

If At First You Don't Succeed

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If At First You Don't Succeed

by [sunkelles](#)

Summary

Try try again.

Or: the first time Zagreus tries to escape the underworld. It doesn't go well for anyone involved.

Notes

i still haven't gotten through elysium and i am DYING. every single time i turn on the game i'm dying.

i think that the implication is that the first time zag tried to escape it was because he found out about his mom? but i kinda like the idea that the original decision to leave was independent from that. so i went with that instead and he finds out about persephone later. my tumblr url is disregardcanon and i get to choose what canon to disregard

Just keep walking, Zagreus tells himself. *You have to do this- you've already made up your mind.*

He could probably try to sneak out unnoticed, but his father has eyes everywhere.... And if he fails. Well, Zagreus doesn't know what it will look like if he hasn't given the Lord of the Underworld some forewarning.

Zagreus keeps walking down the low-lit hallway, trying to steady his breath. He runs his hand over the soft, leather hilt of his sword.

Calm down, he tells himself. Zagreus is confident- he is- it's just. Well. No matter how accustomed he is to his father's dismissal or rage, it's never grown easier to deal with. When he steels himself for dismissal, he's met by his father's rage. When he's raring to fight, he's met with his father's indifference.

So, Zagreus prepares to fight as he puts up his armor for the worst of his father's uninterested disdain.

Zagreus takes his last few steps towards his father's desk. As usual, Hades doesn't even glance up to meet his son's eyes. Zagreus waits a few moments, then taps on the desk. He starts tapping louder, and louder, and louder and-

His father's hand shoves him down firmly onto the table, stopping his tapping with a single thud.

"I don't have time for your impertinence," his father says, not even glancing up from his paperwork, "some of us have work to do." Zagreus pulls his hand out from his father's grasp, and places it on the edge of the counter.

"I'd still have work if you hadn't fired me," he mutters. He never wanted that job in the first place, but being fired for "incompetence" when no one taught him how to do the damn thing stung worse than he expected it would.

"If you had been less incompetent, then maybe I would not have fired you." His father's casual dismissals never stop stinging. Hades has called Zagreus a disappointment just about as long as Zagreus can remember, even before he switched from calling him "daughter" to "son".

The Lord of the Underworld didn't have much trouble with the change of pronouns or name, but thinking of his child as anything less than a failure? Well. That was just too much for his brain to handle.

“I suppose I should thank you,” Zagreus says, “this abundance of free time helped me to decide what I’m going to do.” Escape has been in the back of his brain for years, but he never thought to pursue it. Not until his father cemented the fact that he didn’t view him as a proper heir.

The Lord of the Underworld does not respond.

“Well?” Zagreus asks, “don’t you want to know what it is?”

“Not particularly,” his father says.

“I’m leaving,” Zagreus says. That actually gets Hades to look up from his paperwork.

“Leaving?”

“Yes. I’m leaving the House. I need to see what’s out there,” Zagreus says. His father looks back down at his paperwork.

“You know what the layers of this world look like- Achilles had you study it as a child. You don’t need to leave the House to figure that out.”

“I don’t just want to see the Underworld,” Zagreus says, “I want to see the surface.” His father looks back up at that, if only to glare.

“There is nothing up there for you,” he says. Zagreus can see the implication; he is unwanted in the land of the dead *and* the living.

“Well. I’m going to find out.” He waits a moment, expecting his father to respond. Hades does not. Zagreus keeps waiting, hoping for some kind of reaction. Hades does not even glance up from his work.

Zagreus takes his hand off the counter. He crosses his arms over his chest. “Are you going to stop me?” he asks, just to know what he will face on his journey. Zagreus will fight through whatever guard his father sends to make through the door to Tartarus. He won’t stop until he glimpses the light of day.

“Why would I bother?” his father asks, flipping over his paperwork, “you cannot escape.” Zagreus feels his blood boil.

“You’re so sure I’ll fail that you won’t even try to stop me?” he demands. What does he have to do to be worthy of his father’s notice?

The Lord of the Underworld dips his quill and signs a document. He doesn’t even bother to look up. “Exactly,” he says.

Zagreus lets out a snarl as he stomps down the hallway towards the doors to Tartarus. The staff of the house openly stare, but Zagreus makes no move to speak to anyone. They've heard what they need, and he wouldn't be any good conversation at the moment. He slams open the doors to Tartarus and lets it close behind him.

A green light illuminates the path in front of him. The stones coating the ground are the same as the ones inside the House. The smell of sulfur hangs heavy in the air. The walls of the room are made of the same stone, and the ceilings stretch higher than anywhere in the house.

The room is twice the size of the great hall in the House. At the end of the corridor, Zagreus sees what must be the room's exit. There's a hole in the wall containing a strange, empty vase.

He's so busy examining the sights far away from him that doesn't notice the floor change in material. Zagreus takes a step, and he feels himself fall for a moment. The stone catches itself about four inches below the rest of the floor.

An arrow with bright purple light whizzes in front of his face.

Oh. There's traps, he thinks. He'll have to look closer where he's walking. It'll take a while to even figure out what the traps are and how they work. Zagreus wishes that Achilles could have prepped him for *this*.

He spots a purple glow out of the corner of his eye, and it speeds towards him. Zagreus draws his sword and deflects the attack, but another one comes from behind. It stings when it hits the side of his head, his vision illuminating purple.

"Ow," Zagreus says. He spots the sources of the two blasts. Both of the creatures are wispy little things, bright yellow and emaciated creatures of a strange shape. He dashes forward to slash through one, and narrowly deflects its ranged attack. He hears the sound of an attack coming from behind, and narrowly dodges.

He comes closer, stabbing his sword into the creature. It takes a lot of jabs and him getting cut up and hit with another painful blast to kill the damn thing. It takes a lot of the same to kill the next one.

Zagreus is aching and bruised by the time he's done, but he doesn't see any more monsters spring to life. He watches the exit- and a container of nectar springs into existence in the vase, the wall opening up into a door.

“Wow,” he says. He might actually have some resources to work with when he ends up on the surface.

In the next chamber, Zagreus actually sees the monsters spawn, springing to life on a glowing nest of runes. He spots four creatures- a wispy little witch like the one he faced, a hulking behemoth with a club, and two fat creatures with chalices. He lunges at the witch first, blocking its purple fire with his sword. He stabs into it 1- 2- 3- 4 times, and it blows up in a burst of yellow dust.

Then, he feels a harsh blow to his back.

Oh shit. The thing with the club got me, he thinks. Zagreus tries to dash to the side, and he's met with a stabbing pain in his back. He glances down, and notices a trail of blood dripping down his back and onto his legs.

This is not going the way that he hoped.

Zagreus glances at the back of the room, and sees two of those empty vases. He thinks he'll have to kill all the monsters in here before he can move to a new room.

Then another one. Then another one. Over and over and over again, all through Tartarus and all the other layers.

And here he is, bleeding badly from a wound in the second room he visits. How is he going to get out of here if he can't even stay alive through two rooms?

Zagreus slashes into the behemoth, attempting to block a jab from its club. He manages another quick stab, and kicks at the thing for good measure. He manages to bring it down, but feels another sharp pain to his back- one of the things with the chalices.

He turns around, back aching, and spots the other one dashing wildly forward to attack. He puts up his sword to fight, and the thing twists Zagreus's own sword in his hand, jabbing it into his stomach with the force of its dash.

Zagreus lets out a pitiful little noise as he coughs up blood. The thing keeps attacking, pain coming over and over and-

Suddenly, Zagreus feels the pain melt away. He wakes up submerged in liquid. He opens his eyes and sees light peaking through the red fluid.

And just like that- he's back in the House. He swims through the fluid, body aching and tired from the ghosts of bruises and stab wounds. They've healed, but his body hasn't quite forgotten what they felt like. He feels his foot on the bottom of the steps, and the water level goes down with each step he takes, until he's standing only on the opulent red carpet of the entry way to the House of Hades.

Zagreus holds his breath as he starts down the hallway.

Maybe if he's sneaky enough, no one will-

"Oh, hi!" comes the voice of Hypnos, "your dad said you'd be back, but I didn't expect it to be so soon! That wasn't even fifteen minutes!" Zagreus feels his face flush.

"Guess I'll just have to get better next time," he says.

Hypnos grins. "It would be harder to get worse." Zagreus lets out a bitter little chuckle.

"I suppose it would," Zagreus admits. He takes a deep breath, and walks further down the hallway, towards his father's desk.

For once in his life, his father looks up to meet his eyes.

"Do you see now?" he asks, sounding a little less cruel than normal, "there is no escape." Zagreus could get angry, but he's never had much luck with that. Instead, he goes for humor- the same way he normally does.

"Now you sound like Meg when she's pissed at me."

His father doesn't even acknowledge the comment. Instead, he just says, "You failed." Zagreus is used to failure. His father has made sure that he's well acquainted with the concept. He's not going to let a little thing like a failed attempt keep him from his goal.

“I did,” he admits, “but that won’t stop me.”

His father’s look sours. “Why not?”

Zagreus forces a grin. “Haven’t you ever heard that saying? Try try again?”

“You will fail over and over and over again until you tire of the feeling of blood running down your limbs.” Zagreus hopes his father doesn’t see the way the breath catches in his throat in fear.

Dying hurt. It hurt so much more than he ever expected. And he’s going to do it again, and again, and again, and again- however long it takes until he’s finally free. It’s a terrifying thought, but. Zagreus has never shied away from a bit of terror. He didn’t end up with Meg for nothing.

“Yeah. I’ll fail a lot,” Zagreus says. After his first excursion, he knows he’s going to fail a lot more than he’d like, “but I’ll keep trying. And then one day, I *won’t* fail.” He’ll see the light of the sun, and feel the world around him- and finally know the world outside this dreadful House is like.

Maybe he’ll learn what it’s like to feel alive.

His father’s look is almost soft as he says, “You will fail, Zagreus. No matter how many times you try.”

Zagreus knows his confusion must be written clearly on his face, but he still says, “You can’t know that.”

“Oh, but I can,” his father says. Then, he looks right back down at his paperwork, as if he never gave Zagreus any attention at all.

Sometimes Zagreus wonders why he even bothers to talk to the man. His lord father has made it clear he’d rather do a mountain of boring paperwork than spend a moment’s time with his son. But Zagreus has never taken the easy way out. He fought through stares and glares when he started to present as a boy instead of a girl- dated a fury- listened to all the gossip in the house run wild when he started running around with the god of death. He’s always been a persistent little shit.

Zagreus will keep trying to escape, and maybe he’ll even keep trying to make things better with his father. Try try again and all that.

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