

keeps you cold

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by [Domoda](#)

Summary

Zagreus accidentally releases Persephone's only prisoner-- a young man who can control ghosts and shake the earth. But who is Nico di Angelo and why does he seem to be the only one in the underworld who can shout at Hades like Zagreus can?

Notes

I was waiting for ages for people to write a pjo & hades crossover and it didnt really happen like i expected it. soo the honour falls to me...

Chapter 1

“Hey boy, hey! Hey!”

Cerberus bounced to one side and then the other, tail wagging. His middle head was pointed with magnetic accuracy towards the prince, while the other two heads pointed in opposite directions, the right one sleepy and unconcerned, the left one irritated and snooty.

Zagreus tossed the chthonic ball from hand to hand. It was leather and twine, but somehow robust enough to stand the large hungry teeth of the hellish beast. For that reason, it was very well-loved. If he wasn’t quick, Cerberus might just try to snatch it from his hands.

“Fetch!” Zagreus tossed the ball as hard as he could.

Cerberus reared onto his hind legs as the ball sailed over his head, past Hades’ empty desk, and towards Persephone’s locked garden. Before the ball could land, Cerberus had launched himself after it. There was a loud crash of marble breaking.

Zagreus winced.

Cerberus’ wagging tail was all he could see of the garden. The enormous dog turned; ball proudly caught between the jaws of the middle head.

“You’re a bit of a force of nature, buddy...” Zagreus said, approaching the wrecked doorway. He brushed dust from the broken sheet of marble. Cerberus padded backwards, chewing his ball happily.

He had been in the garden many times, although it occurred to him he hadn’t been in since he found out the truth about his parentage and learned whose garden he had spent his youth chasing Thanatos around in. The grass was a deep red, shining orange when the light from the hall hit it. The trees were greenish grey and the pomegranates which hung down from branches swung against each other as he walked under the trees.

“Was it just the door we damaged?” Zagreus asked, shoo-ing Cerberus further back.

The hellhound didn’t answer him, but Zagreus caught sight of something dripping from the animal’s flank. He frowned and brushed a hand along the vivid red fur. He drew his hand back and saw dustings of wood chips.

“Which tree did you hit?” Zagreus asked.

Cerberus only tilted his head.

Zagreus dusted his hands off. He followed the trail of destruction they had left in the garden and noticed that Cerberus had hit a tree with his back paw. The tree had no leaves or fruit. It was a rough, gray-black, too short to be any good for climbing and the wrong shape besides. Zagreus remembered passing it by when he would play as a child.

The prince put his hand on the bark and felt the crack which spread there. It was slightly damp. He felt something under his fingers, something very small and thin. He pulled it up to the light of the hall. It was a long, curly black hair.

Zagreus frowned at the hair. He searched the bark for where he had found it and felt an expanse of

curly hair under it. He worked his fingers into the wood and snapped off a weakened section. What he saw nearly made him cry out. There was a pale human ear under the bark.

“Oh, hi Zag. Did you damage the prisoner’s tree?” Hypnos asked.

Zagreus startled. “Hypnos? Aren’t you working right now?”

Hypnos ignored him, floating into the gardens. He waved at Cerberus and yawned. “You should probably tell your dad about that. He won’t be happy.”

“Who’s in there?” Zagreus asked. He was looking at the tree with renewed interest. Now he had uncovered the ear, he could see that the tree itself was large enough to hold someone folded-up tightly, with their knees tucked under their chin.

“It’s Commander Nico,” Hypnos said. “He used to work for Hades, until… well until he didn’t. Nice guy, though.”

Zagreus frowned. “Was he a shade?”

“No idea. Nobody was quite sure what he was,” Hypnos said. “He just appeared some day and he could control basically all the underworld minions. Mom thinks Chaos sent him, for some reason. But he got hired and he worked in Tartarus mostly.”

Zagreus stared at the pale ear. “Has he been here this whole time?”

“Yeah.” Hypnos said. “He’s asleep, actually. Persephone asked me to do it, er… back when she was Queen.”

“Persephone?” Zagreus was so startled he didn’t know what to say for a moment. “What was he imprisoned for?”

“How should I know?” Hypnos asked. “He must have done something pretty bad. It’s the only sentence Persephone carried out on her own, without putting the subject to trial first.”

Zagreus swallowed. There was something weird about this, but he wasn’t sure what. “Can you wake him up?” He asked.

“Eh?” Hypnos frowned.

“Can you wake up Commander Nico?” Zagreus asked.

Hypnos scratched the back of his neck and paused. “I can. But shouldn’t we wait for Lord Hades?”

Zagreus pulled out his sword and used the hilt of it to break up the tough bark. It snapped like pottery, revealing more and more of the Commander. He pulled the bark from a leather jacket, pale skin, dark curls. The Commander looked young, he couldn’t be older than twenty. It didn’t take long for the tree to begin to break up, and Nico’s body flopped onto the floor. Zagreus pulled the Commander onto his lap. He was battered and bruised.

Hypnos hesitated, and waved a hand towards the sleeping man.

For a moment there was only stillness, and soft breathing.

Then Nico’s eyes peeled open. His dark eyelashes were dusty and it was a long time until he had the strength to lift his head up. He groaned softly.

“Why did Persephone imprison you?” Zagreus asked the moment Nico’s head rose.

“Dio Mio... Mi dia un momento... I just woke up,” Nico croaked. He wiped his face. “Who in Hades are you?”

“I’m Zagreus,” Zagreus said, quickly. “I’m the son of Hades. Now answer my question.”

Nico massaged his eye sockets with the back of his wrist. “You’ll have to repeat your question. What year is it?”

“Oh... we don’t really measure time in the underworld,” Hypnos said. “But for reference, you have 3,278 years left of your sentence to serve!”

“Then why am I awake?” Nico asked. He pulled himself up.

Zagreus couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for the other man. Nico didn’t look like a criminal. His dark eyes were lined, and his face looked sallow. His temple was swelling with a dark bruise. Nico touched the wound absently.

“Why would Persephone imprison you? What did you do?” Zagreus asked.

“Maybe she can tell you herself when she comes,” Nico said. He knelt in the dust of the broken doorway. “I’ll need her to grow another tree for me, anyway.”

Zagreus and Hypnos exchanged glances.

“What is it?” Nico asked. “Where is she, anyway? It’s her garden.”

“Queen Persephone is not in the underworld anymore,” Zagreus said, awkwardly.

Nico frowned. Then he nodded and stood up. “Oh, right, sure. Well, I guess it can wait. I have nothing but time lately. Sucks, because she’s great at healing.” He cradled his wounded head. “You don’t have any ambrosia, do you?”

Zagreus bit his tongue. He had been saving the ambrosia, which was difficult to acquire, but he brought it out anyway. He had the strange urge to take care of Nico, like the man was a baby bird dropped far too soon from the nest.

Nico uncorked the ambrosia with his teeth and poured the divine liquid onto his temple. He hissed as the swelling across his temple began to quickly deflate and heal.

“I’ve never seen anyone do that before,” Zagreus said with a frown.

“It probably won’t work on you guys because you’re too godly,” Nico said, taking a sip of the ambrosia.

“So you’re not a god, then?” Zagreus asked. “You’re a shade?”

“Who knows what I am, at this point,” Nico said. He leaned on the dusty tree remains. “Did Persephone give you that sword?”

Zagreus touched the broad side of his stygian sword. “No. Is it hers?”

“It’s mine. I gave it to her to help protect herself when she’s on the surface,” Nico said. “It’s weird that she left it down here. I hope she’s alright.”

Zagreus couldn't help but smile. Here, finally, was another of his mother's allies. A million questions jumped to mind, and he took a moment to decide which one to ask. He opened his mouth.

"Prince Zagreus!" Hades' voice boomed through the halls. "What destruction have you wrought in my house?!"

Nico's tired eyes widened. He rolled to his feet and stretched, before he climbed over the rubble and headed towards the desk. "Lord Hades!"

"Commander Nico," Hades looked the thin man up and down. Nico had stringy arms and legs and a bow to his back which made him look smaller than he was. It was hard to believe he bore the title of commander.

Nico stood before the desk, shaking the last of the tree shards from his dark curls. He brushed his shoulder off and cleared his throat.

"Prince Zagreus accidentally released me from my tree early," Nico said. His chirpiness was false and seemed to make him look even more exhausted. "So, if you could just build me another one and putting me to sleep so I could get on with serving my sentence, that would be excellent. It doesn't have to be a tree—just anything I can curl up in. Thanks."

Hades said nothing for a long moment. His expression was dark and unreadable. His pure white eyebrows drew together. "Remind me of your crime, Commander."

Nico paused.

"There was nothing listed in your verdict," Hades said. "I looked over your papers and could find no fault. If anything, your work was exemplary."

"Thanks, but it's probably best not to discuss it," Nico said. "After all, I thought her ruling was fare and even-handed. I'm not asking for parole."

"No, I think it is good to discuss it," Hades said. He sat down behind his desk and drew a sheet of paper towards himself. "Security in the underworld has become lax in your absence, Commander. My son is making himself a nuisance. If you cannot even seem to remember your crime, perhaps it is better to commute your sentence to time served and re-enlist your services here."

"No!" Nico yelped, before he recovered a little composure. "No, I, er... I like being unemployed, actually. Besides, you shouldn't go back on Persephone's decisions, it undermines her rule here. She's Queen, isn't she, even if she's not here right now?"

At the mention of the goddess' name, Hades' expression tightened. "Do not talk about her."

"I know you're probably missing her but," Nico took a step forward. "Look, can we call Persephone or something? Send her an iris message? I'm sure that she'd—"

"I am the ruler of the underworld, not her!" Hades bellowed, loud enough to shake the marble. "You would do well to learn your place here, Commander!"

Nico didn't even flinch. Instead, he scowled. "Oh, come on! You can't go back on what she promised me. I don't want to work for you!"

"It matters very little what you want, Commander," Hades said, his voice dripping with rage. He began to write, the contract rolling out from his quill fluidly. "You will work for me and my ranks of foes, or I shall make your stay in the underworld... deeply unpleasant." He finished the contract

and laid it onto the table before Nico.

Nico frowned. He picked up the quill and looked down at the contract like it might bite him.

“Do you doubt my ability to punish you?” Hades asked, coldly.

“You know contracts signed under duress aren’t legally binding, right?” Nico asked, but signed on the line anyway.

Hades didn’t smile, but he pulled the contract back with a look of satisfaction. It rolled up on its own and split into two. Hades held out Nico’s copy of the contract out, and Nico plucked it from his fingers. The other copy drifted away to be filed by the clerks who worked endlessly in the office.

Nico tucked the contract into the waist band of his jeans. “I don’t suppose I can take holiday right away?”

“Your term of service begins immediately,” Hades said. “If you are lucky, your performance will make up for your impudent comments.”

“I’m guessing that’s a no,” Nico said, sourly. He stalked out of the halls.

Zagreus broke into a run to follow him. Hades looked at his son with a frown but didn’t speak to him. Nico passed the station where Nyx usually stood and walked into Zagreus’ room.

“Hey, Nico!” Zagreus caught up with him.

Nico glared at him. He raised an arm, fingers splayed.

The sword on Zagreus’ back shivered and jumped into the air. It flipped over itself and settled, hilt-first, into Nico’s outstretched hand. When the man touched it, the sword pared down to a pure, black slice of a blade, the colour leaching away immediately.

“Don’t talk to me,” Nico said, sheathing his sword. “This is all your fault! Now I’m back to working for the god of grumpiness for months until Persephone comes back.”

Zagreus was about to comment that he’d never heard anyone call Hades the god of grumpiness before—but then what Nico said struck him. “You believe Persephone’s coming back?”

“Of course she is.” Nico threw aside the curtain doorway with a slap of silk on silk, his shoes slapping the flagstones. “The summer can’t last forever, can it?”

Zagreus frowned. “What’s summer?”

Nico groaned. “For a god, you sure are stupid, aren’t you?”

“Ouch,” Zagreus said.

Skelly jumped into life with a jangle of bones. “Mister! You’re back! Wow, it’s been—”

“Not right now, Skelly.” Nico snapped, and glared back at Zagreus. “Look, Hades might be acting like a dog who thinks his owner’s never coming back because they went to the store for five minutes, but you can’t all be this clueless,” Nico said. “It happens every year! Persephone goes for six months then she comes back for six. Duh!”

Zagreus paused. He wasn’t entirely sure how long a month was, but he was fairly sure he had lived

through the equivalent of a few of them. “I don’t think she’s coming back, Nico.”

Nico frowned at him. The unearthly fire cast bright green pools over his dark curls. “What do you mean?”

“She left for the surface soon after I was born,” Zagreus said. “She hasn’t been back since.”

“That can’t be...” Nico shook his head. “No way. That’s not how it’s supposed to happen.”

“Supposed to?” Zagreus echoed.

Nico glanced at him. He seemed about to say something, then he closed his mouth tightly. “This is all wrong.”

“Nico,” Zagreus started.

But Nico just stepped forward. Before his outstretched foot touched the flagstone, a rush of black shadow came up to meet him and he flickered out of phase. He was gone with a sound like rustling feathers.

Zagreus stared at the space where the Commander had just been seconds earlier.

“Don’t let it get to you, boyo,” Skelly said. “Commish is probably missing your ma.”

Zagreus glanced at him. “So they were close, after all?”

“You bet. Nickels used to sleep in her garden when he wasn’t working for your pops,” Skelly said. “It was a sight to see. He was the only one eating fruit from her gardens. Persephone taught him to play the harp. Besides your dad and old lady Nyx, he might have been her closest pal down here.”

“I thought they might be,” Zagreus said. “But what changed? Why did Persephone imprison him? What did he do?”

“You’re asking the wrong fella,” Skelly said, shaking his head. “Still... it was the weirdest thing. When she sentenced him, she cried but Nickels didn’t seem that torn up. He was comforting her. Strange reaction for a guy about to be jailed for longer than any human civilisation’s lasted.”

Zagreus wasn’t sure what to say. He just frowned, taking that in.

Skelly slapped him on the shoulder. “I’m sure you know by now, but your pops employs all types. Nickels is a bit of a sourpuss most of the but he’s an alright fella. You’ll grow on him!”

“Thanks, Skelly,” Zagreus said. In this heart, though, he wasn’t sure.

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Zagreus didn’t have to wait long to see Nico again.

When he left for his next escape attempt, spear in hand, Nico was waiting in one of the broad rooms of Tartarus. The leaping green flames made him look even more ghoulish and dead-eyed. The pits under his cheekbones were deep in shadow.

“Turn back,” Nico said. He had his black stygian sword slung against one shoulder like a baseball bat.

“Sorry, Nico,” Zagreus said. “I can’t do that.”

“You aren’t going to win,” Nico warned.

“Let’s not be pessimistic,” Zagreus said.

Nico didn’t smile. He drew his sword out and touched the tip of his sword to the grey flagstones. There was a hiss and a rumble. The fires flared.

Zagreus jumped forward, trying to get ahead of whatever attack Nico was preparing, but his strike met iron.

Achilles blocked the strike inches before it struck Nico.

Zagreus was so startled he didn’t resist when Achilles shoved him backwards. He stumbled across the cold stone, heart beating wildly. “What?”

“Sorry lad,” Achilles said. “It isn’t by choice.”

“He’s right,” Nico said, taking a step into the shadows. He didn’t disappear, but the edge of his jacket became transparent. “I’m the Ghost King. Every hero who has ever died is under my dominion. When I say jump, they... well...” He waved a hand.

Achilles struck Zagreus in the heart.

Zagreus looked down at the sword which had slipped between his ribs. He dragged in a single breath through ruptured lungs and choked on bubbles of hot blood. He expired.

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Every time he left the house, he was felled in Tartarus.

It wasn’t that he was bested in combat. That he could accept, even enjoy, and rail against and defeat. But Zagreus knew he wasn’t fighting his best. His strikes were weak and deflecting. He cringed at striking his teacher.

Achilles was not able to exercise restraint. Nico kept him on the offensive, directed him to strike like a viper at every opening. Once, Zagreus managed to reach around Achilles to strike Nico, but the Ghost King just smacked aside his spear easily. In the moments that Zagreus was without a weapon, Achilles beheaded him.

Each attempt drove something deeper into Zagreus. He started to dread it, just a little.

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On one attempt, Zagreus made it through Tartarus without seeing Nico at all. When he returned, involuntarily, to the house after reaching Elysium, he saw the young man in the hallway in loud conversation with the god of sleep.

“I’m really not asking for the moon here,” Nico said. “All I’m asking is that you do the same thing again. I know you can do it.”

Hypnos closed one luminous eye. “Mm... I don’t want to make Lord Hades mad.”

“And I don’t want to have to be awake for the next three-thousand years with only skeletons for company!” Nico shot back. “You know the only thing I can eat down here is in the garden? My skin is turning red from all these pomegranates! I can’t—”

“Oh, hi Zagreus!” Hypnos interrupted chirpily. “Let’s see, you died in Elysium this time? Sounds like someone’s been neglecting their post~!”

Nico spared a glance at Zagreus and growled under his breath. He turned on his heel and teleported away before the prince of hell had a chance to say a word.

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“Wait, please,” Zagreus said, just as Nico was opening his mouth to speak.

Nico stepped back. In the lime green fire of Tartarus, his eyes looked very black. His mouth drew a thin line.

“You can summon any ghost, right?” Zagreus asked. “Could I ask that you don’t summon Achilles? It can be almost anyone else, just not him.”

“Are you kidding me?” Nico hissed. “Achilles is the greatest Greek hero, of course I’m going to use him! He has the most attack points! And, while we’re at it, it’s your fault I’m even stuck here! You’re in no position to—”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry,” Zagreus said. “It’s just... I can’t fight him. It’s difficult to explain. He’s like a father to me.”

Nico didn’t look convinced. He closed his eyes for a moment. Then he drew out his sword, letting it slice through the air with a thin whistle. The ground cracked and a shade swelled into being like a coalescing of grey light.

It was a tall, boxy-shouldered man with densely curling brown hair and bright blue eyes. Dark hair covered his broad arms and trunk-like thighs. He drew his long sword, the razor edge flashing in the unearthly torchlight.

“Hector,” Nico said. “I want you to bring me Zagreus’ head.”

Hector smiled broadly and struck forward. Zagreus intercepted his strike with a clash of metal on metal.

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It took him three attempts to break through Hector's solid vanguard. But on the third attempt, he slew Hector and went around to strike Nico—but felt something slice his ribs. Zagreus dove to one side to avoid it.

Another man stood between him and Nico now. It was a man with long, straight black hair tied into a high tail. He held a net and trident with razor points.

“Bellerophon,” Nico said, tiredly. “This is Zagreus.”

“Another challenger?” Zagreus asked. “How many do you have?”

Bellerophon sliced the air where the young god had just been.

“I have literally... almost an infinite number of shades I can call on to attack you,” Nico said. “I can probably do more than one at once, too, I just don’t want to because it’s an effort. Plus, it’s not that large a room in here and I don’t want somebody to accidentally spear me.”

Zagreus dodged another strike and managed to cut Bellerophon’s net in half. The hero struck the god and scattered red blood across the flagstones.

“Why are you holding back?” Nico asked.

“Excuse me?” Zagreus asked.

“Come on,” Nico said. “You’re a god, aren’t you? You’re the son of Hades and Persephone! You should be able to kick my butt like nobody’s business.”

Zagreus gritted his teeth and drove Bellerophon back with a few keen strikes. “I appreciate your faith in me, but I’m not holding back.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Nico said. “You haven’t done anything. Your father’s called the Earthshaker, isn’t he? You mother, she can turn a tide in war. Why aren’t you wiping the floor with half of the underworld?”

Bellerophon struck through his defence and struck him through the stomach. Zagreus faltered, stumbling back. “Sorry to disappoint,” Zagreus said, as he died.

Chapter 2

Zagreus pulled himself up from the bloody river, the warm wet smell of iron filling his mouth and nose. He shook his head and straightened up, letting the river water wash away from him. He stamped blood from his sandals.

“You’re aware Asphodel has flooded?” Nico’s voice cut through the house.

Zagreus straightened up, wiping blood from his face.

Nico stood in front of Hades’ desk; arms folded. His narrow sword rested in a makeshift sheath through the belt loops on his jeans. He stood in front of the god of the dead with a stern, drawn expression and not even so much as a flicker of fear.

“It’s none of your concern, Commander,” Hades said.

“Of course it’s my concern,” Nico said. “I’m living here, aren’t I? What happens if the lava spreads into the rest of the domain, or even into Tartarus? And that’s not even counting all the shades of Asphodel which have already been displaced!”

Hades slapped the top of his desk. “I am well aware of the state of the House, Commander! I don’t need your patronising reminders.”

“Well then you should do something about it!” Nico said. “All of you and your servants are obsessed with stopping your kid getting onto the surface when you should be worried about the fact this entire realm is crumbling around your ears!”

“Commander!” Hades’ voice slapped through the halls like a thunderclap. Even Nico flinched back. There was a drawn-out moment of silence before Hades spoke again, dangerously quiet. “I think you’ve made your point. You are dismissed.”

Nico shoved his hands into his pockets and stalked away.

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When Zagreus entered the chamber at Tartarus, he found Hector and Bellerophon waiting for him. No Nico. Both heroes rounded on him immediately, but this time they were easier to defeat. Zagreus only to land a handful of hits on each of them before they dispersed in a cloud of shadows.

Silence filled the chamber. Zagreus crept through to the next domain. It was the first time in a long time that he had gone on through the Asphodel, and the heat of the lava was scorching.

A few foes milled around the edge of a field of fire, but they didn’t even look at him. They were transporting large flagstones, jumping like fleas from one dry area of stone to the next. Zagreus followed them cautiously.

“Just set it down here,” Nico told a giant wasp, gesturing to the last gap in a short wall of flagstones. The wasp deposited it and walked smartly out of the way, back-end wagging.

Nico had stripped off his jacket and shirt, and his back shone with sweat. His curly hair was tied up

into a stubby ponytail. Brown freckles dotted his pale skin. “Alright, here we go.”

The young man swung his hands towards and yanked them back quickly, as if he were yanking on an invisible chain.

The ground cracked. Lava lurched and spat black bubbles, before it turned down the funnels Nico had carved out. It hissed steam. Nico swung his hands again, pulling out gouges in the hard rock. Magma ceded gradually, revealing earth the colour of coffee grounds.

“Wow, you’re dealing with the lava!” Zagreus exclaimed.

“Crap!” Nico yanked his sword out of the rock and spun around to face Zagreus.

“Truce!” Zagreus exclaimed quickly. “Don’t attack me, and I won’t try to get past you, I swear.”

Nico let his sword drop. His arms looked heavy. Sweat stuck his curls to his forehead.

“I had no idea you could move the earth,” Zagreus said. “Why don’t you do it when you face me?”

Nico shook his head. “It’s easy to put cracks in the ground. It’s much harder to take them out again. I could wreck the whole chamber but then how would shades or hellish workers pass through?”

Zagreus raised his eyebrows. “You really care about this place, don’t you?”

“Believe it or not, this is the closest place I’ve got to a home right now,” Nico said. He plastered his damp hair away from his forehead. “I think you know that it’s been deteriorating for what looks like years now.”

“I know Asphodel has flooded, but I don’t know much else about it,” Zagreus admitted.

Nico cleared a few shattered stones out of the way and punched a gouge into the brimstone. It was a terrible cracking noise and the ground shook. Lava moved like thick luminous mud over the stone. Nico had to step quickly back to avoid it. A pinkish heat burn was starting to form across his hands and the flat sides planes of his face.

“It’s not just here,” Nico said. “I talked to a shade… I know it’s whatever-B.C. right now, but I’ve checked the records too…” He shook his head.

Zagreus watched him direct another tide of lava. Hellish foes skittered around dropping spare stones into the small pools of magma which looked like lily pads on glowing orange ponds.

Nico straightened up. “I have to see Persephone.”

“Persephone?” Zagreus echoed warily.

“I need to talk to her,” Nico said. He wiped his mouth with the back of his grimy hand. “She’s the key to all of this. You know where her garden is, don’t you? If we want to have any chance of fixing this, you need to take me there.”

Zagreus frowned. His mouth formed a thin line.

“Look, if you’re worried about getting there, don’t be,” Nico said. “I can teleport us up to the surface in under a second. And I won’t bother her—not that I could bother a goddess, anyway—Persephone and I are on good terms.”

“Are you?” Zagreus asked. “Last I checked, she locked you up for over three thousand years.”

Nico hesitated. “That’s complicated. It’s a special situation.”

“Listen, my friend,” Zagreus said. “I want to accept your boons, but I can’t do it blind. You need to tell me who you are, and how you know my mother. I don’t know if I can trust you.”

Nico ran a hand through his wet hair and turned. He pulled his shirt and his jacket from the glassy rocks and folded them over his arm. His cheeks were flushed pink under his tan.

Nico extended a hand. “Alright. Come with me, I’ll explain.”

Zagreus frowned, but took his hand.

There was a rush of thick dark colour, like dropping through a whirl of midnight velvet. For a moment, Zagreus was weightless and lifted by a breath of cold air. Then his feet connected with soft earth.

They were in Persephone’s chambers in the House. Dark grey-green grasses rose and fell softly under the pomegranate trees. When Zagreus turned, he saw that the door was rebuilt and locked tightly. The repaired marble was formidably thick.

“Locks don’t mean much to me,” Nico said, when he saw where the god was looking. “It’s hard to keep me out of anywhere.”

Zagreus glanced at the small hills. There was a neatly folded bolt of fabric and pair of old sandals. “Are you living here?”

“Sure,” Nico said. “It’s also the only place in the underworld where I can be relatively sure we won’t be overheard.”

Zagreus nodded. He sat on a tree stump and waited expectantly.

“Well...” Nico paused. “Look, this might sound weird—but I can only give you my word that it’s true. Do you know Kronos? I guess he’s like your... grandfather?”

“Kronos, the titan?” Zagreus raised an eyebrow. “The lord of time?”

“Yes, him,” Nico said. “In three thousand years he wakes back up and causes a lot of crap to go very wrong, very fast. Anyway, I was... will be... born around that time, give or take, and I tried to defeat him. I think we managed, but at the last moment, he cursed me. Sent me back here. Now, I’m not sure I can age—I don’t know how it works, but I don’t want to find out. So Persephone agreed to sentence me to three thousand years of dreamless sleep so I would be able to find my loved ones again. Without being a million years old, I mean. Does that make sense?”

Zagreus rested his chin on the back of his hand and took a long moment to absorb that. It was a wild, truncated tale, but the way Nico delivered it made it hard not to believe it. He had certainly heard stranger stories.

“So you see,” Nico said, waving his hands. “Persephone didn’t hate me and I didn’t do anything to her. It’s a secret, though, and I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want it to change things or for you to prevent me going back to sleep.”

“What would it change?” Zagreus asked. “Why would I prevent you going to sleep?”

Nico didn’t seem to have an answer. He gave a crooked, sheepish smile.

“Well, that’s the why,” Zagreus said. “But who are you? You said you’re the one who faced Kronos, but you said you’re not a god. So you’re mortal?”

“Mostly,” Nico said. He spoke haltingly. “It wasn’t just me who faced Kronos. It’s... we were... half human. Half-bloods. One of our parents were Olympians, one of them was a mortal.”

“You’re a half-god,” Zagreus said.

“Yes.”

“Who is your divine parent?”

Nico chewed the inside of his cheek. “My father. His name is Pluto.”

Zagreus watched him, uncomprehendingly. He thought of the dozens of lesser gods and goddesses, with roles from the god of shoelaces to the goddess of cabinet hinges, but the name Pluto didn’t ring any bells. “Oh, I see.”

Nico relaxed. “So, you’ll help me contact Persephone? I can’t harm her, she’s way too powerful. All I want to do is talk to her.”

“Sure,” Zagreus said. “We’re cousins, after all.”

Nico’s smile faltered a little, but he still pulled his shirt back on and shrugged into his jacket. He made sure his sword was secured on his belt and extended a hand.

Zagreus took it.

There was another, longer fall through flitting dark shadows like a deep pool of raven feathers. There was a noise like someone flipping very fast through the pages of a book, or fabric twirling, and then it became suddenly very cold.

Zagreus lurched forward onto the snow.

White snowbanks covered everything up to knee-height, leaving cool blue shadows in the crests of the soft hills. Clear orange dusk stretched across the sea’s horizon. Dark green trees speared the evening sky. Everything was still and quiet.

“Hades will know that I left,” Nico said. His tone was hard to read, somewhere between resigned and lethargic.

Zagreus watched the young man out of the corner of his eye. In some ways, Nico reminded him of Nyx, something about his dark hair and flashing black eyes, his stony and cold manner that sometimes hinted at real warmth. Years of reading Nyx’s opaque expressions gave him a hint at Nico’s mood—the half blood was a little nervous.

“Which direction is it?” Nico asked.

“Her garden is through here,” Zagreus said, pointing, and began to trudge through the thick snow. Ice crystals crunched and squeaked under his feet.

Nico fell into step behind him. The man’s breath came in ghosts of white.

As they walked, Zagreus watched the icy landscape around him. Was it truly unusual? It seemed so pristine and ordered, so wildly different from the baked stone of Tartarus or the plush fields of Elysium.

It didn't take them long to reach the gardens. Zagreus turned and gestured Nico forward.

"Phew," Nico said. He was shivering.

Together they stepped into the paradise of colour. The grass under their feet was exquisite and bright green, the fruits and vegetables were like fat jewels and the leaves of the plant were broad and unspoiled by scars or parasites. The earth smelled rich and healthy.

"Mother?" Zagreus called.

"Zagreus!" Persephone walked out of the small house with a basket of fruit on her hip. She paused. "Domenico?"

"It's just Nico," Nico said. "You're the only one who calls me Domenico."

Persephone smiled and set her basket on the table. Her hair was the golden like ripe wheat and her skin was the smooth pale colour of eggshells. "What a surprise. Two children of the House to visit me. Has it been that many years already, Commander?"

"I broke him out of his prison early," Zagreus said. "Could you put him back?"

"The eternal sleep might be a challenge, but I can put him to sleep for a thousand years at a time with one of my tinctures," Persephone said.

"No, that's not what I'm here to ask," Nico said. "Persephone, you need to leave your garden."

The two gods looked at him, startled.

"I'm not saying you have to go back to Hades," Nico said. "But I think you being in here has caused something awful to happen—it's snow all year round right now. Starvation, drought, famine. Going back years and years, in Greece especially at high levels. It's not natural! From all the records, it should be August in Greece, but I hear you're up to your waist in snow here!"

Persephone was almost expressionless. Her bright eyes blinked.

"I can trace it all back to when you left," Nico said. "I think your mother's mourning you because she thinks you're dead. The underworld is decaying rapidly. We have to do something about it now, before it gets even worse."

"You're talking about things you don't understand," Persephone said. She drew herself up to her full height and her hair flowed like rippling water behind her. "I couldn't bear to talk to either my mother or Hades about losing Zagreus. Who are you to tell me what to do?"

"I know Hades and Demeter are assholes, but it's not just them that are dealing with this," Nico said. "People are dying! Surely we can find a way to fix it, even without going back to either of them long term?"

"I have welcomed you into my gardens," Persephone said, her voice rising. "You've tricked my son into bringing you here... you've done it all for your selfish ends?"

"You're the one who's selfish!" Nico shot back. "You've plunged Greece into an ice age just because you don't want to talk about your feelings!"

"Enough!" Persephone boomed.

Vines burst from the ground underneath Nico's feet and snared around his ankles like tentacles. He

tried to struggle but they wrapped tightly around his legs and brought him crashing to his knees.

“Nico!” Zagreus cried.

“You’ve been so frivolous with my favours, Nico,” Persephone said, her voice rough like cracking bark, “let’s see how you fair without them! I will imprison you and you can see how you fair under my garden, awake for three thousand years!”

The last few vines lashed around Nico and he was enveloped completely in the dark, hard foliage. He was pulled back under the earth.

“And you!” Persephone glared at her son. “You brought your brother in here to antagonise me. I thought I could trust you, but evidently you are both too much like your father!”

“Persephone,” Zagreus started to speak, but realised the ground under his feet was starting to shift and lurch like thick sludge.

“Get out of my garden!” Persephone commanded.

There was a surge of dark, hard earth and Zagreus was knocked cleanly back. He landed with a crash in the icy snow. He watched as the silhouette of Persephone cut back through the garden and entered her house with a crash.

*

Pluto.

Zagreus climbed out of the gory river. The tart red blood dripped from his chin, and he ran a hand through his hair, head full of dizzying thoughts. *Your brother.* He straightened up and adjusted his chiton.

“Must you lead every one of my servants astray, boy?” Hades’ voice rumbled through the halls. “And I thought the commander the least sentimental of my staff... When he comes back to the underworld, I shall remind him of his duty to me.”

Zagreus walked towards the desk. “Pluto?”

“What was that?” Hades asked. His frown deepened.

“Have you heard of Pluto?” Zagreus asked.

“What are you babbling about?” Hades asked in a growl. “I’ve never heard of him. Don’t try to distract me with such foolish riddles.”

Zagreus shook his head. “Never mind.”

Hades was still trying to lecture him, but Zagreus stalked past.

He entered his room, but he was too agitated to rest, so he simply walked on through, past the range and back into Tartarus. The dishes of flames cast bright flickering light across the flagstones and the air was heavy with the scent of sulphur.

When his foot struck the stone—a blanket of black spread out underneath him.

A soundless, colourless void eclipsed him.

Zagreus stumbled to a halt. The air was cool and still. There was an odd sensation of weight around him, as if he was standing at the bottom of a pristine lake.

“Hello?” Zagreus called.

There was a light, airy laugh. Three women clothed in floating, white stolas came gradually into existence, their bare feet skimming the featureless floor.

“Fates?” Zagreus frowned. “What’s going on?”

The three fates didn’t respond. They turned their faces towards him, long hair tugging and falling through the thickened air. Only the middle woman had a single shining eye, the other two only had blank holes.

“Persephone said Nico was my brother,” Zagreus said. “Is that true?”

The fate on the left, one of the eyeless ones with hair braided and woven, nodded gently.

“I see,” Zagreus said. His heart twisted. “Then why did he say his father’s name was Pluto? He lied? Why didn’t he want me to know? Why did he tell Persephone but not me?”

The fate in the middle rolled her single eye. It flashed like a freshly minted golden coin.

“Right. Too many questions,” Zagreus said. Not many people got to talk to the fates. Nobody could catch them, and nobody could make them talk. Even Hades, with all his power, couldn’t demand an audience with them. He should use the audience to his best advantage and ask a question he couldn’t find an answer for. “Is there any way I can save Nico?”

The fate on the right smiled and the folds of her long dress shifted slowly as she moved. She reached out with a long pale arm. A very small flask was clasped between two of her fingers. When Zagreus reached out a hand, she dropped it into her palm. It weighed almost nothing.

“Thank you,” Zagreus said. The tiny flask seemed to be the sort that held scented oils, and this one contained some small amount of clear liquid. “He’s got to drink this, right?”

The fates said nothing, turning their faces towards each other. Barely a moment later, they vanished.

Tartarus returned. All that was left of the visit was a coolness on Zagreus’ skin.

*

Zagreus snuck into the garden.

Wind brushed the verdant grasses. Persephone weeded the rows of tomato plants, bowed between the tiny vegetable plants as if in prayer. She didn’t see her son sneak past the raspberry bushes or duck under the apple trees. She didn’t see him reach the tangled knot of vines where her stepson was buried in the earth.

Zagreus saw a curly mess of hair and began to dig.

Earth came away in loose handfuls, and he cleared rocks and bone meal and clods of mud. The vines were harder. He had brought his spear and used the end of it to try to saw away at the thick twists of vegetation, but he could make no progress. The vines were indestructible.

Black eyes met his. Nico was trussed up under the knot of vines, but he was still conscious. Dark vines bound his mouth shut and his head down.

“It’s alright,” Zagreus muttered. “I can cut you lose. Then this flask will let you escape.”

He managed to clear the mud away from Nico’s face, but the vines were like bands of iron. He couldn’t make a dent in them. Just as Zagreus was about to try to use the flask on them, he heard someone call his name.

“Zagreus?” Persephone’s voice rang out.

“Persephone,” Zagreus said, still fumbling with the flask.

Persephone’s face twisted. She struck out and a tree branch smacked the flask from Zagreus’ hand. It shattered on the grass.

“Again?!” Persephone boomed. “You’re trying to go behind my back for a second time in one day?”

“You have to let him go,” Zagreus said. “He doesn’t deserve this!”

“I don’t have to do anything!” Persephone yelled. “I’m quite sick of people telling me what I have to do! Perhaps if you insist on coming back to my garden, you should join your brother in his punishment!”

Vines leapt up from the earth and began to wrap around Zagreus’ legs. He tried to smack them away with his spear, but they kept coming, surging out of the earth like weapons fire. They lashed around his torso and chest.

“Maybe this will get the message across, if talking won’t!” Persephone cried.

A vine snared tightly around Zagreus’ throat. “Mother--...”

Persephone froze.

The vines paused. Zagreus peeled back the vine around his throat and breathed shakily.

Gradually, Persephone began to thaw. She stepped back shakily and glanced between Zagreus and the bound-up Nico.

“Oh my...” Persephone said. Her voice was softer now and shook a little. “What am I doing?”

“Mother?” Zagreus frowned. “Are you alright?”

“Am I...?” Persephone looked distraught. “Look at what I’m doing. All this time I’ve been arrogant enough to think I’m so different from the Olympians and yet when I’m angry I get carried away in just the same manner. Against children, too.”

Persephone waved a hand. The vines around Zagreus’ body relaxed, dropping away. Nico coughed and crawled out of the tomb of earth. The vines fell away from him like heavy sleeping snakes. He

shook earth from his jacket.

“I’m sorry, Nico, Zagreus,” Persephone said. “It’s not an excuse but I got too wrapped up in my own feelings. I shouldn’t have taken them out on you.”

“It’s alright, mother,” Zagreus said.

“What are you going to do?” Nico asked.

Persephone sighed. “I got angry because you were right, Nico. I’m holding onto grief that I should put to rest, and I need my family’s help to do that. Nothing can be healed until I do that. Demeter first, but then my husband.”

Nico looked relieved. Zagreus glanced between them. “Which means...?” Zagreus asked.

“Which means,” Persephone said. “I am coming home with you.”

*

No wind blew through the House, so the grey-green grasses of the garden were still and proud. The shadows were long and obscure, and no torches were lit inside the sanctum. Trees sat like shrunken old men, clustered in patches around the soft earth. Fruit hung like baubles from their branches.

The rest of the House was celebrating the Queen’s return. But here there was quiet. The garden’s only occupants: two brothers.

“I thought you would be out in the festivities,” Zagreus said. “It’s not hard to find ambrosia right now.”

Nico was lying with his arms folded behind his head and his eyes closed. He wore the gaudy brass badge of Employee Of the Month and his feet were in sandals rather than the sneakers which had been ruined by the vines.

“I don’t like people,” Nico said. “I’m just going to enjoy my last night awake in the House in peace.”

Zagreus sat on a nearby stump and rested with one knee up. He wasn’t sure what he was feeling. All of his emotions stirred within him, and every feeling had teeth. “You’re my brother.”

“Yeah,” Nico admitted, quietly.

“You told me your father’s name was Pluto,” Zagreus said. “Why did you lie?”

“It’s not really a lie,” Nico said. “But nobody will call him Pluto for an eon.”

Zagreus just waited.

Nico opened his eyes. He regarded Zagreus with a dry kind of sadness. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to know you were my brother.”

“Why?”

“Because I have to leave you,” Nico said. “And I thought it would be easier for you if you didn’t know I was your brother.”

“Why do you have to leave me?” Zagreus asked. “I only just met you.”

Nico opened his mouth to respond, but a moment later he closed it. Nothing was said.

“The time will pass anyway, won’t it?” Zagreus said. “You said it yourself you might not be aging. Why not stay here, working here?”

“Because if I stay awake, I’ll change. By the time the twenty-first century arrives, my friends will be a whisper of a distant memory. I’ll be too different, and they won’t know me anymore,” Nico said. “I’ve changed a lot in the past few years alone. I’ll be unrecognisable after three thousand years, Zagreus.”

Zagreus wanted to respond, but he couldn’t put together a sentence. He wanted to have a sterling argument, a vision of what they could do as a family but could bring nothing together. His heart was heavy.

“When I was younger, my sister left me to join the hunters of Artemis,” Nico said. “At the time, I didn’t get it. I felt like she must have not cared about me. But now I think I understand it. Sometimes you can really care about someone, but you have to leave them behind when the road forks.”

Zagreus nodded.

“I’m sorry,” Nico said.

“Don’t be,” Zagreus said. “You’ve done a lot for me. You’ve brought my mother back, for one.”

“It might not be permanent,” Nico said. “She’s supposed to come back for six months and leave for six months. That’s what gives birth to the seasons.”

“Seasons?” Zagreus asked, raising an eyebrow. “Is that a sort of animal?”

“Never mind,” Nico said with a grin. “Look, you’re immortal. When I wake up from my sleep, you’ll still be around. I can take you to the surface world, and I can show you everything you want to see.”

“I’ll be waiting for you,” Zagreus said.

“Sure, save the date,” Nico said. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Zagreus grinned. “Hey, you’ll have your peace and quiet soon, but why not actually enjoy yourself this evening?”

“What do you mean?” Nico asked.

“Well, Persephone’s not putting you into a tree until the end of the night, right?” Zagreus said. “Let’s go to the party and get wasted. There are some people I’d love for you to meet.”

Zagreus extended a hand and Nico took it. He helped the half blood to his feet.

“What sort of people?” Nico asked.

“Furies, gods, goddesses,” Zagreus said. “The underworld’s most powerful divine entities and the

most terrible creatures ever devised."

Nico looked a little green.

“Don’t worry, brother,” Zagreus grinned. “I’ll take good care of you.”

“Yeah, because you’ve been doing such a good job of that so far,” Nico drawled. Zagreus laughed.

The pair of them left the garden. Their footsteps were muffled by the soft grasses and the murmur of the party in the main House. Magical lanterns cast long pools of soft party lighting, and the ambrosia fountains flowed merrily. Deep in the depths of the underworld, the thick lava of Asphodel retreated, and the walkways of Tartarus began to gently recombine. Silently, but surely, the underworld was knitting itself back together, and the world was becoming right again.

The end

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