**Chapter 10**

**Scapegoats**

“*You might think it is a good idea to let him speak. I assure you it isn’t. Jackson is going to give you his version of the events. It will be filled with lies, whatever truths will be included in this tale will be undistinguishable from the rest of the story, and he will blame everyone but the chief culprit, who is naturally himself. But if you think you know better than us, go ahead. It’s your funeral*.” Words attributed to Ethan Nakamura, son of Nemesis, long after the Lightning Thief Great Quest was over.

“*The art of victory relies on finding a nice scapegoat at the end of the Great Quest. Everything else is absolutely dispensable*.” Words attributed to Perseus Jackson, authenticity never confirmed.

**1 June 2006, Hades Fortress, the Underworld**

“Yes, it is *exactly what it looks like*.”

The moment the Gods barged into the devastated throne’s room, Perseus knew the Great Quest was successful...and the riskiest seconds of their adventures were ahead of them.

Sure, it was incredibly funny to see Zeus’ horrified expression. It was extremely dangerous too.

Thus he had to intervene, and play the best theatrical performance of his life.

“It is all Hera’s fault!” the son of Poseidon proclaimed, while grabbing Nico di Angelo in a hurry and pushing him towards the Master Bolt in a hurry as Hades neutralised Hera’s power.

Fortunately, the young son of Hades understood what was required of him and handed the Master Bolt to the ‘legitimate owner’.

“**Too proud to give me the Master Bolt in person, son of the seas**?” The Master of Olympus rumbled.

“Of course not!” This time he was going to the truth...it served his purposes anyway. “It’s just my companions and I have sworn an Oath on the Styx to not touch the Master of Bolt for the entire duration of this Great Quest...fortunately, the son of Hades your wife blackmailed into helping her while she betrayed you was-“

“**I had no need to blackmail them**!” Hera raged predictably. “**What they did**-“

Hades gagged her with something shadowy before she said something else.

“As I was saying,” he delighted in the expressions of disgust the Gods were giving the soon-to-be ex-Queen of the Gods, “the Goddess here did a lot of very nasty, nasty things. It is by her actions the son and daughter of Hades were able to leave the Lotus Casino. It is thanks to her help stealing your symbol of power was possible at all, Lord Zeus. With her reputation towards all Demigods and Demigoddesses, is it any wonder the children of Hades were afraid of her wrath and agreed to participate in this act of high treason against Olympus? And it is all Hera’s fault.”

“**This is ridiculous**!” Ah, the Queen of Hell had woken up. “**The daughter of Hades was no mere threatened servant! She was the chief of lieutenant of this treachery**!”

And naturally, the Goddess of Harvests and Agriculture was going to take her daughter’s side, there was no need to be knowledgeable in the Greek philosophy to see it coming.

“**If my daughter says it**-“

“With due respect, Lady Demeter, the loyalty of your daughter to your husband and Olympus is very much in question,” Perseus feigned to not notice the murderous glare Persephone’s mother gave him. “I freed her from her cage where she was imprisoned, this I am ready to swear on the Styx. And yet for all the hour or so it took us to reach the Temple at the edge of the abyss and fight our way to Lord Hades, we saw no trace of her. The noble Goddess of Spring didn’t rush to help her husband. And when the Master of the Underworld sent us back here, her first reaction wasn’t to go help him, but to try to kill all Demigods involved, no doubt hoping Hera would emerge victorious and her crimes would never see the light of day. And it is all Hera’s fault.”

“**This is ridiculous**,” at this moment, Demeter was looking very much like the female version of her father Kronos, as her primary weapon was a sinister scythe of black vines and her armour was covered – or made, he wasn’t exactly sure – with grey flowers. “**My daughter is innocent**!”

Everyone noticed the remarkable celerity with which the Goddess of Agriculture tore apart the metal restraining her daughter, but no God dared commenting upon it.

“**Hades! Defend your wife**!”

“**My wife didn’t come to help me defeat Hera**,” the Master of the Underworld took his royal seat, “**that I didn’t really need the help is immaterial. And she should have known better than to try killing Demigods who have freed me before this conspiracy could have disastrous consequences**.”

“**I knew it**!” Demeter’s voice was not strident, but it wasn’t exactly a model of sanity either. “**I knew you were unworthy of her hand**-“

“**I am the Judge of the Dead**,” Hades reminder her coldly. “**I judge everyone**-“

“**You are too fond of your bastards**!” Persephone accused him. Perseus noticed that a few Gods were busy trying not to burst into laughter, Hermes and Apollo among them. “**Fine, I made a mistake killing the ‘Questers’ sent by Byzantium. But the children you had with this Italian...courtesan...are traitors! Kill them, or I swear on the shards of heaven, the soul of the Earth Mother, and the Styx, that you will have an empty bed for countless nights**!”

Hades hesitated. Everyone present saw it. His eyes watched his children for several seconds...and then he shook his head.

“**No. I forgave them for their part in this...affair**.”

Persephone’s appearance changed. Seconds ago, she was definitely the Queen of Hell. Now her hair had turned to blonde, and her eyes were iridescent blue. When you added the gold-green robe and the various spring-themed jewellery, you got a perfect princess of Olympus in looks and stance.

“**Then enjoy you false righteousness alone**!” Hades’ wife said, and she vanished into a column of light.

“**I knew you were unsuitable as a husband**!” Any other time, the ex-Tyrant would have made a comment or two about one person involved in curious events being allowed to leave without waiting for the judgement to be in its preliminary stages, but the Goddess of Harvests was gripping her very big scythe tightly, and appeared to look for an excuse, any excuse to use it. “**Taking the side of these unworthy Demigods instead of your faithful wife**...”

Perseus felt a twinge of sympathy for Miranda, who had just been declared unworthy by her mother.

“**I am the Master of the Underworld, *sister***.” Hades icily reminded her. “**I deal with facts and the reality of death, which is often unpleasant. Unlike your illusions**-“

“**My daughter is innocent and a victim in this entire affair! You should have taken her side, Hades**!”

And in a column of leaves and flowers, the Goddess left.

“**Your marriage is in jeopardy, Hades**.” Zeus remarked unhelpfully.

“**Thank you, brother**,” the Lord of Hell answered sarcastically. “**I hadn’t noticed**.”

“**Yes, yes**,” Ares intervened, baring his teeth stained with red. “**And the war**?”

Most Gods and Goddesses present had changed their appearance several times since their arrival, but the God of War hadn’t.

He wore a US military uniform...sort of. The clothes had seen better days...in fact, there was a lot of things which would see him thrown out of a regular military faster than you could say ‘sorcery’. The red bandana on his head and the long hirsute hair were clearly unprofessional.

Now that he thought about it, Perseus thought Ares had definitely a family air with this movie character...how was he called again? Rambo?

“**The war is not going to happen, Ares**,” Athena said in an exasperated tone. “**Hades wasn’t responsible for the Master Bolt’s disappearance**.”

“**And here I thought we were going to have fun**...” the God releasing an aura of bloodlust and sheer brutality grumbled while grabbing a cigar, putting it in his mouth, and lighting it, just as a pair of mobile phones were levitated near his ears. “**Rico? Cancel the last missile package, the Council has cold feet about World War III! Yeah, too bad about the new drones, but I’m sure we will find a new conflict to test our napalm bombs upon**!”

Ares stopped speaking as plenty of his brothers and fellow Gods were giving unamused looks.

Impressively, it didn’t seem to bother him that much, though the son of Poseidon was ready to bet he had millennia of experience on the subject. Instead he turned towards Clarisse.

“**Nice killing count you have, girl**,” the God of War told his daughter before grabbing the M134 Minigun he kept on his back and throwing it to the berserker of the Suicide Squad. Fortunately, it decreased in size and weight, otherwise Clarisse would have been crushed by the weight of the weapon. “**But if you want to best me, you will have to use more than the traditional stuff. Ammunition is on me. And tell your brothers and sisters that if they want the same toys, they have to take the serious Quests. I don’t reward my kids who go on safe and secure adventures for weaklings. They have to do things as crazy as this one**,” a knife was pointed directly in his direction, “**and do**-“

“**Ares**,” Athena emotionlessly stopped the warmongering ‘motivation speech’.

“**Sorry, drone strikes to take care of**,” the God of War said unrepentantly, before leaving in a hurry, the audience knowing it was one of the most obvious lies to ever be uttered.

Zeus sighed. Perseus felt absolutely no sympathy whatsoever for him. Ares was his son, and Hera was his mother. It was not difficult to imagine how Ares had turned out like this, not when you saw the ‘talent’ of the two deities doing the ‘parenting’.

But the moment of sadness or ‘my son is a bloodthirsty brute’ did not last long. Soon – and he was speaking of seconds here – the arrogance returned, and it was properly colossal.

“**Now, we have a lot of people in dire need of a severe punishment**.”

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“**Now, we have a lot of people in dire need of a severe punishment**.”

Luke stopped breathing. The God of Thunder’s words couldn’t be mistaken for a declaration of support, and the stern face the Master of Olympus presented to them was evidence itself all the Questers and person present were to be ‘punished’.

“There will be no need for any punishment,” Jackson intervened brazenly, “Lord Dionysus we have returned the Master Bolt and solved the mystery of how it was stolen and why. I think this Great Quest is officially over, no? And it is all Hera’s fault anyway.”

“**Quite right**,” the Director of New Byzantium said, ignoring his father who was glaring at him murderously. “**Though there is the matter of my son**...”

“Oh, Dakota is doing adult things with one of Lord Hades’ servants,” the son of Poseidon revealed like it was the most normal thing in the world. “And it is Hera’s fault.”

“**What Perseus Jackson implies**,” Hades smiled, and wasn’t it a terrifying thing? “**is that your son, Dionysus, is copulating with Megaera in one of my personal dungeons**.”

For a second, the God of Wine failed to react...but then he erupted in laughter, and it began to rain grapes and wine.

“**Excellent! EXCELLENT**!” the most recent member of the Council laughed and several members of the Suicide Squad began to laugh with him. “**Eleutherian Wine**?”

“Eleutherian Wine,” Jackson confirmed. “I blame Hera.”

“**You did a great service to...**” Zeus’ glare intensified, “**I mean, it’s dreadful, absolutely dreadful. I will have to taste...I mean I will have to confiscate all the barrels of Eleutherian Wine in your possession**.”

“It’s your right and privilege,” the black-haired son of Poseidon grinned, “we were saying two full barrels of Eleutherian Wine? I blame Hera for the entire affair.”

“**It’s a deal**!” Dionysus smile before roaring. “**I DECLARE THE GREAT QUEST ACCOMPLISHED**!”

Luke couldn’t say he had the knowledge or the contacts Perseus Jackson did, but when the God of Wine spoke, there was...a heavy pressure in the air. Like Fate itself had been listening to the words.

“**Oh, I must search for my son and save him from the claws of this lustful Erinye, woe is me**!” the Director of the Demigod’s city departed in a blaze of purple light which smelled like ten exotic drinks.

Since his son wasn’t here to be on the receiving end of his anger, the King of the God’s wrathful temper was turned towards his brothers.

“**Poseidon, this isn’t**-“

“**I sincerely hope**,” the God of the Seas said in a falsely jovial tone, “**that your next words are going to be: don’t worry, brother, I didn’t serious intend to punish your son**. **Otherwise I would be very suspicious why my son thinks he needs diplomatic immunity**...”

“Diplomatic immunity?” Annabeth asked, her curiosity overriding everything else which might have stopped her from delving in matters of knowledge.

It was her mother who answered. Athena, armoured like a hoplite of the ancient times, wore a large shield which wasn’t the Aegis, since its symbol was a silver owl. Her face was...emotionless and neutral.

“**A Great Quest, assuming it is successful, grants an immunity of one year, one month, and one day from punishment by the Council of Olympus. This is one of the rewards granted to heroes who have showed their loyalty by**-“

“**They aren’t loyal, Athena!**” Zeus interrupted her rudely.

“**No**,” the Goddess of Wisdom approved, and Luke thought they were going to be incinerated here and there, “**but then you ordered they were to be denied all forms of support, father. May I repeat the words you spoke a couple of months ago**?”

“**You may not**,” Zeus growled.

“**In that case**,” the Patron Goddess of the Athenians said in a conversational voice, “**unless you can bring more rational arguments to the table, the Ancient Laws will allow the diplomatic immunity to stand. Heroes are showing their loyalty by the completion of their Quests; it isn’t Olympus’ right to delve into the heads of our Questers and examine the motivation of their deeds one by one**.”

“**Very well**,” the Master of Olympus spoke like he had an urgent meeting with someone who was going to rip him the teeth from his mouth. “**But this immunity only applies to the Questers themselves. The two Lightning Thieves have helped my treacherous wife steal my symbol of power, and for this they will be judged by the Council of Olympus**!”

Luke supposed he should feel very bad, but right now, the son of Hermes was extremely relieved to have avoided this fate...and in the back of his head, the thief of the Garden of Hesperides wondered how in the hell Jackson had discovered this ‘particularity’ of the Great Quest. No one at New Byzantium could have informed him, since none of the Demigods and Demigoddesses had discovered it from their divine parents or someone else.

Power surged, and the throne room began to smell like two winds of cold and warm weather just before a lightning storm...

“**No**.” Hades refused. “**They are my children, they are in my domain, and if they will be judged by someone, it will be by my authority and no one else**.”

Luke took a step back without thinking, because Zeus didn’t like being denied at all...

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Ethan couldn’t help but feel very surprised by the fact Hades remained true to his vows. Yes, the Lord of Underworld had promised his children that he had forgiven them, but without a vow on the Styx...well, the son of Nemesis had made several assumptions. These assumptions had been clearly wrong...it didn’t happen often.

“**Athena**?”

There had been one or two seconds while Zeus hesitated, his divine form transforming into a tower of lightning and storms, but after fifteen seconds it returned to the more ‘conservative’ image of a man in black suit in the prime of his life. It was too bad for the Master of Olympus that there was no cure to prevent his titanic arrogance from shining through this ‘respectable appearance’. In fact, the more he tried, the more Zeus’ efforts made him appear as a young and absolutely amoral politician.

Ethan wasn’t going to say Poseidon was his favourite God, but the Sea God didn’t waste his time into making them feel miserable or insignificant: in the clothes a tourist frequenting assiduously the beaches would have, the Olympian reigning upon the oceans was drinking a ruby-coloured drink.

“**Hades has the Ancient Laws in his favour where his children are concerned**,” the Goddess of Strategy replied, incidentally ignoring the antics of Apollo and Hermes betting on a lot of things behind her. “**The situation is...more complicated for Hera**.”

“**She is my wife**!” The now-beardless God thunderously proclaimed. “**It is my right to punish her for her betrayals**!”

The son of the Goddess of Vengeance didn’t believe in coincidences, and that Hades clicked his fingers a few heartbeats before Hera’s gag vanished removed all his doubts on the subject.

“**Oh, I am your wife**?” the sister-wife of the Master of Olympus acidly commented. “**It could have fooled me...with all the mortal whores and the nymphs you invite daily into your bed**!”

“**We are not here today to judge my adventures, but your betrayals and the oaths you broke**!”

“**How could I break my oaths, when you haven’t upheld your part of the bargains, Zeus**?” Hera spat her venom.

Apollo summoned large bags of popcorn for everyone, and though his twin sister glared, no one told him it was unnecessary.

The ‘spectacle’, after all, was just beginning.

“**You swore you would not try to usurp my throne**!”

“**That was before you were ready to usher a new Great Prophecy for the sake of this alcoholic attention whore! Did you realise she would have thrown you into Tartarus if there had been a God higher in Olympus’ hierarchy**?”

Many Gods and Goddesses ate popcorn. Their crazy leader did it too...and he took notes between two episodes of mastication.

Still, the argument was getting louder and louder, and Ethan focused his attention on it. It was just exhilarating, seeing the Gods tearing each other verbally like that.

“**I KNEW I SHOULD HAVE KEPT THIS GOLDEN ANVIL AROUND YOUR NECK**!”

“**NOT BEFORE I MADE YOU A EUNUCH, BLIND FOOL**!”

“**THEY SHOULD HAVE MADE YOU THE GODDESS OF POISONS AND BETRAYALS**!”

“**WHY DIDN’T YOU CHOOSE THE RABBIT AND THE GOAT AS YOUR SYMBOLS, SINCE YOU SPEND AS MUCH TIME AS THEM FORNICATING**?”

The whole ‘conversation’ felt it lasted like hours, but more likely it was an affair of approximately twenty minutes.

“**ENOUGH**!” the unfaithful husband barked as his wife threw a few more ‘secret relationships’ straight in his face and a lot of beings present undoubtedly wondered how by everything that was holy the two had failed to murder each other across the millennia. “**Enough. Since you’re unrepentant about your crimes**-“

“**Be a man and admit you fail to rule anywhere which isn’t your bedrooms**...”

“**You are a monster of pride and arrogance, wife**,” the worst part was that Zeus’ voice held no trace of self-awareness about his gigantic hypocrisy. “**I tolerated your jealousy and the rest of your deplorable behaviour for far too long. Hephaestus, the chains**!”

Covered in grease, scars, and more viscous things that weren’t properly identified, Hephaestus, God of the Forges and Smiths, looked very much like a villain. And the nasty smirk he had as he advanced towards his mother wasn’t reassuring at all.

Hera’s eyes...yes, they were filled with hatred, but as the enormous chains which were summoned by her son were the same golden metal the sarcophagus and the cages used – Orichalcum, they called it – glaring was all she could do; resistance was futile by that point.

“**She is going to be punished most severely, brother**,” Zeus told Hades, “**I swear it on my Throne**.”

Everyone heard the capital letter for the last word.

The divine trio of father, mother, and son disappeared for several seconds, and when they went back, the Goddess of Marriages wasn’t with them anymore.

“**Our sister is going to pay for her betrayal. Now it is time for you to judge your children**.”

Hades nodded.

“**Indeed it is. Bianca, come forwards**.”

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If she had the power to do it, Bianca di Angelo would have tried to murder the majority of the Gods present in the throne room.

But this power had never been hers. Even if she had the power she held after conquering Calernia, the former Dread Empress wasn’t sure she could have triumphed over them. For all their foolishness, those Gods of the Greek-Roman pantheon were truly powerful, far more than the Angel she had slain or the Giants she had humiliated an eternity ago.

Without her demons and legions of devils this world didn’t have, defeating a God was not something her magical skills had a slight chance of achieving.

And Zeus looked like he wanted to incinerate her...it would be funny to see how much pain the attunement ritual would cause him the first time he used his Master Bolt, but alas it wouldn’t decrease his accuracy. She would like die, or at least be horribly wounded. It was best to avoid for as long as possible.

“Father,” the black-haired daughter of Hades advanced towards the throne and bowed ironically.

“**Do you want to add something to what has already been said**?”

“Not really,” Bianca didn’t like the son of Poseidon – he had made sure her apotheosis failed epically – but he had made sure most of her crimes fell upon Hera’s head. She wasn’t going to try to convince the rest of the assembly – a group which unlike Hades and she had little idea of the true magnitude of her crimes – that she was the one to punish instead of the Queen of Olympus.

“**In this case, hear the judgement of the Lord of the Underworld**,” Hades began in a voice which mirrored the pompous tone used by Zeus. “**I declare you guilty with attenuating circumstances. As you were misled by Hera, the punishment will be long and *educative***.”

“**And in an understandable language, this means**?” Apollo asked, the playboy stopping an instant munching his popcorn.

“**In plain Greek, it means I sentence you to live inside the boundaries of the Demigod colony of New Byzantium until you reach your eighteenth birthday of age, the time you spent inside the Lotus Casino being deducted beforehand**.” Golden torques appeared from nowhere and tightened around her arms. “**You won’t be authorised to leave the lands where Dionysus is Camp Director without his express permission, or a voluntary participation to a Great Quest. As for your powers of sorcery and divine legacy, they are temporarily inactive, and will only be accessible should I or Perseus Jackson give you the magical word**. **You will partake in all the activities children of your age must do, such as cleaning the stables of diseased horses, repairing the shields and the weapons after exciting capture-the-flag games, and finding all the missing arrows of the sons of Apollo among many things**.”

Hermes laughed raucously. Bianca didn’t find it funny at all.

“**Oh that is evil**...”

“**Brother**,” Zeus growled, “**you are not serious**!”

“**It is Sirius, not serious**,” Apollo groaned loudly, “**sorry, I learned this pun into one of those interesting fiction books. Nico, come forwards my son**.”

Her brother did it, with far more enthusiasm than she did, now that it became obvious they weren’t going to be killed.

“**You were led astray by your sister**,” the God of Death slightly altered the version of ‘it’s all Hera’s fault’, certainly as a warning to her, “**thus your punishment will be limited to a stay at New Byzantium until you reach...the equivalent of your fifteenth birthday**.”

“**HADES**!” The God of Thunder’s wrath was a palpable thing, and the throne room smelled of lightning and storms. “**How dare you call this travesty of justice a punishment? You didn’t even punish the son of Poseidon!**””

“**Ah, thank you for reminding me this awful omission,** ***brother***,” the Lord of the Underworld said in a tone which fooled no one and certainly not the irate Master of Olympus. “**Perseus Jackson, for the impressive collateral damage you caused...you are going to educate my son two hours per day in every subject he wishes to know for the next month, including how to play correctly the game of Mythomagic cards. The House of Hades has a reputation of excellence to uphold. And as my previous judgement hinted at, you will be the top overseer who will make sure my daughter becomes a loyal servant of Olympus**.”

Bianca internally grimaced. She was going to be under the supervision of this mad Demigod until her eighteenth birthday?

“**YOU CALL THIS JUSTICE**?”

“**You call the Demigods who freed me ‘adequate help’**?”

“**This judgement won’t stand**!” Zeus thundered, fury and lightning burning in his eyes. “**I will order a new tribunal to be convened, led by someone reliable**!”

“If you’re thinking about Minos, I’m afraid his shade is prisoner in the Kraken’s belly, oh Lord Zeus...”

Apollo cheered at the son of Poseidon’s declaration, but he was an exception. Most of the audience was staring at Perseus Jackson in shock. How had he been able to anticipate the intentions of the King of Crete’s genitor days ago?

“It is all Hera’s fault, naturally.”

“**There are other Judges**,” Zeus gritted his teeth so hard it made a horrible shrieking sound, “**and many of them**-“

“**Many of them swore oaths to you, yes...but you named me as the oath-binder!**”

The smell of lightning and tempest dissipated, and darkness poured into the room.

The shadows and the night rapidly formed into a humanoid shape, and within ten seconds a Goddess Bianca was very familiar with was standing in all her masked glory at the entrance of the Throne Room of the Underworld.

“**Styx...**”

And for the first time, there was a small amount of...apprehension in the God’s voice.

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Perseus had to admit the timing was perfect.

A few minutes too late, and Zeus would have certainly tried to incinerate a few Demigods in order to heal his wounded pride. A few minutes earlier, there would have been far more Olympians, including Ares, that the ‘wise Master of Olympus’ would have teamed up with Artemis against the River-Goddess of Hatred.

But right now, there were fewer Olympians watching the proceedings, and most of them were wary but not deathly afraid of Styx.

“**Styx...you betrayed me**.”

“**Don’t flatter yourself**,” the daughter of the Sea Titans said derisively. “**To betray someone, one has to be loyal to him in the first place. And you never stayed true to your oaths long enough so that I would have some confidence in your rule**.”

The most powerful of the Oceanids grew in size, and as she did, the throne room drowned under a sea of night. Spears of darkness were hurled at Zeus.

Perseus closed his eyes, and one heartbeat later his caution paid: there was some massive divine light which engulfed everything, and when he reopened his eyes, he saw many members of the Suicide Squad had been temporarily blinded.

Of Zeus, there was no trace. If Styx’s frowning mask was any indication, the King of the Gods had fled to the world above, where the weight of his broken oaths didn’t matter that much, since Styx couldn’t follow without ushering an apocalyptic war.

“**You may not have betrayed Zeus, but you certainly betrayed me**,” Hades declared.

“**Your daughter is far more visionary than you are**,” Styx retorted.

“**Perhaps**,” the Lord of the Underworld conceded. “**Yet your actions are not something I can forgive easily. You authorised two Demigoddesses to bathe into your waters. You conquered a new domain without my permission...**”

Ah yes, if Styx was here, it meant Phlegethon had been soundly defeated...

“**I am far more powerful than I was before the Master Bolt was stolen**,” Styx reminded her former liege.

“**Does that mean you intend to rule the dead in my place?**” The way the question was posed made the son of Poseidon wonder how much of a chore ruling the Underworld truly was.

“**No!**” well, apparently, the answer was ‘titanic chore’.

“**Well it’s too bad**,” Hades smirked, “**for your abject betrayal, I condemn you to leave an island in the middle of your new sea which will be used as the headquarters of new bureaucratic branch of Hell. You will be in charge of it for the next...five centuries. For the twelve millions of souls you absorbed, I acknowledge you as the second most powerful deity of the Underworld...with all the duties which are assigned to this *prestigious* position**.”

“**Lord Hades...**” it was amusing how the Oceanid was trying to avoid her punishment, but failed utterly to discover an angle of attack. “**Many of those prerogatives and duties...belonged to your Lady wife**...”

“**Oh, don’t worry, she wasn’t interested in fulfilling them**,” the Lord of Hell ‘reassured’ his treacherous servant, “**Persephone was spending half of her time shopping when she was supposed overseeing the royal audiences**.”

Megaera the Fury reappeared, wearing a very different garb than the last time, and prostrated herself before her Master.

“**And now that I think about it, Megaera, please block my wife’s credit cards. If she wishes that I sleep alone, I see no point in supporting her ruinous expenses across five hundred luxury shops**.”

Ouch. Perseus couldn’t say he knew women very well, but he had enough knowledge to acknowledge that kind of move was really the big red button to not touch unless you were willing to go for a divorce.

Had his actions really been that destructive and changed the Greek Pantheon forever?

If it happened, it would be extremely amusing! Ha! It wasn’t even written anywhere near his list of goals!

“Your will be done,” the Fury ran out of the room, and didn’t throw them a glance. Was the son of Bacchus that good in the dungeon bed when he was properly ‘motivated’?

“**Kneel**,” Hades ordered, and Styx, for all her newly extended domain, for all her natural strength, for all the souls devoured by her essence, was unable to resist.

Naturally, the former Tyrant learned many secrets from this simple move. Hades had likely been the weakest of the three brothers once upon a time; Demeter hated his guts, and most of his brothers and relatives were happy to forget he existed in the first place.

“**Do not betray me again, daughter of Tethys. Your punishment won’t be as lenient if there is a second betrayal**.”

For a brief moment, the Throne Room was swallowed by darkness, and Styx opportunistically left.

“Now are there any other problems which must be judged?”

“**There are**!” Oh, it was Artemis’ turn? This was going to be good... “**The son of Poseidon trapped my lieutenant, and I want him to be punished for his crimes!**”

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When the twelve Olympians had arrived, Lou Ellen hadn’t liked what she saw. Taken by surprise, the Gods had arrived with an appearance they felt comfortable adopting for their daily activities, not the images they wanted to sell to their adoring public. And no, it wasn’t really pretty.

In a sense, it was Ares who won the laurels of honesty; while the God of War was a bloodthirsty monster, he didn’t try to disguise his true nature.

Artemis was at the bottom of this unofficial contest. The Goddess of the Hunt hadn’t changed her size. She still was as tall as a thirteen-year-old girl. But it hadn’t been furs of various animals Artemis had donned when she teleported into Hades’ greatest hall.

And the looks she gave to the male Demigods...granted, Jackson was unbearable on a good day, but the Huntresses’ bitter hatred for men and boys had to come from *somewhere*.

“Crimes, crimes...always unfounded accusations. I told your Huntress...many times...she had bad ideas. And she didn’t listen to me. I swear it on the Styx! And this is all Hera’s fault.”

The walls shook, but the floor didn’t open to swallow Perseus Jackson.

“**You**-“

“Lady Artemis, it isn’t my fault Julia Drusilla wishes to usurp you. I certainly have no authority upon releasing the dead, and the power of Selene is not mine to give. Blame Hera.”

“**The Demigod speaks the truth, Artemis**,” Hades had somehow stolen a nice supply of popcorn from Apollo’s stashes. Of course, the daughter of Hecate admitted, it gave the impression the Lord of Hell didn’t take the situation seriously... “**And personally, I must say I like the relooking your lieutenant received. This silver armour is far more impressive than the huntress garb**.”

“**Pig**,” the retort was so fast it had to be a reflex.

“**May I remind you I’m the Judge here, Artemis**?” Hades turned his head towards Jackson. “**Drawing power from the Land of the Dead is already a difficult exploit, but using the power of long-faded Titans borders on the realm of the impossible...without my support, only the trio of Immortal Sorceresses are capable of attempting this feat**.”

“The new Roman triumvirate has Medea with them.” Jackson nodded, and weirdly seemed to avoid the jokes wherever the Master of the Underworld asked for his opinion. Maybe it was because the ‘punishment’ was so lenient? “We didn’t meet her, but I suppose they offered her apotheosis and all the other benefits besides immortality in exchange of her sorcerous help. And it is Hera’s fault.”

“**You are supposed to keep these dangerous prisoners locked away for eternity, Hades**,” Artemis seethed.

“**And you are supposed to hunt all threats to Olympus**,” her ‘uncle’ icily retorted, “**not just males who made the mistake of finding you naked and monsters which happen to make excellent fur coats**. **Yet I find out today a triumvirate is trying to usurp many thrones, and has been active for centuries. I am defended to leave my realm except under very specific circumstances. What is your excuse, daughter of Leto**?”

Artemis really, really hated men. Well, that and the truth. Otherwise she wouldn’t glare that way. Not when the target was Lord Hades, and it was evident to all the Hell God could easily wipe off the floor with her if he desired to increase the destruction damage his Throne Room had suffered.

“Oh come on, it is not the end of the world,” sometimes the sorceress really wondered if Jackson had a death wish... “There is a vast array of solutions, Lady Artemis....besides blaming Hera.”

The words of the Goddess would certainly have been very impolite, but fortunately Apollo arrived and placed a hand above her mouth, giving his twin sister an embarrassing hug.

It had to be said, at this moment, Apollo and Artemis didn’t look like siblings at all. One was tall, muscular, and bathed in light; the Goddess was small, feral, and covered in furs. The God by comparison wore a flamboyant red T-Shirt and looked like a narcissist movie star.

“**And what is your solution, Perseus Jackson**?” To his credit, Lou Ellen supposed, Apollo was really listening to him.

“Well, you kill the usurpers, of course!” The son of Poseidon had somehow found a new glass filled with some fruit juice that he emptied before continuing. “I mean, Caligula has not been really careful with his security, so a God of your level should not have any trouble...provided Hera has not caused more damage as we speak.”

“**I can’t go into the Labyrinth for long**,” the Sun God shook his head. “**The risk of setting fire to everything and waking up...the Earth is too great**.”

“Yes, I thought there was something like it at work.” Perseus nodded thoughtfully. “Otherwise I doubt Geryon would have been so brazen about transforming your sacred cows into cheeseburgers the first time I visited. Oops, I didn’t say that, those are not the droids you’re looking-“

“**WHAT**?” Apollo burst into golden flames. “**THAT BASTARD! HE SWORE HE WAS GOING TO TREAT THEM LIKE GODDESSES! I AM GOING TO KILL HIM**!”

Everyone closed his eyes, because the sun rose for the first time in Hell.

“Jackson...” Zoë Nightshade was looking at the Suicide Squad leader with some revulsion and...admiration? “Did you-“

“Ah, and if your mistress can’t kill Neo Selene, there’s a simpler option to avoid servitude, dear Huntress. And yes, it is Hera’s fault.”

“And this solution is?” the exiled Hesperides asked in a suspicious tone, ignoring the last words.

“Why, the Gods give you the apotheosis you deserve, of course!” A lot of beings gaped, included Hermes. “I mean, you served the mistress of an evil lesbian cult for thousands of years, surely that has to count for a major life sacrifice!”

“I AM NOT A LESBIAN!”

“**MY GIRLS AREN’T AN EVIL LESBIAN CULT**!”

Oh yes, Perseus Jackson had definitely a death wish. If Hades had not been there...well, Ancient Laws or no Ancient Laws, Perseus would likely have been turned into a rabbit. And then been impaled by a lot of very sharp and deadly objects, in all likelihood.

“Wait you mean they haven’t each other for-“

Fortunately for the life expectancy of many Demigods, Hades summoned a gag and stopped Jackson from digging his grave further.

“**Artemis. Go**.” Hades spoke tersely, in a tone betraying his impatience at the multitude of screw-ups he had just been informed and now had to take into account for the future of his realm.

The Goddess of the Hunt stormed out so fast she was a blur, and her Huntress lieutenant left with her.

Before anyone could utter a word, Zeus reappeared, and he didn’t look happy.

“**What in the name of the pits happened here**?”

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Like most children of Aphrodite, Drew had dreamed several times about seducing the Master of Olympus. What? If you played your cards right, you could become the new Queen of the Gods. The problem, and it had been for millennia, was Hera...well, Hera and closing your eyes on the endless number of sexual affairs the God of Thunder enjoyed year after year with mortal women.

But now looking at the King of the Gods in person, Drew could only feel disgust. Zeus had not given them anything to be successful when it came to the Great Quest, and the moment Styx threatened him, he fled with his tail between his legs.

Seriously, *that* was the King of the Gods?

“**What in the name of the pits happened here**?”

“**Don’t worry, brother**,” Hades replied in a bored tone. “**You haven’t missed much. There was just the confirmation your twins have monumentally failed in their duties and royally missed the presence of usurpers to their domains and thrones**.”

The next sentences were filled with a lot of subtle hints the daughter of Aphrodite didn’t understand the undertones of, but the core of the message was clear: there was a Triumvirate of Roman Emperors who was at large, and they did intend to overthrow the current Pantheon reigning on Mount Olympus.

“**And none of you took measures to slay those treacherous gods**?” the currently blonde-haired God barked.

“**Well**,” a voice which was as heavenly as its owner purred, “**before the daughter of Hades told them divine usurpation was possible, their efforts were not really threatening**.”

“**Aphrodite...**”

Drew felt her heart beat faster as her mother walked, her divine body the symbol of its grace itself, her clothes, hair, and skin colour changing until it changed into the form several Demigods had reported to be her warrior look: protected by a purple armour, her mother was now a blonde with perfect blue eyes.

“**You surpassed my expectations, Drew. I think you are ready for additional training**-“

“**Yes, yes! You can speak to your daughter later! What did you know about the Roman usurpers and what didn’t you inform Olympus immediately**?”

The soft skin of her mother touching her was a near-miraculous thing to experience, and Drew wanted it to never end. But it did and when it stopped, she gasped.

“**I informed you, Zeus. You told me vague feelings of rivalry were no proof, and to come back when I would get it. But since there wasn’t...**”

The Goddess of Love shrugged, and everything that was beautiful and martial seemed to pour into her divine body.

“**Hunting those usurpers must now be your utmost priority**.”

“**No, my priority is to arrange an amicable divorce**.” Her blonde mother smiled, and the whole world seemed to shine when she did it. “Hera isn’t in the way anymore, and I won’t stand being married to Hephaestus a second more than necessary.”

“**I support this course of action**,” the God of Smiths immediately agreed, and Drew saw behind him Hermes and Poseidon exchange Drachmas and other objects.

“**Out of the question**!” Zeus was prompt to retort. “**The marriages have been consummated, and they will stand as symbols of stability and civilisation**!”

There was a long silence after those words. It was most likely because everyone marvelled at the sheer hypocrisy of the Master of Olympus, Drew acknowledged. After the hateful exchange with his wife, it was a near-certainty Zeus was going to divorce Hera...or at least live like they were divorced, whatever it meant for unfaithful Gods.

“**Then I will rule my domain as I wish**,” Aphrodite raised an eyebrow and dismissed Zeus’ orders. “**Drew I will come to teach you after the Summer Solstice. Be prepared**.”

“Yes, mother...”

Her nose informed her that an entire lake of perfume had been thrown in the palace of Hades, and somehow it felt...right. Her armour changed to a purple colour and was more...seductive, yet dangerous.

But there was no time to wonder on the good news, not when Zeus seethed and several sparkles of his Master Bolt struck the ruined carpet and the damaged floor.

“**Hephaestus**,” the God of Thunder turned towards his very, very ugly son. “**You will make sure your wife follows my orders**.”

“**Yes, I suppose it falls to me as her husband, doesn’t it**?” The chief weapon-maker and automaton-creator of Olympus replied with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. “**Why are we still married in the first**-“

The glare the Lord of Olympus gave him was particularly impressive, and Poseidon didn’t help the situation by chuckling while drinking a cocktail on a deckchair.

The God of Forges sighed, a sound which could have come from a mountain.

“**Permission at least to transform back my son? At least I think it is my son, I don’t remember creating a machine to pour my essence into donkeys...**”

Drew closed her eyes and counted to ten trying not to giggle. It didn’t work. The giggles escaped her lips, and soon she was laughing, unable to stop herself. She wasn’t the only one.

It stopped when Jake Mason began to bray in agony.

Oh, he slowly returned to his human form...if very slowly. But the son of Hephaestus screamed, and he screamed hard. From all evidence available, the prospect wasn’t enjoyed, and didn’t involve new clothes, the pleasurable presence of her mother, or anything which might be associated with Charmspeak and pleasurable transformations.

It took a couple of minutes for Jake Mason to return to his pre-race appearance...well something which looked like his previous appearance. Since the God of Fire and Smiths had not summoned clothes to go along with the change, Drew could see the numerous metal prostheses everywhere on Jake’s body, but especially on the back, which seemed to be a carapace of metal, not human skin.

“**Not a bad work, the spine really had to be replaced**,” Hephaestus commented as he watched his son like one observed a device. “**I hope will enjoy the benefits of the new parts, son**.”

Hephaestus teleported out in flames and the pungent smell of an industrial foundry struck everyone’s nose. Drew didn’t like it at all. Seriously, there were people who enjoyed sciences, machines, and the technology, and there was...well, Hephaestus.

Yes, she could see why her mother’s priority was to get a divorce.

“The flesh is weak,” Perseus Jackson commented idly, nodding like everything which happened was *normal*!

“I...I blame you, Jackson.”

“Why should I be blamed this time?” the son of Poseidon asked rhetorically, his expression one of – fake – disappointment. “We got you out of the Novus Circus Maximus alive, and you are now repaired! I think Hera is the guilty party!”

“WE KNOW!” Half of the Suicide Squad shouted.

The leader of their Great Quest inclined his head, as if he was sorry for the events which continued to unravel.

“I am not a machine, Jackson!”

“Well, now you classify as a cyborg, I think, my no-longer-donkey-lieutenant!”

“Screw you, Jackson! I swear, I will never participate into a Quest wherever you are involved and-“

A new horrible scream echoed in front of Hades’ throne, but this time, it wasn’t Jake Mason who suffered.

It was Annabeth, and while the daughter of Aphrodite and the daughter of Athena weren’t friends at all, she couldn’t help but pity her, as Athena had one of her palms in contact with the grey-eyed girl, and whatever the Goddess of Wisdom did, it was atrociously dolorous.

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Someone screamed in pain.

She needed several minutes to notice the voice of the victim was hers.

It was...horrible.

Pain would have been bad enough if it was someone stabbed her again and again, but the damage, somehow, was like talons and claws were ripping her mind apart.

And then it stopped.

When it did, the world felt...incredibly different.

“**You are getting sentimental, Athena**,” a voice Annabeth didn’t recognise for several seconds, before acknowledging it as Zeus’. “**Ordinarily, you wouldn’t have wasted so much power for a lost cause**.”

The God of Thunder’s words hurt, even as the shame burned in her. Breath after breath, the blonde Demigoddess remembered what she had done and said during the Great Quest since...since the very beginning, but especially since Pasiphaë had cursed her.

“**My daughter is an important strategic asset, Zeus**.”

A loud ‘humph’ resonated, as Annabeth felt her head hurt...and soon her stomach rebelled too.

The carpet was soon struck by her vomit while colours which shouldn’t exist danced everywhere. Urgh.

“**You will make sure your son behave while he stays at New Byzantium, *brother***.”

“**Yes, I will. As long as you will stop trying to incinerate him, *brother***.”

Annabeth’s eyes began to function correctly again. There were two blonde beings whispering like thieves...oh, they were Luke and his father. The God of Thieves sounded...very pleased by Luke’s survival, and was joking her old friend had still much to do before he became the prestigious thief in the world...since the Suicide Squad hadn’t emptied Hades’ treasure vaults.

“**Hades, you better make sure your spawn is never involved in any sort of divine mischief again**...”

“**I will make sure she doesn’t**, ***brother***.”

There was an absolutely brilliant flash and several bolts of lightning slammed and caused more damage.

Zeus was gone.

“**I will make sure my daughter doesn’t attempt to usurp my throne again**.” Hades amended his words after the departure of the God of Thunder and Lightning.

Annabeth heard the tourist-like Poseidon chuckle.

“**Are you sure those are words you want to say in front of many witnesses, brother**?”

“**Are you going to rush to Olympus and repeat what I said**?”

Annabeth stood, and saw the God of the Dead and the God of the Seas stare at each other.

The brothers of Zeus were in nonchalant stances, but around one danced shadows and more tenebrous things, while the murmur of the sea was eternally present around the other.

These Gods were two juggernauts of incomparable power, restrained only by the Ancient Laws and the oaths they swore to Olympus...and now the latter was failing.

“**You see what I see**,” armoured gloves were placed on her shoulders, and when she tried to turn, grey and emotionless grey eyes. “**The status quo is unsuitable**.”

“Jackson helped the Immortal Sorceress kill Daedalus.”

“**No, my son is not dead**.” Her mother corrected her. “My curse is still active. Minos’ wife is many things, but she’s not an architect or an automaton-builder. Unless she finds a very talented son of Hephaestus, she will have more uses for him.”

Athena made a sound which could have been a sigh or a manifestation of exasperation.

“**I know you are idolising Daedalus, and for good reasons, but don’t let reality blind you: Daedalus has done very evil things in order to avoid dying and being brought to the Underworld. He has sacrificed countless Demigods to the hounds of my uncle, and his architectural and technological talents are equal to his treachery skills. My son never dared touching one of his half-brothers or half-sisters, but New Byzantium has lost many heroes in the past due in his quest of self-preservation and immortality**.”

Annabeth wanted to shout she was wrong, and yet...logic told her Daedalus had built the Labyrinth. The same Labyrinth which was a Zone Mortalis and which in a subdued form, had conceived traps which would have killed them all if not for an insane son of Poseidon. And yes, her half-brother had lost control of the Labyrinth, but it had never been a pleasant place...

“Yes, mother.”

“**You have to control your Fatal Flaw, Annabeth. Sorcery is not a weapon the children of Athena are noted to use, but insulting sorceresses and Goddesses like you do is a road where tragic doom awaits. Learn to master your hubris. I was forced to do a lot of mental surgery to your mind in order to root out Pasiphaë this time; there won’t be a second instance**.”

“Oh, that’s a pity, I wanted to see her attempt a ritual which would pit her against Arachne, for the Throne of the Spider Goddess!”

Something different burned in Annabeth’s heart, and it wasn’t hubris.

The daughter of Athena slowly walked towards her prey...and slapped him twice.

To her disappointment, the boy knew how to not stumble, and endured the ‘attack’ stoically.

“Father, the daughter of Athena is weird again...and I can’t blame Hera for this one.”

Weird? Weird? She was going to strangle this insolent worm! She was going to-

“**I have a feeling your children are either going to kill each other, or we will have to organise nuptials in a few years, Athena, Poseidon**...” Hades intervened mockingly.

Nuptials...NO!

“NEVER!” She shouted.

“Please, even I have standards,” the infuriating boy replied at the same time. “Unlike Hera.”

“**It is good to know**.” Poseidon nodded while using his Trident to create a portal of pure water. “**You will have to find three good bottles of rum before the next Christmas my son. My private reserve is something sacred no one, not even my wife is allowed to enter without my permission!**”

“But Asterius was involved too!”

“**Then stop corrupting that poor Minotaur, my son**...”

Hermes gave a pair of flying shoes to Luke, and then the God of Speed was gone.

Poseidon’s exist was more...spectacular. The Trident became a surfboard, and the God’s clothes went from tourist-fisherman to ‘professional Kings of the surfers’ – yes, that was a thing, apparently.

“**See you next time**,” the God of Earthquakes and Oceans disappeared on the other side of the portal while of course adding ‘water damage’ to the list of indignities the throne room had suffered. “**I will send someone to teach you some surfing moves**!”

“**I will watch over you and your siblings more closely**,” her mother whispered to her ears, “**the times ahead...they are going to be troubled. The Gods and the Demigods will need heroes like you if the Greek-Roman civilisation is to survive**.”

Annabeth hadn’t the time to reply they were a band of mismatched crazies and absolutely not heroes; the hoplite warrior had become a flight of owls, and with her gone, the only God left in the Throne Room was Hades.

And the Lord of the Underworld was no longer on his throne, he had teleported behind them...so fast they hadn’t even see him move at any point.

Gods, Persephone was really *that* weak compared to her husband?

“**I thank you once again for risking your lives to free me**,” The God of Hell declared, as his ‘royal tenebrous’ appearance faltered and he began to become taller and...were they wings growing in his back? “**I can only imagine the pressure my little brother applied to make sure there would be no Great Quest..**.”

The God drew a sword bigger than any of them was tall...and the pink crocodile inside the iceberg was decapitated. The iceberg was severed like it had been made of butter.

“**I really dislike how he uses stupid Demigods as his catspaws**,” the God of the Dead announced as shadows devoured what had been the transformed son of Janus. “**I wish you a safe return to New Byzantium**.”

And the darkness swallowed them. Thus their last vision of Hell was the dead head of a frozen pink crocodile.

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

When Dakota woke up, his first thought was to wonder if a truck had rammed him or not.

Then the...very hedonistic memories arrived.

“It’s all Jackson’s fault,” he grumbled, rolling on his belly and trying to find some strength... “damn it, why is my back hurting so much?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” the daughter of Aphrodite...Drew...giggled... “it may be because Furies have claws, and they’re not afraid to use them in all circumstances.”

“And your father healed most of the damage before he dumped you a few minutes ago...” Jake Mason...wait wasn’t he-

“You’re not a donkey anymore.” Yeah, it wasn’t the most intelligent thing to say, but he had the equivalent of a hammer striking his brain.

“Thank you for reminding me.” The son of Hephaestus said testily...and Dakota noticed the metal plates spread over the legs, the arms...and Sweet Nectar, was his back bronze and metal now? “While you were...how did your father call it? Going boldly where no Demigod had gone before...”

Dakota felt himself blush and placed his head into his hands.

“The Gods arrived and removed most of the curses,” Annabeth intervened.

“Oh...” the black-haired Roman Demigod blinked. “That’s good...I guess.”

“Given how impossible the Quest was...” Luke sat on a rock nearby and gave him a ‘are you all right’ look. “Yes, it’s very good. Hera was ‘revealed’ to be the mastermind, mainly because Perseus blamed everything on her, and thanks to the Lord of the Underworld’s support, the punishment was minimal. Hecate and Nemesis visited before your return and told us we’d better stay at New Byzantium for the rest of the year, but at the end, we were very lucky to return here.”

“Err...yes. Where is the ‘here’, by the way?”

“Oh, it’s the clearing where Jackson led us to the Labyrinth’s entrance,” Jake Mason revealed to him. After drinking some cold water and feeling the headache decrease, Dakota was able to see the truth from his own eyes and not get ill or suffering from debilitating nausea.

Thanks the Gods, Hades hadn’t returned them into the Labyrinth...they were well outside of it.

“We’re missing a few-“

“Asterius the Minotaur left a few minutes after we landed,” Annabeth explained. “Our insane leader had a mission for him, and anyway I don’t think anyone would welcome him at New Byzantium, divine protection or not. Many sentinels and patrol forces are already to be aghast we brought back a Hellhound...”

A turn of his head to the left, and yes, the hirsute female hell-dog was here, running to catch the Frisbee-shield the son of Poseidon was throwing her.

“Nightshade the Huntress left with Artemis. The Lord of the Underworld killed Scipio the pink crocodile,” Luke completed. “And of course we got the children of Hades to escort to Byzantium...”

“Wait a minute...the Gods were here, and they’re still alive?”

“Perseus made a mockery of the divine judicial system.”

“Hey! I blame Hera!”

“She’s imprisoned on...oh, forget it...so yes, Bianca and Nico are here, and we are ordered to escort them to New Byzantium, where some of us will make sure they cause no more trouble.”

Dakota had the temptation to place his head in his hands again. The Lightning Thief and Perseus Jackson in the same city...it sounded very much like the dawn of something absolutely chaotic and destructive. What was wrong with the Gods? Was their sense of humour that bad?

“Well...at least we’re still alive.” For a group which had been – for excellent reasons – named the Suicide Squad, it was no small feat.

“You forget, my drunken lieutenant, one part of the sentence...”

“And what have we forgotten, oh sea-brain?” the daughter of Athena asked.

“Glad to see you’ve returned to your normal and so-predictable insults, Angie,” the son of Poseidon grinned. “And yes, you forgot something important. We’re alive and *rich*. **Revelation**.”

Bags, chests, and a lot of objects which could be used as containers – and definitely were in that instance – began to materialise. Many were filled with gold, silver, precious stones, enchanted weapons.

“That’s...all the money we managed to earn?” He squeaked in surprise.

“Don’t be ridiculous...there’s the payment of Atlantis for exceptional services rendered waiting for us at New Byzantium. And the Throne of the Underworld also promised there would be some gesture, beyond leaving us all alive.”

It was...likely more money than all the Questers had earned in the last decade. Only the members of the Suicide Squad were going to be involved into the sharing of the spoils...Scipio Varus was dead, Nightshade was gone, and the duo of Hades’ children wasn’t eligible for this...Gods and wine, they were rich!

Ethan Nakamura cleared his throat.

“Perseus Jackson...you have a lot of things to explain.”

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“Perseus Jackson...you have a lot of things to explain.”

Perseus breathed out loudly...and yes, it was an exaggerated move.

He had to give it to the Olympians, they could make some half-cunning moves when the situation warranted it.

But they were up against a Tyrant of Helike.

Did they really think an empty clearing was enough for him to feel secure and reveal his deepest and darkest secrets? If the answer was yes, he really pitied the Gods and Goddesses prostrating themselves before Zeus.

“I’m sure you have, my not-so-treacherous lieutenant. But it can wait.”

“No, it can’t,” the Lightning Thief said before he released his Hellhound on her. The former Dread Empress Triumphant being a child of Hades, all Hell-born animals were naturally...very friendly towards them. And Zoë the Hellhound proved it by licking vigorously the face of the punished Demigoddess.

“Yes, it can. Ah, I **wish** **you could see the animals**.”

In a fraction of a second, the members of the Suicide Squad saw the ‘trap’ prepared.

There was an eagle, high in the sky. Without incredible good eyes, you had no chance seeing the predatory bird sent by Zeus.

Under the trees, a doe was patiently waiting. If Artemis hadn’t sent it, then Perseus was ready to proclaim himself King of America on the spot.

Those weren’t the only spies, just the most obvious ones. A few owls were hiding in holes carved inside various trees, and the effort had been done several weeks ago, revealing some cunning strategic mind behind the move.

Other actions weren’t sneaky at all. The leopard and the grape vine had nothing to do anywhere near New York City.

“As you can see...” the act of ‘Charmspeak’ was mildly exhausting, but didn’t require the sacrifice of one year like it did on Calernia, and thus was a priceless weapon to wield against his enemies, “the Gods are listening. So yes, you will have answers to your questions. But it will be in my Barrack, where I’m certain only the God and the Goddess of the Sea will be able to spy upon us.”

“Wait a minute...” Luke Castellan reacted. “Our divine parents can watch us inside the Barracks?”

“They blessed the foundations, the walls, and the altars inside, my heroic lieutenant,” Perseus patiently explained, wondering how angry the Gods listening to him were as he revealed their nasty little secrets. “To keep the influence of the other Gods out, a God-“

“Or a Goddess,” the daughter of Annabeth mumbled.

“Or a Goddess,” the ex-Tyrant agreed, “they have to make the Barrack part of their holy sites where their influence reigns supreme. Otherwise foreign spying, curses, and other shenanigans would be merely extraordinarily difficult, not ridiculously impossible.”

“That makes sense...I think.” Jake Mason, which was looking far less dashing now that he was no longer a donkey, commented.

“I’m glad you agree.” Perseus said sarcastically. “Now let’s divide the spoils of the Quest, heroes. The sooner it is over, the fastest we can begin to prepare for a triumph!”

“Jackson,” the son of Bacchus voiced a loud sigh. “*Triumphs* are the highest reward a *Legion* of New Constantinople can receive. It’s for Roman Demigods or Legacies and other Demigods serving in the Roman military system. It isn’t for Questers. And even if there wasn’t that problem, the Senate of New Constantinople must vote in favour of granting a victorious General a triumph by a decisive majority. And...the Lord of Olympus has a right of veto.”

“Then it will be a party-which-is-absolutely-not-a-triumph,” Perseus grinned. “And I will blame Hera for it.”

“Are you making a contest to see if it is possible that one day, the entire world wishes you to kill you, Jackson?”

**3 June 2006, New Byzantium, New York coastline, United States of New America (de jure)**

Jason Grace didn’t like garrison duty above the Gates of Gods. And yes, it had everything to do with the ‘splendid view’ it gave of the pine tree where his sister slept for the rest of eternity.

Unfortunately, the Gates of the Gods was the lynchpin of the western defences of New Constantinople, and Jason, son of Jupiter or not, was a mere Centurion of Legio Fulminata – and his current rank was definitely linked to his parentage, because otherwise he would definitely not have the minimum age to be promoted to it.

There was, however, something more unpleasant to do garrison duty here. It was doing garrison duty with Octavian, legacy of Apollo, centurion of the First Cohort.

For those who didn’t know Octavian, he was a blonde lickspittle eager to curry favour to everyone who might give him more power, and then stab in the stab when they were of no more utility to him. Already several potential Decurions and Centurions who had been in his way for advancement had mysteriously declined honours and improved pay before demanding a transfer to a different Cohort.

Jackson didn’t know what was worse: that his current rank was in part based on nepotism, or that the Legate of the Legion had failed to notice how poisonous the atmosphere was among the First Cohort.

If only Octavian could shut up...but no, the legacy of Apollo absolutely *loved* the sound of his own voice.

“In my opinion, this is all the confirmation we need this misfit band of Greeks perished to the last. Now that there is no more alternative, of course Lord Jupiter is angry and preparing his aerial forces against his unfaithful brother!”

The blonde-haired ‘prophet’ was so absorbed regaling his lackeys with his ‘I-saw-it-coming tales’ that he utterly failed in his garrison duty and didn’t care there was a column of chariots advancing on the western road leading to the Gate of the Gods. And it was interesting, because there weren’t waiting a Cohort or a group of Questers this morning...

Jason sent a messenger to the Legate, and murmured a few discreet orders to his men. Octavian had yet to notice something was wrong.

And then the trumpets sounded.

Immediately hundreds of fireworks which had been somehow hidden from them rose in the air, and in a second the blue sky was shaken by pyrotechnic explosions which must have at some point been part of an Olympian’s festive supply.

Flocks of stone gargoyles descended onto the grounds before the Gates, making a discordant cacophony which could have woken up the dead.

“CITIZENS OF NEW BYZANTIUM! GLORY TO THE HEROES OF OLYMPUS!”

Jason gaped...was there anything to do?

The son of Poseidon, Perseus Jackson, was returning to new Byzantium on a golden chariot, and in...what sort of orange toga was that, by Jupiter’s Thunder?

And you weren’t supposed to paint your face violet...

The laurels weren’t supposed to glow gold like they did...it was the prerogative of the Gods!

“NO!” Octavian had finally realised something was wrong, and if Jason’s face had to show a lot of astonishment, his was a tapestry of unmitigated hatred and panic. “NO! THEY CAN’T HAVE SUCCEEDED! THIS WAS AN IMPOSSIBLE QUEST! IT’S AN IMPOSTURE!”

“**I think**,” warmth and light struck on the Gate before they noticed they had a divine visitor, “**you are quite mistaken, my descendant**.”

“Lord Apollo! They can’t! They can’t! A triumph is a Roman privilege! They can’t do that!”

“**I think you will find the son of Poseidon has not a habit of asking us for permission...or for forgiveness**.” Apollo, golden, tanned, and smiling, laughed. “**You shouldn’t have bet so many Denarii on their ‘certain demise’, Octavian**.”

The Sun God turned his head towards Jason.

“**Open the Gates, Centurion. Glory to the heroic Suicide Squad**.”

“But...” Octavian whined. “What are...what are we going to do?”

“**We are going to party, of course**.” Apollo conjured a golden cup, and as he raised it, more fireworks exploded around them. “**We got rid of Hera for a few years, surely that deserves a long and memorable celebration, no**?”

**Author’s note**: Here ends the Lightning Thief Arc. The next chapter after that will be an adventure, so you can see some of the huge changes having Kairos-Percy in charge of the Great Quest has done to Olympus and the rest of the mythical Roman-Greek world at large.

The other links were the story is available:

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

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