Nico slowly blinked. He knew he was in a dream; he was fairly good at telling and controlling these types of things. Besides, nothing was *ever* this calm.

Warm light bounced off pure white walls. All was peaceful, all was tranquil, and all was safe. He felt tingly, almost weightless. Nico wasn't used to having dreams filled with such… soothing *nothingness.* It was relieving to get a break from the nightmares, war, and general danger that comes with being a demigod.

"Hello, son of Hades," he heard a voice hiss. He turned around, and his heart dropped. The safety and tranquility and peace and *safety* oozed out of the room. The tingly feeling turned into a burning sensation, and he felt as if his bones had turned to lead. A woman in a plain, white tattered dress stood before him, her wiry frame covered in dust and looking like a victim of a severe famine. Her sunken eyes forever spilling tears bored into his soul, cheeks bloody from clawing at them, nose dripping. Stringy gray hair matted itself to her head.

"Achlys," Nico sputtered. "Goddess of misery."

"So you remember me, young demigod," she smiled through the tears and mucus on her grimy face. As Achlys spoke, the warm white of his dream was soaked with a hazy red. A familiar sanguine color, the landscape too real and too squishy under his feet. Small bulges off in the distance glowed an eerie yellow; the regeneration patches for monsters.

He couldn't be back here. He *refused* to be back here.

Tartarus had hurt him too badly and left him broken. Memories of the twin giants Otis and Ephialtes, bronze walls, and near death flooded his mind, things no one should have seen, things that were forever carved into his soul, no matter how deep he buried it. He could feel himself slipping, losing control.

"What are you doing here?" Nico asked, hating how his voice wavered. He wished he could hide his fear and pain from the goddess, but in the presence of Achlys, nothing good could stay.

"I'm here on my mother's behalf. I'm here to remind you that you *belong* to the darkness, you must repent. You will never be truly happy, and you know it," Achlys's cold leer sent a shiver down his spine. She was right. He was a fool to ever think that he could belong at Camp Half-Blood, a fool to think he could ever be normal after all he had endured. Would he ever belong anywhere?

"You're lying. I have—I have a home now," he told the goddess, legs trembling and throat dry. A brittle cackle escaped Achlys's throat. Nico couldn't tell if he was trying to convince her or himself.

"I know what you feel, demigod," she said, spitting the word *demigod* as if he were the scum of the Earth. "You cannot escape your destiny. I can tell you are spiraling, quickly. Let me help you."

A sharp pain stabbed through his head. Memories of his mother dying in the lightning strike, Percy telling him that Bianca, his sister and the only person he had left, had died, getting manipulated in the Labyrinth by Minos, recognizing his *feelings* for Percy, being dragged into Tartarus, being trapped in the bronze jar, getting outed by Cupid, almost dying from carrying the Athena Parthenos, all of it. It crashed over him all at once, pulling him down, drowning him.

"All that belongs to the dark must return, son of Hades. You cannot escape your destiny." The dreamscape spun around him, vertigo flooding his senses. His heart and head pounded, lungs burning and he felt as if he couldn't breathe. Several thoughts whirled through his head, none of them positive.

And then he woke up.