Strife

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Rating:	Mature
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Categories:	Slash (M/M), Getting Together
Fandoms:	Percy Jackson and the Olympians - Rick Riordan, Percy Jackson and the Olympians & Related Fandoms
Relationship:	Nico di Angelo/Original Male Character(s)
Characters:	Nico di Angelo, Original male character, Semi original characters (stolen from uncle rick)
Additional Tags:	The Horrors of Love, Out of Character (Probably), Terrible Jokes, Happy Ending, Whump, Consensual fist fight, Fighting, Forced Proximity, Denial Of Feelings, Enemies to Lovers, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, rivals to lovers, Enemy to caretaker, Mutual Pining, Sharing a Bed, Hugs, Mutual Support, Slow Burn, seriously I promise they kiss, Idiots in Love, Not Actually Unrequited Love, Fever, Temporary Character Death, Attachment Issues, Graphic use of french, Gay as hell, Gays in hell, Tree Abuse, Attempted Murder, Straight up murder, Mental Illness, Depression, Nightmares, Panic Attacks, Poisoning, Fainting, So much fainting lol, Blood, Daddy Issues, Self Loathing, Mentioned Suicide Attempt, Choking, Implied sexual acts, Canon Relationship Break Up, Lots of t-shirt action, Spooky ghost, Spookier goddess, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Injury, Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Head Injury, Blood and Injury, Angst, Gay Panic, Author's poorly disguised fetishes, Discussed suicide of side character, Aged-Up Character(s), Psychological Trauma, Character Study, But all characters are me, Post-Canon, Fluff and Angst, Explicit(?) sex scene (only in chapter XXX), Chapter 26 is just a wonky drawing and a little cat POV story :)
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Strife

by CryingCircusConductor

Summary

Now in his early twenties, Nico di Angelo, son of Hades, has been going through a rough couple of years dealing with deep rooted mental illness. Things somehow get even worse when he is forced to work together with an 'unhinged psycho' who manages to get on his nerves every step of the way. As they get to know each other better facing various adversities, they learn to respect their similarities and differences. Eventually, 'respect' grows into something Nico finds much harder to deal with.

Blurbs:
“The whiniest emo shit ever written. All of the characters are unbearable and the plot barely makes any sense”
- The New York Times

“Hey, at least it’s free”
- Oprah

“I really just wrote this for myself. You're more than welcome to join, but It's BYOB”
- Me

“I loved it!”
- My husband, for some reason

Notes

Ladies, gents and non-binary friends,

Here is a little explanation as to who I am and what that did to the story I'm about to inflict on you. Not only am I clinically insane (under treatment, don't worry), I am also professionally insane (a licensed psychologist, do worry). My main goal with writing this fanfiction, was to learn to understand, accept and love myself. Even the parts that I hate the most and that cause me the most trouble. That is why every main character in the story is a personification of my most prominent coping styles, and most persistent mental problems.

When I was a very unhappy fifteen year old, I always dreamed of writing, but never dared to. Now, fifteen years and a long bout of intense therapy later, I finally gathered enough nuts to face myself and write what I believe kid me would have loved. All of this is basically a love letter, and an apology to a me I failed before in so many ways. If I'm being honest, I probably vandalized the world of Percy Jackson beyond recognition. I haven't read the books in many,

many years... But it is the world I used to escape to, so I owed it my kid self to go back there at least this once.

If this is where you leave me, I just want to say thank you. Thank you for stopping by, and spending your precious time (what else do we truly have?) listening to what I had to say.

If this is where you go on, aside from thanking you, I want to warn you. I am nowhere near done with treatment. I have no idea how toxic or damaging some of the things I wrote down below can be. When I first started writing I never intended for it to see the light of day. So take care, and make sure to stop when it stops feeling right. This warning might be a laugh in hindsight, but I'd rather turn off every single reader than have my words hurt someone who didn't see it coming. Part of me hopes you'll have fun, part of me hopes it manages to move you, no part of me dares to dream anyone will learn anything from this, but all parts of me appreciate that you were here.

Don't be afraid to let me know what you think. This project is all about bettering myself after all.

Warm regards,
your CryingCircusConductor (Or C3, preferably he/him, but call me whatever!).

Chapter 1: I. Loathe at first sight

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Collapsing, verbal abuse, (consensual) fist fight, threatening behaviour, PTSD is hinted at, accusations of attempted murder.

Nico rushed over the camp grounds, making his way over to the agreed spot. *Almost* making it at the agreed time… He probably still could if he really put whatever was left of his heart and soul into it.

He clicked his tongue in annoyance. Just what exactly had he let Chiron talk him into yesterday…? Nico'd tried to refuse so many times. Until Chiron had *actually* started begging and much worse, *apologizing*… Chiron had figured out one of his biggest weaknesses, the ability to set healthy fucking boundaries... He didn't have trouble saying no, it was doing no that was difficult. Chiron had assured him he was desperate, quickly running out of time, that Nico was the *only* one who could help… and explained *fuck all* else…

Who was he kidding? This was his own fault…

He paced up to the small group of people. He saw a short figure embrace a taller figure. As he got closer he could see there was a lot more warmth from one side than the other. The taller one, a young man he could see now, patted the shorter young woman on the back half heartedly. She released him from her grasp. It wasn't much of a guess who was who.

The short, stout looking girl adjusted her glasses slightly. She picked at her many colourful bracelets with her index finger. The many, many beads rattled as she did. Her heavy framed, square glasses made her angular, dark brown eyes look slightly further apart than they would be naturally. Farsighted, Nico guessed. Her black bobcut framed her pale, round face nicely. Despite her friendly appearance the way she dressed hinted at a slightly serious attitude. Her purple blouse was neatly tucked in and she wore bright yellow, smart looking shoes.

Nico assumed she was the representative of the Apollo cabin joining this mission.

She looked up nervously at the young man in front of her.

Even if he hadn't been tall, compared to her particularly short stature he still would have looked imposing. He stood up straight, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his camouflage print cargo pants. It could have come off as casual if it weren't for his serious, almost angry looking expression. His slightly oversized biker jacket, with its lapels covered entirely in small metal spikes, didn't do much to dispel the somewhat hostile aura he was giving off. His dark blonde hair looked messy, almost gravity defying, sticking up in spiky

strands. The short undercut did little to tame it. An army dog tag hung prominently on his chest.

If Nico hadn’t been sure who was who before, he was now. There was no way this guy wasn’t the Ares cabin candidate.

Clarisse gestured at Nico from behind them. “di Angelo! You're one minute late!” she declared.

“I'm sorry!” he offered. He really was. For showing up at all.

The other two looked at her, then at him. The reaction was mixed, but otherwise surprised. The short young woman widened her eyes but then smiled. He smiled back, putting up a hand. Not such a warm welcome from his other new friend.

“Who the fuck are you?!” He got yelled at. Before Nico could react the young man turned to Clarisse “*Who the fuck is this bloodsucker?!* What's going on?! You said this was going to be a two man job” he spat.

Great… So not only was Nico apparently a vampire, it seems he wasn't even one of the popular ones! What a *perfect* way to start this *dream job*. They hadn’t even started and at least half of his new *colleagues* already hated him…

He took a deep breath. He wasn't exactly doing this for the brownie points, but a little appreciation would be nice. Just keeping his gaze straight ahead, trying to ignore the spark of annoyance he felt, seemed like the best strategy. Too bad he couldn’t.

Nico threw up a hand in frustration. “What does it even matter who I am? We're not here to make friends. We're here because we've got a job to do” he said, shooting him an unimpressed look.

This seemed to set the other young man off. He stepped in front of Nico, staring right into him. Nico noticed he was a little taller than him, probably only one or two inches. His rage added to the fiery intensity of his amber coloured eyes. Their upturned edge and the dark circles underneath only underlined the anger further.

If he hadn’t pissed Nico off so much, he might have actually been intimidated.

Whoever he was ripped into him. “You bet your ass we're not going to be fucking friends, *you spooky looking dork!* It *matters* exactly *because* we've got a job to do! I don't know if you realize, but this is going to be fucking dangerous! *And I don't trust-*”.

“Shut it! *Now*!” Clarisse barked. She grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, making him recoil. “Listen, I love you, but you need to seriously *back down*. Right now! I know what I said, but we’re running out of time here! So we needed to make some adjustments.
I *promise* you that Nico here is more than capable enough for this mission! In fact, the whole thing *depends* on him! He is the one who is going to make sure you all get where you need to go in time. It's not *him* I'm worried about here. So *behave yourself*”.

She pulled him closer. “*Am I clear?*” she added loudly in his ear.

“*Yes, ma’am…*” he replied with a clenched jaw.

“Good!” she said happily, giving him a hard shove back to his spot.

Nico couldn’t help feeling a little smug.

“We’re behind schedule. Let's get on with it and talk objectives. You can get to know each other after. We’ve kept our lord waiting long enough” Clarisse hurried along.

Our lord? Were they actually summoned by a *God?* She gestured to someone behind her. A very large figure slowly came into view.

A *huge* man with long brown hair that seamlessly transitioned into an equally long beard came riding up in an electric wheelchair. Nico could only describe the machine as a small monster truck. Hephaestus unintentionally further strengthened the comparison by driving its large, textured wheels over a freshly fallen tree trunk in a straight line, completely unfazed.

“Hello, youngsters. Good morning. I want to thank you for coming. And apologize for the inconvenience". Hephaestus spoke in a low, calming, naturally authoritarian voice. He ruined it pretty much right after.

“I will ‘*be so for real with you’* as my children would say. The reason I call on you today is that sadly I am having some severe marital problems at the moment…”.

Seriously…?

Nico had to clasp a hand on his mouth to keep his expression in check. He carefully glanced over. His shorter new friend had a face like a statue, showing nothing other than a polite smile. Her eyes looked like they were made of glass. His taller new ‘friend’ seemed to be having a much harder time. He’d opened his mouth in exasperation, clearly about to mouth off again. Clarisse glared some daggers at him, all hitting dead centre. He visibly ground his teeth.

Nico turned his attention back to Hephaestus. *There better be a good story to back this up.*

“Who of you has heard of the myth of Harmonia’s necklace?” The God asked brightly.

None of them reacted. His bright smile died down noticeably.

“Truly? None of you…? It is quite a well known legend… One of my few…” he started complaining.

Clarisse carefully gestured at him. “My lord, the *crushing* time pressure…”.

He picked himself back up. “Of course! It all started one thousand seven hundred and thirty five years ago. Hermes flew into my workshop to enlighten me-”.

Clarisse gestured again, a bit less carefully.

“Apologies…” Hephaestus offered. He stroked his beard a few times pensively. “Wife found out about tryst with favourite mistress, thus intends to kill her with cursed necklace” he summarized. He looked at Clarisse for approval.

“Perfect, my lord” she praised.

He turned back to them, clearly encouraged. “Yes! Please, get it back to me. But, beware! The labyrinth I built to protect it is rife with traps and creatures beyond your wildest imagination! You must take every precaution, lest you perish! On this quest you may-!”.

Clarisse coughed loudly.

“Right… Right…”. He turned the small control on his arm rest, turning his wheelchair as if to drive away. He visibly remembered something. “Remember!” he exclaimed at them dramatically. He paused just long enough to make Nico believe that was going to be *all*, like some sort of senile self-affirmation.

“When you find the necklace you must *never* wear it! In fact, do not handle it in any way that might even resemble wearing it! If you do, the nefarious critters protecting it will follow you to the very ends of the earth to retrieve it. Stopping at nothing! You would not survive! It is a terribly dangerous, highly sophisticated curse. You might even consider it a trap, depending on how you look-”.

Clarisse straight up chopped the air with her hand. *“Thank you, my lord”*.

Hephaestus blinked at her.

“No, thank *you* my dear! All of you have my gratitude! Best of luck to you!” he said happily, putting his wheelchair into gear.

They watched as the God of industrialization drove away in another straight line, right into a tree. His machine tore it down like it was nothing but a speed bump, running two of its large wheels over it all along the length. The tree's branches bristled and broke like a horrifying death rattle as he made his way.

The Gods were… Interesting people…

They turned back to Clarisse, trying to ignore the occasional sound of falling trees in the background. Clarisse clapped her hands together.

“So, we all got that? Good. Now, Nico here is going to use his Hades DNA to get you to the entrance of the cave system. Our lord has been so kind to offer up his personal vacation home right outside of it for you to stay at. Or well… as he called it, *his mancave…”* she paused a second to let her eye get some good twitches in, then instantly regrouped. “Point is, It’ll have everything you need. When you get there, you’re going to split tasks properly and get me that damn necklace from that damn cave! I will see you all here in thirty minutes sharp! Dismissed!”. She clapped her hands again.

His new best friend grunted and walked off. The shorter girl stepped closer and stuck out her hand. Nico shook it.

“Hi, I’m Yan, daughter of Apollo. Sorry about all that earlier… My friend there is Logan, son of Ares. He’s not usually… He’s… He, uh… ”.

Nico held up a hand. “It’s not your fault. Don’t worry about it”. He gave her a reassuring smile. “I’m Nico, son of Hades. Nice to meet you”.

Yan smiled. “I know, we've actually met before back at camp when you used to sit with us. It's been a while, though!”.

Right. Of course.

“How is Will?” he forced himself to ask. He twisted his ring nervously.

Yan smiled brighter. “Good! He still works here actually, I can let him know you're here if you-”.

Nico almost choked and waved wildly with his hands. “*No!”* he shouted desperately, making Yan lean away a bit. “I mean, no thank you... I don't think-”.

Like a beefy guardian angel Clarisse interjected before he could finish stammering himself into a corner. “Nico, I’ll show you the location”.

“Right!” he replied. “See you in half an hour" he told Yan, quickly turning away from her.

Clarisse wasted no time, drilling all the information into his ear loudly and efficiently, occasionally holding up a grainy picture. He tried to absorb as much of it as he could, nodding along. She dismissed him with a quick gesture, then shoved the small piece of paper with the coordinates in his hand.

“Uh, thanks” he said to her back as he watched it walk off.

He looked out over the camp grounds. *Gods,* he hadn't been here in years… For good reason… Suddenly, he was very aware of how *visible* the clearing was from most other parts of camp. *Crap.* He moved away from the opening in the treeline and waited out the rest of the time left.

With how precise Clarisse had been, the wait was luckily not much longer. Even more luckily, she was the first to return. She dropped down three backpacks.

Yan turned up next, walking up so quietly and carefully she almost seemed to appear out of thin air.

Clarisse eyed her watch sternly, then found Logan, apparently exactly in time. Nico ignored the hint of nerves when their eyes met, Logan was clearly in no better mood than before.

Clarisse broke the silence. “Get ready” she ordered.

They each grabbed a back pack and lined up. Nico sighed out the dread inside him and offered up his hands. Yan took one without question. Logan looked taken aback, then ground his teeth and did the same.

Nico took a deep breath. The shadows from the trees nearby reached out to them in long dark streaks. Everything went dark. Cold, quiet whispers flew past. He felt Yan’s grip tighten, her hand turned a little clammy. *Poor thing.* Not much longer, he mentally reassured her. Well, not just *her*, actually.

Shadow travelling always took a lot out of Nico. Especially with multiple people. *Especially* that far away.

He had dragged them all the way to the Kamchatka peninsula, Russia. Just wanting to get it over with, he’d done it in a single jump. However, with the three of them, he’d essentially done so *three* times. He should have remembered how that worked… Then again, it had been years since he’d last brought someone along.

Once they hit the ground at their designated location, Nico immediately staggered. He landed on his knees, hard. Yan yelped. Her bright yellow shoes came into view. With a gasp, he dragged his eyes away from them and onto her face, finding her fussing over him nervously. Nico could barely make out what she was saying.

Yan was a sweet girl, he thought to himself.

He looked at her face more carefully. Her mouth was moving quickly. Suddenly it stopped and she looked at him expectantly.

Crap, she probably asked him something.

“H’m fine! … Really” he panted, hoping he guessed the question right.

It came out a little breathier than he had hoped, but Yan seemed to buy into his facade. At least for now. She smiled and pulled at his arm. Nico groaned, this wasn’t a good time to get up yet. He tried nonetheless, pulling himself up on her arm. Somehow, he got to his feet.

He was still a little wobbly, but he figured he’d manage. He’d have to.

For the first time in a while Logan made himself known. He ripped the backpack from Nico’s back. Nico recoiled, startled at the sudden jolt and relief. He would never give Logan the satisfaction, but that actually helped a lot. He might have even felt grateful if Logan hadn’t opened his mouth.

“Tired already? You better know what you signed yourself up for, Spooky”.

Nico glared at him. He tried to hide his unsteady breath.

Logan met his eyes with a scowl. “If you are going to get yourself in trouble, I don't wanna be the one to have to come save you.” He lowered his voice as he finished the sentence.

“It almost sounds like you’re worried about me” Nico taunted.

Logan rolled his eyes. “Just don’t drag us down with you” he warned as he averted himself from them. There was a short silence before Yan tapped Nico on his shoulder.

“Hey… maybe you should rest for a bit”.

Nico knew she was right. He glanced at Logan and thought about what he had said. There was no way Nico was going to feel like a burden. Especially not from the start! He wasn't just here to move people around.

“Don’t worry about me okay? I’m fine, I mean it” he tried to look reassuring.

Yan seemed less convinced than last time. Maybe he shouldn’t have smiled as wide. Her eyes lingered on him as she turned to the cabin. He looked up at it after her.

It was an interesting looking log cabin. It was obvious a lot of time and care had gone into the design and… Was he still dizzy, or did this cabin have eight chimneys? He exhaled when he realized that, no, it did in fact *not* have eight chimneys… It had *nine.*

He followed after Logan towards the door.

Yan held up the near infinite amount of keys. She sighed at the round, fluffy little donkey dangling underneath the daunting bunch. Based on its googly eyes and goofy little smile, the little jackass seemed a lot more excited to be here than they were.

Nico tried not to fall over while the sound of infinite keys being tried out clinked and rattled in the background.

The lock turned.

He almost caught himself being relieved, then put a quick stop to that as soon as they made their way in and he actually caught sight of all the… *Everything.* There were unfinished inventions on pretty much every flat surface as far as the eye could see. Even parts of the floor. The only thing mixing up the pattern being the tools, open beer cans and soot stains from the many random fireplaces.

Mess was an understatement, this was a-!

“What a fucking dump” Logan complained.

Nico tried his hardest not to, out of sheer spite, but he tragically had to agree.

Yan tried harder. “Well… I wouldn't call it *romantic,* but-”.

Almost as soon as the word left her mouth the many, many fireplaces burst into smouldering, passionate flames. The *loudest,* most out of tune saxophones attacked them from all sides, accompanied by a sultry and even more out of tune voice singing in ancient Greek. Despite the clear inability to sing, the voice had a low, calming, naturally authoritarian-?

“Is that Hephaestus?!” Nico wondered loudly in abject horror.

“Who fucking cares?! How do we get him to shut up?!” Logan wondered louder and more pressingly

“*Stop!*” Yan tried desperately, clapping her hands loudly.

The assault on their senses let up instantly. The fires died down slowly and sizzled out, almost disappointed.

Yan still had her hands pressed together as she turned to them. “Let’s *never* say-”. She caught herself. “That *word* again” she offered.

Nico smiled at her in agreement, not managing to muster much more, and crashed down on a chair.

For fuck’s-!

He’d grazed a terrifyingly *pointy* trap placed on the seat. With a jolt, he quickly grabbed the deadly… What the fuck was this? He rotated the shiny pyramid a few times in his hand, all types of different buttons scattered on all sides.

Some sort of remote control? But, what for? He wondered-?

No. He didn’t wonder, he decided. He tossed it on the table and focussed on trying to stay upright.

Yan was busy explaining to them what she was cooking. Nico wasn’t really listening anymore. He wasn’t going to make it to dinner either, he realized.

He got up with considerably more effort than he anticipated. “Alright… I’m going to bed” he managed.

Yan looked at him with worry. “But it’s only five o clock! And you haven’t eaten anything!”.

Nico looked at her, then Logan. If Nico didn’t know any better even Logan looked a little uneasy. He decided not to dwell on it, and pushed on into the small hallway despite Yan’s protest. Practically in a daze at this point. He’d pretended to be functional long enough. He walked up to the first bed he found, dropped down, and was asleep before his body touched the mattress.

When Nico woke up, it was dark around him. He noticed there was a blanket over him. *Yan,* he figured. He reckoned he probably wouldn't be able to sleep anymore. Luckily, they had their own bathrooms. So, he wouldn't have to worry about waking her.

Nico rolled his eyes at the *two* fireplaces he had to pass on his way. He shouldn't have wasted his eye roll so carelessly… With a very deep sigh, he figured out all the bells and whistles in the shower. *Literal* bells and whistles!

Why?!

Praising all the Gods *except* Hephaestus, he managed to take a *quiet* shower. Without a sound, he got dressed and walked into the hallway. He needed some fresh air.

Apparently, he wasn't the only one up.

Lucky…

Logan opened his door at about the same time Nico did. They both stumbled to a halt, almost running into each other. He needed some time to make him out in the dimly lit hallway.

Logan's expression was one that Nico couldn't really place. He usually looked angry, Nico guessed this time it might have been surprised? *No…* He almost looked *afraid,* but there was no way Logan was scared of him. Nico was about to ask him what he was doing being up at this time when he noticed the cigarette and lighter in Logan's hand.

Ah. Caught.

Nico raised an eyebrow. Logan grimaced in disgust and quickly faced away. Nico clicked his tongue at the sudden disrespect. *Seriously? Like I'm any happier to see you, fucker!*

While glaring at him, Nico noticed he seemed different from before. He'd had an intense, *strained* vibe the entire time. Probably on account of being so *angry* all the time. That was all still there, but he seemed really nervous. Almost *jittery,* maybe even a bit… *Unstable.* Nico could tell he was trembling a little. That was new.

"*Uh.…*" Nico started before he had time to stop himself. "Are you alright?".

Logan huffed loudly, still not looking at him.

Nico decided to give up being cordial. It's not like he even cared anyway. "Whatever, *asshole*. Try to go *insane* a little quietly, Yan's still sleeping" he whispered angrily. He turned away and moved to go outside, more than a little done with all of this.

Logan blocked him, hooking one arm around his chest from behind as Nico walked past. He pressed himself against his back, his hand on Nico's throat with a threatening grip, keeping

him close. Nico felt him lean in over his shoulder.

“*You really don't want to fuck with me right now, I mean it”* he growled quietly into Nico's ear, tightening his grip on his throat a little. Both Logan’s hand and voice were noticeably shaky, but somehow that didn’t take away from the danger he emanated even a bit. If anything, it only made him seem even less stable.

Nico felt a shiver go over him as the words hit his ear. He hoped Logan hadn't noticed. He'd barely been able to concentrate on what he was saying…

Logan let go, shoving him off of him. Nico gasped a little, he hadn't realized he was holding his breath. When Nico didn't move, Logan pushed past him, knocking into his shoulder and stomping off to the front door. Nico watched him as he flung it open. He left it that way, disappearing through the opening.

Al…Right…?

No, not alright!

Not fucking alright at all!

What the fuck?!

Sure, Nico hadn’t been exactly polite, but this seemed like an overreaction even for Logan. As his nerves calmed down his face slowly twisted with rage. He decided not to let it go and paced after him, out the door.

He looked around.

Nowhere? That didn’t make any sense! There was nowhere to go.

He heard quiet but shaky breathing. Looking down at the source, he finally found him. Logan had bent over, crouching next to the door, his face in his hands. The now lit cigarette trembled in his fingers, letting off a jagged trail of smoke.

Nico froze for a second. This wasn’t what he expected. He didn’t really know what he *had* expected. A fight? That didn’t seem like such a good idea anymore.

Logan didn’t seem to have noticed him, too caught up in whatever was on his mind. Nico debated asking him what was up. Neither of them seemed very eager to talk earlier, Logan especially. Nico finally decided to leave him alone, quietly backing away.

He dropped down on his bed and stared at the ceiling. Now he definitely couldn’t sleep anymore….

He waited for the sun to come up.

Yan woke up soon after the sun did. Nico closed his eyes for a while. He listened to her sing to herself while whatever she was doing ticked and clattered.

Time to face the music… He got up and walked into the front room.

“Morning” he mustered.

Logan didn’t look up. He looked pissed off, but mostly very tired. Nico decided not to care about it either way.

“Morning!” Yan chimed. “Did you manage to rest up a bit?” she asked cheerfully.

“Yeah, I’m a lot better”.

Yan hummed in approval, turning her attention back to her breakfast. Nico tried his best to keep up with Yan’s stories as he made his way through making and eating his own breakfast. She seemed a little nervous. She also seemed to get a little *chatty* when she was nervous.

That was fine, Nico didn’t mind.

If anything, she was making up for the complete lack of input from the third side of the table. Logan hadn’t said a single word up until now. That would have been fine too, were it not for his barely concealed irritation.

Nico debated calling him out on it when Logan got up and made his way to the hallway, making Yan pause for a second. He watched Logan’s eyes narrow at something on the wall next to the kitchen, then snicker at it. His grin had an evil undertone, but looked genuinely amused.

That was… *Interesting.…?* He hadn’t seen Logan be happy with *anything* until this point. He couldn’t help but wonder what could possibly manage to earn that reaction. He watched Logan disappear into his room, the remains of the smirk still on his face.

Nico crossed his arms.

He wasn’t going to look.

He didn’t care…

But… He was kinda going that way anyway…

He excused himself and got up, bringing their plates to the kitchen and quickly dumping them in the sink. Walking past, he couldn’t resist a glance. He stopped in front of a *very* beaten up dartboard with a picture tacked onto the centre. A small figure looked back at him from behind even smaller sunglasses.

Ares.

Yeah… Alright… Guess he wasn't just on Hephaestus' black list.

Someone else seemed to have been torn away, leaving just a perfectly manicured hand on his arm. *Ha.* It had been Ares who'd been torn away from *her,* he realized.

By the state of the picture, and the board, it was obvious it had been a test subject for pretty much all inventions sprawled around the cabin. He looked at a particularly large, triangular dent. Apparently even the pyramid shaped remote control… He still didn't know what that was for. He tried not to wonder as he got ready for the day. A day he doubted was going to be a fond memory…

Before he had the chance to build up the appropriate amount of dread, it was already time to get to work. The three of them stood outside, in front of the entrance of the cave complex. Deciding who should stay behind at base wasn't hard. It wasn't really much of a choice.

"Yan, how d'you feel about keeping watch while we go and search the caves for a while?" Logan asked "We'll be back before you know it" he reassured her.

Nico huffed. It's not like he was looking forward to spending more one on one time with Logan, but between the three of them Yan made by far the most sense. He'd heard she was a fantastic shot with a bow. A talent that most likely wouldn't really have a chance to shine in the narrow hallways ahead.

Fighting wasn't really her role in this mission anyway. Apart from their prowess in archery, children of Apollo were widely known as expert healers. A trait that was very valuable in case something went wrong and someone got hurt. Risking Yan being taken out of commission would put their whole team in danger.

Yan looked at them hesitantly. "Are you sure you two are going to be okay?" she asked. Nico and Logan shot each other a wary look.

"Sure" Nico said with a forced smile.

"I'll try my best not to kill him" Logan promised, crossing his fingers with a smirk.

Yan shook her head and sighed.

Nico closed his eyes. "Whatever…" he almost breathed out. "Let's just go".

They unsheathed their swords. Nico noted Logan held his in his left hand, and opted to pick up the lantern with his right.

"Lefty, huh?" he asked.

"Yup… Truly a rebel in *every* way…" Logan joked humourlessly.

They entered the cave. It didn’t take long for Yan to disappear in a dot of light at the end of the tunnel. The thread they unwound to find their way back left a soft red glow in the corner of Nico’s eye.

So far neither of them had said anything. So far so good, Nico reckoned. Each time they’d had to choose a path, Logan had kept quiet. Sadly, that didn’t mean it wasn’t *very* noticeable that he clearly didn’t really *want* to keep quiet. So far Nico had decided to just stick to basic logic and ignore him.

At least they still had the ‘quiet’ part in ‘peace and quiet’ down, right?

They reached a fork in the road, three paths opened up in front of them.

“Makes most sense to start left and work our way to the right” Nico said.

“We’re *still* practically at surface level. Clarisse told us they think the necklace is at the centre of the caves, which means we should go down. That’s the one on the right” Logan grumbled, *finally* speaking his mind.

“If it is, we’ll get there eventually…” Nico said.

The tension rose.

Logan turned toward him, already angry. “We don’t have time to try out every option! Did you forget we’re in a hurry?! We need to try our best bets here! Besides, we have no idea what’s lurking down there!”.

Nico groaned. “What are you talking about?! We have *no* idea where the necklace is! It’s going to get way too complicated to figure out where to go next if we don’t have a system!” he burst out.

“If it’s too complicated for you just leave the *thinking* to me” Logan snapped back.

“That’s not-!” Nico tried exasperated.

“Who even put you in charge anyway?!” Logan interrupted him.

“I am not trying to take charge! I’m just trying to stop you from screwing everything up. You’re not being rational!” Nico let out.

Logan opened his mouth, and then clenched his jaw and groaned. He looked up at the ceiling. He seemed to have given up.

Nico couldn’t resist reveling in it a little. “Thank the Gods, it’s a miracle. I've finally managed to find the *off switch!* Could've used that a little sooner, would've saved me a few *headaches*” he hissed sarcastically.

He took it too far.

Before he even realized what happened, Logan had grabbed him by the collar and slammed him into the wall. All the air got knocked out of his body.

“You know what?!” Logan growled in his face “You want to prove you can handle all of this so bad? You can! Show me you can get us out in one piece, even when things go sideways and I'll let you call the shots. Beat me in an *actual* fight! If you're not up for that, stop trying to mess with me!”. He gave Nico a final shove against the wall then let go.

Nico almost slid down but managed to catch himself just in time. He thought about it. This was just plain stupid. It wouldn’t prove anything meaningful. They did not have time for this. *Any* of this.

But… he was angry. *Very* angry.

Knowing Logan was a son of Ares, he realized a one on one fight was probably in Logan’s favour. Then again. Nico had tricks up his sleeve that Logan probably couldn’t even dream of. And the idea of being able to put him in his place…

“You know what” Nico said bitterly. “Fine”.

Nico could see Yan’s face drop when they arrived at base shortly after. All in all, just barely three hours after they entered the cave. Probably not just that, both Nico and Logan were in the foulest mood yet.

“Nooo… What happened?” Yan almost whined.

“Pretty much nothing! That’s the problem” Logan explained while stabbing his sword into the ground. He started taking off his backpack and coat. “So *Spooky* and I have got a little something to settle, and then we’ll be on our merry way. No more discussions”. He side-eyed him angrily.

Nico stayed quiet and started getting ready himself, taking off his own backpack and unsheathing his stygian iron sword. It glowed a sinister purple. Logan hardly seemed to care.

“Oh, *no*.. Nonono!” Yan shook her head “No way, we’re not doing this. Clarisse is going to freak! We don’t have time for this”.

Neither Logan or Nico responded.

In a seeming last ditch effort Yan yelled. “Logan, you promised!”.

Logan laughed joylessly “Oh, don’t worry. I won’t *kill* him”. He walked off to a clearing in the woods, in front of the cabin, and beckoned Nico to follow.

Logan seemed confident. Apart from that, Yan seemed very worried about what Logan was going to do to him. Was it just arrogance? Or was Nico actually going to regret this? Uncertainty made itself known with some sudden nerves. He wasn’t going to let either Yan or Logan see that though. No matter what Logan was up to, Nico was a son of Hades. He wielded the powers of Tartarus itself, for fuck’s sake. He was going to show Logan what happens when you underestimate him…

He followed.

They stood a few feet away, Nico at the top of a steep slope, Logan at the treeline. Nico readied his stance. Logan twisted his sword in his hand, tossing it slightly up and then gripping it. As if to test its weight. They stared each other down for a while.

Logan gestured at Nico with his sword, seemingly telling him to call it when he was ready. Nico hesitated for a second. Then he looked into Logan’s eyes and saw the same fire raging in them he'd seen before at the briefing.

Nico felt bloodlust filling him to the core. He had heard of this, this was an ability of the children of Ares. He wasn't going to show that he was getting to him. Besides, he could do worse.

He threw him a smile, the creepiest he could muster. The bloodlust in the air mixed with intense fear and an aura of death. *There, even more intimate!*

Logan grinned, a wicked grin.

That fucking psycho… “Ready!” Nico yelled in a sudden outburst.

Guess he wasn't?

Logan shot off like a bolt of lightning, he cleared the distance in an instance.

Crap!

Nico was stunned, he barely managed to block the blow with his sword. Even though he caught it in time, he felt it through his entire body. He wasn't as used to fighting left handed opponents, giving Logan an edge.

Yan screamed loudly.

This was bad. Close combat wasn’t his strong suit. Most of what he could do needed at least some distance. Well, time to make some then. With a groan he threw himself backward. As he

rolled down the hill, he willed a crater in his trail. When he got up, he could see the crater had had an effect on Logan. He was still on guard, but visibly confused.

Nico, smirked. He concentrated, willing the dead to wake. Eight undead crawled out of the crater as the ground shook. *Crap*, Nico cursed to himself, that wasn't nearly as much as he'd hoped for. Most of them not even armed either.

Logan seemed to have collected himself. Before the first undead soldier could even reach out to him, he had lopped his head off in a clean sweep.

Surely two or three would give him more trouble, Nico thought.

He thought wrong.

As Logan blocked the next undead's blow with his sword and cut off its arms, he managed to kick the other's leg off. As it fell helplessly to the ground, he crushed its head with his boot.

Nico realized he was going to have to take a more hands-on approach than he usually would.

He reached Logan just as his last three undead did. Nico swung his sword at him. Logan caught it with his.

One of the undead grabbed Logan's right arm. Logan swung him around, right into Nico. It burst into loose bones. Nico felt the wind get knocked out of him.

Fuck! He's crazy strong…!

In the blow, Nico lost hold of his sword. He saw it fly barely out of his reach and hit the ground, regaining his balance just in time to see two more of his undead already down on the ground in a heap. Another one managed to successfully disarm Logan by getting stabbed hard enough for the sword to get stuck in his chest. The undead fell flat on its back, taking the blade with him.

"Ha!" Nico gasped. He didn't get to gloat long.

Logan's fist flew right at his face.

Nico managed to protect his face with his forearms. He recoiled and nearly fell back, but got caught by a tree. Before he could catch his breath, another blow hit him, and another.

Nico had to think quickly, or this would pretty much be over.

Whichever undead might have been left weren't doing their fucking jobs! He let them go and hurled their bones at Logan's back. It just seemed to make him angrier, hitting even harder.

Nico started to panic. No way to run, not enough distance to create a proper shield, too bright out to disappear…! He couldn't concentrate through the blows.

Shit, shit, shit!

He focused all his attention on summoning something, *anything*, that would heed his call. He took a particularly hard hit to the stomach. Something big laid buried near them, close to the surface. It stirred. The grass around them wilted.

“Stop it! *Stop it right now!”* Yan screeched close by.

“I’ll stop as soon as he yields!” Logan yelled back, reaching right between Nico’s forearms and grabbing him by the throat. He squeezed almost all life out of him.

Come on…!

Before Logan could even turn back to face Nico, something huge rammed into them from the side.

Yan screamed.

Nico looked at the sky, drawing ragged breaths. He quickly turned to look to his side. He saw the skeleton of what he presumed to be some type of bear pinning Logan under him, it was absolutely *huge*. Where its nose used to be almost touched Logan’s.

“Do you-” Nico gasped “Yield?”.

Logan struggled for a few seconds under the weight, gripping at the bears’ front paws. Then he hit the ground next to his sides with his fists. All the fire in his eyes seemed to snuff out. “Yeah.” he let out breathlessly.

Nico released the bear as it crumpled into a pile of bones. Logan managed to protect himself with his hand before the bear skull hit him right in the face. He threw it to the side, *hard*. It split as it hit the ground.

Logan got to his feet. He stared at the bear skeleton for a second. Then growled as he kicked the pile of bones. “Congrats.” he said icily “Guess we’re going left.”. He didn’t even turn to look at Nico, he just walked over to his sword and swiped it from the ground. The undead that stole it had long disintegrated by now.

He stomped off.

Nico jutted his elbows under him in an attempt to sit up. Yan stepped next to him. Nico turned to look at her.

She had her arms crossed. “You guys are *such* idiots”.

“Yeah… I know” Nico replied. He looked at the fresh bruises on his lower arms, then pulled up his shirt a bit. *Yep*, nice red hue to it there as well…

He finally got up.

The rest of the day was a bit of a blur. Hours flew by. Nico and Logan ignored each other as best they could. Quiet, seething rage from both sides filled the silence.

Somehow, they'd managed to eat without a single word. A lot more impressively, they were able to get on each other's nerves without any either.

Logan rapped his fingers against the table in a frustrated rhythm, then got up. He gathered the dishes with the cold, brute force of a warden restraining an unruly inmate. The angry little flames in his eyes clearly showed the rage he was trying to hide. They flared up a little further as he stopped at the last fork. His grip on it tightened enough to whiten his knuckles.

Nico leaned back a little, preparing for whatever might be coming.

Whatever it was, it wasn't meant for him.

With a powerful, cathartic movement, Logan flung the fork over to the other side of the room, right through Ares' tiny sunglasses. The hint of an evil smirk broke through his scowl before he made his way over to the counter in the small kitchen. The surprisingly quiet, controlled way he put down the dishes, almost gave Nico some hope it had actually cheered him up a bit.

Nico made a note to make a small offering for Ares later, for the sake of being an even bigger nuisance than him apparently. Sadly, Ares' brave sacrifice didn't seem to have a lasting effect. Logan's knuckles whitened again in his tight grip on the counter. He flipped the tap on.

Fuck this.

Nico clicked his tongue and got up. Yan shifted a little as he did, clearly worried about what he was up to. He gave her the most reassuring smile he could muster, then walked up to Ares' little shrine of blasphemy.

He attempted to free Ares' smiling face from the snide cutlery. It took some dedication. The fork was clearly dedicated too. So deeply driven in its task, it had pierced all the way through the dartboard. Nico nearly pulled it off the wall along with it. The fork lightly bowed to him in a grateful gesture, bent from the force he had to use. Nico did his best to bend it back in an acceptable shape as he made his way over to the counter.

Mild annoyance turned severe when he realized he wasn't even going to get a glance. He tossed the fork in the sink, finally earning himself a fiery glare. Nico crossed his arms and suppressed a mean edge curling in the corner of his mouth.

"Move. I'll do it" he offered coldly. The fire died down a bit as Logan narrowed his eyes. Nico looked at him expectantly, not backing down.

"*Whatever…*" Logan finally sighed as he turned around, walking off with a dismissive hand gesture.

Nico pursed his lips and got to work, quietly celebrating yet another *unsatisfying* victory. At least the dishes gave him something to distract himself with. He took as long as he possibly could.

At some point it had gotten dark.

Nico hadn't really felt like moving from the relative safety of the kitchen. He rested against the counter, looking over at the other two. They found themselves in a triangle so stormy, Nico was sure it could make ships sink.

Yan looked absolutely miserable.

Poor Yan... Collateral damage in their silent warfare...

She sat slumped over the table, her chin resting on her folded arms. Their eyes met. Yan gave him a faint, sad smile. He smiled back at her. Nico watched her look at Logan clean his sword from the other side of the room. Logan looked up at her. She shot him a painful look. He stopped what he was doing and frowned, turning away a bit. Her expression hardened, she put her hands down on the table and got up.

"Look, guys…" she started carefully, but sternly. "I know this hasn't exactly been *fun*, but I'm sure we can still try to *work out* a-".

Absolute chaos cut her off. High, intense flames burst up in the fireplaces all around them. A rack of weights and a sand bag dramatically descended from the ceiling. Loud guitars surrounded them, bombarding them with random noises in an awful attempt at Power Metal. A loud, low, naturally authoritarian voice howled over it in ancient Greek. Despite not wanting to, Nico picked up the words '*Achilles'* and '*Skamandros'*.

"*Stop!"* all three of them yelled at the same time.

It did, leaving another uncomfortable silence behind.

Yan closed her eyes in frustration. "Screw this... I can't take it anymore…" she grumbled. "I'm going for a walk. You guys stew in this *bitterness* all you want. Just don't burn the place down…". She slowly dragged herself away from the table and out the door, closing it quietly behind her. The sad little thud hurt much more than if she would have slammed it.

Logan closed his eyes and sighed. For the first time since the fight, they looked at each other. Logan's expression was hard to read. Nico stared back without any emotion, wondering where this was going to go. Logan narrowed his eyes and turned away in disgust.

Nico clicked his tongue. "*Don't pin this on me, asshole*" he growled.

Logan snapped his eyes back onto him, a dangerous flicker of heated orange went through. With one rough movement he stabbed his sword into the floor and got up. He glared at him as he walked closer. "I'm not pinning this on *just* you" he spat. "But you're not exactly easy to

be around either, *you stuck-up bastard*". He got close, just ever so slightly too close, probably to really sell his menacing look.

Nico didn't care. This was all Logan's fault. Ever since he'd lost he was acting like an angry toddler. It didn't really help that Nico wasn't that proud of his own performance either… With how overwhelmed he had been during the whole fight, and how much it had taken out of him, it almost felt like he hadn't won at all.

But he *had* won damn it!

That was supposed to mean this bickering would be over!

Nico finally felt the rage that had built up all day spill over. "You've done nothing but act like a bitch ever since the fight! *Which was your own idea by the way!* That was supposed to settle it! *Of course* I'm going to be an asshole back to you when you act like this! *You unhinged psycho!*".

Logan's irises burst into flames, he bared his teeth with rage.

Crap. He'd taken it too far again.

Nico hadn't really recovered after their fight today, his arms and stomach aching and almost no energy left. He glanced to his sides, no room to really defend himself either. His eyes lingered on the *large* kitchen knives to his side.

The pure animosity Nico sent out was met with two glaring, absolutely *lethal* fires.

With a sudden shift, Logan moved his arm.

In a growl, Nico reached and swept the block of knives onto the floor where it scattered. It burst against the tiles, so loudly it might as well have been an explosion.

Logan raised his hands at him in a flash. Nico scowled as he tried to back away, practically crawling onto the countertop. Logan held up his hands even higher.

"*Calm down*" he demanded firmly.

Nico took some shaky breaths, still a little unfocused in the rush of everything.

"Did you think I was going to *stab* you…?" Logan asked weakly.

Nico actually looked at his face. Logan was clearly hurt, all rage and fire gone.

Nico looked down. "*No… I-*" he croaked.

No!...

No, right?

Nico didn't know anymore. His eyes followed Logan’s hands down when he lowered them to his sides, his shoulders dropped right after.

Nico pushed off of the counter a little. “Look… I shouldn't have called you that”. He pushed further, past Logan.

Thankfully, he didn’t follow him outside. The bright, full moon did. It followed him wherever he went, staring coldly at his back. It warned of a long, silent night ahead of them.

Chapter 2: II. True loathe

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Descriptions of blood and injuries. Fainting. Poison. PTSD. Vomiting.

Nico hardly enjoyed his new position as unofficial leader of the search party. Their dynamic had somehow only gotten more tense after the whole situation last night. There wasn't just contempt now, there was also a loud undertone of hurt chiming through.

Logan had kept his mouth shut ever since, which was nice. Lucky for Nico, as he suspected earlier, Logan was the '*suffer in silent treatment*' type.

Nico smiled faintly to himself. Good fucking luck trying to get at him with *that.* Nico was a pro at uncomfortable silence, any type of silence, even. He'd proven that countless times. He could go without talking to people for… *Years*…

He cringed at his unintended emotional self harm, killing his faint smile instantly.

Nico side-eyed Logan carefully.

Logan stared straight ahead, as he'd been doing all day. Despite his silence, the hurt, angry scowl on his face wouldn't shut up, telling him everything he needed to know.

Nico tried to ignore how tense and uncomfortable he felt. He *hadn't* downright accused him of attempted murder… But, if you looked at his behaviour last night, *really* closely, reading between the lines, you might have seen a slight hint at an *unfortunate* implication.
An *unintended* one, to Nico's credit.

Even without all that. There were also still the remnants of their original passive aggressive conflict about the fight. Logan was obviously also still not amused with how that turned out. How he'd treated the bear skeleton afterward had made that more than clear.

Yeah, that brought back some *fond* new memories.

Nico tried not to show how much his body ached. He didn't want to give him the satisfaction. Not after all this petty nonsense.

He rolled his eyes. Logan was just going to have to deal with not getting his way. That seemed like a more than fair conclusion. He kept ruminating over it anyway, just in case…

There was no way of keeping time in the caves other than keeping track of their slowly worsening mood. Every turn they took, leading to nothing but more hallways and empty rooms, seemed to push Logan further to the edge, grating on Nico's nerves in turn.

Logan's silent protest slowly became less and less silent. Huffing and grinding his teeth any time they had to turn back to where they came from.

They had been searching for almost two full days now, meticulously working their way through the maze of hallways.

They had come across some monsters, mostly small and insignificant. The way they dealt with them, Nico could tell they were taking their frustrations out on them. Just a few corners ago they had been attacked by countless Myrmekes. One or two after the other. They hadn't even bothered drawing their swords. Without saying a word they had stomped on the dog-sized ants, crushing them. There wasn't any passion in it, just irritation.

It was kinda funny, monster or not, he almost started to feel bad for whatever would run into them.

He could feel the inevitable next fight hang over them like a dark cloud, threatening to turn into a storm. Nico tried to ignore it as best he could, just focussing on putting one foot in front of the other.

They entered another empty space, no doors, no *progress*. There were some empty crates lying around and some long burned up torches on the wall.

"Another dead end" Nico noted "Let's turn back". He walked back towards the doorway.

"Right." Logan grunted. With one aggressive motion, he cut an old, burned out torch off the wall.

The flare of irritation that came over Nico made him tense up. It caused the ache of the bruises on his lower arms and stomach to spike, further fueling his anger. There was no way he could hold it in anymore.

He turned around to face Logan "Alright, enough! You've been acting like a raging ass ever since you let me take over. *Why are you being so goddamn passive aggressive?!*".

He watched the flames rise in Logan's eyes, only to see them die down when he narrowed them. "*Because if I don't shut up, I'm not going to be able to hold back anymore*" Logan growled through his teeth.

Nico felt his hands twitch. He raised his voice "I get that it sucks that you're stuck here with me! But we have a job to do! Get over yourself!".

Logan laughed humourlessly. “You actually think I have room to give a shit about *you?!* I've got plenty of other stuff to worry about! All I want is to find that stupid *piece of crap* so we can get out of here. Which is taking *forever* because you want to turn over every single stone we come across!”.

Nico felt his whole body tense up. “Oh, come on! You’re going to pretend you don’t have a problem with me?! You've been a massive asshole to me since the moment we met! *You fucking hate me!”*. He’d yelled a lot louder than he'd meant to, swept up in the moment.

Logan didn't fare any better, erupting in a fiery explosion. He kicked a crate at full force, making it smash into the wall and burst into pieces. “*I don't hate you! You're just driving me fucking crazy and I don't know how to deal with that right now!”*.

Nico could have sworn Logan's eyes actually lit up in flames this time, even if it was just for a moment. He pushed down the feeling of bloodlust that welled up in him again, even stronger than before. They regained a semblance of composure, but that definitely didn't mean either of them was any less pissed off.

Logan walked closer. A lot closer. All the way up in Nico's face. The fire in his eyes still raged in the glow of the lantern.

Nico didn’t back down a single step. “*Just say what you need to say*”.

He could hear Logan grind his teeth before he spoke. “Oh, you think you're up for it?! Fucking *fine.* I'll *open up* more! *Here’s what’s on my mind!* That fight was a shit show, *but I can’t believe you thought I’d actually murder you over it!* That’s a low blow, man!”. He sounded about as hurt as he did angry.

Nico closed his eyes and groaned. “*Per l'amor del cielo!* I didn’t think you were going to stab me! I didn’t think *anything!* It felt like you were coming at me and I reacted. I was just freaked out. I’m not exactly *easygoing*, if you haven’t noticed. It was nothing personal!” he explained angrily. He meant it.

Logan didn’t seem entirely convinced, but the flames in his eyes died down a little. Nico wasn’t ready to let it go entirely yet. He wasn’t able to resist all the words burling up in him. Logan had dug up the fight’s fresh grave himself, now he would have to deal with it.

“*And since you brought it up…* I know it wasn’t *pretty*, and I’m not exactly *proud* of it, but *again*, that whole fight was *your* idea! You agreed that if I won, we’d do this my way! So stop being such a passive aggressive bitch about the outcome!” he hissed, raising his voice.

Logan’s eyes got some of their spark back. He glared at Nico, grinning deviously. “You’re right, I lost, and I *did* say we would do it your way… But, you can’t expect me to be impressed with what we did back there. You raising the dead and all.
Now, *that* was *something!* But, *my guy,* you need to work on your swordfighting skills, and your hand to hand straight up *sucks*. You couldn’t keep up with me one bit, not even close. And then you just chucked a bear at me. So yeah, *I think you got lucky*” Logan growled in conclusion. He’d managed a surprisingly restrained voice.

Nico felt his face burn. He hated that he felt Logan was right about some of it. He'd never admit that though. If anything the embarrassment only fueled his anger further. Besides, the bear might have been a lucky draw, but raising it was definitely part of his skillset. What the fuck was Logan on about?

Nico lost some control of his emotions. The shadows drew in closely, shifting the light in the room. He was basically screaming again at this point "*Sure*! *Whatever*! You'd have beaten me if it was a swordfight! Or a fistfight! But-".

"Shut up" Logan told him.

Nico was absolutely furious now. "Who do you thi-!" he started at the top of his lungs.

Logan grabbed Nico's jaw, stopping him. "I mean it! I think I hear-!". He didn't manage to finish his sentence.

Nico smacked away his hand. In a flash, Logan swept Nico's legs out from under him, knocking him on his back. Before he had time to process, two needles flew right over him, hitting Logan the left side of his abdomen.

Logan choked back a groan, almost dropping his sword.

Nico scrambled to get to his feet.

Before he could, something huge leapt through the doorway. It smashed its massive paw onto Nico's chest, pushing him flat against the ground. The claws ripped deep gashes into his chest.

Manticore! Nico managed to register.

The beast bit into Logan's right shoulder. The sickening crunch was almost buried by the sound of Logan's scream.

Nico moved automatically, without even thinking about it. He grabbed his sword with both hands and stabbed it straight up as hard as he could. It pierced the manticore's tough skin and muscle, the resistance felt like thunder coursing through his arms.

The manticore let out a deafening screech, letting go off Logan's shoulder. Blood poured out on Nico in a thick stream, drenching him. The manticore buckled, threatening to crush him with its massive body. Then, with a whimper it turned to dust and scattered all around them.

A small ornate box hit Nico's face. With the adrenaline still surging through his body he hardly registered it. He swiped it with his hand, and shoved it into his pocket. There were more pressing things to deal with right now.

Logan cursed under his breath, staggering.

Nico pushed himself to his feet as fast as he could. He quickly scanned the doorway.

Nothing there.

He looked around, his eyes settling on Logan. Logan looked bad. Worse than bad. He was bleeding profusely. The blood stains on his shoulder and abdomen both spread quickly. He had apparently managed to resheath his sword.

Logan wouldn’t meet his eyes, too busy slowly pulling at one of the spikes in his side. His breathing was ragged and uneven. Nico could hear it hitch as he managed to pull it out. It hit the floor with a ting.

“You hurt?” He asked Nico, without averting his attention. His voice was shaky but serious.

Nico almost couldn’t process. “Am *I* hurt?!” he asked in disbelief. Not even sure if he was astonished or angry.

Logan finally looked at him. His expression was hard to read. It was obvious trying to hold himself together was taking everything out of him. His hands were trembling, and he seemed unsteady.

Nico searched for words. The reality of the situation finally hitting him. Logan was in serious trouble. A manticore sting was…

“Those are venomous.” Nico said as calmly as he could. “We need to get you out of here” he added, trying to regain control of the situation. “If we don't you'll…” Nico stopped, losing control of the situation immediately.

Logan didn’t respond right away. He had shifted his attention to the last stinger, grabbing it with a shaky hand.

He was shivering all over now, Nico noticed.

Logan shrugged. “S’ not deadly” he breathed out.

Was he trying to be *reassuring?* As he said it, he pulled the stinger out in a slow, painful motion. He almost casually tossed it aside, another ting. He slung his arm around his lower torso, clenching the open wounds shut with his hand. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

It wasn't quite a sigh, nor quite a whimper. Either way, it *barely* served as enough warning for Nico to get to him in time and keep him from crashing into the floor. He threw his arms under Logan’s, around his waist, hopelessly trying to hold him upright.

Not a chance.

They fell to their knees. Nico leaned back slightly, trying to support Logan’s sudden weight on him. He’d buried his face in Nico’s shoulder, probably unconscious at that point. He had to be. His pride would have never allowed this awkward embrace otherwise. Not that Nico had the luxury of caring about that either right now.

He noticed the concerning amount of heat Logan radiated onto him. The situation had been bad before, but it was definitely worse now. He had to act fast.

He might not even make it.

Nico quickly shook that thought. Logan was right, he reminded himself. Manticore poison was a bitch, but it wasn't deadly. Not much they could do about it anyway. Stopping him from bleeding out was the priority…

But there was no way he was going to be able to drag Logan all the way back to base…

Shadow travel wouldn't be easy either, but it was practically the only option. No time to dwell on it. With some effort Nico freed one of his hands. He tried to ignore the amount of blood on his arm as he reached out for the lantern and dimmed the light.

Shadow travel wasn't very *delicate* business at the best of times. Add trying to drag an unwilling participant along and you get whatever it was Nico had managed to pull off.

They collapsed on the floor in the cabin, barely missing Yan and almost knocking her down.

"Wow!" Yan let out. She jumped back, scrambling not to drop the bottles she was holding. "You guys are late! I was expecting-" she cut herself off. She tossed the bottles to her side causing a barrage of clattering and dropped to her knees next to them. "Oh, Gods! What did you guys do?!" she asked desperately.

"*Long story*" Nico panted, hoisting himself upright.

Yan shook her head, already lost in the task at hand.

Nico admired her work. Her hands were fast and nimble. She had managed to turn Logan onto his back, and find the wounds on his abdomen in mere seconds. Yan hissed long and sharp as she pulled his shirt away from them.

"Those are deep…" she muttered through her teeth.

Nico swallowed. Then he snapped back into action. "They're manticore stings, two of them. It bit him in the shoulder too. I think I heard something break" he summarized quickly.

Yan's eyes snapped to Logan's right shoulder. She traced her thumb over the holes in his shirt.

"Tell me what you need" Nico added.

Yan looked into his eyes. She scanned him over quickly, lingering on his chest for a few seconds, then shifted her attention back to Logan. "Water, towels, and my med bag" she commanded. "Get me those first. After that, my book about herbs if you can find it. It should be in my duffelbag somewhere." she continued while struggling to get Logan's shirt off of him.

Nico took over, and quickly ripped it off. Sorry, 'Discharge', whoever you are. No time to spare you.

Yan took the shredded fabric and bunched it together. She pressed it onto Logan's shoulder, trying to stop the bleeding. Something in his shoulder made a nauseating, dull clicking noise as she did. Logan barely reacted, apart from a pause in his breathing.

That was bad. Yan and Nico made eye contact, obviously thinking the same thing.

Nico shot up. Yan started singing to her father in a bid for help. He stumbled through the door to her bedroom and looked around hastily. Yan's quiet chiming in the background only added to the surreal feeling of the situation.

In the panic of it all, he almost couldn't take in his surroundings. He shook his head, repeating the small list Yan had drummed up over and over in his mind. Somehow, he'd managed to check off everything.

He dumped the small pile next to her and went back for the book. He found three… He couldn't read, he realized. The words refused to make sense under the time pressure. All three of them would have to do.

Yan seemed grateful enough, picking out the right book from his hands without so much as a glance. Nico tossed the two other *wastes of time* on the floor and dropped down opposite her.

In the time he was gone she'd already managed to stitch up about half of the bitewound, keeping pressure on Logan's abdomen with her knee. The towel slowly turned blood red. He carefully tapped her knee, offering to take over. She let him, not stopping her hands even for a second. His own hands trembled at the immense pressure, and the unsettling sensation of the soaked fabric.

"Do these need anything?" he dared to ask.

"No remedy… Just something to speed up healing" Yan replied like in a trance.

That's all Nico needed to know. He wasn't any good at this, not by a long shot, but… He drew in the shadows from nearby, concentrating them under his hands. This did break Yan's concentration, making her glance over.

"*Keep going*" Nico breathed at her.

She did.

Man... These wounds *were* deep. There was no way he could close them. Thankfully, he didn't need to. Yan gently put her hands over his, then firmly moved them away.

"You're trembling all over" she warned. Before she'd finished her sentence she was done sewing up the first wound. "Thank you, you did great" she added, already finishing up the last one.

Nico huffed in utter disbelief. He watched her pop open multiple bottles of varying sizes, applying their contents in several places. She blew a lock of hair out of her face looking at a last, much smaller bottle with a distinct content. *Nectar,* he realized. She leaned down, opened Logan's mouth and carefully poured in the golden liquid.

They both looked at him.

Logan let out two barely audible coughs, his hand twitched, then… *Nothing.*.. Almost no reaction.

Yan seemed distraught for a second, then got back to work, unwinding a seemingly endless roll of bandages. Nico helped her as best he could while she simultaneously cleaned, and wrapped up most of Logan's torso.

It couldn't have taken more than a few minutes.

"That's about all we can do right now…" she said heavily, wiping her face with the back of her hand.

Nico sighed. "You're a hero… Yan… I don't know what we would have done without you".

Yan smiled weakly and winked at him. They stared at Logan for a bit. Nico looked at the bloody handprint on his jaw. It was almost a smear, except every finger was clearly defined. Must be Yan's…

"What do you think? Should we give up and head back?" she asked.

Nico looked up from his bloody hands and thought about it. With a jolt he patted his pocket. He pulled out the box and opened it. They stared at its content in astonishment.

"You actually found it!" Yan exclaimed.

"Guess… We did…?!" Nico stammered.

"Well that's not 'giving up' then, but still… *Can* we even head back right now?" she asked more warily. "Shadow travel isn't exactly… Comfortable".

"Sure isn't, and we'd have to find a way to move him along… I don't know what it'd do to him in this state…" Nico pondered.

"Let's just get him in bed. We'll head to camp once he's back up" Yan concluded.

Whenever that's going to be, he worried to himself. He remembered Logan's last smartass remark about manticore poison not being deadly… Right before setting out to apparently test that hypothesis. He was easily more dead than alive right now. Nico could feel it. And what else had he expected? Aside from being poisoned, Logan had broken at least one bone and most importantly lost a *frightening* amount of blood. By just keeping him alive Yan already performed a miracle as far as he was concerned.

He tried to stop worrying and just nodded. "You go rest" he said. "I'll get him".

Yan laughed, startling him. "Yeah *right"* she said sarcastically. "We'll *both* get him. And then we'll *both* rest… *After* I'm done with you" she added with a stern voice, pointing at the

wounds on Nico's chest.

Nico sighed, then smiled. “Yes, ma'am”.

She smiled back.

They got up with noticeable effort on both their sides. Then looked at Logan, then at each other. *Well… this should be good…*

Yan rolled her shoulders and smiled reassuringly. Nico smiled back, trying not to show his apprehension. They got to work. Trying to spare Yan, he squatted down and grabbed Logan under his armpits from the back, starting to both lift and drag him. He tried to be as careful as he could, but Logan didn't seem to care either way… Yan hurried after him into the hallway.

“Let me help!” she demanded.

At that point he'd gotten far enough, practically next to a bed. He stopped. She grabbed Logan's legs and together they managed to lower him down on it decently elegantly. Nico exhaled deeply at the relief. Yan looked at him a little disgruntled, but mostly pleased. With impressive skill, she threw the covers over Logan in one swoop, like she'd done it a million times. She probably had, he realized, in the infirmary at camp. She looked him over one last time, then turned back to Nico.

“Come” she demanded, walking out the door, beckoning him back to her makeshift workstation, the pile of medical supplies next to a large bloodstain.

Nico took his shirt off and sat down. She immediately got to it. He tried not to show it when whatever she did hurt, which meant staying quiet the whole way through.

“You're not going to tell me what happened?” she asked suddenly, glancing up at him.

Nico held his breath, then exhaled, defeated. “We had a *straight up crazy bitch fight* and got attacked because of it… He, uh… He took the hit for me…” he muttered, going quieter the further he got. The guilt was more painful than Yan prodding his wounds. He was almost too ashamed to look at her. He did anyway.

To his surprise Yan smiled faintly. “Yeah, that sounds like Logan” she breathed out. She looked him in the eye. “Don't feel bad. There's no way you could have stopped him”. She finished up.

He felt incredibly tired, he finally noticed. Too tired to form any adequate reply.

“You should lie down for a while” Yan commanded.

“You too” Nico pointed out, taking in her trembling frame.

“Later, I'm going to sit with him for a bit” she replied.

Nico felt bad, but he didn't have the energy to fight her on this. He relented and walked off to the first bed he could find, which was, coincidentally, his own. He collapsed onto it.

Crap! He had no idea how long he'd been asleep for! How long had Yan been keeping watch?!

He pushed himself off of the bed and through the door. When Nico walked into Logan's room he found Yan practically sprawled out over him. She had seemingly collapsed right in the middle of something. She was technically sitting but her head was on his stomach and her arms laid stretched out, reaching for nothing in particular. Even though she was clearly asleep she still looked exhausted. She'd done more than enough, Nico decided.

She jolted as he carefully shook her shoulders.

"My turn" he whispered to her. "Go to sleep, yeah?".

She dragged herself back onto her chair and looked at Logan. Nico pulled on her elbow. She turned to him and gave him a dazed look.

"I'll watch over him". He nudged towards the door.

She nodded and gave him a rub on his shoulder as she scurried off into the darkness. Nico smiled faintly as he watched her go. Then he turned to Logan.

He looked uncomfortable. Well, that was an understatement. *'Glowing'* was the word that came to mind. Glowing, in the *worst* way. His skin was so pale it seemed to reflect the light shining onto him. It starkly contrasted the bright red hue spread over his face. All of it tied together by the countless little shimmers of sweat spread all over him...

He was a lot less quiet than before, breathing shaky, fast and shallow. His jaw clenched to the point Nico was convinced he could hear it. It was probably a good sign he acted a little more… *Alive,* but it sure didn't look any better.

Nico sighed as he sat down. He watched Logan's deathgrip on the covers. His knuckles white and his hand trembling at the effort. What got to Nico most was his expression. He looked terrified. With Logan's usual demeanor to compare, it felt *wrong.*

Man, manticore poison really *was* a bitch. He didn't particularly like Logan, but this was increasingly hard to watch. It absolutely didn't help that he still felt incredibly guilty. Sure, Logan had been the worst, and they had both completely lost their heads... But, when it came down to it Logan had had his back… And now he was suffering because of-!

Seeing Logan somehow manage to tighten his grip on the covers even more made Nico lose his train of thought. The fabric made a small tearing sound.

That was it. Enough of that.

Nico tried to pry Logan’s hand open. He noticed it felt cold as ice. Fitting, as his hand seemed pretty much frozen solid. Nico shifted his position to get a better angle. Getting his other hand in for backup.

That was a mistake.

Logan stirred. With a wince he let go of the covers and grasped onto Nico’s wrist. *Extremely* hard. The surprise and pain hit Nico like a brick. He only barely managed to suppress a groan. He grabbed Logan’s hand and pulled at it.

Crap! That only made it worse.

Logan squeezed so hard that Nico was sure he was about to dislocate his wrist. Nico croaked out a curse. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself down. Logan seemed pretty upset about the situation too. He sounded like he was desperately holding his breath, almost choking, baring his teeth. He watched him stir again.

Was this really just the poison? It looked like he was having a nightmare…

Time to change tactics. He let go of Logan’s wrist and put his hand around his. He didn’t try to pull anymore, or even squeeze, he just held it. Hypnokinesis was far from his expertise, but it’d have to make do. He tried to reach out mentally. The pain in his wrist was making that *very* hard. He almost couldn't concentrate. Still, he found something… Something unpleasant. Something *bad*.

Fuck.

He held his breath. He couldn't make it out, it was pure chaos, but the feelings were overwhelming.

Fuck!

They both jolted when a deafening bang rang through his head. He could feel his heart in the back of his throat. It almost made him forget about his wrist for a second. He regained his composure and tried again.

Holy fuck!

As soon as he did, another bang echo’d. He ground his teeth in frustration. *Alright.* Prying into Logan's dream any more wasn't going to help anyone. It was too distracting. He sent a message.

Relax. It’s alright, Nico managed. *You’re safe*.

It probably didn’t come across very convincing, it sure didn't convince himself. Still, somehow, Logan let go.

Nico gasped at the relief.

Logan flung his arm upward with a whimper and hid his eyes in his elbow, panting shakily.

Nico couldn’t feel his hand immediately, but it gradually came back to life. He moved his fingers to see if they still worked, then took some time to catch his breath.

Logan seemed to have calmed down a bit. He was breathing heavily, but much slower and deeper. Most of the tension had left his body, his arm now slumped down above his head. He still looked unhappy, his face wet with what seemed to be tears and sweat. But, he was not nearly as stressed as before.

Nico stared at him, trying to make sense of what just happened. He rubbed his wrist as he did.

His wrist had developed a nice, big bruise by the time Yan came to take over a few hours later.

She bent over the bed next to him, looking Logan over carefully. Then gently ran the back of her hand over his cheek. She halted at his neck to press down more deliberately. A low hum of disapproval answered any questions Nico might have had.

“He’s burning up…” she diagnosed solemnly, quickly pulling down the covers a bit.

Logan responded with a deep breath and a weak series of shivers.

“*I know.*.. But you need to cool down” Yan whispered empathetically. She gave Nico a sad smile. “Did you manage okay?”.

Nico debated sugarcoating it a little. Probably wouldn’t be fair. “Sorry… I messed up... I’m pretty sure I made him cry earlier. He almost made *me* cry, at least.” He held up his wrist.

Yan's eyes went wide at the sight of the bruise. She slumped her shoulders. “I’m so sorry, Nico…” she said almost desperately.

Nico didn’t understand. Sure, this wasn't *great*, but she almost seemed to take it personally.

Yan quickly averted her eyes, back to Logan. “*You promised you were ready for this, Lo…*” she whispered. Under the thick layer of sadness was a clear accusatory undertone.

Now Nico really didn't understand. “Wait, is this his *first time* out in the field?” he asked in disbelief.

Yan gave him a look of disbelief in return. “What..? *No!* No... Well, it's the first time in a while… He had to take a break”. She fidgeted with her bracelets.

Nico looked at her questioningly.

“Long story” Yan added. “He’s just… He’s going through a rough time… His mother died. Really *horribly.* He’s not been dealing with it very well”.

Ah. That actually resonated with him a little, instantly bringing back a ton of memories he wished he didn’t have… Not that it actually made it much easier to relate to Logan… ‘Not dealing very well’ was kind of an understatement.

Nico didn't think Yan's shoulders could slump further. She proved him wrong.

“I think so, at least… I haven't spoken to him for a while. Yesterday was the first time in months… He didn't reply to any of my messages…”. Yan looked close to tears.

Nico didn't know what to say. He'd apparently accidentally inserted himself in some complicated personal history.

“I'm sorry, Yan. You don't have to-” he started.

“Go get some sleep. You can still get a few hours in. We can leave when he's up. We finished what we came to do anyway” she told him quickly, seemingly regaining her composure.

Nico didn't want to make whatever she was going through any worse, opting to drag himself away.

As soon as he laid down, he realized there was no way he could go back to sleep. He tried his best nevertheless. Probably tried too hard, he worried, wide awake. At this rate, he might as well let Yan catch up on some rest. She deserved it more anyway.

About to open the door across the hall, a light from the dining table caught his eye. Yan’s dark silhouette was cut out in perfect detail against the brightness. *What is she doing over there?* He walked over to ask her when she turned to him.

To his absolute horror, he realized she was crying. Not just any crying either. She was crying as hysterically as someone could without making a sound. Her face was so scrunched up it looked like it was imploding. She’d pushed her glasses up to her forehead where they now clung on for dear life with a single arm in her hair.

“*Yan…?!”* he asked, uselessly.

She got up from her chair and started sobbing like a dramatic scene from a silent movie. He walked closer, putting his hands on her shoulders. He gaped at her in an equally silent scream. That was possibly even more useless…

She started looking up and wildly fanning her face. “*~It's just… It's… Just… I've missed him so much…! And now… Now we're here… And…! And I still miss him! So much! I… I don't know what to do! Everything is so…! Wrong!~”* she hicced up.

Nico squeezed her shoulders and slowly shook his head. “Aaah…?” he let out.

She narrowed her eyes a little. Then she nodded seriously, tears still running down her chin. *“Yeah. I'm just a little stressed…”* she concluded breathlessly.

Nico nodded back. “Yeah…! Makes sense! That sounds shitty. And let's be real, It's all been a fucking nightmare so far”.

They both nodded together.

Nico pointed to the sink, not breaking eye contact. “You want some water?” he asked, dying for something useful to do.

She smiled faintly. “Yeah”.

He swiped her mug from the table and practically ran over and back.

She took a single sip before she lowered her head. “I'm so sorry, Nico. This *drama* is all such a mess…”.

He squeezed her shoulder. “Nooo~” he let out in a long, drawn out lie. That was all… That was all he had…

Yan let something between a giggle and a sob slip out. She took a deep breath and looked up at him. “I'm going to go take a walk, I think…”.

Nico smiled in relief, pointing at her with both hands. “*Yes!* You should!”.

She nodded again, slowly, seemingly not all that sure anymore.

“We’ll be fine” he said as reassuringly as possible.

He watched Yan give him a last smile before closing the door behind her. Why wouldn't they be fine, after all? Sure, they didn't *like* each other. But, Logan wasn't even awake right now. How could he possibly mess this-?

He heard the toilet flush in the background.

That couldn't be right.

That made so little sense he didn't even turn around.

He did when he heard a loud thump coming from a bedroom. Not just any bedroom… *Gods fucking damn it. Seriously?!*

Nico almost ran making his way over, trying to prepare himself for whatever trouble Logan had gotten himself into. He found him as soon as he opened the door all the way, almost hitting him with it.

Logan laid on his side, *next* to the bed, completely still… He'd probably tried to make his way back on his own, *like an idiot!*

Nico clicked his tongue. He had to admit, Logan had gotten pretty close. Still, a miss was a miss… He knelt down next to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. Logan jolted a little as he did. *Good sign…?*

"Are you hurt?" Nico asked, preferring full annoyance over worry.

Logan took his time, then finally shook his head. He cracked his eyes open a bit. Even barely open, Nico could tell they were dazed and confused. He cupped his cheek and tilted him slightly, helping Logan's eyes find his. He didn't think he'd ever been happier to see him than now. Some mild relief and just barely a hint at the faintest smile showed on his face…

Nico definitely couldn't muster up the same enthusiasm. "What do you think you're doing, genius?" he more accused than asked.

"... *bathroom…*" Logan muttered weakly, just barely making any sense. Still, it *did* make sense. He'd been out for more than half a day...

"I get that, but don't be an idiot. You gotta let us help you next time" Nico complained.

Logan managed a still dazed, but clearly disturbed and angry look. "*Gross…*" he muttered heavily, a lot more clearly than before.

Nico clicked his tongue. "It's not like I'm *excited* about it either…".

Logan responded by closing his eyes and curling up, letting out a long exhale as he did.

Crap.

"*No*" Nico warned sternly. "You're not sleeping on the ground". He shook his shoulder as he said it.

The disappointed noise Logan let out got to him a little, almost making him forget how annoyed he was with the situation. *Almost*.

With some teamwork the hand on his cheek and hand on his shoulder managed to pull Logan into something resembling a sitting position. They both didn't seem that pleased about it. Before Logan could make his way down again, Nico quickly hooked his elbows under his armpits and lifted him up to his feet. This seemed to liven Logan up a little. He grasped at the back of Nico's shoulders trying to get some grip, clearly bracing himself.

"*I'm not gonna drop you*" Nico responded breathlessly.

He wasn't sure if he meant that to come off as reassuring or irritated, either way the result was the same. Logan settled down enough for Nico to start dragging him over to the bed. He tried his best not to mess up Yan's expertly crafted bandage work, but careful was definitely far from the best word for it...

Logan made an unhappy noise as he got sat down on the mattress. Well, something way closer to sitting than he'd managed before, anyway. Nico stuck out an arm to steady Logan’s good shoulder, trying to keep him up. Logan clung onto it, trying to do the same.

They both caught their breath.

Nico caught his a lot sooner than Logan did, and decided he was done waiting. He started pushing on his shoulder, slowly tilting him. Logan visibly startled as he did, trying to resist as best he could. Which was *disturbingly* little… A small spark of pity made Nico move his other hand up to the back of his head, for a little more support and a little less rough of a landing. It seemed to have the intended effect as Logan relaxed. In fact, he could feel him fall asleep in his hands before he'd even gotten him all the way down…

Whatever.

Good, even.

He slid his arms out from under him and moved over to grab two handfuls of cargo pants, hoisting all of Logan onto the bed. Then dragged the covers over him before he sat down on the edge next to him. A sigh escaped when he glanced at him. Logan looked peaceful, but still nowhere near comfortable.

Nico leaned in to take a better look at Logan's flushed face. Logan inhaled sharply as Nico put his hand on his forehead. As he'd suspected, he definitely still had a *raging* fever… *How could he not?*

Logan leaned into his touch and mumbled something so quietly he almost couldn’t catch it. The barely audible, single word question punched him in the gut harder than Logan had done himself earlier.

‘*Mom?’....?!*

Nico froze, unable to breathe. His hand trembled at the effort of trying to keep it as still as possible. Logan didn't seem to mind, deeply asleep. The faint smile wasn't just a hint anymore.

Trying to stay out of even more personal drama, Nico moved his hand so carefully, he barely moved at all. After what seemed like forever, his hand was far enough removed from the sickening heat to fully pull away. He leaned back and crossed his arms, the nerves still evident on his skin.

Time dragged by a lot faster than Nico had expected. He startled when Yan suddenly opened the door. She startled all the same when he almost jumped off the side of the bed. They looked at each other, wide eyed.

“*Everything okay?”* she asked quietly.

“*Yeah.* Good walk?” he returned just as quietly.

“Yeah…” she replied with a polite smile. “You take a break too” she offered.

Nico nodded, slipping past her, past all the mess, past the front door.

Fresh air. That would be good.

It was. He watched the sunrise for a while, letting his thoughts drift away with the clouds. The sun was well up at this point.

He should probably go and eat something soon.

So should Yan.

He’d offer to get her something, he decided.

To his surprise he heard talking coming from behind the door. He opened it and found Yan, still faithfully on her chair. She turned to greet Nico, smiling happily. A lot more happily than she’d been the past days. *Good.* She deserved it more than any of them.

Nico smiled back. He followed her hand over Logan’s, finally forcing himself to face him. Logan's expression turned guarded as soon as he did.

“Hi…” Nico managed.

“Hey” Logan said a little hoarsely.

Nico took a few steps towards them. They stared at each other in a short, awkward silence.

“How are you feeling?” Nico asked even more awkwardly.

Logan looked unimpressed by his interrogation skills. “Bad” he stated coldly. He sounded a little out of breath and tired.

Yeah, that makes sense.

Nico nodded, then cleared his throat. “So, about what happened in there… I need to say something to you” he began reluctantly.

Yan patted Logan on the stomach and got up. “I'll give you guys a minute” she said quietly before sneaking out of the room. She put her hand on Nico's shoulder for a second as she walked past.

Nico dropped himself into the chair heavily. What was he even going to say?

“I don't really know where to start… I really fucked up. You, uh… You saved me back there”.

Logan pulled up his knees a bit, he roughly shoved himself upright and leaned his elbows on them. It was a pretty good attempt at a relaxed demeanor, if it hadn't been so obvious how much effort it took him to do it.

“I guess what I want to say is-” Nico continued.

“Don’t mention it”. Logan waved his words away with a curt, dismissive gesture. His face was hard to read again.

“But, I’m serious. I just want to say thank-” Nico started.

“*I mean it”* Logan cut him off. *”Don’t mention it*”. He rested the side of his head on the palm of his hand and shot Nico an annoyed glance. “Don't remind me of that fucking mess. There’s nothing to be proud of. We screwed up *everything*” he grumbled.

Nico sighed in annoyance. Logan was right. The guilt was almost physically painful. Not just for him apparently. Logan winced and shuddered, bending over a bit. His scowl faltered and didn't recover until *he* did.

“Damn, is that *still* the poison?” Nico asked carefully.

Logan grinned and let out a short, strained laugh. “Yeah, not deadly but it *almost* makes you wish it was” he mused with a low voice.

Fuck.

Nico swallowed. He hadn't thought he could feel more guilty before, he'd been *very* wrong. Thank the Gods Yan wasn't there to hear that *gem*...

Logan seemed to realize he went just a touch too dark too. His scowl died down further, close to a pout. “I'm just a little… *Grumpy”* he muttered. Almost like an apology.

With that Nico remembered what he came here to do in the first place. “Yeah… Alright, so… Fine, I won't thank you, but I *am* really sorry. About *everything*” he stammered. Desperately trying to avoid eye contact. “You know, you getting hurt… It was mostly my fault. I really lost it back there”.

Logan huffed and let himself fall back onto the mattress. “Yeah, well… Me too… I *was* being an unstable asshole. And you did manage to kill it pretty much immediately and drag me back here, making sure I wouldn’t *die* and all... So, I guess we’re even.” he replied coolly. His expression softened a bit.

Nico almost smiled, he decided to purse his lips instead. It's not that he suddenly liked Logan better than he had before, he was still a jerk, but it was nice to know he hadn't made their ‘feud’ even worse.

“Not that it’s going to matter. Clarisse is going to murder both of us when she figures out how badly we fucked up…” Logan grumbled quietly.

“About that” Nico said, hand already in his pocket. “I got you a little souvenir”. He tossed the small ornate box on Logan’s chest.

He took a second to pick it up, giving Nico a wary glance before opening it. His eyes went wide as soon as he did. “No way… Where did you get that…? *When* did you get that?!” he asked.

“It was inside the Manticore Hit me in the face after I stabbed it…”.

Logan huffed in disbelief and snapped it back shut. “*Hah*… Blessing in disguise, I guess…?”. He held out the box. His eyes narrowed when Nico took it. “What did you do to your arm?” he asked, eyes fixed on the large bruise.

“What did *I* do to my arm?” Nico chuckled humourlessly.

His expression fell as soon as Logan’s did.

Fuck.

“*Did I*…?” Logan almost asked.

Nico held up his hands. “It’s not nearly as bad as it looks. Doesn’t even hurt” he lied, moving around the answer.

Logan’s expression hardened, looking away to the ceiling. He drew his lower lip between his teeth, clearly upset. Very upset. Upset enough to-!

“What’s up with you all of a sudden?!” Nico asked, trying desperately to sound mocking rather than desperate. “You were more than happy to beat the shit out of me yesterday!”.

If there had been even a trace of tears, they’d evaporated in the heat of the annoyed fires igniting in Logan’s eyes. They finally snapped back to Nico. “That was *consensual!*” he countered angrily.

Nico had to put a fist to his mouth to stop himself from laughing. “Yeah, sure… I guess that’s true”.

Logan’s expression softened, all fire died. He seemed to think something over, then sighed. He opened his mouth to say something, something that seemed alarmingly close to an apology.

Somehow, every single part of Nico resisted violently. He got up so fast he startled both of them. Nico and his mind regrouped, forcing up a hand. “*Just go back to sleep, alright? You’re still all sorts of messed up*”.

What tone was that? Neither of them seemed sure.

Nico paced out of the room without waiting for an answer. He closed the door behind him and looked to the left, finding Yan before she found him. *No.* He went straight across the hallway, into his own room, and just stood there for a while.

What was up with him?! He cursed to himself under an extra long breath. The necklace shifted in its little box when he turned his hand, making a dull rattling sound. He held it up and glared at it. "*All of this* is your fault…" he grumbled to the contents of the decadent little box.

The necklace didn't even try to defend itself, hiding behind wooden lips, tightly sealed with a golden clasp.

Coward!

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, back still against the door.

Hypocrite…

After one last look at the intricately placed mother of pearl on the box, depicting some sort of scene, he opened the door to face the world.

"Hi~" the world greeted him pleasantly from the dinner table.

"Hi…" Nico returned, walking over to Yan and the inventions of various sizes she seemed to be studying.

"Interesting?" Nico asked.

Yan hummed in mild agreement, rotating the pyramid shaped remote in her hand. "Mostly just keeping myself busy… I can't figure *any* of these out…" she complained.

Nico put the box down on the table, catching Yan's attention. She studied the scene on the box carefully. "An ancient Greek wedding ceremony. A very high class one, at that" she expertly deduced before opening it.

She held up the necklace by both ends.

The large red stone in the pendant looked dull and boring… A lot less interesting than the box it came in. The sunlight glinted in a particularly shiny, metal invention in front of them. They caught their reflection at the same time.

Funny, from this perspective it was almost like she was… *Wearing it…*

The necklace noticed too, suddenly glowing an angry blood red, *far* from dull and boring.

Yan dropped it on the table. She grasped at Nico's arm, looking horrified. He was too stunned to react, the world around them did instead. The ground trembled, the wood cracked, dust fell from the ceiling. Yan quickly pulled herself up by his arm, he held onto her. Large silhouettes moved past the windows, crawling quickly in all directions. Yan's gasp got drowned out by

loud sawing noises from all directions. The noises of the Myrmekes' large pincers trying to get through the wood. Trying to get to *them.*

Nico slowly pulled up his hands, wrapping tight shadows all over the outside of the cabin, dulling the noise instantly and turning everything dark. *Shit.* That cost a lot of effort… Why did it have to be such a nice, *bright* day outside?!

The Myrmekes gnawed at the makeshift barrier, efficiently and tenaciously. More and more of them. A promise of what was to come when he'd surely have to let up, sooner rather than later…

Logan walked up from the hallway, clearly mostly held together by pure willpower and spite. He looked at Nico intently, *accusatorily.* “What's going on?!” he yelled.

Nico made sure to scowl before he opened his mouth.

Yan stuck out an arm in front of him to stop him, facing Logan directly. “*It was me!* I handled the necklace wrong!” she declared, her tone firm despite her trembling lip.

Nico got ready to defend her back. He was surprised to find he wouldn’t have to.

Logan's shoulders slumped down and his expression drained away, still unhappy but no trace of anger. “We'll figure something out…” he said softly. He reached out a hand and gave a strand of Yan's hair a light tug for emphasis.

A tear fell out of her eye as he did.

Logan turned back to Nico. “So… how long can you do whatever it is that you're doing?” he asked. He sounded tired.

Probably not as tired as Nico. “Definitely not much longer” he admitted.

“Then we should probably not stay much longer” Logan offered, completely unhelpfully.

Nico was about to share this feedback when Yan decided to be even less helpful. “They're never going to stop! They're going to follow us everywhere! Hephaestus said so!” she fussed, wiping at her face.

Nico tried not to groan under the weight of the situation and the ever growing number of giant insects. “Well… let's at least get all our stuff…” he groaned.

Nico watched Yan run around, gathering everything at what had to be record breaking speed. It still wasn’t quick enough. He let go of the shadows before he fell over, catching himself on the table with both hands.

The cracking and sawing picked up right where it had left off.

It took some time for Nico to get his breathing back under control. He glanced over when Yan put a hand on his. She looked terrified. It didn’t fit her ginormous, puffy pink jacket. He straightened up and looked past her, past the pile of bags on the floor, at Logan’s much more sober expression. He hadn't even bothered to put on a shirt under his spiky biker jacket. His hands shoved into his pockets.

“There's one place they *can't* follow…” he shrugged, tossing Nico his trench coat.

Right... Camp… All the way on the other side of the world.

Nico pulled his coat on and looked down. Yan's now serious, deadset expression didn't fit her outfit any better.

The silence was tense. They rounded up, trying not to pay attention to the absolute chaos around them.

“I'm going to be honest here, I don't think I can get us to camp in one go. I'm barely able to stand. I doubt I'd survive” Nico admitted.

Yan looked at Logan nervously. “That leaves fighting and running… I won't be able to get more than three at a time…” she concluded.

Logan huffed. “Okay. Talking about barely being able to stand… Running isn't going to *work out* for-”.

Intense fires burst up in the fireplace, casting long shadows on the wall. Even more intense guitars-!

“*Stop*…” all three of them groaned loudly.

Thankfully it did, leaving them in near darkness.

Logan closed his eyes, ran the palm of his hand over his forehead and sighed deeply. All a bit shakily, clearly not just in annoyance. He accidentally proved the point he’d been trying to make. Until just a few hours ago he hadn't even been able to sit upright…

They looked at each other nervously. The sawing and cracking all around got louder.

Yan whimpered.

Logan scowled.

Nico sighed.

“Alright, we don't have a choice. I'll try to get us as far as we can get” he stated.

Yan and Logan looked at him.

“Nico…” Yan started warily.

“Don't be *stupid*” Logan scolded.

The corner of Nico’s mouth twitched right into a growl. Anger flared up inside him. “I'm not *‘being stupid’*, there are *no* other options!” he snapped.

Logan glared at him. “Course there are! There's three of us! You don't have to take *both* of us! Just take her!”.

Nico threw his head back in exasperation. “What are you *on* about?! We're not leaving you!” he shouted.

Yan shot an angry look at Logan, looking back at Nico with worry.

Logan stuck up a hand in an annoyed gesture. “Yan’s the one who set it off, right? If you just take her, and the damned fucking necklace, they might just back off” he growled.

Nico threw up an even more annoyed hand. “Yeah, *might!* We’re not risking that!” he yelled.

“I'm getting better by the hour! I can probably hold out till at least tomorrow!” Logan yelled back.

Nico snapped. “*Probably?! Look at you! You'd never make it! Stop being crazy!”* he screamed at the top of his lungs.

“*I've dealt with worse!”* Logan shouted back at full volume.

Yan burst out crying like a broken fire hydrant. “*~This is all my fault! ~ If anyone should stay behind, it should be~!”*.

Nico and Logan turned on her as one, in a split second collaborative effort.

“*No!”* They thundered at the same time, knocking all wind out of her.

Yan just gaped ahead, wide eyed. Nico swore he saw her tears run back up into her eyes as she shut her mouth.

Logan was the first to reopen fire, leaning threateningly close to his face. “*I'm not coming. Now get the fuck out of here”* he spat through gritted teeth.

Nico grabbed his own face. *This guy is fucking impossible!*

He turned cold to the core. “*We don’t have time for your ego*”. Somehow, he’d managed to *emphasize* every single word.

Nico had no time to think, no other options and he was seriously pissed off at this point. He grabbed Logan’s wrist with his left hand and used his other to punch him in the wound on his abdomen, swift but hard. It’s not that he wanted to hurt him, but the absolute *last* thing he wanted was for this to turn into an actual fist fight. He felt Logan’s wrist tense up in his grip as he cried out, probably as much in pain as in surprise.

Yan gasped loudly.

Nico quickly dropped to one knee as Logan practically folded over his shoulder. He gripped Nico's coat with an angry, *painfully* weak, grip. Nico felt Logan's hand slide down his back and all tension leave his body as he heaved him up. *That* was a relief. Logan's full weight on his shoulder definitely wasn't... He was heavier than he'd even anticipated. The exhaustion probably didn't help either.

Nico pulled one of Yan's hands off of her mouth, tugging her along. "Come on! Running or fighting definitely aren't options anymore now!" he shouted.

She moved fast, swiping the bags, then tightening her grip on his hand.

The shadows enveloped them as they stepped forward.

Nico needed all his willpower not to collapse from the get go. He bared his teeth to bite through. Miles stretched out in front and behind them. Just a bit more, he told himself. The usual calm of the cold whispers nauseated him. He felt the shadows clamp and pull on him from all sides, less and less gently, trying to make him part of them. Yan's hand strained painfully in his crushing grip, going colder and colder. He felt bad for her, but he couldn't let up. If he did, he'd let go altogether. All his senses were so overwhelmed, he barely even felt Logan's weight anymore. Numbness took over his entire body.

No.

He wasn't going numb, he realized. He was *fading*. The whispers and shadows now slipped right *through* him, chilling his bones.

The final few miles took *forever*.

As soon as he smelled the cool summer air, Yan's hand slipped out of his grasp. He fell to his knees, unable to catch his breath.

Logan writhed.

Nico pulled at his back to slip him off his shoulder. He sighed in exasperation when he felt Logan retch right before he could. Nico almost fell right on top of him as he got him onto the ground, barely managing to catch himself with his hands. He noticed they had turned see through at the amount of energy he'd used. A drop of sweat fell off his chin and hit Logan's temple.

"Nico… He… Uh… On your back" Yan stammered.

"*Uhuh*" Nico panted. He pushed himself back up and struggled trying to get his coat off. While he did, he saw the large bloodstain on Logan's stomach. He hadn't really had time to feel guilty before, it caught up with him quick. As he threw his coat behind him, he toppled to the side. He was unconscious before he even hit the ground.

The emptiness filled him completely with a quiet, dreamless sleep. It felt like it could have lasted five minutes to a thousand years.

Sounds of the world coming back to him felt disoriënting. Something was going on. He slowly remembered where he was and what had happened.

"*Where is he?!"* a familiar voice shouted close by.

"Lo! Stop! Please! He's barely alive!" another familiar voice pleaded desperately even closer by.

He heard what he assumed was a curtain get torn aside, the sound of metal rings tingling wildly and the rapid fluttering of fabric. Nico couldn't really move, he had absolutely no energy. There was no way he could fight back right now. Pretending to still be unconscious seemed to be his best bet, he practically still was anyway. Hopefully Logan wouldn't go *that* low in his quest for vengeance. He mentally prepared himself to be strangled, just in case.

Nico almost opened his eyes when he felt his pillow get punched right next to his face. Yan yelped loudly. Logan left his hand right there. Nico could feel the mattress sink slightly as Logan leaned on it when he bent down over him.

"Sleep tight bastard. You're going to need it when I find you later" he growled into Nico's ear.

The mattress shuddered, almost like a gasp, as Logan tore himself away. Nico heard the curtain rings tingle dramatically again as Logan stomped off. He opened his eyes just a crack and drew a deep breath.

Apparently, he was lying on his side. He pulled his hand up to his face with all the effort he could muster. No longer see through. *Good*.

He felt a hand gently move his hair out his eyes. Startled, he turned his head slightly. Yan smiled at him, a little sadly.

"Good to see you, Nico" she said. "Sorry about that… He's, uh…".

Nico smiled back weakly. "Don't worry. I knew what I was getting myself into when I took him out like that" he breathed.

Yan pursed her lips and shook her head. "You two…" she sighed.

Nico rolled himself onto his back and propped himself up. "Thanks for everything Yan, you're a lifesaver".

Yan pushed him down again, way too easily. “You’re welcome. Now go back to sleep” she soothed.

He did, almost as soon as he closed his eyes.

Some time later, he startled awake. He shot up and faced her. Yan sat up straight with a jolt.

“*Is Will here?!”* he asked insistently.

Yan stared at him for a second, wide eyed. “Do…? Do you want me to get him?”.

Nico flung himself out of bed, holding up his hands defensively. “*No!*” he answered even more insistently.

Yan’s stare grew a lot more worried.

Nico lowered his hands slightly. “Yan, thank you *so much* for everything! It’s been gr-”. *Nope. It hshad been the worst.* “You’re great! I, uh… Goodbye”. He grabbed his stuff, fighting his freshly cleaned trenchcoat trying to get it on while running off.

“Oh…! Uhm…! *Goodb-?!*” he heard Yan shout after him as he closed the door behind him.

Nico looked around. Nobody. *Good*. He had to get away from the infirmary as fast as possible. Pacing past all the cabins, he set off in the direction of the edge of camp. Over there he could safely recover enough to finally get himself out of here, out of sight from anyone.

The Ares cabin’s angry red colour stood out among the others. Speaking of hiding... Logan was still going to kill him. He debated evading it, then he adjusted course right towards it. There was something he wanted to ask him. If it turned out he wasn’t there, tough luck though. He wasn’t spending any more time at camp than absolutely necessary.

He opened the door, maybe a little more roughly than he meant to.

Logan sat on a bench, across a young girl with a black, frizzy mohawk seemingly trying to eat her entire head.

“*Hey!* You can’t come in here! This is-” she started screeching in her cockney accent.

Logan shot up and drew his sword, holding the tip against Nico's neck in one fluid motion. He scowled, his eyes on fire.

“*Hahaaa~! You’re so dead!*” the young girl jeered at Nico, punching an armlength of spiky leather bracelets at him.

Two young boys ran closer from the back, almost falling over each other trying to get a better view.

Logan’s eyes flashed to the young girl. “Steph, shut up for a sec”.

She didn’t reply, unable to take her eyes off the sword on Nico’s neck, enjoying the show quite a bit.

He turned back to Nico. “Get your sword. I’m getting you back for that *little stunt* of yours” he growled coldly.

Nico didn’t budge. He took a deep breath. “You already have, you threw up all over me”.

A flash of surprise, maybe even embarrassment went over Logan’s face. It didn't last longer than a second. He quickly narrowed his eyes. “*Good*…” he bit. He jabbed his sword into the hardwood floor and dropped himself back on the bench with a thump.

The young boys boo’d loudly. Logan ignored them and stared straight ahead. Nico blinked a few times. That wasn't so bad…? Not the beating he’d expected, at least. Why not, though? He doubted Logan minded an audience. Maybe Logan wasn't feeling good, he wondered with some guilt.

“How's, uh…?”.

Logan looked at him as Nico gestured at his stomach. He snorted. “*Despite your best efforts*, not bad. The poison's worn off and Yan's gone to town on them with all sorts of experimental, witchy recipes” he pulled out a cigarette as he spoke.

Nico actually felt a little relieved.

“You, on the other hand, look like shit… And you fucking deserve it too” Logan declared smugly.

And, just like that, Nico got annoyed again.

Steph shot Nico a mean smile. Logan nudged the side of her head and got up.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t snoop” he told her. He pushed past Nico through the door. Holding it open, he looked at Nico impatiently.

Oh... Guess he did mind the audience.

Nico followed him out and shut the door behind him. “Look, I'm not going to say I'm sorry for what I did. Because I'm not. You were being stupid. You would have gotten yourself killed. I did what I had to. But… I didn't *want* to hurt you. I *am* sorry about that”.

He saw Logan grind his teeth. Maybe he shouldn't have said what he just did, but he meant it. Logan would just have to suck it up.

To his surprise Logan didn't say anything for a while, still staring straight ahead. He took a drag of his cigarette and blew a stream of smoke out of his nose. Then he threw his head back a little and side-eyed Nico, obviously pissed off. “*Well in my defense, Spooky*, you were being pretty stupid too... First you say that your shadow trick isn't an option because you're about to die, and then you expect me to be cool with it when you just decide to do it anyway? You almost killed yourself too, you know?”.

Nico stared down at his feet. The buckles on his dress shoes looked at him apologetically, apparently not knowing what to say either. He hadn't even considered Logan would have actually cared about that enough to remember that. Nico had figured he was just being arrogant and proud, *which was still true, but...* For an idiot, Logan sure managed to make *him* feel stupid.

“Yeah…” Nico managed. “Guess we kinda had the same idea”.

Logan looked at him for a second, then gave him a cocky smile. “Just so you know, you would have never gotten away with it if I weren't poisoned”.

Nico felt his eyelids drop in annoyance. “Sure, *tough guy.* Don't forget, I was about to pass out myself”. Their fight and then their heated conversation in the caves came to mind. He remembered what he came here for. “Actually, I have a favor to ask” he said finally.

“Don't push it” Logan bit back “I'm not helping you with jack shit. You're lucky I haven't punched you in the face”.

Nico put his hands in his coat pockets. “Actually, that's kinda what I wanted to ask. You were right earlier. My sword fighting and hand to hand aren't really up to standard. I was wondering if you'd teach me. You can beat me up as much as you like”.

Logan seemed caught off guard, cocking his head in clear surprise. Then he grinned deviously. “You know what?... Sure”. He got up. “I'm game”. He stuck out his hand.

Nico grabbed it. Logan squeezed hard, probably as a threat. Nico squeezed back, probably to tell him to bring it on.

“You can come by as soon as I'm back on my feet” Logan offered. “You got a phone?”.

He *did*, he realized. Adamantine SIM cards had only been around a few years and he hadn't been particularly interested, but somehow he'd gotten one anyway. Gods bless Hazel and her unwavering optimism… Nico dug in his pocket and pulled out an ancient flip phone. He handed it to Logan, who seemed far less than impressed.

“Not a fan of technology, huh?”.

Nico shrugged. “Not a fan of most things” he explained, not ashamed in the least of his unwavering pessimism.

“Probably should have guessed that much…” Logan muttered. He pressed some buttons and handed it back. “Send me a message in a couple of weeks. I'll send you the address".

Nico gave him a half smile. “Looking forward to it”. He wasn’t, of course, but at least it’d be useful.

Chapter 3: III. Crossing swords

Chapter Notes

> All warnings are spoilers:
> Repercussions of having an avoidant attachment style, choking, pinning down, well deserved kick in the nards.

A loud beep from his pocket sent a shiver through Nico's entire body.

That sound, he hadn't heard that in… *No,* don't think about that.

He was forced to do just that, as the numerous text messages he'd deleted confronted him. The small, *hollow* black text repeating itself over and over under every name hammered harder and harder each time. One in particular almost made him snap his phone shut, his hand already on the back.

He forced himself to read her name. *I'm so sorry, Hazel.*… It had been so long since he'd last looked at them… Well, he *hadn't* looked at them. Not even back then. It had been too painful. That's exactly *why* he'd destroyed all evidence… Thank the Gods they'd all given up by now…

A wry smile spread on his face.

He quickly read the last message he got, the only one that had anything new to say. He rolled his shoulders, forcing them down. Easy enough, at least this wasn't someone he *actually* cared about.

His smile turned even more wry as he read Logan's address.

Took you long enough, rude jerk. He'd messaged him days ago. He sucked in his lips in shame. *Right.*… He'd try to be a less glaring hypocrite next time… Another message came in right before he put his phone away.

[I'll try not to kiss you] Logan added.

Nico read that again. Then again. *Uhhh.*…

[kill you] quickly came in after.

Oh .

[fucking autocorrect].

Nico snorted. [thanks either way] he replied. He added a thumbs up, grinning to himself.

The lights flickered. Damn, it was bright down here. He glanced up at the countdown clock hanging above the platform. Plenty of time until the next subway.

Without hesitation, he walked off the edge. He didn't even hit the rails before the shadows swallowed him. The echo of a shocked, high pitched gasp followed him into them. It quickly got drowned out by the whispers breezing past.

He stepped out onto dew covered grass, upstate New York. He looked over at an old, but charming house standing amidst the large trees. Right at a rickety looking porch, right at a familiar face, blinking in surprise…

"Ha. You actually showed up…". Logan pushed his elbows off the porch fence, slowly putting his phone away.

"You didn't think I was serious?" Nico asked.

"Just can't imagine you're very excited about this. Or did you forget I have something to make up for?". Logan grinned menacingly.

"Oh I didn't forget. I'm counting on it" Nico responded calmly.

Logan grinned wider "Good". He gestured at the door behind him. "I gotta get my stuff real quick and let my sister know what we're up to". Logan opened the door and looked at him.

Nico looked back at him.

Logan's look turned quizzical. "You're not coming in?".

Nico narrowed his eyes. "Sure...? Didn't think you'd want me to" he shrugged.

Logan huffed. "I'm not *that* petty. If I was, I wouldn't have agreed to this in the first place!". He seemed a little offended.

" *Alright,* relax" Nico responded, stepping up on the porch. He walked through the door. Apparently it led to a kitchen.

A broad, athletic looking young woman stood at the counter top. Her black, wavy hair almost reached down to her shoulders. It bounced slightly as she hacked at the vegetables in front of her. She seemed a little lost in the task at hand, but quickly glanced around as Logan closed the door behind them.

"I thought you were talking to that cat again" she giggled, her bright blue eyes flashing from Logan to Nico. "But, you brought back *another* stray?" she asked. With a grin, she put down the knife and turned around, leaning against the counter. "Ooh, this one's *cute!* " she mused.

Nico felt his face heat up. "Hi, uh. I'm Nico".

The young woman shot Logan a mischievous look. “So *this* is your new arch-enemy? Lucky you”.

Logan scowled at her.

She turned back to Nico. “Hi, Nico. I’m Gwen. Logan’s landlord”. She smiled wider, sticking up a hand. “And *favourite* sister”.

He returned a polite, hopefully not *too* awkward smile.

Logan escaped off into a hallway without a word, leaving Nico under Gwen’s very clearly entertained, scrutinizing gaze. He withered away a little, not sure what to say, nor what to do with his hands. He quickly hid them behind his back, glancing at the door. *Man*, he wished he’d stayed outside…

Gwen giggled quietly. “Don’t be shy. I don’t bite” she cooed.

Crap.… Nico hissed in feigned regret, baring his teeth in an apologetic grin. “Sorry. *I* do”.

Gwen’s eyes lit up. “Aah~! Guess all the *scary* stories I heard about you were true!”.

Nico didn’t think he’d ever been relieved to see Logan again, but here they were. Nico eagerly followed when he opened the door.

“What are you guys up to?” Gwen asked with a swift, worried glance at Logan’s sword.

“Don’t worry” Logan assured. “I’m just going to beat him up”.

Nico rolled his eyes at his smug smile.

Gwen didn’t seem that impressed either. She met Nico’s eyes with a raised eyebrow. “Please, give him back to me in one piece this time, yeah?”. There was a hint of a warning in there.

Still, Nico couldn’t help but smile at the sound of Logan’s annoyed huff next to him.

Gwen grinned. “I love fixing people up, but today is my day off!”.

Nico blinked at her.

She grinned, pointing the tip of her knife to her face. “Nurse!” she explained happily.

He nodded at her as he stepped over the doorstep, hand over his heart. “I *swear* I’ll keep him out of trouble”.

She winked at him before going back to massacring her vegetables. “Thanks, Nicky~!”.

Great, another nickname.…

They silently made their way around the house, all the way over to the edge of the woods.

Logan turned to him, scanning him without any expression. He cocked his head, eyes on Nico’s hip. Nico subconsciously raised his hand a little, running his fingers past the hilt of his sword.

“Right, I forgot. Even your sword is edgy” Logan grumbled. It was almost more of a question.

“Yeah. It's stygian iron. You know, from the underworld” Nico explained.

“Cool” Logan said, under his cold tone he seemed genuinely impressed.

Nico looked at his sword. *Yeah* . Kinda is.

“Has it got a name?” Logan asked. The slight condescending undertone exposed an ulterior motive.

“Nope. Never bothered. Doesn’t need one, anyway” Nico replied.

That was more than half true. *Nico* had never bothered. He still liked ‘Specter’, just not the painful memories of the voice that used to say that name… That aside, he never would have willingly given Logan something to make fun of anyway.

He took a quick look at Logan's standard issue xiphos, hanging lazily in his hand. A mean, sharp little edge curled up at the corner of his mouth. “I’d ask you the same, but seeing how *basic* yours is, I don’t even need to” he scoffed, turning it around.

Logan flung it up and pointed it at him in a halfhearted threat. “Watch what you say about Stabigail” he warned with a grin.

Nico snorted, then quickly hid his mouth behind his fist. *Damn it.* He’d hoped it had been something a little more *unintentionally* funny…

“She might be a basic bitch, but she’s all I need. Anything fancier would be wasted on me anyway. This has got to be Stabigail the seventh”. Logan paused, lowering her just a bit. “Maybe the eighth…?”.

Nico could see him go over the entire, most likely violent, history of Stabigail’s lineage.

“Point is, swords don’t last long around me” Logan finally concluded.

“Weird flex, but alright…” Nico shrugged, back to an acceptable level of frost.

Logan narrowed his eyes, Nico got ready for a snide remark. “So, you're more of a defensive guy right? Seeing as you've got all that long range emo magic to work with”.

Nico tried to keep a poker face. “Yeah” he bluffed.

Logan nodded. “We'll work from there”. He looked at him expectantly. “Go ahead. Get ready” he beckoned with his sword.

Nico did, slowly, poker face still going strong under Logan's scrutinizing watch. *Damn.…* Why did it suddenly feel like he didn't know anything about swordfighting? He never really thought about any of this that much before, he just did it… “There” he stated, with much more certainty than he felt.

Logan snorted, making a show of switching his sword to his right hand. Nico clicked his tongue. *Arrogant asshole.* There was no way he'd let him-!

In a flash Logan had grabbed his wrist and stuck the point of his sword inches from his throat. “Don't lean forward, keep the tip of your sword on your opponent's face at all times and keep your hands close to your body…” he summed up, letting go of him. “You're offering up pretty much all possible openings. This is beginner level shit…” he complained.

Nico huffed in embarrassment. Guess he really was much worse than he thought… “Yeah… Well… Usually I don't have to worry about any of that. I just chuck zombies at the problem until it goes away… Has worked pretty well so far…” he defended.

Logan pursed his lips, barely suppressing a laugh, then pointed his sword at him accusatorily. “Don't brag about being spoiled... Just do what I tell you” he ordered.

Nico frowned. He wasn't trying to… *Yeah, alright. Fair.* He looked at Logan's posture and went over the notes. He stood up straight, tilted his sword forward and turned sideways a bit.

Logan seemed happy enough. “See? Now I actually have to move to get to your vitals. That should at least give you some time, maybe even an opening”.

Ha.…

“You ready?” Logan asked.

Nico nodded. He gripped his sword. Logan stepped forward, hooked his lower leg behind Nico's knees and shoved him over before Nico had time to react. He held on to Nico's shirt, suspending him about a foot above the ground. Nico looked up into another unimpressed expression.

“I'm going to need a little more reaction from you than that…”. Logan pulled him back to his feet in one hard tug on his shirt, causing him to almost topple forward.

Nico scowled. “I thought we were *swordfighting”*.

Logan glared at him. “Why would I *only* use my sword? Real fights don't have rules. People are going to throw everything they’ve got at you. You have to be ready for anything” he responded.

Nico thought back to their fight on the hill. He’d thought it was over when Logan lost his sword back then and almost got decked in the face right after. The bruises on his arms had reminded him of that fumble for two full weeks after…

“Try again” Logan beckoned.

“Alright” Nico grumbled through his teeth. He watched Logan carefully until-!

He blocked his sword, *barely* in time.

“Better”. Logan pulled back.

Damn ri-!

Logan’s sword stabbed forward and stopped right in front of his nose, making him take a step back. “Don’t get cocky! Get back in position as soon as you can”.

Nico did, trying not to grumble. He didn’t *need* to grumble, anyway. He’d just figured out Logan’s tell. Back in his spot, he glanced down, *ready.*

Logan inched his right foot closer.

Nico was already at him, sword ahead.

Logan grabbed his arm, pulling it past him. He slapped Nico on the throat with the flat of his blade. “Dead” he declared coldly. He tossed Nico’s arm back at him. “You fell right for it! There’s no way I could’ve gotten a good hit in from all the way over there. If you want to go on the offensive, you can’t be so *antsy* about it”.

Nico rubbed his throat, hiding a cough. He’d just stick to defense… *For now.*

After what felt like a lifetime Nico finally managed to block Logan’s swings and dodge his stabs somewhat consistently. Consistently enough, it seemed.

“You try to get me this time” Logan ordered, barely even looking at him.

The clear disrespect helped ease Nico’s nerves. He fought the urge to just chuck a zombie at him, swinging his sword instead. As he’d expected, Logan blocked it easily with his own. What he hoped Logan *hadn’t* expected was a kick in the leg!

Sadly, he had. Nico managed a good hit, but didn’t get him to move an inch. A vice grip tightened around his ankle. Their eyes met.

“Aim lower next time” he was told.

Crap…

With an *annoying* chuckle, Logan pulled him right on his ass.

Nico sighed out all the emotional pain. Why did he come here again? Did he *really* need to do this? A hand in front of his face stopped his downward spiral. He looked up, ready for another smug expression.

“C’mon, don’t make me wait” Logan complained, surprisingly serious.

Oh.

Nico took his hand. Back to his feet, he prepared himself once again. This position still didn’t feel natural… His mind worked overtime.

He swung. *Blocked.*

He kicked lower. *Miss.*

That was fine, that wasn’t what he was going for anyway. What he was going for, was an *opening.* As fast as he could, he pulled back his sword and swung harder. He smiled as he managed to disarm Logan.

“Not bad!”.

His smile strained as Logan’s hand closed around his wrist, twisting it and almost making him drop his own sword. Nico grasped at his fingers, trying desperately to pry them open. No such luck.

Logan shook his head in feigned regret, twisting his wrist further without any issue. “Wrong choice~” he mused as he made Nico let go of his sword with a painful hiss. He reached over and pulled hard on Nico’s free wrist, tearing it away with embarrassing ease.

They glared at each other over both Nico’s tightly confined hands.

“I have the clear upper hand here… You should have gone for a counter attack”. His expression turned more scrutinizing. “I'm right in front of you! Openings all over! You don’t even know how to throw a punch?”.

Nico tried not to look away in shame. He bit into his scowl, forcing it into a stoic stare. Logan let go, looking him over thoughtfully. He took a deep breath and beckoned at him. Nico straightened up, not entirely sure what to do.

“I'll give you the first hit” Logan clarified, smiling suspiciously smugly.

Nico clenched his teeth.

Logan cocked his head. “Whenever you're-”.

Nico cut him off with a fist, going right for his, *unremarkable,* sharp jawline. Logan caught it before it landed, keeping it in a tight grip.

“Aha! You're learning” he mused, not even remotely less smug.

Nico clenched his teeth harder. Damn right he was! He flung his other-!

His left hook got caught just as easily as the right…

“ *Now* what are you going to do?” Logan asked, grinning deviously. He tightened his grip on Nico's hands painfully hard.

It was really hard to think like this.

Logan moved closer. “Too late” he taunted.

He swept his feet out from under him, still not letting go. Nico's back hit the ground with a smack against the wet grass. He couldn't suppress a surprised gasp, making Logan snicker. A little bit closer by than he'd like… Logan had him pinned down on the ground, both hands firmly around Nico's forearms by now. They wouldn't move even an inch. He struggled under Logan's weight. Nico watched his eyes flicker with excitement. He was clearly enjoying this a little too much…

“I thought you said you were gonna try not to kiss me” Nico scoffed, trying to jerk his arms free one last time.

Irritation mixed with excitement, turning Logan's grin almost wicked.

“C'mon. Trash talk isn't going to get you out of this. You've got to be a little more creative” he scoffed. He moved one hand to Nico's throat, squeezing threateningly.

You also said you were gonna try not to kill me, you dick!

Nico grasped at his hand, *uselessly* . He wouldn't be able to get a good hit in either… Too far away and not nearly enough room.

“Find an opening” Logan demanded, squeezing tighter.

Alright, jerk. Whatever you say.

Nico dug his heels in and pushed himself upward, causing Logan to lose some balance. He used the opening to quickly knee him in the crotch, making him wince. Nico threw him off and grabbed his sword. He got to one knee and held it under Logan's chin, raising it to force his eyes on him.

“Ha!” Nico huffed out.

He prepared himself for Logan's angry outburst. It was a no-show. “Wow! Straight up *evil!”* he laughed. “ *Way* better!”.

Oh.

Nico grinned back at him.

Loud clapping coming from the side caught both their attention. A young man with short, brown curly hair walked up to them. His wide grin added to Nico's suspicion he'd been watching for a while. Nico met his mahogany brown eyes. The man held up a hand, still walking closer.

"Hi. Mark" he offered short and effective.

"Hi. Nico" Nico managed back before Mark stopped and nudged Logan in the shoulder with his shoe.

"Gwen says it's time to come home".

Nico looked down at Logan, finally moving his sword away. He got to his feet and offered a hand. Logan took it, still grinning. The sunlight hit his dog tag as Nico pulled him up, making it glimmer. Apparently it had slipped out from under his shirt. Nico noticed something in the small metal text. Without thinking about it he reached for it and held it up slightly.

"Samantha…?" He asked.

Mark hissed. Nico saw him suck in his lips and quickly look at Logan, then at Nico. *Crap.* He felt the tension rise quickly.

"My mother" Logan said. The coldness in his voice and expression did not match the flames in his eyes.

Right. "I heard she passed away...". Nico let go of the tag. "My mother died young too… It's rough, huh?" he asked.

Logan's expression softened. A hint of unease shone through. "Yeah. Thanks.". He held onto his dog tag absentmindedly. "Sorry about your mom" he added, avoiding Nico's eyes and settling on Mark instead.

Mark seemed to freeze up a little, a slightly forced smile making its way across his face. He quickly looked away from Logan, at Nico. "Are you staying for dinner?".

Nico didn't even have time to breathe. "No!" he stumbled. "Uh, thanks!" he stumbled on.

"Oh…!" Mark responded, taken aback. "Okay…!".

Nico quickly sheathed his sword, ready to make his escape. He rolled his shoulders and turned back to Logan, for what would hopefully be the final awkward interaction of the day.

' Thank you for your help'. Come on, it's not that hard!

His jaw wouldn't unclench enough to allow him to say it anywhere near convincingly. Guess unconvincingly would have to do...

"Th-".

The words got stuck behind his teeth as Logan suddenly got right up in his face, staring deeply in his eyes.

“While you were glaring at me earlier, I wondered…” he started, threateningly low and quiet.

Nico prepared himself, for *anything.*

“Are your eyes actually solid black?” Logan finally asked.

Anything except *that* , apparently.

The way the sun hit Logan's eyes almost made the amber colour glow. When he didn't look so pissed off, they were actually kinda-! *Stop it! No they aren't.*

“No, very dark brown” Nico replied, almost choking on his own breath.

Logan cocked his head just a bit. “Never seen that before… They're even darker than Yan's”. He turned halfway and took out a cigarette.

Nico blinked. Guess he'd won their sudden staring contest? He shook off the nerves, feeling more than a little annoyed now. Screw Logan and his emotional warfare. Was this another *‘lesson’?*

“You have those *soul stabbing* type of eyes” Logan chuckled, inhaling a drag from his cigarette.

Great , Nico just *loved* being thought of as creepy. It's not like that was a sore spot or anything. You know what? *Good.* He didn't mind scaring him. He was about to tell him so.

“That's pretty dope” Logan added begrudgingly. He seemed to *mean* it.

Nico didn't know what to say to that. He didn't really know what to think of it. “Uh…” was his first try. “Thanks” he tried a little harder. “For your help today, I mean…”.

Logan glanced back, completely serious again. “Sure”. He started wandering off, back towards the house. “Bye” he blew out in a stream of smoke.

“Bye…” Nico muttered back. At his pace he wouldn’t hear him anymore anyway. There was no way he was going to shout after him…

“Don’t take it personally” Mark started apologetically. “He’s, uh… He’s always like this… *Lately* ”.

Nico put up his hands, waving for him to stop. “I’ve heard, yeah. But I *do* have a talent for getting on his nerves. I can't seem to stop doing it either…” he chuckled bitterly.

Mark seemed confused. “What? This is the best mood I’ve seen him in *days* ”.

Nico blinked at him.

“He probably likes you” Mark teased. “Don't tell him I said that…” he added, all the previous glee out of his voice.

“He hates my guts. I promise” Nico scoffed.

“Yeah, *right”* Mark replied, voice low with sarcasm. “If that was true he'd have bitten off your fingers back there. He lets no one touch his mom's tag. Not even Gwen!”.

Nico thought about it. Whatever was going on, ‘ *like’* was definitely the wrong word. The nicest way to describe their dynamic was that they tried to *tolerate* each other. And only since today, honestly… He’d just gotten lucky. If he had anything to do with Logan’s ‘good’ mood today, it was probably just the prospect of strangling him.

Nico felt a faint humourless grin curl up as he swallowed, still able to feel the tight grip around his throat all the way down. *That fucking psycho...* “Sure, Mark” he tossed out dismissively.

Mark held up his hands in defeat.

Nico took a step back. “Say bye to Gwen for me”.

Mark stuck up a thumb. “Sure thing! Goodbye, Nick!”.

Nico grinned through the frustration of yet *another* nickname. These people really *were* family…

He held up a hand as he slipped into the shadows. Well, whatever Logan’s problem was, it wasn’t Nico’s to deal with anymore.

The whispers stopped as he stepped out onto very sandy, rocky ground. He took in the warm, reddish orange all around him. Rocky walls scaled far into the sky. The dry, torrid heat was almost unbearable. So… How could there be a rainbow right in front of him? So close by too… He looked closer, right into Chiron’s forced smile.

“ *No!”* Nico said sternly.

Chiron’s forced smile turned into a painfully apologetic grimace.

“No… Please…” Nico pleaded to any God listening.

Chapter 4: IV. Unpacking emotional baggage

Chapter Notes

> All warnings are spoilers:
> Description of murder/suicide and mention of suicide attempt, PTSD, slap in the face, french death threats. It finally starts to get a little gay from here.

Nico rushed over the campgrounds, *again!* Somehow, tricked into cleaning up the Gods' messes, *again.…*

Chiron had almost been even more cryptic than last time. Only explaining that he'd have to come back, *for his own safety.* Nico didn't know what he was on about, but he did know *one* thing. All of this was fucking bullshit!

He made sure to sigh with extra annoyance, muttering angrily under his breath the whole way. *Gods damn you Chiron.… You horse's ass.…* He swore he'd never forgive him this time. In fact he wouldn't forgive his entire equestrian pedigree, not until at least five generations back, for allowing this to happen.

His heart sank when he saw he wasn't going to be facing whatever this was alone. But, not just that... Two very familiar frames waited for him at the meeting point. Well, not *exactly*. Yan and Logan were far too busy actively keeping a respectable distance away from each other to be *actively* waiting for him.

Nico had clearly disturbed their intense bout of avoiding eye contact with his sudden presence. His eyes darted from one to the other, almost forgetting to stick up a hand. Yan smiled awkwardly, but quickly returned a careful wave.

Logan scowled straight ahead, only glancing over for a moment.

"Didn't expect to see you again so soon, Spooky" he said with a low voice.

Gods. That stupid fucking nickname again.

"Boo..." Nico replied coldly, adding a single, lazy shrug. Seemed like a safe enough response.

Logan barely reacted. The corner of his mouth curled up a bit, nothing close to a smile.

"*So*… Guess we're getting the band back together?" Nico asked no one in particular.

Yan shot them both an apprehensive look, then turned to Nico.

“Well… after our last mission they weren’t *that* excited to send us back out again… You know? The three of us... Together... The only reason Clarisse even allowed it is because apparently it was specifically requested by the God in question. So she asked one of the more experienced demigods to go along with us. One of my friends, actually. I can vouch for her, she’s amazing! I promise!” she said with a bright smile “She’s going to lead the whole mission”.

Nico smiled reassuringly. “Should be fine, right?” he replied, trying to convince himself.

Yan looked behind her, quickly finding someone. “This is Amira, the one who's going to keep us all from dying”. She gestured at the young woman reading a large book at the base of a tree.

Nico hadn’t even noticed her before. A thick bunch of dark brown curls covered her face. He could see she was wearing a very large short sleeved shirt, it almost looked like a tunic. Her thin, muscular legs were clad in a pair of practical black leggings. Amira seemed to have some trouble dragging her eyes off her book, lifting it slightly before looking at Nico. The warm tone of her bronze coloured skin didn’t match her cool expression. She had sharp facial features, reminding Nico of a stern librarian.

She raised one thin, expectant eyebrow. Her cold grey eyes seemed to be trying to figure out Nico’s whole personality through his eyes, like he was some sort of puzzle. He felt a little uneasy.

“Hi, I’m Nico” he said, sticking out his hand.

She gave him a firm handshake, not breaking eye contact even once. “Hello, Amira” she said firmly. “Daughter of Athena” She looked him up and down slowly. “So… What are you bringing to this team, Nico?”.

“Honestly? Mostly free travel as far as Clarisse is concerned… But, I know some other tricks. I’m a son of Hades”.

Amira’s stoic expression cracked ever so slightly with surprise. She let out a hum.
“That *should* be interesting…” she concluded.

Clarisse called out to them from a distance. She was standing in a suspiciously sheltered and dark corner of camp. They reluctantly made their way over and formed a half circle around her and her guest.

A woman Nico had never seen before stood next to Clarisse. Her stiletto heels made her even more remarkably tall than she already was. She wore a long fur coat, very large sunglasses and had her hair hidden under a shiny, purple scarf. Despite the disguise it was obvious she was stunningly beautiful. Based on her impressive appearance Nico didn’t doubt that she was Aphrodite. Apples dotted angry red all across the canopy above her.

Clarisse eyed her nervously. She was about to speak when Aphrodite interrupted her, not wasting any time.

“As you can see I’m not keen to be seen here with you, *after what you did to me*”. She slightly lowered her sunglasses, giving them a look of contempt. She spoke with an angry yet smooth voice. “As you probably already realized, I summoned you because you have something to make up to me” she stated.

“You” she glared at Clarisse. “And the three of *you*” she fanned her hand at Nico, Yan and Logan with a look of disgust. “*Meddled* with my marriage. *You really, really shouldn’t have done that.*…” she said threateningly.

She lowered her sunglasses even lower, looking at Amira. “You… I don’t know you, I don’t care about you…” she said with a bored tone, waving her hand at her absentmindedly.

She turned back to the three of them with a scowl. “You’re lucky I’m such a gracious Goddess” she continued. “And you’re *very* lucky you’re not the only ones who offended me so deeply… So, I’ll consider you forgiven if you clean up a mess for me… Well, clean up a filthy boar of a sphinx to be precise. I’ll arrange a place for you to stay. You can bring me a photo as proof of the deed being done” she offered.

She threw a disposable camera at Yan, who clambered to catch it.

Clarisse seemed tense. “Of course, my lady. Thank you for your grace… If I may ask, where will we find this sphinx?”.

Aphrodite huffed loudly. “The *pig* goes by Wilma Robinson, her ‘*accomplishments*’ will be celebrated this friday in the hotel la Foutaise, in Hollywood”. She burst out in sudden anger, ripping her sunglasses from her face. “*I want you to humiliate her like she did to me!*” she hissed loudly.

Clarisse recoiled a little. “My… lady…?” she asked weakly.

Aphrodite spun to face her “That *swine* had the guts to declare some random Beverly Hills bimbo, *mutilated beyond recognition by plastique*, the most beautiful woman in the world for one of her little gameshow questions. *Perfectly aware how that would make me look!*”.

She threw her sunglasses on the ground and crushed them mercilessly with her heel over and over, small bits flying everywhere.

A silence fell over the group.

Seriously…? Nico bit his tongue.

Logan didn't. “Really?! This petty *bullshit* is why you made us come running?!” he asked in irritated astonishment.

Yan hissed loudly.

Aphrodite blew up. “*Sacrebleu!*” she cried out hysterically. She hit Logan’s face with a hard sounding slap, snapping it to the side. Then leaned in, sticking her finger in his chest. “*Ferme ta gueule, espèce bâtard grossier, ou je te fais tuer!*” she screamed in his ear.

Logan grinned widely. He put up his hands in defeat, snickering quietly to himself.

She backed off, turning around and throwing her hands up dramatically. “*Be sure to dress appropriately, you peasants*” she hissed with her back turned to them.

“... So… Are we clear?” Clarisse asked a little hesitantly.

“Yes, ma'am. We’ll take care of it" Amira said firmly, sticking out a hand at the files Clarisse was holding.

Clarisse seemed to get her nerve back, and shoved them in Amira’s hand. “Good” she huffed. “Remember, my hide is on the line too. I’m counting on you”.

Amira gave her a nod and walked ahead. They slowly followed. Everyone seemed at a loss for words, staying quiet until they reached a decrepit looking little shed. An unending series of loud noises blasted through the numerous holes between the planks of rotten wood.

Amira knocked on the door with a determined rhythm, seemingly unfazed by everything.

“Wow…” Yan let out.

Nico hummed in agreement. “She sure is… *Something*…” he added.

Logan ran his fingers over the red mark on his cheek. “Not gonna lie, I sort of get the hype now. That was pretty hot…” he said, smiling to himself.

Yan slowly shook her head. “Forget that one, my boy. You won't survive”.

Logan briefly seemed to consider the challenge.

Yan noticed. “Besides, you don't want to go where your father's been…”.

Logan shuddered in disgust.

Yan almost reached his cheek with her hand, then *didn’t.* She pulled back with a painful little jerk. Yan’s cheeks turned red when she realized that they’d all noticed, all eyes lingering on her.

Nico stared at the trees behind her, just to not to die from second hand embarrassment.

Amira quickly threw the door open, done waiting for an answer. A wall of noise wafted them all in the face. Amira waded through the wave, quickly infiltrating the small space. Yan almost ran after her. Nico waited for Logan to trudge by before doing the same.

As soon as his ears got used to his surroundings, his eyes had time to take their turn. The small space looked even worse inside than it did on the outside. They barely managed to fit

around the infinite piles of tools, parts and, frankly, *junk.* It instantly took him back to the cabin in Russia.

He took in the frame of the young man in front of them. He was on the shorter side and heavy set, definitely with a little more than just muscle. His dark brown hair had been trimmed close to his scalp. Once, at least, the buzzcut now overgrown. His equally messy beard had a faint reddish hue throughout its otherwise dark colour. Nico noticed the several small burn holes in his shirt when he turned to face them.

"*Hey, guys! Long time no see!*" he yelled at the top of his lungs over the blaring sounds. Sounds Nico only just now recognized as hard bass music, channeled by horribly blown out speakers.

A gaze hidden by incredibly dusty goggles landed on Nico. The young man stuck up his hand, knocking the old radio next to him into submission with a swift punch.

"Hi, Nico di Angelo" Nico offered.

His soon to be colleague revealed two surprisingly large, almost *pretty,* light brown eyes. The dark dirt all over his face left a clear imprint of his goggles around them.

"Hi! Shane Włodarczyk!" the young man replied loudly. "You better remember that name so you can tell your grandchildren you knew me before I got famous" he added, framing his face with his hands.

"Oh…?" Nico replied, a little caught off guard. "What should I know you from?".

Shane gave him a sly look. "Modeling of course. No, kidding, although…? Maybe later, as a side gig. I'm an inventor! Well… I *will* be once I actually invent something people are willing to pay for".

Uhuh... Nico pursed his lips. "Ah, how's that going?".

Shane blew a raspberry. "Oh, great. I mean, nothing like Leo's adamantine phone thingies, but I've already invented tons of, like, hella impressive things. I'm just waiting for people to notice".

Logan folded his arms. "Yeah, like chainmail underwear…" he said with obvious disgust.

"Somehow the chainmail mask was worse" Amira added.

"Both were horrifying. I wish you hadn't modeled them at the same time…" Yan said, seemingly trying to shake off the memory.

"You guys are just shallow! War isn't supposed to be pretty, you know?" Shane responded, undefeated in his enthusiasm. "Besides, I've actually sold some of those! Just not to the crowd I imagined…" he added, his bright smile dimming noticeably. "Just wait till you see my latest project!" he said, picking himself up again. "Prepare to be *wowed*" he warned. He took a can from a shelf. His eyes gleamed when he pulled the lid open. A laughtrack burst out

of the can, echoing off of its tin walls. “Eeeh?” he let out expectantly. “Canned laughter!” he explained loudly.

No reaction.

His face dropped. He took another can from the shelf underneath. He shook his head as he cracked it open. A cricket noise echoed out.

Nico shoved his hands in his eyes. “Well… Thin line between genius and goofball, right?” Nico concluded sarcastically.

Shane pointed a very excited finger at him. “*Thank you!* Exactly! *‘There is no great genius without a touch of madness’!”* he exclaimed happily.

Nico blinked at him. Did he just *perfectly* quote-?

Amira got back to business. “*Enough*. We're here for the trap. Is it done?”.

Shane rolled his eyes. “Right, the one my evil stepmother forced me to make…” he said unhappily. “*Of course* it’s done”. He grabbed something from his workbench and held it up for her. A neatly wrapped little gift box let off a bronze shimmer in his hand.

She inspected it quickly and thoroughly. “Good job” Amira said firmly.

Shane raised an eyebrow at her, clearly amused.

Amira raised an eyebrow in return, obviously not nearly as amused.

Shane raised his eyebrow even higher.

“Hand it over” she demanded.

“Yes, boss lady!” he said happily. He dropped it in her hands. “What are you guys going to do with it?” he asked.

“Detonate it at a party we’re infiltrating” Amira offered up.

Yan gasped in sudden realization. “Wait… Are we… *Terrorists?*”.

Amira shook her head. “No, no. We’re keeping the collateral damage to an absolute minimum. We’re neutralizing the target only” she assured, hitting the palm of her hand with a fist.

“So… Hitmen, then?” Nico concluded.

Amira tilted her head up a little, mulling it over. Then gave a single, effective nod.

They seemed to have lost Shane along the way. “Ah! Darn! I *love* parties! The Hephaestus guys always get left behind…” he complained.

“I mean… no offense, but it's not exactly *your scene,* hun” Yan explained, clearly meaning all offense.

Shane let out a smug chuckle. “You have no idea what you're talking about, *hun*” he declared. He stuck out a pinky as he downed his can of beer. He followed up by taking a dirty rag from the back pocket of his overalls and gently dabbed his mouth with it as he *very poorly* suppressed a burp.

Yan made a noise as if she was about to say something, then opted not to. Nico decided to follow her example.

“Well, for the record, I think it definitely would have been more *fun* if you were there, bud” Logan reassured with a smirk.

Shane grabbed another can of beer and offered it to him in solidarity.

Logan's smirk faltered a little. “No thanks… It's nine in the morning…”.

Shane tapped the side of his forehead and wiggled his eyebrows. “Isn't it still night if you haven't gone to sleep yet?” he asked.

The smirk died. “Yeah, okay, no... It probably would have been a little too much fun to have you there…” Logan concluded.

Amira shook her head. “Enough, everyone. Time to go”. She gestured at Nico inquisitively. “Nico?”.

Yep. That's me. Really wish I wasn’t right now… He nodded and held out his hands. “Right”. The shadows drew in close. He let them swallow them as soon as all hands locked.

They reemerged in the shade of a large fountain, the largest of three, all belonging to the *huge* building they’d be spending the night, it seemed. Water gently misted over them as they took in the sight of the tower ahead of them. A tower fit for the Gods. It reached up into the sky like the clouds belonged to it.

Nico caught his breath for a second. This time he’d anticipated it, but four people was still rough. New York and Hollywood weren’t exactly close to one another. His hand trembled when he wiped his face.

Logan put his hands in his coat pockets. It caught Nico’s attention enough to notice he’d caught Logan’s too. Nico straightened up. Logan narrowed his eyes. Nico didn’t know what to make of it, so narrowed his eyes right back at him.

What was Logan trying? And more annoyingly, why did he have to try it now that Nico almost couldn’t pretend to be fine?

Nico quickly looked away to get him off his back. He let his eyes slide down over the infinite windows of the hotel, all sparkling in the bright sunlight like diamonds. They landed on the

large, glass and marble entrance. And Amira's back, he realized, already well under way.

Yan walked past him, rubbing herself over her upper arms. "Blegh". She shook her head and rubbed harder. "I'll never get used to that! Shadow travel is so… *Blegh*". She stopped and quickly looked back at him, blushing. "Sorry! No offense!"

Nico smiled reassuringly and held up his hands. He walked past her, chuckling quietly to himself. Why would he be offended? If anyone knew how *'Blegh'* shadow travel was, it was him. In fact, every single one of his powers was… Oh, maybe he was a little offended after all.

By the time all of them had made it inside, Amira was already done taking care of the bureaucratic side of the mission. The three of them watched her walk back to them from the Hotel reception desk.

"We are booked for two rooms. For two nights, just to be sure and to throw off suspicion". She looked at Nico and Logan. "Here's your room keys, you'll be staying a few rooms over from us" she declared, placing a metal pass in each of their hands. They frowned at each other, equally excited.

"Guess we're roommates… No way out of that, huh?" Nico asked the Gods more than anyone actually present.

Amira nodded, relaying their divine message. "Yes. Men and women separate. Lady Aphrodite was very clear about that. She wants us to '*focus on what is important'* and doesn't want any '*unnecessary distractions'*. So I will share a bed with Yan and so will you two".

Logan spoke up before Nico could. "A *bed?* You're telling me there's no separate beds left in this *entire, massive* hotel?!" he asked in aggravated disbelief.

Amira lowered her eyebrows sternly. "Yes, I am afraid that is exactly what I'm telling you. This entire, massive hotel has been fully booked. We're lucky Lady Aphrodite could pull some strings. Sharing a bed is a shame, but unfortunately it can't be helped" she explained calmly.

She gave them one last nod before turning to walk away. Neither of them returned it. Yan shot them a last pitiful smile before trying to catch up with Amira.

Great. Wonderful. The first time in years he was going to be sleeping in the same bed as another man and it had to be *him.*

Nico couldn't help setting the tone. "Just so you know, this is going to be *a lot* worse for me than it is for you" he said with a venomously fake reassuring tone.

Logan smiled widely in equally fake appreciation. "For your sake, I *really* hope not…". He punched Nico in the upper arm *quite* a bit harder than amicable and walked off.

Nico rubbed his upper arm for a bit. Did he just… *Actually* sound miserable…? *That jerk!* He had *no* right to be more upset about this than Nico was!

In a weak form of protest, he didn’t follow immediately, deciding to plop down in one of the lobby chairs and glare at the meaningless hotel art on the wall. *Gods,* being a demigod sucked sometimes. *Gods,* this chair sucked worse somehow… He shifted uncomfortably. Then shifted even more uncomfortably.

The sickening colours in the preschooler art projects on the opposite wall ganged up on him. He ground his teeth, carefully taking in every single lack of detail and pointing out exactly what he hated about each piece. That probably killed him more than it killed time, he realized with a sigh.

Reluctantly, he dragged himself off of the upholstered rock pretending to be a chair.

He mentally prepared himself for a long, hopefully *quiet,* day before holding his card to the scanner. Like he’d dreaded, he found his new roommate as soon as the door opened.

It took him a second to realize Logan wasn’t going to react, *at all,* just sitting on the bed, elbow propped onto his knee, chin on the palm of his hand, and most notably, eyes closed.

Was he asleep? *In the middle of the day?* After giving *him* so much shit for being tired when he’d dragged halfway across the world?! Probably about to do the same earlier when they got here?! Nico felt annoyance build inside him. He walked past him and flicked his fingers at his forehead, making him jolt. Grinning to himself, he walked out on the balcony and leaned his back on the railing.

“You tired already? I don't want to throw your own words back in your face… but then again, I kinda *do*… *You better know what you signed up for* because I'm not going to go out of my way to fix your fuck ups” Nico sneered.

Logan faced away and rapped his fingers against the bedframe. For a second Nico thought that was all he was going to get. Right before Nico could throw another snarky remark at him, Logan got up and walked over. He put his hands down on the railing at Nico's sides and leaned in. Nico bent backwards when he realized Logan had no intention of stopping.

Logan stared him down. He was *really* close, and *really* pissed off. The all too familiar fire in his eyes flickered. Nico averted his eyes from them, instead watching as Logan’s mouth barely moved, speaking through clenched teeth.

“*I'm not going to fuck up*. You worry about yourself, Spooky. Don't start anything you can't finish”. He moved one hand up and flicked at the tiny skull hanging from Nico's earring, making a hard ting sound right under his ear.

Nico debated backing down, but he physically couldn't. Admitting defeat with words was even less of an option. He couldn't resist making it worse. “You're a little too close for comfort, buddy. It's kinda intense… Are you going to punch me, or *make out* with me?” he sneered.

The rage on Logan's face made way for contempt. “You pick. Whichever is *worse* for you!” he growled, but he did back down immediately, practically ripping himself away. Nico felt the railing shudder as he did. Logan stormed off inside.

Nico smirked at his small victory. Weaponising homophobia was always fun. There was no better way to get a ‘tough guy’ to back off…

Or to get killed, he admitted to himself. His smirk turned over into a frown.

His frown disappeared when he heard the door slam. *Good.* Some space. Time to think… *About what?* Maybe about what just happened. That wasn’t smart. He shouldn't let this guy get under his skin so much. And probably stop trying to get under his skin too, while he was at it.

He caught himself wondering. Whichever was *worse* for him… His stomach protested. *No… Don't actually think about that.…* He shook his head and grimaced. *No way* did he care to find out.

He pushed himself off the railing into the room, not really thinking about where to go from there. The door stared at him. He stared back. The door was very convincing. He pushed it open and walked into the hallway, thinking of where to go next. Anywhere far from here, that was for sure.

Yan and Amira’s door was open, just a crack. Voices spilled out. Hushed, but pressing. Before he realized he’d done so, he’d stopped. He didn’t see much, but enough to know he probably shouldn't have. Yan was practically wrapped around Logan, holding him tight.

“*I wanted to…*” Logan muttered.

He sounded… *Emotional*. Stunned, Nico realized that despite Logan's scowl, he was crying.

“*I get it*” Yan responded heavily, buried in his chest.

Nico straightened up. They hadn't noticed him. He quietly stepped back and turned around. *Alright… Back to the room after all, I guess.* He walked back a lot faster than he’d done on his way over.

His grip on the doorknob kept him pressed against the door for a second. What had he just seen? Memories of Yan’s slumped shoulders, her quiet panic, the tears, slowly dripped into his mind. His grip around the doorknob slowly let up. As soon as his feet allowed, he moved over to the bed and sat down.

Were they making up? Nico hoped so. For Yan’s sake. He tried to piece everything together. Were they-?

The beep of a keycard broke his concentration. Logan opened the door, even more tired looking than before. He noticed Nico and gave him an irritated look. Surprisingly, it actually made him feel a little guilty. Nico reluctantly turned to face him.

“About earlier… Uh, Sorry”.

Logan looked apprehensive.

“When I got on your nerves” Nico clarified.

“You mean when you were trying *to pick a fight* with me” Logan concluded, a little annoyed. He pursed his lips. “Or *french* me. Which one was it again?”.

Nico narrowed his eyes.

Logan got the hint. “Yeah, okay… Sure”. He gestured to the door, then let his arm drop back down. “Amira wants us to come over. I came to get you…”. Logan rapped his fingers against the open door, actively waiting.

Nico sighed and got to his feet, walking straight through.

Yan perked up when he walked through the door, still cracked open. Amira looked completely unfazed, beckoning him closer.

He could barely keep his mind in the room as Amira went over layers and layers of background information. None of it seemed all that relevant, let alone important. Nico nodded a few times, then slowly let his eyes wander.

Yan looked serious, even daring to ask follow up questions.

Logan looked the opposite. He wasn’t even pretending to be listening. Apart from that, he seemed to be in a much better mood than before. Not that Nico cared. Logan met his eyes from across the room. Nico debated looking away. Too late for that. Logan raised an eyebrow, not looking away either. Nico threw him one of his signature creepy grins.

Fuck off, jerk.

Logan grinned deviously and winked at him.

For fuck's sake.… Nico huffed and looked away.

Yan’s face, staring intently at him caught his attention. She gave Nico a disappointed look, then shot Logan a stern one. They both straightened up and turned back to Amira, who’d seemingly gotten so lost in her stack of documents and giving her speech that she had no idea they’d missed most of it.

“- As for tomorrow, we’ll have to make sure to blend in. It's a gala. The dress code is ‘cocktail’. That means less formal than black tie, but more formal than-”.

Logan cut in. “All good, but I haven’t worn a suit in ten years. Don’t think it still fits” he countered, not seeming remotely sorry.

Nico smirked to himself. *Of course* the savage doesn’t own a suit. *Wait.*… His smirk died. Neither did he right now…

“We have funds for that” Amira reassured.

Nico’s eyes went wide as she put down a solid brick of bills in front of them. “Holy shit… I know we’re going for fancy, but… How much does she think-?”.

Yan cut him off, grabbing the stack of bills off of the bed. “Yoink!” she exclaimed loudly.

Amira didn’t react in the slightest, even as Yan turned to run. Logan grabbed her and hung her upside down. Yan didn’t seem to mind, crossing her legs over his shoulder. She kept on counting the money carefully.

“*Ohohoh*… I’m getting the most *expensive dress* I can find…” she pledged.

Amira stuck out her hand at Yan expectantly.

Yan complied, obediently placing the green brick in it. She hung her legs forward. Logan let her roll over onto her feet.

“First thing tomorrow, we’re going to get the appropriate attire. I think it’s best if we split up. Men and women. We’ll be much more efficient that way. Besides, yours will be easy enough”. She gestured at Nico and Logan. “I don’t think you’ll need my help” her tone made it clear she’d actually considered they might not be up to the task.

Nico sucked in his lips. *Alright.*..

Logan audibly ground his teeth, not nearly caring as much for the art of subtlety “*Yeah, I think we’ll fucking manage*”.

Amira nodded, either not caring about the venom in his voice, or pretending not to.

“Should I go for solid gold shoes…?” Yan muttered under her breath.

“That was all for now. It is time to eat. After that it is time for bed. I will see you all tomorrow morning” Amira concluded.

Nico wasn’t spending any more time with Logan than he absolutely had to.

As soon as he got back to their room, he made a beeline for the shower. The water helped him flush away all of his worries. He watched them all go down the drain. It made him take a bit longer than he usually would. Not surprising, as there had been quite a lot more worries than there usually were… He wasn’t exactly looking forward to going on his little *shopping date* tomorrow. He hated things like that on a *good* day. With *good* company. Hell, he’d give up years of his life to get to do it with *anybody* else… He clicked his tongue. Time to go face the rest of the night, he decided as he turned the valve. His legs took some more convincing.

Nico took in the sight of Logan's *abused* toothbrush as he dried himself off and smiled to himself. Yeah. *Made sense.* He walked out of the bathroom in his underwear, quickly grabbing his t-shirt. He wasn’t in as much of a hurry as he thought, he noticed when he glanced around the room.

Logan had fallen asleep on top of the covers on the bed. He probably hadn't meant to, as he was still fully dressed, and on the wrong side... Nico huffed in annoyance as he pulled his shirt over himself. He hesitated for a second, then walked over to the closet, swiped an extra blanket out of it and threw it over him.

He dropped down next to him and fell asleep almost instantly. During the night his dreams suddenly developed a tense, unpleasant undertone. He couldn't place it, there was nothing particularly tense or unpleasant going on.

Nico startled awake at a loud thump on the floor. Before even fully waking up, he grasped for his sword by the side of the bed. The wrong side of the bed. *Shit.* He slammed the palm of his hand onto the floor and pushed himself upright. Just in time to catch the sound of hitched breathing, a few stomps and the balcony door slamming into its frame.

He tried to make sense of it. Disoriënted, he reached to his left. Nothing there. *Logan.* He looked at the clock. Three in the morning. *That loud asshat. He better have a good reason!*

Nico threw the covers off of him and dragged himself out of bed. The door to the balcony was cracked open. If this turned out to be a smoke break, he was going to raise Hell. *Literally.* He slid the door open, maybe with a little more force than he meant.

Sure enough there Logan was. He swung himself around, obviously shook. He coughed, puffs of smoke blowing out with each hack.

Nico pursed his lips, he was seriously pissed off now. He was about to rip into Logan when he beat him to it.

“Did I wake you up?” Logan asked, the effect of the coughing fit still clearly noticeable.

“The fuck do you think?!” Nico spat.

Logan turned back around. With some fidgeting he stuck his cigarette back in his mouth and crossed his arms. “Right… My bad” he said weakly.

What? Now that he thought about it… Something felt off . What was up with him? Logan was never jumpy, and *never* this… *Meek* . Now that he looked closer, he could see Logan was shivering. His hands gripped tightly onto his upper arms. Suddenly he wiped at his face, giving Nico a sideways glance. He seemed embarrassed.

“You should probably go back to bed” Logan muttered.

Nico didn’t know what to say. He was expecting a fight. Not whatever was going on here. “Hey, uh… Are you alright?” he asked.

Logan didn’t react immediately. He took an extra long drag, ripped the cigarette from his mouth and pressed it out on the balcony railing. Then turned to face Nico, leaning back a bit. He gave Nico a cool smile, a very unconvincing one. “Just had a weird dream. I’ll be fine” he finally responded.

Nico raised an eyebrow. “Right” he said flatly. Then he realized something. “Wait, is that what got you so riled up last time? That night in front of the cabin? And then when you got poisoned?” he asked.

Logan’s eyes widened. His smile turned to stone. “Maybe?” he shrugged.

Nico narrowed his eyes. “Uhuh…” he uttered. *The plot thickens.* “Look I know this isn’t any of my business… And I guess I don’t *need* to know. But-”.

Logan threw up his hands. “I’ll be quiet, okay? Don’t worry about it” he bargained, seemingly desperate for Nico to let up.

Nico sighed. “That’s not really my point-”. He stopped himself “Look… So… I know we’re not really *besties* ” he made air quotation marks with his fingers. “But if you want to talk about it… Yan said some stuff went down a while ago. She's really worried about you, actually... I figure it’s about your mother, right?”.

Logan shifted, visibly uncomfortable. “It’s not that I don’t *want* to talk about it… I just *can’t”* he explained. “I get weird”.

Nico responded with an awkward gesture. He wasn't sure what he was trying to say either. “You don’t have to, but I don’t want this to turn into a whole ‘thing’. If I can’t be sure you’re going to be able to handle tomorrow, I’ll have to tell Yan and Amira. I have no freaking clue what’s going on with you and you look like-”. He didn’t finish what he was about to say.

Logan looked at his feet.

“We’re probably not going to see each other much after this anyway” Nico tried.

The silence was tense.

Just when Nico was about to give up, Logan gave way. “Fine. But it’s going to suck for both of us…”. He turned away, holding onto the railing. He stayed silent for a while. “ *Where the fuck do I even start…? ”*.

Logan rubbed his upper arm, then he continued “So… I’ve been having nightmares… About-”.

He sighed in frustration, rapping his fingers against the railing. His fingers stopped, curling around it. “My mom and my stepdad were both marines. They’d been together for *ages* . Everything was fine, pretty good even”. His voice was lower than usual, but calm.

Still, Nico felt unease build up slowly… He knew she died, what was the point of the family history lesson?

“A while ago, probably like a year and a half… Curtis, my stepdad, got sent on deployment and something happened. He never talked about it. None of us did. But after that he just wasn’t the same…”.

Nico watched Logan’s grip adjust a little, getting a better hold. The unease built up further.

“I don’t really know how to explain it, but I guess the point is that he started drinking a lot. When he did he turned into a… well, a *crazy dickhead* ”. Nico could hear him clenching his jaw tightly as he spoke. “He would start breaking things, shouting... Mostly at my mom. They would get into massive fights. If I was around, all three of us would be at each other’s throats”. Logan’s voice went coarse. His knuckles turned white from his grip on the railing.

Nico watched his shoulders rise and fall quicker and quicker.

“So… One night, either one of us said something that set Curtis off. I don’t even remember-”. His voice cracked. He took a second to look down over the railing, adjusting his grip again. “He got *really* pissed this time. He just straight up… *Snapped* ”. Logan was visibly shaking at this point, his voice trembled.

Nico unclenched his jaw, trying to slow his breathing.

“I don’t even know what happened next… He grabbed my mom… I grabbed him?” Logan shook his head, two quick jerky motions. Nico could hear him panting as he tried to remember. “He pulled out a *gun* and-” Logan drew in a ragged breath and leaned forward for a second.

Nico realized his own breathing had started to get coarse too. Cold shivers rolled down his body. Despite the warm summer night air, he was somehow freezing his ass off...

“He stuck it in my face. And, uh… My mother… She fought him… He turned to her, and he just-”. What was either an attempt at a shrug, or a short loss of control shook Logan’s shoulders. “ *Shot her…* ” He bent over the railing and retched, wheezed, then bent over further and retched again.

Nico felt his blood run cold. He listened to Logan pant for a while, too stunned to say anything. When a shudder went over Logan’s shoulders, he forced himself anyway. “Are you-?!” he began to ask.

Logan shot up a shaky hand. “ *Yeah* ” he breathed.

Like hell you are!

“So after *that* ” Logan continued.

There’s more…?! Nico didn't really want to hear more. But, he didn't have the nerve to tell him to stop.

“He turned to me… But… He was-”. Logan paused and glanced around. His eyes were wide, terrified. He pointed at them. “There was nothing there”.

Nico wanted to nod. He couldn’t. He just swallowed.

Logan tore his eyes away. “I was *sure* he'd...". His hand opened and closed around the railing. “But, he *didn't* … He just broke down. Crying. Saying how sorry he was. Over and over. But, I couldn’t say anything… I couldn't *do* anything... And he, uh…". He glanced around again and slowly raised his hand, tapping the underside of his chin with two trembling fingers. " *He shot himself in the face* ” he finished with a flat voice. He grabbed back onto the railing, adjusted, then finally let go. His fists clenched, and unclenched, repeatedly. He swallowed hard, shaking all over.

Without thinking, Nico reached for his shoulder. Even before touching it, he could feel the heat casting off of it. Logan flinched, *hard* . Nico pulled his hand back as fast as he could.

“ *Sorry…! Guess I’m a little jumpy* ” Logan muttered hoarsely.

Nico cursed to himself. He wished he hadn’t pushed so much for this…

Logan slowly turned around to face him.

Nico blinked in surprise when their eyes met. For the first time, Logan’s eyes were completely dull, like unpolished copper. No fire. No emotion whatsoever. It didn't suit him *at all.*… It felt like he was looking past him, miles away.

Logan seemed to be trying to hold his composure, even though there was none left. Nico rubbed his upper arms, trying to process everything. He was floored, what could anyone say to this?

Still trembling, Logan slid himself down the balcony fence onto the floor. Despite the rough landing, without any reaction. He rested his head against the frame with a long, shaky sigh. Nico watched him struggle to take out a cigarette. He managed to bite it out of his hand and fumbled with the lighter. His hands were shaking too much to manage to get it to light.

Nico sighed. Dropping down next to him, he slowly reached for the lighter.

Logan let him take it. When Nico put up a light for him, Logan gave him a grateful look, and leaned in with his cigarette. Something that could either be sweat or a tear rolled down his cheek.

Nico watched him take a few drags of his cigarette. The shivers calmed with every exhale.

“So… Yeah. That's pretty much it. The cops came, neighbours must have called them. They tasered me. *Because I punched one of them.* I was pretty out of it. Spent a while in a psych ward, drugged out of my mind. Almost missed my mom's funeral… *I had to be fucking chaperoned.…* ” Logan quickly summed up.

Nico felt drained. “I don’t know what to say, sorry” he finally admitted.

“Fair…” Logan responded.

“When did it happen?” Nico asked flatly.

“Bout four months ago” Logan replied, just as flatly.

“How have you been holding up?” It was a stupid question, but Nico didn't have any others.

“Pretty bad” Logan said with a hollow laugh.

“Fair…” Nico responded.

Logan sighed. “I can't sleep, I'm on edge all the time, I started smoking, I moved out from my grandparents because I couldn’t stop being a massive jerk to them, *I got kicked out of college* … I don’t know how I’m going to fix this… Don't think I can fight myself out of *this* mess”.

The complete defeat in his tone was contagious. Nico took a while to think of something that could at least *resemble* reassuring. The while went on.

“Yeah, that sounds rough... What happened at college? You fail too many classes?” he asked, finally deciding to give up and just start talking.

“Ha. I didn’t even make it *that far* ... I threw a guy into another guy” Logan muttered.

Nico wasn’t really surprised. Still… “Why’d you do that?”.

Logan shrugged “First guy called my friend a slur, second guy laughed about it”.

Nico smiled. “Bet he stopped laughing”.

For what felt like the first time, Logan smiled, *genuinely* . It didn’t last long. “Well, they got the *last* laugh. I can’t come back until I have a talk with the counselor about what’s going on with me. They know about *everything* and they’re trying to get me to go to therapy”.

Nico gave him an awkward glance. *“I mean* … Wouldn’t that be smart?”.

Logan side-eyed him. “Smart isn’t really my style, you should have probably figured that out by now”.

Nico pursed his lips.

“My stay at the psych ward wasn't very promising, but I’ll think about it” Logan muttered.

Nico hummed in approval. “Good for you, I hope things fall back into place”. He meant it.

“Thanks”. Logan pressed out his cigarette on the ground and lit another, hands a lot steadier than before. Then he slapped Nico on the knee. “Okay. Enough about me. What about you? Why are *you* so ‘angsty’ all the time?” He asked with a smirk.

Very smooth. Nico shook his head. Then he found himself considering it. It was probably true that they weren’t going to be spending much more time together after tomorrow. *Oh, what the hell.* What did he have to lose anyway? If anything it might be a nice distraction from Logan’s train wreck of a story. Even if not, it probably couldn’t make things much worse.

“I’m also not really living my best life right now” Nico started. “But it’s a long, boring story… You want the whole *sad childhood* story? Or just what I got up to the last few years?”. He glanced at Logan.

“Hey, I’m not going to be able to sleep any time soon” Logan shrugged.

Yeah. Me neither.… “Alright, so… I’m like… Eighty four years old” Nico calculated quickly.

“Old soul?” Logan asked.

“No, I was born in the nineteen thirties”.

Logan seemed to be processing. “ *What.*… ?!”.

Nico smirked “Told you it was a long story”.

Logan shisted. “You also said it was boring! And now you’re telling me you're an *actual* vampire?”. He scowled and jabbed Nico in his upper arm. “Are you messing with me? Or just insane?”.

Nico chuckled. “No, no. I’m dead serious”.

Logan gave him a wary but amused look. “Well, you look great for your age… I would have guessed sixty at most” he grumbled.

Nico elbowed him and continued. “Alright, we'll get to that... So, I was born in Venice. Ages ago. I lived with my mother and my sister. But as children of Hades, things got a little dicey. So my father sent us to the US, and told my mother to hide us”.

He sighed. “It didn’t work… Zeus attacked the hotel we were staying at. He tried to kill me and my sister, but killed my mother instead… My father had our memories wiped. Even now that it's coming back to me, I only remember shreds…”. He paused, letting some shreds pass by until they disappeared back into the fog.

Logan’s eyes seared the side of his face, urging him on.

Nico continued. “After, my father had us hidden away at the Lotus casino. That worked a lot better. Don’t know if you’ve heard about it?”. He glanced to check.

Logan replied with a wary, bit apologetic shake of the head.

Nico went on. “Its history is complicated, but basically time works differently there. So what felt like just a few months was actually about seventy years”.

Logan huffed. “That's a pretty fucked up way to lose your mother… And, like, your entire *life.*… ”.

Ha.… I guess? Nico didn't really know what to think about it, he never really did. He just shrugged. “Pretty long time ago… I kinda got used to it. Besides, I hadn’t lost *everything.* Not *yet.*… ”. He felt his stomach churn. “Losing my sister after that was harder on me…”. He

mulled it over a little. “When we got out, we found out about all the other demigods. We met Percy…”. He paused, shame burned his face. He hadn’t said that name out loud in-!

“Jackson?” Logan asked.

“Yeah…” Nico forced himself to admit. “He was so *impressive.* I really trusted him. He said he was going to keep my sister safe… He couldn't… She got killed. It messed me up for a long time. Especially… because I kinda *fell for him*. That made everything *even more* messed up”.

Nico felt Logan shift again. He stared right ahead, avoiding his eyes. He picked up the pace. It wasn't like he was actively keeping it a *secret* , but actually openly talking about his sexuality was always uncomfortable .

“I was on my own after that. Did whatever I needed to not die for a couple of years. Eros, that *sadistic little asshole* , forced me to fess up. Everyone found out I was gay… I got over it. I met Will… Yan's brother… Fell in love. That was nice. For a while…”.

Logan let out a short hum and narrowed his eyes. He took a pensive drag of his cigarette.

Nico felt himself get defensive. “What? Does that *bother* you?” he asked, heavy and accusatorily.

“Nah, nice dudes. Handsome too.” Logan shrugged. “Just didn't take you for someone with good taste, is all”. He nudged Nico with his knee.

Nico tried not to show how relieved he was. “You're right. I'm setting the bar too high. I should probably settle for someone like you”. He nudged him back.

Crap. Was he making this weird?

Logan laughed. “Nice try, Spooky. Negging isn't going to work on me”.

Nico sighed in feigned annoyance. He felt his shoulders relax a little.

“Must be pretty tough, being an eighty year old gay dude…” Logan muttered.

Nico took a deep breath. “Yeah… I guess I'm kind of lucky I didn't find out until after the whole time skip. Wouldn't have been great in nineteen forties Italy…”.

He looked at the sky. Still pitch black apart from some stars speckled around.

“So how about the last few years? That was the grand finale right?” Logan asked.

Nico swallowed. “Right, I broke up with my boyfriend because I'm an emotionally unavailable asshole. Then I ghosted everyone for that same reason…” he hugged his knees. “ *Then I tried to kill myself for that same reason.. .*” he muttered quietly. He almost didn’t dare to look at Logan.

“Oh…” Logan started.

Nico glanced at him.

Logan gave him a serious, concerned look. “That really sucks” he said firmly.

Nico almost laughed, the matter-of-fact way he said it just kind of got to him.

Logan put an arm around his shoulders.

Nico let him, suddenly too lost in the memory to mind. “Yeah, well…Tried to drown myself in the ocean… It didn't really work” he replied absentmindedly. He remembered how he'd woken up after washing ashore, to a homeless man going through his pockets.

‘*Sorry, I thought you were dead’* he'd said to Nico.

‘*Sorry, me too’* he'd replied.

Nico snorted to himself. “You know what the funniest part about that was?” he asked, trying to lift the mood a little.

“Fucking *nothing! ”* Logan answered, low and frustrated.

Now Nico did laugh, hard. He couldn’t stop it. *You got me there!* He forgot what he even wanted to say. He surprised himself when a sob slipped out through the laughter.

Logan pulled their shoulders together.

Nico vaguely registered the warmth against him. He found himself suddenly choking back tears. “ *Sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me ”* he let out shakily.

“Don't apologize” Logan huffed. “You're not really *in touch* with your emotions, are you?”. He patted Nico on his shoulder, definitely a little more roughly than comfortable.

Nico shrugged, a tear fell down his face as he did.

Logan took a long, final drag and looked at him with an expression Nico couldn't really place. He pulled out his pack of cigarettes. Nico almost thought he was going to light up *another* one, when Logan held it up instead. “You don't smoke, right?” he asked.

No, he didn’t. Did he want to? He kinda got why Logan did now. He understood it more than a few hours ago at least… He shook his head. “No thanks, *my body is a temple…* ” he excused sarcastically. “That is to say, *ancient and in ruins* ... Don't think it could handle even a single cigarette…” he explained just a bit more seriously.

Logan laughed quietly, putting them back down. “Smart man” he muttered. “For the record, I’m glad you’re not dead” he said, with the same matter-of-fact tone as before.

Nico wiped his face and looked back up at the sky “Yeah, me too…”. He closed his eyes and calmed his breathing.

He woke up to knocking on the door and realized he was in the same spot he'd been sitting in last night. Apparently he'd fallen asleep at some point. He tilted his head away from the warmth of Logan's arm and looked to his side. Logan seemed to still be asleep, leaning onto him slightly. Nico reached around and shook his shoulder, then shifted to get up.

“Someone's at the door” he told him as he got to his feet.

Logan almost slumped over when he escaped out from under his arm. Nico ignored all his muscles aching as he walked. He could hear Logan stir as he opened the door.

Yan beamed a big grin at him, then narrowed her eyes a little as she took in the state of him. “Late night…?” she asked.

“Yeah” Nico groaned.

Logan stopped and stood next to him, arms crossed. “Good morning” he said, surprisingly cheerfully.

Nico couldn't tell if he was genuine.

Yan didn't seem to care either way. “You too sunshine!” she said excitedly. Her excitement tempered down a bit as she seemed to work up to the reason she came by. “So, Amira already snuck out at the crack of dawn to have breakfast… Can I tag along with you guys?” she asked, eyeing them both carefully.

“Course you can” Logan answered immediately.

Oh...? Nico quickly glanced at Logan.

Yan shrunk a few inches.

Nico desperately waved his hands at her. “*No…! Sorry, Yan…!*” he stammered. “It's not *you* I'm surprised I'm having breakfast with…”.

Logan raised an eyebrow at him and shrugged, completely unbothered.
“*Do* and *don't* whatever the fuck you want, man. Not *my* problem”.

“*Sure… Whatever…”* Nico sighed quietly. “I'll be right there” he assured Yan.

She perked up, as did her smile.

“See you in a bit~!” she chimed as she walked off, a slight skip in her step.

Nico closed the door, Logan still standing next to him.

“You're pretty tall for an Italian” Logan said suddenly, sounding somewhat impressed.

Nico raised his eyebrow. “So we're jumping straight to stereotypes now? Watch out, I'll report you to Yan for workplace discrimination” he warned with feigned offense.

Logan smiled. “As if you wouldn't do the same if you had the chance. You just don't know anything about me” he retorted.

Nico huffed. “I wish. After last night I know *way* too much about you…”.

He realized apart from… *that.*.. he actually did pretty much know nothing about him. Logan raised his eyebrow, calling his bluff. Nico’s mind worked diligently, eager to prove he’d still figured him out completely, based only on the tiny shreds of information he had. What was his address again?

“Watch out now. There’s tons of stereotypes about New Yorkers” he bluffed harder, going all in.

Logan hissed. “That’s definitely true…”.

Nico managed to reign in his triumphant grin just in time, when he saw one spread on Logan’s face instead.

“Too bad I’m not from New York... Gwen is”.

Nico sighed in defeat. He decided to play along, fully intending to use anything he could get his hands on against him. Also just genuinely a little intrigued… Just a little…

“Alright, spill. Where are you from?” he asked.

He hoped it was somewhere particularly stupid. Maybe even *Florida.* He held himself back, trying not to get his hopes up.

“Utah” Logan replied deadpan. “Good luck” he added.

Nico's face fell. “What the fuck am I supposed to know about Utah?” he asked with mild annoyance.

Logan smiled again. “Nothing. I doubt anyone ever thinks about Utah. But to be fair, it's actually a pretty weird place. It's basically just a pile of rocks with Mormons all over them”.

Nico processed. “What the fuck am I supposed to know about Mormons?” he asked with less mild annoyance. An evil smile crept around his lips. “Screw Utah. I don’t even need it. Your daddy’s the God of meatheads. I’ve got plenty of stereotypes to throw at you, *fist for brains*”.

Nico braced himself for a fiery scowl.

Instead, Logan laughed loudly. “Nice try! But, my dad actually *is* a fucking moron. Those aren’t stereotypes, those are *sacred traditions*”.

Nico cracked up a little, quickly hiding his mouth behind a fist.

Logan shook his head a little, in mild disapproval of Nico’s cultural insensitivity.

“Being a meathead has been passed down in our family for *thousands* of years”.

Nico performed an educated nod, as wry as he could manage.

Logan messed up Nico's hair with his knuckles as he walked past. “Okay…” he muttered along the way. “I'm going to wash off last night’s *shame* real quick…” Logan gestured at the bathroom.

“Good, I don't want any more of your *culture* to get in the way while I get ready anyway” Nico replied coldly, not able to hide all of his smile.

The hotel attendant bared her teeth at them in a friendly gesture, guarding her post next to the restaurant.

Yan went first. “Room seven hundred and two. My roommate has already had breakfast” she offered politely.

The attendant went over an endless list of scribbles, crosses and curls. She stopped her pen and traced a scribble, then puckered her lips and did the exact same thing, but much more slowly.

“Ms. … *Weewee?”*

Nico glanced at Yan. *Gods,* that's an unfortunate last name…

“Wèiwèi…” Yan corrected flatly. “Yes!” she answered right after with a bit of forced enthusiasm.

Ah…

Nico sucked in his lips and tried not to die in internal embarrassment. The attendant seemed to be trying the same, without the luxury of the ‘internal’ part.

“*Apologies…!”* she shouted, her tone changing tune three times throughout.

She nervously glanced at each of them, then gestured wildly, even her hands now bright red.

“Go right ahead!”

They did. Apparently she wasn't interested in the rest of their names anymore…

“That one's new…” Logan muttered, audibly appreciative of both the high level of insult *and* comedy of the mishap.

“Probably the worst one yet” Yan agreed calmly, clearly already over it.

Nico wondered how often things like this happened to her, newly appreciative of the fact he had a slightly more ‘American proof’ last name.

After a decent, very chatty breakfast from Yan's side of the table, the task Nico had been dreading ever since it had been assigned finally became inevitable…

During the short walk from the hotel to the boulevard, Nico realized something crucial. Hollywood was his personal hell. *Man*, he felt out of place *everywhere*, but never as much as he did right here. It was crowded, loud and *needy.*

He swore if he got touched by *another* street performer he’d hurl them straight into Tartarus. He stopped right in time to avoid having to make good on his promise, staring into the shabby, faded face of Spiderman.

Spiderman didn’t budge, gesturing wildly at him and muffling something excitedly.

Nico did budge, much to his own surprise. He let himself get pulled away by his arm, right through a door, into another world. Logan swung him over the doorstep and let go of him. Nico pursed his lips and gave his upper arm a good jerk to get the feeling of his hand off of him. If the stuffy, opulent little store hadn’t been such a savior to him, Nico might have managed better to be annoyed.

What he had assumed to be a melty wax statue of Winston Churchill turned to them from behind the counter as soon as the bell announced them. The clerk slowly looked them over with poorly hidden disgust.

“Excuse me, *gentlemen.* I don’t think this is-”.

Nico barely had time to be offended before Logan tossed their half of the green brick onto the counter.

“Think again, *suit*” he spat, grinning over his scowl.

The clerk glanced at the stack of bills, numbers ran over his eyes at top speed. He forced a polite smile.

“*Why, of course.* What kind?” he asked with a sticky voice.

“I don’t care. As long as it’s quick” Logan grumbled, mood audibly deteriorating quickly.

The clerk eyed Nico a little nervously.

“Black” Nico shrugged. “*Please…*” he added with a bitter smile.

The clerk moved in quickly, wrapping them up in tape-measure in every possible direction. Nico listened to Logan's teeth grind between the swishing and clicking of the roll up mechanism of the tape. Churchill ran off, and right back in with arms full of fabric.

"Why don't you try these" he didn't exactly ask Logan, handing him a bundle.

"Nah. Just take your fucking money" he grumbled in return, taking the bundle and gesturing at the counter.

He side-eyed Nico, cigarette already between his teeth. "I'm going for a walk. Don't wait for me".

The bell announced his departure before Nico even had time to blink. *Al…Right…* Guess he was stuck here by himself now… Well, at least he didn't have to worry about Winston's safety anymore. The long exhale the clerk let out confirmed they'd just had the exact same thought. Nico scrunched his nose at another tacky smile, quickly steering his expression into something polite.

"Here you go, sir. Try this".

He looked at the bundle, wishing he had the guts to just up and leave too. Scrunching his expression into something even more polite, he took it and went through the motions.

"I'll take it" he decided without so much as looking at himself.

"Are you keeping them on…?" the clerk asked as Nico grabbed his things and walked over to the counter.

"Yep" he replied, not really bothering to stay polite anymore.

Winston rushed over, carefully flipping through the bills. He stopped, glancing up with a sharp gaze.

"You know? It's customary for clients to leave a gratuity for good…" he trailed off as Nico's expression darkened. "Here you go, sir. Thank you for your patronage. *I hope to see you again*".

The clerk slid the remaining stack of bills over to him on the counter with a smile like tar. Nico slid the bills into his new pocket, taking a few steps back. He grinned at the clerks wide eyes as the shadows swallowed him.

They spat him back out, right into the hotel room.

A dark clad figure in the mirror caught his attention. The pale young man narrowed his eyes at him as he inspected him. He adjusted the collar of the black turtleneck to align better with his suit jacket. *Yeah.* This should be fine.

Well, allmost… He took off his ring and put it down on a dresser, looking himself over once again. The little silver skull grinned back at him, still hanging faithfully from his ear. With some pain in his heart, he unclasped its shackle and pulled it out. He hadn't taken that out in *years*… Right next to his ring it went.

He watched the stranger in the mirror run a hand through his messy black hair, trying to get it under control. They both pursed their lips.

Despite being covered from head to toe, he felt so *naked*. Well, at least it was nice to wear something different from a black t-shirt for a change…?

Who was he kidding? Being here was the fucking worst.

He spent some time on the balcony, wallowing in the fact he'd never fit into normal society. Winston's melty face, dripping with disgust, flashed behind his eyes, proving some of his deepest fears.

Then again, Logan hadn't really helped their first impression with his usual blunt 'authenticity'. Then again… At least Logan'd had the guts to tell him to fuck off… He sighed in at least two kinds of shame.

The sun had moved quite a bit while he'd been out here.

Showtime…

Chapter 5: V. You look different

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Racism, terrorism, arson, substance abuse

Nico knocked on the door. Yan opened. She looked stunning. She wore a white silk, off-shoulder dress. Its bright gleam in the moody lighting made her look truly divine. The split down her knee showed off a shapely leg. Two golden serpents coiled around her ankles, ensnaring her heels onto her feet.

“Hey, handsome!” she greeted him.

Nico gave her a smile. She gestured for him to come in. He walked over to the bed and sat down.

Amira stood in front of the mirror, doing something complicated with her hair. She had clearly gone all out too. Her dark red, poofy dress rustled as she swiped her hair away from her ear.

“You both look nice!” he said.

Yan smiled and bent her knee in a curtsey.

Amira gave him a glance through the reflection of the mirror. “You too, very appropriate” she said with a clinical tone.

Yan went to open the door at the sound of a knock. Logan walked into the room. He whistled.

“Look at you two! We’re going to be too busy keeping men away from you to focus on the job”.

Yan chuckled. “Don’t worry. With two such *suave* men next to us they won't dare to get close”.

She took the tie from his hand and started forming a knot. Logan gave her a guilty smile. Nico hated to admit it but Logan cleaned up nice. The suit accentuated his figure a lot better than his usual baggy get up. His hair slicked back helped hide his unruly personality. The ends of just a few strands tilting upwards, giving the faintest hint of their true nature. He actually almost looked-

“Gorgeous!” Yan declared excitedly, after hanging the tie around his neck.

No! No, definitely not… *That!* Nico shook his head a little. The word he *meant* to think was dignified! And not even that! No. *Almost* dignified. His most glaring problem was that he was clearly absolutely miserable. Nico watched him tug at his collar, pulling the top button loose.

“Stop doing that” Yan said sternly, swatting at his hand. She buttoned him back up. Logan grumbled when she pulled the tie tight. He looked over at Nico. “I see you've nailed the whole ‘villain’ look. It suits you” he said.

Nico gave him a half smile. “And you actually look like you know how to use a fork now” he quipped.

Logan cackled. “Okay, you *dastardly*-”.

Yan pulled at his tie. “Be nice to each other” she warned, pointing a finger at Logan then at Nico. She looked Logan over. Her scrutinizing finger stopped at the helix of his left ear, and tapped on one of the three studs. “Those have to take a break tonight” she told him.

He scowled. “*You* get to wear earrings”. He emphasized his point by giving the large white pearl next to her cheek a firm tap, making it swing helplessly on its long golden chain.

Yan gave him an annoyed but pleading look. “You know that we're trying to blend in. Please don't make me defend gender norms… Nico took *his* out too…”.

Logan groaned, giving Nico a judging look at his betrayal of the nonconformist code. Nico frowned, silently pleading guilty. Logan finally relented, yanking them out and shoving them in his pocket one by one.

“Yes” Amira said, her hair suddenly in an intricately crafted hive. “We’re ready. Time to go”. She went on as she strode out the door, expecting them to follow her. “We don’t have invitations. I expect they will watch the front entrance closely”.

Nico shrugged. “I could just-”

Amira stuck up her hand as they made their way through the maze of hallways, apparently on their way to the stairwell? “No. It will be crowded. We don’t want to risk being seen. We’ll take the backdoor” her voice echoed against the bare walls, as did the sound of their soles against the concrete steps.

She opened a fire door, letting a breeze of fresh air flow over them from the outside and led them further and further behind the building, away from the hustle and bustle at the front. She stopped at another fire door. No light shone through the small tinted window.

Amira tried the handle. It was locked. She walked up to Nico to hand over her purse and started going through her hair. “I have hairpins in here” she stated.

Oh…!

Logan kicked in the door with a loud bang.

Amira shot around while Yan and Nico flinched. “Fool!” she stated almost more than insulted.

Logan smiled mischievously, sticking out an arm and holding the door open for her.

She paced up to him. “What do you think you're doing? We're trying not to draw attention”.

Logan smiled more genuinely. “Your hair looks nice. Would be a shame to mess it up” he offered casually.

“Flattery doesn’t work on me” Amira declared coolly. She proved it by pulling out a hairpin regardless. She had the sharp looking tip against his throat before the freed lock of hair had time to fall down.

Logan grinned wider.

Amira turned colder than Nico had ever seen her before. “You don't realize how easily I could kill you with this” she stated, words sharp like icicles.

“Oh, I do” Logan assured warmly. “But, you won't” he added with an arrogant shrug.

“Not yet…” Amira reluctantly agreed, lowering the pin just a fraction. “But, if you challenge me again I'll make sure you'll regret it... Only for a very short moment…” she threatened, quickly raising the sharp tip of the pin to the side of his neck. Undoubtedly against a very important vein, Nico realized.

“I believe you” Logan reassured, holding up his hands in defeat. His stupid grin didn't back down.

Amira didn't seem too bothered by it, taking his words at face value and sliding the pin back in her hair. She paced through the door.

Nico and Yan grimaced at each other, then followed suit. Yan grabbed firm hold of Logan’s cheek as she did, dragging him along.

Amira led them through the darkness, past the kitchen, through a crowded room, and another, and another, *and another.*

“Keep your eyes peeled” she ordered.

All well and good, but-

“What does she even look like?” Logan asked, before Nico mustered up the courage.

Amira and Yan turned around in unwelcome surprise. Yan’s shoulders flew up, threatening to enter her ears as she carefully glanced over to Amira.

Amira’s eyebrows turned sharp like needles. “What do you mean? We went over this yesterday. I showed you *numerous* pictures”.

Oops. Guess he paid even less attention than he thought he did. Nico sucked in his lips, then quickly let them go as to not give himself away.

“Sorry. Don’t remember” Logan shrugged. “Do you have a picture or not?” he asked.

Yan quickly dug in her clutch and pulled out a small picture. She held it up for Logan to see. Nico stole a quick glance and took mental notes. Elderly, giant hairdo, kind brown eyes, and an apparent flair for the dramatic based on her bright, daring make up. He caught Yan’s wink when pulled his eyes back up. He smiled guiltily.

Amira beckoned them along through various other rooms, her pace picking up faster and faster, until she stopped. They stood in a circle huddled together.

“There is no sign of her in these rooms” Amira stated hurriedly. She shook her head a little. “We should have started in the ballroom. It’s much more central. So it’s by far the most fitting place for the guest of honor. We’ll go-” she whispered on.

“Someone’s looking” Logan hissed.

A man in another circle of people stared at them with a confused look on his face.

“We’re being suspicious” Nico warned.

They stood up straight.

“*Politics!*” Yan yelled with a horrid phony smile.

They all let out a loud fake laugh, raising their glasses a little. The man turned back to his conversation. Another, seemingly quite *drunk*, man broke free from the crowd and confidently walked up to Yan.

“Hey cutie” he started loudly, leaning in a little too close.

“Hi” Yan replied cordially but unmistakenly curt.

The man bent down further, close to Yan's ear. “I have a thing for *Asians"* he ‘whispered’ loudly to her.

Nico felt anger and nausea fight for dominance in his stomach. He noticed Logan shift in the corner of his eye and Amira put her hand on his arm.

Yan laughed awkwardly. “Hey man, *please* don’t ever say that again. *To anyone”* she warned venomously. She ended the conversation with a feigned polite smile.

The man’s eyebrows knit. Confused. Then angry. “It's a *compliment…* ” he muttered as he pulled back. “ *Fat bitch* ”.

Amira expertly hooked her arm into Logan's elbow as his punch flew out, blocking him. The man recoiled a bit at the sudden fist near his face, almost rocking himself over backwards. He looked at them like they were crazy. Nico tripped him as he tried to wobble off. The man

caught himself on a woman's dress. A ripping sound tore through the atmosphere of light conversation, causing a short silence. They casually turned away as another conflict started around the man.

“Don't cause a scene” Amira commanded.

Logan tore his arm away from her. “My bad” he growled.

She raised an eyebrow at Nico.

“Oops” he said with a shrug.

Yan grabbed their cheeks with her hands. “I had that covered” she said sternly. Then she visibly pushed down her lips trying not to grin.

“Don't encourage them” Amira said with mild disapproval.

Nico smiled through Yan's grasp. “What were you about to say, Amira?”

Her eyebrows curved back in place. “Right. Thank you. What I was about to say is that we’ll go to the ballroom. I think we should split up. To cover the area more efficiently"

The ballroom was an unpleasant reminder of Hollywood Boulevard, being chaotic, noisy and boastful. Other than their slightly fancier appearance the people were just as desperate and annoying as Spiderman, throwing their elbows around trying to rub as many others as they possibly could.

Nico had already gotten trapped in three desert dry conversations in the short while they'd been here, without even having to say a word, or react at all for that matter... People just started bleating to him about their professions, projects, and prospects as soon as he was unlucky enough to make eye contact.

Funny, being dressed the part only made him feel even *more* out of place somehow… Much less funny, nobody here even knew Ms. Robinson, they barely even knew *about* her, let alone where she was.

Ah!

For the first time since he'd entered the room, he made an effort to talk to someone. To do the exact opposite of mingling.

“Any luck, Yan?” he asked.

“Nooope~!” she chimed, raising her glass in a toast. “You?”.

“Hell no!” he replied with feigned excitement, clinking their glasses together.

Their wine swayed in equally sarcastic enthusiasm. They took a sip to celebrate a job poorly done.

Nico looked back at the crowd. Impossible not to. It was everywhere. Another familiar face caught his attention. A familiar scowl, to be precise. Nico felt a mean little smile curl up. At least he wasn't the only one suffering. Don't get him wrong, he was very happy to see Yan, but he had a hard time understanding her genuine love of parties.

He saw a pretty looking, young woman approach Logan and introduce herself. Logan looked a little surprised, then replied and jabbed her in the arm amicably. He watched Logan slightly lean in and say something to her. *Something rude, probably.* The young woman rubbed her arm, seemingly a little flustered.

Yeah…

Nico turned to Yan.“We shouldn't leave him there by himself. He doesn't have any idea what he's doing”.

The woman Logan was talking to leaned in and giggled.

“Ha! See that? You've got to give my boy here some credit” Yan gloated.

They watched the woman's eyes go wide as Logan casually downed an entire glass of wine. Yan walked away, leaving a sigh behind.

Great. He's going to blow our cover. Nico prepared himself mentally to go in and salvage the situation. He rolled his shoulders, then walked over.

“Quite the party huh?” he inserted himself.

“Hey, spooky! Good to see you!” Logan said, a lot more cheerfully than Nico expected.

Nico raised an eyebrow at him.

“This is Monique, her dad's behind all this”. Logan said as he gestured at her with his empty glass. “And this is Nico, my emotional support jerk” he said, gesturing at him.

Nico barely had a chance to throw in a glare before Monique smiled and reached out to him. He shook her hand. “Hi, nice to meet you” he quickly told her. He turned back to Logan and nodded at his empty glass. “How many of those have you had?” he asked, a little accusatory.

Logan shrugged. “Dunno, a few?”. He gave Nico an embarrassed smile “I got a little distracted”.

Monique giggled again. She reached in her purse and pulled out a business card. After hastily scribbling something on the back, she handed it to Logan. “See you around” she winked at him. Giving Nico a nod, she walked away with an elegant stride.

He shot Logan an unimpressed look. “I see you're being a true *gentleman”* he said sarcastically.

“Hey! I'm trying!”.

If Nico didn’t already know him better by now, he might have actually believed the hurt tone he put on.

Logan grinned. “Besides, I'm getting results. I asked her where to find Ms. Robinson right before you barged in. I think I just got us our next clue”.

He held up the business card triumphantically and studied the writing on the back.

“Numbers…?” he muttered, clearly puzzled.

His face fell as it seemed to hit him. Nico snorted. Logan shoved it in his pocket with a scowl.

“Wait” Nico said “What's on the other side?”.

They looked at the front.

“That's Monique's last name. Must be her dad's” Logan explained.

“So, he's an agent” Nico said.

“Seems so. If he's throwing this party I assume he's Ms. Robinson's. The office address is on here. So, guess we know where she meets up with him now” Logan concluded.

“Ha. That’s *actually* pretty smart” Nico let slip, accidentally a little impressed.

Logan ruined the moment with a smug grin.

“You know, the way dogs are smart” Nico quickly added.

Logan stapled the corners of his mouth back in a straight line. Nico smiled triumphantically.

“Okay, fine… You win this round” Logan relented “Now put away those *evil* little dimples and stop rubbing it in” he demanded mockingly, prodding him in the cheek.

All evil and smile disappeared from Nico’s face with a painful singe, hopefully taking his dimples with them.

“Sore loser…” Nico complained quietly.

A waiter with two trays stopped in front of them, staring politely. They stared back… The waiter's eyes politely flashed to their empty wineglasses, lowering his empty tray a fraction of an inch.

Oh.

They put their glasses on it. The waiter smiled politely. They smiled back… The waiter lowered his full tray a fraction of an inch.

Oh…

They took a full glass. Nico took an attentive sip of wine as the waiter finally waltzed off, drinking everything in. Still no sign of Ms. Robinson. Was she *ever* going to show up? This was starting to turn into a *very* long night. He hoped it wouldn't get even longer…

"So, how'd you manage to trick her into liking you?" he sighed, trying to fight off his boredom. Underneath the annoyance he'd hidden some sincere interest.

"She noticed me having a shit time. She thought it was funny" Logan explained, smiling at his wine. "Funny enough to come ask me what the hell I was even doing here, I guess" he added with a quiet chuckle.

"Ah… Thought you said negging didn't work on you. Or are you cool with it as long as it's out of pity?" Nico sneered, grinning to himself.

Logan's annoyed smirk turned devilish. He cocked his head a little, stuck up a middle finger and looked at him intently. Slowly and deliberately, he turned his hand over and stuck his finger in Nico's wine. Nico tightly clenched his jaw before it could fall to the floor. Logan pulled his finger out and crossed his arms, giving him an expectant look.

Motherfucker!

Nico's mind split and kept splitting. What was he supposed to do? Would drinking it be a victory? Or a worse defeat? What about tossing it away? He almost had to restrain his arm to stop the urge to throw it in his face. That asshole *knew* he couldn't, not without completely messing up their cover.

He opened his mouth, as long as he kept his voice in check he could say whatever he wanted. His voice didn't give a damn about this mission. "*You absolute fucking-!"*.

Logan reached around, grabbed something off a platter carried by another polite waiter and shoved it right into Nico's mouth, shutting him up. He leaned in closer, his smug smile dimmed. "*Stop shouting.* My bad, okay? I shouldn't have done that" he offered quietly.

Nico glared at him. He chewed slow and deliberate, all he tasted was anger. *Fucking moron.* He could've choked! In a cold blooded crime of passion, he poured his wine in Logan's glass, mixing the red and white together into a sickly looking pink.

Logan's smug grin instantly found its way back. He presented his glass in a silent toast and took a large, triumphant sip.

Nico pinched the bridge of his nose and bowed his head. He should have known better. Logan was completely uncivilized, probably unable to even taste the difference. Not only had he just cemented his own loss, he'd taken down all of wine culture with him. He quietly begged Italy for forgiveness.

Even all the way from the other side of the room, he could still make out the horrible pink abomination he'd just created in Logan's glass. He took an annoyed sip of his own perfectly balanced, *fresh* glass of wine, watching Logan down half of his. Well, his *two*, technically...

Smug asshole.

How could he not mind? How could Nico *stop* minding? He didn't know *how* yet, but he was going to find a way to get back at-!

"Nico" Amira asked, right into his ear. "Will you dance with me?".

If her sudden disturbance wouldn't have been enough to make him jolt, that question sure would have been. Nico coughed his wine out of his lungs and turned to look at her.

Yep, as he'd feared. *Deadly serious.*

"It's too crowded. I want to see from the dancefloor. It has a clear view of the entire room" Amira explained.

Yeah, sure, that's not the problem. He smirked, wondering if the opportunity for revenge had just presented itself. "Can't you ask Logan?" he asked, still half a cough.

"I already have, he said-"

"He said no…" Nico finished for her.

"Yes" Amira confirmed.

Nico sucked in his lips, getting more and more desperate. "I'm a terrible dancer" he tried.

"I'll lead" Amira reassured, already grabbing his hand.

Crap! Crap so hard! He took the biggest, angriest sip of wine he could manage and slammed his glass onto an empty tray before she dragged him to the dancefloor, all the way to the centre of it.

Why?!

Amira didn't give him much of a chance to sulk, making her move. *A lot of them.*

"Do you know how to dance?" Nico asked in amazement.

"No" Amira assured him calmly.

I can tell. Amira was all knees and elbows. Clearly much more adept at fighting, as that seemed to be exactly what she was trying to do to him and everyone daring to get close enough.

“Give me your hands” Nico ordered firmly. Not taking ‘no’ for an answer, he grabbed them before she could stop him. He pulled her close.

Amira blinked at him in the mildest surprise he’d ever seen.

“Look at my feet” he ordered a little less sternly. To his surprise she did. “Just follow along, alright?”.

She nodded, then carefully mirrored his movements.

Each movement turned into a memory. Very old memories. Bittersweet ones. Wiped clean from his mind decades ago by Alecto… But, somehow through the years, fragments returned. All of the fragments showed his mother’s proud smile, looking down at him as she taught him the steps.

Looking at Amira’s feet, *very good students*, now that he actually took the time to notice, he felt himself smile along with his mother. She had been a great dancer, and an even better teacher. Passionate, but patient. He clearly remembered the last time she danced with him, it had been right before-! *Stop*, he willed himself. He shook the memories out of his head.

“Am I doing it wrong?” Amira asked sternly.

“*No!* No, you’re doing great! Genuinely” he praised.

Amira blinked in another expression of mild surprise. He returned a proud smile, a genuine one. She nodded firmly, quickly turning her stern gaze back to their feet. Nico huffed in amusement as he watched her eyes narrow and eyebrows lower and raise a few times. It was strangely endearing, seeing her like this. Dancing with her wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d expected, in fact, it was almost even-

“Yes, I think I’ve got it now” she declared. Her eyes darted over his shoulders, all over their surroundings. She turned her head as far as she could, taking in as much as possible. To her credit, still keeping up perfectly…

Her eyes snapped back to his. “Twirl me” she ordered.

No. No fucking way. She was almost a full foot taller than him, that would look ridiculous.

“I want to see all around” she explained.

“Uhm… What if I just turn you?” he asked, *pleaded.*

Her eyes narrowed again, before a firm nod. “Yes, good idea. That gives me much more time”.

He sucked in his lips as he slowly led her around him. An inaudible chuckle hid under his sigh. He probably should have known better than to think Amira was capable of appreciating anything not directly benefitting the mission.

Amira's lips drew a long, straight line.

"This was useless. There is no sight of her" she concluded, letting go of his hands.

Yep. See?

Nico forced a smile when she looked at him. His smile turned confused when Amira stared over his shoulder again, eyes sharp and fixed on something. Or someone? Could she actually have found her…?!

He turned to look, only to be greeted by someone entirely unknown. A pretty woman in an even prettier dress smiled excitedly at him.

"Hello, would you like to dance?" she asked with a few slow, smooth blinks. Her long lashes fluttered sweetly as she did.

Nico blinked back, not nearly as smoothly.

The woman offered her hand.

Uhh…

Amira stepped in, sticking her arm between them. "Excuse me" she started. "He can't-"

The woman turned a *lot* less sweet. Her smile widened, revealing her perfect white teeth. Ready to sink into Amira, apparently. "Back off, *ceiling duster!* Haven't you *embarrassed* yourself enough by now?" she quietly bit at her. "You look ridiculous! Completely out of place in that *colour* at a place like this!"

Wait… Red? That didn't make any-?

Oh.

Gross…

The woman ran her fingers over Nico's arm, tugging on the cuff of his sleeve. Amira narrowed her eyes as Nico widened his. Two pretty women fighting over you would probably be a dream for most young men. Nico wasn't like most young men. In any way...

He quickly plucked the woman's talons off of his sleeve, hissing at her in feigned disappointment. "*Sorry…*" he started carefully, holding up his hands. "Even if I wasn't gay, I *definitely* would be now…" he shrugged, smiling the fakest apologetic smile he could manage.

The woman's mouth fell open. She glared at him over her shoulder at least three times as she stormed off. Nico smiled wider each time.

“Very good” Amira concluded quietly.

Yan paced up to them looking worried, Logan followed much more slowly behind her looking irritated. Amira leaned in, and beckoned them closer. They huddled together.

“We just spoke to one of the waiters. Bad news. She's a no show.” Yan explained in a Hush tone.

“Who doesn't show up to their own party…?” Logan asked in annoyed disbelief.

Amira and Nico looked at each other and shrugged.

“She must have been tipped off” Yan suggested.

“Well, guess we're done here then…” Nico said. He quickly realized something. “On the bright side, Logan *flirted* us another opportunity earlier tonight”.

Yan turned to look at him, clearly confused. Amira barely reacted, just raising a sharp eyebrow at him. Logan huffed and dug the business card out of his pocket. He held up the front for them to read. Amira seemed to realize and nodded, swiping it from his fingers.

“Good job. Let’s go” she concluded, already on her way to the back door.

The three of them took a second to process before filing after her into the hallway.

“Gods! My feet are *killing* me! Who let me buy gilded heels?!” Yan asked accusingly, powering through her steps.

Logan put a hand on her shoulder and spun her around. He knelt down and put an arm around her upper legs, lifting her up. Yan gave Nico and Amira a surprised look over his shoulder, suddenly finding herself practically seated on his lower arm.

“That was your own spoiled little Magpie brain” Logan complained, walking on.

Yan propped her elbows onto his shoulder, resting her chin on her hands. “You're drunk” she cawed, before lightly elbowing the back of his head.

“I won't drop you” Logan assured.

“I know…” Yan muttered, yawning quietly and closing her eyes.

“Stay professional” Amira commanded. “Nico” she ordered as soon as they made it out of sight.

“Yep…” he sighed, already drawing in the shadows.

The quiet, cold whispers whirled around them as they slowly became one with the darkness.

The automatic lights in the cramped hallway took a second to register their sudden presence, then quickly startled on. The cold white light was a harsh contrast to the warm moody glow at the party. It made everyone look exhausted. Well, *paired* with the obvious exhaustion.

“Good night, beautiful” Logan mused, carefully putting Yan back on her feet.

Yan immediately leapt back into his arms, sticking her arms out dramatically. He spun her around once before putting her back down again. He kissed her on top of her head and chuckled.

“I’m going for a walk” he said. “And a smoke… What a night” he added in a thinly veiled complaint.

“Have fun!” Yan replied happily. “And be safe!” she warned his back as he made his way into the stairwell.

“Not going far!” he reassured, already out of sight.

Nico took a second to process what happened just now, and right before that. “Is something happening between you? Are you two…?” he asked, without really considering if he should.

Yan burst out laughing. “Oh Gods, no! Never! Don't get me wrong we love each other and he's a great friend, but... I'm only into the soft, geeky and artsy types. And Logan… well he should probably find someone really, really *strong*”.

She looked down. “No, we used to be like this all the time, actually… Just, good friends”. She looked like she was about to cry.

Nico regretted his question immediately. He really needed to stop opening all these cans of worms. “You alright?” he asked carefully.

Yan gave him a big smile, even as her eyes welled up he could see she meant it. “Yeah! I'm really good, actually! I'm really glad he's… I'm happy to talk to him again”.

He patted her on the shoulder. *Good for her.* “That’s nice, Yan. I’m happy for you”

Yan put her hand over his. “Thanks, Nico. Good night” she wished, quickly wiping at her eyes.

“Good night!” he wished back, his hand practically already in his pocket, ready to help him escape back into his room.

Nico turned on the shower and started wrestling off his clothes. He stepped under it. *What the fuck?!* Why was the water still freezing cold? Why was the temperature set as cold as possible?! He quickly tinkered with the surprisingly complicated valves. He scowled as he remembered Logan had taken a shower this morning. Was this his idea of a prank or was he just a masochist? *Whatever…*

Nico went over the events of the night in his head over and over while the water of the shower clattered on him. When it came down to it, it had basically been a complete failure… He turned off the water and went through the motions of drying himself off. They were lucky to have gotten a second chance, but that was just it, they were *lucky.* He walked out of the bathroom. Now that they had that second chance, what were they even going to do? They'd have to come up with a pretty solid plan, getting to her in her own territory like that. He'd ask Amira to go check out the area with him first. He wondered who had tipped her off. He was about to drop his towel to the floor.

“Hey” he heard Logan say suddenly.

He jumped and swung himself around. Logan was sitting on the bed, looking through the documents Amira had given them earlier. Somehow Nico had completely missed him when he walked right by him.

“What are you doing?! I’m naked!” Nico yelled, grasping at his towel. He felt his face heat up.

“Woah, Spooky! This is my room too, you know!” Logan replied, shooting him a surprised but amused look. “I didn’t think you’d care”.

Nico glared at him.

Logan got up from the bed, putting his hands up. “I’m sorry. I’ve shared a bathroom with my brothers for years. I guess I didn’t think about it”.

Nico sighed. “Yeah, alright… Now get out already” he grumbled.

Nico felt Logan look him over. He tried his best not to let his nerves show. Logan cocked his head, he seemed lost in thought for a second. “You’ve really got nothing to be embarrassed about though. Seriously, I’m kind of jealous. You barely eat, and I doubt you exercise… But you still get to look like that” he said, giving Nico a light jab in his stomach with his fist.

The corner of Nico’s mouth twitched. *What the… What?!* He quietly muttered something half-assed about “Godly genes”, hoping it came off smart and, or sarcastic. He couldn't really make sense right now. What the hell was wrong with this guy? He knew Logan would jump at any opportunity to mess with him, but when he did his worst he didn’t even know he was doing it. It would almost be funny, if it wasn’t so *freaking aggravating*.

“Okay, I’ll leave you to do your *dark bidding* now” Logan relented, grinning widely. He tossed the documents back on the bed and turned to leave. “Later” he said, sticking up a hand without a care in the world.

Nico watched him leave. He dropped down on the bed and pulled his pillow over his face. *That drunk idiot.*

Nico woke up when he felt the mattress dip behind him. His eyes shot open. Pitch black. Still night. He closed his eyes again. Pretending to still be asleep seemed like his best bet. Last time they spoke had been annoying, and worse, awkward. This way it at least couldn't get any worse, right?

He tried his best to ignore it when something grazed his arm with a warm tingle. He couldn't manage anymore when whatever it was settled, way too close to him. The *upsetting* warmth drew all his attention to it, not leaving any room for thoughts. With an annoyed exhale, he pulled his arm to safety. He ran his fingers over the defiled area, trying to get the still lingering feeling to fade. Even with the cold of his own hand to contrast, it took a while to fully fight it off.

How was he supposed to sleep in these inhumane conditions?! He folded his arms and curled up, making himself small. Trying to give Logan as little chance as possible for any repeat offenses. He frowned in the darkness. *Of course* that moron has no respect for personal space…

Memories drifted past. Each one slowly adding to his irritation, like water dripping onto his head. Yesterday morning. Getting in his face. Tapping his earring. Sparring. His hand around his throat. That happened *three times*, might he add, not just then. Speaking of their first mission… Their fight. The *punches.* Sometimes he swore he could still feel the bruises! His hands clenched around his arms. Yesterday night. His arm over his shoulders. *Ha.*.. He hid his face in his forearms. That's enough memories for now.

Later that same night, Nico woke up again after a kick to his leg, a surprisingly painful one. Not just a drip of irritation this time, a full splash. He almost opted to kick him back, until he heard Logan's breath hitch. He'd heard that sound before. Last night.

Nico rolled over to his other side. It was still too dark to see properly but he could make out his shape. He felt Logan stir. Nico reached out. He felt for his shoulder, but found his back. The fabric of his shirt was hot and moist. Logan winced as Nico pressed his hand onto it. Nico slid his hand between his shoulder blades and tried to concentrate. That was hard, being half asleep still…

The barrage of fear, anger and sadness assaulted him when he broke through. He ignored all of it and focussed all his concentration on sending his message. He'd learned that lesson the first time. *Relax. It's not real. You're safe.* He felt the muscles under his hand release tension after a few seconds. Logan let out a deep, shaky sigh. *Good.* Nico exhaled, closed his eyes and dozed off again.

Nico felt movement right next to him. He cracked his eyes open. It was bright out. Must be morning already. It took him a second to realize he was staring right at Logan's face, just a few inches away. His breath caught. He almost jolted in surprise. Logan was still asleep. Nico took some time to calm down, trying to lie as still as possible. He almost didn't dare to breathe, scared it'd wake him up.

Other than his serious expression Logan seemed mostly peaceful. *Mostly...* Nico noticed that a tear had rolled about halfway down his cheek. *Right. Last night.* He hadn't heard him get up after his… *intrusion.*…? No, his *help.* He wondered if Logan had slept any better than before. He hoped so.

His body reacted, before his still groggy mind could. His body was a fucking idiot… He stuck out his hand and wiped the tear away. *Wait.* What the hell was he doing?! *Get a grip, you idiot!* his mind scolded. He flung his hand back like he'd been hit with an electric shock. Logan didn't seem to have woken up, not having moved at all. *Thank the Gods* for that. Nico rolled onto his back and put his hands over his eyes. They still trembled a little as the left over nerves of his accidental tear heist died down. He let out a groan in both frustration and relief.

"Hangover?" Logan asked suddenly.

Another electric shock. He jolted and moved his hands up. Logan looked down at him, his elbow jutted into the pillow, the side of his head resting on his fist. His hair looked even messier than usual. *Nope.* Still way too close. Way too awake now too. Nico panicked and rolled out of bed to create some distance.

"Yeah… Maybe…" he managed, raking in some of his clothes.

He glanced. Logan was still looking at him, a mildly confused expression on his face.

"Has anyone ever told you you're awkward?" he asked, his amusement obvious.

"Has anyone ever told the *gay guy from the nineteen thirties* he's awkward?" Nico repeated sarcastically.

Logan pursed his lips, then narrowed his eyes. "Wait. Is it because I'm a guy?" he asked, seemingly with genuine interest. Maybe even worry.

No, idiot. It's because you're you. "No, it's because *you're* awkward!" Nico replied, getting even more annoyed.

Logan sat up. "What did *I* do?" he asked, mildly confused and offended.

Nico was stumped for a second. "It's because you're way too… *Not* awkward!" he blurted out.

Logan seemed more than just mildly confused and offended now. "That doesn't make any sense!" he almost yelled.

“It does! You're just too dense to get that!” Nico yelled back.

Logan got up and held up his hands. “Okay, *whatever.* Just calm down. I'll go be too *not* awkward in the bathroom” he laughed.

Distance! *Good.*

“How'd you sleep?” Nico asked casually.

“Pretty good, actually! Probably the best sleep I've had in *months*” Logan concluded with a spirited tone as he opened the bathroom door. “You?” he asked.

Nico smiled to himself. “Fine” he answered.

After getting dressed, he went and stood on the balcony a while, looking out over the city. He took in everything happening outside, letting his thoughts wander. Hollywood didn't suit him. He’d realized that much yesterday. But even the scenery reflected it. Buildings plastered in brands and signs. Cars and people milling around far below. Their loud colours and movement made up for the lack of noise all the way up here. The snobby palm trees looking down on all of it. He exhaled heavily.

Before he knew it Logan stood next to him, still in the middle of wrestling his shirt on. His pensive expression revealed itself as soon as he did. He stared at Nico. Nico stared back. *Alright…?* Right when Nico was about to ask what he wanted Logan started.

“I need to tell you something, but it's really weird…”. His tone was deathly serious.

Alright...?! Nico furrowed his brow. “Not a great opening, but…”. He gestured for him to talk.

Logan thought for a second. “I dreamt about you last night,” he finally shared.

Oh, right. Nico let out an amused huff.

Logan's hands shot up in a defensive gesture. “No, don't worry! It was a nightmare!” he said loudly.

Nico laughed. “Oh! *Good!”* he replied sarcastically.

Logan smiled awkwardly, opening his mouth to say something.

“But, yeah. I know” Nico quickly followed up before he could. “I did that. To calm you down. You were freaking out”.

Logan’s smile turned confused. “... You can do that?”. He cocked his head, tapping his fingers on the railing. “Hah… Making people dream about you seems more like an *Aphrodite* type of thing…”.

Wow…! Logan didn't struggle intellectually at all, he'd *mastered* stupidity. Nico was no match for him. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“It's not like *that!* I can *enter* people's dreams. Send them messages. That type of stuff. It's not what I'm good at, but it comes in handy sometimes…” he explained with a sigh. Logan cocked his head the other way, crossing his arms and looking at him in a way Nico hadn’t seen before. Was he… Impressed?

“Well, aren't you just full of surprises…”.

Nico shrugged, smiling slightly.

“Thanks, man. That's really nice of you” Logan concluded warmly.

He slapped Nico on the shoulder and walked off. Nico watched him go. *Why would you even bring that up, you moron?* He grinned to himself, rubbing the now slightly sore spot on his shoulder.

He turned back to the view. The palm trees in the distance below swayed a little in the pleasant breeze. The morning light gave the hills and buildings a mild, warm, yellow glow. Maybe Hollywood deserved a second chance.

Probably time to go eat something. His stomach shrugged indifferently. Too bad. It would just have to deal with it. He’d need the energy later. There’s no way he could drag the four of them all the way to the office on an empty stomach, let alone fight a Sphinx.

He opened the door and walked out, right into Logan who'd apparently had the opposite idea. He managed to turn his face slightly at the exact moment their faces collided, catching most of the hit with his cheek. Nico choked loudly. His face practically caught fire. He froze for a few seconds, panicking. Logan stepped back slightly.

“You good?” he asked with a mildly worried look.

Nico processed. He jolted as Logan touched his cheekbone with the back of his fingers. Nico swatted at his hand and pulled back. “*I'm fine!*”.

Logan looked more worried than before. “You sure? It's pretty red… and *crazy* warm”.

Nico closed his eyes. *Why?! Just.… Why?* He took a deep breath and looked Logan in the eye. “I'm fine. *Seriously*” he reiterated firmly. “You?” he quickly deflected.

Logan huffed. A faint smile on his face. “That was nothing. My face has been through a lot over the years”.

Nico snorted. “Yeah, makes sense. You seem like someone who gets hit in the head a lot” he sneered.

Logan laughed warmly. It caught Nico by surprise. That wasn't really the reaction he'd been going for. He smiled a little anyway. The difference a decent night sleep makes, he supposed?

"Yeah, okay… Guess you *are* fine".

Logan stared at him for a bit, expectantly. *Uh.*.. Logan grabbed the door handle next to him, poorly suppressing a grin. *Right.…!* Nico quickly stepped to the side. Logan lightly punched him in the shoulder as he moved past him into the room.

"Nico?" Amira asked, drawing his attention a little further down the hall. "Can I talk to you? It's important".

He forced a smile and nodded.

Crap. How long had she been watching? His crippling awkwardness couldn't possibly be what this was about, right? *Right?!* He sighed as soon as she disappeared back through the doorway. *No,* he told himself. Getting fired would be a blessing! His smile felt a lot less forced as he walked up to the door.

Amira didn't even turn to face him when he closed the door behind himself.

"I need you to drop me off at the office. Just for a moment. I want to look around, see what we need to keep in mind". She finally turned around, almost shoving the address on the business card into his face. "Not just that" she continued before he even got the chance to read it properly.

Her other hand held up the small bronze coloured package.

"I have to make sure this reaches her before we do".

She spoke so fast, he had trouble keeping up. He blinked at her.

She stared back at him, a little impatiently. "Please, take me there".

Oh, like, right now?

"Uh, yeah. Sure…" he finally managed.

She reached out her hand before he did. *Man,* she was intense sometimes… He tried not to shake his head as he quickly wrapped the shadows around them.

Amira escaped his grasp as soon as their feet landed on solid ground. He watched her march up to the front door of the building, efficiently putting on a pair of sunglasses and wrapping a shiny blue scarf around her hair, stylishly hiding herself away.

"Wait!" Nico yelled at her, making her glance back at him. "Am I not coming with you…?".

She looked back. “No. Wait here" she ordered. “Less suspicious”.

What the… This time he did shake his head. What was up with this woman? Couldn’t she care about anything other than the mission? Even still, if she couldn’t, couldn’t she at least *pretend* to try to be polite about it? She was lucky he didn’t really care about social norms… He started caring about them more and more the longer she made him wait. *What was she doing in there?!* Right when he started seriously considering abandoning her, she walked back out the door.

“I’m done” she greeted.

Nico found it hard to unclench his jaw enough to reply.

“Thank you” she offered before he managed. She stuck out a hand.

Oh. His anger subsided a little as he reached out. She gave him a firm shake… Then kept clinging on. *Oh.… Right.…*

“Sure…” he muttered, drawing in the shadows once again.

As soon as they reached her hotel room, he turned around and walked out. He definitely needed to go eat something now. More than that, he needed a break from Amira… Yan perked up as soon as he walked through the doorway, turning away from Logan to face him.

“Hey! There you are!”.

Her inquisitive, worried look revealed the question underneath.

“Yeah, sorry…” he started. “I helped Amira have a look at the office building and deliver the package. Should probably be delivered soon…”.

“Cool. Then let’s just go and get it over with” Logan offered.

“We will!” Yan jumped in “But, I had a chat with Amira earlier. We’ve got to get some disguises first! We can’t just waltz in there like this, there’s cameras everywhere! Our faces would be all over the news!”.

Logan slumped his shoulders, his good mood seemed to have taken a hit. “Again?! Do we really need to? We’ve wasted so much time already. *All of yesterday*” he huffed.

“Hey! At least we got to enjoy ourselves last night! So, it wasn’t *‘wasted’*, right?” she tried reassuringly.

Nico sighed. “Honestly? I’m kinda glad it’s over… I’m *really* not into parties. I haven’t even celebrated my birthday since I was ten” he weighed in, without *thinking*…

“Since you were *ten?*” Yan asked, mildly horrified. “That’s so young! Everyone else was just *okay* with that?!” she asked, much more intensely.

Shit. Of course she'd be worried, she's *normal!* How could he forget?

"Well, I mean… *Everyone else was-"*. *Gone… No,* he better not. "It's a long story… The gist is that my childhood was pretty… *Complicated*" he stammered, trying to wave it away with his hand.

"*Oh…!*".

Yan seemed a little rattled. *Crap.* He should've just lied. She caught herself.

"At least you turned out okay!" she said reassuringly. She threw in an awkward smile.

Ha! Yeah, right! Nico put up his most convincing fake smile. He hated it when people said things like that, but he knew she meant well. Still, it only proved how little she actually knew him. He was a train wreck on his best days. But, that probably meant he put up a pretty convincing act right? That's what he wanted… *Right?*

"Eh, that's a stretch, but you *survived* and you didn't turn into a fucking *serial killer*" Logan snickered.

Yan smacked his arm and turned to him with an offended glare. Nico met his eyes in surprise. Was that meant as a sneer? His usual devious smile was there, but there was a hint of something else. *Understanding?* No way, *right?* Either way, it was probably one of the worst compliments, or nicest insults he'd heard.

"Thanks…". Nico didn't even know if he was being sarcastic or not.

"You know what?" Yan started, smiling carefully. "I'll just go get them! It's easy. Just a few things! You guys just take a break, yeah?".

Logan cocked his head. "You *really* don't have to. I don't mind-".

He got cut off by Amira closing the door behind her. "I'll get them" she declared. "You three, just make sure to wear black" she ordered, looking at them sternly.

Nico and Logan shared a glance, then shrugged. *Yeah.* That wouldn't be a problem… Well, not for *them*. Yan squirmed a little.

Nico put a hand on her shoulder to prevent it from rising even higher. "I'll lend you something".

Her shoulders lowered gratefully.

Alright. Seriously time for breakfast now. He quickly excused himself and walked off to the elevator. He caught Yan and Logan watching him when he looked up from the horrid carpet inside. Yan smiled a little too widely and waved a bit too eagerly at him as she disappeared between the doors. Nico smiled to himself. Well, at least not *everyone* was hard to deal with…

Nico picked at the mask. It was kinda hard to breathe through it, somehow making the hallway feel even more cramped than before. He put on the black baseball cap.

“Looking good! Even spookier than usual” Logan noted as he made his way over.

Nico wanted to insult him back, but frustratingly the getup *actually* kinda suited Logan. He made it look stealthy, almost like tactical gear. Dangerous in a much more subtle way than his usual demeanor. His eyes looked even more fiery contrasted with the black mask.

“Oh, *definitely*. Guys just throw themselves at me. It's actually getting kinda annoying” Nico said sarcastically.

Logan laughed quietly.

“What? Is this not doing it for you?” Nico added, gesturing at his face.

“Are you kidding me? I mean the *hat?* No. But, the mask is fun. *Dark and mysterious...* “ Logan said heavily, narrowing his eyes a bit, a flicker went through them. He stuck two fingers under the rim of Nico's mask, making him tense up as they ran past the underside of his chin. After giving the fabric a tug, he let go, making the mask snap back into Nico’s face.

That annoying-! Nico narrowed his eyes back at him and reached up, pulling Logan's baseball cap down over his eyes by the brim. He smirked, managing to pull his face back into a serious expression before Logan had time to fix himself back up.

Yan carefully walked up to them, mask and baseball cap on. She looked unintentionally adorable in Nico’s black t-shirt. It covered almost all of her, stopping barely above her knees. Her bare, pale legs underneath it hinted the shirt might be her *entire* disguise. She reached for her stack of colourful bracelets and found nothing, opting to wiggle her feet nervously instead. Nico looked at the black flats as she did. Probably the only black clothing Yan owned, he reckoned.

She giggled at them. “Well, at least I won’t have to worry about getting harassed by drunks like this, right?”.

Nico snorted. “Sorry, Yan. You’re irresistible. We’re going to have to keep an eye on you. Make sure you don’t get eaten”

Yan squealed. “Not *all* men are pigs…” she tried carefully. “I mean, look at you guys!” she quickly added. Not that convincingly.

Logan raised an eyebrow. “Nice try, whatever that was, it's not about either of us”.

Yan squealed louder. “Don't drag Nico down with you!”.

Nico smirked at her. “But…? Who is this nobleman hiding amongst the pork?” he pried, turning against her.

She looked up mysteriously, then popped her lips.

“Hmmokay, yes~! You caught me… Not to brag, but I *might* have gotten lucky last week” she bragged.

Logan grinned. “*Nice”*. They fist bumped. “Was it any good?” he asked.

Yan wiggled her eyebrows. “~I'm not saying~” she sang.

“Ooh. *That kind of good,* huh?” Logan mused.

She grinned. “I may or may not have been asked out, yes. But, it's too early to say anything. In fact, forget everything I said just now!”.

Amira strode up to them. The mask and baseball cap changed surprisingly little about her usual expression. Her long, slender frame looked even longer and more slender in her tight, black…

“Are you wearing a *catsuit?!*” Logan snickered at her.

“It’s a one piece suit. Very practical” Amira explained.

Right.…

Nico caught their reflection in the mirror. Four dark figures, yet somehow the complete opposite of inconspicuous. He pursed his lips and nodded slowly.

“Yeah, we’ll definitely fly under the radar…”.

His sarcasm flew right under Amira’s radar, at least, as she looked them all over and nodded. She stuck out a hand, right in the middle of them. “Nico” she commanded.

“Yeah” he replied, putting his own hand on top of hers.

Logan clenched his teeth before doing the same.

Yan quickly slapped hers on top.

The shadows rolled themselves over them, sighing quietly.

After a cold draft of whispers, the shadows didn’t end. In fact, wherever they’d ended up was even darker than the dusky pathway he’d just led them down. Not only that, it was cramped too. As soon as they grounded, his back knocked into something. He felt whatever it was rock, and fall over with a series of loud clatters.

Shit.

So much for trying not to draw attention. He quickly moved into the opposite direction, right into the next invisible obstacle. The brim of his cap bumped against something as his chest

pressed against whatever was underneath. Something warm and firm. Something that grumbled in annoyance. A sound he'd gotten familiar with.

Double shit…

A warm arm reached around him and pulled him away a bit by the back of his shirt.

"Sorry" Nico muttered, quickly readjusting his cap.

A long, slender arm reached between them, feeling around in the darkness. It found something. With a click the light turned on. They all blinked at the brightness.

Logan let go, pulling away his arm. Nico tried not to look at him as he did, standing as still as possible.

Amira opened the door and peered around the corner. She gestured for them to follow as she walked out the door. After looking around and taking in the surroundings, she turned around to face them. "Yan and I will go left, You two take the right. We'll meet up at her office".

She walked off before they got a chance to agree. Yan quickly paced after her. Nico and Logan glanced at each other and shrugged in a rare moment of annoyed solidarity.

They moved up to the hallway on the right, all the way around the corner. Nico stopped and carefully looked at what was waiting for them. He saw the shadows of multiple people move through the tinted glass in the office before them. Yan and Amira looked at them from around the other side. Logan was about to walk up to the door when Nico grabbed his shoulder.

"We can't… There's too many people in there" he hissed.

Logan nodded, seemingly only considering that just now.

He looked around and walked over to a side table covered in newspapers and magazines. Nico watched him with mild interest as Logan quickly swiped them aside into a thick, messy stack. Nico watched with growing interest as he hopped onto the freshly cleared tabletop and gathered the stack in his arms. Logan inspected the ceiling, then shoved them all on top of the tall bookcase next to him. He took out his lighter, looked at Nico and stuck up a thumb.

Nico's eyes went wide.

Logan flicked on his lighter and set the files on fire. The flames grew quickly, dark smoke spreading all over the ceiling.

Nico grabbed the top of his head with both hands, then held them out in panicked rage. "*Are you fucking kidding me?!*".

The fire alarm started blaring. The sprinklers turned on, spraying water everywhere. No… Everywhere *except* the top of the bookshelf, missing the fire entirely. He heard screams and commotion. People burst out the door in a wave, some shielding themselves with their bags and suit jackets. They didn't even notice them as they ran past.

Nico stared at Logan in astonishment. “How are you both *dumber* and *smarter* than I thought?” he asked in awe, flicking water from his face.

Logan held him at gunpoint with both index fingers. “Don't underestimate me either way” he quipped, before hopping down with a small splash.

He walked in the direction of Ms. Robinson's office.

Nico looked at the rapidly growing fire for a second before he followed after him. He should have guessed Logan was an expert at creating chaos.

They both waited by the door, their backs to the wall. Ms. Robinson hadn't come out yet. That was suspicious… They pulled out their swords. Yan and Amira sloshed over hastily to meet with them, bow and spear at the ready.

“Not ideal, but good enough” Amira appraised quietly through her mask, wiping her drenched hair out of her face. She turned her attention to the door, carefully trying to get a view of the situation inside the office. Nico watched her eyes narrow as she took in all the details. Her eyes darted back over to them.

The fire alarm stopped, the sprinklers soon followed. Amira gestured for them to stand down, leapt through the doorway and rolled behind the soaked sofa. They watched her carefully look around the side. She slowly stood up and beckoned them in, putting her finger in front of her mask. They made their way in, right next to her.

They watched the back of the huge office chair behind the desk. Yan strained her bow, pointing an arrow right at it. Nico followed Amira's sharp gaze. The package, still neatly wrapped, stood in the corner with some others.

The chair turned, revealing Ms. Robinson's iconic hairdo, meticulously chiseled out of solid hairspray, and her very unamused expression. She held onto the armrests, her legs crossed. "Let *me* do the guessing, just this once" she stated. "You're the same four I was warned about at the hotel, aren't you?".

Amira stood up straight, completely unfazed. "Correct".

Ms. Robinson smiled sourly. "I figured… Lady Aphrodite sent you to kill me?".

Amira nodded. "Correct again".

Ms. Robinson clicked her tongue in frustration. “I should never have allowed myself to be manipulated by that troublemaker…”.

She ripped deep claw marks into the armrests, her nails suddenly long as daggers. Her eyes turned yellow and pupils vertical. She grew larger and larger, bursting out of her blazer. “Still, I have no intention of making this easy for you” she growled, her voice strained and raspy. Two massive, feathery wings folded out behind her.

Amira moved like lightning, sticking the back of her spear between the couch cushions and swinging herself over it. In one fluent motion she landed in front of Ms. Robbinson's desk

and blocked her claw before it even had a chance to reach her. Nico grabbed the back of the sofa ready to jump over when Amira held up a hand.

“Stay back! All of you!” she commanded, stabbing at Ms. Robinson's face.

Ms. Robinson roared and threw her wings forward, making Amira back up. She spread them as far as she could, eyeing the skylight above her.

“Yan!” Amira commanded.

Yan shot the package dead centre barely half a second later. Green powder burst out everywhere with a loud bang. It covered anything it could reach within five feet in a coat of green. Ms. Robinson seemed stunned for a second, then looked around feverishly. Amira readied her spear.

“Catnip?!” Ms. Robinson screamed. She let out a hysterical laugh. “How insulting! I've been clean for years! This doesn't affect me in the slightest!”. Her eyes were wide, her pupils even wider. “In fact, to prove it…” she muttered. She bent down and snorted a long line from the bottom of her desk all the way to the top. She flopped down on top of it, rubbing her face all over it. “~See? This does nothing for me!~” she mused.

Nico almost dropped his sword. *Seriously…*?

“Who's the troublemaker you mentioned?” Amira demanded.

“Hm?” Ms. Robinson murmured, rolling onto her back and rubbing as much catnip on herself with her hands as she could.

“The troublemaker. The one who set you up. Spit it out” Amira demanded again.

“~Hmmm, you want a riddle? Why, of course, my dear. Here goes; *The one you're looking for does none other than bring death to love itself~”* she purred.

“Thank you” Amira said coldly. “Logan” she commanded.

Logan huffed, hopped over the backrest and unenthusiastically made his way over. He took a single picture and tossed the camera at Amira's feet.

She, in turn, stabbed down her spear in a fast, almost mechanical motion. It crunched right through Ms. Robinson's heart, who let out one final squeal before turning to dust.

“Nico, get ready to get us out of here” she demanded.

“*Sure…*” Nico offered. He resheathed his sword, an uneasy feeling taking over. That was… *Unsatisfying…*

Logan was a lot less subtle about it. He stabbed his sword right through the back of the large chair next to him. “For fuck’s sake! We're just props to you aren't we?! Why'd you even drag us along if you weren’t going to let us do anything?!”.

Amira turned to him, one side of her completely caked in a mixture of green and gray dust. “Don’t be stupid. All of you are the exact opposite of props. That’s exactly why I’m not going to take unnecessary risks. The assignment was to get rid of the Sphinx, and we *did.* That’s *all* any of us should care about” she stated stoically. She turned around fully. “Besides, all of you’ve done plenty the past few days” she added with just the faintest hint of warmth. “You’ve all been very *useful*” she assured.

Nico pursed his lips. *Uhuh.…* Amira wasn’t much of a team player. But still… it was hard to argue with her results… He exchanged a look with Yan. Her eyes smiled apologetically above the face mask. Nico heard Logan’s sword rip all the way up through the chair with an angry tearing sound and a loud crack.

“*Well, at least it’s over*” he growled, sheathing his sword.

Nico drew the shadows in around them.

After a short stop at the hotel, they stepped out onto the familiar camp grounds. Their chain of hands broke.

Amira took the film out of the camera and carefully tucked it into her bag. She took something else out of it. “Here”. Amira turned to Logan and held out the business card. “That's yours. I wanted to give it back”.

Logan held it in his hand, looking at the phone number. They all looked at him as he tore it to pieces and walked over to the trash can nearby. “Her dad's rich, she's probably evil” he explained casually, dropping the pieces into it.

Yan raised an eyebrow. “You *love* evil” she said like he was going crazy.

“Eh” Logan shrugged. “I barely know her”.

Yan raised her other eyebrow too. “Lo, stop. You're scaring me”.

Logan laughed and tugged on her hair.

Amira went right back to business with a single nod. “Fine. It’s your choice”. She addressed the group. “I’ll write the report immediately. Lady Aphrodite should be very pleased. Good job everyone”.

Yan pulled her mask off and smiled awkwardly. She was the only one who bothered.

Nico stuck up a hand. “Alright, goodbye”.

Yan startled a bit as he moved to take a step back. “No! Wait!”. She wrapped her arms around him. “At least let me say goodbye *back* this time!”.

Oh. Right.

“Goodbye, Nico! Thanks a bunch!” she patted into his back.

He returned two pats and gently pulled himself free from her arms. “You too, Yan”.

Amira stuck out her hand to him. “It's been a pleasure working with you, Nico”.

He grabbed her hand and gave it a firm shake. “You too, Amira” he stated. He swore he could see a smile.

He turned to Logan with an awkward smile. Logan smiled brightly. Without a warning he swatted Nico's baseball cap off of his head by the underside of the brim.

“*A real pleasure…”* Nico added sarcastically. There was no venom in his bite.

Yan grabbed hold of Logan's cheek in a clear warning.

Nico didn't bother picking up his hat. He just held up his hand as he stepped backwards into the shadows. They waved at him as he did.

Just moments later he stepped out a few states away.

He ran a hand through his hair then pulled off the mask to breathe in the fresh air. Well… Fresh? He’d stepped out onto a parking lot, right next to a highway. A parking lot, next to a highway where exactly? He turned around to find out. An all night diner made itself known right behind him…

Not like he had other places to go, right?

He stayed there until early the next morning, drinking coffee to keep himself awake, watching the sunrise.

Ms. Robinson’s iconic hairstyle plastered on a television screen in the corner lured his eyes over, a large banner promising ‘breaking news’ slapped right across it. He listened to the presenter’s shouty voice.

“Sad news this morning for fans of the hit television quiz ‘Robinson’s riddles’. Ms. Wilma Robinson has been confirmed to have passed away unexpectedly last evening by the show’s official social media accounts. They have not released any further details to the public at this point, but a verified source close to the acclaimed presenter claims she had secretly struggled with substance abuse for years. What makes the news especially shocking is that only two days ago the show celebrated a major milestone. Suspicions around Ms. Robinson’s wellbeing already rose when she failed to attend the event. The police are said to be looking

into a suspicious package delivered directly to her office right before her passing. It is rumoured to have contained very large amounts of various illegal substances-"

Nico turned away and blew out a deep breath. "*Damn* that's cruel…".

The waitress hummed in solemn agreement as she topped off his coffee. He smiled awkwardly at her, silently vowing to *never* get on Aphrodite's bad side again. Not that he'd ever have to. He was done with the Gods for now. Done with missions.

The last few days flashed through his mind. Yan, Amira… *Logan.* With a sigh he realized he was probably not going to see any of them again. He felt a load of tension leave his body, his shoulders sunk in relief. Funny. Did relief always feel kinda bitter?

Chapter 6: VI. Can I crash at your face?

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Blood, Spooky Goddess, concussion, fainting.

He'd been breathing in the all too familiar fog in Hades so long, he was starting to forgot what fresh air tasted like.

His thoughts twisted and turned over one another. The exhaustion made it impossible to keep up with them. *Good.* At least that meant they couldn't drive him insane anymore… That's the exact reason he'd come here in the first place. The past weeks had been rough. More than rough... Not anything he hadn't dealt with before, though. It'd be fine.

He knew himself well enough to know what to do by now. If living got too complicated, he just ran to death for comfort. Ironically, being among the dead was the only time he *actually* felt *alive* anyway.

He ran his hand along the rocky wall as he walked past the abyss. The only thing between it and him was a narrow, uneven path. When the path widened into a large plateau littered by jagged boulders, he finally took a break. *Crap.* A dead end… He'd have to walk all the way back.

A deep sigh escaped him. It was his own fault, no matter how he looked at it. He'd been wandering aimlessly. Completely unprepared. He walked a bit further and looked over the edge, into the bleak darkness that was Tartarus.

He'd gone quite far today. How long had today been? Maybe even more than a day… Maybe multiple… He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. He'd ran out of things to eat a while back too. That meant he would need to go to the surface again soon. His stomach churned. The thought of going back to normal life felt so… *abnormal.*

He'd wait a little longer. Just a little.

He sat down and rested his back against a particularly large rock. Then closed his eyes for a bit.

Without rhyme or reason, he was back on the balcony at the hotel. Logan's hands gripped the railing next to him tightly.

"Are you going to punch me or kiss me?" he heard himself ask.

Bloodlust took over. He felt himself grin defiantly as he stared into Logan's eyes. They were blazing. He was probably angrier than he'd ever seen him before.

Logan ripped his hands away from the railing and put them around Nico's throat. *Tightly.* If he didn't do anything, he'd kill him. He gripped Logan's wrists with his hands. As he did, Logan's grip let up. Nico ran his hands up, over his.

Bloodlust shifted into something… *Different.* Logan's expression shifted with it. It was still fiery… but mostly just… *Heated.*

Nico froze up as Logan slowly leaned in, until-!

He felt like he was drowning.

Holy fucking shit!

He fought back as much as he could, hitting the stone behind him hard with his back. It felt like he'd crashed down into himself all the way from outer space. Bugs swarmed wildly in his stomach, nauseating him to the core. His body was on fire. He gripped his chest with his hand and bent forward, pressing his forehead against his knees. He finally managed to gasp for air.

It took ages to get his breathing back under control.

What a fucking nightmare. This turning up in dreams thing wasn't supposed to be a *trade off*… He forced himself to calm down, slowly but surely. *Whatever.* It was just a dream. It didn't mean anything. Even if it did, he wasn't going to try to find out what.

He pushed all of this mayhem *far* into the back of his mind and shelved it. All the way on the top shelf, hidden out of sight. *Hopefully never to be seen again.*

He got up.

No matter how bad he'd been feeling before his little nap, it was a shadow compared to how he felt now. *Deep* didn't even begin to describe the pit that shame and misery had dug into his soul, they had burrowed a hole right through it... He straightened up, turned back to the direction he'd come from and took a step. Only to freeze solid on the spot.

He stared into a veiled face, just inches away from his. He could barely make out the features underneath the mourning shroud and long, black stringy strands of hair, but what he could make out was too much to handle. The gaunt, ghastly pale face of a woman gaped back at him. Her mouth twisted in a horrified, silent cry. Eyes dark, bloodshot, and hollow, opened so wide, it was like she didn't have eyelids at all. Tears ran down in an endless stream, dripping off of her chin in an uneven rhythm.

A scream burled up inside his chest, but it never came out, caged in behind his ribs. He wasn't able to breathe. Even as he managed to slowly turn his face away, his eyes stayed locked onto hers. Her stare was mesmerising, all encompassing. Before he knew it, tears streamed down his own face too. Anguish sickened him to the core.

"*Who…?!*" his chest squeezed out painfully.

The face wailed out a hollow laugh, loudly and mournfully. “*Oh… but you know me, boy… You know me so well…*” it whimpered at him.

He didn’t. He had no idea.

Shaking his head weakly, he took a step back, eyes still fixed on hers. The woman followed. He took another. As did she. He took two.

She reached up her arm. He stared down at her trembling finger. With a stab of her long sharp nail, she reached his stomach. Right *into* it. She slowly and painfully dragged her finger up, towards his heart.

He couldn’t explain it, he just knew… If she’d reach it, *he’d die.* His chest slowly twisted in on itself. He grasped at it, as he jolted backwards, out of her reach. She slowly drifted even closer.

“*You may call me… Oyzis…*” she whispered, heavy and quiet, like a final breath. “*Attempting to resist me is futile…*”.

In a panic he stepped back further… Into *nothing.*

She gazed down on him as he fell, her toes curling over the edge. While falling, he realized he felt *relieved.* The growing distance between him and the shrouded figure offered him respite, no matter the cost. He closed his eyes and turned his face to get away from her once and for all. The relief didn’t last long, as he crashed into the ground. So hard that he couldn’t make a sound.

Deafening ringing in his ears brought him back to his senses. Searing pain bound all his bones and muscles tightly.

He took a sharp breath and forced himself to move. To his shock, he could. He could move everything. Not well… But, no broken bones it seemed. He got to his knees. Blood dripped down onto the ground, in a small puddle. From where? He felt. It was difficult. Everything was still numb.

His head, he realized, as he pulled back a hand covered in blood. Lot’s of it. He felt it stream down, maybe more endless than the tears had been. Its warmth washed over him, almost soothing. *Comforting.* He closed his eyes, then almost toppled over.

No.

He willed himself back upright.

This was bad. If he didn't figure something out right now, he wouldn’t make it. This was a very, very bad time to take a nap. He got himself to his feet. But, was he going to have enough energy to get himself out of here? Where would he even go?

His thoughts were starting to become erratic, he couldn't focus. He dropped to one knee.

Well, time's up. *Do* or *die.*

He forced himself up and practically fell into the shadows. The familiar cold and quiet whispers, though draining, greeted him like an old friend. He had no idea how long they took him, or where they took him.

He hit something before the whispers even fully stopped. Whatever it was grunted loudly when he did. Probably *someone* then, Nico still managed to figure.

Whoever it was fell with him, and mostly broke his fall. They hit the ground with a loud bang. The sound spiked Nico's splitting headache. He couldn't move. He almost couldn't breathe. Whoever was under him shifted quickly.

"*What the-!*" Nico heard a familiar voice choke.

He could feel the vibrations of the voice through his whole body. Nico already had his eyes closed, but he clenched them shut harder as the noises around him came over him in a wave of nausea. He let out a gasp.

A hand clung onto his back. He heard the sound of a higher pitched voice slightly further away, screaming a question, he couldn't make out what it was.

"*He's bleeding!"* the familiar voice boomed in response.

Another hand, on the back of his head this time. Everything turned over, *way too fast*. *Enough.* Nico couldn't hold on anymore. He let go of his consciousness. It washed away instantly. He was nowhere now, lost in nothingness.

He felt something cool and wet press against his forehead. Nico sighed at the relief. An intense sting put an abrupt stop to that.

Ow! His hand shot up to push whatever it was away. Before he could reach it, his wrist got caught in a firm grip and pressed down next to him.

"Don't touch that" he heard the same familiar voice from earlier say. It was stern, but a lot more calm than before. It made him a little curious. Curious enough to try to stay awake and find out who it was.

A figure slowly blurred into clear view. Dark blonde, choppy haircut. Sharp jawline, clenched even sharper. Intense amber eyes, in deep concentration.

Ah. He knew that guy!

He stared up at Logan sitting at his side, one arm stretched out to wipe something on Nico's face.

A strange mix of emotions presented themselves one by one. He couldn't keep up with them, let alone unpack any of them. With a deep exhale he let them go.

Neither of them said anything. Logan was clearly very interested in whatever it was that he was doing to him. Nico watched him with equal interest.

For just a moment Logan glanced down and met his eyes. The corners of his lips curled up in a faint smirk when he got back to his task. “What's so funny?” he asked.

Huh? What did he mean?

Oh.

Nico realized he was grinning like an idiot... He swallowed and tried to regain control of his face.

“You got hit pretty hard, huh?” Logan asked flatly. He threw the cloth aside and stuck something to Nico's forehead, right on the source of the stinging sensation.

Nico nodded, then groaned at what he did to himself.

Yeah… it hurts like hell, but it's gonna be fine. He vaguely registered himself saying that out loud. It had sounded like background noise. Apparently it hadn't been very reassuring.

“*What?!”* Logan asked. He sounded *far* from calm all of a sudden.

Nico blinked at his sudden intense stare. Logan looked easily as worried as he'd sounded, disturbed almost. *Crap?*

Logan shook his head a little. “I don't-? You're speaking *Italian*, bud” he concluded with a strong undertone of desperation.

Oh. Oops.

Nico's head was spinning. He had a hard time keeping his breathing under control. Such a hard time, he didn’t manage to.

He felt Logan shift, putting down a hand next to Nico's face. Logan bent over him and put his other hand on Nico's chin. He looked closely into his eyes, even deeper than before. Checking for something…? “Look at me for a bit, okay?”.

Nico swallowed, wide eyed.

Yeah. Okay. He could do that.

Despite the worry, Logan's irises looked so *sunny*. Nico kept his eyes locked on them as the warm, stern hand on his chin tilted his face from side to side a few times. Logan seemed happy enough with the result and let go of him.

“Hm, your brain is not *completely* broken…” he muttered under his breath.

Ah. Good. Nico did feel like things were slowly starting to make a little more sense. He tried to scan Logan's face. His expression was hard to read. It seemed tense. He had an angry looking red mark on his face, under his eye. It didn't look *too* bad, but painful enough. Nico wondered if he did that when he fell on top of him…

“You good?” Logan asked carefully.

“Never better” Nico forced out hoarsely. He propped himself up with his lower arms.

Everything around him started to make a little more sense from this angle. He was in a bed, he now realized. Then, with a jolt, he realized something else.

“You undressed me?!” Nico shouted in disbelief.

Logan snorted. “*My guy*, you were absolutely *drenched* in blood!”.

Nico glanced down and noticed blood stains smeared across Logan's clothes, proving his claims for him. Black Flag was only still barely visible on his previously white shirt. Nico huffed in mild amazement at the sheer size of the stains.

Logan's expression got deadly serious, maybe even irritated. “You scared the shit out of me, by the way… I thought you were dying”.

The guilt and embarrassment lurking in the back of Nico’s mind finally hit him head on.

Out of all the places he could have picked… All the people he could have gone to...

He threw the covers off of himself and stood up. His head protested when he tried to take in his surroundings. He’d have to manage without them. He didn’t care for them anyway. “Where's my stuff?” he asked firmly.

Logan stood up, facing him. He stuck out an arm to block him. “*Nico*”.

Huh? He *never* called him by his name.

“Hold up, you-”.

Nico swayed. His ears rang. It felt like he got hit with a bucket of cold water. His eyes clenched shut. He couldn't keep himself upright. Apparently Logan had noticed that too, because when Nico opened his eyes he found out he was pressed against him.

He gasped for air. It didn't work. Logan's tight grip around his waist squeezed out whatever breath he had left. Nico shoved both hands against his upper arms and pushed as hard as he could. Logan didn't budge. Nico only managed to drag his cheek off of his shoulder and push their chests apart.

Not far enough! He pushed harder! Further!

The iron grip around his waist tightened even more, only allowing him to bend himself backwards. Unable to stop it, his head fell back. He groaned at the confusing discomfort of

everything being almost upside down, grasping onto Logan's arms. Logan relented at that. He slid an arm up. Nico felt his arm slide up between his shoulder blades and a warm hand press to the back of his neck. In one fluent motion the world was right side up again.

Nico blinked at the two very displeased looking little fires right in front of him. They narrowed and flashed downward.

“Okay, you *drama queen*. Calm down already…”.

He felt himself get lowered to the ground a bit, the grip around his waist moved. *Finally!* He drew in a sharp breath. His knees got pushed aside and an arm hooked under his upper legs. The world tilted on its side again as he went back up.

Wait. No. “*Stop!”* Nico protested.

Gods! He'd somehow managed to make this even more embarrassing.

The warmth from Logan's hand under his neck and the heat on his face mixed together into something so unbearably uncomfortable, it made him squirm. That only made it worse, almost literally rubbing it in.

“Put me down” he demanded, glaring up at Logan. It sounded a lot less threatening than he'd hoped.

Based on his expression, Logan agreed. “Are you going to *stay* down if I do?” he asked, obviously not amused “I really don’t feel like doing this again”.

Logan's hands tightened their grip ever so slightly, a clear warning. Nico realized there was no way he was going to win this. He hid his face under his hand.

“Yeah…” he conceded. He'd sounded *pathetic.*

Logan jutted one knee on the bed and lowered him down. He firmly pulled the covers back over him, like a statement. Nico moved his hand up to his forehead, revealing his shameful look.

Logan had his arms crossed. His expression was stern, angry even. Until a hint of pity flashed through. “*Damn it, Spooky…”* he grumbled.

Fuck. He sounded *disappointed.*.. This was the worst.

He could practically hear the inevitable ‘*What are you doing?’* already. He didn't have an answer, so he wasn't going to wait for it.

In a last attempt at defiance Nico scoffed. “You know, I could be out of here like *that*” he snapped his fingers “You can't stop me”.

Logan raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “In your underwear…?”.

Checkmate.

Nico’s last shred of pride shattered. An amused smile crept onto Logan's face. Nico turned away from it, to look at the ceiling for comfort.

“Okay look, you came here for help. *So, just let us help you*” Logan demanded, there was a plea in there. “You'll get your stuff back once it's clean and you've had some sleep”.

The guilt came rushing back. Nico tried not to cry. *Fuck.* That would be the *only* thing that could make this even worse!

The door quietly opened a crack, Gwen's face peering through. “How is he?” She whispered.

Logan turned to her. “Awake… *Stupid.*… So about halfway back to normal, I’d say” he grumbled.

Gwen opened the door and stepped in, revealing her fluffy pink bathrobe. Her eyes quickly found Nico on the bed. “Hiya, Nicky! Who's up for a smoothie?” she beamed brightly at him, holding up a large glass with a very suspicious looking substance. “It's made with whatever fruit I could find in the kitchen” she declared proudly.

Nico grimaced.

“~It's got loads of painkillers in it~” she encouraged in a sing song voice, shaking the glass slightly.

Nico raised his eyebrows. That *did* catch his interest. His pounding head made a very convincing argument. “Thanks Gwen” he said with a guilty smile “that would be great”.

She walked over and put it on the bedside table. She bent down and quickly checked the bandaid on his forehead. “I tied your face back together. Hope you don’t mind” she chuckled.

Nico pursed his lips. “Sorry for all the trouble…”.

Gwen rubbed his shoulder and winked. “No trouble at all, sweetie. It’s my job. I do it all the time!”. She gave them one last look over before she turned to the door. “Okay boys, Imma go get some sleep. G'night” she chimed. “Nicky, I’ll come check on you later!”.

“You really don’t-!". *Have to.*…

Nico’s sentence got chopped in half by a sharp smile from the doorway. Her eyes flickered a scorchingly stern blue. She winked his mouth back shut, and closed the door behind her.

“Night, Gwen. Thanks for your help” Logan sent along with her. He turned back to Nico. “Right, uh, I'll be over in Mark's room” he mumbled, gesturing to the hallway. “Night”.

He turned around.

Guilt made a move. Nico grabbed his wrist. Logan shot him a surprised look over his shoulder.

“Hey, thank you… I, uh... *I'm really so-*” Nico stammered.

Logan quickly faced away and slipped his hand free. He put it up, gesturing to Nico to stop. “Don't worry about it. You're fine”. His tone was hard to dissect. Polite?
Sad? *Annoyed?*... Tired, was all that clearly came through.

Nico watched him walk out the door, leaving it cracked open. He sighed, then shoved his hands over his eyes. *Why?* Why did he do this to himself? To *both* of them.

He sat himself up and downed the whole smoothie in one go. A shudder waved over him. He had no feelings left to feel. The mattress greeted his back when he toppled over. It seemed happy he returned, feeling like it was trying to press around him.

The faint smell of blood lingered. He tried not to focus on it and found something else. A warm smell. Wood tones. Maybe some pine. Pinewood? His thoughts stopped making sense. The strings keeping his consciousness together snapped one by one. He was too numb to dream.

Nico woke up to something rustling, feeling like Gwen's magic potion had knocked him out for a hundred years. More rustling. There was movement close by. Next to him? He glanced over groggily, eyes half closed. *Gods*, it was so bright. He almost couldn’t see-!

He shot up, horror dulling most of the pain.

Logan stood in the middle of the room, half naked, casually pulling up the zipper on a pair of black cargo pants.

“What the hell are you doing?! Why are you *naked*?!” Nico shouted.

“Pf! Not even close, you prude. I'm more covered than you are, anyway” Logan scoffed. “Besides” he went on, barely looking at Nico “This *is* my room, you know? Where all my stuff is. Like clothes. I would have kept what I had on, but there was blood all over them”.

Right. Last night was coming back to him. Regretfully…

He tried to look literally anywhere else, but somehow that made it even more awkward. He watched Logan rummage through his drawer, taking his time, apparently with something specific in mind.

Nico could see he had just taken a shower. His usually gravity defying hair was hanging down over his eyebrows, dripping. Logan pushed it back, out of his face. A few strands rebelled, falling right back.

Nico was surprised to see that without his usual intimidating scowl and get up, Logan actually had some boyish charm to him. *Annoyingly*, you could even call him classically

handsome. Some people could. Not Nico, *obviously*.

He noticed water drip down onto his upper arm. The droplet followed the shape of his bicep as it slid down. It was safe to assume that Logan would be in good shape, he was a son of the God of war after all. But Nico had never actually given that much thought. Logan usually hid most of himself under his baggy shirts… Without any baggy shirts, Nico could see the muscles on his torso were clearly defined. Despite that, Logan still had a lean build. In the light of the warm morning sun, gleaming with the remains of his shower earlier, you could almost mistake him for a son of Apollo. He was just ever so slightly more… *Rugged* looking.

“Healed pretty nicely, huh?” Logan asked suddenly, finally pulling a shirt from his drawer.

Crap!

Nico tried to keep a poker face.

Logan lifted his elbow and looked down just about where Nico's eyes had last lingered. Nico quickly looked closer. The two faint scars on his abdomen where the manticore stung him were only slightly lighter than the rest of his skin.

Right!

“Yeah” Nico replied “You almost can't see them anymore”. *Seriously…*

Now that he actually paid attention to them, he noticed Logan actually had a fairly impressive collection of scars all over his body. Most of them faded, presumably from quite a while ago.

Logan traced his thumb over the line of tooth marks on his right shoulder. “These are going to stick around for a bit, but I barely feel em at this point. Even the bone's pretty much fully healed. Yan's a genius”.

“Hm, she sure is” Nico agreed without hesitation.

Logan threw on his shirt. He looked at Nico's forehead. Nico noticed the red mark under his eye had turned into a dark bruise. It pretty much confirmed it happened last night… His stomach turned a little.

“How are you feeling?” Logan asked.

Nico thought about it. His head still hurt badly, but it was a shadow of last night. “A lot better, not great”.

Logan grabbed something from the drawer. “Good enough to get up and eat something?” he asked.

“Yeah, should be fine” Nico willed himself.

Logan tossed a t-shirt in his face, it fell in his lap. “There's pants in here”. He tapped on the drawer under the one he'd just closed.

“Did I… do that to your face?” Nico asked, gesturing at the mark.

Logan grinned. “Yeah, I guess you finally managed to land a good hit” he mused.

Nico was about to apologize when Logan turned around. “Kitchen is at the end of the hall” he said as he walked out the room.

Nico watched the open door for a few seconds, annoyed and embarrassed. He hadn't even let him apologize… He probably didn't think he would, he realized. Shame crept over him. He took a deep breath. He'd apologize later. First things first.

He held up the t-shirt. The faded image of the mask from Scream silently shrieked at him. Could be worse. He wrestled it on. Probably even baggier than it would be on Logan, but not as bad as he'd expected. He grabbed the first pair of pants he could find. While pulling them on, something dark red beckoned him from the corner of his eye.

An electric guitar leaned casually against the side of the drawer. A thin layer of dust dulled the gleam of the sunlight. A series of deep, deliberate scratches revealed a glimpse of its wooden entrails. He tilted his head, slowly exhaling to fend off the accompanying spike in nausea.

‘***THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS*** ‘ the guitar declared in loud, angry looking carving.

Ha…

His eyes pulled away from it as he moved to the door.

When he walked into the kitchen the sunlight hurt his eyes, making him cringe.

“Morning, Nicky!” he heard Gwen greet him from somewhere in the brightness.

“Morning…” he groaned back.

The brightness finally let up a little and he discovered the table. He dropped down in a seat next to Logan.

“Help yourself!” Gwen offered cheerfully from the other side of the table.

“Thanks Gwen”. He poured himself some coffee and took a sip as he watched Logan bite off an impressive chunk of toast. “Huh. Didn't take you for someone who chews with their mouth closed” Nico pretended to wonder.

Logan looked at him. He stopped chewing like he was about to say something, then seemingly realized that would prove Nico's point. He opted to kick Nico in the leg instead.

“Be nice” Gwen warned.

“Sorry” they replied in unison.

Gwen smiled proudly. Logan looked her over, lingering on her lack of plate.

“You're not eating anything?” he asked.

Gwen smiled. “Nope. This princess is going *out* for breakfast. My prince charming will arrive shortly”.

As she finished her sentence there was a short, polite series of knocks on the door.

“Speak of the devil~!” she chimed. “Come in!” Gwen shouted at the door.

The door opened carefully, revealing a remarkably pretty young woman. Her long dark hair slipped off her shoulder as she peered around the door. Her large, chocolate brown, almond shaped eyes quickly scanned the room from under her bangs. They found Gwen first.

The young woman smiled brightly, revealing two perfect dimples in her cheeks. Gwen smiled brightly in return.

“Morning, Val!” she shouted.

“Good morning” Val returned quietly with a slight sing-song tone.

Her eyes went over to Logan. Nico was surprised to see them light up.

“Hey, Val” Logan offered, his tone a little awkward.

Her smile brightened as she was about to reply, then she noticed Nico. She glanced down a little, her brow furrowed in clear surprise. *Crap.* He was wearing his clothes… Would she really think something might have happened? Who was she? His girlfriend?

Nico smiled as casually as he could. “Hi” he offered.

She smiled weakly. She glanced to Logan then back to him.

“Nico” Nico upped his offer.

She held up a hand. “Valentina, nice to meet you”. Despite her polite tone, it obviously wasn't. “Are you-? I'm, uh, Gwen's friend” she quickly cut herself off.

Before he could say anything she dialed the brightness in her smile right back up. She turned to Gwen, shook her head a little and pointed to the outside with both hands. “Tay's still in the car! I'll wait outside!” she hastily made her escape.

“You don't want-?” Gwen tried.

The door shut.

Nico looked over to Gwen carefully. Gwen pouted at the door. He didn't understand what just happened, but it was bad, and quite possibly his fault somehow. “Sorry” he offered up carefully.

Gwen turned her pout to him, raising an eyebrow. “Hm?” she let out. “No, Nicky! It's not you!” she reassured. She shot Logan an annoyed look. Nico watched him sink into his chair a little deeper under its weight. “It's *him!* He’s making it his mission to ruin my life by frenching all my friends, getting his *cooties* all over them!” Gwen huffed with a little hurt shining through her tone.

“*Hey!* That’s not fair! Taylor kissed *me!* And I've talked to Valentina, she knows it isn't going anywhere” Logan defended himself.

Gwen snorted “*Right,* then why does she keep making eyes at you?”.

“I can't help that...” Logan whined. He wiggled his knee.

“You can and you will! You need to have another talk with her!” Gwen demanded, pointing a warning finger at him. “And you. Need. To. Stop. Doing. This.” stabbing the finger at him with each word.

She grabbed her coat and purse and walked out the door.

“Stop slutshaming me!” Logan yelled after her.

Nico made an awkward face. “She actually seems pretty upset” he said, almost a question.

“Yeah… I messed up…” Logan leaned even further back “She has a thing for Taylor, but I didn't know that back then…”. He grimaced.

Oh…! So, Gwen's-?

Nico heard Logan’s fingers rap on the underside of the table. He almost felt bad for him. *Almost.* “So what's the deal with you and that girl just now?” he asked outright.

“Valentina? She's just a friend” Logan explained, almost curtly.

“Gwen doesn't seem to think so. Honestly… Valentina doesn't seem to either…” Nico pondered, stirring the pot a little more.

“Yeah, that wasn't really the plan…” Logan admitted a bit painfully, sadly even. Nico found himself surprised by that reaction. He figured he was either going to catch Logan being a dog or a hopeless romantic. This *actually* seemed sensitive…

“So… you're not into the whole ‘really attractive woman’ thing she has going on?” Nico asked carefully.

Logan grinned. “Course I am, but only *platonically*”.

Nico grinned back. So he *was* being a dog.

Logan seemed to think for a bit. “No, that's not the problem…” he started, cocking his head to the side. “She's a rose petals and candles type of girl” he shrugged indifferently. “Nothing

wrong with that, but I'm more of a ropes and bitemarks type of guy" he concluded with a dirty smile.

Nico's cheeks caught fire at the sudden crudeness. He was *definitely* being a dog. He let out an exaggerated gag. "Careful, or you'll turn me straight…" he warned.

Logan laughed loudly.

Nico wondered to himself. "If your "*interests"* are so different, why'd you go after her in the first place?" he asked sincerely.

Logan turned a little frustrated. "I don't really know… And I didn't '*go after her'*... I mean, it's no excuse, but... I was in a really bad place. She was there for me… *She's so comfortable to be around.* Things just kind of happened. I thought we were just messing around". Frustration turned back to sadness. "If I'd known she was *actually* into me, I never would have! I'm just not used to people wanting more than… *You know.*.. It never even crossed my mind. If only she'd told me *before*…". He bounced his knee a few times. "She's really nice. *Too* nice. I'm not. I can't hold back all the time. She'd never survive me, especially not how I am now…". He stopped his knee and bowed his head. Seemingly ashamed of himself.

Nico shifted a little. This was getting a bit too real. He was about to say something when Logan picked himself back up.

"Once she gets over it, she'll find someone way better. Guys are crazy about her, she can pick whoever she likes".

Nico smirked. "Except you, I guess".

Logan side-eyed him. "Did you not listen to my whole speech just now?".

Nico smirked wider. "I'm kinda relieved. I thought I got you in trouble there for a second. *She definitely noticed your clothes on me*".

He expected Logan to get pissed off about the implication. Maybe he *intended* for him to.

"So you *do* care about me. That's so cute" Logan mused, exaggerating a touched expression. He reached out and gently tapped the tiny skull hanging from Nico's earring. Nico rolled his eyes when Logan snickered.

"Nah, if she has *questions* for me, she should just ask. I've been pretty clear".

Nico hummed in something resembling agreement and took another sip of coffee. Logan crossed his arms and leaned on them, looking at him intently. Nico felt his eyes burn into him. They *actually* managed to stir up some nerves inside of him this time.

"So… What happened to you?".

Nico froze. Oyzis' eyes opened wide behind his own, sending a painful chill down his body. He quickly clenched them shut. "I *really* don't want to talk about it…".

Logan shifted a little. “Okay…” he sighed. He reached out over the table and slowly dragged a plate in front of Nico.

Nico’s stomach churned at the sight of the two pieces of toast. Logan leaned in a bit closer, his stare burning deeper and deeper.

“No thanks” Nico quickly replied, sounding more nervous than he realized.

Logan narrowed his eyes. “You've *got* to eat something” he said sternly.

“I can't. Not yet” Nico almost pleaded.

Logan rapped his fingers against the table. “Dude, It's been over twelve hours. We're not going through all this trouble to patch you up just to let you starve to death”.

Crap. Right in the soul.

“*Sorry*” he muttered. *Double crap.* Why did he sound so shaky? So *emotional.*

“*That’s not-”* Logan cut himself off with a sigh. “Look, Spooky, it's fine. But if you just eat something, *anything,* you'll feel better” he negotiated. He sounded reassuring, if a little frustrated.

Nico almost fell for it. But toast had quickly turned into the bane of his existence somehow. He looked up at Logan. There was that worried look again, through the faint scowl. He should really stop looking at him like that… It didn't suit him. Nico took a deep breath and struggled his way through a few bites. His body fought back valiantly, twisting and wringing inside with each chew and swallow.

After he managed to finish off the evil pieces of bread he almost laid his head on the table. But that would be admitting defeat… He got up to resist the table's charm. Why was he so *exhausted?*

Now that he was up he suddenly felt a little dizzy. Alright, a lot dizzy. His head complained loudly and painfully. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. Trying to control his breathing wasn't really working out. What was normal breathing like again?

He looked up when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Logan held up a glass of water for him. He took it and downed it. That was slightly better, but not nearly good enough. “Thanks” he muttered.

Logan quickly stole the empty glass back from him. “Sure…”.

He felt Logan's hand sway a little against him… *Wait,* no… That wasn't right…

“Hey, *love* your ambition, but you should probably go back to bed” Logan stated, giving his shoulder a squeeze.

Nico thought about it. Tried to. Man, thinking was hard right now… “Yeah” he relented. “Maybe”.

Logan didn't let go. “Need help?” he offered.

Fuck no! No more of that. Nico shook his head and pulled free. He staggered back into the hallway, trying desperately not to bump into anything. He could feel Logan's eyes burn holes in his back until he closed the door.

Gods. What a fucking mess…

It was unbearably hot all of a sudden. He tried to pull free from his clothes. He only managed to get the shirt off before he dropped down onto the bed. How could the bed feel so heavy? He was *on top* of it for crying out loud! And how could it already be this freezing cold now?

Ah!

He jolted as his legs got adjusted with a shove. Panic set in when the covers came down on him, trapping him in place with their surprising weight. He couldn't even open his eyes, let alone fight whatever was happening. A warm hand pressed onto his head, urging him to stop moving.

“Hey. Calm down. Just go to sleep” a nice, soothing voice told him.

Yeah. Alright. Good idea. He exhaled deeply and let go of all tension. Off he went. Somewhere *very* far.

It took a while to return. He was still mostly asleep when he picked up on quiet whispering around him. It barely reached his consciousness.

He vaguely heard a higher voice ask something. A lower voice responded. “*Not really. Poor bastard almost fainted on me earlier. Barely made it to bed…”*. Its tone was serious. Somehow it was still comforting to listen to.

The higher voice asked another question before the lower voice responded once again. *“A little cold, but he's breathing normally”*.

The mattress sunk heavily behind his back. Soft, slender fingers carefully moved his hair out of his face.

The higher voice was a lot closer this time. *“~Awww. He's so cuuute~”* it cooed quietly, still barely audible. A hand lightly and tenderly ran through his hair. *“Don't you just wanna cradle him and-?”*.

The higher voice got cut off by the lower voice. *“Stop harassing him, or I'm kicking you out”*. It was more of a hiss than a whisper.

“Nuhuh. My house. You can eat shit” the higher voice whispered back defiantly.

“My bed” the lower voice retorted even more defiantly.

“~Lucky you~” the other mused quietly.

“ Okay, stop. I mean it… Either give him the water or get out ”.

The hand moved to his shoulder and shook it carefully, but pressingly enough to actually wake him up. Gwen's voice was a lot louder now, not even remotely subtle anymore. “Nicky? Buddy? You need to drink some water”.

The half of Nico that had still been asleep groaned in protest.

“Please? Just a little. I'll leave you alone after. Promise” she bargained.

Nico pressed his hand onto the mattress and pushed himself up. As he opened his eyes, he winced a little at the light. He sat up and ran the palm of his hand over his face. Gwen placed a glass of water in it when he lowered it back down. Nico gave her a grateful, if a little dissatisfied smile. He took a few sips. It woke him up a bit. “So, how many years was I gone for?” he asked, kinda dreading the answer.

“About five hours” Logan replied.

Damn. That was long.

“Feel any better?” he asked.

Nico looked at him. He hadn't really thought about that yet. Now that he did… *Yeah.* A lot better, actually. Good, even! Well… Almost… “I feel pretty decent, actually!” he replied, quickly finishing his water and turning to sit next to Gwen.

She gave him a happy smile and pinched his cheek. “Great! I'll fix up some food!”. She strutted out the door before he had the chance to reply.

He closed his mouth and pursed his lips. Turning to look at Logan, he got a faint smile in return. “Have you been here the whole time…?” Nico asked warily.

Logan's smile turned into a devious grin. “Well, this *is* my room. I don't get why you keep being so surprised to see me here…”.

Nico huffed and grabbed the small pile of fabric he recognized as his shirt from the floor. Well, Logan's shirt. “And people say *I'm* a creep” he said accusatorily.

“People say that?” Logan asked. Next to the confusion he actually sounded a bit offended. It was honestly a little touching.

Nico wasn’t prepared for it at all. “Well, not to my face” he quickly assured. “*Usually…”* he added as he hastily pulled the t-shirt back on.

Logan groaned in disapproval. “I mean… You're a little edgy” he weighed. “But from one ‘*bad boy’* to another, you're way too anxious and polite to be *creepy*. You haven't stopped apologizing since you got here” he snickered.

A smile crept onto Nico's face. Logan smiled back at him, a bit smug, but Nico didn't mind somehow.

“And no, by the way. I haven't been here the whole time. But, I have *creeped* on you a few times to make sure you weren't dead”.

Nico's face heated up a bit. “Thank you” he said quickly. He looked to the ground in embarrassment at how much he meant that. “And sorry. About all this…”.

“It's fine” Logan said with some genuine warmth.

Nico looked at his smile. The bruise glared at him. “I'm sorry about your face”.

Logan huffed at the ceiling and grinned at him. “*It's. Fine.”* he groaned. “Can you please stop now?”.

Nico grinned in embarrassment. “Right, sorry”. He didn't catch it in time. Nico sucked in his lips.

Logan's chuckle made him crack up a little. “What happened to you, man? Did you get brain damage? I'm starting to miss our fights…”.

Nico pursed his lips. Fighting was definitely better than this awkward hell he'd forced them all into… Yeah, alright. He *really* missed their crazy bitch fights. Too many *fond* memories to choose from. One in particular. He didn't know why. “Right, like on the balcony? When you were about to punch me in the face?” Nico threw at him.

“I wasn't going to *punch* you!” Logan defended, clearly actually offended.

Good start. Just like old times.

Nico raised an eyebrow. “Oh, so you *were* going to make out with me?” he quipped. He could feel himself step over the line as he did it. Something far and *deep* in the back of his mind fell off a shelf, spilling everywhere. *Oh, fuck… Fuck!* He braced himself.

Logan's annoyed expression turned devious. “I told you not to start anything you can't finish, didn't I?” he asked with an exaggerated seductive voice. He went in for the kill with a wink.

Oh! Heat hit Nico's face. *Oh… No…!* He swallowed in embarrassment.

Logan laughed at him. “See? Like right now! Why do you joke about things that make *yourself* uncomfortable?”.

Yeah. Good question. Nico got up and held up his hands in an offer. “What can I say? *I'm an enigma…*”.

Logan seemed to weigh that statement. He shrugged in agreement. Then pursed his lips and seemingly decided it wasn't good enough after all. “What do the numbers in your tattoo mean?”.

Huh? When did he see that? It’s on the back of his shoulder! Oh, right… He’d been practically naked almost the whole time he'd been here… *And Logan had cleaned him up.*… Thank the Gods he'd missed *that.*… “Why?” Nico asked in return.

“Just seemed like it meant something. I get the keys, they’re a Hades thing, right? But, only one has numbers in it”.

Nico smiled faintly. Without thinking about it he ran his hand over where the crossed keys should be hidden under his shirt. “Yeah, they’re a symbol for locking away the souls of the dead in the underworld… Two keys, one for me, one for my sister…”.

Logan visibly realized the touchyness of the subject. “Ah... I shouldn't have-” he began.

“Don’t worry about it” Nico interjected. Subconsciously, he moved towards the door a bit.

“Nice gesture though. Looks cool too” Logan said.

“Thanks…” Nico breathed. He looked down. The Scream mask yelled at him to change the subject. “So you like horror movies, huh?” He asked.

“You're surprised I'm into violent movies?”. Logan asked, a little taken aback. “Even you should know me better by now, Spooky”.

Touché.

“Eh, you got me there. I should have figured you'd like Scream. That's probably one of the dumbest in the genre, and that's a low bar” Nico jabbed.

“What? No way! It's mostly satire! It's *supposed* to be corny, how do you not get that?” Logan asked with fake outrage, his grin gave him away. “You don't deserve to wear that. Take it off.”

He gave the shirt a short, firm tug by its hem. Nico called his bluff.

“Should've vetted me before you threw it at me” Nico said, gripping Logan's hand with a menacing smile.

Suddenly they were in a standoff. He probably should have known better than to goad him.

“Oh. So we're going to do this the hard way, huh?” Logan threatened, obviously amused. Nico could feel his wrist tense up in his hand as Logan tightened his grip on the fabric.

He could still go back, Nico realized. He grinned. “Don't oversell yourself”. Nico added his other hand.

Logan's other hand shot out in a threatening movement. He shoved it flat onto the wall right behind Nico's head with a slam, then pushed Nico against the wall. Nico clicked his tongue at the *annoying* warm feeling of the back of Logan's hand pressed against the back of his head. The fact that he was obviously being careful with him in his own crude way was *damn* frustrating.

They looked into each other’s eyes. Logan's grip loosened a bit. A pensive look hid behind his smug grin.

Nico suppressed a shudder. *Gods*, those eyes were *intense*. He-!

“What are you trying to prove, *old man?*”. Logan always knew how to *diffuse* a situation, in the most *aggravating* way possible.

Nico returned a sly smile. “I hope you're not feeling *sorry* for me. I thought you said you missed this”.

The corner of Logan's mouth twitched. With a worrying lack of resistance he pulled the shirt up to Nico's chin. Nico tried his best to shove his hand back down, trembling at the effort. *Crap.* He was *way* less recovered than he thought he was.

Gwen opened the door. “What's going *on* in here?” she asked loudly, clearly annoyed. She took in the scene. Both stared at her. She covered her eyes with her hand and walked out the door backwards, her lips a long straight line. “Play safe!” she yelled at them, closing the door. “And stop tearing my house down!” she added with exasperation.

Logan tore his hands off of him. Nico pulled the shirt down with both hands. They avoided eye contact for a while, stewing in the embarrassment.

Then Nico cracked, not managing to suppress a laugh. “This is on you”. He kicked Logan’s leg.

“Your clothes better dry quickly” Logan warned with an annoyed smile.

Nico felt a little uncomfortable as Logan looked at him, seemingly thinking to himself. “Okay, Mr movie snob, what *is* up to your standards?”.

Nico didn't need to think long. “Nosferatu. The original” he answered. It was the first movie he'd ever seen, even before moving to America. It had completely blown his mind. He'd never seen a hyena before.

Logan raised his eyebrows. “Old school!... I should have figured…” he said, pointing at Nico. “That *is* a good movie. I'll give you that” he added with a half smile. “But, mostly funny… Not even remotely scary”.

Ha! Try telling that to eight year old Nico. Age restricted movies weren't a thing in nineteen forty.

Nico grinned. “Yeah? You're scared of the killer from Scream?” he quipped.

Logan snorted and leaned back a little. “*Of course not*”. Arrogance dripped off his voice. “If I were in Scream, I'd get *right* in there and-”. He made a stabbing motion with his hand. “I'd be the *first* guy to fucking die…”.

Nico laughed. He couldn't help it. That was not the reaction he’d expected at all. He pursed his lips and crossed his arms. “I *did* like Scream” he admitted begrudgingly, raising one shoulder. “*Because* it's dumb…” he added with an eye roll.

Logan gave him a bright smile, a flicker of warm flames flashing through his eyes. “Alright, that's good enough for me. You can keep that on” he said, punching Nico in the stomach just slightly too hard.

He heard loud tinkering somewhere further inside the house. A chair scraped over tiles. A few footsteps.

“*Dinner’s ready!*” Gwen shouted from the same direction.

Logan nodded at him. “Well, you heard the boss…”.

Yep. That was a fitting name for Gwen. Not ‘boss’ as in bossy, but ‘boss’ as watchful and in control. And she was a great boss. Her patients were lucky.

Nico was lucky too. Gwen wasn’t just a great boss, she was also a great cook. And it wasn’t even just because he hadn’t had a home cooked meal in… *Months.… Hm.*

Gwen was eager though, trying to get him to eat as much as possible. A third serving was a little much, even for the best cook.

“Sorry, Gwen. I *can’t*” he held up his hands to keep her serving spoon at bay.

She pouted, but relented, then turned her attention to her next victim.

Logan pulled back his plate. “I’ll throw up. I swear to the fucking Gods…”.

Gwen piled the remaining rations onto Mark’s plate then leaned back in her chair, very pleased with herself.

Logan yawned, catching her attention. They had a silent staring contest. Nico shifted a little as their expressions slowly soured… Until Gwen leaned forward onto her elbows, frowning at Logan. “You know…? You haven't touched your guitar since you moved in... I can't

believe I'm about to say this, but I miss when you'd wake us up in the middle of the night with your loud music, or when you'd sing".

Logan looked closed off, but there was an air of sorrow around him.

Mark laughed, there was a little awkwardness to it. "More like scream. No way that counts as singing".

Logan responded with an attempt at a menacing smile. It looked forced. "I still scream plenty around here. No need to miss that". He got up and made his way towards the back door, sliding his fingers along the table as he walked by. They all watched him close the door with a loud thud.

Gwen turned on Mark, *furious*. Her eyes blazed in a cold blue fire. Nico guessed all Ares' children were alike that way. She snapped at Mark, punching him in the shoulder. "Why do you always need to make a joke out of everything?! *I almost had him!*".

Mark hissed at the impact of the punch. "I know! My bad. The tension got to me…" . He sighed. "But Gwen, you've tried this *so* many times! He never budges! Half the time you make it worse, and he freaks out! If you wanna start this again, do it when I'm not around!"

Mark got up and opened the door to the hallway. "You *know* I'm bad at this stuff" he added with an annoyed look. He left the door open as he stomped up the stairs.

"We're *all* bad at this stuff!" Gwen yelled angrily at the open door. "Gods, these freaking… men!" she growled through gritted teeth. She slapped the table like it offended her. Then she looked at Nico. "Sorry, Nicky. No offense".

Nico smiled. "Oh, but I completely agree with you. I'm not any better".

Gwen smiled back. "Well, you're still here… Thanks for that". She laid her head down on the table, spreading her arms over it dramatically. "I'm so sick of this" she sighed. "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say…". She grimaced. "Maybe Mark's right. I should probably back off…" She looked even more sad than earlier. "I'm just worried about him" she whispered.

Nico frowned. He patted Gwen on her shoulder. "You're doing everything you can".

She looked up at him and smiled half heartedly.

"I'll go check on him". Nico offered her a reassuring smile.

Gwen grinned, sticking out her fist for a fist bump. He returned it.

"You're the best Nicky. Don't die out there!" she cheered.

Nico opened the door quietly. He walked in on Logan smoking, rapping his fingers against the wood of the porch fence. He had his back turned to him. Nico thought about what to say for a while.

Wow, he really *was* bad at this. Much worse than he thought.

“So you sing, huh?” he asked.

Logan turned to look at him. “Nah, Mark's right. I pretty much just shout over music. I can't sing for shit”. He smiled a humourless smile, then turned back around and kept quiet.

Come on, man. I'm trying here.… Time to get a little more personal.

“So Mark's not why you ran away then?” Nico asked, more confrontational.

Logan didn't turn around this time. “Figured I'd stop bumming everybody out for a while, that's all”. He obviously tried to sound indifferent. It wasn't convincing.

“I don't think it worked” Nico said to Logan's back. He tried to keep sounding as casual as possible.

“*You're probably right*” Logan said a little heavily, pretty obviously depressed at this point.

Gods. He somehow kept making this worse. He mentally prepared himself to beg Gwen for forgiveness later.

“How, uh… Are you-?” Nico started.

He got interrupted by a loud rasping noise.

Nico looked down. He noticed what seemed to be an animated blob of ink rub against Logan’s leg. Logan bent down and petted what Nico now realized was a heavy set, scruffy black cat. One of its ears practically gone and a noticeable kink in its tail.

In typical Logan fashion he went about showing affection in a way that could only be described as indelicate. Based on the strange guttural sound the cat made, with which it seemed to attempt purring, it didn’t mind one bit.

“Who’s your feral friend?” Nico asked, a little amused.

“This little guy is Crazy Butch. The first time he and I met, he bit me and I called him something slightly different… But, that was a little impolite, so when that name stuck I changed one letter to make it a bit more family friendly.” Logan explained, practically kneading Crazy Butch like a piece of dough. “You *are* a Crazy Butch. Aren’t you?” he murmured.

Crazy butch rasped something in approval. He squirmed a little. Then suddenly he swatted, pulling his one ear back. Logan tore his hand away right before it struck, obviously anticipating something like this might happen.

“Yeah, you are!” He chuckled.

Crazy Butch casually laid down on Logan’s foot, like he hadn’t just declared war a second ago.

“Gotta respect a man with boundaries” Logan said matter of factly.

Nico couldn’t help being a little touched, apparently he hadn’t expected Logan to be able to keep his cool around someone, or something, so volatile. Logan slowly pulled his foot out from under Butch, walking over and reaching under a bench next to the door. He pulled out a box of cat food.

“I know what you’re really here for…”.

Butch started circling him, rasping loudly. He dove in face first the second the kibbles hit the floor, chewing messily. Logan gave him some firm taps on the back, right above the tail.

Nico chuckled.

“What?”. Logan glanced at him, raising an eyebrow.

Nico shook his head a little “Nothing. Just didn’t expect you to get along so well with a cat. A mean one at that”.

Logan let out a hum “People always assume I’m a dog person. And I mean, I've got nothing against dogs, but… Dogs are messy, loud and needy. Just doesn't really work for me”.

Nico raised an eyebrow, gesturing at Butch.

Logan frowned “Yeah, okay… So Butch is going through a hard time and needs a little help. But he’s a tough little bastard, and he deserves some credit for that.” Logan shot him a slightly embarrassed look. “Butch and I spent a lot of long nights here together the past few months… I guess he helped me a little too. We’re pretty similar that way. Just two damaged idiots, aren’t we…?”.

Butch took Logan's hand in his paws and started Butchering it. Logan let him.

Nico felt stupid. He should have figured.

Butch climbed on top of Logan’s knee.

“Crazy Butch isn't so bad. I think he's just a little misunderstood” Nico heard himself say.

Logan looked up at him, surprised. He gave him a half smile. Nico watched Logan mess with Butch in his lap. His expression was so warm it was almost unsettling. Nico smiled as Logan snickered to himself.

“He's so *stupid*, though…” he murmured.

Nico's smile turned into a smirk. *Uhuh… took the words right out of my mouth…*

Logan turned to him, Butch fighting his hand tooth and nail. “He reminds me of you” he mused.

Nico's eye twitched. “Does he now?” he asked venomously.

Logan started to grin, but stopped himself. He lowered his eyebrows. “You're shivering” he concluded.

He was?

He was...

“And you're *really* pale” Logan added, getting up.

Come to think of it. He *did* feel a little… Pale?

“I'm just a little tired” Nico reassured.

“Yeah, okay. Let's go inside” Logan offered, opening the door. He looked at Nico expectantly. *Right. Yeah.* That seemed alright. Nico walked through the door and looked at the hallway.

“You going to bed?” Logan asked.

Nico glanced at the clock. What time was it? Eleven?

Half past seven…

Yeah, no…

Logan needed to back off with all this *patronizing* crap. He was *much* better than this morning. He wasn't *as* dizzy. He just had a bad headache, some nausea… And some severe dizzyness… “Not yet” he muttered.

“Okay” Logan replied casually. Nico watched him walk over to the living room. *Ha*. What was he supposed to do now?

“You staying over there?” Logan asked loudly from the other room. He sounded like he was trying not to laugh.

Well *now* he didn’t want to anymore! “*No…!*” Nico answered defiantly.

Gwen’s giggle sounded from somewhere in the other room. He made his way over and dropped down heavily on the other side of the couch. Logan looked at him with a smug little smile. Nico closed his eyes in annoyance and laid his head back on the backrest, trying not to pay any attention to it. He got a little too comfortable doing so…

He jolted up before he could doze off. Not good enough. He got up. “I gotta go…!” he said intensely. A little more intensely than he wanted to. But, all intensity of it was well deserved. He'd taken advantage of them long enough. He felt bad already, staying longer would only make it worse.

Logan shifted, giving him a wary look. He was about to say something when Gwen did instead.

“*No*” she said sternly. “You obviously have a concussion. You're not leaving”.

Nico huffed in exasperation, sticking out his hands. Gwen crossed her arms, staring him down from her chair on the other side of the room.

“Gwen. I'm really grateful, *seriously*. But you can't just keep me here”.

Small blue flames lit up in her eyes. “You know I can, and I *will”*.

He put up his hands, trying to de-escalate a little. “I'm fine” he lied.

She gave him a look so sceptical it bordered on angry.

“I'll get my stuff. Thank you for cleaning it-”.

She briskly got up and walked into the kitchen. Nico looked at Logan, seemingly as confused as he was. He got up and followed after her, just in time to see her go outside.

What?

He took a few uncertain steps into the kitchen. Before he had time to figure out what she was up to she walked back in, his shirt in hand. She smacked it down in the sink, grabbed her coffee mug and carefully emptied it all over it.

What the hell?!

Nico threw up his hands, staring at her in disbelief. He slowly lowered his hands to his sides when she smirked at him, eyes still glowing an evil bright blue.

“There” she said with a devilish smile. “Guess I’ll have to clean it again”. She grabbed the coffee soaked clump, smacked some coffee out of it and then happily strutted off with it into the hallway. Nico followed her with his eyes as she did. He turned to stare at Logan, now standing in the doorway. He opened his mouth, then shook his head.

Logan leaned back and grinned at him. “Yeah” he shrugged. “She's got a big heart, but it's made out of stone” he added dryly.

Nico finally managed to find some words. “She's holding it hostage…” he muttered, more in defeat than frustration. “That has to be illegal!” he added, gesturing to where she went.

Logan snickered. “I mean, you *did* break into her house in the middle of the night. Let's not get *too technical* here”. He walked closer, suddenly a lot more serious. “Besides, she's not wrong. You still look like shit” he mocked. The concerned undertone only made it worse.

Nico sighed. “How long are you guys going to trap me here?”.

Logan cocked his head. “Depends, I guess. Probably, until you're no longer dying. With the way you take care of yourself, could be *forever*”. He jabbed Nico in the stomach accusatorily.

Nico pursed his lips. “By tomorrow I'm abandoning that shirt. She can burn it for all I care” he threatened.

Logan gave him an annoyed but amused look. “Yeah? You're just going to straight up refuse to learn anything from this?” he asked.

Nico gave him a smug little smile in return. “I don't do learning through reward and punishment. I'm the self-study type”.

Logan grinned. “Ah… What's the difference between that and being *proudly* stubborn? I don't think I see it”.

Ha... There was a *huge* difference…

Probably…

Nico's smug smile shriveled and died.

“Look man, you're really hurt. You could have died. And you've tried to fight off any type of help we offered here... I'm telling you, you wouldn't have made it on your own”.

Logan had no business being this patronizing all the time. What the fuck did he know, anyway? Nico was about to ask when Logan continued.

“Even you know that deep down. That's why you came here”.

It shut Nico up instantly. His face burned. Why *did* he come here? He looked away.

Logan nudged him with his foot. “Stop being so embarrassed. And stop apologizing while you're at it. I keep telling you it's fine. It's more than fine, actually. It's good to let people help you”.

Nico's embarrassment turned to irritation. He knew he was right, but still. Logan was being a massive hypocrite. “Well with all due respect, *which is none,* it's not like you're much better at that” he spat at him. “I've had to knock you out to stop you from killing yourself and you keep avoiding Gwen when she tries to talk to you”.

Logan's eyes flashed an angry orange. “*That first one was just as stupid of you as it was of me”* he hissed. He reigned himself in a bit. “The second one's fair. It's just… I'm not used to just… *Not* being able to say how I feel. But, when it comes to this, my body won't *let* me for some reason… I don't get it… It scares the crap out of me… And not just *me.* I hate what it does to the people around me”.

He looked downright miserable. All the fire was gone. Nico kinda missed it… Guilt punched him. He remembered the night on the balcony. It had been more than intense. “I'm sorry. That wasn't fair” Nico offered sincerely. “I know you're really trying”.

Logan smiled faintly.

Nico shifted uncomfortably. “You're probably right… Thanks for not letting me kill myself, anyway” he finally relented.

Logan's smile lit up. Damn him and his stupid *honesty!* It was almost impossible to out-manoeuvre.

“Well, you're right too. I shouldn't be such a fucking coward... And, don't worry about it. I'm honestly glad to help”.

A warm feeling killed most of Nico’s annoyance and embarrassment.

“Gwen definitely is too. She *really* likes you” Logan added.

Nico smiled. He believed that. Gwen was so nice. The past few days she had reminded him of long ago. Over *ten* years ago. *Damn…* had it already been that long? He wondered how Bianca’s new life was faring. Not Bianca anymore now, of course… *Gods*, he missed her… and he missed-*!*

“You're really lucky to have her” Nico quickly flung out, stopping himself before the guilt and shame could fully reach him. “I hope you realize that” he added, as a well meaning warning.

“Oh, you bet I do. Every single day” Logan promised.

Nico smiled, a little painfully.

Logan smiled back, a little pitifully. “*Right.* Your sister… You must really miss her…”.

Nico took a deep breath. “*Every single day…”* he promised in turn.

Logan stopped smiling, leaving the pitiful.

Nico quickly crossed his arms to shield himself from it. “I have another sister…” he accidentally shared. *Crap,* how could he let *that* slip?!

Logan instantly looked more hopeful. All false hope, of course. *Poor guy.*

“Oh, don't worry. I ruined that too” Nico joked, forgetting the punchline.

Logan furrowed his brow, confused, but seemingly not ready to abandon hope yet.

Nico was starting to get a little frustrated. “When I said I ghosted everyone a few years back, I did mean *everyone”* he reassured, not a shred of enthusiasm left.

Logan furrowed his brow deeper, adding some frustration of his own. “So, just… *Go see her?”* he offered.

“No way!” Nico scoffed, almost angry at this point. “I can't do that to her! It's been way too long! There's no way she wants to see me after what I did!”.

Logan pursed his lips and shook his head. “I don't believe that. I bet she misses you just as much” he countered, arms crossed.

Nico rolled his eyes and sighed extra dramatically. *You simple, simple man.…* You can't just *un-ghost* people! That's like… The whole point of it! “You know? For such a hardass, you're kinda *naive*”.

Logan grinned a little sourly. “Nah, you're just *bitter* as fuck”.

Nico grinned back, as bitterly as he could. “It's an acquired taste… Your palette just isn’t refined enough to appreciate it” he shrugged.

Logan's grin lost just a touch of acidity. “Wrong, you *fancy bitch*. I’ll eat *anything”*.

Was that… Supposed to be *reassuring.…?*

“What?!” Nico asked, trying not to laugh.

“*I’m not scared of you.* Whatever you’ve got, I can handle it. *Easy*” Logan explained, gently punching him in the stomach trying to prove it.

Now Nico did laugh. “Oh, right! Like back at the cabin!”.

Logan grinned through his offense. “Hey! I did pretty well before I got poisoned! Besides, I’ve managed to *keep you under control* since yesterday, haven’t I?!”.

Nico threw up his hands, more offended. “I’ve got a concussion!”.

Logan pointed at him triumphantically. “Ha! Gotcha! You’re not fucking fine at all!”.

Nico pointed back at him in a warning. He wagged his finger a little, trying to think of what to say. “... I’m leaving tomorrow! I’ll be fine enough by then!”.

Logan shoved his finger aside. “Yeah, yeah. I heard you the first time”.

Gwen walked by with an amused sigh.

Nico pursed his lips. This evening was going to be way too long… At least his headache was just background noise at this point…

“Uh, Gwen? Would it be alright if I used your shower?” he heard himself ask. *Yeah*. It had been more than a day and he was still finding traces of dried blood. That seemed like a good enough idea.

Gwen stopped in her tracks and turned around, seemingly not agreeing at all. She eyed him with concern. “I don't know, Nicky... Any other time, yes, of course. But… you still don't

seem very steady". She gave him a painfully apologetic look. "Would you be okay with some help…? It's nothing I haven't seen…".

Nico gave her a shocked and then equally painfully apologetic look back. Logan leaned against the doorframe, revelling in all the awkwardness. His smile made it obvious he was enjoying the show a bit too much.

Gwen, seemingly agreeing, turned to him with a stern look. She narrowed her eyes, then looked back to Nico. "Would it be easier if it was a guy?" she asked completely seriously, openly declaring a two-front war.

Dropping that bomb put an immediate stop to Logan's revelling. He stared at Nico. His blank expression said more than words ever could. Nico stared back easily just as blank, wholeheartedly agreeing. Well, a blank expression, aside from all the fiery red undoubtedly spreading across it…

Logan was the first to violate the ceasefire. And *not* fighting for the right side… "Well… probably isn't anything I haven't seen either…" he reasoned without any enthusiasm, apparently conscripted in Gwen's troops now. "I've seen most of it by now anyway…" he added in a *cowardly* ambush of Nico's homefront.

Nico had neither the arsenal nor strategic advantages to adequately strike back. "Uh…" he mustered weakly.

"It would be a pretty stupid way to die, dude… Even for you" Logan went on, moving in for a decisive victory.

Nico shook his head refusing to capitulate to terrorist demands. "I like my chances… Better than *instantly* dying of shame anyway!" he retorted, throwing up a hand in refusal.

"Well, not by *much!*" Logan quipped back, noticeably annoyed now.

Fucking hell, you moron!

This had to be the most *awkward* stalemate Nico had ever been in… And for some reason, instead of just giving up, Logan seemed very determined to put an end to it in the only way they'd *both* lose… Nico glared at him for his betrayal. Gwen was about to interfere when Nico came up with a genius solution. He held up two hands in a declaration of peace.

"I'll just sit on the ground" he made as a final offer, a very desperate one.

All three stayed quiet, mulling the treaty over. Logan and Gwen had a silent conversation, narrowing their eyes at each other. Nico's eyes darted from one to the other, awaiting their answer breathlessly.

Gwen finally nodded. "Yes, okay... It's the first door to the right" she relented. "But call me if you need help!".

Nico quickly made his escape to the hallway.

“*And don't lock the door!”* Gwen warned loudly.

Nico didn't answer. After slamming the door shut behind him, he paused and felt the lock. He clicked his tongue and let go of it. *Fine*, but he was going to whine about it the whole time and nobody could stop him!

He turned on the shower and pulled his clothes off. Well, Logan's clothes. He dumped them in a pile on the ground. Where they belonged! He smiled defiantly to himself. Then realized he'd now have to put himself in his place too…

Luckily, he noticed the shower was still ice cold before he did. He quickly turned the temperature up, then sat down heavily underneath the stream anyway. The water slowly heated up.

Gods... This had been a terrible day. He'd hated it. He'd especially hated that everyone was so *nice* to him. Why couldn’t they hate him for being such a burden? Not even a little bit? Not even Logan…? No, if anything, the more difficult he was, the nicer they were… *All out of pity*. All because he can't even take care of himself properly…

He cursed himself for living a shit enough life that this wasn't even close to the worst day he'd ever had. A quiet, joyless laugh escaped him. Thankfully he couldn't tell if the water streaming over him contained any tears… He washed his face extra well just to be sure.

The urge to curl up and just stay under the shower forever was strong. He was stronger. He finished up and dragged himself out. Getting up had been harder than he wanted, but he’d managed.

He caught his reflection in the mirror and scowled at himself. *There he is, the guy ruining my fucking life.*.. He wiped the wet hair from his face. Guess he *did* look pale...

He didn’t even bother getting dressed all the way. No use pretending he could stay up any longer.

A chair scraped loudly in the kitchen as soon as he stepped through the door. He turned to see Gwen, hands still on the dinner table, looking at him expectantly.

He stuck up a thumb.

“I’m going to bed…” he said flatly.

He’d tried not to sound too dejected. Based on Gwen’s sad little smile, it hadn’t worked. He quickly crossed over to Logan’s room, tossed the clothes down onto the floor, then tossed himself down onto the bed.

Nico woke up to frantic footsteps leaping down the stairs. By the time he'd turned over, he heard the door in the kitchen getting flung open. He sat up.

Quarter past three.

He knew who that was…

Was he going to check on him? He kinda wanted to. But, would Logan want him to? He was so bad at this. He hadn't been much help earlier. Besides, last time on the balcony he'd really, *really* intruded on him. Way further than either of them were comfortable with. Of course, at the time he hadn't really cared much about that. They weren't exactly on *friendly* terms back then.

He fidgeted with his ring a little, then threw the covers off and got up.

Fuck it. They'd both just have to deal with it, like it or not. He felt around the ground for his shirt, not finding anything. After giving up the search, he made his way over to the kitchen. He paused in front of the open door.

Last chance to back out.

He pushed himself through the doorway.

They stared at each other, probably equally surprised. Nico inhaled sharply and quickly turned around.

Logan let out a short wet laugh. "What are you doing?" he asked breathlessly.

Nico tried to make sense of it out loud. "You're crying. I didn't think you wanted me to see…" he almost asked. He turned around warily.

Logan grinned through the tears. "What? That I'm human?" he asked. His voice was still a little shaky, but it didn't take away from the amusement. "Well… *Half* human anyway" he added, wiping a hand down his face.

Nico just stared at him as he took a long drag from his cigarette. This wasn't what he was expecting. What was he expecting…?

"Didn't mean to wake you up…" Logan exhaled apologetically. Most of the amusement from earlier had drained away. Luckily, so had the tears. Man, he looked tired...

"I got my eight hours in a little early" Nico offered. It was true, anyway.

They half smiled at each other.

Nico gestured at him, trying to get to the point. "Are you, uh… Do you need… Anything?" he tried, putting his hands out in an offering gesture.

Logan looked from one hand to the other, then gave him a devious looking side eye. "Are you offering me a hug?" he asked smugly.

Nico instantly clenched his hands shut. “*No*”. *Right?* He panicked a little.

Logan chuckled at his expression. “Don't worry. I'm just messing with you. I know you hate *emotions*” he said with a reassuring smile. The warm flicker in his eyes showed he meant it. “And no, I don't need anything. Never takes very long”. He finished his cigarette and pushed it out against the wall. “I'll go back to bed in a minute”. He got up close, giving him another smug look. “So should you. You look tired”.

Nico huffed. *I am the one who looks tired?!* He was about to tell him off when Logan reached out and ran a hand over his shoulder.

“Thanks for worrying”. His eyes still glowed warm as he said it. His hand lingered for a short while as he made his way back inside. “Night” he left behind.

“*Yeah…”* Nico replied weakly. He stared straight ahead, at nothing in particular, his hand hovered over where Logan's had been just a second ago. He quickly turned it into a fist and shook his head wildly. He really shouldn’t have done that. He closed his eyes and moved his fist to his forehead.

Right. How could he forget? He waited out the faint wave of nausea.

Still, this was *nothing* compared to yesterday.

Using just muscle memory, he navigated the darkness. *What a weird night.* Whatever… He had a concussion, and Logan was clearly going through something.

Don't think too much about it.

Just because they hadn't tried to kill each other didn't mean they were going to be friends all of a sudden.

They really *shouldn't* be, anyway.

He sighed as he sat down on the bed. As he pulled the covers all the way over himself, he rolled over.

So stop thinking about it!

He really needed to get out of here tomorrow. Gwen could try whatever she wanted, he wasn't going to let it work this time.

He thought of a hundred different strategies to counter her before he fell asleep.

The next time he opened his eyes, everything was bright. Only mildly too bright this time, he realized with a smile. Getting up, he found his own pants on the dresser, neatly folded. He gratefully slipped them on. The lack of his own shirt guided him to Logan’s, thankfully for the last time…

Logan smirked at him as he walked into the brightness of the kitchen. “Hey! I see your whole ‘*sickly Victorian child*’ vibe is gone” he declared with some enthusiasm.

Nico smirked back. “Yeah! I’m probably in the best shape I’ve been in eighty years, actually!” he declared himself. He turned to Gwen. “Gwen, I think-”.

She kicked a chair back for him. “Eat!” she ordered.

He pursed his lips, then sat down and did what he was told. Gwen looked on sternly, but happily.

He smiled over his empty plate, *very* expectantly. Gwen got up, put her hand on his chin and tilted his face carefully. She efficiently removed the bandaid from his forehead, he tried his best not to show how sensitive it still was. After giving the cut a stern look, she looked into his eyes and smiled.

“Still *just* as handsome as before. I think I did pretty well” she concluded with a bright blue glow. She quickly replaced the bandaid, giving it a little tap light as air with her finger.

“I don’t know how to thank you” he said with a guilty smile.

She chuckled. “You don’t have to. Just promise to be more careful”.

Nico nodded, much to her approval

“Okay, you’re officially discharged!” she declared, clapping theatrically. “*I’ll release your property”*. She strutted off into the hallway.

Nico sighed in relief. *Finally!* He locked eyes with Logan. He put up another guilty smile.

Logan smirked and narrowed his eyes a little. “If you’re going to apologize again…”.

Nico put up his hands in surrender. “I wouldn’t dare”. He returned his smirk.

“Nicky…?” Gwen started carefully.

He turned to see her holding up his shirt.

“I’m afraid your shirt didn’t make it…”. She stuck one of her hands through a big, vertical tear in the fabric. Right through the Bauhaus logo… “Sorry, guess I didn’t see it before. It was all clumped together with all the blood on it…”. She handed it to him. “*And coffee.*..” she added with some guilt.

He looked it over. Yeah, that was a pretty big hole. Right next to the centre. Not one he’d be able to get away with.

“Heh. Thanks anyway, Gwen…” he said a little absentmindedly, running his hand over the fabric.

Guess that was another shirt down. He was starting to run out. Time to stop this habit of getting clawed at, he couldn't afford it. A sigh escaped. This one was one of his favourites too...

Logan tugged at the sleeve of his shirt. Well, Logan's shirt. "You can keep that" he said casually. "Suits you better anyway" he added.

Liar.

Nico glanced down to escape his eyes.

Ha. Logan's pants must be fireproof...

He felt his stomach turn a little. Logan was only trying to be cordial. But that was kind of the problem. He hated how much he had had to rely on him the past few days. They weren't exactly friends. Wearing his clothes this long had been awkward enough. He didn't really have much of a choice though, he didn't have a spare on him. Leaving half naked would be even worse, *right…? Right...*

"Thanks" he managed.

Gwen grinned. "Aw, Logan you're so cute sometimes!". She punched him in the arm for emphasis.

Logan glared at her.

"I'm just so proud of you. My little brother is a *true* gentleman" she mused.

"Okay, bye" Logan huffed out. He got up and quickly retreated into the hallway towards his room.

Gwen giggled as he slammed the door. "Sorry, couldn't help it" she said. Her apologetic tone didn't match her mischievous smile.

Nico half smiled. Gwen was almost as cruel as she was sweet. "I should get on my way…" he started. "Thank you so much for, well, for everything. I really owe you".

Gwen stuck out her arms. Nico took a while to process. She let out an amused sigh and wrapped her arms around him. "You're welcome" she squeezed into him. "Come back any time, Nicky".

Nico heated up. He squeezed her back. "Tell Logan thanks too" he muttered. He patted her back and wriggled out of her embrace.

"Sure!" Gwen chirped a little too excited.

When he saw her eyes glimmer, he knew he was going to regret that. *Whatever*. She could gloat all she wanted. She earned it.

He shrugged on his coat, grabbed his bag and walked up to the door. They gave each other one last smile before he walked out. He paused outside, hand still on the handle. It wasn't that late yet, not over there at least… Should he? What was he on about? *Of course*, he should. He should have months ago… *Years* ago… It would only become harder the longer he waited.

He stepped into the shadows.

He stepped out into a hallway. His heartbeat took over all thoughts. He just moved. One of the doors stood out. A very familiar one. He hesitated before he knocked, then did it anyway.

The wait was excruciating.

Someone opened the door.

Hazel's surprised expression turned to downright shock. They just stared at each other for a second. She cried out and jumped on him, stumbling as she did. He did his best to catch her. He didn't really need to, her grip on him was so strong she would have dragged him with her to the floor even if he hadn't.

He felt his eyes well up when she started sobbing.

"*I'm sorry*" was all he could muster.

She gripped him even tighter.

Frank eyed them carefully from the crack in the door, smiling even more carefully when their eyes met.

It could have been hours by the time she managed to calm down. She sat in front of him, took a deep breath and wiped her hair from her face. She nodded at him, seemingly trying to reclaim some control of the situation. "So… How have you been?" she asked way too affected to even come close to casual.

Nico smiled weakly. He never knew how to answer that question, he usually tried not to think about it. For a second, he considered throwing out his usual lie. It wouldn't be fair. "... *Bad*" he managed, sounding easily as affected as she had.

Great.… Now they were *both* sobbing.

Chapter 7: VII. Best frenemies

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers
Corpses (like, skeletons), fainting, accidental creeping?

Holy shit!

He jolted awake at the most annoying sound he'd *ever* heard! He grasped at his pockets, the source of the disturbance, and pulled out his phone. He hadn't been called in so long he didn't even remember what his ringtone was anymore. Who could be calling at this ungodly hour? *Oh, right,* the giant time difference. He'd forgotten where he was for a second.

He didn't even bother to look as he picked up. “Yeah?” he answered warily, still half asleep, but fully annoyed.

“Hey, Spooky” he got back.

His stomach jumped a little. “*Hi…”* he replied, a whole different kind of warily and annoyed somehow. Of course it had to be him…

“I need a favor” Logan started, *frustratingly* cryptically.

What the hell does that mean?! Get on with it!

“*Alright?!”* he replied in exasperation, trying to get him to elaborate.

“Cool! Thanks. Just let me know when you've got time. See ya”. Logan hung up.

Nico hung on for a second, then stared at his phone. *Gods, that moron…* Himself too, actually. What did he get himself into now…? He tried not to smile as he looked out over the thousands of tiny lights illuminating Rome in the distance.

The next evening, the shadows dragged him across the ocean in a single short, tedious step. The cold whispers got blown away by the rustling of the trees around him. Just like that, the dry Italian evening made way for the humid upstate New York afternoon.

He rolled his shoulders in a useless attempt to adjust to the sudden changes, and looked ahead. A familiar figure leaned on Gwen's porch fence, scowling at his phone. Still reading the message Nico had just sent, he assumed.

Nico stepped out of the shadows, into sight.

Logan perked up. He blinked in surprise, then grinned. "Woah! Just as fast as last time".

Nico shrugged and walked closer. "Same trick" he replied casually, trying not to show how out of breath he still was.

Logan stood up straight, still grinning. "Well. *Hey*, I guess. How are you?" he asked.

He sounded friendly and *sincere.* Was this the type of relationship they had now? Even if they did, was Nico really going to answer that honestly?

"Good" Nico replied flatly, almost like a reflex. He always did when someone asked how he was doing. An easy answer, an easy out. "You?" he asked in return. He caught himself actually caring. Hoping, maybe even.

"Pretty bad" Logan replied with a faint smile. "*You?*" he asked with a smirk.

Nico pursed his lips. *Ugh, you tenacious.… Jerk?* No, that didn't really feel right… "Fine... Not good, actually. *Downright evil,* even*"* he quipped in one last attempt to get him off his back.

Logan visibly suppressed a laugh, then cocked his head in a mix of amusement and annoyance. He kept looking at him expectantly.

Nico caved with a sigh. Anyway, how was he even feeling? He actually thought about it for once. "I mean, less bad than last time?" Nico almost asked instead of answered.

Logan's smile brightened. "Guess, that's a start" he conceded.

Sure. Nico didn't bother hiding his own smile. "So, what do you want from me?" he threw at him.

Logan's smile brightened even more. "Mark told me something. That children of Ares can raise the dead too. I mean, as long as they died in battle".

"On the losing side" Nico corrected.

"Right" Logan pointed at him and went on. "So, I figured…". He paused, looking up in thought. "Dope…?" he finally shrugged.

Nico chuckled. *Yeah. That sounds like something you'd figure.*

Logan smiled. "Do you think you can teach me?"

Did he? Nico thought about it. “Never tried to before… But, I’ll give it a shot?” he concluded, stepping up on the porch. There shouldn't be any harm in it, anyway. At worst, it just wouldn’t work. Besides, he owed Logan big time. Many times, too. This was probably *actually* the least he could do.

“Cool!” Logan replied excitedly. He looked him over, lingering on Nico’s stomach.“You really *are* a fan” he said, jabbing him in the chest with his fist, punching Nosferatu right in the face.

“Yeah…” Nico admitted. “I guess?”.

Logan opened the door to the kitchen and gave him a nod. “Come say hello to Gwen. She hasn’t shut up about you since I told her you were coming over”.

Nico grinned, mentally preparing himself on his way over to the door. Well, not even *all* the way over. Gwen’s arms were around him before he fully stepped through the doorway. She almost broke his ribs. And his eardrum. He gave her a few pats on the back to appease her. “Hi, Gw-” he tried, as soon as his lungs got room to expand.

Her stern finger on his forehead cut him off. It efficiently swiped his hair aside and clinically traced the scar. It was still a little sensitive, he noticed.

She hummed approvingly. Then finally smiled at him. “Hiya, Nicky~!” she chimed. “Good to see you!”

“You too, Gwen” he returned, sincerely.

“What are you boys up to this time?” she asked, warily looking from one to the other.

Nico gestured for her to calm down. “Just raising the dead” he reassured.

“Oooh~! *fun*” she mused, pulling an exaggerated enticed expression. She cocked her head and crossed her arms, suddenly very serious. “*Both* of you be careful this time! *No more scars*, okay?”.

Both of them stuck up their hands. “Promise” they echo’d.

She narrowed her eyes, staring them down. They didn’t crack under the pressure, smiling right back. Her stern expression slowly dissipated.

Class didn’t start right away, making room for a short break to catch up on the porch. Nico’s favourite kind of ‘catching up’, the type where no one said anything, not figuratively, but literally. It would have been *perfect* if Logan hadn’t been shamelessly staring at him the entire time, trying to get him to speak.

“You’ve lost weight” he said suddenly as he gave Nico a pinch in his side.

Nico yelped.

In an attempt at revenge he pinched him right back. Logan was in better shape than he thought. It was like squeezing a statue. In his surprise he pulled his hand back slightly. It must have shown on his face because Logan snickered, clenching his cigarette between his teeth.

“Ugh!” Nico let out as he rolled his eyes.

Logan dug something out of his pocket and shoved it into Nico’s hand. “Here, eat that” he said.

Nico looked at the sad looking energy bar in his hand. He decided not to fight it. After unwrapping it, he took a bite. He took his time chewing it, then looked at it again. “This has no business being this good” he decided out loud.

Logan laughed. “What are you on about? They *suck*! You’re just hungry”.

Nico huffed, more amused than annoyed.

“I’ve got a whole box, you can have them if you want” Logan offered.

Nico looked at him. He thought about it for a while. Accepting hand outs was definitely not his style... “Hm, if you don’t even like them…”.

They stared at the woods for a minute, leaning on the porch fence. Nico chewed, lost in even more thoughts. “Thanks” he said without thinking.

“Huh?” Logan responded, cocking his head slightly.

For looking out for me. Nico raised the wrapper of the energy bar.

“Oh!” Logan shrugged ”Sure, man”.

Nico crumpled the wrapper in his hand, hiding it away in his pocket.

He hadn’t even realized he’d gotten lost in his thoughts until Logan nudged him in the side with something a lot more angular, and a lot less warm than his fist. Nico blinked at the small box.

Right.

He quickly hid the remaining energy bars in his inner pocket. “Thanks” he mumbled, careful not to meet his eyes.

“You ready?” they both asked, glancing over at the same time.

Ha. Guess that answers that question. Logan smirked. Nico tried not to smirk back, beckoning him to follow instead.

Finding any casualties of war wasn’t going to be a problem here. The New York hills had run red with blood many a time during the civil war. Despite some very persistent bigots still proudly waving their loser flag like it wasn’t over, every fourth grader in the country could tell you who’d won without missing a beat. That meant there should be Confederate soldiers hiding under the earth by the bunch. Relatively close to the surface too, lucky for them.

Nico stopped them at a nice large clearing between the trees. One that by the looks of the trees around it, was nice and *old.* The perfect place for a battle. He turned to Logan and gestured at the field of grass.

“I’ll get one up. The whole ‘died losing in battle’ thing is a little specific. So, it might take a bit” he explained. He stuck out his hands and felt deeply. Not much there. *Wait,* a little deeper down. “Got some”. He looked at Logan. “Can you feel that?”.

Logan looked confused.

“Stick out your arms” Nico commanded.

Logan shrugged and did as he was told.

“Over to the right, maybe ten yards away, pretty deep down” Nico pointed out.

Logan pursed his lips. “Not a thing”.

Nico strained slightly to make a fallen soldier come up. It took a few seconds. It slowly burrowed itself out of the ground, it was still wearing some tattered remains of a wool jacket, by now no longer grey, of course. It raised its rusty bayonet.

“Sick” Logan said in awe.

Nico smiled faintly. “Alright, you see it now. Try to feel it”.

Logan gave him an unsure look. He exhaled and stuck out his hand again, almost reaching for it. He side-eyed Nico apologetically, about to lower his arm. Nico gestured for him to keep going. He did. And did again.

Logan’s outstretched arm was starting to tremble at the mere effort of keeping it up. Nico carefully slid his eyes over it, all the way back to Logan's clenched jaw. It clenched even tighter as he pursed his lips ever so slightly. His eyes smouldered, in full concentration. Logan didn’t even notice him.

It reminded him… Last time he'd seen this same expression on Logan's face was right above his own, fixing him back up.

Nico sighed quietly.

After watching Logan try his hardest and fail just as hard for what had to be *aeons* by now, Nico decided he couldn't *just* watch anymore.

He grabbed Logan's other hand, still by his side.

At that Logan's concentration broke, looking at Nico in confusion.

"I'm going to try to lend you some of my power" Nico explained quickly, avoiding his eyes. *Oops. Probably should have said that beforehand…* He pushed down the embarrassment and pulled up the energy hiding much deeper instead. A small surge ran through his body, all the way up from his heart, down to his fingers.

Easy…?

He suppressed a shaky breath. What was wrong with him? He'd done so for Hazel countless times… This was *nothing!*

Logan's fingers twitched. "*Damn!* Yeah! I think I feel it now". He swallowed hard. "Is it supposed to feel like… Well, *like that?*". His tone was wary, so was his grip.

Right, he'd gotten so used to it over the years he barely even felt it anymore. The cold. The dull pins and needles. Worst of all, the *stiffness* slowly spreading down over the body, an unsettling resemblance to rigor mortis setting in…

Nico smiled wryly. "Yeah, it's not exactly comfortable…". He looked Logan over, just to check. Anything to do with raising the dead was hard on the mind and body, and that was already an understatement for the children of *Hades.* He saw a small shiver go over him, but otherwise he looked fine. "You try to hold it up. Just picture it clearly".

Logan nodded. Nico slowly let go of it, lowering his arm. Logan let out a laugh as it stayed upright. "That's freaking *heavy*…".

Yeah! But you're doing it! Looking at him, Nico felt a proud smile spread on his face. Seeing as Logan was much too concentrated to notice, he let it.

Logan went pale, his arm trembling even more than before. He furrowed his brow. "Wait, there's two more right? I think I feel them".

The proud smile made way for a stern look. "*Careful*".

Logan looked at him, clearly already tired. He seemed to consider his warning. Then shrugged it off… "Gotta at least try right?". He added another arm.

"Don't overdo it!" Nico warned louder. He hissed as he saw the two other soldiers dig their way out of their final resting place. They got to their feet and raised their broken muskets and bayonets. *Shakily,* but undeniably. Nico huffed. *Wow…!* Logan was *actually* doing it.

The undead faltered and collapsed.

Nope, guess not.

Nico felt a hand on his upper arm, as soon as he noticed, it slipped down. He turned just in time to see Logan's head fall back, the rest of him about to do the same. Nico spun around. He caught Logan's back with one arm, his waist with the other. No time to be relieved, the fun had only just started. The sudden weight pulling on his arms made him grunt. He had to dig his heels in not to fall on top of him. Throwing in most of his own weight in the opposite direction, he regained his balance. That finally gave him the chance to get a better hold.

"*Told you"* he grumbled, as he pulled Logan back upright as best as he could. Nico lowered him down. *Well*, he practically dropped Logan in his lap as he fell to his knees. With some awkward movements, Nico propped up one of his knees a bit to support Logan's back, freeing an arm. He tilted Logan's face towards himself to see if he was awake.

He was. Not fully, but at least enough to react.

Logan stirred in his arms. "*Hm.*.. Spooky…?" he mumbled.

"Yeah". *That's me, I guess.*.. The corner of Nico's mouth curled up a bit.

Logan slowly opened his eyes. His half hidden irises reminded Nico of two tiny sunsets. Two tiny *dazed* sunsets…

They stared at each other for a few seconds.

Logan seemed to be in good spirits despite everything, grinning weakly at him. "Well…" he laughed shakily "*That was embarrassing*".

Nico raised an eyebrow. "What? No way! You looked manly as hell when you swooned right into my arms". The sarcasm didn't reach his smile.

Logan laughed harder. He lifted his arm and ran a hand over Nico's shoulder in an amicable, messy gesture. Nico tensed up a bit as he left it there.

"*Thanks*, man" Logan squeezed into his shoulder. He smiled brightly. As did his eyes, shining some more warm sunlight at Nico. They were a lot less dazed now, but clearly exhausted.

"You alright?" Nico tried.

"I will be. I've had worse…". He pressed down on Nico's shoulder and pulled himself up further. "But, before I *literally* fall asleep on you…".

Ha. Yeah. That would be bad... Nico swallowed dryly.

Logan sat up, pulling himself out of Nico's grasp and into a half hearted squat. "*Fucking hell.* Necromancy is really something…" he muttered. He turned his head and looked at Nico in awe. "I bet you can hold up a dozen or more".

Nico felt some heat go to his face. "Yeah. I've had some practice over the years. And as a son of Hades, it *is* kind of my thing, you know?".

Logan turned back and shook his head in amazement. Nico smiled behind him, then shifted and sat down next to him. Logan gave him a last glance before he rolled onto his back and let out a sigh. Nico listened to his breathing slow down into a steady, deep rhythm. Without thinking about it he took off his coat and dumped it on top of him. He watched the actual sun start to settle into the horizon.

His breath caught when Logan's hand grazed his. He felt two of his fingers lay just *barely*, but *very* noticeably, against Logan's. Nico almost moved his hand in reflex, then left it. No big deal. He didn't want to disturb him. Necromancy takes a lot out of you. Best to just let him sleep it off…

All of his focus went back to the sun. Funny how warm it still was, even now… He sat there for a while, letting his thoughts wander. They kept wandering in circles, back to his hand… Logan's fingers had gotten some of their usual warmth back. That was good. He'd probably wake up soon… That was also good. Probably best if Nico got out of here soon, anyway…

Logan stirred, pulling his hand away. It took *way too long* for the memory of the warmth to leave Nico's hand. He glared down at it, trying to force it to let it go.

Ha…?

The grass around it had wilted and died. When had he done that…?

He glanced over his shoulder. Logan was still sound asleep, his arm now next to his face. Nico leaned back on his elbow, looking closer.

Logan's breathing was steady, calm. Most of the colour had returned to his face. He looked comfortable. Different from other times that came to mind. Logan hadn't gotten to rest much in his sleep these past months it seemed…

Nico remembered the single tear. The flushed red hue from the poison. The bloody fingerprints. Nico's hand- *Wait.…*

His eyes widened as he stared at his own hand, somehow now on Logan's cheek. *When did I do that?!*

Logan's skin was surprisingly soft, and unsurprisingly warm against his fingertips. *Holy fuck*, he was being so incredibly inappropriate! He just wanted to wake him up, right? *Right?* He hoped so furiously. Nico took a sharp breath and finally set out to prove it, giving Logan a few hard taps on his cheek. With the added nerves, maybe a little harder than he'd wanted. Harder than Logan wanted, at least.

Nico quickly pulled away and sat up, before Logan's hand could reach his. Logan pushed himself upright next to him with a disgruntled little sound. Nico watched him stretch before he opened his eyes.

“Sorry… Getting late…” Nico pushed out breathlessly as soon as Logan found him. He fought not to look away in shame. The warmth from the small sunsets looking back at him was reassuring.

“Yeah. Good call” Logan replied a little hoarsely. He looked down at his lap, at the crumpled leather of Nico’s coat. He grabbed it and held it up a little, then narrowed his eyes and grinned at Nico. “Did you-?” he started to ask, more than a little amused.

“*You were cold!”* Nico huffed in self defense. He crossed his arms and avoided the scathingly relishing look. His face burned bad enough already…

Logan dumped his coat in Nico’s lap and ran his hand through his hair. “Thanks. *That’s really sweet*”. There wasn’t even a small hint of mockery in his tone. It burned worse than any look could have.

Despite the undeniable embarrassment scorching his face, Nico couldn’t resist glancing back at him. Nor could he stop himself from returning a smile.

“Are you staying for dinner?” Logan asked, sending Nico into another mild panic.

“*Uh…*” Nico started, quickly getting to his feet. He pulled on his coat and turned away. “I should probably just-”.

He got cut off by a jab in the shoulder. “C’mon, man… Don’t make me *beg.*..” Logan pleaded.

Nico turned around in surprise, only to be hit with a deadly displeased looking pout.

“Look, I’m not going to force you… But Gwen’s going to kill me if I just let you go like this…” Logan hammered in the last nail, sealing Nico’s coffin shut for good.

Nico pouted back. “Alright” he conceded.

Logan smiled wide and triumphant.

Nico forced out an extra long sigh to stop from grinning. “Thank you” he offered once he regained control.

Logan cocked his head in surprise, then huffed. “No dude. Thank *you*” he chuckled. “Thanks for coming all the way out here, putting all that effort in trying to teach me how to do this. I know how big of a hassle that is. I’m a really bad student. I’ve heard so many, *many* times”.

Nico gave him a feigned apologetic look. “Sorry to say, but your teachers sound kinda *whiny*…”. He added a shrug “Seriously, it wasn’t any trouble”.

Logan grinned warmly. “Well, *still.*.. Thanks, Spooky”.

The genuine fondness in his tone almost sent a shiver down Nico’s back. “Pf… ‘*Spooky’*… You're going to keep calling me that forever, aren't you?” he asked with feigned dread. Actually… maybe even with some well-hidden hope.

“Aw, c'mon! An *interesting* guy like you… There's no way this is the crappiest nickname you've had, right?” Logan bargained.

Nico pursed his lips, going over the entire arsenal of insulting names people had quietly muttered under their breath around him. *‘Creep’* was definitely the most popular. He glanced over, at Logan's visibly growing interest. *Crap.* His memories shifted direction, a little further back. “In the underworld they call me ‘Ghost king’... I kinda stole that title from king Minos”.

Logan gave him a look of not so mild disgust. “*Ghost king…?”* he said with oozing disdain. “That's the *dorkiest* thing I've ever heard”.

Nico physically recoiled. “*Yeah, well,* I didn't come up with that *myself*” he retorted, more flustered than annoyed.

Logan grinned at him “Spooky is a *way* cuter pet name” he teased.

Nico rolled his eyes and sighed.

“I’ll stop calling you that if you really want me to” Logan offered, his grin now just a sincere smile.

Shit... Did he really have to say it out loud? Nico sucked in his lips, then let them go to sigh even deeper. “No… it’s fine… but, *just* you. If this catches on, I'll never forgive you”.

Logan’s grin was probably the brightest he’d seen yet. “Ha! As if anyone else would ever have the balls to call you that. You’d make them shit their pants”.

Nico allowed the smugness to take over his face, casually pretending to inspect his nails. “Damn right. Of all my powers, *that’s* my favourite…”.

Logan nudged him with his shoulder. “Maybe you can teach me that one too”.

Nico snorted in disbelief. “No fucking way. As if I’d have anything to teach *you* about being terrifying!”.

They cracked up at the same time.

Gwen gasped in excitement when Logan let her know he’d managed to convince Nico to stay. As soon as Nico saw the table had already been set for four, he knew Logan hadn’t exaggerated the threat on his life had he failed...

Mark stuck up a thumb, otherwise keeping all his attention on the pots and pans making all sorts of disturbing noises in front of him.

“I made *plenty*…” Mark assured, only a mild hint of panic when one of the pots noises got significantly louder.

Gwen quickly stepped in, turning a few knobs.

Mark smiled at her in relief, then finally turned to face them. “Food’s done!” he declared proudly.

Nico noticed an almost empty box of pasta on the counter. He tried to stay positive, but couldn’t help picking up on the other warning signs. An open carton of heavy cream... The unmistakable smell of chicken… He prepared himself for an all-American meal, neatly tucking away the Italian flag fluttering angrily in the back of his mind.

Gwen looked regal sitting at the head of the table. She gazed over her small kingdom with a pleased little smile on her face. Like the kind and just queen she was, she got up and distributed the alms among them equally in royal portions.

“Thanks, Gwen” Nico offered in return. “Thanks, Mark” he quickly added.

Mark pointed his fork at him in acknowledgement, mouth already full.

Nico took a bite too, following his example.

Ha.

Nico swallowed. “That’s really good” he muttered appreciatively, thankfully catching the ‘actually’ in time.

Mark grinned smugly. “I know, right? Cindy loves it!” he bragged. “It’s the only thing I ever make!”.

Ah… Didn’t quite stick the landing on there, you dreamboat.… Nico stopped himself from laughing, going for a firm nod instead.

Gwen grinned as she put her cutlery down on her now empty plate. She folded her hands above it and looked Nico and Logan over. “Sooo, how was playing outside? Did you boys have fun?”

“Right!” Mark chimed in, suddenly looking at Logan with excited interest. “Did you actually manage?! How was it?”

“Well… I caught up on some sleep” Logan joked.

Gwen closed in like a shark at a drop of blood. “Another bad night last night?” she sank her teeth in, immediately going in for the kill.

Logan ignored her. Gwen stared at him intently, trying to drag him under. Mark took his coffee and walked out into the hallway.

“Have you called back that guy from the university?” she asked, sinking her teeth even further.

“Not yet” Logan responded stoically.

“Are you going to?” Gwen asked, biting all the way through.

“*Not yet!”* Logan replied angrily.

Nico heard Mark's footsteps pick up pace on the stairs.

Blue fire clashed with orange fire as Gwen and Logan’s eyes met.

“You're such an *idiot*!” Gwen yelled as she slammed her fist on the table.

“And you're Goddamn *lucky* I am! If I weren't, I would never put up with this shit!” Logan yelled back, flipping her off as he walked towards the door.

“I'm doing *you* a favor!” she yelled even louder. “If you hate it here so much, *move the fuck out already”*. She slammed her fist on the table so hard Nico thought he heard it crack.

Logan smashed the door shut behind him. Gwen ran after him and threw the door open. “*I didn't mean that! I'm sorry!”* she yelled shakily.

Logan came back into view and hugged her. “I know” he muttered “I'm sorry too”.

She buried her face in his shoulder. “I don't want you to leave” she said, her voice a little muffled.

“I won't” Logan replied.

“You're not an idiot” she said, still muffled.

Logan smirked. “Yes, I am”.

Gwen turned her face to the side. “Yes… you are”. She pouted. “But you're a really smart idiot”.

Logan patted her on the head. “Thanks. And you're really nice for trying to take care of me. And for letting me stay here… even though *I do* pay rent”.

Gwen looked a little smug. She pulled back and crossed her arms as she looked at him. “Yes, I *am* really nice. So stop being so stubborn”.

Logan put up a fake apologetic smile. “Can't. It's our culture”.

Gwen giggled quietly. “Sure is…” she admitted. “I really hate that sometimes…”.

Logan's smile turned genuinely apologetic. “I'll call soon…” he sighed.

“Thank you…”. Gwen pulled him in by his neck and kissed his cheek.

Nico and Logan made eye contact as she did. Logan gave him an awkward look. Nico returned it, then smiled.

Exactly as Nico predicted, Logan had excused himself outside to go smoke a cigarette after the domestic blow up. Not exactly as predicted, Nico had gone outside too. He didn’t really have a choice. It would have been awkward to leave right after. It might have given Gwen the wrong idea. Not just her…

They were quiet for a while. It was a peaceful silence, comfortable even, Nico thought. Logan seemed to disagree. “Hey… I've got something to say to you” he said, turning to face Nico.

Ha…? Nico held his breath.

“Something I've been feeling for a while…” Logan built up, deep in thought.

What the fuck?! Where was this going all of a sudden? He seemed serious, *dangerously* serious. He wasn't going to-?!

“*Huh*?” Nico choked out. He felt the nerves wash over him like a wave.

“Don’t worry! I just want to apologize. That first mission. I'm really sorry for how I handled that. I was a massive jerk. I just want you to know, it wasn't anything personal. That was all on me”.

Oh. A flood of pure emotion flushed away all his thoughts. He felt every possible feeling at the same time. Relief finally washed the rest away. Well, not all of them. Guilt and shame still stood tall.

Logan had done it again, he stumped Nico with his stupid sincerity. He almost seemed to use it as a sneak attack. Pulling it out of his sleeve just when his enemy least expected it.

What Logan said was true, but Nico hadn't exactly been on his best behaviour either back then…. Should he apologize? That would probably make everything *even more* uncomfortable… He watched Logan put out his cigarette on the heel of his shoe, seemingly oblivious to the war he'd started in Nico's mind.

Logan shifted like he was about to leave.

“Why did it piss you off so much? That I was asked to join, I mean…” Nico asked suddenly.

Logan stopped and looked at him, his expression painful. “Two things actually….”.

Nico held his breath.

“The main thing was, Yan asked for me. I was hoping I could talk to her. One on one. To apologize for being such a shitty friend, mostly…”.

Nico exhaled.

Logan continued. “Besides that, I was *scared shitless*… I didn't want to go. Not really, at least. I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to keep my head screwed on. But... I figured since I trust *Yan*, it would be okay…”.

Nico pursed his lips. “But then *I* showed up…”.

Logan cocked his head a little, smiling apologetically. “*Yeah* … I know it’s a shit excuse, but back then I had no idea how stupidly *overpowered* you are…”. He jestfully jabbed Nico in the chest. “I couldn't even take care of myself, so having to look out for someone *else*.. I just couldn't deal with it…”.

Nico thought back to the Manticore attack. He swallowed.

Logan put up his hands. “But, see? It had nothing to do with you. Not *really*, at least! It was all about me. *Hella* selfish, actually! I should have apologized way sooner, but it took me a while to sort out my feelings…” he explained softly, shaking his head in shame. “I shouldn't have taken all my shit out on you” he ended with a low voice.

It was kinda rough to see how hard this was on him...

Nico sighed. “It wasn't *just* you though. I didn't make it easy on you… I think we're just really different, and really similar in the worst way. You're *hot*, I'm *cold*. We both don't back down… There was no way we weren't going to clash at some point” Nico weighed in, trying to take some responsibility back from him.

“Did you just say I'm hot?”. Logan raised an eyebrow with a grin.

“*Wh-?!*”.

Nico stopped himself. He shoved his palms against his forehead and dragged his hands down his face. “I'm trying to *actually* talk to you here!” he gestured dramatically, almost jabbing his hands in Logan’s face.

“I know! I know… just trying to lighten the mood a little. You got so serious all of a sudden…” Logan defended himself.

“You started it! Besides, me saying you're hot would make this *less* awkward for you?...” Nico asked, *very* unamused.

“Guess I'm a little arrogant, so what?” Logan taunted.

Nico broke. “A little? *Arrogant* would be your whole personality if you didn't have, like, *seven* other fatal flaws…”. He felt pretty smug, until Logan flicked his cigarette butt at his face and it bounced off his forehead.

“Only seven? If I didn't know any better I'd think you're getting a soft spot for me”.

Nico thought about it. Honestly, despite their complicated dynamic, when it came down to it he had grown to respect Logan quite a bit. He had depended on him a lot more than he would ever admit.

Sure, in all his *spartan* charm he wasn't exactly easy to get along with sometimes, but he was brave, honest and he had conviction. In his own crude way he was even caring. “Well, you're reckless, blunt and stubborn, but I guess you try?” Nico teased.

Logan jabbed him on his arm. His annoyance turned to a grin. “That's only three, you *are* going soft on me”.

Nico clicked his tongue, but didn’t argue.

Logan’s expression softened just a bit. “I like to think that deep down, underneath my *rogue* personality, I’m a pretty good guy” he pondered out loud.

Nico snorted. “Are you serious? You're an *aggressively* good guy…” he complained loudly, earning himself another grin. He thought back to what he'd said. Logan was honest. Honest to a fault… “*Do you think I’m a good person?*” Nico asked suddenly. He held his breath, dreading the answer.

Logan seemed caught off guard. “What? Why the *intensity* all of a sudden?” he asked. He looked confused, maybe worried even.

“Just tell me” Nico pressed.

Logan seemed to think about it, scratching his neck. The silence was deafening. “Nah” he shrugged finally.

Nico exhaled. *He knew it.*

“You’re the best, man” Logan concluded, punching him in the arm a little too hard.

Nico should have figured. Logan was an expert at emotional warfare, after all. Nico stared at him in disbelief for a while. Then his face started to burn. He wanted to say something but suddenly he was choking back tears.

“Woah, are you crying?!” Logan asked through an awkward sounding laugh.

“I'm not! You're just such an *idiot* that it hurts my face sometimes…!”. Nico wiped at his eyes vigorously with the back of his hand, then quickly looked away.

Suddenly Logan pulled him in. Nico tried desperately to defend himself. It was no use. His hands and elbows folded uselessly against Logan's *frustratingly* strong build. He wished he could move his hands away from there…

Logan gave him a squeeze, patting him on the back. “Sorry, I shouldn't have messed with you” he said with a laugh.

The studs on Logan's coat were digging into Nico’s chest, his tight grip was squeezing all the air out of his lungs and he stank of cigarettes. Somehow it was exactly what Nico needed. He was so *warm.…*

Enough. More than enough!

“Alright! Thanks! I’m fine!” he croaked.

As soon as Logan let go, he shoved himself off of him.

“I’d better… I’m gonna go” Nico stammered.

“Sure, man” Logan replied happily. “Thanks again!”.

Nico calmed down a little. “No problem. Say bye to Gwen for me”.

Logan smiled at him.

He smiled back. Then quickly pursed his lips. “... *Bye*” he threw over his shoulder as he stepped off the porch.

“See ya” Logan replied.

Nico walked towards the edge of the woods, towards the shadows. He looked around one last time before he stepped in.

He watched Logan bend down to pick up his cigarette butt and shove it in his pocket.

Ha.…

Had he expected him to litter? Maybe? Guess not? But, still. This didn’t seem very rebellious. It was almost… *sweet.*

Nico smiled to himself. *What?* His smile turned to horror.

What was he thinking?! Today had been weird. *He* had been weird. Time to go. Somewhere far away from all of this. Further than last time. He needed to flee the country. *No,* the whole fucking *continent*… He strutted into the shadows, letting the whispers empty his mind. It was calming, a little addictive even. He let it go on a bit longer than he’d meant to.

He fell to his knees, into sand. He heard waves wash up and pull away gently. He looked over the horizon, taking in a red shinto shrine sticking proudly out of the water.

Right. Japan. *Good.* That was far enough. That should give him some space…

He took a deep breath, then dropped down onto his backside. Trying to collect his thoughts, he grasped the sand lightly with both hands. He stared off into the distance, right through the shrine.

Everything looked so warm in the glow of the deep orange sun gazing down at him from right above it…

Sand slowly ran through his fingers as he tightened his grip.

He got woken up well into the evening by the rising tide lapping at his feet,
sand *everywhere.*… Sand as far as his eyes could see, stretched out ahead of him endlessly.

He quickly pulled up his legs when another wave tickled him, turning his face to look up at the sky above him. Right into a rainbow, *way* too close by…

Chapter 8: VIII. You can’t run from your problems

Chapter Notes

> All warnings are spoilers:
> Mention of ornithological murder victim, twerking, death threats, attempted murder, straight up murder, war casualties, descecration of corpses, Death, fainting, drowning, unsafe handling of hair, injuries, blood.

Yan’s bobcut bounced around her head as she ran up to him. She greeted him with a short, tight hug, almost hitting him in the face with the bow strapped to her back. “*Thank you so much for coming*”.

Nico held up both hands to appease her, and hopefully create a *little* more personal space. “Of course, Yan”.

Her already bewildered, stressed expression turned a little wary to add. “Are you… How are you?” she asked.

“Good”. He sounded more defensive than reassuring, but that would have to do. “How are you?” he deflected.

Now that he mentioned it… He actually wanted to know.

Yan quickly glanced up and back. “Oh, good… Good”.

Nico pursed his lips and nodded. “Yeah… Apart from Amira’s death threat, of course”.

Yan cracked a forced grin. “*Yeah*, exactly”.

Nico got down to business. “Chiron told me about the dead owl. Said they’d come by to ‘make amends’ *today* specifically. How many are ‘they’? Who even *are* ‘they’? Is this really all we know?”.

Yan frowned apologetically. “Yes, pretty much… And there’s another thing…”.

Nico didn’t get to learn more about the thing. Yan perked up and ran around him. He turned around in time to see her cling onto Logan.

“Hey, beautiful” he offered the top of her head, ruffling her hair.

She let out a long whine into his stomach.

“Yeah…” he affirmed. He rummaged in his pocket and looked up. “Hey, Spooky!” he greeted with a wide grin, by now already clenching a cigarette between his teeth.

“Hi!” Nico greeted back.

Yan let go and regained her composure with a deep breath. “*So!* Apart from all *that,* Amira is being *impossible.* She’s insisting on fighting them *alone*”.

Nico hummed in understanding. Then he sighed in even more understanding. “Well, that sucks. But, it’s not like she has a choice. Not *really.* She’ll have to listen eventually. To *you* at least…”. He gestured at Yan, trying to sound reassuring.

Yan made clear it hadn’t worked. “Pffff! She's never going to take that from me!”.

Nico raised an eyebrow. “Aren't you friends?” he asked.

Yan popped her lips, thinking about it. “Well, yeah…” she started “She's *my* friend, but Amira doesn't really *do* friends. I assume she just sees me as some sort of ‘friendly’ colleague. She's never going to let me change her mind. Not based on just *goodwill,* at least” she concluded.

“Oh, but we don’t *have* to do this the easy way” Logan muttered. A dangerous little smile ignited, threatening to spread.

Yan’s shoulders dropped in defeat. “Oh. *No.*.. At least let me *try!*” she pleaded.

The danger in Logan’s smile doused.

Yan patted him on the cheek. “I’ll be right back”.

Nico watched her hurry off. He slowly turned back when he felt something burn the side of his face.

Logan narrowed his eyes a little, staring at him for a moment. “How are you?” he asked intently.

Nico put on a poker face. “Fine” he replied casually.

Logan took an extra long drag from his cigarette and stepped closer. “Hah…” he didn’t quite confirm.

Nico shifted a little under the pressure of the scrutinizing orange stare.

Before Nico could return the question, Logan came to the point. “You look bad”.

Yeah. There it was. Nico sighed, then put on a fake wide smile. “*Stop it,* you’re going to make me blush” he tossed out dryly, giving Logan a little shove.

“Ha!” Logan laughed, his eyes glowing warm. “You *do* tend to do that” he tossed back, taking a triumphant drag from his cigarette.

Nico tensed up as a flash of warmth went through him.

“See?” Logan laughed.

Nico put up the best scowl he could manage. “Yeah, yeah. *I get it*. I’m ‘tired and awkward’... So, how are you?”. He wasn’t even trying to deflect, Logan didn’t exactly look well rested either.

Logan’s grin died down to a faint smile. “Probably about as good as you” he exhaled in a small cloud of smoke. They side-eyed each other, eyes scrutinizing and narrow.

Nico was the first to admit defeat. “That sucks…” he conceded, looking down to the ground.

Logan patted him on the shoulder. Nico glanced over, into a warm look. Not a completely innocent one however… “Yep. It's happening. I can feel it. I'm slowly wearing you down. Any day now I'm going to get you to have an actual, *healthy*, adult conversation about your feelings” Logan declared smugly.

Nico rolled his eyes dramatically. “Yeah? You're *really* trying to get on *all* my nerves at the same time right now? That would be *impressive!* But, If *anyone* could pull it off…”. The sarcasm laid on so thick, it almost managed to hide his amusement.

“Ha! Even if I do, you'll just put me in my place anyway!” Logan countered, not even bothering to hide his own. “It's pretty comforting actually… Knowing I don't have to hold back all the time…” he added, all jest gone, his look even warmer now somehow.

He'd done it… That madman had actually gone and done it. He'd just gotten on all of Nico’s nerves at once. He felt every single one of them light on fire. Now to put Logan in his place, as promised… Where the hell would *that* be? “Well… Freak recognizes freak, I guess?” he tried weakly.

They turned to look when a quiet, strained conversation moved closer and closer. It seemed Yan had found Amira. She gestured wildly at her trying to keep up with Amira’s long strides, reasoning desperately along the way.

Amira stared straight ahead, right at them, only replying with single, curt words. She came to a halt in front of them and jutted the back of her spear onto the ground. It caused a stern, disapproving thud. Yan shut her mouth into a defeated pout, looking up at her. “Chiron never should have informed you. I specifically *forbade* it” Amira declared, hitting the ground again for emphasis.

They all stared at each other in silence for a few seconds.

Logan was the first to break it. “Is Shane at camp?” he asked, looking in the general direction of the shed.

“Don’t involve him. None of you were supposed to be involved in the first place" Amira ordered.

Logan turned to her, fire burning in clear protest.

Yan gripped his arm. “Lo… I think she’s right on this one. Shane’s not a fighter…”.

The fire died down. “He has the right to be here, same as we do. If we don’t tell him, he’ll *never* forgive us” he protested anyway.

Yan looked down, pursing her lips.

“I’ll go get him” Nico offered, mostly desperate for something to do. He turned around and walked off before anyone could stop him.

“Leave” he heard Amira order. “No” he heard Logan reply. Nico sighed. *Good luck, both of you.*.. He wondered how long they’d be able to keep that up.

The clattering and tinkering spilled out of the cracks in the rotten wood before he’d even opened the door. As soon as he did, he found Shane, right in the middle of the Gods forsaken mess.

He turned around in surprise, blinking at the light Nico let in. Nico sucked in his lips at the sight of him. Shane looked drop-dead ghoulish… ‘Tired’ wasn’t in the same ballpark.

“Morning…” Shane offered, his voice like gravel.

“Hi… You look, uh” Nico stammered in return.

“Yeah, *I know.* I’m a bit hungover” Shane chuckled like a sputtering engine. “What’s up?” he asked.

Nico straightened up. “Come with-”.

He got cut off by the loudest, grainiest version of Hollaback girl suddenly blasting out of Shane's back pocket. He waited for Shane to pick up. Shane didn't, pursing his lips and loudly humming in approval. Nico watched on mildly horrified as Shane bent down low and started twerking to the beat of the music. The fact he was so much better at it than he'd expected, made it so much worse. Nico wished he could look away…

How long is this song?! He blessed whoever was on the other side when they hung up.

Shane let out a disappointed whine and grabbed his phone, still bent over. He quickly tapped the screen a few times and put it up to his ear. “Yeahlo?” Shane greeted. He seemed happy to hear from whoever had called him. “*Whazzuuuup?!”* he drew out loudly. “Yeah! Last night was crazy! I can't believe you headbutted that melon right in half!”.

Nico couldn’t decide whether to be impressed or appalled.

Shane glanced over at him. “Yeah! Yeah… Listen, I can't really talk right now. Call you back later?”. He smiled widely. “Cool! Love you, mom! Do zobaczenia!”. He rapidly fired some kisses at his phone and put it away.

Nico had a million questions.

Shane asked his first. “What were you going to say?”.

Right!

“I came to get you. Everyone’s waiting near the main hall. Amira’s in serious trouble”.

Shane’s expression dropped. “What…? What’s going on?!” he asked with uncanny seriousness.

Nico saw genuine fear in his eyes, it grew quickly. “Uh… Someone sent her a threat. A dead owl with a message. They’re coming to kill her, in revenge for last mission…” He quickly explained.

Shane threw his invention into a pile, knocking it over with a barrage of loud clatters. “*Agh! I saw her this morning! She didn’t even friggin tell me!*” he shouted in frustration.

Nico took a step aside to let him past as Shane stomped up to him. “*Let’s go…*” Shane grumbled, grabbing a large sledgehammer with one hand and Nico’s sleeve with the other.

Nico let him drag him almost all the way back, still not over Shane’s sudden change in demeanor.

“*Leave!*” he heard, in what was probably the closest he’d ever heard Amira come to a shout.

“*No!*” he heard after, nowhere near the closest he’d ever heard Logan come to a shout.

Well, guess he wasn’t going to find out how long they could keep this up after all.

“What’s all this scary stuff about a dead owl?!” Shane’s deep frown and crossed arms didn’t manage to come off as commanding.

Amira's eyebrows raised, sharp and thin like spears ready to strike. “*I'm telling you all to leave! Right now!*”.

Nobody moved.

Logan grinned through his obvious annoyance. “Too bad, *you fucking tyrant.* You're not in charge today. Your orders don't mean *shit!”*.

Amira's eyebrows lowered all the way down, spears looking for a different opening. “I'm *not* ordering. I'm *pleading.* Please, just let me deal with my own problem”.

Yan stepped in. “This isn't just *your* problem! We were *all* there, weren't we?!” she reasoned.

“Yeah!” Shane chimed in, raising an angry fist in solidarity.

They all turned to look at him.

“Wh- Come on~! *I built the bomb!* I was there in spirit!” he whined, shaking his fist.

Amira blinked a few times.

This was probably the most flustered Nico had ever seen her. “Amira” he started, getting her attention. “We're not letting you go through this all alone. You can’t push us away” he concluded calmly.

Amira regained full stoicism with a single deep breath. “I can't force you to leave, but I will do anything I can to prevent any of you from getting hurt” she warned.

Logan snorted. “Good. Guess we're all on the same page now”.

Amira didn’t reply, seemingly planning ahead. “All the kids are under house arrest in their cabins. Let’s take watch at Half Blood Hill. It’s the highest point. We can see most of the campgrounds from there” she ordered. She walked ahead without waiting for an answer.

Nico listened to Yan’s sigh and watched Logan’s knuckles turn white, then relax. They followed along, not in for another fight.

Shane dashed ahead and spun around to face them. “Last one at the trashcan is a piece of shit!” he dared excitedly. He'd barely finished before he spun around again and started sprinting towards the trash can over in the distance.

What…? Nico stopped and turned to look at the rest in surprise, only to see a complete lack of reaction from any of them. He shrugged and just kept walking.

The metal made a loud clang noise as Shane jumped and smacked it triumphantically. He quickly bent over next to it and peered intensely straight ahead, seemingly ready to make a call in case of a photo finish. He was obviously not bothered in the slightest by the fact none of them had even made it halfway there…

Logan slapped the top of the trash can as he made it past, probably in an attempt to humor him. Then he slapped Shane on the top of his head, probably in an attempt to do the opposite.

Shane dramatically chopped the air as all of them finished. “The results are in! Sorry, Nico. You're the piece of shit. It's official” he declared.

Nico snorted. “Joke's on you. I've been a piece of shit *the whole time!”* he revealed dramatically. “In fact, I've probably been a piece of shit since before your grandparents were even born” he added with a villainous tone.

Logan laughed and offered a fist bump. Nico took a second. Should he really put a *seal* on that statement?

Whatever. It was true either way. He returned it.

Yan shot them an offended look.

Not nearly as offended as Shane's. “*Agh!* That's *against the rules,* dude!*”* he complained loudly.

Yan gave Nico a sad, disapproving pout.

He smiled apologetically and held up his hands in a peace offering. “Sorry, Yan. But, I'm defending my title here…”.

The corners of her pout twitched a little. “*Stooop*~” she pleaded weakly.

After reaching the very peak, Amira dropped down into a nimble cross-legged pose. She crossed her arms too and stared off into the distance, keeping close watch of every corner of camp.

One by one they dropped themselves down in the grass around her.

“So… Now what? We just wait?” Shane asked no one in particular.

“Doesn’t seem like we have much of a choice, right?” Nico asked him in turn.

Yan looked Shane over, eyebrows tightly knit. “Shane, are you sure you want to be here when this goes down?”.

Shane seemed hurt, then a little embarrassed. He quickly looked down and fidgeted with the hem of his shirt. “Well… It's true, I'm a *lover* not a *fighter…*” he mumbled.

Logan huffed quietly. “You don’t have to *choose…*” he muttered under his breath.

“*But*” Shane continued with emphasis, actively ignoring him. “I'm not just going to cower in fear when someone's trying to *kill* my friend! I'll help out as much as I can!”. He looked back up, eyes full of determination.

Amira shook her head sternly, then looked away in disapproval.

Logan jabbed him in the upper arm in support.

That was all the encouragement Shane seemed to need to go on the offensive. “What about *you?* You’re hardly a *stonecold killer* yourself, Dr. Munchkin”.

Nico folded his hands in front of his mouth and carefully watched on as Yan’s hard stare wiped all arrogance off Shane’s face.

Logan added another, slightly harder jab in the arm. “Watch it, *bud.* Don't let the cute little face fool you. If Yan wanted to kill us, we would have been dead a hundred times over. She's a *monster* with a bow” he warned in a low voice.

Yan pressed the palms of her hands under her chin, framing her pouty smile with her fingers. She looked up innocently and threw in some exaggerated blinks.

Shane pouted back at her, rubbing his upper arm. “Did you really need to punch me that hard? You know I bruise easily” Shane whined, turning his pout to Logan.

“Sorry, pal. I thought that was still playing *nice*” Logan offered, clearly a little puzzled.

Nico snorted. “No way. You never learned this in elementary school? I bet you have *piles* of report cards from hopeless teachers saying *you play too rough*”.

Logan cracked an annoyed smile. “As if I’d ever read a fucking report card anyway” he countered, clearly not denying anything.

Nico feigned an appalled gasp. “You never learned how to *read* either?!”.

Logan slumped his shoulders and stifled a laugh. Yan giggled loudly between them. He tugged on her hair. “Really? You too? Even after I had your back earlier? Careful, or you might *actually* hurt my feelings” he warned.

Yan did her best to swallow the rest of her giggles. “Well, no offense, Lo. But no one is going to believe *that.* You're hardly the *sensitive* type…”. Behind her grin laid a hint of an accusation, clearly meaning at least some offense.

“What do you mean? I'm plenty sensitive. I cry pretty much every night” Logan replied with a wide smile.

Oof! Nico hissed loudly.

Yan laughed awkwardly, then quickly covered her mouth with her hands. She hit Logan in the chest dramatically then buried her face next to her fist. “Don't do that to me” she whined, slightly muffled.

“I was just joking” he soothed.

“All your *jokes* are always true…” Yan complained.

“That's what makes them funny” Logan explained, patting her on the head like she was stupid.

Yan put her arms around him and groaned.

“C’mon~” he tried a little more desperately. “You sound just like Gwen right now…”.

Yan clung on tighter and groaned louder.

“Ah, *Gwen*” Shane said dreamily. “She's got what every guy wants. A nice big pair of-”.

Logan flung a stick at him, making Yan jolt away.

“Blue eyes!” Shane laughed, shielding his face.

“That's my *landlord*, man!” Logan grumbled.

“I was *going* to say blue eyes, dude! I swear! You gotta give me just a *shred* of trust here…”.

Logan narrowed his eyes, then pursed his lips. “You better mean that” he warned.

Shane shook his head in exaggerated disappointment. Logan kicked him in the leg. Shane kicked him back. They smiled at each other.

Yan sighed in frustration. “Ugh… You guys are such… *Guys”*. She turned to Nico and Amira “You two have to save me”.

Amira raised an eyebrow.

Nico snorted. “Sorry, Yan. I agree, guys suck. But I'm still a guy”.

Yan clung dramatically to his arm, putting her forehead on his shoulder. “Don't say that~! You're so much *better* than that~!” she cracked up a little as she wailed.

Nico did too, putting a fist in front of his mouth to hide it.

She turned her face on Nico's shoulder. “How *is* Gwen?” she asked Logan.

“Good!” he replied. “When she isn't screaming at me…” he added.

Yan looked worried. “Why would she scream at you?! You guys are so close!” she asked desperately.

Logan shifted uncomfortably.

Dumbass… Think before you speak.

Nico thought back to the last fight they had when he was there. Forcing Logan to open up about the details of his mental health problems didn't seem like a very good idea given the circumstances.

Nico watched on as Logan tried to avoid Yan's eyes, less and less effectively. He decided to spare him, but not to let him off *too* easy. “He made out with her crush” he explained.

Logan shot him a surprised look. A rare mix between relief and betrayal. Nico sent him an evil little smile back, getting him to frown.

“Oof, *Taylor?”* Yan hissed.

Logan held out his hands in exasperation. “Did *everyone* know except me?!”.

Yan gave him a stern but pitiful look. “You're *really* bad at subtlety, Lo. You need everything spelled out when it comes to romance…”.

She glanced at Nico, just for a split second. It probably didn't mean anything. Nico tensed up anyway.

“Well that hasn't exactly been a problem before…” Logan retorted, crossing his arms.

“Haven't changed a bit, huh?” Shane asked with a grin. Logan looked annoyed. Shane continued. “This *habit* is starting to become a problem, man. How many has it been at this point? Dozens?”.

Logan threw his head back a little, avoiding all possible eye contact at this point. “Look, it's not that big of a deal… At least, not the others. Lay off” he said quietly.

Yan stuck up for him, helping him out of the hole he'd been digging himself into “*You* don't get to make fun of him, Shane. You're one of those ‘*dozens”*”. She added air quotations.

Nico gave Logan an astonished look. “He *is?!*” he interrogated, desperate to hear more.

Logan grinned. “Dare” he explained with a shrug.

“Can we stop bringing that up already?” Shane complained. “You guys are making me feel real *cheap* here”.

Everyone looked at him.

“Shane, hun, you did that for a bag of chips. It's kind of on you” Yan retorted.

Shane pouted. “Okay, but I made you guys *work* for it” he countered.

“You jumped onto his lap before he could even answer" Amira added.

Shane looked offended. “I don't get to feel *dainty* very often, *you guys*. I just made use of the opportunity! Besides, I was really, *really* snacky, and Dorito's are my favourite. It's pretty much on you” he concluded.

Nico turned to Logan. “So what did *you* get out of it?” he asked.

“Uhm, *hello?!*” Shane said, while exaggeratedly posing his face. He gestured at himself wildly.

“Other than the satisfaction, I mean” Nico clarified dryly.

Logan snickered. “The credit. I had to uphold my *fearless* reputation”.

Nico mulled it over. “How was it?” he asked Shane.

Shane replied by sticking his hands up like he was weighing two options. “The Dorito’s were better” he concluded.

Nico looked at Logan.

Logan smiled faintly. “Believe it or not, I’ve actually had worse” he concluded in turn.

Yan gave him a teasing look. “You mean the girl who bit you?” she asked.

Logan shook his head with a half smile. “No, I actually got into that a little... I meant the one who kept trying to tickle me. That almost turned into an actual wrestling match”.

Yan laughed. “I’m still *dying* to know who that was…”.

Logan gave her a mysterious look.

Amira raised a stern eyebrow. “And you didn’t tell her off?”.

Logan shook his head slowly. “Nah, it was a fun challenge. Besides, I wasn't in for the long run anyway. Somewhere out there, there's a guy who's really into that, and they'll live happily ever after. Didn't want to dull her spirit”.

Amira's cold grey eyes looked even sharper than usual. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but you are actually too polite sometimes.”.

Her eyes turned even sharper.

“*They’re here*” she declared. “They’re already at the Amphitheater”.

She pushed herself off of the ground with her spear and paced off. They scrambled to keep up with her.

Nico took in the sight of the small crowd waiting for them as he made his way down the slope, he counted eight compared to their lacking five…. One of the mercenaries was particularly imposing. So tall and broad Nico wondered if he was part giant.

Amira strode so fast she might as well be running.

Shane made a beeline for his shed. “Stall as long as you can! I’ve got the perfect tool for this!” he promised.

Amira didn’t acknowledge him, striding on without second thought.

She carefully scanned the group of young men and women now just a few tens of feet away, lingering on one to the side. His bronze Corinthian helmet tipped upward, revealing his face.

With an accusatory point of her spear, she singled him out.

“You! Unclaimed one! I remember you! Why did you lead them here?!” she demanded.

The young man crossed his arms. “Heh! ‘*Unclaimed’* no more, bitch! Lady Nemesis sends her regards!” he yelled, grinning from ear to ear.

Logan stuck up two middle fingers. “Tell your mom to shove her regards up her ass, dickhead!”.

The young man scowled at him, raising his own middle fingers.

The mercenary next to him quickly smacked his hands back down.

Amira held out her spear at an arms length to keep them behind her as she addressed the entire band of enemies. “How dare you defile *sacred grounds* for revenge! *Tell me!* What business does Nemesis have with me?! ”.

The group roared and whistled. “You fucking *Olympians* always think *everything's* about *you!*” One of them spat, a young woman. She continued. “No! This goes *way* further back than you! We’re just here to send a *message!* But, if you thought you could mess with the *Old ones* scot-free, you're *dead* wrong! You *will* be soon, anyway!” she sneered.

Amira held back her spear further, making them all take a step back. “Stand back. All of you!”.

Nico opened his mouth.

“*Fuck! Off!* Amira!” Logan yelled.

Nico closed his mouth and pursed his lips. *Well.…* That was kinda the gist of it anyway.

Without a warning, Amira stuck out her spear in front of her and started sprinting towards their enemies. Everyone stood stunned as she jumped, stuck her spear in the shoulder of the largest mercenary and flung herself over him. She tore it loose with a bloody crunch and hit the ground behind him with her feet. She never even looked back.

“*It’s me you want!*” she yelled as she sprinted off behind them.

The mercenaries followed suit immediately.

“*Stupid fucking-!*” Logan spat as he did the same.

Nico took one last look at Yan before following after. He heard her panting further and further away as the distance between him and Logan’s back grew. Before losing sight of him completely between the trees, Nico still managed to see him leap over an entire picnic table, planting one hand flat on its surface and smoothly landing on the other side.

Ha.… Nope.…

Nico frowned to himself as he adjusted course, moving around it. He forced his legs to go faster. One thing was for sure… Nico fucking *hated* nature. What was the deal with all these trees and bushes everywhere?! Something sharp caught onto his shirt and cut into his hip as he ran past. Something else scratched his cheek.

Fucking ow!

No time for that, though. He heard a scream, adjusting him in the right direction. Soon after, he came across a young man from the opposing side, *affirming* the right direction. He laid bleeding from a large slash on his leg on the ground. He protected his face with his arms as Nico jumped over him.

Alright, two things were for sure… Nico fucking hated running… Had he been this out of shape for long? Or did *sleeping* really matter this much?

Nico slid to a halt, panting. *Found you! …Well, one of you, anyway.* Logan stood a few tens of feet away, sword drawn.

Nico had not found just him, he realized. Logan had gotten himself surrounded by four *very* unfriendly looking young men, circling him from a safe distance. The closest two eyed Nico warily.

Logan glanced over to him, eyes blazing despite his serious expression. The mercenary he'd just taken his eyes off moved in quickly, closing the distance.

Or, he would have… Logan's heel crashing into the underside of his chin sent him right back where he came from. The mercenary curled in on himself as soon as he hit the ground, grasping at his face. This got the attention from his friends, they slowly raised their swords.

Logan glanced back over to Nico, eyes cooled off to an annoyed smoulder. “*She’s over there!*” he gestured with his right hand.

Sure… Dumbass. Nico turned his hands, willing up whoever was fit to heed the call. He turned around to keep eyes on their enemies and slowly made his way over to Logan as cracks opened up in the ground all around them.

The mercenaries took some unsteady steps back as undead pulled themselves out of the dirt.

“I'll never get tired of that…” Logan muttered, the amazement evident in his voice.

Nico tried to ignore him and focus on controlling the makeshift army. He hit Logan’s back with his own. As he glanced over, he caught a look full of admiration. He tried hard to suppress the smile that threatened to spread across his face.

The four mercenaries fought back as hard as they could. Harder than Nico was ready for, honestly.

One of them somehow managed to not only kick the skull off of one of his soldiers, he'd managed to kick it right into another one, exploding it in a burst of bone and bronze.

Another one sliced the lower arm off of one skeleton, sword and all. The undead soldier glanced down at it with expressionless, hollow surprise.

Nico pulled the three skeletons back together, *almost* all the pieces in the right place… As he did, he lost two other soldiers. In the chaos of swords hitting swords, bone and flesh around him, he didn't even know what had happened to them. It was impossible to keep track of, and nearly as impossible to keep up with.

Nico stopped trying to see and hear, and just felt. He grimaced as he pulled all skeletons back to their feet and pushed them onward, trying not to lose any ground. All undead undead rose back to the challenge, then staggered, they seemed to waver a little.

The mercenaries jumped at the opportunity, they regrouped and moved forward as one, trying to break the line.

Nico put his all in it. His soldiers straightened up and swung and clawed even harder than before. He shuddered against Logan's back. Right after, he felt the palm of Logan's hand brush against his and his fingers search his hand. Logan's warm fingers locked around the cold of his. A surge went through them, up his arm, down to his heart, spreading a feeling of relief.

Ha.

He didn't know Logan could do that too… He wondered if Logan did. Then again, he didn't really… Logan didn't seem to think anything through… *Idiot.*

Nico smiled, glancing over at him.

Yan hopped over the bushes, into the clearing. She stopped, trying to make sense of the situation. The mercenaries were too preoccupied to even notice her.

"*Over there!*" Logan gestured, holding out both their hands.

Yan nodded, sprinting off in the given direction, raising her bow in her fist as she jumped over more bushes.

They turned back to the problem at hand. Logan stuck out his sword, his arm now next to his. The draining feeling of keeping up some of the makeshift army lifted slightly.

"*Man*…" Logan breathed out shakily. "I still really suck at this…".

Nico squeezed his hand, it had gone noticeably colder.

"You're doing great… Just… Don't overdo it!" he breathed back.

They watched the undead pile on top of an unlucky mercenary. His colleagues tried desperately to free him. *Not in time*… A skeleton raised his sword high over its head.

Nico looked away right before the nauseating crunch, sounding their hollow victory. Three horrified screams forced his eyes to witness the aftermath of his deed.

Three backs quickly made their way through the woods, seemingly trying to get as far away as possible.

Logan dropped his arm heavily. Nico slowly lowered his. Countless bones and a handful of swords clattered down. “Gods, man. I don't know how you manage to pull that off every time… It's insane” Logan huffed.

Nico felt Logan's hand tremble in his before he pulled it back and wiped at his face. He looked pale. “Told you not to overdo it” Nico scolded. He tried not to show how exhausted he was himself. That wouldn't really help drive home his point.

“I'm still standing this time, right?” Logan countered with a tired but triumphant smile.

Nico smiled back. “Yeah, you're getting a lot better at this”.

Logan patted him on the shoulder appreciatively, then slowly strolled over to their fallen enemy, lying in a bloody pile of bones. He carefully tilted the young man’s head with his boot, knuckles whitening threateningly around the handle of his sword. His shoulders relaxed before he knelt down. Nico’s breath shook a little as Logan slowly closed the young man’s eyes. Nico’s breath shook even more when Logan got back up and looked him over warily.

“That was a *lot* of skeletons. You good?” he asked.

Nico stuck out a hand, leaning against a tree, *very* casually. He let out a short laugh in disbelief. What a stupid question!

He was fine, *obviously*.

Logan walked up to give him a closer look.

He disagreed, *obviously...*

Nico ignored him.

His elbow gave out right before his knees did, knocking his shoulder against the tree. The bark felt coarse and sharp against the palm of his hand as he slid down, trying to get a grip. He'd made it about halfway to the ground before Logan caught his upper arm.

“I got you…” he grunted as he pulled Nico back up, lifting his arm over his shoulder.

Nico swayed against him, but he was glad to at least be back on his feet. Logan could be annoyingly overbearing, but he was strong, sturdy and very *upright.* Nico really appreciated that about him right now. He was close to thanking him when Logan bent down and picked up his legs from under him, hoisting him up.

Not this again…

He didn't have enough energy left to be embarrassed. He used all he had left to struggle against Logan’s grip. Logan seemed fine with that, not moving even as Nico shoved his hand onto his chest as hard as he could.

“Lemme go” he breathed, pushing against him for emphasis. His body betrayed him once again. The side of his head slumped against Logan's shoulder. Funny, the studs weren’t nearly as sharp as they seemed. Or he just couldn’t care anymore.

Logan started walking, ignoring him completely.

Rude.

Nico passed out in protest.

With his last ounce of consciousness he barely registered Logan adjusting his grip, shifting him a little. Nico’s face grazed against the warmth of Logan's neck. He *didn’t* register his own arm moving, slowly pulling himself closer.

The quiet of unconsciousness fell over him. It was less cold than usual. Apparently it smelled of warm pinewood. It was soothing, almost comfortable.

The soothing comfort didn't last nearly long enough.

When he woke up he didn't recognize his surroundings. He heard Yan hum to herself very close by.

She met his eyes. “Welcome back, Nico!” she said with a wide smile. She turned back to whatever she was doing with the gash on his hip before he could respond.

Nico turned his head, looking past Yan fussing over him. Down from the ground, everything that was happening looked a little confusing. Maybe the lightheadedness didn't help either.

His head was laying on something. Logan's coat, he realized as one of the spikes stabbed him in the face.

Then he saw it. Something flying right at Yan's back.

Crap!

With a jolt he pulled her in, bracing her as best as he could. At the same time he did, the heels of two army boots landed on the ground in front of his face.

Logan caught the spear reaching around himself with his hand, grabbing it near the point. He swung it around to the other side. “Cowards” he spat.

Nico wanted to speak but couldn't, completely out of breath after adjusting to the sudden crisis. He released the tension in his muscles, feeling the ground press against his back.

Yan slipped free.

Logan took a step forward. With a grunt he threw the spear back right where it came from. It made a low whistling noise as it disappeared out of sight. He let out an evil sounding cackle at the result and turned halfway to face them.

All three of them caught their breath.

Nico could tell Logan had kept himself busy while he had been asleep. His shirt, his lower arms and his hands fully covered in blood.

“Ha! Thanks” Yan let out, offering a thumbs up. Logan smiled, returning it.

“Are you-” Nico began to ask.

Logan pulled at his shirt, unsticking the blood soaked fabric from his chest with a wet sound. “*Don't worry, that’s not mine*” he assured with a devilish, toothy smile. His eyes were on fire. He wiped at one side of his face, smearing the blood from his hand all over it without realizing. It added to his absolutely crazed look, like some sort of disturbing war paint.

Times like this Nico kinda understood why others could be scared of him. Then again, in a weird way, Logan being an unhinged savage was kinda reassuring. He was glad he'd been there just now, anyway.

Nico dragged himself upward, in a sitting position.

They were next to the lake now, he realized. *All of them* were.

Amira diligently held off the remaining small army with some impressive swings and stabs with her spear. She drove the back of the handle down into the ground and leapt, flinging her long legs around in a wide arch. Nico huffed as two of her opponents failed to dodge, crashing into each other in her sweep.

He heard Yan’s bowstring pull. A mere second later one of the mercenaries dropped to the ground, clutching his leg, blood blooming around an arrow. Sadly, he wasn’t the only one who’d noticed. Three young men broke off the larger group and made their way towards them.

“Shit…” Nico swore out loud.

Yan chuckled. “No worries! Not to brag, but long distance is kind of my jam”.

Nico watched her place three more arrows on her bow. The string made a strained noise as she pulled it back even further. She aimed calmly, the mercenaries still at a safe distance, but quickly closing in on them. She exhaled as she let go.

The arrows struck barely a second later. Two of them hit nearly dead centre in two upper legs, stopping the unlucky young men in their tracks. The third only missing because of an, *admittedly impressive*, manoeuvre by the luckiest of the three.

“Wow” Nico let out in awe.

Yan winked. “Now watch me do that a couple more times” she giggled.

The third enemy broke their short conversation. Petrifyingly fast, he pulled his bowstring, the arrow pointing straight at them. Yan was faster. Her arrow hit his neck before he'd even managed to pull all the way back. He dropped down heavily, no sign of life…

“*Jim!*” one of their stricken enemies exclaimed desperately, stinging Nico with his sudden humanity.

He forced his eyes away from the young man dragging himself over to his fallen comrade, checking on Yan instead.

She drew a heavy breath. “*I hate that part…*”.

Nico put a hand on her shoulder. “You saved the other ones…” he reassured.

A roar closer to the water grabbed their attention. They watched a mercenary's sword and shield drop to the ground, the entire tip of Amira’s spear stabbed through the eye-slit of his Corinthian helmet… Amira kicked him off her weapon, letting him keel over like a felled tree. The gigantic mercenary used his towering height to reach over her, grabbing two huge fistfuls of curls. She struggled while he lifted her off of the ground. Her strong, *ineffective* kicks got put to a halt when he turned, *fast*, swinging her along. He made a full circle before he let go, flinging her far out onto the lake. Amira herself almost made another full turn before she hit the water, *flat*, with a loud bang.

The surprisingly wide splash subsided too late to keep eyes on her, hiding her somewhere under the surface.

Shit!

The loud mocking laughter from their enemies did little to drown out Yan’s contrasting terrified shriek. It brought Nico back to the reality of the situation.

He mustered up as many undead as he could. Which sadly, wasn’t nearly as many as he’d done before. He gritted his teeth through the effort and sent the troop of unfortunate skeletons into the water.

Come on. We can do more than that.

With some dull popping and cracking noises in the background he took hold of some more *fresh* tools… He felt an unsettling disturbance crash through the hectic atmosphere around him as everyone froze. He tried not to focus on the others’ expressions as the four *former* enemies made their way over and joined the search.

Jim was the first to breach the waterline… His own victim the third, after Amira's. The fourth, the last one, had a little more trouble staying upright. And for good reason, it seemed. For a brief moment the angle hit him just right to see the glimmer of the sunset on the water through the gaping hole in his chest.

Three of the remaining mercenaries took a step back. One took a reluctant step forward, quickly pulled back by another.

Yep. That's right. Death could be ugly… This is what rubbing that fact in their faces did to people... This was what *he* did to people. He clenched his teeth harder. No time for self loathing right now. No time for *any of this* right now.

We don't have this long!

Right when desperation was about to take over he found her. Jim dragged her up and towards the bank. Nico's knees gave out. *Whatever.* As long as Jim's didn't, he didn't care.

Yan splashed up to them and grabbed Amira right before Jim fell over, floating face down on the shimmering surface. She threw Amira down onto the hard ground.

No reaction.…

Her last bit of life force was about to drip out of her. He could sense it.

"*She's gone*" he declared heavily, the second all life left her body.

Chapter 9: IX. And you can’t hide from your feelings

Chapter Notes

> All warnings are spoilers:
> pretty bad Injury, blood, snoring, description/mention of corpses, nondescript mention of female nudity, gay panic, lots more gay panic, Italian pride.

Nico carefully looked up from Amira’s corpse to see how Yan had taken the terrible news. She hadn’t. She refused to hear it and knelt down next to Amira, getting to work regardless.

Nico snapped to look at the group of mercenaries, still barely in earshot. They, in turn, seemed to take the news very well. Clearly happy with their results. They laughed among each other, then turned to leave. One cast a last look at the bodies in the lake before getting pulled along.

Nico tore his eyes off of them to temper the rage taking over his entire being, settling them back on Amira’s remains. All the rage turned to sadness.

Despite the gravity of the situation it was hard not to admire Yan’s work. Her well manicured hands almost moved at an unnatural speed. They actually looked sped up. His eyes had trouble keeping track.

In what felt like a single second she’d checked Amira’s pulse, torn her blouse open and started chest compressions. She alternated the compressions with short and efficient mouth to mouth.

Amira’s usually umber skin was unsettlingly pale. Her face like a mask.

Nico looked over when he noticed Logan shift. He saw the angriest, darkest scowl he’d seen yet. Without a warning Logan gripped his sword and sprinted off in the direction their enemies had just disappeared in.

Damn it!

“ *Logan, no!”* Yan yelled desperately.

Nico tried to get up. *Tried…* “ *Sorry* ” he wheezed, falling back down. *Fuck.* He was completely useless right now.

Yan groaned loudly, then turned back to Amira. With one hand, she wiped down Amira’s chest with a rag, with the other, she grabbed something out of the side pocket of her bag and punched it onto Amira’s body.

Nico watched her mournfully.

It was too late…

He took a deep, careful breath, ready to tell Yan there was nothing she could-!

With a shock from the device, everything he thought he knew about life and death shattered right in front of him. Amira's life force came back. Faintly, but undeniably.

The breath stuck in his chest, the seconds dragging by like hours. Nico's eyes locked onto Amira's face as her life force faded in and out with every shock. He gripped the grass, killing it around them without even realizing.

With a burst, Amira's life force reignited. She coughed loudly, heaving up surprising amounts of water with each hack. She drew a few painful sounding, deep breaths.

Yan and Nico gasped in unintended solidarity.

Nico looked up to stare at Yan in awe. She'd performed an actual miracle just now, wielding a power over death he could only dream of. She met his eyes with an unbreakable smile, two tears ran down her cheeks when she blinked.

Amira stirred, catching their attention. Her usually sharp, cold grey gaze was unfocussed. She took in the sight of Yan and stared for a while. "You're wet" Amira rasped, her eyebrow arched weakly, but accusatorily.

"So are you, dummy" Yan cooed.

Amira's eyebrow made its way down into a furrow. She ran her hands over herself in a few shaky, messy movements. After seemingly confirming Yan's observation she slowly dragged herself up.

Nico smiled at her when she noticed him, still mostly in disbelief. She nodded weakly in response and let out some more coughs.

"I'll get you something for your throat" Yan offered.

Amira slowly pulled at her torn blouse, discovering the lack of buttons with a shaky hand. Not a single one of them seemed to have survived.

Yan started sifting through her med kit, occasionally tossing something on the ground.

Nico perked up a bit at the sound of footsteps. Logan strolled back into view, his hands in his pockets, an arrow sticking out-!

Nico tensed up.

An arrow stuck all the way *through* his upper arm at an angle. Its bloodied point poked up, out of the front of his arm, looking down at Nico haughtily.

Nico's stomach churned at the sight of it, tightly squeezing out most of the relief he felt.

He should have been there…

A small cut up on Logan's neck warned of what just as easily could have been.

Nico hid his frown behind folded hands as Logan made his way past. Logan himself seemed unbothered, clearly preoccupied with Amira being awake and *alive* . He swiped his coat off of the ground along the way over to her.

Amira looked up at him as he squatted down at her side, dropping his coat over her shivering shoulders.

"I really missed your slightly *less* lifeless expression. Not a big difference, but still" he joked.

She gave him a small nod in agreement, the hint of a smile in the corner of her lips.

"Thank you" she said quietly.

He smiled as he zipped up his coat for her.

Amira laid back down to focus on her breathing.

Yan hummed and glanced over, then did a double take.

" *Lo!"* she screeched, smacking her hand on her med kit.

" *Tis but a scratch"* he chimed, getting back up.

Yan huffed angrily. "Stop quoting the Black Knight every time you get hurt! It's *not* funny! I'm *really* mad at you!" she shouted.

"C'mon, it's my right arm! I barely use that thing" he said a little desperately, holding up his good hand.

Yan got up and gave Nico an exasperated look. Nico returned one in solidarity. "By that logic they should have shot you in the head, you moron…" he quipped, with just a little more venom than he intended.

Logan deserved it though. He'd been *exceptionally* stupid.

Logan’s expression soured a little, but his smile didn’t let up. “That's *exactly* what they thought too. Luckily for me this was one of the rare occasions my right arm was actually useful” he mused.

Yan got up close to it and carefully inspected the arrow. She moved the shaft a little, earning a slight jolt and a grunt that quickly got swallowed back.

“Hm… Doesn’t look like it hit bone…” she muttered. She swiftly broke off its feathery backside, causing another small jolt. “Don't move. I'm going to pull it through. I'll give you some-!”.

Logan didn’t wait for her to finish.

“I thought so. Don’t bother” he said, gritting his teeth and grabbing the arrow as close to his skin as possible.

All three of them grimaced as he ripped it out with one hard tug. Even Amira's lips formed a slightly longer straight line than usual. Nico tried *very hard* not to make a mental note of the tearing sound his flesh made.

“ *Careful! ”* Yan yelled. She ran back to her med kit, raking in several things from it.

“Real smooth” Nico said sarcastically.

Logan pointed the bloody arrow at him. “Nothing elegant about war, Spooky” he replied, his voice clearly still a little affected. “It’s violent, disgusting and *brutal.* You might even know that better than me…”. He grinned and snapped the blood red arrow in half with his thumb, dropping it in front of Nico’s feet.

“I was talking about your *brain ”* Nico quipped, earning another sour look.

Logan’s smile actually almost turned into a scowl this time.

Good!

Logan dug into his pocket with his good arm and pulled out an energy bar. He tossed it in Nico’s face. “Here. Eat. *You sound hungry* …”.

Nico glared at him, but unwrapped it anyway. He watched the blood run down Logan’s arm as Yan quickly stitched him up. He was too tired to pretend not to care. “Just… Try a little harder not to die, you smartass” he muttered, taking an angry bite.

“Sure, pal. Anything for you” Logan replied with a wink.

Nico's energy level had sunk to the point he couldn't even be annoyed anymore either. That, and apparently he *had* been a little hungry. He let the smile creeping up come out.

Logan held his upper arm out while Yan wrapped bandages around it, quickly and effectively. “What's in these, they smell like ass” he complained.

“You're so much prettier when you're *quiet”* Yan complained back at him.

“Sexist” Logan responded, flexing his upper arm, *proving nothing other than his stupidity.*

Yan looked at him with a mixture of amusement and exasperation. “Seriously, Lo. I'm trying to help here”.

Logan relaxed his arm. “Yes ma'am”. She finished up and pulled on his cheek.

Shane came running in from the distance, armed to the teeth with knick knacks. He spotted Amira laying on the ground and tossed the two small objects he had in his hands behind him.

Nico winced as two huge explosions burst out from behind Shane's back, just barely missing all of them with their blast. Amira shot up at the sound of it right as Shane got flung down face first into her lap. He quickly sat up and tried to reach for her, starting a dramatic wail.

She interrupted him. “ *No.* Don't you dare push your affection on me while I'm clearly *weakened ”* she demanded sternly.

He nodded through the tears and turned to look around. The first person he found was Yan. He embraced her knees trying to finally let out his wail.

She patted him on the head a little roughly, almost like she was trying to push him off. “Oh, it was nothing! Besides, Nico's the one who got her out of the water” she rambled off quickly.

He stopped and turned to him.

Oh, Gods. Those were some *big* emotions. Nico instinctively jumped up and took a step back when Shane almost leapt onto him.

Logan stopped Shane with his good arm before he could. “Hold up, bud. Look at him. You’ll kill him” he warned, probably only half jokingly.

Shane whimpered in disappointment, then let Logan pat him on the head. He looked at the bandage on his arm, tears still running down his face. He gestured at it, whimpering inquisitively.

Logan held up his arm a little. “That? That'll heal in no time. I’ll be fine” he reassured.

Shane fully broke down now, sobbing loudly.

Logan grabbed the back of his head and guided him against his shoulder. “Yeah, *okay ”* he chuckled as Shane lifted him off the ground a bit, sobbing even louder.

Nico met his eyes with a grateful look. This was the second time Logan had taken a hit for him… He might even appreciate it more than the first time. Logan didn’t seem to mind nearly as much this time around either, giving him a warm smile back.

Amira tried to keep it in, but couldn't. She coughed again. Shane stopped crying instantly. He dropped Logan back on his feet and moved over to give her a few smacks on various spots on her back.

Yan hastily bent down over an array of colourful powders and bottles in various sizes. She was comparing them feverishly.

“You've saved us plenty, beautiful. You look like you're going to pass out. How about a little break, huh?” Logan asked, nudging her leg with his boot.

Yan almost fell over. She barely glanced at him, dazed. She didn't even stop working. “Yeah, soon. There's just one more bottle I need to find…. And some medicine I need to make. Maybe some bottles I need to replace…” she muttered, seemingly more to herself than to them.

Nico and Logan gave each other a worried look. Nico bent down and started gathering her things in her med kit.

“Hey!” Yan screeched in outrage. She started swiping at it.

He got back up to keep it out of reach. “How are you feeling?”.

Yan shot him a defiant glare and tried to get up on her feet. “I told you, just a few more. I'll take a break after”. It would have sounded more convincing if one of her legs hadn't given out…

Logan offered her a hand. She huffed, grasping it. Right before she got to her feet he hooked her arm behind his back and lifted her over his shoulder.

“Wait!” Yan pleaded, the surprise and betrayal obvious in her voice.

“Nope, sorry sweetheart” Logan returned.

Yan seemed to have given up. Letting up her elbows and dropping her arms.

“You're going to give yourself a-!”.

Logan interrupted himself with a loud yelp.

They'd underestimated her. Behind Logan's back Yan had a tight grip on the hem of his underwear. Nico met Yan's eyes. She gave him a devilish grin, paired with the exhaustion it made her look completely insane. Nico couldn't help but laugh, quickly covering his mouth.

“Take a nap Yan, you're grumpy…” Logan warned.

Yan chuckled. “Fine, you win. Hope it was *worth it~!* ” she chimed.

“You're lucky I didn't suplex you” Logan grumbled. He turned to Shane. “Can you help Amira, bud?”.

Shane smiled brightly and dropped to his knees, ready to scoop her up.

Amira expertly jumped to her feet in one quick motion, away from his reach. She eyed him sternly, murdering his bright smile. “You can draw me a bath” she half offered, half ordered.

The bright smile burst right back out. Shane ran off like he’d found his one true goal in life.

Amira stood up straight and shook a small rainstorm from her hair.

“You sure you want to get right back into the water?” Nico asked, only barely joking.

Amira looked at him. “Yes” she declared. Her eyes were very uncharacteristically… *Soft.* “It's been a rough day… One I would very much like to *wash off…* ” she explained, almost quietly.

She… Smiled…!

Actually!

Genuinely !

Nico quickly turned his shocked expression into a smile.

“Thank you so much for your help. For risking everything… *Truly”* she continued. She looked from one to the other. “All of you. Without you, I wouldn’t have-”.

She paused.

“I *didn’t* make it… I saw Charon…”. Her soft expression carried some very well hidden hurt and shame.

Nico still managed to pick them out pretty well, he was kinda familiar with those. “I know you didn’t want us to… But, I'm really grateful we got to help. So, thank you… For letting us. Even just a little. I know how *hard* that is”.

She looked at him with surprise, then smiled again. Probably brighter than before. She turned to him like she was going to say something. Then seemingly couldn't. She just nodded. “Always a pleasure to work with you” she stated, suddenly even more serious than usual. If Nico didn’t know any better, he'd have thought she was *emotional.* She carefully glanced around Logan’s shoulder. “*Yan,* I should have-”.

She got cut off by a loud snore. Nico sucked in his lips. He heard Logan choke back a laugh.

Amira just nodded in understanding, turning to them one last time. “Thanks again. Until next time”. She turned around and strode off. The spikes on Logan's coat draped over her tall, straight frame helped her regain her usual imposing demeanor.

He felt a boot nudge his leg. “I'm going to put Yan to bed real quick. Don't run off without saying goodbye, yeah?”. Logan didn't wait for an answer and went off in the same direction as Amira.

Nico watched them for a while, then turned to the lake. He stuck out a hand and tidied up after himself. Well, he made the mess tidy *itself* up. Wouldn’t be very responsible to have *them* floating around in a couple of hours… This was a summer camp for kids, after all…

The water in the lake bubbled and burled at the three spots that would become their final resting place.

He shuddered as he finished, tired. Very tired. *Empty.* He tried not to think of everyone’s reaction earlier. It’s funny how he never got used to putting people off when sometimes that was all he ever seemed to do… He grinned humourlessly to himself. He sat down and watched the water. Time lost track of him after a while.

A familiar voice ruined his very productive brooding session. “Still hiding?” Logan asked, walking up. Judging by the fact he'd gotten his coat back, Yan and Amira were probably taken care of by now.

“Just getting rid of the evidence... Don't wanna make the kids cry… About that, actually. Did you get any more of them?” he asked.

Logan looked over the lake. “Nope… Got shot immediately. Didn't even catch up with them” he shrugged.

Nico was about to rip into him again about how stupid that was. He decided not to.

Logan looked at him intently, narrowing his eyes a little. “When you used those dead Nemesis guys earlier… I didn't see that coming. I bet none of us did…”.

Yep.

Should have figured... Nico's muscles complained loudly as he got up. It was worth it. This way he could avoid his eyes… And prepare himself for a quick, inevitable, escape from wherever this was heading.

“Sometimes I forget how fucking *smart* you are…” Logan concluded seriously.

Nico stared at him in disbelief. He glanced at the trees further off to check if he'd heard right. They stuck up their arms, equally dumbfounded. He narrowed his eyes and quickly fixed them back on Logan's face. “You…? *Don't you think that was fucked up?”* he wondered out loud.

Logan huffed in response. “ *Course I do!* Forcing people's dead buddies to help the enemy? *Right in their faces?* Straight up horror movie shit” he chuckled. “But why would *I* complain about that anyway? It’s *war.* I stabbed someone to death today…” he added casually. The dried blood still on his face emphasized his point. “Besides, what else were you supposed to do? Just let them kill Amira? Out of what? *Politeness?* No! *Fuck that!* You did great, man!” he said happily. His eyes glowed so warm it burned Nico's face.

He was too flustered to respond.

Logan stuck out a bloodied hand, offering… Something?

Uh... Nico reached out and shook it.

“ *No~!”* Logan whined. He tightened his grip and pulled him against him, only letting go to pat him on the back.

Right, only one good arm.

He moved it up to ruffle the back of Nico's hair, now laughing. “ *My guy, c'mon* . You know we're better than *that… ”* he pleaded.

Well. Guess not. But, he probably should have... Nico grinned and put his arms around him, patting him back. *Man,* everything about him was warm. Nico’s muscles tensed up, making him swallow hard. He had trouble breathing normally through the sudden nerves. *Why?* Why the sudden nerves?

Logan pulled away a little. “Hey, are you okay?”. He looked deeply into Nico's eyes as he asked it. So deeply Nico almost completely missed the question. Despite the worry the smouldering orange glow was still so… *Pleasant.* Like the sunset on a summer evening. It was hard to look away. Too hard. They shone even brighter and warmer as Logan let out a low chuckle. “Don't get lost in there” he teased.

Huh?!

Fuck!

Logan narrowed his eyes and tapped Nico on the forehead. “*In your head,* you ditz” he explained through another laugh.

Oh, right. Thank the Gods…

Worry took the upper hand in his tone again. “What's with the panic attack all of a sudden?”.

Nico shook his head. He didn't get it either. Nor did he feel like finding out. “No… I mean, uh. I'm just tired” he conjured up. That sounded like it made sense. It definitely wasn't a lie, at least.

“Yeah, I can tell! You should probably sit back down”.

Nico didn't fight it, relieved he found an easy way out. He pretty much just dropped himself back on the ground. It hurt a little, but that was fine. Logan did the same. *Very close by.* It was freaking *freezing* this evening. Logan's shoulder felt warm against his. Nico almost gave in to the urge to lean on it.

He didn't.

He couldn't...

Nico hugged his knees and put his chin on them, for support and for some warmth. “You know what? You're actually really nice” he started in a rare attempt at being open and honest. “Besides, being a huge dick, of course” he quickly added to soften the blow a little.

Logan smirked at him, two little flames burst to life. “Yeah, I've been told” he started warmly. “Well, not *exactly* . But, ‘really nice’ and ‘huge dick’ I've heard before”.

Nico dug his hands into his face. He considered just letting his heart stop and dying on the spot. He waited. *Nope.* Turns out it didn't work like that.. . He dropped his hands and deflated with a drawn out sigh. At least he could still pretend he was dead anyway. He smiled faintly to himself. *Eh.* This was his own fault. He knew one way or another either of them would have to ruin it.

Logan nudged his upper arm. “Sorry” he offered.

Nico side-eyed him. “Seriously? You just fucking kill me and ‘sorry’ is all you've got?”.

Logan cocked his head a little. “In my defense. I've been *way* less polite about killing people before”.

Nico pursed his lips and glanced down, still catching him red handed. “True… Why'd you rip a hole in that guy…?” he asked out of morbid curiosity, not sure if he even wanted to hear the answer.

“I stabbed him a bit too hard. I needed my sword back…” Logan offered up a little apologetically, sounding more regretful about the fumble with his sword, than the actual murder...

“Yeah, that seems right” Nico decided about all aspects of that explanation. He smiled.

The lake was exceptionally pretty in this light. Small flecks of bright orange danced on the surface in a silent symphony, conducted by the setting sun far away in the distance.

He startled when Logan put an arm around his back.

“Didn’t mean to scare you. You looked cold” Logan excused.

“Yeah, a bit…” Nico admitted, gratefully. He settled back down, against the warmth. Come to think of it, his own face was pretty warm too. He buried it in his knees and just… Fell

asleep.

He got woken up by a tap on the cheek. He was a lot less cold, and a lot less… *Vertical* . He jolted, pulling his face as far away from Logan’s lap as he could, almost tumbling over the other way.

Logan pulled him back upright by his arm and got up. “Calm down!” he laughed. “Just wanted to let you know Yan said food’s ready”.

Nico took a sharp breath. “Yeah… Alright” he exhaled, looking at Logan’s offered hand. Forcing himself to react, he took it and let himself be pulled to his feet. He tugged on his collar after Logan turned away. *Man,* it was hot outside this evening.

He followed after him to a small table, a little bit away from the campers. Yan and Shane were already waiting for them. Four plates of something very suspicious looking let off long trails of steam. Yan quickly switched his plate around with Logan’s as they sat down. Nico shot her a surprised look, but decided not to pry when she stuck up a hand gesturing it wasn’t worth it.

“It was the Hephaestus cabin's turn to cook today…” Yan mentioned intently before carefully dissecting her food.

Should be good.… Nico decided the less chance he had to form expectations, the better. He took a bite. “ *Santo cielo.…”* he muttered in amazement. Awful, awful amazement.

“Right?” Shane asked proudly. “It's got *all* the most fun ingredients they could find! Look at all the colours!” he added, looking at Nico expectantly.

Nico covered his mouth with his fist, forcing it to keep it in. “Yeah… So *exciting* ” he muttered painfully, swallowing it down.

Shane looked pleased and happily chomped down more food. Nico put down his fork as quietly as he could.

Logan side-eyed him, smirking through a stern look. “I know it's fucking *horrible* , but you barely ate today. You don't get to be picky” he said accusatorily.

Shane gasped in betrayal, looking from one to the other in angry disbelief.

Nico turned to Logan defiantly. “Careful, making an Italian eat garbage is a hate crime”.

Shane gasped louder, slapping both hands onto his cheeks.

Logan huffed in amusement. “I've never given a *single* shit about any law! I'll force feed you if you want me to prove it!” he threatened with a wink.

Ugh! Nico bared his teeth in contempt, grabbing a hold of his fork. “Eat shit” he offered in return. He stole a bite from his food and shoved it into his mouth triumphantically. *Shit!* That was murderously spicy.

“You good?” Logan asked, genuinely worried.

“ *Yeah”* Nico croaked. He sniffed with a wet sound.

Logan raised an eyebrow and took another bite, completely unbothered.

Nico glanced at him in mild awe, earning a smug little smile. “Shut up” he demanded weakly. The pain added to his annoyance. “Why would you do that to yourself?!” he asked, swallowing away the self inflicted torture in his mouth.

Logan grinned and shot Yan a look. “Her fault. She loves spicy food. She's been daring me for a decade. I guess I sort of got a taste for it” he explained.

Yan gave Nico an apologetic look and shrugged. The hint of a devilish smile on her lips as she continued eating showed just how sorry she actually was.

Shane smacked the table in amusement. “Oh, you Italians… It's time someone took you down a peg. You always go on about food, but you can't even handle a little bit of *flavour* … Guess you don't know how to eat properly after all!”. He chuckled smugly, his beard filled with an *impressive* amount of crumbs and stains…

Nico pointed his fork at him in a warning. He opened his mouth ready to set the record straight, then closed it again. *Nope. Not worth the effort.* Shane didn't deserve it.

No, he deserved something far better… Nico shot him a creepy smile instead. He raised a finger, making a chicken’s foot burst out of its gastronomic grave right under Shane’s nose. Shane’s chair responded by almost toppling over with a high pitched scrape, ready to take Shane down with it.

“Ha! Gross” Logan declared, noticeably impressed.

“Guys, *don’t play with your food …”* Yan muttered.

Nico ignored her disapproving pout and smiled proudly. One look at his dinner put him back in his place. He stabbed his food to death and took another bite, making sure to chew it as little as possible. In the back of his mind, the Italian flag waved desperately, slowly burning to cinders.

Yan sighed and shook her head a little. “Shane. *Get over here ”*.

Shane looked surprised, but complied. He scooted over, loudly scraping his chair the entire way. She wasted no time wiping his face vigorously with a napkin. Shane let her, looking down in shame.

They forced down the rest of the food in silence, too taken in by the flavour explosion to talk. The soft whimpers and sobs from the Aphrodite table played like background music, complementing the meal perfectly.

Shane got up with another loud scrape of his chair. “I’m going to bring some to Amira!” he declared happily, strutting off.

Before Nico could, Logan got up and gathered the dishes, *all* of them, in a messy stack, *way* too high. Hearing the ceramics shift when Logan turned to bring them away, Nico was sure everything was going to fall, at least *something* . Nothing did instead. *Ha.*…

Nico turned to Yan, only to be met with an intense, inquisitive look. He waited for her to spill her mind, trying not to seem too nervous.

“Hey, just between us…” she started. She narrowed her eyes a little. “You asked me before if Logan and I were… Was that because…?” she built up, clearly a little nervous for what she was about to ask.

Not nearly as nervous as Nico.

“Are *you*- ?” she almost managed.

Enough! Of course not! “*No!* No way!” Nico almost yelled, he threw in some dramatic hand gestures to really drive home his point. The absurdity and embarrassment made him feel too hot and too cold at the same time. How could she even think that!?

Yan nodded, a little taken aback. “Yeah…! No…! Okay! It’s just, the way… Nevermind!” she stammered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable” she added, serious and concerned.

Nico waved her words away. “Don’t worry. You didn’t” he blatantly lied.

Yan smiled anyway. Nico thought hard of a way to change the subject. He didn’t need to.

Shane came running up, seemingly on a new mission. Seemingly involving him. “Amira wants to talk to you!” he passed on excitedly.

Great! Nico instantly forgave Shane for his insolence earlier. He shot up. “Alright, I’ll go right now” he replied, probably a little too ambitiously.

Shane didn’t seem to notice.

“I’ll be right back” he tossed over his shoulder, deliberately not checking Yan’s reaction.

The nerves were mostly gone by the time he reached the Athena cabin and gave the door three polite knocks.

Amira opened the door. In nothing but a towel… Well, two towels, to her credit. One wrapped tightly around her head to tame her usually wild, lush forest of curls. Nico quickly locked onto her eyes. In an even more brazen statement, she didn't invite him in, but rather opted to step outside. She eyed his nervous expression, her gaze now back to its usual frosty sharpness. The bath must have been exceptionally relaxing.

"Why are you nervous? Is it because I'm not dressed? I thought you were gay" she stated.

"Uh…". Was that a good point? He wasn't sure. He tried to relax his shoulders anyway.

She took note and continued. "I'm sorry to bother you again so soon" she started, adjusting her firm grip on her towel.

He waved her words away. "Don't say that".

She nodded. "In the bath, I thought it over. The riddle makes no sense to me".

That didn't surprise Nico. It was about love after all.

"So I figured I'd ask you for help figuring it out".

That did surprise Nico. It was about *love* after all… He narrowed his eyes.

She put up a hand before he could protest and continued further. "The enemy spoke of ' *Old ones* '. I'm assuming we're dealing with a God. An ancient one. That would explain the interference of Nemesis. But. ' *Bringing death to love itself* ''. Why would Thanatos involve himself with lady Aphrodite? Or even Nemesis" she asked.

Oh. The reason she asked for him made sense to him now. "I think you're taking this way too literally" he countered.

She narrowed her eyes in stern confusion.

He continued. "I doubt she meant death as in killing. I think she means what makes people fall out of love".

Amira seemed displeased. "Yes… You're probably right…" she muttered in defeat.

He held up his hands in solidarity. "I'm easily as bad at this as you are…I know nothing about love". He mulled it over. Will popped into his head. "I do have some experience killing it though…".

She raised an eyebrow. "How?".

Crap.… He sighed. "It's complicated. Basically, I'm an asshole. We got into a massive fight… ".

They stared at each other intently.

“Eris” Nico concluded.

Amira grabbed his shoulders. “Yes!” she affirmed loudly.

Nico smiled widely. Amira’s towel fell down. She seemed unfazed. Nico tried to be too.

“I will write to Lady Aphrodite immediately!” she declared. She held out a hand for a handshake.

Nico shook it, staring at her eyes. Nothing but her eyes.

“Thank you” she squeezed into his hand.

Nico opened his mouth. He didn’t get a chance to say anything. She spun around and paced inside, shutting the door behind her. Nico took a second to gather himself. A second too long.

Amira threw the door open again, clearly still too rushed to bother covering herself. “Could you give this to Yan for me?”. She held out a neatly folded piece of paper.

Nico’s eyes gratefully accepted the distraction. He swiped it out of her hand. “ *Yes* ”.

Amira nodded, he nodded back. The door closed in his face. The towel on the grass gave him one last apologetic look before he turned. He sped off, just in case she burst back out the door again.

He made his way back to Yan. Logan had apparently found her first.

"Thought you left!" he greeted him.

"Went to see Amira" Nico greeted back. “All of her…” he complained.

Yan gave him a pitiful look. “She was naked, wasn’t she? Sorry, I should have warned you. She does that…”. She obviously spoke from experience.

“Prudes” Logan shrugged. “Neither of you are even into women” he concluded with a mild shake of his head.

Nico held out the piece of paper for Yan. “From Amira”.

After a few surprised blinks, she carefully folded it open. Nico tried not to look, but it was hard to miss. Four starts of sentences, longer and longer. All crossed out with a single straight line. Underneath just two words, larger than the ones before. ‘ Thank you ’ . Yan stared at the words for a while. She carefully folded it back up and put it in her pocket. Nico thought he saw the hints of tears above her smile.

“Is that why she sent Shane?” she asked.

“No, not just that, at least. She had trouble with the Sphinx’ riddle”.

Logan cocked his head. “She *asked* for *help?!* Hah…”.

Nico felt the corner of his mouth curl up a bit at the sight of his faint proud smile. “Yep. Believe it or not, we actually seem to have figured it out too. It's probably Eris, Goddess of strife” he revealed undramatically.

Yan and Logan hummed in wonder.

“Nice! How'd you know?” Yan asked.

Crap…! Again?! “Bad breakup…” Nico threw at her, declining to go into any further depth.

She slapped herself against the forehead and dug into her bag. “ *Wow!* I almost forgot!”. She held out something for him.

His heart almost stopped as he took in the little Apollo figurine.

“Will wanted me to give this back to you” she explained happily. She looked a little confused when he didn’t react. *At all.* “You don’t recognize it? Weren't you, like, super into Mythomagic?” she asked, even more confused.

Nico felt Logan's eyes scorch the side of his head like two red hot pokers. He ignored him. “No, not really. Not for a *very* long time, at least” he lied. “I forgot pretty much all about it” he lied even more.

“Oh… Well, it seemed pretty sentimental to him… Do you want me to give it back…?” she asked.

Fuck no! That would be painful as hell. Still, how was he going to get out of this mess?! He considered stabbing the evil little figurine into his heart to put him out of his misery. Yeah, no… It would take ages to bleed out. “Uh… No…” He stammered, grabbing it out of her hand.

Yan recovered a lot quicker than he did. “Cool! Hey, I need to go. Thank you so much! For everything!”. She opened her arms, then hesitated.

Poor thing. He moved closer, compromising on one arm. “It’s fine, Yan. See you next time”.

She gave him a careful squeeze, then went on to take out the rest of her affection on Logan. “Good night!” she left behind.

Nico’s grip tightened around the figurine. He gave it one quick glare and buried it into his pocket, *six feet deep.* He looked over at the cabins in the distance, mostly to avoid Logan’s inevitable judgement. Daringly, he glanced at him. His smirk did not disappoint.

“Stop it” Nico commanded.

Logan smirked wider.

“ *Stop”* Nico almost shouted.

“I'm not doing anything!” Logan laughed.

Nico sighed and rolled his eyes, turning away slightly.

“ Nerd ” Logan muttered quietly.

Nico jabbed him in the arm. “I was like *twelve”* he groaned, skillfully chopping off a few years in his favor.

Logan nudged him in the chest with a fist . “Don't take yourself so seriously”.

Nico gave him a cold scowl.

“Look, it's not a big deal. I was a boy scout for four years” Logan added.

Nico instantly warmed back up. “No way” he practically gasped.

“ *Oh, yeah.* Boy Scouts is huge where I'm from. It's part of the whole Mormon cult thing. My stepdad thought it would teach me some discipline. He didn't let me get out until middle school. It got very annoying, very fast”.

Nico tried not to smile too wide. “How many badges did you get?” he asked.

Logan folded his arms. “How many cards did you have? Did you carry them around in a binder?” he asked in return, squashing Nico's sneak attack effortlessly.

Nico pursed his lips.

Logan let up, smiling genuinely. “Way too many, by the way. I was actually pretty good at it”.

Nico gave him a guilty smile. “Yeah, same… And yes, I did have a binder”. They grinned at each other.

Logan took a deep breath. "I should probably get going. It's pretty late…".

Nico looked at the horizon. No more sunset. He looked back to Logan. No, still a hint of it. “Yeah. Me too” he agreed.

“The drive home is going to be interesting”. Logan held up his right arm a bit. “Really wish I didn't drive a stick shift right now” he complained cheerfully, laughing at his own misery.

Nico smiled, but couldn't really get himself to laugh at the idea of how painful that was probably going to be, let alone dangerous… “Want me to drop you off?” he offered.

Logan looked surprised. He smiled and shook his head. “Nah, I really need to get my car home, but thanks”.

Nico held up a hand in an offering gesture. “I can take the car, It's no big deal”.

Logan seemed even more surprised.

Nico smiled a little smugly at that. “Seriously. I've dragged a statue like five times the size over here all the way from Rome”.

Logan grinned in awe. “Are you trying to impress me?” he asked smugly.

Nico let out a mocking laugh. “ *Trying?* Barely!” he lied… *He lied?!* Some nerves hit him.

Logan smiled wider, then stopped. “I don’t know… You only just got some life back in you…”.

Nico shrugged. “It’s fine. It’s on my way anyway” he made up on the spot.

“It’s no use trying to change your mind, is it?” Logan asked accusatorily.

Nico gave him a lopsided smile in a silent admission of guilt.

“Okay… Thanks” Logan sighed, returning a lopsided smile of his own. “It’s close by, at the edge of camp” he explained, beckoning for him to follow.

Nico did, noticing some nerves creep up again. He pushed them down. No need to worry. This really *was* no big deal. He really *had* done much more. When he was only fifteen no less. So, no point in being nervous.

Right? ...

So why was he?

The most beat up, rusty red truck Nico had ever seen crept into sight. It was ancient. Even the small golden cross, still proudly presented in the middle of the grill, had lost its shine somewhere along the years. Logan slapped the hood and grinned at him over his shoulder.

“I see you’ve been practicing your necromancy?” Nico jabbed.

Logan snorted. “Hey watch it, this was my grandpa’s car”.

Nico couldn’t help it. “His first?”. He scored a point.

Logan turned around, arms crossed. He was still grinning, but he could tell he was getting under his skin. “Shut up… This old lady is younger than you are, anyway. *You old fart”* .

Nico grinned. He got him down to playground insults. That had to be another point. “You got me there, but…”. He slowly ran a scrutinizing finger over a particularly rusty patch. “I'd like to think I've aged a little more *gracefully* . Sorry, but your old lady's skincare routine kinda sucks”. He feigned an apologetic look.

Logan closed his eyes and let out a defeated sigh. He rapped his fingers against the hood for a bit and gave him an amused, but clearly agitated, grin.

Nico smirked. He'd managed to annoy the 'clever' out of him. Winning that hard was rare.

"Okay , *pretty boy* … You win this time" Logan concluded with a wink, and a genuine smile.

A burning flash of heat immediately turned up on Nico's face to dispute his victory.

Logan laughed at him. "On second thought, you two look way more alike than I thought". He gave the bright red paint a firm tap.

Nico's turn to close his eyes and sigh in defeat. He leaned on the hood, grabbed the grill with one hand and offered his other to Logan. Logan took it and mirrored him. Nico pulled on the car as he drew the shadows in to meet them. It was fine, a little heavier than usual, but nothing he hadn't dealt with before. If anything, the car was the least difficult thing about this, he realized as Logan slightly adjusted his grip, accidentally running his thumb over his. He swallowed dryly, willing himself not to get distracted.

As soon as the car burst out of the shadows and settled in the grass Nico slipped down a good amount. With impressive speed, Logan turned and shot out his arms to catch him. He quickly hoisted him back up, hissing in pain while doing so. In his wince, he bent Nico backwards a bit, under him. Nico subconsciously pressed a hand on Logan's upper arm, where the wound should be, leaving his other on the hood of the car to steady himself.

" *Are you-?* " they both started to ask.

Logan chuckled. "Yeah. You?" he asked, looking down into his eyes with warm concern.

Nico quickly pulled his hand back, only now realizing their accidental *intimate* position . "Yeah! Fine!" he croaked out, facing away.

Logan didn't sound entirely convinced by his eagerness, probably *because* of his eagerness... "Are you sure…? No offense, but… You're sort of a shivering mess. Maybe you should stay here for the night…?". His hand moved down Nico's waist a little. A finger grazed against bare skin, searing it.

Nico met his eyes in surprise. What were words again? The intensity of the orange almost made him agree on impulse. "Y-". *Almost.* " *No* , uh… No thanks… I can't. I gotta go… *Somewhere!* ".

Logan narrowed his eyes as Nico panicked internally, then carefully smiled down at him. "Let me guess, no way to convince you otherwise?".

Nico couldn't take his eyes off his lips as they formed the question. He didn't want to think of an answer to it. He felt his hands start to tremble even more.

Get out of this!

Now!

“ *Nope!* ” he tossed out loudly in Logan’s face, making him back up just far enough to create an opening. Nico quickly squirmed out from under him, to safety. As far away from his *very* warm hands as he could in one or two steps. This only seemed to deepen Logan’s concern, his eyes burning into him as they followed. “Don't worry! I'm just a little… *Cold* ” he stammered.

Logan eyed him warily, but didn't try to stop him. He stood up straight and stared at him, puzzled. “Okay, *man of mystery...* Be safe out there” he pleaded.

“Stop worrying already! I'm going somewhere warm” Nico decided then and there, earning a faint smile. He set out to score the match point and stuck up two fingers. “Scout’s honor” he added with a devilish smirk.

Logan laughed loudly. “Fine. *But, that's a big deal.* So, it better be true” he warned with exaggerated heaviness, sticking up two fingers in return. He smiled warmly. “Thanks a lot. I really owe you… *Again*”.

Nico shook his head before he escaped into the shadows. “You don't. It's nothing. Just fix your arm”. He took two steps backwards.

Two doves startled in the trees behind him and flew out overhead. Their snow white feather coats stuck out against the dark night sky.

He turned around and let the cold, eerie whispers wash over his face. They helped him clear his head. It was nice. Maybe a little too nice. He just kept moving. Stepping in and out. From place to place. Getting as much distance in as he could.

He stopped when he fell backwards out of the shadows and onto a *very hard* floor, making someone scream out in horror.

A few people he assumed to be tourists quickly made their way down a large stone stairway, desperate to get away from him.

The weather here seemed warm enough…

He dropped his head back down and caught his breath, staring up at a humongous face. It was partially obscured by shade. The sun hiding behind it gave it a divine looking halo. The face stared back at him peacefully. *Harmoniously,* in fact.

He finally recognized the massive Tian Tan Buddha.

Hong Kong… Yeah. Good enough… Pretty much the other side of the world. With a little bit of luck the physical distance would overcome the emotional closeness he'd somehow gotten trapped in.

He rolled over and got to his knees, trying to get a better look at the enormous God's face. The Buddha seemed to welcome him politely. He returned the Buddha's faint, pleasant smile in gratitude.

He replayed the day in his mind. Maybe he'd never see any of them again after tonight. Relief and disappointment wrestled each other, giving it their all. Relief took disappointment in a chokehold and slowly but surely snuffed it out. It was probably for the best. He sighed one of the longest sighs in his life.

Right after, his phone buzzed. It almost never did that. He pulled it out and opened it. A message. He almost never got those.

Hazel? No… *if only* .

Logan had apparently not been done with him.

Nico opened it, only to make his stomach jump. It was a picture… Of Nico... It took him a little while to process, seeing it on the small screen. He was clearly sleeping, his head on Logan's lap. Based on the angle, Logan was obviously the culprit behind the photo. Nico's cheek in the palm of his hand, tilted a bit to face the camera.

Oh, Gods, no... Nico was ashamed to see how peaceful he looked. He started to smile before he caught himself, quickly managing to steer it into an angry pout.

[creep] he sent back. He snapped his phone shut. When it buzzed again a few seconds later, he didn't look again. Not *immediately* , anyway.

[you started it <3] he got back.

Nico clicked his tongue. Was there a middle finger emoji? Yes there was. *Good* . He pressed send and snapped his phone back shut. For good this time. No more messages, relief reassured him.

Probably never again after today.… Disappointment quietly rose back up behind relief and hit it in the back with a folding chair. Frustration called the match.

Why? Why did he keep thinking about him? Why couldn't he just let it go? He'd done this so many times before. You meet people, then you let them go. Sure, it hurt a little sometimes. But, If you didn't, it hurt infinitely more when they inevitably let *you* go… So, no choice, really… *He knew that.* So, why did it never get any easier? In fact, it only seemed to be getting *harder!*

Yan's inquisitive look popped back into his mind, the obvious glint of doubt in her eyes behind the surprise, even after he'd cleared up what was going on. What *wasn't* going on!

He gripped his knees tightly and ground his teeth, grinding up all his feelings, then looked up in exasperation. *What the fuck am I supposed to do?!* The Buddha smiled all-knowingly at him, all the way from Nirvana. Nico scoffed loudly. *Well, what the fuck do you know*

anyway?! With a fittingly dramatic flutter of his coat, he turned heel, down the seemingly infinite stairs.

Chapter 10: X. Star-crossed idiots

Chapter Notes

> All warnings are spoilers:
> Crying, Daddy issues, tree abuse, Gay panic attacks, regular panic attack, hint at slur being used and homophobia, PTSD/nightmares, Non explicit(?) wet dream.

He tore some pieces off of his muffuletta and cast them to the pigeons. The feathery piranha's frenzied around the bread. Fighting beak and talon to be the first to get to-!

Something rustled on his shoulder. He turned in disbelief to the large white dove perched onto him. The dove cocked its head and side eyed him with a vapid, yet somehow pleasant look. It cooed quietly. Why did it sound *encouraging…?*

He hesitantly lifted a finger. It hopped on and sat tight as he lowered his hand. He noticed the small scroll neatly tied to its leg with a flowy pink ribbon. It lifted its dainty ankle for him to reach. Nico gingerly freed the dove from its apparent quest.

He unrolled the message and tried to decipher the flowery handwriting.

Ma Chérie,

One million kisses to you. I have read and reread your friend's report with full devotion. Though I am most grateful for your work, the revelation plunged into my heart like a flaming sword.

Eris.

My shadow, some might say, I even used to say not long ago. I truly cannot believe it. Tell me it cannot be true. I beg of you. My Rage burns with the passion of a thousand suns. Such betrayal. Such heartbreak. Sorrow fills my soul. As women, Nay, as Goddesses, Nay, even as advesar-

An inevitable eyeroll stopped him from reading. He unrolled the scroll to its full length. *Yeah… No…* He skipped to the end.

I yearn to see you. Please come to me at dawn. I will be waiting for you at the location of our latest rendez-vous. We will discuss the affair more intimately. Your partner will meet you there.

Forever yours,

Aphrodite

Partner? Who? Yan or Amira? He pursed his lips. That would be fine. *Shane?* He snorted. That would be a *disaster*… *Logan?* He tensed up. His chest hurt a little. He grasped at it.

The dove cooed pressingly, putting a stop to his inner turmoil. He looked at it, almost about to ask what was wrong. It wouldn't have been any use, the dove only had eyes for his breakfast. Nico smiled and ripped a piece off. He held out his hand. The little postman happily took to his well deserved meal.

As soon as it finished it immediately took off, back into the air. He watched as it soared away. It looked like a small angel ascending back to heaven.

Dawn broke quicker than he'd liked, leaving the haze of the last day somewhere far away. He hadn't had enough time to prepare. Then again, no amount of time would have been able to prepare him for this.

A dark clad figure stood out against the morning sun. A straight, confident posture he'd probably recognize from miles away by now. Delight and dread took turns pinching his heart as he made his way towards him.

Get a grip. Come on.… A few forced deep breaths calmed his nerves a little, but it was hardly enough to keep them at bay. Despite an onslaught of thoughts he managed to register the minefield of rotten apples on the ground and step around them.

He couldn't be reckless about this.

He shouldn't let this get any worse.

The closer he got to him, the more this was going to hurt. There was no way any of this was going to last. Getting used to this would be unfair to himself. He'd learned that the hard way many, many times over.

Life was fickle and cruel. *Exactly* like the two Goddesses that were the *only* reason they were seeing each other right now…

It was time to get more serious, to set some tight boundaries… The same way he always did, of course… He took a deep breath and pulled out his best resting bitch face. He prepared to greet him, cold and collected.

Before he could, Logan turned around and met his eyes. Logan's scowl instantly let up, small fires dancing with excitement above his wide grin. "Hey, Spooky! I was hoping it'd be you. I missed you!" he greeted with an unmatched warmth.

Nico almost tripped over an apple. *Fuck.*

Logan laughed and stuck out a hand to steady him.

Nico quickly straightened up and pulled back, just out of reach. "... Hi…" he managed, painfully awkward. Good start, awkward was great at keeping people away. Still… His face burned a little.

Logan looked happy enough, apart from the dark circles under his eyes.

Nico pursed his lips. "How are you doing?" slipped out. That was fine, it had sounded formal enough. Something you'd ask any colleague, right?

Logan gave him a half smile, suddenly looking a lot more tired. "Bad most of the time. So, pretty much still the same" he shrugged.

Nico returned a half smile. "Sucks. Hope you feel better soon" he offered, strictly professionally.

Logan's smile brightened. "Well, it's nice to see you, at least". He nudged Nico's stomach with his fist, making his breath pause.

To his horror, Logan didn't back down. He moved his hand up and ran the back of his finger past Nico's jaw line. It was a quick, almost clinical movement. Nothing to read into in the slightest. Nico knew that… It burned so bad he froze solid.

"See you haven't shaved in a while!" Logan mocked. His grin wasn't like his usual. It tried to be, but the jest was clearly forced.

Nico tried his best to pretend it wasn't. "Yeah… I'm trying to go for a slightly more *casual* vibe… Don't wanna come across so *stuck-up* all the time…". *Oof.* He needed to force his own grin through that sneer. That wasn't a particularly fond memory...

Logan let out a short, barely viable laugh. "Right…". He narrowed his eyes, seemingly close to done with playing games.

Nico crossed his arms defensively and tried to think of a way out. Any way out.

Too late.

"So… *how have you been?*" Logan asked intently.

Shit… Nico's stomach churned.

An apple from the tree above them broke the silence, hitting the ground with a dull thud. It was inspiring, honestly.

"Yeah, great…". He tossed the words at his feet, with an equally dull thud.

Logan took a small step closer and cocked his head, maintaining eye contact. It made Nico nervous when he looked at him like that. It felt like he was trying to stare right through all the walls he'd carefully rebuilt over the past few years. Sometimes it even felt like he actually did…

"Why do you always do that?" Logan asked warily. "You don't even think about it… You know I'm not just asking for the hell of it, right? I'm really not that *polite*". The disappointment and concern in his tone were louder than anything he'd actually said. It was times like this Nico reminisced about when Logan had punched him… That had been a lot less painful than this.

Nico tried his hardest to sound more annoyed than embarrassed. "I don't… I mean, probably because I don't *want* to think about it" he finally offered. He couldn't look him in the eye.

Logan let out a low hum. "So, it's going *that* bad, huh?" he concluded.

Nico swallowed. All emotions he'd kept locked away rattled their cage at once. "Alright" he muttered angrily. "I'm doing *really* fucking bad. *You win…*". He glanced right in time to see two angry little flames flare up.

"*Yeah? You think I enjoy this?"* Logan growled.

Nico averted himself, almost fully turning away. He tensed up as Logan put an arm around his chest, stopping him before he could make his escape.

"I'm sorry…" Logan started to his surprise. "I know I'm being annoying… *I'm just worried, man*" he pleaded.

Nico swallowed harder. How could he have let this happen? So quickly…? *Again…?* Shame and sadness burst free. He reigned them back in with a drawn out, shaky sigh. "Yeah, I know. That's *kinda* the problem" he sort of accused, sort of confessed. He added a half assed attempt at a shrug.

Logan added his other arm.

Fuck.

Logan pressed himself against his back.

Stop!

Nico braced himself.

“I'll let go if you want me to…” Logan offered, loosening his grip a little.

Nico's mind was making hundreds of calculations at the same time, all of them wrong… He just slumped the back of his head onto Logan's shoulder in defeat, and closed his eyes.

Logan responded by re-tightening his grip. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Nico shook his head a little. “*Everything*…” he breathed out heavily.

Logan paused for a second. “What… Does that mean?” he asked, more carefully.

Nico shook his head harder. “*Nothing!*” he almost hissed. *Fuck!* He was so bad at this! Of all people, how was *he* supposed to know what was going on in his head? It was a fucking mess in there! It had been for years! *Sure,* sometimes worse than other times… Like the last few weeks… But, that wasn’t out of the-!

Logan straightened up a bit against him. “Right… Okay, so… It's a little complicated. I get that… Is there any way I can help?”.

You already do. Way more than you know. Way more than you should, probably… There was no way Nico could actually say those words out loud. He opened his mouth to try anyway. All that came out was a shaky breath.

Logan gave him a few hard, reassuring pats on the chest. He knocked two tears loose. Nico quickly covered his eyes with his hands, trying to hold the rest back by force. He felt Logan lean in and his cheek rub against the back of his hand.

“I mean it! I'll do anything. No matter how dumb”.

I believe you… But. “*No…”*. Nico straightened up and rolled his shoulders to shake him off.

Logan thankfully got the hint and pulled away.

Nico cleared his throat. “Thanks… I, *uh…*”. He took a deep breath and turned around, not quite ready to face the shame, but not having much choice either way.

Logan looked back at him with a serious, still mildly concerned expression.

Nico tried not to look away. “I’m- I’ll be fine… I’m so-”.

He got interrupted by another, much less dull, thud. An apple hit Logan square on the head and made him wince. The bitter fruit took its time to roll off, and finally fell to the ground. They stared at each other for a second, their expressions now only a bad impression of what they’d been before.

Nico slowly put his fist in front of his mouth to hide his smile. “... *Sorry*” he finally finished, his voice a little strained.

Logan regained his composure, smirking and cocking his head. “Well, as long as you feel better…” he grumbled, a bit accusatorily. “And I *did* say ‘no matter how dumb’, I guess”. His

smirk warmed up a few degrees.

Dawn hadn't just come by quicker than expected, it also left in a hurry. The rest of the morning was much more patient than they were, slowly making room for the afternoon.

Clarisse paced up to them out of the trees for the third or even fourth time that day, increasingly agitated. "Our '*lady*' still hasn't shown up yet… Sorry guys. Just… Stand by, okay?".

No. Not really… "Of course…" Nico reassured her.

Logan crossed his arms and rapped his fingers on them, letting out an annoyed hum. "No" he finally concluded. "Fuck this. Fuck her" he added with a glare to Clarisse. He threw his coat at her and shot Nico a mildly apologetic look. "I'm going for a walk. If she decides to show up she can wait a while".

Clarisse was clearly about to shout at him when he turned around and walked away. She let out a low growl in frustration instead. She met Nico's eyes.

He held up his hands in an awkward gesture.

"You go too" she offered in defeat. "Don't worry, I'll explain to her when… *If* she gets here".

Walking quickly, he finally caught up with Logan near the lake. Logan noticed and turned around in mild surprise, then waited for him with a grin.

"Don't just fucking leave me to *die*…" Nico complained.

"Sorry, I thought you were too *polite* to leave" Logan half accused, half explained. He leaned in and nudged Nico's shoulder with his own.

Nico looked at Logan's right arm next to his. He remembered the last evening together at the lake. Their arms were even closer than this… Much closer. *Touching*, even. Logan had barely been able to move it back then. And tomorrow was going to be dangerous. Nico wondered, *worried*, actually… Had it healed enough?

His hand decided to investigate before his mind could step in. He quickly slid it over Logan's upper arm, dragging his sleeve up and revealing a large, roughly cross-shaped scar in the middle of the otherwise smooth skin. He squeezed down a little right above it on impulse. *Firm.* He gasped quietly at his own audacity.

“*No~!* C'mon! It's not *that* bad” Logan insisted. He held up his arm to show it off better and flexed it with a proud smirk.

Really firm!

“See? Works just fine”.

Nico quickly pulled his hand away. “Ugh! Why do you have to be such a douche about it?” he asked, pretending his hardest to hate it.

Logan's proud smirk grew, happy with his results. “Cause it's so much fun!”.

Nico sucked in his lips to prevent from smiling. “That cockiness is going to get you killed one day… Maybe it's a good thing you got that scar. Serves as a nice reminder of how *stupid* you are…” he complained.

Proving the perfect functionality of his arm further, Logan reached out his hand. “Well, if we're going to be like *that.*.. Let's compare…”. He gently ran his fingers through one side of Nico's hair moving it aside, letting his hand linger.

The scar on his forehead felt extra sensitive as the warmth of Logan's thumb carefully traced it. Nico held in his breath to not let another gasp escape. Logan dragged his eyes down from the scar to search for his, Nico forced his eyes up from Logan's pleased smile to meet them.

“Okay, yeah… Yours *does* look a lot nicer… But, I bet it was probably from something *just* as stupid”. Logan's half lidded eyes glowed into his. He winked and gave the scar a light little tap before pulling his hand away completely.

He knocked the sense right out of Nico’s head, the words just fell out with it. “I walked off a cliff…” he muttered breathlessly.

Logan's eyes brightened together with his smile. The edges of Nico's mouth curled up at the sound of his laugh. Embarrassment smacked him to put a stop to that.

“*No!* I mean… *Yeah*, I *did.*.. But, Oyzis, the Goddess of… *whatever*, tried to kill me. I think she tricked me…”.

Logan's expression turned surprised, then slightly impressed. “Damn… That *is* cooler than getting shot like a clay pigeon…” he admitted.

“Well… Not much…” Nico admitted on his turn, running the horrid, weepy memory back in his mind. “You had to be there…” he answered Logan's raised eyebrow.

Logan nudged his shoulder. “Glad you still managed to drag yourself over to Gwen's” he muttered, walking along.

Right... *to Gwen.*..*?* Nico glanced away and smiled. “Yeah, me too I'm still really grateful for all of that”. He looked back. “Not just to her…” he added carefully.

Logan smiled mischievously. “Oh, believe me. *I know.* Gwen made that *very* clear. In great detail. For *days* after. I couldn't get her to shut up about it… You know? I think she *might* have exaggerated a little…”.

Nico grinned. “Pff. Gwen? No way. She was probably spot on”.

They walked along the bank of the lake, all the way up to a large tree trunk. Based on the wear and tear, it had to have been cut down years ago.

Logan stared out onto the lake for a bit. Then he gave the ancient looking tree trunk a firm kick. “Had my first kiss here…” he shared, obviously reminiscing.

Gross. Nico rolled his eyes at Logan's fond smile.

“And it was fucking *awful.*.. She cut her tongue on my braces. *Badly.*.. Blood everywhere…” Logan went on. The fondness in his tone didn't waver even a bit.

Nico tried not to laugh. “Sounds about right. Somehow all your stories end in bloodshed” he replied.

Logan smiled in agreement. “I wonder how she's doing…” he mumbled quietly.

Something about that bothered Nico a little. *Why?* Wasn't it perfectly normal to care about people? Miss people? He sure did… Still, he couldn't bring himself to ask about her. “You had braces?” Nico asked instead.

Logan turned to look at him. “We can't *all* have naturally perfect teeth, Spooky. Some people need a little work…”.

Nico demonstrated his indeed naturally perfect teeth with a toothy grin, trying to get on his nerves a little. Surprise hit him when it didn't work out as intended at all. He got a much more sincere, unnaturally perfect, toothy grin in return.

Fuck. Nico dimmed down instantly.

Logan toned down to a warm smile and looked away. He narrowed his eyes and shook his head slowly. “I've had *tons* of braces, actually... I kept breaking them somehow…” he said with genuine puzzlement.

The puzzle didn't seem that complicated to Nico. This time he did laugh.

“Wish my mom had your sense of humour about it…” Logan muttered.

Nico moved over and sat down on the stump. To his surprise, Logan did the same. That was fine. This was fine. There wasn’t even really a ‘this’ anyway, nothing was happening.

A particularly elegant swan couple swam past, nudging each other lovingly with their beaks. That was fine too… He shook off the nerves. They turned to look at each other at the same

time. Their noses almost touched.

Nico's heart dropped. Logan scowled at him with an intensity he hadn't seen in a very long time. He looked almost… *Murderous.*

What…?! Why?! Nico hadn't done anything! He wasn't even *going* to do anything! He cracked through the ice and jerked back. As far as his hands, still clamped tight onto the tree stump, would allow. Dread and shame stabbed him in the chest.

Logan didn't move. That's when Nico realized he wasn't looking *at* him, but *past* him. He followed his gaze and quickly got up. He took a few steps to the side and stood to attention for the imposing figure approaching them.

Logan made a point not to follow suit. He ignored the intruder to a degree of true performance art.

"You weren't at the Ares cabin…" Ares noted. "I've been looking for you".

Logan didn't turn to look at him. "Hm…" he almost dignified a response. It sounded indifferent, but the rapping of his fingers against his arm gave him away.

"Heard you two are going after Eris… She's like a sister to me, so I know her better than most… It's *not* going to be easy. I wanted to give you something to help you on your way" Ares continued calmly. He rummaged in the pocket of his jacket, then held out his hand. A roughly textured, bronze ring covered in patches of blueish green patina laid on his palm.

Logan still didn't look. "No thanks. Not interested" he replied flatly.

"Don't be so stubborn. You don't even know what it is yet. Believe me, it suits you and I promise it'll be useful" Ares tried.

"Don't need it" Logan reiterated. His tone was starting to become less and less cool.

Ares seemed to notice too. He closed his hand, dropping his arm a little. "... How have you been?" he asked reluctantly.

"Do you mean since the last time we spoke *ten* years ago? Or since Curt killed mom and himself right in front of me? Not great, either way" Logan shrugged. "*You could have asked a little sooner*" he added with a bitter tone.

This seemed to ignite Ares a little, his awkwardness making way for frustration. He lowered his sunglasses to glare more effectively, revealing two pits of bright fire, trailing embers off into the air. "Listen here, you brat, It's not like I *wasn't interested* before! But your mother-" he cut himself off, seemingly thinking of what to say.

Logan did turn now, clearly pissed off. "What about mom?! Are you seriously going to make this *her* fault?!" he asked, bitterness quickly turning into anger.

"I'm not saying anything is her fault! But she was pretty clear about what she wanted from me. Nothing! So I backed off as soon as she married that *loony"* Ares spat.

Logan snapped, blowing up like a bomb. He got up close, despite the height difference it still managed to give off a threatening aura. The fire in his eyes did most of the work. Despite not being made of literal fire, they didn't burn any less bright than his father's. "*Don't you fucking dare!* You're the *only* fucking person who's got *no* right talking about Curt that way! You have no idea who he even was! You've never even met him! Sure, Curt lost his mind and he fucked up in the *worst* way, but that was never who he was. He's never said one bad word about your jealous, petty ass. But forget that, at least he was there all those years! What have you ever done for us? You didn't even show up for mom's funeral!".

Ares snapped right back at him. "Shut your mouth! Who do you think you're talking to?! You have no idea-!" he cut himself off again. "She was *very* clear about what she thought of me the last time we spoke! She would not have wanted me there, and I was big enough to respect her wishes!" he continued, struggling to regain control.

Logan turned icy cold. "She's *dead.* Who cares what she would have wanted?! *I* wanted you there!".

Nico thought he saw Ares' burning eyes smoke for a second.

"You're a fucking coward, you know that?".

Ares clenched his jaw and shook his head. "I can't *undo-!*". He huffed and stuck out his hand one last time. "Just take it…" he said uncharacteristically quietly. It almost sounded like a plea.

Logan didn't budge. The standoff lasted only a few seconds, some *very long* seconds. A menacing grin swept across Logan's face, and Nico instantly lost all hope this was going to end well.

Logan swiped the ring out of Ares' hand and held it up to his face between two fingers. "*Surprisingly thoughtful of you. You really shouldn't have*" he spat. He turned and flung the ring as far into the lake as he could.

Crap. Nico hissed. That took a turn. Not one he didn't expect, but still… A pretty *sharp* turn. He eyed both nervously.

Logan turned to glare at Ares. "Stay the hell out of my life. You've been pretty good at that till now". By the sound of it, his voice almost wasn't able to carry the amount of disdain he put into it. He stormed off, quickly disappearing in the crowd of trees.

Ares stood there, obviously furious, more obviously defeated.

"I don't think he really means that…" Nico tried. Did he even believe that himself?

Ares turned to look at him but didn't respond right away. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "You're that Hades spawn, right? Then you should know that boy has never once said anything that he didn't mean" he gruffed. He took a long drag from his cigarette.

Nico took in the familiar scene.

“You better strap in, cousin. He's *exactly* like his mother…” Ares exhaled with a long stream of smoke.

“Forgive me, but I think you're more alike than you realize” Nico said, willing to risk offending him a little. Logan better not find out he said that, though...

“Strap in *extra* tight then” Ares warned coldly.

Nico didn’t really know how to end this forced conversation, that neither of them seemed very keen on continuing. “I, uh… I should probably…” he started, gesturing awkwardly and dropping his arm back down.

The swan couple ran up and took off, flying over. As they did, one of them dropped a very unelegant wet bomb onto Ares’ shoulder. They both stared at it as it ran down his arm.

Yep... *Nope.*.. There was no saving this situation anymore. Nico just straightened his shoulders and nodded. “My lord” he said, turning and pacing off after Logan.

Slowing down, he wondered if he should… This would be a pretty good opportunity to create some distance. Logan seemed pretty upset though… Couldn’t he just create some distance after checking up? That sounded fair, right?

He caught up quicker than he expected, finding Logan smoking his own moody, post-fight cigarette. The relief evaporated when Logan glanced over, *a lot more* upset than he’d anticipated.

He wasn’t crying, but not that far off… Logan pulled the cigarette butt from his mouth, knuckles noticeably bruised and a little bloody, and pressed it out against a suspiciously bark-lacking spot on the unlucky tree next to him. It sizzled out with an angry hiss. He gave him a painful look and opened his mouth.

Nico cut him off before he could even begin. “You're hogging all the daddy issues. Save some for the rest of us” he complained, trying to lift his spirit a little.

It worked. Logan gave him an annoyed smile, then cocked his head and visibly thought it over. He reluctantly shrugged in agreement.

They chuckled quietly.

As Nico was about to ask how he was doing, he thought he caught a glimpse of a tall, blonde young man walking past at a distance. A very familiar looking tall, blonde young man… One he hadn't seen in... *Years!* He moved on impulse, grabbed two handfuls of Logan’s shirt, shoved him against the tree, and leaned in after him in a desperate attempt to hide.

Logan didn’t seem to realize the life and death level of seriousness to the situation. “What the-!?”.

Nico shoved his hand over his mouth trying to get him to shut up. A little more rough than he wished he had… But it worked. He held him tightly in place.

With an equal amount of panic and care, he scanned the area around them. *Already out of sight…*

Logan let out an annoyed huff against his hand. Sure. He'd earned that right. Nico would apologize later. He had some panicking to finish up first.

Gods, this was bad. What if Will heard them…? What if he'd *seen* him? *Doesn't matter, he's gone*. He allowed his heart to unfold itself, barely even registering Logan opening his mouth under the palm of his hand until-!

Ow! Nico suppressed a yelp and turned to stare at Logan in angry disbelief. He was met with a wide, impish, *very* toothy smirk, the edge of his hand firmly trapped in it. He glared at the evil little fires twinkling above it. "*Rude!"* he scolded as he tugged his hand free.

Logan took over some of his angry disbelief. "Me?!" he practically shouted. "You know? There are way *nicer* ways to get someone to shut up, Spooky…" he complained. The devious wink he added immediately scorched Nico's face.

He couldn't mean…?!

Thankfully, Logan didn't let him suffer long. "Next time just *tell* me… You don't have to choke me".

Nico pursed his lips. That was a relief. Something deeply rooted in him decided to sabotage himself. He narrowed his eyes and hummed in feigned consideration. "I thought you'd be into that…". He should have known better.

The grin returned instantly, as did a small flash of evil fire. "You bet! But, there's a little more *finesse* to it. *If you want, I can show you"* he threatened suggestively.

The scorch on Nico's face erupted into bright red flames.

Clarisse showed up just in time to save him. "*Where have you guys been all this time?! I've been looking all over!"* she barked, marching up closer. "*Why are you hiding-!?"* she stopped mid bark.

She stared at them in sudden realization.

Huh?! What realization? He felt Logan's chest snicker against the palm of his hand. Nico snapped to look at him, still pushed against the tree. He pulled back his hand, throwing both of them up in the air in surrender.

"*Just…! Come with me! Right now!"* Clarisse yipped like a much smaller, much angrier dog.

Nico slapped his forehead with both hands and left them there for a while. They were nice and cold. They were trembling… He felt someone else's, much warmer hand on his shoulder. When he went to check he was met with Logan's now concerned look.

“Dude, what was all this about? You're still *really* freaked out”.

Nico sighed. He looked at Clarisse's back, quickly getting in more distance between them. “I'll explain later... Let's just get this over with…”. He followed after her, then heard Logan do the same.

Clarisse stopped and gestured to the middle of the clearing. They walked past her and up to someone else’s back.

A tall beautiful woman stood with her arms crossed, tapping her needle thin heel impatiently. She kicked a rotten apple, hitting the tree in front of her with a wet sound. As soon as she noticed their arrival, she twirled around and swayed her hips over to them. “Aaah! Mes vrais amours!” she cooed, sticking her arms out as widely as possible. She reached out and sensually ran her fingers down their chins. “*You kept me waiting!”* she growled suddenly. She stopped her fingers and left them at their throats in a clear threat.

Nico gave her an apologetic smile. Logan a much more menacing one.

Her glare softened anyway. “Well, you’re here now. That’s all that matters” she declared. She leaned back and draped the back of her hand over her eyes. “Thank you for coming to me in my time of desperate need!” she wailed. “The past weeks… I’ve been devastated! Eris! How could she!?”. She moved her hand just an inch, giving them a very serious look out from under her hand. “*I need you to defend my honor*” she demanded through clenched teeth.

They all stared at each other for a few seconds.

“Yes. My lady. Uhh… How? What do you want us to do?” Nico asked.

Aphrodite let up a bit and giggled. “Jacques merde, my sweet boy! *Almost* nothing!” she reassured. She wafted a hand at them. “Just go to her and prove that love will always overcome strife, no matter what!”.

Uhhh... He glanced over at Logan. Another wary, questioning look met his.

She gave them an adoring smile. “Don’t fret. I’m sure you’ll figure it out along the way” she said dismissively.

Alright… No pressure, I guess…

Logan spoke up. “And if we refuse to play along?” he asked, clearly heavily leaning towards that option.

Aphrodite giggled humourlessly. “Why, silly you! I would rip your *crétin* little hearts out, *of course!*” she vowed, eagerly crushing something invisible in her fist. The way her pupils dilated showed she wasn’t speaking figuratively…

See? No pressure at all...

Neither of them made a sound, staring straight ahead.

Satisfied with their enthusiastic agreement, she moved along quickly. “Last I’ve heard she was staying under Ms. Robinson’s office. *Far* under. In the executive office all the way in Hades. There is a secret entrance. You can take the elevator down”.

Nico tried to take in the information.

As soon as he did, Aphrodite continued further. She pursed her perfectly applied lipstick. ”It’s past office hours… It will be useless trying to get in now. You will enter in the morning. Don’t wander off, stay here for the night!” she demanded, wafting her hand at them once more.

Seriously? She was the one who showed up late! And why couldn’t they leave? Nico bit his tongue, literally this time. Aphrodite was so… *grating!*

“What the fuck?! *You’re the one* who kept us waiting for *hours!*” Logan shouted.

Aphrodite raised her hand threateningly, about to strike. Logan backed up, seemingly on instinct. She smiled to herself, obviously very pleased with the returns of her earlier investment.

She folded her hands, looking at Nico. “Mon guerrier angélique… S'il vous plait… *Pour moi?*” she pleaded, pouting at him.

“Of course… *My lady…*” he muttered through gritted teeth.

Aphrodite smiled so brightly it was almost blinding. She cupped his face and kissed him on both cheeks. She moved over to Logan, and stopped with a contemplative look. She took hold of his chin, turning him towards her and staring deeply into his eyes. “You're exactly like your father” she stated in equal amusement and disdain.

Crap!

Amber detonated in a violent explosion. Logan opened his mouth and took a threatening step forward.

Nico flung his arms around him to restrain him, wrapping himself tightly around his back. *Aphrodite, you stupid cow! You’ve doomed us all!* The impending doom stayed pending for a while, hanging in the bloodlust filled air. He felt Logan settle down with a frustrated sigh.

Logan faced away with a jerk of his chin, avoiding her as best he could from his confinement.

Nico slowly, reluctantly, let go of him.

Aphrodite caressed her own chin, her lipstick in an absolutely villainous little smile. “Oui, oui… *very* good” she taunted in conclusion.

Logan jerked his face back to her.

Nope.

Enough of this.

Enough of her.

Nico grabbed hold on his upper arm, hooking both his own arms around it. He needed to throw in all his body weight to get Logan into gear. "*Excuse us*" Nico quickly tossed out as he pulled him along.

Aphrodite smiled even more evilly, playfully blowing them a kiss goodbye.

Nico let go as soon as they were out of earshot.

"*Gods!"* Logan spat. He gave Nico a frustrated look. "If I ever get offered immortality, remind me to turn it down! I can't deal with these fucking *sociopaths* a second longer! *Let alone an eternity!*".

Nico stifled a laugh and shook his head. "Don't worry. Fat chance they'll offer us something like that over cleaning up this mess…".

Logan shot him an amused but pensive look. "On second thought… If they ever do… I'll do it, if you do".

He jabbed Nico in the shoulder. Nico forgot to bounce back from it.

"Can't let you get even more *powerful* than me!" Logan joked.

Nico felt a smile take over. "Pff…" he breathed out in disbelief. He waved his hand with feigned humility, making sure to grin extra smug while doing so. "*Right!"* he said loudly, walking the line between biting sarcasm and wholehearted agreement perfectly.

Logan chuckled. "Besides, there'd be much worse ways to spend eternity" he concluded. Luckily, he looked away before Nico's smug expression shattered into a million pieces.

Nico quickly gathered the countless shards and threw them back together. "Are you ready for this? To follow me to Hades and back, I mean?" he asked, steering the conversation back to business.

All distractions aside, this was a big deal. Hades wasn't exactly a cakewalk… Not even that close to the surface.

Logan grinned. "Sure, that sounds fun" he shrugged.

Fun… "Glad you're taking this so seriously" Nico muttered in fluent sarcasm.

“I’m just trying to lighten the mood, I guess. You seem really stressed out” Logan countered, in his native sincerity.

Nico opened his mouth, ready to demonstrate another, more rough sounding dialect of sarcasm. Logan’s genuine friendly concern made him code-switch. “Yeah… Sorry… I’ll try to relax” he offered in broken sincerity. He’d meant it, but ‘relaxing’ was damn near impossible around Logan. He didn’t even dare to look, afraid to see even more *friendliness.*

A reassuring hand ran over his shoulder, his coat didn’t protect against its heat whatsoever...

“I, uh… I think I’ll go to my cabin” Nico quickly stammered.

“Sounds smart” Logan agreed. “Do you mind if I walk along? It’s on the way to ours anyway”.

That seemed fair. He couldn’t come up with any reasons to say ‘no’ that weren’t *unfair* at least. “Uh, sure…”.

They walked in silence. Not an awkward one, as far as Nico could read from the smile on Logan’s face, but somehow definitely not one he was comfortable with. It didn’t help that they were heading for the busiest part of camp… He needed to watch out. At any moment Will could-!

An electric spark stunned him in place when his hand brushed against Logan’s. He quickly shoved his hands in his pockets and kept moving. Not as smoothly as he’d hoped, it seemed.

“Are you okay?” Logan asked carefully.

“Just tired” Nico pushed out, avoiding his eyes. No more unnecessary *contact*. He just needed to make his way behind the door of the cabin, and he’d be free from both of them. From all their *jitters.* Luckily, the Hades cabin would be the closest, furthest away from the centre. In fact, he could already see it.

He swung the door open and stepped inside, only turning around for the last hurdle he had to face. “See you tomorrow" he threw out the door, almost about to close it on Logan’s prying eyes.

The bright orange looked just a shade darker than usual, hidden a bit in a subtle squint. “Aren’t you going to come eat something later?” Logan asked a little pressingly.

Getting out of the cabin? After he’d just made it to safety? Right onto *Will’s* turf? “No, I’m good” Nico replied firmly.

“Okay…” Logan shrugged, not sounding very convinced. “Well, I guess I can’t force you... See you tomorrow then?”. He put on a wide smile and turned away. He looked back over his shoulder. “Take a last good look at this” he added, gesturing at his face. “Before it gets

covered in shittily drawn dicks". He cocked his head a little "I mean, if they're even going to let me *sleep* at all…" he snickered.

Nico thought about it. The Ares cabin seemed… *Lively…?* He wondered how Logan was going to get through his nightly *issues*… "You can stay here, if you want" he shrugged. *What?! He could?!*

Logan seemed equally surprised, turning back to him. "Yeah?". He leaned against the doorframe, cocking his head. "You wanna sleep with me again?" he asked with a mischievous grin.

Nico groaned, closing his eyes in annoyance. *Can you just take anything even slightly seriously? Just once? I'm trying to help you out here.*… "Changed my mind. Get out" he moved to close the door.

"*Sorry,* sorry" Logan said quickly, his grin nowhere near gone. "But, yeah. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine" he added, putting up his hands.

Nico sighed. "I mean… We've got like *eight* empty beds here. Chiron is a lot more ambitious than my father" he said, trying desperately to sound casual.

Logan grinned like a demon. "I mean, if you *insist.*…".

Nico almost slammed the door in his face.

Logan stopped it with his hand. "*Wait!*… I'm being a dick, I know that… It's just… I don't want to intrude on your *evil plotting.*… I know you have a hard time saying *no*".

Nico didn't even get the chance to say no. In all of his annoyance he hadn't kept an eye out well enough. A figure much taller than the children crowding around it, turned to look at them. Two blue eyes he knew *very* well, almost found his. Before they could, Nico's body reacted. The way it seemed to prefer when his mind took a break. Which is to say, *stupidly.*

He grabbed Logan by his coat with one hand and swung him inside, closing the door with his other. His grip on the doorhandle was so tight, he couldn't let go. His legs shook so bad, he could barely stand. He had to lean against the door for support.

Will had seen him. He was *sure* this time… The nerves were numbing, deafening. They trickled down his whole body. How was he supposed to-?

Logan huffed. A huff that could be annoyance, amusement or amazement. Didn't matter. Whatever it was, Nico couldn't really deal with it right now.

"Okay! You've made your point! Guess you *really* meant it!" Logan laughed awkwardly.

Nico couldn't deal with *any* of Logan right now, actually! He leaned in threateningly and gave Logan's shirt, apparently still trapped in his fist, a hard tug. He was about to tell him to shut up, when he realized he still didn't have his breathing under control…

They seemed to realize that at the same time.

Logan put his hands on Nico's shoulders and gently pulled him forward, bending him a little. Well, as gently as Logan did anything. "Slow down. Try to breathe from your stomach".

Nico scoffed through the hyperventilation. *Like you know any-!*

Oh… Yeah, that is better… He looked away from Logan's shoulder and glared at the wall next to them trying to catch his breath.

Logan's stomach moved slowly against his fist, following his breath. Nico tried to mimic it. Slowly, they both calmed down.

He straightened up and side-eyed Logan carefully. He shouldn't have. The concern from this morning was *nothing* compared to what he faced now… With a sigh, he faced him. He knew he couldn't play this off… But, he could try?… As soon as the most careful of smiles made its way onto his face, Logan let loose.

"*What is up with you today, dude?!* You're starting to scare me!" he yelled, gripping onto his shoulders much tighter.

Nico closed his eyes and slumped the back of his head against the door in frustration. "*I know!* I know… *I'm sorry*" he offered weakly. He held up his hands, just as much to underline his apology, as to hold him off.

Logan didn't budge at first, not until Nico shrugged himself loose. Logan huffed out another mix of emotions, all of them negative this time. "You weren't kidding when you said you were doing *really fucking bad*…" he muttered.

Nico shook his head. "No, it's not that… I mean, I don't think so…". This was all Will. Wait, no it wasn't. None of this was Will's fault. Or Logan's. Or anyone else's, actually. This was all *himself!* Wasn't it? What the hell was all of this? *Man*, he was tired.

"So what *is* it?" Logan asked impatiently.

"*I don't know!*" Nico tossed out with a laugh.

Logan didn't seem to get the joke. *At all.* "C'mon! At least *try* to-!".

Nico straightened up. "*No!*" he interrupted loudly, earning a fiery scowl. He stuck up his hands one more time. "I can't! I'll explain later, alright?" he offered desperately trying to buy himself some more time to deal with his sudden existential crisis.

Logan's mouth drew a straight, sharp line. The fire still burning above it vowed to make him keep that promise. "I'm going to tell Steph where I'm at. After that, *I'm going to get you something to eat"* he declared with barely restrained anger.

Nico drew his mouth in a similar straight line, debating if he dared to fight him on this. Could he even eat right now? He nodded reluctantly. *Sure, whatever.* He'd just force it down and be done with it.

The fire simmered down immediately. "Okay" Logan sighed as he nodded back at him.

Relief on both sides made the air feel lighter.

He watched as Logan finally took in the room around them. An amused spark went through his eyes. *Crap.…*

“You sleep in a tomb… In a *coffin* shaped bed?”.

Nico groaned. Why had Chiron given him so much *creative freedom* in this? He punched his teenage self in the face. “It’s not like I’m into this either!”. *Anymore.…*

“Hey, I’m not saying I don’t like it” Logan shrugged. “I mean… This is probably every fourteen year old emo kid's dream bedroom…”.

Ouch, but kinda spot on.

“But, it suits you” he taunted.

Double ouch, probably just as spot on... Nico clicked his tongue.

Logan chuckled and jabbed him in the arm. “Hey, you’ve seen the Ares cabin. We’ve got nothing on you”.

Nico let up a little, smiling faintly. “The barb wire really ties it together” he shrugged.

With that, the last bit of tension left the air.

Logan stepped closer again, looking expectantly. Nico took a second, trying to read his eyes. *Yep.* Still the same sunny orange. *Wait, no. That’s not what-!*

Logan smirked, shaking his head a little. He put his hands in Nico’s sides, gently but firmly moving him aside. His fingers settled in the small of his waist, melting the muscles into their shape. Nico’s soul tried to escape out his mouth in a careful exhale, he lost even more solidity when the hands sank in deeper.

Once he'd gotten Nico out of his way, Logan finally let go of the mess he was making. He gave Nico one last mildly concerned glance. “Take it easy for a bit, okay?” he pleaded as he stepped through the door.

“*Yeah.…*” Nico promised the door.

He threw his coat into a corner and sat down on the first bed that found him. With a dramatic sigh, he dug the palms of his hands into his eyes.

Throwing himself down on his back even more dramatically, he tried to make sense of his mind. His mind screamed hysterically at him for a while, then quieted down just enough to keep him from crying.

After some well deserved self-pity, his mind stopped completely.

Nico hadn’t even realized someone had come in until he got flicked against the forehead. He shot up, almost into Logan’s face. He dropped back down on the bed not to. Not that he’d had much choice, his knees had given out.

“My bad” Logan snickered at him. “Food” he stated. The force with which he’d handed him the plate showed it was an order, not an offer.

Nico looked down. He was grateful Logan had taken the time to explain it, because *food* sure wasn’t what it looked like. “Are you sure?” he quipped.

Logan snorted and dropped down next to him. “Yeah, I haven’t missed camp food either. Even worse than last time… It was the Athena cabin’s turn. So, as you can probably taste, *nutritionally* it's the perfect meal” he replied apologetically. “And before you ask, because I sure did… It's *supposed* to be cold, apparently”.

Nico took a bite and stopped mid chew. He almost laughed at his own misfortune. Now he was *absolutely certain* this wasn’t food. He turned to Logan, his endless list of complaints in hand. The very pleased looking orange hue shining back onto him knocked him off track. “Thanks” his mouth betrayed itself. “Not that bad, actually” it doubled down.

The orange hue brightened, no longer pleased, but *very* spirited. “*You’re so full of shit!*” Logan laughed. “I finished an entire plate of that. Did you *actually* think I would believe that? Or is this one of those *extra smart,* dry sarcasms of yours?” he asked.

Nico avoided his eyes for a bit, not entirely sure himself. He chewed on it. His head responded with a single, jerky shake at the instant reminder of what he had to endure. A barely suppressed shudder rolled over him as he swallowed.

They laughed at the same time.

Logan held onto his amusement a bit longer than Nico did, observing him with mild interest.

“What?” Nico asked, before taking another disgustingly flavourless bite.

Logan smiled wider. “You always put your hand in front of your mouth when you eat. Just looks funny” he explained behind his own hand, mimicking him.

Nico stopped chewing for a second and quickly pulled his own hand down. *Damn*, he didn’t even realize he did that. He turned to Logan in a futile attempt to deny the accusations, then quickly pulled his hand back down again… He exhaled deeply, then slowly hid his mouth behind an angry fist. “It’s cause I’ve got my mouth full. And you keep talking to me... *Basic manners”* he muttered.

“Sure, bud. Don’t get all self-conscious. I’ll leave you alone… Just soldier your way through, yeah? *You owe me*” Logan squeezed into Nico’s shoulder. He pushed himself up by it, leaving

a charred handprint.

“Yeah, yeah…” Nico half whined, half promised.

“I’m going outside for a bit. No offense, but the whole *no windows* thing is getting on my nerves a little” Logan tossed back on his way out.

Nico nodded in understanding and reluctantly got back to his task. In the back of his mind, the Italian flag slowly and shamefully rolled itself up further with every bite.

He grimaced his way through the entire meal as fast as possible and got up. What time was it even? This ‘no windows’ thing was starting to get on his own nerves a little too… He threw his teenage self another, slightly softer punch.

Not having many other options, he went outside too. He was greeted by near pitch black darkness, only kept at bay by the flickers of the eerie green torches lit around the front of the cabin.

He checked around carefully, only to remember he didn’t need to. Will was an early bird. Probably in bed for hours at this point. He found Logan leaning against the wall next to the entrance. Would it be weird if he stayed here and joined him?

Too late... Logan found him, looking him over expectantly. Nico panicked, the only option that flashed through his mind to run off into the woods like a spooked deer.

Logan grinned, seemingly catching on to his panic. “Am I in your spot or something?”.

Only *some* of his panic, thankfully… "Uhh…”. The bright orange caught Nico like headlights, freezing him in place.

“I guess you’ll have to learn to share” Logan teased with a shrug.

Nico sucked in his lips, crossing his arms and settling against the wall next to him. What was he going to say? He looked to the sky for inspiration. The moon was full and present that night. Looming over them from surprisingly nearby, with a cool but gentle gaze.

“The moon is *crazy* big tonight” Logan huffed with a sense of awe.

“Yeah…” Nico agreed, a little awkwardly.

“Pretty dope” Logan concluded with mild, but genuine sounding excitement.

“Sure… But, it’s got nothing on a good sunset” Nico accidentally admitted. He held his breath. *Why?* Why should he not have said that? What was the big deal? He quickly exhaled.

“Really?” Logan seemed genuinely taken aback. “Hah…”. He looked up at the moon intently. “Can’t agree. I spent a lot of time staring at the moon the last few months… I’m really starting to dig that stone cold, *pretty* fucker. Far away, but always around. Interesting

too. Lots of different faces". He glanced over, eyes narrowed with a hint of judgement. "Funny, I really figured y*ou* of all people would get that".

Nico shrugged apologetically. *I used to.* He caught himself before he said it out loud, not sure again why. "Guess I'm still an enigma…".

Logan grinned in agreement. He put a cigarette in his mouth and felt around his lack of coat pocket. He pursed his lips. His eyes found Nico. "You got a light?".

He did, actually. Nico took out one of his emergency matches and struck it.

"*Ha!* Still full of surprises too" Logan mused.

Nico watched the small flame flare up proudly and held it out to give it to him. Logan didn't take it. He put his hand around Nico's to steady it and leaned in. Nico held his breath as he did. *Damn*, he was close!

Logan looked up from the flame, into his eyes. He smiled gratefully around his cigarette. The flame made the orange in his eyes look like actual fire.

Nico could still feel his hand even after he let go. It was warmer than the flame…

No it wasn't, he realized as the match burned out in his fingers… *Fucking ow!* He tried not to grimace as the light went out. He couldn't hold back a hiss.

Logan snickered at him. "*Very* edgy…" he declared.

It wasn't on purpose, you dick… Stop being so… Distracting?

"Thanks" Logan exhaled. Another warm look made Nico melt a little.

"Sure" he replied weakly.

The musical ensemble of crickets playing all around them harped on the long silence.

"So… are you going to explain the whole "*throwing me around in a panic"* thing yet?" Logan asked suddenly.

Nico pursed his lips. He *did* say he would… So how was he going to do that? The moon wasn't nearly as inspirational to him as it seemed to be to Logan, just shining back at him straight forward... Nico took a deep breath. "I thought I saw my ex boyfriend… The second time I'm pretty sure he saw me too…".

Logan mulled it over, clearly not getting it. "And… you couldn't just say hello…?" he asked, looking at him like he was crazy.

Nico looked back at him, like the idiot he clearly was. "Wow, I'd never even *considered* that. What a wasted opportunity…" he said sarcastically.

Logan cocked his head, his cigarette changed direction in his scowl.

Nico groaned. “It's just… It’s not that easy!”.

Logan pulled his cigarette out of his mouth and pointed it at him dramatically. “Course it's not easy! It's hard as fuck!” he waved at him, drawing a jagged line of light in the dark. “But, it's worth it!”. He took a long drag from his cigarette, slowly lowering his shoulders again.

Nico tried to do the same with his. “*Alright.… You're right.*… But I’m too much of a coward, yeah?... So, *please*”.

They looked ahead in a silent truce. It cued the crickets to start the second half of their performance, ending the short intermission.

Nico finally worked up the nerve to speak after a while. “So… How was your sister?” he asked. Steph and him hadn’t exactly gotten along till now, her being a little psychopath and all, but she made for a good excuse to steer the conversation somewhere else, away from him at least.

Logan let out a groan. “*Also* tying herself in knots for no good reason... The others keep picking on her, calling her a lesbian… Well, not with *that* word…”.

Nico felt a little stab in the heart at the sudden kinship. Being a gay teenager was bad enough… Add the Ares cabin in that mix… “Oof. You think she might be…?”.

Logan cocked his head a little. “Well, she keeps telling me she isn't, even though I never ask… And she does have some polaroids of her and a girl she seems *very* close with that I don't think anyone was supposed to find… And those pictures seem *really* important to her. They look like she's chewed on them” he almost laughed. “Poor little shit…” he ended pitifully.

Nico hummed in agreement. “Hope she’ll accept herself soon. People suck…”.

Logan looked at him, puzzled and mildly frustrated. “Fuck people” he shrugged with an exasperated shake of the head.

Nico looked at him. Logan wasn't just your average idiot, he was a *profound* idiot.

“It just… doesn't make any sense to me... Why would you be ashamed of that?” Logan muttered, mostly to himself.

“You don't *do* complicated, do you?” Nico asked. It was meant to be a jab, but there was some sincerity in it.

Logan smiled and gestured at his face. “Damn right, Spooky. I'm *simple*. Nothing complicated about me. But that doesn’t mean I’m stupid. And even if I am, I’ve got nothing to be ashamed of, as far as I’m concerned”.

Nico had no problem believing any of that. It just didn't make any sense to him. That's not how his world worked. He was about to clear that up when Logan smiled extra brightly at him. It turned Nico a little stupid, shutting him up immediately. Much to his own annoyance. *Okay, so he looks good in this light… Who cares?!* Not him. Not even a little! He willed himself to get it together, putting a firm stop to the *stupid* grin about to ruin his perfectly indifferent expression.

“The simple things can be the most beautiful, you know?” Logan offered. His eyes glowed a warm orange when he smiled. He nudged Nico's shoulder affectionately with his own.

Nico tried his best to be annoyed but he just couldn't get himself to. “I think I see it, yeah…” he replied. The stupid grin came back with a vengeance. *Fuck!* Was that supposed to be a jab? Because, if so… He had sounded *a lot* more sincere than he meant to just now! He almost punched his current self in the face too.

Logan smiled wider. “Oh?”.

Nico quickly looked away and folded his arms. “Yeah! I mean… you make it sound kinda nice, being dumb as a brick. You're really selling it”.

Logan snorted. “Yep, there it is… Are you even able to express yourself in *any* way other than sarcasm?” he asked.

“No, of course not” Nico doubled down. “But I mean, I could give *mime* a try”. He smirked at Logan’s laugh.

In the chilly air, the steam of his exhale mingled with the smoke from Logan’s, both slowly dissipating. Their shoulders were still touching. Nico hadn’t even realized he was leaning into him before Logan moved his arm to put his cigarette back in his mouth.

“I always thought you’d be more of a dark, *dramatic* poetry sort of guy” he wondered out loud. The fact he probably *actually* meant that made that comment go right under the belt.

“*Ha!* fuck *right* off with that emo shit!” Nico laughed.

“Oh c'mon, *Guyliner!* You've given me *nothing but* emo shit these past months. Honestly, your internalized *emophobia* is starting to get a little sad… Just come out already, dude” Logan laughed back at him.

They turned to grin at each other at the same time.

Yep, even in the dead of night, the moon had *nothing* on the sun…

Nico held his breath as soon as he realized. They were close. *Way too close.* He could feel the heat from the cigarette on his lips. If he moved in closer he’d get burned. *What?* Why would he want to come closer? *Then what?!*

“Back at it again with those *piercing* eyes of yours? If you keep looking at me like that, I’ll start thinking you’re gonna do something to me” Logan joked.

Gods! Me too…! This was starting to get messier and messier! Panic flooded in.

Logan squeezed him at the back of his neck, probably trying to get on his nerves. Somehow, it seemed to get on his own more. “Fuck, *you’re tense!*” he worried loudly.

Crap…! Nico didn’t know what to say for a second. He wouldn’t have had a chance anyway.

“Are you okay?” Logan asked.

No. “Yeah”.

“Am I bothering you?” Logan tried.

Yes. “No”.

“I can leave if you want me to. Really. It’s no big deal” Logan offered.

No... “No!” Nico admitted, loud and flustered. “I told you. It’s fine!” he reiterated, even more flustered. “It’s just… Stressful day" he pulled out of thin air. It’s not like it wasn’t true. “I’m gonna go to bed” he threw out after, just trying to get away.

Logan took a drag from his cigarette. “Sure…” he said, not sounding all that sure.

Nico leaned against the door after shutting it behind him, waiting for his heart to slow down. It didn’t.

Well, fuck you too then…, he angrily told it, slamming his fist against it for good measure.

He tried not to let his pounding heartbeat distract him *too* much as he forced himself through an acceptable bedtime routine. He gave up after brushing his teeth and kicking off most of his clothes. His heartbeat still knocked on the inside of his chest as he curled up and pulled the covers over himself, clearly wanting more attention. He tried to think of the steady rhythm as soothing. Tried *very* hard…

Nico startled awake at the sound of someone choking on their breath. *Wha-? Right!* He knew this would happen. Quickly kicking off the covers, he got to his feet. He needed a second to figure out where he was. Where everything else was.

The sound of Logan stirring and whimpering pointed him in the right direction. Nico staggered over. A green flame lit up on one of the torches between them as he did.

Logan was laying on his back, fighting for breath. The scene instantly reminded Nico of when he'd taken watch over him when he was poisoned. Logan seemed incredibly tense…

His own hand firmly grasped on the base of his neck. That wasn’t helping, Nico assumed.

He sat down next to him and put his hand over Logan's, but couldn't get it to budge. No problem, he figured as much. He ignored the, by now almost familiar, wall of feelings as best he could. *Calm down.* He sent out. *You're safe.* He added.

The tension in Logan's hand let up a little. Nico tried to move it, carefully. He lifted it off his neck and put it on his chest. Logan squirmed. His other hand shot up, on top of Nico's. He grasped it and sat up. Nico quickly ran out of arm as Logan pulled on his hand, knocking him against his back.

Logan bent over, panting shakily.

Nico propped out an arm behind him to regain some balance. Heat brushed against his arm with every wheeze. *Man,* Logan was *uncomfortably* warm… Nico gently pulled his other hand free and put it up against Logan's forehead.

Logan winced a little. “*Hah! that's cold!”* he panted.

Crap. His hands were always cold… Why did everything about him always need to be-?

“*Nice*” Logan mumbled, leaning into his touch before Nico could pull away.

Oh. Uh… Alright. He waited for him to settle down a little. Before he realized what he was doing he ran his other hand over Logan's back. He almost winced himself this time.

His shirt was *soaked.*

Logan seemed to realize that too. He freed himself from Nico's hands and hastily pulled his shirt off. With a deep breath, he got up and staggered over to the bathroom.

Nico watched him fling the door open, turn the tap, grab the sink with both hands and run his head under the water for a while. When he was done, he didn't even bother drying off. He just leaned against the doorframe, still shivering, giving Nico a puzzled look. Water trickled down over him.

“You alright?" Nico asked.

He tried not to pay attention to the fact that Logan was practically naked, in just his boxers. His skintight boxers... He just focussed on his face.

Logan smiled weakly. “Not yet” he said breathlessly. “I'm pretty sure I actually *saw* you this time…?” he added, pointing at him with the clumped up fabric in his fist.

“Yeah, that's how it usually works”. Nico shrugged and got up. “Sorry I didn't notice sooner…” he added.

Logan looked more puzzled than before, then he huffed. “*Don't fucking apologize, man…”* he said with equal frustration and amusement. He tossed his shirt aside and stared at

Nico intently. The usual fire in his eyes burned unusually joyfully. Not abundantly so. *No.* In a more subtle way. The flames were low, but pleasant and *intense*...

He looked so warm… Warmer than warm. *Hot... No! Not hot! Completely wrong word!* Nico screamed internally. This day couldn't get any worse! So of course it did…

Logan walked over and pulled Nico into an embrace. It was *really* hard to not pay attention to the fact he was practically naked now. Nico leaned back, trying to touch as little as possible.

Logan didn't let up, squeezing him harder and patting him on the back amicably. “Thank you! *So* much! I really appreciate it” he said cheerfully. “I mean it! I could kiss you” he laughed, nudging Nico's cheek with his.

“*Ha!”* Nico let out. *Crap.* It was supposed to be a scoff, but the panic in his voice twisted it into something else. *Gods!* This was *torture*. A swarm of bugs erupted in his stomach. He took a deep breath, drawing in the faint smell of warm pinewood from Logan. It made it impossible to gather his thoughts. He didn't know what to do with his hands. Subconsciously, he moved them down. Logan was only covered in one place…

No! Stop! Terrible idea! He quickly moved them back up and gingerly patted him on the back. It felt like tapping out in a fight. “*Don't worry about it”* he croaked out. He was more out of breath than Logan at this point. Right before he was about to pass out from lack of oxygen, Logan thankfully let go of him.

Nico was still frozen in place for a bit, then hastily sat back down on Logan's bed and just as hastily crossed his legs.

“I'm going to smoke real quick” Logan said, gesturing to the door.

“*Uhuh*” was all Nico could manage.

Logan rummaged through his coat pocket and walked out the door.

Oh. You mean just like that… In your underwear…

Nico slowly dropped down onto his back. Just for a bit. Just to straighten out his thoughts for a second. *What will the neighbours think, you idiot?* He hoped furiously that nobody was out at this time…

The ceiling glared at him until the torch slowly dimmed and eventually died down. Pitch darkness did nothing to hide any of what had just happened. The wet fabric of his t-shirt served as a perfect reminder of *exactly* where their chests had just pressed together. Nico pulled it over his head and tossed it to the side angrily.

No use… He could still feel *everything* somehow. It felt like there was a chalk outline drawn over his body, like a crime scene… That freaking *delinquent* had *no idea* what he did to him!

The mattress and pillow were still moist. He didn't mind that. They also had a very familiar smell, a faint but distinct hint of warm pinewood. He very much *did* mind that. To fight it, he covered his face with both hands. The fact that he no longer needed to face the world now was a nice bonus.

What a *weird* fucking day. A *terrible* fucking day!

No. He willed himself to calm down. None of this was a big deal. Everything that happened was normal, *friendly* behaviour. They *were* friends. Good friends. So, it was fine.

Logan had done nothing wrong. Nico hadn't either. So what if he was gay? That wasn't a crime anymore. Just a gay friend, and his hot straight friend, being *friendly.*

No! Not hot! He almost cried.

To hide his shame and misery, he pulled up his knees and buried his face in them. He rolled onto his side pathetically. It was fine… He'd move soon…

As soon as he was sure he wasn't going to scream. There was no way he'd still be able to fall asleep after all this anyway. Or so he thought.

His thoughts slowly started drifting off randomly. It was hard to process everything.

He could still feel Logan's arms around him. Why did he have to be in his underwear…?

Wait. Why were they both in their underwear?

Logan's eyes were glowing. He'd seen this look before. *Yeah*, this at least made some sense.

Nico felt his own arms move around Logan. He was so warm. He was always so warm. They leaned into each other, foreheads gently touching. There was that devious grin again, a flash of excitement went through the orange flames.

So close by… Nico felt his breath against his lips.

A warm hand pressed against the back of his neck, holding him close. It tightened its grip as the other pressed onto his chest, slowly bending him backwards over the mattress.

He wrapped his arms around Logan's neck and pulled him in. Logan's breath felt heavy against his ear making him shudder.

He gripped the sheets, losing grip of himself. Warm fingers trailed down agonizingly slowly over his chest, his stomach, waist, past the hem of his underwear… and finally against-

"*Wait!"* he choked.

He startled awake, grasping at himself. *Everything* hurt. It was like he'd gotten stabbed in the stomach.

No. No time to recover.

He willed his shaking hands to *move! For fuck's sake! Do your fucking job!*

He hastily looked under the covers.

Fuck! No! His head snapped to the side. *Wait.…* Wasn’t *that* his bed…? Didn’t matter right now! He looked around, actually making sure to *look* this time. Logan was gone. *Thank the Gods...*

Chapter 11: XI. Match made in Hell

Chapter Notes

> All warnings are spoilers:
> You thought I couldn't up the gay panic? Dirty jokes, near death experience, hellhound abuse, angst(?), murder of underpaid and underappreciated employee, smoking, tongue stuff.

He almost fell sprinting to the bathroom and probably just about tore off the valve turning on the shower. The other valve tried to warn him it was turned as cold as possible. Nico didn’t even notice, not even as he got under the stream.

One long, ice cold shower later he finally felt like he could breathe again.

He flung open the cabinet behind the mirror and swiped out a razor. His eyes met those of a very tired looking stranger when he shut it. The stranger scowled at him while started to shave.

He closed his eyes for a second, trying to make some sense of what had happened earlier. Well, what was there even to make sense of? He knew this didn't mean anything. Did he? Didn't it? Did it even matter even if it did? What could he even do about it? He *did* know one thing. He needed to *keep his distance.* This was starting to become a huge mess.

He ran the razor under the tap and threw it back in the cabinet. The unfriendly stranger offered him some positive affirmations. *‘It will be fine!’. ‘You can do this!’. ‘You just need to get through one more mission!’. ‘If you’re lucky, you’ll die and you won’t have to make it through anything else anymore ever again!’.* He let out a low, humourless chuckle. *Man,* he really cracked himself up sometimes…

He fought some clean clothes onto his body and grabbed the door handle. As soon as he pulled the door open, he froze. As had pretty much everything else it seemed. A thin yet brave layer of snow covered everything in sight. Surprisingly early this year.

Luckily he’d already thought of dressing warm, seeing as they’d be going to the underworld.

His eyes settled on the only two, dark clad figures contrasting the white all around.

Steph's eyes grew large as she took in Nico in the doorframe. She quickly looked back over to her brother. Her mouth opened slightly, then snapped shut. She hugged Logan, then

sprinted away in the opposite direction. The silver wings, crudely made out of safety pins, on the back of her jacket almost made it look like she was literally trying to take off.

“Okay…?! *bye?!”* Logan yelled after her.

“Sorry” Nico offered.

Logan turned to him, surprised to see him. “There he is, *the man of my dreams*” he said with exaggerated intensity.

Fuck. The knife in his stomach twisted. *Please don't.*.. Logan obviously didn't mean anything by it. He was just joking, like *always.* Nico hadn't been prepared for the genuine friendliness in his voice. It was the *worst* somehow.

Shame took a stranglehold on him. He tried to bury all memories of this morning as deep as he could. Logan couldn't *know?* Could he? Panic took shame's place. Just for a second or two. No way. There's no way he'd be this happy to see him, he realized.

“... Hi” he forced out.

Logan raised an eyebrow. “That's the best you can give me? After thinking *that* long?”.

Nico sucked in his lips. “Uhm… Fuck off?” he replied, holding out his hands in an offering gesture.

Logan laughed and smacked him on the shoulder. “Little rough around the edges but it's a start. You'll get there”.

Nico felt Logan’s eyes look him over. Nerves took over. “Sorry I keep stealing your bed…” he quickly tossed out, hoping he could stay ahead of the embarrassment.

“No big deal. I thought it was funny. But *you* almost didn’t. I was pretty tired so I almost laid down on top of you” Logan chuckled.

The embarrassment caught up with Nico quickly, slapping him in the face angrily as soon as it reached him. “Haha…” he read off a script rather than actually laughed.

Logan looked almost a little stern. “I probably should have, actually…”.

Nico's heart skipped a beat. *Wha-?!*

Logan grinned at his expression. “You were fucking freezing… But hey, maybe next time. For now I just tucked you in” he teased.

Nico pursed his lips, mostly to stop his face from doing anything else. “Ah… thanks…”.

Logan smiled fondly. “Don’t thank me! That's the least I could do!”.

Nico's face set out to commit mutiny. He tried to keep it in check. Not well enough, apparently. Logan's bright grin dimmed. Nico swallowed nervously.

“You look tired” Logan concluded.

You fucking bet I am. “*Yeah,* I am. Kinda” Nico stammered. He exhaled and lowered his shoulders.

Logan's grin evaporated. “I'm *really* sorry… About last night…”.

Crap! “No! I slept plenty! It’s just…!”. *Too much, if anything.* He gestured wildly, maybe hoping to grab something, *anything* to say.

Logan looked more than a little worried now. Then it seemed to hit him. “Nightmare?” he asked.

“...*Yeah”* Nico lied.

“Hah. Looks like it was a bad one too. You look *terrified”* Logan concluded.

Nico let out a pathetic attempt at a huff. His nod in agreement was so jerky he had to close his eyes in embarrassment. *What the fuck am I doing?!* He moved a hand up to smack himself in the forehead. He quickly stopped himself, shoving it back down.

“Want to talk about-?” Logan offered.

“*No!”* Nico cut him off, accidentally taking his frustration out on him. “Uh. No thanks. I'll be fine”.

Logan hummed. It was impossible to tell if it was in agreement or doubt. His warm smile returned anyway. He gently pinched the side of Nico's neck, leaving a mental scar. *To go with all the others.*

“Okay. Well, I'll try to be a little *nicer* to you today” he said cheekily. It was clear he meant it anyway.

Oh! Great.… That was going to make everything so much easier. Nico bowed his head down in silent frustration, then gathered himself back up. All he needed to do was keep some distance, not just physically, but emotionally. That was no problem. It was one of his biggest talents. He didn’t even mean to do it most of the time.

He made way for his resting bitch face. *Gods*, had he missed working with her… Now all she needed was some ammo… “G.B.H” he coldly read out loud off of Logan's shirt. “What does that mean?”.

Logan smirked. “Grievous bodily harm”.

Nico pursed his lips. “Cute” he said with an eyeroll. His expression cracked with a smile, ruining his attempt at biting sarcasm. *That useless bitch!* She tried again. “So… You're one of those annoying guys who wears t-shirts in dead winter?” Another, wider smile broke his sneer right in half. *She’s so fucking fired!*

“Cold has never bothered me” Logan shrugged. “I can handle it pretty well. I really *like* it, even” he added with a smug little smile.

Why did that brag get to him so much? “Yeah, I keep finding that out every time I get in the shower after you” Nico quipped, finally reaching an acceptable level of bitchyness.

Logan's smug little smile died down. “Oh, sorry…”.

Crap... Why did that get to him even more? “No, It's… whatever, it helped me wake up…” Nico quickly waved at him.

The smile returned, closing the distance he'd just successfully created. Nico tried not to smile along.

“Yeah, me too…” Logan agreed, giving a hint at an explanation behind all his unintentional boobietraps. He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. “Huh… I thought you were an evening shower guy… *Special occasion?”* he joked.

The memory of his morning shower shanked Nico between the ribs. *“I forgot last night…”* he stated gravely. *Ha.*.. that was actually true, he realized.

Logan chuckled awkwardly, downright concerned. “Dude, *chill.* I was kidding. You don't owe me an explanation. Let alone one so… *intense.* Please, shower whenever the fuck you want…”.

Nico took a deep breath. He was too tired for all these games… And he was losing *so* hard… Worst of all, Logan didn’t even know he was playing… He needed to screw his head back on, and to get his priorities straight.

Stop trying to push him away and focus on getting through the day… “Sorry I've been so… *weird*... I'll get it together before we get there. Promise” he vowed more to himself than to Logan.

Warmth radiated off of Logan's signature devious grin. “Don't worry so much. If shit hits the fan, I'll come save you” he taunted with an affectionate nudge to his shoulder.

“My knight in shining armor…” Nico declared, balancing wry mockery and just the smallest hint of appreciation. He forced the heat to retreat from his face. It worked. *See? Way better.* He could do this.

“*My dark lord*” Logan declared in turn with an exaggerated devoted tone. His snickering took some of the heaviness off.

Nico let out a small genuine laugh in response. He pinched the bridge of his nose in embarrassment. *That fucking dork.*.. The heat sieged his face, threatening to conquer it yet again. He barely managed to hold it off.

His mind searched for a distraction. How about the actual mission…? *Yeah*… A mental checklist flowed past behind his eyes as he adjusted his backpack. Logan had done the same.

“Ready?” Nico asked. He suppressed a wince as Logan grabbed his hand firmly. Not the answer he’d expected. *Don't just grab people's hands, you weirdo!* His hand was so warm…

“Yep, still cold” Logan huffed.

“Yeah, I'm always cold. It's because I've been dead for years…” Nico huffed back at him.

Logan chuckled. “Okay, you moody zombie. I'll try to warm it up for you anyway” he offered, locking their fingers together.

Nico glanced over in surprise. Logan gave him a bright smile, eyes almost warmer than his hand. Nico didn’t know how to react, in fact he almost didn’t know how to breathe apparently. He tensed up, accidentally tightening his grip. Logan seemed to notice, looking down in surprise. A flash of heat went over Nico’s face.

“See? It's already working” Logan said happily.

Nico swallowed hard. This mission wasn't just going to be dangerous, it was going to be *dangerous.*…

Logan gave him an inquisitive smile, narrowing his eyes a little. “Are we… Not doing your broody shadow magic thing?” he asked, loosening his grip a bit.

Right! Fuck!

“*We are!”* Nico quickly tossed out, maybe a little too eager. “I'm just… *Getting ready*” he added, gesturing at nothing in particular with his free hand. The shadows moved along with it anyway.

Logan chuckled. “Yeah, okay. Cool”. He immediately re-tightened his grip on his hand.

Relief slapped Nico in the face like a bitch, leaving a burning print on his face. The shadows moved nervously, hastily meeting up with them at the first step they took.

They stepped out of the shadows right into a dark, dirty alley. The front entrance of the familiar office building peeked at them between the alley walls. A creepy alley littered with trash and graffiti was probably a serious contender for the *least* romantic place to hold hands.

Very good!

A large rat scurried past them along the wall, spooked by their sudden intrusion. Nico blessed it for underlining the mood, smiling faintly in relief.

He tried to wiggle his hand free, then almost gasped as Logan tightened his grip. He pulled Nico's hand up and looked it over.

“Black nail polish?” he asked. “*Edgy.* Suits you” he concluded immediately.

Nico looked away to hide how his face burned. “Hazel did that. They've been like that for *days…*” he muttered in annoyance. *You had all of yesterday to notice. Why now, while you're holding it hostage? Just let go!*

“I like that colour on you” Logan added.

“I'm *always* in all black” Nico scoffed.

Logan poked his cheek. “I meant that one. It's a nice contrast with your ‘spooky’ vibe”.

Nico's face burned brighter.

Logan laughed at him. “C'mon! I'm barely even trying to mess with you!”.

Fuck you! Nico was so angry he couldn't speak. He just stared angrily at the clouds. *Fuck you too, clouds.*

“You get embarrassed over almost *everything!*”.

Nico turned to scowl at him. Logan's genuine smile caught him off guard. He quickly pulled his hand free. As he did, he noticed something on Logan's left index finger…

“How are you wearing that ring…? You threw it in the lake!” he asked.

Logan looked at his hand. He cursed under his breath. “That *conniving* asshole! I should have fucking figured! I never should have grabbed that thing!” he angrily told the ring. “Well he can fuck off. I'm not using it…”. He grabbed it with his other hand.

Nico couldn't help it. “You don't even wanna see what it does?”.

Logan shook his head. “Nope”. He twisted it, trying to get it off.

His hand enveloped in green flames. They both recoiled.

“Okay…?” Logan muttered. His other hand was still on the ring, right in the middle of the fire, seemingly unaffected. He let go, trying to shake the flames out. Nope. No effect.

“I think that's greek fire” Nico said, reaching his hand out to it.

Hot! Yep, the fire definitely affected *him.* He pulled back a little.

A woman walking her dog stopped and stared next to the opening of the alley. “Are you… *On fire?”* she asked warily.

They stared back at her.

“No, ma'am” Nico quickly stammered. “Just a magic trick!”.

Logan quickly shoved his hands in his coat pockets and pulled off the least convincing innocent smile Nico had ever seen. Nico stared at him in angry disbelief. Logan gave him a

nervous side-eye. The lady slowly started walking again, tugged away by her impatient little poodle. She kept her eyes on them until she vanished behind the wall.

Nico punched Logan in the arm. “You could have set yourself on fire! Greek fire *spreads!* It's basically *Napalm!*” he shouted angrily.

“Relax! It doesn't seem to affect anything on me!”.

Nico groaned. “You didn't *know* that! You didn't even think!”.

Logan pulled out his hands and put them up in a defensive gesture. “Sorry! Sorry…”.

The fact Logan's left hand was *still* on fire next to his guilty expression got to Nico a little. He tried not to crack. “Right, well… It definitely affects me. Maybe it isn't what's *on* you but just that it doesn't affect *mortal* things…?” Nico tried.

Logan thought about it. He pulled out his sword. As soon as he did, the green flames swallowed it. Logan seemed very unamused about it.

Nico sucked in his lips. “That’s… *Really cool…”* he said almost apologetically.

“I know…” Logan replied with a bitter tone. He reluctantly put his thumb on the ring and ran it over it, downward this time. The fire died down instantly.

Nico looked at him. “Don't hate me, but that actually *does* seem pretty useful. You know, going into the underworld and all… But hey, it's up to you. Seriously”.

Logan seemed pensive. He let out an annoyed sigh. “Okay, just for today. But after we're done here, I'm finding a way to get rid of it…”.

They half smiled at each other.

On their way to the huge glass doors Logan looked over at him. Nico tried not to look back. Logan didn’t let up.

“So, you went to see your sister?” he asked.

“Yeah” Nico replied coolly. *Yep… That's right... You won...* If Logan was going to make fun of him over this, this mission would be over before it even began.

“Good for you. She must have been real happy to see you” Logan said casually, finally looking away.

He caught Nico off guard again. “Yeah…” he replied much softer. *Good…?* In a weird way, this reaction was even more embarrassing. In an even weirder way, he somehow still minded a *lot* less…

They walked in straight ahead, in an attempt to walk past the reception desk to the large bronze elevator.

The sharply dressed lady behind it wasn't having it. "*Can I help you?*" she asked with a loud, nasal voice.

Nico put up his most polite smile. "No, thank you!".

She narrowed her eyes into a sharp stare, forcing him to continue.

"We're here to visit the executive office" he offered up.

She narrowed her eyes further. "*Do you have an appointment?*" she accused.

"Yes" Nico bluffed.

She narrowed her eyes so much they were almost closed now, lines thin as needles. She took a leatherbound notebook from the desk, readying her index fingers. "*Names?*" she stabbed.

They were in a standoff. One where she had the clear upper hand.

"... We would like to make an-" Nico attempted weakly.

"*Get out!*" she cut in, one finger on a threatening large red button.

Logan shrugged indifferently, happy enough to fight security.

Nope. Nico shoved him along, back out the door.

Logan turned to him outside. His eyes narrowed as he pursed his lips."Okay. So, you're not a fan of brute force… But, then what?" he asked. It sounded more like genuine interest than an accusation.

"I doubt she'd just let us go down, even if we *did* manage to beat down security. It's a machine, it has *controls*" Nico explained.

Logan blinked in surprise, seemingly only now even considering that. Nico couldn't help but smile a little smugly.

Logan narrowed his eyes again, almost pouting in thought. "More shadow magic isn't an option…?" he tried.

"Nope. Too dangerous. I've never been in that part. Might toss us right down a cliff.
Or *worse…*".

Logan nodded. "Doubt that elevator is the *only* way down, right? Hades is bound to be huge" he quickly concluded.

Nico’s turn to blink in surprise. “Yeah, it’s probably connected to other parts of Hades… They might have a ‘back door’, somewhere…” he considered. “But I have no idea where that would be”.

A large cargo truck slammed its tailgate onto the ground, multiple workers quickly moved in and out to unload. One crate stood out, filled with large, clear bottles. The golden liquid in them sloshed back and forth as they made their way around the corner.

They gave each other a look.

“I thought nectar was an *olympian* thing?” Logan asked.

Nico grinned. “That might just make it even more appealing…”

They walked around the corner as soon as the workers got back in the truck for the next load of Godly groceries.

Logan didn’t even pause to look around before entering the back of the office. Nico sped up to stop and scold him, when he realized it would be pointless. Nobody in the cluttered little hall even so much as glanced at them, just going about their business.

The clutter paved a clear little pathway to the back, right to another, much more beaten up elevator. It whirred quietly, then creaked and bonked open its doors.

The worker inside was the first to acknowledge their presence, glancing at them in mild surprise. Logan casually stepped aside to make room. The worker shrugged and wheeled out his box cart, giving them a polite nod.

Ha… Easy? Nico stepped inside and reached for the buttons. He paused.

“It goes down to *minus twenty three*” he said in astonishment.

“Kay, seems like our best bet, I guess?” Logan replied.

Nico pushed the button, creaking and bonking the elevator back to work. He felt it sink into the abyss. *Incredibly slowly.*

The light flickered. Logan’s shoulder brushed against his as he turned to look up. It brushed past again as he turned back. Nico leaned against the scratched and dented wall to get away from it. This was going to be a long, *long* elevator ride…

Logan gave him a pensive look.

Oh, great. Now what?

“There's a hole in your hoodie” Logan stated. He stuck a finger through the ribcage painted on Nico’s chest, prodding him right in the heart.

Seriously?! Nico swatted his hand away. “As a general rule for this *entire* day, don't stick your fingers inside skeletons” he huffed.

“Okay, any other *solid advice*?” Logan asked dryly.

“Yeah. Don't touch the skeletons. Don't touch the plants. Especially don't touch the walls. In fact, don't touch anything. If you die there, you stay there” Nico replied just as dryly.

Logan snickered. “Okay, so… What? If you die in Hades, you die in real life?” he quickly summarized. “I figured as much”

Nico closed his eyes to shield his brain from the sheer stupidity. The stupidity snuck past easily and shanked him right in the frontal lobe. He rubbed his forehead to soothe the pain and begged the Gods to put him out of his misery. All they’d have to do was snap the elevator cable. Given Logan’s track record, he’d probably inexplicably survive that anyway…

The elevator creaked and bonked to a stop. It tugged its doors open to reveal… Well, nothing yet. Nico’s eyes needed a while to adjust to the darkness outside. The bright, flickering light wasn’t helping.

He unsheathed his sword and carefully stepped out.

“Welcome home, bud” Logan said cheerfully, slapping him on the shoulder.

Nico heard him unsheath his sword too. Just seconds later everything lit up in an eerie green hue. Dark, rocky walls stretched out in all directions, even up and down. The flames made long shadows dance all across their rough, uneven surface.

“We're not in Hades yet” Nico muttered, looking around. “But, we're pretty close”. He walked ahead, into the only direction they could. The cavelike walls tunneled ahead in a long dark hallway. Nico’s shadow reached for its end, offset by a green halo.

He looked at Logan over his shoulder. “Careful, even the upper levels are filled with traps” he warned, instantly setting one off.

Small bronze chains shot out from a well hidden slit in the wall, quickly wrapping themselves around him and pulling him against it.

Shit! That hurt. His sword dangled next to his face, his upper arm being pulled against his neck. His other arm tightly pressed against his body.

Logan looked at him, seemingly trying his best not to laugh.

Double shit... Nico tried to move his sword, seeing if he could use it to cut himself free. The chains wrapped tighter.

Logan carefully walked up close. “Well *that's* a sight” he mocked, chuckling quietly.

“I could just shadow travel myself out of this, you know?” Nico bluffed. He wasn't sure he could. Probably not actually, he couldn’t move an inch.

An amber flash of irritation shot through the green all around it, catching Nico by surprise. “Don't be stupid! I'm right here” Logan said sternly, moving his sword around to get a better look at the chains.

Nico felt the heat of the flames lick over him as he did.

Logan narrowed his eyes, not able to find what he was looking for. He reached out his free hand, feeling around the chains around Nico's sword arm.

Nico squirmed, making the chains tighten even more.

“*Shit…*” Logan muttered. “Stay still” he ordered, turning off the fire and adding his other hand.

Nico's face heated up. The darkness made it even harder not to pay attention to Logan's hands going over him. His fingers touched Nico's as he gently took his sword from his hand. He dropped it to the floor absentmindedly and got even closer trying to get a better angle.

Logan huffed in his concentration. The feeling of the warm air running past Nico's cheek was *offensive*. He clenched his teeth and moved his face as far away from Logan's neck as he could. He closed his eyes and pretended to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. He thought of nature.

A summer breeze flowed past him through a bristling pine forest…

Fuck…

Logan moved back a little and jabbed his sword right above Nico's head. He felt the chain loosen instantly.

“There! *Mr. Independent”* Logan scoffed, roughly pulling the chains away. “Was that so bad?” he asked, clearly very pleased with himself.

Yes!

No…

Yes.

Nico couldn't answer. Still, it was *less* bad than last night. *Gods! Don't think about last night.…* The green fire flared back up right as Nico managed to get his resting bitch face in working order.

Logan offered him his sword, smiling genuinely.

“Thanks…” Nico muttered, swiping it out of his hand. “Seriously” he added with a bit more warmth.

Logan smiled wider, bright warmth in his eyes. He gently tapped Nico's earring. “Don't be embarrassed” he soothed. “Could've just as easily been me”.

Nico thought about it. Ideas of what that might have been like popped up in his mind. He wished they hadn't...

“Yeah, I guess” he replied weakly. Did he trust the green light to hide all the red on his face? *Nope.* He quickly sped up to walk in front, watching for traps *much* more attentively from now on.

Clicking and clattering echo’d off of the high rocky walls, now much wider apart. Nico’s suspicions were confirmed when the clicking and clattering intensified, to a hasteful pace, revealing a small army of skeleton warriors charging towards them.

Logan pulled him back next to his side, sticking out his sword. The skeleton warriors raised theirs, ready to strike, almost close enough to do so. Nico chuckled quietly, lazily raising and dropping his hands. The skeleton warriors fell apart in the middle of their rush. Bones clicked and clattered one last time as they hit the floor, sprawling out in front of their feet like a macabre wave washing ashore.

The hand on Nico’s back slipped away and the green light lowered. “Right…” Logan muttered with clear disappointment, kicking a skull.

“Cheer up” Nico told him, wading on through the skeleton warrior remains. “This means we’re getting closer”.

Logan sighed. The sound of bones sliding over stone and dirt suggested he followed close by. The chaotic sounds made way for the steady, calmer pace of their footsteps echoing around them.

The echoes stopped, green light growing slightly more distant behind Nico’s back.

“What the…?” he heard behind him.

He quickly turned around to check on Logan, then blinked. Logan looked straight up. Slowly raising his sword to see better.

Nico took in the completely overgrown ceiling. It was covered in light gray roots, sticking out in all possible directions. “Poplar tree roots” he explained, almost sighing in relief.

He felt Logan's eyes on him. “In the underworld…?” he asked.

“Some woman rejected my father. Long story… She's a tree now. They spread everywhere”.

“Petty as hell” Logan concluded.

Nico smirked. *Yep.* That was a pretty good summary of most things that had to do with the Gods. They weren’t great at dealing with complex human emotions. *Ha,* guess he got that from his father then…

The steady pace of echoes picked back up. Half of them a bit faster paced than the others. The green behind him brightened, even more so as it reached in front of him.

Logan nudged his shoulder.“It’s boring back here. Stop running away from me” he complained.

“You’ve never been in Hades before. I just don’t want you to get yourself *hurt*” Nico complained back.

Logan huffed. “I’m more than just a torch, okay? I can handle myself. I’ve even gotten pretty good at the whole ‘zombie’ thing” he bragged, nudging him again.

Nico pushed down the small sense of pride he felt. It kept trying to crawl back up to his face. To keep it down once and for all, he decided to take Logan down a small notch. He never seemed to mind anyway. “Yeah? You think you can top me?”.

That came out wrong. *So* wrong. Nico’s face almost burst into flames. He definitely burned down his grin, at least…

All echoes stopped. The green flames sent a shudder over their shadows. Nico turned to stare at Logan's face.

Logan was clearly in disbelief too, and in *awe*... He cocked his head, smiling as wide as he could. “You *dirty* little-” he started.

“*In a fight! In a goddamn fight, you idiot!”* Nico shouted, waving his hands in Logan’s face hysterically.

“*Okay!* Okay. I get it…” Logan assured, gesturing for him to calm down. “But… For the record, I'd have you *begging* me for mercy either way” he said smugly.

A hundred *cursed* images flashed through Nico's mind all at once. His brain broke trying to suppress them all. He hung his head down and put his hands on Logan's shoulders to steady himself, trying desperately not to kill either of them.

Logan messed up his hair. “Sorry, but you started it. That means this is how low the bar is now. *Those are the rules…*” he hissed with feigned regret.

No, please. Any God out there… This must be what Hell was like. *Oh, wait.* They actually *were* in Hell… He grinned joylessly, then got himself back together. He erased the past ten minutes from his memory. And oh, why not? He threw the last few days away with them too, just because. He was already cleaning up anyway.

He straightened up, folding his hands and putting them on his chin. “Alright. That sentence might have been a *little* up to interpretation. I'll give you that. Now, *please* stop killing me, you pervert…”. He reached his hands out to him a little in an offering gesture.

Logan raised his eyebrows. “So the begging's already-” he cut himself off with a sudden realization. “I said I was going to be nicer to you today, didn't I?” he asked with some disappointment.

Hahaa! Right! And to think he thought that was going to bite him in the ass before. Guess life *was* worth living after all! Nico smiled gratefully.

Logan smiled back warmly. “Okay, fine. Actually getting to see you be genuinely happy for once is worth it anyway” he shrugged. He reached over and gently ran the back of his hand over Nico's cheek.

Gods fucking damn it! Nico could already feel the burn wounds from the *caress* start to scar.

Logan turned around and stuck up a warning finger. “So, the bar goes back up, but just a *bit!”* he yelled.

Nico stood frozen in place for a moment, suffering in silence. In a fit of anger, he grit his teeth and swung his fist up pretending to stab himself in the heart. *That adorable fucking asshole!* He took a deep breath and moved back into gear.

Logan glanced back and slowed down, waiting for him to catch up.

Nico decided keeping quiet would be the safest strategy. There was no way Logan could turn that against him, right? Well… he hoped so… Logan was annoyingly good at turning any type of situation, *no matter how mundane*, right into a panic attack! Nico suppressed a huff. It was strangely fitting. It was strangelier painful…

He shook his head. All he needed to do was keep his mouth-!

Logan suddenly tapped his temple. “You keep doing that” he accused.

Huh? “What?” Nico asked.

“Zoning out” Logan replied. “You’ve always done that, but it’s gotten even worse since yesterday…”

No I don't! Do I? What does that even-. He quickly stopped himself. “It's called *thinking*. You wouldn't get it” he quipped.

“Yeah, no. All my teachers called that *distracted*” Logan shot back.

Nico rolled his eyes. He let his thoughts wander again. Not unnoticed apparently.

“Is it fun?” Logan asked, a lot more amused than annoyed.

Nico looked at him.

“Being an *enigma*” Logan clarified dramatically.

Nico pretended to think it over. “Does it bother you?” he asked in return. *Damn.* That almost *actually* sounded like he cared. He could have fooled himself.

Logan pursed his lips. “I mean, *in a way,* yeah” he replied a little warily.

“Then, yes. It’s tons of fun” Nico concluded.

The corner of Logan’s mouth twitched. Nico grinned triumphantly.

Logan grinned in return, clearly still a little annoyed. “Good. Can’t stay mad at that face for long anyway. You look so *cute* when you’re torturing yourself in there” he huffed, tapping Nico on the forehead. “*Adorable,* even” he added with an evil grin.

Nico’s face burned. He scowled through it.

“Oh, does that *bother* you?” Logan asked triumphantically.

You don’t even know what you’re doing to me…! Nico turned bitter. “You’re such an asshole when you’re being *nice.* I miss the unhinged psycho you used to be”. The words tasted like battery acid.

Logan actually looked a little angry. Then mostly just hurt. He opened his mouth to say something, but, with a small jerk of his head, went and grit his teeth instead.

Fuck. That wasn't worth it... *At all.…* Nico avoided his eyes and kept walking. He picked up the pace a little to create some distance again.

Nico saw the hints of a faded, stone carved symbol on the ground, hidden in all the green looking dirt. He made a quick adjustment to move around it. “Don’t touch that on the ground” he warned.

Just seconds after he did, a *thunderous* crash roared out behind him. The flickering green hue disappeared instantly, obscuring everything ahead. A gust of smoke, dust and cold air almost knocked him over. He spun around. Nico stared at the wall of smoke. Time froze with him.

No way… Right…? Right?!

Shrouded in dust and smoke, everything looked black and white. Logan just *died,* just like that. Nico shook his head. No, he hadn’t. If he had… Nico would never *ever,* not even in death, forgive himself for-

A loud laugh broke free from the silence. A silhouette slowly formed as the dust started to settle.

“Wooh! Close call, huh?!” Logan asked cheerfully. He'd managed to cling on to some especially thick roots growing out of the ceiling, now hanging right above a massive hole

where the ground and walls used to be. “That put *all* my reflexes to the test” he laughed.

He climbed forward and swung himself back onto the ground, landing with a heavy thud. Waving some of the smoke away from himself with his hands, he looked over the edge into the abyss below. “Well, there goes Stabigail number seven…” he muttered. “Or was it eight?”.

He turned around and gave Nico a bright grin. It aggravated him to the core. *That dumb fucking asshole!* Nico only noticed how much his chest hurt when he finally inhaled. Rage took over. He stepped closer. *How could he be so reckless?!* He stopped right in front of him and glared like he’d never glared before.

Logan met his eyes with a fond look, completely oblivious to his imminent murder. Nico was about ready to strangle him. He reached out his arms. His hands missed his throat and moved past it. He wrapped his arms around the back of Logan's neck and pulled him against himself.

“Uhm… Spooky…? You good?” Logan asked, *stupidly.*

Nico dropped his head on Logan's shoulder and quietly swore into it. “*You're the fucking worst”* he said breathlessly.

Logan chuckled and put his free hand on Nico's back, rubbing over it.

“Don't touch me!” Nico growled, pulling himself away and stomping on into the remains of the hallway.

“Oh… Kay…?” he heard Logan say behind him.

Nico ignored him.

“Getting some mixed messages here, pal” Logan complained.

Nico turned around this time, to scowl at him. To his surprise Logan actually looked startled. *Good.*

To his horror he realized his lower lip was trembling. He quickly clenched his jaw and turned back around.

Logan caught up with him. He hooked his arm around him and put his chin on his shoulder. “Hey, look man… I'm sorry. That was stupid. I'll be more careful”.

Nico held onto his last nerve before he lost it. “You fucking better be! If you don’t I’m coming after you just to beat the shit out of you in the afterlife!” he threatened.

Logan chuckled against him. He smacked Logan's forehead with the back of his hand so softly it was almost a pat. “I said don't touch me” he reiterated weakly.

Logan let go.

Nico sighed out his disappointment. It needed to be done, if Logan was still this close when he said what he was about to say… There was no way he could stop himself from crying. “About what I said earlier… Before the explosion. I'm really, *really* sorry… I didn't mean any of-”. His voice cracked.

Logan gently pushed past to face him.

Nico forced himself to look him in the eye when he continued. “I swear, I really didn’t-”.

Logan put up his hands in defeat. “My guy, it’s fine. *Stop!*” he pleaded.

The amount of pity in his expression was painful… And a little annoying… Nico couldn’t help pouting a bit. To Logan’s credit, he seemed to be trying his hardest not to smirk at the sight of it. Nico’s pout didn’t think he tried hard enough, turning angrier.

Logan broke, snickering soundlessly. He caught himself before Nico could tell him off. “Thanks! Forget about it already, okay? It's not a big deal!” he waved away.

Nico sighed, knowing he *wouldn’t* and it *was*. Not that he didn’t believe Logan, Nico just wasn’t any good at that *self-compassion* type of bullshit. But that wasn’t Logan’s problem, so he forced a smile anyway.

Logan’s expression fell, not just pity, disappointment too. “Don’t do that…” he pleaded more desperately.

Nico looked down a bit in shame and watched a faint, but reassuring smile spread on his lips.

“*I forgive you*, yeah? Please at least try to do the same? It’s not fair to do this to yourself. No use to it either” Logan reasoned softly.

Nico’s eyes darted back up, straight into pure, warm sincerity. Relief and shame fought over the tears welling up in his eyes. With a quick wipe from the back of his hand, he subdued them both. “*Yeah.* I’ll try” he promised, just as much to himself.

Logan grinned brightly, lighting up a genuine smile on Nico’s face. Logan’s fist moved up, Nico braced for impact. Instead, it halted before it landed in his stomach, even pulling back a little.

Nico blinked at it a few times then snorted. “*Gods*, fine! Your ban’s been lifted” he laughed.

Logan happily jabbed him in the stomach, just a bit too hard, exactly like he was supposed to.

“Since when do you care about rules anyway?!” Nico asked as soon as he could breathe normally.

Logan raised an eyebrow in clear offense. “Dude, healthy boundaries aren’t just any old, *useless* fucking rule! Just because I’ll murder someone doesn’t mean I don’t have any honor!”.

Nico quickly held up his hands. “*Alright!* Alright! I see your point” he conceded, trying not to laugh. He held a hand over his heart. “*I’m sorry for questioning your integrity*” he added, theatrically serious.

Logan ground his teeth, annoyance and amusement twinkling bright orange right above. “I know you’re joking, but if you apologize one more time I’m going to lose my shit” he warned.

“I’m-”.

Nico quickly bit his tongue. He smiled, *apologetically.*

Logan shook his head slowly, looking at him intently. Nico quickly sucked in his lips.

Logan smirked through his annoyance and dug his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket with two rough movements. “*I need a fucking smoke*” he concluded. He walked a bit ahead, up to a hole in the wall, and sat down.

Nico followed, sitting down next to him. He looked ahead, past their legs dangling over the edge. Underneath them, even more stark white Poplar trees grew on the various ledges and plateaus.

Nico glanced over at Logan. He watched him flick on his lighter. Logan’s eyes lit up a little as he held the flame close to his face, lighting his cigarette. The contrast with his dark lashes made his eyes seem even brighter. The flicker of the little flames in his eyes dimmed when he snapped the lighter shut.

Their eyes locked, Logan's no longer flames, but still emitting a warm glow.

In a weird surge of bravery Nico opened up a little. “Remember that evening on Gwen’s porch? The last one, I mean” he asked.

“Yeah, when I made you cry” Logan replied, almost like a question itself.

“Well, yeah. But I meant before that. When you said you'd been wanting to tell me something… I was afraid you were going to tell me you liked me... That's why I got a little freaked out” his face burned as he said it.

Logan's eyes almost had a twinkle to them as he gave Nico a fond smile. “Dude, I *do* like you!”.

Nico closed his eyes to lock away his glare. *Yes. You absolute moron. But not like that.* He exhaled. Logan was so freaking dense. It was annoying as all hell, but somehow also kinda cute. Nico smiled. Pretty good description of Logan in general. His smile dissipated. What was he even trying to accomplish here?

“What's so scary about me liking you?” Logan asked, he seemed a little defensive.

Nico thought about it. “You know what? I don't think I actually know” he shrugged.

Logan shook his head. “I don't get you” he replied, taking a drag of his cigarette. “*At all…”* he blew out with his smoke.

“Damn right you don't” Nico said. He smiled wider and nudged Logan's shoulder with his.

Logan raised an eyebrow in a puzzled look. “Affection? *From you?”* he asked with a grin.

“Yeah, guess I’m nervous or something” Nico offered in a half assed explanation. He was losing control. He needed to be more careful.

Logan smirked. “You're *always* nervous. It's getting worse too. I'm starting to think your cheeks are just going to stay red forever…” he snickered.

Yeah. Don't think about that too hard, you idiot…

Logan reached out again and nudged his cheek. “Why would someone like *you* be so ashamed of himself all the time? You're a great guy, you know? I wish you’d stop being so hard on yourself” he said *tenderly*, killing Nico instantly.

Nico's corpse exhaled its final breath in a small, damp cloud of melancholy. *But you don’t know me, not really…* Not in the way that truly matters, anyway. If he’d stop being hard on himself, stop *fighting* himself, he’d lose control. And if he did, even for just a moment, Logan would hate him… *forever…* So being himself, his actual self, all of himself, was impossible. At least around the people he wanted to be close with. He used to think he liked irony…

He forced himself to look at Logan. Logan looked back. There it was again, that *irresistible* warmth in his eyes. *Gods*, life was cruel…

His hand moved on its own. Before he could stop himself he took the cigarette from Logan's mouth. He caught himself before he leaned in. *To do what?! Shit!* He definitely lost control there!

They both stared at the cigarette in disbelief.

What the hell was he doing?! More importantly, what the hell was he going to do now?! The problem solver in him glanced over the rocky edge. *Nope.* Nowhere near deep enough, that would just add to the embarrassment!

Logan huffed in confusion. “Oh…? I thought you didn't smoke…?” he muttered.

Right…! Guess he did now?! Nico quickly took a drag. *What burned more?* he wondered. The disgusting hot fumes in his throat, or the fact that what he had in his mouth had been in Logan's just seconds before?

His body fought not to choke either way. It didn't work. The last remains of the temple crumbled, collapsing in on themselves with a puff of smoke. Coughing up his lungs, he held the cursed little hell stick out for Logan. Thankfully he took it. Nico let him laugh at him all he wanted, he was too relieved for the sudden nightmare to be over to care.

“What a *weird ass* power move!” Logan laughed. He gave Nico some rough, slightly painful pats on the back.

Nico caught his breath, grateful anyway. “Yeah, I don't really know what came over me…” he half admitted.

“Shit, Am I a bad influence on you?” Logan chuckled. It almost sounded like a sincere question.

“Are you kidding? *A terrible influence!”* Nico said intensely.

“Damn… Guess everyone else’s moms were right…” he replied with an exaggerated mournful tone.

Nico grinned. “Sure, but at least the dads absolutely *love* you, right?” he asked as sarcastically as he could.

Logan stifled a laugh and winked at him suggestively. He took a drag. “Yeah, okay” he exhaled. “I'm not really someone to bring home to your parents…”.

Nico pursed his lips. “Well to be fair, most parents suck anyway”.

Logan gave him a funny look. He hooked his arm around Nico's neck and pulled him closer. “Are you sticking up for me?” he asked with amusement.

Nico tried not to get distracted by the fact that Logan's temple rested against the side of his head. “No, I just hate most people” he replied flatly.

“Eh, I'll still take it” Logan shrugged against him. “Man, I should be nice to you *all* the time” he joked, rubbing their cheeks together *jokingly.* It burned like hell.

“I don't think I could bear it” Nico accidentally let slip. He'd sounded like he was going to cry.

Logan pulled away quickly, lowering his arm to grip Nico's shoulder tightly. Nico carefully glanced to meet his eyes. He looked *very* concerned.

Nico quickly put up a smug face.

Logan huffed in amusement. “Fuck, you're *cruel.* You got me there for a second!”.

Yeah… I'm the one being cruel… Nico watched Logan put out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe, without a single care. Off into his pocket the cigarette butt went, just like always.

Logan pulled up his knees and got up. Nico sighed and did the same, not quite ready to face the rest of Hell.

He followed Logan’s burning hand further through the rocky tunnel. Logan fidgeted with his fingers, lost in careful watch of the floors and wall. The movements made the flames flicker even more restlessly.

Nico dragged his eyes off of them to look ahead. He wasn’t very familiar with this area of Hades. He wondered where the hallway led to. Where was it going to end? If anywhere at all…

Not long after, he found out. There was no light at the end of the tunnel, just more foggy dusk. The rocky walls he’d gotten used to ended abruptly, into open darkness. Nico almost missed the claustrophobic feeling from earlier, now having to keep careful watch on what might be lurking from any direction.

Logan didn’t seem bothered whatsoever, in fact he seemed excited.

Suspiciously excited.

It quickly dawned on Nico exactly why, when Logan sped up a bit over the dim plain, stopping next to a bundle of bones. The scattered remains of a decapitated skeleton warrior, still in full suit of armor.

Logan bent down and stole its sword, taking its entire lower arm with him.

“Score!” he said cheerfully. He held it up proudly, the bones still clinging onto it. “*Behold.* Stabigail the eighth. *Probably.*…”.

Nico almost chuckled, then he remembered Logan's stupidity from earlier, the reason he needed a new sword in the first place... He drew a sharp breath. “She's beautiful…” he started sarcastically. “Remember, you promised to be careful. So, make sure this *Stabigail* lasts…” he warned, getting to the point.

Logan's expression softened a bit. “Don't worry. I remember” he assured, still smirking a little. “And you can call her *Stabby*” he offered with a wink.

Nico had to try a lot harder not to chuckle this time. He compromised on a grin.

The sound of panting and many clawed feet hitting the dirt caught their attention. The sounds got closer and closer, accompanied by many large shadows growing even larger in the fog ahead.

“Hellhounds” Nico pointed out.

Logan grinned. He stepped in front of Nico. His grip on Stabigail tightened as he held her at the ready, clearly eager to try her out.

Nico smirked and stuck out a hand. The ground in front of them cracked open following his gesture, making the hellhounds slip to halt. The crater grew slowly, pushing them back a bit. Many skeletal arms reached out, grasping at the frenzy of the hellhounds' kicking legs. They snarled and howled, desperately resisting their grip. *No use*, of course. All at once they were slowly pulled under the surface. The dirt caving in over them drowned out their final yips and yelps.

The earth went still.

Logan's shoulders slumped with a huff of disbelief. "You're not going to let me do *anything,* are you?" he complained, resheathing his sword.

"Keep up" Nico shrugged, smiling smugly to himself.

They stepped over the remains of the cracks in the ground and walked on. Mere moments they hit a wall. The ceiling had caved in and formed what looked close to a small cliff. A dark cavern had formed above it.

Nico sighed. "No way to tell if that even goes anywhere".

He looked behind them. Not much to go back to either though… He turned around right in time to see Logan climb up, already almost there. He made it look frustratingly easy.

"Where are you going?" Nico asked, annoyed, a little worried.

Logan knelt down at the top, looking down at him. "Where's your sense of adventure?" he asked cheekily.

Of course.

Nico shivered, not quite recovered from burying the pack of large dogs. There was no way he could climb up in his current state. Just walking had been draining. The thought of having to admit that out loud annoyed and worried him even further.

Guess he didn't have to.

Logan reached out his hand. "Here" he offered.

Nico pursed his lips. Not much better, but whatever. He grabbed it and prepared himself to put his feet on the wall.

Guess he didn't have to do that either.

Logan pulled him straight up and hooked his other arm under Nico's as he stood back up. Showing another frustrating lack of effort. Nico fought his hardest not to get completely pressed against him. Logan turned around and dropped him on his feet, seemingly completely unaware of how awkward this was.

Nico scowled as he pulled back. “Was that really necessary?” he asked, the annoyance clearly getting overshadowed by how flustered he was.

Logan looked amused, but he sounded almost a little worried. “You tell me” He picked up Nico's wrist and held up his hand. It trembled.

Nico pulled it out of his grasp. “That's *nothing*. That happens every time I use my powers. I'm fine” he grumbled.

“Sure” Logan responded with a low voice.

Nico glared at him.

It didn't reach Logan, already looking off into the makeshift hallway next to them. “C'mon”. He glanced at Nico and gestured to go.

There wasn’t much to go to. After just a few feet they found a huge, gaping hole in the wall.

Nico looked down over the edge. Another makeshift cliff. Thankfully a lot less steep. He was about to turn to Logan when he heard a low rumble in the darkness below. His eyes snapped back to the centre of the dark, looking closer. There was a giant mass on the floor. It shifted a little, letting out another rumble. He felt the vibrations in his legs.

“Great. A Laistrygonian giant. A *big* one at that. How’d we get so lucky?” Nico asked sarcastically.

They watched the Giant stir again. It looked like it was about to wake up.

Shit.

He still had no energy left, not having had a chance to actually rest. A shiver came over him like a wave. He grabbed his upper arms in a reflex, trying to warm himself up a little. The green light waved around. Logan dropped his coat over Nico's shoulders. The sudden weight almost made his knees buckle.

Nico winced. “What is this thing made of? *Lead?!*” he blurted out.

Logan laughed at him. “If you can’t even beat my coat, you might want to sit this one out” he said cheerfully. He slapped Nico on the shoulder. “Leave it to me”.

Before Nico could react Logan slid down the debris on the ledge.

Eh. No use trying to reign him in anyway… Nico dropped down in a sitting position and unwrapped the energy bar he’d saved. He took a bite.

The giant sat up from behind a colossal, flat stone slab. It flicked on a primitive looking, massive desk lamp. It got up from the rock he’d been sitting on and stomped over his makeshift desk, dropping its feet onto the ground with a thump so loud it felt like the room shook.

In the light Nico could tell it was wearing a huge, yet still obviously too small, dress suit. It gestured its gigantic hand at Logan and roared.

“Watch out, you ugly bastard! I’m *crazier* than you!” Logan warned, pointing at the giant with his sword. The excitement in his voice was undeniable. The Greek fire cast an eerie glow on his evil smirk.

The giant let loose immediately. He swung his arm down like a sledgehammer.

Logan stepped out of the way just enough to dodge it, ramming his sword down in the giant's wrist as soon as its hand crashed into the ground.

It cried out in a deafening roar and pulled away its arm, green flames still lingering. After spreading them to its other hand trying to put them out, it gave up and swung its arm across.

Logan ran forward and slid underneath on his knees. As he came to a stop he stabbed the giant in its heel. Nico could see the sword exit on the other side. More green fire burst out, spreading ominously all over its lower leg. Logan changed his grip and dragged his sword up through the giant's calf as he got to his feet.

It roared again, but it almost sounded like a whimper. Its leg gave out. The giant tried to turn around to face Logan, but in its wounded state it was slow. It struggled to get back up.

Logan almost casually walked around its back. He sliced at the inside of the knee on its other leg, leaving another deep, bright green gash. The giant buckled and fell forward with a thundering crash.

Logan stepped up onto its back as it very slowly engulfed in flames. The giant slammed its hands onto the ground in a burst of green embers, desperately trying to prop itself up. Before it could, Logan thrust his sword through the back of its neck, putting it out of its misery. It let out a last whimper before it turned to dust.

Logan landed in the big pool of burning blood that had formed underneath it. The small splash echo’d off the walls in shiny emerald ripples, flowing over the dark liquid in expanding circles.

Nico blinked, he realized he hadn't for a while. Watching Logan fight had felt strangely mesmerizing. In all its gory brutality it was almost elegant. He was very agile, very precise and most of all, he was clearly enjoying himself. You could tell children of Ares were *made* for this.

Logan stuck out his arms in a triumphant gesture and strolled towards Nico out of the small lake of slowly dying green flames. He flashed a toothy grin. Nico started a slow clap, chewing on the last bite of his energy bar.

Logan threw his head back a little in frustration. “Oh, come on! That was some of my best work!”.

Nico pursed his lips. “Alright, that was a *little* impressive” he let up.

Logan took a dramatic bow. “Couldn’t let you do *all* the work” he grumbled as he flicked his ring, letting the fire die down before he sheathed his sword.

He cocked his head, his smile fading a little as he looked up at Nico. “Need help?” he asked, holding his arms out in an offer to catch him.

Nico thought about it. He quickly shook the thought out of his head. His cheeks started to burn. Trying to hide the fact he was about to catch fire, he threw Logan's coat down into his face and quickly unzipped his hoodie a bit.

“Hey watch it! That's sentimental” Logan complained, revealing a disgruntled pout as he pulled himself free.

Nico gave him a questioning look.

“It's my grandpa's." Logan explained.

“No way, *how old is it*?” Nico asked.

“He got it in the seventies” Logan shrugged.

Nico mulled it over. “Probably shouldn't bring precious antiques to a monster den, though”.

Logan actually seemed to consider it. “Maybe… But it's good luck”.

Nico slid down the ledge. A lot less smoothly than Logan did before. Logan seemed to pretend not to notice. Nico appreciated that.

He scrambled to his feet as he watched Logan throw on his coat. His dog tag jingled as he did.

“So you’re actually a pretty sentimental guy, huh?” Nico asked. “Wouldn’t have guessed that from such a *tough guy*”.

Logan didn’t seem bothered. “You caught me. Secretly I’m just a big softy”. He gave Nico an amused glance. “You’re one to talk, though. I didn’t expect you to actually keep wearing that”.

He bumped Nico in the chest with his knuckles, right above his zipper. Nico looked down to see what he meant. For a second, he and the faded Scream mask almost perfectly matched expressions.

“I don’t! Usually…! I was just running low!” he stammered, quickly zipping back up, hiding it away from prying eyes.

Logan laughed. “Calm down! I’m just messing with you…”.

They walked around the desk, around the shards of a cheaply made Buddha garden ornament…? Towards a stone arch leading into even more darkness. Torches lit as they came closer, illuminating an impossibly long hallway.

An unnerving feeling crept over Nico. His mind started to wander. Last time he walked behind someone in a narrow hallway like this, the light just slightly too dim, the atmosphere heavy, was…

“Reminds me of when I was down here with Will…” he said suddenly. *Crap.* He hadn’t meant to say that out loud… He hoped Logan wouldn’t pry… He probably should have known better.

“Yan's brother, right?” Logan asked, swiping away a cobweb.

“Let's leave him out of this” Nico pleaded, walking into another cobweb anyway.

“You angry at him?” Logan asked.

“No! *Not at all!”* Nico replied, desperately wiping the remains of the silky trap off of his face. “I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm a pretty *complicated* person. I've got tons of issues. It's not Will's fault that it didn't work out”. He could hear that some hurt shone through. This was always a bit of a touchy subject. He *really* didn't feel like getting into it with Logan of all people.

“Hey, give yourself some credit. You're way too smart, very nice in your own *edgy* way, scary strong, and on top of all of that, you're a really good looking guy. Don't worry about it! Whoever you pick is one of the *luckiest* guys out there” Logan said matter-of-factly, stabbing Nico right in the heart.

He wondered how many times Logan could stab him in the heart before he'd bleed out… Not much more, he hoped.

As usual, it was clear Logan meant *all* of it. Forget all the *physical* stuff. This was his worst emotional war crime yet, *by far*. Nico felt so much he almost went numb. The swarm of bugs in his stomach churned. It made it hard to walk.

Please… You beautiful bastard, have mercy on me. If you’re going to kill me, just get it over with already...

Nico’s face burned bright, the fire quickly spreading all over his body. He fought the smile threatening to come out so hard it hurt, *badly*. There was *nothing* to smile about. It was so fucking unfair. *This freaking guy.* Why did he always make being around him so difficult?

Nico felt frustration take over. “Whatever. Just drop it” he hissed. He scowled when their eyes met.

“What's with the whole ‘*cold and mean’* act again all of a sudden? I'm being as nice as I can here” Logan huffed. He turned around and blocked Nico's path by sticking his hand out against the wall in front of him.

Nico debated shoving it away, but he couldn't bear the thought of touching him right now. He glared at him instead. Logan grinned back, but Nico could tell he was well on his way to

getting angry.

Logan leaned in and reached up a hand. He gently moved Nico's hair behind his ear. He let his fingers linger, *aggravatingly*. “I'm not buying it. I know you don't hate me nearly as much as you pretend to, so cheer up a little” he practically whispered in Nico's ear. He lowered his hand and gave a short, light tug on the tiny skull hanging from his earring.

Nico suppressed a shiver as Logan pulled back. This was exactly what he *didn't* want. Logan was being *unbearable.* “You don't know shit, *especially* not about me” he spat back at him.

Logan pulled his arm back a little then smashed his fist back into the wall. A stream of spiders quickly ran out of a crack next to it, disappearing into the shadows. “Look! I know I was a raging jerk the first time we met, and I know that I still was countless times after that. But I told you how sorry I am! *We talked about that.* I actually thought we were getting better! You’re, like, one of my closest friends at this point, man! And now it feels like the harder I try, the more of an ass you are to me! That’s *fucked up!* Just tell me what you want me to do!”.

Nico lost it. Everything Logan did messed with his head. Especially his *stupid* honesty, his complete lack of fear of saying whatever he felt like. It *always* wrecked Nico’s brain, leaving him speechless. Not this time! “It’s because anytime I'm around you it reminds me of how much of a *freak* I am. How *fucking damaged* I am. I’ll *never* be able to have a normal relationship with anyone… *Especially not you*”.

Nico shoved Logan in the chest. Then closed in on him. “You are my best friend. *Fuck*, you’re practically my only *actual* friend. You're getting too close to me! *I don’t do that, I don’t let people get close to me.* When you‘re nice to me, it messes with my head! It just reminds me that I’m not going to be able to hide how I feel and I’m going to ruin everything!” Nico shouted, staring Logan down furiously.

“Don’t you get it?! *I’m in love with you! Fottuto Idiota!*” he confessed, maybe more to himself than Logan. The relief was short-lived. He felt the shame take a chokehold on him.

Logan’s expression was hard to read, but it was clear he was seconds away from exploding. His eyes were absolutely blazing.

Nico saw the corner of Logan’s mouth twitch. He could tell he was holding back as hard as he could. Until he wasn’t.

Logan grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and shoved him into the wall. He got in his face, their noses almost touching. “*If you're messing with me, this is your last chance to back out!”* he growled through gritted teeth.

Nico gave him one last defiant look. Then stuck up his hands and closed his eyes. Deep down he knew this would happen. That’s why he had tried to avoid it so long. It had been nice while it lasted… “Go ahead. Do your worst” he challenged, already defeated. He waited for the first hit to land.

Logan pulled him in hard. Their lips crashed together. Nico’s sound of surprise got muffled by the kiss.

Nico felt Logan grab the back of his neck, rough and eager, holding him firmly in place. Logan ran his other hand down from his shoulder blades to his lower back, pressing himself against him. Nico’s legs went weak. He rushed his arms under Logan’s coat and grabbed onto him for dear life.

Getting kissed by Logan was everything he had never dared to dream of. He was rough, intense and *skilled.* Exactly like the way he fought. But, Nico wasn't going to go down without fighting back…

He shoved his knee between Logan's legs and swung him around against the wall, switching their positions. As hard as he could, he pulled Logan against him, his lips against his own.

It was impossible to hold back. He'd been *dying* for this for too long.

He ran a hand up Logan’s shirt, over the side of his stomach. His fingers searched for the scars on his abdomen. They got lost, feeling the contour of the muscles under the palm of his hand, mapping them out in his mind *perfectly.*

He felt Logan smirk against his lips.

Logan tightened his grip on him. So tight, it almost hurt. In the best way.

Nico followed suit.

“*Gods”* Logan groaned into his mouth, between them fighting for breath. “*You drive me. Fucking. Crazy”*.

Nico hung on tightly to every word, trying to take them right from-!

Logan bit Nico’s lower lip, not painfully, but hard enough to make a tingle go down his spine. Nico let out a surprised gasp. Logan made tactical use of the opportunity to invade, going in for a deep kiss.

Nico shuddered at the sudden tickling sensation and let out a short, low moan. Logan joined in, sending the vibrations right past Nico's teeth, down the underside of his tongue.

Logan tugged on his hair to get better access. With a drowned out sigh, Nico sank into his embrace. A low chuckle traced around his tongue. Nico tried not to get swept away, giving as much push back as he could.

It felt so… *Addictive*. He could have stayed like this forever.

He would have, if they didn't have something ‘*important*’ to do… *Damn Gods... Always ruining everything.…* Still, Aphrodite had her perks...

With a frustrating amount of effort, he turned his face enough to break the kiss. He kissed Logan on his upper jaw, then rested his face against it. Each pant smelled like warm pinewood.

Nico quickly pulled his hand back out from under Logan's shirt. Logan didn't budge his, leaving it dangerously low on Nico's lower back. They caught their breath for a moment.

Nico pushed himself off of Logan and looked into his eyes. Logan flashed him the smuggest grin yet, the fire in his eyes still smouldering.

"*Uhuh… Good talk…!*" Nico concluded a little hoarsely.

Logan laughed. He pushed himself off the wall, getting himself very close to Nico's face again. Nico fought the urge to lean in.

Logan put his hand on Nico's chin and gently led his thumb over his lips. "I've been wanting to do that for a while…".

He had? Nico didn't bother to hide his smile. "Alright. Lots to discuss, but *'right time and place'* and all that… So now that we're done with our 'fight', we should probably finish what we actually came here to do and get out of here".

Logan grinned, getting even closer.

"Try to take this a *little* seriously, you pervert!" Nico laughed, bending out of reach.

"I am! I'm just a little *worked up*…" Logan defended.

Yeah, fair… Nico quickly closed the distance. *Just for a little bit.*

He got an appreciative hum in response. Logan moved his hand to the side, running it over his cheek.

Nico blindly followed after him when Logan started to pull away, making Logan smirk again. He stopped himself to let Logan break the kiss, and cleared his throat. " *Right…"* he said firmly.

They grinned at each other.

"That tongue of yours isn't nearly as sharp as it sounds, by the way" Logan teased, giving his cheek a final pat before removing his hand.

Nico felt some heat return to his face. Logan grabbed his hand and pulled him along. Nico let him. He watched him closely as they made their way further into the hallway. His smile was contagious.

Logan glanced at him, a little puzzled suddenly. “What was that you said in Italian?" he asked.

Nico got flustered as he remembered. “I called you a fucking idiot…” he admitted. He tried to look sly about it.

Logan gave him an amused look and turned back to the hallway. “Hot”.

Nico shoved him with his free hand. “Have some standards, man” he laughed.

“I know what I like, no shame in that” Logan shrugged with a grin.

Nico couldn't bring himself to sigh, not even to pretend. He needed all his focus not to grin like an idiot.

They reached what looked to be a dead end in the hallway. Walking up to it Nico discovered it was a split in two directions. On one side two bronze elevator doors, on the other a broad, very dark brown wooden door. Two black marble pillars were standing watch next to it.

They looked at each other. Throughout all of the mess of trying to get here, they’d completely forgotten to come up with a strategy.

Nico thought of what Aphrodite had told them. He let out a huff. The annoyance didn’t manage to break through his smile at all. ‘*You’ll figure it out along the way…’. Yeah. Right. My ass…*

Still, they *had* done a lot of *figuring out*. Much more pressing things than how to make it out of here alive, too. Based on the look in his eyes, Logan seemed to agree.

Nico smirked. “Ready to die?” he asked as slyly as he could.

Logan smirked back. “Sure! At least I can die happy now”. The warm glow in his eyes emphasized his genuine excitement.

Nico broke, he bit his knuckles to stop himself from both laughing and crying. “*Don’t do that to me, you dork*” he complained breathlessly, painfully charmed.

Logan snickered. “This might be the last time I get to annoy you, I have to make the most of it”.

Nico reigned in his grin to feign a scowl.

Logan killed it mercilessly with a quick kiss. “Ready?” he asked.

Nico pursed his lips. “I mean… No?” he replied with a shrug. He unsheathed his sword anyway.

Logan smiled and did the same. The unsettling mix of the angry purple glow and eerie green flickers clashed heavily with their giddy smiles. In a strange way, it also didn’t.

Chapter 12: XII. Memento Amoris

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Making out (not super explicit), sexual frustration, it starts to get a little horny, exhaustion.

Nico took a good look at Logan's face. Despite the green and purple all around him, the only colour on Nico's mind was amber. Logan's wide, pleased looking smile almost distracted him from the fact this could very well be the last time he'd get to see it. Eris wasn't known for her kindness.

Excitement overshadowed all fear when Logan squeezed his hand with his.

"Okay! Step back" Logan warned cheerfully, letting go of him.

Nico did, a little disappointed. *Focus!* He willed himself.

With frightening ease, Logan kicked the heavy door down. *All the way down,* dropping it in front of them with a loud bang. They stepped onto it as they entered.

A round room seemingly carved out of the cave itself greeted them. The ceiling went up multiple floors. A wide staircase leading to many doors embraced the single, long rounded wall.

The figure of a woman slowly lowered her papers on the desk right in the middle of the room.

They raised their swords. Nico drew the shadows in close. "*Eris!* We need-!" he shouted.

"Nope" she replied flatly.

"*We need to-!*" he tried again, louder.

"*No!"* she now shouted back. She swiped at her glasses so aggressively she practically slapped them off her face. "Do not *ever* insult me like that again! My mother is *banished* from here after that little '*trick*' of hers! She had my biggest star *killed!"*.

They stared at each other for a second.

"You're not…?" Nico stammered, lowering his sword. The shadows pulled back with it.

The lady sighed, resting her forehead on her folded hands for a moment. “*No!*… Have you not read the sign on the door?” she gestured to the door under their feet.

They looked down.

LADY ATE

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Oh.…

“No, we… Our apologies, my lady” he stammered.

She huffed. “How did you even get past Destructor? I told him not to let anyone through! What did you say to him?!”. She pressed a button on a small intercom on her desk. A low buzzer went off as she did. In the distance they heard a phone ring, echoing from far away. On the giant stone desk Nico presumed… The now *unoccupied* giant stone desk…

He sucked in his lips and glanced at Logan, watching him quickly resheathe his sword with an awkward sizzle.

“Uh… We didn’t really *talk* to him…” Logan muttered.

Nico elbowed him. This was not the time to be stupidly honest.

Lady Ate clicked her tongue and let go of the button. “That *useless* goon! He was sleeping again, wasn’t he?!” she asked intently.

Nico and Logan looked at each other, then back at her.

“I’ll deal with him later!” she stated. “What’s your business with my mother? And it better be important if it’s worth breaking my custom made african blackwood door!”.

Nico thought for a second. There seemed to be tension between Ate and Eris at the moment. Maybe it *was* time to be stupidly honest, just for a bit. “Lady Aphrodite sent us. To, uh. Put a stop to her…”.

Ate raised an eyebrow. A faint smile formed on her dark red lips. “And you decided to just barge in? And then what? *Confront* the Goddess of strife?
Reckless… *Very* reckless. *Delusional* even” she concluded. “I like that” she continued, pointing at them.

She turned her leather office chair and got up, showing off her exquisite pantssuit. “As I said before. My mother and I aren’t really on the best terms right now. As it happens, I too would benefit from someone taking her down… Just for a while at least…”.

She searched for something in her book shelf. “Her meddling and getting Ms. Robinson killed really put a snag in my most successful show. Well, a *snag* is really underselling it… I had to *cancel* it overnight, right after the big ten year anniversary party! Horridly embarrassing…”.

Nico and Logan stayed as quiet as they could. She didn’t seem to realize the scope of their involvement.

“How am I going to come up with a better show than that? What’s a stronger delusion than making an audience of three million believe they can become stinking rich overnight?!” she asked angrily. She pulled out a book and opened it. It was hollow, a big antique looking key laid in the middle. She threw it at them.

Logan caught it.

“There, that’s the spare key to my mother’s vacation home in Tartarus. She’s not going to be staying there right now. The holidays are right around the corner after all. She’s much too busy at the moment… But, she will soon after, during her yearly sabbatical. It’s a lovely little chateau, really. Perfect place to wind down… It has a great view on the flaming river, Phlegethon. Nearly at the source. If you follow it you should get there eventually”.

Nico opened his mouth.

Ate gestured for him to stop. “Now, leave and *never* come back here” she demanded. “And do *not* tell her I gave that to you!”.

Nico nodded. They turned and slowly walked out.

Nico quickly smashed the elevator button. They stared awkwardly at Ate through the open door as they waited. She stared back, arms folded, leaning against her desk.

They walked into the elevator backwards as the doors opened. Nico sighed in relief when Ate's unimpressed scowl disappeared between the doors. Logan chuckled almost without a sound.

“Don't” Nico warned. “That wasn't funny” he added, not being able to keep a straight face.

They both laughed.

The elevator was slow. *Ridiculously* slow.

“What did you mean when you said you'd been wanting to kiss me for a while?” Nico asked.

Logan furrowed his brow. “I meant exactly what I said” he huffed in confused amusement.

“Yeah, but… since *when?”* Nico asked impatiently.

Logan shot him an exasperated look. “*Ages!* What are you even talking about?! It’s not like it was ever a secret… Dude, I *literally* told you I liked you”.

Nico blinked. *What?* “No, you didn't…?” he muttered in disbelief.

Logan’s eyebrow rose to the challenge. “Yes. I did. *Today!* Remember? You brought up the porch. How you thought I was going to tell you I liked you. And I told you. I *literally* said I *do* like you”.

Nico blinked again. “You didn't mean…! You *did* mean…?! But you said it so casually! There's no way you meant you *like* me” he stammered.

Logan looked unimpressed. “I'm not ashamed of that stuff! Sure, I never made a move… But, that’s because I didn't want to make you *even more* uncomfortable around me!”.

Nico blinked once again, huffing in frustration. ‘*Uncomfortable’?! Yeah, only because-!*

Logan cut him off before he could even start. “*Dude!* What did you expect?!” He bruskly started counting on his fingers. “First, I’m not your type. Look at Jackson and Solace. Two really *nice* guys. Especially Will, who you *really* didn’t seem to be over yet by the way… Second, let's be real here, you're mean to me. *All the time*. And don't get me wrong, *I'm into that,* but it's not exactly clear! Last, you even said *the idea* that I might like you scared you. Pretty obvious you didn't feel the same way right? That's what I figured at least…”.

Nico kept staring at the three damning fingers in his face, still trying to catch up with them long after they’d made their point. The plot twist wrecked him. Had *he* been the dense idiot this whole time? How had he missed all of this?

His brain tried to make words. “When I said I was afraid, I didn't mean *scared.* I mean… I *did.* But not like it's a bad thing! I meant it made me freak out… Because I *do* like you. *A lot.* I just didn't think-!”.

Nico cut his ramblings short. Processing hard. He had to remind himself to breathe. “Look, when I thought you were going to ‘*confess*’, I didn't see it coming, because I thought you were straight. So when, you know, I got it *wrong*… I realized how stupid I was for thinking that you ever would in the first place… And I figured you *were* straight. I kinda did until… *Just now.* So I just… Pushed you away!". He gestured wildly with his hands to make more sense of it.

It didn't seem to work. Logan looked confused. “Why would you think I was straight? Weren’t you there *multiple times* when we talked about Taylor? You know, the guy Gwen has a crush on”.

Oh. Nico felt like an even bigger idiot. Why would he assume Gwen would be gay over Logan? “I, *uh*. I thought Gwen…” he stammered.

Logan looked at him, even more confused. Then it hit him and he laughed. “She gets that a lot. You're lucky she doesn't mind”. He prodded Nico in his stomach. His expression turned puzzled again. “Weren’t you also there when we talked about how I kissed Shane?”.

Nico scoffed. “*Right.* Because they *dared* you to”.

Logan held out his hands like it was obvious. “Yeah, but that was because he’s *Shane*, not because he’s a guy!”.

Nico raised an eyebrow. “As if you wouldn’t have kissed him even if you *were* straight”.

Logan shook his head slightly, looking at Nico like he was an idiot. “Of course I would have! Then I would have gotten double the credit.”

Nico laughed “Then what’s the point you’re trying to make here?!”.

Logan smiled and gave a short shrug. “I dunno! That it should have been obvious, I guess? Some *signs* may have been a little more *clear* than others. But anyway, you could have just asked! If not me, then anyone else!”.

Nico stared at him again. That was such a *Logan* mindset. Of course he thinks people just ask those things! He was kinda right though, that would have made everything a lot easier... “Didn't really think of that option” Nico admitted, feeling really drained all of a sudden.

A mean looking smile spread over Logan's face. “Sorry to break it to you, but you're pretty stupid, dude…”.

Nico smiled back. “Seems so…”. Then he laughed. “That realization is hitting me kinda hard, honestly…”.

Logan chuckled. “I already knew that, though. I don't mind. I still like you”.

Nico pursed his lips. “Thanks. I appreciate it…”.

Logan put his arms around him. “So…” he started. “Now that the truth is out there… That you're stupid… That I *do* like you that way… And that you're *madly* in love with me-”.

Nico was going to interrupt, he drew a sharp breath and decided against it, exhaling in an annoyed sigh.

Logan smirked. “When I say *madly* I mean that as in *angrily,* of course” he interjected himself.

Nico giggled. *Damn it!* He quickly put his fist in front of his mouth and played it off as a cough. “Right” he choked out.

Logan continued “But seeing all that… I was hoping I might get to keep *liking you* from a bit more up close…?”. He obviously tried to play it off as level headed but he could tell he was actually a little nervous.

Nico smiled. “Deal” he whispered, getting up close, and *closer.* He slowly backed him into the corner and put his hand on Logan's chest.

Logan’s breathing was fast, his heartbeat even faster.

You too, huh? Good…

They closed in on each other.

There it was again, that addictive feeling. Nico gave in to it. With how slow this elevator was, he was pretty sure he actually *could* stay like that forever this time.

The receptionist let out some very deliberate, sharp sounding coughs. They turned to look at her, through the open elevator doors.

Nico pulled himself away, grabbing Logan’s hand to tug him along. They rushed past the receptionist, pretending not to feel her eyes stab them repeatedly all the way out the door.

The shadows were already waiting for them outside, beckoning them to hurry it up.

Gwen’s porch creaked when they stepped out of the darkness. It creaked again when Logan stepped in closer. “You’re staying, right?” he asked quietly.

Even in the dim light his eyes burned warm. It was almost convincing enough.

Almost. “Yeah, sure”. *Wait…*

Logan seemed very happy to hear that, closing the distance. All doubt evaporated from Nico’s mind in the warmth of the embrace. Logan’s grin pressed against his own.

Six eyes fell on them as they walked into the kitchen. Two Nico hadn’t seen before. They widened a little, igniting an intrigued dark grey fire, slightly hidden behind straight black hair. The young man they belonged to stuck up a hand and smiled.

“Sherman” he threw at Nico.

Nico raised his hand to catch it. “Nico” he threw back.

Sherman turned to Logan. “Heard about your *epic* quest!” he said heavily. “I see you didn’t die” he noted.

Logan shrugged. “Not yet”.

Sherman tutted with exaggeration. “Guess that means I can’t steal your room tonight…”.

Logan hissed apologetically. “I mean, you could try to kill me anyway?”.

Sherman pretended to consider it, then tutted again.

Logan pursed his lips at Gwen, gesturing at Nico. “I asked him to stay for the night”.

Gwen grinned, then pursed her lips too, going over everyone in the room. She settled on Logan and Nico. “Four beds…” she mumbled.

Nico stuck up his hands and gestured outside. “It’s fine! I’ll just-!”.

“No” Gwen and Logan echo’d sternly.

Alright.… He carefully gestured to the living room instead. “I’ll sleep on the couch…?” he negotiated.

Logan scowled. “I’m not letting you sleep on the couch. What’s the problem anyway? You can just sleep in my bed”.

Nico’s cheeks caught fire. Did he mean *alone*, or-?

“Aaahw~!” Gwen cooed. “You really *are* a gentleman~!”.

Logan expertly dodged her prying fingers trying to grab him. Gwen pouted in mild disappointment, then grinned as her eyes found Nico. She winked away a mischievous blue flame.

After everyone had slowly clocked out for the day, it was finally time to find out what Nico would be in for tonight. He prepared himself to ask, turning to Logan and opening his mouth. Logan put chin on his hand and leaned closer. The orange flicker in his eyes seemed *very* interested in what he was about to ask. Nico quickly closed his mouth and glanced away.

He tried again.

He failed again.

Logan snickered quietly. “So, tell me… Are we sharing a bed?” he asked.

Nico tensed up. The heat from his face fried his brain. *Oh, Gods.…* It was up to him? That was an incredibly stupid idea! He couldn’t make his mind up over almost anything. *Especially* not when it came to things like-!

Logan laughed. “Don’t worry! I’m messing with you. I couldn’t help it. I’ve never seen you this scared before. You’ve been red ever since I said you’re sleeping in my room”. He grinned warmly. “I’ll sleep on the couch, yeah? That’s what I meant anyway”.

Oh... Nico's shoulders sank back down, then sank a bit further.

Logan cocked his head and narrowed his eyes, his grin almost a pout. "No…? Not what you were hoping for?".

Nico's shoulders rose back up, then rose a bit further.

Logan's grin widened, warm and bright. "Okay! Uh…" he started, rapping his fingers on the table. "How about we share… But, I promise I won't try anything? I'll follow your lead, yeah?".

Nico's shoulders got stuck halfway. *Ha.* That was more of a relief than a disappointment. "Yeah… Alright…". He tried not to make it a question.

Logan got up and looked at him. Nico got up and did the same. Logan smirked. *Right.* Nico was in charge…

Logan kept his word, to a frustrating degree. Before every move, he looked at Nico expectantly. At every small panic attack, his smirk grew wider. Getting undressed had been an emotional chess match. Nothing in Nico had been able to agree on anything. Somehow they'd ended up in bed. Nico had compromised with himself on half naked, underwear and shirts still on.

They stared at each other from their half of the bed. The bed… Definitely not large enough for two people to stay apart, Nico realized as his hand grazed Logan's. Logan smirked, not moving his hand. Nico didn't move his either.

Then he did, running his fingers over Logan's hand, his arm, behind his neck. He felt Logan tense up as he moved closer. His smirk disappeared in a quiet little gasp. Nico got too lost in its taste to feel smug about getting him to do that.

Nico woke up warm. Warm and cramping all over. Definitely beat his usual mornings, he decided when he looked right into Logan's eyes. They lit up when Nico moved his hair out of his face.

"No nightmares last night?" Nico asked, hopefully. He carefully tried to untangle his arms and legs from Logan's. Despite getting trapped in this delightfully uncomfortable position, he had somehow slept through the entire night.

"Nope! I don't think I slept at all!" Logan declared happily. He met Nico's worried expression with a grin. "I couldn't help it. I just kept staring at your pretty face, wondering how the hell any of this happened…".

Nico grinned back. "Guess you really are a creep".

Logan’s expression turned devious. He traced a finger over Nico's back, right under the hem of his old shirt. It had run up about halfway during the night. Nico tried to keep his nerves under control.

“Are you kidding me? I've been holding back *all* night. I could be *way* more of a creep if I wanted to…”. Logan pushed the hem up a few inches, very slowly. “For example… I kept thinking. Isn't it funny how you look so good in this, but all I want to do is take it off?” he wondered out loud.

Nico snorted. He kneed him just hard enough to serve as a warning.

Big mistake.

Logan took a firm grip on his upper leg and roughly shoved it to the side. Before Nico could react, Logan had rolled on top of him. One hand still pinning down Nico's leg, the other next to his waist. Logan's hips pressed against his. He pushed himself up, towering over Nico to admire his work. He looked Nico over, settling on his eyes.

Nico took a shaky breath. Two blazing little fires heated him up to the core. Logan ran his free hand down Nico's other upper leg, with a threatening grin.

Oh, Gods! He'd never been more scared of him than now, or was it the exact opposite? Nico froze. A whimper never even made it out.

Logan's fire changed temperature instantly. He quickly held up his hands. “Don't worry!” he reassured.

Relief and disappointment slapped Nico in the face, a cheek each. He hid his face in his hands and groaned.

Logan bent over a bit and grabbed Nico's arms, gently pulling them away. “Want me to stop?” he asked warmly.

Nico pouted at him.

Logan raised an arrogant eyebrow. “No?” he asked.

Nico sighed and shook his head, still a little wary.

Logan's smile turned downright evil. “*Say it”* he demanded, low and quiet.

Nico couldn't. He faced away and scowled at the wall. “*Logan”* he groaned in frustration, embarrassingly close to desperate.

He felt Logan freeze. Nico’s surprised glance met with an equally surprised, much more *flustered* expression.

Logan quickly recovered. “Yeah, okay! That works too!”.

Nico let out a quiet laugh. It turned into a nervous one when Logan shifted his hips between his legs.

Logan gave him a scrutinizing look, seemingly not entirely sure of the best way to handle this. He could look at Nico all he wanted, he wasn't going to find the answers there… Logan rapped his fingers against Nico's stomach. Then pressed down his hand. “I won't go below the belt, yeah?” he offered. “Just like last night”.

Nico swallowed, then nodded. *Yeah. Perfect.* He could handle that.

No he couldn’t, he realized as soon as Logan moved down and took a fold in his shirt between his teeth. He dragged it up slowly as he made his way up, then gently kissed him on the collarbone. It turned Nico into a shuddering wreck.

Logan chuckled and kissed him on the temple. “*You're fucking adorable when you're nervous*” he teased quietly. He tenderly brushed his fingers down Nico's chest.

Nico squirmed, arching himself up against him. Logan used the opportunity to run his hands down Nico's waist, and under his back. Nico finally managed to regain some sense. He kissed Logan rough and deep, making sure to take out some of his frustration. In return, he got a warm, appreciative rub over the back of his neck. That felt encouraging.

Nico slid his hands down Logan's back, under the hem of his shirt. He tugged it up, and ran his hands over Logan's stomach. Logan let out an excited sounding hum as he did.

Good. Nico went further up and slowly ran his hands over his chest, taking extra care to move his thumb *just right*. He knew he'd succeeded when the hum turned downright desperate.

Logan tightened his grip to lock Nico down and broke the kiss with a gasp. He gently bumped their foreheads together and laughed. “Sorry, *I have to stop…”* he muttered hoarsely. He escaped off of the bed. “I'm going to take a nice, *extra cold* shower” he laughed.

Nico clicked his tongue in frustration as he watched Logan pull off his shirt without a single care. He didn't have a *good side…* He was *all* good sides…

Oh, right... He didn’t need to pretend to hate that anymore. With a smug smile for none other than himself to enjoy, he revelled in that realization for a bit.

As he enjoyed the view of the carefully compositioned landscape of Logan's back, he followed the slender, elegant crevasse of his spine all the way up. Faded battle scars painted on with expressive, uneven brushwork were the only interruptions to the otherwise fair stretches of skin it flowed past. Even the most skilled Romantic painter probably wouldn't be able to truly capture the beauty of the enticing, rugged-!

Logan stretched his neck and rolled his shoulders, unintentionally demonstrating the overwhelming power of nature with the intricate collection of muscles.

Damn, Nico mouthed quietly, all smart sounding words having blown away... He got up and ran his hands up Logan's back, onto his shoulders, massaging thoroughly along the way. Logan let out an appreciative sigh and turned his face to him.

Nico smirked into the kiss. “My pleasure. *Believe me”* he muttered.

“Thanks anyway” Logan muttered back. “But…” he added, carefully starting to pull away. “I don’t think Gwen’s shower gets cold enough for more of *this*…”. He pulled away all the way out the door.

Nico tried to control his imagination, trying its hardest to convince him to go join him. He shook his head sternly, erasing all images.

They'd get there soon enough at this pace, he reassured himself. He pushed his hands onto his forehead in excitement and frustration. He focussed on his breathing and thought of nature. Pine trees swayed calmly in a warm, pleasant gust of wind. He could almost feel it cooling him down…

Nico followed Logan into the kitchen. Mark stopped himself from taking a sip of coffee, lowering his cup a bit. He blinked at them. Nico was suddenly *extremely* aware of Logan’s hand on his lower back. Mark blinked at the door behind him, the door to the living room, the room with the couch…

“Did you guys…?” he almost asked, raising an eyebrow and finally his cup.

Logan smirked proudly, slipping his hand over to Nico’s waist and pulling him against him. Nico was too flustered to resist.

“Well, I told you he wasn’t sleeping on the couch, didn’t I?” Logan returned.

Mark’s eyes went wide above his cup. Right after Nico managed to push himself away, Gwen walked into the kitchen, right between them.

She hummed a happy little tune. “Good morning everyone~!”.

“Morning” all three of them answered in three completely different pitches.

Gwen hesitated before pulling her chair back, sensing something in the air. Nico quickly took a seat, smiling innocently. Logan took a seat next to him, smiling criminally. Nico’s innocent smile almost didn’t survive Logan’s hand on his knee.

Logan’s attempt at hiding a yawn thankfully grabbed Gwen’s full attention before she could notice. “Bad dreams again?” she asked pitifully.

“Nope! I didn’t sleep even a single second!” Logan answered happily.

Mark broke his toast in half, staring at Nico in astonishment.

"*No!*" Nico choked, gesturing wildly. "*That's not-!*". He cut himself off by getting up and taking a step back.

All eyes were on him. Mark's still astonished, Gwen's confused, Logan's incredibly amused.

Sherman walked in and sat down, completely unaware. He glanced around, then happily decided to join in. His eyes got in line, expectantly.

Nico swallowed dryly. "I, uh… We…". He looked at Logan for support.

Logan gave him a questioning look. Nico grimaced. Logan gave him a knowing smile and a nod.

Oh, good. Nico felt a short sense of relief. Very short.

Logan grabbed him, dipped him ungracefully and kissed him. He swung Nico back up and stuck his fist in the air with a triumphant grin.

Nico almost fell backwards. *Freaking dumbass!* He grabbed Logan's arm and pulled it back down.

There was no reaction for a few seconds.

Then everyone reacted at the same time. Mark laughed. Gwen hollered. Sherman smiled through his mild confusion, he slowly started clapping in polite applause.

"I fucking told you, you fucking idiot!" Gwen shouted at Mark, practically sticking her finger in his eye.

"Watch your fucking mouth!" Mark warned.

Nico's hands blindly found the back of his chair and managed to pull him back onto it. The fire on his face slowly died down and breakfast picked back up.

Logan looked at Sherman, taking a *very* impressive bite of toast. Sherman looked back, trying to take an even bigger bite of toast, which was nearly *all* of it. He pulled it off, chewing with great difficulty. His jaws compacted the toast like a balling press, warping the large red scar on his cheek into various interesting shapes. He swallowed laboriously and smirked smugly.

Logan smirked back. "What's the occasion, Sherbert?" he asked.

"Best man duties. Wedding planning stuff" Sherman explained. "I'm trying to make sure Groomzilla here doesn't fuck up *again,* and can actually evolve into Husbandzilla this time…". He punched Mark in the back of the shoulder, *much* harder than Nico expected him to.

“Again…?” Nico asked before he could catch himself.

Mark smiled painfully, lips tightly closed.

“Cindy, *Mark's fiancée,* kicked him out” Gwen explained dramatically.

Mark looked straight ahead, clearly embarrassed.

“Well, technically Mark got *both of them* kicked out” Logan explained in turn.

Mark kept looking ahead, clearly annoyed now. “Funny story… I punched our landlord” he muttered.

That *did* sound funny! Nico raised his eyebrows expectantly.

Mark looked aside, then back. “Right, so… It's not as bad as it sounds. I told him we got engaged, and the creepy fucker congratulated me on ‘*getting to marry that juicy ass’!* You should have seen the disgusting face he made!” he said sourly. “She wanted to move to her parents for a bit… And have some *space.*.” he sighed. “I don't get it…” he sighed even deeper.

Gwen raised an eyebrow at him. “Mark, I swear… You're such a *dudebro.* You could have just told him off like a normal person. You made her *homeless.*.. And if you seriously think that comment is the worst women have to deal with…”.

A mahogany brown spark flashed in Mark's eyes. “It's the worst *I've* had to deal with! And I'll tell you fucking what! *I don’t regret it!* I've punched people *a lot* harder for *a lot* less!”. He slapped the table for emphasis. His coffee spilled a bit.

Logan shrugged. “I get it”.

Mark exhaled deeply and leaned back in his chair, he nudged Logan's chin with the back of his hand.

Gwen rolled her eyes, but smiled. “*Men.*.*”* she sighed.

Sherman nodded in silent, *proud* agreement.

“Look” Mark started. “It's going to be fine. Her dad suddenly *loves* me now. The wedding is still on. She's helping me look for a house for us… And once we buy one, the only creep she'll have to live with is *me!*”. He took a sip of his coffee. Then he smiled to himself. “I do miss her juicy ass…”. He got up and downed his coffee. “I'm going to call her to tell her that right now!” he said with a giddy tone.

“Close your door this time!” Gwen yelled after him as he ran up the stairs.

Sherman sighed. “Gotta go make sure he doesn’t get dumped… Best man stuff, you get it”. He pointed a finger at Logan as he got up. “You. *Reconcider already!* I need your big, rude mouth to have my back. We’ve got a fucking ‘*Cindy*’ themed playlist for the bachelor party cus of all the other *spineless* losers!”.

“Fuck no” Logan declined politely.

“If I die of cringe I’m having a ‘Cindy’ themed playlist at my funeral just to spite you” Sherman warned. His finger was the last to go through the door.

Nico pursed his lips as he watched Logan yawn again. Yesterday had been a long day. A *good* day, but a rough day nonetheless. Seeing how tired Nico still was despite a good night’s sleep, he wondered how Logan was going to get himself through today…

Logan smiled at him, without a single worry. Nico smiled back, with a plan.

He got up. “Let’s give Gwen some of her space back” he proposed. “Four is too many men to be around”.

Logan cocked his head, still smiling. “What are you up to?”.

Nico shrugged. “Just thought we could go for a walk or something”.

Logan pursed his lips.

Gwen chimed in before he could answer. “*Oooh~!* A date~?” she sang excitedly.

“A walk!” they both corrected.

“*Somewhere romantic~?”* she sang on.

Logan huffed and got up. He reached for his coat.

Nico gestured for him to leave it, pushing himself out of his chair. “Let’s go somewhere warm” he offered, his mind already made up. He smiled reassuringly and reached out his hand.

Logan hesitated, then grabbed it. The shadows snuck out from under the dinner table, stealing them away from Gwen’s mischievous, prying eyes. Whispers rustled all around like a quiet whirlwind.

The subtle, but *sudden* incline almost made him stumble out of the shadows. He caught himself, and Logan, right in time.

The warm summer evening air wiped the cold winter morning they’d just escaped from his face. It brought the briny smell of the sea along with it. They straightened up and looked ahead.

The low sun cast countless long shadows over the hills, all different sizes and shapes, just as the tombstones they held onto. Behind it, underneath the hard border of the cliff, a million specs of light flowed over the waves.

“A *graveyard*” Logan noted with obvious amusement. “I thought vampires couldn’t enter consecrated ground…” he nudged.

“Neither should demons, but here we are…" Nico nudged back. “And, yep. Waverley cemetery. One of my favourites”.

That was true, but that was not the only reason he’d brought him here. Logan reminded him with another yawn, just in case.

“Dope” Logan agreed. “Man… I don’t think I’ll ever get used to how jarring that whole ‘shadow’ stuff can be. Is it *summer* all of a sudden? And what *time* is it here…?”.

“Don’t worry about it” Nico reassured, smiling faintly to himself.

Logan started walking. Nico followed along, looking at him intently. Logan swallowed away another yawn, *not* looking at him equally intently.

After a while, Nico’s eyes stabbed into him deep enough to get a reaction.

“You said we were going for a walk, right? So what’s with the silent judgement?” Logan asked warily.

“You look exhausted” Nico judged out loud.

No reaction. That was fine by him. He’d just have to get a little more persuasive. He dropped himself in the grass, crossing his legs and looking at Logan expectantly. “Time for a break” he announced.

Logan narrowed his eyes. A faint scowl quickly turned into a smug grin. “Don’t worry about me, okay? I can handle it *just fine*” he boasted. To prove it, he startled Nico with a handstand right next to him.

Logan didn’t even get to see his annoyed eyeroll, as his shirt fell down over his face almost instantly. He *did* hear Nico laughing at him, shifting his weight to one hand and pulling his shirt back down with the other. He winked. “See? Just fine” he boasted again. Aside from the slight strain in his voice, he *annoyingly* did seem mostly fine.

“Show off” Nico complained.

“Buzzkill” Logan complained back. He dropped himself on his back. The ground grunted with a heavy thud. He sighed and closed his eyes.

Nico moved a little closer when Logan didn’t open them back up. He watched him take a few quiet, deep breaths.

Logan quickly jolted upright, blinking wildly. Nico pushed him back in his place when he was about to get up. Logan pouted straight ahead in defeat.

“Stop fighting it, you idiot. Just take the damn nap. It's getting dark here anyway” Nico scolded.

“All part of your evil master plan, isn't it?” Logan grumbled, wiping the palm of his hand over his eyes.

“Don’t you trust me?” Nico tried softly. He pulled Logan’s shoulder closer, leaning his forehead against his temple.

“Course I do… But…” Logan muttered. “I keep freaking out. And your powers cost you so much. I just don't want to dump my shit on you all the time… *It's not fair*”. His tone turned from mildly exasperated to sorely miserable.

Nico pulled back a little and blinked. “Is *that* why you didn’t sleep last night?!” he asked angrily.

Logan pursed his lips. “Not *just* that!” he defended desperately. “I had a lot to process! I was too excited to sleep anyway! Promise!”.

“Agh! You-!”. *Adorable fucking dumbass!* Nico bit his tongue, then shook his head. “You're seriously going to underestimate me *this much* right now!? You've seen me cover an entire house in shadows, raise a fucking army of dead guys and drag your piece of junk car all the way to Gwen’s house! That *dream* crap barely takes a minute!” he scolded. “Besides, I'm *dying* for you to shut up for a while! I’ll do *anything*”.

Logan looked at him, pensive… And *tired.*

Nico wasn’t having it. “What was all that crap you gave me about how it's good to ask for help?”

Logan huffed and pulled up his knees. He leaned his elbow on one and rested his cheek on his hand. “Well, at least I won't wake you up this time…” he grumbled, finally closing his eyes.

Nico listened carefully as his breathing got slower and quieter. He turned just in time to catch Logan’s cheek when his hand slipped out under it. As gently as he could, he pulled him against his chest and leaned back against the tombstone behind him. *Thanks for your undying support, Margareth.…*

Logan sank against him with a deep breath. Nico quickly slid his knee up behind his back to make sure he wouldn't roll off. Logan’s forehead settled against his neck. Nico tried not to squirm as Logan’s hair tickled his ear, staring at the small ocean of tombstones to distract himself from the feeling. No luck. It was *impossible* not to feel it.

Good.

His shoulder was starting to ache. That was fine. He could deal with that.

And so he did… For a while.

Nico shifted a little when his shoulder yelled at him, only making it worse.

He yelled back at it internally for being *useless!* Moving upright just a bit, he made sure to move Logan as little as possible. He caught him before he could slide off.

Logan stirred. He tensed up. His breathing sped up, shallow and high.

Nico slid his hand over Logan's when it twitched. *I'm here,* he sent out. *I've got you.*

Logan sank back down with a deep exhale.

Nico rubbed his back, feeling his heartbeat slow back down. "See? No problem…" he whispered near his ear. He smiled proudly when he felt Logan's heartbeat speed up a notch for a moment. He stopped a chuckle and glanced down at his face. Clearly still sound asleep. Vulnerable again, but somehow it didn't seem wrong this time.

Logan smiled. His hand slowly gripped Nico's shirt. Nico resisted the temptation to see what he was dreaming about. Logan's smile turned just ever so evil… Nico *definitely* resisted the temptation to see what he was dreaming about.

He kissed the top of his head and rested his cheek on it. "Have fun…" he murmured a little accusatorily.

An elderly woman smiled at them as she walked by. Nico smiled back politely.

She stopped and wagged the tip of her cane at him. "Hold on tight" she warned tenderly in her thick Australian accent.

Nico watched her slowly move down the path like she'd done so hundreds of times, without a doubt with a clear destination in mind. He wondered who she was here to visit… He held on tighter.

Logan took a sharp breath. He pulled away and stretched his shoulders. He glanced over with a fond smile. Nico smiled back.

"You smell nice. Almost a little earthy, or rainy…" Logan mused. "It's really fitting…".

Nico blinked at the sudden heat on his cheeks.

"Thanks!" Logan added brightly before Nico could say anything. "Guess I really *did* need that".

“Yeah, sure” he muttered weakly. He let Logan pull him to his feet. He pulled him a little further than that, right against him. Nico smiled into the kiss.

They finally set out for an actual walk. Nico watched the sun get swallowed by the sea. Deep orange streaks floated on the waves. A perfect sunset, truly. Though… Not nearly as perfect as the ones right next to him.

He kept glancing over. Logan kept noticing.

“So…” Nico quickly pushed out. “What were you studying for?” he asked, realizing how much he still didn’t know.

“Social work” Logan answered “I was about half way done with my Bachelor when I screwed up”.

Nico thought about it. He remembered how Logan was with Crazy Butch. “Ha, in a weird way, that’s kinda fitting” he stated. “I mean, it's probably either that or prison”.

Logan laughed loudly. Nico tried not to show himself revelling in it too much. An affectionate jab in the upper arm cracked his armor.

“What about your dreams?” Logan asked.

Nico huffed quietly. What a question… Truth was, he never thought of the future. Harsher truth was, he never really expected to get this far… He sucked in his lips and tried to think back to who he used to be, back when he was a real person. His memories took him all the way to the Lotus casino. “When I was a kid I wanted to become a ghost hunter, like in the tv shows” he admitted with a smirk. “Or become a professional Mythomagic player”.

Logan snorted, then cocked his head. “Hah…”. He nudged him. “Never expected you to want to be famous”.

Nico chuckled. “Oh, *no*. I’d do it all under an alias, obviously. Probably wear a mask too… Maybe I’ll buy one from Shane”.

Logan laughed again. “*Coward…*”. His eyes burned low and warm. “If it’s what makes you happy, you should just own it. Be proud of it…”.

Nico sucked in his lips. That could have been profound if it hadn’t been about the scams of ‘reality’ tv and gambling for children. “*Uhuh, sure*” he mumbled. “I’d be more proud if you pull that social work thing off”.

“Eh. We’ll have to see…” Logan replied with some melancholy. His expression turned mischievous. “Would you visit me in prison?”.

Nico stifled a laugh. “No way”. He stifled another one at the sight of Logan’s genuine offense.

Logan moved just out of reach when Nico leaned in.

“I’d break you out in *seconds*” Nico boasted softly, inches away. He almost didn’t get to finish his sentence.

Nightfall slowly closed its star embroidered curtains on their walk. They’d only been there a few hours, of course, but they had to go before they’d get too used to the dark. Messing up Logan’s internal clock would be a waste of all Nico’s evil doing earlier.

Nico tugged him along into the sea of shadows all around them. They splashed over them and washed them away.

When they washed back up, the shade of the porch protected them from the bright sunlight.

Nico reluctantly tried to let go of Logan’s hand. “I’m going to head out” he muttered.

Logan held on a little longer. “Do you have to?”.

Nico hissed quietly. “Yeah…”. He really did. It wouldn’t be right to stick around even longer. He really *wanted* to… And Gwen would let him, because she’s great, but he’d be imposing. Besides, the longer he’d stay, the harder it would get to go.

Logan finally let go. “Okay. But come back soon, yeah?”.

Nico smiled. “Yeah”.

Logan opened the door for him. Gwen’s squeal spilled out, right in his face. After filling her in with every complete lack of detail, and winning at least three debates against her, without *any* help from Logan, she finally let him leave.

Chapter 13: XIII. Come rain, come shine

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Things moving fast, strong hint at oral sex (not described), small hint at PTSD, mild feelings of inferiority/insecurity.
This chapter and the next one will probably feel a little slow(er), but I promise they're important.

It had only been four days since he'd seen him. Four days. *Four.* He needed to get his head checked. It should have been so much *easier* to keep his mind off of him now that the tension was finally gone. So, why was it *even harder?!*

Nico shook his head. He had to be stronger than this. Not just for his own sake. If Logan found out how insane he was, he'd ruin it for both of them.

He looked at the dreary, grey Vancouver skyline. Hundreds of flats popped out of the ground. He could have sworn there were more of them every time he blinked. All different sizes. All somehow even taller than the previous. None of them taller than the mountains behind them. Most importantly, not a single hint of sun *anywhere.*…

Right when he gained the confidence he could manage another day, his phone buzzed. He took a deep breath before he dared to look. It could be Hazel, he repeated hopefully in his mind. He immediately saw it wasn't. It could still be something stupid. Maybe another blurry picture of Crazy Butch, he hoped more furiously.

[i miss you :( ]

Damn it.… He didn't even bother replying before pulling the shadows over himself. The flutter of panicked goose wings echo'd into the darkness.

The clatter of the rain hitting his trench coat drowned out the sound of the quiet whispers before he even fully stepped onto the grass. The shadows drained into the dirt in wet, inky streams.

He looked over to the porch, finding who he'd been looking for. Who'd been waiting for him, to be even more precise.

Nico clicked his tongue.

Instead of being reasonable, Logan had decided to wait *in front* of the porch, completely unsheltered from the onslaught of raindrops. Nico watched the tip of his cigarette light up, braving the weather. The cloud of smoke stood no chance, dissipating as soon as it crossed his faint scowl.

Nico put up his own, much more displeased scowl as he walked closer.

He noticed just how soaked Logan actually was. The wet leather of his coat gleamed in the dim light. Like the idiot he was, he hadn't even bothered to close it. His t-shirt clung to his body under it. Drops fell down his hair alongside the rain, weighing it down…

Nico pursed his lips. He always kinda liked that look on him… *No,* he willed himself. Logan was being exceptionally stupid right now. *Don't encourage him.*

Logan's eyes lit up when he noticed him. The faint scowl instantly turned into a wide smile, gleaming much brighter than the wet leather.

Nico smiled back. *Damn it!* He quickly readjusted. "What are you doing, you moron?! You're gonna get sick!"

Logan's smile stood undefeated. "Don't worry!" he soothed. "I do this all the time!". Based on his genuine tone, and his genuine stupidity, Logan had *honestly* expected that to be reassuring.

Nico tried not to laugh. He doubled down on tough love, for both their sakes. "Oh, *great!* So, you're only a moron *'all the time'*? That's a relief" he grumbled.

"I like the rain" Logan shrugged with a hint of an apologetic tone. "It's calming and cold, it helps me clear my head".

Logan kept smiling… And Nico kept falling for him…

With a sigh, Nico grabbed onto the underside of Logan's jacket, pulling it shut and fumbling with the zipper. "At least cover up a bit…" he sighed in defeat. He met his eyes as he pulled the zipper all the way up. Logan's expression was mischievous, excited and just the tiniest bit smug. "What?" Nico asked, warily narrowing his eyes.

"You look nice all wet" Logan shared, grinning happily around his cigarette.

Nico huffed through a wide grin of his own. He slid one hand to the back of Logan's neck and yanked the cigarette out of his mouth with the other. Logan leaned in before he had the chance to pull him close.

Despite the rain's effort, his lips were warm. They always were. It was comforting through the cold water running over him. He hummed in quiet relief. Logan hummed back in agreement, still smiling.

Nico pushed a bit further, beyond Logan's lips. Not nearly as much of a relief, right in the middle of his smoke break…Nico pulled back a bit. "Like licking an ashtray" he said with distaste, offering him the culprit back.

Logan cocked his head, a little hurt. He took the cigarette. To Nico’s surprise he didn’t put it back in his mouth, pressing it out on the bottom of his shoe instead. “I'll quit” he stated casually. “That was my last one”. He held up the remains of the cigarette, easily more than half of it left.

Instinctively, Nico held out his hand. Logan placed it on his palm, almost delicately.

Nico rolled it between his fingers, blinking at it. “What am I supposed to do with this?” he asked. He tried not to show just how much the sentiment actually meant to him, but couldn't really control his tone.

“Whatever you want. Eat it, for all I care” Logan replied.

Nico suppressed a laugh, not managing to stop a smile. Logan smiled back. Nico moved in closer. As he did, Logan pulled his face back to stay just out of reach.

“You sure?” he asked apprehensively. “I can go and-”

Nico shut him up with another kiss. Funny, he minded the bitter, ashy taste a lot less than before. It had a much sweeter undertone this time.

Logan grabbed his hips to keep him close.

Nico noticed something on Logan’s hand as he ran his fingers over it. He pulled back to confirm. “You’re wearing the ring?” he asked.

Logan sighed. Holding up his hand between them, he ran his thumb over it. Carefully enough not to turn it. “Yep… No matter what I do with it, it’s always back on my finger the next day…” he grumbled. “I’ve thrown it in the trash, flushed it down the toilet, locked it away, I've even *microwaved* it… Nothing works”. He looked at it, then at Nico.

Nico could hear the gears turning.

Logan pulled the ring off of his finger and held it out for him. “Wanna see if this works?” he asked.

Nico smiled and let out a small huff. He closed Logan's hand around it.

Logan raised an eyebrow. “You don't want it?”.

“Sure I do” Nico responded flatly. “But, I'm not taking it from you. I know Ares is a dick… But it'd be a waste to let him ruin something good for you just because he's a deadbeat, right?” he wondered. “I think you should keep it” he concluded, sounding more brave than he was.

This was a touchy subject… He glanced up to carefully gauge Logan’s reaction. There wasn’t one for a little while. Logan looked at his closed hand, his expression serious.

He finally shoved the ring in his pocket and gave Nico a sly smile. “Would it have worked if I'd gotten on one knee?”.

Heat hit Nico in the face. He looked away in annoyance. “Depends, are you trying to get rid of the ring or *me?!”* he snapped.

Logan laughed and pulled their shoulders together. “Maybe I'll pawn it. I need to buy Gwen a new microwave”.

Nico let up a little, leaning against him. A shiver rolled over his shoulders.

Logan ran his hand up and down his arm in a useless attempt to ward off the cold. He realized so too.“C’mon, let’s get you inside” he ordered, nudging him towards the door. “And out of those wet clothes” he chuckled suggestively.

It was just them today, he found out. Both Gwen and Mark were out on dates. Good for them, Nico decided, genuinely excited for them. For just them, of course…

He swallowed dryly.

Seeing as it was just the two of them, *all night,* after taking off his wet shirt, he hadn’t really bothered putting on a dry one… He let his back fall onto the covers, hoping it would feel a little less cold that way. Not much luck…

He turned his head to watch Logan, who was still in the middle of stripping off his own shirt… It held on tight as he pulled it off, slipping over his nice collection of muscles and scars. Nico watched carefully as each of them slowly revealed themselves.

Logan tossed his shirt onto the floor with a damp sounding smack. Drops of water still fell from his hair, almost tempting Nico’s eyes to follow them back down. He kept his eyes fixed on the side of his face instead.

Man, he really did like this look on him… It was a lot less cold now, he realized with an even dryer swallow. He slowly crossed his legs.

Logan looked over. The orange glow heated up to a low, intense fire as his eyes traced him. His smirk grew before he opened his mouth to speak. The nerves made Nico squirm a little as he mentally prepared himself.

“Aren’t you cold?” Logan finally asked. Despite the smirk, clearly a little concerned.

Nico blinked at him. “Uhh…” he exhaled, equally disappointed and relieved. “I mean, I guess? A little…”.

Logan’s grin widened. Concern made way for mischief as he walked closer. “Want me to warm you up?” he asked, hands already pushed into the mattress at Nico’s sides.

“*Uhh*” Nico started in a pitch just a bit too high. “Sure” he quickly corrected. He carefully uncrossed his legs as Logan moved over him, reminding himself to breathe.

Logan made quick use of the opportunity to jut his knee between Nico’s. All disappointment and relief burned up as his nerves set themselves on fire.

Logan laughed at him. “Oh, *okay.* Yeah, you’re *definitely* warming up now…”.

Nico huffed. “Alright, you-!”

Logan slid up his knee.

A little too high… Whatever Nico was about to say turned into a noise. A *shameful* noise!

Logan pulled back a little and stared at him. Nico had never seen Logan blush this bright before. Nico quickly covered his mouth, clasping it with his hand.

The awe in Logan's smile turned into mischief. “*No way.*…” he chuckled. He grabbed Nico's wrist and pulled away his hand, firmly pressing it down next to him.

Nico turned his face away, closing his eyes. He felt Logan lean in close, Nico’s now shaky hand on his chest didn't even bother to try to keep him away.

“*You're not keeping that all to yourself*” Logan whispered into his ear. He lightly bit down on his earlobe and tugged, immediately proving it wasn't just an empty threat.

Nico writhed against him, letting out another noise. The low chuckle in his ear was as pleasant as it wasn't… He glared at the wall, pushing hard on Logan's chest. He opened his mouth to complain about the mistreatment of prisoners when Logan cut him off.

“Still okay?” he asked softly next to Nico’s ear, nudging him with his nose.

Damn it.… “*Yeah.*…” Nico panted with a quick nod of his head.

Logan slid his hand up to Nico’s chin and tilted his face to his. He looked him over carefully. “Let me know if I go too far, yeah?”.

Nico sighed impatiently. “*Yeah!*”. He pulled on the back of Logan’s neck and leaned in.

Logan pulled back, staying just out of reach. The mild worry in his eyes turned devious. “I’ll do *anything* you want me to... All you have to do is *ask*…” he teased with an exaggerated husky voice.

Double damn it. Nico let his head fall back and closed his eyes in frustration. *No way in Hell!* He felt Logan chuckle silently again. Then he felt Logan’s grip on his wrist loosen, ready to move away. Nico quickly clung on tighter, pulling him closer. They stared each other down for a few seconds.

“*Just.*…” Nico started quietly.

Logan smirked and gently ran his thumb over his wrist, dialing up the torture even further.

"*Shut up and kiss me, you asshole!*" Nico ordered through clenched teeth.

Logan obeyed. He kissed him deeply and let out a low, pleased hum. Nico didn't even bother staying bothered, just happily following along. Logan's grip on his wrist loosened further and moved up tenderly over the palm of his hand, slowly locking their fingers together. Nico responded by letting go of his neck and running his hand over his back, finally getting him to press down on him.

Above the belt. That was the rule. Nico was starting to dislike that rule. The control Logan showed over his movements whenever he came near the belt, especially the way he forced his hands back up right after, proved the rule bothered him too.

Logan never complained, of course. Nico knew he never would, either. He did keep wondering if he should work up the courage to complain himself, for both their sakes. As he wondered, so did his hands. They kept checking if the belt was still in the same place.

Logan pulled back, quickly pushing himself off of the mattress. Nico tried to hold on, but missed, grasping nothing but air.

"I've got to take a shower real quick" Logan explained hoarsely. "Sorry, Spooky".

Nico blinked as he shut the door behind him. Then he slapped the mattress with both hands.

No! No way! This whole 'being respectful' thing was starting to get on his nerves! Did he seriously have to admit *everything?!* Out loud?! That was so unfair! Just because he'd almost had a panic attack every time they-?!

Yeah… Alright… Guess it was time to be brave and file an official complaint. Nico got up and quietly hurried over to the bathroom.

As expected, Logan didn't lock the door. After all, why would he? He had no reason to suspect anything like this might happen.

"Want to save water?" Nico asked Logan's back with an evil grin.

Logan startled. His eyes flashed over to him. Bright orange. Excited… *Scared.* "… You're *really* testing me here" he complained with a frustrated grin, both hands still on his belt, already unbuckled.

Nico cocked his head, pretending to be taken aback by the accusations against him. "What happened to you've *'pretty much seen all of it anyway'?* This is fine, right?" he asked coyly, undoing his pants.

Logan's eyes fixed on his, but not really looking. Clearly mostly trying not to look somewhere else.

“Want me to leave?” Nico offered, sincerely this time.

“Nope!” Logan replied nervously. “Definitely not” he added, only a bit more level headed. He turned the valve of the shower to up the temperature, not averting his eyes.

Nico locked the door behind him. He smirked at the dull click. Such a *nice* little sound… It was just them, of course, but you couldn’t be sure enough when you had roommates.

They slowly took their pants off. Then their underwear. One after the other. A fair trade.

At some point, they’d given up their staring match. Nico didn’t even remember who won. No. *He* did, he realized, looking where he was right now. His own very pleased look met Logan’s when they finally met eyes again.

Nico stepped closer, trying not to tremble. Logan pulled him into the shower with a firm but shaky grip, not trying nearly as hard it seemed. Nico almost fell into his embrace. Into *everything.* He didn’t dare to move his hands at first, just holding onto his back.

Logan was a little more brave, slipping a hand up his shoulders, to press him even closer. He left the other on the small of his back. Even with all the warm water raining down on them, Nico still managed to recognize their heat perfectly.

Nico kissed him. Logan kissed him back. Over and over again. Roughly. Deeply. The steam only made it harder to breathe. Each labored breath reminded him perfectly of the *exact* location of everything pressed against him.

Nico ran a hand through Logan’s hair, swiping it out of their faces before moving back in. Letting his hand linger, he ran his thumb over the studs in his ear. He shifted a little in his excitement.

Something else shifted too, against his hip.

His hands wanted to move down to investigate. He stopped them on their way. *Remember… Not yet…* He had to stay above the belt, for now. If Logan still managed, it would only be fair if he did too. Until Nico finally had the guts to say what he *really* wanted, at least. But, *Man!* It was hard to stay above the belt. Above the belt was *great.* But… He could tell there were *so* many interesting things happening in the still unexplored area underneath.

Logan must have noticed too, pulling away and turning around to hide it.

That wouldn’t do… Nico tutted and pressed against him. Logan’s neck, nine kisses long, he counted slowly. He slid his hands up to his chest and grabbed onto him.

“Careful…!” Logan warned, voice hoarse. He placed his hands over Nico’s.

Being careful was hard… Especially when he sounded so desperate. *Not* being careful was just *so* much more fun. Nico pressed against him a little tighter, kissing a little higher, moving

his fingers a little more *deliberately.* Logan grabbed onto his hands and pulled them off. He quickly turned around again.

Before he could react, Nico felt his back collide with the tiles on the wall behind him, Logan's hands next to both sides. Nico glanced up, looking right in two very agitated little flames. They looked almost as agitated as the deep red blush underneath them.

"I told you to be careful…" Logan growled. "Now, everything above the belt is going to be *sorry.…!"*. He made sure to flash his teeth through his grin as much as possible, promising what was to come.

Nico pouted apologetically. He kept pouting apologetically as he slid down the shower wall, all the way to his knees, relishing in Logan's change of expression from awe, to *terror* along the way.

Logan's arms hadn't moved, now trembling above him. *Yep.* It was still true. Logan only had good angles… But, this might be his very best one.

Despite Logan's eyes growing big with fear, his excitement did too… Even *bigger*… Nico's eyes darted to it, then back to Logan's. He slowly moved his hands down to the sides of Logan's hips, making sure to stop *right above the belt.…*

He felt Logan shudder against his fingers. Nico let an evil smirk spread over his lips and stuck out his tongue menacingly, realizing he'd just landed a brutal victory. Logan scowled, visibly realizing exactly the same.

Logan's nails dragged against the tiles as he clenched his hands into tight fists above him, he let out a small but painful sounding groan through his teeth.

Nico felt a short, sharp pang of guilt. Well… Not just that… "Want me to show you how *sorry* I really am?" he asked heavily.

Logan's scowl disappeared instantly with a very eager nod, *much* happier to hear that. "*Hell yeah!"*.

Nico laughed quietly at the clear strain in his voice, before he went on to fulfill his promise. Not even *remotely* sorry. Still… That didn't mean Logan had to be either, right? Nico was cruel, but not *that* cruel. Besides, not having to be careful anymore really was *fun.* Even more fun than he'd imagined.

After a very hot, satisfying shower, Nico felt ready to face the rest of the day. He felt ready to face *anything* right about now. Even the Gods themselves. Eris was lucky they hadn't found her yet, honestly.

“We definitely didn't save water…” Logan complained, not actually sounding all that bereaved about that fact. His grin hadn't faltered even for a second ever since.

Nico smirked in agreement, taking a smug sip of coffee.

“Anything in mind?” Logan asked, leaning in a bit closer over the table.

Nico pursed his lips. “You” he admitted with a sly shrug.
Logan laughed. “What? Even *more?*” he asked with an accusatory kick to the leg.

Nico laughed back, mostly at the dull sting in his leg. Logan *always* played just a little too rough… “Yeah, no, I don’t think I could handle it” he admitted more sincerely.

Logan’s smirk turned into a smile. The excited flash in his eyes didn’t dim. “Want to watch a boring old movie?”.

Nico blinked at him. Logan grabbed something off the coffee table and held it up. Dr. Caligari’s somnambulist greeted him with his usual intense, silent stare. Nico blinked faster.

“You’re into old horror movies, right?” Logan asked. “This one’s even older than Nosferatu” he added with the hint of a boast.

It sure was… Nico had never seen it himself. His mother had, with his grandmother, at its first screening in Rome. Years before he was born. A memory both had shared long after. He hadn’t thought of that in… Well, eighty years, *technically*.

“Where’d you even get that…?!” Nico huffed.

Logan snickered. “Times have changed, *Oldtimer.* You can get pretty much anything nowadays”. He winked.

Nico sighed deeply, making sure to roll his eyes. *That Gosh darn scallywag.* “Those ‘old’ jokes are getting kinda-”. *Nevermind*.

Logan crossed his arms, cocking his head expectantly.

“*Lame!*” Nico revised, pointing at him triumphantly.

“Nice save. Good for you” Logan handed to him, ruining Nico’s fun with his good sportsmanship.

Nico smiled in defeat. If he didn’t give up now this would turn into a real *kerfuffle*… “Yeah, alright. I’ll *gladly* watch your old movie with you” he relented. His *genuine* excitement almost broke through his dramatically *faked* excitement.

Logan’s expression dropped as soon as Nico did, onto the opposite side of the couch. He pouted, almost angry. “Are you really going to do this to me?”. His pout turned into a smirk. “*After what you just did to me?*”.

Nico sighed heavily to ward off his own smirk. “You sound even more desperate than you did back then…”.

Logan’s smirk turned even more mischievous. “Not just *me* though~! I got you back pretty good” he bragged.

Nico pursed his lips. *Yep.* That was hard to deny…

Logan’s smirk let go of the mischief, but not the arrogance. “C’mere”. Not exactly an order, though definitely not a plea... A *threat,* he clarified by slightly baring his teeth.

Nico rose to the challenge. “Can’t” he stated, slowly shaking his head. “I won’t fit next to your *massive* ego…”.

Logan’s arsenal got safely locked away behind another pout. Nico made his way over to claim his territory. He slid his arms around Logan’s waist and laid his head on his chest, turning to face the screen. Logan sighed happily as he sank down. Nico couldn’t suppress his smile anymore when Logan gently moved his hair out of his eyes.

Nico smiled at the imagined reactions of his mother and grandmother at the horrific story portrayed in front of him.

He felt Logan laugh quietly against him when Cesare dramatically stabbed his next victim. *That fucking psycho.…* Nico smirked.

He sucked in his lips. Logan had no clue how cute he was. Not *necessarily* when he was enjoying a brutal murder… But for remembering Nico liked old horror movies.
Nico *should* be happy about that. He knew that. But, the fact he was so bad at that type of stuff himself was making that hard…

Logan’s breathing kept slowing and deepening, Nico noticed throughout the movie. Logan kept stopping it from doing that by force, he also noticed.

“Just relax” Nico muttered when Logan tensed up again underneath him.

“Hm” Logan grumbled, shifting a bit. “Hard not to. Nothing’s happening” he added with a chuckle.

Nico snorted and dragged his cheek off of his chest to glare at him. “What? Just because nobody’s getting stabbed anymore?”.

Logan cocked his head, eyes still half closed. “Well, that doesn’t *help.*…” he argued a little too sincerely.

Nico dropped his face back down extra heavily, mostly to hide his grin. “You’re such a savage…” he complained, muffled by the warm fabric. He turned to face the screen again. “You can’t appreciate art…”.

Logan hummed in weak, proud agreement. He followed up with a very *slow* and very *deep* sigh.

Nico kept half his attention on the movie and the other half on Logan. He knew he’d fallen asleep a while back. That meant any moment, he could-!

Logan’s fingers twitched.

Nico tightened his grip on him. *I’m right here with you,* he sent out, running his hands down over his back. He might be bad at anything resembling romance, but at least he could still do *this* for Logan.

Logan surprised him when he moved his own arms around him and curled up against him. Nico huffed quietly, not even trying to fight himself getting tied up in the mess of arms and legs.

All in all he’d probably missed about a quarter of the movie, he guessed looking at the black screen. It had been black for a while. He didn’t mind. He minded even less when Logan finally stirred.

Logan slowly rolled his shoulders. They let out some satisfied sounding pops.

“Oh, no! You missed all the ‘nothing happening’!” Nico teased, smirking to himself.

“Oh, *damn!*” Logan replied, without any hint of sarcasm.

Nico chuckled. “Don’t worry. You wouldn’t have appreciated any of it anyway, you *connoisseur"*. Logan’s offended huff was like music to his ears.

Nico took a deep breath, preparing himself to get on his nerves even more. “Why did you stop playing guitar?”. It had been something lingering in the back of his mind for ages. There was never going to be a good time to ask… At least it was just them now.

He felt Logan’s breath stop for a second, then he inhaled extra slow and deep. “My stepdad got me into guitar” Logan exhaled. “It’s too *painful*. I think about him every time I touch it” he added quietly.

Ah... Nico had feared something like that. He carefully turned around onto his back, looking up at him.

Logan smiled down at him weakly. “It sucks. I used to love it…” he shrugged. All light in his eyes dimmed.

Nico sucked in his lips. “I hope you get to have that back…” he said carefully. “All of that’s already so *shitty*… Would be a shame if it cost you even more…”.

A small spark lit back up in Logan’s eyes. “Who knows? Maybe I just need a new muse~?” he teased fondly.

Nico clenched his jaw shut, it didn’t stop his cheeks from burning. Logan laughed and grabbed his hands before he could hide his face in them.

Chapter 14: XIV. S.S. Situationship

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Short chapter, Shame, maybe a twinge of jealousy, Hint at sex (Only implied, not described).
Probably slower than last chapter, but necessary.

The weeks flew by. The longest they'd managed to stay apart was six days. Two *whole* days longer than their previous record. They had taken *ages* to pass. Still, Nico had to try. It wasn't healthy to depend this much on someone. He couldn't expect Logan to save him from himself. So try he did. Try, he was doing right now. For six days already. Onto a new record, he hoped.

Nico looked down, gazing over the large copper toes of Lady Liberty. He never realized how huge her feet actually were up close…

Ha. That was kinda rude of him to think. *Excusez-moi, madame.* He gave her dauntingly dainty big toe an apologetic little kick. She didn't notice, far too busy breaking the chains of slavery with her single powerful, perfectly ladylike, stomp.

His phone buzzed. His six day record started sweating nervously. It was right to do so. Nico ground his teeth as he read Logan's messages.
[i still miss you ;)] the first one read. [nerd] the second one added, just in case he hadn't realized Logan was trying to flirt.

He didn't reply. Not yet. If he did, he couldn't pretend it wasn't real anymore. And as long as it wasn't real, he didn't need to embarrass himself by coming over immediately. He snapped his phone shut and hid it away. As long as he-!

"*Hey, you!*" a strong Jersey accent shouted behind him. Angry and winded.

He turned around to see a heavy set man in a stern looking uniform attempting to hoist himself up the base of the statue. The stern looking cap on his head threatened to fall off. His otherwise friendly looking face was red in frustration and effort, the mustache hiding half of it curled down in a thick, bushy frown.

"*Come down from there!*" the man demanded, slipping down again. He jumped a few times, his hands grasping at the edge. "*You can't be there!*" he wheezed between jumps. "*It's dangerous!*" he clambered.

Nico sucked in his lips. He was right. This was getting dangerous. Just not for him… He walked over to the edge and gestured for the security guard to calm down. “Don’t worry, sir. I was just about to leave” he reassured.

The poor man finally stopped jumping. “You’re-!”. He wheezed angrily for a few seconds. “Coming with me!” he demanded.

Nope. That wasn’t going to happen.

Nico gave him an apologetic smile as he threw the shadows hiding in the folds of Lady Liberties gown over himself, giving the guard a last wave.

“*What the…?*”. The man’s whisper merged with all the others.

Nico felt sorry for the guy, but at least he’d have an interesting work story to tell. If anyone would believe him… *Oops.…*

The darkness brought him right where he’d been trying not to go. It had been too hard to keep his mind away from there…

Nico heard Logan’s fingers rap against the old wood before he could even see them, fast and loud. Logan was still wearing his ring, he realized with a small sense of pride. And there was still no sign of a cigarette, he realized with a large proud smile.

Logan’s scowl turned into a smile of his own when Nico pulled him away from the porch fence. “Hey, how-?!”.

Nico didn’t wait for him to finish.

Logan slowly pulled himself back, dazed, but determined. “*Hey*” he tried again, firmly holding onto Nico’s shoulders. “*How are you?”* he asked with a grin.

The grip on Nico’s shoulders didn’t allow a simple shrug. He pursed his lips and tried to sort his feelings. “Still complicated” he had to conclude. “But, starting to enjoy the simple things in life” he understated with a sly little smile. “So, how are *you* doing?”.

Logan cocked his head. “Moving in the right direction” he shared with visible pride. “Gwen finally wore me down and got me to call the university. So they’re looking into-”.

“That’s great!” Nico accidentally blurted out.

Logan chuckled quietly. “Yeah, yeah… I should have done that way sooner”.

Nico shook his head. “Don’t do that to yourself” he pleaded. “*I* can’t even be mean about this. Stuff like this is insanely hard”.

Logan pursed his lips and nodded. “Yeah… Seems so? *Way* harder than quitting smoking at least…”. He opened the kitchen door and gestured for Nico to go in.

Nico did, stepping through. “How’s that going?” he asked hopefully.

Logan huffed through his smirk. “Not going to lie, that’s *also* even harder than I thought! But, it gets easier every day”. He closed the door behind him. “I mostly miss having something to do in the middle of the night”. He nudged Nico in the stomach. “When you're not there, I mean” he added with a fond smile.

Something knocked over on the dinner table with rapid tinkering. They turned to see Mark scrambling to get his laptop away from the flash flood of coffee, eyes still on them.

Nico’s hands shot up. “*That's not what he-!”* he gestured hysterically. “It’s about the nightmares!”. *We haven’t even-!* He quickly shut his mouth, hands clenched into fists, holding onto the words he’d almost let slip.

Mark forced an understanding smile. He caught the tea towel Logan threw at his face before it hit and started cleaning up the mess. Gwen walked in to assess the damage to her kitchen. Her eyes narrowed as Mark plopped the soaked tea towel on not one, but two dirty plates next to him and sat back down.

“Can’t you at least put those in the dishwasher”. She wasn’t really asking.

“Sorry, can't. I'm already late for work” Mark explained apologetically.

Gwen gave him an unimpressed look. She gestured at his makeshift office on the dinner table. “You already *are* at work…”.

When Gwen was the first to make a move for them, Nico quickly stole the grimy plates from the table and stuck them in the dishwasher, making sure to do so as *effortlessly* as possible. Gwen smushed his cheeks in appreciation, all the while glaring at Mark.

An insistent buzz on the table saved Mark from burning to death. Nico heard him introduce himself in a casual yet professional manner. He tried not to listen in on his phone call. It was hard.

“Have you tried turning it off and on again?”. Mark stayed quiet for a minute, staring straight ahead. “Good. Glad to help. Have a nice day” he said with a poker voice. He punched the phone down onto the table.

“Uh… fun job you got there?” Nico asked carefully.

Mark snickered. “Does anyone?” he countered.

“Yes!” Gwen countered back, still fiery.

“Pff! Please the people you work with are even worse!” Mark shot back.

Gwen's expression turned evil. “Sure they are, but I get to stab them with needles~!” she chimed, stabbing the air dramatically over and over. Small blue flames twinkled in her eyes.

Mark pouted in obvious jealousy.

“But stop being such a baby, you get to work from home” Gwen accused.

Mark's pout turned smug. He was seemingly about to rub it in her face when Gwen continued. “Well, *my* home”.

Mark's pout died, having lived a full life. He quickly gathered his laptop, various pens and raggedy balls of paper. His phone buzzed again. Nico listened to him drum up an identical introduction as he made his way out.

“Please stop crying, sir. It's just a machine” was the last thing Nico heard him say before he got so far up the stairs he went out of earshot.

He picked up on some tension next to him, he carefully moved further back, leaning against the counter to observe from a safe distance. Gwen slowly pursed her lips as Logan narrowed his eyes at her, an annoyed grin spreading on his face.

“I saw the look on your face when you walked in” he jabbed, crossing his arms. “I *know* you thought it was me”.

“*Ha!*” Gwen huffed, quickly swiping the empty coffee cup off the table to get rid of the evidence. “*Pff!*” she added, avoiding their eyes on the way to the dishwasher. She took as long as possible to put it neatly next to the other cups, even making sure to tuck the handle away behind theone next to it. She turned around with a guilty pout “Logan has broken almost all my dishes at this point…” she complained quietly to Nico. An obstinate blue flicker went through her eyes.

The annoyance in Logan’s grin turned downright offended. “What do you expect?! Your cabinets are basically boobietraps! You keep just *shoving* everything in there in a big pile. *Of course* it's going to fall out when I open the door!”.

Gwen looked easily as offended in turn. “That's not me! That's *Mark!*”.

Logan stuck out his hands. “Then what are you yelling at *me* for?!” he asked loudly.

Gwen opened her mouth. Then she closed it. She strutted out the door and up the stairs. “*Mark!”* they heard her yell.

“Snitch” Nico accused, leaning his lower back against the counter.

“Hey, that was self defense” Logan replied. “I love him, but I'm not taking the fall for him. Not when *Gwen's* the one dealing out the punishment at least…”. He pushed himself between Nico’s legs and reached down. He grabbed him by his upper legs and hoisted him up on the counter, leaning in close.

A glass shattered on the floor. They stared at the shards.

After helping Logan bury the remains of the broken glass in the trash can *outside,* they tried to act natural.

Logan’s eyes flashed mischievously as Gwen walked into the living room. Nico almost thought he was going to admit their crime, when Logan slid something over the coffee table to him. “Gwen's got great taste. Look, this is one of my favourites. Her lucky can of pennies” he said suspiciously calmly.

Nico looked. Then looked closer. “Is that supposed to say ‘pennies’, because it really… *Doesn't”*.

Logan smirked. “Yep! She wrote that when she was a toddler. Her best work, if you ask me”.

They admired it for a bit.

Gwen stomped over and snatched it. The pennies rattled in surprise. “Really, Logan? The *penis can* again?!”. She shot Nico a disappointed pout. “I expected better from you…”.

Nico tried to suppress a grin as she strode off with a huff.

“You're the one who put it here for everyone to see!” Logan shouted after her.

Nico should have probably figured the best way for Logan to avoid suspicion was to immediately try to get under Gwen’s skin.

Valentina had only come by to bring back a book she'd borrowed, assuring everyone she would be right on her way. Gwen had been right in the middle of cooking, assuring her she had made enough for her to join. Valentina had insisted that wasn’t necessary. Gwen had insisted it was.

As Nico had learned ages ago by now, politeness didn’t stand a chance when it came to the children of Ares. As such, he and Valentina had politely been glancing at each other over the entire meal, making sure to look away every time their eyes met.

Gwen had been much less subtle, staring at Logan with two growing blue fires. She pushed her empty plate aside as soon as he took his last bite and leaned closer to him on her elbows. “Have you heard anything from that guy yet?” she asked carefully.

“I told you… I'll let you know as soon as I do” Logan almost huffed. He turned to Nico. “She can't wait for me to move out” he said with a mean smile.

Gwen didn't look even slightly amused. She got up with a dissatisfied groan and hugged him from behind, putting her chin on his head. “Don't joke about that. I'm going to miss you when you go back, but I just want you to get better…”.

Logan sank further down into his chair. “*I know.*… Sorry…” he muttered as he patted her on the arm. He slipped out of her grasp, got up and sauntered out the door.

Valentina almost froze as he moved past her. She shot up to look at the still open door behind her, then back at Gwen and Nico, not sure what to do. Gwen smiled apologetically as Nico got up. She blinked a few times, the fire in her eyes seemed to die a little each time.

He held up his hands when she opened her mouth. “Don’t worry” he reassured calmly. “I know he hates it, but you *are* helping”. He smiled and nodded to the door. “My turn, alright?”.

She nodded gratefully.

Valentina quickly made room for him to pass. Nico watched her put a hand on Gwen’s shoulder as he closed the door behind him. Both their polite smiles slowly squeezed between the crack before the door latched.

He watched Logan reach for his pocket. His hand stopped to remember and quickly moved to the fence, rapping on the wood instead.

“You alright?” Nico asked, already knowing the answer.

Logan still needed to think about it. His hand stopped. “Nah…” he concluded with a faint smile. He glanced over. “I keep being such a dick to everyone”. His faint smile dimmed even further. “I don’t even mean to… I thought I was getting better”.

Ah.… Nico sighed. “You *are.…!*”. He moved closer and nudged their shoulders together, not pulling away. “Things like this don’t move in a straight line right? You can get better and *still* get to be a dick sometimes”.

Nico grinned at Logan’s genuine smile. He grinned a little wider. “In your case… Probably all the time, actually” he jabbed, leaning in closer.

“Lucky me. You like *dicks*” Logan retorted with a wink, leaning in too.

Nico gasped, genuinely. “You-!” he started, quickly pulling away. “*No!*” he added angrily. “Don't say things like that with Gwen *right there!*”. He gave him a little shove, trying not to laugh.

Logan got in his face, pretending to square off with him. “Oh? Are we going to get *physical?”* he threatened suggestively.

Nico tried to match his energy, standing up extra straight. He wasn’t going to let him get to him twice. “Try me” he taunted.

Logan leaned in and whispered into his ear. “Careful, or I'll hurt you *real good”*.

Nico's eyes widened, his breath suddenly stuck in his throat. Logan closed the distance and bit him on his neck, almost hard enough to be uncomfortable, sending a shiver down Nico's

body. Logan's arms slipped around him. Without a warning, he tightened his grip and locked Nico in a bear hug as he went for a hickey.

No way! That sadistic traitor. "Fuck off!" Nico yelled, desperately struggling to break free. He managed to push him off, but not before the damage was done. "You ass!" he laughed, wiping at his neck.

"Your own fault. That was *way* too easy. You should never leave yourself open like that in a fight!". Logan sighed pitifully, shaking his head. "You didn't learn a thing…". He held the door open for him.

Nico shook his head. "Gotta dry up first…" he grumbled, using his collar to wipe better.

Logan shrugged and walked inside, a pleased grin on his face.

Nico gazed along the treeline across Gwen's backyard. The unmistakable sound of a woodpecker hammered through the otherwise peaceful scenery. Its daring red quiff gave it away when it hopped around the bark in search of wriggly treasure. Nico's fresh bruise ached in solidarity as he watched the bird passionately peck the tree's long neck.

When he finally decided to go back inside, he noticed Valentina waiting for him at the door. Nico stopped and looked at her, some quiet nerves burled up inside him.

"Hi! You're Nick, right?" she asked, her tone and smile careful.

Nico smiled awkwardly. "Well, Nico, but yeah".

Valentina pushed herself out of the doorframe. The dimples in her cheeks turned less careful, more genuine. She sighed, staring up at the sky. Nico watched her for a moment as they both seemed to prepare for what she had to say.

Valentina finally looked back at him and took a deep breath. "Isn't he just the best kisser?" she asked dreamily.

That was it, Nico was done here. He knew Logan had a *reputation*, Logan wasn't *entirely* his first either. But that didn't mean he needed to be reminded of Logan's former conquests. Let alone by his former conquests themselves. Especially not so *fondly.*

"So… *Gentle*" she added, seemingly a little puzzled.

Nico had to hide a snort with a fake cough. He instantly remembered their first kiss, how Logan had practically beat him up with his mouth. They had gripped and pulled at each other so hard, he was surprised he didn't have bruises.

Valentina looked at him expectantly.

"Oh!...*Totally!*" Nico quickly lied, trying to keep a straight face. *This poor girl, she has no idea*.

She looked at him with an unreadable smile. “So… You're his boyfriend… right?”.

Nico blinked. *Was he?* He hadn't really thought about that. “Uhh…” he exhaled.

Valentina waved with both hands. “Oh no, don't worry! I just wanted to say, good for you. Both of you. That's all”. She beamed a perfect, sincere smile at him and tip-toed back into the kitchen.

What the hell. He stared at where she'd stood just a second ago.

Lost in thought he made his way inside. Well, lost in mild panic. Was it possible he’d misunderstood what was going on? Just like she had before? They’d kissed… And a little *more*… But, Logan had done so plenty before, with plenty of people… What did any of this mean? Was Nico even more stupid than he’d realized before? It couldn’t be, right? But, neither of them had actually given *whatever* this was a name.

He closed the door to Logan's room behind him, finding him tuning a guitar. “What's going on between us?” he asked the top of Logan's head.

Logan looked up, visibly uneasy. They stared at each other for a second or two. “Oh Gods… Am I in trouble?” Logan asked with a nervous laugh.

Nico clicked his tongue. “No. I mean… What are we doing? What *are* we?” he asked, trying to stay levelheaded. He wasn't going to let Logan off with a joke. Not this time. Now that Valentina got in his head, he just couldn't let it go. She probably didn't even know what she'd set off.

Logan propped the guitar against the bed and got up. “Well… what do you want us to be?” he asked in return.

Nico looked into his eyes. They seemed sincere. A little amused, but soft. He felt his face heat up. He scowled and turned away.

Logan snorted. “You want *me* to say it? I don't mind”.

Nico shook his head. “Forget it” he huffed. *Jerk.*

Logan put his hand to Nico's chin and turned him to face him. He looked into his eyes, stroking his cheek with his thumb carefully. “Why are you making this so hard for yourself all of a sudden? Did I do something?” he asked, seemingly genuinely worried.

Nico shook his head. “It's fine!” he said desperately. *Gods! Make him stop. Please.* He avoided Logan's eyes. *Why did he do this to himself?* He cursed Valentina.

“You know I'm crazy about you right? Before you asked me this… I kinda assumed we were *together*” Logan muttered. “But if that's not what you want…? We don't *have* to be. Is that it?”.

Nico could feel the mood shift to downright *painfully* tense when he asked it. *Valentina, you are so dead*. He shook his head fast. “No! I *do!* I just…! I'm sorry!” he stammered. “I ran into

Valentina… she asked me if I was your-". Nico couldn't finish.

"Ah…". He saw a grin spread on Logan's face. "Are you?" he asked.

Nico couldn't think straight. His heart was beating uncomfortably fast, his chest felt tight. There was a faint tingle in his left arm… *Focus!* He looked at the floor. Then the ceiling. Neither had the answers. "Am I…?" he asked desperately.

Logan finally relented. He put his arms around Nico's neck and pulled him closer. "I hope so" he said tenderly.

Nico melted. Just like that, everything made sense again. He was such an idiot. The tension evaporated. "Then I am…" he concluded quietly. He dropped his face into Logan's shoulder to hide the shameful, hot relief that washed over it.

Logan rested his cheek on the back of his head.

Nico took a deep breath.

"*I love you*" he exhaled in a whisper.

He felt Logan's breath pause. His own did too as soon as he realized what just happened.

Fuck! He'd said it. He couldn't believe he'd actually said it. He was *never* supposed to say it. There was no way back. He instantly remembered back when-!

"I love you too". He felt the vibrations of Logan's voice through his shoulder as he said it.

Nico lifted his face and stared at Logan in disbelief. *No way.* Nico felt his entire body heat up. Their eyes met, Logan's glowed warm and inviting.

Nico leaned in and kissed him. He could still taste the words on his lips. Holding him tight, he moved down and kissed his neck. *Yes.* He could taste them all over him. But tasting them wasn't enough, he needed to feel them. It was impossible to hold back any longer. He shoved him down onto the bed.

Chapter 15: XV. Relationshipwrecks

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Darkest chapter, Suicidal ideation (!), mentioned previous suicide attempt, self hate, depression, alienation, attachment issues, crying, panic attack, ghosting, break up.

Nico woke up to a sting on his arm. It didn't hurt too bad, but bad enough for him to reach out with his hand in reflex. He watched as an impressively sized spider crawled out between his fingers and scuttled off over the side of the bed. He could barely make it out in the darkness, only recognizing it by the leggy movements. It disappeared out of sight. Nico hadn't realized how unsettled he was until it did.

Was it the spider? *No*. He had nothing against spiders.

He ran his fingers over the now slightly sore spot on his lower arm, hardly aware of the feeling. His thoughts were racing. Why, though? Everything was fine. *More than fine.* For the first time in what felt like forever things were actually *great*.

His breathing sped up. He rolled onto his back, trying to get it back under control. If everything was great, why did everything feel so *wrong?!*

His thoughts sped up even more, too fast to keep track of any of them. They turned to fears, all of his *deepest* fears. Every bad memory he had flashed before his eyes. He closed them to ward the images off, it just made them even more *real.*

Going through all of the worst times in his life was bad, but not close to the worst. *No.* Worse was, he'd been to blame for all of them. He was the *sole* reason for everything that had gone wrong in his life. Somehow, he always managed to find a way to ruin things.

He quickly opened his eyes back up and cracked his head to the side. Through all the turmoil he still managed to take in the silhouette of Logan's back. More memories submerged Nico, not letting him up for air, drowning him. Older ones. Of another night. Another silhouette in the dark.

A huge realization crushed all the other fears and panicked thoughts. Something far worse than any of them… *I don't just ruin everything for myself…*

He needed to get away from here. At least for a bit… He tossed himself onto his feet. It was hard to stay upright, as they'd gone completely numb. Just pins and needles. By some kind of miracle, he managed to get away. Hopefully quietly, he couldn't hear anything over the sound of his heart. He was almost grateful for it, it distracted from everything else.

Well, not *everything*. Another realization hit him. Maybe even bigger and harder to swallow than the last one. One he probably had secretly known all along… *I can't do this.…*

He put his hands down onto the table to steady himself. Still just pins and needles…

He crudely slid a torn, empty envelope under his eyes. The pen on top of it almost rolled off the table because of the force he never meant to put behind it. He slammed it in place with the palm of his hand, then crushed it between his fingers. His hand almost shook too much to write. He grabbed his wrist with his other hand and squeezed as tight as he could. With a painful, dry swallow, he started writing.

What he wrote down slowly managed to form the one word that kept repeating in his head, over, and over, and over. The handwriting was crude and shaky, but clear enough.

SORRY

A tear fell on the paper, running some of the ink a bit. He pulled back like an electric shock went through him.

The thoughts were relentless. Writing it down had just made the word louder. Faster. His breathing was so hard and so fast his throat hurt. It felt like his heart was going to break his ribs. His left arm started to tingle. It spread to his chest. He grabbed at his ribs as they felt like they turned inwards. Then almost collapsed when the light in the hallway suddenly turned on.

Fuck! He needed to get out of here. *Fast*.

Through the hurricane raging in his head, he managed to catch the thought to grab his coat and bag. His hands barely managed to before the shadows grabbed him.

He had no idea where they led him.

He didn't care either.

Not bothering trying to stay upright, he let himself fall. After hitting the ground, he rolled onto his back and caught his breath. It kept trying to escape, no matter how hard he pushed down on his chest. He shoved his hands into his face instead.

What the hell did I just do?!

He pulled his knees up a little with his arms and sobbed. When he finally felt dead enough, he moved. That had taken a while.

The sun had come up to find him at some point, trying to burn him alive with its glare. Unable to face it, he got up and turned his back on it in shame. He tried walking as far away from it as possible, only taking breaks when he cried too hard to see where he was going. Even without looking at it directly, he could tell the sun had started to set again.

Logan had found out ages ago, he knew that. He thought not hearing anything had been the worst. He was wrong.

His blood ran cold when his phone buzzed. He didn't dare move and reminded himself to breathe. The nerves got so bad they almost hurt. They *did* hurt. All his muscles contracted.

He pulled out his phone. It was hard to do, almost being unable to feel it. He took a deep breath as he opened it.

Yep, it was Logan. He debated backing out. Then didn't. He *had* to know.

[you should have at least told me to my face].

Nico felt too many things to actually feel them. He went completely numb as he stared at the words for what felt like seconds, but could have been hours. His eyes clenched shut while he repeated them in his head. He could imagine a million different ways Logan could have said them if he'd been able to hear it. Each of them ripped his heart open a little more.

He thought about replying. What would he even say? What could he even possibly say?

He closed his phone. The regret and guilt hadn't really hit him until he did. He'd gotten to know those feelings *very* well the past hours, but they came in waves. This wave knocked him off his feet. He knelt down where he stood and put his face in his hands. A sound came out of him. Not one he recognized. He sat there for a while. His chest and his head hurt. He noticed his hands were wet. He hadn't even realized he was crying. Slowly scrambling to his feet, he took a few deep breaths.

He walked on, thankfully numb again.

At some point he'd reached some form of civilization. He crashed onto a bench and looked up at the sky. A warm, pleasant breeze greeted him. The sun, *thankfully*, hid behind a herd of white, fluffy clouds. What a horribly, *disgustingly*, normal day… People walked around going about their usual business. It should honestly be illegal.

Someone sat down next to him, popping his bubble for a second. He glanced over. The elderly lady's friendly smile evaporated instantly leaving a mildly horrified expression. She gave him a nervous nod before quickly getting up and scurrying off.

He narrowed his eyes. *Damn right you do!* He leaned down, hiding his face in his hands, and let out a wet sounding sigh.

His thoughts wandered, then tangled. Nothing made sense. Nothing was *helpful.* There was no way to fix this.

He wished he'd never met Logan. His heart stopped, his heart wrenched. *What an absolutely evil thing to think.*… None of this was Logan's fault. If anything he wished Logan had never met *him.*… It was all on him. It was *always* him. He was going to be stuck with himself forever. Torturing himself till the day he *died*…

Something popped up. Something *dark.*

His fingers dug in his face. *No.* He wasn't going there. Then of course, he did anyway. He always did, after all.

Nico could imagine *hundreds* of ways. Vividly. Like the countless times he'd done before. He knew how he'd do it. It would be so *easy.* Sure, there was no guarantee. Not on the first try… But winners don't quit right?

He smiled to himself.

None of this would matter anymore. *Nothing* would matter anymore. Everything would finally be over. He could leave it all behind. Nobody could stop him. It felt so reassuring… *Soothing.* The desire was *so* strong.

He exhaled long and deep. His smile evaporated.

But… He couldn't, anyway. Not like this. Not over a *breakup.* Not *again*… It wouldn't be fair.… Even if he'd ruined everything. He knew that would still hurt… *All he ever did was hurt people*… Not because he wanted to, but because somehow he couldn't figure how *not* to. Doomed to keep making the same mistakes over and over. Never able to learn. Never able to get better.

How did other people do that? How come everyone else seemed to know how to do this? How to be happy, how to be *functional?* Other people always seemed so far away somehow… It wasn't them. They tried. There were plenty of people who had tried to reach him. They just couldn't. He wouldn't let them. Couldn't let them. He wanted to. But the feeling of connection just wasn't there. He didn't understand them… And they didn't understand him. Somehow he was just too *different.*

There was something so fundamentally wrong with him. It hadn't always been. But he couldn't remember what that had been like anymore. He sure as fuck didn't know how to *do* that anymore.

Life felt like a fucking trap… And, *man*, was he *trapped.* He couldn't imagine any kind of future where he'd feel any other way. He'd felt like this for so long… Not always this much, but always at least a little. *He was so fucking tired.…*

He focussed on his breathing and shelved the thoughts. All the way in the deepest part of his mind, right back where they'd come from. The feeling lingered. It'd die down. It always did. *Eventually.…* Ready to come flooding back at the smallest trigger.

At some point he'd stopped crying. When he sat back upright the sun had moved to the opposite side of the sky.

He needed to go eat something… Wash himself too… He willed himself to get up.

He went through the motions. Then kept going through the motions. Different time, different place, same motions. He repeated the same endless night over, and over and over for Gods know how long. Some days the motions were easier than others. Some days he skipped some. Overall, it didn't get any better, but it didn't get any worse… He thought? It's not like he was really keeping track. He wondered if he'd get used to it. He wondered if he wanted to.

The sun started to come up, pushing him to step into the shadows for the millionth time. He couldn't stand to see it. Not yet. It felt like he'd catch fire if he did.

He fell to his knees somewhere else. Somewhere far away. Most importantly, somewhere where the sun had gone down.

Good. He'd gotten lucky early this time.

He got to his feet and looked ahead. Rough waves crashed into the bright white, towering cliffs dividing land and sea. He walked along the edge. If he fell, he'd be done for… He stopped…

No. He'd promised he wouldn't, and not entirely just to himself either. So, he actually needed to keep his word.

Still.… He peered over the edge into the soaking, craggy abyss below. Just to see what he'd be missing out on. From all the way down, the abyss peered back into him, with two eyes that

had haunted his subconscious ever since he'd first seen them. They were no longer covered by a mourning shroud nor long black hair, both whipping about her in the strong wind. Even from this far away her eyes had the same mesmerizing pull on him. They glowed in the moonlight like those of a nocturnal animal. A *predator*.

She took a step towards him, as far as the large, sharp rock she stood on allowed. Silently reaching both hands up to him, she offered to catch him. The rocky whirlpools around her thrashed invitingly, almost like they too were reaching for him.

He stayed put. But, he couldn't help it... He imagined what it would be like. What it would be like if he *didn't* die on impact. He couldn't bring himself to care this time.

For a couple of seconds he didn't care about anything, or anyone. He remembered what that was like very well. He'd felt that way a few times before. Once, it had actually managed to lure him over the edge.

Not this time.

He shook his head.

Oyzis slowly lowered her hands, clasping onto her upper arms for comfort. She closed her eyes, wailing low and melancholic together with the wind. A large wave crashed over her, dragging her into the depths of the ocean and leaving no trace.

He took a few steps back and kept walking, and walking.

His phone buzzed. *Right.* He'd actually charged it for the first time in… *How long?* He hadn't looked at it since the day he left.

He let it buzz. It kept going. That was fine. He'd gotten used to it already.

It stopped. He took a deep breath and looked up at the stars. One caught his eye, smaller and dimmer than the rest, far apart from all the others-!

He grabbed his face in exasperation when his phone immediately started buzzing again. Guilt turned to rage and immediately back to guilt again. He dropped down onto the rocky ground. He snapped his phone open with both hands, almost breaking it in half.

Forty seven missed calls from Hazel. The dates didn't mean anything to him right now. Guess he had been off the grid for longer than he'd realized. Or she was really, *really* worried. Probably both… *Sorry sis.*…

He glanced underneath the small text box, at another one. One missed call from-!

He almost snapped it back shut.

No. You don't get to do that. Time to man up. He called back. His call got picked up after the first ring. Not nearly enough time to mentally prepare himself.

Hazel's voice was so panicked he couldn't make out what she was saying. *He* was so panicked he couldn't say *anything*. He just held the phone, shaking, trying to breathe. He heard Hazel do the same for a while.

"*Please… Come over!*" she begged, excruciatingly desperate.

Sorry. I can't right now. He took a deep breath willing himself to speak. "*Yeah. Alright.*" he answered. He hadn't heard his own voice in a long time. He still hadn't. This was nothing like it.

Hazel whimpered into his ear. He hung up and folded his arms over his knees and bent down onto them, sobbing pathetically. *Rightfully so.*

Was he really gonna go over?

Of course he was! He had to…!

He couldn't though… *No. None of that disgusting self pity. Not right now.* He didn't deserve it. And he couldn't do that to her. Not after everything he'd already done-!

Something pecked his hand, painfully hard. He turned to a large white dove standing next to him. It cocked its head and side eyed him with a vapid, yet stern look. Neither of them moved. Then it pecked his coat pocket. He rummaged through it.

With a pause in his breath he grazed the cigarette butt with his hand. With the sudden pain he felt, it might as well still have been lit. He hadn't even realized he'd kept it… He probably shouldn't anymore. He probably wasn't allowed to… He tried to talk some sense into himself. *What do you mean not allowed to?* It was trash… You throw trash out. It's normal.

He held onto it.

He let go of it. He'd throw it out later.

Nico pulled out the small thin object behind it. The dove and him both took in the sight of the envelope. Depending on whose perspective, it was either very small or very large. He turned it around. It was sealed with a lipstick kiss. That had to be Aphrodite… He opened it, the wind wafted the strong scent of roses in his face as he held up the letter.

Chers Crétins,

I need to have a word with you two.

Meet me in the back of the main hall at camp Half Blood tomorrow night.

Wear Something nice.

Can’t wait to see you...

Aphrodite

He needed to read it countless times for it to actually sink in. *Fuck…* How long had it been? Weeks? He wasn’t *actually* going to go, right?

The thought of letting Logan face Aphrodite alone slowly ripped his heart in half. He couldn’t decide which half to go with, both options seeming equally horrible in the panicked state of his mind.

The dove took off, taking Nico’s train of thought with it. He watched it float off into the full moon, like a small ghost going into the light of the afterlife.

He got up and dragged himself back into the shadows.

He fell out in a familiar hallway in front of an even more familiar apartment door. He pulled himself up somehow. The door stared at him apathetically. He couldn't even knock, just pressing his hand to the door with a single loud slam. He was already sobbing again when it hastily flung open.

He let himself be pulled inside.

Despite the bright sun trying to break in through the windows, the weather inside was rainy. It absolutely poured at first, finally settling down to a drizzle over hours and hours, after the hardest words had been spoken and the tightest hugs had been squeezed. Once he managed to calm down enough to sleep, it was mostly just very, *very* foggy.

The weather in his head stayed foggy all the way until the next day, through the final, tightest hug of all. After all the last apologies and thank yous, he promised her he’d be back soon, hand over his heart this time.

Feeling some small raindrops, warning of another turn in the weather, he quickly sheltered in the shadows.

They took him all the way to the middle of camp. Not exactly as precise as he usually was, but close enough.

He looked around to orient himself. Someone caught his eye over in the distance. Someone he didn't think would ever want to see him again...

He tensed up, then took a deep breath and prepared himself. It was time… He kept walking, despite losing all feeling in his legs.

He stopped right behind two familiar shoulders, looking down at even more familiar blonde hair.

"Hi, Will… Sorry to interrupt… And to *barge in* so out of the blue, but… Can we talk?" he interrupted.

All the kids in the circle, and Will's charming female colleague stared at them in silence as Will stopped tuning his guitar. He turned to face Nico with a confused smile. His eyes went wide and his smile turned even more confused as he recognized him. He opened his mouth to say something, interrupting himself by pulling a guitar string in half with a loud *doink*.

"Hi… *Nico!*" He said loudly, but breathlessly.

The eyes of his female colleague went even larger than his, she quickly pulled her lips in a wide, toothy grimace that was probably supposed to be a smile.

Will quickly shoved the guitar in her hands. "Julia… Can you take over for a bit?" he asked, already getting up.

Julia nodded heavily, still grimacing politely.

Nico heard her address the kids with slightly intense excitement as he and Will made their way over to a place a little more private.

As usual, Will was more brave than him. "It's good to see ya. Didn't think we'd ever talk again" he said with a light, amused tone.

Nico would have bought it, were it not that he very clearly remembered Will's southern accent kicking in when he was upset…

"Yeah, It's good to see you too… And… Me neither, honestly" he replied, no hint of lightness nor amusement. "I figured I should probably apologize to you. About… Well, everything".

Will looked at him, puzzled and possibly a little touched. “Is that why you came here?” he asked, smiling knowingly.

Ha. Caught. Nico smiled back, shaking his head slowly. “No… You know me better than that…”.

Will smiled wider, even more knowingly.

Nico pushed himself a little. “You *would* have deserved that though… It would have been the least I could do…”.

Will’s smile died down a little, genuinely surprised, then it died down even further. “Kay… Well… before we get to all *that*… How are you doing?” he asked, the *most* knowingly.

Nico tried not to burst into tears on the spot. *Fuck.* “You first” he demanded, trying not to sound too cold.

Will humored him. “Oh, pretty swell, actually!” he said with genuine excitement. “I really love my job! My colleagues! The kids! Nothing to complain about” he summed up happily.

Nico smiled at him sincerely. “That’s great! I’m really glad to hear that”.

Will smiled back, then narrowed his eyes when Nico stayed silent. “Kay, time to fess up now” he pushed, slapping his hands together.

Nico nodded slowly. “Yeah… I’m not doing *as* well…” he breathed out.

Will hummed thoughtfully. “I doubt that’s about me either…” he pondered out loud.

Nico pursed his lips. “Oh, you’re part of it, actually. A small part, but still”.

Will hummed in clear intrigue. He plopped down on the grass and slapped the patch next to him. “*That* sounds like a story!” he mused.

Nico snorted and sat down. Will’s enthusiastic, expectant look met Nico’s polite, reluctant look in a silent stand off.

Nico broke first, he always did. “So… You know how I’m an irredeemable asshole?” he started.

Will took a deep, philosophical breath, pondering it deeply. “Hmmmnooo…?” he breathed out with a painfully reluctant look.

Nico clicked his tongue, mostly in amusement. “It’s not a test! It’s exposition, promise” he explained, ready to continue. *Right.*.. This is where it got *really* painful.“Alright, so. For the last few years… I’ve been pushing everyone away. Like I always do. And I’m miserable because of it. Like I always am. Nothing new there… Then I got called here last year on an assignment” he paused, gauging Will’s expression.

Will urged him on impatiently.

“*I kinda… Met someone*”. He swallowed nervously.

To his relief, Will looked excited. “Really?! Who?!” he asked happily.

“His name is Logan. You probably don’t-” Nico tried.

“Logan? Yan's friend? The Ares guy?... *Him?!*” Will rapidly fired all around him.

“Yep” Nico replied. “So you *do* know him?” he asked.

“*Yes, I know him*” Will replied intensely.

Nico drew in a sharp breath. “Wait, don't tell me you and him-”.

Will cut him off. “*No!* No way! That's not what I meant!” he gestured wildly. Then he looked up suddenly. “Well… There was this one time…”.

Nico's eyes went wide.

“No, I'm just kidding” Will chuckled. “He's not exactly my type now, is he? That was the point I was trying to make before… Back when we were kids he was even more of a-” he looked at Nico. “He was even less *refined”* he adjusted. “Didn't really think he'd be *your* type either…”.

Will pursed his lips and pulled at the grass. Then he let out a short laugh. “I mean, I woulda guessed you'd kill each other. You're an angsty loner~ He's a raging hooligan~”. Will moved his head side to side for emphasis. “You're *both* sort of scary, in your own ways… But, now that I think about it, that's probably also why it somewhat makes sense?”

Will looked pensive, then suddenly gave him an amused look. “Probably doesn't hurt that he's sorta good looking either”. He threw some grass at Nico.

“Yeah, yeah…” Nico huffed, swatting it off of him with fitting annoyance.

“No, but that’s so *nice!*” Will offered with loud excitement.

“Yeah! It *was!*” Nico replied, matching his excitement with a clear air of misery.

Will’s smile turned into a straight line. “Oh, *boy*” he muttered under his breath.

“Yeah…” Nico muttered back.

“So, how'd you mess it up?” Will threw at him with another, much smaller bundle of grass “What happened?”.

Nico sighed. He decided it was his turn to pull at the grass now. “Same thing that happened between us. Things got too real, so I ran away.” he muttered on.

“So what'd he do? *Declare his undying love for you?”* Will joked venomously.

Nico felt the memories and shame trickle down on him. “No…” he said glumly “*I did*”.

Will turned, staring at him. “Oh...” He responded coolly. “Not gonna lie, that stings a little…”. Will wrapped his arms around his knees. They stayed silent for a moment.

The moment turned into a while. *Come on*, Nico urged himself, *time to grow up and clean up your act.* “Will…” he started “I'm really sorry I hurt you”. He forced himself to look at his face.

“Don't be” Will shrugged with a genuine smile “I'm not. Not anymore at least”.

Will glanced over his shoulder, his eyes gleamed. Nico followed his gaze. He had to admit, Julia did look stunning in the glow of the fire. Nico smiled. Then he stapled his face back in a serious expression.

“I should have said it back” Nico continued.

Will looked at him.

“I *did* love you, you know that? I shouldn’t have been so scared to say it” Nico finished.

Will put his hand on his shoulder. “Thanks for telling me. That still means a lot to me”.

They smiled at each other.

Nico let out a relieved sigh. “*Good*. Should have told you that ages ago. Glad to have it off my chest too”.

Will laid down in the grass. “I was never crazy enough to keep up with you anyway” he teased.

Nico smirked in agreement.

Will turned to look up at him. “I know one person who might be though”.

Nico blinked down at him.

“You can still fix this. If you get over yourself and don't make the same mistake you did with me” Will said sternly.

Nico stared at him for a few seconds. A million thoughts raced through his mind. Will was probably right, but that was a lot easier said than-.

“*Just talk to him!”* Will almost yelled.

“*Yeah! I got that! I was just thinking!”* Nico replied with exasperation.

They glared at each other, then they cracked up. More memories trickled down on him. Warm ones this time. It was good to see Will again.

“Not like I have much of a choice, anyway. He's probably going to be here soon. Aphrodite is going to rip our hearts out in a bit. We… *I* fucked up her assignment” Nico complained.

Will pursed his lips. “Nah, I doubt that. Even she would get in trouble if she did that on camp grounds… And hey, at least you'll get to apologize to Logan. That's worth something. Exes love that shit. Take it from me!”.

Nico smiled to himself as he got up. He'd kinda missed Will's unbreakable positivity. Enough that he didn't have the heart to tell him how dead wrong he was, probably about all of it. Not that Nico had the right to complain about that.

Will got to his feet next to him, smiling at him with his eyes. Nico felt the scrutiny lurking behind them.

“See you got a new coat” Will noted, *very* casually.

Nico smiled painfully. “Yeah… But, I still have it” he assured. His smile turned even more painful, stabbed by guilt not once, but twice. “I’d offer to give it back… But, Hazel has grown *really* attached to it these past years… She probably even wears it to bed…”.

Will smiled back, not nearly as painfully.

Nico let out a relieved sigh, raising his hands in an offer. “I’ll pay you b-”.

Will groaned, giving Nico’s hands a very gentle, *very* offended smack away from him. “*Nooo!* I don’t want you to! And I wouldn’t have wanted it back anyway! It’s way too *heavy* for me” he complained loudly. His reassuring smile returned. “I like this one better, by the way”. He tugged on Nico’s sleeve. “A little different… In a good way”.

Before Nico had time to fully process, Will stuck out two hands, high and expectant. Nico froze for a second.

“If you don't hug me, I'm going to slap you with both of these~!” Will threatened, wiggling his hands gleefully. The twinkle in his eye showed he'd be pretty happy with either option.

Nico decided to go for the scariest option and embraced him. He braced himself for the giant, roaring wave of old feelings about to wash him away. It hit like a mighty glass of water. *Ha.*.. Yeah, this was fine. Very doable, at least.

Nico smiled to himself. “Thanks, Will. For everything” he squeezed into him before letting go.

“My pleasure! Good luck with cleaning up your mess!” Will wished sincerely, if a little amused. “Guess I’ll see you around sometime?” he added in a careful plea.

“Yeah!” Nico promised wholeheartedly.

They fell silent, then both stuck up a hand in an awkward goodbye. They turned away from each other and made their way back to their own lives. Completely separate, though not as nearly as torn apart as before.

All the relief from his meeting with Will fell down to the deepest pit of his stomach when he reached the entrance of the main hall.

Was he already in there? Did Nico hope so?

He pushed the door open with a shaky hand and forced his legs to take him inside. Everything was dark. The dozens of burning candles set out for a completely different mood than he knew he'd be in for… All tables were moved to the side, making for a large clearing in the middle of the main hall. Aphrodite laid on a red velvet spread in the centre, her back turned to him. Her black satin night gown and long hair curled out behind her, sparkling in the moonlight. The smell of roses hit him as he walked closer.

"Hello, Nicolo… *Mon ange déchu.…*" she said coldly.

Crap. His *birthname.…* That had to be bad.

She turned over dramatically to look at him, rolling onto her stomach. In one fluent motion she caught her chin on the back of her hands and curved her legs up. She started kicking the air playfully, her immaculate lipstick curved in a subtle scowl. The silence was tense.

She raised her eyebrow at him expectantly. Nico opened his mouth, not sure what to say.

She put up a stern finger, willing him to be quiet. "Don't interrupt me" she warned.

Nico closed his mouth. He didn't have the mental capacity to be annoyed at her right now.

She took in the sight in front of her. "You look terrible" she said quietly. "*Heartbroken*" she added painfully.

Nico bowed his head, not able to face her pity anymore. He didn't really deserve it…

Aphrodite took her time to continue. "I've been my *most* patient the past two months" she said with displeasure.

He looked up in shock. *Two months?!* Had it really been that long?

"And it started off *so* well" she sighed, shaking her head mournfully. "Tell me. How do *you* think this quest is going so far?".

He didn't even really think about it. "Shouldn't we wait for-?" he started to ask.

Aphrodite let out a short huff in disbelief, quickly covering her mouth. "Mon chéri, *s'il vous plaît!* You don't actually believe he's going to turn up, do you?". She seemed genuine in her pitiful tone.

Nico swallowed. “I guess… I mostly *hoped…”* he managed.

She sighed. “You’re more of a hopeless romantic than even I am. No, he burned the letter without even opening it. The *brute* lit his cigarette with it. *That boy sure knows how to get on my nerves!*” she spat angrily.

Nico furrowed his brow. That couldn’t be right. Sure, in hindsight, it made perfect sense he wouldn’t show up. Logan wasn’t really the type to be motivated by punishment. Not even *divine punishment* apparently… *But*… “He quit smoking” Nico muttered, shaking his head a little in disbelief.

Aphrodite pursed her perfect lips. “For *you*… Am I right?” she asked quietly.

Nico stared at his feet. The buckles on his dress shoes stared back, equally dumbfounded.

Aphrodite sat up, hugging her knees. “Well” she said, seemingly trying to sound soothing. “It seems we have hit some… *Irreconcilable differences*”. She gave him a regretful smile. “Now, hear me. You came to face me, knowing full well what a mess you made. I am grateful for that. *Just this once,* I will be lenient. I will relieve you of your duty. Consider this quest over” she declared, waving her words over to him.

His mouth fell open a bit, maybe trying to catch them. That was genuinely kind of her. Not what he expected at all. But… “What about him?” he asked firmly.

Her eyes hardened a bit. She took a deep breath. “I’ll spare him too… *Of course…”* she stated with a deep sigh. It didn’t sound like she actually fully planned to before he asked, but he wasn’t in a position to hold that against her.

He thought hard about it. Why wasn’t this a relief? Well, he hadn’t really come here for the mission in the first place... And it’s not like he’d really given his heart a second thought. As far as he cared it had already been ripped out anyway.

She looked him over slowly. “I can see something weighing on your mind. What is your proposal, son of Hades?” she asked.

“Thank you for your kindness, my lady. *Truly*, I don’t deserve it… I know it’s the absolute *least* I can do, but I’ll deliver the news to my partner-. My *ex*-partner in person. I owe it to him… Not just *that*, actually” he concluded.

She smiled warmly. Her eyes gleamed in the moonlight. “Who would I be if I weren’t willing to bet on love?” she chuckled. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “*Go to him, you brave little lavette!*” she commanded. She kissed her fingers and wafted her hand at him, sending him off.

Nico walked straight out the door into the shadows of the night. The cold whispers pushed him forward, sounding urgent and determined.

Gwen’s front door dawned out of the darkness right in front of him.

He straightened up. He rolled his shoulders and knocked. His heartbeat reached his throat with tight, rhythmic squeezes. He thought he was about to choke on it, until Gwen opened the door, almost making his heart stop altogether.

He wasn't the only one affected by nerves. Gwen's wary expression fell right off her face as she recognized him. She quickly closed her mouth back up. Glancing over her shoulder feverishly, she stepped outside, closing the door behind her. Nico made room.

She opened her mouth again, then smiled painfully. "*Hey, Nicky…*" she breathed. She stuck out her arms.

Nico tried not to cry when she hugged him. She was delicate, like she was trying to be sneaky about it. *Like she was doing something illegal.*

She held his shoulders out in front of her, looking him over with pursed lips. "It's so good to see you" she said quietly.

"You too, Gwen. I'm really sorry about… Well, everything" he started. "I'm here to talk to him" he added with a low voice.

Gwen seemed to be trying not to show how much that worried her. Her pursed lips hardened, her eyes widened slightly.

"Uhuh" she said weakly. She nodded. "*Yes*... I think you *should* talk… But, he's… He's *here.* But, I don't know how he's-" she stammered.

"*I know*" Nico said, putting up his hands. "I'm not expecting any miracles. I mostly just want to apologize" he added, trying to sound reassuring.

She nodded again, not any less nervous than before. Then she slapped him on the shoulder. "Good luck, buddy. *Don't die in there…*" she said with the fakest cheer he'd ever heard her muster.

"Thanks, Gwen" he said. He meant it.

She crossed her arms and looked at him as he grabbed the handle. No indication she was going to follow him inside. *Oh, alright.…* She gave him another smile when he closed the door behind him.

He turned and looked into the hallway. He'd never gone this way round before. His mind went blank in anticipation while he walked through the living room into the kitchen.

Mark had stopped mid sip of his coffee, his eyes locked onto him.

Nico stared back. "Oh, hi Mark" he said, the nerves somehow made him sound *more* casual.

Mark slowly put the cup on the table, eyes still wide. He grinned far too widely, obviously terrified. "*Hey, Nick!*" he shouted, holding out his hands in a forced welcoming gesture. "*Does Logan know you're here?!*" he asked with desperate intensity.

Nico smiled nervously and shook his head.

Mark sucked in his lips and made a jerky movement with his head, somewhere between a nod and a shake. He slapped the table, grabbed his coffee and practically sprinted into the hallway. "*Sherman, stay up there!*" he shouted along his way up the stairs.

Logan opened his bedroom door, visibly annoyed at the commotion. He looked in the direction of the stairs. Then into the kitchen.

Nico's heart stopped when their eyes met. He'd never seen Logan genuinely *shook.* It didn't suit him. Logan seemed to agree. His face twisted in rage. No… this was probably *more* than rage. The undeniable fury in his eyes incinerated Nico's soul with the ferocity of hellfire, slow and torturous. In just an instant, though it felt like an eternity, he'd turned to nothing but ashes.

A gasp restarted his heart with vigor when Logan made his way over. He held his breath tightly to prevent his ashes from scattering, then mentally prepared himself for a punch in the face. It never came. Logan shoved past him, letting his anger blow over Nico like a heatwave. The back door closed behind him with a slam so loud it shook the walls.

Nico stood there for a second. What was that saying again? The opposite of love isn't hate, it's…*Whatever*? Good, because based on the look Logan just gave him, he clearly *hated* him. Guess that didn't necessarily mean he didn't have a shot at making this right. Nico grinned humorlessly to himself.

He tried to gather himself. Nope. Not a chance. He pushed through and grabbed the handle.

Nico closed the door behind him. Logan was way closer than he anticipated… *Was it always this cramped back here?!* Despite the open space around them past the porch fence, they were pretty much trapped together now.

Nico stared at Logan's back, gathering the courage to speak. Nope. Not a chance of that either. He pushed through again, inhaling shakily. "We need to talk" he said firmly, his voice wavered a little.

"Funny. That's what *I* thought. But, now that you're actually here, I've got nothing to say to you" Logan said without any emotion.

Nico tried to ignore his heart wrench in his chest. "Then please just listen" he pleaded.

Logan stayed silent, not moving at all apart from blowing out a stream of smoke.

"Look…" Nico stammered "Things moved fast... I know it sounds stupid, but I got *scared*"

Logan scoffed loudly. "*Damn right* it sounds stupid. *You* got scared? You're the one who told *me* that you loved me, man. All I did was say it back" he said in cold anger. Then his tone got downright bitter. "And I *meant it* when I said it. We did things I've never done with a guy before. That *matters* to me. And then you creep out in the middle of that *same* night and leave me a shitty little note? I can't help but take that a little personally, *pal*".

Nico felt the shame wash over him. He couldn’t think of anything to say.

Logan turned around, facing him. He rested his back on the fence leaning on his lower arms. Nico didn’t think his usually fiery eyes could ever be this ice cold. He felt frostbite burn him all over as the tension in his body rose even further.

Logan took a long drag from his cigarette, then very deliberately blew the smoke in Nico’s face. Breathing it in stung his throat like needles, all the way down into his chest. He closed his eyes, held his breath and let the rest of the pain flow past him.

“You broke my heart, you know?” Logan said with a low, brittle voice.

Nico’s eyes stung when they shot back open. He watched a tear slowly run down Logan's cheek. It slipped off his chin without a sound.

Fuck…! This was too unsettling. He couldn’t bear to look at him anymore. “I know I did… I was afraid I had, anyway”. Nico’s voice cracked. He picked himself back up, a little more fiery than he meant to.

“When I said it, I meant it too! *I still do!* But, it kind of just slipped out... When you said it back. That was the *best* thing that ever happened to me! But I got in my head… I couldn't keep out the thoughts of how badly I'd fucked up before and how I was going to ruin *everything*. I started panicking. I’m not good at these things… like, really, *really bad* at these things. I couldn't handle it. I freaked out. It felt like I was going to die! So I figured, best to get out before we get in too deep and it would hurt even worse. Before I hurt you *too* bad”.

Nico could feel his hands shaking. “But I messed up. It was *way* too late for that. And-”.

He was fighting back tears. He was going to lose that fight soon. “And I’m sorry. I’m so, *so* sorry. *I’m always going to be sorry...* I regretted it the second I left”.

Tears were streaming down his face now. He wiped them away with the back of his hand. He forced himself to look Logan in the eyes. Logan’s expression was still cold, but there was a hint of something Nico couldn’t quite recognize.

“*If it’s any consolation, I broke my own heart too*” he wringed out of himself. *Fuck!* It was impossible to handle this even a second longer. He had to get out of here before he made it even worse.

Nico spun himself around, pulling the door open. Logan reached over his shoulder, shoving it back closed with a slam. Nico looked back at him, Logan’s hand now practically next to his face. An unbearable tension filled the air.

“If you’re going to run away again, can you at least give me a kiss goodbye this time?” Logan asked. His attempt at a cocky grin didn't even remotely conceal the immense amount of hurt in his expression.

Nico swallowed a breath. He turned around and threw himself at him. Logan caught him, putting his free arm around Nico's waist. Then added the other. Nico shuddered against him and sank into his arms. He slipped his arms under Logan's and pulled him even closer, kissing him hard.

Logan's lips were chapped, his grip far too tight and he tasted like cigarettes. It was amazing.

For just a moment, nothing mattered and everything in the world was fine.

Very quickly, the door opened, hitting Nico right in the-! Behind him, Mark came out halfway. Only to immediately realize what he had walked into. They quickly let go of each other.

Mark averted his eyes, waving both hands at them and rushed back behind the door. "*Gods!* Sorry! We heard the door slam! Just making sure you weren't killing each other!". He shut the door with a scared sounding thud.

Nico didn't dare to look at Logan. "You have the right to hate me, you know?" he said quietly.

Logan groaned loudly, stunning him. "*I don't-!*" he started, raising his voice in exasperation. "*Hate you…*" he ended much lower. "*C'mon,* how many times are you going to make me say that?!". He sounded desperate.

Nico fought all his feelings. Sadness and shame won. "It's just…I'm such a *piece of shit*" he muttered, shoving his hands in his face.

They both sighed.

Logan put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, watch it. That's my crazy ex-boyfriend you're talking about… I'm not over that guy".

Nico chuckled, it almost sounded like a sob.

"I mean it, though... I still love you" Logan said with a low voice.

Nico looked at him. Logan shot him a sad smile.

He felt tears run down his cheeks again. "I love you too" he said, his voice trembling.

Logan put an arm around him and pressed himself against him.

Nico sunk his face in Logan's shoulder. "It's terrifying…" he said quietly. He started sobbing, he couldn't hold it in anymore.

"I know, but it doesn't have to be... Not as long as you just keep talking to me. I mean it, even if we don't make it… I don't wanna lose you completely" Logan muttered.

Nico felt Logan's breath shake. He nodded.

Time stood still for a while.

Logan huffed quietly. “Guess you really are the ‘*Ghost’* king, huh?” he teased.

The corner of Nico's mouth twitched. He did deserve that... But, *still.* “Very clever. How long have you been waiting to use that line?” he asked with a wet attempt at sounding accusatory.

“Too long…” Logan muttered. His tone was so bittersweet that it was hard to swallow.

Nico gripped him tighter. “Yeah” he sighed quietly.

Something rubbed against his leg and rasped at him. Nico looked down, into the bright dilated eyes of Crazy Butch. Butch didn’t seem nearly as terrified of what he’d walked into than their previous intruder, not having a clue about complicated human emotions. Butch kinda had life figured out in that sense, actually…

Logan bent down to pet him. Butch clawed at Nico’s pants, boorishly daring to ask for even more. *Well, why not actually?* Nico bent down to greet the rude little man too. Butch headbutted his hand, then bit him. Nico let him.

“Kinda missed you too, little jerk” he muttered.

Logan exhaled deeply and gave him a serious look. “This doesn't mean I'm not angry at you anymore” he warned.

“Don't worry, I get that. I'm also still very angry at me” Nico responded quietly. It wasn't really a joke, but he couldn’t stop a wry smirk.

Logan's expression softened. He put his forehead against his. “Yeah… Well… Don't torture yourself *too* much. Just because I'm mad at you doesn't mean I love you any less…”.

Oh!...? Nico closed his eyes for a few seconds trying to take in the words. Maybe mostly trying not to cry, he realized as he swallowed.

“I don’t want you to suffer, I just want you to do better. And not just for me…” Logan explained.

Nico nodded against him. “*Yeah. I will. I'll really, really try”* he pushed out. A kiss on his temple stole all shame from his words.

“Talking about ‘suffering’. Ready to put an end to Mark's?” Logan asked. “Gwen's probably *eating* him at this point”.

Nico let out a short laugh. They pulled away and got up. Logan opened the door and waited for him to enter. *Yep.*.. Of course he had to go first… Nico took it in stride, right into the kitchen. The dinner table was a bit crowded suddenly, Gwen leaned over Mark, Sherman sitting behind them. It went quiet. Everybody stared at them.

Mark had a terrible poker face.

Gwen was the bravest. “Sooo… You going to quit smoking? Or… what?” she asked, obviously trying to fish for answers to a question she hadn’t dared to ask.

Nico looked at Logan nervously.

Logan side-eyed him. His expression slightly salty. “Nah, he can lick ashtrays for a while” he grumbled.

The tension in the room seemed to dissipate a little. Nico relaxed his shoulders. *Oof. They hurt.*… He felt drained. No. *Relieved.* He smiled to himself.

Mark leaned forward. “Gods, Nick! I’m so glad you’re back! It’s been hell without you here. He’s done nothing but bitch and moan” he whispered.

“And he’s been *mean* too” Sherman added.

“He *stabbed* my cute little apple tree! There's going to be a broken sword stuck in there forever! And I *swear,* if I have to listen to *Behind These Hazel Eyes* one more time…” Gwen chimed in dramatically.

Logan groaned and covered his eyes.

“You don't even *have* hazel eyes…” she whined further.

Mark suppressed a snort and beckoned Nico closer. “Few weeks ago, during sparring, he started crying. Valentina tried to hug him. He shoved her right into a bush” he snickered.

Sherman wiggled two fingers, mimicking two legs sticking up in the air.

“Hey! That was *just days* after!... I *apologized* for that and I pulled her out right away!” Logan shouted.

Through all the guilt, Nico accidentally let the beginning of a laugh slip out. A very painful one, but still… He quickly covered his mouth, pretending to cough.

Logan took him in a chokehold. “You don’t get to laugh at that yet” he warned, messing up Nico’s hair.

Logan let him go, leaving his arm over his shoulder. Nico sucked in his lips and lowered his head a little. *Worth it.*… The rest of the conversation flew right past him. He focussed on trying to stay as still as possible, not wanting to risk making the arm around his shoulder move.

Before long, everyone else had gone to bed. The quiet was calm, but a little uncomfortable.

Logan's eyes burned on his face. He decided to be brave and meet them, he'd faced much harder confrontations today. Logan's expression was hard to read. It had a little bit of everything. Nico focussed on the warmth. It was nice, but painfully undeserved.

"When you first saw me… For a second I thought you were going to punch me in the face" he admitted quietly. He withered a little in the genuine offense in Logan's eyes.

"I would *never* do that!". Despite the scowl, there was no anger in his tone, just hurt.

Nico put up his hands, sorry he brought it up. "*I know!* I know that. I promise… Just my own mind messing with me again" he realized out loud.

Logan's relieved expression somehow hurt too.

"Still, I would have deserved it. I would have deserved *much* worse" he reassured.

Apparently not what Logan had been wanting to hear. Logan sighed deeply, sadness washing over his face. By far the worst look so far.

Nico needed to put a stop to this. He slowly shook his head. "But, even if you had. I'd have been lucky to make it that far. Aphrodite decided to spare me too. Guess she didn't feel like ripping my heart out either" he concluded with a sigh.

"You went to see her?" Logan asked, clearly surprised, maybe even impressed.

"Yeah. Thought *you* might… Wouldn't have been fair to make you go face her alone" Nico started.

Logan gave him a slightly guilty smile, pulling his arm back to rap his fingers against the table.

Nico returned a much guiltier smile. "This was all on *me*" he stressed, putting up his hands. "Good news, by the way. She's called off the whole thing. We're free to go".

Logan looked even more surprised than before. "So *that's* what that letter was about. Hah… I have to give it to her, I didn't expect her to be so cool about this".

Nico snorted. "Oh *no*. No way… She was *pissed*. I thought I was done for. But, guess she has a soft spot for heartbroken idiots".

Logan huffed. "Look at you, moping us out of trouble".

Nico huffed too. "Least I could do. My whining was *more than due* to be useful for once".

They grinned weakly at each other. *Man*, what an exhausting day. All the extra energy from the nerves had died together with them.

"I'm going to bed" Logan stated, slowly getting up.

Nico nodded and did the same. He went to reach for his coat. “Yeah, I'll-”.

Logan gestured at him. “You coming or what?” he asked.

Nico stared at him, coat an arms length away in his hand.

Logan raised an eyebrow. “Oh, you have *other* plans at *one AM* on a Wednesday?" he asked jokingly.

Nico slowly let go of his coat, letting it drop to the ground. He watched Logan walk into the hallway and open his door. Logan cocked his head, clearly waiting for him. *Oh.* Guess that meant they were sharing a bed. Relief and nerves mixed together. Nico could hear his heart beat loudly as he carefully made his way over.

The next dilemma lined up for him when Logan got undressed and got in bed. He pulled aside the covers next to him, expectantly… Nico turned away from the prying embers and mulled it over, pulling his clothes off to mask his panic. This was dangerous terrain.

What was he supposed to do? What was he *allowed* to do? All his feelings fought each other. The shame and guilt made a pretty good point… He laid down as far on the edge of the bed as he could, his back turned to Logan.

He heard Logan huff and felt him move behind him. Nico froze as he wrapped his arms around him and yanked him towards the middle of the bed, pulling him against him. Nico’s muscles stayed tense in the sudden embrace, subconsciously trying to protect himself from the familiar, comforting warmth.

Logan pulled back a little, loosening his grip. “Am I scaring you?” he asked carefully in Nico’s ear.

Nico closed his eyes as the guilt and shame intensified and released the tension in his body. “*No!*... no…” he groaned. “It’s just… I don’t deserve this. *I don’t deserve*-”. He cut himself off with a sharp sigh. *You.*

Logan’s grip tightened. “What? *Love?!*” he asked in irritated disbelief.

Nico pursed his lips and thought about it. *Yeah.*… Kinda spot on, actually… “I mean… After what I put you through”.

Logan let out a short laugh, there was only a hint of humour in it. “*After what you put me through?*” he repeated in aggravated amazement. “*Dude… Sure,* It hurt my feelings. *A lot.* But have you *seen* yourself?! You’re a complete fucking wreck! It was a *stupid* move, in probably every way. But, that doesn’t mean you deserve *eternal damnation”.*

The words landed kinda hard. Nico didn’t know what to do with them.

Logan sighed. “You’re officially the *stupid* one from now on, by the way. There’s no way I can beat that” he declared smugly.

Nico smiled weakly. “Damn right I am”.

Logan groaned in disapproval. “No! Don't *agree!* You're ruining it. What's fun about being a confrontational asshole if you're not going to overreact to it?”.

Nico couldn’t help it. “Yeah, sorry…”.

Logan let out a miserable noise. “*Please, stop.* This is so fucking *sad*. You’re trying *so* hard. You showed up, didn’t you? Be at least a *little* proud of that. Stop beating yourself up already”.

Nico felt too many emotions well up. None of that made any sense to him. It was hard to keep track of his thoughts. He just threw them out there and hoped for the best. “I’m sorry! I know it’s not fair. But… *I’m so fucking done with myself.* I feel like I keep looking for proof that you hate me… *I don’t know what’s wrong with me*… Maybe deep down I kinda want you to?… It just makes more sense to me, or something” he whispered shakily.

Logan’s grip tightened more. He kissed him on the neck. “Too bad” he chimed, kissing him on the temple. “I *fucking* love you”. Another kiss. “You sad little *emo*” he whispered in his ear. He tickled Nico in his sides.

Son of a-! Nico jolted. He quickly spun around and grasped at Logan’s hands, gripping them tightly in his. They grinned at each other in the dark.

Logan's grin turned into a pensive look. A painful one. Nico braced himself. “What hurt the most wasn’t that you dumped me” Logan said quietly. “I kept worrying that maybe you'd do something… *Stupid”*. His voice was tense, almost shaky.

Nico took a painful breath at the stab of guilt in his chest. He really wished Logan didn't know him *that* well… “*Everything* I did was stupid. We *just* talked about this, I'm a really stupid guy” he joked, hopeful to get away without lying, but even more hopeful to get away without telling the truth.

Logan shifted, actually shaking.

Shit! Nico pulled him against him. “*No!* No… Don't worry. I didn't mean it like that. I didn't do anything!”.

Logan drew out an exhale against him.

Nico followed suit. “I mean… I thought about it. A few times. But, I knew it wouldn’t be right. I didn't even *try* to do anything. I promise”.

Logan bumped his forehead against his. *Just* a little too hard…

“Sorry” they said in unison. They quietly laughed at each other.

Logan sighed. “Well, aside from *that.*.. I also just really, *really* missed you…”.

Nico’s grin turned into a smile. “I missed you more”.

Logan huffed, gently moving Nico's hair away from his face. “Wanna bet?”.

Ha! Sucker. Nico didn't even need words to win this. He pushed him down and kissed him on his jaw, his neck, *still* exactly nine kisses long, his chest, slowly working his way down. Logan ran an appreciative hand through his hair as he did. Nico smirked to himself. *See?* Words were overrated.

Chapter 16: XVI. Sentimental garbage

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Dead birds (!) somewhat explicit described, Shame, guilt, insecurity, mild tongue stuff, mild biting, dog discrimination.

Despite the cramp in his neck, Nico tried to keep it as still as possible, afraid Logan might pull his arm out from under it if he didn't. He stared at his own fingers tracing a long faded scar on the palm of Logan's hand, light as a feather. It was nearly invisible in the dim early morning light, but he remembered every detail of it since the first time he'd taken the time to notice it. For safekeeping. He kept going when he ran out of scar, tracing all the curves and edges around it, careful not to miss a single detail.

Logan's hands always knew how to draw his attention. Not too big, nor too small, but *just* right. Sturdy. Strong. A little rough. The type of hands that got work done. At any cost, as the many scars on them underlined. Perfectly imperfect. None of that even came close to his favourite part about them, though. He slowly locked their fingers together, savoring the warmth.

Logan curled up his fingers and gently ran his thumb over the back of Nico's hand, probably still asleep. He'd slept through the entire night. That hadn't happened even a *single* time so far.

Nico had been surprised about it. All night long. He couldn't sleep. Too much to process, so he hadn't even bothered to start. Worries littered over the relief he felt. How was he going to fix all this? Could he even fix this? Not for himself, he found out. He was never going to trust himself again… Then again, had he ever? Not that important. Logan had… *Had.*.. Nico needed to push the air out of his lungs by force. His chest almost trembled under the pressure.

Logan tightened his grip on his hand. Nico felt Logan's nose trail up from the crook of his neck, stopping right behind his ear. "You're going to break my fingers" he mumbled right into it. Underneath the drowsiness, his tone was almost impressed.

Nico fidgeted his hand free and turned over to face him. "Sor-" he started.

Logan's disapproving groan crashed against his lips. "Shut up" he ordered, pulling barely an inch away. He wrapped his arms around his back. "Stop *brooding*. Just go to sleep" he added more softly, almost a whisper. He rubbed their noses together before settling back down.

Nico carefully slid his arms under Logan’s. He felt his heart beat against his chest, calm and steady. He slowly lost count.

All the brooding picked right back up hours later, as they stood on the porch, staring out at nothing in particular. Nico had countless memories of scenes exactly like this one. He never expected to be lucky enough to get to stand here again, shoulder to shoulder, in comfortable silence, hearing the flicks of a lighter for the *second* time that day… It was *painfully* familiar.

Nico decided to ask what he hadn't dared to yesterday night. “So you got back into smoking to spite me?”. He wished he was even remotely as bitter as he'd managed to sound. The guilt hiding underneath his words was much harder to deal with than just being a selfish asshole.

Each time he watched Logan light a cigarette, every voice in his head reminded him that he had no right to be angry at him for breaking his promise. After all, Nico had been the one who'd practically done it *for* him, with the amount of bullshit he'd putten him through…

Logan didn’t buy his cold attitude either, ripping his whole façade down with a single reassuring smile. “Nah, Spooky. Not everything I do s’about you, you know?” he said, clearly trying to sound sly. He tucked his lighter away and took a drag. “Trauma therapy is hitting hard. Probably would have fallen off the wagon regardless…” he said a lot more quietly.

Trauma therapy…? Nico suppressed a smile.

“Anyway, there are perks. I get to do drugs now” Logan went on.

“Ha! That's great!” Nico said with genuine excitement.

Logan stifled a laugh. Well he tried to. For a bit…

“About *therapy*” Nico muttered. “Obviously…!”. He nudged him with his hip.

Logan nudged him back. “Yep, Gods bless the University of Utah, I guess? I thought it would have taken ages, but they've got a whole system for this type of stuff” Logan explained in mild awe.

“So, is it as bad as you expected?” Nico asked.

“It's been… Interesting” Logan started, visibly mulling it over. “EMDR is the fucking worst. The medication is hit or miss. Sometimes I feel pretty great, other times…” Logan clenched his teeth and cocked his head. “But that's going to be the dean and counselors’ problem when I go back to college in a few weeks”.

Nico blinked at him. He blinked even more, suddenly a little affected. “I'm really happy for you”. His tone was much more strained than he wanted it to be. The sniff his body forced on him made sure he wouldn’t come off the wrong way.

Logan exhaled. “Yeah, well, it was about time. Still gotta do pretty much *all* the work…”. He crossed his arms.

Nico hummed in agreement. “You'll be fine though. I really think so. You're a crazy strong person”. He felt his face heat up a little.

“Thanks”. Logan slapped him on his back then gave him a devious look. “So, when are *you* going to therapy?”.

Nico's face fell. He tried to move away.

Logan put his arm around his shoulder and pulled them against each other, foiling his plans. “What's your excuse, huh?” he snickered, putting out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe.

Nico knew he was right.

Annoyingly, Logan obviously knew he was right too. Luckily he let up, letting go of Nico's shoulders. “Hypocrite” he said with a smirk.

The tension left Nico's back. “I'll think about it” he said. He meant it. “You first, though. Show me some results” he added.

“Wow! That’s *way* too much pressure!” Logan complained in exaggerated exasperation. He turned to face Nico, hands in his pockets, eyes narrowed and staring closely into his. “What happened to being so sure I'm going to be fine, hm?”.

Nico realized he'd talked himself into a corner. He sighed in defeat, then quickly shoved his hands in Logan's back pockets and squeezed.

“Using sex as a weapon? That's low even for you”. Logan shook his head and sighed dramatically.

Nico laughed. “We both know you're right. So stop making me squirm already, you sadist. And yes, you *are* going to be fine”. He squeezed again for dramatic effect.

Logan smiled faintly, then looked back across Gwen’s backyard. He took a deep, pensive breath.

Nico carefully slid his hands out of his pockets, not daring to leave them. There was a lot to be ‘pensive’ about since last night. Nico had made sure of that… “What’s on your mind?” he dreaded out loud.

“I don't understand the hype around skateboards” Logan said deadpan. “Getting all excited over some wheels” he shook his head slowly. “Bunch of cavemen…”.

Nico cracked up. “*That's* what you were thinking about?” he asked in disbelief. “Sometimes I forget how *deep* and *poetic* you are. It's hard to keep up with you…” he added sarcastically.

Logan smiled. “C'mon, everybody has something they hate for no good reason. *Especially* you, I bet. You already hate everything anyway”.

Nico leaned back and drew a deep breath. He took a minute. “I don't like pugs” he said finally.

“Pugs?” Logan asked “Like, those chubby, wrinkly, gremlin dogs?”

Nico drew his lips in a long straight line. “Yeah, the way they look and sound kinda freaks me out. Plus, they've got tons of health issues. They just shouldn't exist”.

Logan seemed to be thinking. “That's not really the dogs’ fault though. Seems pretty harsh”.

Nico sighed dramatically. “I'm not going out of my way to be a jerk to pugs! I'm just saying”. He looked at Logan. “Doesn't seem more harsh than hating on people on skateboards”.

Logan shook his head. “You see, that's just not true. That dog can't help it. It was born that way. Skateboards are a choice. A very, *very* stupid choice”.

Nico chuckled quietly and turned away. “Whatever”. He shoved his hands in his coat pockets. He grazed something. *Right.* “You should probably have this back” he muttered. He held the cigarette butt up between his fingers.

Logan looked at it with disbelief. “I can't believe you kept that…”. His tone was hard to read. Somewhere between hurt, surprise and tenderness? He took it. “Why didn't you throw it away?” he asked, almost accusatorily.

Nico shrugged. It's not that he didn't know *exactly* why, it just hurt.

“I'll get rid of it…”. Logan scowled at it before shoving it into his pocket.

Nico pursed his lips. Made sense, *but still…*

“Sorry, but I don't want you getting all sentimental over literal *garbage*… It doesn't suit you” Logan said a little sternly. He nudged him with his shoulder. “I'll get you something nicer” he mused, running his hand through Nico's hair.

Dumbass. You really shouldn’t… “Like what? A Scream Two shirt?” Nico quipped.

Logan let out a short laugh. “I said I *don't* want you to get sentimental over trash”.

Nico raised an eyebrow. “You said those movies are good!”.

Logan huffed. “Yeah, because they *are*. But, *you* said they're dumb and even though you're wrong, that means it's not good enough!” he argued.

Nico leaned the side of his head against his.

“I'll think of something” Logan added.

“Don't think *too* hard” Nico warned. He could almost hear Logan ignoring his advice through his temple. He cupped Logan’s cheek and turned his lips onto his own. The bittersweet taste of cigarettes still lingered on his breath.

Logan broke away first. Based on his serious expression, Nico's distraction hadn't worked. "You don't mind the taste?" he asked, no hint of teasing.

Crap. He shrugged, trying to look sly. "Never licked an ashtray before? It's not that bad".

Logan narrowed his eyes, flames twinkling. "Is that a dare?".

Right.… Should have seen that coming. "I dare you *not* to…" Nico groaned.

A smirk crept over Logan's lips. He sighed it away, looking over his shoulder at the trees behind them. "I think I'm going to try to quit smoking again" he muttered, maybe more to himself than Nico.

They turned their faces to look at each other.

Nico smiled. "Good for-!".

He cut himself off as Logan took out yet *another* cigarette. "Last one…" he promised with a guilty smile, putting his hands up.

Nico threw the least impressed look he could muster at him.

"I know, I know… But, I'm *really* stressed out". Logan clenched the cigarette between his teeth and searched his pocket for a lighter.

Nico got up close, giving him a stern look. He put his fingers around the cigarette and firmly pulled it out of his mouth. Logan frowned. He opened his mouth to complain when Nico shut him up with a kiss. He listened as the annoyed groan Logan let out changed tune. He loved that he could make him do that.

A smug smile spread on his lips as he pulled away. "There's other distractions than smoking" he said with feigned annoyance.

Logan's eyes glowed threateningly. "Yeah? You wanna be my next habit?" he asked, slowly moving closer.

Nico backed up as he did, all the way until he hit the window.

Logan closed in even further and rested his forehead against his. "*Think you can handle it?*" he dared him, narrowing his eyes in a threatening, deep stare.

He ran his hands down Nico's waist. The fire burned hot, quickly spreading all over. Nico let out a huff, not managing to sound unimpressed at all.

Logan pushed his knee between Nico's, gripped his upper legs *dangerously high,* and hoisted him up on the window sill. Nico almost gasped as his back pressed against the window. He was about to scold him when Logan made quick use of the opening in his defense.

Fuck.

Nico shoved his hands against Logan's chest to get him to slow down a little. His arms shuddered as he felt Logan slowly run his tongue between his teeth. He let his elbows fold, slowly allowing Logan even closer. His hand slid up Logan’s chest and traced his collarbone absentmindedly. He ran his other past his waist, gripping onto his back.

Yeah… Alright... I think I can handle it…

Nico winced as someone tapped on the window, hard and impatiently. They broke apart. Logan scowled at whoever was behind the window. It was the ‘Gwen’ scowl. Nico didn't dare turn to look to make sure.

Logan grinned and flipped her off. He immediately went back to his attack on Nico's mouth, even more aggressively than before. Probably trying to put on a *show.*

Nico prepared himself to protest. He found it increasingly hard to mind when Logan moved down, biting his neck.

No! Focus! He scolded himself, gritting his teeth. He was going to protest *so hard!* His body ignored him, pulling Logan against him as close as he could. *Fine…* He’d protest later… *Promise…* He barely even registered the angry sound of curtains being ripped shut. *Sorry, Gwen.*

Over the course of a few hours Gwen slowly forgave them. Well, half of them. She glared at the handprint on her otherwise pristine window, then at Logan. Nico smiled apologetically at her from the other side of the table, dousing the large blue flames just a little.

A very loud bang against wood instantly pulled all eyes towards the door. Mark quickly wiped the coffee off of his face and got up.

Gwen was faster. Without hesitation, she opened the door just far enough to investigate, carefully peering around it. Her eyes went wide, her mouth in a silent gasp. She almost pulled the door back shut, then opened it further and pulled something out of it with a hard *crack.*

She slowly revealed an arrow, with two clearly dead doves around it. The dark, dripping blood stain between their chests stood out in grotesque contrast to the rest of their pure white coats. The arrow had joined them together in death, right through their tiny hearts. She held them up by both ends of the arrow with a slight tremble in her fingers, seemingly hoping anyone could explain the meaning behind the meaningless violence.

For what could have been minutes, nobody made a sound. Logan pointed at one of the lifeless little talons. Right above it was a small, tightly wrapped scroll.

Gwen quickly laid the doves down on the counter and untied it with surgical precision. “It says *‘To the happy couple’*... Mark, I think it’s for you…?” she relayed, tense and hesitant.

Mark didn't move at first, not until Gwen practically forced the small scroll into his hand. He didn't make a sound as he unrolled it and read it, then read it again. "This… *I have no clue what this is about… Eris…?!"* he mumbled in exasperation.

"That's for us…" Nico said before the realization even fully dawned on him. He held out his hand. The papyrus felt coarse in the palm of his hand, *ancient*. The words looked carefully written, dark red ink… Or…? He decided not to dwell on that.

My favourite ill fated lovers,

First and foremost, I would like to congratulate you from the very deepest bottom of my Heart.

If only that was my reason for reaching out to you. Regretfully, no. That cannot be the case. It has come to my attention that our much beloved lady decided to have mercy on you. How very typical of her. How very convenient. Bowing out right before having to kneel down. No. I will not accept that. You see, if I were to simply let you be after all of this, that would send the wrong message. I have a right to satisfaction and <u>Demand</u> you provide. However, I am not nearly as cowardly as our angelfaced succubus. Despite what you might believe, I am not nearly as ruthless either. As proof of my faith in you, I will allow you ample time to come present yourself to me. Precisely two months. Not a single day more. I trust you know where to find me. Do not make me come find you.

I am truly overjoyed to share this special moment with you soon.

Eris

Logan let out a quiet huff over his shoulder. "Guess we're not as lucky as we hoped…".

Of course they weren't, when had they ever? Nico sucked in his lips. He let Gwen take the thinly veiled deaththreat from him.

She read it wordlessly. Her face paled a shade when she got to the end. She looked up, eyes darting to each of them, and opened her mouth. She closed it back up, almost as firmly as she did the scroll.

They all looked on as she threw it onto the counter, next to the doves. Anger gave way for tenderness as she picked them up. She walked out the door and stared at the flowerbed next to the porch.

Nico hurried after her, catching on to her plan. He gestured for her to leave it when she reached for the soil, using his other hand to will a small crevice. The ground sunk down under his palm, nowhere near Hades, two feet was more than enough.

Determined to finally free the poor creatures from their leading role in the macabre display, Gwen quietly broke off the arrow head and slid the doves off onto her lap. One next to the other, she carefully placed them in the small, freshly dug grave. She slowly draped the surrounding dirt over them, tucking them into their final resting place.

She took the remains of the arrow back inside. Nico watched her break them into small chunks and dump them into the trashcan with quick, disdainful flicks of her hand

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Everyone had stayed silent after the uninvited funeral. Both Mark and Gwen opted to start their mourning period elsewhere, giving them some privacy to deal with the sudden bereavement. Uncharacteristically, neither Nico nor Logan had said a word since either.

Nico looked across the table, for any signs that anything was wrong. He couldn't find any in Logan's content smile. Nor in his hands, perfectly still. He narrowed his eyes and clicked his tongue in frustration. *That dumbass… Everything* was wrong! *"How can you be so calm about this?!*" he hissed. "I come back and the *day after* we're already in deep shit again!". *Aren't you angry?! Sorry you let me back in…?*

"*Calm down, Spooky!*" Logan groaned through his grin. "Course it sucks! But, hey. At least you *did* come back, right? We'll figure it out together. And it's not like it's *new* shit. She even gave us *more* time than we had". His tone was *disturbingly* reassuring. "Besides, it's not even the worst 'summons' we got this week, right?" he joked. He cocked his head at Nico's confused blinks. "You know…? The invitation for the reunion…? For all surviving campers…?".

Nico cocked his head the opposite way. "The reunion-?" he started, then shook his head. "Wait, for all '*surviving*' campers?! That's what it says?!".

Logan laughed. "I mean, yeah. Pretty much". He reached behind him and pulled a paper from Gwen's corkboard. "I should have guessed you'd missed it… The goat delivering them was shitfaced drunk. No way it could've tracked *you* down".

Nico looked at the frumpled piece of paper when Logan shoved it in his hand. A large red wine stain bled out over half the text, making it almost unreadable. He held it a bit closer.

Dear insert name,

It is I, Dionysus,

God of wine, ecstasy and madness, in other words, fun!

You're welcome.

It is your honor to be informed by me of the upcoming reunion for all former campers of Camp Half Blood.

Those still alive, that is.

To be honest, it might just be four or five of you.

Chiron is not good at his job.

Be sure to remind him of this fact at the party.

It's going to be sick bro!

Be there, or be square!

The mighty Mr. D

Nico looked at the date. Tomorrow's date… “No fucking way…” he sighed.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured” Logan chuckled. He pulled out his phone. “I should let Yan know, though. She asked about you…”.

Yan.… Nico gently pushed his phone down, stopping him from typing. “I’ll go…” he muttered. “Just for a little while!” he made clear when he saw the size of Logan’s grin grow dangerously fast.

He had to go, he owed it to Yan. With all the new old developments, this might be the last chance he’d get to see her. It had been ages since last time. *A lot* had happened these past months… He swallowed dryly.

Chapter 17: XVII. Old flames in the campfire

Chapter Notes

> All warnings are spoilers:
> Jealousy, embarrassing photo (implied), crying, walking in on people having sex (not explicit), mention of cheating (not perpetrated by main cast members!), sunglasses gore.

The campgrounds were almost unrecognizable. Linen drapery hung across the entire area between the cabins, forming a large, flowy tent. Grecian couches in all colours formed various circles on the sides. Olive branches and other greenery decorated the large poles keeping up the whole facade. Even the mounted boar's head guarding the Ares cabin was dressed for the occasion, wearing a neat little top hat.

The silenus, possibly even *the* Silenus, manning the DJ booth at the far end was already so drunk he was practically sprawled out over the turntables. Nymphs raved to the heavy beat and random scratches under the flute music, adorning guests with wreaths and coaxing them to join. Satyrs with bowties skipped among the hustle and bustle, juggling bottles and fruits.

Demigods of all ages mingled in cheerful chatter. As age increased, the number of limbs and eyes steadily declined. Nico scanned all faces carefully, looking for a familiar one.

"Are you in there?" Logan whispered in his ear, cutting him off on his trail of thoughts.

"No" Nico replied dryly, swatting at his ear. He sighed. "It's just… I'm kinda hoping we don't run into…" he stopped.

Logan narrowed his eyes. "Will? I thought you told me you guys made up?" he asked. He glanced around.

The nymph next to him froze. She pulled back her wreath to hide from his fiery scowl and backed away.

Nico shook his head. "No, not Will. Nevermind".

Logan narrowed his eyes further, puzzling so hard Nico could almost feel it. "Jackson? But, you're friends right?".

Nico closed his eyes and sighed. "It's complicated". He waved it away with his hand, hoping he'd let it go. He didn't know why he hoped that, of course he wasn't going to let it go.

"*Everything* about you is *always* complicated. You manage pretty well, anyway. Why make a big deal out of this one?".

Nico clenched his eyes shut harder. No more waving, he straight up stabbed the air a few times. “I'm not making a big deal out of it! I'm just *hoping-!”*.

He stopped himself and opened his eyes. Another nymph hurried away, wreath under her arm.

“Alright, it's just… I've been a massive asshole to him, *just* a few times too many…” he explained quietly.

“Oh? Are you *meaner* to him than you are to me? Should I be worried?” Logan pried.

Nico bit his lower lip in annoyance. “Believe me, *no one* compares to you. You bring out the very *worst in me*…”.

Logan looked pleased with himself. “So, what's the big deal? He'd probably like to hear from you”.

Nico felt the annoyance build up further. “I'm not gonna *talk* to him…!”.

Logan side-eyed him. “Let me guess. You're too *emo* to deal with all your ‘*love him or hate him’* feelings, so you're just avoiding him?”.

Yeah… Pretty much… Nico shot him a defeated look. “Sue me”.

Logan returned a reassuring smile. “Look, I get that the context makes it one hell of a mindfuck, but… There's definitely worse ways to find out you're gay than Jackson, right? He's *objectively* cool” Logan weighed.

Nico thought about it. *True.* But, that was kinda the point, the ‘*context’* was hard to ignore. “Why? Is your *gay origin story* worse?” he asked.

Logan laughed quietly to himself. “*No way*. Can't top yours. Nobody died in mine…”. He seemed a little lost in thought. “Guess my *weird* feelings for the red Ninja Turtle back when I was six don't count, right?”.

Nico huffed. He hoped not… He wasn't exactly dying to share his childhood *fascination* with the Ares Mythomagic figurine. For *many* reasons. “No, not good enough” he declared.

Logan thought about it a bit longer. A smile crept over his face. “There was this handsome *asshole* in middle school. Typical bully. Always picking on me for the way I dressed. That sort of impressed me. Most people didn't dare. He started hitting me at some point, I started hitting *on* him... Once he caught on, he left me alone *right away*” he snickered.

Nico smiled. Whatever he'd been expecting, it should have been this. Anyway, nobody died, but still, complicated enough. He got him now. “And if you saw that guy now you'd be happy to *catch up* with him?” he asked accusatorily. As he said it he immediately realized that, yeah… He probably would.

Logan looked at him like he was stupid. “*Yeah!* Maybe he could punch me in the face, for old times sake” he said, only *barely* joking.

“You're proving my point here. You're definitely the *weird one* this time” Nico concluded.

Logan pursed his lips. “Fine. Maybe”. He nudged him, then made his way into the crowd.

Nico debated staying put. Maybe he could hide behind a tree until the reunion was over? He groaned, then followed after him.

Yan brightened up when she saw them. The young man in the smart looking polo shirt standing next to her looked horrified as she jumped into Logan's arms.

“Hey, guys!” she said excitedly, dropping back onto her feet. “This is my *boyfriend*” she said with exaggerated heaviness, carefully readjusting her wreath.

Her *boyfriend* looked as pissed off as he did terrified while he shook Logan's hand.

Logan gave him a bright smile, maybe as a small peace offering. “Hey, Logan” he stated.

“Yeah, *I was afraid so*. Hey, Richard” Richard offered in return. The joking tone he tried to put on did not mask the bitterness in it one bit.

Logan’s smile widened a little, a mischievous spark flickered through his eyes. “Funny! I actually already thought you looked like a Dick” he said casually.

Nico and Yan elbowed him from both sides.

“Ha, yeah… I prefer Richard…” he replied, not even trying to hide the bitterness this time.

Nico pulled Logan against him, ready for the Sisyphian task of keeping him out of trouble. Logan immediately put an arm around him, *way* lower than he was supposed to…

“Nico, Logan's *handler”* Nico offered. He swatted Logan's hand away before he could travel down even further and reached out to Richard.

“Oh…!” Richard let out. He lit up immediately, smiling brightly. He gave Nico's hand a transparently firm shake. “*Great* to meet you!” he said loudly.

Yeah, a great relief I bet… Nico smiled back, not fully able to suppress a mean little edge in the corner of his mouth.

Yan clung onto Richard’s arm, smiling nervously. “Hey, so… Want to hear something fun? Richard speaks Italian!”.

Nico perked up. *Interesting?*

Before he could say anything, Richard snorted. “Well I *am* Italian, baby” he reiterated, smugly amused.

Nico gave him an inquisitive look. “Ah sì? Da quale parte d'Italia vieni?”.

Richard's eyes went wide for a second. He immediately regained his composure, sticking his hands in his pockets. “Sì, sì… Nonna, uh, bene…”.

Nico nodded slowly. “*Molto* interessante…”. Another, much sharper edge curled at the corner of his mouth. He glanced over at Yan, looking up at Richard with clear adoration, and obviously clueless when it came to Italian… He looked back at Richard's forced polite smile. *Guess it's your lucky day, Casanova.* “Let's just stick to English. For the *others…”* he offered.

Richard nodded, pretending to have the option to even consider it. “Right, right…”.

Logan cocked his head. For a second Nico was afraid he’d caught on somehow. If he had, there was no way he’d keep quiet about it. Nico was sure about that… *If* he had, he proved Nico wrong.

“I heard you also study art history. I bet that comes in handy”.

Richard shrugged casually. “Yeah, well… Mostly for the *dusty* stuff. I’m more into contemporary, *underground* art”.

The rest of the conversation steered towards various artists with very complicated sounding names. Nico had never heard of any of them, and frankly didn’t manage to muster up much interest.

After what felt like a lecture, Richard excused himself. Nico took a last look at Richard’s relieved face as he disappeared into the crowd.

“Lo…?” Yan started carefully. “What do you think?”.

Oof.

Logan shot him a mildly nervous look. Nico returned one.

Logan took in a breath, ready to face her. “*Yeah*, cute name… Artsy, smart... And he seems a little… How should I say this… *Insecure?*”.

Yan managed to look angry and embarrassed at the same time. She pouted. “*He’s not usually like that!* And… I *really* like him” she said a little desperately, almost pleading.

Logan gave her a genuine smile, putting up his hands. “That’s *all* I care about”. He reached out his hands.

She smiled through her pout as she pressed herself against him.

“I’ll try harder…” Logan offered.

She squeezed him, then gave Nico a questioning look. The same one she’d given Logan just moments ago.

“I’m not getting mixed up in this” he warned, leaning away a bit.

Yan sighed. “Why can’t relationships be *easy?*” she complained, letting her head fall back dramatically. “I’m going to say hi to Kayla and Austin” she followed up, still a little grumbly.

“Have fun, buddy”. Logan tugged onto a strand of her hair.

With a hint of a smile, she returned Nico’s short wave goodbye.

Logan shifted uncomfortably next to him. “People can *learn* to love each other, right?” he asked.

Nico took a deep breath. When it came to Richard? There were many impossible things in this world that he doubted less… But, who was he to make this harder for everyone? Hell, he depended more than anyone on people not holding on to first impressions…

“Sure” he hoped out loud. “And even if they can’t, at least they can learn to speak Italian…” he muttered through the sharp edge in the corner of his mouth.

Logan shifted again, all in frustration this time. “*I fucking knew it…*”.

“I don’t think we should tell her. She’s clearly crazy about him” Nico urged.

Logan gave him an agonizing look. “I *have* to”.

“No you don't” Nico assured.

Logan scowled, opening his mouth to protest.

“No, no…” Nico interjected, waving his hands. “I mean, *I'll* do it”.

Logan smiled gratefully. “Thanks, Spooky” he muttered with an affectionate jab in the upper arm. “You’re the best”.

Nico smiled faintly, hoping Yan would agree enough not to downright *hate* him after spilling tea all over her boyfriend…

Loud laughter pulled his eyes onto a tall young man in the centre of a large group. Though not *quite* as young as he remembered, the messy jet-black hair and pretty sea green eyes left

no doubt just *exactly* who he was. He proudly held up a baby, short blonde curls with sea green eyes. The infant squeaked in glee as he blew a raspberry on its tummy.

“I’m going to find Yan” Nico threw over his shoulder, going the opposite direction. He didn’t hear a response, over the sound of his heartbeat in his ears.

It took him a while to find her. In fact, since he couldn’t really focus on looking, it was her who found him.

Yan grasped his wrist. “Hey!” she chimed, pulling him to a stop. She looked him over. “Are you okay?”.

“Yeah!” Nico assured, trying to forget the first predicament so he could brace for the next one. “But, uh. Yan, I need to tell you something…”.

Yan’s expression turned serious. “Well, first I need to tell *you* something”. She turned *deadly* serious. “If you hurt him again, *I'll kill you*…”. She put up three fingers. “Three arrows”. Her finger went down from her eye, to her heart, to her… *Oh.*

Nico put up his hands in surrender. “Yan, I promise. If I do, you won't even have to. I'll do it for you”.

She pursed her lips and put her hands on her hips in contemplation. “Okay. Good!”. She clapped her hands excitedly. “*Aaah!* I'm so excited for you guys! And now that that's out of the way…!”. She stopped herself, put up her hands and shook her head.

“What?” Nico asked.

Yan's lips curled into an evil little smirk. “Nooo… It's just, uh…”. She inspected her nails, pouting smugly. “Called it… You *liar”*.

Nico sighed a sigh fit for theatre. “Yeah, *yeah.* You're a *genius*. I didn't even mean to lie. You just knew before I did…”.

Yan cupped her ear. “Wait, I didn't catch that. What did you just call me?”.

Nico snorted, leaning in. “This is beneath you, *genius*” he scolded. “And just so you know, we call you that *all the time* behind your back” he added with feigned venom.

Yan cocked her head, clearly touched. “You do?”.

Nico half smiled. “Well, in our defense, It's true”. His half smile filled out. “So… Is that why you asked if I was coming? So you could threaten me and gloat?”.

“No!” Yan screeched in offense. “I missed you!”.

“Sorry, I know that” Nico chuckled. “I missed you too. Seriously, it’s your fault I showed up here…”.

Yan smirked proudly. “So, what did you need to tell me?”.

Shit. Time to ruin the moment. “Right” Nico started strongly. “About *Richard*…” he went on much much weaker. *Man,* he hated doing this to her…

Yan shifted a little nervously. “Hm?”.

Nico followed her example, twisting his ring a few times. “Here’s the thing. His Italian… It’s, uh”. He wagged his hand at her a few times, trying to come up with the right words. “Well, it’s *dogshit*…” he offered in the palm of his hand.

Yan popped her lips, nodding slowly. A bright pink blush seeped into her cheeks. She glanced up at him. “Does Lo know?”.

Nico sucked in his lips.

Yan deflated, almost letting her shoulders drop to the ground. “*Noooo~! He already doesn’t like him.*…” she groaned.

“Well… But, he didn’t use to like me either, right?” Nico countered.

Yan pursed her lips as high as she could, the corners of her mouth twitched into the smallest little smile. “Nico, I swear to the Gods, if Lo steals my boyfriend… I’ll rub those words in your face every single day *for the rest of your life*”.

Nico put a hand over his heart. “Ha! Sure! Yan, I *promise.* If Logan runs off with Richard I’ll marry you *right then and there*”.

Despite the scathing sarcasm, he truly meant it. One of the easiest promises he’d ever made. After all… He might as well promise to never become a pug breeder.

Yan cupped his cheeks, throwing her head back dramatically. “*Oh!* That’s the most *romantic* thing anyone’s ever said to me~!”.

She puckered her lips at him, pretending to go in for a kiss. Nico squeezed them between his fingers. She laughed through his grip.

Nico noticed a young woman walk up to Logan and greet him excitedly. He seemed happy to see her too. She hugged him. He hugged her back. They must know each other, Nico reckoned.

Nico smiled to himself. He was happy he wasn't a jealous person, because this young woman was particularly beautiful, her smile especially. She seemed to be doing that a lot, *smiling.* That made sense. Logan was kind of a sociable person in his own way, they probably had a lot of catching up to do.

With the alleged amount of Logan's previous escapades it wouldn't be healthy to worry about it anyway. And he *didn't,* he trusted Logan completely… She leaned in to Logan and

whispered something in his ear. He seemed happy to hear it.

Nico decided to go introduce himself. He turned to Yan, gesturing at them. “I'm just going to…”. Her knowing grin pulled him out of his facade. “Yeah, shut up…” he huffed as he walked off.

He moved to Logan's side casually, put his hand on his chin, turned him to him and gave him a quick kiss. Just slightly harder than he'd actually meant to.

Logan seemed a little surprised but almost instantly regained himself. “Speak of the devil!” he chuckled. He pulled Nico against his shoulder and gestured at him with his other hand. “So *this* is Nico” he said proudly.

Nico felt his face heat up.

The woman smiled her beautiful smile at him. “Hi! I'm Kim! An old friend of Logan” she said cheerfully.

Nico stuck up a hand. “Hi, nice to meet you!”. Now that he had Logan's arm around him, he meant it. He was so distracted by that arm, in fact, that the rest of the conversation was kind of a blur. Kim seemed nice though.

She leaned in a bit, looking at Logan intently. “There's some other people I have to tell” she said in a hush tone.

Logan smiled back at her. “Yeah! I bet! It was great to see you, Kim” he said warmly. “Tons of luck” he added.

She smiled, looked at Nico and seemed to mull something over. She quickly flashed a ring with a very *promising*, sparkly rock on her finger. She signaled to keep quiet, and winked. Nico smiled widely and stuck up a thumb. Kim sped off.

“She seems nice” Nico declared.

“Oh, she is. She's great” Logan replied “I'm happy for her!” he added with a smile.

Nico looked at him for a second. “Old friend?” he asked.

“Yep” Logan replied with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Lucky you” Nico said, trying to sound sly.

Logan narrowed his eyes a little. “... Are you… *Jealous?”* he asked apprehensively.

Nico kept a poker face, the heat in his cheeks started melting it. He looked away, making Logan laugh.

“Oh, Gods. You're giving me *so much* ammo here” he teased.

Nico turned around with a painful look before he could stop himself, visibly stunning Logan.

“Hey, I'm sorry” Logan started. Nico hated how serious he sounded. “I won't go there” he assured, throwing up his hands. His eyes quickly darted to a few women scattered among the crowd, his fingers rapping against his arm.

Nico sighed. That poor *sweet* moron. “No, *I'm* sorry. I wish I wasn’t this weak” he sighed. A genuine smile took some of the weight off of his words.

Logan smiled back. “Right, *weak* is probably the *last* word I'd use to describe you” he said, slapping Nico on the shoulder.

Nico inhaled deeply. “Just so you know, I'm fine with everything and *everyone* from your past. I'm also glad you all still get along. It's *even* fine if you talk about it, I'm happy you do actually… But please just don't use it to mess with me. That's all”.

Logan nodded. “Promise”. He grinned, staring at Nico for a bit.

“What?” Nico asked warily.

“Just proud of you” Logan shrugged. “*Confronting* people, s*haring* and *setting healthy boundaries*” he said with some exaggeration, nodding along. He held out a fist for a fistbump.

Nico closed his eyes in annoyance and took a deep breath. He quickly nudged his fist with his to get it over with. “Yan took it pretty well, by the way. We might be getting married next summer”.

“Good!” Logan said brightly. “Am I invited?”

“Only if you take Richard” Nico told him sternly.

“Pass” Logan scoffed, all brightness out of his smile.

Nico held up his hand and clenched his fist dramatically. He hissed in feigned disappointment. “Guess we’ll have to cancel the wedding…”

Yan wedged herself between their elbows. She glanced up at each of them, mild concern in her smile. “What’s this about cancelled weddings? Are you guys okay?”.

“Just scaring away some ex-girlfriends” Nico assured, gesturing at Kim jumping for joy alongside another young woman.

“Exes? Kim? No~! She was Logan's first kiss. They were like… Thirteen” Yan said reassuringly.

Nico grinned. “*She's* the one you cut up with your braces?” he asked, turning to Logan.

“Yep, and she didn’t even care! What a trooper…” Logan said fondly.

Yan giggled. “Yeah, just like every other girl that dared to kiss you!”.

“Ha!” Logan scoffed. “What about all the poor guys that you made sit through hours of improv theatre?”.

“You can't talk to me that way! I supported you even with your stupid tongue piercing!” Yan complained, *poking him.…*

Logan shot her a menacing grin. “That's *nothing!* I stuck with you through your whole ‘scene’ era. Even during the crimped, racoon tail sidebangs!”.

Panic shone through Yan's pokerface. “Those were iconic. You were *so* honored to witness that”.

Logan's grin turned straight evil. “Okay then! Let's honor everyone else too. I still have the pictures”. He took his phone out of his pocket and went to work.

Yan grimaced and clamped onto him, desperately clawing at his phone.

He held it up, slightly out of reach. “You really thought I'd let you destroy all evidence?! These are going to be passed on for centuries!”.

Nico took a step back just to be safe…

Yan jumped up as high as she could a few times, gave up and climbed onto Logan. She aggressively shoved her hand in his face and pushed herself upward, grabbing the phone. “*Ha*!” she wheezed out, dropping herself onto the ground. They watched her run off, laughing maniacally.

“Does she have your code?” Nico asked.

Logan shoved his hands into his pockets. “Yeah” he said, suspiciously unbothered. “But, she has no idea how many backups I have”. The evil grin returned to his face.

Nico looked at Yan squatting behind a couch in the distance, feverishly at work on the phone. *Poor thing.…*

They weren’t the only ones watching her. Nico looked away from her to glance aside the same time Will did, meeting his eyes.

Oh. “Hi…!” Nico greeted awkwardly. He gestured to Logan. “So, uh… You've met at camp before, right?” he asked nervously.

The air was tense. Will glared at Logan. Logan smirked demonically and walked closer. A little too close. *Way* too close. He stopped right in front of his face.

“Logan…” Will spat.

“Will… Long time no see” Logan mused. He grabbed Will's shirt right below his neck.

“Not long enough” Will responded, unsheathing a dagger.

“Woahah! *Hold on!*” Nico stammered, throwing up his hands.

Will and Logan broke eye contact and burst out laughing. Logan slapped Will on the shoulder amicabally, almost knocking him over. He grinned widely and turned to Nico. “You should have seen your face”.

Will smiled at Nico, rubbing his shoulder. “We talked earlier, we figured we'd play a little prank on you” he said apologetically.

Nico was at a loss for words, too relieved to think straight. Then he got his nerve back. “You guys are the worst. No wonder I dumped both of you” he quipped.

Will pursed his lips “That was a *mutual* decision!”. A tone of hurt rang through his voice.

Logan turned to Will. “He broke up with me through a piece of paper” he said with distaste.

“No way!” Will said in disbelief. He gave Nico an astonished look. “You didn't tell me that when you came *crying to me* that night!”.

Crap! His attempt at getting back at them was backfiring spectacularly.

Logan looked at Nico, then at Will. It seemed to hit him. “Right! You're the one that got him to come crawling back to me!” he said excitedly.

“Darn right!” Will responded with glee.

They gave each other a high five.

“Alright, alright!” Nico said, putting his hands up. “You two are getting *way* too chummy”.

Will put his hands in his sides, pleased with his results. “So” he started. “How’s Aphrodite’s mission going?”

Nico took a deep breath. He sighed out his entire answer.

A thick bunch of brown curls on a tall frame stuck out above the other heads. Nico’s suspicion was confirmed when two cold grey eyes found his. Amira marched right over. People instinctively made way.

“Hello” she greeted. “Good to see you” she added with a faint smile to both of them.

“You too” Nico replied with a smile. “How are you doing?”.

“Still alive” she reported. “How about you two?”.

“Same” Logan returned.

Nico shrugged in agreement. Amira nodded. They stared at each other in silence… They kept staring. In silence. Nico sucked in his lips, not nearly as comfortable as Logan or Amira seemed with the awkwardness.

Amira turned all her apathy to Logan. “Megan asked how you were doing. She seemed nervous”.

Logan cocked his head. “Megan? Nervous…? I mean, I'm not *great*, but that's got fuck all to do with *her*. I haven't seen her in ages. How is *she* doing?”.

Amira’s eyebrows lowered a notch. “I don't know. Busy, she told me”.

Aha... Even the awkwardness itself fell silent.

Yan stepped out of the crowd. They looked at her. Nico couldn’t tell if she was looking at them, her glasses were fully fogged up. Tears ran down her cheeks. She was obviously not alright.

“Are you alright, Yan?” Nico asked anyway.

“I broke up with Richard”. Her lip trembled.

“*Oh.*..” they all responded.

Nico sucked in his lips and bit down. *Shit!* Why did he have to tell her…?! He looked at Amira. She looked as stoic as always. *Yeah.*.. No help there. Logan just frowned. *Aha.* Not much help either, then… Nico looked back at Yan. What do you even say…?

Not much apparently. Logan got up and stretched out his arms. Yan waddled into his embrace, burying her face in his chest. Logan picked her up and pressed her against him, putting his chin on the top of her head. “Now why'd you do that if you like him so much?” he asked.

Yan started sobbing, her legs dangling listlessly. “He ~ Cheated ~ On ~ Me” she hicced.

Oh... That *fucking*-!

Logan's expression went dark, a low burning fire in his eyes. “*Did he now…?*” he growled.

Yan grasped at his back, holding him tightly.

“I'll rip his head off if you want” Logan grumbled, obviously not completely joking. “Or his nuts” he added, letting up a little, but still probably not joking as much as he should be.

Yan let out a wet sounding laugh.

Amira grabbed Nico's wrist and gestured to the other side of the tent. He nodded. They should probably give them some privacy, they weren't really helping. Amira stuck up a thumb to Logan. He gave them an apologetic wave.

Nico blew out all tension. Amira looked at him in stoic agreement. Nico didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t. Amira kept looking at him in even more stoic agreement.

“I’ll go and get Shane” Amira offered. She strutted off without even waiting for a reply.

Yeah. Alright. That would be a relief, actually. Amira and him didn’t really complement each other when it came to small talk he’d found out.

Nico waited. He waited faster. *What’s taking Amira so long? His workplace is right there…!* He stared at the dilapidated little hut off in the distance through a slit in the drapes.

The distance started shrinking.

Before he knew it, he’d knocked on the door. No response. Were they even there? He pushed on the doorhandle and let himself in.

He obviously wasn't supposed to.

Amira and Shane pulled their faces apart to look at him. She sat on top of him on his wonky deskchair, straddling him between her thighs. Shane's shirt was up to his chin. Amira's hair was a mess. She raised two thin eyebrows in just a hint of surprise and firmly grasped the top of her blouse, pulling it closed. Shane quickly moved his hands off her hips, hiding his nipples under them.

Nobody said anything. Nobody kept saying anything.

“I'll wait outside” Nico croaked out. He took a step back and shut the door so quickly he almost slammed it in his own face.

Amira came out, her blouse buttoned up like nothing happened. “I’m sorry. I got sidetracked” she offered flatly.

“Yeah…” *I noticed.* Nico almost couldn't keep a straight face. “Uh… Sorry for barging in on…” his hands tried to finish the sentence, then gave up.

Amira seemed unfazed. When Nico didn't continue, she did. “I like them happy and easygoing” she stated. “Much more obedient”.

Nico sucked in his lips. “You *really* don't have to explain…”.

Amira nodded. “We’ll be right over. We still have to sanitize the-”.

“*Yeah, cool!*” Nico quickly interrupted with a dismissive gesture. He closed his eyes trying to shield himself from the mental image of whatever *mess* they might have to clean. He walked off.

Yan’s still puffy face greeted him with moist, pink surprise, waiting where he’d stood only minutes ago. *Gods* was he jealous of Nico from minutes ago….

“You look like you've seen an eidolon!” Yan chirped hoarsely out from under Logan’s arm.

Nico snorted. “I fucking wish! I saw something *much* worse. I saw Shane and Amira… *Doing it*…”.

He got two puzzled looks back.

“*Them…?”* Logan asked.

Yan wasn’t as good at these types of puzzles. “Doing what?”.

They both looked at her, she looked at both of them.

“... *It”* Nico reiterated.

Logan's dirty grin seemed to help her find the final piece. “Oh! *Oh, ew! Are you serious?!”*. Another tear ran down her disgusted expression.

Logan pushed her back onto the couch behind her. She curled up on it, lifting her cheek on his lap when he sat down next to her. Nico carefully dropped down on the other side.

Shane’s awkward grin appeared in the slit in the drapes. It turned even more awkward when he took in Yan’s lack of composure. He stopped and quickly glanced at Nico for answers, raising his eyebrows. Nico slowly shook his head. *Don’t ask,* he projected into him with his eyes. Shane held up a hand in quiet understanding and pushed himself up on the back of the opposite couch. He lost a shoe halfway through his barrel roll over it. The couch wheezed loudly with his landing.

Amira marched in and set herself down next to him. She turned sideways and stretched out her legs, firmly placing her feet in Shane's lap.

Everyone stared at her.

She rested her cheek on her hand, gazing over them with an extra sharp eyebrow. “I know all of you know by now”.

Shane leaned back, resting the back of his head against his hands. He gave them a proud smile. “Go on, congratulate me” he said, beckoning them with a hand. He took a pair of sunglasses out of his back pocket and slowly put them on, letting out a low, smug laugh all the while. It would have looked more impressive if one of the lenses hadn't fallen out…

Amira put a foot under his chin, nudging him in a clear warning. Shane shut up immediately.

“So… You two?” Logan asked with a grin.

Shane grinned back at him. “She likes that I'm good at following instructions” he shrugged. “And I like being told how much she likes that” he added with a dirty grin. He sat up straight. Then moved his hand down in front of his face, revealing a stoic expression, one raised eyebrow and his lips in a straight line. “Very good” he stated without any emotion.

They all burst out laughing.

Even Amira’s usually cold grey eyes showed a glint of amusement. “The ‘very’ is an embellishment, and you’ll have to work extra hard next time” she stated, pulling her feet off of him and hugging her knees.

Yan crossed her arms and dropped down on the couch between them, pushing them further apart. “I can't believe you guys are making me a fifth wheel… I've been around the longest! I'm the *glue!”* she huffed.

Amira gave her a stern look over. “What are you talking about? Shane and I are not together, he is just my sexual partner” she stated.

Shane reiterated her words with a nod and a shrug.

“Yes, but still…” Yan said disapprovingly.

“You're free to join” Amira offered without any emotion.

Shane wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Yan's face turned to stone. “Actually, fifth wheeling is great… I'm really starting to like it” she replied breathlessly. She quickly got up from between them.

Logan pulled her into his lap. “You'll always be my favourite girl” he soothed.

She curled up against his shoulder and pouted.

Nico rubbed her knee apologetically. “Sorry, Yan…”.

She put her hand on his and smiled through her pout.

“So… since when?” Nico asked, turning back to Shane and Amira.

“The summer Shane left camp” Amira replied.

“No way! That’s more than two years ago!” Logan shouted.

“And-!” Yan started. “And…! You were still a huntress of Artemis back then…!?” she stammered.

Amira’s stoic expression turned a little cold. “Yes, they weren’t very happy about my reason to leave. But, in the end it was their choice. I would have stayed had they been more open minded”.

Yan looked at her in disbelief. “*Shane* is why you left the hunters?!”.

Amira shook her head. “No, them forcing me into arbitrary, lifelong vows as an uninformed child is why I left. I was eighteen when I joined, I barely knew anything about the world or even myself at that point. No, Shane was just a vehicle” she declared.

“Vroom! Vroom!” Shane interjected happily.

Amira continued, unbothered. “Besides, I still believe they stared themselves blind on a technicality. I swore off love. All of them interpret that as staying away from men altogether, and I respect that choice just fine, but I don’t agree with it. Ironically, they all just turned out to be a bunch of hopeless romantics who don’t see the difference between intimacy and physical needs. I saw no need to align myself with that anymore. Not that I was welcome to stay, after bringing up my concerns… Lady Artemis was very clear”.

Yan seemed lost. “You gave up your *immortality* for sex…? I can’t believe *that’s* why you left…”.

Logan shrugged. “I can”. Shane bent forward to give him a fist bump. “Wasn’t about you specifically, but sure bud..” Logan muttered. They couldn’t reach each other.

“Exactly. I’m a free woman. I can do with my body as I please” Amira reiterated. “I won’t give anyone that power over me. Not even lady Artemis”.

Logan gave her a reassuring smile. She responded with a nod.

“I can’t believe you guys kept this a secret for *two years.*..” Yan complained.

Shane side-eyed Amira. “Don’t look at me. I wanted to send out a mass e-mail”.

She seemed unimpressed. “It has nothing to do with any of you. It made no sense to make a scene” she said firmly. “Not that I mind that you know. If any of you would have asked, I

wouldn’t have lied” she added. “Well, It’s getting late. Good night everyone” she commanded. She lifted a foot and looked at Shane expectantly.

He held it and kissed the top of her ankle. She gave him a faint smile before straightening up and striding off.

“*I'm just using you for sex!*” Shane yelled after her.

The rest of them groaned.

“Shane! *Gross!*” Yan shouted at him, pressing her hands against her ears.

“I know… But, I can’t let her know how much power she has over me…” he muttered, still looking at the door. “Anyway, how lucky am I right?” he asked dreamily.

“You don’t mind that it’s casual?” Nico asked.

“Nuhuh. Totally cool with me. I ain’t stupid enough to try to *wife* that woman, but I sure ain’t stupid enough to turn her down either” Shane replied cheerfully, weighing two invisible options in his hands. “As Aristotle famously said, it’s all about finding the golden mean between the extremes”.

They all stared at him.

“I don’t know what’s more disturbing, you knowing literally *anything* about Aristotle, or you trying to use him to defend your weird situationship… Just… *stop it*…” Yan warned sternly.

Nico felt the corner of his mouth curl up a little, threatening to turn into a sharp little edge. “So… *Pick up artist,* what *move* did you use?” he asked threateningly casually.

As expected, Shane took the question completely seriously, visibly going over the events in his head. “Wouldn't know, actually. I’m not any good at these things… I've only *romanced* like, three people” he processed. “Glasses, Blondie, Mole butt…” he calculated on his fingers. “Yeah, three” he concluded.

Nico pursed his lips. “... And Amira, right?”.

Shane grinned. “Yeah, I counted her”.

Oh, Gods… Gross.

“Four. You forgot Lo” Yan corrected with a mean little smile.

Shane's grin died down. “No, I didn't forget him either…”.

Logan slowly turned to Yan, looking worried. “Please tell me you're not Glasses…?”.

“*No~!”* she screeched. “This fifth wheel is still rolling *strong!*” she added dramatically motioning her arms like train wheels.

Shane gave Nico a serious nod. “I get why you‘d think I would have more luck with the ladies. Me being in one of the hottest bands out there…”.

Nico didn’t even dare to ask.

Shane didn’t let that stop him. “You know? Skazon! The Hephaestus cabin Ska band! I play the trombone!” he explained proudly.

Yan looked at him in astonishment. “You know how to play the trombone?!”.

Shane looked at her like she was an idiot. “There's no such thing as *knowing* how to play the trombone, sweetie… You just blow it, *if you know what I mean*”. He wiggled his eyebrows, pursed his lips and jerked his hand towards his face a few times. Obviously miming… *Playing the trombone*.

Yan's face turned to stone.

“Besides, when it comes to good Ska, the only thing you really play is the fedora anyways. The rest is just filler” Shane explained further, his tone disturbingly serious all of a sudden. He got distracted by a satyr with a platter of mini hamburgers. “*Murica!”* he chanted loudly, punching the air. He swiped several before the satyr could escape.

“Shane, aren't you technically Polish?” Yan asked reluctantly. “As Polish as apple pie” Shane replied proudly, mouth full of hamburgers.

Nico saw a nervous young man walk up to them, eyes fixed on Yan. He knew that guy… He knew that polo shirt… Logan must have noticed too, because he got up to face him. The young man's eyes widened right before he made a sudden beeline for the bathroom.

“*You owe her a pair of nuts, Dick!*” Logan yelled after him.

Richard sped up his pace. Yan grabbed onto Logan's arm and pulled him back down.

“I wasn't going to do anything!” he hissed defensively.

Yan sighed, and shook her head. When she turned back to the conversation Nico could see a faint smile on her lips. It stayed there entire rest of the night.

Chapter 18: XVIII. The ‘we’ in wedding

Chapter Notes

> All warnings are spoilers:
> Discussion of incest, Bi-phobia, unwanted labeling, death of chair in the line of duty, more dog discrimination.

His big day finally came. Nico bravely withstood all the nervous sweat, clattering teeth and anxious sighs. All happening right next to him at the breakfast table.

“How are you holding up, Mark?” Nico asked carefully.

Mark pursed his lips and nodded casually, two shades paler than usual.

Sherman reached over the table and punched him in the shoulder with a loud, reassuring thud. “Just think of Cindy, bro. She’s waiting for you!”.

Two mahogany brown flashes lit up at the mention of her name. Mark grinned through the nerves, a faint red broke through on his cheeks.

Nico looked on carefully as the pale stranger in the mirror adjusted his collar. The tense young man went on to fix his messy black hair for him, slowly taming it. All the while, Nico silently blessed Aphrodite for thinking ahead and sponsoring his wedding attire a few months back. He’d offer her some champagne with a libation later. Not just for the suit, also for Mark and Cindy’s future.

Satisfied with his work, he turned around and leaned back on the dresser, watching Logan button up his dress shirt. The same one he remembered. It was still true, Nico realized as he watched Logan’s suit jacket slip around his waist perfectly, Logan cleaned up nice.

‘What are you looking at me like that for? You've already seen all of this” Logan pretended to complain. Well, not all of it was pretend, he reminded himself when Logan pulled his top button loose again with a single jerk.

“Yeah, but… Last time I had to pretend I *didn't* ” Nico explained, moving closer to button him back up.

“You didn't *have* to, you wimp. I told *you* that you looked hot” Logan chuckled, narrowing his eyes at the tie in his hand. He smirked and tied it into a noose.

Nico huffed, pulling the tie from his hands and loosening it back up. “ *No way!* You said I looked *evil* ” he countered, quickly tying an *appropriate* knot and hanging it around Logan’s neck.

“I *love* evil” Logan reminded him, voice low. His eyes glowed mischievously.

Logan’s smirk turned into a scowl when Nico pulled the tie tight. Nico stifled a laugh and held onto it, quickly pulling their lips together. He felt the scowl give up instantly.

“For the record, it looks even better with the earrings” Nico muttered, running the back of his fingers over the studs.

Logan smiled, then smirked as he hooked a finger behind Nico’s turtleneck collar and tugged. “Just so you know, hiding it only makes it *more* interesting for me… I like a *challenge* ”.

Nico glared at him. “If you try to undress me at the wedding, I swear I’ll make you regret it… ”

Logan’s eyes flashed in excitement. “Ooh~! Do I hear an even *bigger* challenge?”

Nico’s eyes narrowed in the opposite. “I could kill you in *so* many ways!” he reminded him in a thinly veiled threat.

Logan moved in closer. “I know! It’s so *hot!* ” he mused.

Nico moved out of reach. “Stop being trash! Just for today, alright?”.

Logan groaned in disapproval. Nico braced himself for the rest of what was promising to be a very *long* day. He shook his head and moved for the door, ready to go face the rest of Mark’s life, pulling Logan along by his tie.

An Amazonian queen turned to them when they made their appearance on the porch, making her long plum dress twirl around her. Gwen’s wavy hair had been caught in an elegant bun. Together with the dark lipstick, it drew even more attention to her pretty face.

“Wow! You look great!” Nico blurted out. He smiled awkwardly at his own brashness.

Gwen blew him a kiss. “So do you two!” she cooed, squishing their cheeks.

“Look at those morons” Logan said, gesturing at Mark and Sherman over in the grass further ahead.

Nico looked on while they threw rocks at each other in their fancy suits, giggling like toddlers as they did. “Well, at least they're happy” he replied.

They grinned widely as they stood there watching them.

Gwen huffed “Just because you two use words instead of rocks, doesn’t mean this isn’t *exactly* the same”.

The smug joy in their grins dissipated instantly. Not even Mark getting hit in the crotch with a particularly good throw seemed all that funny anymore.

The venue was perfect for the time of year. Well, it would be perfect most times of the year. The seemingly endless, large windows on all sides had a great view of the snowy orchard surrounding them. Hundreds of cherry trees stuck out their thousands of arms to catch the snowflakes as they fell. Large fireplaces kept all the cold outside.

Yan would have loved this, he realized with some guilt. She’d insisted he went, of course, but Nico didn’t even like parties. Well, that wasn’t what he was here for anyway, he reminded himself. Logan didn’t seem all that into parties either. So at least they could be mildly uncomfortable together.

Nico glanced away from the familiar faces in their row of chairs, to gaze over the crowd of unfamiliar faces in all the others. Mark and Cindy were popular, he had to conclude.

His eyes went over the bridal party. Four equally stunning women in four stunning, identical dresses guarded Cindy’s spot at the altar like lionesses. Next to Sherman stood three handsome, muscular men wearing the same monkey suits. All pulling faces behind Mark’s nervous smile as the photographer tried desperately to get a single decent picture. Sherman swiftly punched them all back in line one by one.

On her cue, the elderly angel in the corner tickled her fingers over her gigantic golden harp. It started giggling a warm, romantic melody.

With a determined stride, a little girl in a white tutu took position at the entrance and raised her basket of flower petals. She took a calculating look at the aisle, then turned her basket over and dumped the petals in a frilly heap at her feet. She smiled proudly before being whisked away by a hasty, chiding hand.

A beautiful bride made her dramatic appearance from behind the large velvet curtains in the back. The countless small, shiny gemstones in the abundance of shapely white lace shimmered like ice crystals in the low light. Her long red hair draped over her shoulders and back, down to her waist, gleaming like it had been spun from the finest silk. A light veil obscured her face. Cindy was lucky Aphrodite wasn’t there. There was no doubt in Nico’s mind she would have struck her down in a fit of jealous rage before she could have taken her first step down the aisle.

The proud older man on Cindy's arm silently wept as he started to lead her down to the future waiting for her at the end of the path ahead. Nico glanced back to the altar at the sound of a dull thump. And another. He caught the last two of the groomsmen reaching over at their turn to beat the shit out of Mark's shoulder in awe of his luck.

Mark bit his lip, clearly trying not to cry. Not because of the pain, Nico reckoned, seeing as Mark hadn't even taken his eyes off of her for a second. He quickly gave himself a slap in the face to get it back together. A very hard one. The sound of the smack got a shocked '*Ooh*' from one half of the room, and a quiet snicker from the other. With all the pummeling, Nico wondered if Mark would still be standing for the next round of this ceremony…

Cindy dealt him the final blow when her veil got lifted, revealing her beaming smile. Knocked out cold, Mark needed another encouraging punch from Sherman to start straining through his vows. His sweet, but honestly terribly *corny* vows, Nico found out.

Logan's hand brushed against Nico's, he slowly locked their pinkies together. *Ha.* Funny, after that the words suddenly all sounded a lot less corny…

"*Cinnabun… You're such a total babe, inside and out-!*" Mark croaked tearfully.

Cindy put both hands over her mouth in a silent gasp, even more tearful.

Nico only caught his laugh at the very last second, having to smack his own hand over his mouth to do so. Other than a half amused, half warning grin right next to him, luckily nobody seemed to have noticed.

Two rings announced the final round. One kiss sealed both their victories.

Cindy's father was the first to reach the couple, almost doing so in a single leap. After embracing his daughter, he moved onto Mark. He wouldn't let go. Cindy's mother politely, but firmly pried him off under the guise of it being her turn now.

Waiters rushed around chairs and glasses of champagne, preparing for the part of the day Nico had been quietly dreading a little. He stuck close to Logan as everyone started to mingle, waves of cheerful chatter flowing through the room. Logan put a hand on the small of his back, leading him over to Mark and Cindy.

As they waited their turn, Nico stopped him from downing his champagne in one go by placing a stern finger on the stem of his glass, keeping it down at socially acceptable level. Logan tried not to choke and gave him an annoyed pout. Nico pretended not to notice.

Mark beamed at them with pride as he crushed their hands. "So? What did you think? Pretty impressive, huh?" he asked excitedly.

"Definitely!" Nico assured. "I think it's really sweet you wrote your own vows. They were very *you*" he offered with full honesty, under another warning grin at his side.

Two cackling toddlers in ill fitting suits ran up to Cindy and started pulling on her dress with their adorable, grubby little fingers. She turned around and bent over to greet the rowdy little gentlemen. *Don't,* Nico willed himself. He couldn't help it. He glanced down. *Yep.* Their landlord was a disgusting creep, but he definitely wasn't blind.

Logan gave him an unimpressed look. “Really? You of all people?” he asked. “I expected better from you…” he added with a hiss. His faint smile gave him away.

“People need to stop doing that” Nico retorted. He took a smug sip of champagne.

Mark gave him a proud, very self satisfied smile. Nico half smiled and raised his glass a little.

They watched Mark and his fellow himbos flex for the camera. The photographer quickly sped around them in various equally impressive moves to capture their true essence.

“Damn, am I glad I turned *that* down…” Logan huffed as he watched them.

Nico snorted. Those pictures would have been priceless. He almost dropped his champagne when someone put their arms around his neck.

“Sorry, Nicky!” Gwen cooed, quickly letting go. “I got a little excited!”. She pulled a *stupidly* handsome man against her. “This is Taylor! My date~!”.

Taylor gave him a beautiful smile. “Enchanté” he greeted with a deep voice, offering a hand.

Nico shook it.

“Nico” Logan offered for him with a quiet chuckle.

Right. Nico smiled through the embarrassment. The mild burn on his cheeks slowly simmered down through the rest of the conversation.

Gwen pulled Taylor along to the dancefloor. Nico watched her giggle as she got twirled. Her eyes burned the brightest blue he’d ever seen them.

Nico turned to Logan. “Wow, I'm *actually* a little impressed that you managed to woo Mr. ‘*Tall dark and handsome*’ over there. No wonder Gwen was so angry”.

Logan grinned proudly. “What can I say. *I have a type.* He's got nothing on you though, in any way. She can keep him” he mused, jabbing Nico in the chest. He hadn't even needed to, his words beat him to it.

Nico just gaped at him, stunned, unable to get himself to stop grinning.

Logan chuckled and leaned in. “Gods, I love it when I get you to shut up” he teased.

Nico recovered a little at that. “Don't get used to it” he warned.

A tall, slightly broad young woman in a beautiful green sun dress kept glancing over. As she noticed Nico notice, she quickly stepped forward. Her friendly looking, large blue eyes snapped to look at Nico, then Logan, then back at Nico again. Her tight blonde pony tail swung a little as she did. She stuck out her hand to Nico excitedly.

“This little demon is my younger sister…” Logan explained, eyes fixed on her. “Amy, this is Nico” he added with a gesture.

Nico smiled at her and reached out. As he grabbed her hand all friendliness in her eyes turned devious instantly.

She held on tightly, turning to look at Logan. “He's cute” she declared to him.

Nico felt his face start to burn, her grip didn't budge. Logan’s smile widened in clear annoyance.

“Is this your boyfriend?” she asked, her mouth slightly agape and her eyes even more devious. She gripped Nico's hand tighter.

“Yes, now give him back” Logan snapped, grabbing her wrist.

Her eyes gleamed, her mouth twisted open further in a large, gaping grin. “I still can't believe you got an actual *boyfriend!”* she exclaimed.

Logan's knuckles turned white as he squeezed her wrist tighter, scowling at her.

She finally let go, giggling. Then she glanced at Nico with a smile. “Nice to meet you~!” she almost sang to him.

“Yeah… You too” Nico muttered, still a little flustered.

She'd already ripped her hand free from Logan's grasp and bounced off.

“*Little brat!”* Logan grumbled.

They found Clarisse standing a little off to the side in an uncharacteristically dainty floor length gown. She had an attractive hispanic man on her arm. The atmosphere got a little uncomfortable as she noticed them.

“Hey, sis” Logan greeted. “Chris, this is Nico” he added with a nod to both of them.

Chris smiled and reached out. They quickly shook hands.

Clarisse took a sip of her champagne. “How are you?” she asked Logan firmly.

“Ups and downs” Logan replied with a shrug.

She hummed, neither in approval nor disapproval. “Good to see you” she said with stern look to both of them, leading Chris away.

“That's the deepest talk we've ever had” Logan chuckled as soon as they disappeared into the crowd.

They watched a young man scare his date with what Nico had to assume was an attempt at breakdancing. His date hid behind her clutch purse at the unmistakable sound of pants ripping. The young man pulled himself off the ground with a proud smirk, completely unaware of the large streak of white underwear tearing down his backside.

Logan downed a glass of wine, right through his evil grin.

“She’s got it bad enough. Don’t say a word” Nico warned.

“Why would I?” Logan asked coyly, a mild twinge of disappointment in the corner of his grin.

“Because you've got no filter” Nico replied accusatorily.

“Pff! There's plenty I don't talk about! Like, *on purpose!*” Logan almost shouted.

“Yeah, right!” Nico almost shouted back. “Bullshit. You've never even once kept a single thought inside that thick skull of yours”. He pointed at him for emphasis.

Logan turned dramatically. “Ha! How about the fact that we're related?! You're my dad's cousin. I think about that at least once a day! Never mentioned it before!”.

Nico shuddered. “Gross! That's… *Gross!*” he replied, waving his hands in defense.

“I don't know what that makes us, but it's something too close to be doing what we're doing” Logan added.

“Stop! Just stop. You've made your point!” Nico demanded, waving his hands in exasperation. “I'm just saying, there's a lot more stuff you could *not* say to people”.

Gwen walked over, hands in her sides. “Okay, lovebirds. What are you fighting about *this* time? And it better be good, if you're going to do this on Mark’s wedding day” she warned.

“Incest” Logan replied.

Gwen dropped her hands and spun around, strutting away at an impressive pace.

Nico shoved his face in his hands. “That was on purpose…”. He sighed out as much frustration as he could. Not *nearly* all of it.

Logan winked. “Most things I do are” he teased. His grin turned a little apologetic.

Nico sucked in his lips. “Tell me about it…” he complained. “You're *always* yourself. Around *everyone*” he added. A backhanded compliment, but somehow no less sincere.

Logan’s grin turned downright puzzled. “Who the fuck else would I be?” he chuckled, shaking his head.

Ha…

As soon as he caught on, Nico had stopped resisting and let himself get pulled away to the hallway. No crowds. No loud music. No need to force a smile. He relished in that fact, frowning gratefully.

Logan watched him intently. “This really doesn’t do anything for you?” he asked, gesturing at the wall hiding all the festivity. “It's pretty cute right?” he nudged.

“*You* want to get married?” Nico asked in disbelief.

“And acknowledge the power of the *state*? Or even worse… *The church? Nope.* No way” Logan scoffed, then his expression softened. “But, for you? Sure… Of course I would”.

Nico felt his cheeks start to ignite. He hid his grin under a much deeper frown. “Hm. I told you, I'm not into parties. Especially not big ones… I'm way more of a funeral guy. Much more *fun*”.

Logan chuckled and put his arms around him, hands on his lower back. “C'mon don't you think that's at least a *little* romantic? I'm really trying here…” he asked sincerely. He pulled Nico closer and kissed him behind his ear.

Nico could feel his hips against his, swaying to the music the *tiniest* bit. Subconsciously he followed. He smiled to himself. He’d gotten a little lost in Logan’s genuine excitement. Logan kinda had ‘dog energy’ sometimes.

Logan slowly slipped his hands lower.

Ha… ‘Bad dog’ energy… “No. *Bad*” Nico said firmly. “Down!” he demanded.

Logan moved his hands away and faced him. His eyes flickered dangerously. *Crap.* He should have figured he'd be into that… Nico didn't have time to protest. Logan moved Nico's chin to the side with his thumb, then leaned back in and licked him from his neck up to the back of his ear. Nico felt his breath get stuck in his throat.

"I'll be your dog if you want me to" Logan whispered in his ear.

"Wh-! *Gross!*" Nico shouted, wiping at his neck.

Logan pulled away. He tapped the tiny skull dangling from Nico's earring, making it jingle under his ear.

"You already are a *dog*" Nico said accusatorily. He was still annoyed, but couldn't help smirking anyway.

"Woof" Logan said flatly.

Nico snapped to look to the side when he heard loud giggling.

Luckily, they hadn't gotten caught. Unluckily, he'd now caught someone else. A very tipsy elderly man and an equally tipsy elderly woman awkwardly made their way over to the door of the coat room in a mess of limbs, loudly shushing each other every time they bumped into something. Nico bit his fist when they managed to paw the door open and fell in on top of one another, quickly kicking their way behind the door.

"*Grandma! Grandpa!*" Cindy scolded loudly from a distance.

The doorknob quickly rattled, then locked with more muffled giggles before Cindy's sister managed to reach it. Nico bit down harder, probably actually leaving a mark on his finger by now.

Logan laughed with a poor attempt at quietly next to his ear. "Okay… That's a little too romantic. Even for me. I'm going to get some air"

When Logan left, Steph peered around the corner. Nico looked at her. She quickly hid behind the doorway. He suppressed a laugh.

"Your hair is sticking out" he pointed out.

She reluctantly stepped into view, obviously upset. He looked at her expectantly. She looked right past him before she spoke.

"You're gay right…?" she asked with a small voice. It didn't suit her at all.

"Yeah" he replied.

She looked up, visibly nervous. "How did you know?".

Oh. Part of him expected this. Part of him thought she was going to bully him. He didn't know which he hoped for... *Stop being a pussy.* He could actually help someone. In a way he'd missed out on himself. It's the least he could do.

“Uh…” he let out. “You know what it feels like to like someone? As more than a friend?” he asked in return.

Steph looked unsure. “I dunno” she finally replied.

“When you think about them all the time, you always wanna be around them, you wanna *kiss* them…” he explained. *Fuck.* He better not have to give her *the talk*... That's where he drew the line.

She looked miserable. “Yeah, I think so…”.

He gave her a half smile. “Then I think you know if you're gay… Not what you were hoping for?”.

She sighed and shook her head. He could see her eyes well up.

“It wasn't what I wanted either…” he started. “You can take as long as you need with this, you know? You don't owe anybody anything. You don't have to share with anyone you don't want to. But… Once you stop being ashamed of it, it *does* get a lot better. Turned out pretty good for me, actually. I mean, some people suck… And it's not going to be easy all the time, but you seem pretty strong”.

She smiled through the tears. “Hm” she let out. She sounded hopeful.

“Wouldn't you… Rather talk about this with your brother?” he asked carefully.

Steph shook her head, all hints of tears gone. “He's too different” she said resolutely. “He thinks everyone just does whatever they want…”.

Nico hummed in agreement. Yeah. He sure does…

“Thanks” Steph said softly, moving to leave.

“Good luck, Steph” Nico sent along with her, making her pause for a second.

She smiled at him, sincerely. “Thanks!” she repeated. She almost left, then didn’t. “Oh, it's Steph, by the way. Not Steph” she corrected.

Nico blinked at her… *Was… there a difference…?!* He just smiled and nodded, vowing to never say her name again.

Alright. No more hiding. He rolled his shoulders, bracing himself for the rest of the evening.

Greg was drunk. An annoying drunk. “So, you're Logan's latest victim right? Mark told me” he elbowed Mark in the side.

Mark didn't look very enthusiastic about it, a little wary even.

Greg didn't seem to mind, or notice... “You better watch out” he continued. “That boy's been places. Lots of them. Not really one to break the whole *bisexual* stereotype” he laughed as he said it, seemingly not noticing he was the only one. “Is he really going to swear off women for you? If he is, you must be a pretty interesting guy!”.

This was the first time Nico had ever *actually* seen Mark's eyes catch fire. The mahogany brown burned a lot darker than Logan's or Gwen's eyes. That only made them *more* intimidating.

He swatted Greg against the back of his head, making him wince. “*Shut your stupid fucking mouth, Greg”* he commanded in a low growl.

Greg did just that.

Nico faked a smile. He tried to think of an excuse to get out of there. “You know, I don't actually know if he’s done with women. I'll go ask him right now” he put up his hand and walked off.

“Uhm, you really don't have to do that!” Greg shouted after him.

Nico didn’t look back, eyes locked on the door. After the door, there were many more. A young couple pulled their faces apart to look at him, faces flushed, hair messy.

“Have you seen a guy about my height, dark blonde…? Probably some random blood stains on him for some reason?” Nico asked.

The couple smiled. “Logan? He's outside”. They pointed at the door right across the hallway.

The long spiny fingers of the cherry trees almost looked monstrous in the darkness, creeping out of the thick piles of snow. The moon cast cold, white light over the even colder, whiter field. Logan was too busy admiring it to even notice Nico’s intrusion.

A tie hung helplessly over the back of a lawn chair. Logan was definitely going to forget that. He probably already had. He managed to lose everything somehow. It was almost impressive… *Almost.* Nico made a mental note to grab it on the way back. Seriously, what would he do without him?

Nico walked up next to him. He glanced from the moon to Logan, working up the nerve to speak. He took a sharp breath, catching Logan’s attention. “So, you like both men and

women right?" he asked.

"Some of them" Logan clarified. His tone was flat. No… Careful.

"Right… So, you're bisexual…?" Nico asked further.

Logan shifted. Careful turned into mildly disapproving. "I don't know. I never think about that type of stuff. I don't want to put a label on it. Labels mean *rules*. I know what I like, when I like it".

Nico smiled as he thought about it. That seemed fair. Fitting at least. Still, it wasn't very satisfying. Probably because he hadn't asked what he really meant to ask… *Probably because it was kinda wrong to ask anyway…*

"Aren't you going to miss women?" Nico asked as carefully as he could.

Logan's face turned cold for a second. Then a little bit of amusement shone through the cracks. "Was I supposed to lose all women? I better text Yan. She'll probably understand". He pulled out his phone.

"I swear if you text her that-!". Nico regained his composure, holding up his hands. He was the one overstepping anyway. "Look, you know what I mean. And it's driving me crazy. I'm sorry, I have to know. I don't want to keep you from anything you wanna do. You know? Make *rules* for you and all that…".

Logan turned colder again, an air of sadness hung over him. "I just don't get where this is coming from all of a sudden. Wasn't Will into women too?".

Nico squirmed a little, really regretting this whole conversation. "Well, yeah… But, Will was a lot less…" he stopped himself and squirmed harder.

"Slutty?" Logan asked, grinning slightly.

"*Active"* Nico corrected hastily. "It's just… Being here, I met some people and someone asked me if you were really going to swear off women, seeing as-".

Logan got up and cut him off. "*Please* stop worrying about other people so much… For someone so cynical you sure are naive sometimes…".

Nico swallowed and looked away. This was too embarrassing. "Alright, but still… Are you sure? You've been with *a lot* more women than men, right?" he asked carefully.

Logan's hurt turned into mischief. "Yeah, but that's just because most men can't handle me. They're probably intimidated by my *strong, independent* personality". He shook his head in exaggerated disappointment.

Nico huffed. It was either annoyance or amusement. Probably both. He wasn't sure. He wasn't really sure about anything right about now. Still, Logan *was* actually making sense somehow…

“Look, Spooky, I promise you are more than *stimulating* enough for me. Seriously, who else would be stupid enough to ask me all these *super* offensive questions? Exciting as hell right…? And… I haven't been with anyone else in almost a year. Not even when you dumped me! Truth is, I've got my hands full with just you”.

Nico looked down. *Yeah.* He definitely believed that. “I'm really sorry-” he started, forcing his eyes back up.

“Don't be” Logan interrupted.

“No, seriously. I'm sorry I keep doing this to you” Nico continued. “You could have had a normal relationship…” he sighed.

Logan gave him a deeply offended look. “First off, how dare you imply I'd be into that. That's the meanest thing you've *ever* said to me. Second, that's probably also the biggest fucking lie you've ever told me”.

Yeah. Fair.

They smiled awkwardly at each other.

“Next time just tell people to ask me that stuff directly. Part of me hopes they actually will”. Logan grinned deviously.

Nico looked away again. “Yeah…”.

Logan pulled him in. “Thanks for being upfront with me. I'm glad you dared to ask. I shouldn't have made it so hard on you”.

Nico rested the side of his head against Logan's. *Fuck nosy people, they can all eat shit.*

“You gotta trust me… and be a little more confident, you *hot* weirdo”.

Nico laughed. “Yeah, I'll work on it”.

Logan drummed his fingers on Nico's back. “Who was it?” he asked with a good attempt at a reassuring smile.

Logan truly was like the sun, Nico realized as he watched the bright orange flicker. Eyes that could sustain all life on earth with their warmth when he smiled, hiding a very real threatening explosion so enormous it could just as easily wipe out the entire planet, and the seven around it…

“I'm not telling you, this was bad enough. Mark hit him in the head already anyway” Nico tried in a mildly desperate attempt to appease him.

Logan hummed. “Greg. That tracks”.

Nico pursed his lips. “Please don't make this worse” he tried, a lot more desperately.

Logan cocked his head a little. “Oh, don't worry. I'm just going to say hello. Catch up. Ask *him* some questions. You know? Just to clear some things up”.

Nico didn't respond right away.

“Please don't…” he repeated, down to begging now.

Logan kissed him on the cheek. “I would never start a fight at a wedding, let alone my brother's. I'm not *that* trashy”. He patted Nico on the shoulder as he walked past him. “Not a *physical* fight anyway…” he added quietly.

Nico debated staying here for a bit.

He heard Logan shout cheerfully behind him. “*Hey Greg, I wanna clear some things up with you real quick!”*.

Yeah, he was definitely staying here for a bit.

“*Are you seriously trying to run away, you fucking coward?!”*.

The moon looked beautiful from where he was standing. He smiled to himself. The moment didn't last.

He heard a crash in the background. A woman screamed. Logan cackled.

Alright... Guess that was the end of his little escape. He turned around and walked over, a little slower than his usual pace.

He saw Greg sitting on the ground a little further away, a woman was fussing over him. She handed him a beer bottle. Greg pressed it to one side of his face.

Nico walked up to Logan's side and scowled at him.

Logan put up his hands defensively. “I didn't even touch him. He tripped over a chair”.

Nico looked over again. There was a broken chair laying in front of Greg. Guess that checked out. “Still…” Nico started, disapproval clearly audible.

“Yeah… Terrible shame” Logan said in agreement. “Watching that chair take him out like a pro… It made me realize that was probably my *favourite* chair…”. He pulled out his phone and took a picture of the scene. “I'll always remember its sacrifice” he said solemnly, looking at the picture.

Nico shoved him. Logan seemed unfazed.

Nico glanced at Logan's phone. He did a double take. “Is your background picture a *pug on a skateboard.*..?” he asked.

Logan grinned. “Yeah it’s a reminder to be more hateful” he replied casually. “I figured you wouldn't want me to use a picture of you” he added more seriously.

Nico got caught off guard a little. “At this point I'd rather you use *anything* other than that Goddamn dog” he said with a cool tone.

Logan smiled. He messed around a bit with his phone and quickly put it away. Nico could only catch a glimpse. He recognized the picture Logan had sent to him once. A warm feeling came over him. He grabbed Logan's hand.

Mark seemed to have appeared out of thin air at their side. Nico only noticed him when he heard him sigh deeply. Mark looked at Greg, then at Logan.

Logan gestured at the chair. “I'll pay for that”.

Mark smiled and nudged Logan's chin with his fist. “No, don't want you to. Not your fault... I'll just see it as a tax for having *Greg* at my wedding… Drunk asshat…”.

Logan gave him an appreciative look. “Thanks for hitting him”.

Mark glanced at Nico. “You snitched on me on my big day? *Snake…*” he huffed.

Nico shrugged. “It was a cute story” he said “Thought it might help Logan calm down”.

Mark and Logan snorted in unison.

Mark slapped his upper legs. “I'll go send Greg home. Time to wrap up anyway…”.

They got the hint.

“Alright, we've caused enough damage here. We'll get out of your hair. Unless you need help of course” Nico said.

“Don't worry about the clean up, we've got people for that”. Mark smiled fondly. “Thanks for coming, both of you. I'll treasure the memories…” He jabbed Logan in the arm. “Send me that picture”.

They grinned at each other. Nico lifted his hand. The shadows dripped down the walls, all over them.

They stepped out of the shadow of Gwen’s fridge, the darkest corner of her kitchen. Logan undid another button. Nico glanced down and smiled appreciatively at his chest, and lack of *Goddamn* tie…

Chapter 19: XIX. Grandma’s cake

Chapter Notes

> All warnings are spoilers:
> Daddy issues, hint at homophobia, Very likely mischaracterization of Mormon/LDS life, yelling at old people, implied grandma ass.

Eris’ promise hung over them like the sword of Damocles. Ready to fall *precisely* three weeks from now. The worries in the back of Nico’s mind grew bigger and stronger every passing day. Looking over the table, into the growing pensive fires in Logan’s eyes, he could see the exact same happening to him.

Logan leaned over the table.

Nico joined in.

“I need to pick something up at my grandparents’ house” Logan said gravely.

“What?! *Right now?!*” Nico shouted. “We can’t *keep* ignoring Eris for all these random *sidequests!* Time’s flying by… We haven’t even come up with a plan yet!”. He waved an angry hand in Logan’s face, accidentally wiping the grave look right off.

“What do you mean plan?” Logan laughed. “We know where she’s at right? That’s where we’ll go. That’s not going to take *three* weeks”.

Nico glared at his shoulders, stopping them mid shrug.

“Okay, okay. *I get it*, promise” Logan assured. “But, it’s important. It can’t wait till after… There might not even *be* an after. And if we die I at least want my grandparents to know who you are”.

Nico sighed deeply. “Alright… You followed me through Hades. Meeting your grandparents seems like a pretty fair trade…” he weighed, making Logan smile “But, what is this mysterious McGuffin we’re picking up?”.

Logan smiled wider. “I'll tell you later”.

Nico gave him a suspicious look, narrowing his eyes a bit.

“Don't you trust me?” Logan pleaded. He nudged Nico in the stomach with his fist.

Nico narrowed his eyes further. “Depends… With my life? Then yeah, sure… With literally anything else? Fuck no”.

Logan cocked his head. “Smart man”. He gave him a pleading look. “Still, just go along with it for now, okay?”.

Nico pursed his lips. “Ugh! *Fine*”.

The next conflict waited for them outside, in the form of a beat up, red pick up truck. Logan stuck his key in the lock.

Nico blinked at him. “What are you doing?”.

Logan stared at him, slowly turning the key. “Unlocking… The door…?” he explained with a click.

Nico’s eyelids dropped. “Why” he clarified more than asked.

Logan smiled warmly. “I figured we could drive” he shrugged.

Nico’s eyelids dropped all the way down. Drive. To Salt Lake City. *No. No way.* One day would have been bad enough. This would take days. Days they couldn’t afford. None of this was necessary in the first place. And in this *dumptruck* no less? There was *no* fucking way he was going to let him-!

“You’re *always* the one getting us places. Let me do it this time. Just once” Logan pleaded. “I promise we’ll have enough time left to catastrophize and think of something stupid, okay?” he added with a grin.

Ha! Nice try! Nico huffed smugly. There was no way pleading was going to work on him. Neither was joking. Not this time!

Nico made sure to punish the cursed red rustbucket for being in his life by slamming the door behind him extra hard. He tore the seatbelt around himself. The sharp click locked down his fate for the coming days.

Logan got behind the steering wheel and glanced over, his smile clearly more appreciative than smug, but a close call. Nonetheless, Nico’s scowl folded into a pout.

Logan wasn't afraid to die. Nico had known that, probably from the start, but he’d never realized just how *little* he feared death until now.

Logan had kicked down the gas pedal before he'd even lowered the handbrake, making the car quite literally leap forward with a loud roar of the engine. Nico couldn't drive, but he was

pretty sure that wasn't normal. It hadn't *felt* normal when he'd gotten thrown into the back of his seat, anyway. The insane pace the truck had shot out with, somehow only kept rising.

After getting used to moving at warp speed, Nico glanced over. No, Logan definitely wasn't messing with him either. He looked more calm than he usually did… Nico braced himself mentally. At least at this pace, it might save them a day…

Nico held up a CD with a scowl, presenting the *'very badass'* skeleton aiming not one, but two guns at whoever dared to look at it. "Oh, Gods. Am I going to have to suffer through all the two thousand's worst hardrock bands this whole drive?" he asked with genuine horror.

Logan almost tore his eyes off the road to glare at him, barely managing to turn his offense straight ahead. "You *actually* think I listen to *Butt rock?!*" he asked in disbelief. "That's a low blow, man! Even for you…". He shook his head dramatically.

"Well the evidence is right here, isn't it?" Nico countered accusatorily.

Logan quickly glanced over. He turned back to the road with a faint smile. "No, that was my mom's… She probably forgot about it… I hate it, but I can't bring myself to throw it away" he said, low and quiet.

Crap... Nico quickly put it back in the dashboard. "Sorry…".

"No, don't be! My mom had absolute shit taste in music. It was one of my favourite things about her" Logan said, the faint smile brightened, then turned a little toothier in a clear threat. "But don't *ever* accuse me of liking that shit again".

Nico sank into his chair with relief. "So, what *are* you going to subject me to?" he asked. Whatever it was, he would manage.

Logan got an evil look on his face. "Oh, don't worry. *You'll hate it.* It's going to be great" he teased.

Nico groaned.

"Only the *best* for you, Spooky!" Logan promised cheerfully, patting him on the knee.

Despite Logan's threatening words earlier Nico only *barely* managed to hate the music he'd put on. Some of it was even kinda good. He'd never admit that though. All of it was loud and rough, as he should have expected. It felt very fitting, very *Logan.* It *almost* made him feel comfortable…

The sudden hard stop they made sure didn't. Nico gripped onto his seat, hitting the back with a gasp. He looked around to see what was wrong, to find nothing but a stop sign. Right in the middle of nowhere. *Seriously?*

"Really? You drive like a maniac, but you listen to traffic signs?" Nico asked in actual genuine interest. "I thought it would go against the whole kinda 'punk thing' you've got going on…".

"What are you talking about '*punk thing*'*?* Labels aren't *real*. They're just a construct" Logan retorted with a smug grin.

Nico pointed at him. "Yeah, see? That *right* there!" he noted, a little excited.

The corner of Logan's mouth twitched. "Stop stereotyping me! I'm just saying, they're just dumb words made up by society to pigeonhole people!" he grumbled.

This was it. He had him right where he wanted him. Nico grinned an evil grin. He exaggerated an angry fist shake "*Society"* he muttered intensely.

Logan grimaced for a second, with a quick jerk of his head. He avoided Nico's eyes, keeping them fixed on the road. He opened his mouth and started to say something then quickly clenched his teeth.

Nico had never won this hard. He felt a little bad for him… He decided to spare him. *Most* of him. "I'm sorry, honey" he offered. He quickly looked away to make sure Logan wouldn't catch him cracking up. He felt his eyes burn in the back of his head. Nico raised his fist and bit down on it to stop himself from laughing. He heard Logan's fingers rap against the steering wheel, finally urging him to glance around, as apologetically as he could manage through his smirk.

Logan ground his teeth, slowly grinding into a grin. "You're so cute when you say stuff like that. Like one of those pugs".

Nico stared at him. Then he bent over and put his forehead on the dashboard trying not to show how much that got to him. "I hate how much I love you" he muttered lying through his teeth.

"Love you too, Babe" Logan responded.

Nico glared before he'd even turned to him. "*Babe?*" he spat "That's *way* worse than honey. Straight up verbal abuse".

Logan grinned slightly, glancing over at him. "You're right, you batshit little asshole. I went too far. Sorry".

Nico smiled and leaned back into his seat. "Way better". He looked at Logan for a while. He thought back to when they first met. Things had changed so much over the past year…

Logan glanced at him again after a few minutes. "You're being a little weird, bud. It's making it hard to concentrate".

Nico smiled again. “Sorry, reminded me of when we first met and you called me a stuck up bastard... I miss when you really tried to *romance* me”.

Logan looked a little hurt. “Yeah, sorry…”. He cocked his head a bit. “In my defense, you were being a stuck up asshole though, just a little bit”.

Nico pursed his lips. *Yeah… I know.* “But, in *my* defense, you were being kind of an unhinged psycho”.

Logan smiled, a little faintly but sincerely. “Yeah… I know”.

Nico’s smile returned with a warm feeling. He let out an amused huff. Logan side-eyed him, a little warily. “Just hit me how lucky you are to have me, that's all” Nico said reassuringly.

Logan smiled, genuinely. “Yeah, we both could have done a lot worse, huh?” he said with a low voice.

Nico felt himself warm up even more. “Yeah” he muttered back quietly. “Don’t think there is any better” he added, so quietly it wasn’t even a whisper.

‘*I heard that*’ a nudge in the arm warned.

Nico had never stayed at a roadside motel before. It wasn’t something he’d been that keen on trying out, but here they were. The run down rectangle made up of even more run down rectangles tried its very best to prove all assumptions people made about motels right. The chained down appliances, large dark stain in the middle of the carpet and suspicious amount of locks on the inside of the door promised their safety was in the worst hands.

Nico wasn’t actually all that worried, of course. Them being themselves, the murderers were probably more scared of them than the other way around. They seemed shy enough this early at least, as the hasty clicks of locks and fluttering of curtains led the way back to the car.

Nico and the motel gave each other one last apathetic glance goodbye before he got in. He wasn’t going to miss it, or all the things going bump in the night. To be fair, most bumps were theirs. He chuckled soundlessly.

Logan paused and tossed the car door back shut. “Be right back” he said quickly, bending down to grab something through the open window.

Nico stuck up a hand and watched him walk back inside. Logan didn’t bother adjusting his coat when it slipped off one shoulder. Combat boots untied. *Tired,* Nico concluded. Driving hours on end will do that to you, even after a goodish night’s sleep. Nico wasn’t even driving, and still grew more weary every mile.

He looked out the other window. The mid-west had its charm, with its rolling rivers, plains and farmlands, but after a while… He stared at the horizon for a bit, angry music shouting at him from the background.

The sound of a familiar, melancholic piano flowed out of the radio. A haunting, ethereal voice gracefully overpowered it. *My Immortal…?* He hadn't guessed Logan would be into that. In a very roundabout way it wasn't *that* far off from his usual taste, but still. Nico smiled to himself. It wasn't exactly his favourite, but it was kind of a guilty pleasure. Good to know he could pick on Logan for this later.

He looked out the window again for a bit as he listened. He actually kinda loved that song… He looked around. Literally nobody. *Oh, what the hell*, he decided. He knew all the words by heart anyway, and when was he going to get another chance. He sang along loudly as he looked at the sky next to him. It brought him back. *Far* back. He remembered how he used to sing when he was little. He used to sing a lot. So much he'd get picked on because of it. Man, what happened to him? He'd stopped doing almost anything he loved over the years… Well, there hadn't been much reason to sing.

He started singing louder. He got a little lost in it. Before he knew it the song was over.

Gods, what's taking Logan so long? He turned to look.

Logan stared back at him leaning on the window frame.

Nico turned to stone. Logan's grin was easily one of the most devious he'd seen yet, but even worse, it was clearly full of admiration too.

"You can *actually* sing?!" Logan asked loudly with amusement and awe.

Nico finally regained the ability to move, *barely.* He buried his face in his hands in pure anguish and despair. He sank onto the dashboard.

"Why have you been hiding that?! You're great!" Logan practically shouted at him.

"*Just… Get in the fucking car!"* Nico demanded, throwing up a hand and slapping the dashboard. He heard the door open and shut. He turned his head a little to glare at him.

Logan chuckled and shook his head. "That's *insanely* hot" he said proudly.

Nico groaned. "Please, *never* bring this up again" he pleaded weakly.

Logan smiled brightly. "No way I'm going to promise that~!". His evil tone didn't match his smile at all. He messed around with the radio. "And I'm definitely putting that on loop".

Nico's hand shot out to stop him. Their fingers fought tooth and nail.

"Okay! Fine!" Logan laughed, putting up his hand in surrender. "*But*, then you'll have to put up with me singing" he bargained.

Nico raised an eyebrow. He was actually *offering* to embarrass himself? That was *objectively* in Nico's favor. “Uhuh…” he said reluctantly.

Logan punched in some buttons. He started up the car and put on his seatbelt. Suspiciously calm.

Nico groaned as he recognized Kelly Clarkson's voice. *Of. Fucking. Course.* He stared out the window trying, and failing, to tune out Logan absolutely *vandalizing* Behind These Hazel Eyes. He looked at the side of the road, debating opening the door and throwing himself out. Probably wouldn't survive… *Good… Eh…* That would be kinda rude to the farmers though…

Gods, he hoped Logan didn’t find that song *too* relatable. The words stung a little… He pursed his lips and glanced over, taking in Logan's malicious glee as he shouted over the music. He couldn't help but smile.

The smile endured hundreds more acres of floodplain rolling by.

Nico startled awake at the sound of a car door slamming shut. He rolled over, blinking in the dark. The nothingness around him didn't look right. Unfamiliar shapes lurked right beyond the edge of visibility. Even the quiet sounded wrong somehow. A low, undefined hum flowed down from the ceiling. His heartbeat sped up. He gasped quietly and-!

Wait. A faint, sunny, woodland smell broke through the scent of cheap detergent and triggered his memory. He reached over, finding a warm hand.

Right. They were in a motel. The second one even. He gently squeezed Logan's hand. His breathing slowed down. His muscles relaxed. Man, was he sore from the two day drive… Well, not just the drive, the messy sheets reminded him. He smirked. Guess not everything about motels was bad.

Planted at dusk

He blossomed through the night

Decaying in silence

Dying to see the morning light

Nico narrowed his eyes at the words on the other end of his pen. He slowly pulled the tip back over them, crossing them out. Guess he really wasn't the 'dark dramatic poetry type of guy'… Or maybe his time as a plant had been less inspirational than he thought. Well, in any case-!

"Can I see?" Logan asked with poorly hidden excitement, already leaning closer *dangerously* fast from the driver side.

"*Nope!*" Nico shouted, tearing the pen all over the paper as hard and fast as he could. He balled up the paper in his fist. For a second, he debated eating it, to get all the shameful *'feelings'* right back where they belonged. He slumped his forehead against the window instead, watching life pass by.

This time, life didn't ignore him, lazily glancing over the shoddy wooden fence with hundreds of beautiful brown eyes. Under the splotches of cow all over the pasture, the yellow tips of the earliest dandelions reached for the stars, inspired to take to the sky themselves some day soon.

With one more motel stop they'd finally breached the Utah border, and with that *Mormon territory* in all its political complexity. It was hard to gauge how the people would react sometimes. Sometimes it wasn't.

"You two seem close" the motel desk clerk noted, walking a tight line between friendliness and wariness.

Logan pulled Nico against him. "Oh yeah, we're *super* close. You might even say we're *soulmates"* he said tauntingly.

The clerk widened her eyes and pursed her lips. Nico shoved him off and walked outside, not sure who he was more annoyed with.

Logan followed soon after, still grinning.

"Stop using me to scare the Mormons" Nico ordered.

"But we're such a good team!" Logan whined. "I have to try *so* much harder by myself…". He pulled Nico against him, kissing him behind the ear.

Nico almost fell for it, until he heard a quiet snicker. He glanced over, at the clerk staring at them wide eyed, pen halfway through a sentence. "I said stop that…" he warned. He went to give Logan an accusatory little smack on the back. He went too low. *Way* too low…

Logan jolted slightly. He leaned in on Nico's ear. "Harder" he whispered in a husky voice.

Nico's face caught fire instantly.

Nico pulled his eyes off the window to set them on Logan, eyes diligently on the road, but still clearly aware of him.

The amber flared up a bit. “Piercing eyes again, huh? Got anything to say?” he asked.

Nico pursed his lips. He had to give it to him. Driving might have been a complete waste of time, expensive and uncomfortable to add… But when it came to the scenery it had shadow travel beat. Well, when it came to the *cohesion* of the scenery. Shadow travel was so quick and easy, it was like each place he went was an island, completely detached from the rest of the world. Seeing the cities turn into woods, into farmland, into deserts and finally into the rocky mountains, slow and deliberate, was strangely beautiful in a holistic sense. Not something he got to experience often. His ass hoped he wouldn’t have to do it again soon…

“You're doing it again” Logan said a little accusatorily.

Wh-? Right. “I can multitask” Nico defended.

“Okay, so what did I just say?” Logan countered effortlessly.

Crap. Nico thought as hard as he could. *Right!* “Something stupid. Final answer” he offered with full conviction.

Logan cocked his head in frustration, stifling a laugh.

Salt Lake city hid between all the hills and highways, then seemingly jumped out all at once. Before Nico was ready, they’d drifted into a parking spot in front of a door and rang the bell.

An elderly woman in an absolutely massive black, knit sweater dress opened the door. She wore her snow white hair in a tight bun. The heavy, seemingly hastily applied make-up on her face hinted at a taste for non traditional art. Her light brown eyes lit up looking at them.

She screeched excitedly at Logan, tossed her cane aside and waddled up to him. After pulling him down to her, she immediately opened fire, kissing him aggressively on the cheek over and over. Logan put his hands on her shoulders and just let it happen, probably used to this.

Nico smiled at the old gentleman still in the doorway, earning a faint smile in return. He also seemed used to this.

Logan definitely took after his grandfather. He had a sturdy build, especially for his age. His dark gray hair was cut a lot shorter than Logan's, but there were still hints of its unruly temper. Short, straight strands stood in various directions, mostly upward. Nico couldn't help

making a comparison to a, *very handsome,* old paintbrush. His expression was stoic, but his warm amber eyes seemed friendly.

Nico was about to introduce himself when Logan's grandmother snapped her face to him, grinning deviously. Nope. On second thought, Logan was the spitting image of her…

"*Who's this handsome young man?"* she asked accusatorily, jabbing Logan in the stomach roughly.

Nico was about to make another attempt to introduce himself when Logan's grandmother put her hands on his cheeks. *Very* warm hands. He could feel her get ready to pull him down to her when Logan rescued him.

"Grandma, *back off"* he scolded, putting a hand on Nico's chest to keep him in place.

Ms. Venema scowled at Logan and reluctantly let go of Nico's face.

Logan scowled back, then smirked. "Grandma, grandpa, this is my ex-boyfriend".

Fuck…! Nico's polite smile froze solid, as did Logan's grandparents. Nico kicked Logan in the ankle.

Logan quickly put up his hands. "*Right.* Don't worry! He's also my rebound!".

Nico and Logan's grandfather stared at each other, unblinking, mildly horrified. Logan's grandmother snickered quietly. She smiled at him expectantly.

"Uh. Hello, I'm Nico. Nice to meet you" he said, sticking out a hand.

She eagerly grasped it with both of hers. "Now, *that's* a name you don't hear often!" she chirped.

"He's Italian" Logan offered.

Her devious grin returned. "Ooh~! *Exciting!* I'm so proud of you!" she declared, jabbing Logan in the stomach again.

Nico felt his face burn.

"*Grandma!"* Logan pleaded angrily.

Mr. Venema slowly pulled Nico's hand free from her grasp and shook it. "We're Logan's grandparents. Nice to meet you too" he offered. He spoke very calmly, soothing even, if it hadn't been for the slightly authoritarian tone. He gestured inside and made room for them, pulling grandma to his side.

Nico made sure to let Logan go first, giving his nerves some buffer to protect themselves. A long wall filled with memories looked on as they made their way through the house. Nico stopped to admire a memory that caught his attention in particular.

A much younger Logan, probably about eight years old, scowled at the camera in his boy scouts uniform. Nico smiled at him. He took out his phone and quickly snuck a picture.

Nico kept on moving, slowly, eyes on the other pictures as he made his way past. A beautiful young couple smiled back at him.

The young man's smile was subtle, but warm and genuine. He was wearing Logan's coat. The difference being that it wasn't slightly too big for him. That and the very spiky haircut he was sporting.

He held onto a little girl. Her hair gathered in a dark blonde, messy ponytail right on top of her tiny head. She was probably the cutest pineapple Nico had ever seen. The intense amber eyes she would later pass onto Logan looked right at him with wonder.

A pretty looking, young woman clung onto both of them, her back to the camera. All her hair sacrificed to a short buzzcut. She wore a familiar, devious smile. He looked down a little at her very, *very* short leather skirt. Just a little *too* short for the pose she was in. *Oops.* Nico quickly turned away out of respect. Wait, they hung that up *themselves*…

He glanced at a last picture while walking past. The now slightly less young man sat in the middle of a group of firefighters, in full gear. Stoic as today. *A firefighter?* Yeah, that made sense, actually…

Ms. Venema proudly tossed a homemade cake onto the coffee table, still damping a warm pleasant odour. She started cutting it in large, uneven pieces.

Nico offered a quiet thanks as she shoved one of the pieces in his face, almost directly into his mouth. He decided to be a little more brave and attempt to break the ice. “I was looking at some of your pictures earlier” he said, gesturing to the hallway.

Before he could continue Ms. Venema trampled over him. “Ooh! You saw my ass!” she chirped excitedly.

Yes, he had. Nico almost choked on his cake.

“Grandma…” Logan pleaded weakly.

“It was in its prime…” Ms. Venema added mournfully.

Anything Nico could say to that would be the *exact* wrong thing. He turned to Mr. Venema instead. “I saw you were a firefighter”.

Mr. Venema nodded, giving him a pleased look. “Yes” he stated. He inhaled like he was going to say something. Then he went on and just… *didn't*, taking a sip of his tea.

Logan shot him an irritated look. “You *know* that's not funny” he said angrily.

Mr. Venema’s eyes twinkled ever so slightly with amusement and mischief, like he absolutely *didn't* know that. He looked back to Nico. “I was a firefighter for forty two years. I had a pretty good run. That picture is from a few years before my promotion to chief” he explained calmly. “So, you’re from Italy? Being here must be quite the adjustment…”.

Nico smiled. “Well, I’ve been in the US for a couple of years now”. He quickly continued when he saw a devious grin spread on Logan’s face. “I’ve never been in Utah before, though. Logan told me the Mormon community is very big here”.

Mr. Venema raised an eyebrow ever so slightly. “Well yes, but I doubt he was that polite about it” he said, looking at Logan.

Logan smirked at him.

“Still, it would be good to know people aren’t very fond of the word ‘Mormon’ around here” his grandfather gently pointed out.

Nico felt his face heat up. He should have probably asked Logan about social etiquette around the religion before coming along to his grandparents. Then again, he probably would have used it to mess with him… “Ah, I’m really sorry” he said quickly.

Ms. Venema’s cane fell over. She bent down and propped it back up. She waved his words away. “Oh, don’t worry sweetheart. No harm done. We’re not members of the church. Well, not anymore. We’re disaffiliates. Have been for decades, before Logan’s mother was even born” she explained.

“Ah, so you left? That must have been hard” Nico said thoughtfully.

“Yes, I followed Logan’s grandfather out when he left. Used to be a little controversial in the community, but nowadays people don’t seem to mind much. My father did though, I don’t think he ever forgave either of us. Especially not you”. She laughed as she grabbed Mr. Venema’s hand.

Nico gave him a questioning look. Would it be rude to ask? Would it be rude not to?

Mr. Venema met his eyes and smiled slightly before turning stoic again. He spared him the dilemma. “When I turned nineteen the church asked me to go on a mission trip. I figured I would, and I went and traveled for two years with a small group of other young men. It was a little jarring that wherever we went people avoided us like the plague…”. His eyes narrowed a little, lost in the memories.

Ms. Venema’s cane fell over. She bent down and propped it back up.

Mr. Venema continued. “I’d never considered how different other people lived before, or that we weren’t what most people considered ‘normal’. My world was very small at the time. The church was all I knew. In the end I did end up meeting a lot of people who were very different from us and heard tons of life stories. They asked me lots of questions I didn’t have

the answer to. I didn’t know what to believe anymore. Either I wasn’t as ready as the church thought I was, or it was bound to happen, but I left the church after that mission trip. Their ideas just stopped making sense to me. I lost a lot of people because of that, but not any I’d want back” he concluded matter-of-factly.

Ms. Venema’s cane fell over. She bent down and propped it back up. She chuckled. “And then you spent years doing everything God forbids".

Mr. Venema’s eyes glimmered. “Guess I had to make up for some lost time. There were lots of new philosophies to try out”.

She looked at him dreamily. “I have way too many memories of those *exciting* times” she ran her hand over his arm as she said it.

A faint smile crept over Mr. Venema’s face. “Oh I remember too. I also remember that suddenly I *did* catch your eye. I had been nearly invisible to you before”.

Ms. Venema laughed. “You were such a *bad* influence on me” she almost whispered as she leaned into him.

“You were already bad to the bone before I met you” Mr. Venema responded leaning into her in turn.

Logan stuck up his hands. “Okay, now please stop. This is starting to get gross”.

Ms. Venema laughed again and kissed Mr. Venema on the cheek, then she pulled back. Ms. Venema’s cane fell over. She bent down and-!

Logan swiped it off the ground and slammed it down onto the table. His grandmother grabbed hold of it, he didn’t let go. They stared each other down, grinning. The cane trembled between them in fear.

She finally let go. As soon as Logan did the same, she grabbed it and propped it back up.

Like a sweet dessert, the conversation finally took a turn Nico had been secretly hoping for all dinner, a turn away from him, and towards embarrassing anecdotes.

“Remember that time in elementary school? When that sweet young lady asked you to meet behind the shed and you showed up ready for a fight? You scared her so bad that her mother almost had you expelled” Ms. Venema suddenly threw in Logan’s face.

“Well, what else do you meet behind a shed for?” Logan countered with mild annoyance.

His grandmother tutted. “You're lucky you're a looker, sweetheart. That brain of yours isn't going to get you very far…”.

Logan scowled. “I was *seven*, I wasn't interested in that stuff yet”.

His grandfather let out a gruff hum in agreement. “Back then you were only interested in dinosaurs”.

Nico bit his lip to prevent himself from laughing. Logan closed his eyes in annoyance and leaned away a little.

“You were a boy scout *and* a dinosaur kid?” Nico asked, unable to let it slide.

“Not at the same time…” Logan defended weakly. “And I stand by dinosaurs, by the way. They're huge vicious monsters” he continued, seemingly getting his nerve back. “It's Utah's fault. They keep making a big deal about them”.

His grandmother shook her head slightly, clearly reminiscing. “The first thing he had to say about any dinosaur he saw was whether or not he could beat it in a fight”.

“That sounds about right” Nico agreed with a smile. “Sounds like he was a handful” he based on all the new information. Well, and all the information he already had…

“Oh, sweetheart. He was a *breeze*. We’ve dealt with the *original.* If anything that God of war watered him down” Ms. Venema huffed.

Mr. Venema suddenly seemed a little guarded. “Don’t say that. Samantha might not have been an angel, but…”. He stopped himself.

Ms. Venema gave him a fond smile. “Still daddy’s little girl, hm?”.

Mr. Venema looked down at the table.

Ms. Venema put her hand on his arm. “I know. She was a little rough around the edges, but… She was so sweet, and funny, and warm, and so… *Bright.* Our adorable little she-devil” she wiped at the corner of her eye as she finished.

A mournful hue hung over Mr. Venema stoic demeanor. Nico felt Logan shift next to him. He looked over. No expression, but he could tell he was uncomfortable.

“She had so much charm. Everyone was drawn to her. Especially *men.* Those poor bastards” Ms. Venema chuckled. “Remember when she burned that boy’s car down?” she asked.

“Of course I do. I was on call that night. I’m the one who put it out” Mr. Venema responded with mild annoyance. “It cost us an entire paycheck” he added.

Ms. Venema smirked. “Well, he did cheat on her. That wasn’t very smart of him” she countered.

Mr. Venema looked unimpressed. Logan snickered quietly at him.

Ms. Venema continued. “Remember that other boy? The really persistent one who kept standing under her bedroom window even after she broke up with him?” she asked,

obviously amused.

“How could I forget? She tried to pour a bottle of detergent on him and took the entire window frame with her when she fell out. She fell right on top of him… He cried so much I took him to the hospital, only to find out all that was wrong with him was a couple of bruises and a broken heart”. Mr. Venema sighed deeply.

Nico put his fist in front of his mouth to hide his grin.

“Not long after that, she met your father” Mr. Venema said.

Nico could tell Logan shifted again. He looked. Logan was a whole different kind of uncomfortable now, almost all of it annoyance.

Ms. Venema hummed. “I remember the first time she brought him home with her. Right out of deployment. So *smitten”*

“So pregnant…” Mr. Venema complained.

“You always only focus on the *smallest* details” Ms. Venema complained back at him.

“Large age gap too… Thousands of years…” Mr. Venema added to his growing list of complaints.

Nico snorted, then stopped himself and realized… A couple of decades was much less bad right…? He sure hoped so. Better not to bring it up, to be safe.

Ms. Venema shook her head and rolled her eyes. A faint little smile on her face.

“Aside from *that*, it was clear she finally met someone with the guts to deal with her. He was *head over heels* too. You could tell from the way he looked at her that he just *adored* her. He was so proud when he told us how they met. Said she walked up to him to make fun of him for wearing his sunglasses inside and then drank his beer right in front of him… So *Sammy*” she reminisced. “Every time she got mad at him he’d send her flowers. Sometimes so many that it looked like a garden in here. She always took him back in the end”.

Logan folded his arms. “Yeah, well, guess that didn’t last very long. After Curt showed up he didn’t dare to show his face even once” he muttered angrily.

There was a tense silence.

“They didn’t see eye to eye on a lot of things. Important things. Sometimes things don’t work out and they get very… Complicated” Mr. Venema tried.

“Why do you always have to stick up for him?” Logan asked, annoyance turning into frustration. “You know he doesn’t deserve it. You don’t like him any better than I do”

Mr. Venema narrowed his eyes a little, looking at Logan pensively. “Well… As I said. It’s complicated” he finally concluded.

“Sure” Logan concluded coldly on his turn.

Another tense silence.

“The bouquet on the coffin was his, you know?” Mr. Venema added, still pensive.

That seemed to set Logan off. Frustration turned to anger. “I don’t care about the *flowers!*”.

Mr. Venema shifted in his seat. “I know you're angry at him, you aren’t wrong... But you have to try to understand his position. He's the God of war, he can't always do what he wants. He's… Well…” he started stammering.

“Busy? *Yeah, I bet*. Starting wars, killing people all over the place. *Ruining lives*. Sounds like a time consuming hobby!” Logan spat. He shot up and threw his chair back, making it hit the wall with a slam.

His grandparents didn't even flinch, calmly watching him storm off.

That was Nico’s cue. He slowly stood up. “I should probably go put out that fire” he offered, gesturing in the direction Logan had just gone.

Mr. Venema gestured for him to sit back down. “I've gotten burned enough times to learn sometimes it's best to let a fire burn out on its own, son” he stated. “He'll come back 'round soon”.

Nico thought about it. Then sat back down. Mister Venema was an expert, after all.

The silence was more awkward than tense now. Ms. Venema excused herself to the bathroom, leaving Nico and Mr. Venema to stew in it by themselves.

Nico cleared his throat. “I guess his father is kind of a touchy subject for him” he stated.

Mr. Venema hummed. “Very” he agreed. “They both are. Not just Ares, but Curtis too”.

Nico felt his chest tighten a little. *Oh great, way less awkward. Let’s talk about the man who killed your daughter.* Somehow he’d opened a can of worms.

“Ah…” Nico said weakly. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to… You don’t have to talk about him if… I mean…” he stammered.

“Hm, so he told you about him?” Mr. Venema asked, his expression was hard to read.

Nico pulled his lips in a straight line. “Well… I know what he’s done. But no, he doesn’t really talk about him”.

Mr. Venema looked mournful again. “Curtis wasn’t always the monster he turned into. He was a pretty great guy once. A great father too. Not that long ago. Logan Idolized Curtis, you know?”.

Nico swallowed. He wasn’t sure if it was smart to talk about this. He wanted to know more, but this subject seemed *very* private. Logan would probably get angry at his grandfather too, if he found out.

“Oh” he started “Uhm, I’m not sure if Logan would want you to tell me about that”. Nico saw a faint sad smile on Mr. Venema's face.

“Probably not” he agreed quietly. “But if you’re planning on sticking around it’s probably good to know”.

Nico thought back to the night on the balcony. Logan wasn't very good at talking about this stuff himself. Which was actually kinda rare. He hummed in agreement. “Yes, sir” Nico said. “If you don’t mind, of course” he added.

Mr. Venema looked him in the eye, he seemed lost in thought for a few seconds. ”Well, it’s not that I don’t mind. But, not talking about him isn’t going to erase what happened” he said matter-of-factly.

Nico nodded.

Mr. Venema smiled again. “When my daughter brought Curtis home with her, it was very different. Much less dramatic than Ares. He was a real gentleman. Polite. Calm. *Honest.* He treated my daughter with nothing but love and respect. He didn't keep it secret that he would have done anything for her. And he doted on Logan from the beginning. He was almost the complete opposite of Ares. In the ways that mattered, at least. He was a bit stern, but warm. Curt wasn’t easily fazed… Even when things got difficult”. Mr. Venema paused, visibly reevaluating the last part of what he said.

He went on. “They seemed so happy for all those years… Nobody saw it coming... This isn’t a story about an evil stepfather. He really, *truly*, was a kind soul... Curt was very dear to me too... I'm still grateful for all the good he's done…”. His expression turned stone cold. “Of course I would have put a *bullet* right between his eyes myself if I'd known what would happen…”.

Nico drew a breath.

Mr. Venema met his eyes, his face softened slightly. “It's a terrible shame he didn't get the help he needed in time. We found out much too late what had been going on”.

Nico pursed his lips.

“That's why it's so important to talk about things. Even when they're hard to talk about. Maybe even *especially* when they're hard to talk about…” Mr Venema concluded almost more to himself than Nico.

Nico agreed with a nod. “Yes, sir…”

“I hope Logan's going to see that soon too” Mr Venema added, still lost in thought.

Nico gave him a reassuring smile. “Well. He's working on it. You know, going to therapy and all”.

Mr. Venema snapped his eyes at his, wide eyed. For a second his stoic demeanor was completely gone in the surprise.

Crap. He didn't know? Was he not supposed to tell him?

Mr. Venema regained his composure. His eyes showed he was still a little affected, he seemed moved.

“That's good to hear” he stated quietly. Mr. Venema smiled faintly.

The door opened and shut quietly. Logan appeared in the doorframe. He ran his hand through his grandfather's hair.

“I'm sorry about earlier”.

Mr. Venema hummed in approval. “You're fine” he replied.

“Cool down a bit?” Nico asked.

Logan shrugged. “Staring angrily at the sun isn't as fun anymore now that I've stopped smoking. So I figured I might as well think about what I'm doing with my life. Apparently yelling at the few people I actually like isn't what I really want”.

Mr Venema looked up at Logan from his chair. Pride in his eyes.

At bedtime, Nico found himself looking at a familiar pensive expression, just not on *exactly* same face as usual. Mr. Venema glanced at Nico, then at Logan, then back again. He fidgeted with his wedding ring. The slightest furrow in his brow betrayed that he was in the middle of a hardfought internal battle.

Ms. Venema side-eyed him with a grin. “Mr. Venema is still a little old fashioned so he doesn't want you to sleep in the same room, but he's afraid you'll think it's because you're both boys” she explained for him.

He looked at her with mild irritation, but his deep exhale confirmed her theory.

“That's alright, sir” Nico quickly reassured him.

Mr. Venema gave him a faint, grateful smile.

Logan shrugged. “Yeah, that's fine. We'll just have sex in the shower”.

Nico and his grandfather both stared at him, wide eyed. Logan and his grandmother snickered deviously. Mr. Venema quickly made his escape into the hallway. Ms. Venema tapped Logan on the nose on her way to follow him, still grinning.

Merely minutes later Logan barged in.

“I'm not allowed to have boys in my room” Nico warned.

Logan smirked, but otherwise ignored him. He opened every drawer, apparently not finding what he was looking for. He hummed in frustration and rapped his fingers against the last cabinet he'd rummaged through.

“Want help?” Nico offered. “What are you looking for?” he asked, already getting up.

Logan’s eyes lit up. “Nice try, Spooky. You’ll see”. He pushed him back on the bed.

Nico huffed. “It’s hard to hide things from me. I have my *ways*” he threatened. He willed the shadows to flicker, making sure to smile extra creepily.

Logan’s eyes flashed warm orange. “If you think acting cute is going to get you anywhere, you're wrong” he mused, completely sincerely.

Wh-! Nico sighed in defeat, igniting his face.

Logan chuckled, patting him on the shoulder. His eyes narrowed as his grin grew. The warm grip on Nico’s shoulder tightened the tiniest bit.

Nico put a hand on his knee to stop him before he could pounce. “No fun allowed” he reminded him sternly.

“Fuck the rules” Logan shrugged, inching his knee forward.

“No fucking anything tonight”. Nico shoved it right back in place.

Logan groaned, but let go. He moved his hand up to Nico’s chin, tilting it a bit to the side, then gave him a quick kiss on the forehead, right on the scar. Before Nico’s face could catch fire again, Logan backed off completely. Nico tucked himself into bed, by far the best bed he’d had in days. He curled up, closed his eyes and reached over, at nothing…

Chapter 20: XX. Haunted by the memory

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Discussion of suicide (!), attempted vehicular manslaughter, ghost, crying.

By lunchtime, their visit was practically already on its way out. Logan seemed a little worried about that fact, probably on account of the mysterious missing McGuffin.

His grandfather watched him rap his fingers on the table. “Are you going to visit your mother's grave on the way back?” he asked.

Logan's expression softened a bit. “Yeah, I think so…”.

Mr. Venema smiled faintly. “Do you want to bring anything?”.

Logan shrugged. “Not like she's going to appreciate it anyway”.

Mr. Venema turned stoic again. “I suppose. But, you might”.

Logan sighed. “I dunno. I don’t have anything on me”.

Mr. Venema sprung into action true to form, getting up slowly and sauntering to a cabinet. He went over the labels of several bottles of wine until he found what he was looking for. “Here” he muttered, handing it over.

Logan gave him a puzzled look. “Her favourite wine?” he asked, a little amused.

“It's an ancient Greek tradition, right?” Mr. Venema asked in return.

Logan grinned. “Yeah, thanks”.

Mr. Venema patted him on the shoulder, just a little harder than you'd want.

Logan didn't seem to mind. He turned his attention to his grandmother. “Have you seen my old bracelet anywhere? I can't find it”.

Nico blinked. *Bracelet…?* So that’s what they were after?

Ms. Venema turned around, cradling her teapot. “I haven't seen it”. Her expression turned worried. “Are you sure you brought it with you…? I haven't seen you wear it since…”.

Logan sighed. “Ah” he let out. “Yeah, I was afraid so… It's probably still at home…”. His fingers rapping on the table filled the silence. “I'll pick it up on the way back” he added flatly.

Nico looked at him. That wasn't part of the plan… And kind of a big deal… Not something to throw in so casually. “You sure?” he asked.

Logan half smiled in response. “Gotta go there at some point. Don't think I'm ever going to be *more* ready than I am now…” he reasoned.

“Sentimental bracelet?” Nico asked, gauging just how inevitable this whole sidequest was going to be exactly.

Logan smiled fully now. “*Yeah.*..” he muttered in a drawn out exhale.

I was afraid so…

“You don't have to come with” Logan reassured him.

“Uhuh” Nico replied, unimpressed. “Fat chance. I'm not missing out on your mental breakdown. You'll have *way* too much fun without me”.

They grinned at each other.

Ms. Venema smiled, worried, but bright nonetheless. She plopped the teapot down on the table. “Tea time!” she chimed. She put her hands in her sides and looked at it with pride.

Mr. Venema saved Nico from getting crushed to death, wedging Ms. Venema off of him with a strategic attempt at a handshake. “Nice meeting you, son”.

“Thank you, sir” Nico replied politely, gratefully shaking his hand. “It was great meeting you too”. He gave Logan a proud look and got in, buckling up.

Logan grinned mischievously.

Oh no…

Logan locked the doors.

Oh no!

Logan turned to his grandfather. “By the way, since you mentioned the *age gap* yesterday… Before it becomes a whole *thing.* He’s ten years older than you” he chimed, rolling up the window.

Mr. Venema’s stoic expression cracked. Ms. Venema’s happy smile turned to stone as she quickly grabbed onto Mr. Venema's shoulder.

Logan snickered to himself as he shoved his foot on the gas, jerking the car into motion and sending them off quickly.

Nico didn’t dare to look back. He stared at Logan in disbelief. “*Why the fuck would you-?*”.

Logan cut him off. “*Calm down!* They’ll be over it by next Christmas” he soothed, still grinning.

Nico turned his stare into a glare.

Logan cocked his head a little, eyes still on the road. “Look, I’m *terrible* at keeping secrets. *You know that.* Better to throw it at them on the way out than if I’d have let it slip during dinner or something… Right?”.

Nico felt the corner of his eye twitch. “No!”. He leaned his head back against his seat. “Yeah, alright… But, still!”. He crossed his arms and sighed.

Logan shook his head, grinning wider. “They’ve had worse”. The devious chuckle ruined any chance of a reassuring tone. “At least I’m not pregnant”.

Nico snorted. “You should have told them that just now. Might have taken the edge off…”. He crossed his arms tighter to hold onto the anger when he felt it try to slip away.

A winged woman swept down on the road ahead of them. She raised a huge, sharp talon at them out from under her blood soaked robes. In seconds, they were getting so close Nico could make out each individual razorlike tooth in the Keres’ menacing grin. He braced himself. *Brake!*

Logan let out a maniacal laugh and sped up as fast as he could, making the engine roar. He stuck his lower arm against Nico's chest, holding him in place.

Nico's breath got stuck, *painfully* high.

The Keres’ grin turned into a shriek. She wrapped her wings around herself and dove to the side right before impact, seemingly forgetting she could fly.

Logan groaned in annoyance, ripping his arm away and hitting the steering wheel with his fist. The car swore with a loud beep. Nico glanced at him in disbelief, trying to catch his breath. His heart beat against the back of his throat. Logan looked genuinely let down, almost pouting.

“Huh…” Nico let out shakily. Then he got angry. “What the fuck!” he shouted. “Just *who* are you trying to kill here?!”.

Logan's hand shot up. “Don't worry! This thing's sturdy”. He slapped the ancient dashboard. “She knows that too, otherwise she wouldn't have jumped!”.

Nico shoved his hands in his face and sighed. “I think Eris is getting impatient…”.

“I know…” Logan grumbled. “We’ll get to it” he said a little more assuringly.

Nico got an eerie feeling before they even got out of the car. Probably the nerves, he decided. He wasn't very excited to see what this was going to do to Logan. Logan seemed to be playing it cool so far, though.

They walked up to the door. It had been padlocked shut, bolted onto the door crudely right above the splintered wood around the original lock.

“Right… The cops” Logan remembered out loud. “Let’s use the back door”. He let go of the key between his fingers in favor of another one.

The back door was a little bit *too* accessible, opening and closing slightly in the breeze. The calm, rhythmic creaking almost sounded like breathing… The window had been smashed in at the corner, presumably to get access to the lock.

“Guess we won't be needing these” Logan said, shoving the keys back into his pocket.

The door blew fully open as he reached for it, inviting him in with a loud bang against the wall. An empty hallway greeted them. Logan seemed to hesitate. Nico decided to go in first, in an attempt to ease the tension.

As soon as he passed the door he was sure. There was definitely something brewing here… Should he tell Logan? Maybe they could get out of here before anything happened. He decided to ignore it. “Do you think it's upstairs?” he asked.

“Yeah, I have an idea where it should be” Logan responded. He sounded far away. Not quite indifferent, but closed off.

Nico paused at the doorway to the living room. There was a huge sloppy pentagram spray-painted on the floor. Laying in the centre was a lone picture frame. A collection of pitiful, burned up candles decorated the edges. The furniture and some trash strewn about. *Crap!* “Uh…” he let out. He turned around, but before he could even attempt to stop Logan he'd already caught up with him. Nico stuck his arm out and grabbed Logan's arm in a reflex.

Logan raised an eyebrow. He glanced over Nico's shoulder at the mess on the living room floor and snorted. “I hope it worked and she kicked their asses”. He gestured at the stairs. “C'mon”.

Nico felt whatever it was trying to get closer. He wondered if Logan felt the uneasy atmosphere. No doubt, but he probably felt uneasy enough on his own... He followed him up the stairs. Nico noticed that whatever it was, was not a what, it was a who. A very, *very* restless who. He had a pretty good idea who it might be too…

He should have known. *This is bad. This is going to be so bad.*

They walked into a room, Logan's he assumed. Another broken window. A crack split it all the way through, leaving a large hole in the middle. Leaves had blown in and spread themselves around on the floor.

“Logan…”. Nico swallowed. “I think your… I think *Curtis* is here” he stammered.

The temperature dropped. The leaves stirred. Nico felt his ears pick up on something *almost* audible. Logan stopped. He barely even looked at Nico.

“He seems upset. I think he's trying to make contact with you” Nico pushed on.

Logan turned his attention to a beat up looking dresser and opened a drawer, grabbing something out of it. “He can go ahead and fuck right off into the afterlife. There's nothing to talk about” he answered coldly. Nico thought he heard his voice tremble a little.

A small guitar in the corner of the room fell over, hitting the floor with a strumming sound. They turned around.

All coldness in Logan's attitude burned away in a flash fire. *“Okay, you asshole! Spit it out!*”.

The temperature dropped further. Nico heard whispers shout all around him. After one last look at the flames in Logan’s eyes, he conjured Curtis out of the shadows.

A clean-cut, *anguished* looking man stared at them from the corner. His transparent, almost glowing form standing in the small guitar. “Logan…” he started, his voice low and hollow. “I didn't think you'd come back here…”.

Nico heard Logan take a raspy breath. The expression in his eyes was almost as nervous as it was angry. Then the familiar flames took over. His voice cracked as he shouted. “You're lucky you're already dead, Curt!”.

Curtis didn't react in the slightest. He'd probably expected this reaction. “I know you don't want to see me. You probably don't want to hear what I have to say… But, I owe you an explanation”.

This set Logan off again. “*How could you possibly explain what you did?!”* he yelled at the top of his lungs. “*There is no fucking reason why anyone would do what you did!”*.

Nico recoiled at the sudden loudness of Logan's voice. He felt his heart racing. Logan was obviously losing control. He debated casting Curtis off again, but that didn't seem right either.

Curtis spoke, calmly. “You're right. There is no excuse for it. I'm not trying to defend what I did. I just want to say that none of it was you or your mother's fault”.

Logan picked up a photo frame from the dresser and threw it through Curtis. It shattered against the wall. “Don't you fucking dare tell me this isn't my fault, or mom's. *Like I don't fucking know that!*”. Nico could see his hands were trembling. “*Why'd you have that gun on you?”*.

This seemed to get a reaction. Curtis looked through them as if they were as transparent as he was. He stayed silent for a while. When he spoke he sounded even more hollow than before. “The mission I went on… I did something terrible. Because I was told to. I knew it was wrong. But in the heat of the moment… I did it anyway. When I came back, I couldn't cope with the world anymore”. He bowed his head a notch. His image seemed to fade a little.

“Everything was so *frustratingly* normal. But *I* wasn't anymore. I didn't fit in anymore. It ate at me. I started taking that out on you and your mother. I hated who I turned into… *I couldn't live with myself anymore*”. The temperature in the room dropped further as he continued.

“That night. With that gun. I was going to end my life”.

One of Logan's fingers twitched. He seemed to be holding his breath.

“I never meant for this to happen. What I did to your mother… To you. I wish I had put a stop to myself earlier” he almost whispered. “I'm not asking for forgiveness. But I want you to know that I am so, so sorry for what I did. I will be for eternity. And I deserve that”.

Logan didn't say anything. He just stared at Curtis, or at the wall behind him, arms crossed. The silence was deafening.

“How have you been?” Curtis asked.

Logan's fingers dug into his arms. “Bad” he said bitterly. Curtis nodded and looked down, sorrow emanating from him. “But I'm getting better” Logan continued. “I'm getting help. I'm not going to make the same mistake you did” he spat.

Curtis looked up at him. His expression hopeful. “Good!” He said “I'm proud-”. He stopped himself.

Logan looked at him with nothing other than hurt and contempt in his eyes. He took a deep breath. “I don't want you around anymore, Curt. You being here makes everything worse. You need to let go”.

Curtis looked miserable. “If I could do that for you, I would”.

Nico almost jolted. *Finally!* He could actually do something! He stepped forward. “You can. With my help. I’ll release your spirit so you can cross over to the underworld”.

They both looked at Logan. He put his hands in his pockets without a word.

Curtis nodded at Nico. “Thank you”. He looked at Logan. “Logan, I want you to know that despite everything…”. He stopped in the middle of his sentence, he looked heartbroken. “If you want me to stop thinking of you as my son, I will”.

Nico thought he'd seen Logan shook before, apparently he was wrong. It only lasted a second. With a hard swallow he looked away, back to indifferent aside from a noticeable shiver. Nico met his eyes, all fire gone. A flash of a painfully pleading look went through them.

Yeah. Got it. Nico held out his hand. “Stay still” he instructed. He looked Curtis in the eye and sent him on his way.

The light shifted as the shadows moved in. Curtis lit up and then vanished. The leaves on the ground stirred. The temperature rose, instantly melting the frost that had formed on the broken window.

Logan immediately lost his composure. “*Dumb piece of shit!”* he yelled at the empty floor. He turned away and kicked the dresser, making it explode into large, jagged pieces. He panted, his breath hitched, and wiped his eyes with his lower arm.

Nico walked up to him and put his arms around him, pressing himself against Logan's back. Logan shuddered as he did. Nico rested his forehead against the back of his head. Nico felt him swallow. A few droplets fell on Nico's arms.

“Don't hold it in…” he pleaded.

Logan leaned his head back against Nico’s forehead.

Feeling him sob against him was gutwrenching, but not nearly as painful as hearing it. The quiet little sounds drowned out everything else. Nico endured them, just holding onto him. It was unbearably hard, but at the same time it was the *easiest* thing he’d ever done. In fact, he probably couldn’t even have stopped himself if he wanted to. Eventually, the sobs turned into deep, sorrowful breaths.

“How are you?” Nico asked carefully. It was a stupid question seeing everything that just went down, but he didn't really have any better equipment at hand.

“Dunno…” Logan said quietly. “Empty…?” he suggested.

“Is there anything I can do…?” Nico asked, sticking with his repertoire of pointless questions.

“Even *more?* Hah. No, I honestly don't think so” Logan said more firmly. He shifted, seemingly trying to break free from Nico's grasp. He let him go. “Thank you for getting rid of him” he added, wiping at his face one last time. He turned to look at Nico.

He looked absolutely beat. It didn't suit him. It reminded him of the way he'd looked that night on the balcony...

Nico did his best to hide how flustered he was by the situation. He'd been dreading seeing how Logan would react to being here, but it turned out *so* much worse than he'd thought. He'd known coming here was going to be very hard, but he hadn't expected it to turn into a *literal* confrontation with the actions of his stepfather. He probably should have though… He knows how restless spirits can be, and after what happened here…

“I got it. Let's just get out of here” Logan almost pleaded.

Nico nodded and walked out the door. He waited when he heard Logan stop. Logan stood still in the doorway, he looked back at his old room. He lingered at the small guitar in the corner, still on the floor. He seemed to hesitate, then quickly went back in and grabbed it. He walked past Nico on his way to the stairs. His steps sounded angry as he stomped down. Nico winced at the sound of the door slam and followed after him. At least Logan hadn't lost his *spark*... He hoped that was a good sign...

He stood still and watched Logan throw the guitar on the backseat. “What are you going to do with it?” he asked.

“Smash it” Logan responded with a low voice, slamming the door. As he went to open the driver seat door, he paused. “I don't know yet…”.

Nico got in on the other side. They sat in silence for a while.

Logan started the car.

“You sure you should be driving?” Nico asked carefully. “Yeah, I'm fine” he responded casually.

Nico tried not to yell. “*Like hell you are.* This was fucking *horrible.* Don't say you're fine. *I'm not even fine”*.

Logan smiled. It seemed genuine. “Okay. Not the right word. I'm *not* fine. But, I'm a lot better than I thought I would be. Don't get me wrong, it kind of sucked my soul out, but this was good... In a fucked up way, I'm almost a little relieved”. Their eyes met. “I want to drive, it helps me clear my head. I’m probably going to need some time to process this”. He gave Nico a reassuring smile. “Thanks again, by the way. I'm really happy you were there… I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been…”.

Nico felt his face heat up. He'd felt pretty useless back there. Almost like he’d caused it even, seeing as he helped channel Curtis to the world of the living. Not that he felt he had much of a choice though… The only time he felt like he'd done anything to help was when he'd passed Curtis to the other side. “No problem” he muttered.

He watched Logan drive for a while. It was clear the whole ordeal was eating at him.

“I think I'm going to sell it” Logan said suddenly.

Nico was lost. “The guitar…?”.

Logan shook his head. “No, the house” he clarified. “It feels-” he cut himself off, lost in thought. “It's not really my house anymore, anyway”.

Nico blinked.

Logan continued. “I've been thinking… Well no actually, I've been *brooding*… But, after the whole *thing* with Curt just now, I realized something. I guess I felt like I *had* to keep it. Like I had to get over it. Not let what happened rule my life, you know? To try to prove that I *could* or something. But I don’t think keeping it is really going to help me. I think I would just be making it harder for myself. I don’t need that” Logan stared at the road ahead. “So I don’t think I want to keep it” he shrugged.

Nico blinked a few times. Then he hummed in agreement. Logan took a deep breath. He looked tired, and sad. But Nico wasn't as worried as he was before.

Logan was strong. Not just physically, but mentally. Even more than that, he was *brave,* in the purest sense of the word. He always seemed to deal with life as it came at him. Not without kicking or screaming… And *definitely* not without fear… But being fearless wasn’t what bravery was about, was it? What would bravery even mean without fear? *True* bravery meant being scared shitless of something, and then facing it anyway. And that’s what Logan tried to do. Every single time. At least in the end. When it really came down to it, he dared to really look at himself, accept his own feelings and tried to move forward. No matter how hard that was. Even when it made him physically sick. Nico admired that, despite it being the main reason for a lot of their awkward conversations. Maybe even *because* of that…

“What?” Logan asked, glancing at him.

“I'm proud of you” Nico said. It came out with a lot more emotion than he wanted. Whatever. He meant it, emotions and all.

Logan smiled. “I've got a *long* way to go still…” he almost sighed out.

“You'll get there” Nico replied, patting Logan's hand on the gear stick. His hand lingered for a while.

More death and confrontation lay waiting for them behind the heavy metal cemetery gates. Logan stopped in front of him, reluctantly looking ahead. Nico stopped dead in his tracks, but not for the same reason. He’d noticed something. Something he'd secretly been keeping an eye out for.

“One second!” he said hastily. *That is some timing…!*

He knelt down and held out his hand slightly above the ground. He willed his find to come up. This was going to take a while. It was deep, very deep. And stuck to something big,

something *incredibly* big… He shifted a little to get a better angle and smiled when it finally broke free. The ground shook a little. The tiles of the sidewalk gave way, lifting up under the palm of his hand. Something heavy hit it soon after. *Jackpot.* He stood up and held out his hand, hiding what was inside.

Logan gave him a confused look over, lingering on Nico's smirk. “What are you up to...?” he asked warily. He stuck out his hand anyway.

Nico pressed the small, well *not* small, object into his hand.

Logan stared at the sharp, stony fang. He let out an impressed huff. “No way” he said slowly. “Is that a *dinosaur tooth*?”.

Nico shrugged. “I really hope so. If not, that was one horrifying chicken once…”. He tried to look sly about it, but he couldn't hide how pleased he was with himself.

Logan gave him a warm smile, an excited flicker of fire going through his eyes. “That's fucking awesome”. He shoved it into his pocket and pulled Nico in for a rough kiss. “*Thanks*” he almost whispered against his lips as he pulled back. “I’ll keep it close for good luck. Forever”.

Nico forgot all about trying to look sly. This was better than the reaction he’d hoped for. Heat smacked him in the face when Logan kissed him under the ear. In self defense, he quickly set out to ruin the moment. Just enough to keep some dignity... “I knew you were *sentimental,* but… You’re superstitious too?” he mocked gently, giving Logan a quick peck on the cheek before pushing him off.

Logan seemed unfazed in his enthusiasm. “Sure, why not? The fucking *Greek Gods* turned out to be real” he shrugged, walking on with much more confidence.

Touché... Nico’s smug expression cracked in half. “*Ha*…”. He quickly moved to catch up

Logan stood still and turned to the tombstone next to him. This had to be it, Nico reckoned. He stood next to him, reading the inscription. Yes. This was her. They stayed quiet. Not just *her,* he realized a little unsettled.

The grave looked peaceful, and well taken care of. There was a small bouquet of white roses in an old looking vase standing near the top. Its slightly tacky flower print and missing chip in the rim screamed Ms. Venema.

There was another, much bigger and much more intricate bouquet laying right in the middle. White poppies stole the show. It seemed a lot more fresh... Based on what he'd heard, this screamed someone else’s name…

Nico eyed Logan a little nervously. He looked apathetic. Then he didn't. He drew a breath and looked away. When he turned to glance at Nico his expression was sad. *No,* not just

sad, *drained...* Nico reached his hand over to Logan's, intertwinging their fingers. They smiled reassuringly at each other. Logan turned back to the tombstone.

He inhaled deeply. "Yep". He cocked his head slightly. "Still *dead*" he concluded dryly.

Nico's breath caught. He snapped his head to face him in disbelief. Logan snickered at his reaction, leaning away in anticipation. Nico resisted the urge to smack him in the back of the head right then and there. Logan's breath hitched a little as he settled down.

Yeah, alright.… He'd let it slide this time… Nico sighed and rested the side of his head on his shoulder. Stupid spikes be damned. He listened as Logan's breathing slowly calmed back down.

Logan grasped at his collar, pulling at it. Nico shifted a little with concern. He exhaled as soon as he saw Logan pull his mother's dog tag out of his shirt. Logan closed his fingers around it, slowly running over the letters with his thumb. His hand trembled… Nico slowly reached over, closing his hand around Logan's. He froze when Logan pulled his hand out underneath. His breath caught when he closed it around his, gently squeezing the small metal plate into Nico's grip. He relaxed back onto Logan's shoulder.

An arm slipped around his back, drawing him in even closer. "She would have loved you, you know?" Logan muttered. The tone of his voice was low and pensive.

Nico lifted his head to look at him. He couldn't get Logan to meet his eyes, still lost in thought. "I probably would have loved her too" he said without thinking. It was true though. She sounded great.

Logan finally looked at him, seemingly caught off guard a little. Before Nico could react, Logan grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him in. "*Cute*" he concluded after pulling away a bit.

He looked back to the grave, then held up the bottle of wine. Nico glanced at the label. An Italian red wine. Chianti, but on the more complex side it seemed... He pursed his lips with a small hint of pride, slightly impressed.

"I don't get why she likes it so much. It's just old grape juice" Logan muttered, *like a moron.*

One accusatory finger wasn't enough, he pointed his entire hand in his face. "Don't mess with Italians or their wine, you *uncultured savage!* People have gotten killed for less!" Nico spat.

"Oh, right. I forgot you're basically the *Gothfather*… What now? Are you going to make me *disappear?"* Logan asked dryly.

Clever… Very clever… "Shut the fuck up, *darling…*" Nico mustered up. "*It's a good wine…* And it's to honor your dead mother. So, be a *little* more respectful… I promise I'll stop complaining. " he offered, *pleaded*.

"Oh, *an offer I can't refuse…* Fine" Logan chuckled.

Nico closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *Fine.*

Logan grinned and turned his attention back to the task at hand. “Probably should’ve brought something to open it” he muttered, turning the bottle in his hand. “Oh, well”. He knocked off the top against the tombstone, splattering some wine onto the roughly textured stone and onto Nico's pride. He knelt down and carefully poured the rest of the bottle onto the grave. All over the intricate bouquet, moving the bottle around to douse as many flowers as possible.

Nico saw a hint of an evil smile while he did so. He bit his tongue. *Whatever you need, hun.*… This was hard enough. No reason to make it worse. Besides… Even based on the limited knowledge he had of her, his mother probably would have appreciated the gesture anyway. Maybe even *more* so... He smiled to himself.

“Hey, hag. It’s your favourite” Logan mused to the ground. His expression soured a bit. “Sorry I haven’t visited, it’s been a weird few-”. His shoulders tensed up. “It’s been a weird *year.*… Fuck, man…”. He shook the last bit of wine out and shoved down the broken bottle next to him. He folded his arms over his knees and stared at the tombstone pensively for a while, then turned to look at Nico, still deep in thought. He got up. “C’mon” he said, gesturing the other way.

“You sure?” Nico asked.

“Yeah, I’m done” Logan replied flatly.

Nico tried not to look too worried.

“It’s a pretty good start, right?” Logan asked, suddenly sounding a little insecure.

Nico smiled faintly. “Yeah” he assured.

Nico walked up to the car, grabbing the grill with one hand reaching out to Logan with the other. “Come on” he beckoned. “I’m taking you home. To Gwen’s”. It wasn’t up for discussion.

Logan wasn’t listening, too lost in the bracelet in his hand. He held it up, closely inspecting it. It was made of obviously aged, heavy looking silver chainlinks.

Logan was surprisingly sentimental about things sometimes. Nico wondered what memory made him go all the way back for it. Maybe his mom?

“So, what's so special about that bracelet?” Nico asked.

Logan smiled mysteriously. He gave him a warm look, his eyes burned with a hint of mischief. Nico braced himself. What was he up to? *Gods,* did they come all the way here and go through *all that* for a gift from an ex…? Which would be *fine,* he reminded himself. He braced himself a little harder anyway.

“You tell me”. Logan slipped it around Nico's wrist and hooked it shut.

Nico's breath stuck for a second. He looked at his wrist. *No way, right?*

“It's the first thing I ever bought with my own money. I always thought it brought me luck, but I’ve got plenty of luck… I know you don’t believe in that crap, but you wear silver, right?” he asked, gently running his finger over Nico's earring. “Just a little nicer than a *fucking cigarette*, at least…”.

Nico was stumped. He couldn't look away from it. That *cruel* asshole. How could he do something so *thoughtful* to him? *Straight up torture! Right.*.. So, how had he not seen it coming?

“Look, you don't have to *wear* it. I just want you to have-”.

Shut up. Right now, or I'm going to cry on you. Nico quickly cut him off by pulling him in by the collar. He wrapped his arms around the back of his neck, trapping their mouths together. He felt him smile against him. It was too much. His heart couldn't handle it. Just as quickly, he pulled away and wiped at his eyes. He turned away trying to get his breathing to even out.

Logan ran a hand through his hair. “Looks good on you. Way better than it did on me”.

Nico sniffed in response, a little pathetically honestly. He didn't care. That was fine, as long as the grin on his face wouldn't get stuck forever… *Eh.* Whatever. It could stick around all it wanted. He quickly grasped Logan’s hand and tossed the shadows over them.

The truck gave him a shove as it rolled out of the shadows. His bracelet clattered against the hood as he caught himself. Logan’s hands were on his hips before he had the chance to straighten up. Warm amber eyes looking down into his own with concern. Not just concern…

Logan grabbed the back of his neck and gently, but firmly bent him over backwards onto the hood. He shifted his hips between Nico’s legs, running a hand over his waist. A trail of flames tickled his skin as his shirt ran up. “This takes me back…” he murmured, touching his forehead with his own.

Nico let out a huff, even more out of breath now. He closed his eyes, hooking an arm around Logan’s neck trying to pull him closer.

“This is how that night was *supposed* to end” Logan whispered against his lips, before finally giving in and showing exactly what he meant.

Maybe the truck wasn’t so bad after all, Nico decided as his back arched against it.

Chapter 21: XXI. Tartarus hath no fury like a Goddess scorned

Chapter Notes

> All warnings are spoilers:
> Some dirty jokes, Some blood, mild injuries, corpses, more corpse desecration, near collapsing, near death experience, choking, hostage situation, toxic yuri.

Two weeks had passed. Two days they had left. Two plans was all they had managed to come up with… The first option was to storm Eris' vacation home and see what would happen next, most likely a painful death. That was Logan's plan. The second option was to call her bluff and hide, spending the rest of their lives on the run. That was Nico's plan. They both straight up *sucked*.

Logan nudged Nico's shoulder, stopping his downward spiral. "Hey, no pressure, but if we're doing mine, we should probably get to it…".

Nico took a deep breath, ready to continue the rest of his spiral out loud. He tried to stay concentrated while Logan kept turning his Greek fire on and off. "Alright, I know my plan isn't *that* much better, but there is no chance in Hell just barging in is going to end well… We *have* to think of something else! We can't just start a fistfight with the literal embodiment of strife! In her own *home* no less! She's immortal! I-!". *Actually have something to lose now…* He tore his eyes away from Logan's when he felt tears well up.

Logan turned the fire off and reached over, grabbing his hand. "Look, Spooky… I know it sucks, but I think the harsh truth is we just don't really have a choice" he shrugged. "We can't *not* deal with it. Sure, if we go we might die, but it's our only shot at an actual life" he shrugged.

Nico felt his hand tremble in Logan's despite the warmth. "*Yeah…*" he sighed, tightening his grip. He hated when Logan was right, which was surprisingly often.

Letting Gwen know of their plan at the last possible moment, they'd prevented a long tearful goodbye, in favor of a short angry one. Leaving her behind on the other side of the shadows, they'd stepped out in Central Park. The Ramble, in the southern half. Among the rocks in the carefully crafted wilderness, an exceptionally large rock *didn't* quite stand out. Well, not to anyone who didn't know exactly what it was, at least.

Logan looked around, then settled his eyes back on Nico and raised an eyebrow.

Nico gestured at the large rock right in front of them. “The Door of Orpheus” he explained. “Leads right down to Hades. All we need is some music”.

Logan grinned, eyes burning with amusement. “Oh? Does that mean I get to hear you *sing* again?”.

Crap. “No!”. Nico ripped his hand free to stick it in Logan’s face. “We-!”. His hand froze. He hadn’t actually thought about that. Will had opened it last time…

Logan shoved his hand aside, still grinning. “Fine. *I’ll* sing” he declared smugly.

Nico sighed. “*No.*.. There’s no way it’s going to accept *that* as music…”. He reached out an arm. “Nevermind. I’ll just…” he muttered, drawing in the shadows from the undergrowth.

Logan groaned, grabbing his hand. “Don’t waste that on fucking *pride*” he squeezed into his palm. He shoved his other hand into his pocket and dug out his phone, scowling intently at the screen.

Nico blinked at the sight of it. The same familiar industrial black, metal phone case, completely *indestructible*, wrapped around a screen in smithereens… “What did you do to that thing?!”.

“*Nothing it shouldn’t have been able to handle.*..” Logan grumbled quietly, scowling at it harder. “There”. He held his phone out for the rock to hear.

A very angry British man started loudly verbally abusing the rock, encouraged by even angrier, louder guitars and what *might* be drums. The rock stared back blankly, not impressed.

Logan looked at the screen, puzzled. “Maybe I need to up the volume…?”.

At that threat, the rock caved, splitting in two perfect halves to open a stairwell. The stagnant air flowed out with a distasteful sigh.

Logan unsheathed his sword and flicked on his Greek fire. “Well…” he shrugged, taking his first step down.

Nico hurried after him, the rock already inching back to a close. He glanced over his shoulder, at the last glimpse of natural light, as the doors sealed their fate behind them. He took in the downward spiral ahead. The shape of the pitch black stones only hinted at by their shimmer in the green glow of the flames.

After what had to be hundreds of steps, he lost count. After he lost faith they ever would, they ended, leading them down a narrow hallway. The darkness brightened to dusk when they made their way out from behind his father’s palace. The eerie green light emanating from the

expansive windows casting down the walls of the obsidian fortress made Stabigail look like a mere green matchstick.

Logan held her up so she could see better. “Damn…” he huffed in amazement. He turned to grin at Nico. “Is that your dad’s?”.

“Yep” Nico replied coolly. “Let’s keep moving” he urged, glancing at the bronze ‘beware of dog’ sign on the black metal fence.

Too late. A black, furry body the size of a temple rose to four legs like pillars. One head after the other turned their bright red eyes on them. They growled in chorus, then barked in canon. Cerberus bounded at them, landing in increasing magnitude.

Nico pulled Logan behind him and stuck up a hand. “*Down!*” he ordered, pointing at the ground.

Cerberus slid to a halt in a small rockslide, raising six ears at the sound of his voice. He slowly sat down and lowered his heads to sniff him from all sides. One head let out a disapproving rumble when it found Logan.

“No!” Nico scolded with a snap of his fingers, earning a short whine.

Cerberus laid down, staring at Nico guiltily.

Nico petted its middle nose. “Good boy” he praised.

Cerberus wagged his massive tail, creating a happy dustcloud behind him in the chilly, musty air. He panted wafts of sulphur over them.

Nico sighed, letting go of Logan’s arm. Cerberus’ eyes narrowed as they carefully followed Logan’s every move stepping out from behind him.

Logan narrowed his eyes right back at him. “He probably senses I’m more of a feral cat person…” he muttered, grinning widely.

Cerberus let out another rumble, baring some huge teeth.

“Stop antagonizing him” Nico warned. Both of them, honestly... He beckoned at the ground, willing up the largest bone he could find and shoving it in Logan’s free hand. “Here. Throw that as far as you can”.

Logan grinned wider, sheathing his sword with a determined sizzle. He reached the bone behind himself and swung it forward with a low swoosh. All of Cerberus’ heads snapped around to watch the bone fly over him. His nails drew small craters in the dirt in anticipation.

“Fetch” Nico ordered as the bone bounced off the ground.

Cerberus skipped after it, pelting them with dirt and rocks. Two heads fought over the bone. The third snuck underneath and happily chomped down on it. They’d only made it a couple

of steps before he dutifully returned it, dropping it at their feet. Repeating that pattern, they slowly made their way across the barren plain of dead grass.

“So” Logan grunted, throwing the bone even further. “How are we going to get there?” he asked, shielding his face from the rocks and dirt.

Nico twisted his skull ring, not really sure. “I can't shadow travel us there… Not even anywhere *near* the river bank, actually. The fire is too bright and restless. The flickers of the current make the shadows too *shifty*. We’d get torn up…” he pondered.

“Hah. That whole shadow magic thing isn’t as much of a ‘skeleton key’ as I thought” Logan replied, bending down to pick up the bone. “Well, whatever. She probably crosses that river every day, right? There has to be a way” he threw back.

Nico clicked his tongue. “*Sure,* but seeing as she’s a *Goddess* she probably just gets a first class boat ride to-!”.

Logan cocked head in interest.

Nico stopped and closed his eyes in pure dread. “*Ugh*, Charon…”. He walked on. “Follow me…”.

They gave Cerberus some last pats on the noses and made a turn for a path slithering through the black, thorny disarray of a burned down forest.

They found him soon enough. No surprise, as he never left his post. The dead glared and tutted as they skipped the infinite line stretched all along the riverbank of the Styx. Charon didn’t even look up from his scroll. His bony finger slid over the parchment, the rest of him hidden under a ragged cloak.

Nico stepped in front of him, finding an ashen, gaunt face under the pointed hood. Ghastly pale blue eyes narrowed, but refused to acknowledge him. He took a deep breath. “Charon, we need your help” he urged politely.

Charon rolled his eyes at his scroll, still not looking up. “Ugh. You seem to be confusing me with someone who *cares.* I don’t work for you” he mumbled apathetically.

Nico sucked in his lips, then tried again. “I… I know that, and I’m sorry, but I’m sure my father would agree-”.

Charon rolled his eyes harder. “*Ugh!* You’re *seriously* pulling the ‘*Do you know who my dad is*’ card? *Pathetic*” he mumbled in disgust.

Logan snickered quietly.

Nico bit down on his knuckle to stop from screaming. Charon was so fucking impossible. “*Fine*” he groaned. He grabbed Logan’s arm with one hand, and the shadows with the other.

He let them go as soon as they reached the palace. The middle of Persephone’s garden, to be precise. *Oops.*

He stepped out of the now trampled flowerbed. His eyes quickly scanned over all the lush foliage around them, looking for dire consequences. The only movement he saw were the skeletal peacocks strutting and digging around the vegetables and flowers. Their dainty bones almost as stark white and elegant as their large tailfeathers.

An offended shriek made him grit his teeth. A much taller figure emerged out of the grape vines, all the way on the other side. She held onto the large straw hat on her head, waving a sickle around as she ran after a peacock, a bag of seeds in its beak. It led her into a maze of berry bushes.

Nico breathed a sigh of relief, quietly thanking the bird for its death defying instincts. He pulled Logan along, onto the shell path to the front door.

Two skeleton guards sprang to attention before they reached it, crossing their spears in front of the door. Nico dismissed them, all the way into a pile on the ground. He grabbed the doorhandle, then paused to look Logan over.

Logan’s eyes darted from the doorhandle, to his face. He cocked his head with a smile, eyes burning with anticipation. *No.*.. Excitement…

“Don't be cute with my father” Nico warned sternly.

Logan hissed. “Ooh, I can't help it. I'm naturally adorable” he said with the fakest apologetic smile Nico had ever seen.

“I'm *serious*” Nico pleaded.

Logan put his hand on his shoulder. “Hey, don't worry. It'll be fine. He's going to figure me out soon enough, anyway. I'm a terrible actor…”. His apologetic smile seemed a lot more genuine.

Nico sighed. “Let's just get this over with. *Try* to be respectful!”. He opened the door and walked in.

The familiar vaulted ceilings gazed down on them, through the countless empty eyesockets of the macabre chandelier, a carefully compositioned stack of skeletons locked into an intimate embrace, suspended from a spine. They held out their arms in all directions, cupping green flames, and lighting the main hall.

The light complemented the dark green runner, leading the way across the intricate, deep red pomegranate fruits and flowers in the otherwise black mosaic on the floor. His stepmother’s latest attempt at homemaking, Nico presumed.

The rug dulled the echoes of their steps as they walked into the hallway, past a collection of stuffed screech owls mounted on the wall. Nico avoided their intense ominous stare. From the corner of his eyes, he could have sworn they twisted their little necks all the way around to follow them.

His eyes needed a second to adjust when he pushed open the door to the throne room. The flare of the huge green funeral pyre right in the middle of the floor was painfully bright. It hid everything, and *everyone,* behind it. A cat skeleton snoozed lazily in front of it while two rat skeletons scurried by. Nico took a deep breath before he walked around it.

The tall, pale frame of his father came into view, clad in black robes. The heavy fabric cast down the steps in front of his throne made entirely out of bone and ivory. The backrest, a giant ribcage, almost embraced him. If Hades was surprised by their arrival, he didn't show it. His demeanor statuesque and stoic, as he stared right at them.

Nico gestured for Logan to stop, right behind him. He sucked in his lips, sticking up a hand in an awkward greeting.

Hades' lips tightened ever so slightly, finally revealing the slightest hint of emotion. "I heard you're going to Tartarus, despite my telling you not to go back there… And to go live a happy, peaceful life…" he complained, mild disappointment hidden under a stern tone.

Nico smiled guiltily. "Yes… Well… Turns out I'm not really good at… *That.*…" he stammered, glancing down at his feet.

Hades clicked his tongue, then smiled in faint amusement. "I suppose the bane of disobedient children befalls even the Gods…" he sighed. He rested his temple on his hand and gestured at them. "Now, who is this you brought?".

Logan happily accepted the invitation and stepped forward. "I'm Logan, son of Ares, my lord. Your son's personal demon" Logan explained, he pulled Nico against his shoulder.

Nico shoved him back in his place.

"Well" Hades started stoically. "At least he's not Jackson…".

Logan smirked "Thank you for noticing, sir!".

Nico saw the corner of his father's mouth twitch ever so slightly. "Logan, *shut up*" he commanded.

"Yes, dear" Logan responded dryly.

Nico glared at him.

Hades broke the tension, gesturing at the door. "Son of Ares. Leave me to speak to my son".

"Yessir!" Logan said cheerfully. He threw in a salute, his other hand shoved in his pocket. With one last devious smile, he strode out the door.

Nico turned to his father. “Forgive him, he's probably got brain damage from all the punches to the head-” he tried.

“I approve” Hades interrupted him calmly.

Nico looked at him in disbelief.

“That's the reason you brought him here, yes?” Hades inquired.

“No, we're… *Wait*. You approve?” Nico stammered.

Hades leaned back. “This is the young man who singlehandedly slayed Destructor, I believe? I quite enjoyed that story… Almost as much as Ate did. She even offered to show me the security footage. However, as she described the events that followed, that seemed a tad *inappropriate”*.

Nico’s mouth fell open, the rest of his face on fire. Their first kiss had been caught? On camera? *In the underworld?!* Not just that. It was being *shared.*

His father smiled apologetically, with a strong undertone of schadenfreude. “That aside, he seems confident and… *Decently* polite.”. He looked at Nico intently. “More importantly, he seems to challenge you” he added with a faint, but genuine smile.

“Tell me about it…” Nico muttered with annoyance. Truth be told, this mattered to him more than he would ever admit to either of them. “Alright, enough about that. We need your help with something”. Nico handed his father a small, empty scroll.

Logan turned around as Nico walked out the door. “Got what we need?”.

Nico held up the now no longer empty scroll. “I hope so” he said, handing it over. He watched Logan shove it into a small compartment of the backpack. “Despite your *charm offensive* back there, my father said he approves of you” Nico told him, trying not to let his excitement show.

“Does he now? That's going to come in handy when I beg him for your hand in marriage in a couple of years” Logan teased.

“Please, as if you'd ever beg for anything” Nico scoffed.

Logan shrugged. “Not the first time I’ve gotten on my knees for you”.

Nico tried his hardest to shake the memories out of his head before his face burned off. “*Don't say stuff like that here!”* he shouted. He pulled on one of Logan's earrings, just hard enough to serve as a warning.

“Sorry, sorry” Logan laughed, putting his hands up in surrender.

Nico let go.

Logan's expression suddenly turned a lot more serious. “Would you like that? You know, to get married or something? At some point I mean… You never actually told me at the wedding…”.

Nico shook his head slightly, caught off guard. “What?” he asked.

“I was joking just now, but if you'd like to… We could. One day... Or get matching t-shirts that say *‘I'm with stupid’* or something. Probably important to talk about this stuff eventually…”

Nico chuckled. He pulled Logan in by the hem of his shirt and kissed him. “You're so *corny*”.

Logan gave him a lopsided smile “That's your fault though. I used to be really cool before I met you”.

Logan waved at someone.

Nico glanced over his shoulder. Hades was standing by the window, looking at them. One eyebrow raised and his arms crossed. He slowly took a sip from the goblet he was holding.

Nico hastily shoved Logan off of him. “*Father, please!”*.

All recently deceased eyes followed them as they made their way past the line yet again. Charon’s eyes fell on them along his count of heads. He narrowed them in irritation. “Ugh… You again…”.

Nico sighed, just holding out the scroll for him.

Charon swiped it out of his hand and ripped it open, skimming the text. His irritation flared into anger. “Ugh~! *Are you serious?!*”. He pinched the bridge of his nose and tossed the scroll over his shoulder. It landed in the ghastly water in a puff of smoke. He didn’t even bother opening his eyes as he addressed them. “*Ugh!* Fine! Toss a golden drachma into the fire once you reach it! *And hurry it up!”*.

He muttered angrily to himself as he turned to the ever growing line in front of him. Nico only picked up the word ‘raise’. Charon sighed not once, but twice, then cupped his mouth. “Listen up, people! I know you’ve been waiting for *ages*, but my boss is abusing his position to make me take care of his personal matters! Don’t blame me! Blame these *bozos!*”. He gestured at Nico and Logan.

A loud disgruntled groan moved down the entire line. Nico sucked in his lips, he elbowed Logan in the side to get him to stop snickering.

To get to the very source of the Phlegethon, they needed to get to Tartarus. Nico twisted his ring as they walked through the murky meadow of the field of Asphodel, a shortcut to the gateway to the darkest pits of the underworld. He wasn't looking forward to the rest of their journey. He'd been there a few times already, of course. And he'd survived. *Barely.* But Logan had no-!

Logan grabbed his hand and squeezed, forcing Nico's fingers off of his ring. "Stick with me, bud. I need you here" he teased.

"Yeah" Nico affirmed. Jokes aside, that was their strongest strategy.

The dead grass turned into rocky dirt, forming a narrow path through a series of caves. Not the cave he was looking for. Not yet.

Logan let go of his hand to twist his ring. A small green flame grew big as he unsheathed his sword. Nico gestured for him to stay behind him as he took the lead into the darkness, tracing the rocky wall next to him with his fingers.

The walls spread apart, then spread even more. Nico almost tripped when he stepped onto a bone. A *human* bone. It slid right into another, next to a skull. *Ha.…* He slowly nudged it with his foot, rolling it to see from all sides. Deep scratches in all directions hinted at the sharp teeth that had torn away the flesh.

A damp draft hit his face from above. He glanced up, at nothing but darkness. The green flames couldn't reach the ceiling. *No.…* His eyes narrowed, realizing his mistake before he did. There was movement above them. *Writhing.…*

Logan stepped next to him and grabbed his shoulder, illuminating the true scale of the carnage. A pile of corpses in various stages of decomposition right in front of them. "Are you-?" he began to ask.

Nico quickly shoved his hand over Logan's mouth.

Too late. One after the other, eyes opened above them, reflecting the green light like a sickening starry night. The leathery sounds of wings spreading lasted a mere second before piercing shrieks echoed off the walls from all sides.

Nico's hands shot forward on instinct, reaching for the dead. Bones scrambled to assemble themselves, rotting flesh moved once more, all grasping for any weapon in reach.

All at once, the Arai swept down. They darted through the darkness like a flock of bats, clawing the undead corpses apart at any given opening. Nico pulled them back together as fast as he could. Logan pulled him against his side, sword ahead.

The wings of the Arai almost blew the Greek fire in their face with the force they needed to come to a halt. They shrieked in pain as they shielded their eyes from the bright light, then flung themselves back into the air.

The relief was short. They wouldn't be able to keep that up. Not from all sides… Nico's hands trembled at the weight of his army. He groaned as two more soldiers fell, hoisting them back to their feet.

Logan let go of his arm, thrusting his sword forward in a green flash. He stabbed it right through the ribs of the closest undead…?

Nico's eyes widened as the corpse caught fire. It glanced down at the burning flesh of its hands in idle surprise. *Right!* Nico forced all arms outward. He squinted at the explosive flashover, forming a ring of green fire all around them.

The shrieks turned panicked, frantic. The Arai flew into each other and the walls in their desperate attempt to get away from the flaming spears, swords and shields, only spreading the fire further. Their wings burned up in green cinders, dropping them to the floor. Dust and ashes mixed in the air as they perished.

The skeletons fell apart top to bottom, all bones scorched black. All green flames died. The draft returned, carrying the smell of burned flesh. Nico huffed weakly. He felt Logan's arm slide around his waist before he could drop to his knees, and let him pull his arm over his shoulder.

"I swear to the Gods, if you pick me up again…" Nico grumbled. To his annoyance his threat only yielded a chuckle. Maybe it would have helped if he hadn't sounded so frail.

"Yeah, yeah… You're very strong and scary" Logan assured, moving him along to the side of the cave.

Nico gratefully let himself get lowered down, resting his head against the rocky wall. It was still warm from the intense heat earlier. He almost missed the feeling of a near fiery death. The sweat he hadn't felt earlier, was turning cold fast.

He watched on by the dim light coming through the cracks and openings in the walls as Logan kicked some bones in a pile in front of him.

Logan twisted his ring, green flames enveloped his hand. He ran it over one of the skulls at the top, almost like a macabre caress. It lit up, spreading the fire down the rest of the pile, emanating an eerie green glow around them.

Nice. "Lame" Nico said flatly.

"*Damn*, sounds like your pants are a little *too* tight today!" Logan complained. "C'mon, man! That's a *mood!*". He seemed pretty pleased with himself. "Really thought you'd be into that…" he muttered, sitting down next to him.

Nico looked away and grinned. “Alright, sure. Maybe a little”. He dropped his head on Logan’s shoulder, looking at the emerald flames dancing in the empty eye sockets in front of them. “Stabbing that dead guy was *really* smart” he admitted quietly.

“I didn’t really think about it…”. Logan shrugged under his cheek. “You’re the one who thought of letting them spread it themselves. Now *that* was smart!”. He nudged Nico’s foot with his own. “You're probably the smartest guy I know” he said with audible pride.

“Wow! I feel sorry for you. That’s *terrible!*” Nico replied with only half feigned horror.

“Stop being mean to yourself, or there'll be *consequences*” Logan warned.

“Sounds kinky” Nico taunted.

“Okay, you asked for it” Logan sighed.

Nico grinned to himself in anticipation. This should be fun.

“You are a good person” Logan declared empathetically.

Wait. Nico quickly pulled back from Logan’s shoulder and glared at him.

“You are worthy of love and respect” Logan continued, digging even deeper.

No! Nico grimaced.

Logan responded with a malicious smirk. “You are enough just the way you-”

Nico firmly put his hand over Logan’s mouth, putting a stop to the torture. Logan kissed the palm of his hand.

Nico pulled it back like he'd stabbed it. “*Stop!* You win!” he shouted desperately. He angrily dropped his head back onto his shoulder.

Logan rubbed his cheek on his head, chuckling quietly.

Nico shot up, making Logan jolt next to him. *Crap!* How long had he been asleep?! They were only supposed to take a short break! They didn’t have time for-!

A warm hand pressed down on his shoulder. “Spooky! Chill!” Logan urged. “It was just a few hours. We’d have to sleep eventually anyway!”.

Nico sighed. *Sure, but…* “We have to stay focussed! We aren’t even in Tartarus yet!”. He didn’t wait for a reply, beckoning Logan to follow as he paced further down the cave.

Green light hurried after him, with an exasperated sigh. It caught up with him, illuminating a scowl. The scowl turned into a reassuring smile when Nico’s eyes lingered on it. All reassurance turned mischievous as the smile grew.

Oh, no…

“You know, I noticed something…” Logan started suspiciously carefully. “Your dad is actually pretty hot”.

No! You! Fucking! Didn't! Nico stopped and turned to him slowly. The corner of his mouth twitched. He controlled himself as he drew in a deep breath. “Not as hot as yours” he countered.

Logan's eyes dimmed instantly. The spirit of his grin shattered, leaving a horrified green hue hanging over it. He raised his shoulders slightly. “Okay. Let's never go there again” he said breathlessly.

“Deal”. Nico quickly turned back and paced on.

They kept up the brisk pace cave after cave, steadily making their way to where they actually needed to go. Just a bit more and they’d reach-!

The cave rumbled with the unsettling sound of rock scraping against rock, then roared as rocks no longer scraped, but crashed. Green fire clattered ahead of him down the cave and died. Nico turned around in a flash, right as Logan’s arms flew around his neck. The air got knocked out of him when Logan's body hit his, all muscles tense, bracing for the impact. Nico gripped onto him, shielding him as best he could. The darkness caught them as they fell in.

His back finally hit the ground outside, under a shady overhang, now all the way down in Tartarus. Logan’s full weight landed right on top of him. Far away, but not nearly far enough, an entire mountainside collapsed and tumbled down with a thunderous crunch.

“You alright?” Nico heard himself wheeze through the chokehold.

“Yep. I’m fine” Logan groaned. He let go and rolled off of him. “You?” he asked in return.

Nico hadn't really considered it yet. “Yeah…” he breathed.

Logan pushed himself up and stuck out a hand. He pulled Nico up alongside himself. Nico grimaced as he took in the state of him. One side of his nose was bleeding heavily. The impact had splattered blood over his cheek and collarbone.

Logan let the blood run down his face for a few seconds. Then he sniffed and wiped over his mouth and cheek with the palm of his hand, leaving a faded red streak. Tiny flames burned in

the back of his eyes. He looked excited, but uncharacteristically serious. Neither fit the bloody nose… “So, where to?” he asked.

“You said you were *fine!”* Nico replied angrily.

“We almost *died*” he defended. “This is *more* than fine” he said, gesturing over his face.

Nico sighed. He hated that he had a point. “Right… We’re going west. We’re close to the delta now. It’s going to flow over into…”.

Logan didn't seem to notice the blood running down his face. A drop fell off his chin and hit the ground, making Nico trail off.

“Your, uh. Your nose is still bleeding…” Nico pointed out.

Logan grabbed the bottom of his shirt and lifted it up to his face, pressing it around his nose. “Go on” he said, slightly muffled.

Nico tried not to look down. There was no time for an ab break. *Maybe just a second.* He picked up where he left off right after. “The delta flows over into the Phlegethon. We follow it up north. All the way to the edge of Tartarus. That’s where Ate said it should be”.

Logan nodded. His serious expression fell when he looked down at his now empty hand. He slumped his shoulders, grieving Stabigail's untimely death.

Nico chuckled, earning a half hidden scowl. He held up his hands in a peace offering, shrugging off his backpack. He’d known something like this was going to happen… Logan’s eyes followed his hands warily as he zipped the bag open, then widened in awe as Nico pulled out a brand new Xiphos.

Nico held it out for him. “*Behold.…*” he joked. “Stabigail the ninth”.

Logan let his shirt drop down to hold out his hands in surprise, eyes burning with a warm amber fire, a faded blood streak over his grin. “*You know me so well~!”* he mused, voice strained in excitement. He moved past Stabigail to pull Nico into a tight hug, rocking him from side to side.

Nico smirked, savouring the warmth before trying to wiggle free.

Logan stole Stabigail out of his hand, then wagged her at Nico accusatorily. “Stabby” he insisted. He seemed to think for a second. “The tenth, actually…” he added carefully.

Nico blinked at him.

“Apple tree” Logan explained.

Right.… Nico sucked in his lips. His smile returned when Logan kissed them anyway. They got back on their way over the even murkier, gloomier, rockier landscape.

The light of the Phlegethon had led them straight to it, even yards away it shone like a beacon. Its current reflected onto the jagged ceiling in heaving streaks of orange, mirroring its meander all across Tartarus. The whispers in the shadows turned shrill and panicked as they got near, cowering from the restless flickers.

They followed the flowing flames over sharp obsidian pebbles, through breathtaking dustclouds, past bottomless caves. They had no choice but to avert their eyes as they walked, the river being too bright to look at for long. Nico glanced into yet another crevice in the rocks as the light passed over it. He stopped for a second, but couldn't see anything anymore as the darkness reclaimed its territory. The time pressure pushed him on.

He heard Logan shift sharply behind him, making him spin around. But not in time…

A huge, writhing serpent tail coiled itself tightly around Logan's entire upper body. Nico saw he had managed to get his fingers onto the handle of his sword, but that wouldn't be of any use with his arm wrapped against himself… The Dracaena didn't seem to want to take the risk anyway, sliding her tail over his hands and pressing them down.

A mean giggle sounded from behind his back. The serpentine monstress slowly revealed her hideously beautiful face from behind his shoulder, smiling her needle-like teeth bare. Logan fixed his eyes on her when she rested her chin on his shoulder. He let out a laboured gasp, then gritted his teeth.

Shit! Nico shifted to grab his sword.

The Dracaena tightened her stranglehold further up around his neck, tilting Logan's chin up. She tutted, slow and condescending. "No, no, *no*. You don't want to do that" she warned.

Nico froze, then slowly moved his hand away.

"Good boy~!" she cooed.

Nico sucked in his lips. This was bad… One wrong move and…

She pouted her shiny green lips at him, examining him carefully. "That's a *fine* sword you have there. Too fine for a half blood, don't you think? How about a trade?" she suggested, caressing Logan's cheek with the back of her finger.

Logan swallowed. "*Don't*-" he wheezed.

She cut him off with another coil of her tail, squeezing hard enough to make him squint. The orange flames brightened anxiously between the slits of his eyelids. "Quiet, this doesn't concern you…".

The slithery, raspy sound of the scales rubbing together was breathtaking. Nico almost instinctively reached for his sword again, but caught himself. Logan tried his best to smile reassuringly at him. It had the opposite effect.

Nico tore his eyes off of him and forced them back on hers. Her pupils narrowed, piercing him. If he actually believed her, he would have given her his sword without a second thought. But it was obvious she just wanted to disarm him…

“I’m getting impatient~” the serpent mused. She stabbed a jagged fingernail into Logan’s cheek and slowly tore it across, leaving a deep cut.

Logan’s reassuring smile turned a lot toothier. Nico watched his fingers rap quickly against his thigh, not even able to pretend it didn’t hurt. Nico clenched his teeth when she slowly worked her forked tongue along the wound, lapping up the blood.

You. Dirty. Fucking. Worm!

“How much is your friend worth to you~?”.

Nico couldn’t hold himself back. “*I'll show you!”*.

The shadows shot towards his hand. They concentrated, darker than black. In not even a second they fired back out, in a long *sharp* lance. It cut off her shriek as it entered her maw, skewering the back of her throat. She writhed and slithered, then blew away in the draft.

Logan hit the ground with a heavy, dusty thud. He shoved his hand onto the floor and pushed himself onto his back. Nico knelt down and lifted his head onto his lap. Logan grinned widely through the weak coughs he pushed out. He opened his mouth to say something, something that couldn’t possibly be worth the effort.

“Don’t talk” Nico ordered.

Logan nodded, wheezing.

Nico stared down into his eyes. The pleased looking smoulder helped him calm his nerves. He sighed at the cut, blood slowly seeping down the side of his face. His fingers hesitated to touch it. The Dracaena’s *repulsive* expression around her forked tongue flashing behind his eyes almost made him bite his own. *Yeah… No way we’re keeping that one…* The shadows slowly crept in again, right under his fingers as he gently pressed them over the wound. He wiped away the blood, only a faint hint left of the cut left underneath.

Logan laughed coarsely between wheezes. “*Damn.* All of that because she called me your *friend?* I've never heard you that *pissed* before*”* he teased weakly.

Nico raised an eyebrow at him. “Well, not *just* that!... She also licked you” he replied sarcastically. “No. Seriously. How badly hurt are you?”.

Logan’s grin died down. He looked past Nico, actually considering it.

That was all Nico needed to know. “Let's take a break”.

Logan’s eyes fixed back onto his. “We don’t have time”. He slowly shook his head and shifted. A laboured swallow drew attention to the red abrasion streaked all the way across his neck.

“A short one” Nico urged, sliding his hand under Logan’s chin.

Logan settled back down. “Yeah, okay. Guess I don’t have a choice anyway… I’m no match for you right now”. He ran a finger over where the cut used to be, inspecting the result. His eyes glowed with admiration. “Why do I even bother teaching you anything about swordfighting… You're *never* going to use it”. His complaint lacked any bitterness.

“Would have come in handy back in Russia” Nico countered.

“You *won* that fight…” Logan complained again.

Ah, there was the bitterness… Nico chuckled quietly.

After just a few minutes Nico wasn’t able to keep Logan down anymore. He pulled himself free and onto his feet. Nico scanned him carefully, trying not to pout. Logan looked back defiantly. Nico stopped trying not to pout.

Logan grabbed his chin. “Thank you” he said softly, quickly pressing a kiss onto his lips.

Tired and sore, they reached the source of the hellish stream of fire. On the other side, the chateau looked back at them, the pointed arches above the tall facetted windows and doors raised in petrified surprise. The gothic architecture suited the biblical scenery around it perfectly.

They caught their breath for a moment. Their eyes met, both looking for confirmation. Nico sighed as he held up the golden drachma between his fingers, then flicked it into the flames.

The flames rippled as it went under. The ripples grew higher, flowed faster. The bow of the ferry surfaced with a violent, fiery splash. Embers spouted into the air. The bottom of the boat almost crushed them as it hit the bank, forcing them apart.

Charon glared at them from the middle of the deck, arms crossed. “Ugh. Get in already” he mumbled impatiently.

Logan smirked. Nico sucked in his lips. They did as they were told.

Charon didn’t even wait for them to sit down before turning around and sticking his oar into the flames. He let his head fall back into his dark hood and let out a wallowing groan *so* long and annoyed even a teenager would be impressed. He pushed them halfway onto the river in one stroke, letting the ferry come to a halt. He took a deep breath, leaned further back and groaned even more wallowy, all the way to the other bank.

Logan bent down, snickering less and less quietly.

Nico jabbed him in the shoulder as a warning. “Thank you so much for your help” he threw at Charon, disembarking even quicker.

“Uuugh! *Whatever!”* Charon mumbled angrily, wringing his oar.

“We'll be back in a bit…” Nico assured. “*We hope…*”.

There were no ‘ughs’ this time, but Charon’s expression made it clear he really *didn't* hope the same.

They walked up to the front door. Nico hastily checked the time. Two minutes before midnight. Guess they stretched the deadline as far as they could…

“Ready to give your life in the name of love?” Logan asked with clearly exaggerated excitement.

Nico sucked in his lips. Logan looked at him expectantly. Nico got lost in the sincerity in his eyes. There was so much he wanted to say. Way too much. He couldn’t put any of it into actual words. Not without crying. “*Yeah… Let’s just get this over with…*” he pushed out, trying not to sound too affected. He grasped at the key, turning it with a loud click.

Logan pouted. “Really?! Are *those* going to be the last words you say to me?” he complained.

Nico pouted back at him. He leaned in for a peace offering. Logan accepted it with his usual warmth. He smiled, clearly happy enough.

Nico wasn’t. “I know it's selfish, but… If we *do* die… I’m really glad we get to die at the same time… Then, at least I don’t have to miss you…” he declared softly.

Logan’s face flushed. His eyes smouldered with a mix of emotions. For a second it looked like the emotions would spill out. He bumped his forehead against Nico’s. It hurt a little. *Perfect.* “*Shit! I fucking love you, man. I’d die for that any day…*” he declared. The heavy emotion in his tone made up for the deeply poetic language.

Nico leaned against him. “*I love you too*” he let out in a strained chuckle. He sealed the statement with another kiss.

They pulled apart and took a deep breath. Logan nodded. Nico shoved the door open. They turned to see what, or more likely *who,* was waiting for them inside.

The ‘who’ in question did seem to have been waiting. Very patiently, at that. A large stained glass window backlit a tall, thin figure. Her long black dress spilled over the ground. She stood, arms crossed, in the midst of a high, spacious room, flanked by long black marble pillars. Drippy, lit candles melted together in all corners, almost burned out.

“Welcome!” a smooth, dark voice offered.

As Nico’s eyes got used to the surprisingly bright light, he could finally discern her features. Based on the evil, yet amused smirk in her jet black lipstick she was genuinely happy to see them.

“Come to me” she beckoned with an elegant clawlike hand.

They looked at each other, and did, stopping a few feet away from her. Staying *just* out of reach…

Her irises were dark red and threatening. She kept them at bay by narrowing her heavily darkened eyelids around them. Both parties took in the sight of each other carefully. Nico swallowed. She was as beautiful as she was daunting, like a vanitas painted by a true master. She was clearly not nearly as impressed by them. A faint scowl took over her sharp features. One of her hands casually gripped a goblet. A few drops of bright golden liquid sloshed over its side as she tapped it impatiently and indelicately. *Was she… Drunk…?*

“You took your time…” she sighed in displeasure.

Nico heard Logan take a breath, ready to speak. He straightened his shoulders and readied himself for imminent death. Eris put up both hands apologetically, willing him to stay quiet. To Nico’s surprise, he actually did.

She broke the silence. “I don’t blame either of you, of course…” she reassured. She downed her goblet, then took a bottle and poured in some more. Her eyes darted from the bottle to each of them. “Would you like some?” she asked.

Nico blinked at her. Logan didn’t make a sound either.

She straightened up. “Well? It *is* ξενία…” she grumbled.

Right… Xenia… The ancient Greek rules of hospitality… “Yes, thank you” Nico relented quickly, not giving Logan a chance to kill them with a sudden urge of rebellion against cultural norms.

Eris grinned, happily filling two other goblets on a golden platter and passing them over. As tradition, Logan downed his drink in one go… Nico glared at him, then shook his head. *Oh, what the hell…* Pretty sure they’d be dead soon… He did the same. Energy radiated from every single one of his pores as the nectar flowed through his body.

Eris giggled like nails on a chalkboard. “Now *that!... That,* I can appreciate!” she mused before quickly pouring the contents of her own goblet down her mouth and filling it up *once again.*

She draped herself on the leather chaise lounge behind her dramatically. Her long black hair gleamed in the light as it swung after her. “*No,* my sweet boys…” she sighed deeply “I don’t blame you for any of *this*… After all, none of it has anything to do with you *at all*... You see… Me and our fair lady, it has just been a while since we *talked*… We spent some

intense *quality time* together, she promised she would write to me, visit me… None of that… *It's been centuries!* I couldn't help but act out a little… Just for a *crumb* of attention…" she pressed her finely manicured black fingernail into her cheek with a coy expression.

Nico and Logan side-eyed each other. *Of course. Petty bullshit again.*

Eris rolled onto her back looking wistfully at the ceiling, her hand on her forehead. She continued, mostly talking to herself at this point. "Her *arrogance* is insufferable. Just *think* about it. When in history has love *ever* managed to overcome strife? *Never!* Only in fictional sob stories! Only in the mind of infants and imbeciles! So why does *she* think she's too good for *me?!* She keeps doing this to me! Time and time again! And I keep *letting* her! *No longer!* It was high time I put her in her place!". She threw her goblet right between their faces. It shattered against the floor behind them.

She got up and strode towards them in one smooth movement. "Now you two… I got so lucky with you! *Truly a recipe for disaster*. I'm glad you're here. I'm kind of a *'fan'*, you might say. The amount of *strife* you two managed to conjure up all on your own!" she curled up her fingers and kissed them. "*Magnifique*, as that tramp would say…" She draped her arms around their necks, pulling all three of their heads together in an awkward embrace.

"That was… Until the two of you ruined it, of course…" she said with disdain, shaking her head slowly. "I assume that's why she wanted to send you in the first place… To rub it in my face…". She shoved them back hard and turned away from them. "But that *harlot* underestimated me yet again… I know what lurks inside you two… I've seen it… *I've felt it*".

She turned to Nico, running a finger over his cheek. "You... I *respect* you… They say *all* is fair in love and war, but…". She let out a low whistle. "Colour me *impressed*. I never even dreamed to hope for *that!* What you did was exceptionally *cruel!*". Her nail dug into his face as she finished.

Nico almost didn't feel it through the overwhelming nausea. He knew exactly what she was getting at.

"And you… You agree with me don't you?". She gave Logan's cheek a firm slap.

He didn't react. Even if Logan didn't agree, Nico did.

She turned up her hand, a small flame erupted into an envelope. Some embers flew off of it. Nico's stomach churned. He'd recognize that envelope, *his messy handwriting,* anywhere… It had haunted his dreams countless times…

"I burned that…" Logan said breathlessly. He turned to Nico. "*I burned that!*" he reiterated desperately.

Nico couldn't meet his eyes. He wouldn't have had the chance anyway.

Eris cupped Logan's cheek and turned him back to her. "Oh, *yes.* You did. And you were *so angry* when you did… For a second there, there was some *genuine! Undeniable! Pure! Hatred.*… Absolutely beautiful" Eris mused, reveling in every word.

Nico's stomach twisted further. *He knew it.*… A wave of bloodlust washed away all of his misery and guilt, Logan's voice drowned out all of his thoughts. *"That's a filthy fucking lie! Sure! I was angry! Real angry! But I know what real hate feels like! And I've never hated him! Not even for a second!"*. Relief felt like a deep breath.

Eris tutted disapprovingly. Nico glared at her, trying to drown her in the remaining bloodlust with his eyes.

She seemed happy to have his attention. Her disgust turned to glee as she made a show of running the edge of the paper over her lips. "Well, *hatred.*… *All consuming rage.*… What difference does it make? None to *me"* she cooed, narrowing her eyes at Nico.

He had to swallow away a gag at the sight of her smile next to the envelope.

Her eyes moved over to Logan. "Truth be told, normally I only accept the finest foods and wines… But, this… This is one of the nicest, *most heartfelt* sacrifices I've ever received".

Another wave of bloodlust washed over. "*That had nothing to do with you!*" Logan yelled.

"Oh, my dear boy~! You are so *wrong* about that. What happened there had *everything* to do with me. Conflict! That is what I am *all about~!"* she almost sang, rocking herself side to side.

"So, we fucked up! We got a bit too into our feelings and did some shit we regret. *So, what?*!" he heard Logan shout. He almost couldn't hear him. His heartbeat pounded over everything. Logan calmed down, putting his hand on Nico's back. It snapped him back to reality. "We're past that…" Logan said quietly.

Nico looked him in the eyes. Despite his pained expression they glowed their familiar warmth.

"So, you forgive him?" Eris asked flatly.

Nico saw Logan's eyes flash to her. *Crap.*… He couldn't breathe.

Logan's eyes returned to his, he seemed a little flustered. "Yeah… I do" he revealed.

Nico released the tension from his shoulders. They *were* past all that. He knew that. So why didn't he *know* that, until just now…? Did Logan hesitate? Even if he did… He was in no position to be upset about that.

"*Really*? Are you sure about that? These are things you cannot just *take back,* you know?... More importantly, are you willing to risk your life to prove your *outrageous* claim?" Eris asked menacingly. She clasped her hands together gleefully. Her grin like that of a serial killer. "I tell you what. If you can overcome me, not only will I let you go, I'll give you *my*

word that I will never meddle with you or the *skank* again!". Her joy turned even darker. "If you *don't*, not only will I take your lives, I will make sure *you* do it for me…".

Nico looked at Logan. No expression, but clearly tense. They'd managed to overcome lots of things in their short but complicated relationship… From something close to hatred to something he didn't doubt had to be love. But still… Nico's fatal flaw was holding *grudges*… And there was no way Logan's wasn't *recklessness*. Neither seemed very promising when facing *strife itself*… If he'd harm Logan he wasn't sure he could live with himself… If he did *worse*… he was *sure* he couldn't… He felt like he was about to throw up.

Logan gave him a reassuring smile. "This actually sounds like a pretty fair shot, compared to what we expected… So, what do you say? You ready to put our relationship to the test?" he asked. There was some jest in his tone, but Nico could tell he had his own doubts.

"I trust *you"* Nico started "It's *me* I'm worried about".

Logan's eyes glowed like embers. "Good. Same for me. Guess that means we both just have to trust each other's trust right?". All doubt had gone from his voice.

Nico smiled. He was such a dumbass... The absolute sweetest dumbass… He nodded.

"How *adorable!* You think you can withstand me?" she sneered.

With a single snap of her fingers, their eyes stabbed into each other's. Nico could feel the ravenous bloodlust sweep over his mind, more intense than ever before. He let the murky all-consuming mist of death and dread fight back for him.

Ghosts of bruises haunted his body, aching worse than they ever had in the flesh. Each one a memory he'd inexplicably forgotten. A painful swallow rolled down his throat. He moved on instinct to fight the invisible vice grip on it. His wrist cried out with an agonizing memory of its own, forcing itself back down.

Unbridled rage spread over the deepest pits of despair within him. The resulting combustion clouded his mind with the thick, revolting fumes of their worst memories together. Every time Logan *hadn't even tried* to understand him. Every time Nico *couldn't possibly* understand him.

He unsheathed his sword, casting everything in an angry purple glow. He saw Logan do the same, countering with eerie green flickers of his own. All of his senses overflowed with contempt, rage and disgust.

The shadows drew in towards Nico. Pitch darkness swallowed everything around them, leaving them nothing but the ghastly emerald and raging amethyst hue around their faces. With nowhere else to go, their eyes stabbed even deeper. One set of diabolical infernos sunk into two pools of pure black abyss.

This was it.

This was the end.

Eris clapped her hands happily, walking closer to admire her work. “I *love* this part~” she murmured blissfully.

Nico slowly lifted his left hand, Logan his right. Their fingers locked together. The grip was painful, *agonizing*. Nico gripped his sword tightly in his other hand, ready to stab it right through him. Logan seemed to have the exact same in mind.

Without a word they plunged their swords into Eris’ chest. She choked loudly as they ripped them back out. She fell to her knees, grasping at her chest. She managed to subdue the green flames.

“Dis- gus- ting-!” she gasped.

They let go of each other’s hand. Nico gripped the back of Logan’s neck tightly, in turn he grabbed Nico’s lower back. Their lips met, uncontrolled and rough.

“*Absolutely disgusting~!*” Eris bellowed. Tears ran down her face, leaving long black trails as they mixed with her previously immaculate make-up.

Joke's on her. This was their whole dynamic. He had to give it to her, she'd almost had them… This was *by far* the closest they'd come to killing each other till now, but they'd had *lots* of practice.

Nico smiled against Logan. He felt him smile back.

They broke apart and looked at her. Her blood red eyes were spread as wide as she managed. She smacked the floor, cracking the thick, marble floor like an eggshell. Her eyes narrowed, still flowing with tears, as she pulled on her hair. The rage in her shriek ran so deep, it felt nothing short of apocalyptic.

The door opened. A stunningly beautiful, completely naked woman stood in the entrance. In the darkness all around them she radiated light and hope. “Is that truly how you feel?” she asked. Her tone stern, but filled with emotion.

Nico and Logan quickly averted their gaze.

Eris folded her arms onto the ground and laid her face down on them.

Aphrodite pushed them aside with a small flick of two fingers. She came to a halt in front of Eris, folding her arms and sticking out a hip. “You bring *shame* to both of us with your behaviour” she scolded.

Eris sat up quickly, running her hands over Aphrodite's leg with a desperate, painful look.

Aphrodite sighed deeply. She knelt down and cupped Eris’ chin in her hand. She didn't even turn to look at them as she addressed them. “You two, *leave*. You're no longer needed”.

They didn't need to be told twice. Both sped through the door, pulling it shut behind them. They rested their backs against it.

“What the *fuck*…” Logan let out.

Nico hummed in agreement. What happened in there was clearly intimate. It almost felt wrong to be a witness to it. The Gods were such a mess… He thought back to how they managed to get sucked into all of this. He turned to Logan. “Next time I'm telling Chiron to fuck off…”.

Logan's reply got interrupted by a loud, delighted squeal from behind the door. They grimaced and ripped themselves away from it. from all of it. Nico grabbed Logan's hand and pulled him along, practically running at this point.

They found Charon moping in his boat, one hand under his chin, the other stirring through a bag of golden drachma. His eyes shot up. “...Ugh” he sighed, as soon as he noticed them. His hand impatiently gestured at them.

They impatiently complied.

Nico’s hand found Logan’s, still sore from the grip he’d had on it earlier. His thumb gently ran down over the back of his hand, rewarded with a gentle squeeze.

Charon pushed them off the bank without so much as a glance back, muttering about raises under his breath the whole way back. Many ‘ughs’ later they reached the other side.

Nico decided not to bother with goodbyes or thank yous this time. He tightened his grip on Logan’s hand and pulled him up, over the side of the boat, and onto the path between the jagged rockformations, where soon enough not even the light from the Phledgethon could reach. Tears of relief washed away in the stream of whispers. He couldn’t even hear them over the sound of his heart.

Chapter 22: XXIII. Life after near death

Chapter Notes

The chapter nr. is one off on purpose, it's to indicate a bit more time passing than usual :)

All warnings are spoilers:
Handsyness during sparring, mention of cheating (not perpetrated by main cast), pretty girl rage, crying, catnapping, blood, minor(?) injuries, more skateboard shaming.

The sky was cloudy, yet sunny. A perfect day to get punched in the face. Well, *almost* get punched in the face. Logan's fist stopped right before impact, freezing Nico in place. Nico blinked as Logan nudged his nose with it.

"You're too predictable…" Logan complained. He backed up, shaking his head, then got right back in position.

Nico huffed in frustration, readying himself for his next strike. He hadn't managed to land a single hit yet. *Too predictable.…* He adjusted his grip on Specter's hilt, making sure to keep his point on Logan. He struck right before Logan could-!

Nevermind.… He sighed, waiting for Logan to let go of his wrist.

Logan didn't, tightening his grip instead.

Nico watched his eyes burn mischievously. He braced himself for a throw, making sure to stay light on his feet and feel which way Logan might try to move him. Exactly the one way, he hadn't accounted for apparently. Logan pulled his wrist straight up, sticking Specter into the air and making their chests collide.

Nico huffed at the impact and squirmed against him as Logan slid his other arm around his back. Logan let out a low chuckle while leaning in close, the flames no longer mischievous, but *evil.*

Nico sighed dramatically before closing the distance. Logan twisted Specter out of his hand. Nico let himself get pulled closer, trying not to get *too* lost in the moment. Well, not too lost to do *this!* He hooked his leg behind Logan's knee and threw him on his back, landing on top of him. Logan's surprised gasp took long enough to straddle him between his thighs and swipe Specter off the grass.

Nico looked down at him with a smug little smile, his sword raised above Logan's face in an empty threat to stab it down. "I learned that from you" he teased.

In turn Logan stared up at him with pride, hands up in surrender. His eyes darted from the tip of the sword, to his face. Another mischievous flicker went through them as he slowly moved his hands over to Nico's hips. "*Yeah!* Maybe there *is* some use teaching you…". He slipped under the fabric of Nico's shirt.

Nico snorted, stabbed Specter into the grass next to Logan's face and rolled off. He grinned at the sound of Logan's disappointed groan and rested the back of his head on his hands. Specter's blade protected him from the pout next to him, only leaving room for the pleading eyes above it.

Nico smiled victoriously at the cloudy, evening sky above them, catching his breath. A whale slowly floated by, then a mushroom, followed by the pointlessness of existence. *Welp,* time to stop…

Valentina skipped past them on their way to the door, waving happily. The dimples next to her smile looked especially adorable today, probably because she smiled wider than usual. "Bye boys~!" she mused.

Nico stuck up a hand, smiling back.

"Gwen couldn't force you into dinner?" Logan asked, by the sound of it, genuinely impressed by Valentina's perseverance.

"No! Not tonight!" Valentina confirmed. "I have a date with my boyfriend!".

Logan grinned and jabbed her in the arm. "Ooh! Good for you! Must be a nice guy if you're so excited about him!" he concluded warmly.

Valentina smiled back, rubbing her arm. "Oh, he *is!* You probably don't know him. He's a little older" she said quietly. "His name is Richard".

Nico sucked in his lips and side-eyed Logan. He was just in time to see his expression go dark.

"Son of Hermes?" Logan asked in a low voice.

Valentina looked at him anxiously. She looked at Nico, then back at Logan. "Yes?" she offered politely, but in a noticeably higher pitch.

"The guy that cheated on Yan…?" Logan asked with an even lower voice and even darker expression.

Valentina's eyes went wide. "Cheated…*?*" she asked with a voice so thin it was barely audible. "When?...!".

Nico gripped Logan's upper arm, making sure to keep him in check. He tried to sound as delicate as he could. "About four months ago".

Valentina's shy, polite demeanor shattered like a vase shot with a cannon. “*Gods fucking damn it!”* she roared with a guttural sound. “*That motherfucking-!*” She pulled up a locket out of her sweater and gnawed at the chain. “*Enculé de fils de pute!”*. She ripped the locket from her neck and smashed it into the ground. “*We've been dating for-! Five-! Fucking-! Months!”* she underlined each word by stomping on the locket with her neat little kitten heels.

“Val…” Logan tried, completely taken aback. He put his hands up, inching them to her shoulders.

Valentina straightened up, tossing her hair over her shoulder. She looked up and fanned herself a little with her hands. She took a few deep breaths and put on a bright smile. “Oopsie! Sorry!” she chirped. She gave Logan a quick hug. Then put out her arms to Nico, offering the same.

Oh. Alright? He quickly accepted.

Her muscles strained around him, *audibly*. “Thank you *so much* for telling me~” she almost sang. She smiled even brighter and pointed two fingers to the kitchen door. “I'm going to go inside and make a quick call!”. She looked up and shook her head side to side in feigned excitement, then strode off, slamming the door behind her.

“Poor girl…” Nico muttered.

“Dumb guy…” Logan added. “I think she might actually kill him. Even if *she* doesn’t, Gwen will… Come to think of it, I still owe Yan his nuts too…”.

Nico hummed in approval. “I love a happy ending” he mused, smiling to himself.

Logan nudged him.

They watched Valentina’s silhouette fight a bunch of invisible assailants through the heavily lit kitchen curtains. Her muffled screaming added to the ambience.

“Let’s give her some space…” Nico concluded.

Nico and Logan finished cooking where Gwen left off, allowing her to follow Valentina through the whole house and interject some careful, soothing words between all the yelling and swearing.

Angry tears streamed over Valentina’s lack of dimples as she gnawed on her fork with her pearly white teeth. Nobody dared to say anything, listening intently to the sound of a knife cutting right into ceramics. Her cutlery almost stayed upright when she let go of it.

She glanced at Logan and took a deep breath, inflating a forced smile. “I heard you bought an apartment”. The smile warmed up. “Congratulations!”.

“Thanks!” Logan replied. “Yep! I’m moving first thing tomorrow”.

Nico breathed a quiet sigh of relief as the conversation left Richard behind in the dust, and steered towards a brighter future.

Nico’s worries focussed on Gwen’s kitchen door. They’d spent barely a single hour packing Logan’s modest amount of possessions into the beat up red truck. Only one thing left to pack… Technically not even his… And it had already taken more time than everything else combined.

Logan finally barged through the door, very pleased with himself. “Look who's finally ready for the next step in our relationship!”.

He smiled triumphantically, lifting up a beat up cat carrier. A miserable rasp flowed out. It didn't really draw attention, however. Nico hissed as he took in the state of Logan's arms.

Dozens of short and long scratches spread out in all possible directions. Butch had seemingly thrown in some deep bite wounds just to mix up the pattern. Blood flowed out like small rivers, flooding over his arm and onto the floor. Some drops fell on the carrier while he held it out. It shook aggressively as Butch fought to break out of his confinement.

Logan put the carrier onto the counter next to him. Gwen quickly grabbed a kitchen towel and started wiping at the closest arm. She let out an anguished groan.

Nico shook his head. “You look like you got mauled by a bear…” he muttered in dismay.

“Pretty much felt like it too!” Logan replied, gently pulling the towel out of Gwen's hand and wiping his other arm. “That was easily one of my hardest fights yet. *Vicious little bastard*” he said with admiration.

He leaned down a bit in front of the carrier and patted the top. The carrier practically jumped, a loud, angry rasp erupted from it.

“Sorry, buddy… I'll make it up to you. Promise” Logan cooed, seemingly sharing in some of Butch's misery. He stood up straight, giving them a half smile. “Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go get a Tetanus shot!” he declared cheerfully. Some of the joy from earlier had apparently found its way back to him.

He threw the blood stained towel into the sink, grabbed his coat and strolled out the door, holding up a scratched up hand.

Nico walked over to the tiny prison. He leaned down and looked at its equally tiny inmate, giving him a well deserved scowl for the violent crime he'd just committed. He got a long, angry hiss in response.

Nico's expression softened a little. Butch looked easily as terrified as he did angry. He had pushed himself as far back as he physically could, almost folding over himself.

Nico sighed. “I know… But I still don't forgive you” he told him sternly. “...Yet” he added quietly.

Gwen leaned in next to him. She pouted angrily at Butch. He lowered his head and let out a guttural whine.

Her pout instantly turned sad. “Aww… Poor little asshole…” she murmured with genuine pity. She picked up another kitchen towel and covered the small grated door. “I'm going to clean up his room real quick…” she started, smiling brightly. “Well, the guest room, I guess”. She giggled soundlessly.

Nico noticed something lurking in the shadows of the corners of her lips. “Need help?”.

“Nope!” she tried to chime. “You watch the evil furball!”.

Alright. Should be easy enough. He leaned back against the-!

Butch pounced at the side of the carrier, slamming it into his arm. Nico shot back up, arms around himself. *Right...*

Logan returned home with an air of irritation. He threw off his coat. The kitchen tiles let out dozens of small startled shrieks as the spikes hit them. “Look at what they did to me!” he shouted desperately.

He held out his arms, wrapped all the way in bandages. “They smeared some bullshit all over them and now I'm not allowed to take these off for at least two days!” he complained loudly.

Nico looked at him, making sure to show how unimpressed he was. “What did you expect, idiot? You were ripped to shreds. Did you *seriously* think they were just going to stab you with a needle and let you back out the door?” he asked a little angrily.

“I was sort of *hoping* that…” Logan replied, his tone much quieter.

“How did they even manage to put those on you? Figured you'd fight to the death…” Nico wondered out loud.

Logan pouted. “I have a weak spot for stern women…”.

Nico gave him a bitter look.

“And she was sooo *old”* Logan quickly added.

Nico huffed. “So you have a thing for older women now?”. He added a little more venom than he had in him. He couldn't let him off easy all the time.

“Relax. You're way more stern” Logan replied. “And waaay older” he added with a smirk. The smirk didn't last when he looked down at his arms again. “How am I going to shower with these?” he whined.

Nico opened his mouth and quickly shut it again. Too late.

Logan smirked at him mischievously. “... Were you going to offer to help me?” he asked, smirking wider.

“... No” Nico lied.

Logan cocked his head a little. “Too bad…” he chuckled. “When they say two days, it's really just a recommendation right?” he asked with feigned sincerity.

In Nico's mind he was practically already ripping them off. “You fucking better not touch those!” he snapped. “Gods! Alright, *fine*. I'll help you”.

Logan seemed to weigh his options for a few seconds. He grinned. Nico felt a smile creep through his annoyance.

Gwen wrapped her arms around Logan and pulled him against her. She rubbed her face on his shoulder and swayed him from side to side, humming a happy little tune. “Aaargh! I’m going to miss you so much!” she muffled into his shoulder.

Logan ruffled her hair. “I’m going to miss you too. So come visit soon!”.

Gwen nodded against his shirt. Logan tried to pull away. Gwen held on tighter, burying her face even deeper. Her arms trembled.

Oh…!

Logan chuckled and kissed the side of her head. “Thanks for everything, Gwen. I really owe you. More than I can probably ever make up for”.

Gwen hastily shook her head, letting out a shaky breath.

Nico grabbed the carrier, quickly but gently lifting Butch off of the counter. He ignored Butch’s loud protest as he gestured to the door. After getting an approving nod, he made his escape.

Nico looked at the broken off blade stuck *deep* into Gwen's apple tree. Melancholy hit him. Then confusion. The brave little tree was proudly blossoming to the fullest, like there hadn't been a nearly successful attempt on its life. Not only that, he realized, it was *off season.*…

“You ready?” Logan asked him, tapping all thoughts out of his head with a finger to the forehead.

“Yeah” Nico replied. He was. He followed Logan's gaze to the kitchen window.

Gwen was looking at them, arms crossed on the counter, resting her chin on them. She noticed them looking. Her bittersweet smile brightened. She happily stuck up a middle finger. Logan smiled back and raised his own. Gwen smiled wider, then hastily wiped her eyes.

Nico sucked in his lips trying not to laugh. That would be culturally insensitive, after all. He stuck up a hand instead. Gwen found him and waved her middle finger excitedly, quickly realizing and correcting herself with an apologetic grin. A laugh escaped him after all. He grinned back at her before grabbing the grill, offering his other hand to Logan.

Logan was quiet. Pensive. That made sense. Goodbyes were never easy, no matter how ready you thought you were. He looked at Gwen one last time before reaching out.

The shadows curled out from under the truck, wrapping themselves around it. Butch’s hiss cut through the whispers.

The darkness unwrapped in Wilmington, Delaware, the first stop on their one way trip. The truck let out a scrapy groan as its suspension settled on the quiet road. A remarkably well kept, quiet road.

Nico’s eyes went over the large houses in the neighbourhood, all standing apart from one another at a reserved distance, the borders of their enclaves distinctly etched out with perfectly cut lawns.

Yan sped over a neatly laid red brick path, away from the largest house of all. “Hiii~!” she screeched excitedly, arms already spread. She flew into them, trusting them to catch her.

“Hi” Nico grunted on impact, slowly lowering her back to the ground.

Yan beamed a proud smile at Logan, letting him mess up her hair. She knelt down to greet Crazy Butch. Her smile shot down into a grimace when his claws hooked around the openings in the wire door. “*Huuh…*” she concluded, carefully patting the top.

Nico grinned, strapping the carrier in tightly on the back seat. Yan took the seat on the other side, making sure to stay as far away as possible. Nico waited for Logan to get in before doing the same. He gripped the chair tightly, closing his eyes to concentrate better. This wasn’t going to be easy… With an exhale he let the shadows pull them into the darkness of the stormdrain.

They flushed back out on the shady side of a hill. A little steeper than the one he’d actually aimed for. Yan gasped as the car almost tilted to the side, then luckily fell back on all fours. Nico took a sharp breath, slipping down his seat.

Logan reached over and gave his shoulder a warm, concerned squeeze. “You good?” he asked.

“Yeah” Nico replied weakly, pushing himself back up. He glanced over.

Logan smiled, relieved, then fixed his eyes at the road across from them. The road to Salt Lake City. Just a few miles now. He narrowed his eyes, fire burning low. Pensive again.

Nico saw pensive make way for determined with just a few raps of his fingers against the steering wheel. *Right,* that reminded him… He fastened his seatbelt, he was going to need it.

The small prison jolted and shook in panicked surprise as Logan started the car. Nico pursed his lips in pity. He listened to Butch trying to dig himself out through the bottom of the carrier, then heard him give up and settle down with a surprisingly heavy sound.

Butch let out a miserable and gravelly melody. It sounded like he was playing a raspy little harmonica...

Speeding through the downtown area, the truck suddenly screeched to a stop in front of a battered looking apartment building. Nico blinked at the broken window next to the main entrance, his eyes fell on the figure underneath it. A person laid on a strip of torn cardboard, stretched out on their side, facing the wall. Most of them was hidden under a large hoodie, the hood pulled over their head.

“Hey, Merv” Logan greeted his new neighbour as he walked up to the door.

Merv grunted, rolling over to his other side. He was wearing not one, but two stained and torn hoodies. His scraggly beard covered almost all the parts of his face the tightly shut hoods couldn’t reach. Nico guesstimated him to be somewhere between thirty and eighty.

“Those big boxes they brought in last week yours?” Merv grunted inquisitively, bloodshot eyes wide and unblinking.

Logan hummed in affirmation.

Merv’s eyes narrowed. “I want in on that cardboard” he grunted.

Logan smirked. “It’s all yours, bud”.

“Sweet” Merv grunted, smiling with his eyes. His eyes narrowed right back down “Got any change on you?”. The grunt had an undertone of guilt.

Logan hissed. “After buying this shithole?” he nodded to an upper floor. “Fraid not…”.

Yan sprang into action, her frog shaped coin purse at the ready. She snipped open the mouth and emptied the shiny stomach contents into her hand. “Here you go, sir!”.

Merv sat up to accept them gratefully. “Bless you, ma’am!”. He made the sign of the cross. He turned back to Logan. “That’s a sweet lady you got there”.

Logan grinned. “She sure is, but she isn’t mine”. He gestured at Nico. “The scary one is”.

Merv looked Nico over carefully, then raised an unkempt eyebrow. “Uhuh… But, has he got *change…?*” he grunted in wonder, his final appraisal obviously hinging on the answer.

Nico snorted. He carefully lowered Butch to the sidewalk before rifling through his pocket. A drachma brought itself to light with a golden shimmer and dropped down in Merv’s hand.

Merv turned it over a few times in his fingers. He revealed some broken teeth, biting down on the coin’s edge. “Just as sweet as the lady!” he grunted happily.

Six flights of stairs later, Nico lowered the cat carrier down once again, on a scratched up wooden floor. Butch growled sadly, practically rattling a small cup against the bars of his cage door.

Nico let his eyes wander over Logan’s new apartment. Bare brick walls all around. Large slanted windows, broken up in a roster of small rectangles by the iron frame. Beautiful, but a bitch to clean. Three tall, dark metal beams held up the high ceiling. A small collection of very big boxes waited for them in the middle of the floor.

Yan cooed empathetically at the carrier when Butch let out another raspy cry.

Logan flipped the lock on the small jail cell and opened the door, approving Butch for parole. Butch disagreed, pushing himself further back. Apparently in a short few hours he'd already gotten so used to life behind bars, he didn't know how to adjust to society anymore.

Logan patted the top of the carrier. “Yeah? You want your own apartment? Fine by me”. He got up and walked away. A cabinet door shut soon after.

Nico gave the carrier a pitiful look. He wondered if Butch was going to be able to live a ‘proper’ life after all his time on the street.

He watched Butch happily run out towards the sound of kibble hitting a bowl.

Ha…

Over the next hour all three of them walked back and forth, unloading everything they'd packed up just that morning. Yan and Nico spent most of that time groaning as Logan shrugged at every single inquiry where to put anything. They groaned even harder at the somehow even less clear instructions on how to put the bed together.

Nico glanced at her over the clearly incorrectly built bedside. "You'll never guess who got dumped by Valentina yesterday" he set up.

Yan's eyebrow raised at the manual she was reading.

"Richard" Nico revealed without any flair.

Yan pursed her lips, the smallest, smuggest little smile all the way on top of them. "*Who…?*" she asked coyly.

They both chuckled.

Yan let out a long, sad sigh.

Nico folded his arms over the bedside, looking at her sternly. "That's not about *him* I hope…".

"Ha!" Yan blurted out, resting her elbow on her side of the bedframe and furrowing her brow at him. "Gods, no!" she assured. "No… Dating is just the *worst*. I broke up with someone last week… He was *so* perfect. I liked him *so* much, but… I was so busy trying to make sure he liked me back, that I sort of forgot that he was supposed to like me *the way I am*… I'm not making *that* mistake again!".

Nico half smiled at her. "Good for you, Yan… But, yeah. That definitely sucks" he affirmed.

Yan grinned through her misery. "This doesn't even scratch the surface! The guy before that *insisted* on paying for dinner on our first date, and by that I mean he snuck out to pay after I said *no* for the hundredth time, and then guess what? When I told him it wasn't going to work out two days later, he sent me a fricking Venmo request!".

Nico laughed in second hand frustration. "Fucking Hell… I don't envy you, having to date *straight guys*" he joked with exaggerated heaviness.

"*Ha!*" Yan let out again, hitting the bedframe for emphasis. "Says *you!*" she accused.

Nico raised an eyebrow above his grin and shook his head, not getting it.

Yan stuck up a finger. "*Observe*". She turned to the open door and cupped her mouth. "Lo! What type of deodorant do you use?!".

"Green!" Logan's voice yelled back at her confidently.

Yan bent over herself and giggled loudly.

Nico sucked in his lips. “That’s a completely different *type* of idiot…!” he argued quietly, screwing yet another stubby metal leg onto the bed.

Yan looked over the still wonky bedframe, then back at the manual, turning it over in her hands, and back again. She sighed in defeat and bent over her knees, holding the useless papers out for Nico. He reached over and took them, reading them carefully. The seemingly completely unrelated pictures taunted him from the corner of his eyes. Logan walked up and waited in the doorway.

“Hm?” Nico let out without looking.

“Have you seen my phone?” Logan asked.

“Yeah, it was in the bookshelf for some reason…” Nico muttered, trying to keep his attention on the encrypted code in front of him.

“Thanks” Logan said cheerfully as he turned to saunter off.

Nico furrowed his brow. *“You don’t even read!”* he grumbled after him in exasperation.

They gathered the last things from the truckbed. Exactly three boxes left. Merv grunted a happy tune while folding his new cardboard in and out behind them, building his new fortress exactly to his liking.

A teenage boy rode his skateboard past a group of girls waiting at the bus stop across the street, staring straight ahead, hands in his pockets. He glanced around indifferently, slowly rolling to a stop. The girls chatted on happily, admiring each others’ brightly coloured keychains. Spontaneously, the boy turned around and tried again. He successfully caught *all* the girls’ attention when one of his wheels found a pothole and threw him at their feet.

Logan’s laugh was stronger than Yan’s grip on his cheek. Nico shook his head disapprovingly, a mean little edge in the corner of the grin he was trying to suppress.

Butch stared at them out from under the perfectly assembled bed while they ate their dinner. Eritrean food, from the welcoming little place down the street, in three *very* different degrees of spiciness.

“How's university life?” Yan asked, visibly dreading the answer.

“Pretty decent” Logan answered. “Somehow I even managed to pass all my exams this year, despite the fact that I can't read”. He looked quite pleased with himself.

Yan cracked up a little. She crossed her arms. “Well, at least you do all your assignments in time and don't skip any of your classes right?” she asked, pretending she didn’t know the answer.

Logan gave her an awkward smile. “I go to the mandatory lectures” he offered. “... *Most of them*” he added quietly.

She gave him a stern pout. “As long as you don't get in trouble anymore”.

Logan looked a lot more confident now. “Yes, ma’am!”. He tugged on her hair.

Nico returned out of the shadows behind the stack of boxes in the still mostly empty apartment, Yan now safely back home in her mansion. The two way trip took a little more out of him than he’d anticipated. He steadied himself on a box, almost falling over when his hand sank through the opening. Butch flew out of the box next to it, finally revealing where he’d been hiding all day.

Nico jolted, cursing under his breath as he pulled his hand out of the untrustworthy cube, opening up the flaps. A small figure right in the middle of the opening gave him a stern look, waiting for him impatiently on top of the pile of other miscellaneous trinkets.

He reached for it. Something he must have accidentally left in Logan’s room ages ago. Something he’d completely forgotten about, just for a little while. Something that didn’t *belong* in the slightest. Not *anywhere*, not *anymore.*… He traced the folds of the robes of the small figurine with his thumb.

“Is that from the boardgame you were so obsessed with?” Logan asked from his side. “I promise I won’t make fun of you” he added, sounding genuine enough.

Still… Nico folded his hands and pressed them against his mouth. Logan was trying, *so* hard. Nico appreciated that, *so* much… He was stronger than this. This wasn't even really about Mythomagic. *No.* He couldn’t help it. “It’s not a boardgame. It’s a figurine-based trading card game” he explained, gesturing with his hands for emphasis.

The corner of Logan’s mouth twitched, he bit his lip. “... You’re making this *really* hard on me” he said through gritted teeth.

“I’m just saying” Nico doubled down, gesturing extra firmly.

“Look, if I don’t get to call you a nerd, at least let me call it a boardgame. I’m not going to even pretend to try to remember what a-”. Logan seemed to think hard trying to remember, then caught himself and shook his head. “You know what? I got my answer. I’ll just leave you two alone”.

Nico chuckled to himself. A win is a win. Even if it wasn't on purpose...

“My sister left it to me” he told Logan's back.

Logan stopped.

Nico looked carefully at the figurine in his hand and continued. “Percy gave it to me after she died. She wanted me to have it… If it weren't for that I would have gotten rid of it ages ago, just like all the others…” he muttered to himself. *Crap.* Was he going to cry? A warm hand ran over his back.

“Sorry…” Logan muttered.

Nico huffed in surprise. *Poor guy.* He smiled and nudged Logan with his hip. “Why? How could you have possibly known that? I never tell you anything” he said with a chuckle.

Logan looked up and cocked his head. “Hah… Yeah, true. You do like dropping your *sad lore* on me only when I *least* expect it” he complained. He smiled warmly. “Keeps me on my toes. Hoping I get to hear more…”. It sounded like a plea, maybe an invitation.

Yeah... Nico wished he was better at this. *Hell,* he'd settle for just not being *absolutely terrible* at this…

“Hey, it's okay! You don't have to tell me *everything* , if you don't want to. But... Just know that you can talk to me about *anything* ” Logan reassured.

Stop it! I get it. It's fine... Nico wrapped his arms around him and pressed himself against him, staring deeply into his eyes. They lit up as he did. He let out a deep sigh. “I know that, but thanks for saying it anyway” he said softly.

Logan leaned in. Nico pulled back a little, staying out of reach. Logan looked a little betrayed.

“Now stop being so nice to me. It's freaking me out” Nico warned.

“Okay *fine*, you emotionally constipated masochist” Logan relented.

They grinned at each other.

“Way better” Nico said happily. He closed the distance. Determination took over. He was going to try harder to share.

They pulled away.

“So who's that?” Logan asked with genuine interest.

Crap… Could he start trying to share more from tomorrow on? *No. No excuses.*

“Hades” he replied weakly.

A wicked grin flashed over Logan's face. He quickly swallowed it back and nodded, obviously trying everything he could not to make fun of him. “Hah” he let out, just as weakly.

They pursed their lips at the figurine and stared at it for a while.

“*Daddy's boy…”* Logan muttered quietly.

Nico cracked up a little.

“Sorry! *Sorry!”* Logan followed quickly. “I couldn't keep it in…”.

Having spent the entire day being productive, enjoying the fulfilling task of moving things from one place to another, they hadn’t actually had much chance to catch up. That seemed like a good enough excuse to stay the night. Not that he needed one.

Logan stared at him from his side of the bed. His eyes glowed with a low burning, warm fire. “Thank you for all your help” he almost whispered. The fire died down a little. “How are you?” he asked, a hint of guilt overshadowed by genuine concern.

Nico shrugged. “Relieved. Glad it’s over.” he replied with a half smile, realizing how sore his shoulders were. “Glad you’re settled”. He almost jolted when he remembered he *did* have some news. “Hazel and Frank want us to come over again soon” he shared diligently. He was *never* going to allow himself to let her slip to the wayside again.

Logan smiled, humming in obvious agreement. “Sure. Probably the least we can do as their evil twins, right?”.

Nico snorted. *Surprisingly spot on… Gross!* “You have to stop pointing out how *related* we all are…” he complained.

Logan smiled wider, humming in even more obvious disagreement.

“How are you? You got any news?” Nico asked, trying to change the subject.

Logan stopped mid shrug, visibly mulling it over. He looked at his phone to make sure he didn't miss anything. Seems he had. “Right. My grandpa’s butt said ‘#$’ this morning” he relayed dryly.

“Ha. Look at his butt go. Keeping up with the times. Better than me, honestly” Nico replied.

Logan grinned deviously at the screen. Something *really* bad was about to happen… “I'll tell him you're impressed by his butt” he snickered.

“Please don't do that to either of us…” Nico begged desperately, already plagued by prophecies of their next, sure to be doomed, visit.

Logan gave him a pleading look. *Good,* that meant he wasn’t too late this time.

“Delete it” Nico ordered more sternly.

Logan groaned in disappointment, thankfully obedient. He threw his phone into his pile of clothes on the floor and rolled over. He turned off the light, *his* light, and gave Nico a kiss goodnight.

Nico rolled onto his back when he pulled away, making sure to press his back down onto Logan’s new mattress extra heavily. He rolled his shoulders, feeling every inch of it. Yep this was definitely bigger. Softer too. Not nearly as creaky. No more cramped nights, unable to move without jabbing or kicking on accident. He definitely wasn't going to miss the aching muscles and bones.

Even in the dark he could still make out Logan's familiar silhouette. The slow rise and fall of his breathing. Already sleeping peacefully. All the way over there… Without him… *Gods damn this stupid big ass bed!*

Chapter 23: XXX. Happy ending

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Dead mouse (some description), dried blood, blood, mild injury,

(Between * *) explicit (?) sex scene: walks the line between explicit and implicit, BDSM themes if you squint.

Nico gave the thick metal fence between him and the bank of the Great Salt Lake an impatient kick. For some inexplicable reason, Logan had told him to go here, instead of his apartment. He'd gotten the message he was on his way just a second ago. It was a twenty minute drive. That meant he had about ten minutes till Logan would be here.

He leaned onto the fence, staring out over the small inland sea. The deep turquoise water reflected the setting sun like a mirror. Stunning, obviously, but right now it only served as a reminder of what he *actually* came to see…

Nico lifted his chin off of his arms. He pulled out his phone, then looked to his right. Still no sign of him. He opened his messages and fumbled around for a bit until he reached it. He opened the last photo Logan had sent him.

He took in all the details, refreshing them in his memory. A cake that was practically all candles overlit the photo like a small bonfire, Logan holding Nico in a headlock behind it to prevent him from running off, smiling almost as bright as the candles, Nico desperately hiding his face behind the back of his hand and the side of Gwen's face, only barely showing off her signature mischievous smile, taking up an entire half of the frame. No matter how you looked at it, it was a pretty terrible photo. He smiled at it.

"That's one of my favourites too" Logan said over his left shoulder.

Nico jolted.

They stared at where his phone had just disappeared into the water.

"My bad… I'll get you a new one" Logan offered quietly.

Nico sucked in his lips and turned around, leaning against the fence with his lower back. The fire on his cheeks almost fully died down. "So, why'd you tell me to come here?" he sighed.

Logan cocked his head, giving the lake an apprehensive side-eye. "What? You don't think it's romantic…?" he asked with a careful grin.

Nico felt a little bad. “Yeah”. *Still…* “I mean, if the lake hadn’t just *mugged* me…” he joked.

Logan pursed his lips. “Yeah, okay… That’s fair”. His eyes lit up as his grin turned devious. He moved closer, gripping the fence at Nico’s sides and leaning in.

Nico didn’t back down, grinning right back. There it was, the view he’d been waiting for. He ran his fingers over Logan’s as their lips met, running his thumb over his when they met again, and again. Eventually, all of the Salt Lake was forgiven.

Logan pulled back, clearly pleased with himself. The fire in his eyes dimmed into a pensive look. He opened his mouth, glancing down at the water. He snapped it back shut.

“What?” Nico asked.

Logan’s eyes locked back onto his, warming back up instantly. He shook his head. “Let’s go home. It’s getting late”.

In the span of a little over a year, Logan’s apartment had acquired a strong industrial taste. It was moody. Lots of dark metal, wood tones and leather. Well… More than any of *that*, it was a huge mess. *Fitting…*

Nico picked up a random T-shirt from the chaos on the old, beaten up leather couch. The Misfits logo grinned at them as he held it up. “See you added your own *personal touch* to my hard work since I've been gone *a full* four days…”.

Logan grinned. “I'm trying to go for a homey, *‘lived in’* vibe”.

Nico cast the T-shirt back into the chaos on the couch. *Alright*. He could do whatever he wanted. It was all his, after all. “Good for you. Look at you go, a *real* adult” he said with some pride.

“Yep, and all it cost me was both my parents” Logan replied flatly.

Nico almost gasped. He took a stranglehold on the back of Logan's neck. “Stop joking about that! It's fucked up!”.

Logan snickered. “That's *exactly* how my therapist used to sound”.

Nico let go of his neck. “So, start paying me. I'm not going to keep trying to fix you for free”.

Logan nudged him in the side. “I *already* pay for everything. You hobosexual”.

Ouch. Nico threw his head back, closed his eyes and drew a sharp breath. Guilt and annoyance fought each other. He tried not to die pulling them apart. “*I’m working on that*” he

said weakly.

“Right…!” Logan remembered. “How is your *ghost hunting business* doing?” he asked, a little *too* amused.

Nico grinned to himself. This time he’d actually got some good news. “Pretty good actually. Just done with my first job. You’ll stop making fun of it once you see how much I got paid” he retorted. “Besides, I’m probably one of the *only* legit ones out there. So I’m not going to let you shame me”.

Logan raised an eyebrow. “Wait… There was an *actual* haunting?” he asked.

Crap… His first cliënt had been an obviously very wealthy, and even more obviously very *lonely* lady. She had been nice enough, and kinda crazy... But, she’d been *so* relieved when he’d ‘exorcised’ her house… And he *had* given her some genuine advice on how to keep spirits out. Like turning off the tv before going to bed and, most importantly, *turning off the gas stove when you’re not using it…* Honestly he hadn’t really wanted to take her money, but she wouldn’t take no for an answer and she had gotten very *intense* about it.

Nico felt the corner of his mouth twitch. He shifted to dodge the truth. “They *do* exist. You know that. You’ve *seen* them…”. His embarrassed glare was met with a warm, *proud* look. He melted a little. “I’ll pay you back” he vowed quietly.

Logan closed his eyes and huffed in annoyance. “Stop saying that. I told you I don’t want you to!”.

No, but I want to, you noble idiot… He was about to resurrect the by now age old discussion when he got nudged in the leg. Crazy Butch circled him, rasping impatiently. He stuck his claws in his pants and immediately got stuck. *Someone save me from these idiots…*

Nico bent over trying not to get swiped as he attempted to free Butch from the trap of his own making. He failed with flying colours, not only getting scratched, but getting another claw stuck in his pants while doing so. He jolted as Logan pinched him.

“You barely eat, what are you packing back there?”. Logan almost sounded annoyed.

“My childhood trauma” Nico replied dryly, earning a chuckle. “Don't distract people when they're defusing bombs” he added more sternly.

Logan picked Butch up, freeing both of them. He kissed Butch on the forehead. *Great, now the idiots are teaming up...* Only Logan would be crazy enough to casually put his face that close to a freaked out, feral cat…

Butch gave Nico some stink eye, apparently getting a boost in his confidence from his superior position In Logan's arms. Still, he wasn't about to feud with a cat. Especially not a crazy one. He was above that… No, he wasn’t. He booped Butch's nose. Butch scrambled to scratch him, almost instantly falling to the ground. Nico smirked to himself.

“So…”. Logan smiled provocatively. “Tell me about your first day at *group therapy.* That middle finger you sent looked promising”. He was not even *remotely* trying to hide his amusement.

Nico clenched his teeth and groaned as he remembered yesterday. *It had been so fucking intense.* “Well, I *hate* it. But it's kinda hilarious actually” he laughed. “We had to sit on a chair and channel our ‘inner critic’. After I was done bullying myself the guy next to me got all pissed off. He asked me to get up, and he *beat up* the chair”.

Logan grinned. “That's actually really cute though”.

Nico shot him an amused look. “I guess, in an *unhinged* way. It sure got me to stop crying right away… Everyone there is *insane!”*.

Logan grinned wider “Sounds like you fit in just fine”.

Nico snorted. “Oh yeah, I'm probably the craziest one there…”.

Logan shifted a little and gave him an adoring look. “*I’m so proud of you*” he mused, clearly trying to hold back his excitement.

Nico pursed his lips and side-eyed him. “Alright… Do your worst, *tough guy*”.

Logan moved quick. He grabbed him by the upper legs and lifted him up, attacking his neck with his mouth.

Nico grabbed onto his shoulders and braced himself, trying not to laugh. He started pushing when he felt Logan go in for a hickey. “Enough! *Enough!*” he begged.

Logan let up, but didn’t let go. Rocking side to side just a little bit. Nico put his arms around his neck. Group therapy was going to straight up suck, for a *long* time, but guess he was kinda proud of himself too.

After doing the dishes, Logan had gone right ahead sharpening his sword in the kitchen sink. He was frowning at it like it had disappointed him deeply somehow…

Nico pursed his lips. Logan got like that sometimes when he was thinking particularly long and hard about something. That *barely* ever happened. Logan couldn't keep a thought to himself to save his life. Even when he did keep a secret, he'd gloat about it…

Nico snuck up behind him. He snaked his hands around him and kissed his neck. Logan jolted a little, but instantly pressed himself into his embrace.

Good.

He turned to grin at Nico. His eyes lit up instantly in a warm glow. No hint of worry left.

Very good.

“To what do I owe that?" Logan asked carefully.

Nico grinned back. Couldn't hurt to pry a little. He wasn't gonna be *too* nice about it, though. Had to keep it lighthearted. “So, I like the way you look when your brain tries to fry itself. It's cute. But, I thought I better stop you, before you hurt yourself”.

Logan hummed in annoyed amusement. “Are you sure you want to be that mean to me right now? I'm armed”. He held up his sword a little.

Nico pursed his lips. Before he got the chance to try again, Logan turned back around, immediately lost in thought.

“You’re off in space…” Nico complained.

Logan huffed in disagreement.

“Alright. What did I just say to you?” Nico asked, goading him.

Logan gave him a puzzled look, then looked down. He tapped the sink a few times. “Something stupid?” he offered weakly.

“Nice try, but you can't use my own trick on me” Nico huffed. “I didn't say anything” he added with a smug grin.

Logan looked annoyed. “*That's not fair*” he grumbled.

“Sure it is. You would have known if you'd paid attention. So what's on your mind?” Nico asked.

Logan gave him a funny look. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, pressing a kiss on the scar on Nico’s forehead. With another warm look, and shake of his head, he turned back to his sword. “You get ready for bed, okay? I’ll be right over”.

Nico clicked his tongue. This was starting to get him worried.

Somewhere far off, his aimless trail of incoherent thoughts got interrupted by a rare moment of clarity. Well… as clear as was possible right now. Logan? That seemed right somehow… The name felt like a warm caress on his cheek. No? A feather light kiss? Either way, he smiled to himself and settled into the feeling. The aimless trail of thoughts sprawled out before him again, a lot less lonely this time. He didn't have to go far.

Half of him woke up to the sound of the front door closing.

Oof! The other half of him woke up as Butch suddenly jumped up on his chest and sat down like he owned it.

They stared each other down for a few seconds. The mild annoyance made Nico extra determined not to lose their usual staring contest. His furry opponent expertly broke him with a swift little Butch slap in the face.

Butch ran off towards the kitchen triumphantically. He loudly grated a wail, pleading for his prize.

Yep. Alright. He'd earned it.

Nico dragged himself out of bed and into a pair of pants. He followed the familiar sound of a bowl scraping against the floor tiles and caught the usual suspect red pawed.

Butch glared up at him and swatted angrily at his empty bowl. Nico could almost hear a raspy little voice say '*Look at this shit! You see what I have to deal with?'*.

Nico pursed his lips as he got rasped, pawed and headbutted at. It seemed the evil spirit possessing Butch was trying to communicate with him somehow… But what was it trying to tell him…? He hummed in wonder, then grinned as he filled the bowl with the dried out little corpse chunks. Butch seemed very pleased with him, running his cheek along his knee on the way to digging in.

His phone buzzed. He opened the screen and petted Butch as he read the messages pouring in.

[dont forget to eat]. *Yeah, yeah.…* He smiled. [CB been fed btw dont fall for it].

Nico stopped mid pet and clicked his tongue. He glared down at Crazy Butch. "You *sly* little devil…" he muttered.

Butch happily ignored him, continuing his stolen meal.

[later <3]. His smile came back to live. *Fine. This was fine.* He finished his pet and replied.

Something caught his eye, right in the corner of it. He turned. Why was the detergent on the microwave? *Right.* He was doing laundry yesterday. Well, he was *going* to. He should really get to that... *Later.*

Right now was for figuring out his new phone. His stupid 'smart' phone, with way too many menus and way too little buttons. Why did people get these things? Why had he allowed Logan to get one for him?

Butch gnawed at his spiky little leather collar, distracting him. He remembered when Logan had brought that thing home. His words echoed in his mind. '*It just suits him! He's living proof punk's not dead'.* Afterwards Logan had the scratches to prove it…

Nico grinned to himself as Butch kicked himself in the face repeatedly, trying to get at it. He ran a hand over him. Butch was too preoccupied to bite him. Nico shook his head and turned his attention back to the impossible little machine in his hand. He scoffed at the unopened manual on the table. *As if!*

Crap! What time was it?! The clock congratulated him for being on time for once. A smile crept up, then it faded. It felt like he was forgetting something…

Right. He was doing laundry. He clicked his tongue. He was still in time… He could probably make it if he hurried. He sped over and opened the door. Just two steps. Detergent, button. Easy.

Why wasn't it easy? *Where was the fucking detergent?!* Fuck the detergent. Fuck the laundry. *Time to go.* He checked his pocket for his keys, just to be sure. *Haha.*.. *Ha.*.. He drew out a whine. *Extra* pathetically to really relish in it. Alright, time to do some remodelling…

He paused and glared at a dried bloodstain on the floor. He wondered… *Butch* or *Logan?*... He shook his head and kept moving. *Nope.* No time to play *that* game right now. Besides, the answer was usually the same anyway… *Both.*.. At least it was a small one this time…

During his search, Nico's eyes fell on Mark and Cindy's Christmas card on the coffee table. The first time they'd ever sent out a traditional family photo. And for a very good reason.

He smiled at their tired faces. Slightly emaciated, pale, but very happy. Then he chuckled at the tiny elves on their laps. The twins took after their parents in features only. Clearly well fed, bright red and crying hysterically. Tears of joy, he reckoned, at the fortune of being born in such a loving family.

Butch had fallen asleep peacefully. Sprawled out, taking up as much of the couch as he possibly could with his tiny, furry body. The collar hung around his neck, still an undefeated champion.

Nico pulled open a drawer in Logan's bedside table. Fat chance, but Logan did have a habit of randomly grabbing things and then putting them somewhere else without even thinking about it. So, not *zero* chance.

The stony dinosaur tooth slid down the bottom of the drawer. He almost didn't register, too caught up with what was next to it.

A framed picture stared back at him, probably just as surprised to see him. Logan's mother looked beautiful. He instantly recognized her from the numerous pictures at Logan's grandparents' house. She had the same devious smile as her mother, and not just her… Logan couldn't have been much older than ten. He made a funny face, proudly showing off two missing teeth. Nico got a little nervous looking at Curtis. He'd really not expected to find any trace of him in Logan's home… He looked so… *Normal.* He looked *happy* even.

Nico carefully closed the drawer. He probably shouldn't have seen that...

Keys! No time to feel bad.

His eyes fell on the usual huge pile of clothes on the floor. A well balanced blend of clean, dirty, Nico's and Logan's. An infallible system! He *really* hoped the keys weren't in there… Just to be sure, he wasn't going to check.

Something roughly key-sized in the corner of his eyes beckoned to him. His hopes were crushed when half the remains of what he *hoped* had once been a mouse revealed themselves instead. They looked fresh enough. Guess that answered that question he'd decided not to ask… He sighed as he made the damned little critter clean itself up. Its remaining legs dragged it up the windowsill, and finally out, with surprising agility.

Wait.… That's not what he came here for, right? A high pitched shriek outside broke his concentration. He grit his teeth. *Oops.*… He was leaving anyway…

The longer he looked, the more frustrated he got and the more of a mess he made. *Gods damn it*. He was already so late. Screw the keys. He didn't need them in his life. He'd just bet on Logan not forgetting his this time... When you put the two of them in a house together, you didn't really get to have *nice* things like keys, wallets or TV-remotes. He huffed as he shoved his feet in his shoes, hands already on the small leather straps.

He stopped, then pulled the keys out of his shoe with a faint smile. *Touché, past Nico.*

Logan picked the worst time and place to be even more late than Nico was. He felt eyes drill into the side of his head. He tried to ignore them. The eyes decided not to allow that.

"Are you a vampire?" a giggly voice asked him.

Nico turned to see not one, but two young girls looking up at him expectantly through some very heavy black eyeliner. He scowled at the two rude little raccoons. They ducked down a little and giggled harder as he did, but didn't back down, apparently finding strength even in small numbers.

“No, I’m something way scarier. I’m a mentally ill weirdo looming near a schoolyard. Don’t talk to strangers” he warned.

“Hot!” one of the girls declared loudly. They ran off giggling in a pitch only dogs could hear.

Nico closed his eyes in a silent prayer for the future generation, then let out an impatient huff. He pulled out his phone, trying to figure out how to call someone with a touch screen. *Fuck this fucking useless brick... There!* He jabbed the lack of buttons extra hard to show the brick who's boss.

A picture of Crazy Butch's scrungy face stared back at him as Logan picked up. “Come pick me up, I'm scared” Nico said dryly.

“Hey, geezer. You actually figured out how to use your phone, huh?”.

Nico pursed his lips. “I miss buttons” he stated solemnly.

“Stop crying about your buttons. Just because you're almost ninety doesn't mean you get to be a little bitch about technology”. He heard someone yell something in the background and then heard Logan give a firm reply that he couldn't quite make out. “C'mon, this'll be good for you” he added while trying, and failing, not to laugh.

“Did something happen?” Nico asked warily.

“Oh, *no*... But some people should probably mind their own fucking business” Logan said cheerfully. “I'll tell you in a bit. I'm almost there”.

Nico hung up, even more wary. He looked at his phone, then he looked up and shoved it back in his pocket. Whatever Logan got up to, it wasn't his problem.

Almost there, my ass... He winced as someone messed up his hair. He elbowed Logan in his stomach. “So, what adventure did you get up to on your way here?” Nico asked, fixing the mess he just made.

Logan grinned. “Some nosy colleague ripped into me for being a rude bitch to my grandpa. I *fucking* loved seeing her face twist in disgust when I told her you're my boyfriend” he giggled.

Nico groaned. He looked him over. Seeing him in a dress shirt was still kinda weird, even if it was black and at least one size too big. “Roll down your sleeves. You look like a ‘cool’ youth pastor” he complained.

Logan pointed at him. “Aha! But that means it’s working!” he replied excitedly.

Nico raised an eyebrow.

“I got told I’m ‘too intimidating’…” Logan added begrudgingly.

Nico smiled sympathetically. “That doesn’t have to be a *bad* thing” he offered.

Logan looked pensively at the school building. “Guess not… But, I’m *really* trying here. I’m just no good at trying to *fit in* to ‘normal’ society. I hope I figure it out soon…” A dark grin spread over his face. “*Then again*… If all else fails I can always burn the whole place down…” he concluded with a low voice. The fire in his eyes reflected a dangerously likely future.

Nico clicked his tongue. “Sometimes I wonder if you're on the right side of that desk…” he said, unimpressed.

Logan gave him an exaggerated profound look. “It's an asset, actually! I use it all the time. All my experience as a ‘problem child’ really helps those kids *relate* to me” he said, clenching a fist for emphasis.

Nico snorted, quickly hiding his mouth behind a fist of his own.

“Mr. Venema!” a teenage boy called out from a distance. “I just put up another one! *Way* bigger this time!” he yelled proudly, showing a can of spray paint on the inside of his jacket.

Logan angrily pointed a finger at him. “What did I tell you?!” he started.

Maybe there was some hope after all, Nico wondered.

“Don't brag to me about stuff like that *outside my office*, you dumbass!” Logan yelled back.

Nope.

“Oops! See you tomorrow!" the boy yelled back happily.

Logan sighed. “Yeah, guess I will… Damn it, that's another email”.

Nico blinked a few times. “He seems excited to talk to you about vandalism…?”.

Logan sighed deeply. “No, he's dealing with some ‘super secret’ *other* issues he wants to talk about… He's just trying to save face… Typical teenage boy, high school behaviour…” he complained sourly.

Nico blinked even more. “I wouldn’t know. I didn't exactly live the typical high school experience” he countered.

“Oh, right. You *do* have a little bit of a ‘homeschool’ vibe” Logan stated, seemingly mostly sincere.

Nico thought back to the striking lack of ‘*home’* and ‘*school’* during most of his childhood. “... Sure”.

Jeering somewhere close by caught both their attention. Logan groaned and stomped off in the direction of a small crowd before Nico even figured out what was going on. Nico watched him elbow himself to the centre of a circle of boys and girls, getting right between two young boys and seemingly trying to talk to one of them.

Nico walked up closer, then stopped when the situation escalated. One of the boys went for the other, flinging a fist at his head. Logan grabbed his wrist before it could land. The boy turned to Logan instantly and punched him right in the face with his other hand. A low “Ooh” went through the crowd. The other boy spun around and ran off. Everybody went dead silent.

Logan turned his face back to look at the culprit, still gripping his wrist.

Nico held his breath.

“For fuck’s sake, Derek… Now I *have* to suspend you…” Logan said with a low voice. The defeat was clearly audible.

Nico exhaled.

“I didn't mean to-” Derek muttered.

“Uhm, you're not allowed to swear in front of students!” someone in the crowd yelled.

Despite the distance Nico saw the flames in Logan's eyes flicker before he turned to the crowd. “Oh, *now* you care about rules?!”. He regained his composure. “You can file a complaint on the school website. Looking forward to it... Now get lost, all of you. I have work to do”. He looked back to Derek, the crowd dissipating behind them.

“How is your face?” Derek asked carefully.

“Disappointed” Logan replied coldly.

“You're bleeding” Derek muttered.

“Seems like a pretty reasonable response to being punched in the face, right?” Logan responded even colder.

There was a short but uncomfortable silence.

“I'm really sorry, Mr. Venema” Derek added finally.

Logan seemed to warm up a little. “Good, be sure to tell Ms. Alvarez that too” he replied. “Go to her office. You and I will talk about this tomorrow” Logan let go of his wrist “You better show up this time”.

Derek bowed his head down. “Yes, sir”.

Logan half smiled. Derek scuttled away, scooping up his bag on the way.

“Don't think I won't check if you went to see her! I always do!” Logan yelled after him. He wiped at his face and looked at the bloodstain on his hand.

Nico finally dared to walk up to him. “Cool job you have there” he said sarcastically.

Logan smirked. “Right? Pretty good chance he'll show up now and I'll actually get to do my ‘job’ for once. All it took was a punch to the face”.

Nico wiped the last of the bloodstain off the corner of Logan's mouth. “Does it hurt?”.

Logan cocked his head a little. “Pretty impressive left hook, not going to lie. But I've had worse”.

Nico looked him in the eye. “I was being sarcastic before, but… that seriously *was* pretty cool. I thought you were going to freak out, for sure. But, you didn't. Not even a little”.

Logan shrugged. “They're kids. They're dumb. They do dumb stuff. It doesn't get to me”. He seemed lost in thought for a second. “Don't get me wrong. I *care,* but I'm not going to let them have any power over me”.

Nico hummed in agreement.

Logan shot him an annoyed look. “You didn't seriously think I'd ever beat up a child, right?”.

Nico pretended to think long and hard, then shook his head disapprovingly. “You're letting Ares down”.

Logan laughed. “Good”. He leaned in to kiss him.

Nico met him halfway. He ignored the taste of blood.

The sound of a camera shutter ruined the moment. They turned to look. A group of young girls scattered like cockroaches.

Logan pulled back and closed his eyes. “Yep, should have figured… That's going to spread like wildfire…” he sighed.

Nico hummed. “Hope they got a good angle”. He tried to sound reassuring. *Damn.*.. What a mess all of this was… “Is it… *Always* like this here?” he asked carefully, gesturing at the red mark on Logan’s chin.

“I mean, not to *brag* but, we *are* consistently voted the *worst* school in the city. *Every*. *Single*. *Year*.” Logan explained, nodding along slowly.

“So *that's* why they hired you on the spot even though you showed up in fucking combat boots…” Nico realized out loud.

“Yep… I was the *only* one who applied. First one in over a year!”.

Nico snorted. Logan sounded so genuinely satisfied with that.

“At least you're excited…”.

Logan's grin softened to a warm smile. “I *am.*…”.

Nico pursed his lips, a smile hidden behind them. “Well… They're lucky to have you. Seriously”. He adjusted Logan's collar. Going in to button him up a bit more, he discovered an aggravating lack of button… “Are you kidding me?! Another one?! You need to stop doing that…” he complained, tugging out the now *useless* thread sticking out of the fabric.

“Everything’s covered! It’s in line with the dress code…” Logan countered.

Nico sighed. Deep. He kept holding onto Logan’s collar the first steps towards the car.

He worked on autopilot, not even needing to remember any of the steps. His mind wandered, decades into the past. Some of his oldest memories. The yearly, many hours long train trips down to Rome blurred together. It was all so long ago, he’d been very young then…

Some details stood out. Other things were always the same. Those stood out even more. His grandmother’s excitement to see them. The happy tears. Her long slender fingers as she would gesture hastily. Her stern, yet kind voice while he and Bianca helped her in the kitchen. Mostly, the pride in her eyes when she would plate her favourite dish. Matriciana, as she called it in her Romanesco accent. Well, not just her. It was an old recipe. Even then.

He never *quite* got the flavour right. Close, but not *exactly* as she used to make it. He probably wouldn’t manage it this time either… Decent quality ingredients were hard to come by over here… He exhaled deeply. He wondered if his mother even let her know when they took off to-!

“Need help?” Logan offered somewhere from the present.

“Nope” Nico quickly dismissed with a raised hand. He didn’t even need to look at him.

Logan’s eyes scorched his back intently. “Is this *still* about that time I broke the spaghetti in half?” he asked, unamused.

“No…” Nico lied. Well, actually… He didn’t *lie.*… He bit his tongue. “It was Bucatini” slipped past his teeth, giving himself away.

Nico tutted at Logan’s groan. If anyone deserved to groan, it was *him.* “I can't trust you! So get out already!” he demanded, raising his hand a lot more sternly. This time he did glance.

Logan put up his hands in defeat and turned around, raising a finger. “Fine! But you're going to have to get over that some day!” he threw over his shoulder on his way out.

“*Nope!*” Nico threw back at him. And he promised himself he wouldn’t. Ever.

They tried to eat in peace despite Butch's unrelenting green-eyed glare. Butch rasped adamantly when Nico accidentally made direct eye contact. Nico slowly shook his head and took another bite.

“Give up, you bum. It’s never going to work” Logan argued, scratching Butch behind the ear.

Butch swished his tail in angry disagreement.

“You don't even *like* spice…” Logan bargained.

Butch licked his lips trying to convince him otherwise. Logan rapped his fingers against the table. Butch rubbed against his leg and dropped down on his foot, presenting his hungry belly. Logan cocked his head and pursed his lips.

“Don’t…” Nico warned.

Logan turned to him. “But if he can just *see* that he actually doesn’t like it, he’ll-” he started.

“No, he won’t” Nico cut in. “He *never* does. You keep falling into his traps…”.

Logan narrowed his eyes, then closed them and relaxed his shoulders. When he opened his eyes back up, they glowed warm. He leaned in a little. “Thanks for cooking. It’s really good”.

Nico returned a smile.

Logan cocked his head a notch. “I’m sorry about breaking the spaghetti. I mean it” he offered. He didn’t need to clarify that, he always did. Still, he sounded even more genuine than usual.

Nico smiled wider, leaning forward to rest his chin on his hands. “Bucatini” he corrected.

Logan closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath. “*Gods, you’re so pretty.*…” he exhaled through his teeth. He pushed himself off the table and gathered the plates.

“I’m sorry” Nico offered, also more genuine than usual.

Logan looked back, not entirely pleased. “You’re still not going to forgive me, are you?”.

Nico pursed his lips apologetically. “I wish I could…” He tossed up his hands and let them drop back down on the table in defeat. “But, my grandmother would haunt us for the rest of our lives…”.

Nico looked on from the living room as Logan did the dishes. Even from all the way over here, even from the back, he could tell he was lost in thought again. Nico took a deep, sharp breath. He wondered what was going on in-!

Crazy Butch sprinted through the doorway with a low growl. He drifted under the couch, his nails making an unsettling noise as they dragged across the wood.

Nico clicked his tongue. *Alright.* There was no peace in this house. “Your little monster is going to ruin your floor” he complained loudly.

Butch growled loud and raspily, clawing his way out and behind the curtains, only proving Nico’s point further.

“It's his floor too!” Logan countered, sounding offended on Butch's behalf.

Nico prepared his arsenal of sarcasm.

Logan didn’t let him. “He uses it more than I do” he added matter-of-factly.

Nico closed his eyes and gave up on him. Whatever, he'd just-!

He jumped a bit as Butch crashed out of the curtains, right in front of him. They stared at each other in disbelief. Butch pulled back his ear, arched his back and hobbled away backwards. He let out a low, gravelly growl all the way back into the kitchen.

Al…right… Nico gave his head a shake and took a pensive sip of his wine. He'd exorcise him later. This was his free time…

Nico watched Logan scowl intently at the now empty sink, flicking his Greek fire on and off. He sighed and shifted, getting ready to get up and go confront Logan. Whatever was going on had taken long enough. Not even his favourite music could take his mind off of it. Worse than that, blasting his least favourite didn’t even seem to take *Logan’s* mind off of it either.

Crazy Butch casually strolled onto his lap and flopped down. Well, guess he wasn't moving any time soon…

Logan leaned against one of the large metal beams, staring at him with a heated, pensive amber glow. Nico looked on helplessly as he threw his phone somewhere on his beaten up leather couch, sure to be lost for the next two days.

Nico raised an eyebrow. “I’m not helping you look for that when you forget in five minutes” he warned coldly.

Logan’s eyes flashed in annoyed amusement. He cocked his head away from the beam. “Being a bitch… Glass of wine… *Terrible* music… Am I dating my mom?” he wondered out loud.

Thank the Gods. So he *had* noticed his ‘sneak’ attack. “Alright. *No!* I'm not touching that. You need to go back to your therapist” Nico shot back.

Logan pursed his lips and walked over. “Enough. I can't handle this. At least one of those three things has to go. You'll get your shitty post-punk music back later” he said, turning down the radio.

Ha! Got you now, noob. “The Sisters of Mercy are goth rock, you fucking *poser*” Nico stabbed venomously.

Logan groaned in annoyance. The grin gave him away. He bowed down a little and took Nico's hand in his. “Forgive me, *my edgelord*” he pleaded dryly, kissing his skull ring.

Nico hummed, pretending to consider it. “*No”* he finally declared, going slightly mad with power. He took a triumphant sip of red wine. It tasted even better than before. He stroked Crazy Butch behind his good ear, earning a guttural sound in approval.

Logan pursed his lips and gave up. “Smug bastards, both of you” he left behind as he retreated into the bedroom.

Damn right. Nico held up the remote and turned the radio back up. He grinned at Butch widely.

Logan walked back out, right towards the radio, and pushed a button. Nico’s musical warfare made way for a musical counter attack in the form of a wall of noise as ‘Discharge’ yelled at them, clearly upset about something again.

Nico clicked his tongue. “Why…” he muttered unimpressed.

Logan winked at him. “You owe them. You tore them up”.

Nico narrowed his eyes. “Saving your life!” he countered.

Logan shook his head. “Nope, doesn’t count. I saved you first”.

Damn it. Nico took a defeated sip of wine. He pursed his lips at the window. *Double damn it.* When did he start liking his *terrible* music?

Logan undid his buttons. About half of his *aggravatingly* perfect torso peered through. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

Nico clicked his tongue in irritation. “Either stay dressed or take it off” he demanded. “None of this *nineties boyband* crap”. He gestured at him with an angry motion.

Logan smirked. “Okay, fine” he conceded. “You can take it off”.

Nico closed his eyes for a second and sighed. *Yep.*… He turned to him, getting up close. He gave Logan an unimpressed look as he ran his hands over his back up to his shoulders. He ripped his shirt down in a single motion and tossed it to the side. Logan swallowed hard. Nico smirked. *That's fucking right.*

Logan seemed completely lost in thought for a while.

Probably thinking of something stupidly clever to say, Nico assumed. “Yan's right. You really are prettier when you’re quiet” he teased.

Logan smiled widely, more than a little amused. He finally opened his mouth, then quickly caught himself and closed it. He glanced down for a second, then back into Nico's eyes. He almost looked… *Scared?*

Nico narrowed his eyes. “*What?”* he asked, surprising himself with how concerned he sounded.

Logan seemed to be too. “Sorry!... Uh, *nothing”* he stammered quickly.

Nico felt like he got hit with a bucket of cold water, not just the water, the entire bucket. Now he knew why Logan never lied… *He was Gods awful at it!*

“You're lying…” Nico said, more appalled than accusing.

Logan pursed his lips, then smiled weakly. “Yeah… Sorry, I'll tell you later” he promised, nudging Nico in the stomach.

Everything almost seemed alright again.

Nico returned a weak smile. “Yeah”.

Logan smiled warmer. “Don't worry about it” he reassured.

“Alright” Nico reassured him back. He sighed in relief.

Everything was fine.

Logan held up his hands. “It's not a big deal” he lied.

Nico froze. Logan didn't seem to realize, already on his way to the bedroom. This was bad. This was really bad. *No.* Nico willed his heart to calm down. It wasn’t. If there was

something bad going on Logan wouldn’t have kept it from him. He was sure about that. Logan had always been honest… Until *recently.*…

He pushed the panic back down as hard as he could. So, just now had been weird. *Whatever.* He needed to clear his head a little.

Nico shoved himself over to the bathroom. He turned the temperature up and turned on the shower. He absentmindedly shook off his clothes and got under. His thoughts wandered further under the clattering warm water. He went over the day, trying not to miss any important details. He made mental notes along the way.

Yes, something was definitely up.

Logan had been… *Off.* Not *all the time*, and not in a bad way… *Except for the blatant lies just now.* Mostly, he just seemed lost in thought a lot. That wasn't very like him either, actually…

Aside from that, he'd been making eyes at him all day. That part Nico *definitely* didn’t mind as much… His face heated up. He bit his lip. Just to be sure, he decided to clean up *extra* well. He didn't want to be *unprepared* for anything.

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He dried off quickly and put on his pants, not bothering with his shirt. It would just get in the way.

He followed the sound of a poorly tuned guitar into the bedroom. Logan didn't react immediately, lost in thought again. Nico leaned against the desk and looked at him for a while, admiring his fingers run over the guitar strings with mild envy. The still bare chest behind the guitar's body made up for the technical prowess behind the guitar’s sound.

“Even more piercing eyes?” Logan asked with some amusement. He looked up at him.

There it was again, the heated amber, *making eyes at him.* He'd been all over the world, but this was by far the most beautiful sunset he'd ever seen. He would never get enough of it. He melted instantly, smiling fondly.

“Just enjoying the view” he said softly, unusually honest.

Logan seemed to notice too. He got up and *close*. “Oh? Those are *fighting words.*…” he said accusatorily. “Barging in here half naked. You've got some nerve”.

Nico felt himself give in to the excitement, turning him a little less… *Compliant.* “Are you threatening me?” he asked, trying to goad him.

“Do you want me to?” Logan asked suggestively.

Nico smirked. “Depends. What are you planning to do to me?” he responded casually.

Logan smirked back, his eyes glowing mischievously. He gripped Nico's earring between two fingers firmly and leaned in closer. “Whatever I want” he said quietly.

Nico felt his face heat up. He laughed, gripping the edge of the desk a little tighter. “You think I'm just going to lie down and take it?” he asked.

Logan got up close, rising to the challenge. He leaned down, making their foreheads touch, nudging his nose with his. “I bet I can make you” he threatened.

Nico swallowed at the sudden huskyness of his voice. His reaction made Logan snicker.

Gods. These pants were *way* too tight… Nico sighed in annoyance. He got up from the desk, grabbed Logan by the hem of his pants and shoved himself against him. He went in for a kiss, grabbing the back of his neck and lower back. Logan reached down into the back of Nico's pants, grabbing a firm hold.

A tingle went down Nico's spine as their tongues met. Another went after it as Logan slowly and deliberately tickled the bottom of Nico's tongue with his.

Logan let out a low hum as Nico grazed it with his teeth and bit down ever so slightly. Nico felt Logan's heartbeat pick up pace and his fingers twitch. He grinned against his lips. *Got you.*

He’d gotten pretty good at their little *game*. Ironically, if Nico could manage to get down on his knees for him, that would be an easy victory. He’d be able to get him to do anything at that point. He just needed to get free and-!

His breath caught when Logan tightened his grip and ground his hips against him. *Fuck.* He’d gotten trapped. He lowered both hands to Logan's hips in defense, holding him off.

Logan took his offensive further, grabbing Nico's wrists. He pushed Nico's hands behind his back, holding his wrists in place.

Nico couldn’t get his hand off, the grip was more than just assertive. Logan ran his other hand up over Nico's upper arm. He bit down on Nico's lower lip to give it a little tug before letting go. A devious grin spread over his face as he did. Nico watched the warm fire glow in his eyes.

“*Nice try*” he practically breathed.

Nico froze. Logan shoved his foot behind Nico's lower leg and spun him around. He put a warm hand on the back of his neck and bent him over the desk, holding him down. He squeezed tight, it bordered on uncomfortable. Logan always knew *exactly* how to walk the line...

They breathed heavily for a few seconds, then Logan made a move. He pulled Nico against his hips, bucking them against him as he reached around to undo his zipper.

Nico moved back as much as allowed, pressing against him. He slowly lifted his hips, making sure to grind against Logan’s, as *intently* as possible. He couldn't resist letting an evil little chuckle out when he felt Logan react.

Logan shoved him back in place, then ripped Nico's pants down. Not far, but far enough. He pried Nico's legs apart slightly with his knee.

Logan seemed to hesitate for a few seconds.

Nico huffed in frustration and looked back. “Are you gloating? Or are you waiting for an invitation? Get on with it alr-!”.

Logan smacked his ass with his free hand, *hard.* It made Nico choke on his words. Logan left his hand there, giving him a firm squeeze.

Nico looked back to glare again. The fire in Logan's eyes raged. He had a smug grin on his face, almost evil. He roughly loosened his buckle and pulled out the belt from his pants. Just as roughly, he tied Nico's wrists in place tightly, giving the belt an extra tug just to get on his nerves.

Nico winced just a bit.

Logan pressed him down, and held him there. With his other hand, he grabbed a condom from his back pocket, then tore the wrapper with his teeth.

Nico smirked and faced away in anticipation.

He felt something very cold and wet. Then something hard and hot pressed against him.

“I can tell you had *fun* in the shower…” Logan muttered accusatorily.

Nico smirked wider and braced himself as he felt Logan enter a bit, then slowly and deeply exhaled.

“About fucking time” he scoffed.

He suppressed a yelp as Logan suddenly entered a lot deeper, rough and fast.

Nico let out a breathless gasp.

Logan laughed. “Where's that sharp tongue of yours now, hm?” he asked with a breathy voice.

Nico turned to him to make a smart remark, but was shut up by Logan suddenly entering completely. All he could do was let out a whine. Heat overwhelmed his face, in embarrassment and pain and *pleasure.*

Logan gripped Nico's hair and shoved his face down on the desk, leaning in close to his ear.

“That's what I thought” he laughed with a low voice. He kissed him on the temple.

Nico scowled at him, he struggled to keep it up as Logan began to move.

Logan smirked at him as Nico's expression started to falter. “*You look so beautiful like this*…” he hissed, looking at him in awe.

Fuck.

His genuine tone ripped into him mercilessly, making his heart skip a beat. Nico quickly faced away and bit his lower lip to keep quiet.

Logan built up slowly. Nico felt his breathing go coarse. Every thrust pushed him a little closer to the edge.

Logan picked up the pace with a grunt, firmly gripping him by his hips with both hands. He went *deep*.

Nico let out a shameful noise. Logan responded with a low, short laugh through his panting.

After making Nico squirm for a while, he shifted position. He put his hands next to Nico's waist and bent down over him, not letting up the pace. He slipped one of his hands under Nico's chest to the base of his neck and pulled him up a bit, pressing his back against his chest. He took Nico's shoulder between his teeth and bit him, just hard enough to hurt.

Nico gasped.

Logan adjusted his grip on his neck a little and reached down between Nico's legs with his other hand. It just *barely* grazed him, making Nico jolt.

“*Logan…! Please…!”* Nico begged desperately.

Logan relented.

Nico cried out at his touch. A warm, sturdy hand closed around him. The type of hand that got things done, he was quickly reminded. He felt Logan tense up against him, tightening all hold on him. His teeth let go of his shoulder. Nico felt his lips make their way up to his ear. Logan took his earring between his teeth and gave it a light tug. He kissed him behind the ear and stayed there.

Logan shifted his-!

Shivers shot down Nico’s spine. The thrusts hit him just right. He gasped, loudly.

“*Yeah?”* Logan panted against his ear. *“Right there?”*.

Nico nodded furiously, turning too stupid with each hit to be able to string even one word together. Logan was never subtle, but especially not now. The sounds he let out were

intoxicating. Nico fought his hardest to stay quiet, but he couldn't hold it in anymore.

“*It's so fucking hot when you sing”* Logan taunted, his voice strained.

Nico let a desperate whimper slip out. Logan moved his hand up from Nico’s throat, tilting his chin towards him. The rest of his desperation now led directly against Logan’s lips. He felt Logan’s tongue run over his teeth, then between them. Nico tried to keep up, but being completely overwhelmed, couldn’t do more than follow along.

He let out another shaky whimper in defeat. Logan accepted it greedily, closing his lips around it. All the while still keeping *absolutely. Perfect. Pace.*

Whatever game they were playing, Nico was losing. *And he loved it.*

Logan’s grip tightened a little more.

Oh, f-!

“Fuck…!” Logan groaned under his breath.

It was too much, Nico couldn't take it anymore. He braced himself. That instantly got a reaction.

“*I can't-! When you squeeze like that-!”*. The pants were so heavy and damp, the words almost dripped down his ear.

That was all he needed to hear. With a loud, hitched breath, his entire body tensed up. The tension slowly slipped down his body in one final, drawn out moan.

He shuddered in the release, panting loudly.

Logan slowed down, his movements turning a little more erratic, until Nico felt him twitch inside. Logan stopped and exhaled shakily.

He ran a hand down Nico's back, stopping at the belt, pulling it loose with a single jerk. Nico felt him slump over his back, pressing him down onto the desk. He relaxed under the warmth. They caught their breath for a moment.

Logan shifted and kissed Nico's shoulder, right on the bitemark. It stung a little. That was definitely going to bruise, he realized with a smirk.

Logan turned his face to Nico's. Nico turned to meet his lips. Logan broke the kiss with a sigh.

“You good?” he breathed against him.

Nico smiled, nudging Logan's lips with his. “Better than good… *You fucking savage*” he chuckled.

*

After *another* thorough shower, Nico decided to forget about getting dressed entirely.

He found Logan lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. He dropped down next to him, *extra close* to break his concentration.

They looked at each other.

“Dick” Nico addressed him.

“Asshole” Logan acknowledged.

They grinned at each other.

“I'd been *meaning* to dick you down a peg” Logan jabbed lightly, right into his stomach.

“Pfff! *Please!* Life fucks me in the ass harder than you ever could! *Every. Single. Day!*” Nico bragged, wagging not just one, but all his fingers in Logan’s face for emphasis.

Logan locked his own fingers between them and shoved them down onto the bed, grinning at him. Nico pursed his lips, curling up his fingers.

“But… Not usually that *lovingly,* I'll give you that”.

Logan’s grin turned into a proud smile, then into another pensive look. He glanced down at their hands, *nervously*. There it was again... Whatever *it* was, it was starting to freak Nico out more and more. None of this fitted the usual style of *gentle warfare* in their relationship… He was done, and he was *sore.*

“What's going on with you?” Nico asked with a thinly veiled accusation.

Logan tensed up a little.

“You've been weird since I got here… Just spit it out already” he demanded, his tone a lot more stern now.

Logan looked a little apprehensive.

Nico was seriously starting to get worried now. Was something wrong? But they seemed so… *Right* only a while ago. “You're the one always saying people should be upfront” he accused.

Logan smiled with mild frustration. “Yeah, I do keep saying that… Don't I…?”.

Nico held his breath as Logan inhaled deeply.

“I don't want to put pressure on you…” Logan said quickly.

“Huh?” Nico let out.

They gave each other a worried look.

Nico narrowed his eyes. “I swear to Hades, if this is about a sex thing…”.

Logan burst out laughing. “Fuck no!”. Then he turned and smiled. “Do you wanna move in with me?”.

It hit Nico like a brick. There were no thoughts.

“You *really* don't have to” Logan added reassuringly.

Nico huffed in astonishment.

Logan closed his eyes and turned away for a second. “Damn it… I kept waiting for the right moment… Guess I sort of fucked *that* up…”.

Nico watched him dig into his pocket and pull something out. Something small. Something round. Logan laid it in the palm of his hand. Nico looked at the white gold ring. There were numbers inscribed on the inside, a date.

“Is that…?” he started.

“The day we met” Logan finished.

Nico's hand trembled too much to slip it on. Logan reached up and helped him. It matched Logan's silver bracelet perfectly. It would have no matter what it’d looked like…

“Perfect fit” Logan muttered approvingly, running a finger over the ring.

Nico clenched his fist. “*Yeah*” he pushed out without any air. He was *never* going to take that off. He almost couldn't bear to look at it. Mostly he couldn't bear to look away from Logan's eyes.

Logan narrowed them. Two scrutinizing little sunsets. Absolutely *gorgeous*. “So, that's a “*yes*” then?” he teased. Under the bravado were some unconcealed nerves.

Nico felt a grin spread across his face. “Yes” he said happily “I'll move in with you”.

Logan grinned back. He rolled on top of Nico, looking him even deeper in the eye. His eyes didn't just glow this time, they were *radiant.* “*Fucking awesome.* Now we both have a ring we can't get rid off!” he declared loudly. “And I already have a ton of dead plants to make you feel at home”.

Nico giggled… He didn't even mind. Not this time. He faced away and let out a happy sigh.

How did they get here? He wasn't complaining. In fact, he was doing the opposite of complaining-!

Logan kissed his neck. Nico tried to push him off. It didn't work. Logan worked his way upwards to his ear. “I love you so much” he whispered.

Nico felt his words heat him up to the core. “Ti amo di più” he replied softly.

They laid there for a while, just basking in the afterglow of the moment.

Nico woke up a few hours later as Butch jumped up onto the bed right next to his head. He winced as his face got sniffed *very rudely*.

He found Butch's head in the darkness and stroked him behind his lack of ear a few times. Butch made a pleased guttural sound before he bit at his fingers and happily strutted down to their feet.

He sighed, then rolled over to his other side and almost sprawled over Logan. *Oops.*

Logan didn’t move, able to sleep through anything nowadays. A useful skill he’d been forced to master back in the Ares cabin. In the *before days.* It was still going to take Nico some getting used to. Gladly, of course. He put his head down on Logan's chest and watched the moon stare at them through a crack in the curtains.

Light raindrops gently tapped on the window. A bolt of lightning split one of the many thick, heavy stormclouds. A moody rumble rolled through the sky.

Normally, Nico would find this relaxing...

The tapping on the window turned urgent. The next flash, alarmed. The rumble, weary. Nico's thoughts started wandering. Worries started flying in one by one, then all at the same time. The ring on his finger tightened with each breath, threatening to suffocate him. He breathed faster. The ring choked him harder. He grabbed it, making it tremble in his grip. Before ripping it off, he forced himself to stop.

His heart sped up. Then sped up even more.

No problem. He went through the motions of what he’d learned. He didn’t even need to think about it anymore. Two seconds in through the nose, four seconds out through the mouth. He focussed on keeping his breathing low, down from his stomach. He kept it up, as long as needed.

Slowly, the thoughts stopped being terrifying. Even slower, the thoughts stopped being at all.

The ring loosened into a gentle embrace around his finger. It felt warm and smooth in his grip, soothing him lovingly as he turned it. He kissed it, then moved his hand over his heart. It knocked against the ring, in a steadily decreasing beat.

Butch stretching out dramatically between their legs pulled him back into the here and now with two lazy little paws.

He felt the rise and fall of Logan's stomach under his arm. Nico closed his eyes and focussed on the calm rhythm of Logan's heart beat. When he finally calmed down enough, he thought about the past few years.

Everything that had changed. Everything that had stayed the same...

He exhaled as deeply as he could. *Yep*. Life was pretty good.

I can do this, he repeated. And for the first time in a very long time, he really meant that. He smiled to himself with a small sense of pride.

Chapter 24: CXLIII. Paper anniversary

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Mildly creepy clown, clown hate, insecurity, high fever, non graphic vomiting, exhaustion, soup slander, they bicker the shit out of each other, but also somehow the fluffiest chapter. Oh, and Scream spoiler if you pay too much attention.

This is a sickfic. I swear. I don't know why I started with the weird clown tangent either. This chapter doesn't add to the plot. Last chapter was the ending of the actual arc.

Nico followed each step of the ladder up into the darkness. The attic. *Classic.* He looked back at his cliënt and raised an expectant eyebrow.

Sarah had apparently left all middle aged biker swagger at the rowdy bar she'd called him from last night, eyes nervously darting at the ladder, then even more nervously at him.

Nico smiled. "I'll go first". He didn't wait for a reply, sauntering right up. Sarah's quiet whimpers followed close behind him. He coughed out some dust that had snuck up on him in the dark.

As his eyes adjusted to the pale red light seeping through the curtains, Sarah crawled to his side and slowly raised a shaky hand. "*There it is…!*" she hissed sharp and loud.

Nico looked ahead at the culprit seated right in the middle of the attic. All the porcelain clowns gathered at the foot of the table it was displayed on, nearly managed to give the small, frail figure a kingly air.

Even obscured by the thick layer of dust covering the bell jar, Nico could see the doll's sad porcelain face turn towards them. Of course, that wasn't *nearly* as interesting to him as the translucent, smartly bespectacled man bent over the doll, painstakingly twisting its little neck *just* right…

The man kept his hollow eyes fixed on the doll, even adjusting his bowler hat to get a better view. He grabbed the doll's withered silk sleeves and carefully started to move them, forming small and stiff movements. Almost like… *Abstract dance…?*

Sarah glared at the doll, trembling with terrified rage. "Why couldn't grandma be into stamps?!" she growled at it, almost daring to take a step closer. "*I fucking hate clowns!*". She raised her fist at it and narrowed her eyes in disgust, the tears in the corners threatened to spill over.

“For Heaven's sake, Sarah…” the ghost grumbled. “For the *last* time! It’s not a clown! It’s a blasted *mime!*”. He jossled the tiny clown arms in frustration.

“Uhm, actually... It’s a pierrot” Nico pointed out.

The ghost fixed his eyes on Nico. They went as wide as his round glasses when he saw Nico look back, not at Sarah, but at *him.* His finger hesitantly let go of the doll to point at himself.

Nico held up his hands in a peaceful offer. “Technically you’re *both* right!” he said with exaggerated enthusiasm.

“My dear sir… You can actually… *Hear* me…?” the ghost stammered.

“Yup” Nico replied with a quick shrug.

“*Jesus Christ*” the ghost wheezed, mouth agape.

Nico smirked. “Wrong pantheon”.

The ghost didn’t seem to mind. He threw the pierrot across the room with excitement, bursting the bell jar into an explosion of shards and dust.

The loud crash instantly got overshadowed by Sarah's shriek, right into Nico’s ear. She quickly hid behind his back, peeking out wildly behind both of his arms. Nico stuck his elbows back to calm her down. And to force her in place, *mostly.*…

The ghost didn’t pay any mind to her distress. Blurry, *happy* tears streamed down his face and dripped off his chin as he reached for Nico’s shoulders. Right *through* them.

Nico smiled back. “Alright. Stand still. This will only take a second” he told him, hand already in front of him.

The ghost’s toothy smile shattered into a toothy grimace. “*Nooo!*” he yelled, desperately swiping his hands through Nico’s shoulders. “*I haven’t spoken to anyone in a hundred and eighty two years! I have so much to tell you! The reason I’m-!*”.

Nico flicked his wrist. “Rest in peace” he cut in, releasing the energy between his fingers with a single snap. *Sorry, man. Two hundred years for you. Regular wednesday for me.*…

The raggedy curtains fluttered. The ghost lit up, then dissipated in a swirl of dust wafting onto the heap of old furniture and boxes.

“*Huh!*” Sarah let out from behind his left arm. “*Hah!*” she let out from behind his right. She looked up at him. “You got it?!”.

“Yup” Nico assured her calmly.

She stepped out from behind his back, crouching down and inspecting the dust, then glanced back over at Nico. “Who was it? What did they want? Why were they here?” she rapid-fired at him.

Nico's self-satisfied smile turned forced. "You know? He didn't say…" he answered. He made sure to avoid Sarah's questioning eyes for a bit, finding the doll instead, awkwardly sprawled out against a now dented cardboard box, but still perfectly intact. He pointed at it, realizing something more valuable than closure. "You might want to get that appraised, actually. I don't think that's a remake".

Logan thrashed when Nico blew out of the shadows behind him, nearly falling off the couch. Not as battle ready as he used to be anymore, apparently?

"Honey, I'm home?" Nico tried jokingly.

Logan laid back down with a frustrated sigh, wiping a relieved smile onto his face. "Hey" he said flatly from under his hands.

"Rough day?" Nico asked, tossing his pay onto the coffee table.

Logan groaned in disagreement. "Just long". He turned his head to look at the stack of bills. A grin spread on his face, not *just* amused. "I can't believe you make a week's wage in *two* hours…".

Nico shrugged, turning away to hide his proud smirk. "What? The kids don't tip well?".

Logan snorted. "They do the fucking *opposite.*.. I've been giving Derek lunch money for what…? The entire school year now?".

Nico hummed sympathetically, for both poor sods. "I can chip in?" he offered, only half joking.

Logan scoffed at the ceiling and closed his eyes. "Fuck off, yuppie scum…".

Pity turned into a nagging feeling. Nico threw his coat over the couch and moved in. He pushed Logan's knees aside and stabbed down both hands next to his face, locking Logan in place. Nico stared into his eyes. The amber darkened a bit. Hard to read. Harder to read than he was used to…

That can't be good.

"Are you mad at me?" Nico asked carefully.

Logan's eyes flashed in surprise. "No!" he croaked, grabbing onto Nico's sides. "Did I sound angry?".

Nico shook his head too. "No. Sorry. It's just-?". He stared deeper into the dark amber. "Are you alright?".

Logan smiled reassuringly. “Yeah. Just tired”. He tugged on Nico’s shirt, trying to get him down. “Now, c’mere”.

Nico smiled back, leaning into him.

They pulled apart. They pulled apart again.

“Did you eat?” Logan asked.

“Did you cook?” Nico asked in turn with carefully hidden dread. Unsurprisingly, Logan considered recipes to be *rules.*…

Logan shook his head. The reassuring smile shrunk into a guilty one. “I got take-out. Your usual. Didn’t know you were going to be out so late”.

Nico gave him a guilty smile back. “Sorry, I forgot to charge my phone…”. He rolled off the couch, onto his feet.

Logan did the same. He gestured to the kitchen. “I put it in the fridge”. He gestured at the hallway. “I’m going to bed”.

Nico took a second, then searched for the clock. *Nine?* At least three hours earlier than normal. “Wow. You’re *really* tired” he concluded.

Half a nod and half a hum were Logan’s only response, already on his way.

Nico’s thoughts spun along with his food in the microwave. He knew they weren’t twenty anymore, but wasn’t the decline supposed to be a little more gradual than this…? He thought old age would have at least given them the grace to wait until they’d reached their *thirties* before robbing them of their evenings…

An alarm went off. Nico kept his eyes shut. It did that every morning. Three beeps. Then it’d be off, he’d get his kiss on the cheek and he could get another half hour of sleep.

Four beeps.

Five?

Each beep got louder, more pressing.

Nico rolled over, seeing the faint glow of the screen pulse through the darkness behind Logan’s silhouette. The silhouette didn’t show any intention of moving.

Nico slid against Logan’s back, reaching over him and shutting off the blaring. He looked down at Logan, still dead asleep. Gentle, but intently, Nico shook his shoulder.

Nothing.

Alarm bells started right back up in Nico’s head, even louder than before. He grasped Logan’s hand and squeezed. Logan’s hands were warm. Logan’s hands were *always* warm. *Why wasn't it warm?!* He nearly slapped his hand onto Logan’s forehead. That got a reaction from both of them. Nico hissed at the heat. Logan gasped at his touch. With a deep sigh, he seemed to give in, pressing his face against Nico’s palm.

Nico tried to keep his hand as still as possible while panicking. His eyes hastily searched all around the darkness, not even sure what they were looking for. He closed his eyes and slowly forced the rhythm back into his breathing.

Logan let out a content little hum when Nico gently moved his hand, running it through his hair.

See? Good.

After a few strokes Nico forced himself to slip away. He snuck around the bed and turned on the least offensive lamp. Logan clearly didn’t even notice. Each breath sounded like punishment. The inhale forced labour, the exhale doing hard time… Painful, but *steady*. Apart from the red hue over his cheekbones, he was sickly pale.

A fever. Obviously. Nico already knew that. He turned the light off. Time to get useful. He was a responsible adult now. He had a *thermometer* now.

He tried again. For the third time. He kept his composure, but he wasn’t sure how many times it was going to take until he’d lose it. If he didn’t wake up this time, Nico was going to call Yan again, just to-!

Logan stirred under his hand. “*Hah…?*” he breathed out. He cracked open his eyes when Nico pulled back.

Nico let a single laugh slip, then quickly locked the rest of his excitement back behind a relieved smile. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

Logan shielded one eye from the sunlight with his hand, giving the bedroom a brief, wary look over. He squinted at Nico. “What day is it…?” he asked, voice hoarse and dazed.

Nico kept his hand on Logan’s shoulder, easing him back in place when he felt him try to move. “I called the school” he reassured him.

Logan groaned. “Oh…”. He covered both eyes, grinding his teeth. That answered Nico’s question more than words could.

“I called Yan too” Nico went on. “You gotta eat something”. He didn’t manage to make it sound lighthearted. He smiled wider to make up for it.

Logan gave his head a weak shake. “M’ not hungry…”.

Nico pursed his lips. “You’re sick. It’s got nothing to do with being hungry. It’s about getting better”.

Logan took a deep, disgruntled breath.

Nico dared to give him some soft, sympathetic pats on the stomach. “I’ll make you some soup”.

At that, Logan slid his hands up, keeping his hair out of his eyes. Dark amber flames flashed over at Nico in two thin streaks. The corner of his frown twitched. “Are we *actually* doing the ‘soup’ thing? You're so fucking *elderly*”. He sounded as amused as he *didn’t.* His voice was a bit heavier and lower, but for the first time so far, he sounded like himself.

Nico tried not to break. He needed to win this. “It's a classic for a reason”.

The frown twitched harder. “What reason?”.

Nico still didn’t break. He was going to win this. “I don't know…”. He threw some random hand gestures in. “Warm, easily digestible food?”.

The frown twitched much harder. Jerked, even. “*Soup isn’t food*”.

Nico laughed. He already got him. “Good, cause you're not hungry”.

Logan muffled his pathetic sigh by rolling over into his pillow. Butch flailed helplessly as Logan’s legs moved under him, barely staying afloat on the stormy waves of blankets.

Right after he turned the stove off, Nico’s phone rang for the second time. An anonymous number. Probably a client.

He debated letting it go to voicemail, but put on his work smile and picked up. He’d make it quick. No matter what. “Good afternoon, this is-”.

“I’m leaving you a one star review!” a very angry sounding man shouted into his ear.

Ah. The client he couldn’t reach this morning. The one he canceled, *because of an emergency…* “Of course!” Nico replied happily. “If you feel so inclined, you can build me a

website and leave it there". He almost hung up. The client's angry roar kept him *just* interested enough not to do so.

"This is unacceptable! I'm *entitled* to the service I booked! For the day I booked it! *It's the law!*" the man shouted out of his ass.

Nico's work smile had sharp corners. "Don't worry, sir. I'm fully aware of all legal requirements of our verbal contract. As such, I'll refund you the zero dollars you've already paid towards your deposit immediately. In fact, if you check behind your ear, you'll find it already there!"

The client paused for a second. "You think this is funny?!"

"Yes. Very" Nico assured him. He dropped the pleasantries. "But less and less so. As I told you *very clearly* in the voicemail. I have an emergency to deal with. If you want to continue this conversation, we can do so in court".

His almost ex-client paused again "… Maybe we can reschedule? I can have the deposit wired to you by the end of next week" he offered instead, voice meek.

"That would be *great"* Nico lied. "I'm free any weekday, four weeks from now" he told him, adding an extra week out of spite.

"Same day four weeks from now would be perfect" the client meeked on.

"*Wonderful*" Nico replied with an actual, genuine smile. He was going to summon *so* many poltergeists that day! His excitement died the moment he put his phone down. Right in front of the bowl of soup… Any exorcist knew, ghosts were a lot easier to deal with than demons…

Nico put on his work smile once more, carefully kicking the door open. It creaked ominously, warning him of the evil lurking behind it. And warning the *evil* of his own presence.

Logan slowly turned his face. Just enough to reveal the burn of one *restless* flame. It scorched the bowl of holy liquid in Nico's hands.

"You need to" Nico pressed, taking a step towards him. "It'll be easier while it's still hot".

Logan turned his face further, burning him with both restless flames. "I'll throw up" he warned. Threatened?

… Nico inhaled the heavy silence. "Yeah. Alright. I just want to…". His fake smile broke, so did his tone. "*Help you*".

The fires snuffed out. Instantly. Logan punched his hands into the mattress and pushed, slowly rattling himself into a sitting position. "*Yeah.*" he grunted breathlessly. "*I know.*"

Nico cursed to himself, forcing the tears back down further with every step. The useless mush sloshed over the rim when he rushed the bowl down on the nightstand. He hastily grabbed onto Logan to help him upright.

Logan took a break catching his breath to get out some painful sounding coughs. His eyes found Nico's. The fire was back. Warm and comforting.

Nico sucked in his lips. "*I'm s*-".

Logan nudged his shoulder. "Nope…" he breathed. He bumped their foreheads together. Still burning up… "Thank you" he added with a soft whisper.

They reluctantly pulled back. Their eyes darted at the bowl, then back at each other.

Logan took a deep breath, smiled, and held out his hand. "Bring it on".

Nico gave him a dutiful nod and swiped the bowl off the nightstand, into Logan's hands. Logan forced his jaws apart and shoveled two spoonfuls into his throat, not managing to hide the sheer amount of willpower he needed to do so.

Butch parkoured up to them at the sound of cutlery and launched himself into Nico's lap. Merely to get a good view at Logan's. He gave the soup a suspicious look over and a single half assed sniff. He turned away and landed on the ground with an offended thud. If a cat could stomp off…

Logan snickered, quickly taking another bite when Nico cast a glare at him.

Nico's glare turned into a pout. "You both suck…".

Logan gave him a guilty smile. "My bad, Spooky. It's really-" he cut himself off. "I really appreciate it" he corrected.

Nico groaned and got up, away from these haters.

The dishes were Logan's chore. They'd never decided that, it just was. Nico couldn't even remember the last time he'd done them. He tried to anyway, stabbing the knife into the drying rack. His own bowl bobbed up in the suds. He held it down and scrubbed rigorously. That was *good* soup, damn it!

The sponge stopped mid scrub, looking up at Nico from right below the surface with a horrified smile. Did he just hear the toilet flush? *No.*.. Right? He'd checked just a minute ago, when he went to steal the bowl. Logan had already been out cold. The sponge reluctantly finished the scrub.

The toilet flushed again.

Gods fucking damn it! Not this shit again!

Nico smacked the sponge onto the countertop, already halfway out the kitchen door. He stopped running the same time the faucet did.

Logan had left the door open.

Nico shoved it out of the way. “Are you serious!? You haven't learned *anything!* If you need to use the bathroom, ask for-!”.

Logan cut him off with a dry heave. And another one. His knuckles whitened when he tightened his grip on both sides of the toilet bowl. His arms trembled trying to support him. “*I was in a rush*”. The flat tone echoed in the porcelain.

Nico clicked his tongue, rubbing his back through the final, driest heave. He helped Logan fold himself back upright. “Still… Screw the rug. You could have hurt yourself” he squeezed into Logan’s arm.

Logan hummed in half hearted agreement, eyes still on the toilet bowl. He sniffed, punched the lever down one last time and turned his weak smirk to Nico. “See?” he panted. “It’s not food”.

Nico rolled his eyes so hard it hurt. “I’m putting you back in bed”.

Logan grabbed Nico’s other hand and pulled both arms around himself. He leaned onto him, definitely not as casual as he was trying to make it look. “Oh? You think you can make me?”.

Nico tightened his grip on him. “Do you want me to carry you?”.

Logan scoffed, giving him an unimpressed look. “Not the direction I was going for…”.

“You know I can” Nico bragged. “I’ve done it before”.

Logan snickered with a hint of pity. “Not anymore, old man. You've got enough back problems as it is”.

Nico leaned back to look down on him with more weight. A familiar pain stabbed him in the back. His sneer fell flat. “Jerk” he decided, already hooking Logan’s arm over his shoulder and dragging him along.

He dropped him onto the bed, expertly prying Logan’s arms away from the back of his neck before he could pull him down on him. He snuck away.

“Where are you going?” Logan asked, arms still reaching for him.

“Getting you more soup” Nico replied.

“*Nohohooo…*” Logan whined behind him.

Nico ignored him, doing what needed to be done.

“You're being so *mean* today!” Logan yelled after him, voice cracking in emphasis. “And *not* in the hot way!” he cracked even louder.

“Yeah, well, you’re being extra annoying today!” Nico yelled back from the kitchen. “*Also* not in the hot way!”.

Logan was still pouting when Nico returned.

Nico pretended not to feel sorry for him, plopping the soup in his hands. Seemingly realizing pity wasn’t going to work, Logan tried a defiant look.

“I put some nectar in it” Nico manoeuvred around it.

Logan furrowed his brow. He glanced at the soup. “That can’t work” he told it. He glanced back up at Nico. ‘*Right?*’ he didn’t ask.

“Sure does” Nico assured him. “Yan’s advice”.

Logan gave up, not even bothering with the spoon. He put the bowl to his lips and took a large swig. “Little traitor…”.

Nico watched the last sip intently. “Better?” he asked hopefully.

Logan smirked as he handed him the bowl back. “Still just a warm smoothie…” he complained with a small hint of guilt.

Nico sighed through his grin. He pressed his finger on Logan’s lips and leaned in. “Shhhhhhuthefuckup” he whispered sweetly into his ear.

A devious flicker went through Logan’s eyes. He bit Nico’s finger and tugged.

“Nope”. Nico pulled it out between his teeth and wiped it on Logan’s cheek. “Stop it. We're not doing that”.

“You sure? You might actually win this time~!” Logan mused.

“I already won last time” Nico countered, leaning in closer.

“I *let* you win last time” Logan returned, also leaning closer.

“Lie down” Nico ordered.

Logan’s smile beamed with hope.

“And go to sleep” Nico meant. *Obviously.*

All hope was lost. No smile survived.

The crack in the door kept beckoning him. Nico finally gave in. He leaned against the doorway, admiring him from afar.

Logan had kicked most of the blankets off of himself. The sunlight cleaved the curtains, putting the spotlight on Logan’s upper body. What was supposed to be dewy skin was now downright rainy. Every rise and fall sent a shimmer over the rugged view.

Logan’s arm stretched down over the edge of the bed. The back of his fingers on the floor. They twitched. Logan's breath hitched.

Nico was already beside him.

Logan hacked out some coughs, then relaxed.

Nico lowered his shoulders. *False alarm.* He should have figured. It had been years. He wondered why his mind went there. To those old memories. He crouched down next to Logan's bedside, crossing his arms and resting his chin on them. He tilted his face to mirror Logan’s, shamelessly admiring him from up close. Still surprisingly boyish, still unsurprisingly charming. Undeniably gorgeous.

Nico couldn’t help compare to the first time he’d seen him like this. So *vulnerable.* It must have been the dark circles, darker than they’d been in years. Maybe the bright red contrast to the pale glow… His eyes slid lower. Light as a feather, he traced the ancient ruins of the bitemark. Rarely visible, but always catching his eye.

He looked back up. Some things *had* changed. He ran his hand through what was technically not even really an undercut anymore. The spiky strands bounced back instantly, now smoothing instead of bristling under his fingers.

Logan mumbled a question.

Nico almost missed it, but didn’t. No way he was going to let it go. “Nico?” he repeated with a smug delight. “Are we on a first name basis now?”.

Logan smiled too at the sound of his voice and cracked his eyes open.

Nico pushed his hair out of them. “Your hair's getting long”.

Logan closed his eyes again, furrowing his brow. “Yours is longer” he mumbled accusatorily, shoving his hand right in Nico's face before finding his hair, messing it up.

Nico kept smiling despite the annoyance, grabbing Logan's hand and pinning it down between them. “I'm not *complaining”*.

Logan raised his eyebrows back up. “Oh? You like it wild?” he mused weakly, eyes still closed.

The annoyance melted into an even wider smile. “If I didn't, I never would’ve stuck around so long”.

They moved in, chuckling quietly.

Nico pulled away. The unnatural warmth of Logan’s lips reminded him he shouldn’t let himself get distracted. He reached for the thermometer. Last time he’d looked at it, it had been trembling between his fingers. “You know? This morning, if it had been just *half* a degree higher, we’d be in the infirmary right now”.

Like always, Logan missed the entire point. He snickered. “You probed me in my sleep? Like an alien?”.

Nico blinked extra long, savouring the single second of peace. “It’s an *oral* thermometer. Now shut your mouth and open your-”. His eye twitched.

Logan laughed. *Good.* Nico didn’t hesitate, grabbing his chin and shoving the thermometer in. Logan’s laugh turned into a gag.

They glared at each other for exactly forty seconds.

“Beep” the thermometer beeped awkwardly.

Nico took it out.

Logan cocked his head. “What’s my score?”.

“Down almost two degrees” Nico breathed in relief.

Logan scrunched his face. “*Two?* This is going to take *days*…”.

“*Of course it’s gonna-!*”. Nico snapped his mouth shut, staring at him in disbelief. “You were *half dead* just hours ago. Did you seriously think you were going back to work tomorrow?!”. He shook his head, tucking the thermometer away in the drawer. “Gods, you’re so impatient…”.

Logan snorted. “Not *nearly* as impatient as you”.

Nico stabbed his eyes into him. “Bullshit”. He smacked the drawer shut, just like this conversation.

Logan’s eyes twinkled a mischievous orange.

“Bullshit” Nico repeated with a definitive finger in Logan’s face. He turned to walk away.

Whatever.

Not worth it.

He turned back around, raising his voice at him. “I spent an *hour* trying to teach you Mythomagic!”.

Logan raised his voice right back at him, as well as he could. “That was *way* worse for me than it was for you!”

“*No”* Nico replied coldly. *“It wasn’t.”*

Logan inhaled sharply, then gave up with a huff. A faint smile spread on his lips. “Sweeping it all off the table was fun, though…”

Nico stayed suspiciously quiet. He actually turned to walk away this time, back to the kitchen. His only safe space in this Gods forsaken house.

Despite the unusual day, they’d ended up in one of their most usual after dinner activities. Watching a horror movie in bed. One of the very few perks of having a smartphone. Scream. Nico didn’t even know which one. They were all basically the same movie, anyway.

Logan had been asleep since at most ten minutes in, right on Nico’s shoulder.

Nico glanced at him. The peaceful look on his face almost made up for the fact he’d left Nico to deal with his nerves all by himself… And *man*, was this movie getting on his nerves. “Its obviously the cop!” he hissed at the small screen, barely able to keep himself from tossing it into the wall.

Logan activated like a sleeper agent. “Thas the last one…” he mumbled in his ear.

Right... Nico shook his head as the plot twisted itself into a knot. “Gods, this one is probably the stupidest yet”.

Logan shrugged against him. “I like it…”.

Nico kissed his forehead. *Me too.*..

Somewhere around brutal murder seven, Nico’s shoulder quit its job. Barely awake, Logan still noticed, gracelessly rolling himself off. Nico didn’t agree, rolling after him and snaking an arm around him.

Logan’s back seeped through Nico’s shirt. It was like holding a space heater, dialed up to eleven… The warmth was unbearable. Nico pressed against it as much as possible, trying to give some back with the futile hope it would make Logan stop shivering.

Nico slid one hand down on Logan’s stomach, to keep track of his breathing. He stretched the other out ahead, over them, keeping up the shitshow on the little screen.

He couldn’t tell if Logan was still watching, still sleeping, or any combination of those things. Very carefully, he lifted his chin off Logan's shoulder and peered over it, trying to check. Logan used the opportunity to steal a kiss.

Nico nuzzled back to his spot in Logan’s neck. “You smell sick” he thought to himself out loud.

Logan reacted anyway. “What’s that mean…?”.

Nico thought about it some more. “The pinewood is soggy” he explained.

Logan’s shoulder gave a little jerk. “… What? Gross”.

Nico shook his head. “No. Like summer rain in the woods. Still nice”.

Logan hummed, not sounding all that convinced. “I better take a shower”.

After helping Logan in the shower, Nico rummaged through the pile of not *that* dirty shirts. The ideal state of cleanliness for sleeping in. One of them felt different. Worn thin. He dug it up and held it in front of him. The Scream mask was so faded there was barely a silent shriek left. *Perfect.*

Logan rolled over, in time to see him put it on. “You still have that?” he asked.

“Of course I do. It's my favourite. I’m *never* throwing it out” Nico admitted. “And it seemed fitting”. He gestured vaguely at the mask. He sat down next to Logan.

Logan seemed happy enough with that answer, laying his head down in Nico’s lap and looking quite pleased with himself. He tried to see what Nico gathered from his nightstand. “Dark, dramatic poetry?” he asked, pleasantly surprised. “Been a while”.

“Yeah” Nico agreed, giving him a meaningful side-eye. “No emo shit this time, though. *Special occasion*” he set up ominously.

Logan’s brow furrowed. “Hah”. His eyes went wide. He grasped at his old shirt and yanked himself up in Nico’s face. “*What day is it?*” he asked for the second time, voice still hoarse, but a lot less dazed.

Nico chuckled, low and evil.

“*Shit!*” Logan shouted.

“Calm down” Nico said in his worst Logan impression. “It’s just a day”.

A flashfire of frustration flared up in Logan’s eyes, then sizzled out when he closed them in defeat. He dropped his face on Nico's shoulder and dragged his arms around him.

Nico pressed his cheek against the side of his head, rubbing it in. He gave Logan some reassuring pats on the back, smiling at the words he was about to write on the paper in front of him. “Happy anniversary” he said lovingly.

“Happy anniversary” Logan grumbled back.

Nico shut his mind off and started writing. One by one, the words flowed out of his pen. “Done” he realized with equal pride and dread.

Logan stirred. “Wait… Does this mean I get to read this one?”.

Nico sucked in his lips, expression softening at the poem. “Yeah”. Taking extra care, he tore the page loose.

Logan smiled. He propped himself up next to him and reached out.

Nico went to hand it over, then pulled back. “It’s really short”.

Logan smiled wider. He reached out again.

Nico went to hand it over, then pulled back again. “English isn’t my first language”.

Logan’s smile twitched. He reached out again.

Nico went to finally hand it over, then pulled back even further. “It’s bad!”.

Logan laughed. “Stop blue balling me, dude! Either give me the love letter, or don’t!”.

Nico laughed too, awkwardly. He shoved the poem in Logan’s hand before he could change his mind.

Seeing Logan’s eyes move over the lines was unbearable. Nico swallowed and forced his own eyes away from Logan’s and onto the paper. He dropped his head on Logan’s shoulder, trying to keep his breathing under control as he sped over every word.

Love

Just one small word, for many big feelings

When I add more, I somehow say it less

What seems complicated, can be so simple

When you look at me, it fills me completely

Only one small word, and many big feelings

Logan read it three times. He smiled fondly at the paper. “I love it” he said softly. He turned his fond smile to Nico. “I love you” he said even softer, eyes glowing warm.

Nico spilled over. “I love *you*” he said back.

Logan held out the poem for him.

“Keep it” Nico insisted. “Doesn’t fit in there”. He tapped his bedside drawer. Stuffed with an ever growing collection of crumpled paper. Too worthless to reread, too precious to throw away.

Logan let out a single touched little laugh. He took a last look at the paper, then pulled open his own drawer.

Nico stifled a chuckle when Logan tenderly placed the T-rex tooth on top, reducing it to a twenty thousand dollar paper weight. Not that he had any idea, of course. Not that it would have made any difference if he did, of course… He shook his head and laid down, pulling the covers up. “Thanks for reading it”.

“Thanks for letting me read it”. Logan did the same, one goodnight kiss away from him.

Nico waited patiently, a bit more eager than usual.

“Piercing eyes again?” Logan teased.

Nico moved closer, unable to wait any longer.

He pulled away as little as possible, piercing deeper into the sunny amber.

No.

Not yet.

He was getting there. Some day. But right now, he still couldn’t see all the way through him.

Chapter 25: CCC. Curveball to the face

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Mild plot twist (don't literally wanna give it away in the warning)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After their traditional chaotic early morning routine, they finally settled into their traditional peaceful late morning routine. By far one of Nico's favourite parts of the week. A rare moment of peace and quiet during the waking hours in their crazy little household, usually only allowed on the weekends.

He loved the insanity just as much, but that was exactly *why* it was such a nice change of pace. The contrast helped him remember exactly *how much* he loved his usual life before he got too used to it, and dared to stop realizing how lucky he was.

The sun was well on its way across the view outside the window. The shadows of the trees and neighbouring buildings turned away from it, equally slowly. Nico watched them carefully, intent not to miss a single move invisible to the naked eye.

Logan's hand laid against his. The oldest of the habits. The slow rhythm of the tap of his finger was more tangible than audible, bringing another dimension to the shift of the warm sunlight and cool shadows in relaying the passage of time.

Nico took a sip of coffee, in full silence, savouring every bit of it.

The doorbell rang, breaking its usual habit of not doing that. Just like that, the rare peace got disturbed.

Butch stretched his old bones and hobbled over to the door before either of them moved, both still staring at the source of the intrusion in surprise, then at each other.

Logan stuck up a hand, a gesture to leave it to him, as he swiftly got up. Nico leaned onto his elbows to take in the new view.

He watched Logan open the door the same way he always did, casually if just a little bit hastily. He gripped onto his elbows tightly when Logan visibly froze at the sight of whatever was hidden right out of Nico's, on the other side of the doorway.

Neither Logan or the mystery guest made a sound, leaving no clue as to who it may be. The only hint being that it was someone he'd clearly not expected to see. Logan's knuckles whitened around the doorhandle. Eyes wide. Skin pale. He looked like he'd seen a ghost. Except… He hadn't even looked close to that when he'd *actually* seen a ghost.

Butch, however, wasn't bothered in the slightest. He murmured an airy little rasp and walked out the door, welcoming the guest warmly.

Nico regained his composure and jumped up, almost knocking his chair over. Pushing through the nerves, he quickly made his way over.

Logan didn't react when he grabbed his arm. Pushing through even more nerves, Nico quickly tore his eyes off of him to look through the doorway. Right at an equally shocked looking young girl.

She didn't even seem to register him, eyes still fixed on Logan's. Intense *amber* eyes. Her messy, dark blonde hair would have reached her shoulders if it didn't stick out in every direction instead. She couldn't be older than fifteen.

No way…!

Her hands shook. All of her shook. Even the bronze Xiphos hanging from her hip and the large backpack over her shoulder.

Butch bit into the ankle of her big black boot, with all the teeth and ferocity he had left.

Nico tightened his grip on Logan's arm.

Logan let his hand fall off the doorhandle. "*Who…?*" he started weakly. "You… Look *just* like my mother" he finished in disbelief.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Dear reader,

Please believe me when I say, thank you. I might have written this for myself, but all of you you, willing to listen to what I had to say was an incredibly reassuring surprise. Your presence, no matter how short or quiet, added a very welcome warmth to the process. Though I never met you, and never will, I will always be grateful.

I want to give my special thanks to my loving husband, and editor PanicPillow (Blogspot: Tabletop Curiosity Cabinet). Because without him, none of this would ever

have seen the light of day.
Thank you, darling. So much. More than you will ever realize. Your tremendous help with this hobby is only one small example of the ways you have supported me. You inspired all tenderness in my fantasies. You are what makes life beautiful. I love you, in every single possible way anyone can mean those words.

To add just in case: You're free to use this story/these characters however you like. Spread it around wherever you like, for any reason (good or bad), rewrite everything so everyone has a handlebar mustache, translate it, etc. I'd love a mention so I can find it, but don’t really need credit. All I really ask is that you don’t impersonate me :)

If you're interested in the author's notes for the chapters, you can find them on Sufficient Velocity. Not that I didn't feel comfortable sharing here, but I know how tedious it gets to scroll over my massive villain monologues, and they're a lot easier to skip there.

As said in the tags, the next chapter, the last one, is just a drawing I made for the project and a little short story to go along with it.

Best wishes,

C3

Last main story edit: 5th nov 2026

Chapter 26: (Drawing) PS. Love at first bite

Chapter Notes

All warnings are spoilers:
Amateur art, minor injury, hint at needlessly complicated local cat politics.

If the picture is stretched to shit and you mind that, you can fix it if you switch to desktop mode in the browser settings or by opening the picture in a separate tab.



Logan, leaning on Gwen's rickety porch fence in the middle of the night, staring at the shards of his former life. Not pictured, cigarette. Cat’s-eye view.

The stray lay still, hiding in plain sight, *sizing up his enemy.* The human hadn't noticed him so far. He hadn't for the past three nights. The stray flared his whiskers and stalked forward through the tall grass. *This night was going to be different!*

It was bad enough that the stray had suffered a legendary defeat to Lady, the blue eyed temptress, many moons ago, and had lost his territory to her during the daytime… The day she'd arrived no less. That cunning woman. She'd lured him into a sneak attack by turning her back to him, a feigned opening he'd *foolishly* charged right into. Then she'd turned around right when he was about to claim dominance, holding a big square *something* in her arms, forcing him to retreat immediately. Remembering the sheer *size* of the object still petrified him with almost *cosmic horror!*

Every time he caught her eye, she'd beckon to him, *mocking* his defeat with a high, melodic battlecry. Sometimes, she tried to tempt him into another trap with meaty delights. He'd just sneer at her from a distance, not giving her the satisfaction of another victory against him.

And now she'd brought Guy along… Guy had shamelessly taken over his porch too. At *nighttime!* Against the terms of the treaty! Guy was a fool, thinking he'd get away with it without Lady fighting beside him. The stray had defended his territory fiercely against the other warlords in the region, and he'd done so without any servants to *fatten* him for battle. The stray was the biggest, strongest, *most feared* cat in the neighbourhood! At least, he believed so… *No.*.. He'd proven it. Countless times. He'd even given his *ear* to do so, and tonight, he was willing give his other, if need be.

The stray angrily swished his tail. He pulled back his ear as he stalked closer, front paws already on his porch. He felt his pupils dilate, taking in Guy's every detail, analyzing him.

So far, Guy had stuck to the same strategy. He'd thrown open the door, rushed out, grabbed the porch fence, and performed his human fire ritual. The first times, the stray had been too impressed by Guy's abrasive techniques to dare to approach, but it had gotten *predictable* . By now, the stray had noticed that Guy didn't have the same carefree *arrogance* about him as Lady. Guy was easily distressed, unbalanced, *vulnerable.*

The stray unfolded his claws in anticipation, ready to rip into flesh, they dug into the old wood underneath him. He wiggled his hind legs to-!

Guy turned to him, amber eyes wide in surprise.

The stray hit the floor, calculating every possible move.

Well, not *every* possible move, it seemed. Guy slowly crouched down in front of him. The stray stuck out a hind paw, ready to take a step back.

Guy reached out! *Hand!* Hands were bad!

The stray hissed, loud and clear, freezing them both into a stalemate.

After a while, Guy slowly lowered his hand, almost all the way to the floor. The stray eyed it carefully. *What kind of attack was this?*

When Guy showed he wasn’t going to move again, the stray did. He slowly stuck out his neck, sniffing the hand, inspecting it for any hidden dangers. He couldn’t find any, other than the stink of the ritual… He looked up into Guy’s eyes. A hue of sadness shone through the warm amber.

Ah. It finally dawned on him. Guy had just acknowledged the stray’s superiority! He’d submitted to him! The stray had to give it to him, Guy was smarter than he looked!

The stray ran his cheek past the hand, to accept the offering. *Woah!* His hand was so *warm!* The stray ran his other cheek past, savouring the feeling.

Guy added his other hand, tickling him on both cheeks, spreading the warmth everywhere.

The stray felt something. A feeling he hadn’t felt since long, long ago. The warmth he’d felt in the shed, curled up against his mother and his littermates. A guttural rhythm flowed through his entire body.

Guy moved one hand, over the stray’s head and back. It felt *amazing!* The stray felt his defenses slip.

Ah! Guy had been *much* smarter than he looked! This had all been a ploy! *What a formidable foe!*

The stray grappled the offending hand with all his paws, biting down on it as hard as he could!

Guy yelped, ripping his hand free.

The stray rolled back to his feet, ready for another round.

Guy didn’t seem as eager, rubbing his hand. He bared his teeth. “Crazy bitch…” he muttered. The awe in his tone struck the stray with surprise.

‘Crazy bitch’... A title…? It was *beautiful!*

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!