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A NICO DI ANGELO ADVENTURE

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For those wishing for a second chance, a new beginning,
an opportunity to choose differently,
this one's for you.

CHAPTER 1



"Breathe, Nico."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dionysus cleared his throat. "Nico," he said, "why are they here?"

Busted.

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

Mr. D frowned. "Hmm. Perhaps not. I'm still adjusting to the presence of these Chaos Puffs of yours."

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

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

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

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

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

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

He pulled his hand away, and the images vanished.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Being still is overrated."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nico!" Will called.

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

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

He nocked another arrow and pulled back the string.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Will grunted. "Not that comforting, Juniper."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Pleased to meet you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Will chuckled. "The name rings a bell."

"Dude." Ananya turned to Noah. "Didn't you study Greek mythology in school?"

Noah shook his head. "I missed a lot of days."

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

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

"What's Olympus?" Noah asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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