**Chapter 7**

**Invincible**

*The Fields of Asphodel were rarely mentioned among the most dangerous obstacles separating Demigods from the Palace of Lord Hades, for the reason no one sane had seriously planned for the undertaking of crossing thousands of kilometres of shade-crowded plains with limited food and reserves of water.*

*The Suicide Squad had successfully completed this challenge in less than ten days.*

*Of course, to achieve this extraordinary feat, the collateral damage had been considerable.*

*The Phlegethon Dam had been destroyed. The Fields of Asphodel had been drowned and been transformed into the Asphodel Sea. If there was someone besides the Lord of the Underworld who knew how much of Hell infrastructure and defences had been demolished, crippled, or simply gone missing in the monumental flooding, no one in the aftermath had any idea of his or her identity. What it had done to the uncountable number of soul-shades supposed to await peacefully an eventual resurrection or the end of all existence was also a large unknown.*

*The son of Poseidon leading this Great Quest likely didn’t care about the devastation he left behind him, a trail of destruction which had to be measured in the billions of Drachmas from a conservative economic view.*

*Some of his reasons were likely incredibly selfish. Others were maybe more pragmatic.*

*The Great Quest wasn’t over, after all. Before stepping a foot inside Hades’ Citadel, formidable forces and obstacles barred the way of the surviving Demigods and Demigoddesses, the latter including two of the most dangerous trials a Demigod could be opposed to in his life: Cerberus and the Styx.*

*The legendary three-headed dog didn’t need any introduction. Fearsome guardian of the Gates of Hell, Cerberus had loyally protected the Rich One’s domains since his rule began, and save the children of Hades, the only heroes to not be devoured by his three heads were Heracles and Orpheus. Cerberus had no weaknesses one could easily exploit, and thus the bridge he guarded was impossible to use without the consent of the Lord of the Underworld.*

*The alternative was the Styx, and as people versed in mythology truly knew, the three-headed dog was less dangerous, both from a physical or spiritual perspective. Cerberus, in the end, could do no worse than killing you. Staying immerged in the Hell River for too long, however, would be the ruin of not only your body, but your soul too.*

*In most cases, dead heroic and non-heroic souls paid the ferryman Charon to cross what was the most dangerous of the Rivers of Hell. It was a shortcut obviously denied to the living, assuming campers of New Byzantium had a method to summon one of Hades’ servants and convince him to transport them without calling enemy reinforcements. Having a bargain chip to ensure he didn’t throw them in the Styx while in the middle of the naval crossing was a nice prerequisite too.*

*Evidently, the duo Styx-Cerberus was considered superior to Charybdis-Scylla, and the odds of successfully gaining entrance into the Sea of Monsters compared to Hell spoke in the Dark Realm defender’s favour.*

*But the Suicide Squad had already accomplished the impossible several times, sailing on a sea of Hell to come so far. What was one more challenge, to obtain an audience with the Master of the Helm of Darkness?*

Extract from the Chapter 10 of *Chronicles of the Suicide Squad*, by Malcolm Pace, son of Athena

**30 May 2006, edge of the new Asphodel Sea, the Underworld**

“Dear partner-in-crimes of the Suicide Squad! We have arrived at the end of the holiday cruise! We are at the doorstep of destiny! We are-“

“Jackson!” Ethan interrupted before the mad son of Poseidon could continue further. “The ship is in danger!”

An enormous tentacle struck the sails and tore apart most of the cloth on its way seconds after like it wanted to support his words.

It wasn’t the case, of course.

“You were telling us the Kraken had stopped the pursuit!”

“No, Marion, I told you the Kraken had resigned itself and acknowledged it wouldn’t kill us, this is not exactly the same thing!”

Ethan ignored the banter and tried not to shake in fear as the monumental monster revealed itself most of the size which usually stayed under the water.

It was...titanic. Much as he tried to ignore their ‘dear leader’ monologues, the point of view that the first Perseus had killed this sea monster by Medusa’s petrifying power was sounding credible.

The son of Nemesis was unable to see a weak point that would require a sword or another sort of infantry weapon, really.

“We must save the ship!” Chase exclaimed.

“And how do you intend to do that? I’m really curious about the tactics you want to employ, Amanda...”

“My name is Annabeth!”

“Of course it is, Alexandria...”

While the son of Poseidon and the daughter of Athena exchanged barbs, the Kraken had not remained inactive. The ship’s anchor, the masts, and the cannons were sent overboard as the gigantic monster unleashed the wrath accumulated during several days of pursuit.

And finally, once the old warship had been battered into impotence and was nothing but a crippled hulk sinking slowly, the tentacles towed it towards the interior of the Asphodel Sea and squeezed as they sent it by the bottom.

A minute later, there was no more Kraken visible. And of the Napoleonic-era ship, the only signs it had ever existed were the debris floating amidst the shrieking souls of the red sea of liquid-flames.

“Damn it.” Jackson clicked his fingers. “I couldn’t even swear my eternal friendship to this misunderstood animal!”

“Jackson...” Zoë Nightshade growled, her silver armour a beacon of light as the red light of the Underworld was a meagre twilight at best. “This was our only way to return to the Labyrinth!”

“But doing the same thing over and over is *so boring*!”

Someone else saying this would probably have experienced the ‘pleasure’ of a few fists breaking his nose...to begin with.

Ethan sighed.

“Boring or not, this was the only path which guaranteed a safe return to the world of the living above our heads.”

“There is worse,” the Earthshaker’s crazy scion said with a semi-serious expression which fooled no one. “I wasn’t able to insure the warship. Have you any idea of the kind of embezzlements via insurance fraud which are suddenly denied to me?”

The list of crimes they were all going to be accused of by the end of the Great Quest was going to be...record-breaking. Ethan just knew it. They had ‘Hell-spanning vandalism’, arson, high treason, corruption, bribery, and environmental crimes in addition to use of forbidden substances and...okay, he was going to stop there, it was really becoming too depressing.

“No!” The blonde daughter of Athena shouted. “And I don’t care!”

“Anyway, the kraken is gone,” Jake Mason brayed. “For the short-term, our back is safe. The Kraken won’t be able to pursue us on land, and there’s no army that can cross the Phlegethon sea...”

The black-haired Demigod didn’t have the time to count to five before the first skeleton emerged from the Asphodel Sea. He was followed by another. And then countless others.

Before their insane leader found something spiritual to say, there were hundreds of skeletons, armed with muskets and pirate hats like in one of those popular pirate movies, trying to reach the shore, and Ethan had a feeling it wasn’t to say hello.

“I give you a ten on ‘taunting the Fates’, my sole and only donkey lieutenant!”

“I didn’t taunt the Fates!” The red donkey denied vehemently, his bad faith evident to all.

“Much as I dislike agreeing with Jackson on anything...you did,” Miranda Gardiner affirmed. “Okay, how do we deal with these pirate skeletons?”

Perseus Jackson opened his mouth to answer...and Nightshade began to shoot her arrows before a single word was uttered.

The Huntress of Artemis should have been out of archery range, longbow or no longbow. But as the arrows took flight, they turned into moonlight rays after a few seconds. The silver explosions when they hit the servants of the Rich One right between the holes where their eyes had been were rather spectacular.

“We don’t.” The son of Poseidon said after a second of silence. “Impressive shooting performance, Zara, but it wasn’t necessary.”

“It wasn’t necessary?” the silver-armoured immortal hissed venomously, decreasing the distance between the insane Demigod and she.

“Incorrect word, I apologise,” Perseus Jackson didn’t look in her direction. “It was an impressive shooting performance, but you don’t have enough strength to shoot all day the skeletons.”

“What are you-“

The questions and the exclamations of disapproval quieted down, as new skeletons emerged from the Phlegethon burning liquid-flame.

This time it wasn’t the two dozen of animated bone-warriors Nightshade had slaughtered.

There were hundreds of them, maybe as many as one thousand...and behind them there were more coming to the Asphodel shores.

What the Huntress had destroyed was just the advance guard of a true army.

“Oh woe is us, Phlegethon has betrayed me after I greatly increased his influence and his power over the Underworld...”Jackson mused aloud before rising his fist in the air. “You will not get away with this, honourless scoundrel! Asterius, you know what you have to do!”

Then the green-eyed madman turned towards them and grinned.

“To the Styx Bridge!”

**30 May 2006, the Styx Bridge, the Underworld**

They were running.

Luke would say ‘running for their lives’, but it would be a bit dramatic. The skeleton warriors had not started running, and had to be nearly a kilometre behind them. And though the thousands already on the shore were reinforced by thousands emerging from the Asphodel Sea, it was clear the enemy army was in no hurry.

That was the good news. The bad news was ahead of them. The reasons why the servants of the Lord of Hell felt there was no need to hurry. And much as he wanted to say otherwise, Luke understood the intelligence guiding them had a point.

As far as the eye could see on the large valley in front of them, the Styx River waited for them.

There were maybe some places where jumping over it could be possible in the distorted peaks on the far right or the far left of his vision, but it would likely cost them days, assuming it was possible at all and no skeleton armies waited to ambush them.

No, the fastest way to cross was straight ahead, in the form of a colossal bridge which had to be the width of the Brooklyn one...and maybe twice the length.

Never let it be said that when Hades built, the elder brother of the Big Three built small.

It wasn’t a bridge a lot of tourists would love to spend admiring for half of a day, mind you. The railings had numerous cruel spikes, and the decoration theme involved lots of skulls and other death imagery. In the dark atmosphere of the Underworld, it was absolutely sinister, which had to be the ambiance sought for.

The big problem wasn’t the decoration, unfortunately. The problem was that for all its width, the ‘Hell Bridge’ was barely big enough for a certain three-headed dog to mount guard here. The mind of a thief – which Luke fortunately possessed – was suspicious and began to wonder if the bridge had not been adapted to fit Cerberus rather than the contrary.

To repeat, Cerberus was huge. Bigger than the monsters they had met so far, and they weren’t imbued with the power of the Underworld.

And when it was obvious they continued to advance, the three massive heads began to salivate.

“Jackson,” Dakota began hesitantly, “the...ahem...I don’t like how the dog salivates...”

“Nothing to fear, my loyal drunk lieutenant! The poor dog just thinks we are the late lunch he was denied for days! Honestly, the gall of the Underworld authorities, letting this poor animal alone and unfed!”

Crazy, but then the son of Poseidon had befriended the Minotaur...where had the half-bull gone by the way? The son of the Immortal Sorceress had been in the rear-guard, but he wasn’t anywhere in sight right now...

“Well, we don’t have any surplus food to give him,” Drew Tanaka said nervously, “and I am not sure Charmspeak will be enough to convince him to let us pass.”

“Almost certainly not,” Jackson agreed. “The Judges of the Dead must sentence countless sons and daughters of the Goddess of Love, it would be very difficult if the biggest enforcer they have is easily distracted. Fortunately, I have a solution! Zoë, I have found you a new friend!”

The Hellhound, not the Huntress, barked and charged flat out her far larger cousin.

“What are you doing? Your Hellhound is going to be slaughtered!” Jake brayed.

But the Labyrinth-recruited monster wasn’t attacked. Cerberus considered this intruder for several seconds...before deciding sniffing and licking with his large three tongues this distant female cousin was the thing to do.

Ten more seconds, and the Hellhound and the ferocious guardian of Hell were playing with each other, barking in happiness, and generally doing very dog-appropriate activities...which shook the bridge severely. Fortunately, the Underworld architects built tough.

“You were saying, my faithless quadruped lieutenant?”

Perseus Jackson, the son of the God of the Thieves noticed, loved destroying their expectations.

“Err...Jackson?” Lou Ellen Blackstone swallowed nervously, her eyes turned towards the direction of the Asphodel behind them. “The enemy is coming for us.”

The sorceress wasn’t exaggerating. Apparently, someone on the other side had acknowledged there was a small chance they would cross the bridge successfully, and now what was a respectable army of skeleton pirates and other dead warriors was rushing to close the trap.

“Let’s go!” Annabeth began to run...and just as she was some ten feet away from the canine duo, Cerberus stopped the games and salutations with Zoë the Hellhound and growled threateningly.

“Cerberus! I have come to proclaim you my eternal friendship!”

You had three guesses to wonder who had said those words, and the first two didn’t count.

Cerberus barked loudly....just before receiving some liquid on his hirsute black fur.

“First, the Eternal Perfect Shampoo!” The mad boy went so far as to use his hydrokinesis on the Styx *to wash Cerberus*! And the result was a miniature pool of foam forming around the three-headed dog! “You deserve it, good boy!”

“This has to be a nightmare, please tell me I’m not seeing this...” Dakota whispered. “It’s the Eleutherian Wine, right?”

“I don’t know...” Luke had to admit that maybe they were all hallucinating since they had entered the Labyrinth...

Because, of course, the shampoo – the smell of apples was so powerful they couldn’t smell anything else – was the beginning. Then Jackson summoned an enormous blue brush from his baggage, and proceeded to scrub Cerberus. The servant of the Lord of the Underworld had abandoned all vigilance by then, and was not pretending to do anything but enjoying the attention he had been so deprived of for years.

The paws were not forgotten; placed on an inflatable pillow, they were coated in a powerful herb-smelling cream once the fur was clean and pristine.

“That’s a good guardian dog! Who’s a good guardian dog?”

“Are we sure...” Ethan coughed, “that the authority of Lord of the Seas doesn’t extend to dogs and Hellhounds?”

“No,” Annabeth shook her head, “only horses and bulls for the animals living outside the water...but after seeing this...”

“Jackson, hurry!” the daughter of Hecate shouted. “The skeletons are nearly there, and I don’t think we will be able to fight them! They are too many!”

Black flames began to burn in her hands, but Lou Ellen hadn’t exaggerated. Hades’ army would be there within ten minutes, and given their numbers, they would be outnumbered a thousand to one.

“Right, right, Cerberus, noble dog of the Underworld, can we use your great bridge?”

The cousin of Zoë the Hellhound barked in approval as his long ears were caressed and received perfume.

“You see, my treacherous lieutenant? There was-“

A miniature tsunami struck the large section of the bridge behind Cerberus, and in the blink of an eye, the gigantic bridge which was to be their salvation was carried away and destroyed by the furious flooding of the Styx.

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Dakota hadn’t truly realised how large the Styx River truly was until the bridge was torn apart.

Now the son of Bacchus did.

It was really, really big. Not as big as one of those large rivers like the Amazon or the Nile – Chiron was too fond of environmental and documentaries when it was on the evening’s schedule – but then those immensities of water hadn’t the power to hurt you by contact alone.

The Styx wasn’t as polluted as the rumours made it to be at New Byzantium. But then the gigantic garbage-destroyers they could observe at the bottom of the river before it became a furious maelstrom must be responsible for its relatively clean state.

‘Relative’ was the key word, evidently. There was a lot of junk and the filth formed a miniature layer above the water by itself.

Or it had, before the bridge was destroyed.

Now the trash and the garbage were thrown out on the banks of the river, and the water itself was like it was agitated by a hurricane or some equally phenomenon violent.

“I was afraid something like that was going to happen,” the son of Poseidon remarked. “Plan B, it is.”

“You knew?” Dakota managed after coughing, deciding on a common accord with the other Questers it was better for him to speak.

“My loyal drunken lieutenant,” damn it, what did he do to deserve this form of address, “this river shouldn’t be here. Good Cerberus,” ignore the scrubbing of the giant three-headed dog, Dakota, “should be near the entrance of the Underworld. These defences shouldn’t be located where they are. Logic dictates they were moved around, and they aren’t many powers among the Greek-Roman Pantheon which can impose anything to the most powerful of the Hell Rivers.”

Grabbing a few Drachmas from his pockets, Perseus Jackson threw them directly in the tumultuous waters.

“Oh, Styx, accept this offering! I, Perseus Jackson, swear you, my eternal friendship!”

Cerberus barked loudly, but generous caresses and scratching distracted the Underworld guardian again.

Anyway, the result was disappointing. The Styx was still agitated on a level where ‘furious flooding’ or ‘apocalyptically unleashed’ were not something totally exaggerated.

“For once Jackson, it seems your plan isn’t working,” Annabeth Chase told him smugly.

“You are absolutely right, Annie,” there was an amused grin on their leader’s face, which meant...the worst had not happened...yet. “Plan B doesn’t work, so let’s go to Plan C directly.”

Jackson stretched like he was about to do something physically straining...and then he shouted.

“STYX! I KNOW YOU HAVE BETRAYED HADES! I AM ABOUT TO BLACKMAIL YOU!”

The river immediately returned to a somewhat placid state....if one didn’t count the tsunami-high wave rising on the opposite bank.

“I DEMAND AN AUDIENCE...UNLESS YOUR AUGUST DIVINITY WISHES FOR ZEUS TO BE INFORMED OF THIS MINOR ISSUE THROUGH A SHORT IRIS-MESSAGE!”

The impossible wave rushed towards them, but just as it was about to strike, it began to shift into a tall masked woman twice the height of Cerberus.

Despite not seeing most of her face, Dakota shivered at the sheer hate in those night-black eyes. And the power the Goddess emanated...it was far, far worse than anything Caligula and his sister had ever done...ten times their power combined, and Styx was not using anything like her true power.

“**Choose your next words carefully, Perseus Jackson**,” the River-Goddess whose boon of invincibility had made the hero Achilles famous for thousands of generations. “**For no one does blackmail me. I give you one minute to pray for my mercy...past this delay, I will annihilate you, body and soul**.”

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“**Past this delay, I will annihilate you, body and soul.**”

The Goddess Styx, Ethan acknowledged, wasn’t human, had never been human, and didn’t bother hiding she had no common points with Mankind.

Take her appearance for example: outwardly, the manifestation of the Hell River was dressed like one of those Queens of ages past, a large gown the colour of midnight was coexisting with hair which managed to be somehow darker, and her eyes, the only part visible under her mask with her indigo lips, were pits of onyx. But the styles of the different clothes were not in use by humans: every time he tried to focus on one part of her, it gave him a painful headache and visions of nightmare like grinning skulls danced before his eyes.

It went without saying that they hadn’t a chance in all the Hells to cause a minor inconvenience to her. She was the eldest of the Oceanids, the daughters of the Titan and Titaness of the Sea. Most Gods preferred to abide by her terms of punishments rather than ignore her when one vow was broken.

If Jackson didn’t find something clever to say...they were all dead.

At least it would be quick...

“I can make you the most powerful Goddess of the Underworld.”

Styx gaped. Apparently, whatever she had been told to expect, it wasn’t sufficient to be ready for a round of ‘Jackson madness’.

“**You lie**.”

“I do not.” The green-eyed Demigod smiled innocently. “On my life, I swear on the Styx that I can, provided that you cooperate, make you the second most powerful being of the Underworld, right under whoever sits upon Hades Throne.”

There was a thunderous sound, the Hellish red sky thundered, smoke coalesced...and Perseus Jackson remained perfectly unharmed.

“**It does not change anything**,” the Goddess said in a voice which had lost a lot of its certainty. “**I swore a mutual oath to destroy any and all invaders invading overtly or covertly the Underworld whose goal is to recover the Master Bolt**.”

“Excellent!” Oh no, more madness coming. “It just so happened we are paid by my Lord Father’s wife to recover the Trident of the Seas, not some insignificant artefact of thunder.” Jackson shrugged. “Contact Atlantis if you don’t believe me.”

Styx did just that. In one of her hands, a mobile phone, one embedded with numerous onyx stones and other jewels, appeared. The Hell Goddess read for barely two seconds, but whatever she had been given access to in this interval of time had apparently been enough to confirm his words.

“**It seems you are saying the truth**.” Styx reluctantly admitted. “**But I can’t let you pass, son of the Earthshaker**.”

“Is this because you negotiated a pact with the elusive and mysterious Lightning Thief?”

Styx didn’t answer directly, which a damning answer by itself.

“The environmental measures and the garbage-disposers at the bottom of your riverbed are her ideas, I take it.” The too-perceptive son of Poseidon continued. “I suppose several purifying rituals and the disposal of the memory-possessions into the other rivers of the Underworld was also included in the negotiation?”

“**You are too clever to live long, Perseus Jackson**.” The River Goddess warned.

“As long as my death shakes the world,” and Ethan shuddered, for the fearless reaction wasn’t just frightening....it was also heartfelt *truth*. “You are the reason the Lightning Thief was successful in infiltrating Olympus and hiding her intentions from Hades, aren’t you?”

“**I am not alone, but I played the part I was sworn to**,” the Goddess bared pearly white teeth. “**Do you have any idea how many millennia I urged Hades to adopt strict anti-pollution measures? The more I complained about the disgusting activities of humankind, the more he ignored me! I was used as a watery dump! Me**!”

The river grew ever more agitated, not to the point of the previous flooding, but the pillar under their feet shook.

“**I was promised to sit at the right of the Throne of the Underworld. Why would I endanger this accord, Demigod**?”

“Because for all the accords, it will not give you more power or influence,” their grinning commander grinned. “It will give you respect and a title...but both can be withdrawn. I, however, will make modifications far more difficult to reverse...no matter if they come from Hades or the Lightning Thief.”

“**And how do you think you can do that**?”

“Simple,” why did Ethan think he wasn’t going to like what was going to follow? “There is a dam north of here preventing you from flooding into the new ‘Asphodel Sea’ and contesting the domination of Phlegethon. You only have to say the word, and I will blow it up.”

Ethan opened his mouth, in an attempt to tell Jackson to not be ridiculous, before realising the Minotaur was missing. And from the entire group of Questers, ‘Asterius’ was likely the only person to be able to locate and fight his way through to any defenders of a dam as big as the first one without dying.

“**Phlegethon has stacked his claim**.”

“He also betrayed us,” Perseus Jackson gleefully reminded her, “and who has more claim upon this sea than we, the Great Questers who destroyed the Dam preventing him from flooding Asphodel?”

“**You think you can compare yourself to a deity of the Underworld**?”

“I just did it, didn’t I?”

There was no anger in the eyes of Styx anymore. Instead, there was...*avidity*. It was so powerful Ethan could almost taste it. If it had conflicted with the first pact, the daughter of Thethys would have refused outright. But Jackson had offered her to keep the first cake and then offered her a second one which looked even more delicious than the first.

“**If the dam preventing me from flooding the Asphodel is broken and I desire to contest the claim of Phlegethon, this part of my riverbed will soon become empty**.”

“A happy coincidence, I’m sure,” Perseus grinned.

“**All of you swear to not wound, kill, or inflict any form of physical or magical injury to Bianca di Angelo, daughter of Hades**.”

Ethan grimaced inwardly. The Lightning Thief was Hades’ daughter? Curse it, neither Chiron nor any of the Gods like Dionysus had mentioned it!

Jackson however seemed unperturbed by this declaration. Maybe he already knew...the Gods knew he already seemed to be aware of everything else.

“Acceptable, but I want a clause authorising legitimate self-defence.” The son of Poseidon replied. “I will not initiate hostilities to recover the Trident, but I will not allow her to kill me or one of the members of this Great Quest without defending myself.”

“**And one of you will be bestowed the Curse of Achilles**.”

The son of Nemesis froze. No, surely he had misheard...

“If it is to give some kind of equivalent exchange because the Lightning Thief already bathed in your sacred waters, I assure you, Great Styx, it is not necessary!”

But for the first time, there was something...deadly serious under the jokes and the amusement of Perseus Jackson. The son of Poseidon had told them he didn’t believe in Achilles’ invincibility, and the fact Styx had called it a ‘Curse’ tended to support his opinion. Still, there was something...

“**Bianca di Angelo was indeed bestowed the Curse too**,” Styx nodded, “**albeit for different reasons**.”

For once, there was no retort from the Demigod whose existence angered Zeus. Ethan in the meantime tried not to think too deeply how bad this whole mission had become. They would have to face a daughter of Hades empowered by the Styx, and in the unlikely case they found her fatal weakness, they were going to have to swear to not hurt her.

Could this day get any better?

Luke Castellan chose this moment to intervene after a forced cough.

“Lady Styx, we are honoured, but if one of us is bestowed the...Curse of Achilles, the paranoia of certain deities on Olympus is going to be greatly increased, and it won’t be good for whatever plans you have...”

“Luke,” Jackson sighed, “increasing the paranoia of the Master of Olympus is exactly the point of Lady Styx’s plan, not an unhappy side-effect.”

“**Indeed**,” Styx largely smiled for the first time, and it was something elegant, familiar, and terrible. “**Now, who will receive my bestowal, I wonder? Assuming you accept, of course...**”

One turn of the head, and yes, there was an army of tens of thousands of skeletons waiting at good distance five hundred metres behind them...

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“You are not forced to do it, you know.”

Lou Ellen didn’t need to turn her head to know Jackson was deadly serious when he whispered the words. The daughter of Hecate wasn’t worried either about the son of Poseidon trying to watch her naked while she removed her armour and her clothes; Perseus Jackson had a lot of flaws, but trying to see girls naked as often as possible wasn’t among his – long – list of sins.

“You prefer to do it?” the blonde Demigoddess asked in a murmur, though it was certainly useless with Styx being a River-Goddess and thus listening to them a couple of metres away. “We all know how this story ends.”

Styx was a bitch, honestly. A son of Poseidon who irritated Zeus and most of his progeny the moment he was born...or a daughter of Hecate? Yeah, ‘paranoia attack’ was an underwhelming description of what was going to happen when Olympus was informed of the outcome of the negotiations between the Oceanid and Jackson.

Plunge someone like Dakota McDonald into the Styx, and the Gods would chuckle and after a few grumblings, would ignore the problem for decades.

If the most infuriating ‘half-blood’ of their generation was bestowed the Curse of Achilles, however...well, Zeus would know no peace until he was ashes and cinders. It wouldn’t matter if it began a war with Poseidon within the next couple of minutes; Perseus Jackson would be the target of the Thunder God’s wrath...and for all the resistance and blessings granted by the Styx, Lou Ellen wasn’t certain the ‘invincibility’ promised would do anything when the very air became lightning and Jupiter-Zeus descended to battle a half-mortal in his divine form.

“I’m sure a certain God would realise the folly of striking someone as amusing and good-spirited as me!” the green-eyed mad boy protested for the form.

“Yeah, after your father declared war because he killed you in a fit of paranoia...”

Perseus chuckled for a few seconds before speaking again.

“You’re right, of course. He would kill me...or do his best to incinerate me, which is the same, really.” Perseus clicked his tongue loudly. “If only the daughter of Hades had not made so many promises to the local River Goddess...”

“You think this is the problem?” Lou Ellen asked as only her undergarments were left.

“Sorceress, as...entertaining as the rebellion against one of the brothers of my genitor may be, the consequences are not going to be light if the Rich One return to power. The terms I was able to deduce are only part of what was offered, but without knowing more about the Lightning Thief, it is difficult to make accurate guesses about past negotiations.”

“You knew her name and that she was a daughter of Hades.” Maybe this was a cowardly attempt to delay her ‘bath’...okay, it was. “Hades broke the Oath.”

“No, he didn’t.” Perseus was prompt to deny, to her great surprise. “His daughter was born in the 1930s, and after Zeus killed her mother, she was sent to the Lotus Casino, effectively she was a vestige of the pre-World War II era in stasis. Despite my best efforts though, I have been unable to discover who organised her escape...judging by her usurpation schemes, it was not her father.”

“It still could be an illusion.” It was probably grasping at straws and ghosts, of course. “The Lightning Thief may be playing the role of mastermind while Hades remained out of sight.”

“It could be...” Perseus admitted as she advanced naked towards the Styx. “Except we were never supposed to reach the heart of Hell. Are you ready?”

“No.” Lou admitted truthfully.

“Too bad,” the son of Poseidon answered, “if you can visualise where your Achilles’ heel will be, don’t choose anywhere you can’t watch. Siegfried and Achilles can testify it was a very bad, bad idea...”

And he pushed her into the Styx.

The first contact was incredible pain.

It was like she had plunged her body into acid...and after a few heartbeats, it got worse. The muscles, the organs, the nerves, the hair, the mouth...everything hurt, burned, and tortured her psyche. And as Lou tried to steel her mind and ignore the physical inconvenience, each second was more painful than the previous than the other one. Styx wasn’t kidding when she said she could destroy them body and soul.

There was only one thing to do: using the advice the Hell Goddess had so ‘generously’ provided, and creating a spiritual umbilical cordon to keep her mortality and avoid utter destruction while she ‘bathed’.

It was the only thing which mattered. And when she felt her resistance weaken, Lou Ellen remembered the words of Jackson saying she had *potential*. Something her own mother hadn’t told her...because the magic-practitioner had only met her once.

One second later, Lou Ellen was expelled from the depths of the acid pit...pardon, the hellish river.

“There are lobsters which will feel jealous,” Jackson remarked as he helped her find strength to stand on her own. “Did it work?”

Lou shook her head...and then from instinct, she summoned her clothes and her armour on her. Faster than one could say it, the daughter of Hecate was ready to wage war.

As her skin returned progressively to something like her original shade, the blonde felt the currents of magic swirl around her. It was like blinders had been removed from her eyes. It was as if she was an entirely new person. It was if ten thousand gates formerly barred to her were now open.

And as she saw the skeleton army which had stopped standing idle, realising Styx was not going to destroy them, Lou Ellen shouted the incantation which had once demanded her so much concentration and power to unleash.

“HELLFIRE!”

The skeleton army didn’t suffer a serious blow, oh no.

It was engulfed in the magical black flames and was completely, truly, annihilated.

“A simple ‘yes’ would have sufficed, you know...” Perseus Jackson had somehow drawn a cigar from somewhere and used a sparkle from her hands to light it...a very sarcastic way to keep her on her feet to be sure.

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“Remind me Jackson...you declined the ‘honour of the bestowal because once you took the Curse of Achilles, the Olympians were going to panic?”

While his mouth voiced the rhetorical question, Luke’s eyes didn’t turn away from the devastation.

He had seen the destruction Lou Ellen Blackstone could wreck upon Pasiphaë’s fortress, of course, but the incantation had taken far longer...and the spell had not been as powerful as it was today.

There had been an entire skeleton army on these plains. The son of Hermes would not cry for them, though the souls inside the bone prisons had likely not volunteered or any choice offered before they were deployed.

But there had been an entire army. They had not reached ten thousand, but there had been at least six or seven for certain.

Now the only thing left of them were burning bones and twisted things which had been muskets, pistols and various old-fashioned armours a few minutes ago.

The black flames still continued to burn nonetheless. After the sea of liquid-flames, their Quest had just added ‘plains of black flames’ to their list of achievements.

“My dear heroic lieutenant,” the mad Demigod played with a large cigar between his fingers, the odour emanating from it surprisingly pleasant, “I knew from the start our sorceress would be the second most unbearable choice for Olympus where the Curse of Achilles was concerned. That was I would have wanted Clarisse to have it; the God of War would have seen nothing wrong with a bloodthirsty and invulnerable daughter reaping thousands of lives in his name...”

“Screw you, Jackson!” the spear-wielding woman shouted.

“Don’t mind her, Cindy is disappointed she hasn’t killed anyone in the last twenty-four hours,” the son of Poseidon commented. “Where was I?”

“You said Lou Ellen was the second worst choice after you,” Luke swore that if they survived this Quest, he was going to barricade himself in his bedroom for ten days, just to save a bit of sanity...not that he had much left after the last days.

“I did! And I have not changed my mind.”

“Some Olympians might not hesitate killing a daughter of Hecate.”

“True. Unfortunately, there are some who won’t hesitate raising their hands against a son of Poseidon.” The younger Demigod shrugged. “You arguably have a good head upon your shoulders, so I think bestowing you the Curse would have improved you skills while calming the Council. But the whims of a certain Goddess prevented that.”

Perseus Jackson searched in the baggage he had left on the back of the smaller Hellhound – important observation, because yes, in case you wondered, Cerberus was nearby – and drew from it a flare gun.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Excuse me?”

“The Gods believe we dance to their tune,” the green-eyed swordsman grinned as he loaded the flare gun with...the cigar? “But I know better. I am the pebble which derails all their neatly-arranged plans. I am the card on the table that they won’t be able to predict the actions of.”

The flare gun was raised high.

“Let Hell fall, for the Suicide Squad comes!”

The flare gun fired, and impossibly, what rose over their heads was a giant grinning skull of orange and black colour.

North of their position – assuming there was a North in Hell and it wasn’t just an anomaly conceived to screw with the compass – a gigantic explosion happened as the luminous signal was seen and the Minotaur acknowledged the order.

“**Don’t think I am doing you a favour, Perseus Jackson**,” the Goddess Styx intervened as the familiar noise of thousands of tons of water breaking a dam arrived to their ears in a thunderous rumble. “**No matter who will claim the throne of the Underworld, they will earmark you for the Fields of Punishment**.”

And the Oceanid materialisation ceased to be as the level of the waters began to decrease and the ruckus of her waters finding a new riverbed increased in the distance.

“Good,” the madman smiled, “I love punish people.”

“Jackson, I think she meant as one of the punished,” Miranda Gardiner intervened.

“That would be a waste of my talents,” the son of Poseidon replied to the daughter of Demeter. “And frankly, it won’t happen.”

“Why? You think Zeus isn’t willing to condemn you to such a fate?” Dakota asked with curiosity.

“Of course, he is,” Perseus immediately reassured them. “But there are procedures everywhere, and now that I have trapped Minos in a Stygian dagger, the Judges on the panel owe me several favours, and via Asterius I have negotiated for an amnesty the moment I arrive before them in the unlikely case I am killed.”

“You...” Zoë Nightshade was aghast...again. “You are violating the sacred rules of eternal justice!”

“One more legendary achievement to my name,” their insane leader beamed. “Ah, the divine battle begins.”

“**THIS SEA IS MINE, STYX**!” Phlegethon had begun to materialise a semi-divine form, and it was an impressive one. Even two or three kilometres away, one couldn’t miss the giant of liquid-flames emerged from the Asphodel Sea.

“**YOU HAD A CLAIM AND YOU SQUANDERED IT**!” The Goddess had changed her appearance to a midnight-armoured hoplite woman whose silhouette seemed to devour the few lights of the Underworld. “**I AM THE GREATEST RIVER OF HELL! THIS SEA IS MINE TO CONQUER**!”

“Oh, Gods...” Luke didn’t know who had spoken, but he or she was right.

An axe of red flame and a spear of utter blackness crossed, and the clash of divine weapons’ sound arrived to their ears a second later, explosive and promising nothing but death.

“Nothing is going to be the same again after what we’ve done,” Styx had been right on at least that: whoever inherited the Throne of the Underworld, they weren’t going to ignore what Jackson had ordered. Dams destroyed were certainly bad enough, but engineering a battle with the two most powerful river deities of the Hells, beings who were feared long before their births? “I hope you have a good plan to get us out of here alive, Jackson.”

“Don’t worry, Louis, my plan is perfection incarnate! No one is going to see it coming!”

The blonde son of Hermes could already feel the next headache coming.

“Before I forget,” the group of heroes, reinforced by two Hellhounds, and who would see joined by a Minotaur running towards them, “who is going to win between Phlegethon and Nyx?”

“My loyal heroic lieutenant,” the black-haired boy who had joyously proclaimed himself a villain declared, “I haven’t the faintest idea who will win...assuming one will manage to repel completely the other Hell River. But that’s the point of this entire Quest, no? Finding out what happens when Fate’s threads are no longer there to bind us...”

Luke Castellan shivered, and he wasn’t the only one.

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The crossing of the empty riverbed was for once uneventful.

Uneventful apart from the fact Perseus Jackson complained endlessly how unfair it was they were forced to leave Cerberus behind.

Apparently, the ‘poor’ three-headed dog had been given the order to guard the bridge, and the compulsion was so strong that being in ruins or not, Cerberus would continue to guard it.

“I am going to sue the Lord of the Underworld for mistreatment of his employees and animals...” the son of Poseidon promised.

“Sue in front of which tribunal?” Drew raised a dubitative eyebrow. “In case you forgot, Jackson, the only court a God as powerful as the Dark One will listen to is one including Olympians. And they aren’t exactly your best friends...”

“It’s a question of principle!”

“And honestly, since the Gods of the Underworld are unable to rule, it can’t be their fault that they didn’t care about their three-headed canine.” The daughter of Aphrodite reasoned.

“Error! The former Underworld administration has failed to care about one of their most devoted servants for centuries! Did you see how Cerberus was happy at being scrubbed and petted? I can assure you, if he received such treatment once every couple of years from his master, he wouldn’t have welcomed me like he did!”

Zoë the Hellhound loudly barked as if she wanted to confirm Jackson’s arguments. Which was ridiculous, of course, because the Hellhounds weren’t intelligent to understand human conversations...weren’t they?

For the sake of her sanity, the pretty Demigoddess decided to change the subject.

“Do you have any idea how we are going to beat a daughter of Hades in the very heart of the Underworld? Because like with Cerberus, I don’t think Charmspeak is going to do it...”

“Oh, it won’t,” Perseus answered promptly. “To do what she did, our chief opponent must have a will of iron. It’s best to assume Charmspeak can serve as a short distraction, but to assume it will seriously inconvenience her or force her to submit to one’s will is sheer folly.”

“So...the plan?”

“All in good time, Daisy, all in good time! First, we have to deal with a little problem!”

“A little problem?”

The time to climb up out of the muddy riverbed, all the while ignoring the garbage and the shrieking souls everywhere, and the white-armoured Demigoddess understood what their leader had referred to.

The Hades Fortress was waiting for them, its gates incredibly close...there had to be one kilometre between them and the first stairs of black marble which led to them, maximum.

And the majority of this respectable amount of flat terrain was covered in skeletons armed for war.

There had to be thousands, no, tens of thousands of them.

“Great,” Ethan Nakamura said, his dark humour evident to all. “It seems the Lightning Thief had a few contingencies in case one managed to cross the Styx.”

“Which is a good trait to have,” Perseus Jackson nodded vigorously and as far as she could judge...proudly. “We need more worthy opponents like her! I am tempted to swear my eternal friendship to her immediately if she arrives in the next seconds!”

Fortunately for all of the Demigods’ mental sanity, no one teleported or arrived from nowhere.

They were alone...in front of an immense army of the dead.

“Unless I slept too much during my history lessons,” Dakota began, “these are the Legionnaires and troops of General Belisarius, Emperor Justinian’s favourite General.”

Drew’s knowledge of ancient Roman history – or history at all – sucked, but the scowls on Ethan and Luke’s face told her it was very bad news.

“And they somehow found modern guns in the last millennia.” Clarisse La Rue added, in Drew’s opinion, unnecessarily. “I see ten, no twelve artillery guns, and all of the Legionnaires have rifles, plus one machine gun per platoon.”

“And a lot of the ammunition vehicles are full of Stygian Iron bullets,” Luke’s declaration decreased morale even further. “We can safely assume all of the personal weapons have Demigod-killer bullets ready to be fired.”

“And the golden shields?” Annabeth called out. “I think those are sacred mirrors casting back spells to their senders!”

Lou Ellen, who had begun to smirk, suddenly looked ill. In all fairness, Drew didn’t want to eat a Hellfire spell in her face, not with the power the sorceress’ power magnified by the Curse of Achilles.

“We must find another way,” Dakota McDonald spoke after emptying for the third time his flask.

“There isn’t another way.” Jake Mason brayed. And for once, his donkey-transformed mouth rang with the truth.

The skeletons were turned towards them, an army ready to eliminate all those who came too close to Hades’ seat of power, but there were everywhere around it. Everywhere were the hellish landscape allowed it, there were skeletons armed to the teeth waiting to kill them.

“Maybe if I learn another spell...” The daughter of Hecate began...and stopped speaking, as in a thunderous sound, the skeletons took a step forwards. And then another.

The terrible army of death marched forwards, and the first guns began to fire...the explosions were too far to be frightening, but in a few minutes, they would be in range...

And Perseus Jackson burst into laughter.

For a second, Drew feared the son of Poseidon had lost completely his mind.

“My friend asked me once,” the black-haired mad boy drew his sword before sheathing it once again. “What was the point of standing on a battlefield alone, watching death arrive?”

The explosions came closer, Underworld earth being propelled and columns of smoke arriving from every direction.

“And I told him: twenty thousand men march to end me. They will break, because they are in my way. Watch, diplomat, and learn.”

The Demigod advanced, ignoring the bullets and some nasty sorcery being thrown by skeleton sorcerers.

“I am Perseus Jackson,” he laughed, “Tyrant of the Underworld. And I say my **Rule** extends to even the stalactites of the Underworld ceiling. Come, servants of the Lightning Thief. The Age of Wonders is not dead yet. *Not while I breathe*.”

There was a moment of silence.

The earthquake came a second after it, and it was like Hell itself was shaken to its foundations.

And then the stalactites began to fall. Red Lightning struck the skeletons by the thousands.

The earth and the air of the Underworld became pools of devastation where their enemies were destroyed in group of several hundred every second.

For the first time this hour, Drew wondered if Jackson had not bathed in the Styx...but no, he hadn’t, Styx wouldn’t have allowed him to...

The skeleton army was incredibly powerful.

It took less than five minutes for Jackson’s spell or whatever he did to destroy it to the last undead warrior.

And when he turned towards them, the madman was grinning.

“Treacherous and heroic lieutenants of the Suicide Squad, I have arrived to a conclusion.” The Minotaur threw him a banner with a trident and a grinning skull, and the son of Poseidon caught it in flight without looking at it. “I AM INVINCIBLE! MWHAHAHAHA!”

**31 May 2006, Hades Fortress, the Underworld**

After the tens of thousands of skeletons the sorceress and Jackson had destroyed between themselves today, the last guards and the gates they were ordered to defend didn’t last long.

And their demises were...not pretty to watch.

“Clarisse. It’s your turn to shine.”

“About time!” The daughter of Ares growled, and threw herself against the gates, her spear shrouded in crimson light.

The doors of Hades’ palace were big, tall, incredibly massive, and all that stuff.

Clarisse went through them like they had been built in the same material as the potteries were.

“BLOOD FOR THE WAR GOD!”

“No, no, no!” Jackson of course had to intervene with his damnable grin. “It’s ‘Bones for the War God’, the skeletons have no blood to shed, Clarisse!”

“BONES FOR THE WAR GOD!”

Jake closed his eyes for a few seconds, as the skeletons were certainly their enemies, but what Clarisse was doing in the breach she had just created was just....gratuitous violence.

Alas when he reopened his eyes, the son of Hephaestus discovered most of the Suicide Squad had joined the destructive melee and were proceeding to destroy the defenders of the fortress’ entrance hall...and they were not shy demolishing most of the decoration along with the skeleton warriors. Vases were used as blunt instruments to pulverise skulls. Ceremonial weapons were used in very practical and un-ceremonial ways. Statues fell upon the bone-made protectors commanded to shield them from raids and rampages.

At last, which was to say after three or four minutes, the battle ceased, by virtue of the Questers not having eliminated all their undead opponents.

“The courtesies are being forgotten in the Underworld!” the son of Poseidon chuckled, finishing the dismembering of a skeleton with a large sceptre-mass which didn’t belong to him. “We weren’t even proposed refreshments before this skirmish!”

“Jackson, they are trying to kill us...”

“My unfaithful and useless donkey lieutenant, trying to kill someone is not going to give you a pass for your poor manners!”

Jake gritted his teeth.

“I am not useless!”

“You’re staying out of the fights, and all your contributions so far are to bray and complain loudly,” the son of Poseidon began to...steal several of the guns and the Stygian Iron ammunition while speaking. “I expected to see more of a son of God of Smiths and Forges, really...”

“How do you want me to wield my machine gun with hooves?”

Disinterested green eyes turned towards him.

“I already saw the machine gun, Junior.” The insane Demigod paused before yawning. “Boring.”

“Excuse me?” It had taken him hundreds of hours to perfect his weapon and hundreds more to prepare seven different types of explosive ammunition!

“You heard me, Julian...or at least I hope you do, with your long and fluffy ears of donkey. Everyone has machine guns these days. Create something more original, by the Thunderous Imbecile’s Beard! We are in an age of unprecedented warfare where humans killed each other in the skies, on the seas, and across several continents! Many nations have nuclear bombs and intercontinental missiles! We have tanks and bombers, artificial intelligence and nuclear-powered submarines! And you, a teenage son of the Forge Lord of Olympus can do no better than a machine gun? If it’s not mediocrity, I don’t know what it is...”

“I will kill you for that Jackson.” The moment his father retransformed him back, he was going to murder this traitor...

“You will try. I give you points though for warning me of your totally unanticipated betrayal.” The leader of the ‘Suicide Squad’ turned his back upon him, and Jake gritted his teeth. As much as he wanted to throw a good kick to break this bastard’s spine, fear held back his gesture.

Jackson had destroyed a massive army of skeleton warriors *without* bathing in the Styx. If the treacherous son of Poseidon wanted to kill him, Jake would die...and he didn’t want to be transferred to another section of Hell trapped in this cursed donkey body.

“Right, this monologue was incredibly satisfying, but we have plenty of things to do. To the Treasure Room, Suicide Squad!”

“To the Throne Room, you mean,” Annabeth tried to correct him.

“I know what I said, Amanda! Don’t you know the first rule about repaying the discourtesies, oh Great Owlishness?”

“Don’t call me that! I will soon hold dominion over all spiders!”

“Pillage then burn.”Jackson continued, ignoring her – insane – rambling. “The Throne Room will wait. I must check first if the Treasure Room of the Rich One is able to justify his reputation of trillionaire!”

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To answer the question everyone aware of the Olympians’ existence likely asked himself or herself, yes, Hades was worthy of his ‘Rich One’ title.

Like Uncle Scrooge in the comics, Hades possessed a giant vault filled with gold. Well, not just gold bullion: some place had to be made for the silver, bronze, platinum, and other precious metals’ ingots.

Yes, unlike Scrooge’s vault, everything was meticulously and neatly arranged, the metal ingots forming piles which were several meters-high, the rubies, diamonds, and priceless jewels were presented in several collections. There were series of inestimable paintings and artworks magically levitating above this wealth. There was an entire library worth of centuries-old manuscripts and each one was certainly the last copy in existence. There were ancient treasures like weapons, vases, crowns, sceptres, ancient Roman eagles of the Old Legions, silverware...and if she wanted to describe everything, Miranda would still be there when she died of old age.

How could she tell that when she wasn’t in the vault itself? Simple! Apparently, Hades had a dark sense of humour. The God of the Underworld had installed many, many TV screens before the corridors leading to the vaults where he guarded his wealth. Therefore the Demigods were granted what was almost certainly a partial view of the Treasure Vaults of Hades and the phenomenal fortune waiting for any thief audacious enough to dare stealing from the Rich One.

Unfortunately, the treasures of the House of Hades weren’t the only things the technology of the twenty-first century showed. Since labyrinths didn’t fall unto his supervision, the eldest brother of Zeus and Poseidon had decided upon an obstacle course, and he had spared no expense to protect his vaults.

There were lasers able to cut a man in two at the first wrong move. There were poison-filled rooms where a single breath would earn you a long, very long agony. There were underwater challenges where the ‘water’ was acid and fishes making piranhas like tender puppies waited to feed on the unwanted visitors.

“Let’s see the good side...” Luke’s eyes were disappointment incarnate. After all, loyal or not to Olympus, this ‘obstacle course’ was like the ultimate challenge. “The Lightning Thief wasn’t able to empty the vaults before we arrived.”

“What a relief.” Miranda commented sarcastically.

“In fact, it is truly one,” Perseus Jackson commented. “Think about it. With several months of preparations, we ‘only’ had to face several armies of skeletons, Cerberus, Achilles, a River Goddess, and a few other monsters like the Kraken. Now imagine what one competent schemer could do with the keys of the Underworld treasury...”

Miranda grimaced.

“You have a point.”

“Of course, I have!” The son of Poseidon exclaimed. “And if I had a year or two to lose I would try to defeat this succession of obstacles and test my cleverness against the God and the engineers who built this challenge. Alas, we don’t have the time.”

“Yeah, and our supplies would run out,” Dakota pointed out, looking sadly at his empty flask. “Sooner than later,” the son of Bacchus added morosely.

“We have plenty of Eleutherian Wine, my drunken lieutenant,” the Roman Demigod shook his head violently, his face pale and his limbs shaking. “Ah well. I’ve come, I’ve seen, and I’ve decided it’s not worth the trouble. Let’s go.”

“So fast? It isn’t like you Jackson to abandon at the first obstacle?”

“Tell me, oh my heroic lieutenant...in the unlikely case you reach the vault alive and uninjured...how are you going to transport the treasures on your way back?”

Luke Castellan opened his mouth...and closed it.

“Besides, I’m pretty sure that the moment one enters the vault, all the doors which are so nicely wide open right now will close until a certain God commands them to open again.” Jackson snorted. “It’s what I would do.”

“I don’t know what is the most frightening in that affair: for the Rich One to be that much a sadist, or for you to be able to predict his moves...”

“Don’t worry, my treacherous lieutenant! Sometimes I frighten myself if I am not careful...”

Miranda rolled her eyes. This was not reassuring at all.

“The Throne Room?” The daughter of Demeter rhetorically asked.

“The Throne Room,” Jackson approved. “It’s time to get some answers from the Lightning Thief.”

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The ex-Tyrant could freely admit the headquarters of the Underworld were a disappointment in a lot of aspects. Not the ‘I guard well my treasures’ part, this was just good sense, but everything else.

Despite reaching the throne room, Hades was not present, and neither was the Lightning Thief.

“Fortunately, there is a Goddess,” the Hydrokinesis master said cheekily to the other Demigods and Demigoddesses present. “Otherwise I would fear we have entered the wrong castle.”

“Did you play too many video games in your childhood?” of course, his treacherous lieutenant had to voice an outrageous question or two, otherwise he wouldn’t be his treacherous lieutenant...

“Why would I play those games when I already fight or negotiate with mythological beings on a daily basis?” He replied, honestly puzzled. “This matter aside, don’t you think the local decorator abused of red and black? Honestly, lighter colours are-“

“**Demigods. Stop ignoring me or face the consequences**.”

The young teenager – though he was mentally far, far older than that – snickered.

“And what would those consequences will be?” The green-eyed villain walked calmly on the red-carpet, vivid scarlet line in a sea of darkness. “The Erinyes are petrified.” He waved at the ‘remarkable’ statues of three dangerous women with whips, spikes and BDSM equipment which were leaning against the left hall with plenty of ‘authentic’ stone skeletons. “Your husband is absent. Most of your loyal armies are guarding the exits and the frontiers of the Underworld, unaware the betrayal has come from within. Styx and the other River Gods and Goddesses have betrayed you. And your own divine essence is trapped in this golden cage, where the power of seasons is siphoned away and dispersed across the world in order to prevent the Olympians from getting suspicious.”

His long tirade was sufficient to arrive before the small prison without breaking his pace, the Suicide Squad following slowly behind him.

“Err...Jackson, maybe you shouldn’t...”

“So tell me, Lady Persephone...what consequences should I be worried about?”

Persephone was beautiful, of course. Despite the cage forcing her to take a two metres-tall appearance instead of the most ‘normal’ dimensions of a Goddess of her power, despite being a prisoner, the Goddess looked like she was about to give a royal audience...or more likely go dancing in a night club, as her dress revealed a lot of cleavage, and her light brown skin and her brown eyes put together with her light dark brown hair gave her a very seductive vibe.

Perseus wasn’t fooled, obviously. The Gods – and the Goddesses – could take the appearances they wanted when they wanted to convince mortals to accomplish their will.

“**One day, Perseus Jackson**,” the Goddess declared coldly, “**you will return here to be punished. And on that day, the sentence will be long and dolorous**!”

“Why does everyone want to punish me? I am proclaiming my eternal friendship to everyone I meet! By the way, do you want to be my friend, oh Queen of the Underworld?”

If she had not been trapped in this large cage of divine-empowered metal, the leader of the Suicide Squad had no doubt Hades’ wife would have incinerated him on the spot.

“Jackson, please...please stop antagonising the Goddess...please.”

“Fine, fine, my drunken lieutenant.” It was best to keep several jokes for the end of the Quest, anyway. As unpleasant as it was to stare directly in Persephone’s eyes, Perseus forced himself to do it. “I presume there was someone else helping Styx.”

“**How do you...yes, my husband’s bastard found several allies**.” Persephone admitted. “**We were taken by surprise. By the Ancient Laws, no deity should have entered the Underworld without our permission, but her claim is based on the blood of my husband. Styx was already inside, and facilitated the invasion. I was unable to identify the other traitor before we were captured, however. He or she hid his or her true essence under a cloak and an armour of Celestial Bronze**.”

“It was an Olympian,” Perseus feigned to be bored. “If Hades didn’t participate in the theft, someone had to open the doors for the Lightning Thief at Olympus and only the twelve members of the Council have that kind of power.”

It wasn’t his father; the Old Man of the Seas would not have let him take this Quest, since his presence was guaranteed to disrupt most of his plans.

It wasn’t Zeus; the imbecile had not enough cunning in his divine essence to plan for such an ambitious scheme.

Unfortunately, that left ten other Gods and Goddesses, and most of them were unknown factors from his perspective.

“Jackson, do you realise the kind of accusations you are making?” Nightshade asked.

“I am merely saying the truth,” he replied, “I have not heard the Queen of the Underworld interrupting me to proclaim I am wrong.”

“**He isn’t wrong**,” the dark brown-haired Goddess of Spring and the Underworld nodded, “**and I have a feeling you know what my husband’s bastard intends to do**.”

“Usurpation.”

This was the only thing which made sense. Otherwise the rituals of Caligula and Julia Drusilla wouldn’t have been tolerated. The efforts of Pasiphaë to control the Labyrinth would have been reported to Olympus, because if the Council was blind, any respectable Underworld Lord or Lady should be able to notice their plots.

“The Lightning Thief has a claim, since she’s his illegitimate daughter. She has a tool...an altar knife, in the form of the Master Bolt, symbol of power of Thunder and the Sky. Styx supports her, and she has spread stories of usurpation in the Labyrinth, where the Olympians missed them until it was too late. So there is a story and patterns to support her actions, along with divine support.”

Seriously, if the Gods were not...Gods, Perseus would have already been able to make them fall from their thrones. For all their power, they weren’t really subtle or capable of impressive conspiracies. What a potential of betrayals and plots wasted...

“The only thing I’m missing is where this ambitious thief went with her greatest prisoner,” the son of Poseidon inspected the cage, impressed by the sum of work which had gone inside this prison for deities. “Patterns and symbols are important, so if there was a ritual to prepare, I would have expected it to take place here.”

“**You underestimate the ambition of this cursed child**,” Persephone said darkly. “**She wants to be more than the Goddess of Hell. She wants to be the Absolute Mistress of the Underworld and everything beneath the Earth. Do you understand what I am saying, Perseus Jackson**?”

“I do.” The Demigod swallowed. “She’s at the old temple above the pit giving access to Tartarus.”

“**Precisely**,” the wife of the God of the Underworld confirmed his guess. “**Most of the skeletons she bound to her will have done nothing but digging and rebuilding there since the Winter Solstice to make sure the site is an acceptable ritual altar**.”

“And when is this ritual supposed to begin?” The son of Nemesis asked grimly.

From one of the rare windows giving a view to outside, a massive red thunderbolt shrieked and fell upon the hellish plains far, far away.

Somehow, the twelve-years-old Demigod didn’t believe it was a coincidence.

“It will begin tonight at midnight. Am I wrong?”

“**No. The bastard girl came this morning to move the prison of my husband. She taunted me. She said everything was ready and the ritual would be complete by the Summer Solstice**.”

Yes, yes it would. Assuming Bianca di Angelo had a good plan to drain a God of his divine essence and incorporate it into her body without dying horribly – which she certainly did, if she had bathed in the Styx – twenty-one days sounded like a reasonable amount of time, not too precipitated, but not too slow either, to accomplish a ritual of usurpation.

By the Summer Solstice, Zeus and his band of sycophants would declare war. Only they would realise their monumental mistake when a new Titaness-Goddess rose from the Underworld to fight them. Idly, he wondered which other entity the daughter of Hades wanted to eviscerate besides her father. An Elder Giant, perhaps? The anti-Hades certainly would be a good fit, take the power of the Rich One and the being conceived by Gaia to oppose him...not that it mattered too much.

“I suppose I am going to be forced to stop her, then.” As interesting as the plan was, Perseus had the feeling the Lightning Thief was not someone he could just swear his eternal friendship to and hope for the best. “Your help in this endeavour will be appreciated, Queen of Hell.”

“**This is a prison of Orichalcum, Perseus Jackson**,” Persephone hotly retorted. “**I can’t**-“

The son of Poseidon threw a vial against the golden divine metal. The effect was...*corrosive*, pardon the pun. Not enough to destroy the bars of the divine jail outright, but if Persephone hammered it for several hours...

“**How**?” At least until his death, the ex-Tyrant would be able to boast he had been able to leave a Goddess speechless.

“The Styx waters,” he replied simply, “I filled a vial when I pushed our sorceress in it. The Oceanid isn’t as clever as she believes.”

Then he began to climb up the red stairs leading to the two enormous thrones. And the more he approached them, the more the impression of *wrongness* intensified.

“**Reveal**,” Perseus ordered.

The air shivered and rippled...and in the next couple of seconds an infernal archway materialised.

It was made entirely of skulls whose dead orbits burned in shining red and malevolent lights. Someone had a flair for the classics...

“Suicide Squad, what are you waiting for? We have a symbol of power to claim back, a God to save, a war to avoid...all that stuff. Plus becoming richer than the wealthiest human billionaire.”

“Nice to hear where your priorities are,” Dakota McDonald complained.

“I am what I am...” and he wasn’t going to apologise.

It was at this instant that Perseus noticed someone had carved letters in the throne of Hades.

Damn, the Demigoddess had no respect for-

Perseus froze, for when he read the first words, the language was not English, Greek, Latin, or any of the dialect used in the Underworld or above it. It wasn’t a language he’d heard in this life.

It was Miezan. It was a language of his previous life, one he’d thought there would be no return to.

Worse, the words had not been unknown to him before.

Originally, they had been uttered by Scheherazade the Seer.

*Who reigns up high?*

*A dead man’s sigh*

*What sleeps below?*

*A crown of woe*

*That is the Tower*

*Learn and Cower*

“This,” the Demigod who had once been named Kairos Theodosian muttered, “is not part of my plan.”

**Author’s note**: The Great Quest will continue in chapter 8, tentatively titled *Ritual of the Damned*.

The other links were the story is available:

ww w .alternate history forum/ threads/ an-impractical-guide-to-godhood-a-percy-jackson-x-a-practical-guide-to-godhood-crossover .513032/

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