



‘Nico di Angelo, why don’t you tell me a story?’

Nico bristled at that. A story? *Any* old story? That seemed too easy after everything they’d been through.

After all the suffering.

He looked to Will briefly, and his boyfriend arched an eyebrow. He looked tired. *Too* tired. And his bandages . . .

Nico’s stomach rolled. The gauze strips were soaked through with blood again.

He turned back to Gorgyra. ‘A story about *what?*’ he asked.

The nymph examined Nico’s face, then Will’s. Was she going to pull soul threads out of them again?

Nico felt something brush his knuckles. He glanced down and saw that Will was trying to hold his hand. He opened his fingers and let Will slip his in between.

Nico’s heart sank. Will’s grip was *very* weak.

Nico had to do this. He *had* to finish what they had started.

The whispers called out to him.

And then Gorgyra did, too.

‘Tell me about the two of *you,*’ she said.

CHAPTER



Nico faced the worst decision of his life, and he was certain he was going to mess it up.

‘I can’t do this,’ he said to Will Solace, the stunningly beautiful son of Apollo, who stood across from him. But it was Austin Lake – one of Will’s half-siblings – Nico chose to focus on. He was pacing behind Will, which only made Nico more nervous.

‘Stop moving, Austin,’ said Nico. ‘I can’t concentrate.’

‘Sorry, dude,’ said Austin. ‘This is just so stressful.’

‘You gotta choose,’ Will said to Nico. ‘Those are the rules.’

Nico frowned. ‘I’m the son of Hades. I don’t live by most rules.’

‘But you *did* agree to these,’ said Kayla Knowles, another child of Apollo. She twirled a cherry lollipop in her mouth. ‘Are you a demigod without honour, Nico di Angelo?’

Austin kept pacing. ‘To be fair, I don’t think this task requires any *actual* honour.’

‘Quiet!’ said Nico, running his hands through his hair. What if he made the wrong choice? Would Will be disappointed in him?

But studying Will’s face, Nico saw only anticipation. The good

kind. Will was ready for whatever Nico would say, and no matter how this ended, Will would still think just as highly of him.

What did I ever do to deserve him? Nico wondered. He asked himself that question a lot.

‘Okay, I’ve made my decision,’ said Nico.

‘I might explode,’ said Austin.

‘The world might end,’ said Kayla, now holding the lollipop at her side, her eyes bright with anxiety. ‘Like, *actually* end this time.’

‘So,’ said Nico, ‘if I had to choose . . .’

‘Yes?’ prompted Will. ‘You would choose . . .?’

Nico took a deep breath.

‘Darth Vader.’

Will and Kayla groaned, but Austin looked like Nico had just given him a Ferrari as a birthday present.

‘Dude!’ Austin screamed. ‘That is the best answer!’

‘It is the *worst* answer!’ said Kayla. ‘Why would you choose Vader when Kylo Ren is *right there*?’

‘I was hoping for a deep cut,’ Will mused. ‘Maybe someone like General Grievous or Dryden Vos.’

‘Hold on,’ said Nico. ‘I just finished watching all those movies *yesterday*. I can barely remember what happened in the prequels at this point.’ He paused. ‘Were those all actual characters in Star Wars, or are you joking?’

‘Don’t distract from your truth, Nico,’ said Kayla. ‘*Darth Vader*? You’d go on a date with *Darth Vader*?’ She crunched on her lollipop. ‘I’ve lost all joy, Nico. All of it.’

‘Welcome to my world,’ Nico joked. He caught Will grimacing – a brief flicker of one, but he still caught it.

‘This is a safe space,’ said Austin. ‘No judgement allowed for our answers, remember?’

'I take it back,' said Kayla. 'It's an all-judgement space.'

'You're very quiet, Will,' said Nico. 'Especially as *the* number one Star Wars fan in the group.'

'I'm considering all the reasons why you'd give that answer,' he said. 'You might be onto something.'

'He's powerful,' said Nico.

'And decisive,' added Will. 'He'd always know exactly where to go for your date. No arguing about that.'

'Does he take off his helmet to eat?' said Kayla.

Nico laid his hand over his heart. 'Imagine Darth Vader removing his helmet over dinner and then staring longingly into your eyes over the table. Now *that* is romance.'

Will laughed hard, then flashed that brilliant smile of his.

Why, oh why, did it feel like such a victory to make Will laugh? For a long time, Nico had assumed he himself did not have a heart. He was the son of Hades, after all. Love didn't find people like him. But then came . . . Will. Will, who could melt Nico's iciness with a smile. Anyone could have guessed which god was Will's father – he radiated energy and light. Sometimes *literally*, as they had learned in the troglodytes' caverns earlier that year. Will was Apollo's son, through and through.

Maybe that whole saying about opposites attracting was true, because Nico didn't know a single person who was more his opposite. Despite that, they were coming up on a year. *A year together*. Nico had an actual boyfriend.

He still wasn't sure he believed it was real.

The four demigods continued their walk through Camp Half-Blood. There was no fire burning in the amphitheatre. Maybe, since it was starting to cool down on Long Island, Nico and Will would light one tonight. No campers were rushing off to the armoury or the forge; no one was visiting the Cave of the Oracle. The cabins

were empty (aside from Hades's and Apollo's), and that was the clearest sign summer was over.

Nico didn't want to admit it out loud, but he was going to miss . . . well, pretty much all the campers, even though it was at times exhausting to be one of their counsellors. He especially didn't want to say goodbye to Kayla and Austin.

As they passed through the strawberry fields, Nico sensed Kayla's and Austin's tension growing. They'd had to make a difficult decision about their travel arrangements earlier that day, and as the four of them climbed Half-Blood Hill, Kayla and Austin slowed.

'I'm thinking that maybe we should have chosen differently,' said Kayla.

'You sure we'll be fine, Nico?' asked Austin.

'Yeah,' he said. 'I mean . . . no one has ever *died* or anything.'

'That's not nearly as comforting as you think it is!' said Kayla.

'You'll be okay,' said Will, and he put his hand on Austin's shoulder. 'I've heard it's chaotic, maybe a bit nauseating, but you'll make it home safely.'

They reached the summit of the hill, where the Golden Fleece glittered on the lowest branch of the pine tree. Below, Farm Road 3.141 curved around the base of the hill, defining the outer border of camp. On the gravel shoulder, next to a pile of boxes and duffle bags, stood Chiron, the Camp Half-Blood activities director, his equine lower half gleaming white in the afternoon light.

'There you are!' the centaur called out. 'Come along, then.'

None of them hurried. It was obvious to Nico that Kayla and Austin weren't in a rush to leave camp. Almost everyone else had already returned to their 'normal' lives, except . . . well, what was normal for someone like Nico?

Epic battles.

Constantly facing the threat of defeat and death.

The dead talking to him.

Prophecies.

The voice from his dreams bubbled up inside him again now, calling out for help.

Rachel Dare's words haunted him, too. Only he and Will had heard what the Oracle had prophesied a few weeks ago, and Nico hadn't shared it with anyone else yet, not even the other counsellors. Why should he? It hadn't warned of any doomsday threats to Camp Half-Blood. The world was – as far as he knew – safe for now from angry gods or rebellious Titans. Resurrected maniacal Roman emperors were no longer a thing to worry about.

The prophecy merely concerned that lone voice in his dreams, begging for help.

Specifically *Nico's* help.

'Some of the satyrs collected your things,' said Chiron as the four demigods joined him at the road. 'They wish you well on your journey.'

'We might need it,' Kayla grumbled. 'Chiron, just tell us the truth. The Grey Sisters aren't going to kill us, are they?'

'What? No!' He looked aghast. 'At least, they haven't killed anyone so far.'

'You and Nico!' cried Austin, throwing up his hands. 'Both of you think that's an acceptable thing to tell us?'

Chiron's smile lines crinkled around his eyes. 'Now, now, you're demigods. You'll be fine. Try tipping them a few extra drachmas at the start of the trip, though. I've heard that helps make the experience less . . . intense?'

He fished in the pocket of his archery vest, pulled out a golden coin and threw it into the road. '*Stop, O Chariot of Damnation!*'

No sooner had Chiron finished speaking than the taxi arrived.

It did not putter or cruise up to the group. It *appeared*. The coin

sank into the road, tendrils of dark smoke curled upward, the tarmac twisted, and the Grey Sisters' taxi erupted into being. It *looked* like a taxi all right, but its edges swirled and wafted if you stared at it too long. Nico had heard all about Percy's, Meg's and Apollo's experiences with this particular mode of transportation. They'd repeatedly told him that they even preferred his shadow-travel to the bumpy, vomit-inducing nightmare that was riding in that car. The Grey Sisters had a long history of detesting heroes, and at this point they viewed *every* inhabitant of Camp Half-Blood as a potential hero to be detested.

Nico didn't want to admit it to the others, but he had met the sisters several times on his own, and he kind of liked them. They were thorny. Difficult. Stuck in their ways. Chaotic, yet weirdly dependable. They wore their darkness on their sleeves. For Styx's sake, they all shared a single *eye*. How could Nico *not* appreciate them?

The sisters were in the midst of an argument as one of the rear doors swung open.

'I know exactly what I'm doing, Wasp,' said the old lady sitting shotgun, her stringy grey hair swaying over her face. 'When have I ever *not* known what I'm doing?'

'Oh, *oh!*' screeched Wasp, who sat up front in the middle. 'That's lush. That's a real *lush* opinion, Tempest!'

'Do you even know what *lush* means?' Tempest shot back.

The driver groaned dramatically. 'Are you two *children*? Will you please stop talking?'

Tempest threw her hands up and put on her best imitation of the driver (which confused Nico, since they all sounded identical).

'Oh, my name is Anger, and I'm *sooooo* mature.'

'I will eat the eye,' warned Anger. 'I'll do it.'

'You *wouldn't*,' said Wasp.

THE SUN AND THE STAR

‘With salt and pepper and a little paprika!’ Anger threatened. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘Hi,’ said Austin, hoisting his saxophone case. ‘Is there any way you could pop the trunk? We have some luggage.’

All three Grey Sisters spun towards Austin and spoke in unison: ‘NO!’

They fell back into arguing. Nico decided right then and there that these were his favourite people in the whole world.

Still, he sympathized with Kayla and Austin. As Chiron worked to open the trunk, both demigods looked more frightened than they ever had in the last year.

‘You sure you don’t want me to shadow-travel you to Manhattan?’ Nico offered.

Will sighed. ‘Nico, you can’t use shadow-travel like public transportation. It’ll drain you dry.’

‘It’s okay, Nico,’ Kayla said, sounding like she was trying hard to believe it. ‘We’ll be fine.’

‘Plus, we’re going to different places,’ said Austin. ‘My mom’s meeting me uptown. I actually got into an academy up in Harlem, and she found an apartment for us close by!’

‘Sounds like a good place to end up,’ said Will. ‘Not too far from here.’

‘And there’s so much history in Harlem to explore,’ added Austin. ‘Apparently, one of the clubs where Miles Davis used to play has reopened!’

Nico nodded halfheartedly. He had no idea who that was. It was one of the downsides of not being in the ‘human’ world for very long.

‘What about you, Kayla?’ asked Chiron, loading her archery gear into the trunk.

‘Back to Toronto,’ she said. ‘Dad wanted me to come home, and it’s actually been a while. I’m pretty excited, to be honest.’ Her eyes glinted. ‘Especially to prove that I’m now better than him at archery!’

Austin turned to Nico and Will. ‘So . . . you two are really staying here?’

Nico hoped Will would answer first. The sun falling behind the western hills made Will’s curly blond hair look like it was aflame. For a moment, Nico wondered if Will was using his glow-in-the-dark power.

Either way, it made Nico a little annoyed. Why did Will have to be so beautiful all the time?

‘I think we are,’ said Will, taking Nico’s hand. ‘Mom’s touring for her new album this autumn, and I don’t know if I want to bounce around the country in the back of a van.’

‘Could be fun,’ said Austin. ‘I hope I get to travel because of my music one day.’

Kayla nodded. ‘I wonder what it would be like to see other places without worrying whether some murderous statue is going to kill you.’

‘Oh, come on,’ said Nico. ‘Where’s the fun in that?’

‘Are you going to get in the car?’ Tempest growled. ‘Or are you paying us to listen to your boring conversation?’

She was hanging out of the window with an open palm extended towards them. Austin paid her with three drachmas, tipping her heavily as Chiron had suggested. Tempest examined the coins for a moment – Nico didn’t know how, as she had no eyes behind that thick grey curtain of hair – then grunted. She pulled herself back into the car.

‘Get in,’ she said.

There were quick hugs and cheek kisses, and then Austin and

Kayla climbed into the back seat of the Grey Sisters' taxi. All the while, the sisters continued to argue.

Kayla looked around the cab. 'We've been on worse adventures,' she said to those outside the car.

'Have we?' asked Austin.

'Anyway, hope to see you soon,' said Kayla. 'And don't get into any trouble, you two.'

Austin leaned across Kayla to poke his head out of the window, a mischievous excitement on his face. 'But if there is trouble . . .'

Will waved at them. 'You'll know. Promise.'

'Be safe yourselves!' Chiron called out.

'Drive, Anger! Drive!' screamed Wasp. 'Isn't that what you *do*? Honestly, why do you even sit in that seat if you don't -'

Her words were lost as the taxi jerked forward and disappeared in a blur of grey.

Yep. Nico loved the sisters.

'So, that's it,' said Will. 'They were the last, weren't they?'

'Indeed,' said Chiron. 'Aside from some of the staff, the satyrs, and the dryads, Camp Half-Blood is actually . . . empty.'

The old centaur sounded a bit lost. As far as Nico could recall since he'd started coming here, this was the first time that there were no demigods present. Aside from him and Will, that is.

'This is weird,' said Nico. '*Really* weird.'

'A lot has happened over the past few years,' said Chiron wistfully. 'I understand more than ever why campers would want to go home to be with their families, or to see the world.'

'I guess . . .'

'Now, gentlemen,' said Chiron, dusting off the front of his vest, 'I've got a meeting with Juniper and the dryads about tree rot. Exciting stuff, I assure you. I'll see you at dinner?'

They nodded, then waved as Chiron galloped off.

‘So,’ said Nico, ‘what do we do next?’

Will, still holding Nico’s hand, guided him back up the hill. ‘Well, we don’t have any monsters to slay.’

‘Boo. I could raise a skeleton army to perform a choreographed dance. I bet I could teach them “Single Ladies”, if you like.’

Will chuckled. ‘We don’t have any Roman emperors to locate and dethrone, either.’

Nico flinched. ‘Ugh. Don’t remind me. If I could go the rest of my life without even thinking Nero’s name again, I’d be happy.’

‘That’s a funny joke,’ said Will as they reached the summit.

‘What is?’

‘You,’ said Will. ‘Being happy.’

Nico rolled his eyes.

‘My grumpy little ball of darkness,’ added Will, poking him in the ribs.

‘Ew, gross,’ said Nico, dancing away from him. ‘We are *not* making that a thing.’

‘Did you already forget that I was once your – and I am quoting you here, Nico – “significant annoyance”?’

‘Oh, you’re *still* that,’ said Nico, and then Will was chasing him down the hill, back into camp. In that moment, Nico allowed himself to enjoy the sensation. Will was right: there were no threats whatsoever on the horizon. No Big Bads. No lurking demigod traitors, no hidden monsters waiting to destroy Camp Half-Blood.

But then dread prickled across Nico’s skin. His body was warning him, wasn’t it? *Don’t get too comfortable*, it was telling him. *He’s waiting for you in Tartarus. Or have you forgotten about him like everyone else did?*

Maybe this period of rest wasn’t such a good thing. If Nico didn’t have some terrible monster or villain to fight, then what excuse did he have to ignore the voice any longer?

The truth was, he couldn’t ignore it even if he wanted to. He’d

been visited by so many ghosts over the years. The dead wanted to be heard, and who better to listen to them than the son of Hades?

But *this* voice . . . it did not belong to someone who had passed on. And Nico had never heard someone sound as desperate for help.

So his mood was muted by the time he and Will made it to the dining pavilion after stopping by their cabins to freshen up first. It felt strange to be in this place that was normally so alive. Now there were only a few staff dryads and harpies spread unevenly around the various tables. The camp director, Dionysus – Mr D to all of them – was lounging at the head table with Chiron, who had somehow beaten them to dinner. The two administrators were so deep in conversation that they barely acknowledged Will when he waved.

Even the satyrs who served Nico and Will didn't seem all that thrilled to be doing so. 'This whole place feels like my soul,' Nico joked to Will. 'You know, empty and dark.'

Will swallowed some chicken kebab pieces. 'You're not empty,' he said, then pointed the skewer at Nico. 'You are definitely dark, though.'

'Dark as the pits of the Underworld.'

Will looked down, focusing on his food like it was the most interesting thing he'd ever seen.

'We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to,' said Nico.

Will managed a smile. His warmth was genuine – like it always was, since he was basically a *literal* ray of sunshine – and it softened Nico just a bit. 'We can,' he said. 'Just maybe not now, Nico. Austin and Kayla just left. The camp is calm. Serene. *Quiet*. Let's just appreciate the break, okay?'

Nico nodded, but he wasn't sure how he was supposed to do what Will had requested. When had he *ever* got a break before? If it wasn't dead Roman emperors, it was his father. Or Minos. Or his stepmother, Persephone. It had been years since that particular

incident had happened, but he was *still* annoyed about being turned into a dandelion. A *dandelion*! It was an affront to his aesthetic!

And there were other things he didn't want to remember. Darker things. Ghosts who would probably visit him eventually. Nico stuffed it all down – making a grumpy little ball of darkness inside his chest. Then he forced a smile as he listened to Will talk about all the things they could do that autumn while they stayed at camp.

It would be fine. Everything would be fine.