**Chapter 4**

**The Labyrinth Invasion**

*Before speaking about the Labyrinth, one must give the definition what exactly a Zone Mortalis is.*

*Ironically enough, the first mentions of them during Antiquity didn’t insist upon the potential danger they represented to all non-immortal beings. During these ancient times, these places were called the Mist Zones: immense areas where the reality of the mundane world was overwritten by the fantastic locations most people usually believed existed only in tales and legends.*

*But as the Gods began to hide more and more the proof of their existence into the Mist, it became vital to ensure the Zones were kept away from the human civilisations’ eyes. Thus Olympus doubled down on the quantity of Mist to make sure the mortals didn’t wander where they had no reason to be.*

*The consequences were all too predictable, sadly. Contrary to most continental masses, the Demigods travelled far too rarely to these locations. As a result, the Greek and Roman forces weren’t able to realise in time how explosive the growth in danger and monsters had been while they weren’t looking.*

*Worse, the lack of vigilance of Olympus struck again. The Gods and Goddesses – save a few exceptions – had missed an opportunity, and few of them had enclaves or fortresses to call their own in the middle of the Zones. To help Demigods complete their Quests, they would have to directly intervene, something they always hesitated to do for non-immortals when the ancient laws were enforced, whether or not the survival of their sons and daughters was at stake.*

*By the early 1600s, nobody called these dangerous locations Mist Zones anymore. Whatever the language, they were called Zones Mortalis, and no one argued this wasn’t an accurate name. Non-immortal’s lives – to a few rare exceptions – were in extreme danger once they crossed the fragile boundaries separating them from the non-Mist-shrouded world. Time ceased to be linear. Monsters could wait a league away, not in tens or hundreds, but in thousands or tens of thousands. Millenary-old spells could transform you into an animal or give you five arms in the blink of an eye. Enemies of the Olympians took refuge there, where their nemeses had enormous difficulties confirming their presence, much less reaching them.*

*Evidently, this state of affairs was one only the bravest and more prepared Demigods could answer, preferably in large numbers. Divine benediction was a must-have too.*

*The legendary Labyrinth, originally conceived and built on the orders of the inventor Daedalus, was one of the first Zones Mortalis to ever exist. Against the warnings of several Gods, one of the most famous sons of Athena had created a self-aware, self-expanding maze, and given it a malevolent consciousness. Like most Zones, it wanted to be found, and the Olympians’ analyses were that hundreds of mortals disappeared into its depths every year, never to be seen again. The rate of escape of Demigods from this continent-spanning underground maze was little better. Those who tended to survive the Labyrinth’s trials returned broken, mad, or crippled for life.*

*Predictably, the Olympian edict that no hero uninvolved in a Quest below Gold-rank was to enter the Labyrinth solved nothing at all. People continued to enter the Labyrinth at their risks and perils, and paid a dreadful price for it...*

Extract from *The Labyrinth: Zone Mortalis*, author unknown, the work was declared forbidden in 1963 by the Olympian Censorship Board and all known copies were seized and destroyed.

**8 May 2006, one of the Labyrinth entrances, somewhere in the woods of New York, United States of America**

“You’re completely insane!”

Annabeth’s lips had spoken the words before she could control herself, but she didn’t regret them. The son of Poseidon was even crazier than she had thought in her darkest nightmares. The Labyrinth, really? It wasn’t a short-cut! It was the maddest course of action one could imagine! Forget the Underworld and the lands Hades reigned upon, the Labyrinth was going to kill them all before they met a single Hellhound!

“Compliments are always appreciated, of course!” The bastard had the gall to answer. “No one has objections?”

“Why you-“

“Annabeth is right, Jackson,” Luke fortunately intervened before she could draw and throw a few of her knives. “The Labyrinth isn’t a solution. It’s nothing but a gigantic death trap. There’s a reason why it’s among the thirteen Zones Mortalis we Demigods are all supposed to avoid at all costs. By the pits, if we weren’t in a Great Quest, going there would be a crime by itself. The last guy to come out more or less unharmed was one of the Romans who went on Quest to see if Amelia Earhart was still alive.”

“Incorrect,” the green-eyed threat to Olympus grinned, “I am alive and sane, no?”

“Sane isn’t the word I would use,” Jake Mason muttered before speaking louder. “You went into the Labyrinth alone? With no support whatsoever?”

“I had Asterius the second time,” the green-armoured Demigod revealed. “And I had my friendly gargoyles to help me carry the loot and the supplies. Why so surprised?”

“Jackson, there are divine beings who refuse to enter the Labyrinth, and most of those who do rarely stay long.”

“A good thing we are all half-divine, then,” the boy who beat all records of insanity declared to them.

“This isn’t a strategy!” Annabeth shouted.

“Oh? Then what is yours, daughter of the Mistress of Owls?”

Technically, the title was correct, but it was spoken in such a mocking manner Annabeth didn’t doubt it was odious joke half of the contents had still to be revealed.

But the problem remained: the blonde Demigoddess had nothing to propose. The true entrances of Hades’ realm were guarded by several armies, and trying to outmanoeuvre the dead on a terrain they had months to fortify had never been something feasible.

“You don’t even know if an access to Hell exists in the Labyrinth,” she said at last.

“That’s incorrect,” the black-haired bastard of Poseidon was prompt to crush her argument. “I’ve seen it with my eyes.”

“But can you locate it again?” surprisingly, it was the daughter of Hecate who had asked the question. “It is a known fact the Labyrinth extends over several continents now, and its maze changes minute after minute. Beyond the entrance, the pathways you used for your last adventure will be no more.”

“That’s a good point,” the mad boy agreed before grabbing an artefact which looked like a red-painted joystick of a modern video game console. “That’s why I bought this from one of the official shops during my last excursion. This is a Lesser String. You point it at the destination-door, and the Lesser String will always indicate the shortest path to return to it.”

Annabeth was stunned. How many artefacts and items like that had Seaweed Brain gathered in his life?

“It looks like a lesser version of Ariadne’s String,” Zoë Nightshade reluctantly nodded after examining it. “Why didn’t you buy it instead of this subpar creation?”

“Because, dear bow-mistress,” the son of Poseidon’s evil smirk was not ready to disappear, “I am rich but I am not the Rich One. This bloody automaton was asking for a price my pockets couldn’t afford, curse Daedalus.”

“What is wrong with Daedalus?” The inventor was her hero and her model, she wasn’t going to let the bastard denigrate him.

“Apart from the fact he is asking for unreasonable prices, you mean?” Jackson asked very rhetorically. “I tend to not swear my eternal friendship to people who have transformed themselves into metallic automatons and are one step away from becoming an abominable intelligence. I love ambitious people, but Daedalus has gone a bit too far on his path to immortality. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was a precursor of the droids of Star Wars. His Labyrinth is already as friendly as Terminator’s Skynet and you can’t even bribe it.”

“You...” Even Luke seemed to lose his words at these revelations. “You’re accusing one of the most brilliant inventors of history to be an *abominable intelligence*?”

“I can call him conglomerate of automaton minds, if you prefer,” the other Demigod bared his teeth. “I wasn’t able to discover how many he has, but I found three potential replacement bodies, so there can be more, it isn’t like he’s lacking the space downstairs.”

“Okay, okay!” Miranda Gardiner called out. “Enough about Daedalus. He’s not what our Quest is about, and I could care less about him. Jackson, are you sure it is really the only solution? Everyone at Camp was told this is a self-expanding maze. We could wander in the Labyrinth for centuries before we find an exit, any exit, and by that time the Labyrinth’s malevolence will have killed most of us.”

“The Labyrinth will not try to kill you, not at first,” Perseus replied slowly. “Like many things born of an intelligent mind, it will try to give you trials, present some challenges once it has judged your worth. Then it will try to mould you into something new...yes, it will try to change you like it changed Asterius and Theseus millennia ago.”

“You should work on your reassuring speeches, Jackson,” Ethan Nakamura said. “They suck.”

“This wasn’t supposed to be reassuring, my treacherous lieutenant!” the mad boy beamed. “I was just giving my good friend Miranda Gardiner some truths about the Labyrinth’s moods. Feel free to not listen if you want to live up to the noble and distinguished name of the Suicide Squad.”

All her instincts screamed this was a terrible idea. That they had no chance to survive whatever traps waited for them in the greatest and most dangerous of Daedalus’ creations. The worst part...Jackson hadn’t even pretended the contrary.

“Shouldn’t we ask for the help of our divine parents?” Drew Tanaka asked hesitantly with little of her usual arrogance.

“It won’t help at all, Drew,” Jackson didn’t even answer this one, Luke did. “A divine boon in one of the Zones Mortalis will be nothing but a beacon for every monster in the vicinity. They won’t have to smell us anymore to be warned of our presence.”

“This is still a dangerous folly,” Jake Mason whispered, caressing his huge machine gun. He was the only one of the Questers to be visibly armed with a modern-looking weapon.

“I am not a God, and I did not ask for World War Three to begin on the Summer Solstice of this year,” the green-eyed insane brain said with his favourite expression which gave her the urge to hit his face against a wall...repeatedly. “Now that the time for the moans and the objection is over, please do not listen to the whispers and voices you hear in the Labyrinth, unless you want to go to Hell as a scout ahead of my humble person. And be careful about the giant ants, last time there was a nasty hive near the entrance. Questions?”

“Yes,” Clarisse La Rue smiled wolfishly. “How big were these ants?”

**8 May 2006 or some hours and days after it, the Labyrinth**

Avoiding the Myrmekes was not and had likely never been an option.

Clarisse, daughter of Ares, wanted a fight. And Jackson, who was leading the column, was doing so much noise there wasn’t really a question if he wanted to make sure the ants heard them or not.

Then an entire section of wall collapsed on their left, the ants charged from the hole just made, and their first battle in the Labyrinth began.

“I HATE OLYMPUS!” Perseus Jackson bellowed, cackling like a madman, and Ethan like everyone realised one second after it was a war cry...of sorts. “CHARGE!”

Clarisse didn’t need to hear more than that, and the daughter of Ares impaled one of the massive dog-sized ants upon her red spear.

“FIRST BLOOD FOR ARES!” By everything vengeful, what had she eaten this morning? Lion meat?

“SECOND BLOOD FOR JANUS!” Scipio Varus drew his enormous sword and began to hack and mutilate the insects which survived the boar-armoured Demigoddess.

This was a battle the likes which never happened at camp. Assuredly there was a lot of disorder and chaos during them, but here it was clear the anarchy was unleashed from the very start. In fact, the initial clash of the three Demigods was so violent most of them paused as the three madmen of their vanguard broke the ant offensive alone and unsupported. Zoë Nightshade added her arrows soon enough, but most of the others stayed at good distance, almost scared by the...the butchery which was occurring.

The adult Myrmekes – Myrmekes was ‘ant’ in Greek for those who wondered – were the size of a fully grown German Shepherd. They had tough skin. They spat acid.

None of it mattered as La Rue, Varus, and Jackson scythed them down, before charging again, slaughtering them in their very lair. The rest of the Questers followed and killed the ants who had survived the bloodbath, but it was easy game, as the giant ants seemed to experience the same kind of mental shock the heroes of New Byzantium did.

How many of them did they kill in mere minutes? Ethan didn’t know. Perhaps if someone had filmed – though it wouldn’t be prudent with Lamia’s Curse – they could have had a proper kill-count. Otherwise, it was impossible. Clarisse’s spear was a storm of death and blood, each strike of her weapon was eviscerating or impaling a couple of insects, sometimes more. Scipio Varus was fighting in a more clinical, cold series of vertical and horizontal swipes, efficient and monstrous, but everything fell before him.

As for Jackson, he was cackling and striking, an insane giggle perpetually on his lips. There seemed to be no discipline, no coherence to what he did, but everywhere he went, the ants were missing heads or limbs, the swarm of attackers was flowing towards its own allies, and madness ruled.

The whole battle couldn’t have lasted more than ten minutes, and ended when the three finished butchering an ant bigger than her company of bodyguards, as the Myrmekes were unable to field a single additional warrior. A few tried to escape, but arrows and swords cut them down before they were successful.

The ruckus of battle faded, in the ant-chamber now covered in the corpses of dark orange ants.

“Was it really necessary to charge them like that?” Jake Mason was the first to find the strength to spit as everyone made sure no Myrmekes was faking death. “We could have formed a shield wall...we could have used tactics!”

“Tactics?” Jackson grinned, cleaning his two swords. “Nah, tactics are boring and using them isn’t a victory for evil.”

“May I assume you had at least a reason to charge like you did?” Ethan watched around him, and saw only the corpses of the Myrmekes and their cooling blood, which stank horribly by the way.

“Well first the Lesser String is telling us to go through that door,” the son of Poseidon answered, pointing a finger at the entrance the last ant had unblocked with its death. It was true an illumination in from of a cross was indeed coming out the red joystick and pointing towards it. “And second, that we are now in a Great Quest doesn’t mean I’m going to skip the benefits of a new Labyrinth adventure.”

The mad Demigod on these words began to maniacally smash against one of the golden-painted paving stone, which under this assault didn’t last five seconds before breaking in a thunderous crash.

“Oh dear, these Myrmekes were even more successful than I thought,” Jackson mused. Pushed by his curiosity if nothing else, Ethan walked to see what it was about...and stopped. The secret passage was opening on a sort of cavern and it was...gold. There was a lot of gold, a mountain of golden coins. There was jewellery too. And there were several daggers which had to be of Celestial Bronze.

“By my father’s beard,” Jake Mason swore, “this is...how did you know it was here?”

“Myrmekes loves the shiny things, I made the hypothesis a year ago that they are dragons the Gods reincarnated as ants to vex them.” Jackson contemplated the massive pile of treasure for a few more seconds before commanding his gargoyles. “The large-sized enchanted bag, if you please, dear. I have some pillage to do.”

“Divided into twelve parts, I hope,” Luke Castellan intervened. “I suspect you led us right in front of these Myrmekes to claim their treasure.”

“My friend,” the unofficial leader of the Great Quest went on to present a sad and mournful expression. “Would I really do something like that as we have barely entered the Labyrinth?”

“Yes,” Nightshade and Chase replied instinctively, with not a second to think about it.

“This hurts,” the main offender complained. “Am I not renowned for my generosity? Here, Varus, one ring and a few other trinkets for you!” it was a good thing the ex-Legionnaire had good reflexes, for Jackson had not thrown the objects slowly. “And new gauntlets for you, Clarisse!”

The largest of the stone gargoyles gave him the enchanted bag, and the gold and the vast quantities of artefacts and loot disappeared into it. For all its ‘bottomless’ description, the limits of the object seemed to be quite close when the golden and shiny treasures were grabbed.

“This gargoyle is going to return at the surface and wait for us near the entrance.” The son of Poseidon informed them. “We will divide the loot when this little expedition will be over, my treacherous lieutenants.”

“And we will have equal shares, hmm?”

“Of course!” The smile of the green-eyed boy was not exactly of a trustful nature. “Now let’s pursue our Quest, our fortune isn’t going to be made by standing idle...”

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The first casualty of their expedition in the Labyrinth was their watches. Not long after the massacre of Myrmekes, the minute and the hour hand of their clocks had begun moving without rhythm or reason. One moment a step lasted exactly how it was supposed to, the other two heartbeats happened to last four hours...and then the minute hands were going back in time.

Their surroundings didn’t help fighting against this time-distortion effect. A few steps after leaving the butchered hands behind them, the corridor they were using was turned out to be the kind of subterranean path one would imagine for a secret passage under the pyramids or something like that.

Luke wanted to believe they had not travelled to Egypt in one hour of walk, but alas with the Labyrinth, it was far from impossible: Daedalus’ Zone Mortalis had not had any difficulty bringing two giant scorpions that Lou Ellen had burned with her fire balls or the ruined pillars where numerous Hieroglyphs were carved under a lot of dust.

As for going back to the entrance, it was better not to think about it: the path had been twisting and changing when he took rearguard duties for a short moment. The only way to go was forwards.

Their advance continued, and step after step, the sand disappeared, being replaced by a type of dark stone the son of Hermes had never seen before. On the walls a new mark appeared: a black hand below a black crown. Sometimes the hand was grabbing the kingly item, other times it was not touching it. The significance of the emblem escaped him.

Finally, they left the tunnel to arrive on a sort of platform-bridge. For a single second, the oldest Demigod - if Nightshade wasn’t included – wondered if they were out of the Labyrinth.

It didn’t last. They had just arrived on a belvedere where they could contemplate the immensity of the maze.

They were, as he said, on sort of a belvedere-bridge. They were dozens of similar ones next to them, some of higher elevation, while others plunged below them. There were intact ones, and they were those which were damaged or in a worse state of disrepair.

The bridges, however, were the least impressive part. Behind and ahead of them, immense walls of black and white stone towered over them. At the same time, the foundations of these constructions were lost in the abysses below. And on each of these constructions, there were thousands, maybe tens of thousands of opening, all of them offering paths to them. No matter where you looked, it was uncountable paths, tunnels, roads, and bridges...and nothing to help you make your choice save illegible carvings.

“Gods,” Dakota had stopped drinking his Kool-Aid flask at the sight, “this can’t be the work of a single man!”

“It isn’t,” Miranda Gardiner said. “It is sheer madness and-“

A massive block of stone rose on their left, and soon the silence of the Labyrinth broke, replaced by thunderous sounds as pillars and entire sections of the Labyrinths rearranged themselves. The bridge they had stopped upon began to move, leaving them no choice but to cross the abyss as everything moved and trembled around them.

*Strike the Huntress*.

The first whisper he heard had the voice of Thalia.

*She is going to betray you like she betrayed all men. Kill her! Kill the Huntress!*

Several times he had to help Drew Tanaka as the daughter of Aphrodite stumbled on stones which exploded at their feet.

*Kill her, she is useless. Kill her*!

It felt like two hours when the Labyrinth stopped shaking, and Luke’s lungs were burning when a halt was finally called.

Compared to the previous scenery, it was not that impressive. Two-thirds of them went to sit in the middle of the new large bridge of white stone that was the entire infrastructure around them, cautiously not coming too close from the barrier-free edge. The dirty brown stagnant water below did not show anything threatening, but it was certainly not something you wanted to bet your life upon.

“Damn,” the son of Hephaestus coughed, “what was that?”

“That, my friend,” Jackson smiled, “was the Labyrinth greeting us.”

“You call that a greeting?” Annabeth shouted. “Are you mad?”

“Tell me your Owlishness,” because of course the green-eyed Demigod had to make owl jokes, “did you see pits filled with spikes and snakes open under your feet? Did you have to climb the cliff-walls with nothing but your hands and your courage? No? Then this was a friendly greeting.”

“But we walked in the good direction?” Clarisse La Rue asked, trying hard to not betray her exhaustion. Heavily armoured like she was, the race they had just done had not been easy for her...well, it hadn’t been easy for anyone, but she was going to feel it in the days to come.

“We are,” the son of Poseidon said, seriously for once. “And as much as I’m sure you are all going to curse my name for this, we can’t exactly rest for hours after a ‘greeting’ like this one. The itineraries’ changes will have attracted the monsters and-“

Scipio Varus’ Zweihänder was out of its scabbard and struck viciously at the son of Poseidon.

Luke had not the time to shout a single word of warning, and he was sure the younger black-haired Demigod hadn’t seen his coming. The huge blade went for his throat...and stopped.

A sound of pain escaped the Roman killer’s lips before becoming an outright scream of agony. The ring he wore on one of his left hand’s fingers began to shine in a weird pink light.

“ARRRGGGH!”

“Well, let’s give the Olympians their due, they know how to choose their pet assassins,” Perseus Jackson didn’t draw one of his swords, instead he opened the bag offered by one of his gargoyles and grabbed a sandwich...that he proceeded to start eating.

“What have you done to me, Jackson?” the treacherous son of Vanus managed to articulate before screaming his pain again and the pink halo engulfed his entire hand.

“What have I done?” the smirk was back, though the effect was not optimal with bread and food swallowed regularly. “Oh, I assure you, my deeds in this affair were really of little importance...”

The ten other Questers looked at him with distrustful expressions, and for some a little bit of fear. No one rushed to the help of the seventeen-years-old Demigod on his knees, though Nightshade had an arrow ready and a fire ball was dancing in Blackstone’s right hand.

“Right, this is confession time, Scipio Varus. The ring I gave you after we fought the Myrmekes? It was not exactly a proof of my eternal friendship and it wasn’t part of the Myrmekes’ treasure...it was more a contingency plan in case you tried to kill me.”

“But...” Luke tried very hard not to grimace as the sound of bones snapping and being reshaped by magic echoed, and the boots of the ex-Legionnaire began to be torn from the inside. He failed. “But why would you do that if-“

An idea burst at the forethought of his thoughts, and refused to disappear. But Annabeth was faster to speak than he.

“You knew! You knew he volunteered for the Great Quest for the sole purpose of killing you.”

“I confess it is possible certain conversations led me to entertain certain doubts about the infamous Scipio Varus’ loyalties,” Perseus Jackson confessed, placing his hand above his heart – assuming he had one – and baring his teeth. Then the green-eyed boy sighed before marching towards Varus’ affairs and rummaging in it. “Ah, here it is.” The object seized was a classic roll the kind official messengers of Olympus used, the likes New Byzantium possessed by thousands in its archives. This one once unrolled however, had an eminently-recognisable thunder seal at the bottom of it.

Hermes’ wings, Zeus had posted a bounty on Jackson’s head? If anything, their Labyrinth guide seemed to be massively displeased-

“It is an outrage! Only three million Drachmas are offered for my head? What kind of divine system is enforced? This is a scandal! So many stores and reserves I have pillaged and ransacked, and I am worth only three million? This is ridiculous! I am going to-“

“Send a message to Olympus to increase the bounty?” Lou Ellen asked sweetly, doing her best not to laugh at the disappointed face of the son of Poseidon. “No offence Jackson, but it isn’t exactly something the message one sends to Olympus unless you are tired of living.”

“You will have to bear the weight of this torment,” Drew Tanaka approved, for once her former behaviour returning. “But I don’t understand why you accepted him for the Great Quest if you already knew he was going to betray you no matter what.”

“We had not exactly a surplus of volunteers, Darcy,” the son of Poseidon made the incriminating document disappear into one of his pockets. “And if you take care of the less-than-capable assassins, how are you supposed to be betrayed in the first place?”

It wasn’t the argument of a sane soul, but Luke didn’t know why he had expected something else...

“My name is not Daisy, and mark my words-“

Scipio Varus screamed once more and everyone stopped talking or trying to give his opinion to the son of Poseidon.

“Ah, now it truly begins.”

There was something truly...horrifyingly funny about seeing one of the most dangerous Roman swordsmen of their home lose its humanity. It shouldn’t be, but it was.

First the tail came out, with a sound so ridiculous everyone chuckled or nearly died of hilarity. Then the clothes exploded, and where the clothes were no more, the Questers saw what Scipio Varus was cursed by the ring that he was still trying to remove from his finger.

He was becoming a crocodile. A very scaly, and threatening reptile no doubt, but the detail which was too much for him and the other Questers was that it was a *pink* crocodile.

Human fingers were replaced by pink paws. The human nose receded before a mighty pink snout came into existence. The back was now far tougher than even Demigod skin...and also a very, very bright pink, not to say anything about the belly.

“Scipio Varus,” Perseus Jackson announced, and the former human writhing under the pain of transformation, “by the powers not granted to me by the Senate of New Constantinople, I formally declare your participation in this Great Quest over. Instead, it is my greatest pleasure to formally assign you to the newly-created *Legio Crocodilus*, where you will take the rank of *Roseus Centurion*!”

By that point, in hindsight, it was a good thing the Labyrinth had decided to leave them alone, because they were laughing so hard it would be difficult to mount even a minor defence against something threatening.

“Now for the bad news, my new eternal reptilian friend,” the green-eyed Demigod once more took a sorrowful expression. “You were like a brother to me, Scipio, and for all my patience...of crocodile...I can’t find in me the strength to pardon you. I may consider a financial support of your young siblings – if you have any – until they come of age, but you will not receive the two million Drachmas promised, your share of the loot is forfeited, and your name will be forever synonym of improper assault on my glorious person.”

There was no sorrow anymore on Jackson’s face as his monologue ended. There was just a very, very sadistic smile, and Luke Castellan shivered, for between the pink crocodile and the human facing each other, it wasn’t difficult to realise who was the most dangerous of the two.

Something confirmed a second later, as the brown erupted and in act of macro-hydrokinesis the like no one had tried in decades, grabbed the now transformed Scipio Varus by the neck.

“This is the day you will always remember as the day you almost killed Perseus Jackson, saurian!” The insane Demigod bared his teeth. “Now remove yourself from my presence, I have a sudden urge to make myself a scaly handbag!”

The crocodile the twelfth Quester had become was thrown away by the water like he was nothing but a toy, and Varus – or what was left of him after the enchantment transformed him – took the threat seriously, for he didn’t return during the next minutes.

“This is the last we’ve seen of him, mark my words!”

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Drew, like the other Questers, had pretty much been torn between cheering and screaming when Varus was transformed into a pink crocodile.

And no, the daughter of Aphrodite wasn’t going to deny that for a few hours, she had really believed Jackson was indeed capable of accomplishing the Great Quest on his own. The son of Poseidon was playing them like a chessmaster, having tried the same with her half-brothers and half-sisters, the white-armoured Demigoddess could recognise an expert at work. Perseus Jackson had taken the leadership from Luke Castellan without a word of anger, increased Clarisse’s levels of aggressiveness such that the daughter of Ares was a juggernaut of rage and fury, and manipulated each of the Questers into accomplishing the role he wanted them to play.

Everything they faced, external or internal to their Quest’s group, the green-eyed mad boy appeared to have anticipated it.

Until now.

Now, they were in front of a gigantic citadel, whose walls had to be forty metres-high at the very least. Drew wasn’t a child of Hecate, but the numerous inscriptions carved near the top of this massive curtain wall had to be magical protections, and the automaton-ballistae positioned above them on the rampart’s walkway looked superior models to the things the Roman Legions used as fixed positions to defend the city.

As it wasn’t enough, there were two moats to cross before reaching the base of this impossible citadel which could have not been found anywhere but in a Zone Mortalis. And they weren’t filled by monsters or water, but with a sort of orange-coloured acid. Drew had never seen before, but Luke Castellan had, and his grim expression said everything there was to know.

“That’s a big fortress,” Jake Mason said, in another one of his splendid understatements. “Who owns it, Jackson?”

“You don’t recognise the banner?”

Drew stared at the immense flag atop the rampart, a black hand below a black crown.

“No, we don’t,” Nightshade said frostily. “Should we?”

“Perhaps not,” the boy who had defeated Scipio Varus admitted, “it has been a while since the colours of the immortal sorceress were hoisted anywhere.”

“Circe?” The Huntress’ voice was contemptuous. “Do not be ridiculous, Jackson. Her base of operations is in the Sea of Monsters.”

“I apologise for my poorly chosen words,” the son of Poseidon made a gesture which wasn’t exactly to be treated as a reasonable apology. “The *other* immortal sorceress. Also known as Asterius’ mother, wife of King Minos, daughter of Helios-”

“Pasiphaë,” snarled the millennia-old bitch who had sworn to forsake love and everything good in one’s life. “What is she doing here?”

“At a guess,” Perseus Jackson feigned to inspect his fingers. “Settling her accounts with Daedalus. Her sigil was everywhere in the sections we walked through, the logical assumption would be to assume she’s making a power play while the Gods aren’t watching.”

“We must stop her!” Chase barked, her Daedalus-worship evident to everyone. “If she gains power over the Labyrinth...”

“The maze will still be as murder-happy,” Miranda Gardiner finished. “Maybe she will be a bit friendlier where nature is concerned than Daedalus? It isn’t really possible to do worse...”

For a few minutes, everyone wanted to give his opinion, and with neither Castellan nor Jackson interested in stopping them, everyone did...which provided exactly nothing to the issue of the fortress itself.

“Naughty, naughty,” the insane Demigod finally stopped his observation of the dark walls while he rummaged in his back. “If you have said everything weighting down your hearts, it’s time to begin the assault of this fortress.”

“Jackson, I recognise your madness kept us alive for the first traps and obstacles of the Labyrinth, but even you can’t break these defences,” Jake Mason started. “Maybe if the moats were filled with water, you could use your hydrokinesis to sap the foundations, but as it stands, the magic imbued in the walls is certainly making sure this acid will have no effect no matter what you try with it.”

“It’s true,” astonishingly, Perseus immediately agreed with the scarred son of Hephaestus. “That’s why someone else is going to deal with this fortress.”

And he walked...towards her. What sort of madness had the black-haired boy in mind now?

“I don’t have the power to Charmspeak a fortress into opening its gates, Jackson!”

“Of course not, Destiny!” the infuriating Demigod approved. “But you are attending Brooklyn Academy for the Gifted, aren’t you?”

That abrupt change of subject, well...she hadn’t seen coming at all.

“I am. What of it?”

And to her astonishment – again – the daughter of Aphrodite saw the bastard summon her freaking school reports out of his bag!

“How did you? Chiron! You stole the records the school sends to Chiron!”

“Stealing is such an ugly word,” the accused raised a finger like he was in position to do good things instead of practising grand robbery on a divine scale. “I simply borrowed all these fascinating documents. It wasn’t hard, most of your fellows aren’t able to leave New Byzantium all year, but children of your mother are far too weak to register on the monsters’ radar...”

“Go to the point!” Drew spat, as her face burned in shame.

“Well, it has come to my attention you had excellent grades in English, French, and Ancient Greek...and to my pleasant surprise, both in the written and oral exams. Something,” the son of Poseidon smirked, “very few Demigods and Demigoddesses achieve, as our dyslexia screws everything in the written tests. Care to explain this academic miracle?”

Suddenly, the long back-haired daughter of Aphrodite was very well aware she was the focus of all the Questers’ attention.

“I use Charmspeak on myself, in order to convince myself I do not suffer from dyslexia,” Drew admitted.

“Fascinating,” and for once Jackson seemed completely sincere. “Absolutely fascinating! I admit my own efforts on the subject have only been partially successful.”

Wait, what?

“Jackson, are you saying-“ Luke seemed even more shocked than she was.

“In Charmspeak, I am more relying on power and esoteric techniques,” the mad boy admitted. “But the field is prodigiously huge, and I am still learning. Yes, Miss Drew Tanaka has learned something I am still trying to master perfectly,” if anything the fact Jackson used her real name was an even bigger shock...

A spell book was placed in her hands.

“I may be able to read the text, but I won’t be able to cast it.”

The son of Poseidon sighed heavily.

“There is a reason I invited a sorceress to be involved in this Quest. Do you know that if you Charmspeak some magic to a Child of Hecate, a sort of eidetic memory will be activated in her head?”

By the way Lou Ellen Blackstone was gaping with the other Questers, even she wasn’t aware of that.

“You are going to Charmspeak the spell on page thirteen to our sorceress while I make the other preparations required for magic to strike at the correct spot. Then she will cast it and this fortress will fall.”

“Just like that?” Zoë Nightshade was unsurprisingly unconvinced.

“Just like that,” the boy who seemed to thrive on making her miserable replied.

Drew opened the spell book to page thirteen, and grimaced as she read the Ancient Greek word.

*Hellfire*

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Jackson was too dangerous to be allowed to live.

Zoë had known it before this Quest began, but the senior lieutenant of Artemis was forced to admit she had underestimated *how much* this traitor was a danger to Olympus.

His raids, his robberies, his challenges to her Goddess marked him for death, but the millennia-old Huntress had thought that at the first sign of falsehood, the Demigod and Demigoddesses, especially the Demigoddesses would turn upon him.

It hadn’t happened. And when at last Scipio Varus had attempted to kill him, it was not for a perceived betrayal, but because the *man* had accepted the Great Quest to claim a bounty of Lord Zeus.

It was extremely dissatisfying, because for all the idea of cooperating with such an assassin gave her nausea, Zoë had a potential ally...only no one had informed her Goddess of that, and as a result a priceless opportunity had been lost...maybe. Jackson had seen it coming, and Varus was transformed into something more adequate to reflect the state of his soul.

The Huntress commander could have appreciated it...if the artefact used wasn’t one of those he had stolen from one of Lady Artemis’ private stashes!

For that crime alone, Perseus Jackson would die.

The problem, unfortunately, was that his long and painful demise wouldn’t erase the corruption the treacherous son of Poseidon inflicted upon the Questers. The daughter of Ares had been a lost cause from the start, the blood spear given to her and the natural pig-stubbornness of the children of the War God made sure of that. But seriously, who cared about her?

No, the problem was the contagiousness of it. As the daughter of Aphrodite stopped whispering forbidden words into the ears of the blonde-haired daughter of Hecate, the two girls had the kind of hungry looks in their eyes which told Zoë that Jackson had corrupted them.

Lou Ellen Blackstone had tasted forbidden knowledge, there wasn’t any doubt in her mind about it, and now the black-eyed Demigoddess would want more. It was always like that with children of Hecate, and the senior member of the Hunt was among the souls who knew this particular breed of magic-practitioners was never to gain access to specific lore.

Circe, Medea, and Pasiphaë; after these three sorceresses gained the power they did, no one loyal to Olympus wanted to have a fourth headache to deal with on a permanent basis. This was regrettable, but this daughter of Hecate was going to die, and so was Drew Tanaka. Zoë Nightshade didn’t believe for a single second the daughter of Aphrodite hadn’t memorised the content she’d read to the other Demigoddess; if allowed to return to New Byzantium, she would make sure the children of Hecate bought that knowledge from her...exactly as Jackson intended.

This was four Questers marked to death, and none of them could be relied upon to turn against her target. Damn you, Perseus Jackson. Damn you and may you burn in the most dreadful pits of Tartarus...

Zoë didn’t think she loathed Jackson more than *him*, but the more the infuriating Demigod acted and spoke, the more this nearly-impossible level of animosity was not so far in the distance.

“I beseech you, the dagger under the earth, the flames which burns eternally under the ashes, the power of the dark sun only the undead will see...” Lou Ellen Blackstone began to incant, and immediately what little light the Labyrinth gave seemed to flicker and die.

What in the name of Artemis was that incantation?

“Chase,” she told the daughter of Athena, “we have to intervene.”

The promising girl seemed hesitant, but after a second nodded.

“Fine, we will-“

“**You will stay where you are, and you will not interrupt the spell**,” Jackson whispered as he jumped before them. “Thank you, dear ladies.”

Horror spread in her thoughts and soul, as she realised the traitor had immobilised and silenced them!

She was going to kill him! She was going to-

“**And you won’t use your bow either**,” the son of Poseidon said in the same Charmspeak tone. “Seriously, do you really want me to cut your throat, my dear Huntress?”

“Artemis will kill you on the spot if you shed a drop of my blood!”

“She will,” the green-eyed betrayer continued to smile. “But as one of my treacherous advisors and a Goddess reminded me, my future tragic doom would not resurrect you. And given that between us two, I am the one who have angered the Lord of the Underworld the less, I would have a powerful incentive to avoid death, if I was in your shoes. **Now be quiet, and do not act against me**, or I will find something humiliating for you to do.”

“I bury the light in its grave,” the incantation of the daughter of Hecate grew more frenetic, “and I deny the will of creation. The earth and the water are subjugated, the air is extinguished, the fire is sublimated! Open the gates of those who wait below, join strength, and illuminate the world with the flames of negation! **HELLFIRE**!”

At this moment, Zoë knew she had waited far too long to kill Perseus Jackson. No matter what happened now, she waited for too long...

The black flames were summoned, and in less time it took to say it, they vaporised in colossal clouds of evil smoke the acid-filled moats. Then the ramparts were struck.

The magical defences, possibly built by an immortal sorceress, shone and poured unnatural resistance into the stones, but it wasn’t enough.

The storm of black flames became a hurricane of death and damnation. The base of the walls wasn’t hammered or damaged; it was *devoured*.

The Hellfire was eating the stones, the magic...it was eating everything. It was worse than the alchemical Greek fire, and the Byzantine product was already one of the worst inventions of the Demigods, something only the males could aspire to: destruction for the sake of destruction.

The ramparts and the walls didn’t resist. The ballistae fired and fired at the Hellfire, but it was useless. Section after section of wall crumbled, before finally losing all cohesion and collapsing.

The black flames stopped from the hands of the daughter of Hecate, but the ravages of the cursed magic didn’t end. The black fire was something abominable, and continued to eat what it had been offered by pure malice.

It took far too long for the last inferno to die down. But when it did, there was a gigantic breach in the defences of the citadel...though could one call it a breach when most of the walls were nowhere in sight anymore?

One spell. Lou Ellen Blackstone had pulverised one of the Labyrinth’s fortresses on her own, with no direct support save spell-learning!

“Excellent work, elite sorceress!” the infuriating traitor congratulated the daughter of Hecate. “Now do not cast more spells until you feel rested, we are going to finish the assault on our own. DOGS OF OLYMPUS! DO YOU TO BE ENSLAVED FOREVER?”

Zoë Nightshade swore she was going to castrate Perseus Jackson, even if it was the last thing she ever did...

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Pasiphaë had known there would be an inimical reaction from her attempt to bind the Labyrinth to her will.

Her mother had disagreed. All her contacts, immortals or others, had affirmed the power of the prophecies was no longer in Olympian’s hands, and without these miracles in word form, Zeus was blinder than an old bat. Her own spies confirmed the Greek Questers and the Roman Legions had no idea what her plans were.

Nonetheless, she hadn’t relied upon luck once she had finally been able to capture ‘Quintus’, aka the new automaton containing Daedalus’ soul. Since the massive ritual left her immortal body terribly vulnerable, her influence on the Labyrinth had been used to build a well-defended fortress. To these tall walls, the daughter of Helios’ wealth and prestige had brought many mercenaries, monsters or of another nature, to her banner.

Today proved she was definitely right on expecting an enemy attack. Except this time, it wasn’t prophecies who had summoned the opposition. It was Daedalus himself. It had taken her a lot of time to realise it, but the old tinkerer had used her own ritual to call for help.

By the time she had put an end to his defiance many monsters and automatons had been either defeated or converted to her cause. Her fortress had endured without difficulty these assaults, meaning this was not the real challenge.

The Queen of Crete would have preferred being wrong. The alerts had barely the time to scream before Hellfire destroyed the fortress and burned a third of her forces to nothing in the blink of an eye.

Now there was nothing to do but wait and continue the ritual, and pray the last of her supporters could stop the assault, or at least stalemate it for several hours, the time for her to complete the long ritual and become the new Goddess of the Labyrinth.

Given how fast the attacking force of Demigods was progressing, her confidence was not what it was before the walls broke.

“I told you neither Athena nor any other God worthy of the name would tolerate your ritual,” the creature she refused to call anything but Daedalus in public chuckled loudly in his cage. “I’m surprised you aren’t fleeing, your Majesty.”

“Unlike someone whose first reaction to anything is to flee, I am not a coward, son of Athena. I have invested decades of effort and resources in this ritual. I am not going to run until I am certain my ritual can be completed. Besides,” the black-eyed daughter of Hecate bared her teeth, “I am a bit curious to know where those Demigods are coming from. There was no Quest announced when I began this ritual ten days ago, and I am certain my spies would have warned me if I was the target of one or if someone decided to search for adventure and death in the Labyrinth.”

And yet they were here, as the utter ruin visited upon her assets proved beyond any ability to ignore.

“So you say,” the inventor her imbecile of husband had hired and tolerated the eccentricities of answered, “but I think fleeing at least guarantees survival, and given the power these heroes have brought, your demise might be closer than you think. How long do you think a thousand skeletons are going to last after so many traps and illusions destroyed without a single casualty?”

“**Dead or alive**,” a voice shouted in the distance. “**They are in MY service**!”

Pasiphaë winced as the small army of skeletons began to tear itself apart as the spell supposed to prevent enemy mind-control failed like they’d been bronze-grade material.

“I hate heroes,” less than she hated Daedalus, Minos, and Zeus, but there was some hatred in her heart for them too.

The end was not long in coming. By ones and twos they arrived in the Cretan temple where she was officiating, and Pasiphaë gritted her teeth as she had the confirmation the eleven enemies who had destroyed her walls were still exactly of equal strength. Not one of them looked wounded or especially exhausted. It was...maddening.

“Quintus, my friend!” the black-haired hero was the first to step forwards. “Our paths meet again! Thank you for the Lesser String, it works exactly as advised!”

“My pleasure,” Daedalus beamed, “if you could-“

“My Lady Pasiphaë!” Surprisingly, the tinkerer was ignored the next instant, and by the way his mouth was gaping, this wasn’t part of his plan. “The rumours about your beauty and your ambition weren’t doing you any justice! I am very tempted to swear eternal friendship to you!”

The heroine behind him, one bearing armour and clothes of a Huntress, had arrow and hand in her hands before the last word was out...and received the hilt of a sword in her neck for her troubles.

“Thank you, my treacherous lieutenant.” The Demigod had this look in eyes...one she hadn’t seen quite often in the last millennia. Mad. The boy was mad, but he had sufficiently control over his insanity to be a lethal threat to whoever he was directed against.

“I am indeed Queen Pasiphaë of Crete. What brings you to my domain in the heart of the Labyrinth, heroes?”

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Perseus Jackson had promised leaving with him would be necessary to avoid mediocrity.

He certainly delivered on that promise.

Lou Ellen felt her body sing in power, and she almost couldn’t believe, despite the overwhelming evidence, that she had truly cast Hellfire and destroyed an entire set of fortifications.

And now they were facing one of her legendary half-sisters, Pasiphaë, immortal sorceress and nearly-mythical figure of the Greek pantheon.

Of course, she wasn’t alone. There were a considerable number of enthralled hoplites leaning against the walls. Two cages were also taking the centre stage next to the Queen’s throne, one containing the man Jackson had called ‘Quintus’ and the other had a big Hellhound inside it. A miniature storm of black-coloured magic was swirling over the golden altar, before discharging itself at irregular intervals in Pasiphaë’s body.

The air was overcharged with magic, and it was *amazing*.

“For those who have not followed the story until now,” the son of Poseidon began like he was speaking to a large audience. “Quintus is in reality an automaton who serves as a soul-anchor for a famous son of Athena. His real name is Daedalus, inventor of the Labyrinth, chief architect of King Minos and Queen Pasiphaë...I believe he also has a rather large bounty on his head, courtesy of your mother, Annie.”

“The sorceress’ is larger,” ‘Quintus’ called out from his cage. “Please you have to stop her, she’s stealing the life-force I used to create the Labyrinth! She is-“

“She is accomplishing a ritual of usurpation, I know.” Perseus said in a tone which had its fair share of admiration.

“Demigod,” her half-sister spoke, “you do not know-“

“To accomplish something like this, three is the most stable combination which exists. Judging by the Greek letters and the wards you carved around the altar, I think you went with a claim, a story, and a weapon.”

The immortal sorceress was silent for a second before a light of interest was lit in her eyes.

“Continue.”

“The claim, I hypothesize, is that you paid for the Labyrinth in the first place. In the myths, Daedalus is rather infamous for being constantly on the verge of financial ruin. And since your defunct and unlamented husband was not exactly renowned for being farsighted, I can only guess it was you, your Immortal Majesty, who oversaw the construction of such a massive maze. In addition, it was your son, my muscular lieutenant Asterius, who was first imprisoned in it. That makes for a quite solid claim.”

“A claim which has no value because I was imprisoned there next!” Daedalus intervened.

“Silence, the owl-spawn, the young and beautiful generation is speaking,” Jackson countered, not using his Charmspeak. “Where was I? Ah yes, so that makes an excellent claim, your Divine Darkness. The story isn’t difficult to imagine. The Olympians aren’t fond of sorceresses they can’t control. Ladies Circe and Medea, with different outcomes, had to suffer the wrath of the Council. A daughter of Hecate forced to take refuge in the maze which had been supposed to be her son’s makes for a powerful story. As for the weapon...”the green-eyed Demigod shrugged, “obviously it is magic. The rest is only a question of resources, preparation, and execution.”

Pasiphaë, Queen of Crete, laughed. The sound resonated like a powerful symphony, magic given proper sound, and as she laughed her appearance changed. Her dress went from gold to black, and her black hair, pined into a cone with diamonds and emeralds, began to turn the very colour of the night itself, like they were absorbing the light, much like her Hellfire.

Similarly, her eyes were stunning obsidian stones. She was beautiful in a way no mortal could comprehend. And Lou Ellen felt her heart beat faster, because in many aspects, this was why every children of Hecate aspired to be: magically powerful enough the Gods were afraid of her.

“You seemed to have discovered by yourself excellent lore on the mechanics of these rituals,” Pasiphaë approved. “And you know why I am doing it.”

“The Labyrinth’s only limits are its necessity to stay clear of the boundaries of the Ocean and the Underworld,” Perseus affirmed. “Both of them can destroy the Labyrinth’s encroachment when and how they want. But by expanding right under the surface, you can dominate and rule over a realm potentially equal to the lands of mankind, especially if you have a certain Primogenitor’s blessing. And since Olympus’ sending armies of Demigods in the Labyrinth is as ridiculous as the Master of Olympus becoming a faithful husband, securing your apotheosis with the Labyrinth is quite a good idea. Of course, you have to complete said ritual.”

“Is that a threat, son of Poseidon? Don’t look surprised, you are the very picture of your father when he’s taking a youthful form.”

“Merely telling the truth, your Dark Glorious Majesty,” Perseus seemed unfazed by the underlying threat. “As it stands, our choices led us to your domain just in time to make a choice between you and Daedalus.”

This was too much for Annabeth Chase. The daughter of Athena, made desperate as the ritual poured more power into her half-sister’s body, charged ahead and tried to break his cage as she shouted a powerful war-cry.

Once, twice, thrice, her long knife struck the golden cage. There wasn’t a sign of damage...in despair, the next target was Pasiphaë herself.

This was her last mistake. The daughter of Helios raised a finger, and several ropes were conjured from nowhere, tying the hands of the Demigoddess behind her, before binding her feet two. In less time than it took to say it, Annabeth was on her knees and completely helpless.

“Another child of Athena...” the immortal sorceress looked at Chase with an air of pity. “Your kind has always great potential in Mystiokinesis, but your arrogance always leads you to ignore it. You try to build wonders without magic rather than alongside it.”

“I won’t let you kill Daedalus!”

“Kill him?” Pasiphaë raised an eyebrow. “I never had an intention to kill him. Though given that I intend to expel him from **my** Labyrinth the moment this ritual is successful, I don’t think poor Daedalus’ life will be long. His mother wants to have a serious conversation with him, I believe. He slain his nephew, and she has never forgiven him.”

A hand was raised and black-coloured magic shone in her left hand.

“But you should worry more about what is going to happen to you.”

“If it is nothing to you, your Majesty, I would humbly request you do not kill her,” Perseus bowed. “Unlike Daedalus, her mother is still fond of this one, and I would prefer not have to explain to Olympus while I stood idle when you killed her.”

“A good point,” the legendary daughter of Hecate conceded. “But she will be punished for her insolence.”

An incantation was spoken, but it was in a language Lou Ellen didn’t understand. The air around the blonde girl turned black and purple, before fading without any hint as what its purpose was.

The outward effect was evident however: Annabeth Chase fell unconscious.

“What have you done?” Luke asked, in a deeply worried voice.

“Let just be said, that if the daughter of Athena isn’t more respectful to her betters soon, her mother will try to strike her down personally to avoid another humiliation.” Pasiphaë raised her eyes, and for the first time, their black eyes truly stared at each other. “Sister, join me.”

No one made a gesture to block her path, but Lou Ellen would have disposed of them nonetheless.

The contact with the hands of her older half-sister was impossible to properly describe. The hands of the future Goddess managed to be incredibly warm, and yet this was a comfortable embrace.

“I was beginning to lose faith there wouldn’t be another of us this millennia.”

“Jackson helped me take the first step,” Lou Ellen admitted.

“That one and several others, sister,” the midnight-haired sorceress whispered. “Any other time I would incinerate a man who dares manipulate one of my sisters in such a way...but he has made you into something beautiful and terrible, and for this I am thankful.”

A large spell book levitated to her from behind the throne.

“What a pity. I have lamented at my failure to find a worthy Apprentice for hundreds of years, and now that I have one before me, my schedule is already filled for the next decades. This work, I hope, will be an adequate substitute for you. And when you want more...Circe is still thirsting for a worthy student.”

Her half-sister did not release her hands, but she addressed the son of Poseidon behind her.

“Jackson.”

“Your Most Divine Glorious Majesty of the Labyrinth?”

“I don’t know if you are the luckier Demigod to be born or your madness throws you from victory to victory, but I forgive you for the destruction of my fortress. This amnesty lasts as long as you protect my sister from the Olympians’ wrath. If she dies, I will make sure you follow her into the grave. Am I clear?”

“Limpid, your Immortal Darkness.”

“Now tell me what you want to obtain in exchange of your non-interference in my ritual.”

“First, your Majesty, I desire a safe journey towards the silver-ebony Gate which allows one to enter the Underworld undetected.”

For the first time, the Queen of Crete showed a sign of contrariety.

“I will try to give you one, but someone I don’t trust has negotiated the loan of a domain next to this Gate. My power can protect you until there, but I won’t be able to protect or support you against him.”

“We can deal with a trial before reaching the Hell Gate,” Perseus Jackson assured her. “Next-“

Quintus-Daedalus began to scream louder, as if he had finally realised no one was going to help him...or the ritual of the magic tore apart his automaton’s insides, it could be one or the other, really.

Lou Ellen didn’t really feel happy for him. He had put himself in service of King Minos voluntarily, and the son of Zeus hadn’t exactly the best reputation to go around.

“Ah yes.” Oh no, she didn’t like at all the expression of the son of Poseidon. “If it’s not bothering you, can I borrow the Hellhound?”

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Until this Quest started, Ethan had never seen the point about drinking the waters of the Lethe. Given how short a Demigod’s life was, what was the point of erasing your memory when you were guaranteed to have too little memories of it when you held your last breath?

“Who’s a good dog? That’s a good dog! Here’s a good steak for you, adorable one!”

That was before this Quest started. It was before Jackson decided to begin this Quest by an invasion of the Labyrinth. And it was days before realising the Minotaur was not an exception, but the rule, because the son of Poseidon had decided a freaking Hellhound was his new friend!

“Was it absolutely necessary to do...that, Jackson?” The son of Nemesis had a monumental headache as they exited the ruins of the fortress built by Pasiphaë, and he had a feeling it was going to get worse.

“Recruiting Zoë in the Suicide Squad? Of course it was!” Ethan was struck mute for a few heartbeats as he realised the mad boy had decided to name the massive Hellhound like the Huntress. When the lieutenant of Artemis was going to wake, she was going to be...err...volcanic rage might describe her mood.

“No, not that,” Ethan shook his head, trying to not think about this latest set of complications which proved Jackson thrived in the chaos he himself created. “Choosing the Queen’s side over Daedalus’. It likely cost us the loyalty of Nightshade and Chase in the short and long-term.”

The black-haired Demigod of Barrack Sixteen wasn’t going to sigh as the daughter of Athena’s shield was now used as a goddamn Frisbee for the Hellhound, he wasn’t going to place his head in his hands and mourn his lost innocence...

“My treacherous lieutenant,” the green-eyed maniac smiled before giving a few vigorous caresses to his new monster companion. “You have to think bigger and more clearly. First, the loyalty of Nightshade and Chase were never to this Quest or any member of this group, save perhaps to the son of Hermes for Angelina Coliseum. I estimate there’s in nine out of ten possible scenarios, they would still try to kill me if we freed Daedalus and continued our interesting adventure. And in that complicated situation, they would gain our dear inventor’s support to kill me. The old fool is ready to do *anything* to avoid his final punishment.”

Ethan winced. Jackson was insane, why was he in the habit of making such good points?

“Then there is the problem of dealing with a sorceress in her bastion of power. Even vulnerable on the brink of apotheosis, the widow of the little dick,” the son of Nemesis almost had a heart attack as he heard the new nickname of King Minos, “has enough magical power to ensure several of us would lie dead by the end of the battle. All we had to do to negotiate with her was to leave Daedalus where he was. A fight against the Queen of Crete would not have been my cup of juice, and I don’t feel like fighting an unnecessary fight while the hellish challenges wait for us.”

This was a logical reasoning, by his standards. Of course, that left...

“What about Olympus?”

Jackson chuckled as he continued to play with ‘Zoë’.

“Daedalus lied, you know.” The powerful – and mad – Demigod declared absently. “There is no official bounty on Pasiphaë’s head. At least two out of three of the legendary sorceresses are the favourites of Hecate, and since sending Demigods against them would anger her, there are no official Quests to slay them. In fact, killing one is a sure way to anger the Goddess of Magic. And I would lose the loyalty of Lou Ellen, something I care far more than the Huntress’ and Annie’s. I hope you won’t disagree with me when I say our prodigal sorceress is far more useful than the two of them put together.”

Before the daughter of Hecate had destroyed half of a fortress by herself, Ethan would have said no. After it, he couldn’t argue against it...Jackson, as usual, had unleashed his madness at the critical moment to sway everyone’s opinion.

“Still...”

“The new Queen of the Labyrinth has promised to release in our coffers part of the bounty for Daedalus, but even if she hadn’t, the fact is fighting this immortal sorceress would have gained us nothing, since there is no bounty on her, and cost us an enormous amount of lost time, between our own casualties and the time we would take to heal them. We have no dedicated healer, I will remind you, my treacherous lieutenant.”

Yes, the absence of a son of Asclepius or a son of Apollo was really a major drawback.

“If the Gods want to fight Pasiphaë,” Perseus Jackson said, “they can order their own Quests and throw around a few million Drachmas, I am not their attack dog, and I do not work for free. And since Daedalus is an enemy of Her Owlishness, it can’t be treason. After all, how can helping a criminal under the displeasure of one of the Olympian be a *good thing*?”

After a few more tirades and monologues, Ethan could easily see the day where they would attack Mount Olympus...all the while protesting their eternal friendship and loyalty to the Gods, of course.

“And the Labyrinth itself?”

“Daedalus didn’t rule it for as long as he was in control,” the son of Poseidon’s expression turned more sinister and calculating. “As much as I love exploring its depths and finding quantity of treasures with my legendary luck, having one Goddess to speak to when you want a short journey to your destination outweighs the previous status quo. I will remind you that with this new watch,” it was more an enchanted item in the form of a sundial, honestly, “we now have the information that reaching this section of the Labyrinth took us ten days. I leave to your dark imagination, my treacherous lieutenant, how much time we would lose if we were forced to endure Daedalus ridiculous limitations.”

Soon, Jackson to find something else to throw to the Hellhound, because the shield was...a bit destroyed.

“Do you really think you can do it, Jackson? Topple the Gods from their golden pedestals, teach them to respect us? I know Pasiphaë will likely be successful in claiming the Labyrinth, but she was nearly a Goddess, and Daedalus, for all his support of the existing situation, wasn’t a God.”

“I believe we have a good chance,” please ignore the ‘good dog’ sounds for several seconds, “of course, that’s the point of this story, isn’t it? Finding out if the genius of humanity can win against the indomitable power of the Masters of the World.”

Around them, the Labyrinth continued to change. The Questers nearby ate, drank, and rested. Finally after a few minutes, the Huntress of Artemis and the daughter of Athena began to return to consciousness. Evidently, when the former truly woke up, the murderous glare she had for Jackson was really, really impressive.

Then the Huntress bitch realised the Hellhound was named after her, and there were plenty of outraged screams. If someone had supported her, the man-hating girl would have likely attacked, Quest or no Quest, and damn the consequences. But with five boys who loathed her guts – there were always rumours at camp about what the Huntresses loved to do to isolated Demigods when they declared them ‘criminals’ – and many girls not too fond of her, the servant of Olympus’ will dared not make her move.

At last, the other arrogant girl stirred. Castellan was immediately by her side.

“Annabeth, are you okay?”

Something bad formed in his gut as Ethan saw the dreamy face of the Demigoddess of Barrack Six. After being subjected to a spell of a powerful sorceress, anger or rage had to be the normal reaction, as much as it was trouble for him or for Jackson.

“I am...I am feeling extraordinary!”

Oh, no, no, no...

“I have finally realised the truth!”

This was going to suck; the son of Nemesis just saw it coming. Even the son of Hermes took two steps back and had a greatly worried expression.

“What truth?”

“I am a spider’s soul, trapped in a human body!”

Perseus Jackson cackled.

In hindsight, maybe drowning in the Lethe was an acceptable end....

**Author’s note**: And so ends the first part of our intrepid adventurers in the Labyrinth. I hope everyone enjoyed it.

The way about a Gate to Hell existing in the Labyrinth is perfectly possible as per canon, by the way. For those wonder, re-read the fourth book of canon, it was discussed here. Annabeth herself admits the likelihood is high, though obviously, knowing such an exit was created is one thing, reaching it is definitely another.

And of course the Suicide Squad has lost its first Demigod. This was always going to be that sort of adventure...

Next Chapter’s title will be: *Madness and Violence*!

The other links were the story is available:

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

https : / / archive ofourown .org /works /32339365 /chapters /80167612

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