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THE COURT OF THE DEAD

A NICO DI ANGELO ADVENTURE



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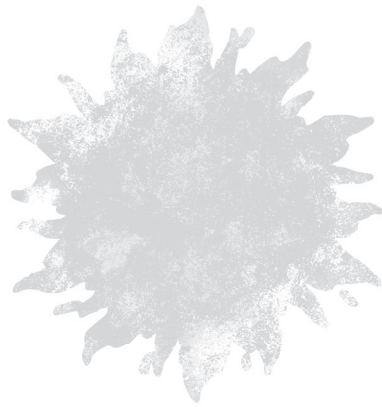
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CHAPTER 1



“Breathe, Nico.”

Nico sat across from Dionysus, who smelled strangely of cinnamon rolls. The son of Hades tried not to let that distract him. He breathed in deeply, filling his chest so full of the icy air rolling off Long Island Sound that he thought he might burst. Then he exhaled slowly and opened his eyes.

Mr. D’s curls rippled in the breeze. He and Nico were both sitting on yoga mats on Fireworks Beach, and the sun was close to setting. The cold didn’t bother Nico much—his black bomber jacket was warm enough. But Mr. D had on a bright pink parka, a matching beanie with a pom-pom on top, and thick ski gloves. Nico thought it was overkill. Did gods even feel cold? But he also knew that Mr. D would seize any opportunity to wear the most garish outfits imaginable.

Nico was uncomfortable for a different reason: these sessions with the camp director were so *awkward*. After Nico and his boyfriend, Will, returned from Tartarus nearly three months ago, Mr. D had expressed interest in starting “something akin to what humans call *therapy*” at Camp Half-Blood. Nico had approved of the idea

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because he knew that when demigods first arrived at camp, they often needed help facing the new reality of their lives. He remembered what that had been like all too well.

Yet this was not how he had imagined “therapy.” The breathing exercises seemed pointless. Mr. D had asked Nico to keep a journal of his daily emotions, but it hadn’t stuck. The god often exhorted Nico to “live in the present,” which didn’t make a whole lot of sense to him. He wasn’t a time traveler, just a shadow-traveler.

Still, Nico *was* trying to take this seriously. He fixed his eyes on Mr. D’s hot-pink outfit, which should have been enough to keep anyone’s attention in the present. Then he heard a rustling nearby and glanced to his left.

At the top of the closest sand dune, a tiny army of puffy dark beings peeked out from behind the tall grass. The Cocoa Puffs.

Nico could tell the cacodemons were trying to be quiet, but since they were personifications of Nico’s inner struggles and trauma, they didn’t do “stealth” very well. They also hated to be separated from him.

Mr. D was still practicing his breath work. His eyes were closed. Maybe he wouldn’t notice them. . . .

Dionysus cleared his throat. “Nico,” he said, “why are they here?”
Busted.

“Would you prefer they wander around the cabins?” Nico asked.
“Maybe give random flashbacks to all our new campers?”

Mr. D frowned. “Hmm. Perhaps not. I’m still adjusting to the presence of these Chaos Puffs of yours.”

Nico waved at the cacodemons to come on over. They bounded and rolled down the dune like inkblots escaped from a Rorschach test, making little yipping sounds like “Yay! Yay! Yay!” as they crowded around Nico.

In truth, Nico and Will were still adjusting to their presence, too.

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A couple of months ago, Fear had given Will a panic attack just by brushing against his ankle. Anger had wandered through a grove of nature spirits and caused a fistfight between two normally peaceful mulberry bushes.

As they got more comfortable existing outside Nico's body, the Cocoa Puffs were triggering relevant emotions in anyone they encountered. Mr. D thought it might be their way of connecting with other living beings as they explored further and further. "Perhaps this is how the little blobs communicate."

Little blobs? Some of them had antlers! Legs! Glowing eyes! How dare he call them blobs!

Actually, Sadness *did* look like a blob as it rolled up Nico's shoe and onto his knee. He ran his hand over its back and marveled at its impossible softness, like a pillow made of smoke. Then the wave of emotion hit: a surge of sadness, complete with memories of his sister Bianca fading away and his mother dissipating into darkness.

He pulled his hand away, and the images vanished.

Mr. D uncrossed his legs. "I see we're done for today. You're not paying attention anymore." He stood and began rolling up his yoga mat. "For our future sessions, I'm going to institute a no-Puffs rule."

"Fine." Nico rose, spilling half a dozen cacodemons from his lap. "Maybe I'll train them to perform for a traveling circus instead."

"Have you ever actually seen a traveling circus, Nico? You'd fit right in."

The demigod rolled his eyes. "Please. They couldn't handle me."

The two began their walk back to camp, the Cocoa Puffs yipping and bouncing along behind them.

As they crested the dunes, Mr. D cleared his throat. "Nico, I know these lessons are challenging for you. You're not used to being still."

"Being still is overrated."

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“Hmph. Imagine how *I* feel being trapped in this place.” The god gestured at the valley spread out before them.

Camp Half-Blood never failed to take Nico’s breath away. Even now, in the dead of winter, the fields were lush and green. The marble Greek buildings—dining pavilion, amphitheater, arena—gleamed white in the sunset. Nestled in a clearing in the woods, the campers’ cabins made a wide rectangle around a central green, where the firepit blazed cheerfully. If you had to be “trapped” somewhere as a god, forced to work off a century of community service for disobeying Zeus’s orders, being the director of Camp Half-Blood seemed like a pretty good gig. But Nico knew better than to say that to Dionysus.

The god brushed a speck of sand off his ski parka.

“My point being,” he continued, “I do think you’re making progress. I just want to make sure you’re better trained before we start teaching the other campers how to deal with stress, flashbacks, fear. Every exercise I show you has a point, I promise.”

“I know.” Nico’s shoulders drooped. “It’s just so . . . *new* for me. Learning to breathe, being still, and all that. We haven’t had a single quest or conflict in months.”

“And I am sure you feel antsy, Nico. But after what you and Will experienced this past fall, you deserve a break.” Mr. D was quiet for a moment, and then he added, “There’s nothing wrong with slowing down.”

Nico wasn’t so sure about that. The last time his life had “slowed down,” he’d gotten stuck in the magical Lotus Hotel and Casino and missed most of the twentieth century.

He and Mr. D cut to the west of the canoe lake and walked past the cabins. Soon, they heard the sound of a whizzing arrow thumping into a hay-bale target. Will Solace stood with Juniper, one of the camp’s dryads, staring down range at the shot he’d just taken.

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They made quite a pair, the son of Apollo and the nymph. Juniper was petite and waifish with bare feet, a green gossamer dress, and long amber-colored hair. She looked like she might get blown away by a strong breeze, but she carried herself with confidence. She was clearly the one giving the lessons.

Will was taller, built like a surfer. Today he wore faded jeans and a blue hoodie that contrasted nicely with his mop of shaggy blond hair. He held a bow against his right side and frowned at the target, obviously not happy with his aim.

Seeing them together, Nico felt an irrational twinge of jealousy. *Hey, that's my incredibly handsome boyfriend. Back off!* Then Will saw him approaching and gave him a huge grin, and Nico's misgivings melted into plain joy.

"Nico!" Will called.

My gods, Nico thought. He still couldn't believe there was someone in the world who always looked so delighted to see him. How had he gotten so lucky?

"I'll make the shot this time," Will told him. "Watch!"

He nocked another arrow and pulled back the string.

"That's right," said Juniper at his shoulder. "Picture where you want it to go with your mind's eye."

Will loosed the arrow. It flew through the air and penetrated the outermost ring of the target.

"I imagined it that way," he said quickly. "Totally intended it."

"It's better than last week." Nico gave his boyfriend a kiss on the cheek. "You weren't hitting the target at all then."

Will blushed. "I know. I can't believe it's taking so long for my archery skills to improve. Hopefully my dad isn't too embarrassed by me."

"I'm sure he's rooting for you," said Juniper. "Soon you'll be hitting a bull's-eye! Or . . . if not soon, eventually."

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Will grunted. "Not that comforting, Juniper."

"Join us for dinner, child of Apollo," Mr. D boomed. "Your presence will help the new campers adjust."

"New ones?" Will handed his bow to Juniper. "You mean the ones from last week?"

"Sadly, no," said Dionysus. "According to Chiron, three more demigods arrived just this afternoon."

"Three more?" asked Nico. "Already? And it's not even summer."

"You can blame Percy Jackson for that." Mr. D threw his hands in the air. "If he hadn't made his dramatic little speech up in Olympus about all the minor gods deserving respect and their own cabins, I wouldn't have to be dealing with this influx of offspring! All of you would have grown up and left, and I could have turned Camp Half-Blood into Camp Me Time."

Will grinned. "You love us, and you miss us when we're gone."

"Not you, Solace," Mr. D shot back. "Never you. Not once, not ever."

Will booped him on the nose. "You're so cute when you pretend to hate us."

Nico gulped, waiting for Mr. D to transform into a fiery pillar of wrath and disintegrate them all, but Dionysus just harrumphed. Somehow, Will could get away with booping the nose of a major Olympian god and still live to see another day.

During their short jaunt to the dining pavilion, Mr. D kept up his complaints about the latest demigod arrivals. Over the past few months, new kids had been showing up at Camp Half-Blood almost every week. Chiron had his hands full because of it. Since Nico and Will were the most "veteran" demigods around, they had taken on some of the orientation duties. Will had suggested they work up a song-and-dance routine. Nico had suggested Will never speak of that again.

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Actually, Nico was glad to help, but something about the increasing numbers of new arrivals made him uneasy. It felt to him like part of a pattern, as if the world's magical climate had changed, forcing mass migrations in advance of some catastrophe. He hoped he was wrong. . . .

Upon entering the dining pavilion, Nico saw the usual crowds scattered across a dozen picnic tables. It had once been the rule to sit with your own cabin, but last summer Nico had started a non-violent resistance movement (i.e., he wanted to sit with Will). The idea caught on without much pushback from Chiron or Mr. D, and now the campers sat wherever they wanted. Some were laughing and tossing pieces of bread at one another. Others made burnt offerings to their godly parents at the firepit. Mr. D ambled over to join Chiron at the head table, where a nervous-looking satyr waited with a platter of chilled, peeled Concord grapes for the wine god.

Nico spotted the three newcomers huddled together at a corner table. A pang of sympathy struck his heart. He wondered if *he'd* looked that nervous when he first arrived.

He looked down and discovered a single-eyed sea-urchin-like Cocoa Puff—Loneliness—hanging on to his shoelace with its spiky little appendages. Loneliness was the smallest of the cacodemons, and though Nico wouldn't admit it out loud, it was probably his favorite. Maybe because he'd spent so much time with that feeling.

He reached down and the creature scuttled up his arm. It nestled at the base of his neck, sending an empty sort of wistfulness through Nico's body, but he didn't mind. It was like a visit from a longtime friend.

When Nico and Will approached the new campers, they scrambled to their feet like they'd been called to attention. They all looked about eleven or twelve years old. One was a small, pale boy drowning in a puffer jacket and jeans at least three sizes too big for him. The

second was a girl with light brown skin, curly hair, and a punkish dress/jacket/boots ensemble that Nico absolutely approved of. The third was a taller boy with warm brown eyes, deep-brown skin, and black hair shaved short. He seemed to be the leader, or at least the boldest. He stepped forward and extended his hand.

"Hi, I'm Oludare!" he said, loudly enough for everyone in a three-table radius to hear him. "Olu for short. Are you Mr. di Angelo? Chiron said we're supposed to talk to you."

At Mr. *di Angelo*, some of the older campers glanced over and snickered.

"Just Nico." He shook Olu's hand, though the gesture felt way too formal for him.

"Pleased to meet you."

"Y'all can relax," Will said, his smile radiating so much warmth even Nico could feel it. "We're casual around here."

Olu shifted from foot to foot. "Okay, yes. Well . . . my godly parent is Hestia!"

This came out at such a volume that the punk girl flinched. "Olu, please," she said, tugging at her curls. "Keep it down."

"Sorry!" Olu shouted. "Sorry, sorry. I get loud when I'm nervous."

Nico offered a smile. "I get it. I was once new here, too. So . . . wait, did you say Hestia?" He looked at Will. "I didn't even know Hestia *had* children. Have we ever had one of hers here before?"

Will blinked. "I . . . Wow. I don't think so."

Oludare's shoulders slumped. "Does that mean I have nowhere to go?"

"Quite the opposite," said Will. "Any demigod is always welcome at Camp Half-Blood. And who are your friends?"

The girl introduced herself as Ananya. Her parent was a minor Greek deity named Astraea.

"I never even met her before," Ananya said. "Then, all of a sudden,

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last week, she appears in my dreams, like, *I am thy mother! Go to Camp Half-Blood!*” She shrugged. “Chiron said she’s the goddess of justice and innocence? I guess that’s cool.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever heard of her,” Nico admitted. “But there are lots of gods I don’t know.”

“At least she claimed you!” Will said. “We used to have to wait months or even years, and some kids never got claimed at all.” He turned to the pale boy in the big clothes. “How about you?”

“I’m Noah.” He rubbed his drippy nose on his sleeve. His red eyes made him look like he’d been crying or had really bad allergies. “I’ve got some obscure godly parent, too. Do you know who Hermes is?”

Will chuckled. “The name rings a bell.”

“Dude.” Ananya turned to Noah. “Didn’t you study Greek mythology in school?”

Noah shook his head. “I missed a lot of days.”

“He’s the god with those little wing thingies on his feet,” she said matter-of-factly.

Nico held back a laugh. *The obscure wing-thingie god.* “I hope he heard that up in Olympus.”

“What’s Olympus?” Noah asked.

“Oh, we have a lot to teach you,” said Will. “But first, have you all eaten? Let’s get some food!”

They loaded up their plates with freshly baked bread, cheese, and fruit while the dryads brought over goblets of ice-cold, whatever-you-want-it-to-be beverage (nonalcoholic, of course). Once they were seated again, Oludare started rattling off a million questions. It was clear to Nico that the kids had only received cursory introductions to being demigods. They had no idea what Camp Half-Blood was for, aside from Mr. D mentioning some sort of “rigorous, painful training regimen.”

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"I . . . wouldn't describe it that way at all," Will said. "But there is training. You'll have to learn how to fight, how to defend yourselves, how to protect others."

"Protect others?" asked Oludare. "From what?"

"One of the other kids told me we have to fight monsters." Noah shrank even farther into his puffer. "Are monsters real?"

"Of course," said Ananya. "If the gods are real, why wouldn't the monsters be?"

"But *are* the gods real?" Noah snapped back. "I've never met this so-called Hermes. How do I know he's not fictional?"

"I truly hope Hermes hears all this," Nico muttered.

Noah frowned. "Sorry. It's just . . . I'm confused. My mom said I *needed* to be here, but I still don't understand why."

"It's okay." Will reached across the table to lay his hand on top of Noah's. "We're going to help you."

"Well, I'm excited," said Oludare. "Gods and monsters? Sign me up!"

"I could always learn how to fight better," said Ananya. "I do throw hands already, though."

Noah pulled back his hand, which disappeared into his sleeve. "How are you both accepting all this supernatural stuff so quickly?" He pointed at a dryad serving drinks to the other campers. "I mean, she's supposed to be a tree spirit? How do we know that's not cosplay or something?"

"You really don't believe?" asked Olu.

"Why should I?" Noah's voice crept higher in panic. He looked like a turtle retreating into his puffy quilted polyester shell. "I've never seen anything supernatural in my life!"

At that exact moment, a sphere of light burst over their table, spinning with the vibrant colors of a rainbow. The newcomers yelped. Noah nearly fell off the bench. Even more seasoned campers

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turned and stared in amazement, as this was not something that normally happened at the dinner table.

Nico knew exactly what this was: an Iris-message, though he'd never seen one so large and bright before.

A voice spoke from the glowing portal: "Nico! Are you there?"

His heart leaped. "Hazel? Is that you?"

The image shimmered into focus: his half sister Hazel Levesque, looking regal in her purple robes and Roman-style armor, her dark hair braided with gold laurel leaves. Nico was delighted, but her grim expression told him this was not a social call.

"Of course it's me," she said. "And I'm in trouble. I need your help."

CHAPTER 2



It wasn't easy to calm Noah, who thought he was hallucinating a floating head. Ananya scowled like she was ready to throw said hands at the apparition, while Oludare bounced up and down excitedly.

"That's so cool!" he shouted. "Will we be able to do this? Do we have *magic*?"

"That's a lesson for later," said Nico. "Will, could you, um—"

"Got it," Will said. "Come on, you three. Let's give Nico some space."

He helped Noah, Oludare, and Ananya gather their food and move to another table full of whispering demigods.

Inside her sphere of rainbow light, Hazel raised an eyebrow. "New campers?" she asked.

"We've gotten quite a few recently," said Nico.

"Ah, well . . . that's sort of why I'm calling."

Before she could elaborate, Will rejoined the party, grinning. "It's good to see you, Hazel! I know your brother has been meaning to reach out." He elbowed Nico. "Haven't you?"

Nico winced. "Totally."

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Hazel smirked. She knew Nico wasn't always the best about keeping in touch. "It's fine. I should've called earlier. I heard about your little adventure in the Underworld."

"It was definitely an adventure," Will said. "Maybe not so little." He squeezed Nico's hand. "But I think we did pretty well."

"Pretty well?" Hazel laughed. "Will, you're a child of Apollo, and you survived a trip to Tartarus!"

Nico patted his shoulder. "Yep, that's my Ray of Light."

Will blushed. "Please stop giving me nicknames."

"Nope."

Hazel leaned forward. Her shimmery, disembodied face reminded Nico of the face in the Queen's mirror from *Snow White*, except without the evil. "Well, if you two can stop being heart-crushingly adorable for a second, I do genuinely need your help."

"Of course," Nico said. "What's going on?"

Hazel looked away, pressing her lips together. Her long pause was worrisome. "So . . . there's an issue here at Camp Jupiter. I think you two are the most qualified."

Nico frowned. "To do what?"

"To, uh . . . handle it."

Nico's heart thumped against his ribs. Something must be really wrong. Why was Hazel being so cagey?

"What's going on?" he asked again. "Details, please."

She sighed. "I don't know how much I should say over an Iris-message. You need to see it for yourself."

"See *what*?"

Will cleared his throat. Nico glanced in his direction, and Will's expression said it all: *Give her the benefit of the doubt.*

"All right . . ." Nico relented. "Just tell me—are you in danger?"

Hazel grimaced. "No, not . . . particularly?"

"That isn't very reassuring."

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“Look, it’s about”—she leaned forward even more, like she wanted to share a secret, but this only made her voice loud enough to be heard at the nearby tables—“our new guests at Camp Jupiter.”

Many demigods in the dining pavilion turned to stare in their direction. It wasn’t every day a giant Iris-message sphere appeared in the middle of dinner. It *really* wasn’t often that a message came from Camp Jupiter. Until last year, most Camp Half-Blood demigods weren’t even aware that an alternate, Roman demigod camp existed out on the West Coast. Their first introduction had been when the Romans marched on Long Island and tried to wipe out the Greeks. Kind of a big misunderstanding. Relations were better now, but still distant and uneasy.

“New guests?” Will asked.

“You mean demi—?”

“Not entirely,” Hazel cut in. “Do you trust me?”

Her voice was strained. The tightness around her eyes told Nico how much her mysterious problem was weighing on her spirit.

He softened. “Of course, Hazel. Sorry. I think the overprotective side of me jumped out.”

“I appreciate that. And I can definitely use your backup. Can I just ask the two of you to come here? For a day or two, max? It’ll make more sense when you see.”

Nico grimaced. “I don’t know, Hazel. Of course we *want* to, but Will and I are kinda the only counselors left to help with the new demigods *here*. Mr. D said he needs our help.”

Hazel’s gaze seemed to drift away from him. “Oh, I’m sure he won’t mind!” she said.

Then she winked.

Nico turned around but didn’t catch whomever she was winking at. He then looked to Will, who shrugged. “I’ve always wanted

to visit Camp Jupiter,” he said. “Besides, it can’t be worse than Tartarus.”

“Right,” said Hazel, her eyes shifting. “Definitely not Tartarus.”

She ducked as a blurry shape, like a chicken with fur, whizzed across the surface of the Iris-message, crashing somewhere behind her. From the sound, Nico guessed whatever it was had knocked over a suit of armor.

Nico’s protective instinct flared up again. “What was that?”

Hazel reappeared in the glowing sphere, her hair blown sideways. “It’s fine. I’m fine. I’ll explain everything when you get here, I promise. Thank you!”

The Iris-message flickered out.

Nico frowned at Will. “That was weird, right?”

Will scratched his ear. “I mean . . . *weird* is kind of our specialty. I’m just excited to see the Roman camp!”

Nico wished he could feel as confident. His mind wandered back to his time at Camp Jupiter, where he was considered a son of Pluto. The Roman demigods respected him well enough. Nevertheless, they still considered him an outsider, a visitor—not part of their legion. If his sister Hazel, their top-ranking leader, was facing something she couldn’t handle alone, Nico wasn’t sure how much help he could be.

And yet . . . he had to try. He was responsible for bringing Hazel to Camp Jupiter in the first place. He remembered finding her in the Fields of Asphodel—a ghostly wisp of a spirit, drifting among the black poplar trees along with millions of others.

Unlike most souls in Asphodel, Hazel’s consciousness had been intact. She’d sought him out, grasped his hand, and filled his mind with her life’s story, the injustice of her death, and her intense longing to return to the world of the living. Nico saw this as a second

chance—a way to save a newfound sibling, a fellow child of the Underworld, the way he hadn't been able to save his sister Bianca.

Nico had brought Hazel back from the dead, straight into the war with Gaea. Sometimes he wondered if he'd done her any favors. At the very least, Hazel now deserved all the support he could give her.

"Nico?" Will squeezed his shoulder. "You okay? You left me there for a moment."

Nico glanced down. He expected to see Sadness or Guilt tugging at his shoelaces, but none of his Cocoa Puffs were nearby. Nico's mind was churning out the dark feelings all on its own.

Focus, Nico told himself. This has to be what Mr. D means about staying present.

He offered Will a weak smile. "Sorry. I just wish I knew what was going on over there."

"I know." Will leaned over and kissed his cheek. He didn't ask what Nico was feeling. He didn't need to. Nico appreciated that his boyfriend knew him so well.

"The good news," Will continued, "is that we get to *do* something about it. Let's go talk to Mr. D and Chiron."

By the time they'd crossed the pavilion to where the two directors were seated, it was clear to Nico that they already knew what the demigods were about to ask. Chiron was tugging pensively at his beard. Mr. D wore a huge grin on his face, like he'd just thought of a new kind of animal he could turn his enemies into.

"You demigods never fail to entertain me." The god raised his goblet of grape juice. "Always something dramatic happening!"

Nico frowned. "Wait," he said. "Was Hazel winking at *you*? Were you eavesdropping?!"

Mr. D slurped his juice so loudly it made Nico cringe. "My boy, everyone in the pavilion overheard that Iris-message. Besides, I still

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have decades left in this prison. I think I am allowed the diversion of eavesdropping on my campers.”

Chiron rolled his eyes. “That’s actually quite problematic, Mr. D.”

“Oh, pish. If that girl Hazel hadn’t wanted me to overhear, she shouldn’t have appeared in a giant glowing bubble while I was having dinner.”

“Anyway,” Will interrupted, “it saves us an explanation. We won’t be gone long. Just a day or two. That’s cool with you, right?”

Chiron didn’t look convinced. The old centaur was in “human mode” today, his stallion lower half hidden in a magical wheelchair so he appeared to be a distinguished-looking teacher with graying hair and a rumpled tweed suit. Honestly, though, Nico found this look even more daunting than Chiron in full equestrian mode, maybe because he’d had some very strict teachers when he was a kid in Italy.

“What about our three new campers?” Chiron said. “They’re in need of your guidance.”

“We can fill them in some more this evening!” Will offered. “Then we’ll leave tomorrow.”

Nico nodded. “Plus, they might benefit more from talking to two adults. . . .”

Mr. D looked to either side, as if trying to find the “adults” to whom Nico was referring. “I’m sorry. Are you telling me to work more, Nico di Angelo?”

Nico couldn’t help but laugh. “Have you ever worked a day in your life, Mr. D?”

“That’s an egregious insult.” The camp director winked at him. “Despite the possible truth in that question.”

Chiron sighed. “Whatever the case, I’m not sure we need to have you *both* leaving if it’s not for a quest.”

Nico gave him his best puppy-dog eyes. “But a fellow demigod

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has asked for our help. Surely you don't want us ignoring her in her time of need?"

"A point for Mr. di Angelo," drawled Mr. D. "Is our venerable activities director really telling the demigods under his purview to ignore the harried, desperate call of one of their own?"

"Whose side are you on?" Chiron grumbled.

Mr. D grinned. "My own. Of course."

Chiron scratched his beard, muttering something about unhelpful wine deities. He considered Nico's plaintive expression. "I suppose we could handle Noah, Ananya, and Oludare's orientation for the next couple of days."

"I'll teach Noah how to ride Peleus," Mr. D offered.

Will's eyes went wide. "You can *ride* the dragon?"

"No!" Chiron said sharply. "You can't!"

"Not with that attitude, Chiron," said Mr. D. "That boy Noah nearly passed away from an Iris-message. He needs to be thrown into the deep end to get his demigod legs. It'll be fun!"

Chiron decided to ignore him, which was often the wisest strategy when dealing with Mr. D.

"Nico and Will, you two have been working very hard," Chiron conceded. "Perhaps a change of scenery would do you good. Just stay in contact, especially if you think you'll need more time out west."

Despite his misgivings, Nico felt a burst of excitement. "Thank you!"

"And I'll expect hourly reports," said Mr. D.

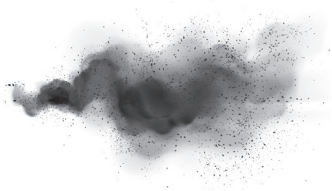
Nico froze. "Wait. Seriously?"

"Of course not." The god laughed. "Can you imagine me caring that much? Besides, my network of minions will keep me updated if anything interesting happens." He faced Chiron. "Now, about these

riding lessons on our fire-breathing dragon. Where do you think we can source an asbestos saddle?”

As the two demigods headed out of the dining pavilion and toward the cabins, Will leaned close to Nico. “Does Mr. D *actually* have a network of minions?”

“To be honest,” Nico said, “nothing about him would surprise me anymore.”



Nico wasn't big on packing. Usually, he just rushed off on an adventure and left the whole *What am I wearing tomorrow?* question for later. But Will was quick to remind him how useful his supplies had been on their journey into Tartarus.

“Imagine if I hadn't had my sun-therapy globe,” Will said, stuffing his backpack with an extra hoodie and some snacks. “Or my first aid kit.”

“We're going to a camp for demigods,” Nico said. “They have food. They have medical supplies. We can even get you one of their purple shirts if you want.”

Will grinned. “I do look good in purple. Would the shirt say *My Boyfriend Went to Camp Jupiter and All He Got Me Was This Lousy T-Shirt?*”

Nico was only half listening. He paced around the Apollo cabin, wondering what it would be like when he saw Hazel. What would she think of the Cocoa Puffs? Had their father spoken to her recently? A million questions. He was also thinking about his friend Jason Grace, the former praetor of Camp Jupiter—another

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blond demigod who looked good in purple. Nico had loved him like a brother, and he was now gone forever. Maybe putting Will in a purple SPQR shirt wasn't such a great idea. Nico wasn't sure his heart could bear it.

Will sat on his bed and began to roll sock pairs into balls. "I know you're restless. I imagine you want to leave right now, but tomorrow is better. Good night's sleep and all that."

Nico kept pacing.

"Hey," Will said. "Lord of Darkness."

Nico paused. "What?"

Will pushed aside his miniature mountain of socks. He tapped the bed next to him. "Sit."

Irritation flared in Nico's chest. Will was a little too good at cutting through Nico's posturing, or his attempts to avoid the truth. He meant well, though. Nico took a deep breath and settled in beside his boyfriend.

"Sorry," Nico said. "You're right. I am a bit antsy."

"You usually are before quests."

"But this isn't a quest."

Will nodded. "And . . . ?"

"And what?"

"Would you prefer that it *was*?"

Nico raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Will put his hand in a blue sock as if checking for holes. "I mean that the last three months have been peaceful, right? Just hanging out. Living life. I, for one, have been happy not to be chased by murderous pigeons or pelted by acid rain on a daily basis."

"I too am glad we're not currently suffering."

"But *are* you glad?"

Nico gasped. "Will!"

“Sorry, that came out harsh.” Will held up his sock puppet and ventriloquized. “Maybe I’m overanalyzing you.”

“Maybe not,” Nico said, tugging the sock off Will’s hand. “I get where you’re going. I’ve been running my whole life. From my childhood or monsters or grief. Now that I don’t have to do that anymore—”

“It feels weird?”

Nico nodded. “I know a lot of us have to deal with ADHD, but with ADHD, you find the most interesting thing, and you can laser-focus on it, right?”

“That’s how demigods are built,” Will agreed.

“But when there’s no threat, no quest . . .” Nico hesitated. He’d talked himself into a corner. He didn’t want to imply that Will *wasn’t* the most interesting thing in his life, or that he wasn’t deserving of Nico’s full focus.

“I’m having a hard time just existing,” he said at last. “I’m worried that I have nothing to worry about. I have no idea if that makes any sense. I keep thinking there’s some monster looming around the corner, ready to pounce on me.”

“And in a way,” Will said, “fighting a monster would be a relief. Because you’re used to that.”

Nico put his head on Will’s shoulder. “Am I broken, Doc?”

Will laughed gently. “Not even a little. But you’re about to go see your sister and a whole different set of friends. Whatever is going on at Camp Jupiter, we won’t have a quest to guide us. There’s no checklist. I’m betting it’ll be more about listening to them, reconnecting, hanging out together. Living life.”

“The hard stuff,” Nico grumbled.

“Exactly,” Will said. “The best help you can offer Hazel is just to be present for her.”

“‘Be present.’” Nico made air quotes around the words. “That’s what Mr. D is always telling me. He’s got me doing all these exercises . . . like if I don’t, I’ll slip into the past or the future.”

“Are you a time traveler, Nico?”

“That’s what *I* wondered! If so, I’m not using my powers correctly.”

Will grabbed his hand. “Well, I am happy to practice staying in our current timeline with you. You just have to ask.”

“Thanks, sunshine.”

Will stood. “Anyway. Not enough socks. Gotta pack more.”

Nico groaned. He slid off the bed and onto the floor. “Will, it’s only *two days*.”

“Maybe so,” Will said, “but what if we end up fighting a monster after all, and its weakness is wool socks? Then you won’t think I’m so silly.”

“The day that happens, I’ll *eat* one of your socks.”

Will tossed a rolled-up pair at him, but Nico dodged it. He lay there staring at the ceiling as Will finished packing.

Nico wondered if he was going to feel this on edge, this vigilant, for the rest of his life. There had to come a time when he could simply relax and learn to *enjoy* relaxing, right?

He still wasn’t sure.

CHAPTER 3



“O h, absolutely not.”

The next morning, Nico and Will stood outside the Big House, watching the camp’s white Delphi Strawberry Service van pull up.

Nico crossed his arms over his chest. He frowned at Chiron, who was playing cards with Mr. D on the front porch.

“I know you don’t like me shadow-traveling so far,” Nico said, “but riding across the country with *him* would take way too long!”

Argus, the many-eyed giant who was the camp’s head of security, parked in front of them. He hopped out just in time to hear Nico’s complaint.

“No offense, Argus,” Will hastened to add, “your company is wonderful, but driving from here to California would take like a week.”

Argus’s shoulders slumped. He blinked his large blue eyes—the ones all over his head, the ones on his forearms, the ones on his shins between his safari shorts and his tennis shoes. Nico wished the giant would say something—just to confirm the rumor that he

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had an eye on his tongue—but as usual, Argus stayed silent. He glumly held up an index finger.

“It would only take one day,” Chiron translated. “The van is quite speedy, and Argus was looking forward to the adventure. Besides, Nico, you’re correct. I worry when you shadow-travel such long distances. One of these days, you may enter the shadow world and not be able to get back.”

The centaur looked at Will for support.

Will winced. “Usually, I’d be on your side, Chiron. But this time, Nico has a point. The sooner we get to Camp Jupiter, the sooner we can help.”

“Also, I’ve come prepared!” Nico reached into the pockets of his bomber jacket. He pulled out a bag of homemade granola bars—gifts from Juniper—and a turkey-and-cheese sandwich that he’d pilfered from the kitchen. “If I start feeling faint, I’ll eat!”

“Plus, we’ll have the Cocoa Puffs,” added Will. “They’ll watch out for Nico.”

Right on cue, the ragtag army of cacodemons bounced out from their hiding place under the porch. They swarmed Nico’s feet, yipping with excitement.

“Ah, but you haven’t shadow-traveled with them yet, have you?” Mr. D gave Nico a sinister smile. “How do you know they won’t slow you down? Or cause you to spontaneously combust mid-flight?”

“Dionysus . . .” Chiron chided.

Mr. D gave him an innocent look, like *Who, me?* “I’m just saying it could happen.”

The wine god took a sip from a golden Capri Sun juice pouch. Nico didn’t even know Capri Sun *came* in gold pouches. Maybe they had a marketing deal with the makers of divine nectar.

“Well, if I combust, I combust,” Nico said. “I can think of worse ways to go.”

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Mr. D laughed. "That's the spirit!"

"It is most definitely *not* the spirit," Chiron grumbled. "Let's not jinx their trip before it begins."

"Oh, grow up, Chi," said Mr. D. "Live a little! Let the demigods make mistakes!"

"Hmph," said Chiron. He looked at Argus. "Thank you, my friend, but it appears we will not need your chauffeur services today after all. You can continue with your normal strawberry-delivery schedule."

Argus didn't seem to like that idea, judging from the thirty or forty stink-eyes he gave Nico, but the giant nodded, got back in the van, and drove away.

"Well!" Mr. D. tossed the Capri Sun over his shoulder. "I do hope your trip to that *wretched* Camp Jupiter goes well, boys. Keep me updated. And as for you, little demons . . ." He leaned forward to study the Cocoa Puffs, who retreated behind Nico with a nervous chorus of *Eep! Eep! Eep!*

"Live your best life," Mr. D told the cacodemons. "Follow your hearts. Sow chaos and discord. Bye, now!" He snapped his fingers and disappeared in a burst of glitter.

"He's never going to change, is he?" asked Will.

Chiron threw his playing cards on the table. "I doubt it. He always disappears just as I'm about to win."

Nico smirked. "I kind of hope he stays the way he is. It's entertaining." He faced Will. "You ready to go?"

Will grabbed the straps of his canvas backpack. "Ready as ever!"

"Please do be careful," said Chiron. "I am not supposed to pick favorites among my charges, but I would be lying if I didn't admit I have grown very fond of you two."

Nico felt heat rise in his cheeks. "Thanks. I promise we'll do our best."

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The activities director waved farewell. "And say hello to all our friends there for me!"

Nico waved back, and then led Will down the path toward the woods. The Cocoa Puffs followed, bumping into one another in a race to be closest to Nico.

At the edge of the forest, where the trunk of an old oak tree blocked the morning sun, they found a nice patch of darkness—perfect for stepping into the shadow world.

"Stay close, Puffs," he said.

Grief grabbed one of his bootlaces. The rest of the Puffs formed a chain behind like they were ready to line-dance to "Old Town Road" all the way to Tartarus.

Will took a deep breath. "I'll never get used to this."

But for Nico di Angelo, son of Hades, returning to the darkness came as easily as thought.

He wrapped his arms around Will. Then he pictured their destination: the western entrance of Caldecott Tunnel, high in the Oakland Hills, where traffic whizzed back and forth day and night on Highway 24. Between the tunnel's two main bores, unnoticed by mortals, stood a set of metal doors, always guarded by Roman sentries. . . .

Nico and Will fell into shadow. The sensation was like flying blind at light speed through a sleet storm—not exactly the most pleasant thing. He worried about Will, who had never shadow-traveled this far before. Nico could feel the Cocoa Puffs dragging at his bootlace, as if they'd become heavier in the shadow world. He really hoped they didn't pull the boot off mid-journey. Otherwise, he'd arrive in California with one shoe and no demons.

The experience was over almost as soon as it began. Nico tumbled to his knees in a stand of sagebrush. His head spun. He was dimly aware of Will crawling to one side, retching up his breakfast.

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The protein bar Nico had eaten earlier was also threatening to come up. The Cocoa Puffs were the only ones who seemed okay. They hopped around in the weeds, yipping excitedly, like *Again! Again!*

“Will?” Nico called.

“I’m good.” More retching. “You?”

Nico got to his feet slowly, fighting off the wooziness. “Yeah. We made it.”

In fact, Nico couldn’t have gotten them any closer. They’d appeared in the median of Highway 24, in a stretch of weeds and wildflowers right at the base of the tunnel. Just outside the guard-rails, cars whizzed by in both directions. To the west, foothills sloped into the flatlands of the East Bay. Beyond that, a blanket of fog covered the bay, pierced only by the towers of bridges, and beyond that in the distance, the San Francisco skyline. The air was cool and damp, scented with the pungent tang of eucalyptus trees.

Will stood, wiping his mouth. His forehead was beaded with sweat. “Wow. That view.”

“Yeah,” Nico agreed. “But look behind you.”

Will turned. At the top of the slope, just as Nico remembered, metal double doors were fixed in the side of the hill between the concrete art deco facades of the tunnel’s entrances. The doors opened, and two Roman sentries came marching toward them. Each wore full legionnaire armor: golden breastplate, plumed helmet, red cloak, with a shield and spear in either hand and a sheathed gladius at their belt. Just your average heavily armed teenagers, strolling down the middle of a highway.

That was quick, Nico thought. He wondered how the sentries had learned of their arrival. Camp Jupiter must have upgraded their surveillance system since his last visit.

The sentries saluted in unison, thumping their spears against their shields.

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“Welcome, Nico di Angelo!” called the guy on the left. He had light brown skin and curly black hair overflowing the edges of his helmet. “I am Yazan. This is Savannah. We’re here to escort you and the son of Apollo into Camp Jupiter.”

“Wow, so *formal*,” said Will, and then he promptly pitched forward into Savannah’s arms. She was half his size, but somehow she managed to steady Will without impaling him with her spear.

“Oof,” Will said, finding his legs again. “Sorry. Haven’t shadow-traveled in a while.”

“Y-yes,” Savannah said, blushing furiously. “Of course.”

She had a freckled face and coppery-red hair braided down to her waist. When she glanced at Nico’s feet, her bright green eyes widened. “What are those?”

Nico followed her gaze.

Oh, right!

The Cocoa Puffs peered up at the girl. One of them—Defiance—rolled forward and inflated itself, growing spikes like a puffer fish. The message seemed to be *You got a spear? Big deal. Check me out.*

Yazan stepped back hastily. “Are those *monsters*?”

Nico frowned. He didn’t like it when that word was applied to the Puffs. “Not monsters. Cacodemons. They’re with me.”

Yazan seemed to think about this. His instructions had probably not included escorting an army of demonic dust bunnies into camp.

“Very well,” he decided.

Savannah scowled. “Yazan, we can’t allow even *more*—”

“They are our *guests*,” Yazan said, cutting her off. “Please, Nico di Angelo, follow us.”

Nico wondered what Savannah had been about to say—even more *what?*—but he didn’t have time to ask.

The sentries led Nico and Will up the path and through the

metal doors, which slammed shut behind them. Magical torches guttered to life, filling the tunnel with an eerie purple light. The corridor sloped downward into the hillside.

Will shivered. His breath smoked in the cold air. "This is the entrance to Camp Jupiter?"

"Yep," said Yazan.

"But . . . is the whole camp underground?" Will sounded worried—which was fair, considering that the last tunnel they'd been through had led to Tartarus.

Yazan chuckled. "No, no. Once we're through the tunnel . . . Well, you'll see."

"Okay," Will said warily. "Cool."

He fished inside the pouch of his hoodie and produced a Ziploc bag of baked goods. He passed Nico an oatmeal raisin cookie. Then he offered the bag to Yazan and Savannah. "Helps with shadow-travel sickness," he explained. "But I've got plenty."

"Uh . . . I'm good," said Savannah. She was studiously ignoring Defiance, who was dancing around her sandals, trying to pick a fight. "Snacks aren't allowed while on duty."

"Really?" Will looked shocked. "That's a weird rule."

Nico coughed. "He means to say that your rules are different here. But we respect them."

"Yeah," Will agreed, stuffing half a cookie in his mouth. "Respect."

As they made their way through the tunnel, Nico was surprised how quickly his strength recovered. The cookie helped, and his nausea had passed. Now, however, he was starving. Perhaps this was a benefit of staying in one place for months—Nico had built up enough reserved energy to shadow-travel across the country without face-planting.

"I did warn you, right?" he murmured to Will as they walked. "Camp Jupiter is more formal. Stricter. Might take some getting used to."

"I get that," Will said. "I remember Leo Valdez telling me—"

"Leo Valdez?" Yazan whipped his head in Will's direction. "You know the Great and Mighty Leo?"

Will raised an eyebrow. "Uh . . . yeah. I can attest that he's a great and mighty goofball."

"And sometimes a jerk," Nico added. "He likes to trick people who don't know any better into calling him the Great and Mighty Leo. Also, he doesn't tell his friends when he comes back from the dead."

"What?!" cried Yazan. "The Great—I mean Leo Valdez *died*!"

"No, he—" Nico put his hand on his forehead. "Don't worry about it. He's very much alive. Shall we continue?"

Finally, a brightness grew at the far end of the tunnel. They stepped into the sunlight, and Will gasped. "Oh. My. Gods."

Nico would always have an affinity for Camp Half-Blood. (And he certainly believed it was the superior camp, thank you very much.) But the idyllic panorama spread out below them *was* beautiful.

Much like Camp Half-Blood, the Romans' bowl-shaped valley was hidden from the eyes of mortals. Unlike Camp Half-Blood, an entire miniature society was nestled inside this ring of verdant hills.

The Little Tiber etched a glittering blue crescent around the western half of the valley, emptying into a crystal-clear lake right in the center, dotted with triremes and fishing boats.

Just across the river from where Nico stood, the fortifications of Camp Jupiter itself looked as formidable as ever: high wooden walls with sentry towers at each corner, surrounded by a moat lined with sharpened stakes. Inside the walls, identical barracks lined the

Via Principalis—everything neat and orderly. Nico could see soldiers of the Twelfth Legion bustling about on their daily routines—marching in columns, polishing their armor, sparring with swords and spears. If a legionnaire from ancient Rome had materialized inside Camp Jupiter, they would have felt right at home. The Twelfth Legion had constructed their base exactly like every Roman legion had for the entire history of the empire.

To the north stretched the Field of Mars—a vast training ground that was part construction zone, part war-game playground, part postapocalyptic wasteland. Nico had almost died on that field a couple of times. The Romans took their training exercises seriously.

To the south, the vast complex of monuments and shrines on Temple Hill glittered in the sunlight. Smoke rose from the altar of the largest temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Somewhere below that, Nico knew, literally in Jupiter's shadow, crouched a much smaller shrine to Pluto—the Roman alter ego of Nico's father.

Finally, Nico's eyes drifted east, across the lake, to the real jewel box of the valley: New Rome. It was a small city, housing barely more than a few thousand, but it was built to have everything a discerning Roman citizen might want. The Forum would be full of merchants and shoppers this morning, Nico imagined, between the gold dome of the Senate House and the gleaming white Colosseum. Somewhere in the city, amid the winding streets, gardens and villas, cafés, and theaters, Nico's friend Tyson the Cyclops ran a bookstore with his girlfriend, Ella the harpy. Percy Jackson and Annabeth Chase would be attending classes at New Rome University.

The idea warmed Nico's heart, but it also made him feel a little wistful. The Romans did one thing very well: they *planned*. This valley wasn't just a training camp. It offered a home for life to anyone who graduated from the legion. Demigods could live here forever,

follow their dreams, get married, raise a family—whatever they wished, all in relative safety.

It was the ultimate lesson in being present, Nico thought. Staying put. Living life. All those things Mr. D had been trying to teach him. Maybe that's why the place made him feel so uncomfortable.

"Welcome to our camp," said Yazan proudly.

"You're kidding me." Will gave Nico an accusatory look. "*This is Camp Jupiter? You did a terrible job describing it!*"

Nico shrugged. "I still prefer our slice of woodsy chaos. But yeah, this place is gorgeous."

Savannah marched over to a nearby sentry hut. She hefted a bronze horn and blew a signal blast that echoed across the valley. A moment later, a horn answered from Camp Jupiter. The Decumanian Gate swung open, and a mounted figure galloped up the road in their direction.

Nico grinned. He recognized that brown stallion, the rider's flowing purple cloak, her praetorian armor, her long dark curls.

He was glad he'd recovered from his shadow-travel, because he actually had the energy to run down the hill to meet her. "Hazel!" he cried.

Arion, her superfast steed, covered the distance between them in seconds. Hazel swung down from the saddle with the grace of a seasoned cowhand and ran to embrace Nico.

He buried his face in his sister's shoulder and held her tightly. She smelled of sweet, freshly turned earth.

Images flashed unbidden through his mind:

Bianca in the Lotus Hotel.

His mother gazing at him lovingly.

Apollo outside the Big House.

He pulled away and discovered Grief sitting on his shoulder, its tiny appendages stretching toward Hazel as if it, too, wanted a hug.

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Arion whinnied in alarm. Hazel gasped and stepped back, her hand closing around the hilt of her spatha. “Nico, what is that?”

“It’s okay!” Nico told her. “They’re with me!”

She kept her grip on her cavalry sword. “*They?*”

The rest of the cacodemons came tumbling down the hill, followed by Will, Yazan, and Savannah.

“Hazel!” Will beamed like he was having the best day of his life. “Nice to see you again! Say hello to the Cocoa Puffs.”

The cacodemons formed a bouncing, yipping semicircle of fuzzy darkness at her feet.

She took her hand off her sword hilt and knelt like she was about to pet a cute dog. “The Cocoa Puffs? Oh my gods, they’re *adorable*! What exactly are they?”

“That’s a long story,” said Nico. “I can tell you la—”

She extended one finger toward the single-eyed, urchin-like Puff.

“Wait!” Nico said.

Too late. She touched the top of its . . . head? Body? Nico wasn’t sure because Loneliness’s whole body *was* its head. It didn’t matter. Hazel’s face went blank. Tears sprang to her eyes.

Nico scooped up Loneliness. More images flooded his mind—his days alone inside a giant bronze jar, his time wandering the dark corridors of the Labyrinth—but he was braced for them. He put the Cocoa Puff aside and turned to Hazel. “Sorry about that.”

She wiped her eyes. “What . . . what just happened? I was back in the Fields of Asphodel.”

“The cacodemons can trigger your memories,” explained Nico. “While we were in Tartarus, a very old god created them from my psyche. They’re basically personifications of my emotions.”

Hazel blinked. “I’ve heard and seen a lot of things as a demigod, but cacodemons?” She shook her head. “I guess there are still new things to learn in this world.”

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"We're still learning about them too," Will said. "They seem to be reaching out to other people more often now. We think it's their way of communicating."

Next to Nico, Yazan shifted nervously. "I'm sorry, Praetor. Perhaps I shouldn't have allowed the demons in."

"No, it's fine." Hazel managed a smile. "My brother is welcome, and so are his personified emotions. Yazan, Savannah, you've done a good job. You may return to guard duty. And, Arion, thank you, my friend. I can walk back."

The horse nuzzled the side of Hazel's head, messing up her hair with a sloppy kiss. Then he disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Yazan hesitated. Maybe he was curious to see what would happen next. But Savannah grabbed his wrist. With a respectful nod to Hazel, and one last suspicious look at Nico, she led Yazan back up the road to the tunnel.

"Those two are new here," Hazel explained. "Yazan's father is Vesper, the god of dusk. Savannah is a legacy. Third generation. She's, um, had a particularly hard time."

Nico filed that away to ask about later. Demigods all tended to have rough lives, at least until they grew into adulthood, got fully trained, and learned to survive in the mortal world. If Hazel made a point of saying Savannah's life had been particularly hard . . . it must've been bad indeed.

At the moment, though, he had more burning concerns.

"So, now that we're here," he said, "can you tell us what's going on?"

Hazel grimaced. She looked suddenly weary, as she had on yesterday's Iris-message. "I think it's best if I just show you. Come on."

As they crossed the footbridge over the Little Tiber, Will peppered Hazel with questions: How was Frank, her boyfriend and co-praetor? How had they managed to repair Camp Jupiter so

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quickly after the Battle of San Francisco Bay? What was her favorite meal in the mess hall?

Hazel laughed. "Wow, I've missed you, Will. I always feel so much more interesting in your presence."

"Good," he said. "Because I want to know everything."

She squeezed his arm. "You might regret saying that. Because what I'm about to show you is a lot." She nodded at the guards at the Decumanian Gate, and led them into the camp.

Nico's heart began to race—partly because it had been so long since he'd been here, and partly because Hazel was being so cryptic. It wasn't like her to withhold information.

Demigods in purple shirts crowded the Via Principalis. Some were off-duty, heading to baths or standing in line for coffee at the kiosk of Bombilo, the two-headed barista. A couple of legionnaires were scrubbing graffiti off a barracks wall, a sight that Nico found very strange. Graffiti was a major breach of army discipline. Stranger still, the white paint read *NON INIMICOS LICET*—Latin for *No enemies allowed*. Why would someone write that in the middle of camp?

Will didn't seem fazed by anything until he saw his first *Lar*.

Floating toward them was a ghostly purple apparition—an older man in a toga and sandals. When he saw Will, his face turned livid. "*Graecus!*" he shouted. "Kill the *graecus!*"

"Theo," Hazel chided the ghost, "we've talked about this. The Greek campers are not our enemies anymore. Will is our guest."

"Hmph." Theo sneered. "Back in my day . . ."

He turned and floated away, grumbling in Latin.

"Sorry about that," Hazel told Will. "Ancestral spirits. Most of the *Lares* are nicer than Theo."

"Fascinating," Will said. "And I thought it was weird that we have a *dragon*."

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“Oh, there’s much more to come,” Hazel warned.

She led them south, away from the headquarters and shops. Nico smelled the stables before they reached them. *Then* he got a whiff of the latrines. *Gross*, he thought. Most of Tartarus hadn’t smelled that bad.

There, in the back corner of camp, stood the last barracks. It looked like all the others—a sturdy wooden structure, freshly painted and well-maintained, but the smells from the neighborhood definitely made it the least desirable location to bunk.

Hazel walked up to the door and put her hand on it.

“The Fifth Cohort,” she said. “My old home.”

Nico nodded. “Didn’t Percy stay here, too?”

“Yeah. And Jason. And Frank.”

“All the best people,” Will observed.

Hazel winced. “Most legionnaires would disagree. Historically, the Fifth Cohort has been for the demigods who didn’t fit in. It has a terrible reputation.”

“So . . . this is where we’ll be staying, then?” Will guessed.

Hazel seemed lost in thought. It took her a moment to answer. “No. I’ll show you your accommodations later. I brought you here because the Fifth is on patrol in the hills this morning. I figured it was the best place for him to wait.”

Nico’s insides started to form a knot. “Who is *him*?”

“I need you both to trust me,” Hazel said.

“Of course,” Will said.

“Why *wouldn’t* we?” Nico added. “Also . . . who is *him*?”

The ground rumbled beneath Nico’s feet, and tiny cracks appeared in the dirt. Skeletal fingertips began wriggling upward like earthworms escaping a flood. Without meaning to do it, he had started to raise the dead.

Will put a calming hand on his shoulder, and Nico relaxed. The dirt stopped trembling. The cracks closed.

Hazel kept her eyes fixed on the door of the barracks. “Just . . . promise me you won’t freak out.”

Nico nodded, though he was totally freaking out.

“Okay.” Hazel took a deep breath. She looked *terrified*. “Come on in.”

She pushed through the doorway and Nico followed. It took his eyes a moment to adjust from the brightness of the morning. Rows of tidy bunk beds lined the walls. In the shadows at the far end of the room, sitting on a footlocker, was a figure that Nico’s mind couldn’t quite process.

Humanoid . . . sort of, but this guy was way too big to be human. He looked like a bodybuilder who had swallowed three other bodybuilders. And from the shoulders up . . . Nico’s first thought was that the guy was wearing a massive, exaggerated papier-mâché head, like the cabezudos he’d once seen at a Puerto Rican festival.

Will pushed in behind him. “What is it? Who— Oh . . .” His voice died as the creature rose to its feet. Its head nearly scraped the ceiling. It filled the space so impossibly that Nico forgot his promise to stay calm. His hand drifted to the pommel of his Stygian iron sword.

“Nico, stop!” Hazel gripped his wrist. “I can explain!”

He watched in horror as the creature stepped forward. It wore nothing but a blue cloth wrapped around its torso—a bath towel? A kilt? Thick fur covered its upper body, which was so bulked-up the creature could probably have bench-pressed the Statue of Liberty. Nico’s gaze traveled up to its bovine snout, the golden ring piercing its nostrils, the massive brown eyes, and the curved white horns that tapered to deadly points.