**Chapter 6**

**Welcome to Hell**

*New Byzantium ignored it and would continue to do so for many more days, but on May 22, the Suicide Squad had achieved the impossible: to enter the realm of the Lord of the Underworld alive and undetected.*

*The exploit was indeed impressive. Heroes, both ancient and new, had done it before, but unlike legends like Heracles and Orpheus, their successors had achieved the feat while the official entrances of the Underworld were closed to them and guarded by uncountable armies ordered to kill any trespassers.*

*Moreover, the ancient Greek heroes were generally alone; as a result their smell had a good chance to be dismissed as unimportant by the hordes of monsters they would meet during their Quest. The Suicide Squad, being twelve strong when they departed the city, would not have this chance.*

*The group of twelve had invaded Hell nonetheless, and the madness of Perseus Jackson had played a major if not essential role in this Quest. Travelling through the Labyrinth, as crazy as it undoubtedly was, had worked. They had lost Scipio Varus along the way, and many of the Demigods and Demigoddesses’ sanity hadn’t survived without scars, be they physical or mental.*

*But they were alive, at a moment where both the Constantinople and Byzantium parts were prepared to organise their funerals at any moment, or gambling on how far the Squad would walk before encountering a challenge they couldn’t defeat before dying pathetically.*

*Obviously, if news of the seemingly-impossible exploit had arrived to New Byzantium, no doubt there would have been disbelief. The thought of this hastily band of misfits and inexperienced Demigods with a few leaders who had good reason to hate each other equalling Heracles and other mighty heroes was one which beggared logic and sanity.*

*Assuming it would have reached the Barracks and the ears of hundreds of Demigods and Demigoddesses and the news were delivered by a source no one could deny, clearly many voices would have mentioned that entering the Underworld undetected was one thing, finding their way to the palace of Hades while avoiding the lethal traps of the Rich One’s defences was something else. There was zero chance such a short force of Demigods could stand in presence of one of Lord Zeus’ brothers and win, much less convince him by any method other than their words to release the Master Bolt in their possession.*

*The Suicide Squad, unfortunately, had already broken the odds once.*

*And in hindsight, had we been aware of it, we shouldn’t have worried about what the Lord of Hell and his enforcers would do to the Suicide Squad when they unavoidably discovered their presence. No, being sane, we should have worried about what they were going to do to Hell.*

*Perseus Jackson, after all, had an insane plan to survive the Labyrinth. Accepting the worst scenario as plausible, it was guaranteed he would have one another for the realm of the dead...*

Extract from the Chapter 7 of *Chronicles of the Suicide Squad*, by Malcolm Pace, son of Athena

**22 May 2006, Fields of Asphodel, the Underworld**

“My promises have been more than fulfilled. I think I deserve a gold medal for bringing the Suicide Squad here safe and sound!”

“Safe and sound?” Jake Mason erupted after braying loudly. “I was transformed into a donkey!”

“We hadn’t noticed,” Clarisse La Rue yawned largely. “What a pity Caligula didn’t transform you into a *mute* donkey. We would have won some moments of peace and calm.”

“What would you say if your father transformed you into a boar, I wonder,” muttered between his large teeth the son of Hephaestus.

“I wouldn’t say anything to him,” the spear-wielding woman assured him. “I would try to tear him apart before I died.”

“Ahem.” Perseus Jackson coughed. “So, where is my gold-“

“Don’t think we haven’t seen you extort hundreds of thousands of Drachmas in Caligula’s Circus Maximus!” Miranda Gardiner exclaimed. “You want to have a gold medal, fine! Give us the gold...and transform back Jake! He’s the metallurgist of our group!”

“It’s not a mere ‘group’, my dear daughter of Demeter, it is-“

“The Suicide Squad, yes we know.”

Ethan’s headache was beginning to feel his headache returning.

“And as I said before, I do not have the power to transform back our unfortunate comrade cursed to walk on four legs.” Jackson placed a hand on his chest over a region where most humans – but not him – kept their heart. “The not-too-great Caligula truly saved your life. Transforming you back without divine healing would be tantamount to return you to a disembowelled state. And I have many things in my pocket, but nothing which will be able to mimic Asclepius’ healing. Now if there are no more questions...”

“I have one,” Ethan winced, because the voice of Zoë Nightshade was really on the edge of cold fury. “No, I have two! Tell me why I shouldn’t execute you here and now for your treason against Olympus!”

“And how did I break the nonexistent vows I absolutely didn’t swear to any God or Goddess, Zara?”

“You didn’t attack Caligula and his whore of a sister!”

The look the son of Poseidon wasn’t one of joy or his usual amused smirks. It was one of outright condescension.

“My dear Zouzou, these two Romans are without doubt very bad news, but there is something in their speeches which was not a lie: they have indeed ascended beyond their mortal limitations...which is sort of impressive since they were very weak Legacies, not Demigods proper. They aren’t as powerful as the Olympians, I will give you that. But to kill them require Gods or powerful symbol of powers. They aren’t going to die from a sword or an arrow wound.”

Just as he said these words, the black-haired boy grinned and placed a ring shining with golden energy on one of his fingers.

Translation in Jackson-language: everything I just said was a lie. The son of Poseidon had magical artefacts to deal with lesser Gods, he just didn’t want to waste them on Caligula and consorts.

“Now if your concerns have been correctly addressed-“

“Ha!” Drew Tanaka snorted before giggling loudly.

“-we can begin the invasion of Hell-“

The lieutenant of Artemis thought otherwise, clearly.

“And what is this beast doing here?” The copper-skinned asked, fortunately pointing a finger and not an arrow in direction of the muscular Minotaur.

“Zara, at the risk of making you angry...angrier...” everyone among the group snorted or prayed the Gods to give them unlimited patience, “you are very racist. This is a Great Quest! Why should non-human warriors be prevented from joining the fun?”

The immortal Huntress gaped. She tried to close her mouth or to speak. And finally an incoherent scream of rage escaped her lips before tightening her lips and gritting her teeth...again.

“Good. Now that Zebra has admitted she can’t tolerate other species to breathe the same air as she...” Ethan seriously began to wonder if their informal leader was not trying to give a heart attack to the Huntress...the glare of the brown eyes was murderous in the extreme. “Hear my first order of the Hell Campaign. Do not eat or drink anything you will find in this realm of the dead.”

For once, and it had to be the first time, everyone nodded in firm or reluctant approval. While the sum of knowledge available to each Demigod or Demigoddess varied by barrack, everyone knew how Persephone had been tricked into remaining Hades’ wife. It had taken one pomegranate fruit, if his memory was good.

“This is going to cause problems, Jackson.” The son of Nemesis began after clearing his throat. “For all the reserves of water and food you stored before we entered the Labyrinth, we used much of them in the last days. And the supplies we grabbed in the Roman stadium were barely enough to replenish them. If the barrel you tied to your Hellhound is water...”

“Oh it isn’t water. It is a barrel of Eleutherian Wine.”

Dakota McDonald took instantly three steps back.

“Don’t worry, by drunken lieutenant! This is sorely for bargaining purposes with your father!” If anything, the son of Bacchus was *more* afraid, not less.

“While as one thief to another I can cheer at the fantastic efforts you must have made to acquire such a rare drink,” Luke Castellan’s face was *very* tired. “The immediate priority is to travel across the Fields of Asphodel. With that obstacle in mind, water should be our first and second priority...unless getting us drunk is the first part of your plan of genius.”

“My loyal lieutenant...water supplies much as everything edible, are important. But to focus on them is to fall into a trap. Tell me...what do you see before us?”

“Err...the Fields of Asphodel?”

“Yes, and?”

“Err...nothing?”

The son of Hermes was certainly reporting nothing but the truth here. The group of Twelve – plus the enthusiast Hellhound – had arrived near the summit of a big, dark hill, which was half-surrounded by dark stalagmites and stalactites. Behind them were dark peaks and what looked like active volcanoes. It was a spectacle of desolation and hellish atmosphere.

Before them however, the relief quickly stopped being uneven and the Fields of Asphodel were waiting for them. Unlike the other terrains, it wasn’t threatening, it was just...grey. Grey, boring, a long plain where the dead were free to wait for all eternity...correction, it was an endless grey field. For all the red ‘lights’ on the horizon or closer, there seemed to be no end to Asphodel.

“Nothing,” Jackson clapped between his hands. “This is absolutely correct. There is nothing between us and the palace of the God ruling this realm. Nothing but the Fields of Asphodel...the two thousand kilometres-long Fields of Asphodel.”

“Two thousand?” Miranda Gardiner asked suspiciously. “This is a very neat number...”

“Well, this is approximately two thousand one hundred and six kilometres,” the madman grinned. “But who’s counting?”

“We can’t walk two thousand one hundred and six kilometres in one month!”

“Technically, it’s four thousand,” Jackson corrected and ignored the glares many Questers sent him. “What? If we can’t solve things diplomatically, we will have to go back to this exit,” the green-eyed son of Poseidon waved in direction of the portal they had walked through.

“And face Caligula again?” Dakota was unsurprisingly not confident in their chances of emerging alive from such a confrontation.

“His enclave will certainly will have moved out by then.” Perseus Jackson replied, clearly not bothered by the challenge. “And I have a lesser Thread to find back the entrance we used near New York City.”

Of course he did. Why was Ethan surprised anymore?

“That still leaves the minor problem of fighting our way across Asphodel,” if Hades had not countless armies or traps ready to ambush potential Questers, Ethan would eat the Drachmas of his purse here and now. “Especially since we don’t have the food and the water...and we don’t have the time, either.”

“We can use the flying chariots we used to escape and the ones intact from the Circus’ races,” the red donkey proposed.

“They are enchanted to prevent any thieves from taking them out of the Labyrinth,” Lou Ellen said quietly. “I was able to subvert a few protections temporarily, but there’s a reason we didn’t ride Caligula’s ride through the Gate.

“And I don’t see trains...or planes nearby,” the daughter of Demeter added.

“Don’t worry,” Luke said after a long sigh of suffering. “I’m sure Jackson is going to propose a plan completely insane in the next ten seconds.”

The son of Poseidon, naturally, didn’t disappoint.

“My friends,” always this crazy grin which should be considered a warning before the weapons of mass-destruction flew. “I have a confession to give to you. My plan involves its fair share of collateral damage.”

“I hate you so much,” Dakota McDonald moaned.

“Nonsense. We are just going to drown Asphodel under the waves.”

One more day of insanity among the Suicide Squad...

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Luke had thought that once they reached the Underworld, the plans of Jackson would become more...okay, perhaps ‘more serious’ had been a pious and vain hope, but certainly a bit more cautious and somewhat less crazy.

They were in Hell, after all...the Underworld, the Afterlife, or whatever name you gave it.

Yes, he was a son of Hermes, but it didn’t mean the operation to recover the Master Bolt and the Trident had to be a succession of catastrophes engineered by Jackson. In his mind, the Councillor had imagined there would be a few days where they would avoid the Lord of Darkness’ patrols, then sneak into his castle. The majority of the Questers in that scenario would create an impressive diversion – as the races of the Circus Maximus had proved, it shouldn’t be too difficult – and Luke in the meanwhile would exploit the opportunity to steal back the precious symbols of power. Afterwards it would be a race to return to the Labyrinth’s Gate before Hades could incinerate them, which promised to be...non-trivial.

But it was a reasonable plan, he thought.

He should have known this wasn’t going to fly, no pun intended, with a mad Demigod at the helm.

“Jackson, we have angered an ever-rising number of lesser and greater deities per our actions since this Great Quest started. Is it really...weird to think angering one of the Big Three is suicidal?”

“The Lord of Thunder is already mad at me, you know.”

Damn it, so much for this argument...

“Besides, I have yet to hear a solution explaining how you intend to travel two thousand kilometres with nothing but a pair of shoes. This is half a world away, you know.”

“I could maybe create a magical carpet,” the sorceress of the group suggested. “Maybe...if had the materials...”

“As much as I am curious to see the result,” the son of Poseidon had surprisingly taken an expression a...supportive stance? “We don’t have the time...or the materials for your idea, my ambitious sorceress.”

“Because drowning the Underworld is? Why do you think it will solve anything?” Jake Mason brayed.

“I thought it was evident, my unfaithful donkey,” Perseus Jackson grinned. “Since we can’t use a flying chariot and going on foot is too slow, we will go by ship.”

“There are no ships in hell! ARGH!” Annabeth exclaimed before returning to her very worrying mutterings about arachnids and weaving.

“Clarisse? Cares to explain to the Suicide Squad what the Toll of Defeat is?”

“It is the price in souls and destroyed military equipment the losers of each conflict must offer to my father,” the daughter of Ares bared her teeth. “Warships are included, of course. I suppose something similar occurs with the Lord of the Underworld?”

“Yes, let’s call it...the Toll of Darkness. Asterius here found one of these warships, and I am confident that if we drown the Fields of Asphodel, I can commandeer the ship and reach the Dark Palace before the Solstice and our water run out.”

“It’s stupid.” Zoë Nightshade grumbled. “Asphodel is limitless...or as big as the world of the mortals. There’s no way a mere lake or a small source of subterranean water will do anything.”

“My dear Zulu, do you really think my plan rely on pushing an ephemeral acid lake or an insignificant body of foul liquid from its riverbed? I intend to flood the Fields of Asphodel with the *Phlegethon*.”

“You’re insane!”

“You’re mad!”

“Compliments will not convince me to change my plan.”

These were not...oh Dionysus’ grapes, forget it.

“The Phlegethon,” Luke tried weakly, hoping his hears had suffered malfunctions, despite knowing it wasn’t the case. “One of the seven great rivers of the Underworld.”

“Also known as the river of flames,” Perseus Jackson confirmed.

“How would we even do that?” Ethan Nakamura said with a frown darker than usual. “We don’t have any big machines to force a small river to take a detour away from its riverbed, and the...*that river* is rumoured to be only dominated in width and fury than the one everyone swears unbreakable oaths upon. Do you have a new spell to teach to Blackstone to achieve that?”

“No, I do not.” Before their expressions of ‘we don’t believe you, the son of Poseidon coughed. “Fine, I have spells which might be useful. But this is a *divine* river, and using powerful magic so close to it would be...counter-indicated. No, we are going to act in a more...judicious way. There is an enormous dam not far from here. Like a lot of similar infrastructure across the Hells, it prevents any of the great rivers from inundating the zones where former mortal souls of men and women remain.”

The grin was expected...and the words were of course the ones every Quester dreaded.

“We are going to blow it up.”

“This is vandalising the possessions of one of the Big Three!” Annabeth intervened.

“Yes, it is. Where is the problem?”

Someone...someone not crazy would have acknowledged it was a major issue.

This time though, Luke had a very real argument to raise his voice against the whole plan.

“Jackson. If this dam was built and prevents a river of hell from flooding Asphodel, it is evidently critical to the security of the Underworld. And if it is a vital strategic location, it will be heavily guarded.”

“Not that much,” the son of Poseidon disagreed fast. “The souls of the departed can’t exactly sabotage anything, so the Rich One is only rotating a guardian with the authority to summon some skeleton warriors.”

“A guardian,” Dakota repeated. “What sort of guardian?”

“A warrior of the old times, short one,” because of course it was the Minotaur who answered. “Odysseus was the last.”

“Odysseus...like Odysseus of Ithaca, famous for the Trojan Horse and his ten long years of wandering to go back home?”

“Yes,” the green-eyed son of Poseidon. “He is a reasonable man and his patron in life was Her Owlishness, so I’m quite confident we will be able to convince him of the righteousness of our intentions.”

There was so many things wrong in this sentence that Luke didn’t how where he should begin...

“If nothing changed, if the Master of the Underworld has not rotated him out, it should be incredibly easy to break the dam.”

“And if we are unlucky?”

**23 May 2006, the Phlegethon Dam, the Underworld**

“We are definitely unlucky.”

Perseus allowed himself a good laugh when Luke muttered the words.

“Luck has nothing to do with it...my loyal and heroic lieutenant.” The son of Poseidon clicked the fingers of his right hand. “There’s not a month remaining until the ultimatum of the Olympians expires. Someone has decided to deploy the strongest assets to the critical strongholds and strategic locations of the Underworld.”

And the ‘Phlegethon Dam’ certain qualified.

The construction was not very large – the gorge it was blocking was far too narrow to make the expense worth it – but it was extremely high, close to three hundred metres above the plains of Asphodel, by his best estimate. Given how dangerous the seven rivers of Hell were, Perseus didn’t blame Hades for taking precautions, but still, it was...inconvenient.

Asterius had described him the dam in detail, but the Minotaur was alas not a brilliant conversationalist, and the son of Poseidon admitted he had let the condescension he felt towards the Gods colour a little his judgement. After seeing the artistic abominations Zeus and other Olympians regularly commissioned – recent modern painting and sculptures were truly insults against everything sacred – he had expected to find a seemingly impressive obstacle that a good detonation would destroy without requiring a second blast.

This had been too optimistic. The dam was a wall of black stone, violent shadows, and monstrous enchantments. Not basing his strategy on a spell cast by a child of Hecate had been, with the benefit of hindsight, quite a good idea. This way he had enough explosives to deal with the dam, despite having underestimated it.

Bad news: they had to find an abandoned road after making a very large detour, and time, this great enemy, was continuing its implacable march.

But now they were two hundred metres away from the ‘rampart’ the top of the dam was proving to be. And thanks to the numerous volcanic explosions and the...various fiery manifestations of the Phlegethon, they had not been detected.

“Oh?” The dark-haired son of Nemesis coughed. “If there’s no luck, maybe you will explain to us how you intend to keep busy *Achilles* while we sabotage the dam!

“Honestly, my treacherous lieutenant, has someone told you your priorities are in the wrong order?”

“He. Is. *Achilles*.”

“Yes, yes, I heard you the first time...and I had recognised him minutes ago.” Seriously, it wasn’t like there were many warriors of the old time who dared bearing the colours of this Hero of the Trojan War...and most didn’t wear long and steely enchanted boots. Why, it was like his fatal weakness was in his heels...pun absolutely intended. “But he is a single man.”

“A single man? Jackson the man killed thousands!”

“In ten years of a war which saw countless battles against Hector and the armies of Troy. And should we push him off in the Phlegethon, he would be incapacitated for hours. No, the main annoyance caused by his presence is the fact he can and will summon skeleton warriors if we prove too cunning for him.”

“Too strong for him, you mean.”

“My treacherous lieutenant, there’s a reason I didn’t take Asterius and five members of the Suicide Squad with us. Strength is something Achilles has an abundance of. But a master strategist he is definitely not.”

“Err...let’s say you are right. Let’s say...you manage to somehow convince him to not summon the warriors of the Dark One. This is still Achilles. The misfortune curses of my mother will be useless against him. The protection he gained when he was a baby-“

“The Curse,” the son of Poseidon corrected him automatically.

“It made him invincible, Jackson.”

“It is a strange invincibility for a man to die of an arrow in his heel after a mere ten years of war don’t you think? And yes, this is a curse. Is there no one at Camp Byzantium who ever wondered why there aren’t more Great Quests to bathe in a certain divine river?”

“Because it is in the Underworld and the brother of the senior Olympians is not known for letting people escape his realm alive or dead?”

“There is that,” the former Tyrant admitted. “And the ‘bath’ is extremely dangerous, I won’t pretend otherwise. But the Curse does not make you invincible, Achilles is proof of that. If you want to survive the experience, you have to keep a part of mortality inside you, the infamous...Achilles’ heel. And in exchange, it will exacerbate all your passions...and your weaknesses.”

“Achilles has no weaknesses.” Jake Mason brayed. Perseus smiled. Both for the comical aspect of the Quest and his knowledge in explosives, it had been extremely important to place the transformed son of Hephaestus in the ‘break the dam’ group. After all these years, the ex-Tyrant had been able to discern the patterns for the Demigods were not the same as the Named of Calernia, but in doubt, always keep a comic relief close to you.

“Of course he has. How do you think the Trojans were able to nearly throw down the Achaeans into the sea?”

“Pride,” the son of Hermes declared.

“A woman,” Perseus said cheerfully, turning his head and nodding as the daughter of Aphrodite left the cover of the rock she had used to discard her armour.

“**Don’t say a word**,” Drew Tanaka growled as she passed next to him.

“**I am not saying a word**.” The son of Poseidon raised his eyebrows and the Charmspeak-user flushed red. The black-haired beauty was more powerful than the fragile thing which had left New Byzantium, but she had a lot of progress to do before developing her full potential. “In all seriousness, if you don’t feel doing this, I have a contingency plan.”

The other members of the group finally stopped gaping and-

“You’re not serious, you can’t send Tanaka half-naked against Achilles!”

The heroic values of Luke Castellan were definitely strong, it had to be said. Though ‘half-naked’ wasn’t a bad description, to be honest. The only thing the Asian-looking Demigoddess wore was a silver robe over her body, and it was more a transparent silvery nightgown than anything destined to wear in public. She had the Belt and her sandals, a golden brooch for her hair...and nothing else.

“Thank you Jackson, but I am going to do it. Time to see if I can seduce a hero, no?”

And the daughter of Aphrodite began to descend the large black stairs leading to the dam...and their ‘invincible protector’.

“Jackson, please tell me this isn’t the entirety of your plan.” Luke pleaded.

“It wasn’t my plan at all,” the son of Poseidon didn’t stop watching Drew Tanaka... if he was wrong, he would have to activate one of his contingencies very, very fast. “Odysseus is not a man known for engaging into adulterous affairs. But he is not here, so I had to...improvise.”

“This is sheer folly!”

“You prefer to fight Achilles, sword in hand, my treacherous lieutenant?”

“No, but...but Tanaka has no chance of seducing him! He may have a weakness for women, but it was after the battles fought under the walls of Troy! The moment he sees her, he will know there’s something wrong and sound the alarm!”

“That’s why I gave her the Belt of Briseis.”

“You gave her what?”

“**Achilles, kiss me**.”

Perseus cackled as the ‘legendary hero’, who had been literally as immobile as a statue since he saw Drew Tanaka approach, removed his helmet and obeyed the command.

If Perseus had to judge the ‘performance’, he would say Charmspeak might have been not necessary to achieve that result.

Operation aside, the faces of Ethan, Luke, Miranda, and Jason as Achilles and the seductress did their best to suck the tongue of the other out? *Priceless*. The instant-photos were going to sell extremely well...especially those of the donkey’s astonished expression.

“But...but...she can’t...” Luke said weakly as Achilles abandoned his heavy weapons, shield, and most equipment to carry the daughter of Aphrodite bridal-style towards the small fort which was undoubtedly the residence of the dam’s guardian.

“She can.” Perseus cackled louder, something which at last attracted him plenty of angry glares. He didn’t care. “My seductive lieutenant has achieved her mission, now yours can begin! Hurry up, I do not pay you to gawk and standing idle...”

“Technically Jackson, you don’t pay us at all!”

“Details, my treacherous lieutenant, details...”

**24 May 2006, the Phlegethon Dam, the Underworld**

The loud explosion was her first clue the plan had worked...and it was time to go.

Drew nonetheless caressed the muscular torso and several other incredible parts of the warrior anatomy before leaving the bed.

“You have touched everything you wanted, oh daughter of Aphrodite?”

He didn’t manage to make her blush or give her a feeling of unease.

“I should return you the question, hero. You didn’t exactly need a lot of incentives to touch me.”

In fact, aside from the first order to kiss her, the Charmspeak orders had been far and few between, and were mostly given when someone brayed loudly outside – the donkey was going to pay for that.

“I was taken hostage.”

The fifteen-years-old seductress gave him a disbelieving look...which didn’t vanish when the sheets were thrown aside to reveal the masculine perfection that was the hero of the Trojan War.

“I want to think you preferred my company to guarding the dam.”

“You aren’t wrong,” Gods, this smile of bad boy was roguish and almost tempted her to-

A new explosion resonated, and the ground shook under her naked feet.

Faster than she could say it, Achilles was behind her, his lips touching her neck.

“But you have the Belt of Briseis too. And it is a little known fact I swore to never hurt a woman carrying it as long as she prove to be not my enemy.”

Had Jackson known? Of course he must have. The infuriating son of Poseidon seemed to know everything...especially details few Demigods discovered even after dozens of major Quests.

Achilles sighed loudly.

“Hades...or whoever will end up in charge of the post of overseer...is really going to make me pay for failing to defend the dam, unfortunately.”

The black-haired Demigoddess took his right hand in hers.

“You could come with us.” Jackson had not suggested anything of the sort, but she somehow doubted he would refuse if she recruited *Achilles*.

“Is it the Belt of Briseis speaking or your heart?” the dream of all girls in masculine form asked before smirking at her incomprehension. “Ah, I see the one who gave it to you didn’t explain all the powers of the object.”

“I know it can only be worn by a daughter of Aphrodite...like Briseis.”

“It is only the least impressive of its powers,” the vanquisher of Prince Hector murmured as he pressed himself against her. “When you threw yourself into my arms-“

“You didn’t exactly protest,” Drew retorted but Achilles ignored her.

“-and did what you did, the Belt gave you a little increase in strength and skill, at the price of being cursed with more tender feelings for the one you tried to seduce.” The warrior smiled. “The blessings of Aphrodite always cut both ways.”

Drew didn’t feel like it was bad deal at all...it wasn’t like the man she had distracted while the others sabotaged the dam was ugly or repulsive.

“But no, I won’t come with you...Drew.” Hearing her name spoken by these lips gave her feelings she had never felt at Byzantium. Damn it, less than a day wasn’t enough to truly fall in love someone...was it? “I have people I care about in the Underworld, and while failing to defend the dam can be blamed on the Belt of Briseis, outright opposition to the Gods is treason and will be punished as such. Should I escape this realm, it will be my friends and my family who will pay the price...and Thanatos is a relentless hunter. He won’t be discouraged by my abilities.”

Acting faster than her eyes could follow again, his lips met hers and the contact was everything she had dreamed for several years. Maybe it was the Belt speaking...and maybe not.

A finger touched it, and a word of power was uttered by the Greek warrior.

In an instant, the white armour she had removed hours ago was back on her, as was all her equipment...but the Belt was still here, and suddenly she felt...stronger. Stronger and filled with confidence she didn’t have.

“We will meet again, lover. Now go, your fellow Questers must wait for you.”

As more thunderous explosions and a noise to literally wake up the dead growled everywhere, Drew recognised the truth in these words and ran out...in time to see a gigantic piece of dark stone as tall as a small mountain from the barrage be torn apart from what had been an impressive monument ordered by Hades. More followed in short order, and the dam explosion after explosion ceased to be.

And from each hole the river of flames known as the Phlegethon roared in fury, free for the first time since the Gods ruled. Free to flow through the ruin of the gigantic dam, and to flood Asphodel.

“You took your sweet time,” the red donkey brayed.

“Shut up, Jake.”

“You know, a donkey’s nose is far superior to a human, and I smell him everywhere on you, and I say-“

“In case you forgot, food supplies are limited.” Her long black hair flew in the wind as the destruction continued and the rare winds of Hell no doubt informed the Lord of the Underworld of the massive act of vandalism Jackson had imagined and the rest of the Squad had participated in. “And I wouldn’t say no if someone proposed a donkey steak...”

**24 May 2006, flooded Fields of Asphodel, the Underworld**

It was a time of apocalypse. If it wasn’t, Dakota had no idea what would deserve the name.

They had heard the explosions, the roar of malevolent joy...then the waves of fire had come.

The Phlegethon was known to be a river of flames, but there was a difference between knowing it and seeing it unleashed against the plains of the dead.

A normal river, even a powerful one, would have lost strength by now, or the overflow made possible by the dam would have disappeared, making sure there were no second or third waves.

But the Phlegethon was no normal river, and with the dam destroyed, it was as if millennia spent seething in rage were at last unleashed in a series of cataclysms which truly deserved the name *tsunami*.

Jackson – and their Quest members, one couldn’t forget it – had done what no hero or rebellious Demigod had done; they had altered the very aspect of Hell.

The Phlegethon didn’t seem to stop pouring more liquid-flame into Asphodel, and while carrion birds of unnatural size had tried to attack them before Lou Ellen massacred them with one spell, there had been no divine reaction to the disaster-level event.

And that meant that right now, the liquid-flame levels, far from returning to non-existence, were continuing to rise at the bottom of the tortured hill where they had dug up one of the Minotaur’s caches and were waiting for the other half of the Suicide Squad.

“The Big Three aren’t going to be happy with us...” The son of Bacchus grimaced.

“Only the Big Three?” Clarisse laughed hysterically. “Jackson drowned Asphodel under the flames of an infernal river! Except my father, everyone is going to be *very* angry!”

Left unsaid, if he could do that to a domain of the Big Three, why wouldn’t he do it somewhere else?

“He broke a marvel of architecture,” Annabeth smiled evilly. “On my honour of spider’s soul, I swear he deserves whatever will happen to him!”

For those who wondered, the daughter of Athena’s sanity hadn’t returned, thank you for worrying about it.

“Never mind that. We can worry about the Olympians when we will get out of the Underworld...” if they ever got out, because after everything Jackson had done, Hades was going to be in a murderous rage. The souls of the Asphodel weren’t dead, but now they were trying to float and shrieked in anger.

Imagine an ocean the colour of blood, perpetually in flames. Now add it millions or tens of millions of arms raised and an infernal cacophony of shades’ angry and traumatized screams.

It was a very disturbing spectacle, though the correct word for it might be ‘horrific’.

“Where is our ship?”

As if waiting only the question to be uttered – and by that point, Dakota wouldn’t even be surprised if that was the case – a gigantic maelstrom formed not far from their point of observation surrounded by liquid-flame.

And from it a massive warship straight from the Age of Sail emerged. It was like the hull was propelled by the infernal currents.

“Does...are you hearing the same music I do?”

“Yes...”

It was suddenly like an orchestra had decided to play...just as they were able to observe the monumental sail ship which had arrived from nowhere.

And near the top of the biggest mast, of course, was Perseus Jackson, grinning like the maniac he was.

Because who else would consider stealing a massive hull with three masts and dozens of dangerous cannons from the Lord of Hell?

“SUICIDE SQUAD! I OFFICIALLY DECLARE THE START OF THE PHLEGETHON REGATTA!”

This was really a competition no member of an Olympic committee would ever approve...

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“Welcome, Demigoddesses and Demigods, aboard the *Indomptable*, ship of the line of the second rank, eighty guns, two decks, Tonnant-class, formerly of the Imperial French Navy!” Jackson made a few grand bows and curtsies for the next ten seconds. “We have a serious problem.”

“You mean, aside from the fact we have transformed Asphodel into a sea of flames and stolen one of the warships the Rich One tithed from the Napoleonic Wars?”

“Yes, my treacherous lieutenant, aside from that.”

“Is it about the fact we are sailing on a sea of flames and that mortal wood isn’t going to survive long?” Annabeth Chase questioned with derision.

“No, I’ve placed an artefact below your feet which prevents that sort of nasty problem from happening. Now-“

“Is it about Drew Tanaka fucking Achilles?”

“She did what?” The son of Bacchus spilled his Kool-Aid and coughed violently.

“I don’t even know why I’m surprised,” Lou Ellen sighed.

“Your punishment is going to be remembered for eternity once this Quest is over,” Zoë Nightshade said.

“Why?” The daughter of Aphrodite raised her eyebrows and made a rude gesture in return. “In case you forget, our insane leader just made sure we replaced Asphodel by a sea of flames. Either the Gods will kill us for that, or they won’t. Whether I took a lover or not isn’t going to matter...besides who will punish me? The Olympians are paragons of marital virtue...oh wait, they aren’t.”

The Huntress glared at the Asian-looking Demigoddess, who glared back, evidently unimpressed. Ethan frowned. There was something different about the daughter of Aphrodite now. Something...he wasn’t able to properly describe.

“Now that the girls have finished gossiping-“

“WE ARE-“

“**Be quiet**.” Charmspeak was really a terrifying weapon for a charismatic speaker. “As I was saying, we have a significant problem. I have reasons to believe the throne of the Underworld is currently empty.”

For once, there was no grin, no mad expression which screamed ‘I am lying to you with pleasure’.

“Ridiculous,” the blonde daughter of Athena scoffed. “The Lord of the Underworld is as powerful as his brothers, and in his realm even more so. Who would have the power to invade his domain when his armies are guarding all entrances and exits?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” The green-eyed son of Poseidon shook his head before his face took a dark expression. “To be particularly blunt, the affair stinks, *Annabeth*. The moment the dam was destroyed and the Phlegethon was freed from its former riverbed, we lost the effect of surprise and the Underworld King should have located us without effort. I would still have the advantage, being naturally proficient at naval warfare while he isn’t, but the moment this happened, we still should have been under constant and all-out attacks. Yet aside a few isolated enemies here and there, there isn’t any opposition worth talking about.”

“Isn’t it possible that your plan to go through the Labyrinth surprised it more than you accounted for?” the black-haired son of Bacchus had returned to his flask of Kool-Aid after the vigorous exchanges of opinion. “If neither Caligula nor the Immortal Sorceress warned him, member of the Big Three or not, he will need several days to transfer several armies to Asphodel...”

“Dakota, a God *is* his domain; unless most of its power, influence, and focus are elsewhere, the ties go so deep that for the Lord of the Underworld to not locate us would require him to be deaf, blind, and actively try to stay that way for as long we are here. No. There are only two possible reasons why we aren’t under enemy attack after what we’ve done. One: the Lord of Darkness is playing with us; he has decided it’s better for us to exhaust ourselves on our way to reach his Dark Palace. Two: the eldest brother of the Thunderous Aggressive Braggart isn’t in a position to smite us. The former is the sadistic option. The latter means the entire series of incidents since the Winter Solstice is a trap whose sole goal is to provoke a civil war between different factions of Olympus...and we’re in the middle of it.”

The grin was back mere seconds after.

“Isn’t life wonderful?”

The noise of the anchor being levitated by Jackson’s power and the sails being unfurled the same way – it was like the winds and the flames around them obeyed the madman’s gestures – almost prevented the screams of outrage from arriving to his ears...almost.

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If there was something that Zoë hated more than staying in company of male teenagers for too long, it was staying on a ship commanded by a person she didn’t trust and whose resistance to the seas was questionable at best.

The Huntress of Artemis logically loathed the current situation. The ship commander was a boy she had a thousand good reasons to distrust, there were many more males aboard, and the girls present were either crazy or lost forever to the influence of Lady Artemis. If she had the choice, she would have barricaded herself in one of the cabins until they reached the end of the new sea Jackson had created.

A new sea. In Hell. It should be impossible, but the Phlegethon was everywhere, it was deep enough to let a ship like the *Indomptable* sail without issues of navigation.

“Jackson we must...what are you wearing, by the Hunt’s arrows?”

The treacherous son of Poseidon still wore his black armour, but he had added a bright orange coat of the eighteenth century over it. The result was...it was hurting her eyes. And there was...no, no and no.

“Is that a pirate hat?”

“It is a pirate tricorn.” The mad boy smiled. “And it is Captain Jackson, my huntress lieutenant.”

“I am not your huntress lieutenant!”

“I note you didn’t deny the ‘Captain’ part...”

Zoë closed her eyes and counted to ten, hoping that when her vision was restored, all of it would prove to be a terrible and short-timed hallucination.

Alas, the nightmare refused to end when she stared at the damned spawn of the Sea God.

“Enough.”

“But we haven’t begun anything! Who’s a good dog? That’s a good dog!”

While she had been...trying to keep her sanity, Jackson had turned towards all his gargoyles – which had volunteered to become a pitiful crew – and then proceeded to give caresses and...*cookies* to his new pet Hellhound.

“You are giving cookies to the Hellhound?”

“I must give her something she will digest...and these biscuits are excellent for an animal which will grow a lot...I think. I left my copy of *How to raise your Hellhound for Dummies* at New Byzantium.”

“This book doesn’t exist.”

“Of course it does! But I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of it. Mostly everything which is about monstrous education or training isn’t sent to the Huntresses of Artemis. You are on the ban list of all interesting libraries.”

“All *traitor-affiliated libraries*, you mean.”

Jackson shrugged.

“See? That’s the sort of inflexible mentality nobody likes!”

“Enough.” Damn it, he had almost forced her to lose track of the topic she wanted to speak about. “The medallion of the Roman incestuous whore. Give it back. Now.”

“Why are you saying ‘give it back’, pray tell? It never belonged to you.”

“It belongs to Lady Artemis-“

“Wrong, it is the power of Selene.” The son of Poseidon interrupted her. “And this is a precious object forged via the arcane methods of the Roman Demigods and Demigoddesses. You are part of the Greek pantheon. Either way, your claim of ownership is null.”

“The same can be said about yours.”

“I took it from its owner.” Zoë really, really didn’t like the glint in those treacherous eyes. “I did all the work and saved the day when your anger and your lack of judgement almost lead the Suicide Squad to disaster and death. Let’s call that...the Right of Thievery!”

The immortal Huntress wondered what sort of madness had led a single God to believe Jackson shouldn’t be executed at once. She just prayed it wasn’t a contagious disease.

“Lady Artemis and the Hunt have a greater claim to it.”

“No, they don’t.” Perseus countered. “Selene was the full moon before the twins decided it was better for the competition to be removed. Artemis was the crescent before she claimed the full mantle. Both were archers, but the Titaness was not a virgin, she was fully associated with the silver shades, and she certainly didn’t have any kinship with the wild animals. Selene’s Roman name is Luna, in case you didn’t know.”

“I knew it, I was alive when the Roman Empire conquered...everything!”

“You must have hated the period,” Jackson commented. “There are many good things about Roman culture that you will-“

“Stop. I don’t want to hear you anymore. Give me the medallion, I will protect it until I meet Lady Artemis again.”

“This is an awful idea.” The green eyes looked back at her with pity. “There is a reason why I didn’t give it back to you. In her persona of Neo Selene, Caligula’s sister imbued the medallion to strike at you. If you touch it-“

“I am protected by Lady Artemis and her power is far stronger than this treacherous incest-loving woman. The medallion, now, or I will make sure Artemis will kill you the moment we leave the Underworld!”

“You wound me terribly.” Jackson breathed out in what had to be fake sadness. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

With the rapidity of a snake – which was likely the animal he was in a previous life – the medallion was thrown in her direction fast but Zoë caught it instinctively in her right hand.

Pain erupted in her body a heartbeat later.

The servant of Artemis screamed in pain.

And for a second the ship and the ocean of flames surrounding them disappeared.

The Circus Maximus of Caligula was around her. She saw the woman who dared trying usurp her Goddess’ throne and duties.

“**This is really unexpected**,” the Huntress heard the Roman whore giggle, “**Thank the son of Poseidon for me, *my* Huntress..**.”

What happened next was not uttered in any language known to man, and yet Zoë understood it. It was...agonising.

**The Moon. Neo Selene. Luna. The Moon. Neo Selene. Luna. The Moon. Neo Selene. Luna. The Titaness of the Moon calls you to serve. The Moon. Neo Selene. Luna**

Ten thousand flashes of silver light struck her. The Roman buildings and the Labyrinth disappeared again.

Zoë Nightshade screamed and screamed...and then she found herself back on the upper deck of the warship sailing the new Asphodel Sea.

Her eyes blinked and suddenly felt weak...but not enough to not notice a heavy chain of silver light fading in the air.

The next second, she screamed in horror. Her clothes of Huntress were missing. The clothes which had been her attire for several decades were gone. And to her shock, the replacement clothes...it was a silver armour akin to those worn by Roman legionnaires, except it was entirely silver, lighter, shining with the power of the moon, and espousing the forms of her body as to reveal everything. And as she tried to remove it as fast as she could, Zoë despaired, because the metallic gloves allowing an archer to use the dexterity of all his finger, the lorica, and the rest of the clothes like the silver boots were stuck to her.

This was...this was-

“At the risk of sounding immature...” Perseus Jackson cleared his throat, and at this moment, Zoë truly wanted to kill the boy, as much as she wanted to sever the balls of Heracles. “I told you beforehand it was a bad idea.”

The Huntress of Artemis screamed in anger.

The Hellhound took it as a sign she wanted to play with her and began to lick her face with her disgusting tongue. And it smelled like cookies.

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“Jackson, whatever game you’re playing, please stop.”

Luke should have said it far earlier, not when they were on a sea of tortured souls and fire, but now it was an absolute necessity.

“Which game are you referring to? I am playing a lot of them you know. I am a chessmaster, a professional poker player, a-

“I’m referring to what you did to Zoë Nightshade.”

“Oh,” the blonde-haired Quester was not naive enough to think the word was embarrassment. “I’m not playing any games with her.”

“Bullshit,” this was a stronger answer he wanted to make, but with Jackson, it was necessary. “She’s been staying in her cabin since you changed her clothes in this ridiculous-“

“-and sexy...”

“and...se...no! This isn’t the question! You are responsible for this!”

“I am not!” the son of Poseidon replied calmly, drinking a cup filled with apple juice. “I will remind you that our dear huntress threatened me and promised me a long and painful death if I did not give her the medallion of Julia Drusilla. I insisted it was a bad idea, but she refused to listen to my warnings. So tell me, Lawrence...” the grin had little joy in it, but it was as mad as ever, “can I be guilty when I do everything in my power to protect someone and the idiotic girl still tries to plunge her hand into the trap?”

“Yes.”

“You’re no fun at all, my heroic lieutenant!” the younger Demigod complained.

“Lady Artemis is going to kill you, you know. Especially...what is going to happen to Nightshade anyway?”

Perseus Jackson shrugged.

“For the short-term? Absolutely nothing.”

“Nothing?” Luke didn’t believe it for a single second.

“Nothing, don’t look at me like that, Lysander,” the green-eyed mad boy threw a cookie to the Hellhound, generating panic in the rank of the gargoyles trampled by the salivating monster. “We are in the Underworld. The influence of the Moon, or any real power not affiliated with Death and Hell for that matter, is really negligible here. The power of the medallion was barely sufficient to forge a link between the Huntress and Neo Selene and give her a fashionable new look. I’m really surprised it was able to change Zoë Nightshade so much, to be honest.”

Luke watched the Demigod who had changed Asphodel in this hellish sea deliberately. For once, the son of Poseidon seemed sincere...as sincere as a trickster like him could be.

“Why?”

“At the risk of saying the obvious, Zoë Nightshade is a millennia-old Huntress. Her allegiance to the Goddess of the Hunt and her hatred of boys is unquestionable. Moreover, she’s not a mere huntress. Nightshade is the chief lieutenant of the God of Music’s twin. In profane words, the blessings and boons granted by the divine power of an Olympian are strong in her.”

“Yet when she touched the medallion, she changed.”

“Indeed,” Jackson approved. “And it raises interesting questions. I’m rather confident Julia Drusilla is far weaker than the Goddess she wishes to usurp right now. It’s not like you claim crumbs of a Titaness’ power is going to make you the equal of an Olympian, the world doesn’t work like that. It isn’t that she is better known or more worshipped. It isn’t...well, I don’t intend to list everything. But let me assure you, Castellan, the fact Nightshade got this silver armour instead of her Huntress clothes shouldn’t have happened.”

“And yet it did...and I have a feeling you are responsible.”

“You wound me.” The exaggerated protestation and theatrical performance didn’t incite Luke to believe Jackson. “I am-“

“You aren’t loyal to Olympus, don’t try to pretend otherwise. Why did it happen, if you weren’t involved?”

“I can only make guesses...”

“Then your best guesses.”

“Fine, fine,” the green-eyed boy muttered as he petted the Hellhound. “In my opinion, it’s a combination of two factors. Above all, the Goddess of Wild Animals must have intermingled the domains of the Moon and the Hunt far more than it should be reasonable. Because our dear huntress guardian shouldn’t have a chink in her soul-armour, so to speak, if she wasn’t tied to the Moon itself.”

“And the second factor?”

“The Moon prefers the claim of Julia Drusilla in her personality of Neo Selene to the Goddess currently holding said power.”

“The Moon itself?”

“Is it that surprising?” Perseus Jackson seemed rather...sincere. “To claim a domain, you have to be attuned to it. Do you think my father would be a fine God of the Oceans if he hated swimming?”

Evidently, when he put it like that...

“No.”

“No,” the infuriating Demigod repeated before chuckling. “It is the same way for every God in existence...and those who wished to follow in their steps. You can’t be a good God of Music if trying to play an instrument of music is a torture for you. You won’t be a competent Goddess of Family if you want to be left alone and isolated. A deity must be attuned to their domain so that they influence the power and their worshippers through it. If they don’t...”

For some reason, the last three words scared Luke more than the rest of the speech.

“This is still very hypothetical. And I note you only spoke for the short-term.”

“By short-term, I mean as long as we stay in the Underworld. Titaness or Goddess of the Moon, their powers are negligible here. Once we leave it...well, I suppose will find out in due time. It’s half of the fun, I think.”

“You’re utterly crazy.”

“And everyone loves me for it.”

Luke frowned. ‘Loving’ was not the word he would have used...’exasperating’ was far more apt.

“You realise, of course, that Olympus’ suspicions are-“

“KRAKEN!” Ethan Nakamura shouted from his position high up in the masts. “WE HAVE A KRAKEN AT STARBOARD!”

“Ah,” Perseus smirked, the madman. “So there is someone in command of Hell...and he or she has a sense of humour.”

“Humour?” Luke asked as the leader of the Suicide Squad grabbed a ridiculously big spyglass from the pockets of his orange Napoleonic uniform.

“This is the monster which was ordered to devour Princess Andromeda several millennia ago, Liam. A monster which was killed by a hero called Perseus, if the myths can be trusted.”

This was incredibly dark humour, if the son of Poseidon was right.

“Asterius! Hoist the black flag! Spider-Chase! Add some sails, I don’t care if you weave them yourself! We are going to challenge this mass of tentacles to a race it will remember for the rest of its stay in Hell!”

“You don’t want to fight it?”

Something erupted from the sea of flames about...a kilometre away. It was extremely huge. It had spiked tentacles and a gigantic maw everywhere. And it looked passably angry.

And as the seconds, as more of its body was revealed...the monster was definitely bigger than the second-rank ship of the line that Jackson had stolen somewhere.

“If you want to fight it, my heroic lieutenant, I won’t try to stop you...I will insist you swim to reach it, though. This ship is a bit fragile, and for some reason which escapes me, the insurance companies refused all the contracts I sent their way...”

**25 May 2006, the ‘Asphodel Sea’, the Underworld**

“You looked tired, Jackson.”

“Nonsense, my dear sorceress. I am in the best health of my life!” And not a second later, the son of Poseidon yawned before adding to it all the classic signs of exhaustion.

“I see that.” Lou Ellen replied. “Seriously, Jackson, you should rest.”

“I should mention that half of the speed of the *Indomptable* is due to my humble efforts,” the green-eyed boy yawned again before petting absently the Hellhound he had ‘purchased’ in the Labyrinth. “If I go to my cabin and close my eyes, we are going to slow down very quickly...and our pursuer will catch up with us.”

Lou didn’t need to ask what the son of the Earthshaker was talking about. The kraken had been for an entire hell-day a constant presence on this ocean of flames.

“Isn’t there a spell I could cast to replace you?”

The daughter of Hecate wasn’t willing to sell her life for Perseus Jackson, but past battles and insane events had proven the survival of the ‘Suicide Squad’ entirely depended upon him and his mad ideas. The more the scion of the God of Seas and Oceans was exhausted, the worse their chances were.

“I appreciate it, but unfortunately,” the black-haired Demigod grimaced, not bothering to hide its tiredness, “hydrokinesis is far from a simple art. It’s a Demigod talent reserved to the children of my father, and I haven’t found a way to mimic it...yet. And while I can explain what I do, we are in pretty much the worst conditions to practise. The liquid-flame of the Phlegethon is fighting me every step of the way.”

“You could force this ship to go faster on a normal ocean?”

“I could maintain the current speed while sleeping,” Jackson corrected, adjusting his tricorn over his head. “Going faster...yes, we could do it, though it would put more strain upon the wooden hull. Something I am always reluctant to do. I don’t want to go swimming in this new Asphodel Sea.”

“According to the myths, the Phlegethon River doesn’t kill if you bathe or drink it.” The young blonde-haired sorceress pointed out.

“In the myths, the Phlegethon hadn’t been infused by the shock with the billions of souls of Asphodel either,” the mind behind said idea replied. “Some people accuse me of madness, but without a considerable number of lab rats to test the waters, I am not going to risk it. And obviously that means a conventional battle against this kraken which follows up is out of the question.”

“You do not desire emulating your namesake?” Lou joked.

“Oh I do! But my predecessor and namesake had something I lack: the head of Medusa.”

The black-eyed Demigoddess blinked.

“If the tales are true, the first Perseus killed the monster without using the petrifying power of the Gorgon’s head.”

“Yes, yes, using nothing but his sword, Perseus the Brave dealt the monster a series of lethal blows which killed it and by it, saved the life of the beautiful Princess.” The sarcasm was so evident it was kind of useless to wonder if Jackson believed the story was true or not. “You have seen the kraken from afar. Do you really believe a single Demigod, even a son of Zeus, can triumph over it with a sword and a shield?”

“No. At least not without divine help...or a monster’s head to make the fight more equitable.”

“That’s my opinion too,” the son of Poseidon said, continuing to pet the enormous Hellhound by his side. “And before you ask, no, I don’t know a spell which would turn the situation in our favour.”

“Couldn’t the cannons be used to increase the power of our spells? Surely you modified them, right?”

This time the – insane – warship’s captain chuckled.

“I’m beginning to enjoy the way you’re thinking, but no, those are the original cannons of the *Indomptable*. I used Asterius’ connections to remove the rust and make them serviceable again...that’s everything I did.”

“That’s all? I don’t believe you.”

“My dear sorceress, the faith you have in my skills is not something I will discourage...but there’s a limit of how many artefacts and special items I can requisition and buy while the Olympians have their back turned. And where the cannons are concerned, I have no direct access to the God of Smiths’ forge-complexes. To order around what some Demigods call ‘magi-tech’, I need a support base...and since I was constantly on the run, it’s a bit difficult to have one.”

For a few seconds, the facade of arrogance and perpetual infuriating behaviour seemed to weaken, and Lou Ellen saw beyond the wall of deception the Earthshaker’s son had built around his soul. At this moment, he was just a lonely boy devoured by revenge and his tricks were everything left to him on a very dark path.

Then the mask reasserted itself. But the blonde Demigoddess was sure of what she had been able to perceive.

“Do you really think you can stay awake until the Kraken abandons the pursuit?”

“I think I can,” the yawn made after the words were uttered was not exactly reassuring. “It’s that or you find me Medusa...”

“In the middle of a sea of flames? I am a sorceress, not a miracle-maker...”

**26 May 2006, the Asphodel Sea, the Underworld**

Things had been going a bit too well this morning. The kraken had been nowhere in sight after the ‘hell-night’ – which was less a night and more a dark day shaken by monstrous red lightning and huge columns of smoke and the screams of souls in agony.

There was a positive side to all of this: all Questers were convinced it was primordial to stay alive. Seeing how bad Hell was for the people who didn’t achieve Elysium – even if Jackson had made it worse, obviously – Miranda Gardiner desperately wanted to go back to the normal world and live a plentiful life.

The Underworld truly deserved the ‘Hell’ nicknames people gave it for millennia. It wasn’t a nice place. It was better to stay alive as long as possible.

And then a squadron of dead warriors riding skeleton-pegasi arrived in attack formation so fast the shout of alarms from Nakamura arrived after arrows and javelins were shredding the sails.

“Oh, look,” Jackson rushed out of his cabin...and why was he bothering taking this horror of orange uniform, by Olympus? “It’s King Minable.”

This, of course, displeased considerably the leader of the shades.

“IT’S KING MINOS, INSOLENT HERO!”

“Minos, Minable, where’s the difference?” Then Perseus Jackson grinned, which, as everyone knew it, was a really bad sign. “Unless...you’re *that* Minos! Former husband of Queen Pasiphaë...who has long divorced you and established as a power in her own right while you played ‘Judge of the Dead’!”

“LIES! NOW DIE, INSOLENT HERO!”

But this time Lou Ellen had drawn one of her spell-cards and incinerated several flying skeletons along with the riders, and suddenly the Minotaur jumped, delivering dozens of axe strikes whenever the enemies were in range. Miranda herself launched several acid-seeds, and as more and more Demigods joined the battle, it was soon a one-sided slaughter of skeletons and shades.

“You didn’t even bother greeting your stepson?” How could Jackson continue his banter as he observed the carnage from the Hellhound’s back was a mystery for the ages. “Shame on you, ex-King of Crete!”

“I AM THE TRUE KING! MY FATHER ZEUS GAVE ME THE ISLAND TO DO AS I DESIRE!”

“Yes, as long as you live,” the son of Poseidon joyously declared. “And you don’t. In fact, you haven’t breathed in millennia. And...sorry, are you sure you’re a son of Zeus? You’re really ugly, usually they tend to have far better looks than that!”

Minos’ shade was violently dismounted by the Minotaur of all...members of the Suicide Squad, and the seas’ scion words were soon justified. Some Demigods and Demigoddesses weren’t supermodels or anything approaching this level of beauty – Clarisse La Rue for example was pretty much at the other end of the spectrum – but the children of Zeus-Jupiter had in general in common fair looks and good genes, provided they trained correctly.

Minos...the shade of the dead King had a terrible glare, but his ghostly body and his face were extremely unappealing to look at. Seriously, it was like a bandit had found a crown and a few impressive clothes under a bridge and was now trying to pass as a ruler.

“I am going to take your life, sea-spawn!” the dead son of Zeus promised. “And once you are no more, my father will free me from this insipid job and allow me to rise to Olympus! So it has been promised, so it shall be!”

“Ah, the promises of the Lord of the Skies...” Jackson said dreamingly. “There is only a small problem with it. Your father won’t be able to convince anyone to let your soul ascend to a higher plane of existence if you are trapped into a weapon of Stygian iron.”

“Stygian iron is the property of children of the Dark One, fool!” Minos cackled. “Its forging is a secret known by few and the Lord of Underworld do not-“

The shade brutally stopped as the insane boy had just drawn a small dagger from behind his clothes.

And it wasn’t made of Imperial Gold.

“Please continue,” Perseus Jackson said in a very ironic tone. “I am always ready to hear more about Stygian Iron.”

“How...how did you...”

The black-haired Demigod could move with a frightening celerity when he felt like it, and this was the case right now. One stab, and the shade of Minos shrieked as the dagger seemed...no, there was no seemed, it absorbed the shade’s essence.

The defunct son of Zeus perished again, and if his screams were any indication, the process wasn’t painless.

“I wasn’t joking about your wife divorcing you, by the way.” The grin on his face was memorable and...okay, how could someone grin so much? “Now where were we?”

Hundred of metres behind their sea transport, the liquid-flame exploded, and the kraken made its great return in its terrible glory, maws and tentacles included.

“Ah yes, it was just a diversion to slow us down.” Jackson sighed and threw the dagger of Stygian Iron with a surprising strength hundreds of metres away...right in one of the maws of the legendary monster. “Unfurl the sails and hold on to something, I am going to push the ship as hard as it can go to escape the kraken.”

“Was the dagger supposed to do something?” Miranda asked. It didn’t seem to have done anything to the sea creature: the kraken was not injured from her post of observation.

“Hmm...oh no! I just wanted to banish King Minable’s soul for several centuries. As long as no one recovers the dagger, they won’t able to extract his soul...I think the Immortal Sorceress will pay me nicely for that service.”

Yes, and Zeus was going to want Jackson dead yesterday for that insult and humiliation...but since he already wanted to kill him long before that...

“Suicide Squad! To your duties, we have a kraken to taunt!”

Of course he would say that...

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

Before her mind was opened to the Truth, Annabeth believed Jackson was mad.

After her mind was opened to the Truth, her illuminated soul still believed the son of Poseidon’s skull had been slammed against a wall too many times. Jackson was truly insane.

“Tourists, lieutenants, allies, we thank you profusely for having chosen Jackson Overseas International for your Grand Phlegethon Cruise and we hope you have enjoyed the journey. If you desire to buy T-shirts, photos, or any kind of souvenirs, the gargoyle mail service of New Byzantium will be happy to fulfil each and every one of your requests after the Summer Solstice!”

“You are going to try to fill your pockets with the Demigod’s hard-earned money?” the red donkey brayed.

“There is no ‘try’, Junior,” the son of Poseidon boasted like it was something to be proud of. “And I will remind you sailing on the *Indomptable* was free for your nice and red long ears despite your lamentable excuse not to climb up the masts or make sailor’s knots...”

“I am trapped into a donkey’s body!”

“See, my treacherous lieutenant? He always answers with the same unsatisfactory excuse...”

Thank the will of the Fates she had been granted the Truth, otherwise the twelve-year-old Demigoddess would be busy strangling Seaweed Brain.

Annabeth closed her eyes, and decided the best solution was to ignore this scene of...she didn’t find the words. Chaos? For some reason, it seemed too weak.

Taking care not to advance too far from the rest of the Squad, the soul trapped into the body of a blonde girl climbed up what appeared to be a dusty and long-forgotten path over the volcanic grounds of Hell.

Yes, Hell. The terrain was uneven and sickened, more of these dark rocks and dark cliffs which marked the limit of the disaster zone that were now the submerged Fields of Asphodel – given the depth of the liquid-flame, ‘flooded’ was insufficient to properly describe it.

The worst part, everything Jackson had ordered, the destruction of this prodigious architectural marvel that was the dam, the destruction of the old Asphodel, his victory over Minos and his decision not to fight the Kraken...it had worked.

It had taken eight days of nightmarish travel, but she could see the dark fortress-palace of Hades less than...it had to be between five and eight kilometres, as far as she estimated.

“You shouldn’t walk so far ahead, short one,” an animal voice resonated behind her. Because of course, Jackson had thought recruiting the Minotaur was a good idea.

“Why? You think I can’t deal with a few skeletons?”

“Asterius isn’t worried about the skeletons,” Jackson said, walking quickly behind his ‘friend’. “And neither should you. Believe me when I say the kraken which I wasn’t able to proclaim my eternal friendship to was not and never will be the most redoubtable weapon of the Lord of the Underworld.”

“I will keep that in mind...” Annabeth muttered. “Seaweed Brain.”

The conversation had distracted her, which was why the arrival to the ridge separating the inner domain of Hades from the Asphodel cliffs caught her by surprise.

A surprise which was near-instantly overwhelmed by the sight awaiting her inefficient two eyes of human when she tried to analyse the sight offered to her.

“Jackson...you told us Asphodel was the last obstacle we would have to cross before reaching his seat of power!”

But when she turned to glare at him, the son of Poseidon wasn’t grinning, smiling, or playing jokes.

“Yes, I said it. And it appears I was wrong. But in my defence...the Styx isn’t supposed to flow here.”

“But it is here, General.” The Minotaur rumbled.

“Your ship-“ she began but the son of Poseidon interrupted her.

“Don’t even think about it.” Perseus Jackson shook his head. “I won’t be able to transfer it so close to the fortress without the defences creating big holes in its hull, and even if they don’t work, the ship was enchanted to resist the liquid-flame of the Phlegethon, not the most powerful of the Hell Rivers. We must use the bridge.”

Annabeth swallowed heavily. They were at least a kilometre away from the massive ramp leading to the dark pillars and ramp leading to it, but she could see what guarded it.

It had a canine shape, but there were modern cruise ships which were far smaller than that. In fact, the more you looked at it, the more it seemed the bridge had been built for the animal which was soundly asleep and preventing anyone not invited by Hades to cross.

But no mortal dog had three heads, and the Hellhound by Jackson’s side was a runt compared to this monster.

Somehow, the myths and the legends failed to do it justice.

It was Cerberus.

“So...” Jackson’s smirk was back. By the web, very bad things and a multitude of disasters were going to happen! “Who is the best singer of the Suicide Squad?”

“The best what?”

“We need a second Orpheus, Annie, since obviously none of us is a second Heracles. So I repeat my question. Who is the best singer of the Suicide Squad? Come on, we are in need of a talented voice here!”

One day she was going to strangle this crazy Demigod, and the spiders would acclaim her as their Goddess for the favour made to this poor world...

“The donkey has volunteered!”

“WHAT? NO, I AM A TERRRIBLE SINGER!”

“It’s that or you will be used as a source of steaks, my dear quadrupedal lieutenant...”

**Author’s note**: Hell will never be the same again...the Suicide Squad has invaded the Underworld and Asphodel paid the price. Next stop: Styx and Cerberus!

The other links were the story is available:

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

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