**Chapter 24**

**Return to Hell**

*There are a few simple things to understand about the Underworld, the Hades, the Realm of the Dead, Hell, or whatever designation you happen to choose to use in a normal conversation.*

*It is not that difficult to go there.*

*You just have to die.*

*Naturally, if you’re still alive, visiting the realm of the Rich One counts as a Great Quest. And it is one which has all the chances to kill you properly despite your best attempts to evade that fate.*

*Demigod or God, it is good to remember that eating or drinking the sustenance of the dead is sufficient to stop you from ever returning to the realm of the living.*

*Still, some legendary heroes did it.*

*Heracles of course did it. So did Orpheus, Aeneas, Theseus, Houdini, and a few others. Odysseus came near the Gates, so he doesn’t figure among them, but it was nonetheless a major exploit of his.*

*It rarely gave these heroes the rewards and the hopes which had led them to take this hyper-dangerous Quest. Orpheus is perhaps the most-well known cautionary tale about it, and the man was the best musician of his time.*

*This never stopped many Demigods from trying to repeat the exploits of the past, unfortunately. Every generation, according to Chiron, there is someone who believes the impossible can be achieved.*

*A very tiny majority sometimes manage to crawl back to New Byzantium over the centuries. Most of the time, their numbers when they come back are a small fraction of the initial Questers who left.*

*And those are the lucky survivors. Nine times out of ten, the heroes don’t get away with it. Hades was and still is a rather benevolent deity. But if you somehow decide for some stupid reason to challenge Cerberus to a wrestling game, insult the Erinyes, or play a contest of endurance with undead skeleton musicians, you probably deserve everything you receive, including your long tortures in the Fields of Punishment.*

*However, all those heroes had one thing in common: they went to the Underworld and back...once.*

*The Suicide Squad, in a mere two Great Quests, had already established a new record.*

*We travelled across the Realm of the Dead twice as a Quester group, though in a few cases, there were members who did it only once.*

*Little did we know that by the time of the Dark Solstice of 2006, our insane leader had zero intention to stop mid-way his insane attempts in that direction.*

*And yes, he would get away with it.*

*Again.*

Extract from the Chapter 13 of *Seas of Madness: Chronicles of the Suicide Squad Volume 2* by Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena

**21 December 2006, Council Room, Olympus**

There were days where Athena wondered why she was the Strategos of Olympus, since quite clearly everything she said was outright forgotten in mere seconds. And this was when her words weren’t ignored in the first place.

“**This is treason! The damnable spawn saw a manifestation of Earth and didn’t inform us**!”

For those who wondered, no, Poseidon wasn’t present today.

It was a good thing, for otherwise this meeting would have collapsed into a mess of childish insults and dangerous quarrelling.

Alas, it wasn’t like the current situation was that much better.

“**As I warned you before**,” the Goddess of Wisdom told her genitor, “**if you pass laws that result in the death of all mortals who met the shadow of a Primordial, it ends every time in the Demigods lying to us or going traitor**.”

Athena wasn’t a fool. Most of the Demigods and Demigoddesses of the current generation supported Olympus because the Gods were the best option of all choices they had available. The Titans would re-establish a reign of savagery and slavery should they get in charge. And it was a gentle fate compared to what the Elder Giants wanted to accomplish.

But when the choice was between dying immediately and dying a little later, their children always took the latter.

“**Besides**,” Dionysus intervened with a smirk, “**if we have to punish Perseus Jackson, we also have to punish Uncle**.”

Lightning danced in the Council Room, and most of the Gods and Goddesses present didn’t have the courage to speak in front of the wrath of the Master of Olympus.

“**He should have informed us**!” The imperious thunder was filled with offended pride, to the point she felt comfortable saying that the correct sentence was ‘he should have informed ME!’.

And as if things couldn’t get any worse, the Lord of Lightning had an ally in this case.

“**He lied to us all**!” Demeter was in a very bad mood, yes. “**He dared lying when my beautiful daughter was imbued with the taint of the Earth! And he did nothing to stop it! My poor daughter**!”

Oh, it was her ‘poor daughter’ again? This was an impressive turnaround, even by Olympian standards.

It was only a few days ago that the Goddess of Agriculture was bemoaning the shopaholic tendencies of Persephone, and how she wished Hades to take care of all the ruinous expense of handling the prodigal Goddess of Spring.

“**From what I understand, she is still your daughter**,” Athena retorted calmly, naturally receiving a terrible glare for telling the truth, and creeping vines among other plants began to encircle her Throne. “**The Earth did not break the existing parental bonds; she added another bond on top of the existing ones**. **I can feel it from where we stand**.”

If the previous parental bonds had been so weak they would break apart in a few years’ time, maybe Demeter should ask herself the question how badly Zeus and she had screwed up the education of their child.

To be honest, Athena was far more worried that she could feel *Persephone’s power* rising from here. Yes, there was now Khione’s power to challenge it and elevate it to new heights as the black flames of the Underworld clashed with the frost of Boreas’ daughter.

It was nevertheless not reassuring at all. Before the battle of Alcyoneus’ Fall in the Sea of Monsters, the War Goddess felt sure she could have destroyed Persephone in one minute, and there would have been many seconds to gloat left.

Today? Even outside of the Underworld, Athena really didn’t like her chances. She had experience, flawless tactics, and many other advantages, but those could have been compensated for given enough time.

“**Silence! The taint must be removed**!” Athena went silent, but not because she felt like obeying her ‘Aunt’. It was just that she didn’t fancy wasting her words to explain the obvious.

Now that they felt the power growing into the depths of the Underworld, it was way, way too late to stop anything. There was no high-quality source of information telling them what was happening in Hades’ realm, but Iris had been able to perceive two ‘Hell Eggs’ ready to hatch from where she watched.

Stopping something as unprecedented would have required the Olympians’ presence in the first place, and since Hades hadn’t invited them, it was impossible.

The armies of Olympus would need to invade the Underworld to force Hades to obey their whims, and that meant war, at a time when there were only eight Olympians in the Council Room.

“**This would be madness**,” Dionysus replied. “**I speak as a specialist, in that regard. Dear Uncle decided to keep it close to his chest, and deal with the problem on his own. I suppose we should honour his wish**.”

“**So your suggestion is to do absolutely nothing**?” Zeus spoke in an enraged voice.

The God of Wine poured himself a new cup with a shrug.

And even the Master of Olympus seemed to understand the message: what could they realistically do, besides waiting? Save Hermes in his persona as the God of Speed, every invasion attempt of the Underworld would arrive near Hades’ Palace long after the Solstice was over.

“**We can punish the Suicide Squad**!” Athena didn’t need to glance in Artemis’ direction to know the eyes of the Moon Huntress were filled with joy. “**We finally have the evidence we need of Perseus Jackson’s vile treachery! I demand his death**!”

Dionysus yawned loudly.

Predictably, Artemis glared at him.

“**Are you going to tell me I can’t kill your favourite**?” the younger-looking Goddess snarled.

“**Perish the thought**,” the God of Madness said cheerfully. “**I was just going to remark that when everything went dark and communications were disrupted, he was busy surrendering to Circe. So yes, go ahead, rush to C.C’s Spa and Resort and try to kill him. I will warn you however, I am close to certain that Hecate is present to visit her favourite daughter**.”

The gritting of the silver teeth was incredibly impressive, it had to be said.

Impressive, but not surprising.

Every member of the Council knew how murderous Artemis could be when she was on a rampage. But there were limits to it. Declaring war to Hecate was definitely one. The Titaness of Magic was really, really the kind of enemy you didn’t want to make.

Of course, if Artemis wanted all her Huntresses to be transformed into cute white rabbits, there would be many persons to make a TV series about it...

“**Maybe**,” Apollo cleared his throat. “**It would be a good idea to not act in a hasty manner**?”

The Master Bolt didn’t strike, and the mini-eruptions of lightning coming from it calmed down.

Athena wasn’t going to say she was reassured.

They were already at war, and it hadn’t gone well so far. The last thing they needed was to open more fronts against even more powerful enemies.

“**I support that motion**,” the Goddess of Wisdom spoke.

The question was how many Gods and Goddesses would once the dust settled.

**21 December 2006, Dante Carceri, the Underworld**

The explosion, even by divine standards, was quite destructive.

At a guess, most of what his subjects had called the ‘Brimstone and Blizzard Peninsula’ had been wiped out in a few seconds.

It was a very good thing that the shades of the dead had been evacuated days beforehand, for they would have been dispersed for centuries if they had stayed there.

There were still going to be a lot of souls scattered across his realm.

This was absolutely unavoidable, when the titanic shockwave had shaken the Realm of the Living along with his.

Mortal minds would be unable to describe the scale of the devastation in mere words. The peninsula and the craters where the Eggs had waited to hatch had been pulverised, razed, burned down, frozen to temperatures near absolute zero, and then rebuilt into something else...before being destroyed all over again. There were massive rocks as big as skyscrapers rained fire upon the Underworld. Tusk-shaped stalagmites followed. An ocean of burning ashes which could have killed a continent transformed temporarily everything into a realm of grey.

Then the apocalyptical changes returned.

It was the beating heart of the volcanoes and the lungs of ice storms. It was the beauty of the rarest gemstones coupled with the lethality of the mega-hurricanes. It was a shockwave which could and did topple palaces and citadels.

It was the primal scream of two Goddesses’ rebirths.

Even with his realm closed off to all visitors, Hades, son of Rhea, was sure that everyone on Olympus had heard it.

With his powers keeping most of the spies away, they may have not seen the kilometres-wide wings of frost rising over the devastation however. They might not perceive the Siren Goddess bathing into new lakes of magma and singing praises to Gaea.

They certainly heard the roar of challenge from Khione, it must be acknowledged. No matter who or what Zeus was busy fornicating with, even his little brother could not fail to hear *that*.

Flames and ice danced from the Styx Sea to the mountainous areas of the Fields of Punishment.

Divine voices spoke, calling his name.

Hades waited patiently, not uttering a single word.

He felt the aggressive search of the two reborn Goddesses, but their powers failed to find him.

As always, the Helm of Darkness granted him complete and total invisibility. No mortal or divine sense could perceive him.

And as the ‘fear mode’ wasn’t activated, it wasn’t even possible to begin to search for a zone where terror had overwhelmed his subject’s senses.

They were impatient. The search didn’t last long.

There was a new storm of ice and fire, and it moved towards his castle and seat of residence.

Hades waited.

For many minutes, the Underworld seemed to fall back into an atmosphere of calm and eternal slumber. Or as much calm and slumber as could be imagined when they had been near ground zero of world-shaking explosions. There were riots everywhere in the Fields of Punishments, and the Erinyes and all his servants were maiming and carving apart millions of souls to make sure a semblance of order stayed enforced. On the shores of the Styx Sea, uncountable souls decided throw themselves to the non-existent mercy of the Goddess, in attempts to avoid the magma and the ice.

Hades had never find the term ‘Hell’ amusing, but right now, he had to admit his realm met a certain definition of the mortals’ imagination.

There was now a glacier moving like a slow avalanche towards the Phlegethon River. As for the magma river, it moved in the opposite direction and would generate quite an impressive cataclysm when it would clash with the Lethe in a few hours.

Hades waited.

His patience was hardly tested.

By the time he was examining the changes brought upon the closest parts of the Field of Punishments, the ground rumbled again. There was a terrible earthquake, which made him naturally wince. Poseidon had been insufferable during his youth when he played with *that* power, if Persephone had the Underworld equivalent of it-

His thoughts were brutally interrupted as an enormous spear of flames shredded the roof of what had been his seat of residence. Two seconds later, one of the walls utterly collapsed and an immense quantity of snow was expelled outside.

Then the explosion came.

Many statues and skeletons were shattered with it, to use a charming understatement.

Hades shrugged and removed the Helm of Darkness, as his millennium-old residence burned and froze.

“**I wanted to build a new one anyway**.” The vaults under it would stay intact, and that was the only important part which needed to remain undamaged.

Yes, he had taken the precaution to remove all power from his Throne before the Solstice.

As the Lord of Hell had that thought, the subordinate he waited for teleported in front of him.

Hypnos rolled over and tried to extinguish the fires burning his red robes as best as he could before saluting. For once, the God of Sleep looked perfectly alert and with no trace of exhaustion in his eyes.

“**We were so close, my Lord**.” The white-haired God declared while giving a look of panic towards the castle...or at least what had been seconds ago a perfectly good castle. “**They almost fell into your trap**!”

Hades raised an eyebrow.

“**I think it’s the number of pages of your abdication document which raised their suspicions. Especially those of the Ice Goddess**.”

“**What a pity**,” the Lord of all Subterranean Riches mused, “**if they had dared put a signature anywhere near page three, I would have been the power behind the throne, while ensuring they had full responsibility of the entire realm’s bureaucracy, and an oath-bound interdiction to delegate it to their subordinates**.”

“**Yes, Lord**,” Hypnos licked his lips in visible sign of fear, “**it was a plan worthy of your genius. Err...wouldn’t it be wise to don again your Helm, my Lord?**”

Half of the upper castle detonated to accompany these legendary words. An entire part of the outer wall melted before being transmutated into gold.

“**Go, Hypnos**.”

The God of Sleep didn’t need more incitation to flee as fast as his powers allowed him to.

Hades uttered a word, and around him, the prison he had erected for Dante changed, becoming an arena that was solidity incarnate. It was, once you went past the sublime decorations, a massive block of black rock that had been a pain to shape into its current form. It was as difficult to damage from the inside as it was from the outside. Sometimes, insolent immortals had been tortured here and failed to escape before Olympus orders their release.

For what was to come, it may not be enough.

Hades jumped and let his natural agility do the rest.

Soon enough, his feet touched the onyx-coloured sand of the arena.

This was when Persephone and Khione suddenly stopped their rampage, suddenly realising he was no longer hiding.

The air screamed and suddenly they materialised in front of him.

Khione hadn’t changed much her appearance or her clothes’ choice. It was still very much the seduction of frost. Of course, the scales-theme in blue and white was rather new, and so were the reptilian eyes. But even the Demigods of New Byzantium would have been able to recognise her effortlessly.

The changes of Persephone were far more significant and unlike the wife he had shared so long the company with.

She was no longer blonde or black-haired; everything had turned into a mane of magma red. Her skin had turned obsidian, a colour she had most of the time absolutely refused to ever indulge in, Queen of Hell or not.

After further examination, the skin wasn’t just black; Persephone had changed her appearance so that most of her body was made of black diamonds. Gemstones of utter darkness and fire covered her arms.

And a longer tale would have to wait, for she hissed very threateningly.

“**Did you think it funny to take advice from Perseus Jackson**?”

“**Now, now**,” Hades bared his teeth. “**There is no need to be that angry**.” He smirked. “**After all, it almost worked**.”

“**Almost**,” Khione agreed. “**You won this battle. We will let you keep the rule of the Underworld**.”

“**How kind of you**,” he replied courteously.

“**But**,” and the slim hand turned into a draconic claw where a crystal of pure ice swirled with impressive power, “**as your wives, we can be the power behind the throne, much like you tried to do with us**.”

“**Yes,**” Hades nodded, before introducing a correction of his own. “**Assuming, of course, I consent. In Hera’s absence, there is no one to force me to a marriage under conditions I don’t like**.”

Persephone’s and Khione’s expressions, naturally, turned extremely carnivorous hearing these words.

The two of them conjured spears. And behind them, their Champions came.

The daughter of Aphrodite had been transformed into a mermaid of silver metal, one who could swim into the rivers of magma her Goddess had just created. As for the Champions of Ice, they were now hybrids of human and Drakon, retaining a human-size, but tails, claws and talons had replaced the human limbs. And of course, their maws exhaled the power of the frost in its most hellish temperatures.

Hades slammed his own weapon against the onyx-coloured arena, and his reinforcements revealed themselves.

“**Achilles, I believe you recognise your former lover, the last holder of Briseis’ Belt. Don’t let yourself charmed this time, or I will find an appropriate punishment for you**. **Hector, please deal with the half-alive Drakonic Champion. Aeneas, you will make sure the other one is kept at bay**.”

“**YES, LORD**!”

“**This is going to be like this, is it**?” Khione smiled, her blue eyes betraying her excitement, not that she tried that hard to hide it.

“**I am the Lord of the Underworld, child**!” Hades proclaimed. “**Your exploits in the Realm of the Living have earned you my attention and this fight. Now prove that you are worthy of the power the Earth Mother imbued your divine essences with**!”

“**Gladly**,” Persephone sang, “**I have a lot of aggression to pay you back with, former husband of mine, for all the credit cards you deprived me of**!”

Well, at least he was sure this was Persephone, not an impostor.

“**TO ME LEGIONS OF DEATH**!”

**21 December 2006, Super-Mega Armoured Yacht *Inevitable Doom*, somewhere in the Sea of Monsters**

It was somewhat a relief to have the super-yacht no longer in submarine mode.

Every minute the *Inevitable Doom* had been under the waves had been oppressive and nerve-wracking.

It should have been a relief to be back under the stars, free to breathe an air which had not been recycled, and it was.

But now that there was no worry about a missile or an underwater trap sending the submersible yacht into the unexplored abysses of the Sea of Monsters, there were many things a Goddess trapped into a mortal body could think of.

Many unpleasant things.

There were some facts that might be only the fruit of her imagination.

But some of the thoughts were not born of despair.

Chief above them all was how useless she was.

Yes, she, Hera, former Queen of the Gods, was useless.

When the time had come to choose Demigods for an assault against a sorceress’ island, Jackson’s argument to not include her had been that the owner of the spa would kill her given the chance, and that as such she wasn’t worth the trouble.

The word had not been spoken, but she had heard it nonetheless: useless.

Everything that had made a Goddess was denied to her.

When it came to military skills, she was judged to be inferior to a trio of penguins.

That was how bad it was.

She wanted to scream, to make sure the world reminded her name.

Above all, she wanted to curse Zeus. She wanted to incinerate all the nymphs and other mortal women he had no doubt slept with since her downfall.

But she couldn’t.

She could still call herself Hera, but the name was all that was left to her.

The name and the legacy.

They all blamed her.

Seriously, it was completely unfair. Take Heracles, or Hercules as he wanted to be called. Yes, she had tried to kill the bastard, as any faithful wife would, when she became aware of her husband’s infidelities.

And yes, she had cursed him several times.

But for some reason, every time Hercules killed a wife or took a woman by force, it was suddenly Hera’s fault. The Hesperides was abandoned by the ‘hero’ even after he was oath-bound to take care of her! Let’s blame Hera! The cousin is angry and declares himself two more Trials are going to added as punishment? Let’s blame Hera! Hebe doesn’t want to share the same temple as her husband? Let’s blame Hera!

These days, she really understood why Nemesis was so eager to answer when someone prayed to her. It was way too easy to wish revenge on someone, especially when the Gods and the Goddesses had done the exact same things you did, caused more bloodshed and atrocities you did, and in the end escaped without any punishment, despite multiple broken oaths and betrayals.

If only she was Hera the Goddess, and not the pathetic ‘Antigone Barbara’ that the son of Poseidon had called her as an insult-

The footsteps she heard forced her to turn.

Hera frowned.

There were supposed to be only two Half-Bloods besides her on the Inevitable Doom: the daughter of Ares and the son of Nemesis.

Anne Bonny wasn’t supposed to be here.

The pirate daughter of Demeter had stayed at the Forge of All Perils, or so went the rumours...but apparently the rumours had been wrong.

“Where were you hiding?” Hera asked, trying to mask her surprise.

“There’s a cabin near the engines no one ever opens.” The former Guardian of a Titan’s Prison answered easily. “I was there all the time since we left the Forge.”

“And...” call it divine intuition or female intuition, but suddenly Hera was quite suspicious. “*Why* were you hiding in the first place?”

“Honestly? It was done for deniability reasons.” Anne Bonney gave her a smile that frightened her. “Officially, I am not here. Officially, Perseus Jackson didn’t give me an order. Officially, Ethan Nakamura and Clarisse La Rue are unaware of my presence.”

She had been wrong; it wasn’t suspicious, it was very bad...for her.

“Why the secrecy?” Hera asked defiantly. “You want to kill me? You don’t need to do in secret, I’m sure my ex-husband will make you immortal if you happen to present him my head! He might even give you a laurel crown and more gifts you will be able to open in a century!”

The Demigoddess chose to wave her large tricorn hat in mockery.

“Oh, it isn’t about killing you. It is about volunteering for a mission.”

“I didn’t volunteer.”

“Yes, it is exactly the point I was making.” The sarcasm gave her the urge to slap Anne Bonny. Unfortunately, the Demigoddess had a pirate’s sabre. “But it is no problem, you know? By a strange coincidence, I learned from Jackson you were one of the loudest voices to propose I became the Eternal Guardian of this Titan’s Prison. Unless the son of the Seas was wrong about that minor detail?”

Hera gritted her teeth as memories of old flooded her head.

“Artemis and your own mother were not exactly shy joining their voices to mine.” She grumbled.

“Good! In that case, you won’t object to test a brand-new weapon? One which you are uniquely suited for, I might add.”

Hera didn’t answer and tried to run.

She barely managed to make ten steps before a massive net closed upon her.

“For your personal information, Perseus Jackson called the weapon the ‘Schrödinger Catapult’. I have no idea what it does, but you should find the password really illuminating, oh Hera. It asks the question ‘is the cat alive?’”

There was a flash, white flames engulfed her, and then Hera felt herself flying.

**21 December 2006, Ogygia**

It took twenty minutes for the next part of his plan to be implemented. Obviously, that amount of time was used productively for intense negotiations with Calypso.

Perseus had just ended that part of the plan when Hera slammed right in the middle of the beach.

“Well, that part of the plan went off perfectly! The Paradox has been solved, the cat is alive!”

Thanks to him, science was about to make a giant leap forwards! If the public hadn’t been so limited, the son of Poseidon would have started a monologue here and there.

“A friend of yours?” Calypso asked inquisitively.

Perseus smiled.

“Let me present you the former Goddess Hera,” the former Tyrant said theatrically. “Once Queen of the Gods, now very much mortal, because she is a treacherous viper, and her husband is very much the hypocritical and unfaithful type.”

The Titaness’ expression changed instantly. Where amusement had shined, it was replaced by vindictiveness. The eyes began to burn in vicious flames.

“As the oaths just negotiated made clear, you can’t kill her.”

This was very much NOT a wasteful statement, given that a second later the right hand of Calypso was tightening around Hera’s throat and raising her half a metre above the sands with no sign of strain.

“Did you have fun all those millennia, you malicious cow?” The daughter of Tethys growled. “All these times I was assured at the end of the Titanomachy that my siblings and my mother could visit me, and in the end, you betrayed your word at the first opportunity!”

Hera croaked, but was unable to articulate a single word.

In the end, her tormentor threw her against a miniature dune in a nonchalant manner before her face turned purple.

“Jackson! Stop her!”

“I already did.” He remarked. “She can’t maim you permanently or kill you.”

He let a few seconds pass before uttering the next terrible words.

“No matter how much you deserve it.”

The former Queen of the Gods crawled on the perfect golden sands for a few seconds before shakily standing on her legs again.

“I didn’t-“

“You weren’t the only one who participated in Calypso’s punishment, I will give you that.” Perseus said shrugging. “But the ugly details are definitely yours, Hera. Seriously, making her fall in love with whoever is thrown by the waves on the beach of Ogygia? That would be impressively cruel in the first place. And then you chose to make it worse, as the Curse would only choose married men who would stay faithful to their wives.”

“The Goddess of Love supported it too! I couldn’t have done it without her!”

“The more she speaks,” Calypso grinned ferociously, “the more I have an urge to carve open her belly and bathe in her blood. Can I-“

“No.” As much as she deserved it, Hera’s life wouldn’t end with such an easy outcome.

He turned back to face the ex-Goddess.

“Honestly, it was already bad by that point, and then you decided to turn the awful into something...something I don’t really have the words for. You scattered and weakened Calypso so much she was only a shadow of herself; and you still had the gall to declare that if one of the companions you brought here accepted to take Calypso using the magical raft, she would lose her immortality and all her remaining powers.”

Hera had the good grace to look incredibly guilty.

As well she should. This sheer amount of cruelty had done more than a thousand insults to convince many parties to fight to the death rather than accepting Olympian rule ever again. Because seriously, when the terms of surrender were so bad, why bother laying down your weapons accepting your defeat? It was better to meet your end on a battlefield or continue resisting in the shadows, no matter how futile the defiance.

“In a previous life, it was said there had to be a Monster, a Trial, and a Pivot.” Perseus continued. “From what I’ve been made aware so far, you went for the Triple-Curse instead. This isn’t just cruelty for cruelty’s sake, it is inefficient.”

And the Olympians had been happy to do it. It was a very short-sighted move; Oceanus may not care about the Titaness of Drakons since she wasn’t his daughter, but the moment Atlas was freed from his own torment, it would be a time-ticking bomb for Zeus and his lackeys.

Fortunately or unfortunately for Olympus, Perseus had arrived first to Ogygia.

“We included monsters too in case someone tried to break the prison-“

Hera stopped speaking, for suddenly the night of Calypso’s prison was suddenly darker.

The lights of the stars began to dim as dark clouds were summoned above the island.

The bioluminescent insects fled.

The enchanted lights faltered and were extinguished.

“I did sense them before,” the auburn-haired Titaness spoke with clear interest. “This is the first time their services are needed, though. You can take pride in that, Demigod.”

Son of Poseidon or not, there was no way you could miss the loud hooting in the distance. And the noise made by hundreds of wings rushing to kill all interlopers was not that discreet either.

“How many of them were they in the beginning?” The former Tyrant asked curiously.

“Oh, only four or five,” Calypso replied. “Of course, they had a lot of time to expand their numbers in the last millennia.”

“Jackson, those are-“

“I know what they are, Hera. They are Strixes. In short and easy words to sum-up, they are giant onyx-black owl monsters, and they are particularly feared by all Demigods and Demigoddesses, for if you kill one by blade or any conventional weapon, you are on the end of a permanent curse. And naturally to keep things interesting, two more Strixes will arrive to avenge their fallen sibling. Oh, and did I mention their talons can paralyse you?”

Since the security measures of Ogygia could plunge it into darkness the moment intruders were detected, using the Strixes was rather well-done. Now that the sources of light were almost gone, it was incredibly difficult to see the monsters in the first place, never mind fighting them.

“Jackson, do something!”

“Hera, I’m waiting for the right time to swear to them my eternal friendship!”

“ARE YOU MAD?” She shrieked.

Calypso chuckled near him.

“While I approve your spirit, Perseus Jackson, the cow has a point. The Strixes are in general sent to drink the blood of the Gods’ enemies, eat the flesh of mortals and Demigods, and of course disembowel them. I don’t remember if it was in that particular order, though.”

Perseus took a step to his right, and the first Strix to make a diving attack missed him largely.

“You have a point, oh Titaness.” The leader of the Suicide Squad drew a box from his pocket. “Fortunately, as Hera and yourself know very well, the Strixes have a massive weakness. It is one which explains why they don’t rule the night and why Demigods struck by their death-curses are rather rare these days.”

“They are incredibly vulnerable to sunlight, yes.” Calypso agreed. “But with the cloudy night which was just summoned to help them in their killing mission, you would need Apollo to come to help you. There are far too many Strixes for you to triumph otherwise.”

“It won’t be necessary.” Perseus prepared himself mentally, and opened the tiny enchanted box he had kept in his pocket so far. Quickly, he plunged his left hand inside...and the pain was incredible, as he had feared.

But pain had never stopped him, and being disembowelled by the Strixes would result in far worse suffering anyway.

“My treacherous lieutenants thought I was content to only disable the targeting array of Circe’s super-weapon,” the explanation helped him focus and ignore the pain, “but I had another reason. The *Eye of the Helios* is no mere super-laser, you see. It also contained some of the Sun Titan’s original fire. And now...I have stolen it. Close your eyes. LET THERE BE LIGHT!”

Even with the eyelids in the way, the radiance was almost too much.

It was as if he had ten thousand lamps right next to his face.

The pain grew near-unbearable.

But what was pain when you listened to hundreds, maybe thousands, of Strixes shrieking in agony?

Perseus left the enchanted box open for three more seconds, and then closed it.

When his vision was more or returned to normal, Ogygia was covered in Strixes’ corpses...and the eyes of the Titaness watched him with an impressed expression.

“Jackson...” Hera coughed, and looked ready to collapse. “You are the craziest Demigod...ever. Look at your hand!”

“It is severely burned, yes.” Fortunately, Calypso was already casting a spell, and soon the pain receded. His hand was not looking good, but the terrible burns were contained. In time, they would be healed. The Strixes would not.

“I hope you realise that holding the Flames of the Sun did far more than that,” the Titaness commented drily. “Your soul absorbed a fraction of Helios’ flames, Demigod. Not a large amount, you would have been incinerated if it was the case. But-“

“There’s a reason why I was the one to do it...Calypso. I bathed in the blood of the Primordial Ice Drakon, and I was a son of the Seas in the first place.”

And even then, it had almost not been enough.

The power of the Titans, no matter how diminished, was really no joke. A few more seconds, and his hand would have been roasted.

“But this dealt with the Monster part of the Quest.” The Strixes could have vigorously supported him, if only they had not been exterminated to the last. “Now let’s speak of the Trial and the Pivot.”

**21 December 2006, C.C’s Spa and Resort**

Defeat.

It wasn’t a word the Suicide Squad was used to. After a successful Great Quest across the Labyrinth and the Underworld, they had believed they could handle the Sea of Monsters.

This battle had proven them that this confidence had been a dangerous lie.

Perseus had found a way to earn a *strategic* win, but from a tactical perspective, as the children of Athena would say, the Suicide Squad had been hammered, and very badly at that.

Lou Ellen tried not to grimace at the sheer number of injuries which had been inflicted in a few hours.

Leo Valdez looked like a mummy now. According to the Amazon Healer she asked, he was very lucky to be alive; Demigods’ bodies weren’t supposed to be capable of handling the absorption of a Destroyer’s reactor. He was a few seconds away from self-combustion before the water jets cooled him down.

All the four remaining Huntresses had broken arms or legs. It didn’t sound so bad like that, but Artemis’ blessings made them far more resistant than ‘normal’ Demigoddesses. If more evidence was needed to confirm it, the other members of the force which had tried to attack the submarine base were severely injured. Well, everyone but the Minotaur. Asterius had easily recovered and was now waiting arms crossed for Perseus to return.

Otherwise, aside from the son of Minos, the only souls to be relatively in good condition were Richard Grant and the two penguins. But Rico Kowalski and Julian Skipper were trapped in modified bird cages, unlike the rest of the Suicide Squad, who had been given their hospital beds.

That was all the good news she could see so far looking at this spectacle of defeat and tragedy. Elvis Knight was tied up to various medical devices; the Centurion would likely take weeks to be able to walk again, no matter how much divine food would help in the mean time.

And he was alone.

Lou Ellen didn’t ask where the golden penguin Fergus Cook and the Gallowborne were. There was no need to. Circe had oath-bound to respect the Achaia Conventions; if the Gallowborne Legionnaires and the others weren’t here, it was because they were dead.

And the least said about the last two Demigoddesses, the better.

Bianca di Angelo’s skin had taken a certain sluggish appearance, for lack of a better description. And she was impaled with four enormous giant arrows, all of them brimming with sorcerous power. If she had not bathed into the Styx, the Lightning Thief would likely be on her way to face her father again.

And if you thought that it was bad, the fate of Miranda Gardiner was worse. At least with Bianca, Lou Ellen was sure that Circe was responsible. For the daughter of Demeter, there was only Jackson to blame.

Miranda was...possessed. There was no other word for it. For the moment, her changes were limited to her eyes, which had turned reptilian. But for a child of Hecate, there was no hiding the malevolent aura shrouding her body.

It said quite something that the Demigoddess had been trapped into a room separated from the rest by near-transparent walls, and even then, Circe had covered her in chains and other forms of magical sealing.

And the chains were shaking every second. That was how powerful the Drakonic essence possessing Miranda was.

Perseus had better have a solution, otherwise he was going to be slapped for this abomination of a plan he had unleashed.

As most of the Suicide Squad survivors were asleep, trying to recover, or healed by the Amazon personnel, there wasn’t a lot of doubt who she had to speak to.

“That was a rough night,” Richard Grant said as a greeting.

“Yes, it was.” The daughter of Hecate answered. “Is there any chance more survivors will arrive?”

“Dakota may still be alive,” the son of Hercules shrugged.

“May?”

“Jackson’s plan somehow involved trapping the son of Bacchus into a room with a Goddess of Lesbian Love, a bunch of Amazons, many Legionnaires brainwashed by your half-sister, and a fountain of ‘Mystery Wine’.”

Lou Ellen huffed and clicked her tongue.

“I’m really going to have to speak with Perseus about his sense of humour.”

“Yes, do that.” Richard snarked, though his tone betrayed his exhaustion. “And you manage to contact him, ask him for a plan so that Dakota leave this VIP Suite alive. When the orgy will end, there will be hell to pay.”

“To be fair, it worked in Caligula’s Circus Maximus and the Palace of the Underworld.”

“And one day it won’t.” The words were said fatalistically. “And on that day, we will never find all the missing parts, no matter how long we will search for them.”

As much as she tried, Lou Ellen couldn’t exactly argue the pessimism of the Roman Demigod was unfounded.

It went to be said that in the next seconds, the silence was not comforting at all.

“I have to give it to him; he was right about a lot of things. We were not ready to attack Forge MP-42.”

Obviously, there was no need to ask who the ‘he’ was.

“His craziness is too often a mask Perseus dons because he loves that,” the daughter of Hecate spoke seriously. “But his plans are based on solid foundations.”

“I know that now.” The muscular Demigod grunted. “Still, we’re all arriving at our limits. The Drakon was bad, but at least we could defeat the army of overgrown iguanas. The Triumvirate fleet was bad, but they could make mistakes like everyone, and when surprised, we could expect them to make many others. But here...the troops defending this island didn’t make that many mistakes. And since they were more powerful in the first place...”

“Yes.” What else was there to say? “Our enemies are learning. And they have immortals and far larger resources on their side.”

“Yes. I don’t know why Jackson stole flames from the lighthouse, or if the Goddess became aware of it-“

“**I WILL TURN HIM INTO A GUINEA PIG THE MOMENT HE TOUCHES THE SACRED GROUND OF MY SPA**!”

Lou Ellen sighed. That was Circe’s voice yes, in case someone hadn’t caught the memo.

“You can safely make the hypothesis she knows now.” The blonde Demigoddess rolled her eyes. “Perseus will have to surrender immediately when he returns, because I think she’s in a murderous mood.”

“Ah yes,” Richard grunted. “And return from where?”

“I thought that was evident. It is a place where there is no light to guide you to your destination.”

**21 December 2006, Ogygia**

Hera had wondered from the moment she landed why Jackson had bothered invading the Spa of this bitch of Circe if he had already a means to send her here directly.

The answer now was limpid.

The infernal son of Poseidon had made a detour to steal some of *Helios’ old flames*!

And it had worked.

It had burned his hand horribly despite every protection he had, but it worked. In the ephemeral light triggered by the flames of the faded Titan, you could easily count hundreds of Strixes’ corpses.

“Jackson...” telling him he was mad would be extremely redundant. And in the end, there was a more important point to make. And it was one which was essential for her survival. “I recognise your...ah...audacious strategy, but surely it must have alerted Olympus something very wrong is occurring on Ogygia.”

“Yes, of course. I think we have five minutes top before the God of Travellers is sent in our direction, no matter how distracting other important events can be for the Council.”

“Of course,” Hera said it in a grim voice, but it seemed to amuse the mad Demigod. “It would be better for us to not be here when the God of Thieves or whoever is sent arrives.”

“Assuredly,” the leader of the Suicide Squad had a lot of fun with her being the dark, it went without saying.

“There is no exit.” She tried to continue without showing her annoyance. “The magical raft is the only way to get out of Ogygia, and in the unlikely case we could summon it, it would leave us at the mercy of Olympus the moment we got past the limits of the island’s enchantments.”

Given what Perseus had already engineered during this Great Quest, Hera had no doubt that the Master Bolt strikes would come first, and the questions later.

“Using the raft would result in striping me of my immortality and my powers,” the extremely dangerous Titaness scowled.

“Technically, from I was able to perceive, using any conventional or unconventional means of transport to leave Ogygia would do the same to you.” Perseus intervened. “I can’t test it, but I’m close to certain it is the case. And it would likely strip me of a few advantages I gained over the years too.”

Hera opened wide her eyes. If it was the case, she didn’t remember it...but then it hadn’t been her power which had separated Ogygia from the rest of the world.

Perseus Jackson chuckled. This wasn’t reassuring at all.

“I thought it was evident. There is a boundary, and the Olympians made a contingency plan to be really, really sure that Lady Calypso never escaped. It is a different problem than the one we faced to enter the Sea of Monsters, but the problem remains the same.”

Hera gaped, absolutely speechless.

“No, NO! You don’t mean-“

“Yes, we have to return to Hell. One more time.”

Yes, this was exactly what she had feared.

“This is...audacious.” Calypso commented, showing no emotion at all on her young visage. “And I doubt the Master of the Underworld is going to be amused by the trespassing.”

“Bah, my Lord Uncle owes me a few favours, and he’s really busy right now.”

Listening to that, you might almost think a certain Demigod spoke of pocket money, not of a dramatic entrance into the Underworld...again.

“I suppose there is a plan beyond that.” The Mistress of Ogygia was not commanding, but there was strength beneath that voice, and it gave Hera very bad vibes.

“Of course,” Perseus shrugged. “One hour ago, I confirmed my suspicions: Circe has an active Labyrinth Gate on her Spa Island. I think that by negotiating well, it shouldn’t be too difficult to convince her immortal half-sister to let us cross the realm of the Labyrinth. Therefore the only real challenge is to enter Hell and find a Labyrinth Gate like we used last time. We evade the welcoming committee, and we escape the charming Fields of the Underworld.”

This raised a few disturbing questions.

But the biggest one flashed into her mind with the fury of a super-weapon.

How many steps ahead from everyone was Perseus Jackson?

“I am extremely unhappy to know that the Olympians had a contingency ready to throw me into the Underworld in case I was seriously at risk of escaping.” Calypso admitted.

“In the interest to be accurate, I don’t think they informed my Lord Uncle of that slight alteration to your current accommodations.” Perseus’ smile was an ugly, vicious thing. “But rest assured I will inform them as soon as I can write him a letter of apologies. Oh, and please go pack everything you need, Lady Calypso. I don’t think returning will be an option.”

The Titaness bowed and rushed to her house, and damn, she was fast by the standards of Demigoddesses!

“Now let’s see...”

Perseus drew a sword Hera had no problem to recognise.

It was the ugly slab of Stygian Iron shaped into a sword that he had wielded in the Underworld.

“I am Perseus Jackson, Tyrant of the Suicide Squad,” the madman laughed, “and I say my **Rule** extends to the Hell Gates I have passed and will enter. Hear me, servants of Olympus. The Age of Folly has just begun! **REND**!”

He swung his sword once.

But once was all that was needed.

A black fissure opened up in the golden sands, swallowing many corpses of Strixes in a voracious manner, and the more corpses which disappeared, the larger the breach was.

Soon there was a long and instable rectangular pit of darkness absorbing sand and monster parts. It was something that shouldn’t exist. It seemed to repel the light of the stars above their heads.

Hera couldn’t believe it, but it was there. And before her eyes, stairs of black granite formed.

“Extremely impressive.”

Hera almost jumped, for in her amazement, she had forgotten Calypso.

But the Titaness was already back.

She was back...but everything about her had changed.

It was still the same being, but the chiton had been discarded and black armour with crimson stripes she’d hoped to never see again had replaced it. Yes, the Glyphs of destruction burned on this protection, and the helmet was shaped like a Drakonic skull.

Calypso almost looked like Athena...but an Athena who revelled in destruction and carnage unending.

“The compliment is appreciated.” Perseus nodded, and this time there was no cheekiness. He didn’t return the sword of Stygian Iron to its scabbard, however.

And then the sound Hera had hoped to not hear so soon arrived.

The sky above Ogygia began to rumble.

The thunder clouds were coming.

“It seems they’ve realised something wrong is happening to their special prison.” The son of Poseidon stepped forwards. “Fortunately, they’re a bit too late. Shall we, Ladies?”

This wasn’t like they had a lot of choice, right?

Things were definitely bad when going to Hell in a very mortal body was the best option you had!

**21 December 2006, somewhere in Hell**

There was a proverb the humans of this world had made about plans never surviving contact with the enemy.

In this case, the plan didn’t manage to reach that beautiful threshold.

Perseus grimaced as his magical compass began to imitate a spinning-top as soon as he opened it.

“We have a problem.”

“Is it possible your device is broken?”

“No.” The former Tyrant shook his head. “I put very solid markers on the Labyrinth Gate we used in a previous adventure. The red arrow of my compass should indicate me the direction of the closest Labyrinth Gate and how many kilometres separate us from it. For ‘my device’, as you put it, to not function, the markers must have faded. That should be impossible, not enough time has passed since our First Great Quest.”

“Does it mean we are lost?” Of course Hera had to ask that...

“There is a single tunnel, Hera. We have only two directions to choose from, and one was flooded with liquid fire. I wouldn’t say we are lost; we are extremely close to the Styx Sea, unless for some reason someone built an aqueduct to transport the dangerous substance elsewhere.”

But no, it wasn’t good news.

The next minutes confirmed it. When arriving in larger caverns, the ground began to spat fire balls, and monsters came in droves to kill them.

And this was not the old and stupid skeletons they had vanquished during their first journey across the Underworld. Several of the skeletons were jumping and launching gusts of air blades. Other brought bags of very powerful fire-based grenades. All seemed to have the capacity to dig and emplace traps.

Plus one had to account for the hellish warmth of the magma.

It was really, really hot in these tunnels and caverns. Calypso and he were sweating hard.

Hera...Hera was on the brink of exhaustion. They had to find an exit soon.

Unfortunately, there weren’t exactly a lot of alternatives offered. In fact, there were none. The tunnels between each cavern were carved into a sort of black granite that Perseus had not the power to break through. There was no offer to ‘turn right’ or ‘turn left’.

It was in the last cavern they visited that he got his clue of why they were imposed those trials.

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“Jackson! What does that mean?”

“It means that my Rend wasn’t precise enough, or Fate wants to kill me. Or both.” The male Demigod replied seriously. “For whatever reason, we are once again in a future layer of what the Underworld could be, much like the one we crossed when we entered the Sea of Monsters.”

“This is going to cause some challenges.” Calypso declared neutrally.

Yes, yes it was. The biggest ‘challenge’ being that unless they returned to Ogygia, there was no gate this time to reach the correct ‘when’. This time, only a single breach had been made. He hadn’t the power to do more on his own, anyway.

“We must press on.” It wasn’t like they had a choice, given that the alternative was Zeus incinerating them for the sake of his world-sized ego.

Three more caverns waited for them, some of them introducing boulder-shaped monsters which towered over the melee before falling in attempts to crush them under their monumental weights. There were parodies of Charon’s boats, which more than once led them to unwanted regattas over the boiling liquid-flames.

And all the while, the atmosphere around them was hot and oppressing. There was something terrible and dangerous watching them, Perseus was sure of it now.

Without Calypso, he wouldn’t have been able to progress so far. He had to defend Hera, and that was a weakness the monsters were prompt to notice and exploit. Fortunately, the former Titaness of Drakons was a storm of destruction in her own right. Between her spear and her shield, the hordes of Underworld monsters died in droves.

“There’s a stairs of bones.”

“Whoever did this, he had the sense of the spectacle,” the leader of the Suicide Squad said cheerfully, though he didn’t really feel it. “Let’s see where it leads us.”

But as soon as all six feet were on the stairs, an earthquake shook the cavern. In a couple of seconds, the ‘stairs’ began to change into a toboggan.

“I should be the only one allowed to do that!”

And then there was only enjoying the descent.

It was a session of gliding which lasted many, many minutes.

To his pleasant surprise, there weren’t many traps, like wrong turns that would send you into pits filled with metallic spikes or something unpleasant.

But when they reached the bottom, Perseus had to admit the architects didn’t really need that.

The toboggan spat them above a rather large island in an even bigger cavern than those they had left previously. The issue? It was entirely surrounded with lava.

And of course, there was no exit to get out of here...

A forceful hiss put these thoughts to halt.

“Oh, no,” Hera mumbled. “Oh, no...”

There were many more hisses, and then an enormous skeletal head came out of the inferno.

It was followed by metres of a skeleton that could only belong to a snake.

That would have been bad enough, but in short order, two more heads looking very much like the first arrived on the left and the right of the revealed monster.

“The Lernaean Hydra...or it is the Bone Underworld Hydra now?”

The terrible hiss from the three heads told him his tirade was not appreciated in the least.

“How do we kill it?” Calypso asked, with an avid expression on her face. Yes, rumours about her battle-lust hadn’t been exaggerated.

“We must crush the heads. Normally we should have burned them, but this time there’s no hope to achieve that; whoever made this arena gave it immunity to the magma and the rest of the flames.”

Of course, the Hydra could hear or sense what they were saying, and attacked.

This was when they realised that while the first head was spitting fire, the others had different attacks. One was the air-blast of the skeletons they had fought previously, except bigger and more devastating. And the other was disgorging skeletons and other monsters.

Calypso went on the attack. Her spear massacred all the monsters, and in a terrible onslaught, slew one head like it was nothing but a minor nuisance.

For a second, Perseus really believed they had a chance.

And then two heads surfaced out of the lava to replace their fallen ‘sister-head’.

From then everything went to hell, and it wasn’t a bad pun.

There were more and more Hydra heads, and the attacks came from every direction.

As he needed to protect the ex-Goddess, Perseus began to receive hits. Most of them weren’t powerful enough to go through his skin or inflict even minor damage, but they hurt and slowed him down. Oh, and they destroyed his armour too.

Whoever had designed this arena was a sadist of the highest order. There were now nine heads, and all had a different special attack. If Hercules had fought that monster, he would certainly have died, help or no help!

They were now fully on the defensive now. Even Calypso couldn’t go after the heads, not that it mattered much, since having an increase of the heads was very much something they didn’t need!

And suddenly, for no visible reason, the nine heads of the Hydra turned towards a single point and hissed in fury.

A heartbeat later, there was a ray of red and dark, and the first head exploded.

Then another was atomised, pulverised so much it became a rain of bone fragments.

And for the time, the ‘Bone Hydra’ didn’t regenerate.

What followed was a one-sided massacre. The newcomer was incredibly fast, and danced around the Hydra like he had done it thousands of times. The Hydra stood no chance.

In less than two minutes, the last skeletal head and part of the Hydra body disappeared into the magma flow, utterly defeated.

And the victorious party at last slowed down, allowing Perseus to see their saviour for the first time.

It was a young-looking teenager, with curious-looking heterochromatic eyes: one was black was the other was red. Since his clothes of red and black were insufficient to hide most of his chest, the son of Poseidon saw immediately that in terms of muscle, Grant was completely outmatched. Overall, aside from a few skulls and other familiar decorations of the Underworld, it wasn’t that strange. The most confusing part were the golden laurels upon his rather unkempt black hair. They shone with an energy which somehow resonated with Perseus’ body. But that was impossible, the former Tyrant had never seen-

“**Yo, Uncle**!” their young saviour said cheerfully, revealing that he wasn’t a young man, but rather a very young God. “**It’s been a while since we played ‘emergency measures’ together**!”

“I’m afraid this is the first time we meet, from my perspective,” Perseus admitted. It was better to admit the truth here and there, for once.

“**Oh come on, it’s me, Zagreus! We played in the Great Bazaar of**...” the young God paused, examining properly for the first time. Whatever he did search in him, he didn’t find it. “**Oh. This is one of your ‘Underworld intrusions’ of the past, right**?”

“I’m afraid so. We jumped into the wrong layer of the Underworld, it appears.” A few seconds were all it took to ‘taste’ the power of the young God. “You are Hades and Persephone’s son.”

And Zagreus was extremely powerful for such a young God. Granted, with a father like Hades, and now Persephone imbued with enough power to hold a seat on the Council of Olympus, it was a logical outcome, but-

“**Yes, and you were proclaimed ‘honorary uncle’ long ago. The fun we had when you did**-“

“**Zagreus, STOP! He’s from the past, you are not to reveal the future to him**!”

There was a flash and a sensation of absolute cold.

Perseus blinked.

When he was able to refocus again, a Goddess had joined Zagreus.

Anyone who could use his eyes would recognise the two were siblings.

The facial traits were majestic and had a terrible darkness in them.

Unlike her brother, however, one of her eyes was blue instead of red.

The weapons differed too. Zagreus had arrived wielding a long sword of red-black. The newcomer had a dagger and a miniature scythe cloaked in a shroud of blue snowflakes.

And if her brother’s hair were pure black, hers were the white of a pristine snow.

Add the information which had already been uttered, and Perseus could guess who she was.

“And your half-sister is the daughter of Khione, I suppose.”

“**I am**,” the young Goddess nodded. “**I am Melinoë, Princess of the Underworld. You are not supposed to be here, Uncle**.”

Ah! So he was honorary uncle for both in a certain future? This became better and better...

“I know.” He answered truthfully. “I’m searching the closest Labyrinth Gate to return to C.C’s Spa and Resort. If you would be so obliging as to lead me to it-“

“**No. You must be by our parents’ side**.”

Perseus, for the first time since he had entered the Underworld, chuckled.

“Dear Princess,” the Tyrant of the Suicide Squad began, “your parents are busy settling their differences before they agree upon which terms they want for their marriage vows. It is very much not the place I want to be near to. I am a strong Demigod, but we’re awfully squishy when Gods begin fighting seriously.”

“**And yet you took Hera in mortal form with you**.”

Khione’s daughter, unfortunately, had forgotten to be stupid. Though it must be said she also had knowledge of the future he lacked.

“Is my intervention going to be really necessary?”

“**Yes**,” Zagreus and Melinoë replied with a single voice.

Perseus turned his head to give a silent question to Calypso.

The daughter of Atlas grimaced.

“We can’t afford to fight many more battles like this one.”

The two young deities tried to hide it, but they had given a few admiring glances to Calypso when they thought he wasn’t watching.

It was funny that they ignored Hera, by comparison. Whatever happened in the future, it seemed the former Queen of the Gods was at best tolerated in the Underworld.

“Very well,” Perseus agreed, and Zagreus smiled like only a young friendly nephew would to his beloved ‘Uncle’. “But I need Cerberus, if I am to arrive in time.”

The son of Hades scratched his head in a very embarrassed manner.

“**Ah, I haven’t collected a bag of Satyr entrails today**...”

Sometimes later, Perseus would wonder what great evil the Satyrs did in the next years so that Cerberus felt happy to eat them regularly.

But it would have to wait.

There were more important things to worry about for now.

“CERBERUS! MY ETERNAL THREE-HEADED DOG FRIEND! IN EXCHANGE FOR LIMITED SERVICES ON YOUR PART, I PROMISE YOU A VIP SPA SESSION WITH PLENTY OF SHAMPOO AND A SMALL ARMY OF PEOPLE TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR SUPERB FUR!”

“WOOOOOF!”

And as if the good boy had been listening to this conversation, the great guardian of Hades’ realm materialised in the cavern, ready to play his part.

It didn’t escape his attention that Cerberus also barked in joy when Calypso caressed his left head.

“Run Cerberus!” The green-eyed Demigod commanded once the three had climbed on the back of the enormous three-headed dog. “Show us the meaning of haste!”

Cerberus obeyed, and then they had all to hold on for their very lives.

But they didn’t go so fast as to not hear the last words of Melinoë.

“**Mother was right, he was already crazy when he was mortal**...”

**21 December 2006, the Underworld**

For the first hour or so, the entire battle had not been so bad.

Sure, Jade had almost died three times.

She didn’t know who had offered this damned sniper rifle to Prince Hector, but the ex-Huntress would definitely murder him the moment she found out his name.

Unlike Achilles, who had thrown himself in an insane close-quarters fight with Drew, the Trojan Hero was happy to fire at her at incredible long distances, and so far, only the regeneration powers Khione had given her had made sure she survived.

It was nothing, of course, compared to the ‘marital affair’.

It had begun with Khione drowning the black arena into an ocean of ice, and it had gone downhill from there.

Now, she was the Champion of Khione, so she was supposed to say her Goddess wasn’t losing against Hades.

Unfortunately, the Goddess of Ice Drakons wasn’t winning either.

Somehow, Hades was always emerging unscathed from each terrible assault. Somehow, the King of Hell was always there, emerging from the shadows, his weapons bristling with dark power, ready to strike with an improbable angle.

And that was when he simply didn’t turn invisible and opened large pits under the Goddesses’ feet.

But it had been a reasonable battle. Or at least it had felt to her it was reasonable.

All of that completely ended when Tartarus began to stir.

Where there had been only servants of Persephone, Hades, or Khione fighting, the infernal Primordial of the Pit spat armies of monsters. And not just unimportant souls and a few thousand skeletons.

The onslaught had begun with immensely-tall Cyclops, and there were Hydras and Giants following behind them.

“Lady Khione-“ Jade began, only for Prince Hector interrupted immediately.

“Your Mistress and my Lord will try to calm the Pit!” The Trojan hero barked. “Focus on the monsters, we need to stop them from ravaging the Underworld!”

“Doing more damage, you mean,” the former Huntress growled before transforming once again into her full Drakonic form and unleashing an ice ray.

To her satisfaction, more than a thousand monsters were instantly wiped out.

The imminent threats dealt with, Jade returned to her mostly-human form.

In the mean time, the God and the Goddesses had stopped fighting, and were plunging their hands into some sort of black sludge.

It didn’t sound awesome to look at, but the sheer power spreading across the very fabric of the Underworld radiated like a million tendrils of shadow.

“Is it something which happens frequently?” Jade asked after using her bow to kill five Cyclops with as many arrows. “You know, since we are going to spend a lot of our time here, my comrades and I may want to be on alert for extraordinary stuff.”

“The Pit stirs once or twice every century,” Hector replied, his eyes cold and determined, each word accompanied by a deadly shot which annihilated several monsters. “But instances where it feels angry enough to teleport enough monsters here to overwhelm the first line of defences are far rarer. And most of this assault doesn’t feel like the Pit at all.”

“From where I’m looking, these are monsters reforming by the power of the Pit.”

“Yes. But the assault is far too well-organised. Oh, I don’t doubt the Pit gleefully vomited its children to cause trouble. But there is something behind it, a presence I don’t remember ever facing during my long career here...”

This was particularly worrying, because the Prince of Troy had been in service of Hades for more than two millennia at this point.

And the time three powerful immortals were taking to ‘calm’ the Pit and re-establish the power over this realm was not exactly something that made to reassure her mind either.

Jade fired ice arrows after ice arrows nonetheless.

No matter how many monsters the Pit could conjure, the fact was that they had just to kill them the old-fashioned way. For now, Drew had once again become a living weapon of blades and silver colour, and she was carving herself a path into the horde, with Achilles not far behind her. Many monsters killed themselves when the daughter of Aphrodite told them to; that was how powerful the Asian-looking Demigoddess had become.

The monster army simply had too little firepower, and the unfavourable balance worsened as more skeletons and other shades of the dead gathered by the hundreds of thousands, answering Hades’ call-to-arms.

And then it changed.

The first thing they heard was the roar.

Then it came out of the night like a nightmare.

It could be mistaken at first for a gigantic snake.

But it was not a snake.

“Drakon,” Jade spat in anger.

“A Lydian Drakon, to be precise,” Hector informed her. “Why the hatred, by the way? Your Mistress is the Goddess of Ice Drakons now.”

“I...I don’t know.” Jade admitted. Why was she feeling that way? “There is something wrong with this Drakon. I can’t tell you what, but it is something that angers me.”

“That’s interesting, but it can wait. Let’s kill it first-“

That was when the Drakon roared again and attacked. And as the first seconds made clear, the weapons, no matter how ancient or modern, simply had no effect against this kind of opponent. It seemed as it was made of shadows, and the arrows and bullets simply went across it without causing it any damage.

But when it unleashed a shockwave, both Drew and Achilles felt it. The pair was projected hundreds of metres away, alive, but definitely weakened by the attack.

The next minutes didn’t get any better.

The Drakon advanced slowly, but nothing seemed to capable of stopping it.

The lines of defences collapsed, and the Drakon acted as a spearhead for the rest of the Pit hordes. It was an unsubtle assault, but it consumed thousands of dead warriors with every second and it was coming straight for her Mistress and the two other immortals.

“I am going to transform it again.” Part of her felt the thrill of fighting such a dangerous opponent. The other part knew that it was going to be her true death this time, the demise which would bound her permanently to the Underworld. “With Jade as a Drakon too maybe we will able to slow it down-“

A loud and joyous canine bark interrupted her.

There was an enormous explosion, and the entire right flank of the Tartarus-born army was annihilated.

And as the dust and the dark ashes of the explosions temporarily faded away, Jade felt she had suddenly hallucinations.

*He* couldn’t be here.

That was just impossible, even by his standards.

That was just-

It had to be the exhaustion. Or maybe Tartarus had decided to release some gas inducing hallucinations?

“Prince Hector, I believe I’m cursed,” the former Huntress said.

“Because you’re seeing Perseus Jackson riding Cerberus with two of your companions?” the Trojan sighed. “Don’t worry, you are not crazy. I’m seeing them too.”

The army vomited by the Pit didn’t stand a chance. They had been flanked, and Cerberus was a massive engine of destruction which needed no help to destroy an entire army. Each head was breaking countless monsters faster than you could say it, trampling Hydras and Cyclops like they were nothing, and biting Giants which didn’t run away fast enough.

The Drakon turned, at last realising the danger posed by the arrival of these ‘reinforcements’.

It was too late.

Cerberus slammed into the unnatural Drakon, and once the Guardian of the Underworld’s three heads had something in their three maws, they didn’t let it go.

This was all two out of three riders of Cerberus needed.

There was a terrible shriek, and then suddenly a small object went flying...and a second later, the head of the terrible Lydian Drakon burned in golden flames.

It didn’t last long...but for a few seconds, the Underworld was illuminated by the flames of the Sun.

Jade didn’t know how it was possible, but she knew instinctively this was it.

The Lydian Drakon died, and the hordes of Tartarus disintegrated it.

The Champion of Khione began to run.

She was fast enough to arrive as a certain son of Poseidon’s feet touched the scarred and corpses-covered soil of the Underworld.

And of course, the moment he saw it was her, the mad Demigod grinned.

“Sorry, I’m late. But in my defence, I was preparing Cerberus for his annual visit to the spa, and a black cat crossed my path, so we had to take a detour. It may have involved stealing the sun, making some surrender promises, organising an escape attempt across time, and testing the emergency responses measures of a Hydra before enjoying a bonding session with my nephew and my niece.”

Yes, it was him. Would Khione be displeased if she tried to strangle him while nobody was looking?

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Calypso had to admit it; she was impressed by the calm Perseus Jackson showed when facing Hades and two other Goddesses. It took some guts to advance and salute immortals like you were old friends.

Well, it was that or the Demigod was completely insane.

The list of exploits accomplished since he had arrived on Ogygia was leading her to think the black-haired son of Poseidon was one of those souls who just wanted to set everything on fire and enjoy the chaos born of it.

“Lord Uncle.”

“**Nephew**.” Hades had changed, and not just because he had adopted a muscular and awe-inducing appearance today. His cadaveric face was nowhere in sight, and with two Goddesses by his side and a terrifying grin, one could almost have mistaken him for Zeus standing triumphant after a battle. “**Did you know I already have half a hundred letters from Olympus requesting your arrest and immediate transfer to the Council’s custody**?”

“No, Lord Uncle! It is a shocking development. I am as astonished as you are by this outcome!”

The daughter of Aphrodite – or at least the soul born as a daughter of Aphrodite – burst into laughter after that, and several dozen spectators of this improvised audience followed.

“**You are a scoundrel who loves nothing better than to enrage my little brother**,” Hades corrected. “**If you seriously intended to gain the good graces of the Master of Olympus, you would have been busy attacking Forge MP-42 as we speak. Breaking the chains of the God of Forges may have given you some support**.”

If these words had been supposed to put an apologetic expression on a Demigod’s face, they utterly failed. Perseus Jackson was clearly unrepentant.

“Come on, Lord Uncle. How was I supposed to attack Forge MP-42 and survive in the first place? I needed someone to make sure the odds are not equal to zero. I had to free *her*.”

This, in turn, guaranteed the eyes burning in black flames turned towards her quickly after that.

“**Lady Calypso**.” The son of Rhea saluted her.

“Lord Hades.”

“**My little brother wants you to return to your prison**.”

“I’d rather die,” the Titaness answered bluntly. “Did you know that your brother and his children had the gall to make me believe my mother and my siblings refused to visit me, while in reality the hypocrites-in-charge had forbidden it? And this despite the numerous oaths which were sworn at the end of the war we lost?”

“**I was aware, yes. But my opinion was not listened to. What do I know, after all? I am merely the jailor of many dead Titans and Elder Giants! What do I know of the bitterness and hatred many immortals feel when they are cheated out of the very blessings that should be theirs by birth, oath, and hard work**?”

Calypso wanted to say she was surprised, but honestly...she was not.

Zeus was exactly a less cruel version of his genitor; overthrowing Kronos had in that regard not changed much. And it apparently included needlessly antagonising all his siblings, no matter how powerful they were.

“**I will not force you to return to your prison**.” The God of the Underworld said after a brief period of silence. “**But if you return to the realm of the Living, know that your return will trigger a major war**.”

“My mother is already at war with Olympus.”

Hades sighed, shook his head, and turned to meet the eyes of the third member of their group.

“Hello, Hera.”

“Brother.” Zeus’ wife, predictably, did not close her mouth after the opening courtesies. “Are you satisfied now?”

“**I did not ask Zeus to deprive you of most of your divine essence**,” the Lord of the Dead replied. “**But I have to admit it did marvels for your humility, even if there are still a lot of improvements to wait for in that regard**.”

“I...I shouldn’t have helped the Lightning Thief. I was angry, but you were one of the few which did nothing to me and stayed faithful to his wife for seventy years. I shouldn’t have done what I did. I’m sorry, brother.”

“**I accept your apologies, sister**.” And then the Master of the Underworld Riches once more stared at Perseus Jackson.

The eyes burning black flames didn’t change, but a silent question was clearly asked.

“Your Lady Sister, Lord Uncle, is obviously trapped inside a mortal body. Yet for stupid reasons I can’t pretend to understand, Olympus failed to even assign a temporary replacement to the Domain of Marriages. The conclusion is thus simple and formidable: Hera here is still the Goddess who has to give her approval for divine unions!”

Many witnesses instantly stopped laughing. Expressions varied from mere surprise to complete astonishment.

Hades stared unflinchingly. The two Goddesses by his side were far more emotional. And the expressions they gave Hera were decidedly not friendly.

“**I am angry with my little brother. But not so angry as to challenge outright his edict and give enough power to my sister so she can storm the gates of Olympus and burn his favourite temple**.”

“I was not promising something so amusing, Lord Uncle,” though given the maniacal grin on his face, Calypso knew that if it had happened, Perseus Jackson would not have tried to stop it. “My solution was far more of the nature of compromise. Assuming you intend to marry those two lovely Ladies here, they have a few Mantles of Power that will be completely useless to them, as they will be staying in the Underworld with you. Lady Khione holds Winter and Lady Persephone Spring.”

Nothing more was said, but it instantly forced her to watch Perseus Jackson with a far more respectful eye. For how long had he been planning this?

The expression of Hades was different, but it appeared that like her, he had realised where it was leading.

“**Are you telling me, nephew, that you want to engineer a second Apotheosis of my sister, but this time as a Goddess of Seasons, with Marriages building the initial foundation**?”

There was definitely a few seconds where it felt that the time stopped for the Underworld and other planes of existence.

“Yes.” Perseus Jackson answered honestly.

“**Good. You have my blessing to do so**.”

“HADES!” An outraged ex-Goddess shouted.

“**This move has my support**,” the Goddess called Persephone smiled evilly, her red eyes burning in amusement. “**I don’t care about Spring anymore**.”

“**I can shed Winter**,” the icy beauty who turned her hair from black to pure white next to her mused. “**After all, Mantle or not, a new Goddess of Seasons will still need my help to freeze the mountains and open all the ski stations**!”

“You will owe me,” the grumble was very Hera-like, for once.

“**It seems we are all in agreement, then**.” Hades commented drily. “**If someone has an objection, I suppose it is now to speak, or forever hold your peace**.”

“***I OBJECT***.”

Calypso, for the first time in an eternity, felt fear.

All the lights of the Underworld flickered out.

The oppressive presence they had felt before in the tunnels was back, but far, far more powerful.

It was oppressive and yet familiar.

It was the obscurity and the monsters which were born into its depths.

It was the Night.

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There were things that you could fairly call ‘coincidences’.

If it happened once, as a rule, Perseus felt it could apply.

Two, though?

Forget it.

The intervention of two Primordials separated by only mere days and for the same Great Quest broke the very idea of coincidence.

It was very much deliberate.

And if they survived, he would have had to make permanent plans to account for Primordials’ interventions during his operations from now on.

The former Tyrant shivered, and his limbs began to shape in an uncontrollable fashion.

Yes, he was afraid.

According to the legends, the Primordial of Night sometimes fancied taking a humane appearance when she was in good spirits.

Perseus hoped this wasn’t true, because the Avatar advancing right now was not human at all.

It was the reason why you feared the Dark so much.

It was the nightmare which every child feared to hide under his or her bed.

It was a vaguely humanoid shape which had stolen several cold and distant stars from the firmament to add them to an immortal essence.

The further the Primordial’s Avatar, the more things were wrong. Where hands and feet should be, there were only lithe talons. The construct had traces of feminine influence, but it was twisted, inhuman. It levitated, and the long tentacles were in reality tendrils of night. And there was no face, but a thing shaped like a mask...

Perseus shook his head and looked away, before making sure Hera did the same. Just in time, by the way, the ex-Goddess was beginning to hyperventilate.

“Nyx,” Hades said in a resigned voice. “This is a private matter.”

“***It is not if you intend to tolerate the Light in your Domain***,” the Avatar of the Night answered in a voice that was the coming of darkness turned into sound. “***I could tolerate your future wives being reborn by Earth’s hand. I will not tolerate the Night being weakened here***.”

“**It is my realm, Nyx**.”

“***The Underworld is part of my Domain, Hades***.”

There was a shrieking sound, and half of the monuments visible in the distance imploded in a deflagration which shook Hell again, before suddenly transforming themselves into a rain of crystals.

It was bloody terrifying, when you know the infighting between several Gods had not managed to damage them before...

Perseus cleared his throat.

“With due respect, oh Lady of All Nights, there are no sun or moonlight here. Fire and Ice are only providing a tiny bit of illumination. Surely-“

The ocean of power engulfed everything. It was oily and black. It was his fears made manifest, it was-

It took him several seconds to realise he had been screaming and falling to his knees.

“**Nyx**,” Hades warned.

“***The Demigod is still alive***.” And she was very much disappointed about that.

“**Nyx**!”

Turning his head, it was clear that Persephone and Khione had donned crimson-black and blue-white armours and summoned long spears again.

It could have been reassuring, if the opponent wasn’t a monster beyond them.

“***Let me devour them, Hades***,” the Night didn’t threaten, it *hungered*. “***These three have now cut the threads the Fates had prepared for them***.”

“**The Fates would have been content to let me an exile far away from Olympus while my brother’s gigantic ego would unavoidably lead to disaster**.”

The green-eyed Demigod tried to think of something that could save his own skin, along with Calypso’s and Hera’s. He didn’t find much. The Primordials were so above Titans and Gods no one sane or insane considered fighting them for good reason.

“***If I let them go, they will once again intervene in this realm. They will bring Light***.” You could feel the hatred of the Avatar for the last word. “***Don’t tell me you don’t feel it, Hades. This one has been touched by the Sun! And he dared using Helios’ flames here***!”

“**Only after you incited Tartarus to send an army against me, Nyx**.”

That was very well-done. Unfortunately, they weren’t in a philosophical school. Worse, Perseus suspected the notions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ weren’t a Primordial’s first, second, or third priority.

Perseus cleared his throat.

“I could swear an Oath on the Styx, Lady of All Nights. To never return and not interfere for the rest of my mortal life, I mean.”

To his relief, his proposal was seriously considered.

“***It is not enough***.” The Avatar replied...somehow. It had certainly no mouth visible...NO! No, focus, focus on something else!

“***You are too insolent, too inventive. If I let you live, sooner or later, you will open a permanent gate which will let the Light inundate this realm. This is unacceptable. I prefer to devour your soul***.”

In normal circumstances, the former Tyrant would have sworn he had no intention to do that.

Unfortunately, it would have been a lie, and the punishment would have been eternal.

The oppressive power of the Primordial forced him to abandon this train of thought.

Night was more and more pouring into the Underworld, and soon, all would be lost.

Past a certain point, it wouldn’t matter how willing Hades and other forces were to defend him, for mortals couldn’t survive the Night. They were already to have big physical problems if they managed to return to the Spa, and he wasn’t eager to find out the details of the health problems it would bring.

“In that case, I invoke the Ancient Laws to defend my honour.”

When in doubt, cheating outrageously was the way.

The Night receded. He had managed to surprise the Primordial.

“***There are many Laws. Which ones are you referring to, Demigod***?”

Perseus breathed out and then voiced one of the most audacious plans he’d ever said in his second life.

“I demand a Trial by Champion!”

**21 December 2006, Approaches of the Abyss of Night, the Underworld**

“I want you to know this is completely insane, even by your usual standards!” Hera whispered angrily.

“There’s no need to whisper, you know. *They* can hear you no matter what,” Jackson climbed the next steps leading to the improvised arena.

“Thank you for the reminder.”

The last steps were done in complete silence, and they took their place on one side of the arena.

It was really an imposing name for something dark and devoid of any imposing decorations.

There was no stadium around it to make the significance of the location.

They were on top of a vast plateau which appeared to be made entirely of obsidian.

A rectangle had been carved deep into the rock to mark the limits of the arena.

There was another delimitation to indicate where the ‘middle’ was.

That was all.

That was the place they were all going to die. And yes, the Primordial had only promised to kill Perseus Jackson, but Hera was sure the Night was not going to be satisfied with just one appetiser.

“I don’t know why we’re playing this charade anyway.” The former Queen of the Gods still decided to whisper, no matter what he said. “She is going to name herself as her own Champion.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, please.” Perseus retorted. “A Primordial taking the field against the Champion of a mere Demigod? That would be like a member of the Suicide Squad deciding to go in person fight a very tiny insect.”

Several hundred metres away, a massive monster shaped like a horse and radiating darkness came forwards.

“Oh. Err...in that case, why you didn’t challenge her like that right away?”

“I am not the only one who can use the Ancient Laws to his advantage.” The son of Poseidon spoke with a very dark expression she’d almost never seen on his face. He cleared his throat, and the next words were shouted for all to hear. “CERBERUS! I CHOOSE YOU!”

Hera turned...and no giant three-headed dog appeared to answer the call.

The Avatar of the Night, a form which had grown up to over ten metres while they were transported to this desolate part of the Underworld, laughed.

“***If the Champion does not come soon, it will count as a forfeit of the challenger***.”

Perseus sighed. But he did not seem very surprised.

“I know he was way too lazy to be reliable.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Bribe him, of course.” The leader of the Suicide Squad said it like it was evidence itself. A package which had been nowhere to be seen an instant ago was suddenly there in front of them, and Perseus drew from it what had to be a massive bone. “CERBERUS! MY ETERNAL FRIEND! IF YOU FIGHT FOR MY CAUSE, THIS PRIME BONE OF THE GREAT DRAKON FIMBULVETR IS FOR YOU!”

This was insane. There was no way it was going to work. No matter if the Drakon bone was getting bigger and bigger in front of them, there was just no way the most loyal dog of Hades’ realm was going to succumb again to such vile-

“WOOOOOOFFFF!”

A very pungent smell of dog slammed in her nose, and suddenly the bone was voraciously attacked by one out of three gigantic heads.

“This is an official fight of the Underworld League! The ruling Mistress of the Night has chosen Shadow as her Champion! The Challenger has chosen Mega-Cerberus as his Champion!”

Wait, why the ‘mega’?

And this was when Hera realised that the more the heads of Cerberus bit the bone Jackson had offered him, the bigger the three-headed dog became.

Cerberus was the size of a very big truck when it transported them into the depths of the Underworld.

Now it was easily twice or three times that size.

The horse of darkness, the monster Perseus had nicknamed ‘Shadow’, suddenly looked rather terrified by the opposition it faced.

“There is no limit of time for this duel of Champions. Let the fight begin!”

Cerberus barked, and it was a sound which resonated across the arena and beyond like the death of Empires.

The next seconds, it had to be said, were just an ungodly massacre of the equine Champion.

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Gods Below, he loved cheating like that.

Obviously, Perseus wasn’t about to gloat about it.

There was the Avatar of a Primordial ready to smack him on the other side of the arena, and he didn’t doubt a single second that the tiniest sparkle of the Night’s power was sufficient to incinerate him.

Yes, Nyx would pay for it, the Ancient Laws were not a joke.

He would still be very, very dead.

“It seems my Champion emerged victorious.” The green-eyed Demigod said, taking great care to keep any triumphalism out of his voice.

There was no reaction for several seconds.

“***Yes***,” the eldritch body seemed to lose slowly its aura of terror. “***Now swear***.”

Let it be known that he was not an oath-breaker or stupid.

“I swear on the Styx that after today, I will never return to the Underworld on my own free will, Mother of the House of Night. I will not bring radiance to this realm, be it from the Sun, the Moon, or any other source. I will not interfere in the divine and not-divine matters of the Realms Below, for as long as I am mortal. Should I gain immortality, the visits will be at the invitation of the Gods and Goddesses of the Underworld, and will not be used to upend the balance of power of the Dark.”

It was as if a million voices of hatred whispered in his ears. It was as manacles of cold metal were tightening around his wrists.

It was, clearly and unambiguously, not pleasant at all.

Such was the price to invoke Styx in the Underworld for such a powerful oath.

But it was done, and Nyx hadn’t incinerated him.

Maybe-

A talon moved, and Cerberus was teleported away.

“***Your soul is saved, Demigod. Now your two companions have to choose a Champion of their own***.”

You know what he had said about cheating seconds ago?

Well, you could forget it immediately, please.

That was blatantly unfair, if you believed in such things.

“Jackson,” the ex-Goddess by his side had definitely a worried expression now. For once, the leader of the Suicide Squad was going to say it was completely sane to feel that way. “Please tell me you can recall Cerberus, or that you have another Champion.”

“He does not have another Champion,” Calypso went to stand at his side. In this realm of penumbra, the former Titaness of Drakons looked ill and far less valiant than she had been against the Hydra. But the son of Poseidon supposed Hera and himself looked far worse. The daughter of Tethys had a lot of immortal energy inside her, giving her some natural immunity to the powers of the Night and Hell. They couldn’t boast about that, and no, Drakonic curses or blessings were not sufficient here.

“This isn’t exact. I could call a Hellhound.” Perseus admitted. “But not only Nico will never forgive me if I steal his beloved pet, I am realistic enough to know Zoë will be defeated as easily as Cerberus defeated the previous Champion.”

“What was the point of throwing this kind of challenge, then?”

Sometimes, it was really easy to see why Zeus had stripped Hera of his immortality.

“I want it to be known that when I asked if someone had a better idea to escape the wrath of a Primordial, everyone was quite silent.”

This, at least, forced her to be quiet for the next seconds.

“We were all about to have our souls swallowed by the Night, so I chose the option which gave us a few more seconds of life. And I happened to save my soul in the process, which might not seem much to you, but definitely matters to me.”

Indeed, Perseus was more or less certain he was going to survive today.

The problem was that at this hour, his escape would be without Hera or Calypso.

Without those two, the Great Quest was near-doomed to failure. It didn’t matter what accords might be bargained with in Circe’s custody or after a hypothetical release. They would have a small increase in firepower after some new Telekhine weapons arrived, and Miranda may have sand powers to support them.

It just wasn’t enough to face the Sea Titaness waiting for them and achieve the liberation of the God of the Forges. As for the Triumvirate, it was a prospect so distant there was no use even thinking about it beyond the fact it existed and had to be dealt with in the future.

“The situation is extremely unfavourable.”

The words had just been uttered that Nyx evidently thought that if they had time to discuss, then she assuredly could send her Champion.

A maelstrom of darkness erupted across the arena, and Perseus for a second hoped the sibling of the horse which had just been defeated had been chosen to avenge the first defeat.

It went without saying that they weren’t this lucky.

The only good thing Perseus could say was that it was smaller than Cerberus at his maximal side. Or in other words, yes, it was that bad.

Nine heads. There were black scales of onyx colour which were impenetrable to all mortal weapons. Nine pairs of red eyes staring at them with malice and hunger. It was easily six metres tall, and the magic of the Night shrouded it. One of the heads began to spit poison, and it had a corrosive effect upon the soil that Cerberus had not been able to damage in his fight.

This was a gigantic Hydra straight from their worst nightmares. It was a monster that relegated the Lernaean bone-specimen they had fought previously to the rank of ‘lesser opponent’. It was something just shy of Godhood.

Evidently, his assumption that Nyx considered it beneath her to fight them was true. But he had annoyed her sufficiently to find a monster which was one step removed from actual immortality.

Even if his Lord Uncle offered him to pick the Champion of his choice from the entirety of the Underworld roster, the former Tyrant wasn’t sure there was one to fight able to emerge victorious against *that*.

Oh, well. Sane, predictable, and fairly successful plans had no longer a chance.

It was time for desperate plans.

“Lady Calypso? I have a plan.” Perseus grimaced. “You aren’t going to like it.”

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Perseus Jackson was right, but for the wrong reasons.

“***Who will be the Challenger this time, and where is your Champion***?”

Calypso stepped forwards.

“I will be Hera’s Champion.” The Titaness spoke. “I want it to be clear it will be for the first and last time in history if I win. And that way if I lose, I will have at least the satisfaction you will devour her soul a few seconds after that.”

“HEY!”

The former prisoner of Ogygia smiled when hearing the outrage of the ex-Goddess of Cows. She had to admit the animal suited very well for Rhea’s daughter. Poor Queen of Titans though, she must be ashamed of what her child had become.

The amusement didn’t last long.

Not when the huge monster Nyx had summoned started to slither towards her. And if the Primordial had been surprised by her announcement, she was hiding it well.

Calypso concentrated on her enemy.

In her prime, she had slaughtered countless Hydras.

But it had been when she was the Titaness of Drakons. Now, she was Titaness of exactly nothing. She was ruler of an island that also happened to be a prison, and if Zeus’ wrath was on the level of Kronos, the little paradise had certainly received a few strikes of the Master Bolt.

The absence of titles would not have bothered her that much if her powers had been restored to her. But it had not happened, and in a way, the appearance of Khione had been a blessing in disguise. The Drakons were now no longer her problem, and good riddance.

In this world which no longer remembered her, Calypso’s powers and titles would be the ones she managed to claim and take for herself.

Besides, it also was funny that Perseus Jackson was unaware of something crucial for his plans. The Demigod was very knowledgeable, way too much any mortal had any right to be, but he was not omniscient.

If Olympus realised what kind of arrow they missed with that, they would literally kiss the floors of their temple in relief.

“My name, serpent, is Calypso of the Hesperides.”

“Who cares,” the nine-headed monster hissed, “about your name? You are my prey, ready to be devoured!”

And it was able to speak, with a touch of the divine. That meant a child of Echidna and Nyx, though fortunately one falling short of true Godhood.

This wasn’t really a relief, for Calypso couldn’t take any divine form; she had none of her pre-Titanomachy ones left.

“BEGIN!”

Instantly, she went on the offensive.

Her spear impaled one of the heads, and what was left of her fires, the daughter of Tethys tried to incinerate it and prevent it from being a factor in this battle.

It didn’t work.

Calypso had to jump away, and only experience of an age long gone prevented her from losing her head as three massive maws opened and closed where she had stood seconds ago.

The Titaness made a second attempt, which ended in an even more lamentable manner than the first.

And naturally, for every head slain, two heads were born, already ready for battle.

The Hydra had nine monstrous heads at the beginning; it had now eleven.

What an unpleasant way to verify that unlike some lesser breeds of Hydra, this ‘Nyx-blessed’ one was not limited to the number of nine.

As the tenth one began to spit black lightning to support an acid bombardment, Calypso really wanted to kill someone for having the temerity to breed that irritant predator. Unfortunately, the only one in sight was the Mother of the House of Night, and even pointing her spear in the wrong direction would result in annihilation.

Still, the first minute of battle proved alas that the basic anti-Hydra strategies were not going to work.

This Hydra was invulnerable to her flames. That meant that to stop the regeneration of the multiple heads, you had to inflict such damage that there would be nothing to grow anew.

“***Choosing Cerberus as your first Champion was a good idea, Demigods***.” The Primordial of Night spoke with clear satisfaction. “***But your second Champion is only the shadow of what she once was***.”

If her attempt was to anger her, it worked.

And yes, Calypso was very much aware her Fatal Flaw was her Wrath.

When everyone in your family had Pride or this Flaw, you didn’t need to search a lot of time to find it.

But this time, the former prisoner of Ogygia embraced it.

“I AM NOT A SHADOW!”

She embraced it and she attacked again.

This time she managed to kill two more heads, including one of the acid-spitting ones.

“Oh? And what are you, then daughter of Atlas?”

Calypso smiled.

“I am an empty chalice, and I need something to fill it.”

She struck at the serpentine body, and when her spear finally broke, she tore apart the scales with her bare hands.

At last the paler and weaker flesh appeared.

Calypso seized it and bit it deeply.

The taste of the meat was very much poison and serpent combined together.

But it was the taste of power.

When she swallowed the meat, Calypso for the first time in millennia felt herself becoming stronger.

By the time she evaded all the frenetic counterattacks of the Hydra, only one head out of the two she had destroyed was back for the fight.

And this time, there was no ‘cut one head, two will take its place’.

“Someone is going to be devoured by the end of this battle, yes,” the Titaness smiled to the Hydra, and the monster suddenly sounded far less confident in its ultimate victory. “Let’s hurry, I want to go drink something else which will remove the taste of your disgusting poison from my tongue!”

\*\*\*\*

For those Demigods who read these lines, Perseus was delivering the warning: no, trying to eat a Hydra wasn’t a good idea.

It was a pretty horrible idea, in fact.

The blood of the Hydras had a large poison component, so the odds were high you would poison yourself after the first attempt to drink it, and then the monster would avenge itself by devouring your corpse.

It was only an option because Calypso was not a Demigoddess, but a Titaness.

And even then, frankly, the Tyrant of the Suicide Squad would have preferred not verifying if his theories on the subject were right or wrong.

Why?

Well, to begin with, that the poison couldn’t kill her didn’t mean it wasn’t a problem. Calypso was losing her strength as the fight went on. Fortunately, by the time her ability to fight abruptly decreased, the Hydra was in agony and had only a single dying head left.

The second problem could be considered worse, from where he stood. Eating the Hydra indeed allowed someone to absorb its power, if done correctly. But it wasn’t a free buffet.

Calypso was indeed an empty chalice, but they weren’t speaking of ordinary wine to fill it. This was a Hydra of the Night which had been summoned to fight her. This had *consequences*.

Bite by bite, the ex-Titaness of Drakons had changed.

The auburn hair had been replaced by a long mane of black colour.

Her eyes were shining the same malevolent red as the nine pairs of the Hydra had.

Her skin had become paler and paler, until it was almost as pale as a corpse.

And those were the superficial changes, those his eyes could discern...and it hurt him to do so. As he touched his face, the green-eyed Demigod realised he had been crying. And the tears were red. He had been crying his own blood. This was really, really bad. They had to get out while they still could.

“The Champion is victorious.” His voice was more a croak than something proud and special by that point. It removed most of the satisfaction he could have felt watching the Hydra’s corpse falling apart and staying immobile for good. “The Challenge was settled. We are leaving.”

“***You and the failing embers of a Goddess can leave, Demigod***.” The Primordial’s power washed around them, destructive and oppressing. “***But the Titaness stays. She ate my child. By the Ancient Laws, she ate the food of the World of Night, and will never return to the World under the Light***.”

What?

Perseus almost shouted this was sheer nonsense. But he managed to control himself, which was certainly good for his life-expectancy.

If that was anybody else, he would have still asked if it was a bad joke.

But it was a Primordial speaking.

It was an Avatar of the Night levitating forwards.

No, it couldn’t end like that, not when they had won-

There had to be a solution, something he could-

There was-

There was a solution.

“OBJECTION!” He shouted as the talons of the Avatar were about to seize Calypso, who was so exhausted she wasn’t able to do more but trying to crawl away. “By the Ancient Laws, this Hydra was summoned into the Underworld, and it was as a monster of the Underworld that it was eaten and slain! Therefore the fate of Calypso can only be decided by Lord Hades, ruler of the Underworld, for it is food of the Underworld she ate!”

A storm of darkness came into existence, and Hades appeared, with Persephone on his right and Khione on his left.

“**My nephew has a point, Nyx**.”

“***Hades***,” the Primordial didn’t hiss in anger, but she was not far from that point. “***If you think I will tolerate you sending this one six months of a year to the World Above, you are sorely mistaken***.”

The God of the Underworld didn’t answer her directly. Instead, he bent the knee to take the exhausted daughter of Tethys in his arms. Whatever they said, Perseus didn’t hear. The fact that his ears began to bleed suggested it was not meant for mortals, obviously.

Persephone and Khione went by his side and used their own powers on Calypso, though. Hades removed his dark cloak, and gave it to her, before helping her to stand again. It had to be said Calypso did it on very shaky legs.

There was a difference, though. For the first time, there was a ring of pure darkness on one of Calypso’s fingers.

“**Calypso made an oath to Perseus Jackson, and this oath she will uphold**,” the Lord of Hell declared. “**One moon of service. It will end once she and her mother will have settled their differences after millennia of separation, or at the end of the moon’s turn, whichever ends first. And then Calypso will return here, to absorb the rest of the powers you want to force her to take...and I will, with her consent, take her as my third wife**.”

Perseus remembered the glances of Zagreus and Melinoë when they had met. Suddenly, their insistence to reveal as little as the future and to push them to go into the depths to meet this Fate was not surprising at all.

“**I consent**.” The voice of the now black-haired Titaness was weak, incredibly weak...and yet it was far more powerful than it had been. “**I...I consent and I pay the price. I cede the Mantle of Summer to Hera**.”

The bridges were burned and the course of destiny set, eh? It wasn’t possible to turn back.

Three female immortals. Three heads for the Warden of Hell. Three Mantles of Seasons abandoned. Magma and Gemstones, Ice, and the Night for the Underworld. By Three they did came, and by Three it ended.

“**Nyx**?”

The Primordial’s Avatar...changed. It was fluid, and you couldn’t honestly describe the process, but soon enough, the eldritch abomination was gone, and a five metres-tall woman with a dark robe of amethyst and onyx gemstones was standing and caressing Calypso’s cheek.

“***You will be the third Queen of the Underworld, Calypso Tenebrae. Yours are the Hydras of the Night, and the Wrath of the Dark Fields of the World Below***.” This wasn’t intended to be reassuring...and it was not. “***I will change you, much like your sister-wives were changed by my sister of the Earth. Now go***.”

“Hera,” Perseus called.

Fortunately, the former Queen of Gods needed no more incitation to play her part.

“We have been invited here today to share in a joyous celebration...”

It was a wedding reduced to its simplest expression.

But then, the official celebrations would likely happen in a few months.

“It is my pleasure to present you as husband and wives,” Hera finished...and then it was as three lightning bolts struck her.

It was a good thing he had anticipated something like that, and he caught her bridal style before she could face back-first against the cold and dark arena.

And just like that, he was almost out of time.

“With your permission, Lord Uncle?”

“**Go. Return to the world of the living**.”

Perseus took a whistle in his pocket, and chirped with what little strength he had left in his lungs.

**22 December 2006, C.C’s Spa and Resort**

The hours had passed, and there had been no visitors.

The Dark Solstice had come and gone, and with it, the first grumbles had been heard.

Annabeth knew it was understandable.

For all the beauty of C.C’s Spa, it was still a prison for them, a fact made clear by the two Amazons escorting her. After the madness Jackson had unleashed, their ‘hosts’ wanted to be sure no one tried to open doors and cause mayhem where they had no right to be.

The daughter of Athena was walking across a large plaza delimited by several triumph arcs, each of them covered in magical runes, when one of said monuments suddenly turned into a vast and threatening black portal.

“Alert!” The Amazon on her right shouted. “We have a situation that-“

There was a terrifying amount of barking, and Cerberus crossed the portal.

Undoubtedly, some people would wonder how Annabeth knew it was really Cerberus.

She would answer that the first time she had met the giant three-headed dog was sufficient to not forget him for the rest of her life and beyond.

Besides, there was Perseus riding on his back, so it had to be Cerberus.

Wait a minute. If the two were there, what...oh, no, he had once more returned to the Underworld, didn’t he?

“CIRCE, I AM BACK!” The son of Poseidon shouted...and to Annabeth’s consternation, the shout was followed by a less-than-glorious coughing fit. And she was pretty sure he spat blood in the next seconds.

As he dismounted from his giant companion – who outside the Underworld was revealed to have a rich and hirsute crimson fur, the blonde Demigoddess could see that whatever had happened, it had been bad.

Perseus had visibly cried tears of his own blood. There were scars on his arms that he had visibly inflicted to himself, and most of his tanning that he had done in the Sea of Monsters was gone. One of his hands was covered in bandages, and despite that, it still managed to look awful.

Hundreds of Amazons stormed the plaza, and the Mistress of the Spa teleported in front of him.

Whatever anger Circe may have felt for the son of Poseidon in the last hours, she was clearly as much taken aback by his appearance as Annabeth was.

“**You are almost dead**.”

“I thought about making a complaint,” the leader of the Suicide Squad replied between two coughs, “but after much consideration, I decided that suing a Primordial may be the last mistake I would ever make.”

Primordial. And they went to the Underworld. That meant either Nyx, Chaos, or Tartarus-

“**I see**,” the Immortal Sorceress commented. “**Still, you are technically an enemy on my doorstep**-“

“Oh, I surrender, of course.” For once, there was no mockery, no humour left in Perseus’ voice. “And I will pay for one VIP day of your spa’s services. Cerberus served as my Champion, and he will have his reward.”

“**And your companions**?”

Annabeth blinked, and then realised there were two women tied to the improvised saddle which had been placed on Cerberus’ back. They were clearly unconscious, most of their bodies was hidden by cloaks the colour of night.

“This is...where it is complicated. But they need rest above all.” The green-eyed Demigod...no, one of his eyes had turned red-black. What in the name of Hades had happened? “If someone tries to sell you the Underworld as a touristic destination, I humbly suggest you believe all the rumours.”

“**There is a reason why no one was eager to break the balance of power in the Underworld**.” The ruler of C.C’s Spa and Resort replied slowly, as her black eyes stayed on the two immobile women. Apparently, unlike Annabeth, she knew who they were. “**On a different subject, I am willing to let you and your fellow Questers recover on my island. But by the Achaia Convention, Olympus can and will likely pay the ransom for some of you to be immediately transferred to Olympus’ custody**.”

“In that case,” and this time a shadow of the mad grin returned, for a few seconds, “I humbly request to emulate the exploit of a great knight I learned the tale of.”

“**Exploit**?”

“Yes, like Bertrand Du Guesclin in his time, I want to decide myself the price of my ransom! In my opinion, my head is worth two million Drachmas, oh Immortal Sorceress! And I say my companions are worth slightly a bit less...let’s say one million and seven hundred thousand Drachmas each?”

He wanted WHAT?

Circe hadn’t seen that coming. The Amazons surrounding them had clearly not seen it coming either.

“**Despite the rumours of the time**,” Circe managed to recover enough to reply in a coherent fashion, “**the knight you’re speaking of had a large part of his ransom paid by his King, who then removed the sum in question from the money he owed to him. I seriously doubt the Master of Olympus pays you enough to consider the same option**.”

“Actually, he doesn’t pay me at all!” Perseus assured her.

And then on these words, he collapsed.

Cerberus made a curious sound, as if the three-headed dog couldn’t believe his ‘eternal friend’ had reached his limits.

“Lady Circe! Do you want us to-“

“**No**.” The Goddess of the Spa Island shook her head. “**I am going to make sure he stays alive and recover to his full health. As long as he breathes, Olympus will know no peace**.”

In the distance, there was a loud thunderous rumble. And oh yes, there were the dark clouds which had almost sank the *Inevitable Doom* at the entrance of the Sea of Monsters.

“The Olympians are not going to be happy. And they can hold their grudges for a very long time.”

Annabeth cleared her throat, and half of the army present turned towards her.

“As Perseus Jackson would put it if he was conscious,” the daughter of Athena said with an apologetic smile, “making the King of the Gods and several Olympians unhappy was either the goal or a happy side-benefit of his deeds.”

That left the question of which goal had been accomplished, of course. Perseus had left to acquire some super-weapons, and he returned with two women in as bad a shape as he was. Annabeth could only hope he had been successful, otherwise the Suicide Squad wasn’t going to live long outside C.C’s Spa and Resort.

**Author’s Note**:

The felonies, crimes, and treasons of the Suicide Squad (and especially Perseus Jackson) will continue in the next chapter. Among the possible titles for it are: *Ransom of Success, I am the Ransom,* and *The Last Muster*. You can already brace for the explosion certain events are going to trigger on Olympus.

**Suicide Squad - List of Fallen**:

*Judith – Huntress of Artemis*

*Kalinda – Huntress of Artemis*

*Eudoxia – Huntress of Artemis*

*Douglas Smith – son of Volturnus*

*Phoebe – Huntress of Artemis, daughter of Eris*

*Eustace Bragg, Jeremy Clark, Helmut Veers, Scott, Irvin, Craig, Jared, Harper, Chuck, Jim plus fourteen other Legionnaire mutineers*

*Gallowborne Division – all seventeen Legionnaires*

*Nick Coleman, son of Quirinus*

*Fergus Cook – son of Liber, transformed into a golden penguin and unfortunately for him, died as one*

**Wall of Dishonour**:

Bella Medina – daughter of Scotus: traitor and betrayer, became Nocturna and discarded her humanity before deserting from the Suicide Squad

Jade – former Huntress: denied the will of Artemis, and became the Champion of Khione

Drew Tanaka – daughter of Aphrodite: became a living weapon, and the new Champion of Persephone

Calypso Tenebrae – daughter of Atlas, joins the Suicide Squad for a moon, may have a slight grudge against Olympus

Hera – completely blamed for organising and celebrating marriages without the approval of Olympus. She is also a claimant to the title of Goddess of Seasons now.

Perseus Jackson – for reasons which don’t need to be explained

**Gallowborne ‘Division’**:

17 ex-Legionnaires, condemned to be thrown in the most dangerous situations for their attempted mutiny; their names are now forsaken, and they are now known as ‘Future Zombie’, ‘Cannon-Fodder’, ‘Scapegoat’, ‘Dead Legionnaire Walking’, etc...

It must be alas noted that all the Gallowborne Legionnaires all perished during their Redemption Mission on the beach of C.’C’s Spa and Resort. Perseus Jackson has already declined all responsibility in the matter.

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/

archive ofourown works /32339365 /chapters /80167612

ww w .pa treon Antony444