he was injured?" Kyle tried, and the boy seemed even more confused.

"Sir…he was the one taking everybody down. I…there was this storm. It was that Jackson's storm, sir. I don't know much about it, I'm sorry. The informant only said he caused the storm, and it ended up killing the campers, too."

Kyle's eyebrows shot up.

What an interesting turn of events.

"What about the other two?" He asked, and the boy frowned, though there was something odd in his eyes that Kyle didn't like yet.

"What other two, sir?"

Kyle felt like the boy knew who he meant, yet his eyes seemed genuine.

He studied the boy a moment longer.

"What is your name?" He then asked, and now, the boy looked like he was going to be murdered on the spot.

True, Kyle had a history of first asking for a name before punishing the person.
"Just out of curiosity, of course." He added when the boy fumbled for words.

"D-Dylan, sir."

Dylan?

Did Kyle know a Dylan?

The name did seem to ring a bell…

Kyle looked off into space, then shook it off.

There were too many people in his troupe these days, anyways. Good thing half of them were dead now.

Would spare Kyle the effort of murdering the rest for their disobedience.

This one might stay, though.

He might be useful, still – depending on his next reply, of course.

"I'm speaking of Jason Grace and Nico di Angelo. The children of the Big Three. What happened to them during that battle?" He elaborated his question, and found the boy gulping.

Kyle watched as the gears turned in the boy's head, undoubtedly trying to figure out who Kyle was referring to.

Then, his face cleared.

"Ah, yes. Jason Grace was injured during the battle. He is currently recovering, and it's rumored he is out of the worst. Nico di Angelo took part in collecting that…that…that cloth at the tree. It seems to be helping to strengthen the border again."

Kyle leaned back a little, letting that info sink in.

Jason Grace was injured.

William had undoubtedly seen to that already though, so Kyle doubted it was worth getting his hopes up just yet. However, this could still be useful.

As for Nico di Angelo…

He must have collected the fleece, which meant that bitch had it for her recovery.

What a curious move, to sacrifice one form of protection for another.

The tree was as good as dead now.

Kyle made a noncommittal sound, then turned his back on Dylan.

If he managed another strike on the woman, there would be no protection anymore.

He could still turn this thing around.

But with Nico di Angelo giving those damned lessons, and Kyle stuck here, there was no way he could do so, himself.

He glanced back at the boy, who was standing awkwardly where Kyle had left him.

"Very well. Get back to my informant as quickly as possible. Tell him to get rid of Calypso, by any means possible. He will not want to fail me." He told him sharply, and Dylan looked up at him with wide eyes.

Such innocence.
Kyle wondered what it would be like to rip that from him and make him see the truth of the world.

"Also, I want to know who is responsible for the attack on camp. I have explicitly stated for there to not be an attack." He added, then hesitated, before looking back at the boy.

"That will be your mission. Find the ones that thought it wise to go against my orders." He ordered, and Dylan stood a little straighter, fear and determination in those pale eyes of his.

Yes, this one might be of use to him.

"Yes, sir."

Kyle's lips twitched.

And he still called him 'sir'. How cute.

"Go. And, Dylan? Don't disappoint me." He added in warning, and watched in satisfaction how the boy gulped, before nodding hastily and rushing from the tent.

Kyle looked after him for a moment, then nodded towards one of his skiés.

"See to it that he gets back to the campsite undetected and unharmed. I don't trust those giants."

His skiá was only all too eager to follow his command.

Kyle smiled proudly at his creations, then moved to pick up the table and the many papers strewn across the floor.

It appeared he would have to make some changes to those plans.

However, it was nothing he couldn't fix.

If anything, it might make everything a little more interesting and worthwhile.

Kyle placed the figures back on the map, then noticed he must have broken the one resembling Camp Jupiter.

Oh?

A sudden idea sparked in his mind, and Kyle started smirking.

Well, that would certainly be an interesting turn of events, if he dared to say so.

Also, it might be the first step to crushing Nico di Angelo's fragile spirit.

Kyle turned towards his skiés again.

"Fetch me Enceladus."

His troupe might have nearly ruined things at Camp Half-Blood.

But that was nothing compared to what he could ruin at the Roman camp.

Oh, this was certainly proving to be just the twist he had been missing all along.

***

Will waved at Percy with a grin as he was dragged out of the tent by Will's siblings.

Aww, he still looked so surprised at their enthusiasm.

Will watched him go, then let the smile slide off his face.

Hopefully, his siblings would make sure Percy wasn't hearing what the other campers said about him.
He had no idea how breakfast had gone, but he had caught some of the snippets outside, and the looks his siblings had given him had told him all he had to know.

But Will had full trust in his siblings and their ability to keep things from going south.

Will looked around the tent again to check that there was nobody else hiding anywhere (since especially known for doing that sometimes).

Then, he turned to look at Leo, who was sitting at Calypso's bedside with the same haunted look on his face he had had ever since stepping foot inside here.

"You should go and grab something to eat, too. I promise I'll watch over her in the meantime." He reassured him quietly as he moved to take a seat next to Leo.

The boy shot him a miserable look.

"But shouldn't she be awake already? We got the fleece and everything, and you said she's going to be fine. Why didn't she wake up yet? What's taking so long? Is there anything else? Please, just tell me, so I can…"

Will shook his head and put his hand on Leo's.

"She'll wake up when she's ready to wake up. Let her rest. More importantly, in the meantime, you should make sure to take proper care of yourself, so you can be there for her when the time comes. You wouldn't want to be exhausted and tired once she wakes and needs your help, right?"

Leo grumbled, still looking rather reluctant and hesitant.

But then, he sighed and admitted defeat.

"Fine. But make sure you watch over her, okay? If she got targeted once, she's bound to be targeted again." He insisted, and Will gave him a pointed look.

"I'll protect her, Leo. Now, go and eat."

Leo hovered a moment longer.

Then, he left.

Will let out a deep sigh.

Finally.

He turned back to Calypso, laying in the white sheets like the dead.

"So, mind telling me why you're faking sleep? You do know it's killing him, right?" He commented dryly, and she promptly tensed.

Then, she peeked through him through one eye, just to close it again.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." She said pointedly, and Will rolled his eyes.

Right.

"What's wrong?" He asked her again, and she tried to act indifferent for a moment longer.

Then, she sighed and sat up, rubbing at her face and stretching her undoubtedly sore limbs.

"Nothing. I'm feeling splendid. Everything is great." She said in a bitter tone that showed she wasn't serious in the slightest, and Will felt the mighty urge to lay back down, himself.

She made to get up, but he held her back by the arm.

"Not so fast, young lady. First off, no patient just flat out lies to my face. Second off, you're due for a check-up. No. No negotiations." He told her sternly, and Calypso looked ready to fight him for a moment.
But then, she merely huffed and slumped again, looking…unusually miffed.

Will clasped her hand in his to get her values as he made her do some simple exercises with her other hand to keep her occupied, also making a show of checking her eyes and pulse.

Needless to say, he already had all his necessary info from the physical touch alone, but she didn't have to know that.

The exercise gave her something to do, and even though she still frowned and seemed miffed, her posture was a little more open than before.

Will leaned back a bit, just watching her quietly for another moment.

"So, you're our protection now, huh?" He asked conversationally, and Calypso flinched and scowled.

"Oh yes, remind me of that, will you? I completely forgot that I'm now stuck in this place, forever." She snapped at him agitatedly, and Will held up his hands in a placating motion.

"Hey, calm down. Is that why you're faking sleep? Because of the border?" He pried, and Calypso looked as if she had just swallowed something very sour.

"Because you were stuck on that island for forever, too. I get it." He said quietly, and her head snapped up, her expression murderous.

"You don't get anything! You have no idea how it feels, to be stuck in one place for eternity! You have no idea what eternity even means!"

Will leaned forward and took her hand in his own.

Calypso let it happen, mainly because she was too stunned that he didn't even flinch back to do much more than stare at him.

Yeah, well, Will had just faced everything he had ever dreaded inside one dream.

He could deal with this.

"Calm down, Cal. I'm not your enemy. You're right, I don't know how an eternity in one place feels like. But I know you're hurting, and I want to help you feel better." He replied honestly, and she looked at him with a mingled expression, before looking down at their hands with a small frown.

"You can't. You already sealed my fate the moment you dumped the fleece on me," she muttered darkly, and he looked down quietly.

"It was the only way to assure your survival." He said cautiously.

The poison flowing through her veins had been a rare one, one they didn't just have a cure to – if one even existed.

Will had managed to slow its progress, but he hadn't been able to cure it, since he hadn't known just what exactly he was dealing with.

The fleece had been the only thing to really fix it.

Even so, Calypso would have to keep the fleece nearby from now on, just in case the poison started to take effect again at a later point.
“Then I would have rather died.” Calypso snapped dismissively, and Will looked away.

“You don’t mean that.” He said quietly, but resolutely, and she stilled beside him.

“You’re right. I probably don’t. But…it just…it just *sucks*. I wanted to see the world. I wanted to…to *do* something. Get out there. See all the places I couldn't see for *eons*. And now, here I am. Stuck. *Again.*” Her voice became quieter as she continued, more fragile with every word.

Will let her pull her hand back as she pulled her knees up to wrap her arms around them.

“You know, I really don’t think it’s all that bad…” He started cautiously, and she instantly shot him a dark look.

Will wasn't deterred.

“It's just a temporary solution, Cal. We're going to find a new way to protect the border. It's just until then, trust me. None of us would want to keep you here against your will. Leo least of all.”

At the mention of her boyfriend, Calypso's face only darkened further.

“I don't want to talk to him right now. And I don't want to talk *about* him, either.” She snapped sharply, and Will sighed.

“Cal, he only wanted the best for you.”

“How is making me the sole protection of your dumb Camp the best thing for me, exactly?” Calypso asked snidely, and Will tensed for a moment.

“He wanted you to *live*. His first and foremost priority was your life. It might suck right now, Cal, but it's going to get better. It has the *chance* to get better. Do you think there would be such a chance if you had died? Think about it, Cal. This way, you can help us fight off those monsters and enemy demigods, and when all is said and done, you can revoke your defense, and visit all those places you want to see. Live the life you want to live. In my opinion, that's much better than dying and being stuck in the afterlife.” He told her with a small shrug and a smile, and she eyed him from the side with a dubious look.

Then, she sighed and looked away again, her chin on her knees.

“I suppose you're right.” She mused, and his smile widened as he leaned forward to pat her back.

“However, that doesn't mean I want to talk to Leo right now. I'm still upset.”

Obviously.

“I would never make you talk to your boyfriend against your will, Cal. You are a strong and independent woman, who knows herself best. I trust your judgment and the ability to see when your boyfriend is hurting unnecessarily and when it is okay to fake your sleep to get out of talking to him.” He told her with a serious nod, and she shot him a dark look again.

Then, she started sulking.

“I want him to apologize. All he did the past hour was ask when I would wake up. He never said he was sorry. He got me stuck here, and he doesn't even have the decency to *apologize*.” She complained, and Will put some more effort into patting her back.

“There, there. Have you considered that he's waiting for you to actually be awake before he apologizes to you? I mean, sure, he's acting a little as if you're still on your deathbed, but he knows you'll wake up, so I'm sure he's just…waiting for the right time…” He tried tentatively, but she merely huffed.

“No, that's just like him. He never really apologizes. He apologizes as a joke, but then he just brushes it off and changes the topic.”

Great. Relationship problems.
Because Will totally knew how to help with that.

Will suppressed a sigh.

"Leo is a very…loud person, but he has many confidence-issues he is still trying to work on. That doesn't excuse his mistakes, of course, and I'm not saying that you should just leave it be if it's something that genuinely bothers you, but…have you tried talking to him about this, before? Like, have you let him know that you feel like he's not serious when he apologizes to you? He has been around many different people in his life, and oftentimes wasn't treated well by them. Maybe he feels ashamed of his mistakes, and thus tries to hide under a mask of indifference or mockery to cover up for it and not appear…weak." Will tried cautiously, shuffling uncomfortably as this wasn't exactly his area of expertise.

Luckily enough, Calypso didn't snap at him.

Instead, she looked even gloomier than before.

"Weak? Are you kidding me? How would apologizing make anybody weak?" She asked, instead, and Will tensed.

"Sometimes, people can be very, very cruel. I'm not saying this is what Leo feels or thinks. I'm just saying that there might be a reason behind his behavior, and the only way to truly solve the issue, is by addressing it. With him. Directly." He told her, and she seemed to ponder his words, before sighing and giving a faint shrug of her shoulders.

"Fair enough. Fine, I guess I won't be faking sleep anymore. Happy, now?"

Will looked up at the glow stars above him.

"Remember you're not doing this for my happiness, but for your own." He pointed out without looking at her, and Calypso huffed to herself.

"Don't remind me."

Fair enough.

There were footsteps approaching, and Will identified them as two of his siblings.

Luckily, the pace was slow and relaxed, so he knew there was nothing to fear.

Instead, he got up.

"If you excuse me, I have to go now." He told her with an apologetic smile, and she looked up at him in surprise.

"What? But I thought..."

His siblings came inside, chattering and laughing, and she looked from them to him, her expression still puzzled.

But he merely smiled at her.

"Guys, can you watch over Cal for a while? Leo should be back soon. I would stay, but I just remembered I still have something very important to do." He told his siblings, and they readily agreed.

Calypso threw him a dubious look.

"What is it that's suddenly so urgent?" She asked him warily, but he merely smiled and winked.

"Just gotta make sure a certain somebody knows how much he means to me." He told her cryptically, though it wasn't cryptic at all, and his siblings were already wiggling their eyebrows at him with dirty grins.

She was watched him go with a frown.
Will merely waved at them.
Then, he turned around and left.

***

Percy was sitting between Will's siblings, mostly hidden from sight from the other cabins, though that unfortunately didn't make him deaf.

He could still hear the whispers and hushed voices around him, and still feel the many looks he was getting.

They were scared.

Of Percy.

And rightfully so, he knew.

Percy tried to keep the smile on his face as Alec leaned closer and said something undoubtedly funny, but he really didn't feel like smiling.

Nor did he feel like eating.

He loved Will's siblings, though.

They were so kind and wonderful, just like Will.

And, just like Will, they also seemed to sense it when his focus started shifting, because they kept bringing him into their conversations or pointing out various other things to him, quickly dragging his mind away from all the other kids around him.

They still seemed so excited at the prospect of Percy working with them in the infirmary – or, well, medic tent, currently.

Percy's smile slid off his lips again, and he hurriedly started eating again to keep them from noticing.

He had destroyed so much.

He had killed so many.

Percy swallowed, then reached out for his glass of water when he noticed just how parched his throat suddenly was.

"Hey, did you hear that? Nico is giving his lessons later. That's cool. So, you guys figured everything out?" Austin asked, and Percy blinked at him in question.

"Uh, I…I guess?" He muttered awkwardly, then realized Nico had mentioned something like that yesterday.

True, he had…they had…

Percy tensed, and he put his fork down hurriedly to avoid damaging it in any way.

He had hurt so many people.

He had taken so many lives.

He would have done so much more damage if it hadn't been for Nico.

Percy started trembling, and found Alec moving an arm around him.

"It's okay. Deep breaths. Do you want to leave? I can grab some food and we can go somewhere more private, if you prefer that." The boy offered, and it sounded so much like something Will would say that Percy looked around at him in mild surprise.
The boy smiled at him, though his eyes still studied Percy intently.

"He used to do the same thing for us. Whenever things got a little too much, he would take us somewhere else and help us through it, away from prying eyes." Alec explained, and Percy found himself smiling a little.

"That does sound like Will."

Alec gave him a knowing look, then he nodded towards his plate.

"So, what do you got there?" He asked curiously, and Percy huffed, knowing full well he was just trying to keep Percy occupied enough not to think about yesterday.

"When we were in the Underworld, we were allowed to cook a couple of times. Nico made pasta. This isn't quite the same, but close." He explained, and Alec immediately perked up with interest.

"Ooh, I love it when you guys talk about the Underworld. Tell me more. What else did you cook there? Will is always so picky with his details. Seriously, you ask him about his time with you, and he becomes all lovestruck and quiet, staring off into space with heart eyes. Useless. Tell us some real stuff." Alec egged him on, and Percy couldn't help but chuckle quietly.

"Some real stuff, huh?" He mused and thought about it for a moment.

Then, he smiled and leaned closer to Alec.

"Did he tell you about the big bathtub?" He asked, and Alec immediately seemed all ears, his eyes gleaming.

"No. What happened in the big bathtub? Tell me everything."

Percy would hate to disappoint.

* 

He was just telling Alec all about Jason's sailor-worthy cussing, when Alec's focus suddenly shifted, and the Apollo table fell silent, all eyes focused on a point somewhere behind Percy.

Percy first expected an attack, or somebody pushing him, or hurtful words.

He did not expect to hear Will clearing his throat awkwardly.

He also didn't expect to see his boyfriend looking sheepish and unusually flustered as he stood in front of their table, hands behind his back and his eyes hushing to Percy's face and away.

"Uh…hi."

Percy blinked at him, then frowned, turning towards him properly.

"Hey, love. What's wrong? I thought you'd stay in the tent?" He asked hesitantly, because Will seemed a little…off?

"I was going to, but then I remembered something very important." Will told him hurriedly, and Percy tilted his head, studying Will's face in confusion.

Next to him, he could hear Will's siblings snicker and clasp their hands over their mouths to keep it down.

"Yes? What is it?" Percy pried cautiously, and watched Will swallow, his freckles beginning to glow as he shifted from one foot to the other.

"Well, you see…do you remember when you got me those flowers? Those small white ones? And you came to visit me in the infirmary and gave them to me, for no real reason other than that you thought I might like them?" Will asked, and Percy looked up at him with wide eyes, his face warming.
"Yeah?" He asked, and found himself getting up, his eyes hushing down to where Will still kept his hands behind his back.

Will was shifting again, and his freckles started glowing a little brighter.

"Well, I thought, since…since I really liked that…I just…well…you know…" Will stammered, and Percy was biting his lip now, curious and hopeful as he stepped closer.

"Yes?"

Will looked at him with his beautiful blue eyes, searching his gaze before suddenly closing them as he took a deep breath.

The next moment, Percy had a bunch of tiny, blue flowers right under his nose.

"I thought you might like some, too." Will blurted, his gaze averted as his face seemed to burn, and Percy found himself grinning, his heart soaring.

Gingerly taking the flowers from his boyfriend, he was painfully aware of everybody watching, but when had he ever cared about that?

"They're the only flowers I could find. I checked back with the Demeter cabin, and they're not poisonous. Apparently, they're called Speedwell, and are meant to symbolize either facility or fidelity. Oh yeah, and with 'facility', it doesn't mean the building." Will explained to him with a serious nod, and Percy first gazed at the delicate flowers in his hands, then back at his boyfriend.

Then, he beamed.

"I love them. Thank you!" He said softly and leaned forward, and Will looked back at him with gleaming eyes and his whole face brightening up.

He tried to meet him halfway for the kiss, which led to them bumping their heads together awkwardly, but Percy merely chuckled and tried again, pressing their lips together softly.

Several of Will's siblings cooed, though he could also hear somebody from a different table muttering darkly.

Since he wasn't paying attention, all he could hear was 'monster' and 'flower', but he was too preoccupied with smiling against Will's lips to really think much of it.

At least not until he pulled back from Will and saw Alec whooshing past his boyfriend with a low growl.

The next moment, both Will and Percy turned their heads to watch Alec leap at an unsuspecting kid from the Hermes cabin, pelvis roughly around the height of the kid's neck as he slammed into him and tore him to the ground, together with a near-perfect roll to pin the kid down and in a headlock.

"You take that back!"

Percy stared, then turned to look at Will in confusion.

Will, however, only looked mildly impressed, his hand already on Percy's arm to tug him away.

"You don't want to know. Anyways, let's get going. Alec's got this."

"But..." Percy started, but then chaos already erupted all throughout the dining pavilion as people started bickering and fighting and yelling at the two boys on the ground, so Percy merely made a face and let Will pull him away.

Were they...were they fighting because of him?

Percy felt the queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach again.

Not for the first time, he wished he could turn back time, before he had wreaked havoc on the
camp.

But he couldn't.

Percy gazed down at the flowers in his hand, and his expression softened again as he looked back up at Will.

Will met his gaze with a cautious one of his own, before he started smiling again, his hand moving down Percy's arm to take his hand in his own.

"Come on, Gorgeous. Let's give those flowers some water and spend some time cuddling on the bed. Sounds good?"

Will sure knew how to pamper Percy.

"You're just trying to get out of work, you lazy butt!" Austin exclaimed next to him, and Percy had to snicker at the indignant look on Will's face.

"Excuse you, but who was the one telling me to 'take it slow' and 'rest as much as possible' for the time being?"

"You're not trying to rest, you just want to coddle your boyfriend."

"Jealous?" Will teased, and Percy snorted out a small laugh, before his attention shifted to his flowers again.

Flowers.

Will had gotten him flowers.

The warm and fuzzy feeling came back, and Percy felt Will squeeze his hand a little.

Percy kept looking at his flowers, taking in the delicate little buds.

So, this was what it felt like to receive flowers, huh?

Percy kinda liked it.

He smiled to himself and let Will and his siblings tug him along.

***

Jason walked towards the debris that used to be the Big House.

There certainly wasn't much left of it.

He watched as Chiron and a few other campers tried to find anything salvageable in the ruins, while others collected the rubble to clean up the area for future construction.

"Oh man, this is going to suck. We barely have enough to fix the armory, as is, there's no way we can just magically conjure up the materials to rebuild this." Leo muttered next to him, still seeming unusually on edge and restless.

If Jason had gathered correctly, he was having some sort of argument with Calypso, but he hadn't really given him the impression he wanted to talk about it just yet, so Jason hadn't pried.

"Do you think it's doable, though?" He asked, instead, and Leo kicked at a big rock that once was part of a ceiling.

"Everything is doable, Jason. It's just a matter of time, willpower and resources. We have none of that, though, and I honestly couldn't care less about a stupid building. There's way more important things to tend to. I mean, seriously, the Big House? Why the Big House? You know, my climbing wall, the one I poured so much hard work and effort into, got torn to pieces as well. Am I mourning the loss? Yes. Am I immediately thinking about rebuilding it?"

Jason shot him a long, telling look, and Leo grumbled and rolled his eyes.
"Yeah, okay, I am thinking of rebuilding it. But I won't. Not now, anyways. First, we gotta get everybody armed up, and all the cabins back to top functionality. The forge has taken immense damage, so that definitely has to be tended to, unless we want to lose it entirely. And, Jason, we do not want to lose the forge."

Jason let out a deep sigh.

"I know that, Leo. I agree with all of it, too. However, my job is to assess all the damage and supervise the repairs, so that's what I'm doing. Listen, I don't need you to do an exact replica of the old Big House. I just need you to tell me whether or not it's possible to fix this mess, and how long that would take." He told his friend, and Leo grumbled a moment longer, before his eyes fell back on the debris.

Then, he sighed and rubbed at a smudge on his cheek.

"Well…I suppose it would be possible to build up something small as a temporary solution, then expand that once we actually have the time and resources. I can make that happen in, what, three to five days?" Leo told him as he started counting something off on his fingers, and Jason beamed at him.

"That sounds perfect. I knew I could count on you, man."

"Yeah, whatever. Now, about the forge…" Leo immediately started, and Jason tried very hard to understand all the things he was saying.

All in all, from what he gathered, entire sections had caved in, and parts of the machinery seemed broken beyond repair, but the whole place still seemed worth saving because of some salvageable parts and the like.

Jason nodded along, then looked back towards Chiron.

Chiron luckily wasn't looking in his direction.

"It's your forge. You and your siblings get to decide what happens with it. Just tell me what you need, and I'll see what I can do." He told Leo at long last, who looked rather pleased.

"I need more people. At the moment, the camp is split in those who actually help, and those who whine and complain all the time. I can't very well tell the younger kids to work their share, but ironically, those are the ones most eager to be of use. We need more hands, Jason." Leo said quietly, and Jason made a face.

Yeah, that was the biggest issue at the current time.

They had more campers than ever, but at the same time, they had never had less to work with.

Some were too young, others were busy mourning and couldn't help much without breaking down.

A good portion of the ones left hadn't been around for the last war and felt overwhelmed with the situation.

The rest was split into people willing to help, and people who, as Leo had put it, rather complained than worked.

In other words, they were doomed.

Jason took a deep breath, then looked around himself, taking in the Camp as a whole.

At Camp Jupiter, people had been trained from the get-go what to do in the worst-case scenarios, and it had been essential for all of them to be able to take part in taking down and rebuilding the entire camp at a moment's notice.

Jason wished the same had been done here. It would make everything so much easier.
As it was, he knew he had to work with what he had. No matter how little that actually was.

"What do you suggest?" He asked Leo, and the Latino let out a deep sigh as he mimicked him, looking out at the Camp around them.

"Honestly? I don't know. Most of them are upset about Percy. You know why."

Jason tensed.

"If they want to point fingers-…."

"I know, Jason. I know, because I know Percy, and because Annabeth threw a tantrum and yelled at Chiron when I happened to be around. I know. But the rest of the camp doesn't. All they know is that, one moment, Percy is fighting by their side, and the next, he turns on them and kills campers with that freaky storm he summons. They're scared. To them, he lost control of his powers and harmed them, and if that can happen once, it is bound to happen again." Leo explained while gesturing vaguely with his hands, before he pushed them into his pockets.

Jason opened and closed his mouth, trying to find the right words, while also trying to control the various emotions surging through him.

Leo was right, of course.

Jason knew the campers were scared.

But at the same time, it was just…unfair.

Everything was unfair.

"Then what am I supposed to do? What is Percy supposed to do? He has been in this camp for so long, shouldn't they know better? He has helped so many campers, has taught them how to fight, and has done everything in his power to protect them and the camp. How can they just forget all of that in a heartbeat? Do you have any idea what they are saying, Leo?" He asked agitatedly, and Leo shrugged without meeting his gaze.

"Of course I know what they're saying. They aren't exactly quiet, after all. You should have been there during lunch."

Jason immediately tensed, his stomach dropping.

"Percy was at lunch?" He asked hesitantly, hoping faintly to be wrong.

Leo looked up at him with a telling look, and Jason's stomach dropped further.

"Oh, he was. While you and Nico got everything set up for those lessons he'll be giving, Will made Percy his apprentice and sent him to lunch with his siblings. They seemed to distract him for the most part, but he was bound to hear at least some of the stuff. He looked heartbroken enough, after all."

Jason's hands clenched to fists, and he hurriedly pushed them into his pockets.

Leo glanced at him briefly, then nodded for him to come along as they left the Big House behind and instead started walking through the camp.

After Jason and Nico had made up – and made out, followed by some long-overdue cuddling on a rather uncomfortable and cold floor, as well as a very pleasant shower – Nico had told him about his revelation regarding the mind-sealing lessons.

So, Jason had jumped to help him out, going to Annabeth and getting everything running so that Nico could get those lessons started right away.

They hadn't even stopped by the medic tent, since Jason had intended to return to Will and Percy right away.

That had, of course, been before Annabeth had begged him to take care of the rest of the damage
assessing and repair management.

Gods, Will was awake.

Percy had been at lunch.

And Jason hadn't been there for either of them.

“What happened?” He asked cautiously.

Percy being heartbroken because of the other kids being cruel was already bad enough for Jason as it was, but he was pretty sure Leo had meant something else entirely when he told him he should have been there for lunch.

"You know Will's brother? The one with the dark blond hair that likes to violate any musical instrument he can find? The younger one, who likes to play around with guitar picks for no apparent reason?"

Jason frowned.

"Alec?” He asked hesitantly, and Leo snapped his fingers

"That's the one. Yeah, he got into a fistfight." He told him, then put his hands pack in his pockets with a satisfied smirk.

Jason stared at him in confusion.

"Alec got into…what? But why?"

But Alec was the shortest out of all of them, and the one with the least fighting abilities, if he had remembered correctly.

Who did he get into a fight with? And why?

Was he injured?

Jason would have to check on him in the medic tent and see that he was okay.

He had helped Jason just this morning with their clothes, it would be wrong not to check up on him.

"With a kid from the Hermes cabin. You see, your boyfriend – Will, I mean – came by even though he should have been watching over my girlfriend, just to give your other boyfriend – Percy – flowers. Needless to say, while half the dining pavilion was cooing inwardly…or not so inwardly, for that matter…there were also those that didn't take well to seeing that." Leo explained, accompanied by a noncommittal shrug, and Jason stared at him.

Wait, Will had brought Percy flowers?

That was a brilliant idea! Jason would have to remember that.

"Wait, so Alec fought a Hermes kid who said something bad about Percy? Or Will? What?” He asked, trying to stop his mind from wandering, and Leo made a face.

"Well…there were more people who talked shit, but that kid in particular? I would have punched him, too."

"Why? What did he say?" Jason asked, feeling a little alarmed, though he knew there was nothing he could do to change it anymore, and chances were, he would be better off not knowing.

However, he still wanted to know, just so he knew what to expect from here on out.

Leo grimaced.

"Monsters should be put down, not given flowers."
Jason stopped walking, and Leo instantly had his hands up.

"His words, not mine! Seriously, you should have seen Alec's face. He was livid. Jumped at the kid with so much momentum that he tore him down with his legs around the kid's neck, and he had him stuck in that headlock for the majority of their brawl."

Jason felt hot and cold, and his hands were still fists in his pocket.

"And Percy?" He asked, because, while he was grateful for Alec's interference (which he of course wouldn't tell him, to prevent him from picking fights again), he needed to know how Percy had reacted to all of that.

Leo shrugged.

"I don't think he really heard? He seemed too preoccupied with his flowers and Will. If anything, he looked a little confused about Alec throwing himself at the guy, but then Will and his siblings herded Percy out of there, so I guess he didn't get it?"

Jason let out a long, relieved breath.

Thank the gods.

The last thing he needed was Percy beating himself up over that whole breakdown even more than he was already doing.

Leo shot him a pitying look.

"You know you can't protect him forever, right? You guys are acting a little like over-protective parents."

Jason shot him a pointed look, but when Leo started walking again, Jason followed, anyways.

"I see no reason why we have to let him hear all that bullshit if it can be avoided. He's already blaming himself enough."

"I believe that. Well, at least he'll have a bit of a break now, won't he? The Apollo kids seem to love him, so he should be safe and sound in the medic tent for the time being." Leo mused, and Jason turned his head to look in the direction of the medic tent.

"Hopefully so." He replied quietly.

So, Will had taken him in, huh?

Finally.

Jason smiled to himself, banning all the negativity from his mind as he focused on the thought of his boyfriends and flowers, and Nico sprawled out on his clothes, looking up at him with dazed eyes.

He looked back at Leo, and noticed they were moving towards the forge.

Jason really didn't feel like going to the forge, because he knew he wouldn't be able to leave for the next some hours once he was there.

"I'll organize you some more hands to help, okay?" He offered, and Leo turned his head to look at him quizzically.

"Huh? You're not coming along? Oh man, I was totally counting on you to help for a bit."

Yeah, Jason had already guessed that much.

"I need to check the rest of the Camp as well, and there's something I need to talk to Will about before I forget." He explained, and Leo looked doubtful, but didn't argue.

"Well, okay. In case Cal asks…which she probably won't…tell her where I am, okay? Just…eh,
forget it, who am I kidding…” He suddenly waved off, and Jason frowned.

"Is it really that bad?" He asked cautiously, not wanting to pry, but if they were really fighting, maybe Leo should talk it out with somebody.

Leo let out a long, deep sigh.

"Kind of? She's upset about the whole border-thing. And the fleece-thing. And the me-thing. Apparently, it's been a landslide waiting to happen. She doesn't want to see my face right now. Gotta respect that, I guess." Leo muttered with a grimace, and Jason's frown deepened.

He…had no idea what Leo was talking about.

What border-thing? What fleece-thing? What did he mean with 'the me-thing'?

"I'm sure she just needs some time to…get used to the current situation. Give her a bit of time to herself. After that, I'm sure she would be open to talking everything out with you," Jason suggested cautiously, not quite sure how to help when he didn't know the background of their argument.

Leo sighed again.

"Maybe. I don't know. I just…I just wanted her to live, but apparently, that makes me a shitty boyfriend. She didn't just snap at me about that, but also about my 'inability to apologize', and that I 'always try to laugh everything off'. Like…yeah? That's what I've been doing, all my life? Did she never notice that before? Did she think I could just stop doing it out of nowhere? I don't get it."

Jason awkwardly scratched the side of his neck as Leo started rambling next to him, looking agitated and hurt and absolutely frustrated.

Then, his friend turned to him with a miserable expression.

"Like, what am I supposed to do now? Where did all of that even come from? Why is she suddenly so angry? All I did was try and save her life, and now I'm the bad guy?"

Jason opened and closed his mouth, then thought of his boyfriends.

Mainly, he thought of Will and his tendency to fight all his battles alone, and of Nico, who was still struggling with the whole talking aspect of a relationship.

"I don't think she thinks you're the bad guy, Leo. I think she's just been struggling with a lot, and right now she simply let out some of it on you. Have you thought about her words? If she's this upset about something, maybe there's some truth to it." He tried carefully, and Leo huffed and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"How so? Again, I'm the same as always! If she didn't like me the way I was, why did she even start going out with me?"

Jason scratched the side of his neck again, thinking over his words for a moment.

"Maybe she doesn't want you to change, but to simply…be more honest with your feelings, Leo. I mean, maybe she just wants to talk to you about more serious matters, but your cheerful attitude makes her feel like you're not taking her seriously. That doesn't mean you have to change your whole personality, it just means that she feels hurt by your dismissive behavior and is asking you to pay more attention to your actions."

Will would be a lot better suited for this sort of talk than Jason.

He half expected Leo to snap at him, but instead, the Latino let his shoulders slump and seemed to sulk, which seemed even worse.

"I suppose you're right. I just…never noticed anything was wrong, to begin with. Maybe I'm not actually made out to be in a relationship. I've always been better with machines than people. Maybe that's simply how it is, and I've been living some sort of pipe dream up until now, thinking
I could make things work out with somebody like her. I mean...have you seen her? She's...she's..." Leo struggled for words for a moment, then he sighed and buried his face in his hands. "She's gorgeous. And funny. And just...so great. She deserves better than somebody like me, who can't even apologize for being two hours late for a date I set the time for, just because I was so busy tinkering that I completely forgot about it."

Jason shook his head and put an arm around his friend comfortingly.

"Hey, don't think like that. She clearly wants to be with you, Leo, else she wouldn't try to talk things out with you, right? She didn't break up with you, after all, did she now?"

"No, but maybe she should."

"She shouldn't. You're completely underselling yourself. Come on, you say she's gorgeous and funny and great, but you have your good qualities too, you know? You're funny and quirky, and...and Nico always calls you the hottest." He tried tentatively, because it was the first thing that came to mind as he faltered.

Oh man, how much he wished Will could have this conversation in his place right now.

Leo shot him a confused look, but at least the misery had disappeared from his face.

"Well, I do erupt in fire at least once a day." He then mused, and Jason wasn't sure whether that was something to be proud of.

"Does she mind it when you do?" He asked, and Leo shook his head with a small smile tugging on his lips.

"Nah, she thinks it's 'endearing'."

Jason wasn't sure how, but maybe he was biased because of Will burning up every time he had those nightmares of his.

"There you go. See? She's totally into you. You'd be crazy to give up on your relationship just because you two are hitting a rough patch, Leo. Instead, you should try to work through it with her. What doesn't break you makes you stronger. That applies to relationships, too." He tried to convince him, but Leo immediately slumped again.

"But how? I would just try to crack a joke and laugh the whole thing off and have things return to the way they were before, but she's made it obvious that's not going to happen!"

Had...Leo listened to anything Jason had just said?

Jason looked back at the medic tent, knowing exactly what he was going to do once he saw Will again.

"You could always try to talk to her in a more...serious...manner. Like you're doing with me right now. Just talk to her, let her know how you feel about this whole issue you're facing, about your feelings for her, and that you don't want to lose her over something like this. You don't want to lose her after all, do you?"

Leo shook his head, though he still seemed doubtful.

"Then let her know that. Let her have some time to herself now, and later, when you had a chance to think about everything again and know what you want to say, you can approach her and make up." He suggested, and Leo looked at the ground for a long moment as he shuffled, his hands back in his pockets.

When had he stopped tinkering with his hands non-stop?

Jason wondered whether he had simply not been around Leo for too long, or whether this was just because his argument with Calypso was dragging him down so much.

Either way, it bothered him, and he wished he could help his friend better than this.
However, this was the best he could do, especially since he didn't know Calypso's side of the story.

"I suppose so. I...yeah. I'll think about it. Thanks, Jason. You're a real friend. And a great consultant. Now I get why your boyfriends always look to you whenever anybody asks anything. You're the one with all the answers."

_Gods no._

"Most definitely not." Jason blurted, and Leo chuckled next to him, eyes slowly filling with mirth.

"Of course not. Anyways, I think I'll get going now. Got a forge to fix. Thanks again for your help. You didn't have to listen to all of that, you know?"

Jason waved off.

"That's what friends are for, man. We'll see each other later?"

Leo threw him an amused look, then shrugged and turned his back to him.

"I would hope so? We live in the same camp, after all."

"Smart-ass." Jason called after him, and Leo turned his head to stick out his tongue at him.

"Not my fault you say weird stuff, superman."

Ugh, not the superman-thing again.

The last time Leo had called him that, a bunch of other campers had overheard and called Jason that for an entire week.

He still considered himself lucky that the name hadn't stuck with his boyfriends.

Jason waved slightly in Leo's direction, then he turned around and hurried towards the medic tent.

Alright, he had taken care of almost everything on his imaginary to-do list.

Now, it was time to face the truly important things in life.

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Will wasn't sure what he had expected Jason to do upon stepping inside the medic tent, but it certainly wasn't Jason walking right towards him and hugging him from behind.

"You're awake." His boyfriend greeted him with his nose buried at the side of his neck and his arms around him in a near-crushing embrace.

Will was still blinking at the cupboard stupidly with his hands raised midway to put the bandages in the drawer.

"Hey? Yeah, I am. Sorry for oversleeping. I don't know how that happened." He replied and put the bandages down to turn in Jason's arms and look at him properly.

From what he could sense, Jason seemed perfectly alright? Why was he hugging him with such... urgency?

Was he okay?

The moment Will laid eyes on Jason, he snorted out a small laugh.

Oh gods, he had completely forgotten about all the _hickeys_ he had left on Jason.

Then again, not all of these seemed to be from Will.

"You've been busy today, huh?" He teased, and Jason blinked at him in confusion for a moment, before his face cleared and his hand shot to his neck.
"Ah, that. Yeah. Uh…had to make up for…you know…wait, don't make them go away! Please."

Jason immediately exclaimed when Will moved a hand to touch his neck, and Will's eyebrow shot up.

But…

Will hesitated, then gave a small nod.

If his boyfriend wanted to run around looking thoroughly ravished, then Will guessed he could live with that.

Jason promptly relaxed again and let Will touch his neck, moving his arms loosely around Will once more.

Will smiled up at him.

"So, is there a reason for just suddenly ambushing me with hugs like this, or are you just that happy to see me?" He asked teasingly, and Jason's lips twitched into that smile Will adored so much.

"Happy to see you. Also, I just had to give relationship advice." Jason told him with a quick glance around, but other than Will's siblings, Clovis, and a sleeping Calypso, there was nobody around.

"Relationship advice? Oh dear, that explains everything. Let me guess, was it Leo?" Will asked when he caught Jason's gaze lingering on Calypso for a moment too long, and Jason shot him a surprised look.

"How did you know?"

Will shrugged, acting innocent.

"I guess I'm simply that smart? No, wait, I have the gift of sight, you know?" He insisted with a wiggle of his eyebrows and a grin, and Jason studied his face for a moment.

"You saw me looking at Calypso." He then deduced, and Will huffed.

"Yeah, pretty much. But hey, it would have been my first guess, either way. I was the one talking to her, so I shouldn't be surprised that he talked to you."

Jason let out a deep sigh, and Will sympathetically patted his arm.

"Probably. I'm just…so glad we're not arguing like that."

With that, Jason leaned closer to hug Will again, and Will moved his arms around him automatically, patting his back in comfort and reassurance.

"Just so you know: I love you. A lot. And I don't want us to fight. I hate it when we fight." Jason said quietly, and Will halted, before shooting his siblings murderous looks when he caught them staring.

They immediately started acting busy again.

"I love you, too. I don't want us to fight, either. It's just something that happens sometimes. Did…did you and Nico make up?" He asked hesitantly, though he was fairly certain they had.

They had both been gone earlier, and even though Jason was alone now, some of those hickeys on his neck looked like the teeth marks Nico liked to leave sometimes instead of simple love bites.

(Because Nico was savage like that.)

Jason chuckled quietly as he let his forehead drop on Will's shoulder.

"Yeah. He challenged me to the most vicious sparring session I've ever partaken in. We went all out on each other."
Why… did that sound just like something Nico would do?

"Let me guess, he didn't know how to bring it up?" Will asked, and thought he could catch a glimpse of a grin on Jason's face.

"Pretty much. It was all in his eyes, though. But yeah, if you overhear anybody talking about us punching each other's teeth out, it wasn't like that."

"You punched each other?" Will asked dubiously, because that didn't sound like something those two would do.

"Nah. Though Nico did do this really cool thing when he jumped at me and pulled me down into the ground with his legs alone. Did a really nice roll, too."

Those two.

"I'm sure it was. Did you two make it back to the cabin before jumping each other after that, or did you get grounded for public sex?" Will asked doubtfully, and Jason pulled back to look at him in surprise.

"You get grounded for that?"

That meant they either hadn't been caught, or they had made it back to the cabin.

Will let out a relieved sigh.

"Yep. You also have to write apology notes to everyone who saw you, and you have to do a public speech at the Campfire, apologizing for your behavior. That's what it says in the Camp rules, anyways."

Jason hummed, then he smiled and leaned closer to give him a peck on the lips.

"The things you know. But yeah, we made it back to the cabin."

Will shook his head and tugged on his shirt to bring him close enough to be the one giving him a peck.

"But you two did talk too, right? Or was everything said through clashing swords and adrenaline-fueled sex?"

Jason looked way too giddy regarding the topic, but it was better than the drained Jason that had entered the medic tent.

"We talked. Mostly afterwards, though. But yeah. It's all good now."

Will smiled and gave him another peck.

"That's a relief."

Jason let his hands stroke up and down Will's sides, still smiling at him with that soft smile of his. Then, he pulled away a little to turn around.

"So, where's Percy? I thought he would be here, but I guess not?"

Will sighed.

"He left earlier. I don't know exactly where he went, but he said it wouldn't take long and that he was going to be fine on his own, so I let him go."

Jason hesitated, and Will could feel the faint worry inside him, much like his own.

"Leo told me about lunch." Jason said quietly, and Will's hands twitched.

"Alec took care of it."
"I took care of it! I lost a tooth! Look!" Alec suddenly piped up and jumped up next to them, and Will shot him a dark look, though Jason seemed anything but perturbed as he let go of Will and turned towards Alec.

"Uh…is that good, or…?" Jason muttered awkwardly as Alec showed off his new tooth gap.

That idiot.

How had he lost a tooth in that fight?!

Teeth were one of the few things Will couldn't yet fix – which was ironic, seeing as he could fix bones and muscles like they were nothing.

He was about to speak up, when he caught the wondrous way Alec looked at Jason, together with the little head tilt and the slow blink that was a trademark for Apollo cabin flirting.

Will made a face.

Was he flirting with his Jason?!

When had Alec even had his bisexual awakening?

Wait…by the gods.

Alec caught his look, and immediately grimaced and took a step back.

"No…"

Will took one forward, his expression speaking for itself.

Alec gulped.

Then, he turned and bolted with a screeched 'No!'.

"You get right back here!" Will called after him and gave chase, leaving Jason behind with a confused look on his face and one arm outstretched as if he had wanted to hold Will back.

"What just happened?" He heard his boyfriend ask as he chased his brother through the limited space of the tent.

Then, he heard his siblings snicker as they easily stepped out of their way to let them do their thing.

"Nothing. It's just an Apollo thing. Nothing to worry about." Austin explained, and Will huffed loudly.

Oh, it really was an Apollo thing, alright?!

Usually, they already had their (usually bi, occasionally pan) awakenings by the time they hit puberty, so he had thought Alec would remain straight, seeing as he was turning sixteen this year.

Apparently, he was a late-bloomer. A very late one.

Alec ran through the room wailing, then tried to maneuver around the occupied and empty bunks to shake him off.

Will hopped over the beds and snatched Alec by the elbow.

"Gotcha!"

Alec screeched, then tripped, and the next moment, they both smacked into the ground with loud crashes.

Of course, Alec immediately tried to get away, but Will was faster, pulling him right back and tickling all his weak spots.
"No! No, it wasn't on purpose!" Alec cried and kicked, before he started giggling uncontrollably, and Will looked down at him with a dirty grin.

"Oh, it better not have been on purpose. My boyfriend? Really?! Why, Alec?!" "Why does it feel like I did something wrong?" He heard Jason ask, but trusted his siblings to reassure him.

He kind of had his hands full at the current time.

"Noo, I already said I'm sorry! It's not my fault! Come on, can you blame me?" Alec pressed out between fits of giggles, and Will halted in his tickling for a moment.

Will looked at the puzzled but handsome face, the broad shoulders, the strong arms.

If one combined that with Jason's kind and caring personality…

"I suppose you're right." He relented, and Alec let out a sigh of relief – but then, Will already started tickling him again.

"However, that doesn't mean you don't get punished! Still my boyfriend! How dare you!"

Alec wailed beneath him, but quickly resigned himself to his fate, and Will kept tickling him until he started acting dead.

"Aww, so he found out already? There I was hoping about teasing Alec with that for a while…" Kayla said as she stepped into the tent, and Will shot her a dark look as he let go of Alec with a sigh.

His brother remained on the ground and kept acting dead.

"Found out what?" Jason asked, still looking utterly confused.

"Don't worry, it's an Apollo thing." Kayla replied with a dismissive wave of her hand, before putting her hands on her hips and looking between Will and Jason with a disapproving look.

"Anyways, did something happen? Are the four of you fighting? Again? Because, seriously, now is not the time for that!" She chided them both, and, while Jason looked positively alarmed, Will just looked at her in utmost confusion.

"What are you talking about?" He asked, and she frowned at him, then gestured behind her.

"Well, Nico and Percy are sitting at the lake? Alone? And you two are here? There's also this talk about Nico and you fighting to the blood in the arena, Jason? What's all that about?"

Will threw Jason a pointed look, but Jason was deliberately not meeting his gaze.

"That was…just training. Though we should probably go and check on them, if they're by the lake alone." Jason mumbled and rubbed the side of his neck awkwardly.

Will sighed and nodded, then he stuck his tongue out at Alec, who had dared to move to peek up at him through a gap between his fingers.

"Fine, you're forgiven. Just don't let me catch you making any moves, alright?"
He might not be worried about Jason suddenly getting interested in his little brother, but he did want to avoid any possible drama related to all of this, like rumors or taunts.

Though there were much more pressing matters right now than Alec’s possible crush.

What were Percy and Nico doing? Did something happen?

Maybe Will shouldn't have let Percy leave, after all…

But he had assumed Percy just wanted to bring Nico some lunch; or check their cabin and have some time alone!

Plus, shouldn't Nico still be giving those lessons people had talked about earlier?

Will gave Jason a small nod, and the two excused themselves before leaving the medic tent together, Jason's hand immediately taking Will's.

Oh, right. Jason had come for reassurance and closeness.

Will shouldn't have let Alec distract him like that.

He stroked over the back of Jason's hand with his thumb, and Jason glanced sideways at him, his lips twitching into a small smile for a moment, before he looked ahead again and his expression became stern once more.

Will didn't want to look ahead, because he had already seen enough of the ruins of the Big House.

He still looked at them, anyways.

Unbiddenly, he remembered the crash, the way the walls had shook before caving in, the panic inside him as he had frantically searched for Jason in the debris.

The dread he had felt when he had dragged his body out of it, just to feel his life slipping through his fingers.

Will shuddered, then took a deep breath and grabbed Jason's hand a little firmer.

"Do you think it's anything serious?" He asked to drag his mind away from hell, and Jason gave him an odd look for a moment, before he let go of his hand.

But only to link their pinkies.

Will was never going to understand this guy.

"I hope not. My best guess is that there was more talking, like at lunch – hopefully without a fistfight, though. I suppose it's still too early to hope for things to calm down…" Jason said quietly, and Will averted his gaze, instead looking down at the mushy ground and damp grass at their feet.

"He didn't hear. What they said at lunch. Just in case you're worrying." Will said, because he knew Jason was worrying.

Jason let out a long breath next to him.

"That's good to know. I guess he was too distracted with the flowers?"

So, Jason knew about the flowers, too.

Will's lips twitched.

"Yeah. He loved them. You see, when Calypso told me about her relationship problems, I had the same momentary panic that you had, and immediately had to go and tell my boyfriend I love him." Will told him, even though he hadn't intended to tell Jason about that, just to prevent him thinking Will needed reassurance regarding their relationship or feelings.

However, since Jason had been the one rushing to Will immediately for reassurance, he supposed
However, since Jason had been the one rushing to Will immediately for reassurance, he supposed he could let him know that he had sort of done the exact same thing.

"I wouldn't call it panic, exactly, but...yeah, I know what you mean. You know, when Leo told me about the flowers, I was momentarily tempted to bring some, too."

So, Leo was the chatterbox, then.

Also: Yes, that sounded just like something Jason would do.

"No need to bring me gifts when your arms are the greatest gift the world could make." Will said without thinking, then stumbled over his own feet as he turned towards Jason.

"I mean...ah...what I was going to say, was...uh...I take your hugs over any flowers, any day, Handsome? You know? I don't...need...flowers...." He tried to save himself, but Jason was already giving him that soft look again, even as he had to bite his lip to stop himself from laughing.

Will could clearly feel the mirth in the blonde, but he decided to merrily ignore that as he tugged Jason along by his pinkie with a low groan.

"Don't laugh, Jason."

"But that was so adorable, I can't help it!"

"You better push that laughter down or that will be the last time I say anything nice, sweetheart." Will grumbled, and Jason fell back into step beside him, still giving him that look of adoration and joy that Will usually loved.

Right now, though, he was trying very hard not to look at his boyfriend.

"But I loved that. Can't I laugh out of joy that my boyfriend appreciates my arms?"

"I appreciate your hugs, mister." Will corrected, but then also looked at Jason, and his eyes drifted to those broad shoulders and strong arms almost against his will. Jason was still grinning.

Will made a face and looked away again.

"Though I suppose it's only right to admit you do have rather nice arms," he grumbled, though he was aware that Jason already knew, same as he knew about Will's attraction to them.

Jason, being the absolutely unfair dork that he was, stopped and pulled his hand free to look at his arms with a playfully curious expression.

"You think so?" He asked innocently – then, he flexed.

Will gave him a long, dark look, while Jason grinned from ear to ear, still showing off his muscles in that thin shirt he was wearing.

"You are the worst." He stated darkly as he crossed his arms in front of his chest, refusing to look at his boyfriend, though it was so difficult to look away.

"How so? I'm just testing out my hugging power."

Hugging power.

Right.

Will huffed to himself.

"Weren't we on our way to check on our boyfriends? It could be serious, you know?" He
remarked, but Jason didn't seem perturbed as he stretched out his arms to the sides to apparently stretch his back.

The next moment, said arms wrapped around Will and pulled him into a crushing hug.

"It's not. I can see them from here, and they're both smiling and waving, so I'm sure they're fine." Jason said quietly, his breath tickling Will's ear in that way that made his insides flutter traitorously.

"I didn't see them yet." He argued, but also didn't fight the embrace, even if he waited another beat before caving in and hugging his boyfriend back.

"There we go. You'll see them in a moment, love. Let me have you to myself for another moment, without the prying eyes of your siblings."

Will shifted to glance past Jason's shoulder at the Camp around them, though he couldn't see much thanks to Jason being unfairly huge.

"You consider the middle of the camp a more private place than the medic tent with a bunch of my siblings? Seriously?"

"Will, stop arguing and hug me like you mean it." Jason told him and pulled him in further, so Will followed in kind and wrapped his arms tighter around his boyfriend.

"Fine." He relented with a sigh, though he had to admit he was always a sucker for being held like this – even if it was in the middle of the freaking camp, where everyone could see.

Maybe, in a way, he liked it especially because of that.

Will closed his eyes and buried his face at Jason's chest, trying to hide himself in those arms until he was certain he was invisible to the rest of the world.

Jason let him.

Will thought back to his dream/nightmare/whatever, and he knew he would have to tell them eventually.

Even if he didn't want to bring it up, didn't want to talk about it, and didn't want to know their reactions.

Here in Jason's arms might be a good place to start, though.

It was a good place to be.

Safe and warm and surrounded by love.

"I need to talk to you. I mean, all of you. Preferably later, though." He said quietly, hoping futilely that he was so quiet Jason wouldn't hear him.

"Okay." Jason said simply, and, while Will appreciated it, it also left him with the queasy feeling that Jason wasn't aware of what he was agreeing to, and that he would end up being upset later, once he knew Will had dragged it out for so long.

"It's important. Possible wedding cake." He added, though he desperately hoped he wouldn't have to talk about it now, even though he seemed intent on making exactly that happen.

"I gathered as much." Jason replied softly, and Will tensed, confused at the lack of surprise inside Jason.

"How?" He asked, unable to hide the hint of incredulity in his voice.

His boyfriend let out a small huff of laughter.

"You, telling me you need to talk to all of us? While trying to crawl inside me as if to hide from the world? It has to be something very big if you only feel ready to bring it up like this, Freckles."
Will made a face, wondering faintly whether he would get away with biting Jason's shoulder in retaliation for being laid bare like that.

Did nothing ever escape his boyfriend?

Other than Ash's and Hannah's crush-issues and Alec's apparent bisexual awakening?

It was so unfair.

Will grumbled to himself, though the garbled mess that came out of his mouth could hardly be considered words, much less coherent.

Jason let him, merely keeping him close and stroking over his back with soothing strokes.

"It's okay. We can talk about it later, when you're more comfortable. Want to go to our boyfriends now?" Jason suggested, all soft and kind as always.

Will kept grumbling, anyways, and tried to get even closer than he already was, just because.

Unfortunately, to get closer, he would probably have to climb onto Jason and wrap himself around him like a koala, and, while he was certain Jason would let him, he didn't yet want to give up on the little bit of dignity he had left.

After trying futilely a few more times while Jason held still and let him do as he wanted, Will had to admit defeat and pulled away from his boyfriend with a deep sigh.

"Yeah, sure."

Jason was back to smiling at him softly, and Will wondered where a single person got all this kindness from.

Gentle fingers touched his face and Will leaned into the touch reflexively, before Jason leaned down to give him a peck on the lips.

Will both wanted to drag him in for a proper kiss, and pull away so they could finally move on and get to their boyfriends.

(Whom Will still hadn't seen, by the way, because he still hadn't managed to look away from Jason yet.)

Jason made the decision for him by linking their pinkies again and tugging him along to move towards the lake once more, where their boyfriends were waiting.

"Why, hello there, my darling sweethearts." Percy greeted them good-naturedly once they were within earshot, a big grin on his face as he sat close to Nico, their hands linked between them.

"That took a while. Is everything alright?" Nico asked immediately, eyes hushing between them and stopping on their linked pinkies, his lips twitching into a small smile before his eyes found Will's again.

Will stuck out his tongue at both of them.

"We're perfectly alright. Talk about yourself. Kayla thought we're fighting because you two seemed like doom and gloom over here." He notified them, but his boyfriends merely exchanged matching grins and high-fived.

"Told you it would work."

"Never doubted you, my mighty Ghost King."

Will shot Jason a dubious look, and his boyfriend seemed to come to the same conclusion.

Will looked out at the dark and still-poisonous lake in front of them with a deep sigh.

Apparently, they had been played.
Of course.

"You two are the worst." He remarked as he sat down next to Nico, and his boyfriends both cackled in sync.

"How else were we supposed get you two would join us ASAP for a late afternoon lunch? Come on, you love us." Percy argued, and Nico nodded in agreement.

Jason laughed quietly to himself, though he was also shaking his head as he flopped down next to Percy and immediately tugged him close to give him a kiss to the forehead.

"Well, that goes without saying. Of course I love you. But, seriously? Worrying my siblings in order to get us to drop everything to come check on you is a low blow, especially for you two." Will chided, just because somebody had to do it, and that somebody apparently wasn't going to be Jason, who was now busy snuggling up to Percy and having a whispered conversation.

Will shot him a reprimanding look, but Jason merely grinned back at him, winked, then took a slice from the pizza in front of their boyfriends, nicely laid out on an undoubtedly stolen plate.

These criminals.

"You looooove us." Nico insisted with a shit-eating grin and let himself drop against Will, tilting his head upwards to look at him with those bottomless, dark eyes of his that were one of Will's greatest weaknesses.

Was he drunk? He was behaving unusually…straight-forward, but without the straightness.

Oh, wait, he had made out with Jason. That explained everything.

"I hate people, by the way. The whole plan with teaching the campers anything? Big mistake." Nico added in a serious tone, before his smile was back and he rubbed his face against Will's arm, undoubtedly enjoying the soft fabric of Jason's sweater.

Why were Percy and Will the only ones still wearing Jason's comfort sweaters, anyways?

How unfair.

"You poor thing. Want to get underneath my sweater with me to recharge your social skills?" Will offered as a joke, but instantly found Nico's eyes gleaming with intent and challenge.

Whoops.

"Will, there's no way you two are going to fit." Jason put in dubiously, but Nico was clearly into the idea, and who was Will to deny him anything?

"We'll see about that." Nico stated determinedly and moved, and Will guessed this was going to be a very awkward, but undoubtedly very satisfying way to spend lunchtime together with his boyfriends.

"Jason! Let's do that, too!" Percy exclaimed and started tugging on his sweater, and Jason shot Will a pointed look.

Will merely shrugged innocently.

Sorry, but he didn't make the rules.

Jason succumbed to his fate, and Percy and Nico both seemed incredibly pleased as they took on their mighty tasks.

Yep, this was going to be a fun 'lunch'.

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They were just leaving for their cabin for the one-hour break they had all agreed on, when Jason saw something moving towards them out of the corners of his eyes.
He didn't even have to turn around to know who it was, just because of the way Nico stiffened, Will snarled and Percy hung his head.

*Chiron.*

Well, that was one way to ruin a perfectly fun lunch.

Jason turned to look at the approaching centaur, straightening his back and readying himself to tell him to get lost.

Needless to say, he didn't get that far, because Will was already striding forward, too quickly for any of them to stop him.

"And what are you doing here?!" He snarled, and Jason let out a deep sigh, before signaling Percy and Nico to stay put as he went after their boyfriend.

"I am *trying* to talk to Percy, Mr. Solace." Chiron replied with a strain to his voice and his tail swishing, but at least he stopped in front of Will instead of trying to get past him.

Since Jason clearly saw Will's hand twitching towards his medic pouch, he didn't want to know how that would have ended.

"Percy doesn't want to talk to you." Will retorted simply, and Chiron's jaw tensed.

"Shouldn't you let Percy make that decision, himself?"

Jason wondered why he even bothered.

"No, he's right. I don't really want to talk to you, thanks." Percy mumbled awkwardly from behind Jason, and Jason took his rightful place by Will's side, his gaze fixed on the centaur.

"I wish to apologize." Chiron tried, and Jason snatched the back of Will's sweater when he tried to surge forward.

"Apologize?!! Stick your fucking apology where the sun doesn't shine, you fucking-…" Will exclaimed loudly, followed by even more swearing as he gave Chiron a murderous look, but Jason's grip on him didn't waver.

"Will, no swearing. Chiron, sir, now is not the time." He said calmly, and willingly endured Will's wrath for the sake of peace.

Chiron didn't seem to value his sacrifice.

"Then what would you consider a good time, Mr. Grace? I have realized my decisions haven't been the wisest, and I know there is no fixing of what has happened, but I am aware an apology is in order. This is my attempt at giving at least that much." Chiron put in, and Will hissed like an angry cat, his entire body vibrating with anger and heat.

"Apology not accepted! I warned you, Chiron! I warned you, and you decided you didn't want to listen. Now, look at him! Look at what you've done! If you were truly sorry, you would talk to the campers, you would defend Percy and console those who have lost loved ones, instead of sulking about the damage and leaving it to Annabeth to do everything for you!" Will exclaimed heatedly, and Jason tried to pull him back a little further, away from where he could still strike Chiron if he truly wanted to.

He let him speak, though.

Mostly because it was the truth, and Will was good with words, even when he was yelling and spitting them like venom.

Jason didn't question how Will knew that Annabeth was doing everything.

Will had that ability to find out anything he wanted to find out, just by observations alone.

Chiron's tail swished again, though he stood his ground.
"I am aware that I have made a mistake, but…"

"A mistake, Chiron?! More like, hundreds!"

"How about you let me speak!" Chiron said sharply and stomped one hoof on the ground.

Jason immediately straightened his back, daring him to threaten his boyfriend.

"How about I don't?!!" Will yelled back, clearly not needing any protection.

"We should leave." Jason tried to reason, but went ignored by both sides.

"You are letting your anger get the better of you. Be reasonable, so we can have an actual conversation, rather than this nonsense." Chiron said pointedly, and Will looked ready to leap at the centaur.

Instead, he sneered.

"Oh, you want me to be calm, huh? I can do that. No problem." He said sweetly, and Jason tensed, involuntarily reminded of Kyle.

The thought scared him.

He let go of Will, though Will didn't seem to notice his shift in mood as he stepped away from him and towards the centaur, his eyes cold and his expression stony.

Chiron stepped backwards instinctively, tail swishing repeatedly as his eyes scanned Will's face with unease.

"Do you remember what I told you? Three, maybe four months ago? Maybe even earlier than that, when I came to you about my concerns regarding the training plans? When I came looking for you and told you that you're pushing the campers too much; that you're pushing Percy too much? Do you recall when I came running to you, begging to let Nico stay with him so they could work together? What about the time when I explicitly told you that what you're doing was going to backfire badly and that you should act now, before it was too late? Because I do. I also remember what you did each time. Do you remember that, too?" Will asked him, his voice still sickly sweet and deadly calm, even as his body kept vibrating with pent-up anger.

Jason didn't like this.

He looked over his shoulder and saw Percy with his eyes on the ground, while Nico stood next to him with an arm around him and a helpless look on his face as he stared back at Jason.

"I should have behaved differently, I am aware of that now." Chiron said quietly, and Jason looked back at the two.

"Congratulations. It only took, what, the Camp getting destroyed? Percy nearly dying? Campers actually dying, just so you could wrap your mind around what I've been telling you all along?" Will tore into him mercilessly, his voice icy, even as the air around them remained hot.

"I am sorry that I didn't give your words as much weight as I should have." Chiron said, and he looked grave again, older, but Jason couldn't make himself take pity, his priority being his boyfriends right now, rather than the centaur.

He wanted their peaceful lunchtime back.

With Will and Nico awkwardly stuffed into one sweater together, all snuggled up and cozy as they fed each other, while Percy and Jason had been something akin to a disaster, thanks to the sweater not being big enough.

It had been fun. It had been nice. It had been all the things this situation right now was not.

"You did nothing then, and you're doing nothing now. What are you doing, coming here to bother Percy, when you could be taking care of the camp? When you could be helping Annabeth? When
you could be helping Leo and his siblings with the repairs? Or Nico with his lessons? Or you could start preparing for the burials. You cry about your Big House? Others cry about the loss of their siblings and friends. Guess which one is worse. Do something, Chiron. Anything. But get out of my face and stay the fuck away from Percy." Will snapped, and Jason was glad the eerie calmness in his voice was gone, same as that sweet undertone he despised so much.

"Don't you think you're being a little unreasonable?" Chiron asked as his tail swished again, and Jason momentarily worried Will was going to bristle all over again.

Will didn't.

Instead, he let out a feeble, humorless laugh.

"Oh, I'm being unreasonable now, huh?"

Jason lowered his head as he saw Will's shoulders shake a little, this time not out of anger.

"I don't know where you have been yesterday, and I don't want to know, either. But there was this tiny battle going on, you know? The one that had the border protection breaking, Calypso dying and Percy losing himself. The one that nearly cost the lives of all the healers in this camp in one go. The one that had me nearly losing Nico and Percy to the storm. The one that…that…Jason—" Will cut off as his voice started shaking, and Jason took a step towards his boyfriend, moving his hand on his shaking shoulder to give him some sort of physical contact.

"I'm right here." He told him quietly, though he knew Will knew.

Will gave a weak nod, fighting against his tears as he looked up at Chiron in contempt.

"We were all fighting our battles, each in their own way. Some of us still are. And you stand there, telling me I'm being unreasonable when I say you can fuck off with your feeble apologies and empty words. Well, I don't think I'm being unreasonable. I think I have every right to tell you to fuck off. Which is why I'm going to do it all over again: Fuck off and stay away from my boyfriends, or I will make you."

Jason tightened his grip on Will's shoulder a little, but it luckily wasn't necessary to hold him back in any way.

Chiron looked displeased, but didn't argue anymore, and his gaze moved from Will to Jason, then past them both to Percy and Nico.

He pursed his lips for a moment, then he gave a small nod and took another step back.

"Very well. I shall take my leave. Whenever you feel ready to hear me out, you know where to find me."

Jason inwardly sighed in relief, though he only really let his body relax when Chiron started trotting away from them at a slow pace.

"Let's go back to the cabin. Come on." He told Will, but Will still took a moment to glower after the centaur, before he turned and looked at Percy.

"If he approaches you at any other time, you let me know, okay?"

Percy didn't look up from where he was still staring at the ground.

"You…you do know it was I who agreed with him, right…? It's not all his fault…" He mumbled quietly, hesitantly, and Jason watched with a sinking heart how he pulled his shoulders up a little, as if to make himself smaller.

Oh, Percy.

"Maybe so, but he is the one who should have known better. He's supposed to be the grown-up at this camp. He was ancient before we were even born, so he carries the responsibility. He knew everything he had to know, and still decided to use you like a toy. You might have agreed to his plans, but he should have never made such shitty plans to begin with, much less pushed you to
agree to them." Will countered, his words sharp and not allowing for an argument, but his eyes were soft as he exchanged a quick glance with Jason, before they both moved to their boyfriend.

Percy still looked rather pitiful, but gave a small nod, anyways.

"I…I guess so…"

Jason wanted to reach out and comfort, and so did Will, but Nico beat them to the punch as always, already moving to wrap his arms around Percy properly and pulling him against him.

"Will is right, Percy. Now, how about we finally get that downtime? Talking to Chiron just wasted fifteen precious minutes of the hour I have to spare. I don't want to waste any more of that out here, when it could be much better spent cuddling in our very comfortable bed."

Percy took a deep breath and nodded faintly, and Will and Jason exchanged another look, before they moved to take their boyfriends in the middle and made their way towards the cabins, away from the poisoned lake, and Chiron, and the rest of the camp.

Yes, they deserved that downtime, even if it was only going to be 45 minutes.

"The…the burials…” Percy mumbled quietly, and Jason looked at Nico, who was looking away from them.

"Later. I will take care of them later." The Italian said quietly, and Jason felt uneasy at the realization that they had only just held the burial for Andrew and Rin, and now they were holding new ones, for so many more campers.

Percy looked down again, and Jason watched Will move an arm around his shoulders from the right, while Nico held his left hand tightly in his own.

"I…can I help you? With the burials?"

Jason wasn't sure whether that was a good idea.

By the looks of it, Will had his doubts, too, though neither of them spoke up, instead looking back at Nico.

"Sure thing. But first, cuddles, yeah? Then, I'm going to return to the pits of hell with those despicable things called teenagers and torture myself and them for a while longer until I've made a bit more progress. I'll come and get you once it's time for the preparations, okay?" Nico agreed without hesitation, and Will and Jason exchanged uneasy looks.

If the campers were already talking about Percy the way they were, was it really a good idea to let Percy partake in the preparations?

Having Percy there for the burials themselves was already going to cause unnecessary drama, but Percy needed the closure as much as everyone else, so it was obvious to Jason that he would be there.

But…for the preparations…?

He tried to catch Nico's eyes, but when Nico did look at him, his expression spoke of determination and challenge, and Jason guessed he had his answer right there.

Percy was going to help with the preparation of the burials.

"Thank you." Percy said, so quietly it was almost a whisper, and Jason wished that they walked a little faster, so he could wrap himself around his boyfriend in the safety of their cabin already.

"I'm the thankful one. After all, you're the one offering to help me, and I can always make do with some helping hands." Nico replied with a smile and a little wink, and Jason felt his stomach twist.

"Do you want me to help, too?"

"I can help as well, if you want me to."
He and Will offered simultaneously, but that only made Nico laugh and shake his head.

"It's fine, I know you two don't have time to spare for that. Plus, Percy already knows the ropes, so I know he won't need me to supervise him. With you two, I'd just have to explain everything again."

Wow, harsh.

Will huffed and shot Jason a sulky look, before they both shrugged in defeat.

Meanwhile, Percy seemed both happy and uneasy at once.

"Uh…you…you might want to supervise…I mean, I'm not sure I will do…that great of a job…" He mumbled awkwardly, but Nico promptly shook his head and tugged on his hand.

"Don't say that. You did great the last time. I have full faith in you. Jason and Will do, too. Right, guys?"

There was no reason for Nico to add that edge to his voice when he turned his attention back to them.

Jason would have rushed to agree, either way.

He and Will stumbled all over themselves to agree with Nico and reassure Percy, which, they realized, was exactly what Nico wanted.

Their favorite Italian certainly knew what he wanted.

He also knew how to get it.

Jason felt played.

However, Jason didn't mind being played, long as it made his boyfriends happy – and they certainly seemed happy, what with Nico grinning to himself victoriously, and Percy smiling in that rather relieved and happy way.

They finally reached their cabin, and Jason had never been happier to hold the door open for them and close it behind them, shutting out the rest of the world.

Finally, time for cuddles.

Now, Jason was the one grinning the widest.

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"Okay, but where did that closet come from? And where's the old one?" Percy asked ominously, but Nico was too busy stroking through Will's hair to pay much attention, his entire focus on the blonde laying on top of him.

"We didn't really get the chance to talk up until now, huh?" He asked quietly, twirling Will's curls around his fingers as he looked at the relaxed face resting on his chest.

Will's eyes were closed, but Nico knew he wasn't sleeping.

"Is…is nobody else questioning the closet?"

Nico gave Will's hair a little tug, and blue eyes opened a little to squint up at him, a questioning hum vibrating through the blonde and thus Nico.

"Closet…” Percy whined next to them, where he was opening and closing the doors of their wardrobe.

"Jason told me about your great plan." Nico said quietly, though it definitely hadn't been a 'great plan', at all.
More like the dumbest thing Nico had ever heard.

Now, Will mumbled something incoherent, before he turned his head to hide his face back at Nico’s chest.

"I’m sorry." He heard his boyfriend whisper, and stroked through his hair again with a sigh.

"It’s okay. He also told me about your talk and the pinkie promise. Just…let that have been the last time, yeah? No more." He told him pointedly, and Will shifted on top of him, before giving a faint nod.

Then, Nico was suddenly – viciously – bit in the chest and let out a rather loud and embarrassingly high-pitched squeak.

"What the- what was that for?!" He exclaimed as he sat bolt-upright, while Will pulled away from him with a huff and a sulky look, even as the corners of his lips quirked up seconds later.

"For ruining the mood!" His unreasonable monster of a boyfriend shot back, and Nico huffed loudly.

"What mood?! You were dozing!"

"And you woke me up to scold me!"

"Guys…the closet…it's so big…” Percy put in next to them, but Nico was too busy glowering at Will to check what the heck Percy’s problem with the closet was.

"I'm gonna scold you again in a moment for biting me, you little shit!" He exclaimed, then rushed forward to grab Will and pull him sideways into their blanket.

Will let out a squeak and went down.

"What are you two…Percy, why are you trying to climb into the wardrobe?" Jason asked as he stepped out of the bathroom, but Nico was too busy trying to pin Will down properly and gain the upper hand.

Jason might be capable of pushing him down, but he would be damned to let Will do the same, at least not after biting him.

"I'm trying to find Narnia!" He heard Percy exclaim determinedly.

Nico had no idea what a narnia was.

Whatever it was, Nico hoped it wouldn't be a monster, and wouldn't eat their clothes.

Will seemed distracted by Percy's words as he turned his head with a confused frown, which Nico exploited to secure his spot on top of his boyfriend, hands immediately hushing beneath the sweater to tickle over Will's stomach and sides.

Will choked out a messy laugh, before beginning to flail and whine.

There.

That's what he got for biting Nico.

The audacity!

Sure, it hadn't hurt, but still!

"Oh, true, you weren't with us earlier. I'm sorry, Percy, I should have explained. Nico's dad seemed to have visited at some point between last night and noon. He also fixed the damage on the roof, as well as our water fountain. I'm surprised that wasn't the first thing you noticed." Jason explained somewhere behind him, and Nico realized that was probably why Percy had been going on about the closet.
True, they had a new closet now.

Nico wasn't sure what had been wrong with the old one, and he certainly had been as stunned as Percy when he had noticed earlier, but by now he didn't care anymore.

Will tried to say something, and Nico promptly prevented it by intensifying his tickling.

"That's what you get for biting me!" He exclaimed as darkly as he could muster, while his lips kept tugging upwards and he had to fight his own laugh.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry!"

"You're totally not sorry, I can see you laughing." Nico argued, then realized Will was probably laughing because he was still being tickled.

Oh.

Will shot him a wild look that said the same thing, and they both halted for a moment.

Then, Percy snorted out a small laugh next to them.

A moment later, they joined in.

"What am I going to do with you?" Jason asked with a sigh, though it sounded more amazed than exhausted, and Nico already knew they were going to get flattened into the mattress long before Jason reached the bed to do so.

Percy went right along with it, of course, and Nico found himself squished between him and Will into their comfortable, wonderful bed once more.

He so wanted to stay here for the rest of the day.

Much better than trying to train a bunch of kids how to keep him (or Kyle, for that matter) out of their minds.

Nico grumbled to himself at the thought, unwilling to let his cuddles get ruined by the thought of work.

"How much time do we have left?" He asked into the silence, and there was shuffling behind him, before Jason let out a deep sigh.

"Ten minutes."

Oh man, that was nothing, then.

Nico grumbled, then bit Will's shoulder.

His boyfriend hissed and hit him with Mrs. O'Leary Jr.

"Nico!"

"This is all because of Chiron." Nico said darkly, and his boyfriend sat up a little to hit him with the plushie again.

"Then bite him, not me! Geez."

Nico shot him a sulky look, then pulled him back down and wrapped his arms tightly around him.

"You started it." He mumbled against the sweater in front of him, and Will turned his head to argue.

"Guys, I'm stopping it. Enjoy the ten minutes you have left. Don't waste them on petty arguments." Jason put in sternly, and they both deflated again.

Nico felt like getting fed up over petty arguments, though.
How dare Chiron approach them – approach Percy – after everything that had happened?!

Nico remembered Will's outburst, the accusations, the way he had faltered at Jason's name.

Nico's eyes narrowed.

Then, he closed them and buried his face at his boyfriend's back.

Will was still and quiet once more, but there was a tension in his shoulders that hadn't been there before.

Nico shifted and kissed the spot he had bitten.

"Sorry for biting you. I was upset." He apologized dutifully, because he had manners, and Will sighed deeply, while Percy let out a small, amused-sounding huff.

"No laughing or you will be next, Percy." He warned him, and Percy promptly whined, while Jason let out a small grumble.

"I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have done that. Listen…I…I need to talk to you guys…” Will mumbled, and Nico noticed him trembling slightly.

Nico stilled, paying closer attention to Will's posture and tension.

"Are we too close?" He asked carefully, because his first thought was of the Underworld, when Will had been so unnerved by people behind him.

He knew Will didn't have as much of a problem with that anymore now, but he also knew that sometimes things could still get a little too much.

But Will shook his head.

"No. Stay. It's…there's…” Will replied, yet promptly struggled for words, and Nico sat up cautiously, stroking over his boyfriend's back and side slowly when Will curled into a ball.

Was he…scared?

Nico glanced towards Percy and Jason, and Percy shrugged at him helplessly, clearly as much as a loss as he was.

"The wedding cake?" Jason asked cautiously, and Nico frowned.

Wedding…cake?

Will gave a faint nod, but didn't speak.

"Who is getting married?" Percy asked slightly confused, and Nico was glad he asked, because that meant Nico wasn't the only one who was clueless.

"It's a sort of code word for very important things Will has to tell us about, instead of keeping them to himself." Jason explained, and both Percy and Nico gave slow nods.

So…nobody was getting married.

Well, okay.

Nico wouldn't have been able to prepare a wedding on such short notice, anyways.

"Actually, can we…talk about this later? I just…it's gonna take a while. I shouldn't have brought it up. I need to go." Will suddenly blurted and sat up, and Nico jumped a little, trying and failing to snatch his boyfriend's arm before he was already up and gone.

"Wait!" He called after him, but then the front door already closed with a loud thud.

Nico blinked, then looked at his boyfriends, who were both looking at the door with sober looks.
"It seems to be something big. He only brought it up earlier when we were on the way to you."
Jason said quietly, and Percy sighed, before he also climbed off the bed.

"I'll go after him. He forgot his medic pouch. *And* he's wearing my shoes."

Jason also left the bed, and Nico regretted not enjoying his last ten minutes with the guys more than he had.

Now, he would have to return to the pits of hell.

Freaking *kids*.

Plus, how was he supposed to focus on the whole mind-accessing thing when *Will* was behaving all weird again?

What did he want to talk about?

What could possibly be so important out of nowhere? Or was this something that had pent up over time?

No, it had to be something recent, Nico could feel it.

His eyes hushed back to Jason, then away.

Then, he closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath, before getting up as well to face the world.

"Make sure to give him some space, just in case. I told him he could take his time, and I was hoping he would come forward when he feels ready to." Jason said after giving Percy a peck on the forehead, and Nico watched Percy grinning like a fool.

Some things never changed.

Nico smiled.

"Don't worry, I'll probably not have much time to bother him, anyways. His siblings are going to teach me everything I need to know to be of help as soon as possible. Cool, huh? I'm going to be such an awesome healer." Percy stated confidently and posed, which had Nico's smile only growing wider.

There was the guy he had fallen in love with. Right there. That dorky fool with a heart as big as the world and eyes full of wonder and excitement.

Jason seemed to think the same thing, smiling softly at their boyfriend before cupping his face to draw him into a kiss.

"I know you will be. See you tonight, okay? Maybe even before then."

Nico walked up to them, wanting to partake in the goodbyes, even though he didn't want to go, at all.

"Give Will his goodbye kiss from me, okay?" He said quietly as he pushed himself up to push his lips onto Percy's, and his boyfriend grinned against his lips almost giddily and held him.

"Sure, but I'm not sharing, so you gotta give me his kiss too. And one as postage charge, of course."

Yep, that was his boyfriend.

Nico smiled and gave him all the kisses their short moment allowed, before waving after his boyfriend as he hopped out of the door with a bright grin and his eyes gleaming.

"He looks so happy. I hope it stays that way." Jason said next to him as they watched him go.

Nico let himself lean against his side.

"Me too."
His thoughts drifted back to Will, and Chiron, and Jason's quiet 'I'm right here'.

"Hey…when Will talked to Chiron about yesterday…about you…” He tried, but then trailed off, wondering why he was even bringing this up.

What did he think it would gain him?

The confirmation of something he had been trying so hard to deny?

Jason moved to kiss the top of his head.

"I'm here now, that's all that matters.” Jason said, and Nico's heart sank, though he tried to swallow away the pain.

And his thoughts.

And everything, really.

He closed his eyes, then leaned against Jason further, and his boyfriend stroked over his arms and back, then he gave him another peck.

Nico lifted his head for a kiss, and Jason complied.

He wished he was still rolling on the ground with Jason, like they had done earlier.

Instead, he demanded another kiss, then sighed.

"You're right. We're here, we're alive, we're together. That's all that matters.” He said resolutely, and Jason smiled at him with that soft expression again.

Then, he leaned down for another kiss, and Nico couldn't help but smile.

"You're also still as needy as always. That also matters." He added cheekily, and Jason huffed in reply, before ruffling through his hair and nudging him out the door.

"Yeah, yeah. I will never not be needy, you know? Come on, let's get going. Want me to accompany you back to ‘the pits of hell”?” Jason offered, and Nico immediately brightened.

That was a great idea.

Maybe seeing Jason would put them all back into their place and they would show Nico the respect he was due, instead of constantly dragging him for not immediately getting the hang of something he had never previously done in his life. (Not like this, anyways.)

"Yes, please. Be my knight in shining armor. Save me from the misery. Take over my job. Let's take down the--"

"Hold your spirits, sweetheart. Don't you think that's a little…much?” Jason cut in promptly, and Nico deflated again.

"You have no idea.” He grumbled, but then Jason took his hand, and he supposed life wasn't all that bad.

Nico looked down, wondering faintly when he had put on his shoes, just to then wonder when Jason had put on shoes.

Muscle memory certainly was amazing.

"I can stick around for a while, if you think it might help?” Jason offered cautiously, but Nico merely blew out a frustrated breath.

"No, it's fine. I'll deal with them. By the way, have you seen anybody from the team, yet? I was hoping they would be the first to participate, but Annabeth put all of them in the last group. I don't
even know when I'll get to those." Nico mumbled miserably as he looked around, but their teammates sadly didn't appear out of thin air.

Instead, he saw a bunch of gloomy faces and some fingers pointed in their direction, accompanied with muttering.

These people really had too much time on their hands if they wasted it with pointing fingers and trash-talking.

"I can go look for them, if you want to. Thinking about it, it would be great to include them in the search for volunteers. There are lots of repairs needed all over camp, after all." Jason mused, and Nico huffed.

He would much rather they helped him with his lessons, though he wouldn't know how they possibly could help him.

Nobody could really help him.

Except Clovis, and Nico couldn't bear to think of him right now.

"Sounds like a plan. But first you gotta take me to hell."

"Are you really going to keep referring to the amphitheater as hell? I mean, I know there's a fire and all, but…" Jason trailed off, and Nico guessed he could see what he meant.

"You're right. Hell is too nice a word. How does 'The Fields of Punishment 2.0, new and improved' sound? You know, like the Fields of Punishment in the Underworld, just for the living." He suggested instead, and his boyfriend let out a small laugh.

"Very well. Hey, I think I can spot your first students."

"Oh, what joy." Nico deadpanned with the most impassive voice he could muster, and Jason gave him a pointed look.

"And you wanna go teaching kids with that attitude? What happened to my optimistic boyfriend from earlier?" Jason chided, and Nico stuck out his tongue at him.

If that 'earlier' he was referring to was about their sexual escapades, then that was already hours ago, so the blissful high that had given him this mighty (shitty) idea had already worn off long time ago.

Had he been optimistic back then? Heck, it was so long ago he couldn't even remember anymore.

"You must be confusing me with Percy. He seemed very optimistic when he hopped off towards the medic tent." He retorted, and Jason very dramatically rolled his eyes and tugged on his arm.

The next moment, Nico was getting assaulted by smooches from a suddenly very close boyfriend.

Freaking unfair!

"Jason…no…stop…there's…kids watching…" He complained and wailed as he tried to swat him away, but Jason merely intensified his advances and accompanied them with the grossest kissing sounds and laughs.

Then, he managed to get to Nico's neck, and Nico cringed and whined when Jason licked across his skin as if he was some sort of dog, before he blew a freaking raspberry.

Nico couldn't help it. He had to laugh.

Even as he continued his efforts to get his boyfriend off him, he couldn't help the laughter bubbling out of him, tears forming in the corners of his eyes at the tickly sensation.

Jason only slowly stopped with the raspberries and smooches, though he remained close, smiling with his sky-blue eyes gleaming so beautifully.
"Do you feel better now?" He asked softly, and Nico huffed, trying to catch his breath and compose himself once more as his eyes hushed around them at all the people that had just witnessed all of this.

"I certainly feel ready to face that hellhole if it lets me escape this one." He grumbled half-heartedly, but Jason wasn't fooled, merely stroking through his hair and leaning forward to give him a peck on the forehead.

The same way he had done with Percy.

"You know you love me. Now, be good and teach them all they have to know in order to survive."

Oh, if only it were that simple.

Nico huffed again and waved a dismissive hand in Jason's face.

"Yeah, yeah. And you go look for our children. They gotta be around here somewhere." He told him, hoping at least Jason would be able to find their teammates, if Nico already couldn't manage to see them anywhere.

"I will. I'll let them know their mom is very concerned." Jason assured him, and Nico promptly glowered up at him.

"Call me mom one more time; see what happens."

Jason blinked at him innocently.

"You'll love me very much?"

Nico's glare intensified, then he rolled his eyes and went on his tiptoes to give his boyfriend a quick peck on the lips.

"Just look for them. Good luck with the repairs."

Jason gave him another peck, then they parted ways, and Nico watched him go with a sigh.

Then, he turned to the campers, who were all standing/sitting around the amphitheater and Campfire and looked at him with a wide variety of expressions.

"Are you done now?" One of them said in a bored tone, and Nico made a face.

"Not really. Should I…should I call him back? Want to wait another fifteen minutes? Because I totally will—..." He offered, just because he could.

"Gods, please, no!" The kid exclaimed, and Nico decided to count this as success.

"Good, then stop complaining. Everybody, group up again, let's start over." He ordered, glad when they complied without complaining too much.

Once they were where they were supposed to be, Nico took a deep breath and rubbed his hands together, already missing his guys.

Anyways, time to get some progress done.

He had a busy day ahead of him if he still wanted to get to the burials, after all.

***

Will's siblings had so much to teach.

Percy tried his best to follow what they were saying, but sometimes, they were simply too fast, or a few others joined in to explain something simultaneously, all with different words that just flew over Percy's head.

He had been worried that they would laugh if he continuously asked them to repeat themselves,
He had been worried that they would laugh if he continuously asked them to repeat themselves, but after daring a few times out of sheer necessity, he realized any such worry was unfounded.

Will's siblings were nothing but understanding and kind, repeating the same thing over and over until Percy understood, sometimes even breaking one topic down into smaller bits so he could grasp the concept properly.

Percy liked working with them.

He had even been allowed to patch up two campers already.

Sure, they only had minor injuries and all he had to do was disinfect the wound, apply a thin layer of ointment and bandage them up, but to him it had still felt special.

His bandages might have still looked a little sloppy, but Alec hadn't seen the need to fix them, so it couldn't have been too bad.

In fact, Alec had even praised him for his good job on his first tries.

All the healers were very supportive, to be honest.

It was different from Percy's usual training experiences.

Some clapped him on the shoulders, others patted him on the back, and once there were no patients around anymore, they would tell Percy about their first-time fiascos (or their siblings' first-time-fiascos).

It was…fun.

For a little while, Percy was worried that this was just because he was new, that the joy and ease with which the healers treated him would stop once some time passed and he became just one of many.

However, even that worry went away as he watched the healers interact with each other, joking around, helping each other, some even asking for help or guidance with something they hadn't done in a while.

It was amazing to watch.

Watching Will work was also amazing.

Percy had watched him work in the infirmary before, but somehow, he had forgotten how focused Will could get, or how still his hands were when he needed them to be.

They had to do a lot more stitches and makeshift-casts due to the lack of supplies and ambrosia/nectar, but Percy didn't hear a single one of them complain.

Instead, they split up the work and got to it, while also showing Percy how it was done.

"You're such a quick learner! Why are you such a quick learner? It's no fair!" Alec exclaimed astounded when he tried to quiz Percy and Percy – after a moment of horror at being quizzed – actually managed to get the answers right.

"Why are you even acting so surprised? I told you he's smart." Will called over from where he was stitching up a wound, and Percy felt his face warming a little.

"Yeah, but you always praise your boyfriends, so I wasn't going to take you that seriously." Alec shot back.

Percy was once more humored by the open displays of brotherly affection when Will said something else and flipped Alec the bird, while Alec repeated Will's words in a derisive tone and rolled his eyes, just to squeak and duck when Will tossed a toilet paper roll at him.

They sure loved each other.

Percy smiled as he watched them, his gaze mostly on Will, who seemed so at ease here, even in
doctor-mode.

It was much better compared to the uncomfortable, panicking Will that had left the cabin in a hurry.

Percy hadn't brought it up, though he had given him the kisses from their guys, and had accepted Will's sheepish apology immediately.

Maybe he had run away again, but he had at least tried to bring up what was bothering him, and he had promised to tell them later, so that was good enough for Percy.

He glanced towards the clock they had put up, mostly for his sake.

Apollo kids could still feel the sun outside, but Percy unfortunately couldn't, and with the tent lacking windows, he wouldn't have had any telling of time if it wasn't for Alec's bright idea of that clock.

It was six already.

The sun wouldn't go down until nine at the very least, but to Percy, it still felt late.

Would Nico actually get him?

Would he even start on the preparations for the burials today?

Maybe he was too busy with his lessons.

Percy couldn’t blame him; they sounded exhausting.

Or maybe Nico had changed his mind about letting Percy help.

Percy entertained that thought for a moment, then he shook it off.

No, Nico wasn't like that.

Percy spotted his flowers, happily sitting in a glass of water on the cupboard that held most of their supplies.

Such pretty flowers.

Percy glanced towards Will, just to find him watching him with a soft smile on his face, before he quickly looked away and returned to his task at hand.

Percy grinned and watched him work a moment longer.

"Ooh, the heart-eye-game is strong in this one." One of Will's siblings said loud enough to be heard by everybody, and Percy made a face.

"Wait until you see Jason's." A voice said behind him, and Percy promptly brightened up again.

Nico!

He heard some snickering around him as he whirled around, but he didn't care, already dropping everything he was holding (so, a sealed roll of bandages, scissors and three empty tubes) to greet his boyfriend.

"Hey! You're here!"

Nico caught his hands in his own as Percy flailed them around a little in joy, then gave them a little squeeze.

"Hey. Of course I am. I told you I would get you, after all. How is your training going?" Nico asked, and Percy promptly felt himself overflowing with excitement, tugging him along to show him all the things he had done so far (except for the patched-up campers, sadly, because they were long gone).
The other healers let it happen with some chuckles and amused looks, even passing Percy one of his little jars of herbs that he had put together, so Nico could appreciate his handiwork.

Nico seemed just as excited for Percy as he was, and when Percy looked at his boyfriend, he could swear he even saw a little pride in those beautiful eyes of his.

Undoubtedly because Alec was praising him to the sun and back for his 'quick learning' and 'smooth moves'. (Though Percy had no idea what he meant by the latter, and he wasn't going to ask.)

"Stop acting so surprised, Alec. I told you all of this before." Will chided as he strolled over and gave Nico a peck on the cheek in greeting.

"Yes, but, again, you keep raving about all your boyfriends, all the time! How are we supposed to know what's true and what's your lovestruck mush of a brain?"

"Oh, you…"

Percy laughed as he watched Will throwing his old rubber glove at his brother, who immediately made a scene.

Good thing there were no patients around right now.

Percy glanced back at Nico, and found him gazing at him with that same, relieved and rather proud-seeming look on his face.

"I'm glad you're enjoying your new job, Percy. Definitely sounds like you had fun. Do you still want to help? It's fine if you rather stay here." His boyfriend offered quietly, but Percy shook his head.

"No, it's okay. I promised to help you, and I still want to. Plus, everybody already knows. I told them right away, so I wouldn't forget." Percy told him, and Nico gave a small nod as he linked their fingers together.

There was no hesitation or doubt in his gaze, no 'Maybe this isn't such a good idea'.

Instead, his expression was happy and grateful as he bid his goodbye to the others and gave Will a peck on the lips, which Percy quickly mimicked before waving at his new coworkers and letting his boyfriend tug him along, out of the medic tent.

As expected, the sun was still up, and it was much warmer than Percy had anticipated, considering it had been rather chilly ever since the storm.

He still wouldn't trade his comfort sweater for anything in the world.

"How did things go for you, by the way?" He asked Nico curiously, and Nico shot him a pointed look, though the smile stayed on his face.

Nico was so pretty when he was smiling.

"Better. I think we made some progress, so now I at least know I was doing something right. It was…a lot different compared to when we…you know…" Nico trailed off, and Percy nodded quickly in understanding.

He would imagine so.

After all, these kids weren't on the verge of death, like Percy and Nico had been.

Percy bit back his words and instead focused on Nico's smile.

"I knew you could do it." He told his boyfriend, and Nico practically gleamed with pride, though Percy could tell he was trying to not let that show.

So adorable.
Percy gave his hand a little squeeze, and Nico squeezed right back, and the world was okay.

They passed the ruins of the Big House, and Percy ducked his head a little when a few campers shot him dark looks as they loaded parts of the wreckage into wheelbarrows.

"Where will we be working now, anyways?" He asked to kill the silence, and Nico shot him an odd look for a moment, before looking past him at the campers with an equally dark look.

"First, we need to find Annabeth to get the list of the Fallen. Then, we'll visit the cabins and get everything sorted out there. The Hecate cabin already approached me to let me know they took over the making of the burial shrouds, with the help of some Demeter kids. Since we only have a few bodies, the wreaths and clothing are already prepared." Nico explained, and Percy's stomach churned at the knowledge that he was the cause for the lack of bodies.

He had killed them…

Percy steeled his mind and nodded.

"Okay. What will I be doing?"

"For now, I was hoping you could supervise the offerings, so we don't burn anything we're not supposed to burn. Later, I want you to be by my side for the actual burials. Would that be okay?" Nico asked, and Percy nodded even before Nico had finished.

He was okay with anything, as long as he could be of use.

"Sure thing."

Nico shot him an odd look, but then only smiled and gave his hand another squeeze.

"Thank you."

Percy should be the one thanking him.

Percy should also be the one apologizing to him.

Percy closed his eyes and squeezed Nico's hand.

Jason was right.

Will was right.

Nico was right.

He couldn't change what had happened, not anymore.

But he could work on himself to not let it happen again.

***

Jason watched the flames rise into the sky, silence filling the camp grounds as Nico's words ebbed away in the wind.

It was amazing, how much Percy and Nico had gotten done in three hours alone.

It was horrifying how many had lost their lives, though.

Jason listened to the names as Nico spoke up again, saying them loud and clear for everyone to hear, along with a few words for each of the campers they had lost.

Some he knew in passing.

Some he had trained.

Others, he didn't know at all, but it hurt, anyways.
He remembered the girl that had died in his arms, and lowered his head.

The enemy demigods were none of their concern, yet that girl made him wish that they could hold
the same burials for them.

Unfortunately, they didn't know their names, so even though they were burnt after the campers,
there was no speech for them, and no kind words muttered in their memory.

Jason prayed for the girl, anyways, hoping Hades would show mercy on her.

The campers were silent for the most part, some weeping into their friend's shoulders, others
standing tall and looking into the flames with looks of determination.

Ash leaned against Jason's side, and Jason moved an arm around them, just to find Will doing the
same from his other side.

He put an arm around him, too, tugging him against him and placing a kiss on his messy curls.

His team had been great, independently checking on the stables and the satyrs in the forest even
before he had found them, just to make his job a little easier on him.

They had helped him with his search for helpers, and had offered their help wherever they could,
as well.

Now, the team remained by his side to watch the burials and mourn the losses together with Will
and him.

Liam was crying, having lost his older sister to the storm.

Hannah was holding Sara, both of them weeping silently for the half-siblings they had lost to the
battle.

Ash wasn't crying, though Jason knew they were suffering just as much, having lost three siblings
in one day.

None of them had said a single bad thing about Percy, instead asking whether he was okay, and
how everyone was doing.

Such a great team.

Jason watched how Nico exchanged a look with Percy, before they nodded at each other and
Nico started speaking again.

The burials were coming to an end.

Ash trembled a little, and Jason stroked over their back, while Will had his face buried at his arm.

Liam walked up to him with tears still running down his cheeks, before wrapping his arms around
Jason's middle and burying his face at his chest.

Jason adjusted so he could hold all three of them.

Sara and Hannah joined in a moment later, too.

Then, Nico and Percy came, and the team let them join the hug, as well.

They stayed like that for a long time, all with their heads low and shoulders shaking, while Jason
watched over them, holding them and stroking over their backs or patting their hair as he gazed at
the flames still dancing in front of them.

He thought of the girl again.

As he looked back down at his boyfriends and team, he prayed that he would be able to protect
them when the time came.

Jason cried along with them.
Dinner was quiet, the mood in the dining pavilion a mixture of grief and acceptance.

The team sat with them at the Hades table, poking at their food listlessly, but Jason couldn't reprimand them.

Instead, he was the one herding them towards the Campfire, having promised Kayla to take the guys there more often.

The mood there wasn't much better, but the Apollo kids did their best to lift everybody's spirits a little.

Instead of the loud and upbeat songs, they played soothing tunes and serene music, singing of peace and forgiveness rather than parties and love.

They sang songs of loss, friendship and hope, and Jason kept his guys and team close as they huddled together on the stone floor.

Annabeth and Piper came over at some point, the latter limping a little, and they exchanged hugs and whispered greetings, before Piper dumped a big bundle of cloth in Jason's arms with a small smile.

It was a thin blanket.

Jason made good use of it by rearranging the team to get them all covered, warding off the quickly settling chill of the night as they watched the Apollo kids sing and perform.

Ash and Hannah dozed off at some point, their heads resting against each other, but nobody woke them.

Percy was to his left, with his arms around Liam and his chin resting on the top of his head as the boy still wept silently.

Will was to Jason's right, softly snoring against his arm.

Nico and Sara sat next to Will, eyes glazed over as they listened to the music.

They stayed until the last song was played, and even then, Jason was reluctant to leave, to disrupt the peace that had been so fragilely built on the ashes of grief.

Nico was the one who made them get up, and, while he moved to take Hannah, Percy wordlessly went to carry Ash, clearly unwilling to wake them.

Jason wrapped Will up in the blanket and lifted him up cautiously.

Sara and Liam were right beside them, accompanying them to the Hermes cabin for Ash, then the Ares cabin for Sara and Hannah.

Liam gave Percy another hug when they bade him goodnight in front of the Hecate cabin.

"I don't blame you." He whispered quietly, then left.

Percy started crying again after that.

They made their way back to the Hades cabin in relative silence, with Nico's arm around Percy to steady him, and Jason still carrying Will, who stirred a little in his sleep and murmured something along the lines of 'Don't cry, Percy, I'm gonna protect you'.

It made Percy smile, even as the tears kept running down his cheeks.

Jason was glad to close the door behind them.

The world had taken enough from them.
Now, it was time to rest.

***

Percy was tired, but somehow, he couldn't sleep.

After everything that had happened today, he thought sleep would have come easy, but even though he was exhausted, it just wasn't happening.

He turned, then turned the other way, then Jason growled and moved an arm around him, pulling him against his naked chest and thus keeping him from moving anymore.

Percy sighed, then closed his eyes again in the hopes of finally finding the rest he knew his body needed.

It didn't work.

Instead, his bladder announced that it fancied a bathroom trip.

Percy wanted to cry, but he had no tears left to shed.

Sighing, he gave Jason's arm a pointed nudge, and his boyfriend let him free with a low grumble, before he turned away and wrapped himself around Nico, much to the latter's dismay.

Percy's lips twitched at the sight, then he hurriedly climbed out of bed and hurried towards the bathroom.

What if he wasn't going to be able to sleep, at all?

Percy thought back to the burials as he flushed the toilet and washed his hands, staring at himself in the mirror.

His reflection stared back at him.

'I don't blame you.'

Percy closed his eyes and let his forehead fall against the glass softly.

He had killed so many people.

He had killed Liam's sister.

Liam should blame him.

Percy shook his head, then turned on the faucet again to splash some water in his face, before getting the bright idea to fill up a glass to drink something.

Drinking something might make him feel better.

Maybe his body needed liquid, and that was why he was so restless.

Drinking didn't make him feel any better.

Percy splashed some more water in his face, then looked back at his reflection.

There was no change there, other than that his face and fringe were now wet.

Percy looked down at his hands, eyes following the thin cracks that zigzagged across his skin.

Then, he clenched his fists and left the bathroom.

There was no point in feeling sorry for himself.

There was no point in whining.

People had died, but this wasn't going to bring them back. Nothing would.
All Percy could do was keep moving forward.

A small cry reached his ears, and his head immediately snapped up, all alarm bells ringing as he rushed back to the bed.

Will.

Will, who had previously been still and silent against the wall, and who was now thrashing and turning, his entire body shaking as his face was contorted in a pained grimace.

Percy was on the bed in an instant, hands flying to Will's face.

Warm.

Percy blinked in confusion, having expected the searing heat that came with Will's nightmare.

So...a normal nightmare?

Will's hand shot out, and Percy could only watch and cringe as Will flailed and punched Jason right in the nose.

Jason, obviously, woke with a start, which shoved Nico clean out of bed.

Oh, what a mess.

Percy moved to straddle Will's hips, gently nudging him and trying to wake him, while Jason swore loudly and held his face.

Nico was cursing like a sailor on the ground, fighting mightily against the blanket.

"Nightmare?" Jason asked in a rather nasal voice, and Nico's head popped up with an annoyed but worried expression, too.

"I...I'm not sure..." Percy replied awkwardly, now shaking Will, but his boyfriend wasn't waking up.

Just like during his nightmares.

But he still wasn't burning up.

Something was wrong.

"Jason, you're bleeding. Let me see." Nico demanded, and Percy looked back at Jason, but his boyfriend was shaking his head and climbing off the bed.

In the dim light of their jar, he could only vaguely see something dark dripping from his hands.

"It's nothing. I'll clean up in the bathroom." Jason mumbled evasively, still in that odd tone.

But Percy's attention was already back on Will.

"Come on, wake up. You're dreaming, Will..." He tried as he tried to somehow wake his boyfriend, but Will just kept thrashing and sobbing.

Nico put his hand on Will's forehead as he climbed back into the bed to help him.

His expression was as puzzled as Percy felt.

"Maybe it's him." Nico suddenly muttered darkly, and at the thought of Kyle, Percy's stomach knotted up.

"Careful!" Nico suddenly hissed and tried to tug on Percy's arm.

Unfortunately, he was too slow.

"No!" Will yelped and shot up with a start, hands finding Percy's chest and shoving him
backwards so harshly he momentarily felt like he was flying.

Then, the back of his head hit the cupboard at the foot of their bed, and his vision exploded into stars as pain shot through him.

Nico called something, but he couldn't catch it, the words drowned out by Will's howl of utmost agony and despair that had Percy shaken to the core.

He heard footsteps rushing towards the bathroom, then startled noises there, then the sound of somebody retching.

"Fuck." Nico very eloquently summed up, and Percy felt small, cool hands touching his face gently as he blinked rapidly and held his head.

It took him a moment to realize he was hissing in pain.

It took him another moment to stop.

"Will!" They heard Jason call from the bathroom, and exchanged concerned glances before rushing over, even as Percy's head throbbed painfully.

Will was cowering in front of the toilet, shaking like a leaf and with the tears running down his face in rivers.

He looked absolutely terrible.

"This is all my fault…" He whimpered, then sobbed, then suddenly retched again, and Jason was there immediately, stroking over his back with one hand while the other held a wet cloth to his nose to apparently still stop the bleeding.

"What happened? Vision? Nightmare?" Nico asked, and Will helplessly shook his head as he heaved again, ridding his stomach off its contents.

Percy made the toilet flush and went to fill up a glass of water for him.

"You have to…have to warn them…" Will pressed out shakily, then whimpered and sobbed again.

"Warn who?" Jason asked as he brushed Will's hair out of his face.

Will looked up at them miserably.

"Camp Jupiter. Reyna. Hazel. He's going to…he's gonna…he will…"

Will's voice was trembling as much as his body, so it took a moment for his words to register, and an even longer moment for Percy to understand.

The next moment, he felt the cold dread settling into the pit of his stomach.

"Oh gods." He whispered, and Will looked up at him with trembling lips and a despair in his eyes that chilled him to the bone.

Nico sucked in a sharp breath.

Jason stared at nothing with a look of blank horror.

Will retched again.

"I'm going to call Reyna." Nico blurted, then stormed from the room.

"I'll inform Annabeth." Jason followed, and Percy rushed forward to steady Will when he tried to suddenly get up, too.

"This is all my fault! I did this! He's doing this as payback! I should have never…I should have never…" Will brawled, then gagged, and Percy quickly shifted and moved him back over the toilet, seconds before Will retched again.
"It's going to be okay. It's not your fault." He whispered in reassurance, but Will shook his head wildly, so wildly Percy immediately shut up to prevent him from breaking his neck.

"It's my fault. I defied him. I shouldn't have. I wanted to tell you! I promise, I wanted to tell you! I should have told you! I am so sorry! This is all my fault, this is all my doing, this is all…" Will rambled, and Percy didn't understand, but he nodded, anyways.

"I know. It's okay. I believe you. You would have told us."

Will kept shaking his head, then started sobbing against his chest, and Percy couldn't do anything but hold him and rock him back and forth carefully.

He heard agitated voices from the ajar door but couldn't make out any words.

"I fought him, Percy. I was such a fool. I wanted to protect you." Will sobbed, and Percy's heart ached at his despair, though he still didn't understand.

He had fought Kyle? When? How?

What was he talking about?

"You've done so well, Will. It's okay. It's not going to happen. We'll find a way." He tried to reassure him, anyways.

Will just kept shaking and sobbing.

"He's going to destroy the Camp, Percy. He's sending his forces there as we speak. He's upset because I defied him, because I wouldn't let him inside my head, because I wouldn't let him take you from me. He has the giants, Percy. They're going to tear everything down. Terminus is going to be destroyed. The Camp is going to be torn to shreds. New Rome will burn to ashes. Everybody is going to die. The forces are too great." Will babbled against his chest, and Percy's eyes widened, before he moved and tried getting the bucket next to the sink closer with his foot.

"Will, come." He said hurriedly as he got the bucket and pushed it into Will's arms, before helping him up and moving towards the bathroom door.

"Nico, he's going to attack with the giants on his side. Will says he's already on the move!" He related the info, and Nico looked at him with wide eyes, matching his horror.

Then, he nodded and turned back towards the screen in front of them, showing a half-dressed but very awake Reyna.

"He's going to reach you by sunrise, coming from the east. Reyna, there's no way you can beat him. Please, you need to leave. Now." Will told her frantically, then swayed, and Percy tightened his hold on him.

Reyna stared at them, seemingly processing their words and her options as her face paled even further.

"Sunrise is going to be in less than six hours!" Nico exclaimed, sounding absolutely devastated as he began pacing.

Percy closed his eyes as the dread seemed to fill every part of his body.

Will kept shaking and crying.

"I am so sorry." He whispered, but Percy shook his head.

So did Reyna, who held her hands in front of her face as if in prayer.

"I will prepare the evacuation immediately. Is there any route you suggest we take? Anything that will minimize the losses?" She asked, and her voice was grave, but steady.

Nico and Percy both looked back at Will, who had his eyes squeezed shut and his lips forming a
thin line as he tried to keep them from trembling.

"Please..." Nico whispered, and Percy thought of Hazel, and Frank, and all their friends at Camp Jupiter, all the people there and in New Rome.

Will opened his eyes to look at Nico, and new tears spilled out and ran down his cheeks as he sniffled.

"He's everywhere. The Camps are surrounded. The forests. He's mostly in the forests. The cities, you might be safer there, but not for long. He has lookouts everywhere. He is prepared for anything. For everything." Will whispered shakily, and Nico let out a small sound, as if his voice caught in the back of his throat as tears ran down his cheeks, his fists shaking at his sides.

"Did you see what would happen if we left?" Reyna asked, and her voice was still so steady, Percy was once more in awe.

Will looked down, seemingly thinking it over.

Then, he shook his head.

"Only what is supposed to happen. His forces will reach you by sunrise. There is a lull in attacks on the Camp shortly before then, but he will notice immediately if you suddenly retreat or minimize your forces."

"But then there's no way there will be enough time for them to evacuate!" Nico argued, and Will averted his face with a pained look.

Percy looked back at Reyna, who was lowering her head, too.

Silence filled the cabin as they let the truth sink in.

Then, Reyna balled her fists and looked up again, her expression one of a leader ready to rise to battle.

"We will have to try."

Nico looked up with teary eyes, and Percy watched them exchanging a last, long look.

Then, she put on a mask of confidence Percy knew she didn't have, and nodded her head at them.

"Thank you for your warning. Wish us luck." She said, then cut the call.

"May the gods have mercy on us." She whispered as the screen dissolved, and Percy's stomach knotted up again.

There were quick footsteps approaching, followed by Jason and Annabeth barging into the cabin.

Percy held Will tightly pressed against him, the bucket still in Will's arms.

People spoke, all at once, and words overlapped with more words, building strings of incoherent gibberish Percy's mind couldn't comprehend.

He held Will, and the rest of the world started fading out of focus.

***

Will sat at the desk, cheek pressing against the wood as he flicked a pen that kept rolling back against his hand.

They waited.

There was nothing they could do but wait.

It wasn't sunrise for the Romans yet, but it would be, all too soon.

Will could practically feel the ticking of the clock, each tick reverberating inside him and
intensifying the death sentence he had hung over Camp Jupiter.

Nico was still pacing.

He had been pacing the past hours, unable to find rest when his sister and friends were in such grave danger.

No survivors.

Will had never said it out loud, but he knew they had understood.

Percy laid passed out in their bed, having collapsed after Annabeth had left.

Will wished he could have done the same.

Instead, he waited.

He waited, and he prayed, and he flicked the pen repeatedly, the rolling noise the only sound in the cabin other than Nico's footsteps.

Jason was with Annabeth, trying frantically to find a route or safe place for the Romans.

At least Jason was doing something.

Maybe Will should have gone with him.

Will glanced at the bucket next to him, then stared back at the pen.

Will wouldn't know what to do if he were with them.

He hadn't seen what would happen if they managed to evacuate in time.

He hadn't even seen any alternative realities.

There had only been death and devastation.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Then, he flicked the pen again, but with too much force, and he heard it clattering to the ground.

Nico stopped pacing for a moment, then groaned and moved again.

Will heard the creaking off their mattress, and guessed Nico must have let himself fall down on it.

Maybe he, too, would finally find some rest.

Will opened his eyes again, staring at nothing at all, wishing he could do something, anything, to help.

"I'm sorry." He said into the room, though he knew his apology would never reach the ones that deserved to hear it the most.

"It's not your doing. You did great, Will. You stood up to him. It's not your fault that Kyle is a stupid, deranged, monstrous asshole." Nico's voice turned from soft to angry, all in the span of a few words, and Will sighed.

He wanted to reply, wanted to tell him that it was still his fault Kyle was doing this now, but then, he merely sighed again and stayed silent.

"He would have attacked the Camp, anyways. I'm sure of it." Nico said quietly, confidently.

Will stared at the wood his cheek was resting on.

"He was talking about it. Said this was payback." He said quietly, the memory still fresh on his mind thanks to it replaying over and over.
Kyle's ice-blue eyes, staring off into the distance with cold calculation and glee.

His lips tugging into a small, sardonic grin.

'This is what you get for playing the hero, William.'

Will shuddered, even more so when he heard himself repeating the words.

"All just dumb pretense to justify his slaughter." Nico grumbled darkly, then got up to pace again.

"Don't let that guy's words influence you, Will. He's been nothing but a monster, so treat him like one. You wouldn't listen to what a monster has to say, right?"

Will sighed again.

"I suppose not."

Nico seemed pleased with that.

Will stared at the wood again.

It was so silent.

The world was still asleep.

Well, the oblivious part of the world, anyways.

Will closed his eyes again, but whether they were open or not, it made no difference.

He still saw the faces of the dying Romans, anyways, heard their screams reverberating inside his head.

Will wished he could control the visions.

Then he could check on the different possibilities, could find the safest way for Reyna and her camp to travel, could get them to safety…

Then again, what was safety?

Will thought of the statue of Terminus, broken and shattered and godless on the ground, leaving New Rome defenseless to the death that awaited it.

If even the gods couldn't protect them, then was there truly any place anymore that could be considered safe?

Was Camp Half-Blood safe?

Will knew that was what Annabeth and Jason wanted to suggest if they couldn't find any other option.

But it was a futile plan.

Camp Half-Blood was already weakened greatly, with their supplies scarily low, their buildings and forge damaged, and their only protection being Calypso's magic.

They were surrounded by Kyle's forces just like Camp Jupiter, and their return with the bus and the loss of Andrew should be enough to show everyone there was no way an entire Roman Camp was going to make it in here in one piece.

Plus, where would they stay? What would they do once they were here?

For battles, the additional forces would be great.

Unfortunately, that was the only thing additional forces would be great for, considering the lack of space, materials and supplies.
Will sighed and opened his eyes again.

He stared at the wood, watching the sunbeams of the rising sun dancing on the wood.

Soon, it would do the same over the Roman Camp.

All too soon.

Lifting his gaze, he looked at the sun, bright and unforgiving, rising higher and higher.

Will knew there was a time difference thanks to the camp being on the west coast.

But that time difference was almost up.

They were running out of time.

Will dropped his head again.

Who was he kidding, they had run out of time a long time ago already.

"I wish I could have had the vision sooner." He whispered.

Nico appeared next to him, looking out of the window with bated breath, before his hands clenched to fists at his sides and he started trembling.

Will watched him tiredly, wishing he had the energy to get up and wrap his arms around him.

Comfort him somehow.

But he couldn't, so he stayed where he was and returned his focus to the wood.

The sunlight still danced across it.

Nico still paced.

The clock still ticked away.

Then, their alarm blared, and Will closed his eyes.

Nico sucked in a sharp breath and stopped the beeping, filling the cabin with silence once more.

Their time was up.

Whatever had happened, had happened.

"Do you think they…made it?" Nico asked, his voice nothing but a shaky whisper.

Will wished he knew.

Then, he was glad he didn't, because it still allowed for denial in case the truth wasn't pretty.

"It's the Romans. They are trained to take the Camp apart and rebuild it elsewhere in a matter of days. I'm confident Reyna knows what she's doing. If anybody can pull this off, it's her." He replied to ease Nico's mind, and felt his boyfriend relaxing, the hope in him growing.

"He's going to pay for this. Kyle is going to pay for all of this, Will." Nico said next to him, and now, his voice was stronger again. Determined.

Will didn't look up at him.

Instead, he closed his eyes.

He had stood up to Kyle inside his dream, and Kyle was retaliating by taking apart the Roman Camp.

Shouldn't that show Will anything he did would end in death?
There was a bunch of thuds and clattering sounds, and it took Will a moment to realize he had jumped up and swiped everything off the table.

Nico was still standing next to him at the window, but now, he was looking back at him in surprise and confusion.

Will tried to control his expression as he swallowed and lowered his head, moving to pick everything up again.

"Will?"

Will stubbornly kept his gaze on the ground as he collected the books and pens off the floor, placing them neatly back on the table.

Then, he grabbed his medic pouch and tossed it onto the table, too.

It opened, and everything spilled out.

Great.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath, moving his hands through his hair in a faint attempt to collect himself again.

He sat back down and started pushing back the various things that had fallen out of his pouch, but then, he slammed his hands on the table, too fed up to ignore it.

"It's just. I wanted to protect you, but every time I try, it just…just…I don't know what I'm supposed to do!" He vented and looked at Nico.

The surprise was gone from his face, replaced with understanding.

"Will, this isn't Your Fault. You did great. You stood up to him, Will. Do you have any idea how brave that was? So, don't let him intimidate you now; don't let him push you back down. Stand tall and proud and keep cutting through his plans, the same way you've done so far."

Nico could talk so beautifully.

Will hated what he said, though, because it didn't feel like he had done anything to cut through anybody's plans so far.

Everything that had happened up until now had happened because of him.

Nico seemed to read the doubt on his face.

"Will, you knew when the Camp border was breaking and immediately rushed to help, preventing much worse. You helped save Calypso when she got wounded, thus retaining the Camp border protection. You revived Jason. You have just given an entire Camp with countless people a chance to survive. All those things…do you think any of that played into Kyle's plans? Because, newsflash, I can guarantee it didn't. None of that did. You have done so much already to make things difficult for him. So, don't buy into his bullshit, okay?"

Will felt hot and cold as he realized Nico knew about Jason, but then, he slumped again, wondering how he hadn't guessed that, to begin with.

Nico could feel death, after all.

"But that's not going to stop him, Nico. We can't keep preventing worse to happen, we have to prevent all of it from happening. It didn't stop anything, it just dragged it out." Will argued, and Nico huffed in frustration.

"Yeah? Well, I know what would help that. A one-way ticket to the Fields of Punishment. Just for him."

Will would smile, if it didn't take so much energy.
Instead, he sighed.

"Yes, because the past encounters really showed that he is so easy to defeat." He mumbled sarcastically, and Nico shot him a dark look.

"Thank you for your confidence in our abilities, it is greatly appreciated."

Will groaned.

"Nico, I don't want to fight. Not now, not with you. Just…go to bed, or something. I just want to wait for Jason to come back and tell us whether he knows anything. I just want to sit here and do nothing and stare at this trash that belongs in my medic pouch. I just…I don't want to talk about any of this right now, okay?"

He was tired, he was exhausted, he was scared.

He didn't want to fight with his boyfriends, and he didn't want to explain how much he dreaded losing them, and how helpless it made him feel to be just the healer, not somebody who could protect them the same way they constantly protected him.

He didn't want to explain to him how much it had hurt to watch them fight and lose against Kyle repeatedly, and how much he already dreaded ever letting them meet again, especially after seeing the scene Kyle had shown him in his dream.

Nico looked ready to argue, but then deflated with a sigh.

"Fine. Just…we're going to beat him, Will. Somehow, we're going to beat him." His boyfriend stated confidently, and Will gave a faint nod to show he agreed, then he let his head fall back on the table.

Nico hovered a moment longer, then he ruffled through Will's hair and gave him a peck on the side of his head, before walking back towards the bed.

Will partly wanted to join him, and partly wanted to stay here and sulk.

He stared at the wood again, but his scalpel was reflecting the sunlight from outside, which quickly became annoying.

Will tried to ignore it as long as possible, but ultimately, he pulled himself together and started putting everything back into his medic pouch orderly.

He needed that, after all.

Will was barely looking at the items, already knowing all of them by heart just by shape and feel alone.

That was, until his fingers closed around something small and sleek.

Will stilled, his eyes snapping to the vial.

He had forgotten all about that, to be honest.

Will gazed at it thoughtfully.

What if…

No, that was a bad idea.

"Nico?" He asked into the room, and his boyfriend let out a grumble in reply.

"What?"

Will tried to phrase a proper sentence that could possibly convey the jumble of thoughts that was currently going through his mind.

"If…if there was a way…to stop future attacks for a while…or completely…would you do it?"
He asked vaguely, turning the vial in his hand.

"Depends. Does it involve any self-sacrifices? If so, then no. If not, sure. So, what are you talking about, anyways?"

Will kept considering the vial, then he pushed it back into his medic pouch before Nico could catch a glimpse of it.

"Just wondering. Maybe I'll be able to think of something until Jason comes back." He said with a shrug and looked over his shoulder, where his boyfriend was laying on the bed with an arm over his eyes.

"Hmm okay. Good luck with that." Nico mumbled, and Will glanced back at his medic pouch.

Luck, huh?

Will looked out of the window.

Why was he even considering this? It was madness. A horrible plan.

On the other hand, though…

Will contemplated Nico's words.

It would ruin Kyle's plans, right?

And…hadn't Will promised he would do everything in his power to smite him?

It would be payback for attacking Camp Jupiter.

Will closed his eyes.

No. One should never draw blood for blood. It would only conjure up a vicious circle of death and revenge and even more death.

Will peeked back at his medic pouch.

However…

There were footsteps approaching, and Will perked up, same as Nico did.

Even though Will was closer, Nico somehow managed to be at the door first.

"And? What happened? Are they okay? Did they manage to evacuate? Are they still alive?" Nico immediately asked upon seeing Jason's face, while Will took the moment to look at Jason's face.


Exhaustion. Relief. No tears. No grimace.

*They must have made it.*

"Reyna contacted us. They had to split up into separate groups, but they managed to leave the Camp without alerting anyone or anything to their doings. They are currently in the process of regrouping in Berkeley. Reyna claims to have a plan, so we have high hopes they will make it." Jason announced, and Nico nearly exploded with excitement and relief.

Will, meanwhile, wasn't sure he truly wanted to get his hopes up too much just yet.

It was sunrise on the west coast now.

Kyle's forces must have reached the Camp by now, which meant he would know only all too soon, and could easily send troupes to the surrounding cities.

He knew Reyna was smart, and he trusted her judgment, but at the same time, he hoped she wasn't underestimating their opponent.
"Did you manage to find a possible route or place they could stay at?" He couldn't help but ask, and Jason's smile faltered a little.

"We found some paths that seem promising, but with the amount of people we're talking, we can't be certain of anything. Nobody knows we warned them, by the way. Reyna entrusted the groups to a selected few individuals who know where to meet her and the others, the rest is clueless. She will call again once she has everybody together once more."

It was far from ideal, but it was better than nothing, Will guessed.

At least they were still alive.

Will glanced through the window, where the sun kept rising in the sky.

His thoughts hushed back to the massacre that had been meant to take place under the very same sky.

They were still alive.

It was already more than Will could have ever hoped for.

They took Jason to bed with them, where Percy very drowsily shot up and asked a very garbled 'Did I fall asleep? What happened? How is the Camp?'; which Jason luckily took care of.

Nico immediately succumbed to sleep.

Will gazed back towards the table, where his medic pouch was laying.

He pursed his lips.

Then, he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Remember, there's wonderful fanart that y'all better look at, especially before the next chapter.

Here's the link to all of them once more:
http://mel-chan366.tumblr.com/fanfic-fanart
Chapter Notes

**Check out the FanArt for this series!!**
I have made a new page for all of them, so everything is a little more in order without the risk of running out of space!

Here's the link:
http://mel-chan366.tumblr.com/fanfic-fanart

Seriously, it helps with the angst!! ;)
Enjoy~

A/N: Hey Cupcakes,

First off: I apologize for the delay. I messed up my weekdays (thanks to irregular work shifts and WTH is time management) and thought I still had a few days - and then noticed I missed Saturday, so I decided to upload the next chapter now, rather than mid-week.

So, yes, my apologies.

Next: This chapter is pretty much 99% suffering. I am so sorry. Suffer with me.

Best wishes,
-Tári

**Trigger Warnings:**
- Death
- War
- Violence / Graphic depiction of injuries & blood
- Helplessness / Hopelessness / Everything is horrible
- Death
- Relationship Angst
- Murder / Slaughter
- Jason cries.
- Emotional Detachment
- Visions
- Death
- Mentioned/Implied abuse/Rape
- Kyle
- Graphic depiction of death.
- Nobody is safe

**Chapter 16: Sacrifices**

Will watched Percy work alongside his siblings, but his thoughts were elsewhere, his hand fiddling with the button of his medic pouch.

New patients entered the medic tent, and he let go of it to take care of them, since the other healers already had enough work on their hands.

The attacks had picked up again.

The enemy had recovered much quicker than they had hoped, and the monsters and demigods alike seemed even more vicious than before.
Meanwhile, the campers were in lower spirits than ever before.

The repairs were going poorly, and lots of their armor and weapons couldn't be mended due to the state of the forge, leading to even poorer defenses.

Many campers had also started refusing to join the battle, forcing the fighters at the border to make do with what they had – themselves.

In other words, it was madness, which led to even more injuries.

Will patched up the campers, trying tentatively to use a little bit of his powers to speed it up.

His boyfriends and siblings had prohibited the usage, so he would conserve his energies for emergencies, but Will was aware of his limits, and at this rate, the emergency that awaited them would be the lack of capable fighters.

Percy and Alec both shot him reprimanding looks, obviously noticing the faint glowing of his hands immediately.

Will stuck out his tongue at both of them, before sending the fighters back on their way.

"It's quicker and doesn't waste even more of our rather scarce supplies." He argued insistently, and Alec rolled his eyes, while Percy eyed him worriedly.

Will's expression promptly softened, and he moved over to him to cup his face, stroking over his cheeks and giving him a confident, reassuring smile.

"I know my limit, Percy. This is nothing. I'm much better with this than I used to be, so don't worry, okay?" He assured him softly, and Percy studied his face for a moment, before smiling and leaning into his touch.

"I will never not worry about you, sun-bug. But, if you are certain you know what you're doing, then I won't stop you. Do what you believe is right. I trust you."

What magnificent words.

Will smiled at him, then nuzzled their noses together because his siblings had the tendency to coo and disrupt the workflow every time they caught them kissing.

Also...

"Hey, no woohoo-ing at work!" Austin reprimanded, and Will rolled his eyes and pulled away with a sigh.

Siblings. One couldn't live without them, but one certainly couldn't live with them, either.

"That wasn't even close to..." He started darkly, but Austin was clicking his tongue and pushing a mortar into his hands, before nudging him away from Percy and back into his corner he had only just managed to escape from.

"You have been banished to the pestle-corner, so do your job and grind those herbs, Mr. I-can-reach-the-top-shelf-by-myself." His little brother scolded, and Will made a face.

"Do you have to keep bringing that up? How was I supposed to know the thing was going to break off the moment I touched it?" He remarked sulkily, glancing over to the other side of the tent, where the remnants of said shelf leaned against the wall after having nearly murdered Will.

"You didn't just touch it, you clung to it. Of course it broke off, it's not designed to carry your whole weight." Austin reprimanded, before poking him in the stomach and pointing at the mortar in his hands.

"Now, grind."

Wow, bossy.
"You do know I'm the head medic, right? So, technically, you're my subordinate." Will put in sulkily as Austin sauntered off, and his little brother started whistling a happy tune to block him out.

*Rude.*

Percy gave him an apologetic look, then a small wave, and Will promptly felt much better, smiling and waving back at him.

Then, he winked and blew him a kiss, and Percy's ears turned pink before he quickly returned to his own work.

Aww, so cute.

Will watched him a moment longer, then he let his gaze travel over the rest of the medic tent.

They had pushed in some more bunks, though it had greatly reduced their working space.

Sadly, said bunks were regularly occupied since the attacks had picked up, so they had to stay.

Will watched as his siblings patched up some more campers.

So many wounded.

Will's hand moved to his medic pouch again.

Then, he started crushing the herbs in the mortar, trying to focus on his work, though his mind drifted back to the vial, anyways.

It would stop the attacks.

Done properly, it would stop the attacks, and for a long time, too.

The camp would have a chance to replenish, to finish the repairs, to get armed up and ready to face any reinforcements Kyle might send once he found out.

It would even out the odds.

Austin came to check on his progress, then gave him more herbs to grind, and Will stuck out his tongue at him.

But it would be so risky.

If anybody else got into contact with it…Will didn't even want to imagine it.

Also, it would be slaughter.

Will had made an oath as a healer to never hurt anybody, and he had already gotten close to crossing that thin line between self-protection and outright assault many times before.

This wouldn't just 'get close' to crossing that line, though.

This would be like running across it naked and setting the world on fire on the other side.

Will stared down at the ground herbs in his mortar, remembering Persephone's words as she had pushed the vial into his hands, all that time ago in the Underworld.

'It's a choice.' She had said, looking at him with those ageless, dark eyes. 'But beware, sun boy. You will have to bear the consequences on your own.'

Will crushed the herbs into oblivion, feeling hot and cold at once.

If the consequences were his own, then that meant he would have to *do* it alone, too.

His gaze flickered to Percy, then away, an unpleasant feeling settling in his stomach and chest.
Will pushed everything down again and focused on the task at hand.

Later.

Will would decide this later.

But the thought of the vial kept coming back, anyways.

***

Nico saw Thalia approaching and gave a signal for everybody to take a break, his students letting out sighs of relief as they immediately scattered.

He wasn't sure why they seemed so exhausted; they still had a long way to go.

This was still his first group, and so far, only five out of fifteen people had been able to completely repel him.

Sure, it was barely even noon, and he was functioning on three hours of sleep and sheer willpower alone, but he was kind of on a tight schedule, so he would have preferred a greater progress than this.

This afternoon, he was already supposed to deal with the second group.

"Hey there, how's it going?" Thalia asked the moment she was within earshot, and Nico frowned a little.

Since the battle with Percy's storm, she hadn't exactly approached him, so it confused him to see her now.

Maybe something had happened?

But then, why would she come to him, instead of Annabeth, Jason, or any of the others?

"It's going well, I suppose. How are you?" He asked politely, even more bewildered when she boxed his shoulder lightly.

Were they…really that close already to allow for such gestures?

Was he supposed to do it back?

Thalia opened her mouth to reply, then caught his look and started laughing, instead.

"Aww, don't look so much like a doe. We're cool, right? You saved my ass a bunch of times, I saved yours, that makes as pals." She explained, and he couldn't quite understand her logic, but he wasn't going to question it, either.

He was pals with Jason's sister. That was what he had wanted, right?

"I suppose so." He agreed with a smile and awkwardly boxed her arm as lightly as he could, much to her apparent amusement.

"You can hit harder than that, pal, I'm not made of glass."

Yeah, well, he usually didn't go around hitting his friends, so…

Nico humored her and boxed her shoulder like he would box Percy's whenever he said something inappropriate at a bad time.

Thalia seemed absolutely delighted.

"Now, that's more like it!" She exclaimed, then clapped him on the shoulder so hard he had to suppress the urge to groan, feeling like something had just snapped out of place.

What if she had dislocated his arm? Or his spine?
He would need Will to check him up later.

Nico tried to keep his eyes from tearing up as Thalia laughed heartily next to him, oblivious to his agony.

Then, suddenly, she turned serious again, and he straightened up a little as she turned towards him again, stepping a little closer than maybe necessary.

"Listen, I actually came to say goodbye."

Nico blinked.

Then, he frowned.

Then, he looked around, wondering why she was whispering, before he took her arm and led her further away from his students.

None of them were paying attention, but if Thalia felt the necessity to whisper, then Nico should, too.

"What do you mean?" He asked her in a quiet voice, positioning them so he had a good view of half his class, while Thalia could see the other half.

The gleam in her eyes told him she noticed and appreciated the gesture.

"Annabeth told me." She explained – and it shouldn't be an explanation at all, but it was, and Nico immediately understood.

Camp Jupiter.

Nico looked around again as inconspicuously as he could, and Thalia did the same.

"I see."

Thalia smiled at him again.

"She wouldn't have, but Lady Artemis has sent a message, telling us we are needed elsewhere. I didn't understand, so I approached her, and she believes this might be where we are supposed to go."

Nico mulled over her words for a moment, then gave a small nod.

"When will you take your leave?"

It was shortly before noon. The attacks had gradually picked up, and from what Nico had gathered from passing campers, things were currently going fairly poorly at the Camp border.

The Hunters had been a great aid whenever their fighters had faltered before, so losing their support now would undoubtedly hit them hard.

However, it was without question that Reyna and her camp would need the help much more.

"With the next switch. I already talked to Jason, and he has agreed to try and distract monsters and demigods alike to give us a chance to escape." She explained, and Nico's heart sank.

The next switch of fighters was at lunchtime, which was roughly an hour from now.

It seemed rather sudden, but he understood.

He also hoped that Jason knew what he was doing, though he trusted his abilities all the same.

Nico took a deep breath and nodded, trying for a small smile as he reached out to clasp her shoulder.

"In that case, I wish you and the other Hunters safe travels, and the best of luck." He told her, and she smiled back at him in a way that reminded him a lot of Jason.
"I'm sorry I didn't get to play Mythomagic with you, after all. Next time, okay?"

Nico was surprised she even remembered that.

"For sure." He agreed, and they grinned at each other for another moment.

Then, she shook her head and hugged him.

"Take care, okay?"

He was initially surprised, but then hugged her back with a small smile.

"I'll try my best. Get them to safety, yeah?"

"Will do."

They held each other a moment longer, then she let go of him, and they smiled at each other again, before she stepped back and left him.

He watched her go, even nodding towards the two Hunters that were waiting for her, and they inclined their heads respectfully.

Then, they were gone, and Nico let the smile slide off his face once more.

Hopefully, they would make it.

Nico looked towards his students, but they were still busy chatting and goofing around, just like kids their age should be.

He thought of Hazel and closed his eyes.

Reyna's last update had come shortly after breakfast, letting them know the regrouping had happened without incident, and that even the last group that had stayed behind for distraction purposes had made it out with only a few casualties, which had come as a relief.

However, Reyna still hadn't enclosed how she thought about moving around in such great numbers, much less find a safe place for all of them, and Nico couldn't help but worry.

They would be so easily spotted, so easily found.

No matter where they might be hiding at this time, a city was a city, and there were only so many places one could hide an entire town worth of people.

What if they had already been found?

What if Kyle's forces were finishing them off right at this very moment, while Nico stood here and did nothing?

Nico opened his eyes again, wishing once more that he could use his powers.

But even if he attempted it, he knew he wouldn't have enough strength to summon a strong enough portal to get all of them through – and he knew the ones he so desperately wanted to save the most would not come if others would have to stay behind.

So, right now, the best he could do was training these kids how to ward off Kyle to the best of their abilities, to at least create one safe space from him and his forces.

Nico took a deep breath, then walked back to his students.

"Alright, break time is over. Let's get back to practice." He called, and, while a few groaned, they still obediently came and took their place around him once more.

Nico nodded towards the first one, and they picked up where they had left off.

He was going to protect these kids and this camp with all he had.
Kyle cut through the table, then whisked his scythe around to strike a cupboard, papers flying everywhere.

Dylan flinched and tried not to make a sound, sweat running down the side of his face.

He was going to die.

This was it.

He had achieved nothing, and he would die at the hands of a maniac.

Kyle whirled around, and Dylan instinctively ducked, missing the deadly weapon by inches.

The monster behind him, however, did not.

A screech filled the tent, and Dylan felt something wet hitting his hair, though he didn't dare to lift his head, much less look.

"You are telling me…" Kyle spat, his voice full of venom and fury. "…that the entire Camp is empty?! You let them escape?!!"

Another monster, an empousai, Dylan thought, spoke up with a shaky voice.

"They were already gone by the time we got there, there was nothing we could do…"

"Silence!" Kyle roared, followed by a loud crashing sound that indicated the end of his cupboard.

Dylan cowered on the ground, hoping against hope that he was going to make it out of here alive.

He had no idea what was going on.

After relating a slightly changed version of Kyle's orders to the spy and finding the ones responsible for the attack on Camp Half-Blood, he had dutifully returned to this place to report back to Kyle, to gain his trust, to show he could be 'useful' and hopefully gain some insight about his plans.

Instead, he was going to get murdered, because some part of Kyle's plans had badly backfired, by the sounds of it.

Dylan tried to school his breathing to focus, though he knew his fear was the only thing that kept Kyle from killing him in an instant.

Kyle wanted to be in control, at all times, and everybody else had to cower in fear or they were dead.

But Dylan was still going to die if he didn't think of something soon.

What had happened?

What had Kyle planned to do? What camp was empty?

Who had escaped?

"They must have been warned!" A monster from the back called, and Dylan whimpered a little as Kyle whooshed past him to slaughter that one, too.

"I said silence!"

Everything went deadly silent in an instant, and Dylan was still cowering, his entire body shaking.

He had to think!

Footsteps sounded, coming closer, and Dylan squeezed his eyes shut as Kyle approached him, just
"Stand up, or I will kill you where you cower like a fool." He spat, and Dylan pushed himself to his feet immediately, still shaking like a leaf, but he knew Kyle would let it go.

Kyle did, eyeing him a moment longer in satisfaction, before turning his back to him.

There was something else in his eyes that made Dylan's skin crawl and his mother whisper 'Get out' in the back of his mind, but, for now, his main focus was to stay alive.

"They must have been warned." Kyle said loudly, and Dylan heard shifting behind him, but none of the monsters spoke.

His eyes hushed to the things in the corner, the ones that Kyle called 'skiés' in an almost loving voice.

They were as restless as their master.

Dylan was scared of them even more than he was of Kyle, knowing what they did to their victims.

Kyle had made him watch them kill the two boys in charge of the attack, after all.

"You, go back to the Roman camp. I want all scouts moving out to the surrounding cities, especially Berkeley. Find them. Find them and kill them all. Leave no survivors. Also, one of you fetch me Enceladus. I must speak to him. The Greek camp will pay for this."

Dylan's head swam, something clicking into place.

Kyle must have attacked Camp Jupiter.

The dread in the pit of his stomach told him he was right.

How could Camp Half-Blood have warned them, though?

Dylan thought of Will Solace, and inwardly sighed in relief.

Of course. The healer had those visions, after all, as Dylan had come to find out the other day.

Kyle knew Will had visions.

Dylan heard movement behind him, but didn't dare to check what was leaving or coming back, his eyes fixed on Kyle's feet.

Kyle didn't like it when his subordinates looked into his face, after all, unless he was speaking to them directly and expected a firm reply.

Dylan swallowed when the feet started moving towards him.

"Dylan."

His head shot up, pushing all his fear into his eyes to show Kyle what he wanted to see.

"What do you know about Nico di Angelo's lessons?"

Dylan wished he knew nothing.

Unfortunately, Billy and Fae had come running to him the moment he had finally gotten back to his cabin, and they had told him all about these lessons.

Dylan took a deep breath, knowing he wouldn't be able to lie with his current state of mind.

He was too unfocused; Kyle was bound to see right through it.

"People...have been split into groups. He trains fifteen to twenty at a time." He replied vaguely, hoping to give him the most useless intel possible.
"Do you know any names?"

He would have, if it wasn't for Fae cutting in and scolding him for not being there to sign up with them.

He had never been more grateful to be scolded.

Dylan lowered his gaze and shook his head, letting his shoulders tremble even more than before.

"N-No, sir. I- I'm sorry…" He stuttered, and saw Kyle's hand clenching around his scythe, but he didn't attack.

"Very well. Tell me about the border protection." Kyle ordered, and Dylan's stomach knotted up again.

Kyle was going to attack the Camp, wasn't he?

Oh gods, how was he supposed to prevent that? What was he supposed to do?

He couldn't tell him any obvious lies else Kyle would strike him down and get his intel someplace else, but he also couldn't possibly give Kyle an actual opening, either!

But what was he supposed to say?

Should he make the Camp sound better protected than it was, to throw Kyle off? No, he would only send even more forces, then.

Dylan wished he had more time to think.

"There is a small group of people that switches in irregular intervals. The wounded are tended to immediately, but it has been observed that it takes longer for them to join the frontlines again." He told him with his head bowed respectfully, even as his shoulders continued trembling.

Kyle would want to see his face in a moment.

He had to concentrate on making himself believe his own words.

The man stepped closer, and Dylan swallowed, before lifting his head fearfully.

Kyle stared into his eyes, trying to look into his very soul.

Dylan thought of Billy and Fae, and his chest clenched as he swallowed again.

Kyle's eyes narrowed, then he nodded and shifted his focus on the monsters all around Dylan.

"There you have it. You hear that? We have a camp that's about to be crushed." Kyle announced with a gleeful smirk, and Dylan's stomach churned.

There was an odd sound behind him, followed by monsters scurrying out of the way of the newcomer.

Dylan didn't dare to look over his shoulder, already sensing who it was.

Enceladus was here.

"We have told you before that he wants to take care of the camp, himself. Don't go sprouting about nonsense just because your pipe dreams are leading you to ruin." The giant's voice boomed just as much as his steps did, and Dylan hurried to the side, even though Kyle hadn't given him the permission to move.

Right now, Kyle's focus would be on the giant, anyways.

"I have not called you to criticize my words. I have called you to utter my displeasure. You have failed me, Enceladus. Two times, you have predicted a future that has been prevented. Are you certain you are truly the bane of Athena?" Kyle said loudly, nearly drawled, and Dylan felt every hair on his body stand on end as he watched the exchange.
Enceladus bristled immediately, the end of his spear slamming into the ground as he rose to his full size.

"You dare speak to me in this way?!!" He asked in outrage, and Dylan watched Kyle's skiês shift, even more restlessly than before, but there was something strange in the way they moved.

Kyle wasn't scared. He was out for blood.

They weren't fearful of the threat. They were excited to tear it down.

"I will speak to you however I see fit. You have ruined my plans twice. You will not do so a third time. Am I understood?"

Dylan wanted to be anywhere but here right now, but he forced himself to stay put, knowing there would be no chance to escape Kyle's wrath if he left now.

Kyle loved to rule over his scared subordinates, but he despised cowards.

"You may have the authority to give us orders, but my loyalty lays with him, not you. We have been given orders to keep the Greek camp intact until the very end; I will not defy those orders just to satiate your senseless bloodlust."

So, Kyle really held some sort of power over the giants.

Dylan had already assumed so before, but it still came as a shock to have said thoughts confirmed now.

What he hadn't yet figured out, though, was who it was they were all working for.

It was obvious it wasn't Kyle, but it also didn't seem to be one of the other giants, or else Kyle's behavior towards them would be different. Or so Dylan assumed, anyways.

"I am aware of my orders. However, we have already progressed enough to warrant an attack. You will let Polybotes know to get ready." Kyle countered, and Dylan didn't like the sound of that, at all.

Polybotes was the bane of Poseidon, Dylan knew. Dylan also knew of his role in the last war.

Where was he? What was he supposed to get ready for?

Was this related to Camp Jupiter still? Or Camp Half-Blood?

His gut churned, and his heart sank at the answer it gave him.

"I will not have even more giants sidetracked by your nonsense, Kyle! We have no time to play games, and it is still up to him to tell us what progress can be deemed great enough to allow an attack." Enceladus boomed and slammed his spear into the ground again, much to Dylan's surprise and shock.

Then, he tripped backwards when Kyle moved forward at a terrifying speed.

Enceladus raised his spear, but the next moment, he was kneeling on the ground with Kyle's scythe at his neck.

"Do not test me, Enceladus. Remember: My mother is always with me."

Monsters had scurried back in terror, much like Dylan, while the skiês had come forward a little, seeming thrilled at the turn of events.

"You wouldn't dare to strike me down, Kyle. He would not permit such an act so close to his success, no matter if you're his favorite or not." Enceladus spat, but he held very still, all the same.

Dylan wasn't just fearing for his own life, now.
How were they supposed to beat a man who could force a giant onto its knees in a matter of seconds?

How were the guys supposed to beat this man?

His thoughts drifted to Will, and his hands clenched to fists.

They would find a way. They had to.

"You will do as I say, or you will learn that I always follow through with my threats. You will tell Polybotes to get ready to strike at my command. Have I made myself understood?"

Enceladus turned his head minimally, and his eyes landed on Dylan.

Dylan immediately lowered his gaze, all his hair on end once more.

Enceladus was the bane of Athena, but he was also Dylan's greatest threat.

The giant had the gift of foresight and intelligence. If any of them could look through Dylan's act, it was this one.

He still remembered when the giant had eyed him warily, back when Dylan had first come here to pose as Kyle's new messenger.

It had been a risky act, fueled by willpower and the urge to protect his friends, but at that moment, when he had come face-to-face with the giant and a variety of monsters, it had felt like the greatest mistake of his life.

He had thought he would die before his mission even truly began.

But he was still here now.

Dylan would make it stay that way.

"Yes." Enceladus said quietly, and Dylan dared to glance up again.

Enceladus had his eyes on Kyle once more, the hatred clearly visible, though Kyle didn't seem to care as he eyed him with contempt a moment longer, before giving him free.

"Then get out of my sight."

Dylan wished he could leave now, too.

Instead, he remained where he was and watched the giant take his leave, not meeting the eyes of any of the monsters still present.

It had to be very degrading, to be treated like this in front of 'lesser' beings.

Dylan could understand the hatred of the giant, though he didn't sympathize with him.

"The rest of you, move out and collect the rest of my forces. You will leave immediately for Camp Half-Blood. I want everybody to be at the campsite by nightfall, and that camp torn to shreds by the morning. Understood?" He called through the tent, and Dylan felt himself swaying on the spot.

No!

"All of us? But I thought…" One of the monsters spoke up, and Dylan's gaze snapped to Kyle, almost expecting him to strike the speaker down.

Kyle didn't, though he brandished his scythe as if he contemplated it.

"All of you. I have underestimated them before, I will not do so again. Leave."

The monsters rushed from the tent in a hurry, and Dylan wished they could drag him along with them.
But none of them did.

"You will go and join the search for the Romans. I have a feeling the scouts will fail me, and you know how much I hate failure." Kyle said sweetly to his skiés, and Dylan watched how all the shadowy creatures glided out of the tent.

Then, he was alone with the monster.

Dylan tried to school his breathing, tried to compose himself, tried to not let it show just how much everything that had just transpired hit him.

He prayed to his mother that he succeeded enough to fool Kyle.

The man turned towards him, his cold blue eyes scanning his face and posture.

His lips twitched into a small smile.

"Dylan. You have once more proven yourself helpful, it seems."

Dylan hoped that his vague intel had been anything but useful, but somehow, no matter what he did, Kyle seemed to pull some sort of gain from it, anyways.

It made Dylan wish he hadn't done this, because the guilt of not knowing how much of this was his fault was weighing him down more than he could have ever imagined.

"I… I would hope so, sir." He replied hesitantly, and Kyle hummed thoughtfully as he studied him a moment longer.

Then, the man started moving towards him slowly.

"Yes, yes. You have given me interesting insights, and you have followed my orders well. It shocked you, didn't it? Watching the two fools die?"

Yes, it had.

Dylan had known they would die if he sold them out, but he hadn't known just what sort of death awaited them.

They had been hateful people, greedy for power and blood, but in the end, they had been dumb kids just like Dylan and everyone else. They hadn't deserved that end.

"It…it did." He admitted in a small voice as he lowered his head again.

"You aren't used to death yet. Don't worry, it will get easier soon." Kyle said, and Dylan was confused by the suddenly gentle voice.

His mother was whispering in the back of his mind again, telling him to get out, telling him to flee.

He stayed put, not knowing how to possibly leave right now.

A large, cool hand touched his chin and tugged his face up, and Dylan didn't have to fake or intensify the fear, this time.

Why was Kyle touching him?!

'Run, son.' His mother whispered, but he couldn't. Not without risking everything.

"S-sir?" He asked in a shaky voice as Kyle studied him more intently, his lips tugging into a smile that sent shivers down Dylan's back.

"Who is your godly parent, Dylan?"

Why was he asking that? Was he suspecting anything?

Wait, what was he supposed to reply?
Based on his observations, only a few of Kyle's underlings actually knew their godly parent.

However, Dylan was also one of the older ones, and he knew he wouldn't get away with claiming to be unclaimed.

"H-Hermes, sir." He lied, but felt his mother's praise, all the same.

"A true messenger, then." Kyle remarked, and the smile was still on his face, same as his hand was still on Dylan's.

His finger touched Dylan's lip, and Dylan suddenly felt very, very sick.

Memories of Will Solace shot through his head, of the rumors, of his sickly and shaken look back when Kyle had been at Camp.

"You remind me of him, you know?" Kyle said quietly, and his voice had something raspy to it now, almost like a purr.

His mother had fallen silent, and he felt her presence disappear.

Dylan felt the cold dread settling into every fiber of his being.

"Of who, sir?" He urged himself to ask, though he already knew the answer.

Kyle grabbed his chin a little harder.

Then, he suddenly let go and turned away.

"Nobody. Have you told the son of Athena to get rid of Calypso?" He asked as he walked away, and Dylan found himself swaying on the spot again, this time out of relief.

He caught himself before Kyle could notice anything.

"Yes, sir."

At least, he had told him to await orders to attack Calypso.

"Good. Though I am not entirely confident he will be up to the task." Kyle said thoughtfully with his back to him, his scythe disappearing into thin air as he eyed the wreckage throughout the tent.

Dylan wasn't sure whether he was supposed to respond, but since he wouldn't know what to say, he remained quiet.

He had to get back to Camp as soon as possible.

To warn the others of the oncoming attack.

"Dylan." Kyle said loudly, still with his back to him.

Somehow, it felt like he was calling him forward, so Dylan reluctantly moved.

He didn't want to get closer to him.

He still did it, anyways, stopping right behind Kyle with his head bowed and his gaze on the ground.

"If he fails, you will do it in his place. Here." Kyle said, before turning towards him and holding something out to him.

Dylan stared at it.

Then he stared up at Kyle.

It was a dagger.

Dylan didn't need his mother's powers to tell him that this was the dagger that had wounded
Calypso before.

"Take it. But make sure not to touch the blade. It is doused in a very rare, very lethal potion. Enough to bring down a god, Dylan."

_Enough to bring down a god._

Dylan didn't want to touch this thing.

Dylan reached out to take the sheathed dagger, anyways, staring down at it in disbelief, before staring up at Kyle once more.

He didn't know what to say.

His mind was blank.

"Use this to kill Calypso. Take her fleece, and strike her with the dagger. That will be all it takes. Any cut will work, as long as the poison gets into her system." Kyle explained, and Dylan couldn't stop staring at this man, unable to comprehend.

How could he say all this to Dylan?

How could he expect a twelve-year old kid to attack a goddess?

How could he force a giant to his knees as if it was nothing?

How could he plan to tear Camp Half-Blood to the ground, just because Will had prevented an attack on Camp Jupiter?

Dylan swallowed thickly, then he nodded.

"Y-yes, sir. I…I will do my best."

He felt sick.

The weapon emanated a dark, evil aura, and it felt wrong to hold it, to keep it this close to his body, like his body was repelling it.

His grip on it tightened.

Kyle's hand clapped onto his shoulder.

"I know you will. I expect you back in that Camp before nightfall. The attack will happen tomorrow. While it is not essential, it would be favorable if she finds her end before then."

Dylan was going to do no such thing.

The moment he was back at Camp, he was going straight to Jason Grace, or Will Solace, or di Angelo or Jackson, any of them, as long as it was one of them, because he knew they would listen, and they would believe him.

Dylan nodded hurriedly.

"Yes, sir."

"Good boy." Kyle said, and there was that purr in his voice again, causing Dylan's heart to beat in his throat once more.

The hand on his shoulder turned into a firm grip, and Dylan kept his gaze on the dagger out of sheer fear of what he might see if he looked up.

"I have a good feeling about you, Dylan. You will not fail me." Kyle said confidently, and Dylan swallowed.

Kyle couldn't be farther from the truth…right?
The grip on his shoulder turned into a caress.
The man in front of him let out a faint hum.

Dylan held very, very still.

"You know what, I have a new message for our spy. Let him know there is a change of plans.
You will take down Calypso. Tell him to get rid of Will Solace, instead." Kyle mused, and Dylan's head snapped up against his better judgment.

"W-What?"

Kyle raised an eyebrow, but his expression was curious, at most.

Then, it turned amused, and his hand found Dylan's cheek.

Oh gods, he was going to get raped.

Raped and murdered.

This was not what Dylan had had in mind when he had decided to do this.

"Will Solace, Dylan. It is shameful, but the boy has been a thorn in my side ever since those idiots have befuddled his mind. I fear there is no hope for him anymore. Tell that son of Athena to attack him, instead. It should be simple enough, for somebody that close to everything."

It would be.

Will Solace was a kind-hearted idiot, all it would take was for Malcolm to go to him complaining of a mild injury, and Will would practically invite a knife into his chest.

Oh gods, Dylan had to talk to the guys as quickly as possible.

"I-I…I will let him know, sir." He stammered quickly and swallowed again, though he promptly stopped breathing when Kyle's hand traveled down his cheek to his neck.

Kyle traced his throat with one finger, then smirked that sardonic smile of his, before pulling his hand away.

"Good. Then you may leave. Keep that dagger hidden until it is time to use it. Do not disappoint me."

With that, the man turned away from him again, and Dylan stared at his back, before his gaze hushed back down to the sheathed dagger.

"Yes, sir."

Dylan turned and left the tent with measured steps.

The moment he was outside and a safe distance away from Kyle's tent, he pushed the dagger into his bag and started running.

Oh gods.

Oh gods, the Camp.

Oh gods, the monsters.

Oh gods, Will Solace.

Dylan prayed to his mother and all the gods he could think of that he would make it back home before the monsters got to the campsite.

Somehow, he had to make it.
Reyna took a deep breath and turned away from the fading screen of the Iris message with Annabeth.

The Hunters would come to their aid.

It was great news, but unfortunately, Reyna wasn't sure they would make it in time.

Her troupes were wary, none of them knowing quite what was going on, and she had already overheard the mutterings of 'paranoia' and 'she's trying to get us killed'.

She wasn't too bothered by their words.

They could say whatever they wanted, as long as she managed to keep them alive.

As long as she managed to get them through the day.

But the people were tired, too.

Especially the ones from New Rome, who had been forced to leave their beds and homes and pack their necessities in a matter of minutes, before collecting at the evacuation spots and looking at her with bleary eyes, fear and uncertainty written all over their faces.

They knew even less about what was going on.

Reyna wished she could explain.

Unfortunately, there were too many things she couldn't say, not without risking more lives, so she decided against saying anything, at all.

There was barking and whining, the sound of babies crying, and Reyna closed her eyes.

They were just too many.

Too many people, too many pets, too many elderly people that couldn't move quickly enough to keep up with the speed Reyna would have hoped for.

Too many wounded that couldn't move, at all, but had to be carried on makeshift stretchers.

It slowed them down.

It slowed them down so, so much.

And time was something they simply didn't have.

Reyna was painfully aware of each passing hour, each passing minute, and she knew the fact they were alive right now was already akin to a miracle.

Unfortunately, they would need an even bigger miracle to stay alive.

Reyna looked back down at her ring, but there was still no change, no response, nothing.

She took a deep breath, then stepped out of the small nook she had found for her private call, back into the alley where her people were currently hiding.

"Get everybody to pack up and get going. We have to keep moving." She told Frank in a quiet voice, and the praetor nodded and passed the message on to the others.

They were already crossing into the outskirts of the city, hopefully able to leave it behind soon enough, but as glad as she was about the distance they had put between the Camp and themselves already, she was also too aware of the risks she was exposing her people to the moment they would leave the safety of the city.

Their cloaking spells from the children of Trivia were allowing them to blend in with crowds and the city, but once they were out in the open, Reyna knew there wasn't much they would be able to do in forms of protection.
All she had was her legions, but, if they wouldn't have been able to survive the forces inside their Camp, then they wouldn't stand a chance out here, either.

It was a dead end.

If they stayed, they would be found sooner or later.

If they left, they were bound to be sighted.

But it was their only chance.

Reyna glanced back down at her hand, then clenched her fist and hoisted herself onto Guido's back to take the lead once more as the people began moving.

The babies kept crying. The children chimed in, hungry and exhausted.

Reyna heard all sorts of animals and pets complain at the tight spaces of their confinement and the constant moving.

She pushed on, anyways.

"Any monster sightings yet?" She asked Hazel, who was on Arion at the corner of the alley, looking out at the traffic with a grim look full of concentration.

"No. Everything seems normal, so far." She replied, but there was an edge to her voice, showing she didn't like this, at all.

Reyna didn't, either.

Their enemy was bound to know by now that they were gone, so where were the scouts?

Where were the troupes?

"We have to keep moving. If we stay in one place too long, they are bound to find us. We can't allow them to surround and trap us."

She said sharply, and Hazel gave a nod, her eyes still on the busy streets.

Reyna turned to look at Frank, who was in the far back with Dakota and Leila, two of the few who knew of the bloodshed they had so narrowly evaded.

Frank gave her the sign to say everything was good to go, so Reyna motioned for her people to follow.

With another look around the busy road, she glanced towards Hazel, nodded, and led Guido out of the alley.

Thanks to the mist and their cloaking spells, none of the mortals around paid them any mind, but Reyna was still wary, her gaze hushing from face to face of each person passing them, trying to see some sort of recognition, some sort of sign that they were being found out.

But nothing.

Reyna patted Guido's neck, and the Pegasus snorted, ears flicking in all directions as he, too, seemed agitated and wary.

"I'll look on ahead again." Hazel said quietly next to her, and Reyna gave a curt nod.

Arion took off, and Reyna glanced after them fleetingly, before watching the people around them once more.

But nobody even blinked an eye, nobody looked after Hazel or the way too fast horse, nobody glanced their way.

They seemed safe.
Reyna looked back at Hazel, who had stopped at the next intersection, eyes scanning the perimeter before looking back at her and lifting her hand.

The coast was clear.

Reyna motioned for her people to move.

Hazel waited for them to come closer, then she trotted on ahead again.

It was a slow progress.

Reyna hated being out on the busy streets, but there was no other way.

She passed an alley and glanced inside, half expecting something to come jumping out.

But there was nothing.

Reyna glanced back down at the ring in her hand, a gift from her sister.

It was meant to be a way to contact her in case of emergencies.

This was the greatest emergency Reyna could possibly think of.

Unfortunately, there was no sign her sister had received her plea for help.

There was no sign of life from her sister, at all.

Maybe their enemy had already found the Amazons.

Reyna dreaded to think of it.

Guido whinnied, and her head snapped up immediately to look around, trying to find the threat the Pegasus was alerting her to.

She couldn't find it.

Hazel was at an intersection ahead again, looking around before turning around to lift her arm.

The next moment, Reyna flinched and cried out in warning as something big hurled towards Hazel out of nowhere.

There was a crash, enough to make the ground shake, and dust and dirt flew up where Hazel had just been.

Reyna wanted to rush to her, but then, screams erupted behind her, and she called for her legions to adapt the defensive position.

As she turned her head, she found Frank rushing forward, his face pale as he looked from her to the wreckage ahead.

Reyna was about to give him the okay to go and check on his girlfriend, when she heard a hissing sound and whirled around.

The next moment, all hell broke loose.

Cries behind her.

Guido rearing back.

Something colliding with Reyna and tearing her off the Pegasus and onto the ground.

A dark growl.

More hissing.

The sound of fighting.
A bear's paw smacking whatever deranged beast on her clean off.

Reyna gasped for breath, then pushed herself to her feet even before her vision cleared from the pain of the impact.

They were surrounded.

That explained the lack of monster sightings.

"Alert the others." One monster called to another.

Reyna tried to find it, tried to see which one was running, because that was the one she had to strike down to prevent worse.

She didn't get the chance.

Something tried to strike her from behind.

She whirled around and stabbed it, before yelling out more orders to her legions.

Frank was gone, but she thought she could see something feline attacking more monsters coming from the left.

They would never make it out of the city at this rate.

Reyna clenched her teeth and raised her weapon to strike down more monsters.

Then, Guido was back by her side, and she jumped onto his back, promptly taking to the skies.

She saw something scurrying away and wanted to go after it, but then something leapt off the building right next to her, trying to tear her off the Pegasus.

Guido struck it with his hoof and sent the monster falling to its death.

She tried to spot the runaway again.

She couldn't find it.

Reyna wished she could give pursuit, but instead focused back on the battle below her, calling out warnings and orders as the Romans surrounded the families and children in an impenetrable circle for protection, while her best fighters battled the monsters that tried to advance on them.

She realized quickly that these monsters were only meant to buy time.

To keep them rooted to the spot for the reinforcements.

Unfortunately, there was no way to retreat or scatter, not with this many people in one spot.

They couldn't flee.

There was no place to flee to.

Reyna lunged at a monster that tried using another one as springboard to get to their civilians, catching it midflight and sending it flying back into a couple of other monsters.

Then, the hellhounds came bounding down the street towards them.

So many hellhounds.

She yelled orders, watching Frank rushing towards the oncoming threat in the form of an elephant, but even though his tusks and trunk claimed a few, the rest jumped around and past him, making right for her troupes.

Reyna soared down, but only managed to stab two before they started attacking Guido's wings and she was forced to fly up again to protect him, keep her overview and command her people.
Frank was a hippopotamus now, gnawing one hellhound to mush before turning and letting out a deafening roar, already making right for the targeted troupes.

Reyna looked back at the intersection, where the dust and dirt had settled down once more, showing a disintegrating monster and nothing else.

So…they had thrown one of their own kind, in an attempt to take out Hazel? To announce their attack? To give the signal?

She couldn't see Hazel's body, and that gave Reyna hope, though she didn't want to dwell on it too much at the current time.

She had to keep her people alive, right now.

Reyna saw a few pedestrians run, screaming something about rabid dogs, but she ignored them as she kept her focus on her troupes.

One child of Trivia fell, and Reyna immediately caught more outcries from surrounding pedestrians.

Their cloaking spells were lifting, exposing them even more.

Reyna grimaced and soared down, cutting down monsters left and right as she trusted the centurions to command their legions.

The hellhounds managed to break through the ranks and made to attack the civilians, causing even more chaos and screaming.

Reyna cursed and slipped off Guido's back, landing in front of her people to strike down her opponents.

But she knew she would be outnumbered eventually.

Legionnaires came left and right to fight by her side and push the monsters back.

But the monsters just kept coming, just like they had back home.

Reyna grinded her teeth when her weapon was knocked out of her hand, instantly pulling her dagger to not be defenseless.

Her gaze fluttered to the intricate design along the handle, and her thoughts shifted to Nico, even as she raised the dagger and sunk it into an advancing monster.

She remembered the devastation in both his voice and face, the way he had looked so helpless as he had told her of Will's vision, of the attack, of her having to flee immediately.

Her heart felt heavy in her chest as she heard the screaming of her people around her, while the monsters hissed and spat and taunted and laughed.

There was a lump in her throat as she whirled her body around to strike at another monster trying to get past, knowing there were many more to come.

There were so many.

There were too many.

Reyna stood in the ashes of the monsters she had slain, and as she looked behind herself, she saw the faces of her civilians, of the people from New Rome, who didn't have anything to do with this war, who didn't have anything to do with anything.

She saw elders and children, saw parents holding their little ones, and partners clinging to one another, while others made themselves taller and tried to act as a shield to their loved ones.

Reyna looked back at the unforgiving battle in front of her, trying her best to stand her ground, trying her best to not let anything past.
She cut down monster after another, some with the help of the struggling legionnaires around her, some alone.

The dust at her feet grew and grew, but the number of monsters didn’t seem to lessen.

There was a distant thunder, a roaring sound that promised nothing but death, and the lump in her throat only grew larger, making it harder to swallow.

Making it harder to breathe.

A horse jumped over her, Arion, Hazel on his back with tears streaming down her face as she struck down their opponents.

It wasn’t enough.

When Hazel looked back at her, Reyna knew that she knew it, too.

They continued fighting, and when Hazel was knocked off Arion’s back, she took to Reyna’s side to keep on fighting, her wild hair billowing around her as she raised her arms to let all sorts of gems rise from the earth.

It wasn’t enough.

Her eyes stung as she heard the sound growing louder, *nearer*, and she knew that, once it reached them, there would be no way out anymore.

Reyna’s eyes fell back onto the handle of her now bloody dagger, and she thought of Camp Half-Blood again, of Nico’s hopeful expression this morning, of her last update, of the news of the Hunters, of Annabeth’s well-wishes.

The Hunters were on their way here, but they would never make it in time.

It appeared their miracle had come to a bitter end.

Reyna looked over her shoulder at her people again, wishing there was a way to send them off into the crowds of mortals to let them be safe, to let them *live*.

But monsters would know the difference.

There was no safety for them anymore.

Reyna locked eyes with a small child, staring at her with teary eyes. Her hair was braided just like Reyna’s.

She looked away again, unable to let that child see the truth in her gaze.

The thunder and roaring had nearly reached them, now.

There was no escape.

There was no place to hide.

The Roman Empire they had built for themselves was going to meet its end today, on an open road in a city that held no meaning to them.

Reyna allowed one tear to run down her cheek before she wiped it away and moved to her original position at the very front, getting ready to face the inevitable.

She heard the thundering footsteps, reminding her of Orion, though she knew it wasn’t him.

It was others, though.

Buildings fell, creating a path of destruction towards them that showed where their end was coming from.
Reyna lifted her chin and raised herself to her full height.

She wanted to pray to her mother, but she knew it was too late for prayers now.

A giant shadow appeared on the road, the cars derailing off their paths or colliding with one another.

A massive hand grabbed the side of a hotel, causing it to crumble under the weight.

The monsters fell back all around her, and she watched as the giant's head appeared, before the rest of him stepped into the intersection.

At least forty feet tall, with green hair and green scales adorning his dragon-like legs, Reyna stared up at what she knew had to be Porphyrian, the king of giants.

Reyna raised her dagger higher, though she had never felt smaller.

Behind him were two more, slightly smaller giants; one with ashen and one with rust-colored legs.

She heard the terrified cries and sobs behind her, but there was nothing she could do.

She had done all she could.

Frank joined her side. Hazel stepped up to the other.

When she looked at them, their faces said it all.

They nodded at each other.

Then, she looked back at the approaching giants.

This was it.

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Porphyrian sneered down at them, assured of his victory, as Clytius and Aeloneus stood to his left and right, weapons at the ready.

Hazel clenched her fists at her sides.

The king of giants opened his mouth to speak – but he didn't get the chance to, an ear-shattering explosion sounding from the right.

The giants looked around, distracted and confused.

Reyna shot her a questioning glance, but Hazel could only shrug.

Suddenly, there was movement in the corners of her eyes, and she was about to call out in warning, when the grenades exploded into puffs of thick, gray smoke.

There were screams and cries, and Hazel found people and monsters alike moving around in confusion and panic.

Then, there was a firm set of hands on her waist, pushing her forwards.

Unable to identify the pusher, she whirled around to punch him in the face, just to realize it wasn't a man, at all.

It was a woman.

With a mask.

And a rather familiar face.

"Kinzie?"
Kinzie caught her fist in her hand and gave her a slow blink, before she grabbed hold of Hazel and hoisted her over her shoulder, much to Hazel's stunned surprise.

"Yep. Sorry, got no time to chat right now."

Hazel protested against being carried, then stopped when she saw other Amazons doing the same, all of them rushing in the same direction.

They were getting them to safety.

Or trying to, anyways.

She heard Frank calling her name and called back, spotting him in the fog moments later as he stared at her with wide eyes.

Then, he seemed to catch on, giving a short nod before turning away, towards their legions and people that began scattering in fear more and more.

There was another explosion, and even more fog, and Hazel thought she could hear the booming sound of giants rushing closer.

"Hurry!" Kinzie called, and Hazel spotted more masked women rushing back and forth in the thick fog.

Then, she heard the sounds of battle further off, where monsters were slowly starting to catch their bearings and attacking again.

"Follow the others. Go." Kinzie told her as she was suddenly dropped back onto her feet, and Hazel looked after her in confusion, before two Amazons pushed past her and hurried down a set of stairs.

Hazel saw her boyfriend in the form of a panther, moving through the fog and herding people towards her.

Then, more Amazons with more people came and pushed her to the side, and she found herself squished against the wall, before one of them tugged her along by the arm, pulling her down the stairs and into darkness.

"Keep going on ahead." A voice told her, then let go, and she was dimly aware that the words were repeated all around her by other Amazons, before footsteps hurried back up the stairs and away.

She was tempted to follow them back up, to make sure everybody else made it here, too, but cries and calls echoed all around her. Cries of people calling for help or crying out of fear.

Hazel faltered in her steps.

"Keep moving! These are friends, we can trust them!" She called into the darkness, and the voices fell silent.

"Hazel?" "Centurion Levesque?"

"Yes, it's me. Everybody, keep going. We need to make space for the others." She told them, and heard people stumbling on ahead, some still crying, but they were moving, so it was okay.

New people came, and Hazel stayed behind, calling to the newcomers and sending them on their way.

The Amazons became more frantic, but then, a hoard of people came rushing down the stairs, and Hazel instinctively knew that Frank was responsible for that.

Hazel sent them on their way, whispering reassurances as legionnaires and civilians from New Rome alike cried or touched her shoulders or tried to find each other in the darkness.

Soon after, the Amazons and her boyfriend came rushing down the stairs, forming the end.
"Where's Reyna?" Hazel asked, because it seemed odd to think she would have gone on ahead.

"Probably with our Queen, distracting those buffoons. They will take a different way. Come now." One of the women told her, before taking her arm and tugging her along.

Hazel didn't like being pushed around, so she pulled her arm free, finding her boyfriend's hand in the darkness as they followed the footsteps in front of them.

Frank squeezed her hand tightly with his own, and Hazel could feel him trembling a little.

"Are you okay?" She whispered, and her boyfriend hummed faintly in reply.

"I thought that was going to be it." He said quietly a moment later.

Hazel looked into the darkness ahead of them.

"Me too." She admitted, and they traveled on in silence.

There was a booming noise above them, but it was muffled enough to show there was no immediate threat.

"Keep quiet, now. We don't want to alert them to our whereabouts." One of the Amazons hissed when they reached parts of the rest, who had started talking agitatedly or crying loudly again in fear and shock.

Hazel once more took over, speaking to her people with Frank by her side, both of them managing to calm the masses down enough to keep going.

One of the Amazons lit a torch after the path seemed to take a left, illuminating long corridors and allowing them to see where they were going, as well as to look around at loved ones and family members.

"Keep going. It's not safe here, yet." One of the Amazons spoke up again, and Hazel called for her people to follow the order.

They came to a crossroad, and Hazel was baffled to see even more people streaming onto the main path from the left and right.

Kinzie joined her side, smiling at her and wiping some blood off the side of her face as she took off her mask.

"Sorry about that. We planned to come sooner, but Queen Hylla wanted to prevent being followed. This should be the last of them, I think." She told her, and Hazel looked at the shook faces of the legionnaires and civilians alike as they bumped into each other and tried to fall into place, moving along the narrow path at a cautious pace.

"You split them up?" She asked, though she guessed it made sense.

Kinzie nodded.

"Had do. Way too many people. Did you bring your entire town with you? Luckily, we have a great underground system. Better than any metro system in the world."

Frank was silent at her side, and Hazel squeezed his hand a little.

"We had to bring everybody. Reyna received a warning of an attack that was going to wipe the entire Camp out." She told Kinzie quietly, and the woman faltered a little, her expression turning sympathetic.

Then, she smiled again.

"Well, at least you managed to get out. Now, time to get you to safety. Ever since Orion, we have done some drastic changes to this place to prevent any more attacks like that."

Hazel eyed Kinzie in the dim light, then glanced at her boyfriend.
To be honest, she had thought Kinzie had died, back in the battle against Orion that Reyna had told them about.

It was a relief to see her now, of course, but Hazel couldn't think of a way to say 'I'm glad you're alive' without the risk of accidentally insulting the Amazon or her survival abilities.

Frank was busy taking in their surroundings, his expression thoughtful and grim, though he looked back at her immediately when he felt her gaze, reassuring smile already on his lips.

Hazel leaned against him a little, and allowed herself to let out a deep, relieved sigh.

They were still alive.

Somehow, by some strange miracle, they were still alive.

A thought crossed her mind, and she frowned, looking back at Kinzie, who was looking at them with a knowing look and a smirk.

"Wait, how did you know where we were? How did you know we needed help?" She asked skeptically, and Kinzie shot her a slightly bewildered look.

"How? Well, you called for us, didn't you? This morning, your praetor has sent a plea for help to Queen Hylla. We immediately assembled our people and came to your aid, but found your camp already swarmed by what must have been an entire battalion of monsters. We caused a diversion for your last people to make it out as Queen Hylla realized you must have evacuated; then we retreated and tracked your whereabouts." She explained, and Hazel wondered vaguely what she meant by 'tracking their whereabouts', but she decided not to ask.

Reyna had called the Amazons for help.

Hazel wondered whether that had been her big plan, or her last hope.

Then, she decided it didn't matter, as long as they were still alive and had a place to go.

"Thank you." She said quietly, and Kinzie gave a little shrug.

"You gals helped us in the last war, it's only fair to give our aid now. That's how Queen Hylla phrased it, anyways."

"Quiet, now." Another Amazon reprimanded, and Kinzie made a face, before rolling her eyes and winking at Hazel.

Then, she moved on ahead to exchange a whispered conversation with her fellow comrades.

Hazel watched her go, then looked sideways at Frank, who was back to eyeing their surroundings warily.

"What do you think will happen now?" She asked him quietly, and he gave another small shrug.

"I don't know. They said they would get us someplace safe. Maybe we will stay there? It depends. Though I guess this does put us at the mercy and generosity of the Amazons for the time being."

He didn't sound very happy, but that was understandable, given the Amazons and their views regarding males.

Hazel still hoped they would be able to stay and hide for a while, though.

She had no illusions about this being a permanent solution, since she was too aware of their differences. Not to mention, she highly doubted that the Amazons were equipped to house the entirety of New Rome in their 'underground system', no matter how great it may be.

They came to another crossroads, and this time, there were no legionnaires or civilians joining them, but more Amazons, accompanied by men in orange jumpsuits and collars.

Hazel watched them walk alongside the masses that kept walking on ahead, the path now
widening to fit them a little more comfortably.

"We're almost there." One of the Amazons explained, and Hazel tried to see some sort of difference in their surroundings, but even with the numerous lit torches, the walls around them still seemed dark and bleak and the same as before.

"Where do you think we are?" She asked Frank, but he only shook his head.

"I have no idea."

Kinzie fell back again to join them at the rear, this time walking next to Frank, which had her promptly noticing the missing limb.

"Oh! Accident or battle?" She asked curiously, seeming almost excited as she poked Frank's shoulder, and Hazel's face promptly darkened.

"Battle." Frank replied hesitantly, and the Amazon patted him sympathetically.

"Oh well, it happens. We could fix you up with a nice prosthetic, tough. I have one, too. Wanna see?"

Hazel frowned, her eyes on the two seemingly intact hands Kinzie had.

"No, it's al-…" Frank started, but then, Kinzie already bent down to pull her right pant leg up.

Sleek metal glinted in the dim light of the torches, black and silver.

"I lost my entire leg in that battle against Orion. Nearly died, too, but I wasn't ready to go just then. Now, look at this. It still acts up every here and there, and cleaning it isn't very nice, but otherwise, it's a real dream." The Amazon explained to them as she covered her leg once more and moved a little quicker to catch up to the rest of the group with them.

"It looks very well-made." Frank agreed, and Kinzie winked at him, before looking back at Hazel.

"So, what about it? Would you be interested?"

They didn't get a chance to reply, because the sound of an explosion had them on high alert immediately. They rushed forward as the others seemed to freeze on the spot, listening.

"An attack?" One Amazon whispered, but another shook her head.

"No. It's coming from the path Queen Hylla wanted to take. It must not have been safe, so she blew it up to prevent our detection."

Hazel felt the cold coils of dread as she thought of Reyna, hoping faintly that she was safe, wherever she currently was.

There were more sounds of battle, but they were muffled again, far away, and after another moment of hesitation, the Amazons called for them to continue on their path.

When they came to the next crossroads, they took a right.

Even though the Amazons had said they were almost there, it still felt like an eternity until they finally came into a spacious hall that reminded her of the warehouse-like place she had seen the last time.

This one had no shelves though, and no products anywhere.

Just a big, empty hall.

"This will have to do for the time being. It's the most secure spot we can offer you and your people. Rest here for now." One of the Amazons spoke up, addressing Hazel, and Hazel wondered faintly whether this was because she recognized her from last time, or whether she thought Hazel was some sort of leader figure.
She only had her cohort to command, after all.

Still, she nodded and said her thanks, before turning towards the masses again.

The hall was nearly filled to the brim, but at least everybody fit in.

Tearstained and scared faces looked back at her, waiting for guidance and orders.

Even her fellow centurions looked at her rather helplessly.

Hazel nudged Frank.

No matter where they were or what was happening, he was the praetor, and she needed to uphold that if she wanted to keep everything in order.

She caught Kinzie raising an amused eyebrow, but then the Amazon was already pulling away, speaking to the other women.

"Everybody, listen up. The Amazons were kind enough to offer us their aid in our time of need. You are safe here, for now. Until Praetor Reyna is back with further intel, you should settle down and try to get some rest. Centurions, step over here for a moment, please." He called out, and Hazel was pleased to see that everybody followed his orders, the legionnaires and civilians organizing various possibilities to sit and huddle together for warmth, whereas the centurions immediately moved towards Frank.

She looked back at the Amazons, but they didn't show any interest in their activities, a few of them guarding the entrance while the others seemed to discuss something with their heads together and their expressions grim.

Frank briefed the centurions on the Amazons, reminding them to watch their words and manners, before telling them to check their cohorts for wounded and missing, while he would do the same for the civilians.

They didn't ask any questions, merely nodding grimly and moving to check on their people, and Hazel moved back to her cohort, too, while Frank moved towards the frightened people from New Rome.

They had lost more than initially expected.

Hazel's heart sank as she returned to Frank to let him know, and the others did the same, their heads now bowed as Frank nodded and clasped their shoulders and told them to get some rest, too.

Then, he and Hazel returned to the Amazons, who were in the process of splitting up.

"We will go and see what is holding up our Queen and people, as well as your praetor. In the meantime, you will be tended to with food and drinks and blankets." The same Amazon from before spoke up again, addressing Hazel once more, instead of Frank.

She wanted to offer to come along, to fight by their side if necessary, but she knew it wouldn't be welcome, so she bit back the words and nodded, watching them leave.

She thought of the giants and hoped once more that Reyna wouldn't come to harm.

Frank moved his arm around her, and she leaned against him.

"She's strong." He assured her, and she nodded.

"I know."

Hazel still couldn't find any rest or peace of mind until she finally caught a glimpse of purple, what must have been hours later.

Just a glimpse, and she was already moving, was already running, from the midst of her cohort towards her praetor and friend, who was helped into the room by an Amazon and her sister, Hylla.
Hazel was already around her neck before she realized there was blood, and before she realized how heavily Reyna was limping.

Reyna still hugged her back weakly, anyways.

"Sorry. Got…a little surprised." Reyna whispered, and Hazel was crying out of relief and worry, all at the same time.

"We need to tend to her wounds. One of the giants struck her with that crazy staff he had." One of the Amazons told her as she tugged on Hazel's arm, but Hazel needed another moment before she managed to let go.

Reyna was pale, her breathing shallow as she slumped against her sister once more, who looked just as bloodied, but seemed mostly unharmed.

Hazel looked down at Reyna's armor, noticing a variety of dents that hadn't been there previously, as well as the odd angle her foot was pointing.

Frank put his hand on her shoulder, and Hazel stroked through Reyna's hair again before letting them take her away to tend to her, the same way they had tended to the other wounded.

"She protected our Queen. It was a risky, yet brave move." One of the Amazons told her quietly, her eyes speaking of gratitude and loyalty.

Hazel inclined her head and looked after Reyna.

Of course she had.

This was Reyna, after all.

Hazel took a deep breath, then turned towards Frank and hugged him.

Her boyfriend hugged her back with one arm.

"She's alive." He said quietly.

Hazel nodded.

"We are alive." She whispered, even though they had lost lives today.

Compared to what could have been, it still felt like a victory.

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Percy stuck his tongue out a little as he set a splint, pleased when the result looked rather presentable.

"Alright, that should do it. Want a sticker?" He offered and shook the little transparent box with stickers that had had never been offered to him before.

The boy, a twelve-year-old son of Demeter, looked at him as if he had personally offended him and his entire family just with his existence.

"No! I'm not a kid anymore!"

Hey, stickers were awesome.

Percy shrugged and let the boy go to Austin to fill out his form, then he looked towards Alec, who was still meant to supervise him.

"Can I get a sticker if they don't want them?" He asked hopefully, and Alec raised an eyebrow at him, as if trying to decipher whether he was serious or joking.

"Depends. Are you going to put them on every piece of furniture in our cabin?" Will asked as he appeared by Alec's side, and Percy put on an innocent expression.
"Maybe?"

"In that case, most definitely not. Alec, watch those stickers." Will declared, and Percy sulked as he put the box down again.

Fine, no stickers.

Alec looked after Will as he walked away again to talk to one of the other healers, then he opened the box and held it out for Percy, his expression telling him mutely to hurry up.

Percy snatched a sticker of a little shark and put it in the breast pocket of his scrubs.

Yay, a sticker!

Also, wow, these scrubs were sure coming in handy, and they weren't even half as uncomfortable as he had expected.

"You did a really good job on that splint, Percy. I think we can let you do those by yourself from now on. Next, we're going to check how much you remember of the ointments." Alec told him as he put the stickers away with a little wink, and Percy beamed at him.

He caught Will looking and tried to look innocent, but something about his boyfriend's expression told him he knew about the sticker.

Percy promptly looked away and followed Alec through the medic tent, deciding to act oblivious.

Then, he was quickly distracted by having to think about the various herbs that Alec had told him about the previous day.

Repeating what he knew felt weird, because he knew it didn't sound half as well-phrased as when Alec said it, but Alec didn't complain, instead nodding and letting him continue with a rather pleased expression.

"Yes, that's about it. So, now, how about a bit of quizzing?"

Percy hated quizzes.

It reminded him of all the teachers in his schools that had ordered him to the front of the class to ask him a variety of questions Percy had often not even understood entirely, much less comprehended. Which, in turn, had made him more and more nervous, and thus know even less, until he had become the laughing stock of the class and the teachers had dismissed him with that sigh that told him he was a lost cause.

"He doesn't like quizzes, Alec. Just let him explain what he knows." Will called over without even glancing their way, and Percy felt himself relax again.

His boyfriend might be strict regarding stickers, but he certainly was still looking out for Percy.

"Really? Oh man, why didn't you tell me? Well, alright then. Come, we'll grind some herbs. Now that Will has been released from the mortar-corner, we don't have anybody who willingly crushes these perfectly crushable herbs."

Percy followed him, watching how Alec inspected the various herbs that the Demeter kids had brought earlier.

"This is yarrow. You know it?" Alec asked, and Percy shook his head.

They had talked about a few herbs yesterday, but only the essentials, for the ointments and creams that Will or his siblings usually prepared, since they were also infused with Apollo's healing powers.

Percy also hadn't seen the herbs in question, merely seeing the already crushed versions or finished products while Alec had explained the process to him.

"We use it for tea, usually. There's many good combinations and uses for it. We tend to mix it
with horsetail or ribwort to help with the healing process of cuts or other wounds, same as frequent nosebleeds. Mixed with lady's mantle and/or raspberry leaves, we also like to give it to people with menstrual pains, since it helps relax. It also helps against weather-related headaches." Alec explained to him as he hung it upside down once more, probably to let it dry.

Percy nodded along, though he was fairly certain he wasn't going to be able to remember any of that.

"Yarrow. Tea. Mix with different herbs for better tea. Helps heal and relax." He repeated, and Alec clapped him on the shoulder, before showing him some more herbs.

It was interesting, but also a lot to learn.

Percy wasn't sure whether he would manage, but he was willing to try.

They ended up grinding some thyme, just so he had something to crush and Alec could explain the difference between crushing for tea and crushing for ointments to him.

Then, Alec let him help with the next step of preparing an ointment he had started on the day before.

Apparently, those took a while, and Percy was about to learn why.

Percy liked learning.

Percy also liked how overly dramatic Alec made everything sound as he showed him what looked like moldy porridge and explained just how awesome it was going to be once it was done.

His eyes hushed to Will when he felt his gaze on him, but Will was already looking away again with a smile, talking to Austin in a hushed voice as they looked over some papers.

Will had been tense throughout the morning, not having caught much sleep last night.

Percy felt guilty for not being there for them the way he should have been, but at the same time, he knew he couldn't have done anything to really make the situation any better.

Annabeth had fetched them after breakfast, so they could be present when Reyna was supposed to send her update, and Percy had already felt overwhelmed by the anxiety and dread coursing through him for the half an hour he had had to wait for the IM-message to come through.

He would have died if he had forced himself through an entire night of that.

Luckily, his boyfriends hadn't seemed upset in the slightest.

Percy watched Will for a little while as Alec kept staring into his pot of doom, noticing the way Will still looked rather grim, with his hand occasionally going towards his medic pouch.

He wondered faintly whether he was still thinking of his vision, or Camp Jupiter, or Reyna.

Maybe he still blamed himself for it.

Percy had tried to approach him tentatively about it again when they had been on their way here, but Will had seemed too distracted to really respond, so Percy had let it be.

Will had actually stood up to Kyle.

The realization was still as impressive as it was scary.

Percy had been shocked to realize that Will had practically been assaulted in his sleep, again, when Percy had been right there by his side and should have helped him somehow, but what had shocked him even more was the fact that he truly hadn't noticed a thing.

Anything could have happened, and Percy would have just sat there and let it happen.

Percy took a deep breath.
Then, he noticed Will doing the same, his expression looking…oddly resolved.

Percy frowned.

What was Will breaking his head over?

Somehow, it didn't feel like anything good.

"But yes, this is how it's done. I am tempted to let you do the rookie cream, but that takes two days of preparation before you can make the ointment, and it's not really durable or effective enough to really get used, so I think we'll just skip that." Alec tore him out of his thoughts and observing, and he looked back at Alec hurriedly.

"Rookie cream?" He asked, and Alec nodded and led him back to the herbs, showing him a ginger root and explaining all its various benefits, though Percy was more disturbed by how that thing looked, than what it was used for.

He quickly found himself busy once more with new tasks, too busy to really check on Will or pay any more attention to his expressions, especially when a whole bunch of wounded campers came in and Percy was supposed to handle one entirely by himself.

By the time he thought of Will's odd behavior again, Will seemed just as always once more.

He laughed, he smiled, he took care of his miniature-infirmary as if nothing had changed.

He even approached Percy and gave him a peck on the lips, before patting his breast pocket and saying 'I know you took a sticker, Percy. Which one is it, the shark?'.

At long last, Percy gave up, deciding he must have imagined it.

He still intended to talk to Will later, though.

Just to make sure he wasn't still blaming himself.

Percy knew how that felt, after all.

Putting on a smile once more, Percy focused back on his newest patient.

This one desperately wanted a sticker.

Percy did, too.

***

Dylan had to stop by the campsite first.

Exhausted and sweaty and gross, he couldn't care less about being found out or not, so he didn't have to pretend belonging there as he trotted past monsters and enemy demigods to the two currently in charge.

He wanted to get back to the Camp as soon as possible.

He had to let the guys know.

Heck, at this rate, he would even tell Annabeth, though he knew she would question his words much more than the guys would.

Dylan related the info of the reinforcements, as well as the shift in command, now that the other two kids wouldn't be coming back.

They took the news the same way they had before: By nodding and not paying him any more mind.

Dylan loved being dismissed like that.

He was wearing his oldest and grimmest hoodie, and his most torn pants and shoes, which made
traveling living hell, especially with the messed-up paths Kyle had ordered them to take.

He wanted to go ignored.

Why, then, had Kyle suddenly *shown interest in him*?!

Just the thought of his hands touching Dylan's face had him shuddering, though he tried to suppress it.

He couldn't wait to get into the shower later.

He couldn't wait until all of this was over.

Unfortunately, if he didn't get to the guys as quickly as possible, this whole thing was going to be over – but in favor of the wrong side.

Dragging his feet up the thin trail that led into some thick bushes near the Camp border, Dylan knew the drill.

He ducked low, pulled his hood over his head, and started crawling through the undergrowth, stopping every time his gut told him to watch out so he wouldn't get spotted.

He knew from his own fights at the Camp border that nobody looked over here, the area simply looking too crammed for anybody to fit through.

Unfortunately, little kids – and Dylan, with lots of practice – could fit through just fine.

Dylan wished he could just run up the hill and past the border and throw himself into Jason Grace's arms to tell him everything he knew.

Unfortunately, he was pretty sure he would get skinned alive by ten demigods at once in his current getup, because they wouldn't first check whether he might not be a camper.

So, he first had to get inside.

Then, he would approach one of them.

Or should he change clothes?

He halted, trying to analyze the response to that, but the feeling in his gut could best be described as 'mingled'.

Which…wasn't very helpful.

Great.

Did that mean he was going to get skinned alive either way?

His gut said no.

At least something.

Dylan sighed deeply, then forced himself through the narrow opening and onto the grass.

Inside.

He rolled over, then kept rolling until he was a safer distance away from the battle, hiding in a few more bushes to check whether anybody was near enough to spot him, should he come walking out of the woods.

Dylan had thought of hiding some clothes around here for this very reason, but due to the kids also moving back and forth in this immediate area, he had decided against it to avoid being found out at the wrong time.

Now, he wished he had.
'Be careful, son.' His mother whispered in his mind, and Dylan stilled.

What was she talking about?

He checked his surroundings again, but there was nobody around…right?

Wrong.

Dylan felt his skin crawl as he felt a presence, though he couldn't see it.

The feeling of eyes on him filled him, and he wondered whether he could get away with looking behind him.

However, the feeling of the gaze was a familiar one, and Dylan decided that letting it show that he felt it wouldn't do him any good.

Kyle.

But why?

Never mind why, how?!

Oh gods, was he possessing somebody, just to spy on Dylan?

Had Dylan given him any reason to suspect anything?

No. Of course not.

Dylan closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Kyle was just curious.

Curious about Dylan, so he decided to spy on him a little, just to see what he was doing.

Dylan didn't even want to know why Kyle was doing that.

Instead, he tried to focus on what he was supposed to do now.

He couldn't go running to the guys now, not with Kyle watching.

Who knew what he would do?

The monsters were already on the way here, and if Kyle knew Dylan was a double agent, he would change all his plans on a whim and render everything Dylan had gathered so far useless.

He would also tear the entire camp down in a heartbeat just to watch Dylan bleed.

Dylan looked towards the cabins, wondering whether he could get away with just going to his cabin and acting asleep for Kyle to lose interest – but then he realized he wouldn't be able to do that, either.

He was supposed to be from the campsite, not Camp Half-Blood.

Not to mention, he had told Kyle he was a son of Hermes, so what would he do anywhere near the Eris cabin?

Oh gods, he was so screwed.

Dylan still felt the gaze on him, but he knew there was no way he could just turn around and leave.

Not when he was already inside the Camp.

He would have to report to Malcolm.

He would have to go and act like he was going to kill Calypso.
Dylan swallowed thickly, praying that Kyle would lose interest any moment now.

His gut told him something along the lines of 'Good luck with that'.

He snuck out of his hiding place and moved towards the cabins, though he wasn't moving towards his own.

Making sure not to be seen by anybody, especially not now, and not in this outfit, he snuck around the cabins towards the Athena cabin, though he wasn't crazy enough to go knocking on the front door.

Instead, he moved around the silver-gray building until he could spot the shed behind it, which posed as their armory.

It was the meeting spot Dylan had found when he had gone investigating, all that time ago.

Before, all one had to do was walk inside and operate a simple mechanism near the wall, easily overlooked by anybody who didn't know it was there, but smart enough to not draw the attention of the Athena kids to it.

Now, their armory was half-demolished, so the meetings still happened in there, but under the pretense of damage assessing or 'looking for something salvageable'.

Dylan bent down to pick up one of the small pebbles, then he tossed it up at the window, knowing it was the one near Malcolm's bunk.

Since Malcolm knew he would meet Kyle today, he was bound to be in there, while the other children of Athena would undoubtedly be out and about, what with their brains currently needed everywhere at once.

Dylan didn't wait for a response or a sign that the son of Athena had heard him, instead moving right towards that shed and inside, the door not even closing completely.

He was still feeling watched.

It seemed unnervingly risky of Kyle to go this far.

Whatever it was he was possessing, it had to move across Camp, and Dylan had already gathered before that the things possessed did feel it to some extent.

If it was a human…

No, it wasn't human.

An animal? Something small.

Dylan didn't look around to check for any animal nearby, knowing it would make him look suspicious or paranoid, and neither would get him anywhere.

Instead, he stared down at his bag.

If Kyle wasn't going to lose interest…

Dylan couldn't possibly attack anybody.

Not with a dagger that held enough poison to kill a god.

But then, what was he supposed to do?

What if Kyle was watching him for exactly that reason? To watch him 'succeed' as he had predicted?

Dylan felt his skin crawling as he realized that this seemed eerily close to the truth.

Dylan also decided he didn't want to know what the rest of Kyle's reasoning was.
He had to think of something.

Footsteps approached the shed, and Dylan knew it was Malcolm, but for the sake of pretense, he slipped back into the shadows hurriedly to 'hide' himself, just in case it might be anybody else.

The next moment, Malcolm stepped inside the armory with a loud sigh and a show of closing the door in exasperation, as if it was a pain to come here.

It was the perfect way of showing others Malcolm had no shady business in here.

Gods, Dylan was never going to get over the fact that Annabeth Chase's brother was the spy.

He had always been nice, even to Dylan!

He was the one who had always taken over the Athena cabin whenever Annabeth had been in school; it would have never occurred to Dylan that he of all people was the one betraying them.

However, he was. Dylan had long realized his reasoning, too, though it was of no importance now.

"What did he say?" Malcolm asked immediately as Dylan showed his current hiding place.

The feeling of being watched intensified, indicating whatever it was Kyle was using was closer now.

Undoubtedly within hearing range.

Could Kyle possess bugs? No, it had to be something bigger than that.

Something more like a…mammal.

Great, that meant Dylan couldn't even bend the truth to buy themselves more time.

Damn it.

"He said it's time. For the murder." He replied, and making himself sound scared wasn't very difficult, considering he was terrified of the current turn of events.

Malcolm straightened up immediately, even though he was already much taller than Dylan, anyways.

"Good. I am ready. I will not fail him." Malcolm said confidently, and Dylan's stomach knotted up the same moment he had an idea.

Oh gods, he couldn't believe he was doing this.

Dylan sent a prayer to all the gods that this wouldn't backfire.

"But...there was a change of plan." He added, and his mind was working almost feverishly now, going through possible conversations and discarding them again, picking the words he needed, the tone he needed, everything he needed to get this through.

At the same time, he felt sick and sicker, knowing what he was doing could very well cause much more damage than if he walked into the medic-tent wielding a poisonous blade.

Because, if he was the one wielding it, he still had a certain level of control over it.

"A change of plan? What is it?" The son of Athena asked, though he sounded skeptical, as if believing Dylan was lying.

Dylan couldn't blame him.

To this day, he would never understand how Malcolm of all people had bought his confidence-act and not questioned why he was suddenly the messenger, when he was meant to be a camper.

It had been so comically easy, to stop the little boy and tell him it had been decided that he would
take over from here on out, just to tell the same lie to Malcolm later.

They had both bought it.

The entire campsite hadn’t blinked an eye when Dylan had walked into their midst for the first time.

Malcolm had questioned him exactly one time, in the very beginning, looking him up and down and asking him whether he wasn't one of the campers.

All it had taken to throw him off was looking him dead in the eye and saying 'Yeah, so?'.

It had been so easy.

Even fooling Kyle had been easy, if one thought about it.

This, however? This wasn't easy.

This was anything but easy.

Dylan tried to control the shaking of his hands as he pushed them into his bag, knowing a little bit of shaking was necessary to be convincing, but too much would alert Malcolm to something being off.

His hands closed around the sheathed dagger, and Dylan forced himself not to raise his gaze to stare at the man he was about to give it to.

Instead, he looked down at his bag, licking over his lips in an obvious sign of nervousness as he shifted slightly.

"Yes. He…he says I have to do it instead. He gave me this…this dagger. I'm supposed to do it." He told him and showed him the dagger, and Malcolm froze in front of him.

"Why do you have to do it?" He asked, his voice sharp, just as Dylan had predicted.

He swallowed and dragged his gaze up from the dagger, to the boy in front of him, allowing some of his fear to show in his eyes, though it was for entirely different reasons than they thought.

"Well, he said you…you…"

"I what? Speak up." Malcolm snapped at him irritably, and Dylan was forcefully reminded of Kyle.

Who knew, maybe Malcolm wanted to be like him.

Dylan had to wonder whether Malcolm knew what a monster Kyle was.

But it didn’t matter.

Only this mattered.

"He said you wouldn’t be able to do it. So, I have to do it. I will kill her and prove my worth to him. He said you have to kill Will Solace, instead. I will kill the goddess.” He said, forcefully pushing an edge into his voice as he tensed his body to appear determined and strong.

Malcolm stared at him.

Dylan knew he would laugh seconds before he did.

"Don't make me laugh! You? Tiny, weakling you? That was a good one, man. Now, what did he really say?"

Dylan didn’t laugh. He also didn’t respond.

There was no need to.
Malcolm would see the answer in his eyes.

Malcolm *did* see it in his eyes, his smile immediately sliding off his face.

"You're not joking."

Dylan pulled the dagger against his chest.

"No. I will do this. You had your chance."

Malcolm looked ready to lynch him on the spot, and now, Dylan was also holding the dagger as a form of self-protection.

As long as he had the dagger, Malcolm couldn't kill him with it, after all.

"Give me the dagger." Malcolm said in a low, threatening voice.

Dylan still felt the intensity of Kyle's gaze on him.

He knew Kyle was mad right now, knowing how this was going to end.

Dylan would disappoint him.

However, he would do it in such a way that wouldn't force Kyle to act immediately.

Malcolm didn't know anything of the planned attack on the Camp; he was clueless about everything important that could have made Kyle strike.

"No!" Dylan exclaimed and clutched the dagger to his chest, and Malcom immediately grabbed for it.

Dylan wished he could just let this accursed thing go and be done with it.

Instead, he put up as much of a struggle as he could, even when both of them ended up hitting the ground.

He struggled, he pushed, he even bit Malcolm's hand when he tried to take the dagger from him, all so it would look like a real fight.

"No! He told me to do it! This is against his orders, Malcolm!" Dylan cried, and it was a risky thing to say, because it could very well make Malcolm reconsider.

However, it would also draw Kyle's attention to the son of Athena, instead of Dylan, because it emphasized that Malcolm was the one breaking the rules here.

Technically speaking, Dylan had done exactly as he had been told.

Malcolm was the one acting out.

The son of Athena halted for a moment, and Dylan dared to loosen his hold on the dagger as he sat up and looked at him, clearly expecting this to have been the end of it.

The next moment, Malcolm shoved him backwards harshly and snatched the dagger from him.

"Don't be stupid! You could never do it! I will kill her. I will kill them both."

Dylan pushed himself up somewhat with a small sound, partly out of pain, partly out of genuine fear.

Then, he forced himself to keep pushing.

"But you can't! You will be caught! He said he wants it to happen today, you can't possibly get this done before sundown, Malcolm. I can! I can sneak in, and-…"

Malcolm laughed again, unsheathing the dagger to look at it, as if he was checking whether it was the real deal.
Apparently, it was, because he sheathed it again with a satisfied look and a sardonic smirk in Dylan's direction.

"I can do anything, Dylan. I'm the son of Athena, I always have a plan. Now, if you excuse me, I have a goddess and a fool to kill. Unless you want to join the list, of course."

Malcolm wasn't talking like Malcolm anymore, and Dylan didn't have to fake his fear as he moved back a little.

Kyle would see it as cowardice, yes, but he would also not expect anything else in a situation like this.

Dylan was safe.

Malcolm, however, was not.

Dylan watched the son of Athena step backwards, then the boy left, leaving Dylan behind by himself.

He could still feel the gaze on him, and now, he did look around the shack with a shaky breath escaping his lips that was only partly acted.

"What am I going to do now?" He asked at nothing, just so Kyle would hear it.

Dylan pushed himself up and held his ribs with a grimace, then winced when he pushed himself up to his feet, just to groan and slump forward again.

He was just a simple son of Hermes, after all, who was living in a campsite with scarce portions.

Obviously, he wouldn't take well to being punched by a much older, much bigger, and much better-fed guy from Camp.

Dylan faked some sobs as he wrapped his arms around his legs.

The tears came easier than they should have, considering that boys didn't cry.

However, the thought of what Malcolm could do with that thing was enough to make anybody cry, Dylan was certain.

"How will I prove myself to him now? He's going to think I'm such a coward! How could I have been so stupid?!" He vented to himself, hands now in his hair, and the gaze still lingered and lingered.

Dylan was going to go crazy, at this rate.

'Soon.' His mother whispered in his mind, and Dylan was about to bawl, when the thought crossed his mind that Kyle didn't like emotional outbursts of any kind.

He wouldn't want Dylan to bawl.

He would want Dylan to get up and fight.

Dylan lifted his head, letting the last of his tears fall before he wiped them away stubbornly.

Then, he pushed himself to his feet, clenching his teeth and looking towards the armory door with what he hoped was a look of determination.

"I'm not gonna give up now." He whispered resolutely.

And, as he moved towards the door, he finally felt the sensation of Kyle ebb away, felt the gaze disappearing, felt himself being able to breathe again.

'He's gone. Stay safe, son.' Eris whispered, then she, too, disappeared to leave him to himself.

He continued walking until he was out of the door and around the corner, first checking whether
the coast was clear before he dared to move towards his cabin.

Out of curiosity, he turned his head to glance behind the armory, roughly where he must have been with Malcolm.

There was something small on the ground, first running in circles frantically, before laying very still.

When Dylan stepped closer cautiously, he realized it was a squirrel.

It breathed a few more times in a rather erratic manner.

Then, it stopped.

It was dead.

Dylan stared at it.

Then, he turned and ran for his cabin to get changed and think of something to save Calypso and Will from Malcolm, as well as the rest of the Camp from the attack tomorrow.

He really had to talk to the guys.

***

Will sat by Clovis' side, wishing he could just put his hand on his forehead and heal him back to health.

Instead, he had his hand on Clovis', feeling. Searching.

But there was nothing but fragments that couldn't be mended. Not by him, anyways.

Will sighed, then looked towards Calypso, who was sleeping again.

She was sleeping a lot.

Of course, she was. The border was under constant pressure, after all, and thus so was she.

Will wished he could help her, too.

He heard two of his siblings chattering, while Alec was making tea illegally with that water boiler they shouldn't be using anymore, ever since it had exploded and scorched the wall of the infirmary.

Will wondered faintly how that thing had even ended up in the medic tent, but also had an inkling the person behind it would have thought it was 'nostalgic', rather than an indirect murder attempt.

"You could have just gone with the others to eat lunch, Alec." He called over without looking up, and his brother promptly started lamenting about the noise, people, his missing tooth, and that tea tasted so much better when it was enjoyed in peace and quiet.

Will let him ramble, instead focusing back on Clovis.

At least, he wanted to, when he felt a sudden shift in the emotions around him.

Determination.

Anger.

Intent.

Malice.

Will shuddered and found himself getting up, hand moving into his medic pouch and closing around his scalpel instinctively.
Somebody entered the tent.

Will knew those footsteps, knew the values, but he couldn't immediately place them.

"Guys, I just remembered something really important. Who's up to the task of fetching me something from Cabin 13?" He called to his siblings, who immediately jumped at the chance, thanks to Hades' apparent visit while Alec had been there.

Even Alec piped up, forgetting all about his tea.

"Oh, I could- oh, guess we have a new patient. Oh man, that means I gotta stay." Alec sulked when he spotted the newcomer, but Will needed them gone. Now.

A thought occurred to him, and he made a show of signing some of the papers, before writing down something on the last one and picking up the whole stack.

Then, he held it out to Alec, still not looking around to not give the intruder reason to suspect too much.

"Actually, can you bring these to Percy? I want you to teach him what to look out for on these reports; it's something that he hasn't learned yet. You two, I need you to get me one of my books. It's on the desk. About poisons. Can't miss it." He babbled, though he couldn't care less about what book they ended up bringing, as long as they left.

The malice intensified, but there was also a faltering.

Alec groaned, but took the stack of reports, while Will's siblings cheered and high-fived and rushed from the tent.

He waited until they were a safe enough distance away, before he allowed himself to relax.

"What do you want?" He asked, seeing no reason to beat around the bush.

The person took another step closer, and Will turned around, his hand once more firmly around the scalpel in his bag, ready to face whoever-…

**Malcolm**?

For a moment, Will thought his eyes were playing tricks on him, tempted to rub at them or blink excessively as he stared at the blonde, but the emotions were unmistakably coming from Malcolm Pace, and Will would be a fool to lower his guard.

"Surprised?" The boy asked, and Will tensed at the undertone in his voice.

Low. Aggressive. Dangerous.

"To be honest, yes. What are you doing here, Malcolm?" Will tried in his best conversational tone possible, considering the situation.

"Oh, I'm injured. Thought you would like to patch it up." The boy replied with a shrug, but it was obvious he was lying, and it was obvious he knew that Will knew it was a lie.

"Sure thing. Why don't you take a seat over there, and I will take a look at you in a moment?" He offered and waved towards the chairs with his free hand.

Malcolm's lips twitched into a small smile, even as his eyes hushed from Will's to something behind him.

"I fear I can't do that. You see, I'm putting everything on the line right now. Can't have that go to waste, can I now?"

Will's hand twitched.

Calypso.
He wanted Calypso.

Which meant…

"What has Kyle promised you for your efforts?" He asked, and Malcolm laughed.

It was an eerie laugh that reminded Will a little of Kyle, himself.

Who knew, maybe Malcolm was being possessed.

Will wouldn't wish it on anybody, but at the same time, he also wanted to believe Malcolm simply wasn't being himself right now.

"Why would I tell you?"

So Will could stop him from doing anything he would regret, maybe?

"Oh, this is too simple. And there, he thought I wouldn't be able to do it." Malcolm said in an amused tone as he stepped forward, and Will remained very still, aware of his surroundings, and aware of his current confinement with Malcolm in front of him and Clovis' bunk behind him, same as the table to his left.

However, he was also aware of the fact that Malcolm would have to pass him to get to Calypso, and he wasn't going to let that happen.

"That you wouldn't be able to do what, exactly?" He asked to keep the conversation going, but Malcolm didn't seem very interested in talking, his hand pulling out a dagger that had been sheathed at his side.

Will's alarm bells started ringing, something about the sight of it sending chills down his back, though he couldn't remember ever seeing it before.

"I had it planned out so nicely, it's almost a shame. You know, I considered the possibility that you might sense that I'm not injured, that you might even sense that something was wrong…but I would have never guessed that you would be dumb enough to send everybody else away." Malcolm drawled as he eyed his dagger with a smirk, before looking back at Will.

"I had this whole plan that would have had you begging on your knees. He would have appreciated it." He continued, and Will swallowed as he saw the shift in Malcolm's stance, the way his eyes gleamed with determination as the malice and intent in the room seemed to nearly peak. "But it doesn't matter. I will simply kill you like this."

Malcolm rushed forward, and Will reacted, narrowly avoiding the blade as he ducked beneath it, scalpel slashing out in front of him to cut across Malcolm's chest.

Not a deep wound, just enough to draw blood and force Malcolm to become aware of his actions.

But the son of Athena didn't stop to consider his actions.

Instead, he snapped his hand around and the dagger came rushing towards Will's shoulder.

Will instinctively pushed himself sideways out of harm's way, then rolled over to get back to his feet, dodging one of the bedside tables.

He half-expected Malcolm to go for Calypso, but he didn't, instead he rushed towards Will like a man on a mission.

Will evaded the blow again, his scalpel slashing across Malcolm's face.

Malcolm hissed, but otherwise didn't let it stop him.

"Stop this! What good will it do if you kill me? What good will it do if you kill any of us?" He tried to reason, but Malcolm only huffed out a laugh and charged again, this time smacking the scalpel clean out of Will's hand with that dagger, and Will was forced to move back further to escape him.
"I will prove my worth to him! I will kill the both of you, then he will realize I'm his best man!"
Malcolm exclaimed, and Will flinched when he felt something pressing against his back.

Alec had moved the cupboard with the bandages again.

How had Will not noticed that?!

Malcolm's dagger came rushing for his chest, and Will steeled his nerves for what he was about to do.

His hand snatched Malcolm's wrist, pushing it back with all he had as he moved the rest of his body forward, whirling around until his back hit Malcolm's chest, followed by his elbow in his ribs.

Malcolm gasped in pain.

"Drop the dagger!" Will ordered sharply, but Malcolm exploited his move by snaking his arm around Will's neck and shaking his other hand off his wrist, dagger immediately moving to stab him.

For all his earlier talking, he didn't seem interested in allowing any sort of delay now.

A loud whistling noise had them both whirl around, but Will identified the source quicker, already throwing himself at Malcolm to disarm him.

Alec's water boiler kept whizzing as Malcolm and Will struggled for the dagger.

Malcolm was taller than Will, and he wasn't afraid to use that to his advantage, but Will's legs were stronger.

Kicking at his knee at a near-perfect angle, he brought him down, but even though Malcolm cried out, he didn't stop trying to stab Will, as if driven by the devil himself.

The dagger slashed through the air, inches away from Will's face, and this time, he realized what it was about that dagger that unnerved him so much.

Poison.

It was laced with poison.

Will swallowed as he realized this had to be the same poison that was still coursing through Calypso's veins.

Suddenly, avoiding that blade became a lot more important than Will would have liked.

Their balance was off, and the next moment, they were on the ground, each fighting for the upper hand while Will constantly had to watch out for the blade.

Malcolm was a son of Athena; obviously, he was more skilled with weapons than Will could ever dream to be.

Fortunately, Will was the best when it came to evading blows, though.

They were rolling from one side to the other in the narrow space, Will constantly missing the blade by inches, while Malcolm became more and more frantic, not even caring where he struck Will anymore.

He just wanted to strike him once.

"Hold still, you dumb healer!" He exclaimed and tried to pin him to the ground again.

Will struck him in the jaw, and the dagger fell from his hands, clattering to the ground right next to Will's head.

He whirled around, snatching it and tossing it across the room before Malcolm's hands clawed at
his hair and shoved his face into the hard and unforgiving ground.

A knee dug into his back and Will gurgled out a cry of pain, then Malcolm took off after the dagger.

Will snatched his leg, holding him back with all he could.

Malcolm cried, tripped, then cursed and went down, though his hands still stretched out for the dagger, which was scarily close.

Will immediately pushed himself up and forward.

He didn't make it past Malcolm, but when he went down, he managed to shift and kick his legs forward to shove it further away.

Malcolm was already struggling back on his feet, so Will tried the same thing, just to get punched in the gut.

He gasped and wheezed a little, then caught something glinting out of the corners of his eyes.

His scalpel.

Malcolm was moving, and so was Will, but they went in opposite directions.

Will towards the only weapon he had, and Malcolm towards the only one he needed.

Unfortunately, Malcolm was faster.

Will tried to grab his scalpel as he whirled around, but he was still on the ground, and Malcolm was somewhat standing.

The son of Athena kicked the scalpel right out of his hands again.

Well, shit.

Malcolm sneered.

"You've always been a thorn in my side."

Will gazed up at the boy he had known since he had first come to this Camp.

Always nice, always willing to lend a hand, always taking care of his cabin whenever Annabeth wasn't around.

"Shame, I always liked you." Will replied honestly.

Footsteps came running towards the infirmary, only audible to Will's ears, but it wasn't Percy, and he couldn't see how anybody else could possibly help him right now.

Malcolm raised his poisoned dagger, and Will wondered faintly whether his guys would think he had done anything self-sacrificial this time, too.

If they did, he hoped they would forgive him.

"No! He told me to do it, and you will not take that away from me!" A voice yelled as the footsteps entered the tent, and Will was shocked by the voice, shocked by the words, and endlessly confused by the dread and determination filling the room, even more profound than Will's or Malcolm's emotions.

Malcolm froze, his expression turning to one of utmost fury and hatred.

Will caught a glimpse of Dylan behind him, standing in the entrance and shaking like a leaf, but his expression was one of resolve.

"You will not take away from my glory! I will not let you!"
And with that, the fool went into a fighting stance, as if readying himself to come for Malcolm. Malcolm immediately turned his back on Will to rush at Dylan, instead.

His entire expression and demeanor spoke murder as he raised the dagger with a growl to spill Dylan's blood, rather than Will's. 

*Oh no.*

Will held his breath as he pushed himself off the ground with as much speed as he could muster. One step.

Two steps.

A leap.

He punched Malcolm in the kidneys to make him falter, then used all his strength to strike the back of his head, before they both hit the ground.

The dagger clattered to the ground.

Will sucked in a deep breath, laying on top of Malcolm, his hand at the ready to strike again should he move.

He didn't.

Will focused on his values, then let himself slump on top of the boy in relief. Unconscious.

*Thank the gods.*

He raised his head to look at Dylan, who was picking up the dagger with a look of contempt.

Will narrowed his eyes.

But there was no malice coming from Dylan, no 'I will get that glory'-vibe. Nothing.

Just a scared boy.

"I am so sorry." Dylan whispered, and Will slowly pushed himself up, still eyeing him warily. "So, you are the spy?" He asked, but Dylan shook his head.

Will didn't believe it.

"Messenger. Malcolm was the spy. I hoped to speak to you before he attacked you, but I guess he thought I would try take the dagger from him again if he waited too long."

Will eyed Dylan skeptically, but there seemed to be no lie in his words.

Since he still held the dagger, Will wasn't going to trust him too easily, though.

Dylan seemed to read his thoughts, his eyes fluttering down to the blade in his hands, before the contempt crossed his features again.

For a moment, it looked like he was holding the dagger out to Will, but when Will didn't react, Dylan let it fall to the ground once more.

Then, he gave it a soft kick in Will's direction, making his intent obvious.

"Take it. I definitely don't want it."

Will didn't take his eyes off Dylan as he reached down to take the dagger, but Dylan made no move to attack, instead lifting his hands to show he was no threat.
Will moved to take the sheath from Malcolm's side, and both he and Dylan exhaled in relief once the poisoned blade was out of sight.

"Explain." Will told him as he put the dagger on the table, before bending down to collect Malcolm and heave him onto the closest chair with backrest.

"I wanted to help protect the camp, so I went searching for the spy. I found their secret meeting spot and realized Malcolm was the spy, using the younger kids as messengers. They can get through the undergrowth near the pine tree. I decided to pose as the new messenger to gain inside information and to control what intel would reach Kyle." Dylan rambled immediately, as if he had prepared for this.

He probably had.

Will waved him over, and Dylan helped him tie up Malcolm.

"I got taken to their base, where the giants are. He has all the giants on his side. I had to tell him that Percy caused the storm, but I didn't tell him about his arm injury or that he wasn't fighting anymore. I swear, I tried to give him as little info as possible. I'm not a traitor. You have to believe me." Dylan's voice became scared once more, but Will just kept tying up Malcolm.

"I believe you." He replied without preamble, his thoughts already straying as he tried to wrap his mind around what Dylan was telling him.

He could understand the boy's fear.

His story sounded extremely far-fetched.

Unfortunately, Will could tell he wasn't lying.

"They are coming, Will. You warned Camp Jupiter, didn't you? I was there earlier, at their base, and he was livid. He sent all his skisés to search the cities for the Romans, and then, he sent the rest of his troupes here. They will be here by nightfall. Tomorrow morning, he plans to take the Camp down." Dylan told him, sounding frantic and breathless as he started fidgeting next to Will, moving his hands together like he was trying to clap.

Will watched him, the news sinking in slowly.

Somehow…he wasn't even surprised.

He wasn't quite sure what it was he was feeling as he checked Malcolm's ties once more, before turning to take Dylan's hand to calm him down a little.

"Breathe. It's going to be okay."

"Nothing is going to be okay! There are giants going after the Romans as we speak, before they're going to come here. His forces are already arriving in small numbers at that campsite and they will be complete by nightfall. He gave me that dagger to kill Calypso so there would be no border protection. He ordered Malcolm to kill you because you have become too great of a threat to him with your visions. He's going to find out I betrayed him, and then he's going to get me murdered by those Shadows of his, and he's going to destroy the Camp, and he's going to kill Billy and Fae, and you, and…and…" Dylan vented, and tears appeared in the corners of his eyes, though he tried very hard to keep them in.

Will reached out to comfort, pulling the boy into his arms.

He understood what Dylan was saying.

He knew the meaning behind his words, too.

Yet, he still failed to be surprised.

"It's okay to cry. Let it out." He told Dylan quietly, and Dylan promptly broke down and started sobbing, clinging to him like the terrified child that he was.
"I'll figure something out, Dylan." He assured him as he stroked over his back in long, soothing
strokes, but Dylan just kept on crying.

"Even if we strike now, there will just be more coming, and he will know I've told you. What am I
supposed to do now? He checked on me earlier, what if he tries to do it again? He's not there now,
I am aware of that, but what if he comes back later and finds out?"

Will kept stroking over his back, feeling an eerie calm inside him as he realized what he would
have to do.

"I won't let him get to you, Dylan. You're safe here. We have to let Annabeth and the others
know, though. Do you know whether there's any other spies here? Or any of those messengers
nearby that could alert him?" He asked Dylan, and the boy hesitated, before asking himself that
question again.

Will didn't question it, simply continuing to pour some of his warmth into the boy to soothe him.

Dylan started relaxing slowly.

"No. Not right now. They are… busy. Newcomers. The first of the troupes are arriving. They are
needed." He told Will, and Will could feel a faint hint of power rushing through Dylan, the
sensation similar to the one he had whenever Percy dried them after a shower or let them breathe
underwater.

"Good. Percy should be here in a moment, same as Alec and my brothers. I will send them to
fetch Annabeth and my other two boyfriends. Is this okay with you?"

Dylan nodded, then pulled back to rub at his eyes hurriedly to get rid of any trace of tears.

Will let him compose himself and pushed himself up on his feet, the pain still pulsing through his
body, though he knew it would be okay.

His siblings would patch him up later.

His eyes fell on the dagger on the table, while his hand moved to his medic pouch.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

It seemed he had come to a decision, after all.

***

Alec was running.

Running as fast as his feet would carry him, his heart in his throat.

He was still slower than Percy.

Percy was right ahead of him, and even though Alec knew Percy used to be one of the slowest
runners at Camp, one couldn't see any of that now.

Will.

Alec was so, so stupid.

How had he not gathered that something was off?

How had he not been able to read Will's expression?

Why had he taken his sweet time getting to the dining pavilion?

Why had he taken so long with his lengthy explanations about report-making?

Why had he taken so long to give the stupid papers to Percy and let him look them over?

Why hadn't he looked them over on the way?
Then he would have seen Will's plea of help so much sooner…

What if they were too late?

What was happening?

What could possibly be so bad that Will would write 'HELP!' across the last paper?!

It could be a joke. Something like 'Help, get me out of work early, sweetheart'. Alec knew in it heart that it wasn't.

The moment Percy had seen, he had jumped up and rushed from the pavilion, and Alec had followed immediately once he had spotted the message, too.

Why hadn't Will said anything?

Why had he sent him away if he needed help?

*What was happening*?!

Was it Malcolm?

Was Malcolm a threat?

Oh gods, and Alec had thought the son of Athena had behaved a little oddly.

Had thought that Will suddenly seemed weird.

But he had left.

He had left Will.

And he had been gone for so long.

*What if they were too late*?

Michael and Lee flashed across his mind and he tripped, but he managed to catch himself again as he pushed on, practically flying across the Camp grounds as they ran for all they were worth.

He couldn't lose Will, too.

Not Will.

He had never been that close to Lee or Michael, but he was close to Will.

Will was the one who had always been there for him.

Who had gotten him through his homesickness when there was no home for him to return to.

Who had gotten him into playing the guitar, showing him the ropes and giving him something fun to do when things got rough.

Who had helped him through every panic attack and taught him how to help others.

Who had helped him find his place in the infirmary, helping him help other people the same way Will had helped him.

Percy reached the medic tent before him.

Percy also unleashed all his powers at once.

"Will!"

Alec yelled it, Percy growled it.
Water surged up from all over the medic tent.

Percy searched for the threat, while Alec searched for his brother.

"Percy, no! I'm okay, it's okay! I'm safe!" Will called and rushed forward from where he must have been sitting behind the table, out of immediate sight.

Alec breathed out a thank you to the gods and rushed to meet him.

Percy beat him to it.

The water was still around them, and Percy was still on high alert and ready to take down any threat, yet when his hands cupped Will's face, it looked unimaginably gentle. Treasuring, even.

"Will..." Percy breathed out, and it sounded relieved and broken and scared, all at the same time.

Then, Alec collided with them, and he could sense Percy's initial tensing and the tug of power, but Alec cared more about Will's wellbeing right now than the threat to his own life.

"Will! Will, what happened?! I am so sorry, I took so long, I'm so sorry!" He bawled the moment he had his arms around his big brother, and Will hugged him back tightly.

"Shh, it's okay. I'm alright. Dylan helped. It's okay." Will explained as he stroked over his back, and Alec tensed.

"Dylan?"

Dylan was this weird boy. The blonde one that had talked shit about Will and the guys before.

Percy growled again when there was movement, and both of them looked at Dylan, who was slowly stepping out from behind the table, too.

He looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

Alec didn't trust him.

Percy didn't, either.

"He saved my life." Will said, his hand on Percy's arm, and Alec looked from him to Percy, then back.

Then, he noticed that Will's cheek was swelling.

"You're hurt."

It was a statement, not a question – and, the moment Alec realized this, he also noticed the other telltale signs of more bruises and injuries, all over Will's body.

"I'm-..."

"Don't say it." Percy cut in, and there was still a growl in his voice, and the water was still at the ready around them.

Alec watched Will avert his face with an odd look.

He didn't like it.

When he glanced at Dylan, he noticed Malcolm was tied to the chair, his back to them.

"Did he hurt you?" He heard himself asking in a low voice, and saw Percy tensing all over again when his eyes fell on Malcolm, too.

"He's no threat anymore. Percy, calm down. I have some really, really bad news, and I need you to help me. Both of you." Will said in a serious tone that dragged both their gazes back to him, though Alec felt more like walking over to that chair and beating the hell out of Malcolm.
How dare he touch Will?!

"What do you need?" Percy asked immediately.

Will still looked at Alec, first.

"I need you to get my boyfriends and Annabeth. It's very important. Don't talk to anybody else on the way, and don't say anything about Malcolm or Dylan." Will told him, and Alec promptly clenched his fists.

Why was he sending him away? Again?

Why didn't he let him help here?

His eyes hushed back to Malcolm's head, wanting to punch, to hurt, but then he took a deep breath and suppressed the urge.

Will never wanted him to use violence.

Beating up an unconscious person wouldn't do any of them any good, either.

Helping Will in any way possible had to be Alec's top priority.

"You'll let me treat you once I'm back." He insisted, because this wasn't up for debate.

Will gave him a small nod, then turned towards Percy.

"Percy, please. I'm safe. Let go of the water. You're still unstable with your powers."

Alec turned away with a last glance towards Dylan, who kept his head low and was awfully silent and still, considering his usual loud and fidgety behavior.

"Touch my brother and I'll skin you alive." He told him quietly, and Dylan's gaze hushed up to his, then away with a faint nod.

Alec wasn't satisfied, but he'd take it.

With mixed feelings, he left to fetch Will's boyfriends.

***

"What do you know about all of this?!" Percy growled the moment Alec was gone and he lost his hold on the water, walking towards Dylan to corner that piece of shit and get him to talk.

"Percy, don't. He saved me." Will cut in and held him back by the arm, and Percy's gaze snapped back to him.

He wanted to yell, to scream, to rattle Will and hold him and check for worse injuries than the many bruises forming on his boyfriend's face and arms.

Instead, he forced himself to take another long and steadying breath.

"What were you thinking, sending your brothers away."

It wasn't a question.

Percy was about done with his questions.

Will's grip on his arm tightened.

"I felt Malcolm's intent, Percy. He would have hurt them unnecessarily."

Percy clenched his teeth.

"He would have killed them, then Will. The dagger is laced in poison. Will wouldn't have stood a chance if there had been any distractions." Dylan said quietly.
The first thing he had said so far.
Percy was at his throat in an instant.
"Percy!"
"How do you know?" Percy asked in a low voice, everything inside him still twitching.
Everything inside him still angry.
Still scared.
Will.
His Will.
Percy could still feel the cold dread that had washed over him the moment he had found Will's 'message'.
Why?
Why always Will?
Why like this?
Why in that one moment Percy hadn't been around?
Percy should have been around.
Percy had failed him.
"Percy! Let. Him. Down." Will ordered sharply, appearing next to him again, and Percy became dimly aware that he was literally holding Dylan up by the throat.
He reluctantly put him back down and let go of him, watching how Dylan immediately lowered his gaze and adapted a more submissive stance as if to make Percy drop his guard.
He didn't.
"Dylan is a friend. I trust him. Calm down. I'm sorry for worrying you. I'm sorry for all of this. I did what I thought was best. I'm sorry." Will tried next to him, his hand back on Percy's shoulder.
It felt like he was trying to placate him.
Percy didn't need to be placated.
Percy needed to rip Malcolm and Kyle and everybody who ever tried to harm his boyfriend to shreds.
"If you calm down and take a seat, Dylan and I can explain everything." Will suggested.
Percy took a deep breath.
Then, he gave a small nod.
He didn't take a seat, of course.
"I'm going to make you some tea." He told him, then walked over to the herbs – though he didn't let Dylan or Will (or Malcolm) out of his sight.
Will let him go, instead putting his hand on Dylan's shoulder and apparently checking on him with an apologetic look.
Dylan only shook his head slightly and still refused to look up.
The two had a quiet conversation, too quiet for Percy to overhear, but he kept his eyes on them
anyways, while rummaging through the baggies of dried herbs for what he needed.

There was something in Will's gaze that he didn't like.

Percy couldn't put his finger on it just yet, but there was something there that didn't fit the situation, and he didn't like it one bit.

He liked the current situation even less.

Dylan glanced towards Percy, then quickly at the ground again.

Percy scrunched up his nose, still unwilling to lower his guard.

But then, Will shot him a reprimanding look, and Percy let out a displeased grumble before caving in and turning away from them to turn on Alec's 'super-secret and definitely functioning' water boiler.

When he turned back around, he found Dylan still in the same position as before, looking mildly disappointed yet resigned.

Will was busy doing something at the desk next to Malcolm's tied-up form.

Percy looked down as he put together the mix of herbs Alec had made him write down before.

When he looked back up, he found Will holding a dagger in his hands and inspecting it.

Percy promptly slammed his hands on the table.

"Put that down this instant!"

Will and Dylan both jumped, looking back at him with wide eyes, before Dylan's gaze hushed to Will's, and Will's expression turned to one of defiance.

"I need to analyze the poison in order to find a cure, Percy. This is the same-…"

"I don't care. You're not touching it. Put it down, or I'll take it off your hands. I can control poison, if I truly want to." Percy growled, and Will sheathed the dagger again reluctantly, not looking happy in the slightest.

"You…need a stabilizer. For your powers. An anchor. You overexerted yourself and gave your powers too much reign over yourself, so now you're in the same position as di Angelo. He needs light to keep the darkness at bay. You need an anchor." Dylan whispered, and if his words didn't explicitly refer to Percy, he would have thought the boy was talking to himself.

"What?" He asked, the growl still in his voice, though he was taken aback, all the same.

"Anchor. You need. An anchor. I'm sorry. I just…thought I should…mention it." Dylan mumbled, drawing up his shoulders and shrinking away from them a little.

Percy's hands clenched around the mug he was holding for Will.

Then, he took a deep breath and loosened his grip.

What was he doing?

Dylan was just a kid, and Will had already said they could trust him.

While Will might be irresponsible and self-sacrificial, he surely wouldn't lie about that sort of thing when it could affect other people than just Will alone.


He had no idea where Dylan was getting any of this from, but he might as well take his input.

"Jason." Dylan replied in the same hesitant way, and Percy frowned, eyes hushing to the entrance
to the medic tent.

But Jason wasn't walking in, so he was a little at a loss.

"Jason?" Will asked, a small frown on his face.

Dylan shrugged.

"And di Angelo. Both. Di Angelo to ground, Jason to hold him there."

Percy had no idea what he was saying, but Will was nodding thoughtfully, so he apparently understood.

"For how long?" He asked, and Dylan hesitated, gaze hushing to Percy and away once more.

"Until he can face himself. Di Angelo needs to show he is the one in charge and bend the shadows to do his bidding again. As long as he is scared of them, he will need the light to protect him and keep them at bay. Percy needs to come to terms with himself and what he has become, only then can he regain control." Dylan explained without looking his way, and Percy hated being talked about when he was right there and couldn't understand a single thing.

"I know full well who I am and what I've become." He spat, then turned his back to them when the water boiler started screeching rather unhealthily, announcing it was finished boiling Will's water.

There was silence behind him, but he was certain they were exchanging looks, all the same.

He gritted his teeth and focused on his task.

He could control the water just fine.

It was just…a little aggressive, he supposed.

But nothing too bad.

And not nearly as bad as Nico's problem with the shadows.

Percy wasn't fading.

Percy's eyes fell on the scars across his hand, knowing full well they were much paler again.

He shook the thought off and made Will his tea.

Somebody stepped up to his side, and he looked sideways at his boyfriend, instinctively pushing his hands into his pockets.

Will's expression told him that he knew, anyways.

Of course he did.

He knew everything.

Except how to keep himself alive and safe, apparently.

Will leaned against the cupboard and let out a deep sigh.

"What tea are you making?" He asked, but Percy knew he was just trying to change the topic.

"Didn't you want to explain to me why you sent your siblings out and got into a fight with Malcolm that could have ended in your death?" He retorted, and Will promptly averted his gaze.

"No point. The others will be here any moment, it would be stupid to start over again. Also, I want you away from boiling hot water when we have that talk. It's not pretty. The fight with Malcolm is nothing compared to what Dylan told me."

Percy's gaze promptly hushed back to Dylan, who was staring at the ground once more.
"And how does Dylan know what he's talking about, exactly?" He asked pointedly, and Dylan flinched a little, while Will was back to glaring at him.

"Dylan took the role of a double agent to gather information from the enemy, risking his neck for our sake. That's how he knows what he's talking about." Will replied, and Percy wanted to feel sorry, but at the same time, he was distracted by the way Will said the word 'enemy'.


Will gave a small nod.

Dylan kept his gaze on the ground.

Percy scrutinized him, trying to picture some kid like Dylan walking up to Kyle with the intent of betraying him.

It sounded…unlikely. Far-fetched.

It sounded like a lie.

However, when Dylan looked up and met his gaze with a forcefully resolute one of his own, Percy realized instinctively that it was the truth.

He also realized something else, already moving towards Dylan at a determined pace, while Will let out a deep sigh behind him.

"Percy, don't…"

"I'm not going to hurt him." He said dismissively, then stopped right in front of Dylan, studying him up close.

He had never paid attention before, but Dylan was blond.

Blond, and now that his hair was a little longer than usual, one could definitely tell it was beginning to curl a little.

Dylan had blue-grey eyes.

There was a faint splatter of freckles across his nose.

Percy looked at the kid in front of him and just knew what Kyle must have thought.

Dylan, for all his differences, looked a lot like a washed-down version of a much younger Will.

"Did he touch you?" He asked quietly, though it wasn't a question he thought he would ever ask anybody.

Dylan's head snapped up, his expression one of horror, his face quickly blanching.

"No! No, he...he didn't..." Dylan exclaimed, but there was something else there as he averted his gaze and brought his hand up to his cheek.

Percy knew the gesture.

It was like tracing a touch that wasn't there anymore.

"Not yet, at least." Dylan whispered, and Percy took a deep breath, before moving his arms around the boy.

Dylan was trembling.

Will drew a sharp breath behind them, but didn't speak, and Percy decided to give him a moment to himself as he held Dylan.
He was really nothing but a kid.

"We're not going to give him the chance." He promised, though he knew it wasn't his promise to give.

Dylan let out a shaky laugh, though he didn't fight the hug.

"Come tomorrow, we're all going to be dead, anyways." The boy told him, and Percy didn't know what that meant yet, but he was certain it had to do with whatever news Will was going to share with them soon enough.

"Then we'll keep you safe until we die." Percy replied with a shrug.

Will showed up next to him, holding out the mug of Percy's tea to Dylan, who took it hesitantly.

"Nobody is going to die." Will told them both in a confident, determined voice.

It was an odd voice, with an odd undertone.

Percy studied his boyfriend's expression, once more noticing that gleam in his eyes that he couldn't yet place.

He still didn't like it.

Percy took a deep breath, then watched Dylan drink the tea.

Hopefully, the coming explanation was going to shed some light onto all of this.

Percy looked back at Will.

But his boyfriend was already looking away from him, his eyes on the dagger on the table, his hand on his medic pouch.

Percy didn't like it.

***

"My brother." Annabeth repeated, still in the same tone as before.

"Yes. He felt like he wasn't being…well, valued enough, I suppose you could say." Dylan tried to explain as best as he could, but he was fidgeting again, and he knew Annabeth didn't believe him when he was fidgeting.

He couldn't help it, though.

Everything was tingling, he was feeling hot and cold, his mind was a buzz of fear and dread at the thought of tomorrow, and he was stuck in the medic tent explaining to Annabeth of all people asking why the spy was a spy.

He had known she wouldn't believe him, which was why he had wanted to approach the guys. _Only_ the guys.

He should have known that they would want Annabeth around for the whole story.

Dylan had given it.

 Twice.

The second time around, he had even remembered some minor details he hadn't thought of before, but while di Angelo and Jason Grace had taken it with a nod and a polite 'Please continue', Annabeth had immediately cut in.

She had cut in a lot.

He could understand, of course.
At the same time, he wished she would just stop, because he was tired, he was exhausted, he still reeked of sweat and dirt, and they were all going to die tomorrow morning if these people didn't think of something soon.

"Valued enough." Annabeth repeated.

She reminded him a little of a parrot.

Di Angelo shot her a sour look, and Dylan appreciated it, but at the same time, he decided to just get this over with.

Leaning forward on the bunk he was sitting on, he took a deep breath and looked her straight in the eyes.

"Your brother knows Kyle from back when he lived here. In Malcolm's eyes, they were something like friends, and Malcolm was interested in more than friendship. From what I gathered, there was nothing serious going on between the two, but there must have been something that gave Malcolm hope. He clung to that hope until Kyle left the Camp whenever he did." He explained, and it felt weird to talk about this, to phrase what Dylan had concluded after hours of pondering the matter in the safety of his cabin the day he had found out Malcolm was the spy.

There was a difference between realizing these things for himself, and sharing them with Malcolm's sister.

Especially since he had never gotten any confirmation on any of this.

For all he knew, it could be wrong. He could have misinterpreted.

Dylan's gut told him he was right.

Annabeth stared at him, then she leaned back with a deep breath.

"When Kyle came back to Camp for Will, Malcolm was as confused as he was thrilled, and he tried to approach Kyle. I don't know the details, I just know it must have happened. And Kyle must have given him enough attention to fuel the feelings Malcolm was still harboring for him." He continued, and Annabeth's face scrunched up again as she held up a hand.

Di Angelo rolled his eyes.

Jason buried his face in his hands.

Percy stared up at the ceiling.

"That's all nice and well, but Malcolm isn't stupid. He wouldn't go against the entire camp just because he has a bit of a crush on an asshole." She argued, and Dylan looked down.

"That's what I said, though. He didn't feel valued enough here. It all fell into place like puzzle pieces. Malcolm is older than you, yet he is always second-best to you. He didn't want to feel jealous of you, but with time, he did, anyways. He took care of things while you were gone, and people clearly appreciated it, but he wanted more than that. He wanted to be more, and be recognized for more. Kyle realized that as well and played right into that for his own gain. He fueled Malcolm's dislike towards you and the Camp, told him what he already assumed deep inside. He played with his fears, until Malcolm readily believed that the Camp would never be able to give him what he truly wanted. Only Kyle could do that." He explained, and noticed Will growing rigid next to him.

"But..." Annabeth started again.

"No. He's right. That's what he did with me, too." Will cut in, and Dylan promptly understood his tension.

Alec made a small sound, but otherwise, the medic tent remained eerily silent.
Dylan cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Malcolm became the spy in order to prove himself. Since he couldn't prove himself to the Camp, he was intent on proving himself to Kyle. Partly because of his belief that he had to prove himself, partly because he was hoping Kyle would start reciprocating his feelings if only he showed how useful he could be."

"This is so messed up." Di Angelo whispered, and Dylan whole-heartedly agreed.

His eyes hushed back to the tied-up form of Malcolm, still knocked out.

Then, he frowned.

"He's going to wake up soon." He said without thinking, and Alec promptly got up and left the half-circle around Dylan as he moved over to Malcolm.

"I'll take care of that."

"Don't hit him with the-..." Will said hurriedly, but then they already watched Alec whack Malcolm across the head with a giant book about what seemed to either be herbs or poisons, Dylan couldn't tell.

"Just sedate him, Alec." Will grumbled irritably, but Alec only huffed and sat down on the desk, book at the ready.

"Nah, this will work just fine."

Dylan sighed.

"Kyle is going to kill Malcolm. I...I think he's checking in on him. Not yet, but...I'm not sure. He knows Malcolm got caught, he already expected him to fail. He knows Malcolm doesn't know anything valuable, but he'll still kill him for defying him." He said quietly, and everybody turned grim again.

"How do we save him?" Jason asked, and Dylan hesitated, trying to find a possible solution.

"If he can't possess Malcolm, he'll try and possess somebody else from Camp, No, the campsite. He doesn't know who already had the lessons and who hasn't, and he doesn't want to alert anybody. He wants to stay low. If we...hide Malcolm somewhere far enough away without anybody else knowing of it, and keep him knocked out, that might help? I'm not sure." He mumbled, something still nagging at him, but he couldn't think of what it was.

"Or we let him die." Alec put in, and Will shot him a reprimanding look, while Annabeth practically glowered.

"Not an option. If anybody gets to kill my brother for betraying us, it's me. Definitely not that monster, though.""}

"Then put him somewhere safe and keep him knocked out. But actually knocked out, not asleep. Else he'll meet the same fate as..." Dylan started, then trailed off, merely nodding into Clovis' direction when he found he couldn't speak his name.

They didn't need to look to know who he was talking about.

A tense silence filled the tent, before Will took a deep breath and looked up.

"Alright, so we're hiding him and keeping him sedated. Alec, would you-..."

"Oh, hell no! I'm not gonna protect him, not after he tried to kill you, Will! Or did you forget that?!" Alec exclaimed, and Dylan put his face in his hands.

This was going nowhere.

Why were they still arguing about Malcolm, as if that was their biggest problem?
Did they not realize what was happening at the campsite at this very moment; what Kyle's forces were getting ready to do?

"How about we put him in—..." Nico spoke up, and Dylan's head and hands snapped up.

"Wait!" He cut in, and everybody stared at him.

Dylan ignored their confused and skeptical expressions, instead trying to make sense of what his gut was suddenly warning him about.

"Nico, your location is great. Don't tell anybody except Alec. Alec, you'll go, because Kyle won't even think about possessing you. You won't harm Malcolm because you know how much it means to Will." He babbled, and found Nico looking at Jason in confusion, though the blonde only shrugged.

"But I...he...that...ugh, fine! When shall I move him there, your majesty?" Alec relented with a disgruntled sigh and crossed arms, but Dylan was already looking at Will.

"You have to make sure to show him the proper dose for the sedation. He'll have to keep doing it for a while."

Will gave a nod and got up without a word, already waving Alec over to one of the cupboards.

"Okay, that takes care of one problem." Dylan sighed, and Annabeth looked at him with a disgruntled look.

Nico shot her a warning glare immediately, before very obviously nudging Jason in the side.

Jason made a face, then cleared his throat.

"I would suggest checking out the campsite before deciding on anything just yet. If there's already new troupes arriving, striking immediately might be the best option to keep the numbers down, compared to waiting it out. But it would also increase the risk of Kyle finding out, which could only lead to more problems."

Dylan nodded along, already trying to figure something out, but he could only think so fast.

"Yes...but I can't go there right now. There's...something we have to do first, something..." He tried to pinpoint it, leaning forward again to put his face in his hands and focus, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Something had to happen first.

He would have to leave the Camp, but later.

Why?

He wasn't sure, but it wasn't a good feeling, and he had a hunch that he should enjoy not knowing.

"It's okay. I will check out the campsite. I've been there before." Jason offered, and Dylan nodded absent-mindedly, his focus suddenly shifting to Will.

Will, who was wrapping up his whispered conversation with Alec, his expression grim and his hand on the pouch at his side.

Dylan stared at him.

The something that still had to happen...that had to do with Will.

Dylan stomached that info, then wondered what he would have to do in order to help him.

Then, he turned to look at Annabeth.

"Are you willing to work with me?" He asked, though he knew the answer, and she looked
displeased and miffed, but he knew she knew it, too.

"Alright. My cabin?"

"Yes."

"Very well. But know that I don't like how you kept these powers of yours a secret up until now. Not to mention your whole 'spy'-act. You should have never put yourself in such a dangerous position." She lectured him, but he had already gotten the answers he wanted, so he didn't care.

Jumping up, he nodded towards Nico and Jason, who took deep breaths and got up to give each other quick pecks before turning into opposite directions.

Jason moved towards the exit, Nico towards Alec and Malcolm.

Dylan glanced towards Percy, who was sighing and staring up at the ceiling with a lost look that Dylan could understand only all too well.

Then, he looked back at Will.

There was…something.

Will was planning to do something.

Dylan could feel it.

Dylan could also feel that, whatever it was, it was the turning point.

Will's actions would determine what would happen next.

Dylan didn't like it.

Mostly, because he could also sense that, whatever it was, it wasn't anything good – and it would come at a devastating cost.

He looked at Will, and Will turned his head to meet his gaze.

For a moment, Dylan wanted to warn him and tell him not to do it.

But it wasn't his decision to make.

Dylan gave him a small nod in goodbye.

He moved after Jason to hold him back and tell him about a better way back to Camp to avoid detection, even if the son of Jupiter intended to fly.

Then, he signaled Annabeth that he was ready to leave.

Annabeth followed, but her expression was neutral at most, and Dylan was more distracted by the faint sound of Will talking to Percy and assuring him everything was going to be alright.

He waited until Jason was gone, then Annabeth moved, and he followed.

The Athena cabin. He had to go to the Athena cabin.

Why, he wasn't sure yet, but it was important.

Same as it was important to plan with Annabeth.

They wouldn't be able to come up with a battle plan that would secure their survival, but they might be able to find something else, something that would at least reduce the losses, or an escape route, or anything else.

Something was nagging at the back of his mind again.

There was also this uneasy feeling flowing through him, like a whispered warning that he couldn't
yet understand.

He grabbed his bag a little tighter, then focused back on the matter at hand.

It didn't matter what would happen next.

All that mattered was that the Camp would make it.

Dylan had to focus on that.

Will was right – everything was going to be alright.

They would make it so.

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Jason was moving as silently as possible, hiding behind the same tree he had used the first time when he had found the campsite.

With his back pressing against the wood, he looked down at the enemy demigods, young and old ones alike, in the midst of hundreds of monsters.

Jason swallowed, then tried to sneak closer to get a better overview.

The number of monsters at the border hadn't changed throughout the day.

It had given him the faint hope that their enemy might be running out of fighters, thanks to their good defenses and Percy's storm.

Now, Jason knew better.

Jason tensed when he saw more monsters coming from a trampled path, by the looks of it just arriving after a longer journey.

So, Dylan was right.

They were already arriving.

Jason hadn't doubted him, but he couldn't deny a part of him had still hoped it wouldn't be quite as bad as Dylan had made it sound.

It was that bad…

Hell, who was he kidding, it was even worse than he thought it would be.

It was far from nightfall, and the 'campsite' was already swarming with enough monsters to overrun them easily, should they all attack at once.

Jason was tempted to attack, to call upon the sky and try to take out as many as he could in one go, but he was aware it would be a fruitless attack.

He had been fighting since the early morning hours, without sleep, and his thoughts were with his comrades from Camp Jupiter.

Even if he used all his left-over power right now, he would only aggravate the rest of the monsters and send the Camp to its doom, while losing his life without sense or reason.

Instead, Jason fell back, taking the route Dylan had advised him to take, though flying through the dense branches was far from pleasant.

However, he got back to Camp unspotted and alive, so he guessed that was all that mattered.

Landing further away from the border, he moved towards Nico, who was waiting for him at the bottom of the hill with a grim expression.

"And?" He asked immediately, though he seemed to already read the answer on Jason's face.
Jason shook his head.

"A whole bunch of them just arrived. Everything is swarming with monsters. Even if we were to attack right now, we still wouldn't stand a chance." He spoke clearly, but his voice was heavy with defeat.

They had all been hoping they could somehow strike the enemy before there were too many, and then keep the numbers down, despite the risks. It had been their last hope.

Anything seemed better than the alternative, after all.

Now, even that hope was crushed.

Nico looked devastated for a moment, then his expression changed to one of anger and defiance.

"No, there has to be a way! We still have Calypso's protection; we're not entirely defenseless!"

Yes, but Calypso was still knocked out – she had even slept through Malcolm's assault and their rather loud argument and following conversation with Dylan and Annabeth.

It was obvious that the border protection was taking too much of a toll on her; how was she supposed to handle even more?

"New Rome had Terminus, and they still had to evacuate." Jason said quietly, even though he didn't want to.

Nico flashed him a dark glare, and he immediately regretted his words..

"Where would we go? There's nothing we can do but stay and fight. I still say we should strike now, when they're still arming up. That way, we can take down as many as possible before retreating back within the border, and when they get their reinforcements, we will have ours, too." Nico's argument wasn't without merit, but they had already had this talk.

"Annabeth said it wouldn't be wise to strike without a plan." Jason reminded him, and Nico stomped his foot on the ground.

"Annabeth didn't notice that her own brother was spying on her for months, so why do we always have to listen to her, anyways?! This is madness! We sat around waiting without doing anything when Reyna and the others were going to get attacked; now we're supposed to do the same thing again?!"

He was loud, he was agitated, but, most of all, Nico was scared.

Jason knew.

Jason was scared, too.

He put his hands on his boyfriend's shoulders, stopping him from moving and making him look up at his face.

"We're going to fight, Nico. But not right now. Not when we barely have any people. Let Annabeth and Dylan plan, and let them decide when to arm up and get ready for battle." He told him.

He knew Nico didn't want to hear this, but he also knew he would listen anyways.

Nico grimaced and pursed his lips, but then he sighed and gave a defeated nod.

"Fine. But know that I don't like it."

"None of us do." Jason said and looked towards the border, where their team was fighting with some other brave warriors from the Camp.

There was nothing they could do to stop what was coming.
Jason would let their team know later.

They deserved to know, after all.

Jason looked back at Nico, who was staring at the ground with a pained expression.

He wished he could offer some sort of support.

Something more than 'We'll figure something out'.

"Let's go back to Percy and Will." He suggested instead, glad when Nico gave a small nod and promptly moved in the direction of the medic tent.

He knew Nico was as worried about those two as Jason.

Then again, how could they not be?

Will had gotten **attacked**. By **Malcolm**.

When Alec had come running, Jason had **just known** that something had happened to his boyfriends, immediately abandoning his spot in the middle of the battle.

The dread he had felt at that moment had been both devastating and sickening.

Jason knew he had already been running for the medic tent long before Alec had even told him what was going on.

Alec had explained on the way.

Jason hadn't understood nor cared, all his focus on getting to his boyfriends.

He hadn't been able to think.

Hadn't been able to **breathe**.

He had only been able to regain his bearings when he had reached the medic tent and had both Percy and Will pressed against his chest, reassuring himself that they were alive.

Only then had he allowed himself to pant and suck in frantic breaths that had been shakier than intended.

Then, he had checked them for injuries.

There hadn't been any on Percy.

But, **gods**, Will had been littered in them.

Will bruised easily.

Jason had forgotten.

Jason wouldn't forget again.

Nico had been right by Jason's side, just as frantic and worried as he had been.

He had already been there when Jason arrived.

Jason had been the last to reach the medic tent.

Alec had met his other siblings, the ones that Will had also sent away, and they had fetched Nico and Annabeth.

They had been closer.

Jason had been the furthest away.
Jason wondered how he was ever supposed to leave again if his guys got into danger every time they were alone.

Alec had healed the bruises on Will's body and patched him up.

Nico had been the one holding onto Will all the while, looking pale and sick.

Percy had been the one bringing them tea.

Jason had never had tea before, and he didn't want to have any ever again.

But he had emptied his mug without a word, since Percy had been the one making it.

Percy, who had sometimes looked lost, sometimes angry, but mostly defeated and exhausted.

Jason reached out for Nico's hand as they passed the construction of the new Big House, glad when his boyfriend threaded their fingers together without hesitation.

"Do you… think we can go to the cabin?" He asked reluctantly.

There was a lot happening right now.

They could very well be attacked by tonight instead of the morning.

They could be dead by the morning.

Jason knew they should be ready to answer the call for battle, but at the same time, everything inside him yearned to retreat.

Recharge.

Get his boyfriends together somewhere else, somewhere private, somewhere safe.

Somewhere where they could enjoy the little moment of peace he knew he would be able to create for them.

But now wasn't the time for cuddles and comfort.

Now was the time to plan, to get ready, to fight.

Nico didn't look at him, though Jason knew he had heard his question, and was undoubtedly thinking the same as Jason.

"I don't know. I would love to, but I'm not sure we can." Nico replied in a slow, cautious voice, and Jason suppressed the urge to press the matter.

Now wasn't the time for selfishness.

He would have to make do with what he had.

They entered the medic tent, and Jason felt a rush of relief when he found his beautiful, wonderful boyfriends in the far back on one of the bunks, safe and sound.

He had to make do with what he had, and by the gods, Jason was so glad he still had them.

Jason felt like crying, but he knew that wouldn't do any of them any good, and Will's siblings didn't know what was to come; he didn't want to worry them.

They would find out soon enough.

Once Annabeth and Dylan came to an agreement, the Camp would know.

"You need to do the-…" Will started, but then Austin cut in.

"We said you have to rest, not order us around from the corner, you jerk!"
They didn't know what had happened, for the sake of keeping Malcolm alive for as long as possible.

For the moment, Will's siblings believed Alec's water boiler had exploded and hurt Will.

It was a flimsy lie, and Jason knew as children of Apollo, they knew it wasn't the truth, but they had accepted it readily, knowing their brother's injuries were real.

They had immediately prohibited him from working, though that didn't mean he was allowed to leave.

Jason knew they wanted to keep an eye on Will, to make up for not being there the one moment it mattered.

Unfortunately, Jason also wanted to keep an eye on Will, and Percy, and Nico, away from prying eyes.

He watched how Nico zigzagged through the room, past medics and bunks and the tipped over cupboards they were currently fixing.

He followed slowly, both wanting to hold his guys until the world fell apart, but also unwilling to hold them because, for once, Jason wasn't sure he could keep himself together.

Last night, they had heard of the attack on the Roman Camp.

This morning, they had waited feverishly for a life sign from the Romans.

At noon, Will got attacked by the spy and a poisonous dagger that would have killed him without any of them being able to help or protect him.

Tonight, the enemy campsite would have more forces than they could ever hope to beat.

Tomorrow, they would fight a battle of the likes Jason would have never wanted to imagine.

Nico sat down between Will and Percy, an arm moving automatically around the latter to keep him close, because Percy's eyes were dull again, his expression rather blank.

Jason remembered when Percy had told him about wanting to just…take them and put them on a ship to sail far away, where they could be safe.

Back then, Jason had thought it was a nice thought.

Now, he wished desperately that Percy had just done it when he had the chance.

He also wished he had supported Percy and that crazy but glorious idea.

Jason stood in front of them and gazed at them, taking in the fading bruises on Will's face, Percy's defeated posture, and Nico's frown as he stared off into space, undoubtedly still trying to find a way.

A way to safe them.

A way to survive.

A way out.

Jason didn't know what to do.

Usually, he had a vague idea.

Now, there was nothing but the yearning for things he knew he couldn't have right now.

He wanted to comfort. To hold.

He wanted to give Will a chance to vent, to let out what he had to be keeping inside, because nobody faced a poisonous dagger in the hands of a former friend and just moved on as if nothing
had happened.

He wanted to reassure Percy, make his eyes gleam and his expression brighten again, no matter what he would have to do to make it happen.

He wanted to let Nico breathe, give him the chance to relax and leave their impending doom be for a moment, so he could recharge, so he could smile, so he could regain the hope Jason could see dying in his eyes with each passing second.

But he could do none of that here.

And their cabin was so far away.

Jason would never let them out of that cabin again.

He knew he wouldn't be able to let go of them, because once he did, they might slip through his fingers and be gone.

But Jason also knew that he could smother his guys the entire rest of the day, leave no inch between their bodies, keep them all to himself and shut the rest of the world out – and it still wouldn't be enough.

Death was always around the corner for demigods – heck, for everyone.

But there was a difference between knowing one could die any moment – and knowing they would die.

Jason knelt down in front of his boyfriends and reached out to hug all three of them, pulling them against him.

Will's siblings kept talking around them, chatting amiably as they collected papers and items off the floor and fixed whatever had been damaged.

They had no idea.

Meanwhile, Jason was trembling as he suppressed the tears and held his guys.

They held him back.

"We'll find a way." Nico whispered.

But he hadn't seen Kyle's forces. He could still believe the 'maybe it's not all that bad' that Jason had so desperately clung to before.

"It's going to be okay." Will reassured him quietly.

But they always said that, and it was becoming difficult to believe those words.

Percy said nothing, and Jason believed him the most.

"Can we go to the cabin?" He heard himself asking again, unable to help it.

"Sure." Will said readily, and Jason was both relieved and unnerved by Will's continuous calmness.

No, it wasn't calmness.

But it wasn't detachment, either.

Jason wasn't sure what it was, but it didn't comfort him.

If anything, it scared him even more.

"Guys, I'll see you later, okay?" Will called towards his siblings as he struggled to get up, the process a little difficult since Jason was still clinging onto them.
Jason ever so reluctantly let go, his body feeling tingly and restless, and the lump in his throat only made breathing even harder than it already was.

Percy looked at Jason, and Jason tried to look composed, to look confident, because he had promised he would be there for Percy at all times and keep his spirits up no matter how difficult it may seem.

He was pretty sure he failed.

But Percy didn't say anything, instead getting up with Nico and reaching out to take Jason's hand, since Will walked ahead so they could follow.

Jason wanted to look towards Will's siblings to bid them goodbye, but they were still chatting so merrily, oblivious to the happenings outside Camp, and Jason couldn't bear the thought of changing that with his undoubtedly haunted expression.

So, he followed Will.

First out of the tent, then past the Big House, then the still-poisoned lake, towards the cabins.

Towards their cabin.

Jason held open the door for them, only able to calm his racing heart when all three of them were inside.

He locked the door, just because he could.

Then, he had his arms around his boyfriends, and they held him back, and he was pretty sure Nico was crying because he could hear sniffing, but he didn't pull back to check.

"It's going to be okay." Will reassured them again, the only truly calm one, because even Percy's heart was racing as he held Jason's shirt in a death grip, forehead pressing into his chest.

"How? We don't even know whether Reyna and the others are still alive! You heard Dylan! That freaking monster sent his Shadows after them! They're bound to find them, no matter where they're hiding, even with the help of the Amazons!" Nico promptly vented and pulled away from them to rub at his face harshly.

Then, he sniffled again.

Jason pulled him back into the hug.

"They'll be okay." He tried, and Nico huffed loudly, followed by a small hiccup.

Any other time, Jason would have smiled.

Now, he merely held them.

Percy was still quiet, and still pressing his forehead against Jason's chest.

Jason wished he had more hands, then he could stroke over their backs, hold them better, do more.

But this would have to do.

Will was looking away again.

Jason turned his face back towards him determinedly.

Nico hiccupped again.

Jason nudged them towards the bed.

"No cuddling. We have to be ready. No time for sleep." Nico immediately put in, his voice thick and his nose running as he tried to shoot Jason a pointed look, which got lost in the many tears escaping his eyes.
Jason cupped his face to brush them away, still walking him and the other two towards the bed.

"We’re cuddling." He announced, and Nico looked like he wanted to complain, but then he hiccupped and climbed into bed, anyways.

He was the first to wrap himself around Jason, closely followed by Percy, who clung to his back like it was all he had.

Jason controlled his breathing.

Controlled his trembling.

Controlled the rising panic that seemed like a whirlwind in his chest.

Will was missing, but he appeared a moment later, climbing over Percy to straddle Jason's thigh, even though he was laying on his side.

Jason didn't understand, looking up at him in question.

Will looked…sad.

Sad, and guilty.

But there was nothing for him to feel guilty about, and Jason hoped that he knew that.

Warm hands touched his face, before Will's lips pressed against his lightly.

It was warm. Warmer than usual.

Jason didn't have to open his eyes to know Will was glowing faintly.

"Preserve your strength." He said quietly, thinking of the battle to come.

Then, he remembered the countless monsters and felt his heart clenching in his chest.

They wouldn't stand a chance.

They could try, but Jason had been in enough battles to know what was possible and what wasn't.

Even if they had double the fighters, double the armor, double the weapons…then they might be able to challenge those at the campsite right now.

But there would be more.

And they didn't have double the fighters, didn't have enough armor, barely had any intact weapons…

Will's hands stayed on his cheeks, still warm and undoubtedly glowing, and Jason put his own hand over Will's, letting him know it was okay.

If he already used his powers, he should use them on Nico and Percy, instead.

They needed it more than Jason.

He opened his eyes to look up at Will, just to feel a tear running down his cheek.

He tried to wipe it away, but then another one already joined the first.

And then, just like that, Jason was crying.

He tried to stop, tried to compose himself, his fingers threading together with Will's to pull them off his face gently.

But Will kept healing, and Jason kept crying, shoulders shaking and sobs escaping his lips.
His sobs became louder, and he turned his face away, grimacing when both Nico and Percy pulled away.

He tried to hide in the pillow, but that didn’t stop him from shaking and *bawling*.

Will was still straddling his thighs, but he wasn’t touching him anymore.

Nico did.

Nico was stroking through his hair and sobbing right along with him, forehead pressing against the side of Jason’s head.

Jason hadn’t cried like this in a long time.

A very long time.

He did cry sometimes, but he did so quietly, or when he was alone, away from others who depended on him for support and comfort.

He didn’t bawl and shake like a leaf.

But now, he did.

Percy’s hands found his back, his touch feeble and extraordinarily gentle, before he moved his arms around him, shifting until he held Jason the same way Jason usually held him.

When he rubbed at his face again, he risked a glance up at Will, just to find him with teary eyes as well.

"It’s going to be okay.” His boyfriend promised again, and Jason wanted to nod and shake his head at the same time.

Of course it had to be okay. They had won so many battles, they had to win this one, too.

If they didn’t, they would die.

All of them would.

And when had they ever let the bad side win before?

But at the same time, such thoughts meant nothing when one knew there was an entire army of monsters just waiting to slaughter them.

Jason didn’t argue.

Instead, he kept crying, and this time, it were his boyfriends who comforted him, instead of the other way around.

It felt good. It felt terrible.

It felt relieving. It felt constricting.

Jason kept crying.

Will leaned down, slowly lowering himself on top of him as he embraced him as well, and this was exactly what he had wanted for them, just in an entirely different way.

Jason cried until he forgot what he was crying about.

Then, Percy left the bed to get their photo album, mutely telling Jason to look at it with him.

So they did.

Jason started crying again quietly when he realized just what was going to happen tomorrow, and what it meant.
There was no way he would be able to protect his boyfriends against those forces.

Percy let his head fall against his shoulder, and he could feel something wet seeping through his shirt moments later, even as they continued filing through the pages.

They were going to die.

And Jason couldn't think of anything to stop it.

All he could do was face that army and go for as long as he could.

Jason moved his arm around Percy and swallowed thickly, intent on looking through this album and if it was the last thing he did with his boyfriend.

Chances were, it would be.

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Will sat at their bedside, looking at his boyfriends as they laid in bed, though only Jason was truly dozing.

Percy and Nico had their eyes closed, but they were wide awake, each following their own thoughts.

"I have to go." He said quietly.

It wasn't a question.

It wasn't an explanation.

Percy opened his eyes and gave him a long, sad look.

Then he closed them again and swallowed, but Will knew he wouldn't stop him.

"Where?" Nico asked as he sat up and looked at him, his expression alone telling Will he knew this wasn't just a mere errand.

"I promise I'll be back." Will told him, though it didn't answer anything.

Or maybe it did.

Nico looked at him with the same look as Percy.

"What will you do?" He asked, but Will couldn't tell him.

If he did, he knew Nico wouldn't let him.

It was murder.

It was mass murder.

It was slaughter.

Will shook his head.

Nico kept staring at him.

But he wasn't stopping him.

"Why do you always do this?" Nico asked him, his voice a mere whisper.

Will looked away, unable to look him in the eye.

"This is the last time. I promise."

Nico didn't say anything, but Will could hear the shaky breath he exhaled, and that was answer
enough.

He stood up and took a deep breath.

But there was no way to prepare himself for what he was about to do.

"You said that about your self-sacrifices, too." Nico whispered behind him, a feeble try to make him stay, if only a little while longer.

"I tried to reach out to Percy." Will replied, and Percy tensed, before he rolled onto his side, his back facing Will.

Will tried not to think of how this would be the last thing he would see if his plan backfired.

This could be the last moment with his boyfriends.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"I have to do this, Nico." He insisted.

Nico didn't fight him.

Nico only looked at him with that lost, sad expression that made Will want to crawl into bed with him and beg for forgiveness and kiss that expression away.

But he didn't.

If he didn't do this, they would all die.

This was the only way.

Will could sense it, same as he could sense the vision that was just at the edge of his mind, as if waiting for the right moment to strike.

Will wasn't sure he wanted to see what it would show, but he wasn't fighting it, either.

"What is it that you have to do, Will? What can you do?" Nico asked, and he didn't sound bitter.

He sounded like he wanted to negotiate with Will, the despair and fear palpable in his voice and face.

Will couldn't reply.

He shook his head again helplessly, his lips a thin line.

Nico’s eyes teared up as he gazed at him, even though they were still rimmed red from his crying earlier.

If Will didn't do this, then all those fears that had his boyfriends crying would become reality.

The battle Kyle had shown him would become reality.

Will moved to reach out to his boyfriend, but Nico already pulled back further, shaking his head at him and taking a few shaky breaths.

He didn’t speak again.

He didn’t stop him.

Will stood next to the bed, wishing he could give them one last kiss each, just in case.

But it would be too much of a goodbye, and he would never be able to leave if he didn’t do it now.

"I'm sorry." He said into the silence.
There was no reply.

Will wanted to hover.

Wanted to talk.

Wanted to fix before his actions could destroy.

But he didn't.

Instead, his hand settled on the medic pouch at his side, checking it was there.

Then, he turned around and left.

It was nearly nightfall.

He had to do it now.

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"The skiës are still looking for the Romans. They…they found a…bus? Train? No. Subway. A system. Ah, a metro system! They found a metro system. I…I think that's where they are. You should probably warn the Romans. They…they don't know the area, and there's a lot of people. Many wounded. Slow progress. They can't leave. Somebody important is injured." Dylan explained, clapping his hands soundlessly as he tried to focus, sorting through his thoughts like others would look through files.

"That would be Reyna. She got struck by one of the giants." Annabeth informed him, and Dylan hummed vaguely in agreement.

"Broken leg and a hip fracture. Not pretty. Gonna need a wheelchair. They have some though, and she'll manage to keep her…rank?" He guessed, not quite understanding the Roman system well enough to understand what he was deciphering.

Annabeth gave him a long look.

"Has anybody ever told you that your powers are as scary as they are fascinating?" She asked with a raised eyebrow, and he was reminded of Billy for a moment.

He made a face and looked away.

"Scary, yes. Fascinating, not so much. But thanks." He told her and focused back on the map she had spread out on her already cluttered table.

He looked down at the Monopoly houses she had placed all over it, symbolizing all sorts of things that mostly only made sense to her.

His eyes settled on one house that was outside Camp Half-Blood, though he knew it still belonged to it.

Ah, the Hunters.

"The Hunters aren't there, they're over here. They will…actually, they will help out with the skiës. There will be losses for the Romans if they let themselves get trapped though, so you really have to contact them. Somebody is going to have to hold them off. A girl? Di Angelo…"

"You mean Hazel? Nico's sister? She's called Hazel Levesque." Annabeth offered, and he hummed again.

Yeah, that one.

"She'll hold them off. You should probably tell her that. Eh, what am I saying, she'll know when the time comes, no matter whether you tell her. You won't reach them anyways. Connection is bad. Giants did something. Smart giant. Oh no, not that one, I hate that one." He rambled, then grumbled, frowning at nothing as he filed through his thoughts.
"You know, you're lucky I'm used to my siblings talking to themselves when they're getting worked up over something, else you would look pretty crazy right now." Annabeth piped up, but Dylan waved her off.

"You wanted my input on the Roman situation. I'm doing the best I can."

"Yes, and you're doing great, good job, magnificent. Now, if only you managed half as well as that when it's about our camp." She pointed out, and he shot her a dark look.

"It's not my fault! At the moment, everything is out in the open, so the answers I get are really contradictive and confusing."

"How is it out in the open? The troupes are assembling, and they're going to strike in the morning, right? What's open about that? Do you think they'll strike before then? Because then we're practically out of time already!" She exclaimed and let herself fall back into her giant beanbag.

"We are going to die at this rate. What are we doing, wasting hours on battle plans and strategies that aren't going to work out because nobody has any idea what's going on. All the campers..." She groaned and put her face into her hands.

Dylan averted his gaze, which let him catch sight of a Yankees cap hanging on a hanger.

That's...that was the thing.

The thing that Will needed.

A cap?

Dylan frowned.

No, not a normal cap.

Ah.

There had been talk about this thing before. It could turn people invisible or something.

Of course.

That's why Will needed it.

Dylan hummed to himself in agreement.

So that was why he was here.

He had to distract Annabeth enough to allow Will to take it.

Because Annabeth would demand to know what he needed it for, and Will couldn't tell.

Dylan looked at the time, then hummed again.

"What? What are you agreeing to? You didn't say anything." Annabeth pointed out as she frowned at him, but he merely shrugged and pointed back down at the map.

"Something still doesn't add up." He said, which was true, though he still wasn't sure what it was, and he was pretty sure he wouldn't figure it out, either.

Somebody else would, though, so it wasn't his biggest concern at the current time.

Annabeth sighed and dragged herself out of the beanbag again.

"What is it?"

"I have no idea." He admitted, and she shot him an exasperated look, though she stepped up to his side, anyways.

She pushed figures around again, muttering to herself as she tried to figure out whether there was
a mistake in their overview.

There wasn't, but he let her do it anyways, humming along and nodding his head whenever she glanced up for confirmation.

"Freaky powers." She muttered again, but he pointedly ignored that as he heard a faint clicking sound, signaling a door opening.

He checked the time.

Then, he pointed at a random spot on the map.

"Tell me about the possible emergency routes again. Maybe we missed something." He told her, and she groaned, but promptly leaned forward to start rambling, her entire focus on the map in front of them as she started counting down their options.

Meanwhile, Will made his very silent entrance.

He wasn't wearing shoes to reduce the noise, and if Dylan hadn't known he was there, he probably wouldn't have heard him, at all.

Dylan didn't look around, though he glanced at the cap again, before leaning forward and shaking his head.

"Not gonna work. We need something he couldn't think of. He had years to plan this, and unfortunately, he's smart." Dylan told her, though she already knew all that, and she shot him a dark look before huffing and tapping on the map agitatedly as she continued.

But it was futile, and Dylan already knew it.

They couldn't take the pegasi, because they didn't have enough to get everyone out, but would be spotted far too easily by the scouts and storm spirits if they kept going back and forth.

They also had no underground system or other 'secret' way out of the camp, and the forest was no option, either.

The maze entrance had crumbled and it would require way too much time to attempt clearing up the rubble to check the rest of it – plus, they would die in there.

They couldn't leave via ship or boat, because they only had tiny boats, and a few miles away were more scouts that would alert the others.

He wasn't sure whether Kyle had ships, but he had the nasty feeling that Kyle would be prepared to battle on water if necessary.

Meanwhile, they weren't.

Percy Jackson would be their only advantage, but he was unstable, and every time he used his powers, he risked losing control over them.

Needless to say, Dylan only shook his head determinedly when Annabeth pointed at the sea.

She didn't argue.

Instead, she dragged her finger back over the map to show the two other ways over the mountains, but they already knew that wasn't going to happen.

Dylan glanced back at the cap.

He wasn't surprised to find it gone.

He heard a door closing softly, and Annabeth looked up for a moment, but then Dylan already huffed loudly and clicked his tongue.

"I really hate this." He said, though there were a lot of things he hated right now.
He had a hunch he was going to hate something else so much more in a moment.
The thought threw him off a little, making him frown and stare straight ahead.
Annabeth was mid-sentence when she seemed to feel his shift in mood.
"What? What is it?"
Dylan…wasn’t sure.


None of that made…sense…

Oh no.

Kyle was looking for him.

And he was on his way to Camp.

No.

Why?

"Kyle." Dylan pressed out as he started feeling hot and cold at the same time, abandoning their map and table as his hands started clapping again in agitation and nervousness.

What was he supposed to do?

He had to leave.

Kyle was on his way.

He was…possessing somebody.

A kid. From the campsite.

He had looked for him at the campsite and not found him.

But why?!

Did he suspect anything? No.

There was a mistake.

Or the possibility of one.

Kyle wanted to fix a mistake.

Malcolm.

He wanted to kill Malcolm, and take Dylan with him, because he wasn’t going to repeat his past mistake again.

What mistake?

Will. He had let Will out of sight and now Will was lost to him because of the guys.

Will was going to die in the battle, and then he would be gone for good.

But Kyle wasn’t going to let Dylan get harmed in the battle to come.

He had a much better purpose for him, after all.

Shit.

"What's going on? Are they attacking now? Hey!" Annabeth asked and held him back by the arm.
Dylan flinched and pulled himself free.

"Kyle is coming. Possessing somebody. He wants Malcolm, and he's looking for me." He explained, because she might not understand all of it, but enough.

"Does he know about you?" She asked immediately, and he shook his head.

He realized with a growing amount of dread that he was wearing his orange camp shirt. Kyle would figure everything out if he saw him in that.

Dylan moved over to his bag that he had dumped by the door, ripping it open to pull out his grimy shirt and pants again.

So, that was why he had to carry these around.

He had assumed he would have to go by the campsite again, but he could understand why that thought hadn't felt that far off.

He had to do something.

Had to think of something.

"He wants to take me with him. He doesn't suspect anything. Yet." He explained as he pulled off his clothes to get changed.

Under different circumstances, he would have felt embarrassed and uncomfortable to let anybody else watch.

Right now, he was in too much of a hurry to care.

"He reached the Camp." He informed her, and Annabeth looked towards the window, though they both knew she wouldn't be able to see.

"Does he know you're here?"

"No. But he'll assume I'm close. I'm a spy, remember?" He told her, then closed his bag and grabbed it before moving towards the other window.

The one behind their table.

The one that led to the back of the Athena cabin.

He was the spy.

Kyle didn't know he had sabotaged Malcolm's attack, but he knew that Malcolm had failed.

If Dylan wasn't at the campsite, he would undoubtedly be trying one of two things: Do what Malcolm had failed to do – or try and find out where Malcolm was hidden and what they were planning on doing now.

Since Dylan wasn't going to do the first, he had to go with the latter.

He opened the window and started climbing out, Annabeth right behind him to help him.

"What are you going to do?" She asked in a hissed whisper.

Dylan swallowed and shook his head.

"Spy on you. Tell him I don't know where Malcolm is. Go with him." He told her, and at the last part, he felt his heart grow heavy.

'Don't go, son.'

His mother's presence was weak, distant.
She was busy. There was a lot happening, some sort of dispute with the other gods.

But she still went out of her way to speak to him.

"Don't go with him, Dylan. What if he finds out?" Annabeth said, but Dylan knew Kyle wouldn't.

He knew a lot of things.

None of them were things he wanted to know.

Dylan shook his head.

"I have to. Now, close the window and keep pondering about tomorrow. Don't tell the guys about this." He told her, and she looked ready to argue.

But then, she shook her head.

"I don't like this. When will you be back? What is he going to do with you? Where will he take you?"

So many questions.

Dylan looked up at her, knowing the answers to all of them.

"I'll be fine. Stick to our plans. Everything is going to solve itself." He promised, because, now that Will had the cap, he was going to even the odds.

Dylan had to believe in him.

He watched the window slam closed before Annabeth cracked it open properly once more, allowing him to overhear anything she might say inside and thus giving his presence purpose.

He adjusted the strap of his bag, then tried to make himself smaller next to some wooden planks from the armory that leaned against the cabin, ready for later repairs.

Kyle would find him soon enough. He didn't have to do anything for that.

Dylan closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing heart.

It was going to be alright.

He knew how to react. What to say. What to do.

'Don't do it, son. Run. Leave. You don't have to do this,' his mother whispered in his mind.

Dylan whispered back a small apology.

There was nowhere he could go where Kyle wouldn't find him.

Leaving or running would only tip Kyle off that there was something wrong, and the moment he suspected anything, he would figure it out.

Once Kyle figured it out, he would attack immediately, and all their planning would have been for naught.

*Everything* would have been for naught.

They would be doomed.

Dylan took another deep breath, mostly to keep his eyes from tearing up.

Kyle's plans for him were nothing compared to the alternative.

So, this was going to be easy, right?

Dylan looked up at the sky, thinking of Billy and Fae.
Then, he pulled himself together and looked back up at Annabeth's window.

This was the thing he had felt earlier.

The thing he hadn't wanted to know.

Now, he knew why.

Footsteps came running closer, and Dylan braced himself even as he pressed his back against the cabin to hide from the newcomer.

A kid appeared, his movements a little clumsy as he looked around, clearly searching for something in particular.

Dylan didn't know the kid, but knew he was from the campsite, and he had to keep up the act.

"What are you doing here? Get back to the campsite, you'll be spotted!" He hissed towards the boy, and cool eyes immediately fixed on him, a small smile spreading on his lips.

"There you are."

Kyle.

Dylan obediently made himself blink in confusion.

"What? Of course I'm-…"

"It's Kyle. I was searching for you." Kyle cut in, and Dylan snapped his mouth shut.

Kyle walked up to his hiding place and gave him that same condescending look that he gave everything else around him.

"Uh-…" Dylan started, acting as if he wasn't sure whether to believe him or not.

Kyle raised an eyebrow, then nodded up at the window.

"What are you doing here? I expected you back at the campsite."

Dylan swallowed, still staring at the boy who didn't look like Kyle, at all.

Then, his eyes widened with faked realization and he moved back a little in acted shock.

"S-sir! I was…Malcolm…I mean, he…he got caught. They have the dagger. It's…he…” He stumbled over himself to explain, trying to keep his voice down.

The fear in his voice was real, but for entirely different reasons than this.

"I am aware. You should have never let him see the dagger. However, what's done is done. Do you know where he is?" Kyla asked him, his eyes cold, though sometimes, there was a flicker of confusion or fear.

Dylan thought back to the dead squirrel and swallowed, hoping the kid was going to be fine after being possessed like this.

His thoughts shifted to Clovis, then he forced them back to the matter at hand.

"N-no. I'm sorry. They talked about a 'secret location', but I have yet to find out where that is. I was hoping I could get the dagger back for you, sir…” He made up, and Kyle gave a small shake of his head.

"It doesn't matter. Let them have it. I was going to kill him for his disobedience, but I'm not going to trouble myself looking for him. Come." Kyle told him and beckoned for him to follow as he got up.

Dylan didn't want to.
"Sir?" He asked in confusion, though there was nothing to be confused about.

Kyle took in his expression with a rather satisfied one of his own.

"Come. I know you are eager to prove yourself, but the coming battle is not for you. I want you with me."

Dylan knew what Kyle wanted.

His gut felt like it was filled with stones as he pushed himself up.

"With you?" He forced himself to ask, hoping he sounded hopeful, rather than terrified.

Kyle smiled again.

Dylan wasn't sure whether it was because this wasn't Kyle's face, but there was something pretty about the smile.

Something reassuring.

It was easy to see why Will Solace would have believed it, or why Malcolm had fallen victim to it.

However, Dylan was aware it was an act.

There was nothing nice or reassuring about Kyle.

"Yes. With me. I've been thinking about you, Dylan."

Dylan was aware.

"Have I done something wrong? Is this because of Malcolm? I'm sorry if I…" He started as he followed Kyle, though he wished he could run into the opposite direction.

"Oh no, nothing of the sort. Quite the contrary. Your special, Dylan. Really special. I knew that the moment I first saw you."

Dylan swallowed.

"Special? Me?" Dylan asked doubtfully.

Kyle's pedophilic tendencies were no secret at the campsite.

Mostly because a few of the kids had already had the misfortune of being summoned to his tent before, and from what Dylan had overheard, it hadn't been pretty.

"Oh yes. So, you see, it would be a shame if something happened to you in the upcoming battle." Kyle explained, and Dylan bit back the urge to tell him he would rather die horrifically than spend the rest of the night getting raped by the likes of him.

"But…I can't just sit around and do nothing, sir. I'm not a coward." He said sternly, and Kyle turned his head to give him that oddly satisfied look again.

"Without doubt. But I have something far better for you to do."

They reached the edge of the woods, and Dylan found himself looking around automatically to check whether there was anybody else nearby.

He knew Kyle wouldn't risk detection, but he also knew Kyle thought he was from the campsite, not the camp, so he obviously wouldn't think too much of people seeing Dylan walking around with another kid near the forest.

Luckily – or not so luckily – there was nobody else close enough to pose a problem.

Which meant there also wasn't anybody close enough to save him.

"What is it?" He asked.
Kyle's smile widened as he waved a hand.

Black shards appeared out of nowhere, assembling a sort of portal.

Much like di Angelo's shadow portals, but this one had an aura of anger and malice to it that repulsed Dylan.

"Come. I will show you." Kyle said and gestured towards the portal.

He didn't step through it.

Of course he didn't.

He was still possessing a kid from the campsite, after all, and he had no care for that kid's life.

Dylan wished he could look around himself once more, to look at the camp he was leaving behind.

He also wished he could have said goodbye to Billy and Fae.

Instead, he couldn't even hover, couldn't even hesitate.

Dylan thought of his friends, thought of Annabeth, thought of the guys.

His mother told him one more time to run.

Dylan stepped forward, instead.

They wouldn't make it otherwise.

He was going to buy them time. Buy them all the time he could buy them.

If Kyle was busy with him, he couldn't check on the campsite, couldn't send his troupes, couldn't do anything to the camp, to his home, to his friends.

Dylan swallowed thickly.

This was war.

Everybody had to make sacrifices.

This was Dylan's.

Eris wept in his mind.

Dylan stepped into the darkness, wishing he could cry along.

***

Will was standing next to the dead pine tree.

But he couldn't see the battle in front of him.

Couldn't see the sunset.

Couldn't see the forest where the enemy was hiding.

Instead, he saw war.

He saw death.

He saw monsters and demigods alike running for the camp, war cries on their lips and their weapons held high.

He saw campers rushing to the border to protect it.
They paid with their lives for it.

He saw his teammates at the front.

Sara fell victim to the hellhounds.

Liam did, too, her name on his lips.

Ash took a dagger for Hannah, right to their chest.

Hannah died at the hands of another demigod, anyways.

He saw Piper charmspeaking to cause confusion.

She fell victim to a child she couldn't bear to attack.

He saw Leo, trying to protect the camp and his girlfriend.

Leo died a second time, but this time, it was final.

He saw his siblings, trying to get to the wounded, trying to heal, trying to save.

They, too, were struck down, one after another, by monsters and demigods alike.

He saw campers fleeing.

There was no place for them to flee to.

He saw Chiron trying to protect the campers.

Thalia's pine crashed on top of him.

He saw Clarisse wielding her spear and striking down monsters left and right.

She got overthrown by four monsters at once.

He saw Annabeth yelling orders and wielding her dagger.

She got distracted when she found Piper, which became her downfall.

He saw Jason, striking down monsters with lightning and cutting down the rest.

Jason used up all of his powers, and then some, until he fell from the sky.

He saw Percy, protectively shielding the younger children, forcing the water to rise around them.

But he was unstable, and when he saw Jason falling, he fell along with him, the water hitting the ground before the enemy was on him.

He saw Nico, forcing his powers to his will as skeletons rose from the ground to join the battle and the shadows claimed some monsters.

Nico faded away with his head held high, standing right among his friends, though they didn't even notice anything until his sword clattered to the ground.

He saw children running, screaming and crying for the gods to help them.

There were no gods.

He saw the enemy overtaking the Camp.

They left no survivors.

Will opened his eyes, his fists shaking at his sides.

Then, he stepped forward.
Past Thalia's pine.
Past the camp border.

Will walked down the hill, past monsters and demigods alike, knowing they wouldn't notice him.
He wasn't thinking. Not anymore.

His mind was empty as his feet carried him into the forest, through the undergrowth, to the trampled path that led to the campsite.

He saw children cleaning their weapons and looking far too serious for their age.
He saw monsters arguing about armor and fighting for the best pieces.
Will walked past it all, knowing where he had to go.
Dylan had mentioned a river.
It was their only water source.
The campsite was crowded.

Will moved back into the undergrowth to prevent anybody running into him by accident.
He moved around the campsite until he reached the river.
Monsters and demigods alike were there, talking or arguing or laughing.
Will crossed the river, settling down on the other side.

For a moment, he just watched them.

His vision was still in the back of his mind, gruesome and morbid.

But it was difficult to imagine the kids he was looking at right now would be killers by the morning.

He looked at the monsters, behaving like humans would as they nudged each other or chattered away, or took turns grooming each other.

He looked at the demigods, getting their bottles ready to fill them up, smiling at each other or laughing, while others looked grim and thoughtful, undoubtedly unhappy to be here.

He looked at the many children, demigods too young to truly know what was going on, too young to do any damage in the coming battle.

They would all die.

Will was aware of this.

Will still slipped his hand inside his medic pouch, feeling for the small vial.

He kept it in his hand for a moment, his eyes still on the children.

It would be murder.
It would be slaughter.
It would be madness.

Will pulled out the vial, eyes hushing down to it.

But the battle would be all those things, too.

Will removed the stopper.
He looked up again, to the kids, to the demigods, to the campsite.

Will thought of his boyfriends, and Nico's resentment, and Percy's denial, and Jason's obliviousness to everything.

Would they forgive this?

He didn't know.

Would he forgive himself?

Will kept his gaze on the demigods as he held out the vial over the water.

One of them was moving towards the water, calling out to the others to get their bottles filled up before the monsters would drink and pollute the water with blood and grime.

The others followed.

Will tipped over the vial, emptying it into the river.

The water didn't look any different.

Will didn't feel any different, either.

He watched blankly how they filled their bottles, calling for their friends and comrades to do the same, smiles on their faces, jokes on their lips.

He watched humane monsters doing the same, chiding them and sending them on their way before talking to each other about how they had never thought they would work alongside children one day.

He watched the more animalistic monsters moving towards the water, shooing away the others when they were done.

Will got up, feeling as empty as the vial as he slipped it back into his pouch and started moving up the river again until he got to the spot he had crossed earlier.

He waded through the water, reaching the other side when he heard the hellhounds bounding into the water, followed by other feral monsters.

Will didn't stop, and didn't look back.

The poison worked with a delay.

They wouldn't know it was the water until it was too late.

Will made his way out of the forest when he heard the first anguished howl from the center of the campsite.

He could feel the agony from all the way over here, same as he could sense the confusion of those around it.

Will continued walking.

One became many.

Will tuned the sounds out as he made his way up the hill, enemy demigods and monsters rushing past him in bewilderment as they ran for their campsite to see what was happening.

More screaming.

So much screaming.

Will heard and felt the first humans dying.

Will pulled the cap off his head as he walked towards the camp border.
He saw campers hurrying away, undoubtedly to tell the others what was going on.

He saw Annabeth.

He saw his boyfriends.

Will wasn't surprised to see any of them.

Will crossed the border without a word as they stared from the forest to him and back.

Their eyes were wide with shock and fear.

"What have you done?" Nico asked, with a fear in his voice Will had never thought would be directed towards him.

Will could feel the pain of the dying. Nico could feel their deaths.

He met his boyfriend's gaze with a blank one of his own.

"I evened the odds."

His voice was as empty and devoid of emotion as he felt.

Nico stared at him in shock, then he shook his head, swaying on the spot as the pain coming from the campsite spiked, then ebbed away.

He could hear the sounds of battle, monsters lashing out in agony and others attacking in response.

Nobody would be safe.

Will had doomed them all.

Nico was still shaking his head, frantically now, as if it was going to make this any less real than it was.

But it was real.

The sun was almost done setting behind them, making the world turn dark.

And Will was a murderer.

Will felt no remorse.

***

Will moved past him, and Nico couldn't breathe.

He could hear the screams of monsters and demigods and children.

He could feel the tugs the moment their screams died, and new ones started.

His hand closed around Will's arm, pulling him back, wanting to shake, wanting to rattle, wanting to punch.

Why?

He wanted to ask, wanted to scream, wanted to yell and cry.

A part of him knew it was either their lives or the Camp.

The rest of him knew that Will had just massacred children along with monsters, and he would never be able to compensate for that.

This wasn't a fair battle.

It was slaughter.
"Why?" He asked, his voice weak and brittle as he tried to hold onto Will, tried to hold onto his own sanity, as each tug in his gut took his breath away.

Will looked at him, his expression indifferent.

"You know why."

Nico could only shake his head, his lips trembling.

He thought of his father, of the Underworld, of Andrew's judging.

Of the scales that had nearly tipped to the wrong side because of things that had seemed so trivial to Nico.

Nico stared at his boyfriend, knowing what these scales would say to this.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" He asked shakily.

New Rome had already been taken away from them.

Now, any hope for an afterlife together was crumbling to pieces in Nico's very hands.

Nico tightened his grip on Will.

But Will just kept giving him the same blank look.

"I did what was necessary."

"Why?" Nico asked again. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell us? Why?"

He was shaking Will.

Will's expression didn't change, and he didn't fight him.

Nico half wished he would fight him.

Anything was better than the blank look as countless people died.

"You would have stopped me. You would have rather faced the battle than let me do this." Will replied, and it hurt.

It hurt, because it was the truth.

It hurt, because Will knew, he had known, and he had still decided to do it, anyways.

Nico felt something wet run down his cheek, and was reminded of earlier, when Jason had wept in their cabin.

They had cried because they knew they would die.

Now, Nico cried because he would have rather died in that battle with his boyfriends, than face death knowing his boyfriend would have to suffer for the rest of eternity.

"The children, Will…” He pressed out as he kept shaking his boyfriend.

But there was no guilt, no remorse, not even the twitch of an eyebrow.

"It was their lives or ours. I made my decision."

Nico clung to his boyfriend, desperately trying to shake sense into him, while also needing him to support himself.

Percy and Jason were behind Will, but they didn't speak, and they didn't look at them, Percy with his eyes closed, Jason with his gaze on the ground.
Nico wished they would help him right now.

"Why do you have to do this all the time?! Why can't you just...just come to us, instead of...instead of...always making your f*cked up decisions all by yourself?!" He vented, though his voice was so thick he knew his words were barely distinguishable.

He knew Will would understand, anyways.

"It was my burden to carry." Will replied, and Nico shoved him away.

"Bullshit!"

Will stumbled backwards a few steps.

Nico stumbled forwards and hit the ground.

Tears ran down his cheeks, dripping to the ground as he knelt in the dirt.

He could still feel them dying.

He could feel each and every death.

There was nothing he could do to fix this.

Nothing he could do to save Will's soul.

Nothing he could do to change anything for the better.

Nico dragged his gaze up to Will again, just to see him holding out Annabeth's cap to her wordlessly.

She took it without a word, her expression grim as she studied him.

Then, she turned around and left, staggering down the hill to undoubtedly let Piper and the others know.

Nico looked after her blankly, then back at his boyfriend.

He shouldn't have let him go.

He should have woken up Jason, because they all knew Jason would have stopped Will.

He should have made him tell him about this.

He should have sat them down and told them of this option, should have let them weigh the pros and cons and come to a decision together.

Why couldn't Will ever do that?

Why did he always have to do this?!

Nico had tried. They all had tried.

They had tried, over and over and over again, constantly pointing it out to Will that they were right there, that he could trust them, that they wanted to be part of his life and his decisions and the burdens he always thought he had to carry by himself.

And yet...

Nico closed his eyes, his lips pressing into a thin line as he shook his head to himself.

"I'm done with you." He whispered, and his body was still shaking as he pushed himself up.

When he opened his eyes again, Will still stood at the same spot, looking at him with the same empty look.
"I'm done with you." He repeated, stronger this time, more definite.
Then, he turned around and left.

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Will watched Nico go.
It hurt.
But at the same time, Will had known this might happen.
Will also knew he deserved it.
Jason moved to his side, his expression sad and haunted, even as he kept his eyes on the ground.
Will turned his head in his direction to acknowledge him.
"This was wedding cake." Jason said quietly.
Then he, too, left.
Will watched him follow Nico at a slow pace, hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched.
So much smaller than usual.
Percy was the only one that stayed behind.
Will turned his head to look at him.
Percy was staring back at him with the same defeated posture as Jason, his eyes full of sadness.
It reminded Will of the way Percy had looked at him in the cabin, before turning away from him.
Will averted his gaze again, knowing Percy had to turn away from him now, too.
"You should go after them." Percy said, and his voice was quiet, but soft.
Full of emotions Will couldn't wrap his mind around at the current time.
"They are right." Will replied.
It was their right to be upset with him.
It was their right to turn away from him.
It was Will's responsibility to accept this and step away.
"You should still go after them." Percy pointed out, his voice still soft.
Will shook his head.
Then, he started walking.
If Percy didn't leave him, he would have to leave Percy.
"Do you want to lose them?" Percy called after him, before he started following Will.
It was a laughable question.
Will didn't laugh.
"I don't think you want to lose them." Percy continued, but Will didn't reply, and didn't pay him any attention as he made his way down the hill.
"You love us. I know you do." Percy insisted, but the fact that he pointed it out showed that he doubted it.
Will just kept on walking.

Not towards the cabins.

Towards the medic tent.

"So, you can't just let them go like that. You gotta fight, Will. You keep wanting to fight, keep wanting to be some sort of hero, always complaining to 'just' be a healer'. Now's your chance. This is the greatest battle there's ever gonna be."

Will saw Kayla in the distance, talking to Sara in hushed voices.

They turned to look at him, eyes wide and shock written all over their faces.

Shock, and fear.

Of what he had done.

Of him.

"You told me yourself that life isn't easy, but I don't get to just…give up and put my head in the ground. So, you don't get to do that either. You fucked up. You did something bad. Now, you have to fight for them, show them you still care, you still love them, and you want to be with them. You want to be with us. So, fight. If you don't fight, if you don't push, then how are they supposed to know?" Percy insisted, and there was something frantic in his voice.

He was scared, too.

Will could understand.

Will stopped in front of the medic tent to turn his head towards his boyfriend.

Percy stood in front of him, sea-green eyes full of pain.

"I'm sorry, Percy." He said quietly.

Percy shook his head and tried to reach out for him.

Will stepped backwards and turned to enter the medic tent.

Percy didn't follow him.

***

Percy stood in front of the medic tent, hand still hovering in front of him as if to touch.

But Will was gone.

Percy could hear the healers, talking to Will, asking what had happened, what was going on.

He could hear Will, replying in the same detached voice as before.

"I'm stepping back as head medic."

Percy closed his eyes.

There was an outcry of confusion and disbelief.

People exclaiming that he had to be joking.

Footsteps that indicated them moving towards Will.

"You can't do this!" He heard Austin yell.

They knew he wasn't joking.
"Austin will be taking my place for the time being." Will continued as if nothing had happened.

As if his siblings weren't yelling and arguing and yelling even more, demanding answers, demanding reasons.

"No! I refuse! Forget it! We need you, Will! You can't just do this!"

Percy stared at the ground, and saw his hands, instead.
The white lines made it look like he was crumbling apart.

Just like the rest of his life that was crumbling to pieces around him as he stood there.

"I have broken my oath. Apollo will not grant me his powers for the purpose of healing anymore. Hence, I am unfit for the role." Will said, and there was the sound of crying now.

"That can't be true!"

"You're lying!"

"No!"

Percy heard them cry and plead.

Somebody ran from the tent, nearly colliding with him.

It was Austin.
The boy looked up at him with teary eyes.

Then he let out a broken sob and rushed past him and away.
Percy gazed back at the medic tent.
The place that had become his purpose these past days.
The place that had made him feel a little more at home, in a world that didn't want him anymore.
Percy stood there and wondered if anything was ever going to remain intact in his life.

Maybe he was simply destined to lose everything.

He could feel the cold settling over him, turning the tips of his fingers numb.

But then, he balled them into fists.

No.

He wasn't going to give up like that.

Will might be an idiot, and what he had done was horrible and was going to take a lifetime fixing.

But Percy still loved him.
Percy still wanted to be with him.
Percy still wanted Will to be with them.

He wasn't going to let Will walk away.
He had never let Will walk away before, after all.

There was more crying and arguing from inside the tent, but Will didn't reply to any of that, letting them vent and cry the same way he had let Nico vent and cry.

He was numb.
Percy knew how that felt.

Percy knew what helped him when he felt that way.

There were footsteps, slow and steady as they made for the exit, and Percy knew it would be Will even before he stood in front of him again.

He didn't look surprised that Percy was still there.

But he didn't look like he had expected it, either.

"Hug me." Percy demanded, just as Will averted his gaze again to walk away.

Will hesitated.

Then, he started moving again.

Percy stepped into his way.

"Hug."

Will exhaled, but his expression remained blank as he dragged his eyes up to meet Percy's gaze.

"What's the point?" He asked and tried to move around Percy, but Percy didn't let him.

"There's none. I just desperately seek physical contact with the person I love." Percy retorted and spread out his arms.

Will had always hugged him, always held him.

Whenever Percy had come to him and whenever Will had been around when Percy had felt down, or empty, or anything else, Will had been there for him.

Hugging him. Holding him.

Sharing his warmth with him and giving him comfort he never knew he needed until he could feel again.

There was something magical about hugs.

Will studied his expression.

Percy still held out his arms.

His boyfriend closed his eyes and move forward, arms ever so timidly moving around Percy.

Percy felt his heart leaping in his chest in triumph and relief, before he engulfed Will in a crushing hug of his own.

Will was cool to the touch, matching his detached behavior and the subdued freckles, and Percy wished he had more body warmth to share with Will, to make him feel better the same way Will always managed to do with him.

But this would have to do.

Percy held him with all he had, aware that Will remained stiff and unmoved, but unwilling to give up.

Will didn't know how to let it go.

Percy knew how that felt, too.

"Talk to me." He told him, and it wasn't quite an order, though he wasn't afraid of making it one.

"Percy…" Will started, and he still sounded indifferent, like he was just humoring Percy for his sake, and it hurt, but Percy only kept him tightly pressed against him.
If he let him go now, Will would retreat, and who knew what he would do until he came to his senses?

Who knew whether he would come to his senses?

"What's there to lose? Humor me." He told him, aware this was the wrong place to be at the current time, but also aware this was the only place he was going to get.

"What do you want me to say? I'm not sorry, Percy. I would do it again in a heartbeat." Will said coolly, and Percy bit the inside of his mouth.

"Tell me something nice." He prompted.

Will remained silent, his arms by now only keeping a loose hold on Percy.

Percy refused to give up.

"Nice? Have you looked around lately? 'Nice' left us a long time ago." Will replied, and there was a bitter undertone to his words.

But that was okay, because it was better than cold detachment.

"Tell me why you love me." Percy insisted, his hand moving up and down Will's back to show him how to properly comfort somebody.

Will didn't mimic him.

Instead, he blew out a deep breath.

He wasn't holding him anymore.

But he also wasn't pulling away.

Percy tried to cling to that as he clung to Will.

The silence stretched on, and Percy tried so hard to overlook it, to brush it off, but it hurt, and with each passing moment, he felt the cold dread inside him growing.

But he couldn't give up, and wouldn't let go.

"Your smile. I first fell in love with your smile. And your caring attitude." Will's voice was still quiet, but different.

That was something.

Will took another deep breath.

And then, all at once, he slumped against Percy.

Percy felt himself breathing out in relief when Will's arms snaked around him again, holding him properly.

He wasn't crying or trembling, but Percy knew he was slowly getting there.

"That's all?" He pried, and Will's nails dug into his back.

"No. But I can't put it into words. Not right now."

Percy could live with that.

"When did you fall for me?" Percy asked, and Will took another deep breath.

Probably because he couldn't get enough air, pressed against Percy's chest as he was.

"I don't even know. When you dragged me off to your cabin? When we went ice skating at night? When you put up with me even while Jason was gone?" Will mumbled, and Percy felt a flutter in
his chest as he remembered all of that.

"When did you fall in love with Nico?" He asked, and Will slumped against him further.

There was a soft snuffle.

There.

Finally.

"The moment I first saw him." He whispered thickly, and Percy held him with a little more ease now, knowing he wouldn't leave, knowing he wouldn't run.

"Do you remember how long it took us to get together? To get past all misunderstandings and miscommunications and start this relationship?" Percy asked him softly, and Will let out a small sob, his shoulders shaking.

"Yes."

Percy did, too.

They had been so stupid.

However, Percy wouldn't change a thing about it.

"And do you want to let that go now?" He asked, and Will sobbed again, louder this time.

Percy decided to interpret that as a definite 'No'.

"Then you know what you gotta do. You're going to pull yourself together and walk to that cabin and woo those two so hard they're going to have anime hearts floating around them for the rest of the night." Percy told him, while Will just kept on sobbing and clinging to him.

"I can't!"

"Why not?"

"Because they're right, Percy!" Will tried to snap, but choked it out, instead, and Percy shook his head to himself as he rubbed his shoulder a little firmer.

They were still right outside the medic tent, and Percy kept glancing at the unmoving flap, just waiting for one of Will's siblings to come rushing out to vent or interrupt or drag Will back in to demand answers.

But nobody came, though the venting and sound of crying didn't cease, either.

"Then let them be right. But don't let them walk away." Percy told him, and Will shook his head.

"I can't force them to stay with me. If they don't want-…"

"They don't want you to be an idiot. They're hurt because you keep doing this to yourself and us. They don't want to break up with you. They just want you to realize that what you're doing is terrible for all of us."

"You would have stopped me." Will insisted stubbornly, and Percy rubbed the side of his head against Will's, seeking more contact and comfort.

"We would have." He agreed and left it at that.

"They would have killed you. They would have killed all of us."

Percy was aware.

He had already been aware of this before, when Nico had jumped from hopelessness to encouraging speeches and back.
He had already been aware of this when Jason had started crying.

Will's voice was resolute as he said it, even as he trembled at every word.

Percy knew it wasn't just a thought, not an overly dramatic 'We could have died!'.

It was a fact.

Which indicated Will must have had a vision to confirm what they had feared.

"They would have." Percy agreed, his voice nothing but a soft breath.

They both clung to each other.

"I had to do it." Will whispered thickly, still justifying his actions.

Percy didn't fight him.

"Then stand by your decision. But don't let it ruin our relationship. You faced that choice. You can face your boyfriends." He replied.

Will was silent.

Then, he gave a hesitant nod.

Percy was tempted to gather him up in his arms and carry him all the way back, both out of relief, and the need to make sure Will would truly get there.

Instead, he waited for Will to be ready to pull back, then he entwined their fingers to walk with him.

Will looked terrible, but he followed.

Percy allowed himself to breathe and hope.

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Nico was pacing.

His mind was a whirl of anguished screaming and heated ranting, while words flew from his mouth in both Italian and English, trying to let it all pour out of him.

He was painfully reminded of the time when they had found out that Will had willingly worked towards his death because of some stupid vision and his fucked-up reasoning.

The memory made him halt, just to cuss heavily and continue pacing, hands in his hair and eyes roaming the room.

Jason was silent on the bed, just sitting there and letting him vent, his gaze downcast and his expression grim.

Nico's eyes hushed to the door.

But Will wasn't there.

Will probably wouldn't come, either.

He hadn't come the last time, no matter how much Nico had mutely pleaded for it.

Stupid Will.

Stupid war.

Stupid everything.

But, mostly, stupid Will.
Nico spat as much, then whirled around, away from the door, to stride through the room and look for something he could knock over, something he could throw around that wouldn't immediately break but that would still show his displeasure with the situation.

Unfortunately, he couldn't find anything.

There were plenty of things laying around, but he couldn't bear the thought of damaging any of them.

In the end, he fished out one of Will's shoes from under their bed and kicked it across the room.

"Fuck you!" He yelled after it, but that didn't make him feel any better.

He could feel his eyes stinging again, but stubbornly rubbed at them, refusing to cry.

Nico had cried enough.

Especially because of Will and his stupid, stupid stupidity!

How could he do this to them?!

Why could he never just freaking learn?!

He had expected Nico to learn, too, had expected him to be more open with what he wanted and try and talk things out!

So, why couldn't he realize his own issues and fix those, first?!

Nico's inability to approach them was nothing compared to Will's inability to trust them!

Nico all at once deflated like a balloon, his gaze on the ground as he remembered Will's words, his face, his posture.

Remembered his own words.

That…that could be considered breaking up, right?

Nico hadn't meant to break up.

Not really.

But he had wanted to hurt Will. Had wanted to show him that this was it, that this was something he wouldn't just accept and forget, like all the other shit Will had pulled in the past.

He hadn't meant to phrase it in such a way that Will might interpret as Nico breaking up.

However, the lack of a reaction from Will had only fueled his anger even further, so instead of clearing that up, he had just…left.

And now, Will wasn't going to come back, because this was Will, and Will didn't fight.

Nico made a small sound, and now, the tears came, anyways.

Will couldn't come and comfort Nico and hug him and kiss him and let him vent, but he could go and murder kids for fucked-up, stupid reasons, all without blinking an eye.

He couldn't fight and couldn't face Nico's wrath, but he could go and fuck up Nico's last resort for them.

How was Nico supposed to fix this?!

Could he even fix this?

What was he supposed to do?

He didn't know.
Nico didn't like not knowing.

"He's not even going to show his face, that stupid stronzo!" He vented in Jason's general direction, though he wasn't sure Jason was even listening.

Probably not.

Nico couldn't remember the last time he had felt this alone.

"Will is a coward." He ranted and nearly tripped over Will's lonely shoe.

He kicked it through the room again.

There was noise in front of the cabin, and Nico's head snapped up, heart immediately in his throat as he hoped, begged, pleaded for it to be Will.

He might want to punch him, rattle him, shake him until he realized what he had done and understood – but he also needed to see him, needed to get his hands on him, needed to keep him close…

If he already had to suffer because of that insufferable fool, said insufferable fool should have to feel it, too.

But it wasn't Will.

Just some kids running past.

Nico stomped his foot and let out a loud, miserable whine.

Then, he kicked the shoe again, which hit the wall and fell to the ground, looking lonely and abandoned.

Nico snarled at it, then returned to his pacing, his hands shaking as he rubbed at his eyes and dragged his fingers through his hair.

He wanted to cry.

He wanted to break down and sob and wail like a small child would, anything to let it out.

But every time he was tempted to sink to the ground, the anger flared back up, resentment filling him to the core for being rendered to such a mess.

So, he didn't, instead venting and rambling and yelling and cursing.

Two more times, the campers tricked him into hoping futilely that Will was coming back, only to crush his hopes again.

When he heard another noise outside, he refused to even glance in the direction, stubbornly keeping his back to the door and stomping on the ground and whirling his arms around to get his point across of how much he despised everything related to Will.

Like his dumb-ass curls.

And his sunshine-smiles.

And the stupid crinkling of his dumb eyes whenever he smiled.

And those fucked up reasons of his to be an idiot!

"I told him! I told him so many times! We all did! Why can't he just ever listen?!!" Nico vented and threw his arms up, just to kick the shoe again that he had so kindly fetched from the corner moments ago.

Jason was looking up now, but he wasn't looking at the flying shoe, or at Nico.
He was looking past Nico, his eyes sad and dull.

Nico wanted to snarl at him for undoubtedly hoping Will might come marching in to take responsibility.

Of course Will wasn't going to come.

Why would he?

Will was an idiot.

An idiot and a coward.

Nico wouldn't want to see him, anyways.

Or so Nico stubbornly told himself as he whirled around, just to feel all the air getting punched out of his lungs at the sight of the open door.

Will.

Will, closely followed by Percy.

Will, who was looking at him with red-rimmed, blue eyes full of pain and unease, lips pressed into a thin line as he hovered in the doorway.

Will, whose gaze hushed fleetingly to Percy, who gave him an encouraging nod.

Nico's stomach churned with both elation and anger.

"What do you think you're doing here?!" He snarled, which immediately made him dread Will was going to leave again.

But Will only gulped and stepped inside ever so reluctantly.

He was looking at Percy again.

So, Percy had herded him here, huh?

Will couldn't even come here on his own accord.

That's how much Nico meant to him, then.

Nico felt his chest aching, and a part of him wanted to turn away, to turn his back on Will and give him the cold shoulder.

But he was too scared Will would disappear if he let him out of sight for even just a second.

"I'm not talking to you anymore. You're not listening, anyways." He snapped for good measure, but kept glaring at Will, who wasn't quite meeting his gaze.

Nico wanted him to look him in the eye.

If he could slaughter that campsite in cold blood, then he could face Nico now.

Will shuffled a little, but didn't look back at Percy, and didn't run from the cabin, either

Nico was still miffed, anyways.

He waited, his glare fixed on Will's face with as much intensity as he could muster.

But Will was just shuffling awkwardly, mouth opening and closing as he looked from Nico's feet to Jason's legs and back.

"I don't want to lose you."

Will's voice was less than a whisper, shaky and weak.
Nico felt his heart ache at the sound.

At the same time, he felt the anger returning full force.

"Oh, you don't, huh? Well, good thing you decided that you don't want that! Same as you decide everything else by yourself, always!" He snapped at him, taking two big steps towards the blonde, who looked like he wanted to step backwards, but then remained rooted to the spot.

"I told you it would be the last…" Will started, but Nico stomped his foot on the ground.

"I don't care! I also told you I'm sick and tired of you trying to, like, heroically face down every issue this world is throwing at us, ever. All by yourself. I told you that we are here for you! You said you loved us!" He vented, feeling much better now that the object of his distress was right in front of him to feel the full brunt of it.

Why hadn't he yelled at him earlier?

Nico wanted to yell at him so badly.

Will shuffled again, hands fidgeting awkwardly as he looked at the ground.

"I do love you."

His voice was still quiet, but a little stronger than before.

"I don't care! You still did it! You could have told us, could have actually talked it through with us!"

"I told you I had to go." Will put in, but that only fueled Nico's rage as he closed the distance between them, and if only to shove Will backwards.

"You idiot!"

Will let him shove him, stumbling back a step and still looking at the ground.

Nico pushed him again, both trying to make sure not to hurt him, while also hating how gentle he was being with Will, considering his current state and the situation as a whole.

Why did he have to still care about Will so much that he couldn't bear the thought of hurting him in any way?

It wasn't fair.

Will had hurt him, after all!

Will hadn't cared what he would think about this whole thing.

Will hadn't cared whether he had clung to that hope for a peaceful afterlife with the guys.

Will hadn't cared what consequences there would be for everybody else.

"You insufferable fool! How can you say that?! You told us you had to go? Yeah, you did. It was quite obvious you would fuck off, wasn't it? All quiet, tight-lipped, looking around with that typical look of 'I might never come back but oh yeah it's for the greater good'? All that just screamed that you're going to run away."

Will still wasn't meeting his gaze.

Nico snarled at him to make him look up.

Will's sorrowful gaze didn't make him feel any better.

"I am sick of it! Do you have any idea what you have done, Will?! Any at all?"

"It was the only way." Will whispered, eyes hushing away from him again.
"Everybody would have died, Nico. All of us. They would have left no survivors."

Nico shoved him again with an anguished cry.

"I don't care!"

He did care.

The worst part was that Nico knew he would have done the very same in Will's place.

He would have chosen the campers over the campsite any day, no matter whether there might have been children or not, and no matter what would happen to him afterwards.

He understood all that.

What he didn't understand, was why Will hadn't been able to tell them first.

Why he had to go alone, why he had to leave them first to do something so stupid, something so big, something so bad.

They could have worked something out.

Maybe they could have helped him.

Maybe they could have shouldered that burden together.

Maybe they could have even worked something else out that could have saved all those kids that hadn't even wanted to be there, in the first place.

But now, there was no knowing whether any of that could have happened, because Will had never given it the chance to.

Because Will had to decide by himself that he wanted to do that, wanted to play the hero or whatever else it was that had served as his motivation, and hadn't felt the need to include them.

But if he didn't do it now…would he ever do it?

Nico was back to grabbing Will's shoulders to shake him, words tumbling from his lips that sometimes made sense and sometimes didn't, a river of phrases turning into a sea of curses and pleas and anguish and chaos.

Will wrapped his arms around him, and Nico both wanted to scream at him and shove him away – and pull him closer and never let go.

Both at once didn't work all that well, but Nico could at least say he had tried as he cursed Will out loudly and told him to get lost and not to touch him, while also clinging to the front of his shirt desperately.

Will let him vent.

Nico was shaking, but he hoped Will would believe it was out of rage, not because of the lingering shock and the fear still coursing through Nico now.

He slipped into Italian, cursing Will for being an idiot all over again, but Will just kept holding him, pulling him closer whenever Nico tried to pull away in his anger to yell again.

He even started stroking over Nico's back, which both felt terrific and terrible, and Nico started banging his fist against Will's chest weakly as he started sobbing all over again.

There was just no helping it.

"I hate you for this, Will. I hate you so much." He choked out as he sobbed like a child, and Will started swaying him slightly, as if to soothe him.

"I know."
"Fuck you! I don't care whether you know! I love you!" Nico exclaimed and hammered against his chest again, but thanks to the proximity, it was more of a timid nudging as they kept swaying from side to side.

"I love you, too." Will whispered softly, and Nico let out another small cry, the tears just flying from his eyes as he shook his head wildly and wanted to shake him.

"You don't understand!"

"I'm sorry." Will whispered, and Nico let out another small cry, the tears just flying from his eyes as he shook his head wildly and wanted to shake him.

"You don't understand!"

"I'm sorry." Will whispered, and Nico froze.

Suddenly very quiet, he wasn't even sure he breathed.

"I'm sorry for hurting you. I'm sorry for always trying to do everything by myself. I know what I did wasn't right. I knew there was a chance that you wouldn't forgive me, and that I would lose you forever. But I still did it. Not because I don't love you, but because I decided I rather see you alive and happy without me, than watch you die when I could have done something." Will explained, and there was an urgency in his voice that reminded Nico a little of himself.

Will wanted him to understand.

Nico momentarily bristled, but then deflated again.

Everybody wanted to be understood.

However, Nico didn't want to start the understanding.

Nico wanted to be understood first.

"You should have told us." He snapped, though he knew there was no bite in his voice anymore.

He liked to pretend, anyways.

"I couldn't let you stop me." Will said, and Nico wanted to shake him again.

"We could have helped you!"

"I wouldn't have wanted you to." Will replied, and Nico felt the anger and despair coursing through him as his fingers dug into Will's shoulders.

"Why not?!" He asked, and it sounded as desperate as he felt.

Will merely held him a little tighter.

"You know why."

Nico didn't.

Or he refused to know, anyways.

However, instead of asking, he started venting again, feeling like Will still didn't know just how angry Nico was with him.

Will kept holding him.

It was exactly what Nico wanted, but that didn't make him feel any better, and he voiced out his distaste as often as possible.

"Don't think you can get away with this, Will. Don't you dare think that just because you're here, everything is miraculously going to be fixed. You've went too far this time." He ranted angrily, but Will didn't reply.

Maybe he couldn't hear him.

Maybe Nico should yell again.
But his voice was hoarse already, and his throat burned, and he was fairly certain if Will couldn't
hear him, it was because he didn't want to hear him, so yelling would be pointless.

There was shuffling behind him, and he turned his head a little to watch Jason getting up.

Jason still hadn't said anything.

Percy hadn't, either, still standing behind Will and in front of the door, as if to make sure none of
them would leave.

It would be a laughable thought, if it wasn't quite so sad.

Will stiffened, and when Nico glanced back at his face, he saw a flash of fear in his bright blue
eyes, gaze fixed on Jason.

It automatically made Nico want to protect. To comfort him and let him know Jason of all people
wouldn't hurt him.

Jason was moving towards them, his pace slow, his expression inscrutable, and his gaze locked
with Will's.

Nico pulled away from Will, though it was difficult to let go of him, especially with the lingering
fear of him leaving, still.

The whole cabin seemed to hold its breath as Jason reached Will, stopping in front of him to gaze
down at him.

Will's breathing was off, a little quicker than normal, and Nico was stunned to see his eyes fill
with tears.

He opened his mouth to speak, but then squeezed his eyes shut and averted his face, fists clenched
at his sides and his shoulders shaking.

Nico watched Jason take him in.

Then, without a word, Jason walked past Will, put a hand on Percy's shoulder to move him aside,
and left the cabin.

The moment the door fell shut behind him, Will let out a choked sob and was crouched low on the
ground, hands over his head.

Nico stared at him, then at Percy, who had his eyes squeezed shut and seemed to fight an internal
battle of his own.

Nico swallowed thickly, his heart in his throat.

Meanwhile, Will was sobbing pitifully by himself.

Nico wanted to persist, wanted to show he was still angry, but…

He couldn't.

This was still his boyfriend.

Still the guy he loved.

Still the idiot he cared about, no matter how much of an idiot he was.

He had wanted to hurt Will, to have him feel the same way they were feeling.

Now that Will was hurting, though, he just wanted it to stop, because nobody should be
intentionally put through such pain.

Nico stepped back close and crouched down next to Will, moving his arms around him and
pulling him against him gently.
Will lost his balance and fell without a care, knees hitting the ground before he slumped into Nico's arms, still sobbing frantically.

"He'll be back." Nico told him quietly, voice softer than he would have liked.

He was still mad at Will.

He probably would be mad at Will for a while.

"I'm sure he'll be back." He repeated confidently, though he wasn't sure where Jason had even gone.

He was aware Jason might be just as upset as Nico, but he wasn't the type to abandon others, and out of the four of them, Nico had always thought Jason would be the one who would fight for their relationship the most.

Will just kept crying.

Percy crouched down to Will's other side, moving his arms around both of them with his lips pursed and his eyes full of pain.

"I'll go talk to him, okay?"

Will didn't reply, but Nico gave him a small nod.

Percy gave them another squeeze, then he pulled away, and Nico listened to his footsteps, before the door opened and closed, leaving them behind by themselves.

Nico looked down at Will.

A part of him wanted to point out that he was still mad at him.

Instead, he swallowed down the words and gave Will a gentle tug.

"Let's get you somewhere more comfortable." He said softly, and Will didn't struggle against his hold, but also didn't help him in any way as Nico was forced to lift up his boyfriend to carry him to the bed.

Will just kept on crying.

"I didn't deserve you, anyways."

Nico dropped Will onto the bed without preamble and climbed onto it, sitting with his back against the wall before dragging Will closer again.

Will promptly curled into his lap.

"You should leave that to us to decide, don't you think?"

There were many things Will should have let them decide, or at least partake in the decision making.

Will cried against his chest.

"No more, okay?" Nico whispered as he stroked through his blonde curls.

"I promise." Will replied weakly, and Nico wished he could smile.

Unfortunately, he was missing two boyfriends to truly feel at ease, even with Will's promise.

Nico held him quietly, instead.

***

Jason took the same way he had taken earlier, though there was no noise, no scouts, no sign of life – and thus, no real need for stealth.
He still proceeded with caution, quietly and slowly, until he was pressed against the same tree as before.

It was the same view.

Yet there was nothing that was the same as before.

Jason stared at the very center of the campsite, which had been swarmed with monsters just hours ago.

Now, there was nothing there.

Except the dead, of course.

Jason took a deep breath, eyes scanning the perimeter for anything alive, but when he still couldn't find anything, he abandoned his hiding spot and flew down.

He landed next to some dead logs, some dust flying up as his feet hit the ground.

Monster remains.

Jason looked at the wreckage around him.

Tents of all shapes and sizes, all torn into or tilted or entirely collapsed.

Dust everywhere, more pronounced in some areas and less in others, some of it still in the air.

Weapons discarded on the ground, also of all shapes and sizes, both monster and demigod weapons alike.

Bodies of all sizes, scattered across the entire campsite, making it difficult for Jason to move.

He saw blood, gashes on children's back and fronts, undoubtedly inflicted during the chaos and panic that must have filled this campsite an hour ago.

Jason moved to search for survivors.

He couldn't find any.

Even as he called out cautiously, trying to get anybody still living to give him a sign, there was no reply.

There was nothing but silence.

Jason crouched down next to a girl, no older than maybe eight or nine, and closed her eyes.

There was nothing peaceful about her expression, nor any of the others.

Jason didn't want to think of the pain they all must have experienced before they had finally died.

Their faces said enough.

Jason swallowed and looked at the bottle the girl was still clutching, water dripping out of it slowly and dampening the ground.

Closing his eyes, he swallowed again and pushed himself up to continue his search.

But there was nothing.

Jason pulled an older demigod out of the water to put him with the others, then moved on to skim the outskirts of the campsite.

There were no survivors there, either.

Jason returned to the campsite with a heavy heart.
So many.

There were so many.

He knew there had been more monsters here than demigods, but now, without the monsters, the number of demigods seemed so much higher, and so much more terrible.

Jason walked through the thick layers of dust, making sure not to breathe any of it in as he left the campsite and took the normal path back to the Camp.

Will had done this.

His Will.

His Will, who was a healer.

His Will, who was no fighter, and no murderer.

Now, he was.

Jason pressed his lips together and kept moving, walking past some more dead demigods that had been struck down by whatever monster had disintegrated behind them.

Some hours ago, he had cried because of the futility of the situation, and because he knew he wouldn't have been able to protect his boyfriends and home against Kyle and his forces.

Now, he wanted to cry for the fate of these children, and the realization that his boyfriend had done this.

Jason took a deep breath.

He understood, of course.

Will had wanted to protect them, the same way Jason always wanted to protect them.

He had just chosen a terrible way to do so.

Jason had half-hoped it wouldn't be that bad.

The same way he had hoped when he had checked out the campsite before to get an overview of their forces.

But it was that bad.

It was even worse than bad, just like the last time.

Jason wasn't sure what to do.

He hadn't known what to do against the forces other than to stand and fight.

Now, he knew a part of him was grateful for evading that fate, while the rest of him was as clueless as before concerning the big 'What now?' that loomed over them.

What was Kyle going to do once he found out about this?

Dylan had already been so scared of Kyle finding out about a possible sneak attack, what would Kyle do once he knew they had killed everyone at that campsite?

Did he have any other forces left?

Would he send the giants?

How were they supposed to stand up against those?

Dylan had told them of the giants under Kyle's control, after all.
Even if they were looking for the Romans, Jason was certain Kyle wouldn't hesitate to send them after the Greek camp, first.

Jason took another deep breath as he walked up the hill.

No matter what was in store for them, they would have to be prepared.

He saw a few campers at the border, looking out into the distance curiously to undoubtedly catch a glimpse of the campsite, just to look at Jason in utmost confusion, instead.

Jason didn't explain himself.

"Get some people together. We need to prepare the burials for the dead." He ordered as he passed them, not intending to linger.

"What happened?" One of them asked.

Will happened.

Jason didn't stop, and didn't turn to look at them.

"They're dead." He replied, because that was all there was to say.

Jason walked down the hill towards the tiny building that was now the Big House, not surprised to find Annabeth and Piper there, already holding a meeting with the other head counsellors.

He also wasn't surprised that neither he or his boyfriends had been informed.

They already knew what had happened, after all.

A mixture of stunned and fearful gazes met his, but he ignored the looks as he sat down in his rightful place, joining the meeting as if he was meant to be there.

Annabeth gave him a long look that Jason ignored, unwilling to understand what she wanted to tell him.

Piper stared at him, too, and her expression was a little more urgent, and a little harder to ignore.

Jason could read her mute 'What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be with your guys?', even without trying.

Jason turned his face away.

There was nothing he could do to fix what Will had done.

All he could do now was to keep moving and make sure they would get through the days to come.

Annabeth continued talking, picking up where she had trailed off as if Jason being here was nothing out of the ordinary.

Jason made sure to listen to what she had to say, then he lifted his hand to add his observations from the campsite, including his call for people to help with the necessary burials.

There was a murmur of understanding, and once Annabeth declared the meeting as over, Jason let himself fall back into his chair.

He watched the others getting up and filing out, some muttering in hushed voices, others clearly rejoicing at narrowly evading a losing battle.

Then, they were gone, leaving only Piper and Annabeth behind.

"Why aren't you with your boyfriends?" Piper asked the moment the door fell shut.

Jason thought back to Will and the way he had looked up at him to meet his gaze, with his lips trembling and tears pooling at the corners of his eyes.
What was he supposed to do there?

Nico had said it all already.

Percy had undoubtedly talked to him, too.

There was nothing Jason could tell him that he didn't already know, and nothing he could do to change what had happened.

There was only the here and now, and Jason had to pour all his focus into keeping them alive.

He had to pour all he had into keeping everything up and running, or they would slip right through his fingers, just like how Will had slipped out of the cabin to become a murderer.

"There's weapons at the campsite. We should collect those and let Leo and the other children of Hephaestus look them over for anything useful." He said instead and pushed himself up.

"You know he did this for you, right?" Annabeth asked quietly as he turned to leave.

Jason stopped.

"No." He replied, but didn't look around. "He did it for all of us."

Jason simply wished he hadn't.

However, this was how things were now, and Jason had to do his best to protect them, to keep them alive at all costs.

If he failed, he knew what would await Will.

Jason left the small Big House without looking back, too busy working off the ever-prominent to-do list in his mind.

Anything to keep them alive.

Anything to keep them safe.

Anything for them.

Jason would do all he could.

Jason wasn't sure how much he had left to give.

***

Percy was looking all over the camp, but no matter what he did, his boyfriend was nowhere to be found.

Which was ironic, because he seemed to have been everywhere.

He went to the border, but Jason wasn't there anymore.

He went to the newly built tiny Big House, but Jason wasn't there anymore.

He went to Leo, but Jason wasn't there anymore.

He went to the Bunker, but Jason wasn't there anymore.

He went to the campfire, but Jason wasn't there anymore.

He went to the arena, the armory, the Ares cabin, the Hermes cabin, the medic tent and the dining pavilion. But Jason wasn't there anymore, either.

Percy wanted to believe that he went back to their cabin, but something told him he hadn't, and so he kept looking.
In the end, he found his boyfriend at the beach.

It was odd, because Jason had never seemed particularly interested in it before. Yet here he was, standing in the sand and looking off into the dark distance, his back to Percy. Percy hesitantly made his way over. They waves still called to him. They still whispered to him, trying to lure him in, ever since the battle. Ever since he had let his powers take over. Percy ignored the pull of the water as he took to his boyfriend's side. "I was looking for you." He said quietly, looking out at the pitch-black sea like Jason was doing. "Now you found me." His boyfriend replied simply, and Percy glanced at him. "You were busy."

Jason kept his eyes on the horizon. "I was."

"When will you return to our cabin?" Percy asked tentatively, because it seemed like a better approach than to grab Jason's hand and drag him off. "Maybe later."

Percy didn't like the 'maybe', but also didn't like the 'later'. "You do know that Will is having a breakdown because he thinks you're breaking up with us, right?" He asked cautiously, but Jason didn't look away from whatever it was he was seeing in the distance. Percy wondered faintly what he was thinking about, and whether it was a better place than reality right now. "I'm not breaking up with you." Jason replied at long last. Even though Percy had expected as much, he still felt a small rush of relief.

"Good. Can you…maybe tell Will that, too? And Nico? They both looked terrified. You know what they think about any of us leaving the cabin." He pointed out cautiously. Jason kept staring into the distance. Then, he dragged his gaze away to meet Percy's, his expression as inscrutable as before. "I can't. Not right now. There's still a lot to do, and I don't know how much time we have left."

Percy deflated, his heart heavy in his chest, though he tried not to let it show too much. "Oh. Okay, but…they need you, you know?" He tried carefully, but Jason was already turning away from the sea and from Percy. "I need them, too. But right now, I need to make sure we all survive the morning." Jason told him, glancing up at the flickering light of one of the lamps Leo and his siblings had installed all over the camp to make sure there was always enough light. Especially because the cleaning harpies had never returned after Jason had zapped them to ashes, and the campers tended to do whatever they wanted these days. Percy wished he could do what he wanted, too.
Instead, he swallowed thickly and followed his boyfriend.

"If there's the possibility that we don't survive the morning, wouldn't it be better to spend the night with loved ones?" He asked, a last attempt to get Jason to join them and clear things up, because he knew both Will and Nico needed the reassurance.

Jason kept on walking.

"I'm not going to let you die." He said, and there was an edge to his voice.

Percy looked at the dark grass at his feet as he followed.

Sometimes, it wasn't about what people 'let happen'. Sometimes, things simply happened.

Percy didn't say that, though.

"How about just a quick break, then?" He suggested hopefully.

But his boyfriend wasn't deterred.

"If I go back, you know I won't be able to leave again. Go to them, Percy. Sleep. Rest. Comfort. I'll be back in the morning, probably."

_Probably._

Percy didn't like the sound of that.

He reached out for his boyfriend, then thought better of it and pulled his hand back.

Then, he realized what he was doing, and reached out once more, tugging on Jason's shirt until his boyfriend stopped and looked back at him.

"Percy, I…" He started, but Percy was already leaning forward and cut him off with a small kiss.

"We should stick together in times like this. Don't make the same mistake Will made." He told him softly, and Jason was looking at him with an odd look, before his eyes hushed back down to Percy's lips.

Percy resisted the urge to smirk and pulled away from him, before turning towards the cabins.

"Well, I'll be off now. Our boyfriends are going crazy with worry, I wouldn't want to feed into that by being gone even longer than necessary." He told Jason with a small shrug and a wave of his hand.

He managed five steps, then he heard Jason's footsteps hurrying after him, and he smiled to himself in triumph.

"Maybe for a few minutes. But I _really_ have to leave again." Jason insisted next to him, and this time it was Percy's turn to not look at him as he let out a vague hum in reply.

His hand brushed against Jason's a few times, until Jason got the hint and took it, threading their fingers together.

There.

Now nothing could go wrong anymore, Percy was certain.

It seemed there was one more thing he was good for, on his ever so tiny list of abilities: Getting his boyfriends together when they tried to scatter.

By far not the worst ability to have.

Percy kind of liked it.

*
It was shortly before midnight when Percy's bladder forced him to abandon the safe haven that was his boyfriends' embrace to go to the bathroom.

They hadn't slept much, but hadn't quite been awake, either.

Jason had tried to leave again, but when all three of them had gotten up to follow him, he had relented and stayed 'a while longer', which was lasting until now, so far.

Percy used the bathroom, then washed his hands in the sink, looking bleary-eyed at his reflection in the mirror.

He looked…well, as always, he guessed.

But also not.

Percy frowned a little and leaned forward, tilting his head from side to side.

Fine, stark-white lines zigzagged across his jaw up to his cheekbones.

Percy blinked.

That…that was new.

Were his scars spreading?

Percy touched them, but they were too thin to notice any temperature difference, like with the bigger ones on his back and chest.

These would probably still go unnoticed from a distance, but…not from up close.

Percy wondered whether his boyfriends had already noticed.

Then, he remembered the stunned look Will had given him, before he had shook his head and held him a lot tighter than necessary.

Ah. They knew.

Percy studied the lines a moment longer, then checked his arms to see whether the scars there had changed, too.

But they seemed the same as always, ugly and white and giving him that cracked-terracotta look he despised so much.

Will's cream had helped, back when he had used it.

But then they had paled again, and Percy decided it wasn't worth the effort.

They were low on supplies as it was, Percy wasn't going to waste those on something so stupid.

With one last look in the mirror, Percy pushed away from the sink and left the room.

It didn't matter.

He looked at his guys, still sitting against the wall with the blanket wrapped around them, waiting for his return with as tired expressions as his own.

Percy smiled to himself.

As long as they were with him, it didn't matter.

It didn't matter whether his scars were spreading in mysterious ways, and it didn't matter whether they might all die tomorrow.

He had the here and now.

That was enough for Percy.
Kyle stood in front of his tent, breathing in the morning air and watching the leftover giants taking apart what seemed to be a bunch of cows they must have found somewhere.

This was the day.

Kyle didn't have to check the time to know his forces would already be marching into Camp Half-Blood at this very moment to tear it apart.

There were enough of them to get the job done, this time.

No more risks. No more loopholes.

He thought of William for a moment, but then pushed the thought aside.

It was a shame he had to die, but he had made his decision.

Kyle glanced over his shoulder to his bed, where Dylan was still rolled up in a blanket, fast asleep.

He had found a good enough replacement, anyways.

Maybe not quite like William, but close enough.

Kyle considered the blonde mop of hair for a moment, then returned his attention to the giants.

They were done with the cows now.

Kyle wrinkled his nose at all the blood that had splattered everywhere, glad his tent wasn't close enough to fall victim to it, too.

Everything was going according to plan.

Camp Half-Blood was being torn down at this very moment.

Camp Jupiter was already getting chased down by his skiēs and those two good-for-nothing giants, Clytius and Alcyoneus.

Porphyryion was already on his way back at his orders.

It wasn't long, now.

Who knew, maybe today would be the grand day.

The day both Camps fell, and the day Kyle's master would seize control of what was rightfully his.

It would be such a lucky coincidence.

Kyle smirked to himself.

Without the oracle, the gods wouldn't even know what hit them until it was too late.

Much too late.

Kyle's smirk widened as his eyes hushed over to the tiny tent in the very center of their current hiding place, heavily guarded at all times.

Good thing they had that oracle.

Pleased, Kyle stepped back inside his tent, moving over to his map to give his little Camp Half-Blood figure a nudge, causing it to topple over and roll away.

Maybe he should check in on his troupes.

Just to catch a glimpse of all those terrorized demigods as they realized they would be wiped out
within a few hours – if they even lasted that long.

Kyle mused this, liking the idea more and more by the second.

Plus, his troupes hadn't called him the way they had been supposed to, and everybody knew how much Kyle hated sloppiness.

There was only a thin line between that and disobedience, after all.

If his troupes couldn't give him regular updates, they might as well be saying they didn't respect him enough as their leader to keep him informed.

Like when they had attacked the Greek camp and nearly ruined all of Kyle's hard work because of their own foolish lust for power.

Kyle flicked the Camp Half-Blood figure off the table.

Yeah, he would check up on them.

Just to see how well they were doing already.

Who knew, maybe they were already finishing up.

Kyle liked that idea, and managed to take two steps towards the exit, when he heard rustling and shuffling behind him.

He halted with a glance over his shoulder.

Dylan had woken up.

He watched him sit up in bed, the blanket tightly wrapped around himself, his expression seeming a little exhausted, even though he should have had enough rest.

"S-sir?" The boy asked, sounding a little puzzled to find Kyle out of bed.

Kyle's lips twitched, and he found himself hovering, torn between checking on his troupes and going back to bed.

Dylan looked nice and warm, after all.

Just like William used to be.

Kyle moved over to the boy, and found him reaching out for him with shaky hands, though he didn't seem cold.

Maybe scared, then.

But of what? Kyle leaving him behind in bed?

Ah, he must expect Kyle to abandon him like he had abandoned the other kids before.

The ones he had used for only a night or two.

Kyle smiled at that.

So, Dylan was the uncertain sort, huh?

Kyle liked that.

He felt Dylan tugging him back into bed and allowed it to happen.

Possessive, too, it seemed.

Kyle liked that even more.

Fine, the troupes could wait.
This promised a much better start into the day than waiting for a bunch of fools to explain themselves, after all.

Kyle smirked as he took control, and Dylan swallowed and let it happen.

Yes, this boy really made a great replacement.

Not quite like Will.

But close enough.

***

Hazel herded her people along, Frank yelling orders as the Amazons rushed to join the fight breaking out only a few turns away from them.

"Frank! We need to take a left!" She called towards him when she spotted the drawing of an owl on the wall ahead of them, remembering Kinzie's words.

The amazon was one of the first who had rushed into battle to protect them when Hazel and the others had suddenly found themselves attacked by some shadowy monsters that had appeared out of nowhere.

That had been the last time she had seen Kinzie, too.

Hazel refused to dwell on that.

She called orders to her cohort, who obeyed to the best of their abilities, and they hurried left, even though all the paths in this maze-like structure seemed the same.

Hazel only hoped she wasn't leading them into a trap.

She trusted Kinzie.

She didn't trust those Shadows, though.

Hazel felt her arm vibrate where Reyna's IM-ing device was.

Camp Half-Blood had been trying to reach her for a while now.

Unfortunately, she couldn't exactly answer the call while running for her life and trying to keep her people alive.

Hazel saw one of the Amazons giving her the sign, and she called upon her powers, drawing anything she could from the soil at their feet and blocking off the passages to both the left and right, to throw the monsters off.

The amazons would find alternate ways, they had claimed.

Hazel had to believe them.

The moment she had them moving down the long, narrow path, she heard something on the other side of her barrier, trying to get through.

What were those things?!

Hazel swallowed and tried to rush the others, but she knew they wouldn't be able to hold out much longer.

At this rate, they would have to fight.

The Amazons had already declared they would help them, but they had no intention of dying for them.

Once they were cornered, Hazel knew they would be on their own.
Thus, they weren’t allowed to get cornered.

Hazel called for them to take another left, and Frank repeated the order loudly from where he was towards the head of the group.

They were just too many...

Maybe they should have split up, but Queen Hylla had advised against it, claiming it would give the monsters the chance of picking them apart one by one.

Hazel still wished they had done it, because it felt like there would have been more of a chance for any of them to survive.

Whereas now…

There was a crash behind them, and Hazel knew her barrier had broken once more.

She conjured up another one and kept going.

She sealed up the next passages too once they passed them, but the Shadows didn’t seem too bothered by her gems, even when she tried to bury them beneath them.

They simply struggled back out and kept giving chase.

Hazel partly dreaded they were trying to herd the Romans out of the Underground and into the giants’ very hands.

Unfortunately, they had to get above ground to escape these things.

After the next turn, Hazel realized with a sickening feeling that they were closing in.

There was a ruckus somewhere in the midst of the group, and Hazel craned her neck to see what the holdup was about.

The wounded.

One of the stretchers had broken.

Hazel saw a flash of purple and gulped.

Reyna.

Their praetor hadn’t regained consciousness yet after succumbing to the pain of her injuries, and Hazel knew that things weren’t looking too rosy for her.

She would live, they said, but there was also that undertone in their voice that indicated Reyna would need a long time to recover from this.

However…

Hazel looked back over her shoulder, already spotting one of the Shadows turning the corner and making for them.

If this kept up, there would be nothing to recover from.

She called to her cohort to take up arms, while Frank and the centurions tried their best to get everybody moving again.

The Shadows came swarming towards them, becoming more and more, and Hazel wondered faintly whether they were breeding down here, because there couldn’t have been this many.

She swallowed when they reached her troupes and the battle started.

"Hazel." Frank’s voice sounded right behind her, and she realized he must have pushed his way through to her, disregarding his duties as praetor for her sake.
Hazel steeled her mind as she reached out to thread their fingers together for a moment.

"At the next turn, you take a right. Then, there should be a ladder. Have everybody move up and you'll get out at an abandoned factory. Kinzie said you can regroup there and will find everything you need to keep going." She told him quickly.

Frank looked grim, and his hold on her hand increased for a moment.

She knew he wanted to argue.

But now was not the time.

"I will hold them off to give you a head start. Go. Call Camp Half-Blood the moment you can, let them know we're trying to meet the Hunters midway towards them."

It was their last hope.

Frank still looked grim, but he nodded, anyways.

"Stay safe." He told her, and she smiled back at him in reassurance.

Frank squeezed her hand, then he let go and called to the others.

Hazel turned back towards the battle and gave her own orders to her cohort.

They obeyed, pushing back the Shadows enough to allow Hazel to conjure up another barrier.

It wasn't enough, but it allowed them to keep moving down the tunnel after the others.

Hazel looked at her cohort, taking in the battered and beaten faces.

She wanted to pick the fittest to stay behind, but none of them were fit, and all of them had already done their part.

Hazel sent them after the others, ignoring their uneasy and concerned expressions as they realized what she intended to do.

These were her friends.

She was going to protect them with everything she had.

Hazel waited until the last one disappeared around the corner, before calling upon the earth again and filling the entire path with gems and rocks, anything that would obey her, and anything to block off any possible way for the Shadows to follow.

The tunnel groaned and shook at her efforts, threatening to cave in, but her gems would hold it in place, she knew.

At least for as long as she was alive.

Hazel turned back towards the falling barrier and drew her spatha.

The Shadows were breaking through already, making right for her.

Hazel narrowed her eyes and raised her weapon.

She wouldn't let anything past her.

Hazel charged.

***

When Kyle finally decided to check on his forces, he was confused to find that he couldn't possess the kid he usually used.

In fact, he couldn't possess any of the kids he had possessed before.
With a frown, Kyle glanced back at Dylan, but the boy was still knocked out, so he concentrated back on the campsite.

Had they joined the battle? Kyle had given strict orders not to include the children, since those still might come in handy in the days to come, and wouldn't deal much damage in any battle, anyways.

They had gone against his orders again.

Kyle silently fumed as he focused his mind on one of the older kids, a cowardly boy who would do anything to stay away from battle and was bound to still be alive.

But he couldn't find him, either.

Strange.

Kyle opened his eyes again, working his jaw angrily.

He didn't like this.

He didn't like this at all.

Kyle got up and waved his hand, calling upon his scythe.

How dare they go against direct orders?

Hadn't they learned from last time?

He only hoped for them that they were already finished with the Camp, or Kyle might as well kill off the rest and finish the job, himself.

Kyle didn't even try to control his anger as he focused on his powers, before he felt himself dissolving into darkness and misery.

They would pay for their disobedience.

*

Kyle reappeared at the campsite – and promptly stilled, anger momentarily making way for confusion when everything was strangely quiet.

Not to mention…empty.

Kyle looked around, his scythe in a death grip by his side as his eyes roamed over the tilted and destroyed tents and the thick layer of dust in the air and on the ground.

Kyle's lips curled into a snarl as he began walking, taking in the rest of the campsite.

Where were his forces?

The last update he had received had been yesterday, shortly before nightfall, stating that everybody had arrived and would be ready to do his bidding.

Kyle kicked at the dust, watching it fly up as his eyes narrowed.

*Monster remains.*

He saw dark blotches of dried blood on the ground, as well as a large number of footsteps.

Following said footsteps, Kyle found himself stopping short at the sight greeting him just behind the tents.

Bodies.

Dead bodies.

Neatly piled together, ready to be prepared for burials.
Kyle's hand was shaking where it squeezed the living hell out of his scythe.

White, hot anger surged through him.

William.

Kyle's gaze snapped up, looking through the trees towards that accursed Camp.

His feet started moving.

That boy had crossed him for the last time.

***

Will was following his guys up to the border when he felt it.

Hatred.

Anger.

The thirst for revenge.

Kyle.

Will choked out a feeble sound as he felt himself swaying at the intensity, at the proximity of those emotions, moments before he picked up on the values.

Nico was the first to notice, already at his side to steady him, the question on his lips forgotten as he, too, seemed to sense it.

"Watch out!" He called out to something Will couldn't see, but he could sense the confusion, the shock, followed by fear and retreat.

Then, everything was Kyle.

He heard Percy and Jason call something, felt them taking to his side protectively, but they were facing away from the border.

Will dreaded to think of what it meant, wishing he didn't have to open his eyes to find out.

He did, anyways.

Everything was Kyle.

There were five campers behind them, all kids that were meant to collect the dead with them for the burials.

All five of them were staring at them with the same hateful look of disgust on their faces, their eyes cold and their sneers evil.

"You've gone too far, this time." They spoke in sync.

Will couldn't breathe.

All eyes were fixed on him.

"I warned you, William. Now, I'll make you pay."

Nico stepped in front of him protectively, snarling at the threat.

"You'll have to go through me, first." He threatened, and Will found himself losing his balance at the sudden surge of anger coming from Kyle.

Then, there was cold malice.
Followed by something dark, eerie, and pleased.

"As you wish."

Will let out a quiet cry, but then, as quickly as everything had started, everything came to a halt.

Kyle disappeared.

The kids slumped to the ground.

Nico was still alive and well in front of him.

His boyfriend turned to give him a wide-eyed look full of fear.

"Will, what is he going to do?" He heard him ask, his voice faint.

Will found himself shaking uncontrollably, cold dread filling him to the core.

Something cut its way into his mind.

Then, the vision hit him.

***

Hades was tending to his wife's garden when he heard it.

A distant rumble, sounding through his realm.

His eyes narrowed.

So, it was time.

There was more rumbling.

Louder, more distinctive.

Hades stood up, his gaze on the delicate flowers in front of him as he stroked along the petals, before he let go.

Turning his back on the garden, he began walking.

The darkness around him seemed to weep, but he ignored it.

Same as he ignored the rocks and walls around him as they started groaning and cracking.

In the distance, he could hear the first sections caving in, the ground shaking at his feet.

Hades walked through his realm.

Past the silent remains of Elysium and the Isles of the Blest.

Past the emptied Fields of Punishment.

Past the lonely leash that marked where Cerberus used to lay.

Past the vacated Fields of Asphodel.

More groaning.

More crumbling.

The unintelligible screaming of a world that knew no pain.

Stones hit the path around him as he kept on walking.

His robes billowed in a breeze that had no place here.
The ground shook harder.

The rumbling was getting closer.

He willed the palace doors to swing open, even as they cracked and creaked and wept along with
the rest of his realm.

Hades kept his gaze ahead of him, striding through his palace.

He reached his throne room, and there was a loud crash, the sound of the ground breaking open,
while the edges of the Underworld caved in.

Hades sat down on his throne, his hand closing around the sword resting against the side of it.

There was a roar now.

Dark, booming, and full of hatred and triumph.

A power much like his own, yet entirely different, filled the emptiness outside, demanding
sacrifices for its effort.

Hades kept his gaze on the doors, watching them creak and groan and scream along with the rest
of his Underworld.

He thought of his wife.

Of her words.

Of the defeat in her ageless, beautiful eyes.

The ghost of her touch still lingered where she had caressed his cheek.

Hades held his sword firmly, while his other hand gripped his throne.

There was another booming crash, and everything around him shook.

The force outside his palace demanded entrance.

The doors yielded.

His palace was falling.

Hades gazed into the eyes of his demise.

There was a cold, triumphant laugh, filling a space that couldn't be filled anymore.

Hades rose from his throne as his world crumbled to pieces around him.

His last thought was of his children, and the bitter knowledge he wouldn't get to see them grow
old, after all.

Hades lifted his sword and charged.

*Farewell.*

***

Nico screamed.
A/N: Hey Cupcakes!
Here's the next chapter!

Finally, some answers.

I'm sorry again for the last chapter.
I wish I could say it gets better.

Sorry, and love y'all~

Trigger Warnings:
- Death
- War
- Graphic depiction of violence, injuries and death
- Mentioned/implied rape
- Angst

Chapter 17: The Truth

Will wasn't sure how they made it back to the cabin.

He wasn't sure how Nico could still even look him in the eye.

He couldn't tell how Percy and Jason could still even let him inside the cabin.

All he knew was that he was there, and they were alive, and Nico was still shaking like a leaf, and Will was already on the ground. Again.

Somebody was speaking, but he couldn't tell whether it was one of them or himself or somebody else entirely.

Hands grabbed him and pulled him off where he had curled up on the floor.

Nico was put into bed.

The next moment, footsteps hurried away from said bed and into the bathroom, before Nico started retching.

Again.

Percy ran after him.

Jason put Will into bed.
Will struggled and fought and pushed himself back out of it with a high-pitched whine, unable to take either Jason’s kindness or the comfort of their bed.

He tried to escape under the bed, but Jason cut off his efforts, strong arms wrapping around his middle and pulling him back.

Will choked out a frantic sob, pleading for mercy.

But he was undeserving of mercy.

His vision blurred at the edges, graying out, and he felt himself slumping a few times in Jason's arms as he teetered on the edge of unconsciousness.

Jason's voice sounded at his ear, trying to calm him.

Will pointed into the direction of the bathroom weakly, trying to tell him to take care of Nico.

Nico.

White and black dots danced in his vision as everything spun around him.

What had he done?

Will whispered Nico's name weakly, before slumping back into Jason's arms once more.

What had he done.

Will knew what he had done.

Will's head fell against Jason's chest, and he felt Jason take his pulse cautiously, his voice seeming far away.

Too far away.

Will felt a new spike of pain flare through Nico, a loud, despairing cry tearing through the cabin.

Something wet hit his cheek as he looked up at Jason weakly.

The next moment, he passed out.

It was a blessing he didn't deserve.

***

Will was walking.

At first, he was certain he was dreaming.

Even now, there still seemed to be dreams to his left and right as he kept walking down a long, even path.

He could catch glimpses of them, if he put his mind to it.

But after the first promises of peace, warmth and happiness, Will had realized he wouldn't be able to return to this path if he succumbed to temptation.

And so, he kept walking, his eyes fixed on a spot ahead of him.

He didn't know where he was going.

He didn't know where he was.

But at the same time, it seemed familiar.

As if he had been here a thousand times already.
Will felt his surroundings fading away, though he wasn't aware that there had been surroundings until they were gone.

The snippets of his dreams disappeared.

There was only the path, leading away.

To where, Will didn't know.

*It could be a trap,* he thought to himself.

But he wasn't scared, and he didn't falter.

He kept moving, until it felt like he was all the way up in the sky, even though he thought he had been moving downwards.

Will was tempted to look behind him, but something told him not to, so he kept his gaze straight ahead, searching for the end of his journey.

It came suddenly.

One moment, he was walking the endless path.

The next moment, there was a gate in front of him.

It looked beautiful, but cruelly so, like a rose with poisonous thorns.

It was a gate, but it felt like a cage.

Will felt uncomfortable, looking at it.

He felt even more uncomfortable when the gate swung open to let him in.

However, he knew that only moving forward would give him the answers he sought.

What answers did he seek?

He didn't know yet.

But they would be answered.

Will stepped through the gateway, half expecting the golden gates to slam shut behind him, but they remained open.

There was no need for them to close.

Will wasn't going to leave.

As he walked on, he recognized the sweet scent of various wildflowers and herbs, promising peace, and he looked curiously towards the meadows to the left and right of the path he was still following.

But this wasn't what he was looking for.

There was a river, sparkling water calling to him, promising relief.

But that wasn't what he sought, either.

There was a cool breeze, whispering of well-deserved rests and new beginnings.

But Will shook it off, knowing this wasn't what he wanted, either.

The path started broadening, and Will noticed the change in material, the gravel making way for bricks, making way for marble, making way for an iridescent stone he had never seen before.

It reminded him of liquid glass – which made no sense, because it was very much solid, and very
much not like glass.
And yet, the thought remained.

His gaze wandered again, and he caught sight of various animals, some of them familiar, while others he had only heard of in stories and fairytales.

But Will didn't linger, knowing this wasn't what he was looking for, either.
The path ended in a wide platform, placed in the middle of nowhere, overlooking nothing at all.
Will hovered in front of it for a moment.
But it was unmistakable that this was what he had been looking for.

He stepped onto it cautiously, half expecting it to fall apart beneath him, to let him tumble to his death.
But it remained just as solid as the path, and the world around him turned still and quiet as everything else faded away.

There were no animals anymore. No breeze. No river. No meadows.
Not even the path.
There was only the platform, looking out into a nothingness Will couldn't describe.

He took another step towards the railing, and noticed a bench, right in front of it.
The moment he noticed the bench, he noticed that there was somebody sitting on it.

He wasn't alone anymore.

Will felt like he should be surprised, and yet he failed to feel so as he walked up to the bench and sat down next to his father.

"It's been a while." Apollo said quietly, gazing out into the nothingness.
Will mimicked him, not seeing any reason to study his father's face or appearance.

"You got exiled. Doesn't really make it easy to come by for brunch." Will replied coolly, and Apollo let out a small sigh.

"Why do you always say that? You know, one day, when I'm out of here, I'll take you out for brunch."

"Don't. Just stay here, before you end up making even more children that you'll never bother with again after birth." Will retorted derisively.

Apollo only sighed at that.

"You've come far, son." He said, changing the topic and keeping his gaze firmly on the nothingness in front of them.
Will didn't feel like replying to that.
Instead, he became aware.
Aware of what had happened.
Aware of what he had done.
Aware that this wasn't just a dream.

"Is this the vision? The one I've been having?" He asked, and now, his father turned towards him, but Will didn't look at him.
"Yes. I have been trying to reach you for a while now. Sometimes, you come. Other times, you don’t."

It explained nothing, and only brought forth even more questions that Will swallowed down again.

"Did you know? About what would happen?" He asked, swallowing thickly as his thoughts went to Nico, and his chest clenched painfully.

He looked down at his lap, and could see his father's sad expression out of the corners of his eyes.

"No, I didn't. But you did." He said softly, and Will's head and body shot up again, eyes wide as he stared at his father.

He opened his mouth to ask, to yell, to deny.

But then, he couldn't find any words, and he just stood there, staring, moving his lips senselessly.

Apollo gave him a sad, sorrowful look.

"You're lying." Will pressed out at last long, though he knew his father wasn't lying.

But Will hadn't known!

If he had known that Hades would...that he would...

That the Underworld would...

Apollo let out another deep sigh.

"I wish it were so, Will. I really do. Come now, sit with me. Allow me to explain." He said gently, patting the space next to him, but Will had his fists bulled at his side, shocked and disgusted by the lack of care.

"Do you have any idea what just happened?! Nico's father just...he just...that was a god! Kyle managed to...to somehow...he sent something after..." He couldn't say it.

He tried to press the words out, but his throat constricted, his body fighting against him.

Apollo looked at him with that same sad look.

He looked older.

He also wasn't wearing his sunglasses.

In fact, he was looking rather unlike himself, wearing simple clothing rather than the punk-like style Will had caught glimpses of before.

"I know, Will." Was all he said, and it sounded grave, and sad, and Will found himself deflating as the hopelessness inside him rose.

Apollo patted the space next to him again, and Will sat.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke as they looked out into nothingness again.

"Hades was a kind man. One of the kindest gods I know. He sent me a letter, you see? Told me that you would travel into his realm with those boys of yours. Sickeningly polite, as always." Apollo told him, though Will wasn't sure what to do with this information.

His father leaned back against the bench and blew out a long, deep breath.

Silence settled over them again.

Will was looking back down at his hands in his lap.
"Why did you say that I knew? About what would happen? I...I mean, I clearly didn't know, else I wouldn't have...I wouldn't have..."

Woudn't have slaughtered that campsite.

Will's hands clawed his thighs.

But hadn't he said he was willing to face the consequences?

Hadn't Persephone warned him that he would have to carry that burden?

Hadn't everything inside him told him that his actions would come with a great price?

Will had presumptuously assumed that the cost would have something to do with him.

How truly arrogant of him.

He should have known that a cruelty that great would be punished with something far worse than one pitiful afterlife.

But to think that Hades had to...had to...

Because of Will...

"Because you did know, Will. Every time you come here, we sit and talk. I answer the questions I can answer, and I explain the same things, over and over. And in the end, you see the truth. You see what has happened and what is happening and what will happen." Apollo explained quietly, moving an arm around him in comfort.

Will shook it off.

Then, his words sunk in and he jumped up again.

"But...but...?! How?! Why?! Why would I see all that and then just forget?!" He exclaimed, but right then, he remembered Clovis, and the time the two of them had settled down in the Hypnos cabin to get to the bottom of Will's 'nightmares'.

He remembered Clovis' confusion, and the way he had only shrugged helplessly, telling him that he would have to remember by himself.

Realization dawned on Will, though he tried to deny it, shaking his head to himself as if it made the truth any less real.

Apollo gave him a long, sympathetic look.

"You saw everything that has happened so far, Will. And, even though there were a lot of good things you saw, like your blossoming relationship with your boyfriends, there was also plenty of bad. You saw death. You saw pain. You saw your greatest fears come true in the form of Kyle Thorne returning to Camp and attacking you and your loved ones; repeatedly so. You saw your decisions and its consequences. All of them. Is it really that surprising that the knowledge was too much for you to bear at the time?" His father asked, and Will felt hot and cold again, his fists still clenched and his body still shaking, but he knew in his heart that Apollo was right.

"But I...if I had known, I could have...I could have..." He whispered, weakly.

Apollo shook his head.

"Don't get lost in the countless what-ifs, son. Face the reality that awaits you, and make the best of it." He said wisely, and Will was tempted to punch him in the face.

Instead, he kicked his shin.

"Hades is dead, and you tell me to make the best of it?!" He yelled at him, and his father yelped, caressing his leg with a devastated look and a pout.
"Aw, don't kick me! You didn't kick me the last few times. Granted, you always end up punching me at least once, but you don't kick!" He lamented, and Will got ready to do it again.

Father or not, this was serious, and this ass should finally show some maturity!

Apollo immediately twisted his legs out of the way and let out a small wailing noise.

"Oh, come on, Will! Don't be like that!" He called when Will made a frustrated sound and turned his back on him, walking up to the railing, instead.

"Why couldn't you have contacted me some other way? Why am I still getting those other visions, if this one shows me 'everything'?! If I had known that bastard was going to attack the camp, we could have planned ahead, we could have done something, and Hades wouldn't have had to…"

Will gestured feebly with his hands, trailing off helplessly.

Apollo stepped to his side, looking sad and grave again.

"The guilt was too great for you to bear, at the time. The knowledge that Hades and the Underworld would fall, immediately after your actions, was too much for you to handle, especially when none of the other things that had led up to your decision hadn't yet happened." He explained patiently, and Will stared at him, even as his father kept his gaze on the nothingness in front of them.

"There is a difference between seeing things happen from an outside point of view, and being there when they happen, feeling the full brunt and finding yourself in hopeless situations that seem inescapable at the time. Afterwards, it's always easier to think 'I should have done this or that, why didn't I?' But those different possibilities will only occur to you afterwards, when you've had a chance to fail and learn from that failure."

Will had his arms on the railing now, his forehead resting on them as he stared at the ground, trying to comprehend.

Apollo's words made sense, he guessed, but they felt wrong to Will, like they were meant for somebody else.

He hadn't learned anything from his failure.

Instead, he couldn't believe he had apparently seen this happening before, but had simply decided to conveniently forget about it again, without a care for the consequences.

Hades was dead.

Will had seen it happen in the vision he hadn't wanted to have.

Nico had felt the full brunt of it.

Nico.

Will closed his eyes.

How was Nico ever going to forgive this?

If it had just been Will's afterlife, if it had just been something with Will, then maybe, maybe…

But Hades had been forced to pay for Will's actions.

Will thought of the god of the Underworld, of his rare smiles and his attentive looks, of the mild interest in anything they had talked about, and his respect for their privacy.

He had tolerated Will, Percy and Jason inside his realm, had let them wander and do as they pleased, had made sure they would be well-fed and taken care of.

He hadn't threatened them, hadn't scared them with his powers, hadn't even given them one small reason to cower in fear before him.
He had treated them with respect and done his best to accommodate their wishes, even allowing Will a form of protection from these very visions, all to grant him a break.

He had been kind.

He had been so, so kind.

Apollo took a deep breath next to him.

"When you first came here, you were so confused. You had followed the path out of curiosity, but you didn't know where it would lead. Seeing me only intensified that confusion. When you saw your first glimpses of the future, I thought you would spontaneously combust. It was so much to take in. Too much to take in, in fact. The very fact that you would have to face your greatest fears, coupled with the chance to be with the ones you love, was so much, it catapulted you right back out of here." His father explained, and his words didn't really make sense to Will, but he listened, anyways.

"You were in so much shock and denial that this became a normal occurrence. You wouldn't even get to face half of the future ahead of you before disappearing from this place to wake in your world, shaken and confused."

Will thought vaguely of the time his visions had started happening, and how Percy had noted before that they seemed to get 'more intense' with each time.

Will closed his eyes again.

"The next big leap was when Kyle Thorne appeared at Camp, searching for you." Apollo continued, and Will tensed.

It had been a while since he had heard Kyle's full name.

He had noticed Apollo had said his name before, but it hadn't hit him quite as much as it did now.

"You knew." He said, and for a moment, one sweet moment, he forgot about the pain to focus on the fleeting sense of hatred and disgust flowing through him.

Apollo had known about Kyle.

Of course he had known.

Will had begged him for help often enough.

And Apollo had never cared enough to do anything.

His father let out another loud sigh.

It sounded pained, rather than exasperated.

"Yes, I did. And I am sorry."

Anger flared up in Will and he pushed himself up again, looking at the man who claimed to be his father, at the man who had left him to fend for himself this entire time.

"Why didn't you help me?! I was a kid, for fuck's sake! A kid! And I asked you to help me, I pleaded with you to help me! Why didn't you?!"

Apollo had that sad look on his face again, but Will couldn't care less how sad he was about this.

How sorry he was about this.

"Gods can't always be in all places at once. I heard your pleas, but I fear I was being ignorant of the importance, at the time. I believed it to be the usual worries of a child, confident the Camp would keep you safe and solve your issues in time. It wasn't until much, much later, that I realized what had happened." His father explained, but it was a shitty explanation, and Will was already moving forward before Apollo had even finished.
Will punched the god of the sun square in the jaw.

Apollo's head snapped to the side and he hit the railing, before going down with a small sound.

Will watched with greatest satisfaction how his father sat on the floor like an idiot and touched his face delicately.

"And that," Apollo started as he pushed himself off the ground, dusting off his clothes and moving his jaw into various directions to make sure it worked as it should. "Is the punch I should probably be used to by now."

Will only glared darkly at the god.

"I prayed to you. Every night, I prayed to you to help me. Every time I ran away to hide, I prayed to you, called to you, begging for help. And you. Ignored. Me. You ignored me! All that time!"

Will pressed out, shaking again as the anger and resentment inside him only grew, the punch not enough to overlook the pain of feeling abandoned and alone by the one person who was supposed to know everything and be capable of doing anything.

Apollo tried to take him by the shoulders, but Will shook him off, letting out a low sound in warning.

This wasn't his father.

This was just some dumb god, unable to grow past his immaturity even after living for centuries.

"Will..." Apollo started, but Will was already turning away from him, walking away from the railing and towards where he knew the path was meant to be, just past the platform.

He should just leave.

Hades had already fallen, there was nothing else this place could show him, he was certain.

Nothing would ever be quite that bad.

"I really am sorry, Will. If I could go back to that time...if I could change what happened...I would have helped you. I would have sent help. I would have come from the skies myself to protect you if necessary, son."

Big words for somebody who had left Will to his own devices from the get-go.

Will looked over his shoulder to give Apollo a cold look, letting him see that he didn't buy his words.

He was too old to believe in such blatant lies anymore.

Apollo looked small and helpless, compared to before.

Will didn't feel any pity for him.

Instead, he turned to leave.

"You left before, you know? Many times. I know you hate me, Will. Righteously so. But you're still my son, and I still love you, even if I may not have shown it in the past." Apollo called after him, and Will found himself stopping once more.

"You let mom die. You left me to fend for myself, like you do with all your kids. You walk around boasting and acting like you're oh-so-great, when you're nothing. You're not my father. Hades was more of a father to me than you'll ever be." He spat as he looked back at Apollo, who flinched a little, but didn't argue.

"I know I've made mistakes, Will. I know I can't fix them anymore, either. I wasn't there for you when you needed me before, and I know you wouldn't accept my help now."

If he knew all that, then why did he still bother talking to Will?
“But I also know that you will hear me out, because this is about more than the two of us. Do you really think this was it? That Hades' fall will be the worst you had to face?”

Will hated how that _did_ make him listen, how it made him falter and turn back, away from the only way out that he knew of.

As he walked back towards Apollo, he felt the trickle of awareness once more.

He remembered.

Remembered taking these steps before.

Remembered arguments with his father, remembered screaming and denial.

Remembered the cold dread and the realization, over and over, the tidbits of knowledge too much at once to comprehend and stomach.

Remembered the countless times it became _too much_, his body and mind incapable of coping, forcing him out of this place, away, the knowledge buried deep within himself, hidden away to protect his sanity.

The visions he had all the time…they were from here.

They were _memories_ from here.

He had seen them _here_, first. All of them.

And when it had become necessary, he had yielded to himself and allowed the snippets to fill his mind.

Will didn't understand, but at the same time, he did.

It was a strange feeling, much like the one he had when confronted with those visions.

"What else is there?" Will asked when he stopped in front of Apollo, and the god didn't meet his eyes anymore.

"I don't know. I only know what you let me know, and you have never moved past Hades' death, too shaken and hurt to proceed."

Will couldn't blame his past self.

He remembered, vaguely, how horrified he had felt.

How hurt and devastated, the realization of 'This was me' setting his body on fire repeatedly.

The feeling was nothing compared to how it really felt like.

Will looked towards the railing.

Towards the nothingness that waited there.

He realized dimly that it wasn't nothingness, at all.

It was everything, all at once.

Will didn't like it any more than before.

"What about our _talk_?" He asked derisively as he walked past Apollo, remembering all the conversations they had shared on that bench.

About Kyle, and Apollo's inability to help him.

About his boyfriends, and Apollo's happiness for them.

About the dangers he had already faced, and Apollo's pride.
About the decisions he had made, and Apollo's understanding and support with all of them.

They hadn't had any of those conversations this time. At least not yet.

Apollo followed him to the railing, leaning against it next to him.

"You already know all of it. What happens here is up to you, Will. It always is."

Will didn't look at him, though he felt his gaze fixed on him.

He thought about it for a moment.

Anything he still wished to talk about with the person who called himself his father.

Somehow, it felt like this was the last time he would come here.

It could be the last time he saw Apollo, or at least the last time they could speak like this.

"I can't forgive you. Not yet. Maybe one day, but not now." He said at long last, and Apollo blew out another deep breath.

"Okay."

Will kept his gaze on the future that awaited him.

"Will you be able to forgive yourself?" Apollo asked him quietly, softly, and Will knew he meant Hades, and the slaughter, and the pain Will had caused for his boyfriends as well as so many others.

"Do I deserve forgiveness?" Will spoke his thought aloud, though he hadn't meant to.

"Everybody deserves forgiveness." Apollo told him, and Will turned to give him a pointed look.

"Kyle?"

Apollo's lips twitched into a small, unsurprised smile as he shook his head.

"You can't compare yourself to something as corrupted as Kyle, son. He had all the choices in the world, yet he chose to cause pain and suffering, only looking for personal gain and fulfillment. He can't be forgiven when he can't find it within himself to feel any sort of remorse or guilt for his actions."

Will pondered that as he studied Apollo's face.

The god trailed off, then smiled and shook his head to himself again.

"Also, on a more personal matter, I wouldn't forgive that piece of scum even if the world depended on it. He has taken you from me, and he has killed my son in cold blood. He could come pleading on his knees, begging for forgiveness, and I would show him just where I would put that nasty scythe of his." Apollo suddenly vented with a determined, hateful look on his face, and Will stilled.

On one hand, he was stunned to see Apollo acting so…well, so much like him, in a way.

On the other hand, his mind was reeling as he realized just what Apollo had just said.

"W-Which son?" He pressed out, swallowing repeatedly as he steadied himself with the help of the railing.

Apollo looked up at him in surprise, then lowered his gaze again with a hint of guilt.

Something tugged at Will's mind, the faint memory of war, of searching for a body and never finding one, of the burial that had ensued without them ever truly knowing whether he truly was gone.
Will had his hands in Apollo's shirt immediately, rattling him a little in his shock.

"He killed Michael?!"

Will was dimly aware that he was screaming.

He was also dimly aware that he was swaying on the spot.

Apollo had his lips pressed into a thin line and his gaze anywhere but on Will's face, but he gave a small nod, anyways.

"He wanted to do what I hadn't done. He wanted to protect you."

Will let go of him as if stung, staring at him in disbelief.

He shook his head, then clung to the railing again to steady himself, taking deep breaths as he tried to stomach that.

Kyle had killed his brother.

Michael would have survived the water. He had fallen victim to Kyle.

He must have confronted him.

Because Will had told him about the whole thing.

His death was Will's doing, too.

A hand touched his shoulder, and he shook it off.

Apollo didn't try again.

"I am sorry, son. I should have been there for you. For all of you."

It would be easy, to redirect his anger towards Apollo, rather than himself.

Will didn't.

"I sent him to his death." He whispered emptily.

Same as he had sent Hades to his death.

"Now, don't go taking credit for somebody else's actions. You didn't kill your brother, Will. You didn't kill Michael, and you didn't kill Hades."

Will let out a derisive huff.

No, but it was his fault, all the same.

"You have talked to your brother, have you not? Did he give you the impression that you were to blame?" Apollo asked quietly, even though Will tried not to hear it.

He still thought back to Michael, anyways.

Of how they had talked in Elysium.

How Michael had hugged him, seeming so relieved to know he was alright.

How Michael had tried to comfort him after his breakdown, when everything had suddenly come back to him after he had repressed it for so long.

"You've done nothing wrong, Will. You reached out to him for help when I didn't give it. If anything, I am to blame." Apollo told him gently, but Will didn't look at him, didn't acknowledge him, and very much wanted him gone right now.

"He didn't tell me." He whispered, instead.
"Of course he didn't. I wouldn't have, either."

This did make Will look up.

"You just did!"

Apollo held up his hands defensively.

Then, he scratched at his nonexistent beard.

"Yeah, I guess I did do that...however, my point still stands." He insisted with a determined nod.

Will turned away from him again, trying to act like he wasn't there.

Apollo still slid closer to him, anyways.

"Hades knew, too, didn't he?" Apollo's voice was soft, easy to overhear, but he heard him, anyways.

Will swallowed thickly.

He didn't want to think about this.

His thoughts betrayed him, as usual.

He saw Hades, walking along his realm, no rush in his step and no surprise in his expression.

He saw the empty plains, long evacuated.

He saw Hades standing in his throne room, gazing into the face of his end without a trace of fear.

"He did." Will confirmed in a whisper.

Hades had known what was coming.

Had been waiting for it.

Will wondered whether he had already known back when Will had been there.

If so, he couldn't understand why Hades had been as kind to him as he had been.

Then again, he also couldn't understand how Persephone could have given him that poison if she knew it would claim the life of her immortal husband.

Will stupidly remembered how she had spoken of adopting him.

Now, he couldn't imagine her even looking him in the eye anymore.

_It is a choice_, she had said. _But you will have to carry the burden on your own._

Will sagged down to the ground, making himself as small as he felt.

Apollo crouched next to him – not reaching out anymore, but showing he was there, and that Will wasn't alone.

"But did he blame you?"

Will hugged himself, trying to hide in his own arms.

He selfishly wished Jason was here, because it was always the easiest to hide in Jason's embrace.

"No." He whispered, because there had been no hint of blame in Hades' behavior or emotions.

He had known what awaited him, and he had faced it with his head held high.

"Then I doubt he wanted you to blame yourself, either. You didn't kill him. Kyle did that."
Kyle had given the order.

Something else had done the killing.

Will tried faintly to focus on it, to put a name on it, but his mind strained against him, unwilling to let him ponder this just yet.

"What am I supposed to do now?" He asked feebly, his voice as helpless and small as he felt.

Apollo took a deep breath.

"Well, I believe that's an answer you have to find for yourself."

He really wasn't very helpful, Will noted.

"Why me?" Will croaked out weakly, because it was a question he had been scared of asking in the past, unsure whether he could take the answer.

"Finally, something I can answer." Apollo said, and his tone was cheery again, so unfitting for the situation.

Will still hugged himself and stayed on the ground, the iridescent floor glittering enchantingly beneath him.

He ignored it.

"When they took the Oracle, she knew she would be cut off from me and the other gods, and knew the ones taking her would go after everyone still linked to her. So, she didn't choose to stay bound to Rachel. Instead, she picked you, Will." Apollo explained, and Will swallowed thickly, though the words didn't make any sense to him.

He didn't know much about the Oracle, the stories differing too much.

He didn't understand why she had 'picked' him.

"She knew, the same way I know, that you're strong enough to face what awaits you, even if it may have taken you a while to come to terms with it."

A while? Will had wasted months acting oblivious, when the answers had been served on a silver platter every single night, just for him.

"One could say that you became her eyes. She gave you the power of foresight, allowing you to see all the possible futures up to the point that ties everything together. This is the vision you have been having since the beginning, Will. You have never seen it through until the end, but it has been waiting for you right here." Apollo explained, and when Will looked up at him, Apollo nodded towards the railing.

Towards what laid beyond.

"Why didn't you go and see it? See the vision through, I mean?" Will asked weakly, feeling rather ill-fitted for the task.

Apollo smiled gently at him.

"Because it is only meant for you to see. I could stay by your side, though, if it made you feel better."

Will ignored the offer as he looked back down at his hands.

"What if I can't change it? What if I fail? What if I take one look at the truth, and run away again, like all the times before?"

Apollo leaned towards him a little, and Will could see him shaking his head out of the corners of his eyes.
"You won't. You are stronger than you think, Will. You can face this, and you can push through."

Will wasn't quite so sure.

Apollo let out a small laugh as he sat down close to Will, legs crossed and elbows on his thighs as he leaned forward and eyed Will with a confident smirk.

"Come on. You survived so many things, and you have helped so many other people survive. You have come so far, Will. I can't even put it into words how proud I am of you."

Will swallowed, but promptly averted his gaze.

"Proud, huh?"

"I made Austin head medic." He said quietly, because it was easier to say than 'I slaughtered an entire campsite and sent my boyfriend's father to his death'.

Apollo let out a deep sigh and deflated a little.

"Yes, I know. He told me in his prayer, just before you came. He really wishes you hadn't."

Will tensed.

"I can't be head medic. I went against my oath. Don't you get how your own powers work? We can only heal if we stick to that oath." He spat, unable to believe that he had to explain this to the very god who had made these rules.

"That is true. However, being unable to use my powers, doesn't mean you can't heal. It is your decision what you will do with your life from here on out, son. I will not be in your way for any of it. Quite the contrary: You have my full support, no matter what you decide."

Will didn't understand what that even meant.

Apollo seemed to notice that, too, smiling at him again, even though Will still tried to ignore it as he leaned further away from the god.

"You have powers of your own, Will. You don't need me, you don't need any god to give you theirs. It's all inside you, already."

Will thought of his healing, and how much he had improved over the past months, forced to resort to his powers when there had been nothing else to rely on.

He thought of Frank, of his many injuries, and how Will had put his hands on him, unwilling to let him suffer, and healing him with the help of his own powers.

He thought of Percy, detached and broken on the bed, and how he had stroked through his hair, unwilling to let him suffer, and giving him some peace of mind with the help of his own powers.

He thought of Nico, fading, and of his own hands clasped around him, unwilling to let him go, drawing him back into himself with the help of his own powers.

He thought of Jason, of him slipping right through his fingers, and how he had been unwilling to let him go, either, drawing him back into himself with the help of his own powers.

It was true.

He had powers of his own, too.

But would they be of use in what was to come?

Will thought back to Hades bitterly, and the campsite.

His powers had been useless then.

What if they were useless in what was to come, too?
What if the future the Oracle would show him, was one that he couldn't escape?

This was what everything was meant to lead to.

An end, of sorts.

What if it was *the* end?

What if the great big finale would be the fall of all demigods? What if it was the fall of *the* gods?

Would Will still be able to do anything to prevent it?

He was just Will, after all.

And it was already the eleventh hour, he knew.

At that moment, Will thought of Nico, and his sober expression.

*What has to happen for you to understand that you can't face every challenge in life by yourself?*

That was true.

Will perked up a little.

He still had the guys.

He couldn't see how Nico could possibly forgive him, but he knew that *they* would face anything that was to come with their heads held high.

They would be strong, even if Will was weak.

They could still turn this around, he was certain.

Maybe his purpose wasn't to *act*.

Maybe his purpose was to *let them know*.

Will looked back at Apollo.

His boyfriends would want him to see this through.

They had waited so long for him to give them the answers he had seen every night.

Now, it might as well be time to do it.

Apollo seemed to sense his resolve, straightening up a little as a genuine smile appeared on his lips.

"Is that determination I'm seeing? Have you made up your mind?"

Will ignored him in favor of getting up, looking at the everything in front of him, just waiting for him.

The same way it had all this time.

Will stepped up to the railing, gripping it tightly.

He could do this.

"You'll do well. I know you will." He heard Apollo say quietly.

"Goodbye." Will said without looking back at him.

"Goodbye, son." Apollo spoke softly.

Will hoisted himself over the railing and into the abyss.

Will was thrown into a turmoil of it all, seeing things he had experienced himself, and things that had happened far away from him.

He saw the giants and Kyle's forces take the Oracle, and he saw Apollo waiting on the bench for him, knowing he would come eventually.

He saw his guys, dancing around each other, longing glances and forbidden touches masked with jokes and fake smiles.

He saw Kyle walking through burning plains towards a figure Will knew was Akhlys, and he saw a boy reporting to another, possessed one at Camp Jupiter.

He saw the pillow corner, and his breakdown in Elysium.

He saw Simon warily following Kyle around, confused and unnerved by his smile, and he saw Clovis bound in the forest, struggling to stay alive.

He saw the guys in the Apollo cabin, finally admitting to their feelings, and he saw the awkward first moments of their new relationship.

He saw children being taken from their families, and he saw Dylan becoming aware of his powers.

He saw the countless battles, at the border, at Camp Jupiter, in the middle of nowhere, and he saw Percy and Jason holding him underwater, expressions frantic and fearful.

He saw Malcolm sneaking to the armory to speak to the messenger, and he saw Kyle arranging monsters like figures on a game board, sending them everywhere he deemed necessary with a gleeful smirk on his face.

He saw Percy's storm unleashing, and he saw Kyle flipping his table and beheading monsters.

He saw Reyna standing tall and strong in front of the giants, and he saw the Hunters joining Hazel in a dark tunnel, facing the Shadows.

He saw Dylan stepping through a dark portal to buy them time, and he saw Jason walking through the remnants of the campsite with a haunted look on his face.

He saw Hades die.

Will derailed a little, here, the vision and the memory crashing over him simultaneously, even though it matched perfectly.

The past was so much easier than the present, he realized.

Then, he realized that the present was so much easier than the future.

Paths started parting, several images zigzagging through his mind simultaneously, showing different nuances of the same thing.

He saw everything in order, and yet everything seemed to be a mess.

The sky breaking open in the middle of a storm.

Gods in chariots, riding into battle.

Tears.

Nico's disbelieving face.

A giant's roar.
Dylan struggling in Kyle's hold as they dissolved into black shards.

Monsters everywhere.

A battle without end.

The darkness rising.

He saw his boyfriends fighting, sometimes by themselves, sometimes together.

He saw the different realities, the many possibilities, the many losses that could be prevented, and those that remained the same.

He saw campers falling, and he saw his siblings healing, and then, for all its differences, everything became one.

Will was in the middle of the Camp, though it was unrecognizable as such.

He stared ahead of him, at the ground breaking open, and suddenly remembered his other vision, the one he had had all that time ago, that had shown what would happen if he had fallen.

A reality that had been prevented by him not falling, yet here they were, facing the same fate.

But this time, they were there together.

Will watched in horror at the ground giving way, breaking away just like the Underworld had.

A big, dark shape shifted inside the darkness.

Then, it pushed itself up, out of the hole it had created for itself, and Will breathed out a disbelieving 'No' as he swayed on the spot.

Will heard a low rumble, and felt the immense power that Hades had been forced to face.

Suddenly, it clicked.

Suddenly, everything made sense.

Suddenly, he had the answers he had sought.

***

Will woke with a start, in what felt a little like a nest, and a lot like his boyfriends' loving embrace.

He was breathing heavily, burning up still, and Jason kept holding him in the nest of blankets as Nico dabbed a wet cloth against his forehead, while Percy moved to get a glass of water.

Will snatched his wrist to hold him back.

"Guys!" He exclaimed urgently, his mouth dry and his eyes wide.

They gave him confused looks.

Nico was the first to understand.

"A vision?"

"The vision." Will breathed out, and watched their eyes widen in realization.

Will swallowed dryly, unable to believe what he had seen, though he knew it was the truth.

"What did it show?" Nico asked, his voice faint.

Will took a deep breath, his hand still squeezing Percy's wrist urgently.

"Tartarus."
Persephone walked with her head held high, her heels clicking on the stone marble, her black dress flowing like water behind her.

She threw open the doors in her way, uncaring what she might interrupt.

Noise greeted her, a variety of yells and arguments she had no care for.

"Zeus!" She called loudly, and there was silence almost immediately, her intrusion one that was not expected.

She found her father and brother-in-law on his throne, first tall and proud, but promptly growing smaller as he recognized her.

"Ah, Persephone…"

She strode forward, stopping right in front of him and staring him down.

"What do you think you're doing here, Zeus?" She asked coldly, and he turned a little red around the ears, looking at her with an expression of shock and incredulity.

His eyes hushed to the many others present, and he cleared his throat and tried to straighten up a little, trying to act tough.

Persephone didn't give him the chance to speak.

She whirled around, looking at the many familiar faces around her.

"Look at you! All of you! Cowering here like the cowards you are, letting the world dissolve into chaos!" She exclaimed, and saw many of them shrinking back into their thrones.

Persephone turned back to Zeus, not hiding the look of disgust on her face.

"My husband is gone. He has fought valiantly for his realm, facing the threat we knew was to come, while you were hiding away up here. What do you have to say for yourself?" She asked him, and Zeus looked even more uncomfortable than when he had been forced to attend her wedding and her mother had momentarily turned him into a seedling in her anger.

"I…you see…we couldn't really…there was nothing…"

"Nothing you could do?" She finished for him, her voice pure acid.

Zeus shifted.

As did many of the others.

Persephone drew herself up to her full height.

"I hereby call upon the contract you all have signed!" She called loudly, not surprised when her words were met with various gods freezing up in shock, while others started muttering.

Zeus shifted even more, opening his mouth to speak, but the words didn't immediately come to him.

There was the sound of footsteps behind her.

Persephone didn't have to look around as Nemesis stepped up to her side, her expression as cold as her own.

"You have all agreed to come to Hades' aid, yet none of you were there in his time of need. I demand you take responsibility for this." Persephone declared, and Zeus looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here, glancing around for help.

Hera was next to him, sober and silent.
Poseidon was to his other side, looking down at his folded hands with a grim look on his face.

Nobody spoke.

Zeus fumbled with his words a moment longer, then cleared his throat and shook his head.

"H-How…what do you expect I do, Persephone? I can't very well get him back, you know that as well as I do-…"

Persephone held up her hand, and he fell silent.

The pain was still fresh.

She had known this would happen, but it didn't make it any easier now.

"You may not be able to give me back my husband. But you will take responsibility of what he has left behind. It is only fair." She told him, and he stared at her dumbfoundedly.

Nemesis was still beside her, watching the god of the gods with a cold, calculating look.

She would make sure justice was served.

"What he…what he left behind…?" Zeus asked, swallowing repeatedly, and Persephone saw him breaking out in cold sweat.

"The Underworld, Zeus." She confirmed his thoughts, and watched him pale in response.

There was more muttering now, and Athena leaned forward a little, trying to draw her attention.

"I thought the Underworld was destroyed in the attack?" She asked, her tone one of mild surprise and curiosity.

Zeus tried to become one with his throne.

Persephone let her gaze sweep through the room once more.

"My husband was a smart and brave man. He read the signs the same way you did, but rather than fleeing in fear for his own welfare, he spent his time finishing the judging and evacuating the Underworld to minimize the losses. All the souls, from Asphodel to the Isles of the Blest, have been taken to a temporary safe space. I demand the god of the gods to accommodate these souls and give them the afterlife they deserve." She explained loudly, and saw Nemesis nodding to herself in agreement.

Zeus looked torn between devastated and outraged.

"What?! But I can't just…where am I supposed to put them?! This is Olympus, not some…some…some empty cave you can fill with the dead! It's not laid out for…for that…" He insisted, and Persephone leaned forward, hands grabbing the arm rests of his throne and cornering him.

She had lost her husband.

She was not going to take any sort of excuse from anybody.

"You will make sure all the souls and beings from the Underworld will be taken care of accordingly. You could have helped your brother. You chose to cower here, instead. You. Will. Take. Responsibility." She growled darkly, and he stared at her with wide eyes, his beard quivering a little.

He looked past her towards Nemesis hopefully, but Persephone didn't have to turn to know the goddess of justice and revenge would be on her side.

Zeus' face fell a little, and she had her confirmation.

Next, he looked towards his wife, but she wasn't looking at him, instead keeping her head bowed and her lips pressed into a thin line.
Zeus turned towards his brother.

Poseidon cleared his throat.

"If I may," He started, and Persephone inclined her head for him to speak.

Poseidon turned towards his brother.

"You did say the other day that your realm was the grandest of them all. Surely, it can't be that difficult to find a place for all the mighty warriors that have once fought for you, right?"

Persephone smirked to herself in satisfaction as Zeus looked positively betrayed.

But instead of assassinating his brother, he slumped back into his throne, looking sour but defeated.

"Oh, very well! I will see what I can do! But this better not be permanent, Persephone! I have my own duties to attend to, after all!"

Persephone straightened up again and gave him a pointed look that showed her opinion on his 'duties'.

Then, she smiled.

"Of course it will only be temporary. Once we have freed the Oracle, I am certain there will be enough volunteers here that will help repair the damage dealt to the Underworld and get it up and running again for the souls to return there." She said sweetly, and Hera gave her a curious look, but remained silent.

There was even more muttering, now, louder and more restless than before.

Athena sat up in her throne, looking intrigued.

"Freed the…volunteers for…the souls will…what?!" Zeus asked, his voice almost a bark as he sat bolt-upright in his throne.

Persephone raised an eyebrow.

"Obviously, they will return to the Underworld, where they belong. I have spent centuries by my husband's side and have aided him with his duties many times. Once the Underworld has been repaired, I will personally see to it running as it used to." She explained sweetly, aware this wasn't what Zeus was so upset about.

"That…that very well may be, but…" He sputtered, and she tilted her head a little.

"Good. Then I trust you will provide your help on the matter, too?"

"I…I…now, listen here…" He continued, turning more and more red in the face in both anger and fluster.

Persephone took a step forward, her heel clicking loudly in the sudden silence.

Zeus looked up at her face.

You have watched my husband die without lifting a single finger, she thought to herself as she watched him with a cold smile on her face.

Zeus swallowed.

Then, he shook his head and threw his arms up.

"Oh, do as you deem fit! Fine, I shall see to the repairs, myself. Now, what was it you were saying before then? What of…freeing the…the Oracle…? Surely, I must have misheard…"

Persephone inclined her head once more.
"Oh no, you've heard right. We need to free the Oracle. You can't seriously be that conceited to believe there are any demigods left to do it for you, right?"

There was muttering again.

But now, it sounded fearful and uncertain.

Zeus was sputtering again.

Hera was still eyeing Persephone with interest, her eyes gleaming.

Athena was smiling to herself.

"That is…why would you…are you out of your mind?! Fighting the giants without demigods?!! Preposterous! Impossible, even!" Zeus exclaimed and slammed his fists on his arm rests, making a few gods jump a little as thunder boomed around them, the air crackling with electricity.

Poseidon moved a cautious hand towards his trident, but smiled innocently when Athena shot him a dubious look.

Zeus wasn't noticing any of that, though, as he leaped to his feet, towering over Persephone, though she didn't as much as flinch.

"I will not risk my neck for that fool's Oracle! Never! And I won't support this madness, either! What is it to me whether they have the Oracle or not?!!" He bellowed, beard quivering and lightning striking the ground in his anger.

Persephone met his furious gaze with a cold one of her own.

"So, you're saying you don't care what will become of the camps? Of our children? Of the rest of the world? You know as well as I do that the boy and his forces will not stop at that. They will come, sooner or later. Our only chance is to free the Oracle, before they destroy her and thus eliminate our power of foresight entirely." She spoke calmly.

Zeus leaned back a little, giving her some more space, though the intensity of his gaze and anger didn't change.

"They haven't destroyed her yet, so I don't see why they would. It is a trap and nothing more, meant to lure us down there for them to strike. Also, what would you know about children, Persephone? You don't have any." Zeus drawled, and Persephone's eyes narrowed.

There was an outcry of protests at Zeus' words, Athena jumping to her feet, Nemesis stiffening to a board, while Demeter came marching towards Zeus with her finger pointing and her expression one of fury.

"How dare you speak to her like that?! Have you no respect?!" She spat and jabbed him in the chest, while Aphrodite yelled something about 'people not needing children of their own to care'.

Hermes was also on his feet, looking downright insulted on Persephone's behalf.

Zeus suddenly looked sheepish and uncomfortable, though it was obvious he was still very much upset.

Persephone cleared her throat.

"I may not have children of my own, but that doesn't invalidate my words. If you sit here idly and do nothing, you will soon be without children. All of you will be. Followed by your own downfall. Is this truly how you wish to fall? Sitting in your thrones, arguing among each other, rather than joining forces and taking down the rising threat?" She asked loudly, and the others looked grim at her words, while Zeus worked his jaw angrily.

"You're causing an uprising for nothing, Persephone. They know we can't beat them without demigods, and they've got all the demigods surrounded and trapped. It is a trap. They want us to come to them. I will not fall for it. I will not stand for it. No. I. Will. Not." He stated sharply, then sat back down stubbornly.
Persephone thought of her husband, and his derisive snorts whenever he came from a meeting with his brothers, looking exasperated and exhausted.

‘He is like a toddler. I thought it would pass after a few millennia, but alas!’, he would say.

She suppressed a sad smile at the memory.

Even with their many differences, and the many disputes and wars they had waged, she knew he had still cared deeply for both of his brothers.

She also knew that said brothers, as stubborn and immature as they might seem at times, had cared for Hades, too, in their own way.

"Is that so? So, you are saying you're going against what you have signed in the contract? You won't take up arms and join the battle?" She asked with a raised eyebrow, and Nemesis and Athena both gave Zeus matching looks of warning.

Zeus ignored all of them in favor of slouching into his throne and gripping his arm rests, eyes closed and chin tipped upwards.

"Battle? What battle? I see no battle. All I see is a grieving woman seeking revenge and dragging others into it, without a care for the consequences or risks."

Demeter made to move forward, a curse already on her lips, but Persephone held her back.

She could fight her own battles.

"You don't see the battle? That's funny, it has been going on for quite a while already, after all. Maybe you were too preoccupied with your 'duties' to see it. I would suggest opening your eyes." She replied sweetly.

Then, she turned towards the others.

"I am a grieving woman, and I will not deny that it would bring me the greatest satisfaction to avenge my husband's death. But this is so much more than that. Your children are fighting for their lives as we speak. They have gone through terrible hardships at our costs, and yet have always prevailed. Is this your thanks? Will you leave them to fend for themselves against the very giants made to be our banes?" She called to them, and it was very quiet, again, all eyes fixed on her.

"Is this how you wish to be remembered? As the gods that hid away and waited for their ends, rather than the gods that risked their own immortal lives to take up arms against evil, themselves? We are the gods of this world. It is our duty to protect it, not that of our children!"

She heard a few mutterings of agreement, and a few of the minor gods and goddesses stood from their much smaller thrones with determined looks on their faces.

Hephaestus was stroking his beard, but when Aphrodite shot him a questioning look, he gave a curt nod, showing Persephone what she wanted to see.

She looked back at Zeus, who had an expression reminiscent of a thundercloud.

"Seems like they see the battle." She couldn't help but taunt, and his beard twitched dangerously.

"This is doomed to fail. If there are no demigods, the battle will be pointless. We would be at the greatest disadvantage!" He put in, a last attempt to make them see reason.

But Persephone only smiled.

"That's where Apollo and Artemis come in." She told him, and found Hera and Athena smiling to themselves, clearly having expected this turn of events.

Zeus turned rather red in the face, his entire body quivering with rage.
"What?! No way! Preposterous! I will not allow-..." He broke off his angry bellowing, clearly unable to find the words he was looking for.

Persephone paid him no mind anymore, instead exchanging a pointed look with Hera, who gave a small nod.

Athena stepped forward.

"I stand with you. We have watched this going out of control for long enough. It is time to act."

Hermes gave a serious nod.

"It is time to remind everyone who we are, and what happens to those that cross us."

"Hear, hear." Poseidon put in as he, too, got to his feet, trident firmly in his grip.

Zeus’ eyes hushed up to him in betrayal for a moment, then away again.

Persephone gave the god of the sea a grateful smile, and Poseidon inclined his head politely.

"For our children, and the world we were born to protect." He said loudly, and many cheered.

Persephone and Nemesis shared a look.

It was time.

***

Zeus sat on his throne, alone except for the Ophiotaurus.

He was tapping away at his arm rest, silently fuming.

Even his wife had left him to join that...that battle.

Zeus huffed to himself.

A suicide mission, that's what it was.

Zeus watched the Ophiotaurus swimming idly in its aquarium, not paying him any mind.

How could they be so foolish?

It was obvious this was a trap.

He was well aware that the Oracle of Delphi was kept in the midst of that hideous hideout, well-guarded and protected by the very banes of the gods.

Their banes.

Zeus leaned back in his throne.

No, he wouldn't participate in that.

His eyes hushed to the rolled-up paper Nemesis had left behind.

He knew it was the contract.

He knew she expected him to honor it.

Zeus closed his eyes.

He would honor it by staying alive and picking up the pieces of those that survived the slaughter.

That's what he would do.

Plus, somebody would have to stay behind to take care of the dead, after all, right?
Since Persephone had made that *his* responsibility oh so graciously.

Zeus shifted, still miffed, but now, his thoughts strayed to his brother.

Hades had *fallen*...

It was…an unnerving thought.

Death was nothing new or particularly surprising to them, seeing as humans died every second of the day.

And yet…

And yet.

Gods *didn’t* die.

Gods sometimes let themselves fade away when they grew tired of the world around them and lost their purpose.

Gods could be killed by giants, if they ever were to engage in battle and lose.

Gods could fall to higher powers than their own, but usually, they were never challenged.

But Hades had been challenged, and had fallen to that higher power.

Zeus still remembered how it had felt, how his chest had ached, the knowledge of what had happened settling in as the hall had fallen silent.

Everybody had felt it.

And, while Poseidon had let the seas roar, Zeus had lit up the skies in response to that heinous crime.

In response to the cruel, undeserved and sudden death of his brother.

Zeus opened his eyes and moved his hand to the folds in his robe, fishing out the envelop he had put there earlier.

Hades had been one of the oldest gods, yet, now that he was gone, it felt like he hadn't lived, at all.

He gazed down at the dark grey envelope in his hands, silver, neat lettering spelling his name.

Zeus fiddled with it a moment longer, contemplating.

Then, he turned it over and started opening it.

Hermes himself had passed it to him wordlessly, shortly after his brother had fallen.

Hades must have given it to him before his time had been up.

He must have known his end was near.

Zeus pulled out the card that rested inside, eyebrows knitting together into a frown as he turned it over.

It was…well. It was very colorful.

Rainbows, glitter, an unnecessary number of stickers, all messily compiled together to build the worst atrocity Zeus had ever had the misfortune to lay eyes on.

Maybe it wasn't from his brother, after all.

Hades wasn't exactly known for his humor, after all.
If this was Hermes' attempt at a prank, it was very uncalled for.

Zeus opened the greeting card, eyes hushing over the same neat handwriting he knew was his brother's.

Dear brother,

I feel compelled to inform you,
that your son, Jason Grace,
is much less of a dick than you are.

I hope this card finds you well.
I made it myself.

-Hades

P.s.: My son is better than yours. Ha.

Zeus stared at the words, his mouth gaping open.

Then, he roared and shot to his feet.

"What do you mean, my son is less of a dick than I am?!" He bellowed at the card, which obviously didn't reply.

Zeus stared at it.

Then, he closed it and reopened it, to check whether the writing would change.

This was what his brother sent him?

These were meant to be his last words to Zeus? His brother? The god of the gods?

Zeus stood there wordlessly for a moment, staring at the handmade card in all its atrocious glory.

Then, he sat back down and put his face in his hands.

Gods didn't die.

Gods also didn't cry.

But if nobody saw him do it, then it wasn't really happening, was it now?

"Hades, you fool." He muttered to himself, cursing his brother and yet wishing he could do so to his face.

"And my son is way better than yours." He said into the empty room, but it felt pointless when his brother couldn't argue back.

Zeus sat there for a long time, and his face remained hidden from view for the most of it.

He was tempted to crumple the card, but then, he merely put it back in its envelope and put it away.

Then, he stood, lightning striking overhead as he looked back at the contract Nemesis had left behind.

His brother had fallen.

Would he truly let his other brother go and get himself killed, too?

No.

For all their differences, they were still the same, after all.
Plus, he wouldn't be able to face Poseidon if he came from this battle victoriously – however small that chance may be.

Determined, Zeus snatched the contract, then strode from the hall.

It was time.

***

Eris clicked her armor into place, the café dead silent as all her laptops had been turned off, everything dark and still around her.

A wind spirit held up a mirror.

Her grim, determined expression looked back at her.

It was time.

***

Athena looked up at the board she had conjured up for herself, showing the best battle plan she and Ares had been able to come up with.

She had already donned her armor, knowing who she would have to face.

She was ready.

Ares called behind her, telling her to get a move on.

Athena looked back at her notes for a last time, then let them disappear to follow him.

It was time.

***

Aphrodite closed her beauty case and looked into her heart-shaped mirror, the face of a warrior staring back at her.

Hephaestus held out her newly made armor for her, and she took it.

It was time.

***

Hermes checked his supplies for a last time, then looked out at the world that laid beneath them.

He would fight for Hades, for his children, and for the world he had come to love.

Hearing the signal, he took off.

It was time.

***

Demeter fixed her braid, adding a single black-dyed flower to pay her respects to her son-in-law.

Then, she turned to leave, her curved Imperial Gold sword already itching to be put to use.

That good-for-nothing scoundrel had finally gotten himself killed.

Demeter was going to find those responsible for it – and slay them all.

She followed the others as they answered the call.

It was time.
Hera walked along the path, until she reached the golden gates, firmly closed to keep her out.
She waved her hand, and they broke apart, exploding into a million pieces.
Hera waited for the dust to settle, then watched as two figures emerged from the inside, walking side by side towards her.
Their expressions were grim, but they didn't seem surprised.
They knew.
Of course they did.
Hera gave them a nod in greeting.
Apollo and Artemis nodded back.
It was time.

Poseidon took the lead, his trident firmly in his hand as the others followed him, each in their best battle armor.
Persephone was already waiting at the golden gates, adorned in a beautiful, black armor that lacked nothing in functionality.
Her eyes spoke of pain and determination, and he inclined his head in respect.
His brother had fallen.
He would avenge his death and secure the safety of all those Hades had been forced to leave behind.
"Is anybody still missing?" He called out as he turned to let his gaze roam their small army.
"Not anymore, no." A voice called from the back, and Poseidon couldn't say he was surprised.
Smiling to himself, he watched the crowd part to make way for Zeus, wearing his best armor and his master bolt crackling in his hand.
"Brother. I was wondering when you would join us." Poseidon greeted him, and they exchanged a faint half-hug, to show they would be allies in the battle to come.
"I couldn't let you have all the fun, could I now?" Zeus said lightly.
Poseidon decided to keep his comments to himself, instead patting his shoulder with one hand and looking back at the others.
"Alright, let's do this!"
It was time.

"We're leaving." Kyle announced as he stepped into his tent, finding Dylan where he had left him.
In bed.
Safe and sound, the way Kyle liked.
"Where are we going?" Dylan asked uncertainly as he sat up, holding the blanket in a tight grip to keep himself covered.
Kyle liked that, but he didn't like the constant questions.

"Away." He replied simply and turned to check his cupboards for anything he might need.

It was almost time for the rise, and Kyle knew that would happen much nearer to the Greek Camp than here.

Plus, now that Hades had fallen, Kyle was certain there would be at least some sort of backlash from the gods.

He had heard the giants talking in hushed voices just earlier too, about this very thing.

Kyle smirked to himself.

The Greek camp was surrounded, the Romans too far away.

The gods would be powerless against the giants, should they be foolish enough to strike now.

Still, if there was going to be a battle, Kyle wanted no part in it.

He also wanted Dylan away from here.

The campsite should make for a good place.

That way, Kyle would be close enough to help his master, and Dylan would have a place to stay hidden from everything.

The Camp would show no more interest in the campsite, after all.

Not now that they had killed everybody.

Kyle's jaw tensed at that, but then he brushed it off.

His master had done him a great favor, destroying the Underworld for him and getting rid of di Angelo's nuisance of a father.

To think that Hades had actually tried to stop their progress, and repeatedly so.

Laughable.

No, he had certainly deserved that end.

Now, the last barrier that could have posed problems was broken, and next to that, Kyle had gotten his sweet revenge on di Angelo, at the very least.

For now, that had to be enough.

There was shuffling behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder, watching Dylan awkwardly limp over to where Kyle had undressed him last night, looking rather uncomfortable.

Ah, yes, Kyle kept forgetting this one was rather shy.

Kyle watched him curiously for a moment.

Then, he returned his focus on his belongings, packing a few items and discarding the rest.

He brushed the figures off the table and rolled up his makeshift map, pocketing it before snatching his jacket.

"Are you all set?" He asked without looking around, though he could hear Dylan still struggling with his pants.

"Y-yes, sir!" The boy called, anyways.

What a good kid.
"Then let's go." Kyle said and started walking out of the tent, Dylan promptly stumbling after him. He was still limping, but Kyle wasn't very worried.

It wasn't like he had hurt him, after all. Not excessively, at least.

The sky was a murky grey, thick thunderclouds constantly rumbling above them and occasionally lighting up white when lightning either struck the ground or fellow clouds.

There was barely any rain, though.

At least not here.

Kyle took Dylan by the arm and started dragging him after him, pleased to see that there was rain pouring down in the thin and dying forest ahead.

He pulled up the hood of his jacket, then dragged Dylan into the wetness, hearing him gasp and shiver promptly.

Kyle smirked to himself.

"We're going to pay Camp Half-Blood a little visit, Dylan." He explained when they distanced themselves further from the hideout, and Dylan's hand was trembling in his, turning colder and colder as the rain picked up around them steadily.

"D-did something happen, sir?" Dylan asked with chattering teeth, and Kyle glanced over his shoulder back at the boy.

He looked rather pitiful, soaked from head to toe in nothing but that grimy old shirt and the torn pants.

"Oh yes. But nothing you need to concern yourself with anymore. Just come along, now."

Was it his imagination, or did Dylan seem a little wary?

Maybe he was still worried Kyle would discard him like the other kids.

Kyle hadn't yet told him that there were no other kids anymore, after all.

There were only the giants, the scouts and monsters at the outposts around the Camp that hadn't been attacked, and the monsters that had still been searching for the Romans.

And, of course, the forces outside of Kyle's control.

But it didn't matter.

Now that the rise was almost upon them, there was no need for any of that anymore.

He had gotten his first revenge already.

Now, he would wait for the rise to be complete before striking again.

His eyes fell back on Dylan, a plan forming in his mind.

With a grin, he stopped walking so abruptly that the boy walked into him, perfect for moving his arms around him.

Dylan froze up, sputtering and struggling for a moment, but Kyle held him tightly.

"This is too slow. Hold on." He ordered, and Dylan looked up at him with wide eyes again.

But Kyle didn't say anything else as he focused on his powers and allowed them both to dissolve.

Dylan could do one more thing for him.

Oh, it would be perfect.
Kyle smirked and became one with the darkness.

***

When Zeus broke through the skies in his chariot, the others were right behind him, following him down to the ground, where the giants were awaiting them.

He heard the roars, but only had Nike pick up speed.

He would not falter. He would not bow.

He was the god of the gods.

Zeus let out a war cry of his own, and his brother joined in, followed by the others.

Then, they reached the ground, and battle was upon them.

Monsters, trying to slow them down, but taken care of by some minor gods Zeus only glimpsed in passing.

Giants, roaring and attacking, but he evaded the blows and set the skies ablaze with lightning.

He knew who he was meant to face.

"Look who decided to join us." He heard the loud, gleeful drawl and turned his head.

There he was.

Zeus ripped one of the monsters apart before turning towards his bane.

"Porphyryion." He replied coldly, lightning flashing in the sky.

The giant looked back at him with his white eyes, holding an axe in one hand and a massive sword in the other.

Zeus gripped his lightning bolt tighter.

"Ready to die?" The giant drawled as they both started moving towards each other, the rest of the battle forgotten around them.

"I don't know, are you?" Zeus retorted, and Porphyrion sneered a little.

"You may have bested me the last time, but don't think I will make it that easy again, Zeus."

Porphyrion threatened darkly, and they began circling each other a little, still out of striking range.

"You will fall today the same way you have fallen all the other times, Porphyrion. So, stop trying to draw out the inevitable and face me." Zeus shot back and smacked his bolt into the ground, making the sky roar and lightning strike around them.

Porphyrion sneered and raised his weapons, before letting out a deafening roar.

Then, they both charged.

The giant's weapons clanged against Zeus' lightning bolt, sending sparks flying as they both tried to push their whole bodies into the blow.

"How touching. Who would have thought the great god of the gods would leave his palace to die, all because of his big brother falling victim to the greater good?" Porphyrion taunted, and Zeus growled, before pushing the giant back and raising his bolt.

But Porphyrion met his attack and they exchanged blows, just to block all of them.

"You have never bested me before, Porphyrion. You will not best me this time, either." Zeus shot back, and Porphyrion let out another roar before charging.
Sparks flew once more, their faces inches apart, even though Zeus had made himself grow taller than the giant to intimidate him.

"You are a fool if you believe you can beat me! Haven't you noticed you're missing the most important thing? Without demigods, your attacks mean nothing!" The giant spat in his face, and Zeus growled and shoved him back, before striking the ground between them to force Porphyrion back further.

The giant might not be affected much by his lightning, but it was still enough to keep him at bay.

"You will die here, Zeus. You will die at my hands. Alone and defeated, you will plead for me to end your misery." Porphyrion promised him darkly, and Zeus gritted his teeth as the giant started laughing loudly.

The next moment, Porphyrion's laugh was cut short by a trident flying at his face that he only narrowly managed to dodge, though it still sent his sword flying.

They both turned to find Poseidon walking towards them, with his head held high and the trident already reappearing in his hand.

"My brother? Dying alone at the hands of a lowlife like you? I think not." He remarked with a dry voice as he joined Zeus' side.

Zeus couldn't help his lips twitching into a small smile.

So, his brother still had his back.

Poseidon exchanged a pointed look with him, then they both raised their weapons.

Porphyrion cursed, bellowed something unintelligible, and charged.

They were ready.

***

Persephone strode through the battlefield.

She was aware of the battle around her, but her eyes only saw one thing.

One giant.

With her head held high, she drew her sword, black as night, like the rest of her armor.

It had been a gift, just like the armor.

A gift from her husband.

She remembered it well.

It had been their 666th anniversary, and Hades had gotten her that armor.

'In case you'll ever need protection, my dear,' he had said, with an expression that said he hoped she would never need it.

The sword had come later, so much later, but she cherished it just the same.

It was the first time she had to use either in a real battle.

But she was ready.

The giant looked back at her, his metallic skin reflecting the lightning above and around them.

He sneered at her.

She was going to rip him to shreds.
"Persephone. It's an honor to meet you," Alcyoneus greeted her sweetly, the platinum links of his armor clinking as he moved. "What a shame your husband couldn't make it."

Persephone let her eyes hush over the front of the giant, from the armor to the dragon legs, checking for weak points.

"Cut the pleasantries, so I can cut you apart." She shot back, and his sneer only widened.

"What? Oh, but I could never attack a petite woman like you, could I now?"

What a shame.

Persephone had no qualms whatsoever attacking him, after all.

She rushed forward and swung her sword, and Alcyoneus barely managed to block the blow with his bloodstained staff.

The sneer was gone from his face.

His eyes were full of shock.

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you expecting me to be slow and helpless? How unfortunate for you." She told him sweetly as she struck again, and his expression turned grim as he felt the force of her blows.

"I see you have trained." He pressed out, clearly not liking this turn of events.

Now, it was Persephone who sneered.

"Did you think my husband was the only one you had to fear? I was the one he trained with!" She told him, then whirled her body around to strike him, managing to cut his shoulder and draw blood.

The first bunch of platinum links clattered to the ground, followed by thick droplets of oil.

Alcyoneus looked between livid and terrified.

"I won't go easy on you, woman!" He bellowed, and she was tempted to throw her head back and laugh.

Instead, she charged.

***

Eris was on Cerberus' back, riding through the battlefield and taking down monsters to help the gods left and right.

The three heads growled and snarled and ripped into the enemies crossing their path, getting all those that Eris couldn't get to.

They made a good team.

Eris would have to thank Persephone later.

She watched the goddess battling Alcyoneus with a finesse and grace unlike anything Eris had ever seen before.

Amazing.

Eris dragged her eyes away from her to survey the rest of the battlefield.

There was Athena, battling fiercely against Enceladus with the aid of Nemesis and some minor gods like Eris.

There was Dionysus, having some sort of comedic battle with Otis and Ephialtes, Hermes right by his side to help.
There were Zeus and Poseidon, battling Porphyrrion together, bellowing orders towards each other or laughing in triumph when they landed a blow.

There were Ares, Hephaestus and Aphrodite, fighting Mimas.

There was Hecate…

Eris tugged on Cerberus' collar, and the dog changed course, allowing her to cross the battlefield in a matter of seconds to come to Hecate's aid.

She was fighting valiantly against Clytius, but with the giant consuming all magic around himself, it put the goddess of magic at a terrible disadvantage, and it was showing.

Eris watched the giant raise his giant black sword and yelled a command at Cerberus, all three heads snarling as he took the leap.

They jumped onto the giant's back, successfully causing him to sway to keep his balance.

Then, Eris jumped off Cerberus' back to stab the shadowy cloak where the giant's neck should be.

Clytius roared and thrashed, snatching her ankle and tossing her away, but Eris had expected as much, and managed to catch herself to prevent any injuries.

She hadn't attacked in the hopes of causing damage, but to give Hecate a chance to get up and away from where Clytius had tried to corner her.

Cerberus came bounding towards Eris, and she started running, until they were side-by-side and she could hop back onto his back.

They made straight for Clytius again, who seemed to anticipate her this time.

But that was okay.

Eris had enough tricks up her sleeve.

Hecate shot her a grateful look, and Eris gave a small nod.

They might not usually get along.

But in the face of battle, Eris supposed they could work together.

So they did.

***

Aphrodite stayed back to let her husband and her lover work together against Mimas.

She realized too late that she should have never left it to men to get anything done.

Mimas was the destroyer of plans, yet those two kept bickering and planning, which of course got ruined.

It was terrible to watch them.

She yelled at them to split up, to fight separately, rather than right next to each other, but they didn't listen – until Hecate and Eris came flying past right in front of them, followed by a whining Cerberus, before Clytius came bounding after them with a war cry and his Stygian Iron sword raised above his head.

Aphrodite wanted to bury her face in her hands.

Instead, she watched scandalized how Hephaestus moved to help them, leaving Ares alone, right when Mimas focused back on him and made to strike.

"Watch out!"
Ares didn't watch out.

Instead, the god of war was thrown back as Mimas kicked him square in the chest with one scaled and armored leg.

Aphrodite cried out and rushed forward, cursing her husband, cursing her lover, cursing all men for being stupid, and the giants for being there.

She reached Ares' side, but the god was groaning and curling into himself rather than getting to his feet, and she could hear Mimas bounding towards them, ready to finish them off.

Aphrodite took another look at Ares, and the dents in his armor, and the many wounds he already carried.

Then, she made a rather unladylike sound and pushed herself to her feet, turning to look at the approaching giant.

Time to stop playing nice, then.

Aphrodite steeled her mind and straightened out her back to make herself taller, protectively staying in front of her wounded lover and drawing her sword.

It was beautiful, just like her.

It was also deadly. Just like she could be.

Mimas slid to a stop, staring at her in stunned surprise for a moment – then, the giant started laughing.

"What do you think you're doing, birdie? You're the goddess of love, are you not? What good can you do? Step aside and let me finish off that fool, and I might spare you." He drawled, and she adapted her fighting stance.

"You think love can't fight? Love is the greatest force in this world, you fool." She growled darkly.

Love was what gave people hope.

Love was soft, and gentle, and warm.

Love was what motivated people to keep going.

But love was also fierce.

Love was what made people work their entire life to provide for their families.

Love was what made people work on themselves to become better.

Love was what made parents protect their children from harm, both in pregnancy and after.

Love could be vicious and cruel.

One would never want to face a moose with a calf, after all.

One would never want to face a lioness with cubs.

One would never want to face Aphrodite when her lover was on the ground.

Mimas wasn't laughing, instead studying the intensity of her glare.

Then, he growled in warning, and she snarled back.

"I am the breaker of plans! You will never be able to take me on!" He bellowed.

"I need no plan to kill you, bitch!" She screeched back.
The next moment, they both charged.

"Only fire can kill me!" Clytius roared as he slammed Hecate into the ground with a triumphant snarl.

Eris screamed in terror, stabbing him in the side the same moment Cerberus' three heads attacked his scaly leg on the other side.

It wasn't enough.

The giant was out for the kill.

"No!" She yelled as she watched Clytius squeezing Hecate's throat and bringing down his sword with the other hand.

There was a thundering of footsteps, then Hephaestus, twice his usual size, came crashing into the bane of Hecate and tore him off her.

The two grappled on the ground with loud snarls and growls and blood flying in every direction.

Eris stared at them for a moment, uncomprehending, then she shook herself and rushed to Hecate's side.

The goddess wasn't moving.

Iris joined her side, touching Hecate's face and checking her injuries – which wasn't very difficult; her body was littered with them.

"We need to get her out of here." Eris told her, and Iris nodded, before putting her fingers to her lips and whistling.

The next moment, Hermes came rushing towards them, abandoning his spot at Dionysus' side.

He took one look at Hecate and nodded, gingerly picking her up, before running off and disappearing from sight.

Eris looked back at Clytius, but he and Hephaestus were having a savage battle with sword versus hammer.

She looked to Mimas, and found Aphrodite tearing into the giant with a glittering sword.

Her pretty face was distorted into an angry grimace, and a wounded Ares was weakly fighting his way back onto his feet behind her.

Eris went to help him, even though the god of war never liked being helped.

This time, he didn't seem to mind, quietly accepting her support.

Cerberus came bounding towards them, and, once more, Eris was glad to have Persephone's dog around.

"Come." She told Ares, helping him onto the dog's back before hopping onto it, herself.

The three heads barked and looked at her for instructions.

She stroked over their foreheads quickly in praise and gave a nudge with her calves.

The dog bounded off.

Eris looked behind her, finding giants and monsters alike following them, and everybody engaged into fierce battles of their own.

This was madness.
Where were Apollo and Artemis?

***

Zeus was bellowing at Poseidon, and Poseidon bellowed back.

Why was this man so loud? He was right next to him!

Porphyryon decided to bellow, too, and Poseidon wondered whether they were having some sort of shouting match.

If so, he couldn't remember agreeing to participate.

He still tried to bellow louder than the other two, anyways.

Then, he roared and forced his trident into the giant's side.

"Good one!" Zeus called over, while Porphyryon roared in agony and tried to decapitate him in retaliation.

"Not a good one!" He bellowed, which made Poseidon even prouder than his brother's praise.

"I beg your pardon? That was an excellent stab!" Poseidon yelled at him and stabbed him again, this time in his scaly dragon leg, and Porphyryon howled in pain.

Zeus laughed in triumph and zapped the giant with his lightning bolt, and the two brothers nodded at each other.

They could do this.

***

Athena checked on the battles around her fleetingly as Nemesis distracted Enceladus.

It looked like the battle was currently in their favor, but she knew this couldn't possibly be all.

There were giants missing.

Polybotes, the bane of Poseidon, for example. Or Thoon.

Also, Athena was certain Orion had to be nearby.

Based on their observations and intel, Periboia and Hippolytus hadn't been seen since the last war, but she had heard of Thoon, Orion and Polybotes.

Where were they?

It didn't bode well with her.

Nemesis made a small sound, and Athena immediately hefted her weapon.

Joining the fight once more, she switched places with the goddess of justice to give her a chance to catch her breath.

Until Artemis and Apollo arrived, they were sitting ducks.

Any damage they dealt to the giants only aggravated them further, but it would never be enough to kill them.

Not without demigods.

She caught sight of Hermes out of the corners of her eyes, getting wounded gods and goddesses to safety.

If the battle continued this way, the giants would regain the upper hand.
Athena wasn't allowed to let that happen.

She whirled her body around and cut off Enceladus' dominant hand, which had the giant screaming in pain and clutching his bleeding wrist, looking at her with murder in her eyes.

He took a deep breath, and she grabbed Nemesis by her shoulder and dragged her to the ground, out of harm's way, moments before the giant blew out hot jets of fire.

"You fool! No flames!" She heard Mimas roar somewhere behind them, where Hephaestus and Iris must have lured the giant.

Athena glanced over to check their position, then pushed herself to her feet and lunged at Enceladus.

Time to find out whether giants could kill each other.

"Your plan will never work." Enceladus spat at her, clearly knowing where her mind was going, but she didn't care.

It wasn't a matter of him knowing her goal.

It was a matter of fooling him into doing what she wanted him to do, which would allow her to reach that goal.

The missing giants would have to wait until Apollo and Artemis joined the battle.

Athena shot Nemesis a look over Enceladus' shoulder, and the goddess nodded in understanding.

They both charged and put their plan into action.

***

Aphrodite was on her knees when a flash of light lit up the battlefield and Zeus' roar left the ground shaking.

There was a pause as monsters and giants alike turned to look at the spectacle.

Aphrodite, however, had no time for that.

Instead she pushed herself to her feet and rushed forward, sword raised to strike.

Mimas was distracted, but sadly not distracted enough to miss her attack.

His head snapped around and his arms shot forward to catch her sword and stop her in her tracks, rattling her to the core.

She let out an anguished cry, before trying to pull back.

Mimas didn't give her the chance to.

Instead, the giant laughed and grabbed her sword tighter, before whipping it upwards – along with her.

She went airborne, before coming down again all too quickly.

She hit the ground and pieces of armor crumbled from her chest and arms.

She wheezed and tried to push herself up again, the thundering of footsteps indicating the giant had thrown her a little further than it wanted.

Aphrodite reached for her sword, but it wasn't next to her.

She must have let go during the impact.
Aphrodite glanced around for it, just to see the red hilt way too far away for her to reach it in time. She pushed herself to her feet, anyways, adapting a defensive stance and focusing on her enemy. Dimly, she thought she could hear somebody calling her name.

Mimas was almost upon her now. She readied herself for the impact. This was not going to be her end. She wouldn't let it be her end.

Aphrodite swallowed as Mimas raised his massive arms to strike her down. The next moment, the battlefield lit up in a blinding flash of white, hotter and more intense than any of Zeus' lightning bolts could ever be.

Mimas howled in agony and broke off the attack to shield his face, apparently blinded. Aphrodite, however, turned her face towards the light. Apollo.

Finally.

Their eyes met and he gave her a small nod, a gesture Aphrodite returned. Then, the god of the sun turned to join his father, and she returned her attention to her own battle.

If Apollo was here, that meant Artemis was on her way, too. It wouldn't be long now.

She would be able to hold out for a little bit longer, surely.

Mimas seemed to have recovered, and was already making to snatch her, so Aphrodite lunged sideways, kicking up dirt and monster remains in his face to keep him blinded.

"Running out of ideas so quickly, birdie?" The giant taunted between coughs.

He grinned savagely as he started following her.

Aphrodite looked back at her sword and started running faster. Which…would probably be much easier if she wasn't bleeding ichor from a long gash across her thigh.

She clenched her teeth and pressed onwards.

She was no stranger to pain. This was nothing compared to what she had experienced before.

Mimas followed the golden trail of her blood, his laugh shaking the ground along with his footsteps.

She reached her sword, but he reached her at the same moment.

Aphrodite moved to strike, but he swatted her weapon aside like a fly.

The giant opened his mouth to speak – then a giant hammer smacked into the side of his face, sending him toppling sideways and to the ground.

"Hands off my wife, you brute!" Hephaestus roared, and Aphrodite couldn't remember the last
time she had been this happy to see her husband.

He wasn't very handsome, but there was something roguishly attractive about the way he looked at her in this very moment.

His armor was full of dents and giant blood, and his face was just as beaten, but his eyes were full of concern for her welfare, not his own appearance.

Aphrodite smiled at her husband, and he managed a half-smile of his own, before his expression turned grim and his focus returned to Mimas.

The giant was on his feet again, ready to roar at Hephaestus in rage, but Hephaestus was already throwing himself at him.

Aphrodite watched them brawl for a moment, then the sound of thundering footsteps made her look past them towards Clytius.

He was quickly making his way towards them, followed by a horde of monsters.

She raised her sword, but then Eris appeared. She was riding on that three-headed dog, crossing the path of the giant, slicing at his legs, and making him stumble before she disappeared from view again.

Nemesis showed up next, yelling something at the giant and making him roar and push himself back up to pursue her.

The monsters scurried around in confusion, seeming torn as to who to follow – but then, the decision was taken from them.

Fire.

An enormous jet of fire, illuminating the battlefield, the monsters, and Clytius; it set everything ablaze.

Athena let out a loud, triumphant laugh, Nike by her side.

Enceladus roared in anger.

Clytius howled in agony.

Aphrodite smirked, then returned her attention to her husband and his battle against Mimas.

She hefted her sword a little higher, then moved to join him.

It wouldn't be long now before Artemis would show up and they could put an end to all of this.

Aphrodite would be able to hold out until then.

***

Eris watched Clytius burn, knowing he was lost to his fate even when Enceladus and a few other monsters tried to save the burning giant.

All it seemed to do was make Clytius even angrier as he flailed his enormous arms around and struck Enceladus in the jaw.

"Fire! You dare attack your own, Enceladus?!

"It was an accident!" Enceladus yelled back and punched the giant in the nose, though he had just been trying to quench the flames.

Eris let herself slide down Cerberus' side to the ground to pick up a stone, then she took aim.

It struck the back of Enceladus' head.

As expected, the giant whipped his head around to look at her.
She lifted her hand, feeling her powers surge through her.

How about a little…strife?

The giant's eyes glowed a dim green, before he looked back at Clytius.

Eris breathed out and slumped against Cerberus weakly, closing her eyes to stop the whirling of the world around her.

There was yelling, the sound of something falling and hitting the ground, a new fight breaking out, and Eris knew she had reached her goal, even if it had come at a great price.

She felt something nuzzle against her side and knew it was one of Cerberus' heads, reaching out weakly to pat it.

"Good boy." She whispered weakly.

The dog helped her back up onto its back when her legs threatened to cave in beneath her.

Giants were strong opponents.

Using her powers against them was never a good idea if she wasn't willing to pay with her life for it.

She wasn't willing to pay with her life for it.

The giants were at each other's throats now, Clytius scorched and blackened, and Enceladus bleeding, their roars and yells drowning out the rest of the battle noises easily.

Cerberus started moving, and Eris let him take her away, glancing back at Enceladus and Clytius through barely-open eyes.

Eris focused on the frail connection between herself and Enceladus she had established.

"Do you really want him to be the one people remember as the smartest?" She whispered in his mind, then her powers gave out completely.

Enceladus let out a booming roar, Clytius a terrified scream, before they both went up in flames.

Eris smiled to herself weakly, her face dropping into Cerberus' soft fur.

That took care of Clytius, at least.

And there the Olympians claimed they didn't need the help of 'minor' gods such as herself.

Eris felt her consciousness slipping, the drain of her powers too great to stomach in such little time.

Cerberus came to a halt, and arms moved around her to pull her off his back carefully.

"You know, for somebody who has been sitting around in an internet café for ages, you still got nice moves," Hermes remarked good-naturedly as he put her down and started rummaging through a bag.

She held up her middle finger in response and merely closed her eyes again.

"You're just jealous because I discovered real estate before you did."

"I was never one for settling down, but keep telling yourself that, darling," Hermes replied, and held something to her lips.

She swatted it away in annoyance.

"Call me that one more time, see what happens."

"Yeah, yeah. Take the nectar, sweetcakes. Unless you want your son to become an orphan?"
That perked her up, eyes fluttering open to glance down at the large vial he was still holding out to her.

She snatched it from him and drained it in one go.

"Like hell am I going to leave my son to fight this world alone! I am going to tear that piece of trash apart for touching my child!" She spat as soon as she was done, though whether the burst of energy came from the nectar or her pure hatred for that offspring of evil, she couldn't tell.

"That's the spirit. Need some more?" Hermes offered, and she gave a curt nod.

"Hit me up."

She was going to show that monster what happened if somebody touched her child.

There was no way she was going to let him get away with that, like Apollo had done before.

Everybody had to answer for their crimes, it was just a matter of when.

Hermes gave her another vial, and she drained it in one go again, much like a shot.

It tasted a bit like one, too.

Eris looked out at what she could see of the battlefield.

Persephone and Eros were battling Alcyoneus, an unlikely team that worked better than Eris would have expected.

Aphrodite and Hephaestus were keeping Mimas under control.

Athena and Nemesis had joined Dionysus and vines burst from the ground to tie up Otis and Ephialtes, rooting them to the spot.

Zeus and Poseidon were facing off against Porphyrion. They were still, a whirl of winds, water, lightning, thunder, and the giant's angry roars.

Apollo was sneaking towards the tent in the center of the battlefield, so far untouched.

Eris' eyes narrowed.

The Oracle.

That's where it had to be.

Eris gave her thanks to Hermes, then pushed herself to her feet.

Cerberus trotted towards her promptly, ears perked and tail wagging, but she shook her head.

"Not this time, big guy. Help Hermes a little, alright?" She told him, and all three heads tilted in confusion, ears drooping in disappointment, before one tongue licked across her face and the dog turned to wag his tail at Hermes, instead.

Hermes looked from her to the tent and back, his expression grim, even as he nodded.

"Be careful. There's bound to be more protection that we don't know of yet." He warned her. It was a sweet gesture, but unnecessary.

She was about to reply, when they heard a chorus of war cries that weren't from gods or giants.

Demigods.

Eris turned her head to see Artemis breaking through the trees of the forest leading up to the battlefield, followed by her many hunters, arrows already at the ready.

Finally!
"Yes! About time, too!" Hermes exclaimed behind her, and she grinned, before remembering her plans.

Her gaze snapped back to Apollo, who had stopped to glance towards his sister for a moment. He was moving towards the tent again.

Realizing this would give her the perfect cover, Eris started moving to join him, sneaking across the battlefield that became a whirl of flying arrows and roaring giants, screeching monsters and triumphant gods.

She reached the tent entrance the same time Apollo did, and the two shared a long look.

He studied her, the same way she studied him.

His colors were muted, subdued, but she knew why, and she wasn't sorry for him.

Not when her son had been forced to endure such a similar fate to Will's.

She would have renounced Apollo as her father, too, in his position.

Apollo was the first to avert his gaze, his demeanor submissive.

"I'll go first and distract whatever they've positioned in there for protection. You save your Oracle." She ordered, taking the lead, and he followed without argument.

Eris looked around one last time to check nobody was coming for them from behind, but everybody seemed busy enough.

She pried the entrance open and slipped inside, closely followed by Apollo.

* 

All noise died the moment they were inside, along with all the light.

Eris tried to make out anything around her, but she couldn't even see Apollo, who was right next to her and standing just as still as she was.

They tried to sense any movement, any form of life. Any danger.

Apollo made to move, but Eris put her arm out to stop him, instead stepping forward herself.

His job was to free the Oracle, not get himself murdered.

Eris took another step – and promptly stumbled over something.

The inside of the tent lit up and, as Eris tried to catch her balance and motion to Apollo to stay where he was, she caught a glimpse of what had to be the Oracle, thin, frail, in chains—

Something punched her in the gut and threw her backwards onto the ground, knocking all air out of her.

A giant meat cleaver appeared above her, ready to strike, and she rolled sideways, pushing herself to her feet and trying to rush out of the way of her attacker.

She heard a loud snicker, and her gaze snapped around to make out greying hair and milky eyes, before she had to dodge his cleaver again.

_Thoon._

So this was where he had been hiding.

Eris spotted Apollo moving along the wall towards the Oracle, so she tried to move in the opposite direction and keep Thoon focused on her alone.

"Eris, goddess of strife and discord. How curious to see you here." Thoon remarked in an old and raspy voice as he tried to strike her down again.
Eris wished his moves were as rusty as his voice.

"I was about to say the same thing, old fart. I was certain you must have withered away by now," she retorted. The giant growled darkly, before swinging his axe again.

Eris jumped out of the way – just to sense movement coming from behind her.

Oh no.

Eris lunged around, catching an arrow inches from her face, but nothing could possibly protect her from the giant's scaly leg that collided with her side and sent her flying.

She heard Thoon laughing loudly, the sound reminiscent of an old man's cough.

Eris pushed herself up as well as she could, looking up to find two giants moving towards her now.

Thoon – and Orion.

So, they were both here.

Of course, the giants wouldn't have left it to an old geezer like Thoon to protect the Oracle.

Eris could feel Apollo's hesitation, even though she didn't dare to look towards him or the Oracle.

He had to keep going, now more than ever.

She wouldn't be able to hold these two off forever, after all.

"Should have known that you'd be lurking around in here too, Orion." She spat to keep their focus on her.

They both had the same vicious sneer as they closed in on her.

They wanted to play with her.

Orion could have shot her with an arrow easily by now, yet he hadn't.

That meant they were certain of their victory and wanted to make it a little more fun – at her expense, of course.

Eris took a step back, trying to think of a way out.

If she managed to lure them out, then she wouldn't have to worry about them noticing Apollo anymore.

It seemed crazy enough that they hadn't already noticed Apollo, to begin with.

As she thought it, she saw Orion's eyes hushing to the side, towards the Oracle, lips twitching as he drew an arrow from the quiver at his hip.

Wait…

Oh no.

Eris let out a small sound, then threw all caution to the wind and started forward.

She was short, not very impressive, and not exactly strong in combat – but all these features just played into the giants' confusion as they suddenly saw her rushing towards them.

Eris pushed past Thoon and his swishing meat cleaver, instead wrapping her arms around Orion's bow, her knee kicking the arrow upwards and out of position as she tried to somehow rip the thing out of his burly hands.

Orion looked both stunned and annoyed, shaking the bow and snarling something she couldn't
catch, but she refused to let go.

"Let go, you bitch!" He snapped and grabbed her, forcefully pulling her off his weapon – and throwing her away like trash.

Eris saw nothing but whirls of color before she collided with something bouncy and soft – which gave way, and she struck the ground shortly after.

Noise exploded all around her, and she became dimly aware that she must have broken through the side of the tent, which put her back into the middle of the battlefield.

She fought the white sparks in her vision as she pushed herself to her feet, but then Thoon's meat cleaver was already moving towards her at intense speed.

Eris dodged it by mere inches, but couldn't protect herself from Orion, whose arrow lodged into her calf and made her cry out in pain and fall to her knees.

Somebody came rushing to her aid on a horse, a girl with dark skin and bushy hair.

The girl blocked Thoon's cleaver with a sword of her own and forced him backwards, away from Eris.

Eris wished she could thank her, but then her eyes fell on Orion, and the notched arrow in his drawn bow.

"Oh." She whispered, instead.

A rainbow lit up the battlefield, right in front of Orion.

She heard him curse.

The arrow went flying.

Eris felt it before she heard the soft *thud* as it hit her.

***

Persephone let out a furious roar as Eris slumped sideways to the ground, ichor pooling at her feet, Orion's arrows in her chest and leg.

"No!" She yelled, already moving towards her to help, when a loud laugh drew her attention back to Alcyoneus.

"Aww, I guess that's the end of your little friend." He mocked with a sneer.

Persephone growled and raised her oil-stained sword.

How dare he laugh!

How dare he mock Eris!

Anger shot through her, born from the loss of her husband and the fear for her friend. Before she knew it, she was moving forward.

It was time to *end* this.

Alcyoneus' laugh stopped the fraction of a second before her sword ran him through.

"Your attacks are nothing…without a demigod…" The giant pressed out, trying to sneer, though it was nothing but a grimace.

She shoved forward until the hilt hit his chest, her face right next to his ugly ear.

"Oh, this is nothing. Just punishment for laughing at my friend." She assured him sweetly, and saw Hazel ride up to her on Arion, spatha at the ready.
"This is for my husband." She spat – and turned her sword.

The giant roared in pain as his body jolted, seconds before Hazel's sword struck his calf.

"No!" He howled, but when he tried to grab for her, Persephone shoved him back until he was on the ground, her sword still lodged in his chest.

"Begone!" She roared, and Alcyoneus stared up at her with wide eyes, his lips moving without sound. Then, he died.

Persephone grunted in satisfaction and glanced towards Hazel, who was already raising her stained spatha to search for the next victim.

Their eyes met for a moment, and they both gave each other respectful nods.

Persephone was just withdrawing her sword from Alcyoneus' chest when she heard the faintest sound of footsteps, almost unnoticeable in the noise of the battle.

She spun around, seeing Orion lunging right at her, his bow gone, replaced with a dagger the size of a small demigod.

"You will pay for that!" He yelled, and Persephone tried to raise her sword in time, but there was no time.

"Daughter!"

There was a swirl of color.

Her mother's face in front of hers.

A grunt of pain.

Persephone stared wide-eyed into her mother's face.

Then, her gaze moved down, to the tip of the dagger that was protruding from Demeter's chest, ichor dripping from the blade and running down the damaged armor.

Trembling hands touched her face, and Persephone looked back up into her mother's eyes, tears running down her cheeks.

"Mother..." She whispered feebly.

Her mother smiled a small smile, before opening her mouth to speak. She never got the chance.

Orion's dagger sliced through the goddess, and Persephone let out a feeble cry, even as Demeter made no sound.

Persephone reached out for her, but then her mother was already fading, her hands caressing Persephone's face one last time.

Tears pooled in her eyes as she watched her mother disappear into nothingness, the realization sinking in.

A black flower fell to the ground, flecks of ichor on the petals.

"Whoops. Guess I got the wrong one." Orion remarked in an amused tone, but Persephone barely registered it as she stared at where her mother had just been, and at the one thing that was left of her now.

She had lost her husband.

She had lost her home.
And now, they had taken her mother from her, too?

"Oh, fear not. You'll join her in a moment." Orion assured her sweetly.

Persephone's jaw set.

Her gaze snapped up.

Her hands caught Orion's dagger before he could finish his attack, and she shoved it aside, before shoving the hilt of her sword into his abdomen, forcing him back.

Next, she whirled her sword around and struck his side, letting out an anguished cry before striking again.

She didn't speak, no words strong enough for her grief as she struck his leg, reducing his mobility and thus taking his greatest advantage from him.

He cried out in pain, trying to move away, trying to flee, but she didn't let him, advancing again and again, uncaring where she struck him, long as he suffered.

An axe swung at her, but she swatted it away like a fly and made for Orion again.

The axe came again, striking her shoulder, and she cried out in pain, turning to glower at Thoon.

Persephone let out a drawn-out cry and charged, uncaring who she had to strike down.

She would kill them all, if she had to.

Artemis rushed past her, undoubtedly twoards Orion, and she let it happen, knowing Artemis' thirst for revenge was much like her own.

Another god joined her side, Eros, and Persephone accepted his aid willingly.

Sad, deep-red eyes fixed on her, a mute expression of condolences, but Persephone didn't acknowledge it, instead focusing on the battle.

Eros was a good battle companion to have.

Her husband would have liked his style.

Mostly because her mother would have hated it.

Persephone squeezed her eyes shut and charged again.

***

One after another, the giants fell.

Zeus could see Mimas getting struck down by Aphrodite and a stray arrow from one of the Hunters.

He could see Dionysus and Hermes finishing off the twin giants with the help of a small boy that might have been Dionysus' Roman son.

He could see Athena, landing the finishing blow on Enceladus with the help of another Hunter.

He could see Thoon, falling victim to Persephone's rage and a bunch of savage women that had to be the Amazons.

He could see the burnt remains of Clytius, adorned with many arrows to make sure he had truly met his end.

He could see Apollo, leaving one of the tents with what he knew had to be the Oracle, Iris immediately at his side to get her away and to safety.
Orion was still fighting Artemis, the two battling each other fiercely, and Zeus could spot his own daughter by the goddess's side to aid her.

He dragged his eyes away from the battles and victories around him, instead focusing back on his own bane, which was just as alive as ever.

Porphyrian was littered in injuries and blood, but, unfortunately, he was still standing, and still fighting, and still just as formidable a foe as before.

Poseidon shot him a look where he kept the giant in check, and Zeus lifted his master bolt to set the sky ablaze again, before joining the battle and knocking his bane back.

They had to finish this.

Now that the demigods were here, they could finish this.

Zeus searched for one within reach, but the Hunters were with Artemis, the Amazons still busy with battering Thoon to a pulp.

The Romans had arrived, too, led by a giant bear, but now they had scattered into smaller troupes, battling the remaining monsters.

Zeus didn't know what to do to get them closer, to come to his aid.

He wasn't going to call for them, after all!

He was the god of the gods. He would not ask for help.

Soon, Orion would fall, too, leaving Porphyrian the last giant standing, so they were bound to come fight him then.

Zeus only had to be patient.

Porphyrian struck him with his axe, and Zeus grunted in pain.

He had to be patient – and he had to make sure he stayed alive until then.

The giant attacked again, but Poseidon caught the axe with his trident and catapulted it out of his massive hands, the same way he had done with one of Porphyrian's many swords earlier.

"Face it, Porphyrian. You will never triumph over us." Zeus replied sharply, but the giant merely sneered at him, already wielding another weapon.

"Oh, but we already have. He will rise, no matter the outcome of this battle." Porphyrian assured him darkly, and Zeus grinded his teeth.

Where had he even hidden that up until now? It didn't matter.

"Oh, but we already have. He will rise, no matter the outcome of this battle." Porphyrian assured him darkly, and Zeus grinded his teeth.

The giant's sneer widened, and evil glinted in his white eyes.

"Even if my brethren and I fall now, we will rise again. He is on his way, and nothing can stop him anymore. Your failure of a brother and his dying realm was the last barrier, and it is gone. There is no future for you or your kin anymore, Zeus. You're done for," Porphyrian promised.

Zeus caught Poseidon's wary look, though he kept his own expression as neutral as possible.

"The ramblings of a dying giant mean nothing to me." He insisted, and they struck each other again and again, ichor and blood splattering to the ground.

Zeus searched for a demigod again, anybody nearby who could finish the job with him, but they were all so far away, leaving the god of the gods to battle the giant of giants by himself.

Porphyrian grazed his chest with his sword, the chest plate long stripped from his body and leaving his skin exposed, easily drawing more ichor.

He could feel the drop in power, the sky rumbling in warning as lightning danced in the clouds.
Poseidon hissed something in warning, but Porphyrion made to strike him next, and Zeus couldn't have that, could he now?

He was the god of the gods, and this was his bane, and he was going to take it down, no matter the cost.

Zeus threw himself at the giant with another battle cry, and the giant sneered and rose to the attack.

Sparks flew, and Poseidon had to retreat in order not to get in their way.

Porphyrion struck him with the sword again, this time in his side.

He winced inwardly at the pain, though he tried not to let any of that show on his face as he lunged to strike back.

"Pretty tough for an old, weak man like yourself, Zeus," Porphyrion taunted. Zeus ground his teeth as he pressed on.

"You forget who is on the losing side here, Porphyrion," he reminded the giant.

His bane merely chuckled, the sound enough to make Zeus' skin crawl.

"You are wrong. So very wrong. Even if you live now, our master will destroy you. It is only a matter of time," Porphyrion assured him darkly.

Zeus struck him again, trying to tune out his words.

But the giant merely laughed and cut Zeus' side again, deepening the wound that was already there.

Zeus let out a grunt of pain.

"Then again, maybe you will be spared from that fate, after all," the giant suddenly mused, his voice laced with amusement, even if Zeus tried to strike him again.

"How so?" He barked at him, then felt stupid for playing into the giant's foolish game.

His bane sneered at him with an expression full of glee.

"I don't see any demigods coming to your aid."

Zeus’ jaw clenched, his beard quivered and he knew Porphyrion was right.

His bane struck him again, and Zeus barely evaded the blade as it slashed across his exposed chest.

The tip still broke the skin, anyways.

He lunged forward and struck Porphyrion again, mostly to keep him from repeatedly attacking him, but this just seemed to play into his bane's plans as he snickered loudly – triumphantly.

"But I'll let you in on a secret..." The giant whispered wickedly, and Zeus found himself stilling.

"Your brother let his guard down."

Zeus' eyes widened.

Porphyrion turned, sword raised as if he intended to throw it, and Zeus' gaze snapped to Poseidon.

Poseidon, who had his trident loosely in his hands and his attention elsewhere.

Poseidon, whose armor was dented and damaged, just like Zeus'.

Poseidon, who wasn't even wearing his protective helmet anymore.
Poseidon, who was an easy target.

Zeus had already lost one brother in this war.

"No!" He called, lunging forward.

Poseidon's head snapped around, eyes wide and alert, mouth opening to call out.

Porphyryion laughed, his hand not letting go of his sword. but gripping it tighter as he moved his body around.

Zeus stumbled, realizing his mistake.

The blade came rushing for his chest, and he couldn't catch himself.

Something big and burly shot up between them, a loud snarl cutting through the plains that used to be a campsite.

Somebody screamed.

There were three nearly identical yelps.

Poseidon's trident struck Porphyryion.

A one-armed boy struck the giant at the same moment, bringing him down.

Zeus stared.

First at the falling giant, whose face was distorted into a grimace of rage and fury.

Then he stared at the thing that lay slain on the ground, the thing that had come to his aid, that had saved his life, that had taken the blow for him.

Zeus stared at Cerberus' three heads, their eyes turning misty as they yapped a few times more, body twitching weakly as blood poured from the big gash.

Zeus reached out for the dog, trying and failing to find any words as he gingerly stroked through the dark fur.

*Hades' dog.*

Cerberus' tail wagged three more times, one head turning towards him slightly.

Then, the dog fell silent and still.

Zeus closed his eyes.

Poseidon's hand found his shoulder, giving it a small squeeze.

"The battle is over. We have won." His brother said quietly, and Zeus nodded.

"We have won." He agreed soberly.

***

"Why do we have to do this, exactly?" Hannah asked grimly, but Ash merely clicked their tongue and led the way further into the forest.

"You don't have to do *anything*, princess. I said I'm going to find out what's going on in this weird-ass forest. It was you who randomly decided to tag along."

Though, if Ash was being honest, they highly appreciated Hannah coming along.

Not only because Hannah was a sight for sore eyes, but also because Ash might be a tiny little bit wary of walking through a rather dark and gloomy (not to mention eerily empty) forest all by themselves.
"Well, I obviously can't let you wander around in here by yourself, so I have to come along."
Hannah snapped back, adorably annoyed as always.

"Aww, you care about me." Ash cooed to tease her a little, and Hannah threw them a dark and menacing look.

Ash shot her a little wink, and Hannah rolled her eyes and looked away again.

"Whatever. So, why exactly do you need to be in here? It's just an empty, eerie forest."

Ash thought they could hear something, but when they perked up to listen for any noise other than the sweet melodic voice of their partner in crime, there was nothing but the usual sounds of the forest.

"The satyrs said there's something wrong. Lots of trees just uprooted, lots of draiads just suddenly gone. A lot of the general wildlife was found dead, too. Kind of weird, considering there shouldn't be any monsters here anymore, don't you think?" Ash explained, making their way through the thick undergrowth, since they had left the path behind a long time ago.

Hannah followed at a more cautious pace, careful not to make too much noise, while also apparently trying not to get too dirty in the process.

Precious.

As if dirt and grime could take away from that beauty.

"Sounds like they're being overly dramatic again, if you ask me. I mean, they also wanted to peel our eyes out for interrupting their sacred meeting at whatever-that-place-was-called. Like I truly care for either their weird locations or their weird meetings." Hannah grumbled, and Ash smirked as they watched her over their shoulder.

Such an adorable frown.

"Aww, but princess, they didn't mean it bad. They just wanted to keep their secrets secret. You know, the same way you would protect your diary from my ever-curious eyes." They teased, and was is just their imagination, or did Hannah just blush a little?

"I do not have a diary, you privacy-ignoring dimwit. And stop calling me princess!"

"Dimwit? That's not very nice. I'll have you know my teachers always said I was very quick on the uptake – especially when it came to running away from responsibility." Ash informed her with a serious nod, and Hannah rolled her eyes again, though they could still see her lips twitching.

Ash grinned and continued onwards, deeper into the forest, Hannah right behind them.

They wondered, faintly, what it would be like to walk through this forest for a different, much nicer reason.

Something like a nice stroll through a secluded section of trees, just the two of them.

Just…talking, maybe even holding hands…kind of like a…date…

Ash found themselves peering back at Hannah, who had her eyes down on the ground with a small frown, though she didn't look particularly upset.

Would she go on a date with Ash? If Ash built up the courage to ask?

Percy always told them to go for it, but Hannah was kind of sending mixed signals.

On one hand, she clearly wasn't being particularly nice or forthcoming to Ash in any way.

On the other hand, she was also tagging along with Ash now for no reason other than to keep them company, really.

Also, Ash still vividly remembered the visible relief in Hannah's eyes when they had found each
other during Percy's storm, and how both their hearts had pounded in their chests as they had hugged each other so hard it had hurt.

That had to count for something, right?

She certainly hadn't hugged Sara that tightly, and those two were tight.

Hannah looked up and fixed Ash with a dark look, so Ash guessed they had been a little too obvious in their staring, hurriedly looking ahead again.

Oh wow, a tree! Good thing Ash hadn't run into that.

They could still feel Hannah's wary gaze on them, so they decided to keep their eyes on the nonexistent path in front of them, focusing on their surroundings properly once more.

Hannah had never brought that hug up again.

She never brought up anything, to be honest.

Even back when Ash had absolutely embarrassed themselves in front of her with their failed attempt at a compliment, Hannah had never brought it up again, and nothing had changed between them.

Maybe Hannah just wasn't interested, after all.

"What got you so thoughtful? Seen anything suspicious yet?" Hannah asked, now walking next to them as the bushes and undergrowth made way for some easier navigable moss.

"What? Nah. Just thinking about how to best ask you out on a date, princess." Ash replied with a little wink, knowing Hannah wasn't going to take it seriously, anyways.

Hannah promptly scowled again.

"Aww, but you always blush so adorably when I do." They cooed to distract from their own, quickly warming face.

Had Hannah just indirectly said that there was a possibility she would say yes to a date?

Hannah stumbled, her head snapping around, her eyes wide before narrowing down into the darkest, meanest glare she could

"I...I do not...I don't blush! You're seeing things! Anyways, it's rude to call people something after they said not to call them that! Learn some goddamn manners, Ash!" Hannah ranted, and Ash had to suppress a laugh as they watched her turning beet-red.

Sure, no blushing, at all.

Ash was totally imagining that.

"Sure, tell me about manners while cussing me out. Your parents would be proud." They retorted with a grin, and Hannah looked positively offended.

Then, the girl threw her strawberry blonde hair back and looked away, arms crossed in front of her chest.

Oh no, now she was pouting.

Ash was never quite sure what to do when she was pouting.

Biting their lip and taking in their surroundings again for any sign of danger or abnormality, they shifted closer to Hannah's side cautiously, nudging her shoulder with their own.
"So…what would step two be?" They asked innocently.

Hannah shot them a confused look – then, her expression changed to one of incredulity.

"Ash!"

"What? Just checking!"

"We're walking in a creepy forest, far away from camp and safety, and instead of paying attention to your self-imposed mission and your surroundings, you're bothering me about a date?!!" Hannah vented, a little louder than maybe necessary, and Ash hurriedly raised their hands in surrender to calm her.

"Okay, okay. No bothering you about dates while on self-imposed missions in a dark forest. Got it."

Hannah jabbed a finger at Ash's chest, which was something Ash generally did not like, though they merely tensed their jaw and stayed quiet.

"Good. And don't call me princess."

Ash looked down at the jabbing finger uncomfortably, and Hannah seemed to still for a moment. Then, she pulled her hand back, and Ash felt themselves relaxing infintively.

"Alright, fair enough. No calling the princess 'princess' anymore. Got it. Serious mission, serious behavior. I can do serious." Ash assured her with a wink and a grin, even doing finger guns to show how serious they were.

Hannah didn't look very impressed.

Instead, she threw her hair back, rolled her eyes and walked on ahead.

"Whatever. Where are we heading, anyways? Or is it your great plan to get us lost in the woods?"

Ash sighed and followed her.

"One of the satyrs gave me directions to where the uprooted trees start. I wanted to start there and check for any clues as to what uprooted the trees, and then move on from there." They explained, and Hannah threw them a skeptical look over her shoulder.

"That…surprisingly enough seems like a decent plan. So, how much further until those uprooted trees, then?"

Ash gave a little shrug and moved back to Hannah's side.

"We should get there any minute, I guess? Satyrs are a little weird when it comes to directions, apparently. I understood him well enough, and we already passed all the key places he mentioned, so if we just keep going this way, we should find the first slain trees."

"Slain trees?" Hannah asked dubiously, and Ash shrugged again.

"Satyrs." They said, which should explain enough.

Hannah sighed.

"Fair enough. So, does anybody back at camp know where we are, at least? You know, just in case there's something in here that's doing the uprooting?" Hannah pressed, and Ash scratched the side of their face sheepishly.

"Uh…well, I told you and Liam?"

"Ash!" Hannah exclaimed, and Ash rushed to calm her.

"Big Daddy knows, too!" They cut in hurriedly, and Hannah's protests died on her lips.
"You told Jason?" She asked skeptically, and Ash gave a small, sheepish laugh.

"Well, I…uh…in a way? I guess? I sort of…mentioned it?"

Hannah's face was quickly darkening again.

"What do you mean by 'you mentioned it', exactly? Does he know, or does he not?"

Well, would their team leader really have let Ash and Hannah go into the woods all by themselves if Ash had told him what they were looking for?

"I…I told him that somebody should probably check the forest at some point, to make sure there's nothing in there hunting the wildlife." They explained awkwardly.

Hannah looked ready to explode.

"Then he definitely doesn't know! They are already struggling with enough; do you really think he has the time to read into your cryptic words and realize what you're up to?!" She vented, but just then, Ash thought they heard something, moving forward hurriedly to put their hand over Hannah's mouth and push her into the bushes.

"Shh!" Ash hissed, straining their ears.

Hannah, for all her anger, immediately deflated and fell silent.

Both of them listened with bated breaths, trying to find anything unusual in the many noises around them.

There was the rustling of leaves and bushes.

The distant sound of twigs rubbing against each other or breaking.

The wind blowing overhead in the treetops.

Ash frowned, closing their eyes and straining their ears.

Was that…was that the wind hissing, or…

"Snake?" They mouthed at Hannah, whose eyes were fixed on a point far away, a look of concentration on her face.

Ash noticed they still had their hand clasped over her mouth, so they hurriedly pulled it back, which drew Hannah's attention.

They mouthed the word again, but Hannah only frowned and seemed to listen again.

Then, she sighed and shook her head.

"I don't know what issue you have with snakes all the damn time, but I can't hear anything." She grumbled, though Ash felt the immense urge to clasp their hand over her mouth again and tell her to keep quiet.

No, there was something, they could feel it!

"But there were snakes! I saw them!" They argued quietly, instead.

It was a sore topic, after all.

"Yeah, sure. Whatever you say. Snakes just love to follow people around, after all. All the way from Camp Jupiter." Hannah muttered, clearly not believing them.

Ash grinded their teeth.

"I know what I saw, Hannah! I'm not crazy. It started with that weird hissing and the feeling of
being followed, and then, *bam*, snakes! Every time!" They vented, and Hannah made a noncommittal sound as she climbed back out of the bushes and brushed off her clothes.

"Well, we never saw anything. So, either you were seeing very scary twigs, or you're just really, really unlucky."

"But..." Ash started, then froze.

Hannah shot them an odd look immediately, as if reading the shift in mood.

Then, she followed their gaze.

They both stared.

"Holy shit, that's a lot of uprooted trees." Hannah mumbled, and Ash gave a small nod.

Ahead of them, the thick undergrowth and trees suddenly thinned out into what looked a little like a clearing, and a lot like a tree graveyard.

Ash was about to ask how they hadn't seen that when walking right towards it, but a glance back at the bushes told them that they had been going slightly off course.

That, and with the light hitting that part of the forest after keeping the rest of it in relative darkness, made the whole thing seem so surreal that the eye just sort of passed over it.

In fact, if Ash hadn't just seen a bird swoop down and sit on the root of one of the biggest uprooted trees, they probably wouldn't have realized what they were seeing, at all.

They would have simply continued arguing with Hannah and continued on their way deeper into the forest, while their destination had been right here all along.

Ash was about to point this out to Hannah, when they frowned and squinted at the roots again.

Wait, where had the bird gone?

Hm, it must have taken flight again and the sunlight had simply kept them from seeing it.

"Let's go check it out." Hannah muttered and started walking, so Ash followed, albeit reluctantly.

Their fingertips were tingling.

Their fingertips only tingled when they were about to do something forbidden, though – or when there was danger.

Ash hoped faintly it was the former right now.

They both walked towards the 'clearing' cautiously, checking for any sort of tracks on the ground that could give any indicator as to what had caused this level of destruction.

But there was nothing.

Every time Ash thought they could make out animal tracks, they led away from the scene of crime and seemed to be from way before the uprooting.

Though the exact time of the uprooting was a little hard to tell, considering some of these trees looked like they had been this way for weeks, while others looked freshly dug out of the ground.

None of this helped ease Ash's nerves in the slightest.

Their gaze kept hushing from the ground to the trees to Hannah and back, worried they were going to miss the one big clue that just had to lurk around here somewhere – but they were even more worried they were going to lose sight of Hannah in this rather unnerving place.

"Let's split up." Hannah suggested when Ash accidentally ran into them.

"Yeah, let's not do that." Ash immediately replied with a grimace, and Hannah shot them an odd
look.

"What? It's our best chance to check the perimeter as quickly as possible. If there's nothing to find, we can get back to Camp sooner. If there is something, we can call for the other and check it out together." She explained, but that sounded like a terrible plan.

"Have you never watched any horror movies? Splitting up always gets people killed. In really terrible ways, too!" They tried to make her understand, but Hannah only gave them a long, unimpressed look.

"You watch too much TV. See, this is why the Ares cabin doesn't have a TV. So we focus on training and keeping our mind alert to real threats, not weird, unrealistic horror movies." She argued, and Ash felt positively offended.

Huffing to themselves, they crossed their arms in front of their chest.

"Spoken like our favorite doctor. Splendid taste regarding fashion, but when it comes to movies? A disaster."

"Oh, just go and search for clues, Ash. You go right, I go left?"

Most definitely not.

"How about we both go left?" Ash suggested hopefully, and Hannah glowered at them darkly.

"Ugh, fine! But if we get killed, it is your fault!" They grumbled and kicked at a twig on the ground, which went bouncing off the side of a tree trunk and flew off into the opposite direction.

Ash and Hannah both followed the twig with their eyes, then Hannah shot them a last, dark look.

"Go right. I'll go left."

"Yes, princess." Ash grumbled, but sadly, Hannah didn't take the bait, instead already turning away from them and marching off.

Ash looked after her, the tingling in their hands still ever present.

But they guessed there was no point in arguing.

Grumbling to themselves, they turned away from Hannah's retreating form and started making their way around the 'clearing' from the right.

Hannah was right about one thing.

The faster they got through this place, the faster they could get back to each other and leave.

Ash kept their eyes open and their ears ready to pick up any more sounds, but the hissing had long stopped, and there didn't seem to be anything worth seeing.

Just tree trunks and dirt and moss and twigs.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

Ash tried to hear Hannah's footsteps, but wasn't surprised when they couldn't.

It was a rather big 'clearing', after all.

Ash looked at one of the biggest tree trunks yet, then decided to climb it, just to check they weren't missing some great big clue by walking around the place, rather than through it.

But there didn't seem anything interesting up there, either.

Ash walked on top of the trunk, looking out at the many others that were littered around them.

Who or what could possibly do this sort of thing?
And why?

There were no claw or fang marks, nothing that would indicate some sort of beast, but it had to be something non-human, since no human could possibly have the strength to just pull a giant tree out of the earth.

Ash inspected some of the roots in front of their face, but there was nothing interesting to be seen there, either.

No poison, no herbicide, nothing that could have weakened the roots.

Ash was about to hop off again, when they noticed something glinting in the sun, right between two big treetops that offered so much shade Ash considered themselves blinded momentarily.

They hurried over to the thing, climbing off the tree cautiously and pulling their dagger from their side, just in case it was anything alive.

Their footsteps caused some twigs to crack, making them flinch at the sound, but nothing else moved, and nothing came jumping at them.

Ash lowered themselves slowly and entered the darkness of the treetops, eyes on the weird object that had caught their attention.

They poked it with the dagger, then jumped back.

"Snake!" Ash hissed, already in combat pose with their dagger at the ready to cut the beast apart – but nothing happened.

Frowning, Ash lowered the dagger again and went back closer to the snake.

Poking it again with the dagger, they realized it had to be dead.

Curious, Ash tried to pick it up with their dagger.

But it kept sliding off.

Weird.

Grumbling to themselves, they pulled a glove from their pocket, hidden there in case they needed another load of stinging nettle at any given point.

(Not that they had a history of smuggling stinging nettle into people's unsuspecting beds, of course.)

Then, they moved to pick up the dead snake.

This, as it turned out, was a big mistake.

"Holy shit." Ash muttered, partly in awe, partly in terror, as they pulled on what was actually a snake's skin – and then just kept on pulling.

What they had assumed to be the end of the snake, was actually not even the middle of it, the rest of it coming out from beneath the dead leaves of the trees.

To make matters worse, they came to realize that there was a second snake skin stuck on the end of the first, which was just as long as the former.

Ash stared at the skins, realizing with a new surge of dread that they were easily the size of their arms, maybe even longer.

Dropping the skins in a mixture of shock and disgust, they looked back at the dead leaves in the shadow.

Then, they shook themselves from head to toe, wishing they could shake off the lingering dread, too.
"Oh man, that reminds me of freaking *Harry Potter*, second book. When they find that chamber of secrets and that Basilisk…” Ash said to themselves, then trailed off, a rather horrifying thought occurring to them.

They looked back down at the snake skins.

Then at the shadows.

Then, they searched through their pockets and fished out the miniature flashlight the Stoll brothers had given them on their first day at Camp.

The dim light hit the dead leaves, and Ash swallowed when they saw many, many scales reflecting it.

Oh no…

Ash looked back around themselves, at the many uprooted trees, which no man or animal could have done.

Oh no.

Ash heard the distant hissing again, sounding louder than before.

*Oh no.*

"*Hannah!*” Ash screamed and started moving.

Unfortunately, so did something else.

***

Hannah was just checking the remnants of what seemed to have been a ferret at some point, when she heard Ash screaming bloody murder.

For one short moment, she thought they were going to pull a prank on her.

But that moment passed when they realized Ash had never sounded so terrified before.

Pulling her weapon from her side, Hannah got ready to face whatever danger there was – but then Ash already leaped over the tree trunk between them, snatched her arm and pulled her after them.

"Ash, what…”

"Snakes!"

Oh no, not *again* with the snakes!

Hannah groaned, trying to pull herself free, but Ash didn't let go, merely hissing at her to pick up her pace.

"Ash, seriously, there's no-…”

"Basilisks, Hannah! I found the skins! It's *Polybotes!*” Ash yelled at her.

Suddenly, many things happened at once.

First, Hannah realized that Ash had never yelled at her before.

Second, Ash had a terror in their eyes that made all words die on Hannah's tongue.

Third, there was the very real sound of hissing coming from behind them, and quickly closing in.

Fourth, there was the sound of trees snapping and thundering footsteps, indicating that Ash might be right.

"Fuck.” Hannah summed up the situation as eloquently as possible, then started running in
Ash looked past her at whatever was behind them, and Hannah was glad she didn't do the same, because Ash's face suddenly looked paler than a sheet of paper, and she was pretty sure she could hear them whimper faintly.

"Run!" They yelled unnecessarily, but Hannah merely nodded wildly and tried to pick up her pace.

Ash seemed to be chanting something, too, but it took until Hannah managed to catch up with them for her to make out the words.

"We're going to die, we're going to die, we're going to die."

Hannah shot them a dark look.

"What sort of mindset is that?!"

Something roared behind them, and the hissing suddenly seemed a lot closer than before.

"A realistic one!" Ash yelled back and snatched her hand, pulling on it harshly as they kept on running through the quickly thickening undergrowth.

"Let go of me, I can't run like this!" Hannah yelled at them, but Ash only wildly shook their head and kept pulling.

"No way! I'm never gonna let go of you, forget it!"

"Ash!" Hannah yelled when she nearly stumbled and fell, and Ash looked back at her, before looking at whatever was following them.

Their eyes seemed to grow even wider.

"No!"

The 'No', as Hannah came to realize, hadn't been meant for her, but for a long, green snake with white spikes around its neck, hissing and spitting as it nearly caught up to her ankle and snapped at it.

Hannah shrieked and stupidly tried to kick at it, but luckily, Ash saved her from instant death – by dragging her sideways and throwing something at the creature.

"Choke on that!" Ash cried, and Hannah saw something that looked a lot like a nutrition bar flying at the snake, which snapped angrily and swallowed it whole, just to slow down and look like it was going to choke.

Hannah wanted to keep looking, but Ash kept pulling on her hand, forcing her to look ahead again to not fall.

The thundering footsteps were still behind them.

"You will not leave this forest!" A loud voice bellowed, and both of them flinched, though they kept on running, anyways.

Was that a giant on their heels?

How were they supposed to survive this?

Oh gods, they weren't going to survive this!

"I told you there were snakes!" Ash yelled at her, but this was definitely the wrong time to be arguing about that.

"You just had to go into the stupid forest!" She yelled back, and Ash made an offended noise.

"You decided to come along! I never made you!"
"You would be dead now if it wasn't for me!" Hannah screamed at them, though she was very well aware that it was the other way around.

"I wanted to ask you out on a date!" Ash screamed back, and Hannah stumbled in her step a little.

"What?!" She asked, because, somehow, that didn't sound like it had anything to do with the current situation.

"Forget it! Duck!" Ash yelled, and Hannah did.

They let go of her hand, turned their body around and pulled something from their pockets, tossing it over Hannah's head at whatever was quickly following behind her.

She first thought it was more nutrition bars, but then heard a series of explosions behind her, making her stare up at Ash in terror.

"Leo's prototype hand grenades. Still gotta tell him I stole those," Ash explained with a little smirk, before the roar behind them had them snatching Hannah's hand again and both of them picked up speed once more.

"You stole his prototypes?! What if they had been malfunctional?!!" She screamed at them, but Ash only shot them a confused look.

"But they were! That's why he didn't use them and why I could steal them so easily!"

"Ash, you could have died!" Hannah exclaimed in disbelief.

"I'm going to kill you!" Polybotes yelled behind them.

"Shut up!" Hannah screamed back at him to glower at Ash.

"You carried malfunctioning hand grenades around with you, just like that?! Are you crazy?!"

She couldn't see much, but she could very well see the red creeping up Ash's neck to their face as they kept looking on ahead and pulling on her hand.

"I took some precautions! It's really not that big of a deal!"

"Not that big of a deal?! Are you kidding me?!"

"Shouldn't you be thanking me instead of freaking yelling at me?! They just saved your life, princess!" Ash argued irritably, and Hannah squeezed their hand in warning.

"If you had just asked Leo, I'm sure he would have given you some of his actual, safe-to-use grenades!"

"There are no safe-to-use grenades! That's the whole point of them!" Ash yelled back at her, and Hannah was tempted to strangle them.

Ash glanced back at her, undoubtedly to say something else that was going to make her blood boil — but then, they got distracted by whatever was behind them, and they pulled harshly on her hand.

"Hannah!"

It was the last thing Hannah heard before she was harshly shoved to the side, stumbling and hitting the ground and rolling onward, seconds before there was a loud CRASH.

The hissing around her grew louder, but Hannah was too busy pushing herself to her feet and whirling around, staring at the giant tree that was laying where she had just been running with Ash.

"Ash!" She called in terror, ignoring the slithering green snakes that came right for her.

There was no reply.
Oh no…

The thundering footsteps slowed, before coming to a stop, and Hannah turned her head to look at the giant, his blue skin and green hair making her sick to the stomach.

However, her rage was greater than her fear.

"How dare you! You can't just fucking throw a tree at us! What sort of monster are you?!!" She screeched up at the giant in accusation, and Polybotes looked a little taken aback, mouth still open to speak, though no words came out.

Then, he pulled himself together and growled.

"Now, listen here, little girl—…"

"No, you listen! You think you can just do whatever you want, wherever you go? Because you can't! I don't always get what I want, but do I throw trees around? No! Because you don't do that!" Hannah vented and drew their weapon, moving closer to the tree in hopes of finding Ash somewhere, safe and sound, maybe just knocked out, but whole, and alive…

"I am a giant! I…"

"You're a coward, that's what you are! A stinking, ugly and disgusting piece of shit that needs to send snakes after demigods or throws trees at them when he can't get the job done, himself!" Hannah yelled at him, and Polybotes looked down at himself in confusion.

"But I'm…"

"Bullshit!" Hannah exclaimed, and then proceeded to hiss at one of the snakes in warning when it came closer slowly.

It surged back again, looking as confused as its master.

"Hannah…" Somebody groaned softly, and Hannah's head snapped around immediately, hurrying over the tree trunk to get to the source.

"Ash!" She exclaimed, both in relief and horror when she found her teammate and friend on the ground, scratch marks across their face and body, but they were alive, and not stuck beneath any part of the tree, so Hannah counted her blessings.

"Ash, oh gods, you're alive! Thank the gods you're alive! Oh gods, Ash…” She breathed, pulling on their upper body to get them further away from the tree, just in case it decided to roll over or whatever.

Ash looked a little out of it, a bit cross-eyed as they looked up at Hannah, but otherwise, they seemed okay.

"Are you finished now?" The giant called, still sounding rather confused.

Hannah's face snapped up to glower darkly up at him, and Polybotes shifted uncomfortably.

"You've done it…you've turned a giant speechless…always knew you had it in ya, girl." Ash mumbled, still sounding out of it, but also sounding proud, and Hannah managed a small smile.

"He did throw a tree at us. I had to say something." She retorted, and Ash grinned up at her.

Then, they blew out a weak breath.

"Oh man, I'm so glad you're okay." They whispered, and Hannah leaned over them a little more, bringing their faces closer together.

"I'm pretty sure you saved my life right there." She replied softly, and Ash looked up at her again, searching her gaze, before a small smile graced their lips.

"Well, maybe the princess would like to reward me with a date?"
Hannah blinked.

Then, she snorted.

"You're asking me out? When we're about to be slaughtered by a giant and his pet snakes? Shitty timing, Ash. Really shitty timing."

"I don't hear a no." Ash mused in a singsong voice, though they were slurring their words slightly.

"That's because I didn't say no." Hannah admitted bashfully, and, for all Ash's teasing and self-confidence, they looked rather stunned for a moment.

Then, a blush crept up their neck to their face, and Hannah had to suppress a snicker.

"Alright, this is it! I am Polybotes, the bane of Poseidon, and greatest giant walking this earth! You should fear me!" Polybotes suddenly roared and stomped his feet on the ground, followed by him hurling a monstrous trident at them.

Ash let out a small sigh, but Hannah was already moving, grabbing hold of them and hoisting both of them out of the way, just in time to dodge the spikes embedding themselves into the forest floor.

"Can you stand?" She asked as she peeked at the giant from behind a tree, the telltale hissing of his snakes was just as menacing as before and promising no good.

"I think so?" Ash replied meekly and tried to make their way back to their feet, which looked rather pitiful.

"Good. Because we need to run." Hannah told them, and Ash shot her an unhappy look.

"You didn't ask whether I could run, though."

"Just do it!" Hannah exclaimed and gave them a little push, and Ash stumbled off, Hannah right behind them.

She was tempted to draw her weapon and jab at the advancing snakes, but she knew from Percy's many stories that basilisks could only be killed by ferrets, so she threw stones and twigs at them, instead.

Well, she guessed this explained the dead ferret she had found.

A net came flying, but Ash showed a burst of their usual finesse as they threw something up in the air that looked a lot like a quickly expanding fidget spinner – just with what seemed to be razor-sharp blades.

"Another one of Leo's prototypes! It was labelled 'Certain Death'!" They called back as explanation, but Hannah merely pushed them to keep on running.

"I don't even want to know!"

She had to have a talk with Leo about where he kept his failed projects, and his apparent lack of care regarding their sudden disappearances.

There was a loud, menacing hiss, and Ash slid to a sudden stop in front of her, causing Hannah to collide with their back.

She was about to tell them to keep on running, when she saw the basilisk in front of them, standing up with its head downward, eyes fixed on Ash, the white spikes around its neck vibrating slightly in warning.

Hannah didn't know much about snakes, but she was pretty sure that one was ready to strike.

More hissing came from all around them, followed by Polybotes coming to a halt behind them once more.
They were surrounded.

Hannah swallowed thickly and looked at Ash, who looked back at her with an almost miserable look.

"I told you. I am the most fearsome giant there is. Now, get ready for your end." Polybotes spoke behind them, and they both turned to look at him.

Hannah wanted to draw her weapon, but the basilisk next to them hissed in warning, showing it would strike the moment she tried to fight.

Great.

Ash let out a small groan and looked up at the sky, beginning to mutter something darkly under their breath.

Hannah took their hand in her own.

If they already had to die, she might as well be holding hands with Ash.

Ash gave her hand a little squeeze, which felt adorably comforting in this rather hopeless situation.

"Any last words?" Polybotes asked as he pointed his giant trident at them.

"We're not gonna go down quietly!" Hannah called back defensively, not intending to tremble like a coward in her last moments.

Ash stiffened like a board next to her.

Hannah frowned and looked at them in question, but Ash wasn't looking at her or the giant – instead, their gaze was still on the sky.

And they were smiling.

Polybotes moved to attack, when he seemed to notice the wide grin on Ash's face, and promptly halted once more.

"You. What's so funny, eh?"

Ash looked at the giant, mirth sparkling in their eyes.

"Oh, I just realized we're going to live, that's all."

Hannah frowned and wanted to ask them what they were talking about, but also didn't want to blow their cover in case they were bluffing.

Strangely enough, Ash didn't seem to be bluffing, their mirth and relief seemed genuine as they gave Hannah's hand another soft squeeze.

"And how do you believe to accomplish that, little demigod?" Polybotes asked with a low growl, hands tightening around his trident.

Ash's eyes sparkled more than ever.

"Daddy is gonna fuck you up good." They said, and Hannah gasped softly as she understood, relief flooding through her.

Polybotes looked Ash up and down with a look of mild confusion, undoubtedly trying to figure out what that meant.

Then, he growled and raised his trident again.

"Enough of these games. Die!" he roared. And then Ash grabbed Hannah, and they both hit the ground seconds before Jason Grace came crashing from the skies and struck the giant with enough lightning to power an entire village.
Everything turned white, followed by the loud crackling sounds, followed by Polybotes roaring in anger and pain.

There was the faint sound of hissing, and Hannah realized belatedly that there were still snakes.

She grabbed for her weapon, hoping to at least manage to hold them off for a moment or two, but the first one was already moving to strike.

Hannah let out a small scream, while Ash tried to cover her protectively with their own body.

There was a whooshing sound, followed by a small grunt and a thud, and when Hannah and Ash looked up, they found the snake flying in a high arch away from them.

Nico di Angelo stood in front of them protectively, a disintegrating branch in his hand, his expression one of murder.

"Get away from my kids."

The snakes hissed, then struck, but Nico kicked another branch at one of them and held his hand out to the others, a shadow portal opening up in front of them and swallowing them whole.

Hannah and Ash helped each other up, watching in awe how Nico stood his ground, protecting them and making one basilisk after the other disappear into darkness, before returning his attention to the giant.

Jason landed, sword at the ready and expression as grim as Nico’s, though it softened slightly when he looked towards Ash and Hannah.

"Are you okay? I'm sorry, it took a while until I realized what you tried to tell me, Ash." He said, and Hannah shot Ash a dark look, remembering their earlier conversation.

Nico shot them a dark look, too.

"I realized what you meant to tell him. You two have some explaining to do."

Hannah hated it when Nico was mad at her.

"Stop ignoring me!" Polybotes exclaimed and stomped his foot on the ground again, snakes flying from his hair.

Nico groaned and brandished his sword.

"Alright, here's the plan: You two get back to the Camp. Go."

If it wasn't for Nico being the plan-maker, Hannah would have considered that a shitty plan.

Since it was Nico though, she hastily agreed and pulled Ash with her, only now noticing they were still holding hands.

Oh, it didn't matter, they could still die at any moment!

Behind them, there was the sound of battle, the giant roaring again in anger and fury, while Jason set the skies ablaze with light.

When Hannah looked over her shoulder, she saw Jason and Nico working together to make the giant fall backward onto the ground, the entire forest shaking in response.

She was about to cheer, but then, Polybotes laughed, loud and menacing.

"Fine, have it your way!" He bellowed.

Ash pulled on her hand furiously, and she followed, dreading what the giant was talking about.

The sound of a horn blared behind them, followed by Nico's cursing and Jason's faint sigh.

This time, the ground shook for different reasons than the giant.
Hannah and Ash were running from the forest as fast as their feet could carry them, and she didn't know how she knew what the horn meant, but somehow, she did, anyways.

There was a distant rumble, the sound of trees falling and the ground quivering.

Hannah shot Ash a wide-eyed look, and Ash looked back at her with an expression that said they knew, too.

In front of them, just past the trees, were the campers, already in their battle armor and at the ready to face the oncoming threat.

It came moments after Ash and Hannah stumbled out of the forest, the first monsters appearing between the trees.

Percy Jackson snatched them and took them away, right before Annabeth and Clarisse called for war, and the sounds of battle filled the campsite.

Hannah let herself slump against Percy, knowing what it meant.

The final battle had begun.
Check out the FanArt for this series!!
I have made a new page for all of them, so everything is a little more in order without the risk of running out of space!

Here's the link:
http://mel-chan366.tumblr.com/fanfic-fanart

Seriously, it helps with the angst!! ;)
Enjoy~

A/N: Hey Cupcakes!
First off...sorry for the radio silence.
A LOT happened, and is still happening, and it just got a little too much to also write next to that.

I wanna thank you all again for the many kind messages and words of encouragement. Each and every one of them meant the world to me, and motivated me to keep going. Writing this chapter was rough, but I still have the same love for the story, my babies, and writing in general, so even if this story comes to an end, I'm not gonna stop ;)
(Still gonna start my series after this, and still super hyped about it ;D)

I hope you're doing okay, and that the last months have been kind to you. That you could do the things you love and got to enjoy yourself more than you had to push yourself to keep going. Sometimes things can get a little out of hand, life can be unbearable, but never forget, it will always get better!

Soo, back to the story!
We're finally here! The last chapter! (Well, and an epilogue, but I guess you'll have to wait a little longer for that)
I hope you'll like it, and that you enjoyed the series up until now!
Make sure to check out all the fanart, they are all absolutely AMAZING, and I can't put it into words just how much I love every single one of them.
So, I'm sure you'll like them too ;)

For this chapter, heed the trigger warnings of course, and let me know if you need a quick summary or the like!

Wish you all the best!
-Tári

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Trigger Warnings:
- Last Chapter
- Death
- War
- Kyle
- Graphic depiction of violence/murder/blood/injuries/death
- The usual, but final

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Chapter 18: The Last Fight

"Give me the son of Poseidon!" Polybotes roared, but Nico didn't give him anything other than a good stab into his scaly, sandaled foot.
Who even made shoes for giants? It was a mystery.
The giant tried to run him through with his trident, but Jason had his back, already soaring down to cut Polybotes' nose, which made him break off his attack to wave his hand at Jason, trying to swat him out of the sky like an annoying fly.

Nico saw more snakes falling from his hair, and immediately raised an arm to let shadow portals appear beneath them.

They never made it to the ground, instead disappearing into darkness.

Nico smirked, wondering faintly how those snakes would like the Pacific Ocean.

Jason successfully cut off a few of Polybotes' grimy dreadlocks, and the giant roared in anger and stabbed his trident into the sky several times.

Nico dodged the stomping feet and let the falling hair disappear, before moving to jump up Polybotes' leg to impale his knee with his sword.

He was going to bring this giant down eventually, no matter how many times he was going to have to strike him.

Like before, Polybotes swayed and stumbled, but he still caught himself and tried to kick at Nico.

Nico was quicker.

So was Leo, who soared past him on Festus Jr. and threw some round objects at the giant.

Nico instinctively searched for cover, moments before the grenades exploded.

"Woohoo!" Leo cheered, and Nico let out a deep sigh, before checking on the on-going battle around him.

Everywhere he looked, there was fighting.

Nico spotted Ash and Liam, fiercely protecting the medic tent from unwanted intruders, and his thoughts strayed to Will and Percy for a moment.

Then, Nico steeled his nerves and charged Polybotes again, who sadly didn't seem very impressed by Leo's grenades.

"Give me Percy Jackson!" He roared again, and Nico and Jason struck him simultaneously.

"Like hell I will!" Nico yelled up at him, and Polybotes cussed him out and tried to kick him again, which had Jason swooping down to disarm him and force him back with a wall of lightning striking down right in front of the giant.

Nico barely managed to dodge said lightning, though he hoped vaguely Jason could somehow protect him from that, the same way Percy could keep them dry in water.

All the same, he preferred not to find out the hard way.

"Die!" Polybotes yelled, taking the words right out of Nico's mouth as he rushed forward to slash at the giant's legs again to draw his focus away from Jason.

They knew one touch from the giant would kill them.

However, Nico's great plan was to simply never let him touch them, and it was working so far, so he kept going.

"You will never beat me!" Polybotes roared.

Nico was going to prove him wrong.

***

Will felt ready to split in two, rushing from one end of the tent to the other, helping the wounded, helping his siblings, passing along the nectar and ambrosia they had left, passing along the salves
helping his siblings, passing along the nectar and ambrosia they had left, passing along the salves and creams, passing along all he had.

He was calling orders, but he couldn't tell whether they were being followed, everything around him a vortex of noise and movement.

Austin appeared in the entrance, another wounded camper leaning against him for support, a gash running down the side of his body from rib cage to knee.

There was more yelling.

Percy rushed forward to take the boy from Austin, exchanging a series of words Will couldn't catch, before Austin disappeared again, and Percy turned to look at Will, eyes wide and helpless.

Will was with him in an instant, helping him with the camper and calling for his siblings to clean off one of the bunks.

But there were no bunks that could be cleaned off.

Will was forced to lower the boy onto the ground in the corner, running his hands over the length of the gash without ever touching it.

The kid was no older than twelve, looking up at him with wide eyes full of pain and fear.

Percy disappeared from his side to help somebody else, and Will started healing.

There was a loud roar, and Will knew the giant was still far away from the medic tent, but the sound reverberated through him, making his skin crawl and his chest clench.

He swallowed and focused on his powers, watching the skin mend itself as the boy exhaled and closed his eyes, his features slowly relaxing.

Will wished he wouldn't have to send the boy back into the battle again – and then, he didn't have to, because the moment the kid was healed, he got to his feet and left, only whispering a small 'Thank you'.

Will didn't deserve that thanks.

Will went to help the others.

Percy was perfect, offering the right tools at the right moment, bringing creams, bandaging what could be bandaged, and putting the kids at ease where he could.

But Will could see his eyes hushing back to the tent entrance, could see him flinch every time Polybotes' roars shook the tent, could see the inner struggle as if it was his own.

Will wished he could help him.

But he had done all he could do to help.

He had told his boyfriends everything they had wanted to know, and when Percy had put his fingers to Will's lips and told him he wanted to make his own choices, Will had agreed to let him.

It was a difficult promise to keep.

Will supported his siblings as they healed another stab wound, but his eyes were on Percy, who was standing with his hands covering his face, and he could feel his pain, his reluctance, his fear.

He heard the sharp intake of breath.

Felt the burst of determination.

He watched as Percy turned towards him, and when their eyes met, Will felt a tear running down his cheek, but he gave a small nod, anyways.

Percy nodded back, stumbling towards him with a determined expression that quickly turned into
a grimace.

Hands cradled his face, and Will leaned into the touch, though it was far from enough.

"I have to." Percy whispered, trying to convince Will.

Trying to convince himself.

Will gave a weak nod.

Lips pressed against his forehead, and Will's hands shook as he tried to reach out for Percy, tried to keep him there.

But then, Percy was already gone, slipping through his fingers, slipping out of the tent, leaving to join a battle he shouldn't have to join.

Will looked after him, wishing he could follow.

Then, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath – and returned to help his siblings.

He had seen all the possible futures.

But there were too many to predict what would happen next.

Will had to believe in Percy.

Will did believe in Percy.

Percy was going to be fine.

They were all going to be fine.

Polybotes roared again, but this time, it sounded triumphant.

Will ignored the looks of his siblings and continued healing where he could.

He believed in his boyfriends.

***


Percy was surrounded by battle, and his arm ached, but he told himself to get it together as he raised his sword.

Polybotes was sneering at him, confidence pouring off of him, while Percy felt weaker the closer he got.

Nico spotted him, and Percy's heart ached when he saw his eyes widen and his lips part to call his name.

To ask him what he was doing here.

It was obvious.

Percy was going to fight the bane of Poseidon, the way he should be.

He would fight in this battle, the way he should be.

Percy gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on Riptide.

He could do this.

"Percy Jackson." Polybotes said, and Percy looked up at the giant blankly.

"That's my name. Glad you remember." He replied over the noise of battle, and spotted Jason,
floating in the air like superman and looking down at him, his expression as concerned as Nico's.

Percy ignored it, instead readying himself to attack as Polybotes snapped back at him in annoyance, clearly not up for games.

Well, neither was Percy.

The giant charged, and Percy did the same.

"This time, I will not be tricked!" Polybotes exclaimed.

Good thing Percy didn't intend to trick him.

He slashed at the giant's legs as he dodged his attack and slid past him, forcing him to turn around.

There were already plenty of cuts on the giant, undoubtedly courtesy of Nico, but Percy could see them healing and knew it wouldn't be enough.

Percy glanced towards the lake, so close, yet so far away.

It was already poisoned, so Polybotes couldn't do much with it, and it could give Percy an advantage...

He dodged Polybotes' next attack and saw Nico charging at the giant, the same time Jason did, the two of them helping him the way they always did.

Percy looked at them, then back at the lake.

This was nothing compared to what was still to come.

If Percy managed to beat Polybotes quickly enough...if only to make sure they would have enough power to face the rest...

Percy slid to a stop and felt for the tug in his gut, urging it to comply with his wishes as he reached out for the water.

He could do this.

He just had to push himself a little further, just one more time.

Percy's arms started tingling, then the rest of his body did, too, but Percy ignored it, focusing on the power surging through him as he felt the water abiding him.

He opened his eyes again, and when Polybotes shook Nico and Jason off to attack him, Percy moved to send a wave of water crashing into him.

It forced the giant back and had him roaring in anger, but Percy didn't wait for him to catch his bearings before attacking again.

**Power.** There was an immense power, flowing through Percy, filling him to the brim.

He attacked again and again, and the water was vicious, cruel, cutting through the air and the giant.

**Too much.** The power felt like too much to take.

Something jumped at him, and he snarled and waved his hand sharply.

The monster screeched as it was drained alive, its blood joining the force of water attacking Polybotes relentlessly.

**Malice.** So much malice, so familiar yet so foreign to Percy.

He couldn't control it.

More monsters.
Percy found his hands moving on their own accord, reaching out to them, and the malice intensified as he sneered, watching as they thrashed and screeched as blood and whatever other fluids they possessed escaped them.

_This isn't me._

They combusted.

Percy struggled, his arms beginning to tremble from the strain, his control wavering.

_Unstable._

When he looked at his arms, he saw the stark white lines on his skin that seemed to grow and spread.

Percy tried to pull away from the force, tried to regain control, tried to let the water fall to the ground the way he usually could.

But the water wasn't abiding him any longer.

It was whispering to him.

Percy struggled and squeezed his eyes shut.

He heard campers scream, and somebody cursed.

Percy dreaded what it meant.

He wanted to check on his surroundings, on his boyfriends, on Polybotes and the battle.

But when he opened his eyes, he couldn't see.

The water still whispered, promising all the things Percy couldn't do.

Percy struggled, thinking of his boyfriends, of his home, of his promise to protect them, and to never hurt them again.

But would he be able to protect them?

Doubt filled him, making him waver.

_Oh._

The water pushed.

Percy yielded.

The water surrounded him, the power reaching a new peak as it took control.

Percy slipped away.

And then, he was the water, and the water was him.

Polybotes roared.

The water roared back.

***

Alec tapped his foot on the ground impatiently, looking at the trembling door as the ground shook beneath his feet.

There was so much noise outside.

_War._
Alec started biting his lip as he checked his watch.

Five minutes.

He had another five minutes before he would have to sedate Malcolm again.

Alec looked at the syringe, at the ready in his sweaty hands.

There was a war waging outside, and he was stuck in the Pegasus stables.

His siblings were out there, healing or fighting, possibly dead, and Alec was forced to watch over the Camp's traitor.

He glanced over his shoulder at the boy behind him, who was still very much knocked out and still exactly where Alec had dumped him – in one of the uncleaned, empty stable boxes, surrounded by pegasi poop.

Served him right.

Alec wrinkled his nose and turned back towards the door, just in case anything decided to come through it.

Of course, Alec didn't have a weapon and would only be able to run for it, should anything find the stables interesting, but…well, whatever.

He heard distant screaming, and the roar of what reminded him of the sea.

Water.

Percy was probably using his powers again.

Alec hoped he was alright.

He hoped all of them were alright.

Alec started tapping his foot again, wishing he could go and help.

He heard more screaming, and somebody cursed so loudly it carried all the way over to the stables.

Was that…Nico's voice?

Alec hesitated, checking his watch again.

He still had three minutes.

Plus, Malcolm wouldn't wake up immediately, anyways.

Alec started edging closer to the door, trying to catch what was being yelled, trying to catch anything that might let him know what was happening.

The stable door trembled and shook in its hinges, and Alec nibbled on his lip again as he opened it the tiniest bit.

The creaking sound seemed so loud that he cringed, fearing that monsters would come running for him immediately – but nothing attacked.

Nothing seemed to have noticed.

Alec spotted monsters and demigods alike, much closer than he would have expected, but none of them paid any attention to the stables.

Of course they didn't.

The pegasi were all in the air, with or without demigods on their backs, so the stables should be deserted and thus uninteresting.
It was still a terrible hideout, in Alec's opinion.

He heard a distant roar, the same one he had heard earlier, and knew it had to be from the giant.

Alec didn't know what giant it was, but he had heard him yelling earlier, demanding Percy.

Since Alec could see the water slashing through the air and campers and monsters alike running away from the deadly waves, he was pretty sure the giant had gotten its wish.

Alec irritated his lip until he broke the skin, tasting blood.

He watched the water worriedly, remembering the last battle that had cost Percy his control and led to so many deaths.

There was another yell, and now, Alec could see the giant, far away and struggling against the water, everybody else scrambling out of the way except for one lonely figure.

The figure that was yelling.

Alec squinted, and realized it was Nico di Angelo.

Gasping, he gripped the door tighter and kept looking, mesmerized.

Was Nico going to face the giant all by himself?

But Percy had to be somewhere, too, to control the water, right?

And where the heck was Jason?

A strong gust of wind smacked Alec in the face and surged through the stables, causing some of the tools and the giant shovel behind him to clatter to the ground.

Alec winced as he glanced at them, then back outside to check whether anything had heard.

But the battle continued.

He watched in awe and horror how the tiny figure of Nico started attacking the rather massive giant, the black blade glowing darkly as it slashed through the air.

The sky crackled above them.

Oh, Jason had to be up there!

But where was Percy?

Was he with Will?

Was Will okay?

Were their siblings okay?

How good was the Camp faring?

Alec thought he heard something behind him, but when he turned his head, there was nothing out of the ordinary, the tools still scattered across the floor.

He returned his attention to the battle.

Alec already had his eyes back on Nico's battling form when it occurred to him that the giant shovel was missing.

It occurred to him a moment too late.

He turned around, arms already shooting up to defend himself.

But then, Malcolm already struck him with the shovel.
Shit.

It was the only thing that crossed Alec's mind as he went down, vision blurring and pain shooting through his body.

He looked up at Malcolm's sneering face groggily.

It seemed he had failed his brother.

Again.

"Will…" He whispered.
Then, Malcolm struck him again, and he lost consciousness.

***

Jason watched Nico battling Polybotes with a savage strength he had never witnessed before.

Much like the water that was whipping through the air, claiming lives left and right.

So far, the campers had been spared, but Jason could see them scattering in fear and letting down their guards to escape the waves, leaving them open for attacks from the actual enemies.

Jason swooped down to help them, knowing they needed him more than Nico right now.

He herded them back together so they could help each other, then went to lend a hand to Billy, who was single-handedly facing off against four monsters at once.

Jason helped by grabbing two and tossing them towards Percy's raging storm, before disemboweling the third.

Billy whistled and gave him a thumbs-up, before they both went their separate ways again.

It was difficult to fly.

Jason had to dodge the water as well as the monsters, and both seemed intent on snatching him.

But Percy wouldn't hurt him.

He knew Percy would never hurt him.

Not intentionally, anyways.

Jason watched another monster getting sucked into the growing vortex, screaming and thrashing as it dissolved into nothingness.

Yeah, he didn't want to get too close to that.

He dodged a jet of water, which instead latched onto a venti and sucked it into the vortex.

Was this what had happened last time?

Was this what Percy hadn't wanted him to see?

It wasn't like Percy.

None of this was like Percy.

Percy didn't fight by hiding behind the water and letting it slaughter for him.

Percy fought with the water, letting it aid him in his task of beating what had to be beaten.

Jason looked back towards Nico, but Nico was still standing his ground against Polybotes.

The water had seemed intent on killing the giant, but by now, it seemed more interested in feeding its growing vortex of death.
This wasn't like his Percy.

*My son.*

Jason halted in midair.

Had he just heard…

*Help my son.*

Neptune.

Well, *Poseidon*, but same difference.

Jason's eyes narrowed, and he urged himself to fly closer to the vortex.

*Help my son.* Poseidon repeated, his voice distant and weak.

"How?" He asked, hoping to be heard.

But Percy's father didn't reply.

Jason watched as tendrils of water snaked through the battlefield.

Then, he watched the first enemy demigod getting snatched by it and dragged into the vortex.

Jason soared higher into the air, grinding his teeth as wind and water slashed through the air around him, eyes on the storm.

He remembered Percy's scars on his skin, and the guilt in his eyes.

The tears on his cheeks as he called himself a monster.

He remembered Percy snapping at him, telling him he hadn't been there, he hadn't seen his doings, so he couldn't tell Percy otherwise.

So he couldn't convince him that he was nothing like a monster.

But Jason was here now.

Jason would help him now.

Jason wouldn't let his boyfriend think of himself as a monster, and he wouldn't let him get hurt.

He flew closer to the vortex.

Then, he was right above it.

Jason glanced back towards the tiny figure that was Nico.

Glanced towards the distant shape of the medic tent, where Will was.

Then, he put all his faith in Percy.

Jason let himself fall.

***

Nico felt his heart missing a beat as he watched Jason drop into the vortex.

He gasped, Jason's name leaving his lips, a hand reaching out uselessly, though he was way too far away.

Everything seemed to slow down, but at the same time, it was over in a heartbeat.

Nico couldn't act in time, couldn't conjure up another shadow portal, couldn't reach his boyfriend
in time.
Instead, Jason disappeared from view, swallowed by the vicious waves.
Nico stared, motionless.
Jason…

A roar made him snap his head around, just in time to pull himself out of his stupor and dive out of the way of Polybotes' trident.

"I will not be beaten by the likes of you!" The giant yelled at him, but Nico had a different opinion on the matter.

With half his mind on Jason and the very real possibility that one of the deaths Nico felt could be his boyfriend's, he turned his back to the storm and faced Polybotes.

His Stygian Iron sword felt heavy in his grip, but he merely raised it higher.

"You're wrong." He replied coldly.
Polybotes sneered at him.

Nico charged.

The giant was bigger than him, and there was no doubt he was much stronger than any human could aspire to be.

But Nico didn't care.

Nico would bring him down.

He had already lost enough.

He wouldn't lose this battle.

And he wouldn't let anybody else get hurt on his watch.

The trident whooshed down, but Nico slipped past it and jumped onto the giant's armor-clad arm.

Polybotes grunted in effort as the trident pierced the ground, and by the time he noticed Nico had evaded the attack, Nico was already on his shoulder and stabbed him in the eye.

"Fuck you!" He yelled, and Polybotes screamed in pain, shaking his head wildly and trying to grab him.

Nico fought for balance, but it was a losing battle, so he abandoned his sword and jumped off the giant, sliding down its armored back and landing clumsily on the ground.

His ankle twisted when he pushed himself up and going, but it wasn't broken, and Nico clenched his teeth and pressed on, away from the giant's stomping feet.

Polybotes was still screaming, searching for Nico on his body with one hand, while the other covered his bleeding and blinded eye.

Nico grunted and wiped the greenish goo off his cheek and neck, knowing it was poison, but hoping it wasn't going to kill him before he brought that giant down.

Something was flung across the Camp, and Nico identified it as his sword.

It got sucked into the vortex.

Great.

No weapon anymore, then.
Nico looked around for an alternative, anything he could use to his advantage, but all the campers around him were engaged in battle and needed their weapons, themselves.

He spotted some bodies on the ground, but was reluctant to go and search them for a weapon.

He knew campers had died.

But he didn't know who, and he wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible.

"You!" Polybotes roared, and Nico's gaze snapped to the giant, just to see Polybotes' working eye staring right at him.

Oh no.

The giant let out a loud battle cry and leaped towards him, and Nico cursed vehemently in Italian. Just his luck.

He evaded the giant's fist, then the trident, then slid between the giant's legs to get behind him.

Nico grabbed one of the broken branches off the ground and flung it upwards, striking Polybotes in the back of his head by sheer luck.

He needed a weapon.

Now.

Nico glanced at the storm, fleetingly hoping to see Jason, but there was no trace of him, nor of Percy.

He was alone.

Nico ran towards the dead bodies to his right.

Polybotes snatched him by the back of his shirt before he could even finish his third step.

Nico thrashed and cursed, but Polybotes merely raised him up to his face, a wide, ugly sneer on his face.

"Got you."

Nico snarled at him, though without a weapon, he was defenseless.

Polybotes let out a small laugh.

His working eye was fixed on Nico, the other one swollen shut and bleeding green and brown goo.

"I came here to slay the son of Poseidon, but he chose to slay himself, instead. I am not happy about this, you see? I was looking forward to letting him die a slow, painful death," Polybotes explained, and Nico snarled at him again, as loudly and viciously as he could.

Percy hadn't slain himself!

He was there, somewhere, in that storm.

He had to be.

Nico thought of Will's ashen face, the way he had kept looking at them as if he wasn't going to get another chance to do so.

He squeezed his eyes shut and let out a loud, angry scream.

No.

Percy was still alive.
Jason was still alive.

They *had* to be!

He hadn't come all this way – *they* hadn't come all this way, just to die now!

They *couldn't*!

It didn't matter whether there was a possibility they wouldn't make it.

Fuck possibilities.

They would make it.

They would make it through this, they would face Tartarus, and they would *beat* him – even if Nico had to shove him back down into his hole, himself!

Polybotes laughed, and Nico's eyes snapped open.

There was a tug in his gut, and he felt the darkness, inside and around him, surrounding him, and the world turned black for a moment.

Then, he was on the ground, free.

Polybotes stopped laughing.

"Do you really think you can beat me? You are nothing. Barely even a meal."

Nico snarled again.

Polybotes' lips tugged into a smirk as he took a step towards him, trident already at the ready to strike again.

"You were Percy Jackson's lover, were you not? Well, then I shall help you join him in the afterlife." He promised darkly.

But Nico wasn't scared.

And Nico wouldn't die. Not at the hands of this monster.

He raised his arms, feeling his powers surge through him.

All around him, the grass died.

The ground cracked open.

The skeletons and spirits rose.

"I am the son of Hades." Nico spoke darkly, eyes fixed on Polybotes, even as he felt himself flickering.

He wouldn't bow.

He wouldn't break.

The shadows were his to command.

Skeletons climbed up Polybotes' legs, keeping him rooted to the spot.

Spirits surrounded him, confusing him when he tried to shake them off.

The darkness spread and thickened around them.

Nico's hands started flickering in and out of view.

"You think this will beat me?" Polybotes called, his face contorted into a furious grimace.
"This is nothing! You need a god to beat me, kid!" He exclaimed, then tore himself free from the skeletons trying to keep him captive.

He rushed forward, and Nico snarled and moved, too.

He was the son of Hades.

He would not fail now.

He would make his father proud.

Nico remembered Kyle, and his hand reached out to the side as he ran towards the giant.

There was a tug in his gut.

Then, there was a sword in his hand.

His sword.

Nico evaded Polybotes' blow and took a leap.

The giant looked up at him.

The hateful expression changed to one of fear.

"Impossible…"

Nico swung his sword.

When he landed on the ground behind the giant, there was a loud thud, followed by an even louder one as Polybotes' scaly knees hit the ground, his body slumping sideways.

Nico gazed at his hands, covered in poison, yet glowing a mixture of yellow and green.

Then, he looked at the severed giant's head that laid next to him.

"Thanks, Persephone." He whispered quietly.

***

Percy faded in and out.

One moment he was floating.

Then he was sinking.

There was a pressure on his chest.

Yet he felt weightless.

There was noise.

A gentle whooshing. The sweet melody of the sea.

The muffled sound of something else, far away, distant, unimportant.

Percy zoned out again.

Then, he was back, floating, sinking, listening to the music.

It promised a forever that was so difficult to resist.

Why was he resisting it?

Percy faded again.
His boyfriends.
Percy opened his eyes.
At least he thought he did.
Everything was blue, was white, was all the colors, all at once, then none at all.
The sea whispered to him.
Percy looked at his hands.
But there were no hands.
Percy closed his eyes.
Percy was fading.
The water was protecting him.
The water was consuming him.
Percy was dying.
He opened his eyes again, fading in and out of consciousness, in and out of being.
The colors of the ocean.
The reflection of the distant sun.
Shadows dancing just outside his reach.
Percy closed his eyes once more.
Did he even have eyes?
Was he even there anymore, at all?
Maybe he wasn't.
Maybe he was just a memory of the sea.
Percy faded, becoming one with the water.
Then he separated again.
Like a seashell at the beach.
Percy gazed up at the distant sun.

*Noise.*
The water around him struggled.
Percy struggled along.

*Movement.*
The water fought, thrashing and snarling.
The melody disappeared.
The water hissed.

'*Jason,*' it warned.
Percy felt a glimmer of hope.
The water struggled, and Percy did, too.
But for different reasons.
The water wanted to force Jason out.
Percy wanted to welcome him in.
Neither won.
Percy couldn't see Jason.
But he could sense him.
Somewhere, neither close nor far.
'Don't hurt him,' he whispered to the water.
It ignored him.
Percy pushed, feeling a momentary surge of power as his consciousness manifested.
He couldn't let Jason get hurt.
The water reacted immediately, forcing him back down.
Percy felt himself retreating, receding, fading.
The water kept pushing.
The gentle whooshing turned into an angry screeching.
Malice, greed and wrath surrounded him.
All accumulated by the remains of monsters and humans alike.
Percy couldn't take the intensity of those emotions.
Partly because they seemed so foreign to him.
Partly because he dreaded to find himself in those emotions, too.
Percy was fading.
Percy closed his eyes.
The water drowned him in its misery.
Percy was going to die.
Or maybe he was already dead.
Percy faded.
'Jason,' he whispered.
But he had no voice.

* Hands touched his cheeks, and Percy felt himself coming back, fading back into existence.

It occurred to him that he didn't have cheeks.
Yet he could feel hands.
Percy opened his eyes.

Jason.

How had Jason found him?

Percy didn't know.

Percy didn't know anything.

A thumb stroked over his cheek, and Percy leaned into the touch.

But how could he do so?

Percy didn't know.

Jason's concerned expression softened, his lips tugging into a small smile.

He looked glorious, like always.

Full of dirt and grime and dried blood, of course, but glorious, all the same.

Surrounded by air, in these poisonous waters.

Percy closed his eyes, feeling the water struggle against Jason, against him, trying to force him down, and Jason out.

Jason's hands on his cheeks remained.

His body was warm.

His body was close.

The hands moved.

Percy dreaded they would leave him.

Instead, they moved around him, embracing him.

They tugged, and Percy was torn between the water's prison and Jason's warmth.

There was a struggle, both the water and Jason unwilling to give him up.

Percy felt himself slipping under the pressure.

But then, Jason had him.

Jason pulled, and the water screeched, but then caved in, just like Percy had.

Warmth.

It was the first thing he felt.

Endless warmth.

Not just around him, but inside him, too, filling him.

Percy was hit with an abundance of air, sucking in a sharp breath as he was there, entirely there, in Jason's bubble, with Jason.

He looked up at him with wide eyes.

Jason started smiling.

His hands were still on Percy.
"Found you." He whispered softly.

Percy swallowed.

He glanced down, just to see his own hands, trembling but corporeal, littered in old and new scars, but there.

Jason's hands found his, covering them, closing them.
"I'm sorry." Percy choked out weakly.

With the freedom came realization.

He couldn't control his powers.

He had brought chaos to the already chaotic battle they were facing.

He had failed them and himself.

"You're so much like Will; always trying to face your battles on your own." Jason said quietly, and Percy's eyes hushed up to his face.

Jason still gazed at him with the same soft expression, endless affection in his eyes.

How could he look at Percy like that, at a time like this?

Percy didn't understand.

He also didn't understand what Jason was talking about, much less what he expected him to do now.

Percy flung his arms around Jason.

Jason held him.

"I can't do it, Jason." He whispered weakly.

He couldn't control his powers.

His arm hurt.

He couldn't fight.

He was useless, in a time where nobody was allowed to be useless.

"Of course you can, love." Jason soothed him, but Percy shook his head.

"I can't. I can't stop this thing anymore. What if it's gonna go berserk, like last time? What if it's gonna hurt our friends?"

He was scared.

If he couldn't control the storm he had created, then what was there for them to do?

This wasn't even the worst of the battle.

Or at least it wasn't supposed to be.

What if Percy had made it the worst of the battle?

"Hey…" Jason interrupted his onslaught of doubts, and Percy looked up at him, at the still ever-so-soft expression, and the infinite love in his eyes.

"I'm with you; now and forever. I'll help you. It's about time we fight together, don't you think?"

Percy gazed at him, trying to make sense of his words.
Then, it clicked.

He stared at Jason, and Jason looked back.

Then, Percy smiled.

"Okay."

***

Nico was almost in front of the vortex to get his boyfriends out of there – when it practically *burst* apart.

The wind slapped him in the face and shoved him back several feet, cries and yells sounding from all around him.

When Nico lowered his arms from covering his face, he saw Percy and Jason, in the center of the storm – but it seemed like a much different storm now.

Nico watched in amazement how the water and air seemed to mingle, forming a new vortex that seemed ready to lash out, but didn’t.

He focused on his boyfriends, and found them entirely focused on each other, gazes locked and swords crossed.

They were combining their powers.

Nico had never seen that happening before.

Nico was *mesmerized*.

He was about to go and join them, when a movement out of the corners of his eyes caught his attention.

He moved and blocked the harpy’s claws with his sword, recognizing it as one of the old cleaning harpies.

Ah. So that was what had happened to them.

They had joined Kyle and the bad guys.

Nico forced it back, but it merely came swooping down again, too quick for him to attack properly and forcing him into a more defensive position.

This, however, made him vulnerable to other attacks.

As he thought it, there was the thudding sound of something approaching, and Nico cursed under his breath.

He dived out of the way, turning it into a forward roll and trying to keep his sword from skewering himself.

When he was back on his feet and ready to face whatever else was attacking him, the harpy came whooshing down with a maniacal screech.

Then, something else collided with the harpy.

Another harpy, small and red-feathered, and strangely familiar…

"Ella?" Nico heard himself asking, dumbfounded and confused.

The harpy turned its head, coffee-brown eyes twinkling with joy at being recognized.

Nico was about to ask her what she was doing here, how she had gotten here – when the monster from earlier attacked him again, forcing him to focus on the battle at hand, first.
Ella had been at the Roman Camp, and must have fled with the Romans.

So, if she was here, did that mean…

There was the sound of a horn blowing, and Nico slashed through the monster, already turning towards the hill.

There, at the top, perched on Arion, was his sister.

And, right behind her, a whole new army of demigods.

*Help.*

They had come to help.

Nico started grinning, his grip tightening on his sword as he hefted it a little higher, a new rush of adrenaline surging through him.

Alright, they *got* this!

***

Will heard the horn, and inwardly sighed in relief.

That meant the Romans and the Amazons had made it here safely.

Which meant they must have split up with the Hunters just in time for the latter to take out the outpost of enemy demigods in the hillside that would have otherwise come and intervened.

Will sent up a silent prayer in gratitude for the lives saved.

He knew there was still a high chance for many to die, but this was already better than the alternatives.

Will was just focusing back on his healing when he felt a burst of emotion and values, quickly moving closer.

With the realization of who it was, came the realization of what must have happened.

Oh no.

*Alec.*

Will stopped healing and got up hurriedly.

His siblings shot him questioning looks.

Will ignored them in favor of pulling out his scalpel.

The flap opened before Will could reach it.

But nobody was bringing in wounded campers.

Instead, there was Malcolm, holding Austin captive in front of him, syringe at his neck.

"Let him go." Will spat before Malcolm as much as opened his mouth to speak.

There were gasps all around him, his siblings dropping what they were holding, healers and wounded campers alike holding their breaths.

Malcolm sneered at him, the surprise fading from his eyes.

"I don't think so. You see, I've come to finish the job." He told him, and Will flinched when it looked like Malcolm was going to puncture the skin at Austin's neck.

He was holding the needle all wrong.
At this rate, he would do more than enough damage without ever emptying the sedative into Austin's veins.

Will had to do something, and quickly so.

"Then why don't you let go of Austin and we take this somewhere else? Outside, for example."
He suggested, though he knew very well Malcolm wouldn't be foolish enough to go along with it.

Then again, he was foolish enough to show up here.

He was foolish enough to go after him, when they had gone to such great lengths to keep him alive.

Malcolm jerked Austin closer to himself, needle still firmly at his neck.

"Yeah, I don't think so." He growled.

Austin whimpered quietly, keeping his eyes closed as if he could somehow shut out what was happening.

Will tensed.

Alright, time for plan N.

He tried to suppress a small smirk.

Malcolm immediately narrowed his eyes.

"Well, in that case... have it your way." Will conceded placatingly and lifted his arms in a surrendering motion, even making a show of dropping his scalpel.

Malcolm seemed hesitant but intrigued.

Will waited until he was about to speak.

"Nico, now!" Will yelled, even though there was no Nico.

If there had been a Nico, he wouldn't have waited for Will's okay to skin Malcolm alive.

It still worked, anyways.

Malcolm snapped his head around to check behind him, and Will rushed forward.

The son of Athena cursed, realizing his mistake.

He shoved Austin towards Will to hold him off, but Will merely breathed out a small apology and pushed Austin sideways into a bunch of healers and his siblings, who caught him with loud gasps and cries.

Then, he was in front of Malcolm.

His fist collided with his jaw.

"That's for threatening my brother!" He yelled, and Malcolm cursed as they both hit the ground.

Will saw the needle out of the corners of his eyes, still firmly in Malcolm's grip.

He shoved his elbow into Malcolm's arm to make him let go of it.

It went flying out of their reach.

Malcolm scratched at his face and arms, anywhere he could reach, too close to throw good punches, until he managed to roll them over and pin Will to the ground.

Will snarled and shoved the heel of his hand upward into Malcolm's jaw, forcing him back.
Then, he slid further up and wrapped his legs around Malcolm's neck, twisting until Malcolm was forced sideways and back on the ground.

Will had been in this position enough times. He knew how to get out of it now.

Unfortunately, the moment he was back on top of Malcolm, one of his siblings struck him with what felt a lot like a chair.

"Oh shit! I'm so sorry! I wanted to hit him!" He heard somebody exclaim as he struggled to keep his wits about him, his vision blurring as he rapidly blinked.

Malcolm laughed and shoved him off him, taking the upper hand once more.

Obviously, his siblings weren't interfering anymore.

Which was a shame, because Will needed another moment.

Malcolm's punch hurt much less than what Will had come to expect.

It still hurt, though.

As did his back from the impact of the stupid chair.

Malcolm tried to get to his neck, but Will tried his best to prevent it.

When Malcolm tried to punch him again, Will caught his fist and twisted his arm, making him cry out in pain.

"Fuck you!" He yelled, and Will rolled them over again.

They smacked into one of the cupboards, which went toppling over sideways, spilling bandages and other supplies across the floor and shattering some glasses along with it.

Malcolm tried to shove his face into the shards, and Will countered by pulling on Malcolm's hair and tearing the glasses off his nose.

The two grappled again, snarling and cursing and trying to get the upper hand.

Malcolm's glasses ended up beneath him, where they got bent and crushed.

Will pulled them out and flung them across the medic tent when the glass threatened to break his skin.

His siblings were coming closer again, everybody trying to find a way to help.

Will tried to get Malcolm into a position that would let them overpower him – without the risk of Will getting knocked out by a chair.

Unfortunately, Malcolm caught on to what he was doing.

He countered by snatching Will and forcing him around, a shard of glass in his hand and pressing against Will's neck.

Uh-oh.

How had he missed that?

"Stay back!" The son of Athena spat towards the others, who immediately started scurrying back, looking positively terrified.

Malcolm moved, and Will was forced to get up along with him, which was easier said than done.

One of Malcolm's hands was trying to keep Will's hands behind his back.

Will guessed he could break free, but the risk of finding that glass impaled in his neck was too high for his liking.
Especially considering Malcolm's end goal was to kill him.

"I'm going to kill you, " Malcolm whispered into his ear, a promise and a threat.

"And then Kyle will realize how useful I can be to him. How valuable. I'll be indispensable to him."

Will had never heard so much bullshit in his life.

"He doesn't give a damn about you. You're just one more tool in his toolbox of idiots." He snapped back, and the glass pressed against his neck, breaking skin.

Yeah, maybe he shouldn't aggravate Malcolm even further.

"Liar. You're just jealous."

Will snorted out a weak laugh.

"Jealous? Of what? You? Malcolm, I've been struggling to get away from Kyle from the moment he showed his true colors. Why would I ever want to crawl up his ass?"

They made their way towards the tent exit.

Will spotted some of his siblings and healers crying.

The patients stared at him with fear and pain in their eyes that wasn't related to their own injuries.

Malcolm growled, but Will wasn't scared of him.

"The only thing I would like up Kyle's ass is a chainsaw," Will continued unfazed.

Malcolm let out a warning snarl, but Will was done with this bullshit.

"Or how about an acid-filled waterbomb? That would be fun, don't you think?" He pushed, and Malcolm growled, the glass at his neck drawing more blood.

It stung, but Will had felt much worse.

"You shut your mouth!"

"I don't think I will," Will retorted, and when Malcolm hissed and dragged him further towards the exit, Will pulled his hands free.

Malcolm was too surprised to act immediately.

By the time he wrapped his arms around Will's neck, Will was already in the process of heaving Malcolm forward and over his shoulders to send him crashing into the ground.

The glass shard went flying, ignored and forgotten.

Will was on top of Malcolm, trying to hold him down, but Malcolm grabbed hold of one of the healer's bags and struck him with it.

They were back at grappling on the ground, cursing and spitting and snarling as they rolled their way through the medic tent.

People hurried out of their way, and a patient fell off the other side of her bunk when they collided with it harshly.

Another cupboard fell.

When Will hit the ground, he fell into something warm and wet.

The water boiler was next to him, empty and sputtering strangely.
Will frowned, something nagging at the back of his mind, but then Malcolm was at his throat again, and he snarled and bit his hand.

The water boiler suddenly started screeching, signaling it was done boiling water, even though there was no water left in it.

Malcolm jumped, but so did Will, both of them looking sideways in surprise.

Then, Will kicked him between the legs, and Malcolm howled in pain.

Will was just trying to crawl out from beneath the son of Athena, when Malcolm grabbed for the water boiler.

"Say your last goodbye, Solace!"

It was at that moment that Will realized what had bothered him.

Oh no.

"Not that reality..." He whispered.

The water boiler gave a loud, high-pitched screech.

Malcolm halted to frown at it.

Will pulled his arms up to cover his face.

BOOM!

Will flinched and tried to curl up, while Malcolm's scream tore through the tent, followed by the outcries of the healers and patients.

The explosion was loud, hot, and scorched Will's arms and clothing.

However, that wasn't what had him reeling and screaming along.

It was Malcolm's pain.

Will could sense it, could feel it as if it was his own.

Will couldn't bear it.

He pushed, reaching out blindly until his hands found Malcolm's shoulders and shoved him off him, away, the scorching heat leaving with him.

The pain lessened.

Will sucked in a deep breath, then pushed himself to sit up, his ears ringing from the sudden burst of noise.

When he looked towards Malcolm, he wished he hadn't, his eyes already squeezing shut, though the image was still there.

As abruptly as it had started, the pain stopped.

Will swallowed as he knew what it meant.

He looked at the burning remnants of the water boiler, just to notice that the dried herbs and papers that were strewn about everywhere had caught fire.

Which, in turn, helped set the floor of the tent ablaze.

Oh no.

Will forced himself to his feet hurriedly, trying to think, trying to find some water around him, but the entire tent was very flammable, and their last water had been boiling in that water boiler.
"Everyone, out, now!" He ordered, hoping his voice was loud enough to be heard as his ears still rang and his vision swam.

It took him a moment to notice there was already plenty of movement, some trying to salvage their supplies, others trying to rein in the flames.

He called for everybody to leave, again, then heard a loud crash behind him as the side of the tent started caving in and the shelves fell.

Will hurried everybody out, swatting at the flames and pushing his siblings through the exit that tried to come back for more supplies.

He was about to leave after making sure that nobody was left behind – when he stepped on something.

Looking down, he recognized the remnants of Malcolm's glasses.

Will looked back towards the far corner of the room.

But there was only fire and fallen shelves.

"Goodbye," He whispered.

He had always liked Malcolm.

***

Dylan didn't know what to do.

He was clapping his hands agitatedly, and when that made too much noise, he started patting his thighs repeatedly.

He was stuck.

There was no way out of this.

Kyle had set up a makeshift hideout in the old hideout of the enemy demigods and monsters that had found their end here, and now Dylan was stuck here.

He was so close to Camp, yet so far away.

There was no way Kyle was going to let him leave, and no way for Dylan to sneak away.

Not when Kyle was always just within reach.

Dylan glanced over his shoulder, watching Kyle standing a few feet away and looking towards the Camp.

There was a storm raging over there.

Undoubtedly Jason's work – and Percy’s, probably.

Dylan knew they were fighting for their lives over there.

Meanwhile, he sat in old monster remains and patted his thighs because he was inwardly freaking out.

At this rate, Kyle would find out.

Dylan knew that he wanted to use him to get back into Camp at the right moment, to mingle with the campers and strike from within.

Maybe he would even try and make him go after Calypso again – Kyle didn't know that Will had made her renounce her border protection to keep her alive, after all.

Or he would let him fetch Will for him, to finally put an end to the healer.
Dylan shuddered and patted his thighs a little more vigorously. There were too many possibilities. Kyle hadn't yet made up his mind entirely. He seemed to always know what he wanted, except when it came to Will Solace. It was a weakness not easily exploited. But Dylan had a massive weakness. If Kyle found out before then that he was a double agent, a spy, a fake… He glanced towards his bag, safely at his side. Kyle hadn't shown any interest in it so far. But he might. And if he did, then it would all be over for Dylan. He had his crumpled Camp Half-Blood t-shirt in there. Not to mention, his notes from the various classes the Camp offered. On all of them was his name, and, meticulous as he was, his Cabin number and the name of his mother, perfect for Kyle to see and look right through him. Dylan took a deep breath. No, he had to stay calm. If he acted too scared, Kyle would get suspicious. Then again, how was he supposed to act? After last night, he couldn't feel anything but a deep-rooted terror when it came to Kyle. Dylan squeezed his eyes shut as he tensed, wrapping his arms around himself protectively, though it wouldn't protect him. Deep breaths. Everything was going to be okay. Dylan wished he could seek comfort in the presence of his mother. But Eris' presence was long gone from his mind, and he could sense that she was still in critical condition after the battle. "Dylan." Kyle called, and Dylan promptly flinched, though he tried to mask it as surprise, rather than fear, as he jumped up and joined Kyle's side. "Yes, sir?" He asked quietly, not quite certain whether he should look at Kyle or towards the Camp. "It's almost time." Kyle told him quietly, and Dylan suppressed another shudder. He looked towards the Camp. "Time for what, sir?" He probed, though he could already guess most of what was to come. There was only one question left, and Dylan knew he didn't want to know the answer to it. "For something great, little one. You should consider yourself lucky. You will be right there to
"witness a new era of greatness begin." Kyle explained, and Dylan kept his face forcefully blank.

He *hated* it when Kyle called him that.

Also, *lucky?* Seriously?

"An era of greatness? What do you mean, sir?" He asked with faked curiosity.

He didn't want to know.

Knowing wouldn't help him anymore, now.

Knowing wouldn't make him capable of helping the Camp.

His friends.

His home.

"Always so curious." Kyle mused with a small smile, still looking out into the distance, where the storm was raging and the sound of battle carried over.

At least he wasn't getting upset anymore whenever Dylan asked questions.

Dylan watched as a few monsters soared high up in the sky, but the storm snatched them and dragged them back down.

Kyle let out a small chuckle next to him.

Dylan couldn't suppress a small frown.

Wait, shouldn't Kyle be…at least a little upset about seeing the monsters lose against the camp?

For all the things Kyle hadn't caught on to so far, he certainly noticed Dylan's frown.

"All of this," He started, motioning towards the distant camp. "Will be meaningless soon. It doesn't matter which side wins. Tartarus will claim them all in the end."

Dylan felt like the air was punched out of his lungs.

He made a strangled sound, unable to help it.

*T-Tartarus?!*

Kyle's hand found his shoulder, giving him what was probably meant to be a reassuring squeeze.

Dylan suppressed a shudder and the urge to push it off him.

To get this man away from him.

To get as much distance between them as possible.

Instead, he looked up at Kyle with what he hoped was only a fragment of the fear he truly felt.

Kyle was smiling at him.

It was undoubtedly meant to be reassuring.

Yet it looked nothing but dangerous to Dylan.

"There, there. There's no reason to be scared, little one. I know you've undoubtedly heard *many* stories about Tartarus. But I can assure you, he will be…*better* than the Olympians could ever dream to be."

Dylan felt very, very sick.

"H-How do you…how do you know that, s-sir?" He asked carefully, though it wasn't the smartest
thing to ask.
It wasn't what he should have asked.

But his mind was a whirl and he couldn't think and uphold his act at the same time, not right now.

He wanted Kyle's hands off him.

He wanted Kyle far away from him.

But he had to stay put, and he had to keep him entertained, and if they were talking, they were at least not doing anything else.

Kyle's smile widened, and he leaned down.

Dylan's hand slid out of view as he clenched it into a fist, bracing for the kiss.

Contempt and repulsion flooded through him.

But he upheld his act.
He would not die now.
He had come this far, he would see this through.

"Because I've met him. I've been there." Kyle purred, still too close to Dylan's face.

Dylan swallowed, praying mutely for Kyle not to lean in again.

Kyle did, anyways.

Dylan forced himself to hold still and play along.

Finally, Kyle pulled back a little, but he remained much too close for Dylan's liking.

"I was there before, by my mother's request. It gave Tartarus and me the chance to get… acquainted. So, you see, there is no reason for you to be scared. Tartarus comes to claim this world as is his birthright, being the center of it, the base, the fundament the earth depends on. Gaea might have been celebrated as deity of the world, but it is Tartarus who is the core of everything. Tartarus, and Chaos."

Dylan swallowed thickly.

Tartarus and Chaos.

Two names that should not be said lightly.

Two beings that should not be taken lightly.

Two things Dylan didn't want to contemplate right now.

He had to keep up his act.

What would a devoted fool do? Somebody who trusted Kyle with their entire being? Somebody who had nothing left in the world, and nobody to show them the truth and severity of what was going to happen here?

"Okay…" He pressed out – still scared, yet accepting.

Kyle's hand was still on the side of his neck, his breath on his cheeks.

Dylan could both see and feel him studying him intently, as if he was trying to read him.

But Kyle didn't see through his act.

Kyle saw nothing.
Dylan swallowed, and Kyle started smiling again.

"Always putting on such a brave face. Not many would have accepted what I just told you so easily. See? I told you. You're something really special." Kyle purred, but at least he pulled away again, putting some more distance between them.

The hand disappeared from his neck, and even though it hadn't applied any pressure this time, Dylan immediately felt like he could finally breathe again.

It was a short-lived victory.

Kyle was already eyeing him like he was going to devour him at any moment, and Dylan felt nauseous just thinking about what that meant for him.

But no matter what it was, he would pull through it.

He had come this far.

He would make it through this and outsmart Kyle.

Somehow.

"It's almost time." Kyle repeated in a soft, pleased voice.

Dylan looked towards the camp.

His friends.

His home.

Dylan's gut churned with answers to questions he was too scared of asking.

He closed his eyes, wishing he could pray.

But there was nothing that could help them anymore.

Tartarus was rising.

Dylan couldn't sense a way to prevent it.

It was almost time.

***

Will was calling orders, swatting away Austin's hands when his brother tried to touch the burnt skin on his arms again.

It didn't matter.

Will didn't matter.

The campers mattered.

The wounded mattered.

Alec mattered.

Will coaxed them towards the stables, ignoring the confusion and the complaints.

'It's the safest place right now,' he thought he heard himself saying at some point, though he wasn't sure.

His ears were still ringing.

But that didn't matter, either.
Will would be fine.

It was the others he was worried about.

He got them inside the stables, and immediately slumped down next to Alec.

Alec, who was on the ground – unconscious, but alive.

Will thanked the gods that Malcolm had spared his life.

He put his hands to Alec's temple, ignoring the dried and fresh blood as he focused on the curling knot of energy in his gut.

Will felt strange, but he ignored that, too.

The healers around him went to work, cleaning the perimeter and laying down the wounded they had brought.

Will was endlessly grateful that Dylan and Annabeth had decided beforehand to move Clovis out of harm's way, along with a still-weakened but recovering Calypso.

He could only hope they truly were safe in Bunker 9.

Leo had assured him that he had set up some 'precautions', but Will knew there had been some realities in which Calypso had still fallen.

"You can't heal like that. We need to take care of your burns, Will. Just look at yourself! Your arms...your face..." Will heard Austin arguing next to him.

His hearing was almost back to normal now.

Will acted like he couldn't hear him and continued healing Alec, carefully mending the fracture and renewing the skin cells.

Austin put his hand on his shoulder.

Will flinched and shook it off.

"Why won't you let us help you?"

Austin's voice was quiet, hurt, but it was the question itself that threw Will off.

He remembered Nico saying those exact same words, his expression so sad and defeated.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath, focusing back on the job at hand.

"Preserve your powers. There is so much more to come. I'll be fine." He said resolutely, but Austin didn't move from his side.

"What is going to come, Will?" He heard him ask, his voice barely audible.

Will turned his head.

Austin's eyes seemed to bore into him, studying his gaze, his posture, reading the answer Will couldn't give.

"We're going to die, aren't we?" Austin asked, and it sounded shockingly empty, considering the meaning.

It was a terrible thing, hearing this question from his own brother, his own family.

Hearing this question that was so much more like a statement, from the very people Will had sworn to protect.

Will tore his gaze away, letting it sweep through the stables, where all his healers and siblings were hard at work, and new campers were already being brought in.
"We have many great fighters." Will whispered, though it wasn't an answer to Austin's question.

"But they won't be enough." Austin concluded in a dead, defeated voice.

Will kept his gaze averted.

What was he supposed to say to that?

He had already seen all possible realities, and Tartarus had risen in all of them. It was the one thing that seemed unpreventable.

How could they possibly dream of beating Tartarus?

They were just kids.

Kids who had the misfortune to be the offspring of gods who didn't care for them enough to protect them.

He thought of his boyfriends, out there, fighting for their lives, knowing Tartarus was about to rise.

They were still fighting, still going strong. He could feel their joined energies from all the way over here.

"They have to be enough." Will replied at long last.

He had to believe in his boyfriends.

He had done his part. He had told them all he knew, no matter how little that was.

What more was he to do now, other than to heal as many as he could?

"What if they're not?" Austin asked, and Will wanted so badly to reassure him.

But how could he, when he himself wasn't sure whether there was any hope left for them?

He had to trust his boyfriends. He did trust his boyfriends.

Yet he still felt as if he had doomed them.

They had stood up to so many dangers and hardships, had beaten Kronos, the giants, even Gaea.

But all of that seemed so unnaturally simple, like easy feats, compared to the here and now.

How were they supposed to beat Tartarus?

They didn't have Festus this time, and nobody to sacrifice themselves stupidly like Leo had done the last time around.

They didn't have a plan, nor a prophecy.

They only had Will's vision, and a broken camp.

Will looked at Austin, wishing there was something he could say or do to change their fate.

"They'll have to be." He repeated quietly.

Hopefully, they would be.

Otherwise, the world would be lost.

They would be lost.

And Will would lose his siblings, his boyfriends, everything.

Will swallowed thickly and went back to work.
Austin followed.

***

Nico fought like he had never fought before.

His body was always in motion, striking something here, slicing through something there.

He was on auto-pilot, slaughtering monsters and looking out for the people around him.

Sometimes, he fought alone.

Sometimes, he fought alongside others.

Sara was with him first, then there was an Amazon.

Then Dakota, breaking the Roman formation just to prevent some monsters from cornering Nico.

Nico saw the world in a blur, and he was certain he was just a whirl of color to the world, too.

His boyfriends were there, as well.

Percy, occasionally appearing at his side and commanding the storm raging above and around them.

Jason, always appearing at the right moment to steady Nico when he swayed, shooting him those confident, reassuring smiles of his that were Nico's substitute for ambrosia.

He heard calls in the distance.

Voices.

Annabeth.

Some others.

Will.

Nico halted, his sword buried to the hilt in the gut of a monster.

But he couldn't see Will anywhere, and Annabeth was resuming the battle, he could see her yelling orders to the others.

Will was safe, still.

Nico kept fighting.

There was an itch, just under his skin.

A thought in the back of his mind.

Nico snarled and cut through his enemies.

There was an enemy demigod, undoubtedly from one of the outposts the Hunters had attacked and taken down.

Nico didn't give him the chance to plead for mercy.

He could sense it.

Could feel it in the earth beneath his feet as he leaped towards his next enemy.

There was something dark and sinister, lurking beneath them, just out of reach.

But it was getting closer.
Nico could feel it growing stronger.

He also recognized it.

An arrow came whizzing, the sound catching Nico's attention.

But he knew who that arrow belonged to, and already tilted his head to the side to allow it to pass and impale the monster behind him.

Nico nodded towards Liam, then repaid the favor by waving his arm and letting the shadows consume a hellhound that was bounding towards the boy.

There was a rumble in the ground.

Nico felt a surge of power and malice.

_Tartarus_.

Nico felt his skin tingle.

He remembered Will's words.

The ground began cracking at his feet.

Nico swallowed and pressed on, continuing to fight.

He would not bow to his fears, and he would not run from the inevitable.

He would face whatever came their way.

Jason was by his side, then Percy, and Nico knew from their expressions that they felt it, too.

They fought together, in a way they had never done before.

They moved fluidly, much more attuned than Nico would have thought possible.

As if they had never done anything else.

Nico jumped, and Percy ducked.

Jason made a sound, and they reacted.

Percy took out a monster to their left, and Nico took care of the one on the right.

Liam got injured, and Percy was the first by his side, while Nico gave them cover and Jason took out the monster with a low growl.

Their storm was still raging, keeping the skies clean and causing monsters to jump away in fear whenever lightning struck.

The enemy numbers had greatly decreased, while the Camp seemed to still be faring well.

Yet, Nico couldn't feel victorious.

The ground shook again, the tremors more intense than before.

The itch under his skin grew.

The thought in his mind became louder.

Annabeth took Liam from them, and they resumed their battle.

Nico looked at the faces around him.

Looked for the faces he couldn't see anymore.
Nico closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and pressed on.

The darkness was inside and around him, but he was its master, and it obeyed, calling forth skeletons, dragging down monsters, sending enemy demigods to the bottom of the ocean to join the Basilisks.

He was the Ghost King.

And yet, it wasn't enough.

It wasn't enough to prevent campers dying.

It wasn't enough to prevent the ground from breaking open further.

It wasn't enough to prevent Tartarus rising.

It just wasn't enough.

Nico started struggling, trying to command the earth at his feet to remain shut, to not let the evil pass.

The earth wasn't his realm, but it was connected to it.

His control was feeble, but palpable.

Nico knew it wasn't enough.

Nico tried, anyways.

Nico failed.

Jason caught him when the next tremor made him trip and fall.

It was followed by another, and then some more.

For a long, strange moment, the battle ceased as everybody stopped and felt the earth rumbling and cracking beneath them.

Nico couldn't hear anything but his own, shaky breaths as he felt Tartarus' power seeping through the ground and infiltrating his home, tarnishing it.

The battle resumed around him, but Nico felt like time had come to a halt.

There was a small voice, in the back of his head.

"Time's up," Clovis whispered in a sorrowful, empty voice.

Nico turned his head towards his boyfriends.

His wonderful, beautiful boyfriends.

The ground tore open at his feet.

***

The stables shook and groaned, and Will heard the screams and cries around him, but his mind was only registering one thing.

He moved, like on autopilot, towards the stable doors, wide-open and waiting for him.

"Will! Will, what's happening?!" Somebody screamed.

Will didn't answer.

Annabeth stood in front of the stables, looking into the distance with wide eyes and open mouth.
Ash was next to her, the wounded demigod they had been carrying now laying on the floor, both of their expressions filled with terror.

Piper took his hand and squeezed it.

Will watched the ground tearing open, entire chunks falling away, building a hole akin to the one in Will's vision, in the field, the one that had been meant to claim his life.

He saw Nico, right in the middle of it, slipping and falling.

Will's heart missed a beat.

But then, Jason was there to catch him and fly him to safety.

They landed next to the small figure that was Percy, right in front of the growing hole.

A giant tremor shook the campsite, and the small Big House caved in and crumbled, followed by the remains of the forge and the arena.

A low, eerie sound echoed through the dead-quiet camp.

It was a laugh.

A low, cruel laugh.

Will knew that laugh, had heard it before in his vision, when he had died.

A shudder ran down his back, and he took a step back to grab the flailing stable door and keep it still, protectively shielding his siblings from view.

It wouldn't save them.

Nothing would save them.

Something shot out of the hole, and the others jumped and screamed.

A hand.

A giant, black shape that somewhat resembled a hand, with long, spiky fingers that seemed to bleed ink.

It came whooshing down, slamming into the ground, closely followed by a second hand.

Then, the rest of the black, bleeding mass hoisted itself up.

Will felt his stomach plummet as he realized that this was it.

Tartarus showed his ugly head, his eyes glowing, his sneer otherworldly and terrible.

All of Will's visions had led up to this moment.

Nothing they had done had prevented it.

They were on their own.

"Attack." He whispered when nobody else moved, too shocked to act.

Piper squeezed his hand into oblivion.

Annabeth opened and closed her mouth, no sound coming out.

Then, Nico, nothing but a tiny dot in comparison to Tartarus, raised his sword in the air.

"Attack!" He yelled, loud enough to carry over Tartarus' laugh, loud enough to carry over the entire campsite – loud enough to pull everybody out of their stupor.
Will watched his boyfriends surge forward, water, air and shadows striking Tartarus in the chest.

Various battle cries filled the grounds as others chimed in, raising their weapons and running for the rising threat.

Tartarus wasn’t laughing anymore.

The final battle had begun.

***

His guys were fighting.

They were fighting so well.

Will couldn’t stop watching, holding his breath as he stood there, immobilized by his fear, his dread that Tartarus would take them from him.

They were so strong.

Jason was in the air, just a tiny dot of color, too fast for the human eye, but Will could still sense him, sense his movements, his values, his fear for everybody but himself.

Percy was on the ground, his hands outstretched in front of him, the water roaring around him and trying to loosen Tartarus' hold on the edge of the hole, trying to force him back in.

Nico was a blur of motion, sometimes on the ground, sometimes in the air, slicing at Tartarus' other arm and calling forth everything the ground would give him.

He made the ground tear open further to ruin Tartarus' balance, but all the protogenos did was grab hold of more solid ground, the rest crumbling away and only widening the entrance he had made for himself.

He was trying to hoist himself further out of the hole.

Will watched his boyfriends and the other campers struggling to battle the dark mass, but normal weapons seemed to have no real effect.

Even the Hunters had joined in now, firing arrows after arrows, trying to blind Tartarus.

But it seemed futile.

Piper whispered something next to him, and, while Will couldn't catch the words, he still understood the broken tone of her voice.

Will swallowed thickly.

They were going to lose.

It was a realization that shouldn't have been a realization, at all.

It should have been obvious, that this was how it would all come to an end.

His visions had all led up to this, but never past it.

It should have been so obvious.

Yet it still felt like a shock to Will, settling coldly in the pit of his stomach.

Hopelessness.

It came from Piper, even as she kept squeezing his hand.

It came from Annabeth, even as she started yelling orders, bringing awareness to the still-alive monsters that seemed to be thriving, now that Tartarus was there.
It came from Will's siblings, who were huddled behind him, their quiet sobs audible to him even with the sounds of battle around him.

It came from the campers, all across the battlefield.

But not from his boyfriends.

Never his boyfriends.

Will watched Jason land and stumble, Nico and Percy catching him from falling.

They turned towards the rising threat, and there was fear, so much fear.

But also so much defiance, so much will to fight, so much determination to see this through to the bitter end.

Will watched them cross their swords.

A last attempt.

A tear tickled down Will's face.

He watched how strange blobs seemed to fall from Tartarus' chest, neck and arms, realizing weakly that they were monsters.

New monsters.

Monsters that had rebirthed on Tartarus' body, the way they always did upon dying on the surface.

They were going to be outnumbered, soon.

There was a pull in the air, so sudden and harsh it made even Will's body rock forward, the stables behind him groaning dangerously.

The ground started rumbling, and a crackling filled the air.

Water, from the sea and the storm, surging towards his guys.

They were merging their powers.

The children of the Big Three were merging their powers.

Will heard Annabeth gasp, while Piper let go of his hand to claw his arm.

"You think you can beat me?" A voice echoed through the campsite, low, dark, otherworldly.

The words seemed to reverberate inside him, filling him with cruel coldness and yet setting him on fire.

"We will damn well try." Nico's voice carried over.

Always so fierce.

Will watched Tartarus sneer – but then, his boyfriends moved, sending their combined powers into the protogenos.

It forced Tartarus back considerably.

The Camp seemed to hold its breath as everybody dared to hope.

The dark mass shifted and groaned as Tartarus slipped a little, but then, he pushed himself even further up, trying to hoist more of his endless-seeming torso out of the hole.

Annabeth cursed under her breath.

Some demigods wailed miserably.
Others cried.
But they all kept fighting.
Will watched numbly.

_It wasn't enough._

Even as his boyfriends kept attacking, and even though their attacks _worked_, it just…it just wasn't _enough._

They couldn't keep Tartarus down, couldn't keep him from coming back.

Nico tried to close the ground at their feet.

But he had never been very good at patching up any of the cracks he had caused, much less those he hadn't caused.

They were failing.

Will watched as several demigods on pegasi came soaring down, recognizing Sara among them, attacking Tartarus' face repeatedly until monsters flew from it and forced the pegasi to either flee or fall.

Leo flew in with Festus Jr., setting Tartarus' chest ablaze, but it only caused more monsters to fall and join the battle.

His boyfriends still stood together, in their bubble of fused energies, still attacking, still doing their best to force Tartarus down.

"They won't make it." Annabeth whispered, her voice full of shock and disbelief.

Piper had long let go of his arm.

Tartarus lifted one massive, black hand, his intent obvious as his gleaming eyes were fixed on his guys.

On _his_ guys.

He struck, and their united screams tore through the campsite and through Will, as their protective bubble burst to shreds.

Tartarus was forced to pull his hand back, bleeding even more black ink than before, but he was already raising it again, anyways.

His boyfriends were huddled together on the ground, their weapons next to them, their powers separated.

They were unprotected.

Will gritted his teeth.

This couldn't be it.

This couldn't be how it ended.

Will started moving.

Annabeth yelled behind him, her fingers missing his arm by inches.

But he didn't stop, and didn't reply.

His siblings cried out behind him, calling his name, pleading.

Will ran.
Ran, as quickly as his legs would carry him, and his surroundings allowed.

Monsters came whooshing in and out of view, but Will just kept running.

A harpy soared down in front of him, but the storm picked it up and slammed it into the vortex that attacked Tartarus.

A hellhound jumped at him, but the shadows appeared in front of him and let it disappear into nothingness, clearing his path once more.

He jumped over bodies.

Ducked under attacks.

His eyes were only fixed on Tartarus' raised hand, and his guys.

His guys.

His boyfriends, who had pushed themselves back to their feet, swords already crossed above their heads once more.

His boyfriends, who knew what was awaiting them, but who stuck together, and who kept attacking, anyways.

His boyfriends, who were looking at him as he came for them.

His boyfriends, who were reaching out for him, welcoming him in.

Will collided with them, so harshly it should have knocked them backwards, but they caught him, they held him, they pressed their bodies together.

* A last embrace.

Will felt Nico's tears against his neck, felt Percy's trembling hands and Jason's shaky breath.

Felt the despair of the campers.

Felt Tartarus' triumph, his powers so much more intense up close.

Tartarus' hand was almost upon them.

Will thought of many things at that moment.

He thought of cuddles in bed and his boyfriends' drowsy faces, thought of their long and yet short time together, thought of Nico's father and Apollo, thought of his siblings that he couldn't protect.

He thought of visions and dreams and a future they couldn't have.

He thought of Kyle and Dylan and Clovis and death.

He thought of Camp Jupiter and scorched fields.

Will looked at his boyfriends, at their closed eyes and grim expressions as they gave it their all, even as they held him with cold and trembling hands.

He wasn't going to let them *die*.

Not like this. Not now.

Not when he could help it.

Something flared up inside Will, a burning coil of love, fear and determination, the urge to protect outweighing his rationality.

Will moved.
He shifted, not to escape or run away, but to wrap his arms around his boyfriend, pressing them against him.

It hurt, and the angles were all wrong, but there was only the here and now, and Will would rather have this than nothing at all.

He thought of the Fields of Mars, of his boyfriend's worried faces, of his own burning skin.

He had done it once.

He could do it again.

Will closed his eyes, feeling for the tug in the pit of his stomach, the burning sensation spreading through him.

He took it all, everything his body could give him.

Then he forced it out.

***

White.

Everything went white.

Annabeth tried to squint towards Tartarus, towards the guys, towards the light.

Then, the heat came.

A heat wave, scalding hot and deadly, whipped through the campsite, forcing everybody back, and causing monsters to scream in agony as they burned to ashes.

Annabeth felt it passing through her, already trying to shield Piper from the worst – but it didn't harm them.

It just passed through and claimed the life of the empousai behind her that had tried to sneak up on them.

Annabeth didn't understand.

But her eyes were already back on Tartarus.

The protogenos was howling in agony, tearing his hand away and trying to move backwards, out of the way of the blinding light that made it so difficult to see.

Annabeth watched numbly how the guys came back into view, still in front of the gaping hole, still huddled together, still alive.

She saw Will, standing in the middle of the bundle and glowing so bright it hurt, the light radiating from him in waves that burnt all the vegetation around them into oblivion.

A second heatwave struck, but once again passed through Annabeth and Piper without harming them.

Then came a third.

Then, she watched Will move, pushing his way towards Tartarus, and forcing him back.

Tartarus was howling louder now, cursing him, cursing all of them, his arm in front of his face to shield himself from the blinding light, while the other clawed into the earth to keep himself steady.

Annabeth saw an opportunity.

"Everybody, attack his hand!" She yelled, and there was a jolt of movement all around her as demigods were pulled out of their stupor, already running for Tartarus.
She shared a look with Piper, and her girlfriend gave a short nod, before leaving her side.

She knew what she was doing.

Annabeth looked back towards the guys, watching in awe and trepidation how Nico gave a command and Percy and Jason followed.

They went separate paths, each attacking a different part of Tartarus, yet their powers still seemed to be fused.

Tartarus began slipping.

Monster started attacking the demigods more ferociously, and Annabeth saw Sara and Bill rushing to finish them, while Clarisse was moving towards Tartarus with a loud war cry.

She was surrounded by a red, fiery glow.

A god's blessing.

Annabeth spotted some Romans with shields, and yelled towards a half-transformed Frank, who started barking orders immediately.

The next moment, the Romans had their shields ready for Clarisse and her momentum, catapulting her up towards Tartarus' chest.

Percy's water slashed at the protogenos, leaving him open and defenseless against Clarisse's rage.

Her spear stabbed him in the chest, and Tartarus howled in agony, but couldn't swat her away, not with Will still blinding him and the campers attacking his other hand.

She stabbed again, then sliced down his chest to the visible midriff, until Leo and Festus Jr. picked her up mid-air and got her safely to the ground again.

Giant blobs of black ink rained down and smacked into the ground.

Annabeth saw something in them move, and for a moment, she dreaded it would be more monsters – but then, she recognized one of the shapes that was shaking off the goo.

"Bob!" She cried, incredulity and relief in her voice.

The giant turned towards her, still covered in Tartarus' dark fluids, but she thought she could see a smile as he lifted his weapon.

More shapes started shifting, most of them immediately running away from Tartarus and the battle and disappearing into the forest.

But others stayed and joined the fight.

Annabeth spotted Small Bob and Damasen, who were already working on tearing off the many layers of Tartarus' skin on his arm and elbow.

Piper appeared, up in the air on a pegasus Annabeth thought was Reyna's.

She couldn't hear her words, but she knew she was using her charmspeaking ability.

Will was still glowing a vivid yellow, forcing Tartarus back relentlessly, no matter how much the protogenos tried to fight it.

More blobs fell from his chest and moved to join the battle.

Sara was on the pegasus again, attacking from above and forcing him to duck.

There was an abrupt pull in the air, much like earlier, when Percy, Jason and Nico had fused their powers.

Will's light turned impossibly brighter.
The ground started shaking and caving in.
Several people stumbled and fought for balance.
"Get out of my home!" Will's voice echoed through the campsite.
And then, all noise died.
Everything seemed to stop.
Annabeth held her breath and reached out for the stable doors.

WHAM!
Annabeth hit the door as the shockwave struck, the heat more than palpable this time.
Her eyes snapped back up to Tartarus.
It was like a scene in a movie.
His head tilted back, a roar still in the making.
One arm in the air.
The other, detached at the shoulder, falling away.
The light forcing its way through his chest.
The elements forcing him backwards and down.
Damasen and Bob, shoving him away from the edge before Small Bob rushed in to prevent them from falling after him.
Nico, working on closing the hole as Tartarus started falling.
Tartarus' clawed hand, reaching for something to hold onto, or tear down with him.
A pegasus, too slow to get away.

"Piper!"

***
Annabeth's scream tore through the camp, and Nico reacted.
He was moving, still high on adrenaline but low on power, rushing forward, taking the leap – but then, there was Percy, colliding with him harshly and tearing him to the ground.

"No!" They both yelled, but for different reasons.
He tried to escape Percy's hold, but he clutched him too tightly, his entire body shaking like a leaf.
Something rushed past them.
When Nico managed to sit up and look, he saw Bob leaping across the gaping hole and colliding with Tartarus' hand.
He tore it open with a roar, freeing the pegasus and snatching Piper before she could fall to her doom.
Then, he jumped.
Festus Jr. whooshed past, getting them to safety and crashing into solid ground, unable to take the weight.

"Oh man." Leo's exasperated sigh sounded through the campsite.
Nico watched with bated breath until he could see Bob getting up and holding Piper safely in his arms.

Then, all tension left his body and he let himself fall back with a sigh of relief.

His hand found Percy’s hair, and he stroked through it weakly.

"We've made it." He whispered.

They had made it.

They had done it.

It was over.

***

"No!" Kyle exclaimed, disbelief coursing through him as he stared towards the campsite.

He couldn't see Tartarus anymore.

He couldn't sense him.

The despair in the campers had subsided, making way for triumph.

Tartarus had failed!

Impossible.

It was impossible!

Their plan had been perfect!

How could they have failed?!

Kyle's fists clenched at his sides, hatred coursing through him as he came to the only possible conclusion.

"William."

He started moving.

It was time to finish this.

Once and for all.

Kyle summoned his scythe and gripped it tightly.

He felt himself breaking out in a light sweat and swallowed.

Tartarus had fallen to the camp.

To William and his buffoons!

For the first time in years, Kyle felt what seemed a lot like fear.

He swallowed again, then focused on his hatred and anger.

William and his 'boyfriends' had crossed him for the last time.

He would make them pay.

***

Will had his hands on his knees, bent over and panting, watching in amazement and horror how his burnt skin started healing in mismatched patches.
The glow finally vanished, leaving him weak and drained in a way he had never felt before.
Was this how Percy, Nico and Jason felt after using their powers?
Will sucked in deep breaths and motioned to Jason that he was okay.
Jason, who was still by his side, hand on his back, expression as worried as always.
"You're not burning up." He noted, and Will managed a small laugh that burnt his throat.
"I'm not." He confirmed.
Relief washed over Jason, the sensation so much more intense due to the physical contact and Will's hypersensitivity.
Around them, the campers were finishing off the last remaining monsters.
The battle was over.
They had won.
Will slowly let that sink in as he pulled himself upright again, even as his body ached.
They had made it.
Somehow, miraculously, they had made it.
And Will had been a part of it.
He had thought his one big job in this war was to let his guys know.
But he had been wrong.
He had been meant to fight Tartarus.
He had been meant to be by his boyfriends' side.
Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath.
Somehow, it seemed easier to breathe now.
Will glanced at his arms, pleased to see that the calico look was gone, and his skin looked as it should.
Then, he looked up at Jason with a small smirk.
"I'm not gonna do that, like, ever again." He told him, and Jason smiled back at him, reaching out to stroke through his hair like it was the most natural thing to do in the middle of a battlefield.
"Hopefully, you won't have to."
Jason had been so scared for him.
Will had felt it.
Percy and Nico had been scared, too, of course. Especially of Tartarus, and of losing anybody to him.
But Jason had been the one with a groundbreaking fear of not being able to protect Will the one moment it mattered.
It was a fear Will had felt before.
It was a fear he hoped they could work on in time, to give Jason the peace of mind he kept giving everybody else.
He felt a rush of power, followed by great fatigue, and turned to look towards Percy and Nico, huddled together further away, near the remnants of Tartarus' hole.

Nico was trying to close it.

But he didn't have enough energy.

"You should help him." Will suggested, knowing he had no energy to spare right now.

He was pretty sure he couldn't even heal right now.

Jason seemed reluctant to leave.

"You'll be okay?"

Will smiled up at him.

"Stop worrying about me, superman. The battle is over. Go help Nico." He told him, and Jason let out a fake deep sigh, before giving his shoulder a squeeze and leaving to join his other two boyfriends.

Will watched them with a small smile.

_They had won._

It was at that moment, that Will sensed it.

Anger.

Malice.

Hatred.

_Kyle._

Time seemed to slow as Will's eyes hushed to his boyfriends.

To their mingled energies that were so subdued after the battle.

They were in no shape for another battle.

Especially not this one.

Will looked down at his own hands, still trembling from the amount of energy he had used.

Maybe…maybe it was time.

Time to finish what should have been finished months – no, _years_ – ago.

He had already faced Tartarus.

He could face this, too.

Will looked at his guys again.

Then, he turned and snuck away.

***

Dylan was running, as quickly as his feet could carry him.

He had to make it.

He had to make it to Camp before Kyle did.

He had to make it to Will before Kyle did.
He had to.

Dylan crashed through the undergrowth and threw himself to the ground, crawling as fast as he could to get out at the secret pathway into Camp.

Thorns, stones and sharp twigs cut his skin, but he ignored the pain and pressed on, his pulse pounding in his ears.

Nothing mattered except getting to Will Solace in time.

He pulled himself to his feet and started running again, eyes darting towards the hill to check for any dark shape that might be Kyle.

The next moment, he collided harshly with something warm, tearing it to the ground with him.

It was Will Solace.

"Dylan? But…"

"Run! He's coming! He's on his way! He's going to kill you!" Dylan immediately yelled in his face before Will could finish.

Then, he saw the realization wash over Will's features, and Dylan found himself falling silent, knowing that Will knew.

Knew where he had been.

Knew what had happened.

Dylan didn't want him to know.

Dylan didn't want anybody to know.

Dylan didn't want to know, himself.

Will's eyes were full of a pain Dylan knew with every fiber of his body.

"Dylan, you disappoint me." A voice sounded behind them, and Dylan felt his heart dropping to his feet, while Will froze beneath him.

Kyle.

Kyle was here.

*Here.*

Inside the camp.

He must have realized the border protection had been lifted.

He was here.

Dylan swallowed and stared at Will, unable to turn his head, unable to look at Kyle.

He knew.

Kyle finally knew.

Dylan forced himself up to his feet as Kyle came closer.

Everything inside him screamed for him to flee.

But there was no place he could flee to.

He felt the tip of a blade at his back.
He knew, without looking, that it was Kyle's scythe.

"Why, Dylan. It could have been so beautiful." Kyle said, his voice laced with disappointment, but also indifference.

"Leave him alone! He has nothing to do with this." Will spat as he pushed himself to his feet.

Dylan felt Kyle's hand on his arm, pulling him backwards, the scythe moving from his back to around his neck.

"Oh, but he has. Why don't you tell him, Dylan? Tell him who was the one giving me all the necessary information to put my plans into action." Kyle purred.

Dylan swallows.

It made the blade against his neck even more palpable.

There was no way out for him.

Dylan remained silent.

"It's over, Kyle. Tartarus is gone. Your grand plan failed. So, let Dylan go and fuck off." Will said darkly, so much braver than Dylan.

"But maybe Dylan doesn't want to go." Kyle replied sweetly, and Dylan whimpered.

He very much wanted to go.

Will's face darkened.

"I said let. Him. Go." He growled.

Kyle growled, too.

"Or what, William?"

His scythe pressed against Dylan's neck, and Dylan closed his eyes.

This was it.

He was going to die.

Well, at least he could say he had tried his best to be of use to the camp.

His thoughts went to Billy and Fae for a moment, wishing he could have at least said goodbye properly.

Had they even noticed he had been gone? Would they miss him?

Kyle's scythe drew blood.

Will growled menacingly.

Then, there was an explosion of noise around him.

The sound of voices.

A shrill whistle.

A sharp cry.

Dylan's eyes flew open.

A spear flew past his face, so narrowly missing him that he could feel it against his cheek.

It struck Kyle in the shoulder.
He cursed behind him, stumbling backwards with Dylan still clutched tightly in his grip.

Then, the ground broke open and vines shot upwards.

"What…” Kyle managed to ask, before his grip went slack, the plant engulfing him and thus setting Dylan free.

"Dylan!"

Suddenly, there was Fae.

Suddenly, there was Billy.

Suddenly, Fae had him in her arms and pulled, leading him away while Billy rushed past him with a menacing snarl and a glowing spear.

Dylan stumbled along numbly, turning his head to see Billy – short, 13-year old Billy – with his spear held high against the monster that was Kyle.

He struck.

Not Kyle.

Kyle's scythe.

And the damned thing shattered to pieces.

"No!” Kyle roared in anguish, struggling to free himself from the vines that still tried to hold him captive.

There was more yelling, of Will, of Billy, and Fae pulled him along a little more frantically than before.

But Dylan was too busy looking at her, now.

Vines.

Of course.

Fae was a child of a nymph. She had nature powers.

Dylan finally began to comprehend.

"You saved me.” He whispered, though a confirmation was unnecessary.

Fae and Billy had come for him.

Billy came running for them, taking to his other side and helping him away from the devil.

"That's what friends do.” Fae told him.

"You're crazy.” Billy notified him.

Dylan found himself smiling weakly.

They had him.

He was home.

Dylan did two very unmanly things:

First, he let out a choked sob.

Then, he promptly fainted.
Will watched as Kyle tore through the vines with what seemed to be sheer willpower alone.

Of course, he immediately moved to go after the kids.

Will got in his way.

"Stop this, Kyle. They have nothing to do with this, and you know it."

Kyle looked ready to slaughter him on the spot.

Will would like to see him try.

"Get out of my way, William. It will be your turn soon enough."

Yet, he had stopped.

"It's my turn now. It's me you want, Kyle. We both know that." Will said blankly.

He stared into Kyle's furious face – and yet, he wasn't scared.

Maybe he still was, somewhere deep inside.

But, more than that, he just wanted to get all of this over with.

Put an end to all the misery he had put on himself all this time.

Put an end to the misery Kyle had caused.

Kyle sneered at him.

"I can end you anytime I want, William. Now, out of my way. I have some campers to slaughter. The same way they slaughtered my armies."

With that, he pushed past him.

Will evaded his shoulder, unwilling to let their bodies touch.

"Slaughtered your armies? Don't make me laugh." He called after him with a derisive snort.

Kyle looked at him over his shoulder and came to a stop again.

Dylan and the others finally disappeared out of sight.

Will made sure to look Kyle as deeply into his pale-blue eyes as he could as he sneered at him.

His hand moved to his medic pouch, pulling out the empty vial.

"That was all me."

There was silence as they stared at each other.

Kyle's face was so wonderfully incredulous, it was a joy to watch.

Then, it suddenly darkened, and Will remembered why he had been afraid of Kyle for so long.

The man turned towards him, and Will moved into a defensive stance.

"You have become such a pain, William."

Will barked out a small laugh.

"Only to those threatening my loved ones." He shot back.

He knew what was to come.

He was ready.
Reyna had been right.
It was time he faced his fears.
"I will enjoy killing you." Kyle spat menacingly.
Kyle had hurt him for so long.
He was never going to let it happen again.
Kyle charged.
Will was ready.

* 

Kyle swung his fist at him.
Will ducked beneath his arm and out of the way.
Kyle had touched him enough times in the past.
He would never let him touch him again.
The blonde spat something, whirling around with a wild look in his pale eyes, looking like he wanted to skewer Will on the spot.
But he didn't have his scythe anymore.
He was weaponless, just like Will.
And even though this was still the very person Will had dreaded to face for so very long, he wasn't scared now.
Kyle had made him watch his guys die in that fake vision of his.
Kyle had caused all those visions that could have happened for real.
Kyle had played with his fears so much that Will had learned to move past it.
This man could not faze him anymore.
Kyle tried to grab him, but Will moved out of his reach.
He pursued, but Will was faster.
Will had always been faster.
He had just been too afraid to see it.
Kyle snarled at him, but Will didn't react, merely evading him again.
"You can't run forever!"
The next time Kyle attacked, Will moved forward to meet him, dodging his arms and striking Kyle's pressure point just beneath his jaw, under his ear.
*His mastoid process – perfect for causing severe pain.*
He wasn't running.
He was facing Kyle.
Kyle let out a painful yelp before hitting the ground, one hand clasped over his ear.
Will moved out of his reach once more.
Kyle pushed himself to his feet, shooting him a glare that would have made him freeze up mere weeks ago.

Now, he moved into a defensive stance, ready for Kyle's next move.

"You'll regret all of this, William." Kyle swore, and Will raised an eyebrow.

"The only thing I regret is never standing up to you." He replied coldly, and Kyle's eyes narrowed.

For a moment, he thought he could sense a pang of pain from him, but if so, then it was quickly replaced by more anger and hatred.

"You'll never beat me. You may believe you can walk from this victoriously, but I can see how exhausted you already are. Don't think for one second that I will let you live. Not after everything you've done." Kyle spat, but Will wasn't moved.

"Do you mean me single-handedly taking out your army? Or the fact that I helped shove Tartarus back down his rabbit hole?" He retorted, and Kyle let out a low, menacing growl before attacking again.

Will evaded the blow with ease.

Kyle tried to use his body to slam into Will.

But Will slipped away.

"Stop your games!" Kyle snarled, and Will stopped.

He turned towards the man pursuing him, thinking of the many times he had run from him, unable to escape.

Will's fingers struck the pressure point right beneath Kyle's cheekbone, aligned with his nostrils. The maxillary nerve – perfect to take down opponents and cause pain.

Kyle's eyes squeezed shut as he let out another sharp cry and found himself on the ground.

"This has never been a game to me." Will stated.

Kyle howled in agony and tried to grab his leg, but Will was out of reach again in a heartbeat.

There was noise.

Voices calling his name.

Will looked up to see his boyfriends, along with several other campers and Chiron.

They were coming for them.

Kyle looked, too.

Then, he charged at Will.

Will struck the point between nose and upper lip with two fingers, then his temple with his other hand, and Kyle was back on the ground.

This was the man he had feared most of his life.

Blood was seeping from his wound on his shoulder, and his eyes were wild with confusion and what might as well be fear.

*Cut him and he will bleed.*

Reyna had been right all along.
The others were almost with him, but Will held up his hand.
This was his battle to finish.
His, and his alone.
"Stay back." He said loudly.
Not an order, but a request.
Nico was the first to stop, holding out his arms to hold the others back.
Their eyes met.
Will saw and felt his worry, his fear.
But also, his trust.
Kyle tried to pull himself back to his feet.
But now, he was wobbly on his legs, and his usually so smug and composed face was contorted in a permanent grimace.
"You think you can beat me with some fancy pokes?" He asked darkly and swung at him again.
Will ducked under his arm, then caught his other fist in his hand, just to twist it and force Kyle back into the ground, using his own weight against him.
"You're already beaten." He informed him.
Kyle didn't want to hear it.
"You are nothing, William! Everything you were, was because of me!" He spat at him, and Will felt a tingling under his skin, but it was minor and easily ignored.
He had heard these words before.
But they didn't have the same effect anymore.
"Keep telling yourself that. I know better now." Will replied, eyes hushing towards his boyfriends.
Kyle pushed himself up and charged again.
Will remembered all the times he had struck him, had forced him to the ground, had sweet-talked him one moment and punched his face the next.
He evaded Kyle's hands making for his neck.
Then, he clapped his hands to Kyle's ears left and right.
Kyle's eyes snapped wide-open as he staggered, his lips parted even though there was no sound coming out.
Will forced him back by striking his nose.
"Give up, Kyle. It's over." He told him.
He could defend himself.
He could show he wasn't the weak nobody that Kyle had always thought he was.
But he wasn't sure whether he could kill him, the way Kyle wanted to kill him.
"It is never over!" Kyle snarled at him.
All his composure and arrogance were gone now.
He looked crazy, with his wide eyes and bizarre grimace.

Like a man who had been winning for so long, he had forgotten what losing felt like.

Will walked towards him, and Kyle let out a dark, threatening growl.

It was a gesture of defiance and fear.

"I don't want to kill you." Will said quietly, and saw people shifting out of the corners of his eyes, exchanging looks.

Kyle sneered at him, a glimmer of his old self shining through.

"That's why you'll never win!" He spat and surged upwards, trying to grab Will.

But Will didn't let him, slapping his hands away and striking his suprasternal notch.

*The perfect striking point for choking and extreme pain.*

Kyle made a loud choking noise and fell back down, clutching his throat.

Will remembered the many times he had been choked by him.

He wasn't sorry.

"I have already won. I won years ago, when I stepped up to you and said I don't want you anymore." Will told him quietly.

Kyle was still choking, yet he managed to squint up at him through one eye, his anger palpable.

"It was *I* who let you go. You weren't…worth the…trouble." He pressed out as he pushed himself up again weakly.

Will watched him swaying.

The clap to his ears must have been enough to cause a slight concussion.

Will remembered Jason struggling to remain upright after escaping the crashed bus.

Kyle deserved this.

"You're right. I wasn't worth the trouble. I'm worth so much more than what you could possibly give." Will replied, and Kyle let out an inhumane sound of anguish and contempt.

"Is that what those *fools* tell you? Have you fallen that low to believe such empty lies to boost your fragile confidence?!!"

Will met his anger with a blank look of indifference.

"It's what they told me, and what I've realized for myself."

Kyle sneered at him.

His eye and nose were bruising now, undoubtedly from Will's earlier strike to his nose.

Will remembered Jason's bruised face.

Kyle deserved this, too.

"Then you are lying to yourself! I was the *best* thing to happen to you! *We* were the best… you…*you loved me!*"

For a split second, Kyle's voice broke.

Something in Will stirred.
He glanced towards his boyfriends again.

"Love isn't meant to hurt, Kyle. Love isn't meant to make you sick to your stomach and cry yourself to sleep at night. What I felt for you wasn't love. It was dependency and fear. I know love now. I've learned the difference." Will replied, his eyes back on Kyle.

This time, Kyle wasn't meeting his eyes.

"I loved you." He said quietly.

It was…strange.

To hear those words from him, now, after all this time.

In that weak, broken state he had never allowed himself to be seen in.

In that sober, honest tone he had never had before.

Will looked down.

"I know."

Kyle's head whipped up, anger and bitterness giving him enough strength to attack Will again.

He was cursing something, but Will couldn't distinguish the words, and maybe didn't want to hear, either.

Nico made a small sound.

But Will had this.

He didn't even dodge Kyle's hands this time.

Instead, he shifted and poked Kyle's eyes harshly – not enough to blind him, but enough to make him reel back.

Will followed and kicked his legs out from under him, then planted one foot on his chest, right over his wound.

Kyle let out a strangled sound of pain.

"Face it, Kyle. It's over."

Kyle was trying to squint up at him, but his eyes were already swollen, and now threatening to shut completely.

He was a bundle of pain and misery.

Will wondered whether he could have felt pity for him, had the circumstances been different.

But they weren't.

"You will never..." Kyle started venomously.

Will moved his foot up to Kyle's neck, and his words cut off with a choked gasp.

"I will never what? Beat you? You're already beaten."

Kyle grimaced up at him.

"Keep telling yourself that. End the fight, then. Come on, do it."

Will ignored Kyle's weak taunts, though he knew he had to come to a decision.

"I don't want to kill you, but I will do it if you force me to." He replied, applying more pressure to Kyle's throat.
This man had hurt him countless times.
Had hurt his boyfriends.
His friends.
His siblings.
Clovis.

*Dylan.*

He had brought pain and misery everywhere he went, and undoubtedly hurt so many more people that Will would never meet, and would never be able to help.

People who might never heal from what Kyle had done to them, if they were still alive.

Kyle would deserve this.

Kyle *deserved* to die.

Will looked at the man at his feet.

Then, he pulled his foot back.

"It doesn't have to end like this," He said quietly as Kyle's fingers hushed to his throat as he sucked in sharp breaths.

He remembered the conversation with Apollo and looked away.

Will thought of Kyle's physical and verbal abuse, and all the things that had been taken from him because of it.

He thought of his brother, dead because he had stood up for him against Kyle.

He thought of Clovis, rendered to nothing but a mindless body and the scattered remnants of a soul, all because of Kyle.

He thought of Annabeth's scar.

Of Percy's mental health.

Of Dylan and the sacrifice a child should have never had to make.

All because of Kyle.

"I can't forgive you, and I'll probably never forget", he told him. "But I'm willing to make you an offer."

It was more than Kyle deserved.

So much more than anything he deserved.

There was the sound of rustling and movement around him, followed by murmurs and noises of disagreement.

But Will kept his focus on Kyle.

Kyle stared up at him through swollen eyes, his expression inscrutable.

"Go, Kyle. Leave this camp for good and start over somewhere else, somewhere far away. Make a new life for yourself. One without causing pain and suffering everywhere, one without rape and abuse, one without harming innocent people the way you've done up until now. Just...a *good* life," Will told him, the only alternative he could bear to offer him.

It still pained him to offer it, the words tasting bitter on his tongue.
Kyle stared at him.

Then, he tried to sneer.

"You don't have the guts to kill me. See? I knew it. You're still weak."

Will didn't even blink.

"Showing mercy is not a weakness. Putting others down to endorse yourself, is," he replied, and the sneer died on Kyle's face.

"Mercy?"

Will inclined his head a little.

The memory of Kyle above him came to mind, of excruciating pain Will pleading for him to stop, pleading for mercy – and Kyle's voice, sometimes melodic and sweet, sometimes full of anger, demanding his promise to protect his own skin.

A promise on the Styx.

Will blinked the memory away.

"Mercy. I'm willing to show you the mercy you've never shown anybody else. All you have to do, is promise on the Styx, and you can have a new life. You can walk out of this camp, and nobody will stop or harm you. You have my promise on that," Will declared.

He didn't tell Kyle what would happen if he didn't agree to this.

With all the demigods surrounding them, it was obvious Kyle would never be able to make it out alive.

Even if he tried to do his own form of shadow-traveling, they both knew it wouldn't be quick enough to save him.

Kyle was silent, eyes slowly shifting from Will to the people around him.

Chiron and several others were holding their bows at the ready, but kept the arrows pointing towards the ground.

Jason, Percy and Nico were the only ones that didn't have their weapons ready, yet Will felt like they were the most prepared to strike in a heartbeat.

Nico was the only one staring right at Will.

Will kept his eyes on Kyle.

Kyle let his swollen eyes travel over everyone around them, his shoulders falling slightly.

Resignation and dead acceptance radiated from him.

Will looked down.

It appeared he had come to a decision.

"Just promise and get this over with." He said quietly.

A part of him was glad it was over.

Another part of him still thought this was so much more than what Kyle deserved, and he almost regretted offering this way out.

But he would stand true to his word.

"I promise…" Kyle started, voice resigned as he looked at Will as if he was seeing him for the last
time.

Will suppressed a shaky breath.

Their eyes met.

Kyle pushed himself to his feet, staggering and swaying, one hand clutched over his shoulder, the other now hanging uselessly at his side.

"I promise..." He repeated, stronger this time.

Will thought he could sense something, but he couldn't decipher it.

He narrowed his eyes, senses back on high alert to attack if necessary.

Kyle swayed for another moment, silence filling the campsite.

Then, as it always was with Kyle, everything happened at once.

A snap in the air.

The broken scythe in his hand.

Movement and cries all around him.

"I promise to curse you with every fiber of my being!"

Kyle moved towards him with his last energy.

Will flinched, realizing what Kyle was doing.

Not an attack. A suicide move.

Nico moved.

Will wanted to speak, wanted to stop him, already reaching out to keep the broken remnants of his blade from striking him – though he wouldn't be able to stop the curse from setting with Kyle's dying breath.

Unless Will kept him alive – or killed him before he could finish.

"I curse you and your freaks with all the misery my mother can summon. You will never find peace, never find happiness, never feel love! There will only be misery, naught but misery, for the rest of your lives!" Kyle cried, his expression crazy and his movements wild.

Arrows were fired, but they would be too slow.

Percy and Jason acted, but they would be too slow.

But then, there was Nico.

Nico, who had been looking for Will's sign, and who had gotten it.

His foot stomped onto the ground, and before anything else happened, Kyle seemed to stop in midair, words dying on his tongue and eyes bulging in shock.

Will watched, in both amazement and horror, how his greatest fear thrashed and pressed out the last words of his curse as he was taken apart in front of their very eyes, dissolving much like the monsters in Percy's storm had.

He was looking at Will, his expression full of glee and loathing, before it changed to one of shock and disbelief.

Then, he was gone.

Will felt his values fading away, leaving nothing but a memory behind.
Arrows hit the place where Kyle had just been, as well as Clarisse's spear.

Will stared.

Stared at the place where Kyle had just been.

Where Kyle was no more.

Then, he stared down at his hands.

They were glowing in a mixture of yellow and green, reminding him faintly of spring.

His eyes hushed to his boyfriends.

They, too, were glowing.

A memory resurfaced, as strange and otherworldly as he remembered that moment being.

Words, spoken with a meaning transcending his understanding at the time.

A fall in power, a struggle he couldn't comprehend.

*May you be safe from Misery.*

Misery. Not misery.

Persephone had known.

She had known all this time.

And she had protected them.

There was an explosion of noise around him, of cheers, of chatter, of jubilations and cries of love and relief.

Will was pulled from his stupor.

His feet started moving, immediately stumbling towards his guys.

They met him halfway.

They had him.

He had them.

They had won.

It was over.

They hit the ground, curled together and clutching each other so tightly it hurt, before their teammates came running to join the hug, followed by Will's siblings and their friends.

*They had won.*

***

Nico was standing at the beach, waiting.

It had been two days since the big battle.

Two very long, sleepless days, filled with collecting the dead, tending to the wounded, cleaning up and salvaging what could be salvaged.

Not to mention, the burials.

Percy had helped him greatly, but it had still been tormenting, to know so many had fallen.
Nico heard the sound of footsteps behind him and turned his head.

It seemed Will had finally found him.

His boyfriend had been busy the past days, patching up campers in the dining pavilion and avoiding Nico as sneakily as possible.

Nico knew.

He knew why, too.

With the battles and the impending end of the world, they…hadn't exactly had a chance to talk. Not about the one thing that still gnawed at Nico, and that was visibly eating Will alive, as well.

Nico watched him approach cautiously, and turned his head away again.

He wasn't sure he could bear this conversation right now.

But he also knew it had to be done.

Nico waited until Will was standing by his side before looking towards him again.

"Hey," he greeted him, surprised by how soft and quiet his voice was.

Will didn't meet his eyes, but his anxiety was visible on his face and his nervously moving hands.

"I was looking for you," he said quietly.

Nico knew.

"I was waiting for you," he replied.

He turned his face towards the sea again, waiting for Will to speak.

Silence fell over them as they stood there.

"I…I wanted to say I'm sorry," Will whispered, his voice weak and trembling.

Nico watched the waves come and go.

Now that everything had calmed down, it all seemed so…surreal.

And yet, it felt realer than ever before.

The Underworld as they knew it was gone.

Hades – his father – was gone.

Nico closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Then, his hand reached out to take Will's.

His boyfriend was trembling, his hand colder than usual.

Will should have talked to him. To them.

Will shouldn't have tried to face all his battles by himself.

Will had promised, but he hadn't kept his promises.

Nico should be angry with him.

But Nico wasn't angry.

Nico was just glad it was over.
He was just glad they could finally breathe again.

It hurt, to think of his father.

It hurt, to lose another part of his family.

But the thought of what else he could have lost hurt even more.

Will started sniffling next to him, his free hand hushing up to his face to wipe at his tears.

Nico found himself shifting closer.

He could never bear to see his boyfriends cry.

"I have taken so much from you."

Nico thought of the camp.

Of his friends.

His boyfriends.

His family he had made for himself here.

They were alive, and they would be okay.

Now, they had a chance to be okay.

Nico smiled, his fingers brushing through Will's hair gently as he wept.

"But you've given me so much, too."

Will pulled back to look at him, with his bright blue eyes wide and wet, his lips already parted as if to argue.

But then, his shoulders fell, and he smiled, instead.

It was a shaky, weak smile, but it was a smile, nonetheless.

Nico moved to hold his boyfriend, and Will very hesitantly moved his arms around him, too.

Nico held Will tighter, breathing in his summery scent that went so well with their summery surroundings.

A thought crossed his mind, and he grinned to himself as he pulled back.

"Want to do something really cheesy that only happens in movies?" He asked his boyfriend – his beautiful, stupid boyfriend, who would still be his boyfriend until Tartarus froze over.

Will looked at him with mild confusion, the tears still drying on his face.

Nico wiped them away, his grin still in place.

Now, Will looked wary, but also intrigued.

Then, his lips split into that rather sheepish, adorable smile Nico had only ever caught glimpses of before.

Nico took that as a yes.

The next moment, he tugged on Will and dipped him, luring a surprised sound out of his boyfriend, followed by a disbelieving laugh.

Nico grinned at him and wiggled his eyebrows.

Then, he kissed him.
Behind them, somewhere further towards the camp, he could hear Percy and Jason whooping.

They would be okay.

For real, this time.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Check out the FanArt for this series!!

Here's the link:
http://mel-chan366.tumblr.com/fanfic-fanart

Enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A/N: Hey Cupcakes!

And! We're finally here! To be honest, I never thought I'd see the day this series comes to an end. (Probably because a part of me never wanted to end it...)

I have SO much I wanna say, but no words to express how grateful I am to all of you for your continuous support and kind words. This story and you have taught me A LOT, and I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I did a little drawing a few months back of the guys, as a sort of small thanks. Maybe you'd like to look at it, maybe you don't. It will be on my Tumblr, and (hopefully) also at the end of this epilogue.

Again, thank you SO MUCH for everything! Your kind words meant the world to me (and still do), and while I'm sad to let the series go, I also accept that it's time to do so. (Though I might still do those one-shots...writing my book series will undoubtedly have its ups and downs...so...I'm sure there will be enough times I'll be able to write some short tidbits of their later life...)

Now, before I start getting too sappy, time for the epilogue! I hope it meets everybody's hopes and expectations, and ties up most of the loose strings.

In case anybody wants to know something else that hasn't been addressed here or that still feels open, just write me a comment and I'll try reply to the best of my abilities ;3

Enjoy the last chapter!
-Tári

Epilogue

"So, you see, that's how Medusa came to be. Anyways, anybody up for some homework? No? Yeah, me neither." Percy wrapped up his class, his few students shooting him wry grins as he gave them the okay to leave.

Who would have thought Percy would one day teach history classes instead of sword fighting?

Moreover, who would have thought Percy would enjoy it? Percy smiled to himself as he waved after them, then he checked the time.

Just enough to drop by the infirmary and visit his boyfriend.

Pleased with that plan, Percy packed his things, erased the wild drawings and chaotic handwriting on the blackboard, and checked whether anybody had left anything behind, before locking up and moving down the front steps of the tiny Big House.

Today was a good day.
Percy took a deep breath as he made his way across the bright and beautiful campsite.

It had been less than a month since the final battle, but looking at the blooming flowers, green grass and blue sky, it seemed forever ago.

Percy whistled a happy tune as he got closer to the newly built infirmary.

After lots of discussions, they had made an entire separate building, much like a small hospital, so it could expand quicker if necessary, and accommodate more demigods.

It was also fire-proof, or so Leo claimed.

Percy thought it looked pretty cool, and it definitely had a lot more space to comfortably work alongside each other.

He knew, since he was still helping out occasionally.

But now that he was giving history lessons, he had to admit he liked those even more than the work in the infirmary.

Teaching felt…surprisingly pleasant.

Though he guessed he shouldn't be too surprised, considering he had liked giving sword fighting lessons before, too.

History lessons were a lot more fun though, especially when he could tell the kids about the monsters or gods in question with some first-hand experience.

Their expressions of utmost horror and disbelief were his favorite part.

Percy grinned and let himself in through the staff entrance, knowing Will was having the talk today.

There was no way he wanted to barge in at the worst moment.

The talk.

Percy sighed and moved down the narrow hallway to the changing rooms, though he didn't stop at his locker, instead moving through the room and towards the ajar door.

When he poked his head out, he saw Will in the main room, surrounded by his healers and siblings.

Ah.

Good thing Percy hadn't used the main entrance.

"As you know, I have stepped back as head medic after breaking my vows a few weeks back. This was met with a lot of disagreement and complaints," Will said loudly, and the others immediately started muttering and shifting, looking anything but happy.

Percy leaned against the doorway, watching quietly.

Will held up his hands to quieten everybody down.

"I have given your arguments a lot of thought, as you know. I stayed and helped the rebuilding of the infirmary, worked on a new filing system, and have been leading you to the best of my abilities," he told them, eyes finding Percy's for a moment, before hushing away to look at Austin.

"However, my final decision remains the same. I have not been a very good head medic, much less a fitting head counselor. Which is why I am now officially stepping back as both."

There was the sound of complaints, but Percy was relieved to see that nobody started yelling or crying, like last time.
For the most part, they looked as if they had expected as much, though it still seemed to hit them hard.

Will gestured towards Austin, who stepped forward.

He didn't look too happy, but Percy knew the two had talked about this the past days.

If Will said Austin was ready and willing to take this job and responsibility, he believed him.

"Austin will become the new head medic, as well as head counselor of the Apollo cabin. It wouldn't be right of me to keep either title, especially with everything that has happened. I hope you understand, and that you give Austin the same respect and blind eye towards mistakes that you've given me," he explained, patting Austin's shoulder.

"He's very reliable, he can read Alec's terrible handwriting, and he actually sleeps in the Apollo cabin! Those are only three of the many advantages he has on me, but I'm sure those are the most convincing to all of you."

Percy couldn't help but smile, while the others laughed.

A few were crying now, but they were also smiling, so it was okay.

"Of course, I'll still be around to help, and I'm always willing to listen if there's anything you need to get off your chest," Will told them, and his expression softened.

"Not gonna lie, I'll miss this, though."

Percy smiled and watched the first people break and move forward to hug his boyfriend, which had everybody else following right after.

They had talked about this quite often the past few days.

Percy knew how much it hurt Will to let this go and step away, but he had also been adamant about going through with it.

If he thought this was the best thing for him and them, then Percy wasn't going to argue.

Instead, he stepped out of the doorway and moved to heroically save his boyfriend from the love of his siblings and friends.

He failed, of course.

But he did get a kiss from his boyfriend for trying, so Percy was pleased, anyways.

***

Reyna let Leo help her into her new wheelchair.

"And you're sure it's not going to blow up like the last one?" She asked warily, not very reassured when Leo made a series of vague noises instead of replying.

Needless to say, she still sat down in the thing and immediately tried out the wheels at the side to move.

As much as she enjoyed her stay at Camp Half-Blood, she was looking forward to rejoining her legions.

For that though, she had to be in a better fighting condition.

She needed speed, strength, and the ability to protect and defend herself.

Leo had claimed he could help her with all of that, so she had put her faith in him.

So far, he had failed her twice.

The Latino pressed a button at the side of her arm rest, and a panel slid back, exposing a sort of
control panel.

"That's to make moving quicker. Jason said you used to participate in Mario Kart races against him and a few others, so I mimicked the controller layout. The little wheel is to move, and those buttons are for various other things, like shooting lasers, bursts of speed, skates, or taking off." Leo explained, pointing at the various keys.

Reyna narrowed her eyes.

"Taking off? Don't tell me this thing can hover over the ground."

Leo looked offended.

"Obviously not! That would be way too boring. No, this beauty here – I call it the Leochair of Luxury 3.2 – can fly. Try it."

Reyna raised an eyebrow, thinking of all the things that could go wrong.

She still pressed the button, anyways.

Her wheelchair made a churring sound, then, surely enough, there was a push beneath her, and she found herself rising into the air.

The control panel disappeared, replaced by a stick controller.

She tried it tentatively, pushing it forward.

The wheelchair gave a little jolt and moved.

Fascinating.

Leo beamed, looking like a proud parent.

"Awesome, isn't it? Now, if you wanna land, just steer towards the ground and then use the green button." He explained, and she followed his orders carefully.

She half-expected to crash, or the wheelchair to tip over, but it seemed to have a balancing function, assuring her safety.

It also set down on the ground rather smoothly.

The control panel reappeared.

"Once you've activated the wheelchair, the control panel will always open automatically, unless a different controlling device is in use. You also have the option to drive over ice, snow, and water, but I wouldn't recommend going underwater with it just yet. Still haven't entirely worked out how to include proper air supply."

Reyna nodded with a frown, wondering vaguely why she would possibly want to go underwater, in the first place.

Leo pointed towards some other buttons on her control panel, explaining their functions.

She would have to practice with those a lot, to remember everything they did.

Her favorite was the little force field that activated when the auto-detecting system detected a physical attack.

Mostly because once she pressed the activation button, the system filed Leo as a threat and created a force field strong enough to catapult him back a good ten feet.

She was beginning to like this wheelchair.

Leo waited until she deactivated the auto-detecting system again before coming back closer, muttering something about necessary system updates under his breath.
Reyna smiled to herself.

Then, she noticed two buttons at the side of her other arm rest.

"What are these for?" She asked, apprehensive of pressing anything without first knowing what was supposed to happen.

"The first one, closer to you, is to open up the same control panel as on the other side. Just in case there's a problem, or you can't use that hand at the time. The second one is for some little fun extras I included." He explained, already grinning again and rubbing his hands together like a mad scientist.

'Some little fun extras' turned out to be variously sized cupholders, a heating option for coffee cups or soup cans, an umbrella for shade or rain, voice recognition, a drill that manifested the wheelchair's hold on the ground, a mechanism that pushed water bottles out from a stashing place beneath her seat and right into her palm, and a quick and easy way to create a rainbow in case she needed to Iris Message anybody.

In other words: She owed Leo an apology, and her thanks.

"This will be very helpful. Thank you, Leo." She said quietly.

She knew Leo had been bummed out when Frank had told him he didn't need a prosthetic, not even one made by Leo with all his funky extras.

It was mostly due to the look of utmost disappointment on Leo's face that Reyna had even mentioned her problems and unhappiness with her old wheelchair.

After the first two fails, she had thought she'd regret her stroke of pity.

Now, she was glad she had brought it up.

Leo paused in his rambling to look at her.

Then, he smiled.

"It's the least I could do. Thalia told me it was you who saw the last two demigods and who ordered her to go after them. Seeing as they were on their way to Bunker 9, you indirectly saved the love of my life from certain death. So, just see this as my way of saying thanks."

Reyna didn't know what to reply to that.

Due to her current condition, she had been unable to truly participate in the battle as a praetor should have, but she had done everything in her abilities to help in other ways.

But it had been mere luck that she had spotted the two demigods sneaking away, and Thalia had been the one to bring them down, so she wasn't sure she deserved Leo's gratitude.

The Latino didn't give her a chance to argue though, already waving exaggeratedly and rambling about all the different extra things he had in mind in case she wanted some 'upgrades'.

Reyna was tempted to point out that she was going to recover eventually – but then, she let him ramble.

Her medics didn't yet know how long it would take for her to walk again.

For all she knew, she might be wheelchair-bound for the next some months.

She knew Will still wanted to offer his help, which was precisely why she had been avoiding him.

Reyna had seen the energy he had unleashed, and she knew from overheard mutterings that he was still in the process of replenishing said energies, making his healing a lot slower and a lot more straining on him.

She didn't want to add to that.
Maybe one day in the future, but not now.

Plus, now she had a super cool wheelchair that could probably do more damage than what she had been able to do on a good day.

In other words, she was okay.

"Did you and Jason finish the surprise yet?" She asked when Leo started making laser gun noises, and the Latino immediately started grinning his widest grin yet.

"You bet we did! Percy is gonna be totally swept away!"

Reyna raised an eyebrow.

"That's the best you can come up with?"

"What, would you prefer…shell-shocked?" He countered with a wry grin and wiggling eyebrows.

"Your puns seem a little…dry." She noted unimpressed, and Leo put his hands over his heart.

"Oh no, she has a fishue with my puns!"

Reyna could do better than that.

"Well, at least I think we can both agree he'll totally be on-board."

Leo opened his mouth to counter – then, he snapped it shut again, the gears turning in his head.

"How did I not think of that one?" He asked blankly, and she grinned back at him.

"Water you talking about?" She teased, and he groaned.

"Not that one! That's the most classic, most basic one there is! Stop doing this to my soul!"

"Sea you at the party, Leo." She told him with a wink, and the Latino groaned even louder, covering his ears with his hands and turning away from her.

"Note to self: No puns around the praetors! They're both terrible!" She heard him lamenting as she played around with the controller a little.

Oh, he had tried to out-pun Frank? She'd have loved to see that.

Reyna made her wheelchair turn and roll away, all by simply moving the little wheel with her thumb.

Truly fascinating.

She looked around herself, wondering where to go to test out all those things she was itching to try out.

Her eyes settled on the new archery range that had nearly gotten her killed twice already when she had needed to pass through it.

That.

She was gonna blow that up.

Reyna wondered vaguely whether being away from her legion and all the responsibility made her a little more reckless and a lot more immature.

She decided not to answer that.

Instead, she made her wheelchair drive forward with a wicked grin.

Time to test those lasers.
"Did…did you just hear that, too?" Hannah asked, looking around in mild confusion.

Ash had been trying to put their arm around her for the past five minutes, but now, all seemed ruined again.

Damn it.

"Uh, no, what?" They mumbled distractedly, trying to quickly move their arm back to their side.

"That sounded like an explosion. Should we…go check it out?" Hannah asked doubtfully, and Ash deflated a little.

Oh no.

Their date was going so terribly that Hannah wanted to leave.

"Do you…want to?" They asked miserably, and Hannah turned her head around with a quizzical look, her pretty strawberry blonde hair just…so pretty.

Why was Hannah so pretty?

Why was Ash so bad at dates?

They should have gone to Percy for date advice.

Why hadn't they gone to Percy for date advice?

Why had Ash been so stubborn and decided to do all the planning by themselves?

Hannah studied their gaze, and Ash tried their hardest to smile, to not look quite as miserable about messing up their one chance to have a date with the lady of their dreams.

They were pretty sure they were grimacing.

Hannah glanced into the distance once more, her foot tapping on the ground.

"Nah. If anything happened, there's tons of demigods much closer. No point in us going all the way over there." She decided and reached for Ash's hand to thread their fingers together with a shy smile.

Ash felt ready to combust on the spot, the heat rising in their face as their heart and soul soared and threatened to escape their body.

"Didn't you want to impress me with your lockpicking skills by opening the boathouse? To steal a boat even though there's plenty of them at the dock already?" Hannah teased with mirth playing in her eyes, and Ash was torn between the urge to sigh wistfully and counter back.

They were at the freshly cleaned lake, since Ash had every intention of going all out with the romance – which of course included rowing around on the lake like all the other lovesick fools did here at camp.

Nico himself had once mentioned that was something he would do with his boyfriends as a nice, quiet date.

If Nico did that, then it had to be a good idea.

Unfortunately, Ash didn't like any of the boats at the dock, so they simply had to break into the boathouse. That was simply how it was.

Also, they would lie if they hadn't wanted to impress Hannah the tiniest bit with their abilities.

But they hadn't meant for Hannah to know that!

"Is it so wrong to want the best of the best for the best?" They countered at long last with as much
certainty they could muster, and Hannah's smile turned sheepish again, her tanned skin flushing pink.

Oh gods, she was **blushing**.

Ash suppressed another wistful sigh.

Hannah was going to be the death of them.

"Well, it's still stealing." Hannah mumbled quietly, though she didn't seem upset and didn't stop Ash when they took her hand a little firmer and led her towards the boathouse.

"Borrowing." Ash corrected stubbornly, and Hannah let out a small laugh.

"Fine, borrowing."

"Unless it's a very nice boat." Ash mused, and Hannah snorted and gave their shoulder a light shove with her free hand.

Ash shot her a wry grin and tried the knob, though they knew the door was locked.

"Alright, ready for the magic?" They asked, pitying the fact that they would need both hands for this – which meant it was necessary to let go of Hannah's soft and warm hand and untangling their fingers.

Hannah raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Ash winked at her with a confident grin, then turned their attention to the lock in front of them, ready for picking.

It was an easy enough lock to pick, and probably wouldn't have taken more than a few seconds – but with Hannah watching, Ash tried to do a bit of a show, fiddling with their pin, winking some more, playing with the lock and acting fake-surprised when it came off without issues.

"**Tadaa!**"

Hannah shook her head and clapped a few times.

"You know that the key is under the doormat, right?"

"Hush, this is **much** more impressive."

"Consider me very impressed." Hannah told them wryly, and Ash beamed as they pushed open the door.

They knew nobody would question why they were in here, but the two of them still acted like they had to sneak around on tiptoes, always glancing over their shoulders and towards the door just in case anybody might find them.

Ash loved it.

Hannah was such a great partner-in-crime.

Hopefully, she was having a good time so far, too.

"How about this one?" Hannah asked, stopping in front of one of the small boats, and Ash made a show of inspecting it from all sides, accompanied by thoughtful noises.

"If this is what the princess desires…" They started, and Hannah pinched their side.

"Hey, I told you not to call me that."

"Aww, fine." Ash agreed easily, though they were certain they would slip up again eventually.

What could they say, Hannah simply reminded them of a princess.
Pretty and fierce and ready to slay dragons.

They managed to get the boat to the water without problems, and Ash insisted on doing the rowing by themselves, though their arms were already complaining at the mere thought, and complained even louder when they started rowing for real.

However, this was a date, and it was Ash's duty to make Hannah as comfortable as possible – which included not letting her work in Ash's place.

Hannah watched them with a calculating look, before smirking and crossing her arms in front of her chest.

Ash kept on rowing, ignoring the loud wailing in their head and the intense strain in their arms.

They were pretty sure there was sweat running down their temples, which had to look disgusting.

"You know I could help, right?" Hannah teased as she leaned forward a little, and Ash got distracted momentarily by the cleavage that cruel blue blouse of hers pronounced.

Where did Hannah even get that from? Ash had never seen her wear it.

She looked so pretty in blue.

Ash loved blue.

Ash swallowed and looked away stubbornly.

"Nope, not happening. I can do this."

"Your arms are like twigs." Hannah noted, and even though it was the truth, Ash felt wounded in their pride.

They rowed with even more effort, though they also had to admit grudgingly that they were making less and less progress.

"My arms are fine." They insisted stubbornly, and Hannah raised an amused eyebrow.

"You're sweating, out of breath, and we're at near stand-still."

What a harsh, cruel girl.

Ash expected nothing less from a daughter of Ares, but still!

They continued rowing with a pout, though it was undeniable that their arms weren't going to hold out much longer.

Freaking twigs.

Ash should have taken up Andrew’s advice and started working out when they had the chance.

Hannah’s hand touched their thigh, and Ash nearly lost their grip on one of the paddles.

"It's really no big deal, Ash. I'm a grown girl, there's no need to pamper me."

Hannah’s voice was…surprisingly soft, given her usual attitude.

Ash opened and closed their mouth, then moved a hand through their hair aggressively to get rid of the awkwardness and the growing heat on their face.

Needless to say, they dropped the paddle in the process.

Hannah caught it just in time before it abandoned the boat and got them stranded in the middle of the lake.
Ash felt completely out of their comfort zone, unable to as much as apologize as Hannah took over and made them switch places.

When she started rowing, her movements were strong and fluid and wonderful, and all the things Ash's rowing had not been.

They moved their hands through their hair again, noticing with growing dread just how sweaty they were, how sweaty their palms were, how terribly their date was going, Hannah wasn't going to as much as look at them anymore when all this was over—

"I'm sorry." They blurted out, awkward and out-of-breath, fitting their inner state.

Hannah sent them a puzzled look.

"What?"

"You're right. You don't need pampering. I...I didn't mean to belittle you or anything. I just...you're always so tough and cool, I wanted to...to...show you I can be tough and cool, too, I guess? But I'm messing up, I already messed up, I know jack-shit about dates, much less about how to woo your crush, and this is just...this is just nothing like how I hoped it would go, but you're still there, so..." They started rambling, looking anywhere but at Hannah.

"Then again, I suppose there's no way for you to leave, unless you take a swim – by the gods, I didn't even think of that. I should have just taken you to the city for ice cream and a movie, or gone to Percy for better ideas, or—..."

It took a moment for Ash to realize that Hannah had stopped rowing.

It took another moment for them to realize that they had stopped talking because Hannah's finger was on their lips.

Ash blinked at her, the heat rising in their face all over again.

Hannah smiled.

Then, she leaned forward.

Her lips felt unexpectedly soft against Ash's.

"As cute as you are when you're rambling, you gotta stop worrying so much," Hannah said quietly as she pulled back a little.

Ash felt like the world didn't hold enough oxygen for their lungs anymore.

"Also, I have no idea what you're talking about. I think this is going great. For a first date, that is." Hannah continued with a light blush on her cheeks as she looked off to the side, and Ash was swallowing again, opening and closing their mouth as they started shifting.

"Ah...you...you do? Wait, first? So...you'd like to...uh..."

"Go on another one?" Hannah asked before they could, and Ash could only nod dumbly.

Hannah started nibbling on her bottom lip, looking like she was trying to suppress a sheepish smile.

Instead, she tried to act smug.

"Depends. Will you be wearing the Camp shirt to that date, too?" She asked, and Ash looked down at themselves, cursing their very existence.

"I don't have anything else!" They cried, indignant and crestfallen.

Hannah merely laughed.

"Then I know where I'm taking you for our second date."
Ash looked up, not even trying to mask their hope and excitement.

Hannah's eyes were sparkling.

Ash let their eyes roam over her face, a slow smile spreading on their lips.

"Alright."

They grinned at each other, then Hannah started rowing again, moving their boat further towards the middle of the lake.

A peaceful silence settled over them, and Ash was looking down the side of the boat into the water, when something occurred to them.

"Wait, did you kiss me?" They asked incredulously, and Hannah's eyes widened as their gazes met.

This time, Hannah was the one nearly dropping the paddle.

"I did not!"

"You totally did!" Ash insisted stubbornly.

"You called me your crush!" Hannah called defensively, and Ash couldn't argue with that, but they still pointed their finger at Hannah accusingly.

"You like me!"

"Well, duh, else I wouldn't go on a date with you!" Hannah shot back, and Ash snapped their mouth shut at that, because…what could they possibly say to that?

This time, the silence was much less peaceful and much more awkward.

"Uh…for the record…I like you, too…like…like-like you…" They mumbled quietly, and Hannah made a small sound between a snort and a laugh.

"You know, I gathered as much."

Ash looked up with a rush of exasperation.

"Do you always have to—"

"And it's not an actual kiss unless you kiss back, you know." Hannah cut in without meeting their eyes.

Ash's words got stuck in their throat.

The words hung in the air between them as Ash took disturbingly long to process and understand them.

Their palms were still sweaty when they started rubbing them against their jeans, excitement and fluster filling them to the core.

They started shifting, forward and backward, left and right, opening and closing their mouth but unable to get the words out.

"Would you…can I…we could…" They stammered, beginning to gesticulate.

Hannah had stopped rowing again, seemingly waiting intently for whatever Ash wanted to say.

Unfortunately, Ash was the master of untimely bouts of awkward stammering.

"I mean…if you want…like…we…I could…there's…I would love to…uh…"

Hannah took a deep breath.
"Ash…just kiss me already."

Finally, something they could work with.

It was undoubtedly funny for any outsider to watch how they struggled to move as quickly as possible in such tiny space, the entire boat rocking and swaying dangerously.

Hannah wasn't laughing though, instead smirking and already reaching out to cup Ash's face.

Ash didn't know what to do with their hands, so they just put them on Hannah's thighs and hoped against hope Hannah wasn't going to skin them for it.

She had nice thighs. Firm and strong, like the rest of her.

She had even nicer lips.

Her smile felt amazing against their own.

"See? Not so bad for a first date, at all." Hannah whispered when they pulled apart, though Ash could barely hear her over their internal screaming of euphoria.

"I filled up a whole notebook with poetry about your hair." They blurted, which…wasn't the smartest thing they had ever said, but it certainly was one of the truest.

Hannah blinked at them.

Then, she laughed.

"I'll only believe that when I see it." She teased, and Ash felt positively drunk on love.

"You can! Maybe as a…third date?" They tried to wiggle their eyebrows, but with their fringe growing so long, they couldn't be sure whether Hannah even saw it.

As if on cue, Hannah's hand reached out to brush their hair out of their face.

"Our first date hasn't even ended yet, and you're already making plans for the next five dates? Eager." She teased, but Ash felt too high to be teased.

"You want to go on five dates with me?" They asked, instead.

Hannah laughed her sheepish laugh again, now brushing her own hair out of her face.

She had such pretty hair.

She was so pretty.

Ash was so in love.

"Guess there's only one way to find out," Hannah replied, their eyes heavy-lidded and their cheeks a gorgeous shade of pink.

"Guess you're right," Ash whispered as they reached out to touch her jaw timidly.

Hannah looked up at them.

Why were her eyes always so sparkly and bright and beautiful?

Ash felt the immense need to ask her.

"Will you be my girlfriend?" They found themselves saying, instead.

Somehow, they had a feeling that they should get used to this happening around Hannah.

Maybe that was simply how things were going to be.

Hannah looked just as happy as Ash felt.
"Yes," she replied, simple and clear, just how Ash had hoped.
They didn't kiss, but Ash did take her hand, and Hannah let them.
They grinned at each other widely.
It was…so much more than what Ash had dared to hope for.
So much better than how they had pictured their date to possibly go.
They had a girlfriend!
They were gonna be Hannah's significant other!
They…
"Please tell me you didn't drop the paddles." They blurted with a growing sense of dread as they realized where they were and what they had been doing up until now.
Hannah's face fell as she looked around, moments before she cursed.
They were stuck in the middle of the lake.
Ash buried their face in their hands.
Though, to be honest, they still couldn't help but smile.
This was the worst date ever, yet it was the best in the world.
***
Dylan stood next to the road, patiently waiting for the postal car to make its way towards him and slow to a stop.
Only half an hour later than expected.
His godly powers were slowly coming back to him, it seemed, even with Eris still in the process of recovering.
Just like Dylan.
It was amazing, what a little rest and a lot of self-care could do to a person.
Sure, he still got nightmares, but Will Solace had also gotten him into an unofficial therapy group that was helping a lot, so Dylan was certain he'd get better if he gave himself enough time.
He also hoped the group wouldn't stay unofficial forever and finally get the permit from Chiron, so more kids in need could join and get the help they deserved.
"Did you order this?" The mailman asked with a puzzled look on his face as he poked his head out of the window, holding up a small package.
Dylan bit back his snarky reply and instead nodded quietly.
"Funny address. Kinda weird place, though? For a kid?" The man proceeded to ask as he kicked open his door and climbed out, scanning the package in the process.
"My parents decided camping would get us back in tune with nature and away from all the technological stuff." Dylan lied effortlessly as he signed for his package.
"Makes sense, makes sense. Didn't know there was a campsite around here." The man mused as he nodded to himself.
"It's pretty well hidden," Dylan replied and took the package from him.
It felt a lot heavier than it was.
Dylan held it a little tighter, a small smile hushing over his face.

Now, he only hoped he had picked the right one…

"So, what's in there that's so important you had to order it from the middle of nowhere?" The mailman asked curiously.

Dylan looked up at the man fleetingly, then away again.

"A gift. It's very important to me. Thank you for your trouble," he replied curtly, already stepping back and making to leave.

"Well, I hope it will have been worth the trouble! See you around, kid. Don't let nature eat you alive." The man laughed, and Dylan forced a smile.

"Sure. Good day to you, too."

He waited until the postal car was well on its way again, before he ran back up towards the camp, only stopping when he was next to the dead pine.

His eyes were already back on the small package.

Should he…open it? To check whether it was the right item?

Or should he just trust his gut feeling?

"Dylan? What are you doing here?" A voice asked, and Dylan jumped, hands immediately up to defend himself, the package now a possible weapon.

But it was only Billy, looking at him with a puzzled look.

Fae was next to him, looking just as bewildered.

"Oh…I…I was just…" Dylan mumbled awkwardly and dropped his guard again, sheepishly shifting from one foot to the other.

"We were looking everywhere for you. Please don't disappear on us like that. If you need to be alone, that's cool, but don't just leave in the middle of lunch." Fae chided, and Dylan cursed himself for leaving in a rush.

Considering the mailman's delay, he could have easily explained himself and taken his time.

He probably could have even brought them with him to not be so alone.

"I'm sorry." He said quietly, but they didn't seem all that upset with him.

Instead, they already had their focus on the package in his hands.

"You bought something?" Billy asked.

"You can actually order stuff? How?!! Teach me your ways, Dylan! I want to order summer dresses and body oils!" Fae whined, hands in her hair as she started listing all the things she could have been getting all this time if only she had known.

"It's for you." Dylan muttered, his gaze on Billy as he held out the package hesitantly.

Maybe he should have checked.

Just in case he got the wrong size…

Bill blinked at him, then down at the package.

Fae was watching with her lips forming a small 'o'.

Her sparkling eyes told him that she knew what it was.
"For...for me?" Billy asked, looking bewildered as he took the package and turned it over in his hands, undoubtedly trying to figure out what it was just by looking at it.

His eyes hushed back to Dylan's, as if silently asking for permission to open it.

Dylan gave a hesitant nod, his fingers already back to tapping against his thighs.

Fae followed the motion for a moment, before shooting him a reassuring smile.

They had been so kind to him the past weeks.

Dylan couldn't have asked for better friends.

They had saved him from certain death.

They had taken him to the other wounded and gotten him patched up.

They had taken him to his cabin and spent the rest of the night with him, so he wouldn't be alone.

They had done some more random, unauthorized and undoubtedly forbidden sleepovers whenever they sensed he wasn't doing too well.

They had spent a lot of their daily time with him, just hanging out with him or letting him tag along with whatever it was they were doing.

He had told them what he had been willing to share, and while they had been visibly upset at his decisions, they had also ultimately come to terms with it.

It was...nice, having friends like that.

Being so close to them.

Dylan knew it wouldn't be like this forever, couldn't be like this forever, since life was ever-changing and sometimes paths diverged eventually.

But he wanted to enjoy their company and friendship for as long as possible.

He watched as Billy tore open the package, his lips forming a little pout of concentration.

When he held the piece of fabric in his hands, his face still looked as puzzled as before.

Dylan was about to tell him what it was, when Billy's eyes widened and his face snapped up to stare at Dylan.

"You got me a-..."


Billy had never talked about it again, but Dylan had noticed his discomfort ever since that one day when they had saved Calypso.

He still remembered how upset Bill had been back then.

Now, Billy looked positively thrilled as he looked over the binder.

"This looks awesome! What size did you get? How did you know my size, anyways? Oh gods, I'm gonna have to try this on, like, right away! Finally, no baggy shirts anymore! No tight sport bras! Freedom, here I come!" He rambled and rubbed the fabric against his cheek happily.

Dylan and Fae shared matching looks of joy, though Dylan was pretty sure he was way happier right now.

Not to mention relieved.

Billy liked his gift.
The world was saved, and Billy had a new binder, and now, everything was perfect, in Dylan's book.

"I did some deductions to find out your measurements, then had it tailored with those. I hope the design is to your liking." He explained coyly, and Billy replied by throwing his arms around him and pulling him into a crushing hug.

For a moment, Dylan flinched and stiffened, but it was over before it started, and his arms found their way around Billy, too.

"That's gay." Fae commented very helpfully next to them.

"Hush, I'm ace." "I'm still questioning."

Billy and Dylan shot back, though they were still hugging, anyways.

"Thanks, man. This really means a lot to me." Bill said quietly, and Dylan felt his heart thumping happily in his chest, missing a few beats.

"It's the least I could do."

"You didn't have to do anything, Dylan. But…I'm glad you did." Bill whispered.

They let go of each other, just grinning stupidly for a moment.

Then, Billy was already back at rubbing his face against the binder.

"It's so soft! How can it be so soft?! My old one was store-bought and stiff as heck, always scratching and chafing, but this?! Either this isn't going to bind at all, or it's going to be heaven on earth. Bet what I'm hoping for!"

He was so excited.

It was the best thing Dylan ever got to witness.

"Dylan?"

This time, the voice was still familiar, but it was one Dylan hadn't expected to ever hear again. His muscles tensed and a low, strangled sound crept out of his throat.

Billy and Fae immediately looked towards the newcomer with alert expressions, Billy's free hand hovering over the spear strapped to his back.

Dylan slowly turned his head.

"Grandpa?" He asked, his voice a mixture of confusion and dread.

Sure enough, there was his grandfather, with his grandmother right behind him.

How had they even found this place?!

Well, okay, he knew the answer to the last question, considering the giant 'surprise' party everybody was talking about for Jackson, but…oh well, whatever.

"Dylan, what have you been doing all this time?! We have been trying to get a hold of you, but the number you gave us didn't work!" his grandpa snapped at him.

Dylan felt discomfort coiling tightly in his chest as his eyes hushed to Billy and Fae.

He…would greatly prefer if they weren't around to meet his grandparents.

"The phone was destroyed, sorry." He mumbled awkwardly, thinking of the demolished remains of the only telephone the Camp had.
"Destroyed?! How can a phone just get…" His grandfather asked incredulously, but then trailed off, his eyes finding the many ongoing constructions around the campsite.

The tiny Big House and the infirmary were finished already, but the forge and many of the cabins were still in need of repairs, and it looked the part.

"What happened here?" His grandmother asked weakly as she, too, looked around.

Dylan wondered faintly what they would have said if they had seen how this place had looked mere weeks ago.

"A war." Billy replied blankly, while Fae looked from Dylan to his grandparents with a look of mild concern.

Dylan worried his bottom lip, wondering how to best explain to his grandparents what had happened.

They didn't really know about the Greek gods, or that Dylan was a demigod.

In their eyes, he was just a normal, hyper-active kid that went to a normal, though maybe slightly weird camp for the summer.

"Who are you?" His grandad asked, and Dylan made a face.

"That's my friend, Billy, and this is Fae." He introduced them hurriedly, and Fae crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"We're his best friends." She declared, and he felt his heart beating a little faster in his chest.

His grandad looked them up and down, lips moving into a thin line as he took in the many twigs in Fae's hair and the dirt on her Camp clothes, before scrutinizing Bill's dented breastplate and looking at his run-down sandals.

"We're Dylan's grandparents." He unnecessarily introduced himself with a look of mild disdain.

Dylan felt more uncomfortable than ever.

His grandparents were…very clean people.

He didn't care whether they liked his friends (best friends) or not, but he cared about Billy and Fae. He didn't want them to feel uncomfortable because of his family.

He needn't have worried, though.

His grandad was already turning towards him again, and his expression didn't bode well.

"You had us very concerned after your last call, Dylan. Who was it that told you such lies? Who have you been hanging out with? It's clear these two might not set the best examples, but they…"

"What's going on here?" A new voice asked, and Dylan inwardly sighed in relief as he turned his head towards Jason, who was walking up the hill with his hands in his pockets and his eyes fixed on the newcomers.

"Jason, these are my grandparents. They've…come to check everything is alright at Camp." Dylan explained hurriedly to avoid any misunderstandings, and Jason's expression softened a little.

"Ah, yes. That is understandable, given the circumstances with the battle and…everything else. Well, welcome to Camp Half-Blood, then. I'm Jason Grace, head counsellor of cabin one. Nice to meet you." He introduced himself politely and reached out a hand, which Dylan's grandfather shook in a heartbeat.

Dylan was just glad he introduced himself as head counsellor, not as ex-praetor, Pontifex Maximus, son of Jupiter/Zeus, or, worse, boyfriend of three other guys.
"The pleasure is all mine! I didn't know there were such grown men here at Camp, unless as staff. What battle are you talking about, exactly?"

Thinking about it, maybe it would have been better if Jason had introduced himself as boyfriend of three guys, after all.

That way, his grandpa wouldn't give him that 'Look at this guy, why can't you be more like him?!'-look as he was currently giving him.

"The war." Billy unhelpfully put in with the same blank tone and face as before.

His grandad shot him a small frown, then laughed a small, awkward laugh as he brushed the comment off and focused back on Jason.

Jason was frowning momentarily, but then smiled again and turned towards Dylan's grandmother, always quietly waiting next to her husband.

He shook her hand, too, shooting her a charming smile that made her blush even in her old age.

Then, he eased into the conversation again.

"Camp Half-Blood has people of all ages. Some of us do help out with lessons, but we're all campers. There's no staff." He explained, and Dylan wondered whether he would get away with sneaking off right now.

Unfortunately, his grandad was already reaching out a hand and motioning for him to come to him, so Dylan begrudgingly went.

He guessed he had faced worse.

Though that didn't make him feel any better.

He would never be able to tell his grandparents of the most traumatic experiences in his life.

"So, what are you helping out with? I hope Dylan hasn't been making trouble. He has been such a sweet boy, but the last time we spoke on the phone, he was saying some…rather worrisome things. We just need to know he's in a good place here," His grandpa said as he moved an arm around Dylan's shoulders, both to show how close they were and to keep Dylan from escaping.

Dylan felt the tickle of fear running down his back and swallowed, schooling his breath and trying to remain calm.

Jason shot him a concerned look.

Of course, Jason would notice, considering he was in a relationship with Will Solace.

"Dylan has done great things for this camp. We wouldn't be standing here without him, I'm certain. He is in the place he wants to be, and the one he's meant to be in," Jason replied smoothly, and Dylan wanted to shoot him a small smile.

He knew it was more of a grimace.

His grandmother put her hand on his shoulder, and Dylan wanted to cry.

"Well, if somebody like you keeps an eye on him, I'm sure he's fine." She said softly, which… seemed to totally disregard everything Jason had just said, but Dylan knew it was more directed towards his grandad.

So, it had been his idea to come here.

Dylan had thought that maybe his grandma had wanted to check on him and had convinced him to drive her here.

But if it had been his grandpa's idea, then he wanted to cause a scene, certainly.
"Yes, I agree. Dylan would do well following your word. Much better than the nonsense he seems to have been exposed to. Those homosexuals, and all that crap."

For all of Dylan's symptoms of a growing panic attack, everything was gone the moment he snorted out a laugh.

He first tried to suppress it, but it just ended up getting worse, until he had to turn away and escape their hold to laugh freely.

"Dylan! Is that how you behave around here?! Where are your manners?" His grandpa exclaimed incredulously, but Dylan couldn't help it.

"I am so sorry. I don't know what's gotten into him..." His grandmother immediately started apologizing to Jason.

Jason, however, merely shrugged with a smile.

"It's fine. I know why he's laughing, after all."

"You...you do?" His grandfather asked, and Dylan wanted to both watch this unfold and leave.

Billy and Fae were by his side, their lips pursed and their eyebrows raised as their eyes told him they knew what was about to come, too.

"Oh yes. But to come back to an earlier question: I supervise, mostly. It's my boyfriends who are the real idols here. One just resigned as the head medic, but is still the one responsible for many, many lives saved. One just started giving lessons and seems to be a natural at it, surprising only himself. And the third is in charge of the sword-fighting lessons. Also a natural." Jason explained cheerfully, first stoic and serious, then suddenly like a schoolboy talking about his crush(es).

Dylan and his friends exchanged gleeful looks.

His grandparents suddenly looked rather pale, his grandmother with her hands covering her mouth, his grandad with his mouth hanging open.

"Did you...did you just say boyfriends?"

Jason tilted his head a little.

"I did. Would you like to meet them?"

Such optimism.

"Y-You're gay?!"

It sounded like an insult, the way his grandfather said it.

Jason's expression didn't change in the slightest.

He was still smiling brightly, and then, he simply waved off with a small laugh.

"Nah, I'm demi. Pretty sure only Nico is gay, though nobody knows what Percy labels himself. Will suggested pan, but we're pretty sure Percy just doesn't care what anybody calls him."

"Did you just out me to a stranger, Grace?" Nico asked as he made his way up the hill, sword strapped to his side and hair tied back into a messy bun.

Dylan felt like he was watching the best movie of his life.

Billy and Fae were right there with him to witness it.

All that was missing was the popcorn.

Jason gestured towards his boyfriend with his arms, looking like a lovesick fool.

"There he is! Nico, these are Dylan's grandparents. They were concerned he'd be around the
wrong sort of people, here at camp."

That was one way to put it.

Nico’s eyes narrowed the faintest bit, though he didn’t slow as he moved up to Jason’s side and kissed his cheek.

"We battled 'the wrong sort of people' out of this camp a few weeks back. Nothing but open-minded folks here now. Still, don’t just out me, I wanna do that myself," Nico argued, then held out his hands to Dylan’s grandparents.

Dylan didn't know what was possessing them, but they shook his hand with ashen faces.

"Hi Dylan's grandparents. I'm Nico, gay and in a loving relationship with my boyfriends."

"You said that so wonderfully." Jason immediately put in with a soft sigh, and Dylan did admit he was feeling some sort of second-hand embarrassment, but he was too gleeful to focus on it.

His grandparents didn't say anything, still frozen rigid and with ashen faces, staring at the two guys in front of them.

Nico smirked a rather sardonic smile, then turned to give his boyfriend a peck on the lips, undoubtedly just for show.

"Well, I'm off. Got somebody important to pick up, after all."

"That you do! Take care, love," Jason called after him as Nico moved past them with a small nod towards Dylan and his friends.

"Stop being sappy, Jason, and get on with our plan. The 'surprise' party isn't going to remain a surprise when everybody is talking about it. Right in front of Percy." Nico called over his shoulder as he made his way down the hill towards the road.

"He already knows, anyways." Jason informed him with a grin, and Nico pointed up at him with an accusing look.

"Only because you kept making dubious remarks!"

"You love me!" Jason called with a self-satisfied grin.

Nico stuck out his tongue, and Jason responded in kind.

Those guys.

Dylan looked at his grandparents and found them looking at each other with wide eyes and shocked expressions.

"Sorry about that. We have quite the tight schedule today, so I don't have enough time to show you around. I can get Annabeth and Piper, though, if you want? They're great at explaining everything that happens around here, and they won't make out in front of you just to tease you. At least, I think they won't?" Jason mused, his expression turning thoughtful.

His grandpa was beginning to turn red in the face, which was always a sign for an impending rage attack.

Dylan shifted anxiously.

"Maybe we should leave." He suggested quietly towards his friends, and Billy and Fae immediately nodded.

"Let's go to your cabin. I wanna try on this beauty and feel good about myself, but my cabin is way too packed right now." Billy suggested, and Dylan promptly agreed.

The three made their way down the hill, chuckling and laughing and talking about what had just happened, but Dylan still had half a mind on his grandfather's reddening face.
He didn't want him to yell at Jason.

Jason had never wronged him, after all. Quite the contrary.

It would be unfair to let him be the victim of his grandfather's rage.

Just as he started slowing down at the bottom of the hill, his eyes landed on somebody who could undoubtedly help.

"Chiron!" He called, and the centaur turned towards them, expression wary.

Billy and Fae fell silent, though they followed him as he moved closer.

"Ah, Dylan. What can I do for you?" He asked, his voice soft, though his eyes were still grave.

Dylan didn't like the way he looked at him, like he pitied him for what had happened.

It was one of his main pet peeves. Mostly because it forced him to remember, at times when he shouldn't have to remember.

"My grandparents came by for a surprise visit. They're at the dead pine. Apparently, they have some questions regarding camp, so I thought it would be better if you did the explaining," Dylan told him, and Chiron's tail swished as his face turned towards the top of the hill.

"Of course. Have you told them of the gods, yet?"

Oh, hell no.

"Yes." He lied with a serious face.

"Though I'm pretty sure they didn't believe me," he added, just for fairness.

Chiron let out a deep sigh and started trotting up the hill.

"Very well. I shall speak to them."

"Thanks, Chiron! I would come along, but I'm pretty sure I just got grounded for a lifetime, so I'll be in my cabin." He told him, and Chiron gave a small, distracted nod.

"Did you just send Chiron to his doom? Power move." Billy muttered, looking impressed, while Fae moved her arms around both of them and tugged them along.

"Well, we already knew Dylan was a total badass." She put in, and Dylan inwardly gloated.

His grandpa started yelling something from the top of the hill, his words indistinguishable, but loud.

His grandma shrieked, undoubtedly at the sight of the centaur.

Dylan and his friends stopped to look back, watching as Jason lifted into the sky and zoomed off, his laugh carrying through the camp, too.

Billy, Fae and Dylan exchanged telling looks.

Then, they laughed and went on their way.

He was a total badass.

He had two best friends.

He would do his mothers proud.

Dylan moved his arms around his friends.

"Guys, I think I'm gonna cry."
“Do it.” “I dare you to.” They replied, and he let out a deep breath, looking up at the blue sky.

Dylan smiled to himself.

He was home.

***

Persephone stood in the deserted cabin, looking at the piles of laundry and the many books littering the room.

Her husband’s cabin.

Nico’s cabin.

She had known Nico and his guys wouldn’t be here right now, but she had wanted to come, anyways.

Just for a short while.

She sighed and stepped over some dirty socks and shirts.

Hades had always been so proud, to have Nico settle down in his cabin, rather than abandoning it for a different one.

He had always been so proud of Nico.

Persephone took a deep breath and focused back on the room.

On the messy desk.

The small TV in the corner.

The bed that was so big, yet seemed so small for four people.

Persephone remembered the many times Hades had complained about Nico never asking for help, never asking for more than this.

She understood her husband.

But, looking through this room, she also understood Nico.

This was his home.

The things he had were small and worn out and oftentimes broken, but they were his, and he cherished them the same way he cherished everything in his life.

With a love and passion much like his father.

Nico didn’t show his love with big words or a boisterous attitude.

He showed it in small things, like the way he had placed chocolate and some water bottles in the open drawer of the desk, in perfect reach for Will if he needed some during his nighttime reading.

Or the vase with the dried flowers that Persephone knew belonged to Jason, carefully placed on the bedside table and free of dust or dirt.

Or the photo albums, strategically placed in Percy’s corner he had made for himself when he was feeling down or struggling again.

Persephone moved towards that corner now, too, wishing she had a place to retreat to, as well.

But there was no place she could call home.

Not right now.
The Underworld was in the process of being rebuilt – a process she should be supervising at this very moment.

But it was no home to her, not yet.

Maybe it would never be.

Persephone settled down in the corner – a tight fit, but a fit, nonetheless.

It was a nice corner.

Not the most comfortable one, but it overlooked the rest of the room without problems, and it made her feel hidden from the world's cruel grasp.

She could see why he liked it.

Persephone closed her eyes, thinking of her home, her husband, her mother, her dog.

She had lost…everything.

The Underworld had been cold and gray, but it had been her home, and her garden had been her pride and joy.

Hades had been dark and gloomy, but he had been gentle and quite the romantic. He had also always tried to understand her, and would have moved heaven and earth to make her happy, she knew.

Demeter had been stubborn and sometimes close-minded, especially when it came to her choice of husband, but she had been a loving mother, nonetheless, always looking out for Persephone's welfare and happiness.

Cerberus had been Hades' dog, but Persephone would lie if she claimed she hadn't loved him just the same.

None of them had deserved their fate.

But it had happened, nonetheless.

Now, all that was left was Persephone, and the shattered remnants of a realm she would one day lead.

She curled together a little, wishing she could weep.

But there were no tears left to shed.

'This is what you get for spiting me,' Misery whispered in the back of her mind, but she ignored it.

Anger or a lust for revenge wouldn't get her anywhere.

What had happened had happened, and it was wiser to move on, rather than to seek more bloodshed and death.

It didn't make her feel any better, though.

Persephone let her head tip back with a deep sigh, just staring into space, when something glinted out of the corner of her eye, catching her attention.

It was a glass case with a flower inside.

Persephone faintly recognized it as one of Percy's gifts that Hades had rambled on about many, many times.

He had always complained about 'the Jackson boy'.

Persephone smiled at the memory, knowing her husband had cared for and respected Percy greatly.
His fake mask of indifference hadn’t fooled her in eons, after all.

She took the flower, careful not to break it.

It was such a small thing, delicate and fragile.

Persephone could see why Nico cherished it as he did.

She couldn’t see why it had been placed here, though.

It had been too hidden from view for Percy to easily find it, but it also didn’t seem like something Percy would willingly hide, considering he had gotten it for Nico, and it was clearly important to them.

She turned the glass in her hands, looking at the tiny petals, the fragile stem, the reflections of the light, her own reflection in the glass.

She turned it over, just out of curiosity, and stumbled over a message written in neat lettering.

'Star of Bethlehem Flower

Never lose hope

You never know what tomorrow will bring'

Persephone held her breath as her finger traced the letters, grief and pain washing over her anew.

So that was the flower's meaning.

So that was why Hades had pointed it out to her repeatedly.

So that was why she was here now.

She had come to feel close to her husband one last time, to be where he had last said goodbye.

She remembered, clearly, how he had joined her in her garden, holding out flowers that she already possessed, a small smile on his lips.

It had been their last moments together, and they had both known.

She closed her eyes, a sad smile on her face as she remembered how he had helped her water her flowers, even as they both knew it would be in vain.

He had talked about this flower then, too.

'You don’t have that one yet, do you?’ He had asked when telling her the name.

'I have so many flowers here, I don’t think another one would fit,’ she had replied.

'Maybe you can find a place for it, anyways. It’s a tiny flower, but holds a big meaning,’ he had said.

Back then, she had thought he was just trying to tease.

Now, she held the flower tighter to her heart.

'What meaning would that be?’

Persephone remembered his expression, the soft look in his eyes and the sad smile on his lips.

'You’ll see, my love.’

Persephone felt a tear run down her cheek, and she didn't wipe it away.

"Thank you,” she whispered into the empty room, knowing nobody would hear her.
Especially not the person she missed the most.

Then, she got to her feet.

She placed the flower gently on the bedside table, next to a little note that read 'Jason's glasses!' with a big X beneath, though there were no glasses placed on it.

Persephone let her gaze travel through the room once more, taking in the home Nico had made for himself.

Then, she nodded to herself and stepped back into the shadows.

Hope.

It was an important thing to remember.

It was an even more important thing to have.

She had lost everything, yet no loss had been in vain.

Persephone would make a new home for herself.

She stepped out of the shadows, greeted by darkness and gloom and noise, but she didn't mind.

Her feet carried her past the many gods, spirits and Hades' old staff that were helping one another build this place anew.

She walked until she reached the dead and torn remnants of her garden.

Then, she put her hands on the ground and gave it life, waiting until the first white flower poked out of the soil.

It wasn't much.

But it was a beginning, like everything else.

"You know, I always liked the Underworld. Think I can snatch a room and set up my home office here? Always so noisy on the surface." A voice behind her announced, and she turned her head, watching Eris and Nemesis making their way through the rubble towards her.

Nemesis still had to support Eris a little, but the goddess of discord and strife had recovered greatly from her wounds, as had Hecate and the others.

"Only if you help out with the judging and treat the deceased with respect. That includes not setting them up against each other out of boredom," Persephone replied pointedly, and Eris flashed her a cheeky grin.

"Would I ever?"

"Yes, you would," Nemesis remarked before Persephone could.

"Though the idea isn't bad. Settling down in the Underworld. Sounds like it could be fun," the goddess of enacted retribution added, and Persephone tilted her head a little.

"Are you two trying to say you wish to live here?" She asked for clarification, and the two shot each other questioning looks.

Then, they both grinned.

"Anybody can do with a little help," Nemesis decided with a nonchalant shrug.

"We should hold parties every Wednesday. Wednesdays are terrible, so that would be a great way to make them better." Eris put in, and Persephone smiled against her better judgment.

It appeared she wouldn't be alone for very long.
Persephone wondered faintly whether Mrs. O'Leary had already given birth to her pups.
If so, she might consider taking one in and training it to become the new guard dog of the Underworld.

*Hope.*

She looked down at the small flower blossoming in the ashes of the past.

It wasn't much.

But it was a beginning.

***

Jason tapped his foot on the ground, admittedly a little anxious for once.

He checked the flowers in his hands again, but they were just as vibrant and perfect as before, thanks to the Demeter kids.

Was…was this how Percy had felt, when he had given Jason his flowers?

No wonder he had just flat-out jumped him the moment he had seen him.

Jason was tempted to do the same thing right about now.

Instead, he took a deep breath and tried to remain where he was, standing in front of their cabin where Will and Percy were supposed to get ready.

It was all planned meticulously, to the tiniest detail – courtesy of Annabeth.

Of course, Percy already knew about the 'surprise' party.

Jason knew, because he was the one who had spoiled said surprise, leaving hints whenever Percy looked anxious or worried, and ultimately telling him just last night, in a quiet moment when Nico and Will were in the shower.

But even if all their planning was for naught now, it didn't stop them from following through with it anyways.

It might not be a surprise anymore, but it was still a nice gesture, and Jason was certain Percy would appreciate the effort, and love the attention.

Jason heard noises moving towards the door, and automatically checked the flowers again for any damage.

But they were beautiful and impeccable as before.

The door opened, Will's laugh reaching his ears, and Jason was thrown in a loop as he realized he should *probably* put the flowers behind his back or something, hide them from immediate view, do something *romantic*.

But Jason was a better receiver of romantic gestures than a giver, so he just stood there with his flowers and a look of mild horror on his face as Percy stood in the doorway and promptly spotted him.

Jason, in a rush to do *something*, promptly dropped the flowers.

Ah, this was off to a good start.

Will, the tease, started laughing loudly at his dismay, while Jason cursed under his breath and scrambled to pick up the bouquet he had so meticulously put together with Calypso, Sara, and the Demeter kids.

Footsteps hurried down the front steps, and then there were Percy's hands, joining his and settling on the bouquet.
Jason looked up at the sea-green eyes of his boyfriend.

"They should call you Jason Butterfingers, rather than Grace, don't you think?" Percy teased with a crooked grin, and Jason gave him a pointed look, before smiling.

"What can I say, you're just that drop-dead gorgeous, the flowers never stood a chance," he retorted smoothly as he took the bouquet from Percy again, just to hold it out to him properly.

"Happy belated birthday, love."

Percy grinned widely as he took the flowers, mirth playing in his pretty eyes.

"Is this the moment when I should act surprised?" He asked, and Jason stuck out his tongue at him, before moving to engulf him in a hug.

"The flowers! Watch the flowers! Oi!" Percy promptly cried, but Jason knew the flowers were enchanted to survive the day, and smothering his boyfriend in love always had priority.

"Lemme smooch the birthday kid." He declared and did just that, rendering Percy to a giggling mess in his arms, trying to escape the many pecks Jason placed all over his face.

"Noo, not the smooches! Will brushed my hair, you're gonna get it all over the place again!" He wailed, but Jason hadn't noticed anything different about Percy's hair, so he was sure he'd be fine.

"I really can't take you two anywhere, can I?" Will remarked drily next to them, and they both stopped to shoot him a pointed look.

Then, Percy let himself drop sideways into Jason's arms.

"Oh Jason, kiss me some more!" Percy declared with fake exaggeration and his free hand against his forehead, while the other clutched his flowers close to his chest.

Jason wiggled his eyebrows at Will, then promptly dipped Percy to resume his smooching, which quickly turned into a rather messy yet satisfying kiss.

"You two are the worst. Jason, might I remind you that we're supposed to be at you-know-where in five minutes, tops?"

Yeah, but you-know-where could wait a whole lot longer for all he cared.

He had an obligation to smooch Percy, especially on his (belated) birthday.

When they pulled apart, Percy was beaming, his face flushed and his green eyes more vivid than in a long time.

Jason felt rather proud.

He grinned at Percy, and Percy kept beaming even as he raised his bouquet to sniff on the flowers.

"They're very pretty, by the way. Thank you," he said softly, face still partly hidden behind the bouquet, and Jason moved to stroke an unruly strand of hair out of his face.

"Only the prettiest flowers for the prettiest birthday kid," he replied, and Percy huffed out a laugh, while Will started nudging his shoulder with his head.

Jason moved an arm around him automatically and placed a kiss to the top of his wild curls.

"That's not what I meant, you lovesick dork. Seriously, can we go now? My siblings are an impatient lot, and we don't want them to get started without Percy."

Jason sighed and motioned for Percy to come closer, so he could move his second arm around him and lead them both towards the forest.

"Fine, fine. Guess we gotta continue the lovemaking later."
"You have a strange definition of lovemaking, though it does explain a lot," Will remarked, but it didn't sound like a complaint, so there was no reason for Jason to be worried.

"You love me," he replied simply, and both his boyfriends gave him matching smiles.

"Endlessly, but you're still a dork."

"I also love him because he's such a dork," Percy added, the sweetheart he was, and Jason hummed happily to himself as he led them into the forest.

This was a good day.

Percy's scars were finally healing properly, thanks to some better self-care, his new teaching job, and Will's new salve he had created.

Will was almost back to his former strength, thanks to lots of time in the sun, regular breaks, and a very watchful and persistent Nico.

Jason led his two boyfriends to their clearing, where his third boyfriend and most of their friends were already waiting for them.

Nico looked healthier than ever with his bright eyes and olive skin, finally seeming content with himself and the world around him.

Jason smiled at the sight of him, and when Nico met his gaze, he smiled back.

Today was a good day.

The sky was blue, the flowers were in full bloom.

He was very much in love with his boyfriends.

They were happy.

He let his boyfriends go and watched them laugh and greet the others, looking beautiful and happy and carefree, the way they deserved.

These were the guys he was going to spend the rest of his life with, with all its ups and downs and in-betweens.

A future.

*Their* future.

Jason looked forward to it.

***

"I swear, if this is another bottle of lube…” Percy lamented loudly, but then broke off with a groan as he pulled out what was *unmistakably* lube – this time, it seemed to have glitter in it, and Percy could tell without opening that it had a very strong smell of strawberry.

"You know you love us!" The Apollo cabin universally yelled towards him between their bouts of laughter, while Nico had his face buried in his hands and Will looked between impressed and disturbed.

"Is this what you're spending all your pocket money on? Lube and condoms? I mean, I'm proud I taught you the concept of safe sex properly, but…” He heard him muttering, but he, same as Percy's wailing, seemed to go ignored.

Percy sighed and passed the lube to his blonde, who inspected the back of it with a frown.

Jason, to his other side, didn't seem perturbed in the slightest, instead wiggling his eyebrows at Percy when the glanced sideways at him.

Percy promptly looked away again, knowing full well just what it was Jason's gaze was promising
Percy promptly looked away again, knowing full well just what it was Jason's gaze was promising him. Instead, he reached out for the next gift.

It was...weird.

Being the center of attention, for something other than battle and drama.

Percy of course loved attention, but more from his boyfriends.

This was nice, though.

Sure, he'd prefer to not have gotten seven bottles of lube and a 'honeymoon pack' of condoms that included more than Percy's poor head could count, but...

It was also nice.

This was nice.

His boyfriends were nice, with their innocent yet lingering touches and happy smiles.

His friends were nice, with their cheers and vivid joy and party mood, occasionally showering him in compostable confetti or bringing him a new slice of one of the many cakes and sweets all around – courtesy of the joined efforts of what felt like the entire Camp.

Even Chiron had supposedly helped making the big, blue birthday cake with candy seashells and so much fondant it was practically inedible.

Percy opened his next gift, and threw an exasperated glance towards the kids from the Apollo cabin again.

"Seriously? Why didn't you just put all of them in a bag together, instead of having me unwrap each one, guys?" He complained, but then his lips twitched, anyways.

This lube was blue.

Where did they even find such stuff?

When he passed the bottle to his boyfriend, Will's eyebrows shot up, once more turning it in his hands to inspect the label.

"Guys...did you make these yourself?" He asked as Percy grabbed the next gift, happy to find it was shaped so oddly, there was no way it could be another bottle of lube.

Seriously, they didn't even have sex that often.

When his brain registered Will's words, he found himself stopping, looking back up at the Apollo kids – who were suddenly much quieter, their eyes anywhere but on him or Will.

Wait, what?

"How did you even know how?!" Will cried, but then Leo was hiding behind Calypso, even though she was the one pointing at him with an unimpressed expression, clearly uncaring for his dismay.

Percy was too busy looking at Will's siblings, though.

"Wait, they're self-made!"

That changed everything.

"Well, we wanted them to be special, not the generic ones you got in a store! It wouldn't have been so many if Alec had been able to make up his mind regarding flavors!" Kayla ultimately admitted, much to the dismay of the rest of the Apollo cabin, who was still trying to stop her until the very end.
Alec looked more than a little flustered, scratching the side of his neck awkwardly, the same way Jason sometimes did.

Percy stared at them.

Then, he turned towards Jason.

"Yes." Jason replied before he even opened his mouth to speak, and Percy blinked, before he turned back towards Will's siblings with a self-satisfied grin.

"I'm gonna cherish the heck out of them, guys. Your hard work will not go to waste," he promised seriously, much to the apparent amusement of his friends.

The Apollo kids, however, seemed relieved.

So that was all that mattered.

"Open the next one! Come on!" Somebody from the Aphrodite cabin yelled, and Percy promptly eyed the deformed package in his hands with worry.

Wait, that was from the Aphrodite kids?

If he got lube and condoms from Will's siblings, what in earth could he be getting from the Aphrodite cabin?

He glanced towards Annabeth and Piper for a possible clue, but they were busy standing with their backs to him, staring out at the lake for whatever reason.

Percy hesitated a moment longer, then curiosity got the better of him and he tore open the paper.

Inside was an intentionally deformed cardboard box that betrayed nothing of its content, and Percy shot Drew an ominous look as he pried it open.

Will shifted closer to him, peeking over his shoulder with greatest interest.

Percy pulled out the flimsiest piece of fabric he had ever seen.

"It's blue!" Drew called before he could comment, and Will let out a low whistle behind him.

"Damn, Percy, everybody seems to want you to get laid."

Percy wished he could complain.

However, this was his (belated) birthday party, and these were gifts from his friends, so he guessed they had put some sort of thought and effort into this.

Hence, it would be rude to complain.

…He would simply complain later, when he was alone with his boyfriends.

They would undoubtedly show him just how good some of these gifts were, and he was totally looking forward to that.

"I'm gonna get Nico to wear this," He replied with a smug grin, and promptly had Nico's head snapping around at him with an incredulous look, while the others laughed.

Percy wiggled his eyebrows at his boyfriend, but Nico only mouthed 'Forget it' before returning his attention to…some spot in the distance?

Hm, weird.

Why did he keep checking that very spot all the time, anyways?

This had to be the fifth time Percy caught him looking there.

Curious as always, Percy tried to crane his neck to spot what Nico had to be seeing, but then
Jason already nudged him and passed him another gift.

This one was definitely from the team, judging by the abundance of tape and the scribbled 'ASH WAS HERE', as well as the cursive 'I told them not to -Hannah' that was written in marker across the package.

He promptly decided this was his favorite, even though he didn't yet know what was inside.

Judging by the squishy feeling, it was clothing, and he could only hope it wouldn't be another… whatever it was the Aphrodite cabin had gifted him.

Percy searched for their team, but while he immediately spotted Sara and Liam grinning back at him, he couldn't seem to find Hannah or Ash.

Which was…odd.

Though, now that he thought of it, he hadn't seen either of them since this morning at breakfast.

Were they still on their date?

"Hey, Percy," Annabeth called, and Percy looked towards her and Piper, still standing at the lake.

Piper motioned for him to come over, so he shared a puzzled look with Jason and moved.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't those two from your group, too?" Annabeth asked as she pointed into the distance, while Piper had her hand over her mouth, suppressing a giggle.

Percy followed her finger, just to snort.

"Oh no, Ash must have aimed for a romantic boat trip," Nico uttered next to him with a groan as he buried his face in his hands, while Will flat-out laughed.

In the distance, right in the middle of the lake, were Ash and Hannah, standing in their tiny boat and flailing their arms wildly, undoubtedly trying to catch somebody's attention.

They must have dropped their paddles at some point.

"Want me to get them?" Jason offered behind him, one hand on his side, but Percy shook his head with a smile and focused.

After the battle against Tartarus, Percy hadn't been sure whether he'd ever be able to control his powers again, or whether they would try to consume him just like Nico's powers had tried.

However, today was a good day.

Nothing was gonna change that.

He felt the tug in his gut, and Will's hand found his shoulder, giving it a light, reassuring squeeze.

He got them to the shore safely, greeting them with a teasing grin.

"How was the date?"

In reply, both Hannah and Ash stumbled out of the boat and into his arms.

"It was all Ash's fault for distracting me!"

"She's my girlfriend now."

Aww.

They both nudged each other in the side more or less playfully, before looking up at him with matching grins.
"Happy belated Birthday, team dad." They both told him, and Percy felt rather loved.

"I was about to open your gift. It better be something decent, guys," He notified them, and promptly found them exchanging telling looks.

"Open and you'll find out," Ash insisted with a wiggle of their eyebrows and a nudge.

Percy waited until Sara and Liam were closer, before he finally opened the package.

He had to admit, he was impressed by his own patience.

When the paper came away, he first worried it would be another set of questionable underwear – but then, he realized it was a shirt.

A blue shirt.

With a tiny fish on the front.

Percy smiled, about to say thanks, when Hannah fake-coughed and motioned to him to turn it over.

Puzzled, he did.

'BEST TEAM DAD', it said, in big, silver letters across the back.

Suddenly, his 'thanks' was stuck in his throat as he swallowed thickly.

Then, he felt himself tearing up.

"Oh no, guys, come on, we told you not to make him cry," Nico complained, while his team rushed forward and engulfed him in a hug.

"Noo, no crying! We promised Nico you wouldn't cry!" Ash exclaimed, but Percy couldn't help it, holding the lot of them tightly pressed against him.

"How could you promise that, you know I'm a weak man!" He lamented with a thick voice and a sniffle, and promptly heard all four of them complain and tell him just how strong they thought he was.

They were so precious.

He was gonna adopt the lot of them.

Wait, he was pretty sure they had already talked about that before.

It didn't matter.

These were his children now.

"Come on, Seaweed Brain, open the rest of your gifts. We're all anxious to see what your boyfriends have thought of." Annabeth called from somewhere next to them, but Percy merely stuck out his tongue at her.

Then, the meaning of her words dawned on him, and he looked back at Jason with a quizzical look.

Gift? From his boyfriends?

He had checked the gifts, there hadn't been any gifts from them, else he would have opened those first.

Plus, they had already given him all he could have ever wanted.

They were his boyfriends, after all.
Also, he had gotten flowers, so he was pretty sure there was nothing that could possibly top that.

Annabeth pushed a rather heavy gift into his hands the moment he let go of his team.

"First open my gift, before breaking your head over theirs."

Eh, fine.

Percy started tearing open the paper, already knowing it would be a book from the shape and weight of it.

Unsurprisingly, it was.

Surprisingly, it was a book about sailing destinations, rather than a textbook.

Percy frowned and shot her a confused look, but she merely shrugged with an innocent smile.

"Just thought you might like the pictures," she told him, and he wasn't sure whether to thank her or feel affronted.

He could read.

It was just really difficult for him.

"Thanks, Wise Girl. Who knows, maybe this will come in handy one day," he told her with a smirk, and something gleamed in her eyes for a moment, as if she knew something he didn't.

However, she always knew more than he did, so he found himself neither surprised nor worried.

He passed the book on to Jason, who inspected it with a curious look before moving over to the small table of now-opened gifts.

Percy glanced at it, too, to make sure he was done now.

Yep, that had been the last one.

Will tapped him on the shoulder gently, and Percy turned to look at him, just to find him holding out a small package, right under his nose.

"You didn't think all we had for you were some simple kisses and flowers, right?"

What was wrong with kisses and flowers?

Percy loved kisses and flowers.

However, he couldn't help feeling rather intrigued as he took the little gift from Will, inspecting it from all sides.

"Don't shake it. You're not gonna break it, but still. No shaking." Will reprimanded, and Percy pushed out his bottom lip, though he resisted the urge to shake.

"Are we getting married?" He asked hopefully, because, well, it would be the perfect size for a ring box…

"Not yet, Gorgeous. Nico said he wants us to date for at least two years before walking down the aisle," Will told him with a nod towards their hot Italian boyfriend, who promptly crossed his arms in front of his chest, his cheeks gaining some much-adored color.

"We're four guys, who's even gonna wed us," he grumbled under his breath, but Percy was certain he would find somebody when the time came.

When he exchanged a look with Jason, he found his blonde nodding with a soft smile, letting him know he'd have his back.

Percy smiled back at him, before returning his attention to the little gift in his hands.
If it wasn't a ring...then what was it?

A necklace? Percy had way too many necklaces already, though he'd of course still wear this one if his guys so wanted him to.

A bracelet? Percy hoped it would survive, because he tended to gnaw on things on his wrists.

Will called it stimming, Percy called it anger management, but fact was, a bracelet would probably be a terrible idea.

Maybe...earrings...? Percy didn't have pierced ears, but he was certain the Aphrodite cabin would jump at the chance to change that.

Percy took his time removing the paper, but the little jewelry box sadly didn't come with a label.

It was a pretty box, though.

Also: Dark blue!

Seriously, they were all spoiling him with blue stuff today.

Blue cake, blue confetti, blue lube, blue jewelry boxes he couldn't wait to open, while also dragging it out for as long as possible...

"Just open it, you dork," Nico insisted and leaned forward to give him a peck on the nose.

Needless to say, Percy immediately opened the box, the lid already popping open before Nico had even pulled back completely.

The whole clearing seemed to hold its breath as Percy held his, peeking inside with his teeth worrying his bottom lip.

Then, he huffed out a weak laugh and looked back up at his boyfriends.

"You just said we're not getting married!"

"It's not a wedding ring!" Nico immediately insisted with a quickly reddening face and his foot stomping on the ground, while Will practically cackled as he winked at Percy.

"Percy Solace di Angelo Jackson, sweetheart. Just you wait."

"Jackace." Both Percy and Jason promptly shot back and shared amused looks, before Jason moved to take the little box from him.

Percy wasn't quite willing to part from it, especially not with the ring still inside.

However, Jason seemed rather adamant, so he caved in and let him.

The next moment, he made a startled sound when Jason took out the ring and reached for Percy's hand.

"It's not a wedding ring, but...I'd like to think of it as a promise, anyways. We've only been dating for a few months, but we've already come so far -- and I know we'll go even further. We have won the wars. Now, it's time for us to live. And I want to spend that life with you. All three of you. So, Nico and Will agreed that, while I can't put wedding bands on you three just yet, I might as well tie something around your fingers that's a little sturdier than grass."

Jason's voice was gentle and soft, the way Percy's mind connected with afterglows and sweet love confessions.

Percy watched him gently push the ring onto his finger, a perfect fit.

When their eyes met, he found himself looking into sky-blue eyes full of love and adoration, even softer than his voice.

He had his arms around his boyfriend in a heartbeat, choking back a happy sob as he buried his
He had his arms around his boyfriend in a heartbeat, choking back a happy sob as he buried his face at the side of his neck.

"I wanna get married to you one day, too!" He pressed out thickly as he started crying again, and his boyfriends were instantly with him, wrapping their arms around him and smothering him in warmth and affection for a little while.

"We love you, Percy," Will whispered, his lips at the side of Percy's neck.

"I love you the most," Nico informed him cheekily from his other side, making him chortle.

Oh no, that had to be the first time *he* had ever made *that* sound.

That was usually *Jason's* job.

As if on cue, his boyfriend chortled, too, his voice rather raw and thick, as well.

He loved that sound.

"Do you two have rings, too?" Percy asked weakly towards Will and Nico, and found two hands shoved under his nose, adorned with matching rings.

Percy felt a tear running down his cheek and snatched those hands to kiss them both.

Beautiful.

They were beautiful.

His boyfriends were beautiful.

It was a beautiful day.

Everything was beautiful.

"Hold your horses, Percy, we're not done yet. I have something for you, too." A voice called behind him, and Percy wanted to whine, but he was still sniffing and crying, so he merely brushed his tears away somewhat before turning to look towards Reyna.

Reyna, who was moving her wheelchair forward with what looked like a game controller, though Percy was going to resist asking whether he could try that, too.

"Well, it's from Frank, Hazel *and* me. They wish you all the best, as you undoubtedly already know," Reyna told him as she passed him a purple envelope, and Percy nodded weakly.

They had already wished him a happy birthday, same as most of the others had, back when it had actually *been* his birthday, even if it hadn't felt like it.

This, however, felt a *lot* like a birthday to him.

Maybe that was why his boyfriends and friends had insisted on 'surprising' him with this party.

He looked the envelope over, but, again, there was nothing on the outside that could possibly betray its content.

He hoped for a birthday card.

Granted, he had gotten tons of those already, but most of them were with rather dubious pictures, and he was certain Frank, Hazel and Reyna would pick a really pretty one.

Oh, maybe they would include a group photo!

Jason had gotten photos for his birthday, after all.

He'd love to have some for his album.

He opened it carefully, unwilling to damage the envelope more than necessary, just in case Nico wanted to keep it.
Nico tended to keep nearly everything, after all, which were hoarding tendencies Percy should probably not support.

Percy tugged out the card, pleased to see that he had been right.

It was a pretty one.

Dark blue and royal looking, with fancy lettering and an even fancier ornamental design on it.

When he opened it, there was a folded note that nearly fell out.

He would have guessed it to be the birthday wishes, but those were written across the inside of the card – not just from Frank, Hazel and Reyna, but what had to be the entire Roman Camp.

Or, at least, Percy's cohort.

He squinted at the tiny writing, deciphering Dakota's name scribbled in red, before his focus shifted back to the folded note.

Percy glanced back at Reyna as he opened it, but her face didn't betray anything.

His boyfriends were watching him with matching gleams in their eyes, telling him they already knew what this was about.

Maybe it was a coupon to a theme park.

Percy wouldn't mind taking his guys to one again, now that they were dating and he could woo them in all of the water rides.

…It wasn't a coupon to a theme park.

It was an enrollment letter for college.

Percy stared at it, then stared at Reyna.

She let out a small huff of a laugh.

"We have finally found a place to build up Camp Jupiter anew. Including New Rome. Granted, it won't be done by tomorrow, it might even take another year to have everything running smoothly once more, but…whenever that will be, know that you're welcome to join us. Welcome to settle down. All four of you." She said, and Percy had the distinct feeling today was meant to pull on his heartstrings.

In all the best ways, of course.

"Thank you," he breathed, unable to put his gratitude into words, but Reyna's expression told him she knew, anyways.

They hugged each other, which wasn't even all that difficult, even with the wheelchair.

"You'll be just fine," she told him quietly, and he nodded.

"With those dorks by my side, I'm practically invincible."

"I don't doubt it," Reyna retorted with a wink as he pulled back, and Percy let out a small laugh.

Then, Jason was by his side, taking the card and paper from him with a smile.

"I'll keep it safe for you."

Percy knew he would.

Nico appeared at his other side, stroking along his arm with one finger as if to ask for his attention.

As if he ever had to ask.
Percy leaned forward, and Nico chuckled quietly as he gave him a timid peck on the lips, before he dragged Percy down by his collar for a proper kiss.

There was the unmistakable sound of whooping from the Apollo kids, and Percy smiled into the kiss.

Some things never changed.

Like the Apollo kids cheering whenever they kissed.

Or the butterflies in Percy's stomach whenever he got to kiss his boyfriends.

Or his boyfriends' soft lips and breathtaking kissing skills.

"Ready for the next to last surprise of the day?" Nico whispered, and Percy's eyes shot open immediately.

"Another one?" He asked faintly, not sure whether his heart would be able to take it.

Nico's eyes gleamed with warmth, joy and excitement.

"This is something Will thought of first, don't let him fool you into thinking it was just me."

"You were the one doing the most to make it happen. I merely threw the idea into the room," Will immediately argued, but Percy already moved to wrap his arms around the blonde and give him a kiss on the cheek, anyways.

"Thank you, Will."

"You don't even know what it is, yet!" His boyfriend cried, but Percy didn't care.

Or at least he thought he didn't care – but then, there was rustling, and he spotted Jason coming back into the clearing, though he hadn't noticed he had left his side.

Following that confusion, was the realization that he was coming from the very direction Nico had been looking off to before.

Following that realization, was the sudden feeling of all the air leaving his lungs as somebody else stepped into the clearing, right after Jason.

Percy's legs moved before his mouth did.

"Mom!"

She was smiling, and then, she was in his arms, and Percy swirled her in a circle, then another one, before pressing her against his chest.

There was a laugh, and Percy recognized it as Paul's, and he didn't even look up as he reached out to pull him in, too.

"What are you…how did you even…how are you here?!" He asked, tried to ask, his mind a whirl as he hugged them both, trying to understand, trying to comprehend…

"Your boyfriends," his mother explained, and even though those were only two words, those two words explained everything.

"I love you!" He yelled to the world, not quite sure whether he was still talking to his mother, or his boyfriends, or Paul, or his friends, or all of them.

He was pretty sure it was all of them.

"We love you too, Percy," his mother replied, and she trembled a little in his arms, so he squeezed her even tighter.

This was the best belated birthday party in the world.
Sally watched her son, beaming and laughing and gazing at his boyfriends as if they were his world.

Her son had grown so much.

So quickly, too.

It felt like just yesterday when she had taken him by the hand and led him to his first school, with that little hop in his step and eyes bright and vivid with curiosity and a hunger for more.

Time had passed too quickly, in her opinion.

But her son was happy, and that was what mattered.

Sally let him show her the Camp and the home he had made for himself here.

It was beautiful and strange, just like her son.

Next to meeting some familiar faces again, Sally was introduced to all his friends she hadn’t yet had the pleasure to meet – like their quirky little team, the rumored Stoll brothers, all of Will’s siblings, and Bob, who had decided to become the new border protection with Small Bob.

She laughed along as Percy told her of the many little and harmless adventures around camp; and shook her head when he told her about the many rules they had bent and broken in the process.

She let Jason show her the roof of his cabin, and Nico gave her a tour of their room.

Will walked her through the infirmary, and Percy took her for a walk around the lake.

She shared Percy’s surprise when Nico greeted them at the end of their walk with a handful of baby’s breath for Percy, and a hydrangea flower for her.

’As thank you,’ he had said.

Though it should have been her thanking him for taking care of her son.

She thanked him by hugging him and telling him she would always be there if he needed anything.

She didn’t mention the tears in his eyes when they pulled away.

She gave Will the hug she should have given him months ago, telling him his mother would be proud.

She didn’t mention the way he clung to her like a child and soaked up her words like a sponge.

She gave Jason a hug because he, too, needed one, telling him it was okay to not be strong sometimes.

She didn’t mention his small, shuddering breath or the trembling of his shoulders.

Instead, she held them and patted their backs and told them she was proud of them.

They had been robbed off their mothers much too soon. All three of them.

Sally would take good care of them whenever they would let her.

She took Paul’s hand as she followed them towards the sea, hours later, already knowing what was waiting there.

But Percy didn’t know yet.

It was the last surprise of the day.
It might be the biggest one yet.

She smiled and shared a look with Paul, who was still fascinated by this place, by the people, by the magic and *otherness* in the air, but who was now focused entirely on the boys and her.

Life was difficult; love even more so.

Both rarely went the way one might expect.

But Sally was lucky. She had Paul.

She looked at Percy and his boyfriends as they guided him to the beach, broad smiles in place even as their eyes seemed between anxious and excited.

Percy was lucky, too.

She watched how her son stared at the sea with a stunned, speechless look, and she watched how he shook his head with a weak laugh, unable to believe.

She watched Nico entwining their fingers and putting their foreheads together, a soft smile on his lips as he spoke.

'It's a gift from us, as well as the rest of the Camp', he whispered.

Her son was trembling.

It was still hard to see him cry, but she knew these were tears of joy.

Sally looked out at the little ship, big enough to sail the world, yet small enough to keep them close.

Jason and Leo had done a great job planning it out and working on it with the others.

'It's a choice, Percy,' she heard Nico say.

A *choice*.

Sally felt a tear trickle down her face.

Percy had never wanted to be a demigod.

Had never wanted to fight.

Had never wanted to hurt anybody.

Had never wanted what the Fates seemed to have laid out for him.

He had never had a say.

But they gave him a choice.

'We don't have to leave. We can just take her out on the weekends or whenever else you want. Summer vacation is almost over. No more classes. No more stress,' Jason's voice carried over.

'Or we can go and see the world. It's all your choice,' Nico put in, their foreheads still together, his expression still soft.

'You don't even have to decide right now. You can take all the time you need, and change your mind a hundred times if you so desire. We'll be by your side, no matter what,' Will promised.

Sally looked back at the little ship, taking in the dark wood and the two masts, the little crow's nest and the cream-colored sails, set ablaze by the setting sun behind it.

Looked at the cursive 'IPOD *Elpídia*' written in silver lettering along the side.

*Hope.*
It was a beautiful name for a ship, in Sally's opinion.
Will had been the one to suggest it, and Nico the one to decide on it.
Sally watched Percy as he looked back at the ship in astonishment and wonder.
Then, she watched him falling apart and being caught by his boyfriends.
Once upon a time, she had been the one catching him, she still remembered.
Her little boy.
But her little boy had grown up.
Grown up enough to make his own choices, his own decisions, and live the life he wanted to live.
The life he deserved to choose for himself.
Sally smiled at her son, watching him stumble towards her.
She cupped his face.
A mother always knew, they said.
"Send me some postcards, okay?"
Percy beamed at her, a last tear running down his cheek as he leaned into her touch.
"Will do, mom."
Sally let her son go.

The End
Thank you for reading! 💖

Original can be found here!!

Chapter End Notes
Some fun stats of this series:

End 2014 - Sep 2018

Page Count (European DIN A4 Pages in Word, mostly unformatted)
Advent Calendar - 308 pages
Love Dreams Blah - 1,820 pages
Weeks of Bliss - 226 pages
TFIADP - 853 pages
**Total: 3,207 pages**

Word Count (from Word, without A/Ns, minor differences possible because constant editing)
Advent Calendar - 145,575 words
Love Dreams Blah - 1,017,586 words
Weeks of Bliss - 345,050 words
TFIADP - 491,436 words
**Total: 1,999,647 words**

POVs (Total count of character POVs from all stories)
Percy - 152 / 158 (including the POVs in the Special of the Advent Calendar)
Nico - 153 / 301 (including all the POVs from the Advent Calendar)
Jason - 138
Will - 188
Other Characters&OCs - 67
**Total POV count for the entire series: 698 / 852** (including all POVs from the Advent Calendar)

Thank you for reading this series!! Now, onto new adventures *-**

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Works inspired by this: *Legacy of the Light's Sky* by KingNoctisXIII

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