

Don't Bury Me (With A Coin Under My Tongue)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/20667512) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/20667512>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	All For The Game - Nora Sakavic
Relationships:	Kevin Day/Neil Josten , Kevin Day & Andrew Minyard
Characters:	Kevin Day , Neil Josten , Andrew Minyard , Matt Boyd , David Wymack , Allison Reynolds (All For The Game) , Renee Walker (All For The Game) , Danielle "Dan" Wilds , Jeremy Knox , Seth Gordon , Laila Dermott , Alvarez (All For The Game) , Nicky Hemmick , Aaron Minyard , Riko Moriyama , Jean Moreau , Nathan Wesninski , Lola Malcolm , Romero Malcolm , Patrick DiMaccio
Additional Tags:	Demigods , Alternate Universe - College/University , Angst , Drinking , Underage Drinking , Hurt/Comfort , Scars , Jealousy , Palmetto State University , House Party , Roommates , Alternate Universe - Roommates/Housemates , Eden's Twilight , First Meetings , Alternate Universe - No Exy (All For The Game) , Fantasy , Urban Fantasy , POV Neil Josten , Bad Days , Training , Kissing , Cuddling & Snuggling , Sharing a Bed , Torture , Art , art in separate chapters , References to Ancient Greek Religion & Lore
Language:	English
Collections:	AFTG Big Bang 2019
Stats:	Published: 2019-09-17 Completed: 2019-10-31 Words: 18,347 Chapters: 4/4

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by [mr-im-fine \(witch_lit\)](#)

Summary

Neil's been a demigod on the run for most of his life. When an offer to stay comes his way, packaged with invisibility and training, he can't refuse. It's against everything his mother ever taught him, but with her death, he has to find out for himself that all the protection in the world won't help when Tartarus comes knocking.

Notes

Guess who did a Big Bang! you can check out the Tumblr page for [aftgbigbang](#) to see what other people are up to!

Many thanks to my artist, [jojen-hewitt](#) on Tumblr! I really love their artwork of this pic, I hope you like it too!

I am posting the art in separate chapters for mobile users, there are 4 pieces in total! (They went HARD)

Enjoy the first half!

Chapter 1

Neil can hardly hear the Satyr over the pounding of his own heart. The sword in his hand is heavy, unfamiliar. The locker room he's spent a better part of the last year sleeping in feels too small, a contortion pressing at his chest.

Neil drops the sword. It clangs in the empty room, interrupting the Satyr. Grabbing his duffel bag, Neil leaves the satyr, following the cement-walled hallway out onto the soccer field. Around him, the sun is setting. There is grass at his feet, fake as it may be, to settle him. He collapses down onto it, pulling his legs up to his chest.

Neil lights a cigarette, the satyr fumbling behind him. It takes more attempts than he is proud of.

"Hey," The satyr says. Neil can all but smell the trees on him. He is tall and dark skinned, one cloven hoof visible where his shoe had fallen off earlier. Neil's surprised that his nose isn't twitching. He hasn't met many Satyrs, but he knows they're not big on smoke.

"I'm Matt," Matt, the Satyr, says. He gingerly sits down next to Neil.

Neil inhales, never bringing the cigarette is half gone. They sit until his cigarette is half gone, Matt's hands ripping into the astroturf. "I hate this crap."

"It gets the job done."

"Isn't playing on a real field so much better?"

"I wouldn't know," Neil says. "I don't play."

No, he's only been camping out in the locker room of Millport High School to avoid going back to his squat on the other side of town. The more trips he makes, the more he risks being noticed. His last year of high school hasn't been very eventful, in the scope of things, until Matt shows up.

There had been a flock of stymphalian birds on his tail, and he must have smelled the demigod on Neil, because he threw him a sword and expected him to take them down. He had, quickly weighing his odds. The man-eating monsters would have followed if he'd run, and they had no voices to use to whisper his name in the Underworld. So, Neil had gone against everything his mother had ever taught him and send the birds to Tartarus.

"Were those your first monsters?" Matt asks softly.

"Is that what those were?" Neil asks.

"You're old not to know about monsters."

Neil shrugs, inhaling the smoke from his cigarette.

"Do you have a parent around?" Matt asks.

Neil hesitates. He doesn't, but no one in Millport knows that. Millport was his first stop since his mother's death, and he'd fabricated parents to avoid drawing attention to himself.

“I live with my aunt,” Neil says. “But she’s always away for work.”

“I know a place where you can learn about what just happened. A place that’s safe. Where you can learn about gods and monsters.”

“How safe?”

“Not even the gods can see you uninvited,” Matt claims.

Neil’s mother had always told him to be wary of waystations for demigods. His mother had lived in one as a child--a place called Camp Half-Blood. There, she’d learned to resent the olympians. But Neil has been alone for so long. Being invisible sounds tempting enough.

“What do you call it?”

Matt grins. “The Foxhole Court.”

It takes them two days to make it to the Foxhole. They have far to go, from Arizona to South Carolina. They go by land, something his mother had always insisted on and Matt seemed to agree with. No need to draw the attention of sky gods, she’d said. It was easier to be close to the ground.

They don’t run into any monsters. Matt, clad in fake feet and cargo pants, expresses his surprise. He’s used to running into monsters when escorting newly-aware demigods. They’re usually extremely potent, Matt tells him. The knowledge bleeds into them like a beacon. Neil can’t remember a time when he didn’t know about the gods. He doesn’t tell Matt, but there are enough tricks up his sleeve that they manage to avoid any monsters.

The Foxhole is a white stone building on the edge of a college campus. It has huge pillars, a tired homage to greek heritage. It is slightly run down, a bare black metal railing jutting out of the cement at an odd angle. Trees rise up in front of it, digging their roots into the sidewalk. There are a few shingles missing from the roof, and the door is peeling white paint. The place doesn’t smell like demigods, at least until Neil sets foot on the sidewalk leading up to the house. Then, the scent hits him like BO had in the Millport locker room.

Sitting behind the two story pillars on the porch are two men, a blond and a brunette. The brunette is turning pages in a book, a pencil behind his ear. The blond smokes what must be his nth cigarette if the ashtray is any indication. The scent is strong, but not enough to clog the smell of demigod. The blond’s eyes flick up to Matt and Neil as they approach.

His gaze is cold, and Neil fights the urge to meet it head on. He’s Neil Josten, a mild-tempered teenager from a lazy town in Arizona. He needs to keep his head down.

The brunette looks up as Matt opens the screen door, green eyes intense. His eyes land on Neil, scanning him up and down. Neil watches him in return, cataloging him. His skin is lighter than Matt’s but darker than Neil’s and he fills out a Nike sweatshirt. There’s a sturdy book between his hands and a chess piece tattooed under his left eye. He doesn’t look that friendly either.

“Boyd,” the blond says, snapping Neil’s attention away from the brunette. “Bring us another stray?”

“Whatever, Andrew.” Matt rolls his eyes. “This is Neil. Neil, Andrew and Kevin. We’re still not sure if they’re actually part monster. Stay out of their way if you can.”

Sounds about right for the offspring of gods, Neil thinks, but doesn’t say. He grips the handle of his duffel bag and considers how fast he can get out of here if he needs to. It smells of Olympian.

Neil’s nods at the two in greeting, then follows Matt into the house. The place smells slightly of cigarettes and heavily of magic. There are a stack of shoes in the entryway, and Neil follows Matt’s lead and slips his off.

They pass a set of white stairs to a living room where more people are hanging out. A woman with long blonde hair is leaning over the toenails of a dark skinned dryad, polish in hand. The TV plays a show that Neil’s unfamiliar with.

When she spots Matt, the dryad grins, sitting up from her reclined position on the couch.

“Dan,” the blonde scolds as the dryad stands up. “You’re going to ruin your nails.”

The dryad, Dan, doesn’t seem to care. She launches herself at Matt, who catches her easily. They share a quick kiss.

“I missed you,” Dan says.

“I missed you too,” Matt says. Neil feels a little like he’s intruding, but the blonde is rolling her eyes.

“Who’s your friend, Matt?” The blonde asks.

Matt laughs, pulling away from Dan. His hand grabs hers for a pulse before he lets go. “Right. Guys, this is Neil. Found him in Arizona finishing up his senior year of high school. He should be staying with us a while.”

The blonde nods in acceptance and taps the nail polish cap against the bottle. “He’s cute.”

“Don’t scare him off, Allison. Neil, I’m Dan. I’m half tree nymph,” Dan says, holding out her hand. Neil shakes it. “That’s Allison. We’ll be your housemates if you decide to stay.”

Neil nods and smiles.

“Well, we’ve got to get to Wymack. Neil just met Kevin and Andrew, so we’d better get him settled before he decides to bolt.”

Matt laughs as Dan makes a sour face.

“If those two or their cousin gives you trouble, come to me, alright?” Dan asks.

Neil nods, though he doubts that he’ll take her up on her offer.

Matt leans down to kiss Dan’s forehead, then meets Neil’s eyes and nods his head towards a hallway. He leads Neil back to the front of the house and up the stairs Neil had seen earlier.

“What?” A gruff voice comes from behind the door.

Matt opens the door, revealing an office space cluttered with papers. Chewing on a toothpick behind the desk is a man with bulging muscles and thick tattoos lining his arms. The scent that hits him is strong, too strong for this person to be the descendent of just one god. Neil's heart skips as the man flicks his gaze to look him up and down.

"You must be Neil," the man says around the toothpick. He picks it out of his mouth and throws it away. "I'm Wymack. I run this house. Keep it off-grid for monsters, help train you, get your tuition covered, etcetera. Sit down."

Neil sits in one of the chairs in front of Wymack's desk, Wymack never leaving the periphery of his vision. His duffel is on the floor, the strap resting on his knee. Matt sits next to him.

Wymack drums his fingers on the desk. "So. I'm sure Matt's given you the rundown: you're a demigod, monsters are trying to kill you, and you need to get stronger so that you can kill them before they can kill you."

"Roughly," Neil says.

"Do you know which god is your parent?" Wymack asks.

Neil doesn't hesitate when he shakes his head. He doesn't, technically, have a godly parent, but his mother did.

"Alright, that's fine," Wymack says. "Law dictates that they claim you your first week of being here, so it won't be a mystery long."

Neil's heart jumps into his throat. He has to be claimed? If his father can claim him, he can find him. Neil takes a quick breath to calm himself down. "Does it matter?"

Wymack pauses, looking at him. "Not really. It helps us with training. Most kids want to know."

"Matt said that the gods can't see us here," Neil says.

Wymack leans back in his chair, eyes narrowing. Neil feels a little too naked under his gaze. "They can't. That's not how the claiming system works."

Neil nods, and feels some of the tension between his shoulders release. "How?"

"My mother is Hecate, the god of magic. I can keep this place invisible to gods and monsters."

That explains the smell of the house. The wards surrounding the property can't have been made purely from Hecate's power, but Neil isn't surprised to find it's been a factor. Neil thinks of the trees invading the property and assumes that Dan's abilities as part dryad played a role in maintaining the magic.

"Matt can get you settled in. He lives here, but every now and then goes out to search for any last vestiges of the wild. Sometimes, he comes back with a demigod like you. Has to convince the Satyr council he's doing something."

"I don't want to be reincarnated into something stupid when I die," Matt explains.

"They'd do it just to spite me if I don't do something."

“Renée will start your sword training tomorrow, and I’m sure Kevin’d be happy to start your ancient Greek. Speaking of Kevin,” Wymack says.

“We met, on the porch,” Neil says.

“Good,” Wymack says. “He’s my son, but he can be a bit of a handful. He’s going to be your roommate.”

Neil sucks in a breath. Surely Andrew and Kevin aren’t as bad as Matt made them out to be. It could be like rooming with a brick wall or a time bomb. Whatever the case, Neil’s probably slept in the same room as worse. No, he knows he has. He’ll have to watch his back.

“You can leave at any time. We’d prefer you didn’t go anywhere alone until we can get you trained up a but, but I’m not your keeper. You can make your own stupid choices.”

“Alright,” Neil says. “Is that all?”

“There’s one more thing,” Wymack says, already reaching for a stack of papers. “If you kill anyone of your housemates, I end you. Got it?”

“Got it,” Neil says. It’s a strange request, but it probably won’t give him any difficulties. The last thing he wants is to send anyone to the underworld.

“Good,” Wymack says. “Matt will show you to your room and introduce you to your housemates.”

“Everyone here?” Matt asks.

“Aaron and Nicky are in class. Renée’s volunteering. Seth has made your room into a bit of a cave, but he’s here.”

“Great,” Matt grumbles, leading Neil out of the room. He take Neil up the stairs to the second floor, where he leads Neil to a room with two beds.

The room is clean but lived in. One bed is barren while the other is neatly made, a summer comforter wrapped into the crease between the mattress and box spring. There are running shoes tucked under the bed, books stacked on the desk, and a pen resting over a closed notebook. An orange backpack hangs from the back the desk chair. The laundry bin is half full. The cleanliness doesn’t hide the smell of magic, of god, and Neil wonders just how much the smell of cigarettes had hidden about Kevin. He wonders who Kevin’s mother was, because he doubts it was a mortal.

Matt shrugs. “This is your room. You can leave your duffel on the bed if you want. Kevin’s clean, at least, so that might make up for his horrible personality.”

“What’s wrong with his personality?” Neil asks. He doesn’t set his duffel down.

Matt pauses. “He’s... intense. A bit of a dick and doesn’t care for much other than getting better at fighting monsters. Picks a lot of fights, mostly with Seth.”

Neil doesn’t understand what’s wrong with wanting to be better at fighting monsters, but he nods. Neil would love to pick up a sword again, to train to get rid of anything in his path. To do so is a risk bigger than his mother would ever allow, but she’s long gone. Taking out those birds for Matt had been a thrill, and not just because of the potential consequences. Being known, even just to some monsters, was intoxicating.

“You want to hang out with the girls for a little bit? It looked like they were taking a break from working anyway,” Matt asks.

“Sure.”

Neil stares into the room that he now shares with Kevin. He stares at the bed. He hasn't slept in a bed since before Millport. The room is heavy with the smell of demigod, and Neil wonders how powerful Kevin is.

“You going to leave your bag in here?”

Neil considers his bag. It's all he has, but nothing he's hugely attached to. He can always get more clothes and toiletries. The colored contacts are a little incriminating, but they're in a hidden pouch. Everything his mother left him is on his person.

Shrugging, Neil drops his bag on the empty bed. “I'll need to buy sheets.”

Matt lights up. “Renee will probably be home by the time we get back, so we can get dinner with the girls. We can take my truck.”

Dan and Allison have split ways since Neil and Matt were downstairs. Dan is still on the couch longways, drying toes in the air, tapping her fingers on a textbook. She looks up when Matt and Neil come in.

“Oh thank god,” she says. “I couldn't focus on studying. You really had to come back during finals, huh?”

“Needed to get Neil somewhere safe,” Matt says, sitting down on the couch next to Dan's hip.

“I was doing fine before you showed up,” Neil says.

“Everyone knows demigods get especially smelly once they learn about their nature,” Dan rolls her eyes. She sniffs the air. “You don't smell like much, though. I'm surprised Matt even found you.”

“Hey!” Matt says. Then, sheepishly, rubs the back of his head. “He was the only thing I could smell for miles and I had a pack of stymphalian birds on my heels.”

Dan whacks his arm. “So you led them right to him?”

“I'm surprised you survived the encounter.” The voice is deep, and new to Neil. Sharp green eyes dig into him.

Kevin and Andrew stand at the doorway, a giant and child next to each other. Neil hadn't realized just how short Andrew was, nor how tall Kevin was.

“He doesn't look like much, does he?” Andrew says, and it nearly sends Neil's heart into overdrive.

“He could be,” Kevin replies in latin. Their accents are identical and terrible. “Dan said she could hardly smell him.”

“She's been wrong before.”

Neil glances at Matt, who's frowning.

“Care to share with the class?” Matt grumbles. It brings Neil back to the moment. Kevin and Andrew had been speaking only to each other. For a second, Neil had thought they were speaking to him. He thought they knew, somehow, that he could speak the dead language. “We’re Greek, not Roman.”

“No,” Kevin says. He turns his eyes back to Neil. “We start studying Greek tonight. Be ready.” “We’re going out for dinner,” Matt says.

Kevin raises an eyebrow. “After, then.”

The trip to the store doesn’t take particularly long. They get sheets and a towel, and though Matt tries to convince Neil to get more clothes, he refuses. He has enough for a week’s worth of outfits, which is more than enough. On the way back from the store, Matt points out different parts of campus and helps Neil get a lay of the land.

The campus is bigger than any school Neil has ever been to. Millport had had a dusty husk of a high school, the population aged far past its prime. On the run there had been bigger schools, but Palmetto is a big 10 university and has a pool of students much larger than the public schools Neil had been through on the run. He’s glad, at least, that he had those schools to buffer a childhood of personal tutoring.

The summer will be long enough to adjust to the size of the campus, even if Neil’s not sure he’ll be at Palmetto long enough to enroll in classes.

After making the trip to the store (and Matt offering to buy Neil alcohol, even though he’s underage), Neil meets the rest of the residents of the Foxhole Court. He’s surprised to find Andrew has a carbon copy in his twin brother, Aaron. Their boisterous cousin Nicky (“on our human side,” Nicky adds), is grabby and enthusiastic to meet Neil. Seth, a greasy demigod, appears out of his room to grab a cold slice of pizza from the fridge, completely ignoring Neil. The last resident Neil meets is Renee, who is sweet enough to fit outside of Neil’s view of the world.

Neil knows the least what to do with Renee’s soft presence, but she joins him, Matt, Dan and Allison for dinner. They go to a dinner just off of campus, a greasy spoon full of students who look like they’re only half alive. They all squish into a booth, Neil in the middle. Renee, Allison and Dan fill Matt in on what he’s missed in his months away. They talk about finals, Allison and Dan arguing about who’s more stressed about the exams and projects.

“You were both working on Dan’s nails when we got back,” Matt points out. Dan sticks out her tongue at him as Allison waves him off.

“Finals are a stressful time,” Renee says mildly. “Have you given any thought to what you’d like to study, Neil?”

“Not really,” Neil says.

“You’ve got plenty of time to decide,” Dan says. “Not everyone knows what they’re going into.”

“Like you didn’t know you wanted to go for sports management since you started college,” Allison rolls her eyes.

“I did,” Dan says. “But not everyone does. And a lot of people get caught up in who they’re supposed to be.”

Dan shifts in her seat. “I’m part dryad. Sports management isn’t exactly what people would assume I’d go into. When we get visitors from other schools who know about the gods, a lot of them are surprised I don’t spend my time in the agricultural department.”

Neil nods. This struggle doesn’t apply to him, but he tucks the information away.

“I’m just saying you shouldn’t base your career and school around who your parent is, when we find out,” Dan says, then sighs. “It’ll only make you miserable.”

Neil nods, his smile tight.

“Look at me,” Allison laughs haughtily. Her words have a hint of metal to them as she speaks. “Daughter of Ares, majoring in fashion merchandising. Daddy doesn’t mean shit.”

Neil blinks. He wouldn’t have pegged Allison for a daughter of Ares. With her perfectly coiffed hair and angel face, he would have guessed closer to the Aphrodite section of gods. With a major like fashion merchandising, it almost seems like Allison is doing everything in her power to redefine her godly parent. Neil looks down and catches Renee’s hand cupped around Allison’s under the table.

Neil’s already spent all day talking to Matt about his plans to return to school. The girls, however, are mostly unknown.

“What about you?” Neil asks Renee, who had started this whole topic to begin with.

“Theology,” Renee says.

Neil doesn’t really know what to do with that answer. He doesn’t know what to do with the cross around her neck, either. Renee catches him looking and meets his eyes.

“We all have our faith.”

Neil, who’s never had faith in anything except the cold hard reality that one day he will die at his father’s hands, nods like that means something. It certainly doesn’t mean anything to him, but the person he’s pretending to be comes from a nowhere town in Arizona where church is the place to be every Sunday.

“If you ever need help reconciling, let me know,” Renee offers. Her voice is soft, but the thought of taking her up on it unnerves Neil. Allison saves him from having to answer.

“So, I hear you’re rooming with Kevin?”

Dan groans, dramatically throwing her head back. “Kevin’s such an asshole.”

“If you ever need a break you can come visit me and Dan,” Allison offers.

“He’s not that bad,” Renee says, her smile diplomatic.

“He was yelling about inefficient dishwasher sorting earlier today.”

“Everyone’s stressed about finals,” Renee reminds. “Besides, he was kind enough to teach you ancient Greek.”

“He grew up speaking Greek,” Allison whines. “And he was so insufferable I almost didn’t want to learn it.”

Unease sneaks into Neil. “Is he really that hard to work with?”

“He’s so strict,” Allison complains. “Always telling you what you’re doing wrong. Wouldn’t even let me eat during lessons.”

Neil’s not surprised to hear that. Kevin’s side of their room had been neat and well kept, and it was looking like that was a standard he’d be holding Neil to as well. Neil wasn’t concerned. He hardly had enough things to make a mess, and he’d practiced keeping things organized to make it easier to split with a second’s notice. He knew to do the work as soon as he could, not when he was running on deficit.

They head back to the Foxhole soon after. Neil lingers with the girls for a while longer.

The sun has set when Kevin finally tracks down Neil. Neil was just thinking about changing into his sleep clothes when Kevin appears in the doorway to the room that’s technically theirs, Andrew slouched behind him on the railing opposing the door. Kevin has a book under his arm, and he nods towards the front of the house and takes off.

Taking the cue, Neil follows Kevin and Andrew down the second floor hallway. The floor is divided in the middle by the staircase, three rooms on each side and bathrooms at the top of the stairs. Opposing the bathrooms is a common space, furnished with couches and a TV. Neil thinks that they might stop here, but they don’t. Instead, they keep walking through the French doors to the balcony behind the Greek pillars at the front of the house.

There’s a barn light hanging from the bottom of the entablature of the pillars, and a few illuminating lights, but otherwise the night is dark. The balcony is decorated with old wicker furniture. White wears away at the hard edges of the armrests and on the seats.

Kevin and Andrew occupy a loveseat outside of what Neil thinks is Wymack’s office, and Neil sits on the chair adjacent to Kevin as Kevin pulls the book from under his arm and sets it on the wicker table in front of them.

“We’re going to start with the alphabet,” Kevin says. “You’re a demigod, so it shouldn’t take too long to get you reading in greek.”

Neil, who already knows greek, asks, “Why is it important to learn greek?”

Kevin frowns. “It’s good to know.”

“How were your grades in your English classes?” It’s Andrew that asks, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his chest pocket.

Neil thinks back to his years in school and frowns. English had never been his strong suit, but then, he hadn’t expected it to be. English had come later, a necessity on the run.

Andrew snorts and lights his cigarette. “Figures.”

“You shouldn’t smoke those,” Kevin scolds Andrew. He receives a cool look in return.

“You probably didn’t do well in your English classes because your brain isn’t wired for it. Being part god, your mind is predisposed to understanding Greek. We think it’s part of why so many Gods were born fully formed and capable of speech, but it’s become a hindrance in the modern age, where ancient Greek isn’t the norm.”

Neil hadn’t known that. It’ll give him an excuse to pick up Greek quickly, though, so he’ll run with it.

Kevin flips open the book. “We’re going to go over the symbols and how they sound. Try to keep up.”

Neil looks at Kevin in confusion. He wonders, for a second, if this is some kind of trick. Neil doesn’t have any problems seeing in the darkness, but anyone else would. Neil wonders if Kevin or Andrew’s godly parent allows them to see in the dark, but he doesn’t have to wonder for long.

Above the table, an orb of light forms. It is warm on his cheeks, and illuminates the table and his housemates. The light hits Andrew like he’s a wall, but it dances on Kevin’s skin. It brings his skin to life, adding an element of mystery that Neil hadn’t considered before. Neil feels like the sun should burn, but it doesn’t.

“My great grandfather was Apollo,” Kevin says, shedding some light on his ancestry. He clears his throat. “Let’s begin.”

They spend an hour on the balcony, working on Neil’s ancient Greek. Kevin is a harsh teacher, unforgiving in critiquing the mistakes Neil makes on purpose. Still, he offers anecdotes and continues to give Neil the tools to rebuild something he already knows. It’s been so long since he last spoke in greek, his mother forbidding it when they were on the run. The nostalgia almost burns.

The air is cool enough for comfort, the oncoming swell of summer heat a threat rolling slowly through the grass. It’s too early in the season for mosquitos, if they even come to South Carolina, and it’s bordering on nice.

Neil can feel the beat of the party under his skin. Matt had started the night with what he’d called “classics, Neil. Classics,” disparaging the fact that Neil was not an avid Britney Spears enthusiast. Later, a cup in her manicured hands, Allison had commandeered the sound system. The base had gotten heavier, the tempo aggressive enough for the war in her blood. Neither had felt like an interruption to the night. The party is a shot of adrenaline he will have to conceal around his housemates.

Parties like these are about giving in to the night, a surrender to her powers. Neil has spent enough time in the house of Nyx to know that she thrives off of celebrations, accepting as many kinds of night as there are. Neil has to fight the urge to become less, to melt into the walls and become something a little more god than human.

Party goes, college students, and anyone that his housemates could collect swirl in front of him. A tribute to Dionysus. Perhaps a tribute to Apollo, through the speakers. Someone sloshes their drink onto him, cheering the end of the semester. The party pulls at him from all directions. The room begins to feel less like a tribute to the night and more like a heavy hands pulling him down into a pit with iron-shut openings.

Slipping out the front door, Neil's not sure just how much of his body is blurring to shadows. This is why his mom kept him away from the crowds, from other kids at school. He could barely keep himself together in these situations. She taught him control through fear, and fear only disciplines him so much when power threatens to spill from his every pore.

Neil climbs the front pillars of the house, more a shadow than a creature, needing to see the stars and remind himself of where he is. For most of his life, he hadn't known stars. He'd known dirt and stagnant air and nothing of this terrifying wonderland above ground. The tumble over the entablature at the top of the pillars finds Neil finally still, face up and eyes on the stars.

For a second he's so focused on Ouranos that he doesn't register the smell of smoke and the startled shuffle next to him. He does notice the clank of a glass bottle hitting marble. A now familiar voice says his name in surprise.

Sitting up, Neil surveys the duo he's joined in the entablature. Kevin is leaning against one of the corners walls, legs splayed and bottle dangerously close to a storm drain. His eyebrows furrow as he squints at Neil. He's a mess of akimbo limbs next to Andrew, who is leaning over one of the edges, perfectly controlled. A line of cigarette butts decorates the edge of the structure, a cherry burn dangling from his mouth as he surveys Neil. He is impassive except for the hand reaching into his armband. It's a wonder Neil didn't see him on his way up, but his haste to remember the sky might have been his undoing.

"Not a fan of the party, Josten?" Andrew asks, an eyebrow raised.

"I could ask you the same thing," Neil says, eyeing the evidence of Andrew's chain smoking.

Andrew flaps a hand at him. "I'm more interested in your climb up."

Neil feels rigid. Accidentally showing Andrew and Kevin an expense of power that should be unknown to him in his alleged newness to godliness is not what he wanted. "I needed to see the stars."

"Oh? Is little Neil afraid of the dark?" Andrew asks, voice mocking.

"Andrew," Kevin says, his eyes are sharp on Neil.

"I'm not afraid of the dark," Neil says, and it's true. He's afraid of the earth eating him and being returned to his father, but not the dark. Never the dark. Neil feels power surge, a pride not his own running over him like a laugh in his ear or hand on his shoulder.

"Oh," Kevin says, staring somewhere above Neil.

Neil glances at Andrew, who is also looking above him, before raising his eyes to the sky above.

Floating outlined in a soft white is a crescent moon. Neil knows this symbol from his childhood, and it both comforts and terrifies him to see it above his head. He's glad it's Nyx who's claiming him.

"Nyx," Kevin says.

"Really went far in proving that point," Andrew says, squinting at Neil. "You don't seem surprised."

Neil tries to inject some confusion into his face, but he can't. He was shaken off his center by the heat of the party and the slips he's made in front of Andrew and Kevin. "We haven't covered that god yet."

"Goddess," Kevin corrects. "A part of the universe. The personification of the night. She's... very powerful."

Neil nods, as though this is new information.

"Not so little after all, huh?" Andrew says, stubbing out his cigarette. He pushes off of the wall and squats by Neil. "I don't trust you."

Andrew stands, brushing off his pants. He sends a look to Kevin, who sighs as he stands up. Together, they push off the side of the entablature, using Kevin's ability to float to the ground.

Staring at the spot Kevin and Andrew left from, Neil sighs. The feeling that he's made an enemy is ice in his veins, but the pulse of the party and the surrounding darkness warms him.

Lying on his back, Neil breaths in through his nose. The stars are bright and reassuring, even if they're full of other people's ancient tragedy.

The party seems to have broken something between Neil, Andrew and Kevin. That night when Neil goes to bed, Kevin isn't there. That itself isn't cause for concern, and neither is waking up alone in their shared room. What draws his attention is that Neil is never alone in a room with Kevin after the party.

Before, Kevin and Neil had spent hours working on Neil's classic Greek, Kevin filling in the gaps of Neil's education while Neil pretended everything was new to him. They would sit next to each other on the back porch, Kevin peeking over from his homework when Neil struggled through a passage. Sometimes, if he needed to take a break from studying, Kevin would take him through a couple of defensive maneuvers to blow off some steam. They'd repeat until Kevin was pleased with the progress Neil had made. It had been less than a week, but Neil had felt like he'd made progress.

Now, things are different. Whenever Kevin asks Neil to come and study, Andrew's there, watching them from over the top of his own book. Neil hasn't missed that Andrew's got a fair number of classic english texts translated into Ancient Greek. He'd wonder where they came from, but he'd have to give a shit.

They don't spar anymore. Maybe Neil's blowing it out of proportion--it's only been a week since school ended, and maybe Kevin's recharging. It could be that Andrew's always like this outside of school, but Neil doesn't think so. The look in Andrew's eyes, the surprise and hard wall of protection, isn't something that Neil's able to dismiss. He can feel something brewing.

Neil isn't so busy with the other foxes that he can ignore that this is hurting his ability to learn as much as he can. He's learning a lot: more than he could with his mother, who had kept secrets so secure that he'd have needed diamond to break through her walls. He'd learned plenty with his grandmother, when he wasn't recovering from whatever his father had decided to do to him that time, but his respite had always been short.

After a week of Andrew's nonsense, Neil decides that he's had enough. He confronts Kevin in the kitchen midday, a peace offering of his diminished powers during this time. While Kevin chops vegetables, Andrew pokes at a bowl of artificially colored cereal.

"Why haven't you been training me?" Neil asks, his words carefully lacking the frustration he feels. He came to the foxes for a safe place to hide and training.

Kevin looks at Andrew, as if asking permission. It lights Neil's blood on fire, but Neil Josten doesn't have a big temper. He's been carefully crafted against it. Neil tries to keep it in, like swallowing a hot coal.

"Not right now," Kevin says.

"Why not?" Neil says. "Your handler disapprove."

Kevin sneers at him. "It's none of your business."

"I came here to learn," Neil says. "So yeah. It is my business."

Kevin's mouth works until he finally decides on a frown. "Whatever," he says, turning back to his vegetables.

"Don't ignore me," Neil says, walking around the kitchen island.

"Josten," Andrew says, even though this should be between Kevin and Neil. "Come to Eden't with us Friday night and we'll see about Kevin training you."

"What, are you his keeper?" Neil asks.

Andrew just raises an unimpressed eyebrow, but it's not Andrew's constitution Neil cares about. Kevin's eyes are down, focused on the cutting board in front of him. His hands are still, though, his back tense.

"Fine," Neil says, backing out of the cooking area.

"Josten," Andrew says, tossing something at Neil. Neil catches it before it collides with his forehead. "Where you're going, you'll need this."

Neil looks at the coin in his hand, then back at Andrew. He sets the coin down on the table. "Sorry, but I'm not interested in visiting Charon anytime soon."

It turns out Eden's is a club out in one of the suburbs surrounding Palmetto State University. Andrew drives them there in an expensive car Nicky tells him they bought with the twins' mother's life insurance. Neil isn't going to dive into that one, but follows Nicky's conversation for the thirty minutes it takes to get them to the club. He's underdressed, but at 11 pm, Neil can feel his battery is fully charged. No one will question how he looks. Mortals might not even be able to see him as the night stretches on. He wonders why they decided to take him out at night, when he's the strongest and Kevin's the weakest.

The night might suit the cousin's parentage, but Neil can't tell from smell alone. He knows that Andrew is more potent than Aaron, likely through use of his blood, and Nicky hardly smells like anything but human. It might be because he's older and has had more time to settle into his scent, but Neil's not sure. It sets him on edge, but he knows he can leave anytime he wants.

They bypass a line to enter the club, Nicky stopping to talk to the bouncer. When Neil looks at Kevin in question, he shrugs. He has to raise his voice to be heard, even in the entryway.

“They all used to work here.”

Walking into the club Neil’s veins pulse. The place is dimly lit, red lights streaking up the walls, music loud enough that Neil wonders if they have to give out earplugs. Neil’s been to bars before with his mother, usually in the light of day, but never to a club like this.

It’s intoxicating. It’s like the party at the house all over again, Nyx calling out to him like she, not Dionysus, is the patron of parties. She was always kind to him, and maybe that’s why he can feel her so strongly now.

Neil follows Andrew to the bar. There is a swarm of people there, vying for the bartenders’ attention with hands gripping green dollar bills. Andrew elbows his way to the bartop, leaning against it. They wait, Andrew half turned towards Neil, silent.

“You wanted to talk,” Neil yells over the noise. He has to lean into Andrew’s space to be heard, something he’s reluctant to do.

It’s Andrew who pushes into his space. “What do you know of Olympus?”

“That it’s probably not atop a mountain anymore.”

Andrew frowns. Neil can see him “tch,” but he can’t hear it over the music. “Don’t play dumb, Neil. You’re more than you said you were.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Neil crosses his arms, his eyes hard against Andrew’s.

Andrew raises an eyebrow. “We’ll see.”

“When? It’s not like I’m going to be drinking with you.”

Andrew rolls his eyes and turns back to the bar. The bartender seems to have finally found time for them exchanges a few words with Andrew before he grabs a tray and starts pulling at bottles. He sets a glass on the tray and pours it full of brown soda. An offering for Neil, then.

The exchange lasts half a minute, and then Andrew is bending at his knees to lift the tray up above the crowd. They walk through the club to a grove of high top tables where they find Kevin, Nicky and Aaron. The table has gauzy curtains, which they draw as Andrew and Neil arrive.

Andrew’s hardly set down the tray when the group starts going for the shots. Neil watches them as Andrew hands him his soda, their faces contorting from the alcohol. There are fewer chasers than shots, and Neil notes it’s because neither Andrew nor Kevin choose to chase before taking a second drink.

Nicky makes a “wahoo” sound and leaves the table for the dance floor, pulling Aaron off with him. Andrew climbs into one of the tall stools. He’s still shorter than Kevin like this, but Kevin is truly a giant.

Neil sits down, his feet dangling. Taking a sip of his soda, he wonders how quickly he could slip out of this club. Seconds, if he used his abilities. But Andrew hasn’t seen him move like that, not really, so Neil won’t risk it if he has a choice.

“Why don’t you trust me?” Neil asks.

“You’re too powerful to have no training,” Andrew says. “I wonder where you got it from?”

“Renee’s been teaching me how to use a sword for a week.”

Andrew waves his hand. “The night of the party, you used shadows to climb the POLE. How did you know how to do that?”

“Instinct? It felt right.”

“No, you knew you could do it.” Andrew leans back in his chair. “You wouldn’t have thought to try otherwise.”

Andrew is right, but it’s strange that something so small could blip his radar. Neil’s behavior only borders on suspicious, it shouldn’t have caused Andrew to yank Kevin away from Neil. Why is Kevin Andrew’s to protect, anyway?

“Do you know who my godly parent is, Neil?”

Neil shakes his head, looking to Kevin. Leaned up against the table, Kevin’s eyes burn into Neil. He looks away.

“Aaron and I were claimed by Soretia, a god of deliverance. Of safety.” Andrew leans into the table, eyes hard. “When you climbed up the front pillar you set off my warning system.”

Neil’s vision is so full of Andrew that he doesn’t notice Kevin behind him until his arms are pulled behind him, Kevin a solid mass keeping him immobilized. Neil shoves his weight from one side to another, but it feels like he’s moving through molasses. Futile.

Fear spikes through him, and he looks at his empty glass. His mouth dries up.

Andrew smirks. “You thought you were safe, here, in my territory? How stupid.”

Neil keeps struggling, convulsing in Kevin’s grasp. He pulls at the shadows in the room. They’re slippery, but plentiful, and Neil can almost use them.

“Relax,” Kevin says in his ear.

Andrew reaches out to him, one hand pulling down his collar and the other bringing something to his throat. Neil stills, afraid to sink the point of a knife into his neck, before he feels the wet felt tip of a marker against his skin. The shadows become inaccessible again, frozen out of his control.

“What did you do?” Neil gasps.

“I made your parentage useless,” Andrew says. “Or practically. You’re too incapacitated to burn it away.”

“You could have just asked me what you wanted to know.”

“Like you would have told me.”

“And now I have no choice?”

“That’s right,” Andrew lets go of Neil’s collar. “I want you to tell me about the Ravens.”

Neil stares at him, dumbfounded. “Birds? You’re asking me about birds?”

“Stupid’s a bad look on you,” Andrew says. “Kev used to play with the Ravens, and you’re here to get him back.”

Neil laughs. He can feel Kevin’s chest against his back, a cage of muscle. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then tell us what you do know.”

“No,” Neil says.

“If you want to stay at the Foxhole Court, you’re going to tell me. I’ll have Wymack kick you out if I think you’re a threat. That, or I’ll kill you.”

Neil’s being starts to shake. He wonders just who Andrew thinks he is. Spawn of a minor god, trying to hold Neil back? The rune on his neck might hold Nyx back, but Neil has something older buried in his blood. He takes a deep breath, exhaling through his teeth.

The room gets colder. The music starts to distort, as if it’s bleeding through the walls and not the speakers. Kevin releases his grip, and that snaps Neil back from the spiral he was starting on. He wants to see the sky.

“Show me the sky,” Neil says, becoming boneless against Kevin. “Show me the sun.”

Kevin holds up his hand, one of the ones holding Neil up. Inside it sits a light, his heritage. He is so different from Neil, and has even more ichor in his veins. Kevin isn’t showing him the real sky, but it’s enough to distract him from his panic. It’s enough to keep him from pulling on his father’s power, to keep him from becoming what he’s spent half his life running from.

He reaches out for the sun, but stops when he feels the warmth on his hand.

“There are so many ways to enter the underworld,” Neil says. “Sing to a rock in New York, wade into the waters of the crystal caves... There’s no sun in the underworld.”

“You’ve been?” Kevin asks from behind him.

“I was born there,” Neil says. The drug he’s under is making his tongue loose. His desire to stay at the foxhole court is making things difficult for Neil. Luckily, these secrets are ones it won’t hurt him too badly to shed. He’s getting close, though, to a truth his mother made him promise to never speak. Neil looks at Andrew, then stares at the sun in Kevin’s hand.

“I want to stay.”

Chapter 2

(Neil's claiming, by jojen-hewitt on Tumblr)



Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

honestly this story deserves 20k more but it's not getting it from me, which is my way of saying that the end is not nearly as pretty as the beginning

I'd like to thank Remy for giving me the idea of who Neil's dad should be, what a lad

Neil wakes up alone in his and Kevin's room and seethes. He can hardly remember the night before, but he knows he gave away far too much. It might not be worth it to stay at the Foxhole Court any longer, despite all that he's learning about his abilities.

Kevin steps into the room. His footsteps are soft, which is unusual, and he shuts the door quietly.

"What do you want?" Neil snaps.

"I wanted to go get a coffee." Kevin's voice is quiet, far less demanding than what Neil is used to.

"Why? Guard dog run off his leash? Deem me safe for you to be around?" Neil's snarls.

Kevin purses his lips and leans against the door. "I want to explain."

"What? That this Riko guy had you as monster bait between training sessions? I heard it from Andrew, thanks."

"Andrew talks a lot."

"No, he doesn't," Neil says. "But we've all been used on one occasion or another. That doesn't give you an excuse to treat me like that."

Kevin makes a keening sound. "I know. Let me explain? My treat."

Neil thinks about packing all of his belongings back into his duffle bag, carefully folding each article of clothing to minimize wrinkles and alert him to any prying eyes. He knows his temper, and he's not sure it will hold until after he's talked to Kevin. Still, he nods.

The tension doesn't leave Kevin's body as they make the silent walk to one of the many campus coffee houses. It is a summer installation in one of the Greek life housing residences, and the walls are warm brown wood and crowded enough to provide many alcoves.

They order without referring to each other, eyes carefully avoiding each other as they wait for their drinks. True to his word, Kevin pays for Neil's. Neil would have gotten something expensive just to be petty, but his mother had taught him only to waste resources when it would benefit his survival.

They take their seats in a bow window, sitting on the same side of a clunky but small wooden table covered in circle heat stains. Neil rests his mug on his elbow as he crosses his arms over his chest.

Kevin pulls something out of his pocket, a small cloth bag, and mutters something that Neil doesn't quite catch. He shifts awkwardly, placing the bag on the table. Neil can feel that it draws power, something old, but born again. Kevin's ties to Hecate, Neil doesn't doubt.

"That should give us privacy," Kevin says, running a finger over the rim of his mug and frowning at the bag.

They sit there for a few more minutes, Neil biting his tongue and Kevin fidgeting with his cup. Neil's foot begins to tap against the ground after they hit the two minute mark, and he starts to stand up.

"I'm leaving."

"Wait!" Kevin grabs Neil's arm. Their eyes meet for the first time since they were at the house.

"Wait."

Neil stands there, eyes on Kevin, and does as he says. Kevin gives him a frustrated look, then opens his mouth.

"When Wymack was building the Foxhole, he was researching a lot of old magic. How to stay hidden from monsters, even from gods. How to make the talismans we wear to make it difficult for monsters to place our smell. That sort of brain power was what attracted my mom."

"Athena," Neil says, almost a breath. He'd known that Wymack was Kevin's dad, and therefore Kevin had some godliness from him, but he hadn't known the extent. Neil sits back down, but Kevin doesn't release his wrist.

"Yeah," Kevin says. "I was their brainchild. And because I belonged more on Olympus than in the world of mortals, for a while, my mom raised me."

Neil shivers. His own experience with immortals during his childhood had been a mixed bag of bad, from well-intended but uninvolved to downright murderous.

"I'm sorry," Neil says.

Kevin gives Neil a confused look. "Don't be. My mom was great to me."

"Then what went wrong?"

Kevin's face darkens. "She's the goddess of wisdom, war strategy. A group of demigod monster hunters would make sacrifices to her, asking for her blessing. They did it often enough that she started bringing me along."

"They didn't call Artemis?"

"Too many men," Kevin shrugs. "She wouldn't bless their hunt."

Kevin's fingers begin to drum along Neil's pulse line. "I would hang out with them. Mostly they were adults, college age, but there were a few older and there was always this boy my age who I could play with. Riko. We'd practice sword fighting with some of the older members, swap stories about our families... They wanted to know so much about the gods. I grew up in Olympus, and a lot of it was second nature to me."

Kevin shivers. "I was stupid. I shouldn't have said so much. They became greedy, seeking from me what my mother wouldn't give them."

Removing his hand from Neil's wrist, Kevin taps at his collar bone. He pulls down his shirt, exposing an intricate black ink tattoo. A pleated pinwheel surrounded by letters that Neil shouldn't understand, laid bare on Kevin's chest. Neil takes in a sharp breath.

"Now I'm in exile from Athena. No matter how hard she looks, I'm invisible to her." Kevin swallows. "In punishment, she cursed the Ravens. No kill will ever be big enough, no move too daring. They will always hunger for more, hunting until all of the original members have died the most terrible fates. They used me to plan, to keep them alive during their hunts. They didn't understand that sometimes not fighting was the best strategy, and every mistake came with consequences.."

Neil doesn't understand loving a god, but he had a mother once, too. He reaches out for Kevin's shaking hand, squeezing it. Kevin squeezes back, offering more a grimace than a smile.

"I lived with them for years, on the road. They were all I had. The only reason I got out was because Athena had alerted Wymack to look for me. He found me when I was 18, but couldn't protect me against the Ravens, not fully. It wasn't until he recruited Andrew that I could leave."

"Andrew protected you?"

Kevin nods. "He gave me his blessing. I could leave and not face the repercussions. Wymack gave me a place to hide, but Andrew gave me the way out. He won't let me go back to the Ravens. If he or I think I might be in danger, his blessing will protect me. "

"And he was worried that I was here to bring you back to them," Neil says. "He still doesn't completely trust that I'm not."

"I do," Kevin says. "I don't know how you know as much as you do, but last night you showed me you know more than the Ravens do. Secrets I learned in Olympus I heard on your breath."

"What did I say?" Neil says, alarmed. He knew he'd slipped up at Eden's, under the influence of whatever Andrew had given him.

"You told me how to find Olympus," Kevin says. "How to enter the underworld. All back ways, things the Ravens would have abused had they known about. Hell, they're desperate to fight their way into Tartarus itself."

Neil feels himself numb over. The room grows darker, his presence less permanent.

"Hey," Kevin says, holding onto Neil's hand. "I'm not going to say anything. Neither is Andrew. And those secrets can't have been pleasant to come by, so I won't ask."

Neil has to try twice to actually manage to swallow. "Thanks."

Kevin nods. "You can talk to me if you want."

Neil doesn't think that that's the safest idea, but he keeps that to himself as he agrees, Kevin's hand burning into his palm. There are many secrets he could tell Kevin, and many he's thankful he didn't. He has a trail of monsters after him, something Kevin seemingly spent years confronting.

Being near Kevin could be very dangerous, especially if the Ravens make a second claim on him, but Neil can't find it in himself to leave.

The ghost of his mother might be screaming in his ear, cursing his bad choices, but being with the Foxes has been an adventure unlike any other he's ever undertaken. It's strange, to be with a group of people so different from either of his parents. He feels less frantic than he used to, even if he still knows it's just a matter of time before he has to leave again.

He squeezes Kevin's hand. That's a thing people do, right?

Neil's been counting the mistakes he's made since his mother died, but he can't resist the urge to make another when Kevin invites him down to the back garden at 10pm that night. If the timing hadn't been exact, Neil would have assumed that Kevin had just grown bored of his book when he set it down. He'd asked Neil to follow him, and against what was probably his better judgement, Neil had agreed.

There's still a lot for Neil to learn about Kevin. At least, that's what he tells himself as he follows Kevin down the stairs. They pass Andrew in the TV room, sat sideways on a chair and reading a book. Andrew sighs and stands to follow them.

The garden is dimly lit at night. Much like the night of the party, faery lights barely illuminate the boundaries between plants and grass, grass and mud. That it is the beginning of a large field neatly hidden away from mortals is always striking to Neil. The garden feels like it should pitch into the underworld, not a forest and then a visible night sky.

They walk through the trees to a small clearing. Around them, branches creak, and Neil can hear distant laughter. He remembers that Dan lives in these woods, and she's not alone. He doesn't bother to ask if it's safe: if what they're doing was completely free of danger, Andrew wouldn't be with them.

"We're going to test your abilities," Kevin says.

"I do that enough during the day," Neil rebuts. Beside him, Andrew yawns, walking over to a large tree trunk and sitting down.

"When you're weakest." Kevin opens his backpack, pulling out a sheathed dagger. He throws it at Neil's feet. "Pick that up."

When Neil begins to bend, Kevin makes a clicking sound. Glancing up, he sees Kevin shaking his head.

"I thought you wanted me to pick it up," Neil says.

"Not with your hands," Kevin says. "You're a child of Nyx. You should be to will it closer to you. I knew a child of Nyx who could reach through shadows, or become one with the night. Whatever you do, don't pick it up like a mortal."

Neil stares at the dagger. His mother could do things like that, though she rarely did after they left the underworld. It attracts monsters, she had claimed. Closing his eyes, Neil tries to remember what his mother would look like, pulling this dagger to herself. Her dark hair would be just a little glossier, a little bouncier, as she surrounded herself with the will of the night. She would go blurry at the edges, her hand would disappear, and when the earth stopped seeming too real around her she would reemerge, whole, knife in hand.

The blade is cool in his fingers. The hilt is metal, wholly ineffectual for any close range blood spill but well balanced for throwing. Neil turns it over in his hand, surprised that he managed to manifest it.

When he was younger, any signs of his mother's abilities were considered a symptom of weakness. One of his father's favorite furies had liked to make sure Neil knew where he stood when he used it.

"Good," Kevin says, rummaging around in his backpack. "We should test the limits of that ability."

Neil's chest feels like fire. He feels exposed in all the wrong ways, like he is at once betraying everything his mother did to keep him safe and growing closer to her. His vision begins to blur, the world around him becoming far less sturdy than it had been a moment before. The ground below him feels like it could give out, could become a pit if he can't control it. He feels justice clawing at his throat, begging recompense.

Neil disappears. He grabs Kevin with him as he moves through the night, and they re-emerge deeper in the woods. There is no moon, nothing visible in the thicket they've landed in. Kevin's breath is heavy under Neil, their limbs stuck together in the dark. Neil is not vulnerable, like this, but Kevin is.

"What the fuck, Neil," Kevin says. A light begins to emerge above them, but Neil snuffs it out. He wants the darkness.

"No," Neil says. "You cannot push me like that without giving something in return."

"You're here to learn," Kevin's voice is higher than it was.

"I don't mind learning," Neil says. "But what about you? You've pushed all your abilities but your strongest one. You insist on training me, but I've seen you blowing off your own lessons. You act like Apollo is your mom, not Athena. Your strongest asset, gone to waste?"

"I can't," Kevin says, strangled.

"The Ravens aren't here," Neil says. Ignoring the hypocrisy in his words, he continues, "You are half of your mother, and ignoring that will only make you weaker."

"I can't," Kevin says.

"I'm not saying to strategize for the world, for the school, or even the other Foxes," Neil cups Kevin's face in his hands. It's pitch black, but he can still see, "If you're going to ask this vulnerability of me, I need something in return. Give me your strategy. Use me as your pawn to practice ideas and complete puzzles."

A twig snaps in the distance. A soft glow envelops Kevin, beige light just barely giving him form.

"Andrew's worried," Kevin says. "He might not let us do this again."

"Then you'll have to convince him," Neil says, not letting go of Kevin, even though Kevin can see him now. His eyes are sharp enough to draw blood.

"I will."

They stand facing each other in the dark, and Neil feels like he's begun to pick away at Kevin's insurmountable wall. Maybe, if Kevin is also vulnerable, Neil won't feel so bad about using his abilities. Maybe he just wants to see what Kevin can do.

“You know I still have to test your limits, right?”

“Yeah.”

Neil feels like he’s finally getting his footing with Kevin when the Trojans come into town. There are only three of them--nomads, demigods touring America. They are what Neil and his mom were pretending to be, but the opposite in every way. They are a hurricane of noise and good intentions, almost more than Neil can ((bare))

Jeremy, sun-kissed child of Helios, is as laid back as Matt. Apparently he and Kevin knew each other from when Kevin ran with the Ravens, and Kevin seems to open up to him easily. Kevin’s just started to talk to Neil more openly, at training late at night or on their weekly trip to the Greek Life house coffee shop. It’s weird for there to suddenly be another person that Kevin shares that intimacy with.

As much as Jeremy’s impact on Kevin has set Neil on the wrong foot, it’s one of the girls that sets him off. Alvarez barely registers to him, someone that would have to make a gargantuan effort to be a threat but for her relationship with Laila.

Laila.

To Neil, Laila is a disturber of the peace. She threatens to expose him for everything that he is--and everything that he isn’t. She is a true daughter of Nyx, of the underworld in her own right. Standing next to her, being compared, can only make it clearer that Neil’s powers and hers are not all the same.

There is huge overlap, of course. Neil’s grandmother was Nyx, and his father thrives in the fear caused by the night, but it isn’t the same. He stays in his room as much as possible without looking like he’s avoiding the trojans.

It’s not particularly difficult. The first night, Kevin stays out of the room late, talking with Jeremy on the balcony. He doesn’t get Neil to train in the woods, like they usually do. It causes an irritating divergence in Neil’s emotions--he wants to spend time training with Kevin, but he knows that’s not more important than staying hidden.

Kevin comes back to their room in the early hours of the morning and collapses into his bed. It’s bittersweet, but necessary.

The days pass, and Neil continues his ghost routine. He spends a lot of time in the woods alone, practicing with his abilities, which in the end is almost his undoing.

On the fifth morning, Neil had left Jeremy and Dan arguing about plant care and management. There had been talk of wards and plant magic, and Neil had thought they’d stay in the gardens at least until noon. He’d thought wrong, and had been working to make the forest pitch black when brown eyes met his.

Laila had stepped through his cloud of darkness, her eyes seeing. Behind her, Jeremy held aloft a halo of light. Half the house was with him--Kevin and Andrew, Dan and Matt, even Aaron and Nicky, even though Neil knows Nicky doesn’t much care for the outdoors.

“You’re like me,” Laila says.

“Similar,” Neil says, fighting the urge to use his ability to fade into the darkness. He lets go of the darkness surrounding them, letting the afternoon sun warm the forest.

“Neil was claimed by Nyx,” Nicky says, unaware that he could be pulling down the hammer on a nail that closes Neil’s coffin.

“You’ve gotten better control since we last practiced,” Kevin says.

“It’s been a while since we last did,” Neil says, his voice steel. Kevin looks taken aback.

“We just came out here to spar,” Jeremy says. “Do you want to join us?”

“No--” Neil says.

“Yes,” Kevin says. He raises an eyebrow at Neil. “It’d be a good opportunity.”

“I don’t care,” Neil says.

Kevin makes his way to Neil, his jaw set. His green eyes are intense. “And why not? It’s one of their last days here.”

Neil scoffs and looks away. “I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

In a voice low enough to be private, Kevin talks. “You’re the one who wanted to get better. You wanted me to help you get better--to strategize again, to reclaim what was taken from me. If you’re backing away from what I’m telling you to do so you can be a better fighter, a better demigod? Then you’re going to have to work on your own from here. I won’t put myself out there for you if you refuse to do the same.”

Neil crosses his arms.

“Neil,” Kevin says, his voice all sorts of ways Neil has no business caring about.

“Fine,” Neil says, admitting his defeat. He’ll just have to be careful.

“You can go against me first, if you want, Neil,” Jeremy offers. “Kevin’s been telling me about how he wants to see how you do against sun abilities.”

“Kevin’s just jealous because he got so little of the sun from his Apollo legacy,” Neil says, his voice perking up. Kevin had been talking about him to Jeremy?

The foxes and the trojans split up across the clearing into pairs. There are more foxes, by far, but Aaron, Andrew and Nicky seem more interested in watching than participating in the fights. It doesn’t surprise Neil when Kevin climbs a tree, notebook open, to watch the fights. It is, after all, what Neil’s been fighting for. For Kevin to be comfortable in analysis, in telling Neil the best ways to win.

First to have their back to the ground loses. Abilities are fine, weapons are not. It’s not the kind of fight Neil is used to, but a kind the Foxes and other demigods seem fond of.

Jeremy’s eyes sparkle as Nicky calls the start of the match. He doesn’t immediately lunge at Neil. Instead, he watches. He lights up his skin like a glow stick as they circle each other. It’s a smart

move, and Neil will have to reconsider his plan of dropping into Jeremy's shadow and tripping him.

This is a battle of night and the sun, at least on the surface. Their abilities should cancel out, making it nothing more than a wrestling match if they can keep each other in check. Around them, Neil can hear Matt grunt under the weight of his own fight. He can hear Dan shriek a laugh, but he can't focus on it.

Jeremy lunges, and the chase begins. Jeremy is fast, but Neil's the fastest person he knows. He manages to get behind Jeremy, and tries to use the momentum to topple the larger man. Jeremy takes a few steps to regain his balance and turn to Neil, shifting to redirect the fist Neil's aimed for his solar plexus.

"What a combo," Jeremy says. So good natured that even if Neil didn't know of the gods he'd think Jeremy was divine. The glow makes it a little obvious, though. "You haven't even bothered with your abilities."

"You know how to counter my abilities," Neil says.

"No, I know how to counter Laila's control of her abilities. You don't fight anything like her."

"Then why are you glowing?" Neil asks.

"Precautions never hurt," Jeremy says. He looks up, behind Neil, and laughs. "I get the feeling that Kevin wants us to take this more seriously."

"Well, whatever Kevin wants," Neil rolls his eyes.

"I'm glad we agree," Jeremy says. His eyes grow serious, his stance shifting from what Neil hadn't realized was a more relaxed pose into something dangerous. Neil knows that the Trojans are nomadic and are always ready to fight monsters as they need to, but he hadn't really integrated this information fully. Now, he can see that Jeremy isn't alive through luck. He's not going to win on chance, if he wins at all.

From then on, the rest of the group fades away. Neil makes Jeremy his whole world as they push themselves to the brink of their abilities. Jeremy pushes his limits, pushes him to the maximum of the abilities he gained from his mother. If not for her years of guidance, of hiding, of panic when he thinks about it, he'd be pulling at a power that's festering in him, begging to show Jeremy his worst nightmares come to life. His father's blood is calling at him, telling him to put Jeremy at the ground.

Neil's so caught up in his fight that he almost doesn't notice when the sun disappears. He stops, doesn't even notice when Jeremy barrels into him. He goes right through, because Neil's short circuiting.

There's only one place where Neil can see the trees and feel the grass, but can't see the sun and the stars. Staring up at what was once the sky, Neil can hear the trickle of the river Acheron. He can't see the rocks that make up the ceiling, but then, he never really could. He's back in the pit, the underworld his keeper and guardian. It's the furies taking their turns with him, trying to mold him into something his father can be proud of.

He calls on the earth, opening a pit around him. He can hear screams, but only vaguely. Someone's calling a name that's only been his for a while, a human name. He can feel himself soaking the field with an aura of fear, pushing regret into every living being around him.

And then, like he's been snapped out of a horrible dream, the darkness is gone and the sun is back where it belongs. Neil blinks.

Around him, the clearing has collapsed down into the earth. Some trees have sunk down with them. The twins and Nicky are staring down from what's left of the clearing, and everyone's staring at each other, trying to figure out what happened.

It's Kevin, who was watching the whole thing, that reaches out to Neil. When did he get that close? Neil doesn't feel grounded, even as Kevin's hand lands on his shoulder, his face lost.

"Neil, what was that?"

"I." Everyone's eyes turn to him, and Neil buckles under the pressure to respond. "I don't like it when I can't see the sky."

"That seemed like a little more than dislike," Jeremy says, softly. Neil turns away, not looking at him.

Everyone's getting closer, as if trying to suffocate him with their presence, their questions. He takes a step back, accidentally running into Kevin. Even through his shirt, he can feel that Kevin's warm. Behind him, he feels sturdy, even if his past is still dragging him down.

Struggling through what he can say, how he can explain, Neil settles for a half truth. "I was raised in the underworld. I don't like to be reminded of it."

Behind him, Kevin sucks in a sharp breath. The look Matt and Dan are giving him are full of concern, and the rest are looking on with curiosity.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Matt asks, cautiously.

"Not at all," Neil answers honestly.

"Then you'd better thank your lucky stars Allison isn't here," Dan says, a little more flatly than she might have intended it to be. She grimaces. "We won't ask. But tell us when you're ready, ok?"

Neil nods, eating the lie. He won't ever be ready to talk about his past, but she doesn't have to know that.

He turns to Kevin, exhaustion leaking through his body. "I'm done here."

Kevin nods. That he's not arguing for Neil to continue practice shows how unexpected Neil's actions must be. "Take me with you?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Neil warns.

"That's fine."

Neil sighs. He grasps Kevin's shadow, and together they walk into the nearest shadow. They walk out into their shared bedroom, and usually, after using his abilities like that, he would feel antsy.

He'd feel a million kinds of wrong and would need to sweat it out. Today, though, he just feels exhausted.

Kevin seems to pick up on this, hesitating before he hands Neil his pajamas. "Go change. I'll be here when you get back."

Neil heads to the bathroom to change, thankful that Kevin doesn't push for him to change in their room. Thankful that Kevin seems to be respecting his boundaries. Tomorrow, he knows, Kevin will ask him questions about his abilities. He'll push and he'll prod and he'll only stop when it's clear he's worn Neil down.

Today, though, Neil returns to find Kevin in his own pajamas, sitting on his bed. He's got a book on his lap, on of the ancient epics that he likes so much. It's in greek, of course, though studying is less the focus now that Kevin knows he speaks fluently.

"I'm going to read to you," Kevin says, still a battering ram. His face yields some uncertainty, like he's nervous Neil will kick him out. If Neil was going to follow his mother's advice on not letting anyone in, he'd have stopped himself from getting close to Kevin months ago.

"Okay," Neil says, crawling into the bed. It feels a little weird, being so close to Kevin. Electric, but not enough to keep him awake as Kevin's melodic voice tells him of the great odyssey. If this is all Kevin's gotten from his grandfather being Apollo, Neil can't find it in himself to be mad.

Later, after Neil has woken tangled up with Kevin, Laila find him alone in the kitchen. Neil hears her coming, but not soon enough to avoid her. She's grabbing a drink, getting ready to rejoin what sounds like the trojans and foxes in the living room.

"Your powers aren't like mine," Laila says quietly, standing next to Neil where he's preparing two sandwiches. "Similar, but... I can't make people feel *fear* like that. I can't topple the earth."

Neil is silent, smearing peanut butter on bread.

"I'm not going to tell anyone how different we are," Laila says. "But I think it would do you justice to be honest."

"What if I don't want to be?" Neil asks. "What if what I'm good at isn't what's good for me?"

"No one's asking you to make it your life," Laila says. "Just figure out how to control it, because it's controlling you. Be honest where you can."

Neil frowns.

"Or do whatever. It's none of my business. We're not half siblings after all, I guess."

"You're my half aunt," Neil says, impulsively. It's too late to go back now. "My mother was a daughter of Nyx."

Laila holds up her can of soda. "To blood, I guess."

She leaves Neil in the kitchen with an incomplete toast he won't return.

August ends and things change. The reaction to Neil's abilities pulls some questions from Neil's housemates, but aside from Seth, everyone mostly acts like nothing has changed. Like there's not a gaping hole in his story about being a child of Nyx.

Things don't really change, besides the parts that do. Dan ends her crash course on edible plants and begins instead with poisonous ones. He gets good enough with the sword that Renee stops pulling him aside from group sessions for private tutoring. The house gears up for a back to school party, and night sessions continue with Kevin. All of this, and they have to sign up for classes.

As a junior, Kevin's already signed up for classes, but he browses freshmen courses with Neil. Neil doubts he'll be at the Foxhole Court long enough to get his degree, but he can't say that when Kevin pulls up a list of "liberal education requirements" on his computer while they lounge together in his bed. They end up deciding on a literature class in the Classics department, where they can likely find the books in Greek for easier reading.

"Summer must be over," Neil says. The wooden stand announcing the coffee shop they spend an hour in each week is gone, and the street is bumper to bumper as students pull boxes and suitcases into the house that it was in.

"There are other coffee shops on campus," Kevin says.

"We can stop coming, if you want," Neil says, turning to face Kevin. "You've more than made up for Eden's."

Kevin's jaw clenches and he looks away.

Neil reaches out to Kevin's biceps. It's muscular, and strong enough to ground him, at least for now. Neil can't think about the future, about how long he'll stay.

Kevin reaches across his chest to put a hand over Neil's. "I don't want to stop."

His eyes burn, the green filling Neil up. Neil can't shake the feeling that this is an unspoken promise, one to accompany the steady progress they've been making in Kevin's own issues with his abilities. Kevin's been getting stronger, more sure of himself, and it shows.

Neil feels pride settle in his chest, and he squeezes Kevin's hand.

Neil's housemates decide to celebrate the start of a new semester the same way they'd celebrated the end of the last one: with a party. Neil's watched Allison, Matt, Nicky and Kevin imbibe in a beer bong funnel alongside what feels like half the campus. He, Andrew and Renee aren't drinking, but they seem to be the only ones.

There are bodies everywhere, and though Neil can feel his power growing, like last time, it doesn't threaten to consume him. It probably helps that Kevin is by his side, talking to him about their syllabus for their classics class and hypothesizing study strategies. Neil doesn't really care about the class, but he likes having Kevin's attention on him. They part from Andrew on the porch, where he's chain smoking a pack of cigarettes, after his gaze turns sharp at Kevin's loud complaints. They make their way further into the house, past the stairs to the living room, where the bass is the loudest. Neil wonders if Wymack can hear it in his cottage in the woods, but doubts it. He lives pretty far into the forest.

Neil spots Allison dancing against a pleased-faced Renee, the two of them a strange but image together. If he didn't know them as he does, they might seem like an odd pair, but he's spent enough time with them to see how they might slot together.

Kevin pulls him closer, and he stops thinking about Allison and Renee. The warmth of another body is so heavy, but it's *Kevin*, which makes it electric. Neil's never danced before, but that melts away as Kevin moves against him. He's off rhythm, likely due to the alcohol, but Neil can't say anything as he sways vaguely to the music. Neil feels off center, but it's not his inheritance that is pulling him under.

Kevin laughs. His head moves back, exposing the column of his throat and forcing Neill's eyes up. The giant.

"Never done this before?" He all but yells.

Neil hasn't, but he does his best to keep up with Kevin. It's easy to be pulled in, to watch the flex of Kevin's muscles, feel his warmth where he presses against Neil.

A while later, Kevin pulls Neil off the dance floor, laughing. His voice is light as he recalls Neil tripping over someone on the dance floor. When they get to their room, hands entwined, Kevin closes the door and pulls Neil close.

Neil would be lying if he said he wasn't ready for this, if they hadn't been leading up to this point for the entire summer. He lets Kevin tilt his head back, and wraps his arms around Kevin's neck, pulling him closer. They collide, finally, soft lips on his. It's not Neil's first kiss, but it feels like it's the first one that matters. It feels like the world.

"You're too short," Kevin whines, stretching back up to his full height and rolling his shoulders.

"You're too tall," Neil counters.

Kevin rolls his eyes, manhandling Neil around the room until he butt is pressed up against his desk. Wrapping his hands around Neil's thighs, Kevin lifts Neil, sitting him on the desk. From between his legs, Kevin kisses him again, a hand snaking up his shirt. The smell of alcohol on his breath gains importance and Neil pulls the hand out from under his shirt.

"You're drunk, Kevin."

"Not that drunk," Kevin says, leaning back in.

Neil turns his head. "We're not doing this until you're sober."

Kevin huffs, but pulls back. "Fine."

"It's not that I don't want to," Neil says, standing up. "Just... not right now."

"Andrew would kill you."

"He'd try," Neil snorts. "Why don't we go dance again?"

Neil pulls Kevin back downstairs. As soon as they're on the first floor, Neil can tell that something's different. There are still a throng of students dancing, taking up every corner of his

house, but the first floor reeks. It smells like a peach left in the car for a month. Worse, it smells like the gooey pus Neil had been achingly familiar with as a child.

Across the dance floor, Neil makes eye contact with a man. He's got a few inches on Neil, black hair and a rotten smirk. He doesn't look like a student, for all he looks to be around Neil's age. His eyes flicker from Neil to Kevin and they don't leave his face.

"Kevin," Neil asks. "Do you know that man?"

The man approaches, a second man following behind him. This one is tall, and built to do damage.

Next to Neil, Kevin whimpers. "He can't be here."

The two finally reach them, the smaller man taking up far more space than his body should allow.

"Kevin, it's been a long time."

Kevin wheezes, the color drained from his face. Neil steps in front of Kevin just as he starts to glow.

"What are you doing here, Riko?" Kevin asks, voice strained. Neil jerks, remembering the name.

"What, I can't enroll in this shithole university? Jean and I were just thinking about getting an education."

"Get out," Neil says. Riko glances at him, then sends a smirk Kevin's way.

"Got another guard dog to keep you safe? I know from experience just how much work it can take to keep you... contained."

"I said," Neil says. The noise of all the people around them shrivels, the very foundation of the house shaking as all the light in the room is sucked away. His voice booms, for a second sounding so much like his father that it scares Neil. "Get. Out."

Riko laughs. "Oh, he's a good one Kevin. But then, you never did have any problems attracting powerful beings, did you?"

Jean taps Riko's shoulder and points across the room. Where everyone else is halted, a silhouette, Andrew is barreling through the hallway, a snarl on his face and a knife in his hand. "We should go."

"Three against two. But whose side would you be on, Kevin?"

Kevin's knuckles are white on Neil's shoulder. He's going to leave a bruise.

"Theirs." It sounds more like a breath than words, but it lets Neil relax, if just a little.

Riko sneers. "I'll be seeing you, Kevin."

Riko turns to leave, bumping into Andrew with a smirk, who shoves him away. He and Jean disappear out the front door, the slam echoing down the frozen hall.

"I'll kill him," Andrew offers as Kevin slumps against Neil's back.

Kevin mutters something into Neil's hair, but he can't make it out.

“I’ll help,” Neil offers. Their eyes meet, and for a second they connect over their own sincerities.

“No,” Kevin says. “That would be bad.”

“He deserves it.”

Kevin sighs. “I want to go to bed.”

“I’ll take you,” Neil says.

“You might want to unfreeze the party, or whatever the fuck you call this.”

The party comes back online, life returning and vibrant around them. The room takes a collective shiver, and thanks to combination of godly obfuscation and Neil’s actual ability, moves along like nothing happened.

Upstairs, Neil pulls Kevin into their room. He leaves Andrew outside the door and throws Kevin his pajamas. When he’s done changing, Kevin is sitting on his bed, staring at his own lap. He’s still glowing, but at least he’s in his pajamas.

“Hey,” Neil says, tilting up Kevin’s jaw to look at him. “He’s gone.”

“He won’t be gone forever,” Kevin says. He pulls Neil onto his lap and buries his face into his chest.

“I know,” Neil says, running his hands through Kevin’s hair. It’s soft. He strokes Kevin’s hair as he shakes in Neil’s arms, holding onto him until he’s ready to let go. The sounds of the party almost drown out Kevin’s tears. They fall asleep together on Kevin’s bed, and Neil hopes he won’t ever have to let go.

The next morning, Wymack makes everyone sit down in the living room to discuss what to do about Riko. The room is tense. Not even Seth gives Kevin shit about the situation, but Wymack’s heavy presence next to him is probably what’s keeping him from being an asshole. Neil doesn’t care, as long as it doesn’t impact Kevin.

They agree to ward the house against Riko and make sure to move out of the house in groups. There’s a heightened risk of monster attacks, so everyone has to be extra careful. Everyone is to have a weapon on them at all times. For Neil, it’s a charm on a leather cuff he wears around his wrist.

Someone will escort Kevin to all of his classes, a suffocating but necessary arrangement. Kevin doesn’t seem to mind it, saying that that’s how things were back when he was with the Ravens anyway. Andrew and Neil are able to switch out on Kevin duty for most of the week, and where they can’t, Aaron and Nicky will help keep him company.

For a while, things progress normally. They don’t see Riko again for the first week of classes, and slowly things begin to look normal again. Kevin and Neil go to a coffee shop once a week, continue practicing their abilities at night. They don’t discuss what happened between them at the party, but it seems only a breath away from conversation.

Neil can't help but look in the morning, the sunlight turning gold Kevin's taut torso as he changes shirts. He knows Kevin is looking, too, past his scars and the violent history displayed on his skin. It feels like a half answered question, but Neil's not going to push at something Kevin did while drunk.

It comes crashing down on them soon enough.

A month into the semester finds Neil and Kevin playing with each other's hands, books opened but unread as they discuss the most efficient way to dispatch large swarms.

"I just think that trapping and then eliminating would be most effective."

"Well, sure, but that's not always going to be feasible. You have to make the traps and then destroy each one."

"Not if there's poison involved."

Neil wonders what the other students on campus think they're talking about, but his thoughts are cut short by a familiar smell in the air. Clenching Kevin's hand, Neil sits up and turns to the source of the smell.

"I thought I smelled something rotten," Neil says, standing up to move in front of Kevin.

"You shouldn't speak to your betters like that," Riko says, Jean at his heels.

Neil feels Kevin freeze behind him. Neil bares his teeth. "What do you want?"

"I want Kevin back," Riko says simply. Like it's simple request. "All the others are dead. It could just be the three of us, like when we wanted when we were younger."

"I don't want that anymore," Kevin says. His voice isn't as strong as Neil's ever heard it, but it's much stronger than when he first saw Riko again at the party.

Riko sneers. "You don't want to rid the world of monsters? You'd rather hide around a university campus like a rat in the sewer?"

"They just come back after we kill them," Kevin says.

"But the glory, to send them to Tartarus? To make them suffer as they reform? Is that not power, glory? It's all the gods wanted for us." Riko's voice gains volume, his arms waving out to accentuate his points.

"It was a curse from my mother," Kevin says. "To fight monsters like this. To not be able to stop."

"I'll show you a curse," Riko says, reaching into his messenger bag. He pulls out an ornamental blade, gilded and encrusted with gemstones. Neil pulls back, but Riko reaches for Jean. He grabs Jean's arm and digs the blade into his wrist, slicing up to his elbow.

Blood spurts from the wound, flowing down his arm in heavy drops. The wound pulses, green boils popping up on Jean's skin. He holds his arm out, face agony, as the boils grow into bulbous sacs,

only to pop and multiply into more and more sacs.

Around them, students start to scream. Someone yells, “He’s got a gun,” and people start to duck away from the scene, scattering in any direction that’s away.

Jean stumbles, losing his balance as the mass on his arm rips away from him. It writhes like it’s got a life of its own, growing and churning until a humanoid back pulls out of the chaos, slime pulling down long black hair. A snake tail unfurls and wraps around Jean, throwing him across the quad to the auditorium steps. He makes a groan of pain and sits up enough to grasp at his wound, but doesn’t look like he’s going to be moving anytime soon.

“Echidna,” Kevin whispers as the snake-woman turns to them. He’s begun to glow, Andrew’s blessing activating.

“Demigods,” Echidna says, her voice a hiss. The top half of her is all woman, the bottom the tail of a huge serpent.

“No choice anymore,” Riko laughs. He pulls an apple out of his bag and crushes it in his palm. It transforms into a sword and he takes up a fighting stance. “Neither of us can take her on our own.”

Niel looks at Kevin. He’s white as a sheet, stunned, staring at Echidna, the mother of all monsters. He can’t take her on his own. He hopes Kevin won’t falter now, not when they’ve spent months together working him up to situations like these. They might be far from ready, but Neil needs to take a leap of faith and have Kevin catch him.

“Kevin, I need your help,” Neil says as he activates the charm in his bracelet. It grows into a full sword, balanced just for him. “We can’t just let her terrorize campus.”

Kevin’s eyes snap to Neil’s and he swallows, hard. He nods. “Andrew should be here soon. If… I think I have a plan.”

They let Riko distract Echidna as they quickly lay out their ideas. Then, they burst into action, Neil going for a decapitation and missing. Echidna counters with a swing of her tail, but Neil phases through the shadows to end up behind her. Her reflexes are too fast, swiping at him with sharp nails. Neil would have taken the hit if he hadn’t started to light up. The light protects him, a protective layer that keeps him free of Echidna’s talons.

Andrew stands across the quad, awash in light from channelling his godly parent. Neil makes eye contact with him, and remembers their silent promise. Neil puts on a show, taunting Echidna as he hides pops out of shadows, circling her. He feels like a predator on the prowl, and he’s the cat with a canary when he climbs out of Riko’s shadow and her tail smashes down, hard.

He can feel Kevin, horrified, and he feeds on it. The fear generated by the mortals who think this is an active shooter only egg him on further. He lets himself open up to these emotions and channel his father’s powers.

He portals directly in front of Echidna, breaking up his pattern. Echidna’s eyes are bright as Neil sinks his sword into her shoulder. She takes a shuddering breath, her tongue playing with the air.

“Oh,” she says, her voice gravel. “I’ll be seeing you soon, won’t I?”

Neil feels his blood freeze, his entire body caught on the implication of her words. He's finally been found out, his location on the tongue of a powerful monster bound for the abyss of Tartarus himself.

Echidna laughs, even as her body turns to ash on the quad of Palmetto State University. She might be disintegrating, bound to a Hell it might take her centuries to reform enough crawl out of again, but the news she brings with her will send Neil down with her.

Neil takes a step back, his legs faltering. A hand rests on his shoulder, a weight snapping Neil back to the land of the living. His life has been a mad dash of a kitchen timer, and it's about to expire.

Turning, Neil sees Kevin, white faced. He's still glowing from Andrew's blessing of protection, (Riko summoned a monster), but he's not looking at Neil. Instead, he's staring across the quad, where Andrew's kicking at a lump in a red patch in the grass. A body, one without a soul at that.

"He should check for a pulse," Kevin says, voice hoarse.

"Riko's dead," Neil says. He can feel it vibrating through him, knows that Riko will be waiting to be sent to the Fields of Punishment after he crosses over the River Styx in the Underworld. He's familiar with these mechanics, has seen them himself, has felt them in his core.

Kevin makes a choked noise and Neil can feel him shaking through their shared contact.

"Hey," Neil says, reaching up to cup Kevin's face. "Things are going to be better now. You won't have to worry about Riko coming for you again."

Kevin's eyebrows draw, his mouth opening and closing. "I..."

Feeling the hands of the clock turning, Neil releases Kevin's face. He nods towards Jean, hunched over one of his arms on the marble steps of the campus library. "Why don't you go check on Jean?"

"I don't..." Kevin says, his eyes wandering over to his former friend.

"Go," Neil says, gently pushing at Kevin's shoulder. "He needs someone right now."

As Kevin walks towards Jean, Neil takes one last look at the scene. He thinks about all of the people in Wymack's house that he's grown close to--Matt, every friendly, despite him getting Neil into this mess in the first place. Andrew, protective under his hard layers. Aaron, dumb as a goddamn brick. If he goes back to the house, he knows that the traps he and Kevin spent hours building will only last for minutes. Sooner, rather than later, his father will find him.

It's just a matter of if they find him alone, or if they take his friends. Neil knows that his father is keen on collateral damage, but only in the heads of his victims. He is a being of torment, and he will not let Neil rest.

Neil closes his eyes, resting them for just a second. Then he turns on his heel and begins walking away from the quad, from everything he's grown to cherish. He got years away from Tartarus, and he has many more to make up for time lost. Not even death will venture out into Tartarus unprotected. He's alone against this.

Between the chemistry and geology building, Neil's ears fill with static. Something grabs his leg, and when he looks down, translucent blue arms are clawing up his body. The arms give into heads,

three ghostly faces twisted and furious. He recognized them as his father's people, once siblings and now enemies to his mother.

"You will not get away from us," they chant. Neil drops his sword, a final message to his friends, and lets the three furies pull him into the ground and to Hades.

They drop down next to a river. Neil hits the ground hard, losing his breath. Megaera grabs him by an arm and uses it to drag him across the sharp rocks of the riverbank. When he was young, he'd known her as Lola. Now he knows her as jealousy personified, a violence he's spent his teenage years escaping.

Allecto, a fury Neil once knew as Romero, eyes Neil and the river. "You're not getting out of this that easily."

Regaining his breath, Neil struggles in Megaera's grip. When he lands a hit to her thigh that nearly unbalances her, she throws him against an outcrop of rocks. Hissing, Neil goes back down. Scrambling to right his torso, Megaera pushes him back onto the ground, pressing his forearms into the gritty dirt, straddling his thighs.

"You want this to be hard, junior?" Megaera asks, her breath cool on Neil's face.

"Don't call me that," Neil grits out, his heartbeat battling to make his words stuccato.

"Why not?" Megaera asks as one of the other furies, Allecto, steps in to help secure him. Caressing his face, Megaera coos. "Look enough like your father, when he graces us with physical form."

Megaera pulls her hips up over his groin. "Might go for a round."

"Going for leftovers because you can't get the real thing? Or was this a substitute so he didn't have to deal with you?"

Megaera's face hardens. She slaps him, raking her fingers across his cheek. "Is that any way to treat your auntie?"

Megaera's hand plays at his collar, no doubt searching for his rabbit heart beat. Neil would be happy to deny her this, but he can't. Instead, he spits on her face. Her hand stops searching as she bares her teeth and tightens her grip around his throat.

"I can't wait for your daddy to beat your power into you," Megaera says.

Neil's throat becomes an unimaginable thing. All breath becomes an illusion as Megaera presses down on him, and Neil tries to remember what Kevin told him. In moving up to his groin, Megaera had freed his legs. Neil launches his legs forward, kneeing Megaera in the back. She topples into Allecto, giving Neil a moment to untangle himself and run towards the hoards of ghosts at the entrance to the underworld.

He almost makes it. Cerberus's name is on his lips as Megaera appears in front of him, face thunderous as she holds out her arm to topple him. Neil loses his breath, but can still register the third fury, Tisiphone, binding his arms and his power.

"Do you want us to go back for your friends?" Tisiphone asks.

Fed up, Megaera drags him from the underworld and to the Abyss by his hair, Allecto following at a leisurely pace. There's no getting out anymore. To the pit he goes.

Tartarus sits at the edge of the underworld. Surrounded by iron gates and omens of ill intent, it is where the House of Nyx sits. It is where Neil was born. His mother had an affair with the abyss itself, the great pit of despair, and left Neil saddled with its legacy. He is a titan by birth, a child of the primordial deities, with chaos in his blood. It's too bad that it's not enough to face off against Tartarus, against pain itself.

He lands in the chalky dirt of Tartarus, the three furies his prison guards. Claws dig into his bound arms as Megaera drags him across the rocky terrain. She could fly, or let him walk, and it would hurt less than the burn of gravel against his skin, tearing at his clothes. She won't, he knows from experience, unless he begs. If he's going to die, he's not going to beg.

Neil's father could appear in any part of Tartarus, but he is strongest at the center, and Neil realizes that's where they're taking him. They depart from the path of the parallel rivers Styx and Phlegethon near the House of Night, just enough for Neil to know that they don't want to risk her involvement. Neil isn't sure why they're concerned: she'd always been a respite for him, not a place to seek help.

Neil wonders, vaguely, what Kevin would have him do. His best chance of getting out of this was at the beginning, but he'd wasted it. He's so far in now, he's not going to be coming back. At least Riko is dead, and Kevin won't have to worry about that anymore.

Neil is jerked out of his thoughts by claws on his face. Megaera climbs on top of him in the banks of the Phlegethon River, close to where Neil will meet his end.

"Should I give you something to remember me by, before you meet your end?" She taunts from above him.

"I don't see why not," Allecto says as Neil spits on Megaera's face.

Megaera doesn't move, aside from a slight grimace. She holds out her hand, which Allecto fills with a cup. She lifts Neil's head with her other hand, and places the cup at his lips.

Neil knocks at the cup with his head, spilling some of the liquid onto his cheek. His whole world is consumed by that cheek, the burn searing all of the thoughts from his head. Megaera would have him drink fire.

"His father would probably like to hear him beg," Tisiphone says, with no great interest. "Don't burn out his vocal chords."

"Fine," Megaera sighs, pulling off Neil. She upends the cup below his head, letting fire rage down his collarbones and chest. Neil jerks, trying to get away from the fire, but it's no use.

Neil isn't sure how long it goes on for, but at some point he blacks out.

When he wakes, he knows he's at the center of Tartarus, the tightest accumulation of his father's power. Under the exhaustion, the pain he's in, he feels like there's electricity under his skin. If he wasn't so close to death, he'd even feel powerful. Like this, and with a familiar back turned towards him, all he feels is hopeless. He's never going to see Kevin again. Andrew, Matt and Dan are all a dream here.

“You’ve been gone so long, my son,” Tartarus says. “We’ve so much to make up for.”

Neil loses lucidity under his father’s systematic destruction of his body. Every time he feels closer to the surface, to fighting back, he’s pulled back down by a wave of pain. He knows he can’t fight any more, that everything his mother worked to keep him away from will finally run its course. There can be no successors to despair itself, to the pit of misery and punishment that even gods and titans alike fear.

Neil doesn’t know how long it’s been when he hears the screeching of metal above him. He’s past bracing himself, and the laughter that’s accompanied his torture finally stops. He wonders if his father’s had his fill, if he’s going to kill him now.

Instead, gentle hands lift him up.

He hears a voice, familiar and familiar, speak to him in soft tones.

“Nyx?” Neil asks, flinching in pain as the grip on him tightens.

“I’ve got you,” he hears her whisper as he passes out.

Neil fades in and out of consciousness on the heels of Nyx’s attack. She carries him from his father, a shade and a shadow, they move in an array that is foreign to Neil’s old human sensibilities but second nature to his godly side. That it is dark helps him, that they are in his birthplace, helps him. Still, his father has done a number on him, burning out the pieces of him he deemed lesser.

Neil’s not sure he’s even human anymore, closer to the raw energy of the universe than more of the gods sitting on thrones in Olympus. If he fades, he’ll be able to reform, slowly pulling his molecules back together one by one. He doesn’t want that, though, his head bobbing in Nyx’s arms.

They fly into the house of Nyx. Neil can hear the chain clank behind them, fortifying the one safe place in tartarus. The halls, obsidian, feel unending and mirrored. The world feels like it’s spinning, and it’s as if a tsunami overtakes him when he’s suddenly on a couch in one of the many rooms.

Somewhere, Neil hears his name. He forces his eyes open, and he sees blurry sea green eyes. His eyes close of their own accord, and he collapses back. Someone’s pulling at him, shaking his torso against the bed. Neil’s eyes roll open in time to see Nyx herself push Kevin away from Neil, dropping him back onto the couch.

She’s saying something to him, but Neil can’t understand it. Something presses at his lips, and he recoils away from it. A hand grips his chin, and Neil can’t fight it like he used to when Megaera got ideas on how to play with the “mortal”. Neil can hear Nyx ordering Kevin about.

Something pops into his mouth, and it tastes like strawberries and the first time he kissed Kevin. Ambrosia. It is slow to dissolve, meant to be chewed, but absently, Neil doesn’t mind the taste on his tongue. He feels like his skin is cracking, clay left too long in the sun.

Something pushes his torso up, the familiar musculature easy to relax against. There is a familiar voice in his ear, sounding desperate. Neil would do anything for that voice, even if Kevin is sometimes a dumbass.

Something presses at his lips, and this time, Neil accepts. The ambrosia is sweet syrup on his tongue, unrefined and washing down the lump that's been sitting on his tongue. Neil drinks, letting the syrup run through his veins.

The ambrosia enters him with no plans to stop. Neil lets it seep through him, replacing the water in his cells one by one. He should probably stop drinking, because half bloods can only take so much without dying.

He hears Kevin say so.

"He has the power of a titan, borne of the blood of chaos and the abyss itself," Nyx says. "He'll live even if we burn out the weakness."

Neil drinks. It feels like that's all he can do, drink from this endless cup. He can feel his soul vibrating, both leaving and taking over his body at once. He feels himself become less of a physical reality and more of a concept, filling the room and being outside it all at once. He can see Kevin holding him up, his brows creased, but his eyes are closed.

He's becoming a god, blood turning from red to gold in Nyx's sitting room. He knows when enough is enough, and so does Nyx, pulling back the glass.

An exhale. Neil feels beyond his skin, expanded. His body reforms, knitting back together despite his father's claws. The only evidence is the red and gold on the couch, the floor, Kevin's face. The scars add to his collection, proof that against the odds he's a survivor.

"You're okay," Kevin says, gently reaching for Neil's cheek.

"I'm okay," Neil confirms, and his body blurs, folding in to Kevin's in a near bone crushing hug. It's almost impossible to believe that he's here. When his sword had sliced through Echidna, his scent with her on her descent to Tartarus, Neil had thought it was over. He thought he'd spend an eternity being played with by his father until he finally ended it all. That he can still be with Kevin at the end of the day, more solid than ever before, is all but miraculous.

"You're a god," Kevin says into his hair. It sounds less like a question and more like a fear, a whispered curse and prayer. "Zeus will be angry."

"The Olympians have no power in the Underworld," Nyx says. "Least of all in Tartarus. Neil will be safe here while Tartarus slumbers."

"It's Neil," Neil says, resting his cheek on Kevin's chest. While he's not ready to completely shed the name his mother gave him, one of rebellion against an enclave of gods, he doesn't need to be known by it any longer. "And I'm not staying."

"Your safety isn't guaranteed," Nyx says.

"Is it ever?" Neil asks.

Nyx hums. "Alright, little one. You are too much like Mary, sometimes. You are free to go, but you and your lover owe me a favor for storming Tartarus on your behalf. I'll be in touch."

"Thank you," Neil says around the lump in his throat.

Nyx leaves in a flurry of shadows, her movements nonlinear steps through her home.

“We’ve got a lot to talk about,” Kevin says softly, tightening his grip on Neil.

“Yeah,” Neil says, slumping into Kevin. “Can we go home first?”

Kevin kisses his hair. “Of course.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

thanks again to jojen-hewitt for the art! They were great to work with!

Training Scene:



"Night Reading":



Final Scene:



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