

## Inherent Vice

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# Inherent Vice

by [cabin13 \(honeyflow\)](#)

## Summary

The moment Nico's name is picked, out of everyone, only a week after tragedy struck and left him alone, he knows he won't make it out of the arena. Knows, without a doubt, that it won't matter, not to his father and not to the people of District One.

And why should it?

Estelle Blofis is eleven years old, when her name is called, and she doesn't have the chance to know anything before her brother is rushing in headfirst.

Percy Jackson is scared out of his mind. He still intends to come home, no matter who he has to become to do so. No one ever comes back *whole* from the Hunger Games, after all. It doesn't matter what pieces of himself he loses in the arena, so long as he remembers what brought him there in the first place.

**[Inherent Vice: the tendency in objects to deteriorate because of the fundamental instability of the components of which they are made. As a result of the baseline law of entropy, all objects have some kind of inherent vice.]**

# The End of the World

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

From the Treaty of Treason:

*In penance for their uprising, each district shall offer up two Tributes between the ages of 12 and 18 at a public “Reaping.”*

*These Tributes shall be delivered to the custody of The Capitol. And then transferred to a public arena where they will Fight to the Death until a lone victor remains.*

*Henceforth and forevermore, this pageant shall be known as The Hunger Games.*

## ACT I: EVER IN YOUR FAVOUR

### NICO

Looking back on it, it probably isn't that shocking. It really shouldn't have caught him by surprise. It's not like his year had been going any better before this, so *why not?*

Why *not* add yet another thing to the list?

The sound of gravel under his feet is so incredibly loud as Nico takes his first step towards the raised platform, breaking the shocked, embarrassed silence that had fallen moments prior — *“Niccolò Di Angelo!”*

There's a halfhearted applause when he climbs the stairs and comes to stand beside his fellow tribute. Nico stares at the crowd and they stare right back, unsure.

His father is nowhere to be seen.

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The truth is that, by the time Nico wakes that morning, Capitol and its games are already too late: his world has already ended.

The stiffness of the people he encounters, the fear in the air and the façade of excitement don't faze him as he takes his place in the crowd.

Nico's world ended exactly a week before, when a group of idiots decided it would be a great idea to have fun with the pretty girl they'd seen nearby. Just so fucking *amusing*, to try and follow her around to see what she'd do.

It ended when Bianca lost her temper and dislocated the ringleader's shoulder with one quick movement. And paid for her actions.

*Harshly.*

Because district One may have plenty of fame, amongst citizens of the Capitol, plenty of *love*, for the people that give them the means to be as ostentatious and as utterly *ridiculous* as possible. But it's still a district, at the end of the day, and it follows the same rules. Violence, of any kind, for any reason, is not tolerated.

All of father's pleads and money and power – for *nothing*.

The trial had been swift and cruel and Bianca had stood with her head held high even as they carted her away. She'd only broken once they'd almost reached the train – fought and fought well and Nico had remembered only too late that his sister would rather die than let them *win*.

And so she had.

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There are not enough words to express how it feels, to be shut in a room even more opulent than father's money could manage and knowing that a death sentence brought you here.

Nico stares at the door for what feels like hours. No one steps through.

He doesn't know what he hoped or why he dared to at all but for a moment he almost convinces himself that Hades is out there, trying to save him from the inevitable. He can almost hear his father's shouts.

Trying to save him from what wouldn't *be* inevitable, if only he'd deigned to train his son the way he'd done with his daughter.

Not that Bianca let that stand, of course.

He thumbs the faded scar near his left wrist, the jagged line of it, and remembers her grim expression as she taught him how to hold knives and swords and shoot arrows to the best of her abilities – scared out of her mind, probably. He doesn't know. Bianca made sure to never show it, not to him.

She's always standing before him, in his earliest memories. Strong and steadfast and never unsure of anything.

Until the very end, when she pressed that stupid skull ring in his hand and told him to stand up straight. Nico hasn't taken it off since and he finds himself absently spinning it around his finger now, just to see if some of her courage will seep into him.

Who knows how many fears she swallowed down to help him face his own.

In a better world, she'd be here to reassure him or say goodbye or shout her own name over his, even.

She's not, though. Nico is here, stuck, and she went, stubbornly, where he could not follow.

Where he *thought* he couldn't follow. What do you know, it seems he'll get there soon enough.

He wonders if she'd be scared, now.

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## PERCY

He doesn't really *think* about doing it – doesn't even have the time to – before he's moving.

“*Estelle Blofis!*” echoes through the courtyard and Percy moves, shoves and pushes his way through and grabs his little sister's arm before she has the chance to take a single step forward.

Already, he can hear his mother's cries.

“I volunteer.” He shouts, not a single goddamn thought in his head other than *Estelle*, *Estelle* that still cries about monsters under the bed every other night.

It cannot be her.

*Anyone but her.*

“I'm Perseus Jackson,” he says into the silence, pushing his sister to the side and back into the line, “I volunteer as tribute.”

The man who extracted his sister's name nods, quickly, and he can almost see pity in his eyes – then again, he's from Capitol and Percy has never seen one of *them* show sadness over the games before so what does he know. The ridiculous golden horns peeking through his green-brown curls are enough of a reminder: the man does not feel pity because he's not *capable* of it. Percy bristles.

There is no applause, no matter how fake, when he steps onto the platform. The people of twelve lower their heads, as if already witnessing his funeral.

He thinks of Estelle's braids, the colourful ribbons mom ties them with, the way Paul will spin her around in an embrace whenever he comes home – Percy thinks of his family and pushes down the *terror* rising in his throat.

Pushes down the tragedy.

He doesn't look for his mother in the crowd, doesn't think he'd be able to keep himself from running into her arms if he so much as caught a glimpse of her.

Nancy Bobofit is called next.

Percy remembers the way she used to push him around, back when they were children and tries to catch her attention – she looks back, hands trembling, and that angry fire that used to burn in her eyes seems to have fizzled out under the fear. It feels like another loss.

He averts his eyes, stricken.

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Percy considers turning away, when the door opens quietly – a moment's thought and no more, because Estelle is already throwing herself into his arms, sobbing.

Mom leans against the doorframe, bringing a shaking hand to her lips, and Paul looks just as devastated even as he shoulders her weight himself.

Percy has always been grateful for the man's presence, ever since he first came along when Percy was six, with his gentle eyes and patient smiles. Today he is even more so.

Paul will be there for his mother.

Whatever may happen.

Panic threatens to choke him and he breathes in deeply, leaning down to wrap his arms around Estelle.

“Hi, bug.” He tries his best to smile. Estelle shakes, visibly making an effort to speak through the tears.

“I'm coming too.” She proclaims, holding on tighter.

Mom sobs.

Percy has to close his eyes and steel himself before responding to that.

*God, don't let me break in front of her.*

“Who'd look after mom, then? You need to stay here until I'm back, you know your dad is useless at haggling prices.”

That gets a wet laugh out of them, if nothing else – because it's true. Paul never quite got the hang of it, hating the conflict. That's how he'd met Sally in the first place. They were all still surprised that he'd made it in Twelve without that particular skill.

“Don't let them rob us all, hm? Take good care of them.” He says, quietly, tilting her head up to look into her brown eyes.

Trying to memorize the way her hair curls, the exact shape of her nose and the smattering of freckles on it.

*Just in case, he thinks. Just in case this is the last time I see you.*

He doesn't want to die having forgotten a single detail, wants to keep her close in his memories and be able to say *I remember everything of my sister, of course I do.*

“I promise.”

Estelle is ushered outside, a determined glimmer in her teary eyes, and the moment the door closed behind her, Percy falls into his mother's arms.

“I'm sorry,” Sally says, nonsensically, weeping into his hair and holding him close, trying fruitlessly to gather him into her lap like she used to, “I'm so *sorry*, my baby.”

He doesn't know what she's apologising for – the entire world, maybe. Having given birth to him in it. *Every child that is born in a district has already one foot in the arena.*

“Mom,” he croaks, “Mom, I don't wanna go.”

“Oh, *Percy*.”

He doesn't know how long they stay like that, Paul a comforting presence at their side, but it's too long and not enough all at once.

The knock comes, eventually, like they knew it would – Paul hugs them tight and Percy, selfishly, doesn't want them to ever let go.

“Come home,” his mother says at last, tugging him down to look her in the eyes, “Come home to us.”

“I love you.” He answers and she kisses his forehead like she used to when he had nightmares as a child.

He wishes this was a nightmare, still. Far away and beyond his comprehension, disappearing at the mere sight of his mother.

He feels so very small.

“And we love you. No matter what.”

*No matter what you do*, Percy hears.

He's grateful anyway.

No one has ever come home clean from the arena, after all.

Paul opens the door, lets the awful reality back into the bubble they'd created – and then Percy is alone, again, while his entire world shatters around him.

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## GROVER

He tried pretending not to hear – tried pretending not to be here, more accurately. Through every district, every shouted name, every mourning family.

*This is my job*, like a mantra, *this is my job and I can't afford to break down over it*.

It never works.

The last escort had never said anything about it, this need to step in and interrupt, to throw that stupid bowl to the ground and watch it shatter. Every time a name was picked, even outside of his assigned district, nausea would swirl in his stomach – what was Grover *thinking*, coming here? Accepting to do this?

He thinks of the gossip he'd heard from the others, how *no one* had visited the district one tribute, and almost chokes on the sadness and misery and pity that the thought brings.

How alone must that boy feel? Grover hasn't had the chance to get even a glimpse of him aside from the empty eyed pictures that had shown up on every screen, what with the way Minos hoards his tributes like gold.

Still, he knows the old man isn't happy with his younger chosen, has heard the whispers that already call him a *lost cause*.

He can't imagine what they'll say about the district twelve boy – brave, for sure, but his heart clenches with grief at the sounds he can just barely hear from his place in the hallway.

Percy Jackson has taken his sister's place and he'll pay the price for it.

President Kronos has never liked volunteers.

*Too heroic*, everyone knows but doesn't say, *too big of a threat*.

But that doesn't bear even thinking about.



Maybe Grover will check up on that district one boy, if he finds the time, just to reassure himself. What kind of mentor would leave one of his own behind, after all?

Another sob reaches his ears.

What kind of man would make a living on death?

## Chapter End Notes

this is going to be a long one. i dont know what i was thinking but its mostly already planned so there's that ig. once again: slow updates as is my usual.

so, how was this for a beginning?? what are we thinking??

just to recap:

nico is from district one, minos is his mentor (apparently the guy sucks, who would've thought!) while percy is from district twelve, our brave volunteer and big brother of the year, his mentor is still unknown but grover is his escort and nancy bobofit the ketchup sandwich bully is the other district twelve tribute.

now. onto sadder things.

- bianca my love im so sorry i killed you off already, my first victim (on that note, nico's bit of the chapter being so short bc he's got NO ONE got to me ngl)

- nico my favourite little ball of angst and darkness. its gonna take A While to get him to open up. his povs are always so tricky for me i hope i did good enough??

- the jackson-blofis family. ESTELLE my little girl. percy would die and kill and do anything for her. and sally the absolute queen, she's going through it. paul as well, he's gotta be her support now but percy's his boy too!!

- nancy... i couldnt believe it but i do love nancy in this. she's just another proof of percy's childhood being taken from him, another thing the capitol got its filthy hands on.

- and GROVER, i adore him as effie sorry. my masterpiece truly. he's TRYING to act like a capitol citizen but he cant do it, my boy knows this is SICK.

# Dead Man Walking

## Chapter Summary

You don't ask the monster under the bed *why* he's a monster, he just *is*.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### PERCY

He only gets mere minutes to collect himself before the door slides open once again – for a moment, he entertains the idea that it's someone come to tell him to get out, that this is not his place.

It's a bad thought, maybe, to wish his burden upon someone else. Some shadowy figure that might take his place on the chopping block. Percy doesn't much care, though. It'll never happen, why should he feel guilty for making a dumb wish?

Instead of a saviour, it's the man from the reaping that stands there, golden horns shining.

“Ah- Hello,” He says, “I'm Grover, the escort assigned to Twelve.” Then, when it becomes clear that Percy won't answer him, “We should get going.”

He looks so nervous that Percy feels absurdly sad to be contributing to it. He's always been one to break the tension, not reinforce it.

“Well, Grover, you know my name already, I suspect.”

If his smile is more of a grimace, Grover doesn't say and instead replies with one of his own – still tinged with something like *sadness* and Percy can't wrap his head around it. Grover is one of *them*, unmistakably. Percy has never really interacted with anyone from the Capitol, not really, he's only ever seen their more *excitable* celebrities on screen. And only ever for the games.

It should make it *better*, to have Grover here, visibly shaken and sad *for Percy*. The proof that not everyone is blind, outside of the districts.

It doesn't, though. Because in his head, for a long time, the people in Capitol City were monsters.

And it made it easier to hate them, made it easier to cope with questions such as “*how can they*”. You don't ask the monster under the bed *why* he's a monster, he just *is*.

Grover is the proof that people, *normal people, people like him*, can look at death and suffering and grief and be entertained. Be *satisfied*.

Percy doesn't know how to cope with knowledge like that.

Still, he follows Grover into the hallway, nods at Nancy even as she ignores his existence completely and stubbornly doesn't look for his family in the crowd of people near the train – for fear of not finding them, maybe. He doesn't know anymore.

Quietly, he takes in the lavish interiors, the closed doors holding their private cabins and the table piled high with desserts and cooled drinks.

*Something like this*, he thinks, *would cost more than my entire district*.

And, again, *something like this would feed my family for weeks*.

He tries not to feel too bitter as he takes a seat across Nancy.

“Feel free to eat,” Grover smiles, already moving towards the door to the next car, “I’ll just go and get your mentor.”

The food is left untouched.

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## GROVER

As much as he'd like to pretend not to know where Dionysus is, Grover is all too aware – he might be new but working with that man you either learn fast or leave faster.

He doesn't bother checking with the escorts, shouts quick *hellos* as he races through, directed to the train car assigned to District One.

Out of all the mentors, Dionysus and Minos seem to have the kind of hate that can only stem from *history* – which means that if there's an occasion to bother and anger the other, they *will* take it.

This is something Grover learned *very* quickly: never leave them alone and ever push for explanations.

The cause of this visit, he suspects, might run deeper than that.

He's unfortunately proven right as soon as he steps through the door – there they are, fighting once again while the tributes look on awkwardly.

*Tribute*, Grover corrects himself.

The older tribute – *Charles Beckendorf*, he remembers – seems to be trying to blend into the background, fiddling with his napkin and staring down at his empty plate. The younger – the *lost cause*, he thinks first and flushes with shame, *Niccolò Di Angelo* – is merely looking out of the window, apathetic.

He has to look away from the sheer *emptiness* in the boy's eyes, almost burned by the feeling of inexplicable *familiarity* rising in his chest.

Grover made it just in time: Dionysus is holding a bottle of wine as if he were considering the best way to smash it over Minos' head.

“Sir,” Grover says, trying to be as firm as possible even under the full strength of the man's annoyed glare, “Sir, the tributes are waiting.”

That seems to get a more positive reaction, at least before Minos ruins it – really, Grover might just understand *why* few people can stand the man.

“Indeed,” he says, “Do go on, Mr. Bromius. My tributes and I would like to have some peace and quiet.”

“*Tribute*,” Dionysus answers, “We all know you're only considering one of 'em.”

Charles looks even more embarrassed, at that.

“I'm sure I don't know what you mean.” His voice is downright *frosty*.

“I *mean* that you don't give a fuck about that one,” Dionysus points to Niccolò, waving off Minos' sputtering, “Hopeless or dead man walking - though, I wouldn't call him a *man* yet, personally - or whatever the hell you're saying about him now. So let me have him.”

Grover chokes on his spit, trying to make sense of what he just heard because there is *no way*.

The boy in question breaks his uncaring facade, turning to look at the two men, apparently caught by surprise.

“To what end? You seem to be forgetting that you've never brought anyone home before, old friend.”

“Don't call me your friend, jackass.” Grover has to close his eyes and pray for *patience*, “Let me have the kid and I'll go on my merry way. We both know you don't need dead weight hanging around your *winner*.”

Niccolò scowls, the first bit of genuine emotion he's shown so far.

Grover rather feels like he should sit down.

“Fine,” Minos makes it sound like he's doing them a generous favour rather than exchanging a *teenager*, “Take him, then. Just go.”

Most people would see this as a concession.

Grover knows better, can see the glimmer in the man's eyes that means he got exactly what he wanted. If Dionysus sees it, he doesn't seem to it pay any mind.

Grover would wonder why but, well, he already knows, doesn't he? – *lost cause* was, after all, what Dionysus himself had be called in his own games. Before he outsmarted his way to victory, no one would've bet a damn thing on him.

*The boy without a mentor:*

Dionysus doesn't wait for them, before stepping through the doorway.

“Di Angelo,” he calls out, “With us.”

The boy doesn't look at anyone, when rises from his place and follows his new mentor.

With a start, Grover realises why the look in his dark eyes had been so familiar. How similar they are, mentor and tribute.

He'd thought it was the games that did that, that put the shadows in Dionysus' eyes. By that logic, there should be no reason for Niccolò's own to resemble them so closely, not this soon.

Now, Grover knows he wasn't *wrong* but unforgivably *blind*.

Unaware of how deep it ran or just willing to overlook it for his own comfort, it's all the same.

The games have already started.

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## NICO

The first thing he sees, when the doors open for them, is the Twelve boy – a couple years older than him, maybe, and the way his green eyes seem to gloss over Nico completely to fixate on the man making his way to the head of the table.

At his side, the girl bristles, obviously recognising him as another tribute. Anger rolls off of her in almost visible waves.

The escort pulls up a chair, gesturing for him to sit. He does, observing the way Dionysus is now drinking directly from the bottle of wine he'd stolen off of Minos' table earlier.

It brings a bit of satisfaction, after Minos had ranted for almost an hour about paying to have his favourite brought on their car.

The girl, however, seems to have had enough.

“Why is he *here*?” She spits.

“My dear...” Dionysus flounders, obviously not remembering her name. From Nico's side, Grover coughs something, “Nancy. Why is *anyone* here?”

“To *survive*. Which would be easier, I imagine, if my mentor wasn't going around picking up tributes from god knows where.” She states, glaring darkly.

Nico is glad to have been brought here. *Truly*.

“Yeah, sure,” he snorts, “From what I've seen you're not exactly *likeable*. Which, and you may consider this your first lesson, is necessary so that the bastards watching you will find it in their hearts to let you live a single day more.”

His words are bitter, angry, and Nico remembers Minos' words. *You've never brought anyone home*.

Knowing District Twelve's reputation in the games, the general dislike of it in the Capitol, he has to wonder if the truth is that they didn't *let him* bring his tributes home.

“They're the ones pulling the strings, at the end of the day. And I'm going to be frank with you, girl: they won't like what they see.”

There's a tense silence as Nancy takes his words in, clenching her jaw so harshly that Nico almost winces.

Dionysus coughs, leaning back against his chair.

“In fact, I'd say the only one here that has a chance at becoming their next golden child is your friend here.” He waves to the male tribute, careless, “Volunteering for your little sister? They'll fucking *love* you. You're shit out of luck with Kronos, though, so that's too bad.”

“That's it?” The boy answers, “That's all you can say?” He stands up abruptly and turns to Grover, “I'm so glad you went looking for him, really. Can't imagine what we would've done without an alcoholic piece of shit here to tell us how screwed we are.”

On that note, he leaves and the room plunges in an awkward silence.

Nancy keeps glaring at him while Nico is just considering getting it over with and jumping out of the train.

So he's going to die as entertainment to the Capitol, *fine*. He doesn't need to be a silent witness to Dionysus' already strained relationships with his tributes while he waits.

As a matter of fact, he *refuses* to.

“Do you have *anything else* to say?” Nancy asks, turning her angry gaze upon her mentor.

Nico exhales, as quietly as he possibly can.

Dionysus burps, patting his mouth with the end of his hideously bright purple shirt.

“Can't say I do.”

It's enough. The girl storms out, yelling incoherent insults.

There's a moment of silence as the man goes back to his wine and Grover visibly tries to calm himself down.

Nico traces his ring with a finger, spinning it twice and tapping each eye softly.

The silence stretches on.

They turn to look at him and he pretends not to see – if they're waiting for *Nico* to break it, they'll be waiting a long time.

*I never used to be this quiet, he thinks, before Bianca went and got herself killed.*

There's something to be said, about being listened to. As to what happens when there's no one left to do it, maybe.

It doesn't matter, either way.

He could understand their anger, in some other life. Could open his mouth and ask for help, ask for explanations, anything and everything to *survive*, the way that girl had.

But Nico is not in this to *win*.

He gains nothing by walking out of that arena.

“Well. I've just been proven wrong. That boy will make a decent golden boy up until he opens his mouth and pisses them off,” he raises his bottle, as if toasting, “Won't that be fun, though.”

Grover sighs.

## Chapter End Notes

whooo guess whos fresh from an exam??? "u could do better, do you want to retake it?"  
ma'am its law of cultural heritage, im satisfied that i made it at all.

anyway. onto more important things:

- dionysus!! hes percy's mentor!!! he's perfect argue with the wall idc. him picking up nico like a stray off the street "thats my kid now". he's an icon. 'bromius' was one of his epithets, it means loud or boisterous or something like that.

- charlie we already mourn you, never forgotten.
- nancy, my angry queen. shes also right tbh.
- percy facing the idea that the evil of the capitol is a man-made evil is my favourite thing actually. bc, yes, they're doing this awful thing. but theyre HUMAN while they do it, just as he is. how do u even begin to understand the horrors men can do??
- nico :( he's silent and still and doesn't care much at all bc he's already decided NOT to come out of the arena. god help me but he makes me sad even when doing NOTHING.
- shout out to grover for doing his job excellently considered the ppl he's working with.

pls DO give me any feedback, itd be very appreciated especially since i cant focus just on writing this as much as id like to so i probably dont notice MANY mistakes.



# Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

## Chapter Summary

A distorting mirror is a mirror all the same.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### NICO

The Capitol is as shiny as one would expect – all colourful decorations and solid gold accents and marble buildings. *Olympus*, some people call it.

He thinks, privately, that some of District One might've tried to blend in with it, tried taking inspiration and making themselves familiar as a way to inspire sympathy, maybe.

It doesn't matter. They might be the Capitol's favourite cattle but they go to the slaughter all the same.

*Bianca would hate it. This pretense of cleanliness, of justice.*

The crowds hungrily watching as they step out of the train, pushing in against the railings as if to *touch*.

Nico is nauseated by it, the opulent façade that hides only fear and murder, but Bianca would be enraged.

She'd spoken of *them*, the beloved citizens, like one would speak of beasts – spitting out words like poison, anger dripping from every letter. *They watch children die and root for it. They mock their families by mourning the very people they killed.*

Nico has always seen it differently, kind of. It was the only true point of contention, he thinks.

Where Bianca saw thoughtless monsters, Nico saw people. Brainwashed and mindless with violence, barely awake enough to protest when their favourite died.

*It's no justification*, she'd say.

*And it wasn't meant to be*, he'd reply, *there can be no justification, ever.*

He doesn't think he ever said it right, ever made her fully understand. It seemed so pointless, in the end, that finding the right words was never a priority. He knew Bianca had every right

to be mad, that everyone in every District *should be* and *is* filled with anger.

It wasn't that she was wrong, exactly.

But he's always thought that making them out to be monsters takes away from the horror of it all – a monster is a monster and it can't help acting like one, people are people and they *choose* to act like monsters – as well as the conflict that comes with knowing that they might all be complicit, but very few hold any claim to the blade that sinks into the Districts' flesh.

Nico wishes he had bothered making her understand, now – standing before Bianca's monsters and spying children and elderly and aching *human* beings.

Clad in jewelry and colours and heavy accessories, some of them could almost pass off as completely alien creatures. But the eyes betray them. The feelings, there. The way their mouths curve, the wrinkles and imperfections they missed.

A distorting mirror is a mirror all the same.

Nico stands before a mass of *people*, chanting and reaching and enabling his death – their deaths, all of them – and can't *breathe*.

Someone pushes him forward, off the platform and through the crowd.

He taps her ring.

*Tap. Tap.*

One-two.

And feels his lungs expand again.

---

It's without an ounce of emotion, fake or real, that Minos pushes him into the penthouse that's been assigned to their District – Nico thinks of Dionysus' hushed explanation back at that table. The fact that, for the Capitol, Nico is Minos' tribute but in reality, it will be Mr. D to guide him.

It would've been nice, maybe, if he had any intention of surviving.

As it is, he steps into the luxurious room that's going to be his for a little while, and waits for the design team to come and try to make him *marketable*.

The idea makes his skin crawl.

He wonders, briefly, how the boy from Twelve is doing. If they managed to hide the defiant glint in his eyes, already.

The boy, *Perseus Jackson*, had looked shocked at every interaction with his mentor and escort. Shocked at the gleaming palaces and crowds of people – as if he were expecting monsters in their place. Like *her*, but *less*. Monsters in fairytales to Bianca's *beasts*.

Nico wonders how he's dealing with this new reality, pristine and shiny and rotten and covered in blood, all at the same time.

He spins the ring around – *one-two* – and stares at the rubies that make up its eyes.

They're as empty as his own, he imagines.

---

## PERCY

The boy from District One leaves with his actual mentor and Percy can't help the relief it brings – everyone knows about the higher districts and their *peculiar* approach to the games.

He's watched enough to know they make up their own faction. A violent one, filled with *hunters*. They're the ones who actually receive training, after all.

It's terrifying.

True, that particular tribute hadn't looked like much – not-quite-apatetic to everything going on around him, clad in black clothes that only accentuated how thin he truly is – but Percy knows better than to judge a book by its' cover.

Dionysus himself is proof enough that you can't afford to underestimate anyone, not if you want to make it out.

And Percy *does*.

Mom and Paul and *Estelle* wait for him back home. Regardless of what he has to do, who he has to *become* – Percy wants to go *home* and surely that'll matter for something? That he never, not in his entire life, considered seriously harming anyone?

Does it matter, if he's so willing to be the last one standing now?

Does it matter, here? In a place full of people that breathe and laugh and cry just like him – just like *Estelle* – and still, only encourage the violence?

He thought he was going crazy, the moment he stepped out of that train.

The crowd had blurred into indistinct shapes and colours and only Grover's presence had kept him from falling. The man had guided him gently into a car and then through the penthouse to his temporary bedroom.

It's only adding to his confusion.

---

The team of stylists or whatever they're called comes in after an hour – of doing nothing but breathing. Listening to the sounds of Dionysus and Grover moving around with his eyes closed and pretending to be home.

They don't talk to him, at all. They joke and laugh and gush over his eyes but leave him alone with his thoughts as they set up whatever it is they might need.

It feels like a kindness, even if it is one borne of pity. He'd get angry, maybe, if he had the energy to do so.

But Percy can't think of a reason *not* to be pitied, right now. His very last reaping, months from being eighteen, and look where it's gotten him.

He doesn't regret volunteering.

That doesn't make it any easier.

“Hey,” one of the stylists smiles, bright and bubbly, “We won't take long, I promise.”

Percy nods at her, taking in the bright pink hair and heart shaped bangs. He wonders if they're a particularly popular style, if it's got a meaning, all the things they cover themselves with.

If it's just an habit, the way things have always been – why change? why question it?

He's ushered into the bathroom and told to clean himself up, quickly, before being brought back in his room.

They're being pleasant, *kind*, and still, it's one of the worst experiences of Percy's *life*.

It's not *quick*, because it couldn't be. It feels *gross*, like ants crawling over his skin – *turn this way, close your eyes, tilt your head*.

*Assist me as I prepare you for entertaining the adoring masses that'll sign your death certificate.*

*Assist me as I strip away even the smallest of imperfections, even the faintest reminders of your home.*

It's not quick, it *couldn't* be, but it's not a long time either, before they're packing up their stuff and waiting for the pink haired stylist to spray some sort of substance over his hair.

“Done!” she chirps a second later, to a chorus of awed sounds from the rest of her team, and Percy looks at the mirror for the first time since they entered the room.

He doesn't recognise what he sees.

Gone, is the boy with messy hair and dirt smudged under his nails and staining his fingertips, clad in old, worn clothes. In his place, stands a man for the masses to admire: carefully arranged and utterly *fake* curls, black lined eyes, spotless skin and soft clothes that could probably be sold for more than District Twelve is worth and wouldn't last half a day in it. And, still, they mimick the suit the miners have to wear. *Claim it.*

Percy *hates* it.

There's nothing of *him* in the man he sees reflected. Nothing of *Twelve*.

*Assist me, as I rebuild you in the image of your executioners.*

He feels sick.

---

The parade is everything he thought it would be – Dionysus stands off to the side and laughs himself hoarse when he sees them stop near the chariot dressed as miners, almost blending into it, pitch black as it is.

Grover shoots them a tremulous thumbs up and Nancy steadfastly pretends not to see him even as they stand side by side, waiting. She, too, has gone through the same process he has – the wild curls that had stayed the same through their childhood and beyond are tamed into a severe bun, makeup covering the smattering of freckles on the bridge of her nose.

He can't quite bring himself to look at her like this. Stripped of what makes her so recognisable in all his memories, unwanted – they were never friends, after all – but so bright, all the same.

The tributes are all in one place, for the first time since they were reaped. Percy tries to spot them all but some of the stylists seem to have taken a subtler approach than theirs did. If it wasn't just a recycled idea, of course. The man hadn't even shown his face, they only knew he was supposed to because Grover had shouted loudly enough to carry through the penthouse.

Percy had been really impressed at the sheer volume.

Still, he can easily figure out the two people apparently dressed as *trees* as being from Seven, same goes with Three's and Four's – the first are clad in actual *steel* and latter has an unmistakable *sea* theme.

The tributes you cannot ignore are from District One, of course.

The bigger tribute is draped in a gold chiton, a solid gold laurel crown on his brow. Clearly, he's meant to be the face of the so called *Olympus*. Interestingly, he looks decidedly

uncomfortable, despite his mentor looking on with pride and arrogance – the face of a man that knows victory is secured.

The boy from the train is off to the side of them and he looks as changed as they are. Perfectly coiffed curls in place of the effortless ones he'd spied on the train, eye bags hidden and a fetching blush on his cheekbones. Fake, all of it. As much as the Capitol itself.

His clothes, too, make Percy raise an eyebrow. A silver version of his companion – and no crown. In its place, a simple silver circlet with a cascade of weirdly shaped red stones, shining bright against his black hair. Matching gems drape down to his neck, on invisible lines, gleaming on his pale skin.

*Like blood*, Percy thinks and there's a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“A winner and a martyr,” Dionysus says, coming to stand beside them, “The man is a fucking prick but, by God, does he know how to play the game.”

“Do *you*?” Nancy asks, biting.

Dionysus turns to look at her, bored.

“No. So you'd better get to work yourself and smile for the crowd, hm?”

She bristles at the response and Percy prepares himself for another row – only for the doors to open, the first chariot already going out.

As he climbs on their own, he spies another glimpse of red, shining brightly, *ominously*.

The girl that stole his lunch in school and pushed him on the playground.

The boy from the train, constantly fidgeting with a silver skull ring, huge dark eyes betraying his apathetic façade.

The girl that screamed and shouted for a disinterested man to help her stay alive.

The boy from District One, more likely than most to win, by all accounts.

*Martyrs*, he thinks and it feels like grief.

## Chapter End Notes

just percy and nico this week bc 1) theyre my boys above everyone else and 2) as much as i love grover he's still part of it. he still comes from enemy territory. he has a part in what they're going through so their first interaction with the capitol or, as mentioned, the olympus should be through their eyes only. i wont take that from them.

and they're going through it already. i really wanted to emphasize how horrible and violating the entire thing is, not just the arena, and i hope it came across fine.

hope u enjoyed, thanks for reading and let me know of any mistakes!!

# Meet and Greet

## Chapter Summary

It makes something in Percy's chest ache, the easy way they interact while knowing they might end up as the other's murderer in just a few days.

He's never thought about how many things can start in so little time.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### NICO

The morning after their presentation to the Capitol – the morning after he'd been scrubbed clean and forced into a mess of silver fabric for the citizens' pleasure – is crucial to a Tribute.

This, even Nico knows.

He sits quietly at the breakfast table, listening to Minos' droning on and on about Beckendorf's skills with the sword – and how idiotic is that? Every single person in One knows that his actual skills lay with hammers. But that would remind people too much of the fact that he's originally from Two and that his talents are more in the *building* side of things than the fighting – when there's a knock at the door of their quarters.

“Ah, yes,” Minos sneers, “Your mentor is here, dear boy, let's not keep him waiting.”

If that was supposed to be encouraging or even *sweet*, he's missed the mark, landing squarely into *threatening* territory.

Still, Nico stands up as steadily as he can and doesn't bother welcoming Grover in – simply exiting himself and shutting the door.

“Good morning, Niccolò,” the escort says, “Dionysus is waiting for you at the Twelve quarters.”

He grimaces at the name. No one's used it since his mother, not unless he'd done something truly wrong and it sets him on edge. Convinced as he was that this wouldn't last, he hadn't bothered to correct them.

Since it is lasting, apparently, he'll need to.

“Nico,” He coughs, “Nico's fine.”



He doesn't look back at Grover, speeding up towards the elevators.

There's a hot flush climbing the back of his neck and Nico curses himself for how easy he gets flustered – how easy it is for him to feel self-conscious.

*It's just a name*, he reminds himself, *just a name*.

He spins the ring around again, in three neat circles.

---

They get there just as Dionysus and his *other* Tributes are exiting – all three of them clad in the same dumb black uniform that's meant to '*lessen the differences between Tributes and avoid favouritism of certain Districts*' as if that could ever be possible. As if anyone cares about it, other than the teenagers that will be too busy getting slaughtered to care about politics and corruption.

Yeah, he knows enough about the games without the Twelve people bickering about it all the way down to the training rooms.

The girl – Nancy – is fired up about it and Nico respects it, truly. He's just also tired and not bothered at all by the idea of his own approaching death, though, so he doesn't care to listen to her tirade.

Perseus looks a bit more into it but it's obvious to everyone that his main interest lays with getting back to his family like many others. A worthy goal, as far as Nico's concerned. He wishes him a quick, painless death rather than the gory, long lasting alternative that's unfortunately common in the arena.

The conversation moves from useless fighting to an actual topic of interest, just as the doors open, and Nico tunes back in – Nancy will be going for hatchets which sounds absolutely *brutal* but good for her. She might just be able to scare people into letting her live more.

Will definitely bring about a couple of really gross deaths, which is always a plus as far as the audience is concerned.

(There are days where he feels a bit more charitable towards them.

Where the anger simmers but doesn't boil over, where he turns and twists every fact in his mind and examines it to find the underlying humanity. The proof that they're not his executioners, not really.

Today is not one of them.)

Perseus – Percy, they call him, and Nico wonders if he should do so as well on the off chance that they actually speak to one another – will try his hand at swords, apparently having had some lesson or other from his mother. If he actually manages it, that will help his image

immensely. The Capitol *loves* swords with all the talk of honour and courage that surrounds them.

As far as Nico himself, well.

“And you, my dearest unexpected addition?” Dionysus smirks, “What will *you* dazzle us with?”

Nico considers it for a moment.

The truth is that all weapon are the same, if you don't plan to make use of them at all. There's no use in carefully choosing one.

“I'm fine with swords,” and he is, “And knives.”

“Of course you are.” Nancy hisses poisonously while their mentor nods approvingly, “You're from One.”

Nico bristles.

“My sister taught me out of pity- I'm not some kind of fucking war machine, why did you think my mentor dropped me so fast?”

It's not that it isn't a fair assumption to make – it's that he's so unbelievably tired and ready to end it that her outrage becomes just another bother. Something more to get through.

Bianca would be outraged, in his place. She'd like that this girl is and so does Nico, really. He'd be able to show it, too, if only his own anger and disgust hadn't been covered by a thick layer of apathy.

Nothing has mattered much, since Bianca.

There's not really any room for conversation after that.

Still, Percy smiles at him on the way into the gym – the kind that's unsure but there, even if tinged with the faintest traces of pity and relief at once, and Nico does his best to appear less gloomy, just for that single moment.

He's not sure it works, exactly, but Percy's slight acknowledgement makes him feel better and that has to count for something.

---

## **PERCY**

It's kind of a relief, as fucked up as it is, to hear that Niccolò isn't part of the downright sadistic faction that forms every year.

Nancy shouldn't have said what she did, maybe, but it still lead to Percy's letting go of any wariness he felt before.

A weight off his chest, even if small.

He doesn't know what the other meant when he talked about his sister but he feels bad all the same – Percy has a sister and it sounds like Niccolò's is a complicated topic.

It doesn't matter, not now.

The training room is filled with people, every single tribute is testing their strength in various areas. Percy eyes the survival part, with its plants and ropes and books on poisons, and makes his way there.

The girl nearby, crouched and obviously trying to start a fire – from Eleven, maybe? – eyes him with distrust.

He has to make his way through and start somewhere, no matter how boring it would sound any other time.

---

An hour later and having learned absolutely nothing, Percy admits defeat and walks over to the weapons – there's a couple swords left and he grabs the closest one, testing its weight.

He's no expert by any means but it'll do, he thinks.

At the very least it will soothe just a bit of the sting that comes from being completely unable to memorise any of the information he needs – studying is not his thing, not even in a life or death situation apparently.

After five minutes the Eleven girl – Katie – had even started giving him much friendlier looks, just because his struggles was *that* obvious.

She's not bad, gave him a few pointers on plants and such. Still, it doesn't stop the frustration.

He feels like a fucking idiot, frankly.

Percy's not the only one that's moved, though. Nancy's back at the hatchets but she'd been fiddling with the fire starting station and the ropes just ten minutes ago. The Tributes from Ten and Six seem to be trying everything all at once, unsure of what to focus on and he grimaces, knowing he'd be just as lost if his mother hadn't taught him the basics. Their Districts really aren't known for weapons or survival knowledge, after all.

The guy from Six kneels besides Katie and they seem to hit it off instantly, smiling slightly. It makes something in Percy's chest ache, the easy way they interact while knowing they might end up as the other's murderer in just a few days.

(He's never thought about how many things can start in so little time.)

Everyone's trying to find their footing but the upper Districts, evidently – they've been grouped up near the weapons on the farthest corner of the room for most of the time. Niccolò is not among them, standing just off to their right where the knives are, but he spies the other Tribute from One, Charles, as well as the guys from Two, Three and even Four.

They make an intimidating picture, smirking and laughing as they are.

Shaking his head, he approaches one of the dummies, all too aware of Niccolò's dark eyes on him and his slow approach, knives in hand.

He breathes in shallowly, swinging like he's been taught to – maximise every movement, no use wasting energy. It's reassuring, the easy way it comes back to him, like stretching a limb he hadn't been aware of.

A knife goes flying into the dummy at his right, embedding deep into its left arm, and loud, sarcastic cheering breaks out from the group.

“You know, di Angelo,” Shouts someone from Three, an idiot with pale blonde hair that looks far too thin to be this arrogant, frankly, “If that's all you can do we might as well put you out of your misery now!”

A smattering of laughter – Percy prays it won't get to a fight but he's bristling, too, and it's not like any of them are in a particularly good mood today.

(There's are Tributes, between them, that he recognises only too well. Both of the Four ones, in fact. Triton and Pallas, children of venerated mentor Poseidon.

Half-siblings.)

To be fair, the guy tries to ignore them even while obviously clenching his jaw.

The anger doesn't help him, however, and the next knife just barely hits the side of the head. Percy minds his business even as more shouts follow and, for a moment, genuinely believes he might be able to come out of this unscathed.

Then, the blonde idiot starts up again and says something that is *unforgivable*.

“My friend Charlie, here,” the big guy from One looks distinctly uncomfortable, trying to subtly move away from him, “Told me your sister died recently – sure you don't want to follow her?”

Niccolò *throws* himself at him and gets surrounded in moments but the guy moves fast, faster than Percy thought he would, and by the time someone's trying to pull him off he's already broken blondie's nose. His fist is wet with blood, a snarl twisting his face and it's the most emotion Percy has seen him show so far.

(“*My sister taught me out of pity.*”)

Christ. No wonder he'd snapped this morning.

Still, the idiot keeps talking, obviously sure of himself now that someone's holding the smaller boy back and away.

“We could do that, you know, send you straight to your mother as well-”

Percy doesn't think, before punching him. There's a satisfying sound as the breath rushes out of the jerk all at once and his hand comes back covered in blood.

It's not the first time he's fought someone – it is, however, a first in that it's never felt quite this good.

He wonders if they'll be able to fix the asshole's nose in time for the games.

---

Dionysus laughs so hard he cries, when they meet back at their quarters.

“You sure made a number on that little prick, you should've *seen* Nero's face!” He crows, a bottle of wine in hand, already moving towards the bedrooms.

Nancy rolls her eyes and ignores them all, disappearing behind her own door, while Grover gives them a nervous goodbye, informing them that Nico – is that how Percy should call him? – will be moving in with them.

He doesn't much care about the how or why, truthfully. He watches Niccolò spin his ring and stare pointedly away from him and feels frustration mount in his chest.

Just what has he done wrong by helping him, exactly?

“Are you seriously mad at me?” He explodes, “When I've helped you?”

That's the wrong thing to say, apparently.

“What? You thought I was some helpless fucking damsel? I was doing *fine*.”

He can't help the incredulous laugh that bursts out of him – not a smart move, judging by the furrowing of his eyebrows and tightening of his fists.

“Sure you were- surrounded by five fucking people who, by the way, all *tower* over you.”

“I'm not *defenceless*, Perseus!”

“We both are,” Percy yells, losing what little of his patience he had left, “We're both fucking helpless if they think we're easy targets!”

This, if nothing else, gets him to shut up.

They stand there in silence for what feels like hours.

“And my name's Percy,” He says in the end, as some sort of peace offering, “Perseus is a mouthful. Don't bother.”

The younger boy stares at him, tilting his head like he's examining a particularly interesting insect.

It makes him feel as if he's been cut wide open to show his insides.

“Nico.” He says finally and walks off, still playing with his ring.

It's progress, surely.

---

## **GROVER**

It took a lot to smooth over the fight, not that Dionysus would ever admit it.

Grover makes his way back to the Twelve suite and knocks politely at the man's door – there's no broken furniture or blood on the pavement so he assumes Percy and Nico have resolved their little spat without resorting to more violence. The air was *tense* before.

Receiving no response, he cracks the door open to see Mr. D, passed out on the bed with a kitchen knife by his side.

He sighs.

Quietly, making sure not to disturb him, Grover picks up the broken glass and the empty bottles and places the knife on the nightstand after a moment of careful consideration.

*(“They won't make it, with Nero gunning for them.” A hitched breath, “More kids to the slaughter. Bought them some time.”*

*“Sir-”*

*“The fucking Titans, of all enemies to make on the first day. Little idiots.”*

*And there's the problem, isn't it?*

*The poorly hidden pride.)*

All mentors care about their tributes, in their own way.

Grover cleans up after his colleague and tries not to think about what he might've done, to assure those kids just one more chance.

Or how many times he must've done it.

## Chapter End Notes

it's been. a while. but we're back!! so:

-tributes that we know:

Nico and Charlie (Beckendorf) from 1, mentored by Minos (officially);

Katie (Gardner) from 11;

someone from 6 who really gets along with katie (and who could that be?);

Some skinny blonde asshole from 3 (any guesses?) whose mentor is Nero;

Triton and Pallas from 4 (percy's half siblings), mentored by dear old dad;

and ofc Percy and Nancy from 12 with mr D. Did i miss any?

- nancy is RIGHT. nico just wishes shed stop being right next to him bc hes mourning and does not care about anything rn. which is also valid, the fact that youre a victim of something doesn't mean you should be constantly in the fighting zone, you're allowed to break and put yourself back together first bc you're a person not a soldier.

- nico is not feeling up to exploring the deeper complexities of the capitol today sorry. he's so valid tbh he's been TRYING to hold onto his good will and the more optimistic and nuanced view he had when bianca was alive but he's a teenager whos lost and he can take a break just for today if he wants to.

- percy lowkey judging everyone. whether positively or negatively. and being relieved that nancy is a belligerent little gremlin so he doesn't have to worry about nico fucking murdering him on sight in the arena.

- you do not want to mention nico's family. or anyone's family near percy, apparently, bc hed a supportive king.

- dionysus is once again best mentor or at the very least a mentor that's doing his best

- grover's suffering is immense and never ending.

- only took them 4 chapters to give me the chance to ditch both niccolò and perseus, praise the lord.

thank you for reading, let me know what you think/any mistakes you've found!!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!