**Chapter 12**

**Imminent Problems**

“*So it begins. We are at the end of sanity, my friends*.” Attributed to Perseus Jackson, authenticity never confirmed.

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

Luke Castellan had gone out of his Barrack on this sunny morning with the goal of finding Perseus Jackson, sole and only son of Poseidon, and without doubt the craziest Demigod of New Byzantium.

To his sorrow, the son of Hermes had found him quickly.

The Earthshaker’s son, despite the early hour, was already active on the beach instead of being near the breakfast tables, surrounded by a respectable crowd of gargoyles, nymphs, and Demigods.

And they were dancing.

No, they were dancing and singing. It was the latter action which was the most disturbing...especially given how atrocious the melody was for his poor ears.

Though one had to admit, the dancing choreography was hurting his eyes too.

“One night in Bangkok and the world's your oyster
The bars are temples but the pearls ain't free
You'll find a god in every golden cloister
And if you're lucky then the god's a she
I can feel an angel sliding up to me.”

The singing stopped for a second, and the gargoyles and the rest of the dancers took the most ridiculous positions possible, while firecrackers of orange and purple exploded.

The only thing Luke found reassuring was that Ethan Nakamura had refused to participate, and was standing near a pile of crates with an expression of suffering, dark shadow in the middle of this musical madness.

“One night in Bangkok makes a hard man humble
Not much between despair and ecstasy
One night in Bangkok and the tough guys tumble
Can't be too careful with your company
I can feel the devil walking next to me.”

There had to be a VIP place in the Fields of Punishment for whoever had introduced Jackson to this world’s music, of that Luke Castellan had no doubt.

Unfortunately, this person was not here – otherwise the Son of Hermes would have taken great pleasure killing him or her.

There was nothing to do but wait for the cacophony to end, the awful musical choir to stop singing, and the crowd to disperse...which it did...after long minutes which were near unbearable.

“Luke Castellan!” Perseus exclaimed like he had not seen him in a month, as his gargoyles hurried to clean the beach. “How fares my favourite heroic lieutenant today?”

“The day was good,” the son of Hermes admitted, “before I listened to your horrible musical performance.”

The insane Demigod placed a hand on his chest, where most humans could say they had a heart beating underneath. In the case of the self-proclaimed leader of the Suicide Squad, the blonde-haired Quester had his doubts.

However, this move allowed him to observe the ‘master’ of Barrack Three more attentively. Perseus Jackson was bare-chested, and aside from a swimsuit to protect the strict minimum of modesty, was not wearing anything else.

“If you’re watching me like this, for too long, the girls are going to be jealous, oh my heroic lieutenant.”

Ethan Nakamura snorted in the distance.

“Don’t flatter yourself...I am not into boys. I was just wondering why you were in a swimsuit so early in the morning.”

“Well, I went for my morning swim, of course! You don’t think having a body like the one I have is obtained by drinking ultra-sugared drinks and other products of the fast food industry, do you?”

Luke rolled his eyes. He had no doubt the younger black-haired boy had trained hard to have a muscled body like he did; one did not arrive to the kind of result which had several girls whispering behind their backs while sleeping most of the days like a child of Hypnos. But most of the time the last week, it had been evident the son of Poseidon was an early riser.

“I don’t doubt you are training...unconventionally. I just wonder what you did long before breakfast, this time.”

“Fine, fine! Take the joy out of my grand proclamations...I just went to visit a nice couple of sharks.” Perseus grinned. “They offered to launder some of our less...irregular prizes into usable Drachmas and Denarii. With several Olympians refusing us the access to their banking services, I had to resort to alternative measures so we had proper bank accounts.”

“When you say sharks,” Ethan said dubitatively, “are we speaking about the animals or the lawyers?”

“One does not prevent the other,” the son of Poseidon replied virtuously, his green eyes shining with mischievousness. “Anyway, this was the last step in the proceedings of dividing the spoils of the Great Quest. In approximately twelve hours, each of the members of the Suicide Squad will receive a direct Ultra-Divine Portable Vault with the most modern international money transfers I could negotiate, filled with exactly ten million Drachmas.”

No matter how jaded – and Ethan and Luke had reasons to be more of that than most Demigods – there was no way they couldn’t gape at the son of Poseidon.

“Ten...million...” Assuredly, there had been assurances each Quester would receive two million Drachmas if the Great Quest was successfully completed.

It was a very respectable sum, enough to make them incredibly wealthy...but between two and ten million, there was an enormous difference.

“How?” He managed to ask.

“A Great Quest is very, very profitable, my heroic lieutenant...provided you survive of course.”

“What I think Luke wants to ask,” Ethan said in a tone of ‘Gods, give me strength’ and a gargoyle handed an orange towel to Jackson, “is how you managed to raise the rewards from two million to ten million for each of us. Yes, you repeated to us that twenty-four million Drachmas is just cheap pocket money for the Lord of the Seas, but there was no promise to spend one more Drachma than that. And I doubt very much the owner of the Master Bolt contributed.”

“He didn’t,” Perseus confirmed. “But the Lord of the Underworld did. That’s where most of the neat increase of our individual rewards is coming from, since you’re asking about it.”

“Most?”

“I will send you the paperwork along with the extra-documentation, but to keep it simple, the Rich One gave each of us five million, the God of Wine added one million, and Aphrodite was satisfied enough to add one more million to the mix.”

“And the last million?” Luke didn’t know if he should be worried that they were in the good graces of so many important Gods and a Goddess...or afraid about how many Olympians had evidently decided not to reward them.

“The Lady of Magic,” Perseus replied neutrally, and the son of Hermes nodded. Yes...they hadn’t exactly opposed Pasiphaë beyond ruining her fortress, didn’t they? And Lou Ellen Blackstone, her daughter, had received power boost after power boost...before taking a bath in the waters of the Styx.

This was great. They were not the wealthiest beings in the world, far from it, but they had likely more money they would ever be able to spend in their lives, unless they were given immortality somewhere in the future.

Of course, with the attention they had brought upon themselves, the big problem was how long they still had to live before Zeus or another irritated Olympian decided to get rid of them.

“Well, I’m hungry,” Perseus affirmed while a gargoyle threw him an orange T-Shirt and purple shorts he promptly donned. Most orange T-Shirts for the Questers of New Byzantium were thematically wearing something like ‘Byzantium’ or ‘Quester’, but this one had a large sigil of a furious minotaur’s head, above the capital letters ‘SUICIDE SQUAD LEADER’. “We can finish this discussion while we go to breakfast. For instance, you can tell why you were searching for me so early in the morning. You didn’t know about my shark negotiations, so logically it should be for another issue. What is the problem you couldn’t solve, oh great leader of Barrack Eleven?”

“Our newest addition is going to be assassinated if she spends one more night in our Barrack.” Luke Castellan declared bluntly.

“That bad?” Ethan seemed genuinely surprised; the son of Hermes noted that the green-eyed mad Demigod wasn’t.

“We have had problematic ‘guests’ in the past,” the blonde-haired Demigod who had journeyed to the Garden of the Hesperides and come back sighed, “I know it’s tradition, with my father being the Protector of Thieves, Travellers, and countless other titles I have not bothered to learn by heart. But ...”

“But?” Perseus Jackson grinned.

“She’s a very unpleasant bitch.”

Luke wasn’t going to say every Demigod who came to Barrack Eleven was greeted with smiles and a party, even after he had contributed to enlarge their home and make it far more comfortable than it was before.

There had been problems before the fallen Goddess stepped a foot inside the boundaries blessed by Hermes, it went without saying. It had unravelled into something worse very quickly.

Yes, Hera was mortal right now, but it didn’t prevent her from being an antagonistic pain in the ass to anyone she met.

And speaking of the Devil...

The fallen Goddess was waiting for them at a respectable distance from the breakfast tables...most likely because the table of his half-brothers and half-sisters had decided the bitch would eat once they were gone and not before.

Outwardly, it was evident Zeus had done a number on this mortal form. Nobody could be that ugly by accident.

Now that the girl was somewhat clean, her hair was a combination of blonde and brown, as if the Master of Olympus had been unable to settle on one colour, and decided on something which looked like wheat mixed with dirty mud. Each of her eyes had a different colour; blue for the left one, green for the right one.

But the most terrible insult was the acne. Without exaggeration, Luke could say it was disfiguring her: the healers who had inspected her had thought first it was some form of disease before recognising the ugly red marks for what they were.

And though she was in hands-me down clothes which were too large for her, there was no denying the rest of her body, while certainly aged enough to be fifteen or sixteen, was unattractive in the extreme. Mortal Hera had a flat chest, didn’t have a trace of warrior musculature in her arms or legs, and was generally not beautiful whatever your standards for it were.

The aura of arrogance the fallen Goddess had surrounded herself with in the Underworld remained, though.

“I thought each newcomer, no matter if he or she is Greek or Roman, receives a basic kit of clothes and gifts once he is accepted inside the colony,” the son of Poseidon mused.

“Yeah,” Luke commented sarcastically, “the rules say that, and it applies to every *Demigod* newcomer...and she isn’t one. Plus I don’t think our Director is very eager to enforce the rules when it is his *lovely* and *compassionate* stepmother we’re talking about. Anyway, she can’t stay in Barrack Eleven for one more day. Not unless we want a corpse on our hands. And unlike Barrack Eleven, you have a gigantic Barrack for yourself, Jackson.”

“I have plenty of uses for it,” the black-haired Demigod countered, “but yes, it shouldn’t be too much of chore to give her a room...I can decide if I will pay for the rebuilding of her Barrack or not later.”

“Just like that?” Ethan raised his eyebrows in semi-stupefaction.

“Just like that,” the leader of the Suicide Squad – after all, he had the T-Shirt to prove it – answered before shaking his head. “I will want a minor favour in exchange, of course, Castellan.”

“Of course,” but since it was his half-sisters who had been the most virulent voices to expel Hera from Barrack Eleven – logical, as they were the ones in contact with her most of the last evening – it would be them who would repay the favour.

“You’re not afraid of the Master of Olympus’ wrath, Jackson?” Ethan asked, in what could have been a dark joke but definitely wasn’t. “He isn’t going to happy she is living in your Barrack...adultery opportunities and all of that.”

“My treacherous lieutenant,” the young son of the God of the Seas said in amused tone, “first, I have no intention to touch Hera. I won’t be always too young to enjoy carnal activities, but I have no intention to touch someone that self-righteous in her hypocrisy.”

Obviously by this point, they were so close to the fallen Goddess that she couldn’t help but listen to every word they uttered.

“I will kill you for that,” the ugly female teenager muttered predictably.

“And there is the fact the Lord and Master of Olympus is doubtlessly besieged in his very temple at the moment we’re speaking,” the infuriating Demigod continued, “as mobs of female deities, nymphs, and other powerful beings have heard of the divorce and now want to become the Queen of the Gods.”

“Err...” Luke cleared his throat. This was a...very disturbing image conjured in his head. And after a second of deep thought, the son of Hermes wondered why this hypothetical was...

“Wait a minute. This is a hypothetical scenario, right?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, my heroic lieutenant!”

Somehow, the tone employed didn’t reassure him at all...

**8 June 2006, Zeus’ Palace, Olympus**

Apollo had expected things when answering the summons sent by his genitor.

He had not expected his first reaction would be to evade a blue high-heeled shoe once he was there.

This was just the beginning of a desperate series of moves as hairbrushes, containers of mascara, and many other objects he recognised as part of several Goddesses’ arsenal of beauty products, went flying near him.

“**This isn’t funny**!” The God of Poetry, Sun, and Music exclaimed.

Unfortunately, his words went completely unheard in the massive chaos which was now reigning.

Despite experience on many, many wars – some of them he had himself instigated – the Slayer of Python had never seen so many lesser Goddesses and immortal beings of the Greek-Roman Pantheon participate in the same quarrel.

It was enough to make him doubt for a few seconds he was truly in the Palace-temple of the Lord of Olympus...but the decoration of lightning bolts and enchanted clouds was unique and had never been replicated elsewhere.

“**Stop this quarrel at once**!”

He was completely ignored, which was...really unusual and disrespectful of his authority.

The God of the Sun thought to illuminate the columns and the rest of the avenue...but given how loud the women were screaming, he recognised it was something he may not wish to attempt.

For the time being, Apollo had only to evade the lipsticks, the hairbrushes and the torn-up hats the Goddesses threw at each other.

If they suddenly decided to unite against him...err...it was a frightening possibility.

One which would leave him no choice but to unleash his full divinity and hope he could stand against dozens of enraged Goddesses.

And judging by their mood, there would be no mercy...

“**I AM ZEUS’ FAVOURITE**!”

“**GET OUT OF MY WAY! I WILL BE THE NEXT QUEEN OF THE GODS**!”

“**YOU ARE A UGLY CRONE! WHO WOULD MARRY YOU**?”

“**YOU ARE ALREADY MARRIED**!”

“**I WILL BE DIVORCED BEFORE SUNSET! HERA IS NOT HERE ANYMORE TO TAKE MY RIGHTFUL PLACE**!”

Golden and silver objects went flying, and Apollo had to catch up an inestimable violin before it was smashed apart.

Damn it! Damn it to all the pits of Tartarus! The God of Healers and Medicine had known Hera being officially cast down was going to cause headaches – no great pun intended – but this was worse than his most pessimistic predictions!

The God of Archery looked around, and sure enough, there was a Goddess who was staying out of the melee of shrieking deities, but sometimes threw one watch or a brooch, creating more violence when it was at risk of decreasing.

“**Eris**,” Apollo raced to place himself behind the Goddess of Discord, “**the Council is not amused by this scheme of yours**.”

“**Oh, this isn’t my scheme**,” the daughter of Nyx protested lightly, before giving him a sultry look. Apollo ignored it. He had no wish to find himself in the bed of an immortal woman like her, no matter how attractive certain of her looks pertaining to strife and mental vigour could be. “**They were already fighting when I arrived**.”

“**I don’t believe you**.”

“**Well, in this case...you are wrong**.”

The Goddess clicked her fingers, and in a heartbeat, a large advertisement board which had been thoroughly ruined and cut in half by something very sharp was restored.

Apollo grimaced, because truly, there was little subtlety in the message he could read.

YOU ARE DESIRABLE? YOU ARE AMBITIOUS? YOU THINK YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BE AN OLYMPIAN? MARRY THE MASTER OF OLYMPUS!

Under the large bright red letters were a few more sentences which almost brought a smile on his lips.

*This organisation declines all responsibility in case of infidelity from one of the parties. We wish to remember all participants must be adult, vaccinated against stupidity, and that divine condoms have a 5% success rate. Incestuous relationships will be accepted as long as Aphrodite consents. This message has been approved by SHARK PROPAGANDA, bringing news and rumours to Olympus since two millennia*!

By his Oracles...how many of those advertisement boards had been built and dispersed near the palaces of the Council?

Many nymphs and lesser Goddesses stormed the outer temple of Zeus, and Apollo shivered, because he had a feeling the answer was ‘too many’.

“**This isn’t funny at all**!” Apollo declared, as the ‘reinforcements’ were determined, armed with hairbrushes and many improvised weapons no true man wanted to stand against...and they easily doubled the effectives of the immortals already present.

Eris, traitor Goddess, burst into laughter.

“**I completely disagree**!” Then the Goddess of Strife turned towards her fellow Goddesses. “**May I remind you, cousins, that the glorious God of the Sun has yet to be betrothed**?”

Hundreds of eyes turned towards him, and in an instant, delivering his genitor from this terrible female siege...it was not a priority anymore.

“**Now that I think about it, I have a Sun Ferrari to drive! Ciao, Bella**!”

Apollo was among the fastest Gods of the Greek-Roman Pantheon.

He almost managed to get out of Zeus’ Palace before being intercepted.

Almost.

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

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, my heroic lieutenant!”

Perseus cackled as Luke Castellan and Ethan Nakamura looked him in alarm.

After a few seconds, he decided it was no use letting them worrying about what was happening on Olympus. His efforts at spreading fake news in those august halls had gone into effect hours ago.

“Don’t worry, I know what I am doing.”

“And that’s absolutely not reassuring,” his treacherous and brooding lieutenant muttered.

“Now let’s go to breakfast, I’m famished. You are welcome at my table, ex-Hera.”

“When I will have recovered my powers-“

“You will get rid of your acne first, I presume,” Perseus said, walking towards Table Three without looking behind.

“Yes and...what? No!”

“Oh, you’re enjoying your acne so much you want to stay with it for a few thousand years? This is a very surprising choice, but who I am to deny you your ugly looks and your pig-like arrogance?”

Truly Zeus had done him a splendid favour by turning his wife into a mortal girl. Not one day, and Perseus was having unprecedented fun riling her up.

Forget the man-hater huntress, Perseus had already found a worthwhile replacement. The possibilities, both in terms of story, powers, and humiliations, were truly infinite!

“Getting rid of my acne will be my second use of my powers once I have my divine powers back, infernal bastard,” the heterochromia-eyed girl glared murderously as they sat at the Poseidon breakfast table – not to be mistaken for the lunch and dinner table, of course. “Killing you will be the first.”

“I’m flattered,” Perseus answers as he asked for a bottle of grape juice and immediately filled his glass with the container which had arrived magically within two seconds.

The next five minutes were spent on complete silence, though the ex-Goddess never stopped glaring at him, no matter what she ate or drank.

Perseus was pouring a lot of strawberry jam on a large piece of bread for the third time – hey, he was a growing boy, and a lot of activities at New Byzantium, official or not, required a lot of energy – when he felt divine energy coming in his direction.

“Mountain of Arrogance,” one blue eye and one green eye promised him hellish pain...but seriously, given that he had met Bianca di Angelo, Hera was severely lacking when it came to threaten someone just by baring her teeth. “Move.”

Predictably and just as the son of Poseidon had anticipated, the girl who had been the Queen of the Gods didn’t. People who hated him were prone to making the same mistake again and again.

This was why, a second later, the pot containing delicious apricot jam was overturned on Hera’s head.

A lot of Demigods at the other tables laughed, especially as the fallen Goddess spluttered in rage and turned to face the being who had humiliated her.

“You are-“

And then she realised how muscled the God in front of her was. Was it interesting to see the ex-Queen of the Gods pale and for the first time lose her colossal arrogance?

Yes. Yes, it definitely was an interesting moment.

“**Yes**?” Unfortunately, there was the same arrogance in the God’s voice. Well, he was the son of Zeus. “**Nothing to say, Hera**?”

The ex-Goddess of Marriages glared but didn’t say a word.

Which was wise of her, really.

Nemean Lion cape, check. Ten-packed abs, check. Blue eyes which redefined the colour of ‘electric blue’, check.

The God was built on the model of the mortal actor playing the Terminator in the same movies, except possibly even more over-muscled and shrouded in virility and vitality.

Already, Perseus knew one blow from this God would result in his death, no ‘if’ or ‘but’. The only Demigods who could possibly survive a couple of hits were the daughters of Hades and Hecate, courtesy of having bathed in the Styx.

Seriously, how was it possible that this God wasn’t an Olympian? His power was several levels above half of the Gods who had been present in Hades’ Throne Room!

Oh, right...Hera.

“**I am going to watch you while I’m here to oversee the War Games**.” The vicious smile proved the God of Strength was very much the son of Zeus. “**One step out of line, and I will be your executioner. This time, there will be none of our favourites to save you. It was so satisfying seeing them pillaging your palace**...”

Tears appeared on Hera’s face. Perseus had to admit he was interested to know if it was about the part where she was at the mercy of Hercules, or if it was at the realisation everyone had truly abandoned her.

“**You deserve this fate. For everything evil you have done**,” the God exulted, “**you will *pay***.”

And this time, the strawberry jam was thrown upon her head.

Perseus sighed internally. Truly it had taken very few seconds for him to lose all respect for Zeus’ son. Seriously, the guy had millennia to avenge himself, but only made a decisive step when his enemy was mortal? It was *pathetic*.

“While I am willing to blame everything upon Hera’s head...” many Demigods snickered not far away, having heard about certain events of the Great Quest, “she is hardly the only one who has been involved in unsavoury deeds. Isn’t that right, *Heracles*?”

The name meant ‘Glory of Hera’ in Greek...and naturally Hercules hated it. To be fair, given the past between those two, Perseus would hate it too if he was in his place.

“**You are the son of Poseidon. I think I know why my father loathes you, *pest***.”

“You are the son of Zeus. I’m beginning to see how you turned Zoë Nightshade, a pacifist Hesperides, into a man-hating Huntress.”

For the first, and likely only time of his life, there were cheers coming from Artemis’ table to support him.

Truly the end of this world was near.

“**The promise was not made on the Styx. I am not *her***.”

Perseus Jackson laughed high and loud, and he didn’t need to force himself.

“Tell me...did the Council mention to you how the Goddess of Hatred attacked viciously and relentlessly your stepmother?”

It hadn’t happened, of course. For all her arrogance, Hera had not broken the oaths she swore on the Styx. Unlike Zeus, the ex-Queen of the Gods was intelligent enough to know how much of a bad it was.

“**She is not my stepmother**.” The God of Strength denied instinctively before growling. “**And she killed my wives and children**!”

“You should thank her,” hey, he was a villain, and everything could be excused under the ‘right circumstances’, “Hera likely saved you a fortune in divorce fees and husband pensions. Truly the power of the Goddess of Marriages is absolutely boundless within reasonable limits.”

“**If you think making light of my suffering is going to help your cause**-“

“Oh come on! The Twelve Trials would have been extremely easy to accomplish if you hadn’t tried to accomplish them by slamming your head against each obstacle like the bag of muscles you are!”

The glare Perseus received in return was rather...disappointing. His first impression was the right one: Heracles was a mad dog which had little imagination.

Yes, Hera was a monster – though admittedly, several times she had warned Zeus his infidelities would not be tolerated, and every time her husband thought he could get away with it...which was a recipe for a bigger disaster down the line.

Hera was a monster. But it didn’t erase the rather monstrous behaviour of other Gods and Goddesses, and well before his ascension, Heracles’ deeds had been extremely bloody and violent. Seriously, if you read between the lines, he had been raping and massacring his way across the Mediterranean long before becoming immortal.

It was extremely practical to blame everything on Hera. But speaking from experience, the ex-Tyrant knew a lot of crimes the son of Zeus had committed were not done when divinely cursed.

“**When you step out of line, I will be your executioner too, sea spawn**.”

That answered the question if he was going to have to kill Heracles before dealing with Zeus.

Obviously, it meant ‘yes’.

“And this was such a nice breakfast...ah, well.” Perseus raised his toast, and a second later, the protection enchantments of Poseidon kicked in.

Yes, he had invited Hera at his table. She was a guest, and thus protected by the laws of hospitality.

And ‘Mr. Muscle’ had just violated those laws without a care, before egregiously threatening a son protected by the diplomatic immunity afforded to the Questers who came back alive from near-impossible exploits.

Heracles hadn’t the time to change shape or become insubstantial as a geyser of water struck him.

The water attack was so powerful he was expelled from New Byzantium’s boundaries and disappeared far over the horizon.

“What a beautiful morning,” the former Tyrant proclaimed cheerfully, and many Demigod and Demigoddesses laughed nervously. After finishing his grape juice, Perseus turned towards the miserable-looking ex-Goddess. “Follow me to my Barrack. You need a shower, and I need to decide what to do about you, ex-Hera.”

Predictably, she glared again, the nickname restoring a bit of her fighting spirit.

Oh yes, the next weeks were going to be very amusing...

**8 June 2006, Poseidon’s Barrack, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

Hera had feared the worst when the son of Poseidon had ordered her to follow him to his Barrack.

Young or not, the Demigod was utterly crazy, and within the boundaries of Barrack Three, no one but Poseidon, Amphitrite and Triton had really the power to intervene if the boy who had participated in her downfall decided to torture her.

Remembering the threats of Hercules – she wasn’t going to call the brute by his Greek name – made her shiver.

The new mortal girl had tried to conjure her divine power so that she would be protected if Zeus’ bastard struck her.

She hadn’t been able to materialise a sparkle of power.

Since her fall, every hour had been filled with new realisations how weak she truly was, but this one had been the worst of the lot.

Even when Hercules had clearly been in the wrong, it had taken *Perseus Jackson*’s intervention to banish the aggressive brute.

No God or Goddess had been willing to intervene for her...and her own martial abilities were truly nonexistent.

All of this meant she had definitely feared the worst...and then entered Barrack Three anyway.

To her pleasant surprises, there had been no gargoyles or another slave of Poseidon’s son trying to spy her under the shower. There was plenty of warm water to remove the jam she had gotten in her hair, and then enjoy a soothing moment, likely the most peaceful moment she’d had since Zeus dragged her away in chains from Hades’ seat of power.

There were even clothes to her size waiting for her.

The former immortal winced though as the underwear, the T-Shirt, the trousers, and...well, pretty much everything, were a glaring shade of orange which would be seen a kilometre away.

But at least they were her size. So were the boots...though she wondered how in the name of Tartarus Perseus Jackson had found a shoe designer willing to sponsor those orange fluorescent fashion atrocities.

When she looked in the mirror of the large bathroom, Hera froze for long seconds.

This...this was a nightmare, right?

She was going to wake up...any moment...but no such luck. The nightmare continued.

And after a few seconds, there was nothing to do but getting out and facing the son of Poseidon.

Hera had expected him to wait right behind the door, but once again, the boy surprised her; only a gargoyle was present near the corridor, and it escorted her for quite a walk before they were introduced in what was an Atlantis-themed office.

Poseidon and Amphitrite had done a good job with this place, she had to acknowledge it. Most of it was blue and white columns and walls, with numerous sea-themed mosaics which served as floor. Water was everywhere, no matter the room you found yourself to; this office for example had a mid-sized fountain with four little crabs of stone and one much bigger dolphin as stone ornaments. A system of water pipes could regulate the temperature of their surroundings between ice-freezing polar conditions and sauna-hot atmosphere.

This made her remember the ruin her own Barrack had become by the fault of Zeus...and why she was here today.

Perseus Jackson took his time looking up from a pile of documents which looked official bureaucracy from Atlantis.

“Oh good, you’re here,” where else exactly could she go? “And you look like a human being...might have to do something about this arrogance, however.”

“Listen to me,” the Goddess who had been denied her rightful throne, “I have had a very bad day and-“

“And it is going to get worse,” there was no maniacal grin, just a bored expression...though the green eyes shone with something she didn’t like.

“What? NO! I am a Goddess!”

“Ex-Goddess,” the son of Poseidon raised a finger.

“This situation is not permanent!”

The expression on the face of the Demigod made her freeze once more. There was more than a shadow of mockery...but the foremost emotion was pity.

“No, it isn’t. But.”

“But?” She didn’t like at all where it was getting.

“Well, I’m not familiar with thousands of years of Greek-Roman deity punishments, but the instance where your former husband chose this particular one happens rarely. I think it was the God of Music and my father who were the last ones to ‘enjoy’ it the last time it was done.”

Though some of her memories were either fragmented or not here anymore, Hera knew instinctively what he was talking about.

“They were banished for an entire year. And they built the walls of Troy during that time...without being paid.”

It was in many ways the first reason why there was a Trojan War in the first place...not because of this damned golden apple of Eris.

“Indeed,” the black-haired boy grinned. “As you can see, your case is very different. If there was a time limit to your exile, no one has been given it. Hephaestus TV and Apollo Instantaneous Chat have already thousands of pages remarking upon that.”

“Those ‘social networks’ are filled with fake news.”

“Oh, absolutely...but then the God of the Sun has a point when he tells others it was the support of his twin sister which ensured the punishment lasted only one year. Similarly, my father had the support of Atlantis’ court behind him. While you...well, you have no one left. Your court is doing a very good job trying to sell their services to any Olympian or powerful God and Goddess who is willing to overlook their previous allegiance to you.”

“Nothing is lasting forever, even on Olympus,” Hera hissed. “I’m sure once they realise how tyrannical my former husband is without me to keep him on a straight path, they will repent!”

“That’s a given,” to her surprise, the agreement came once more, “but you were a horrible Goddess to be around, and the most likely reasoning is that they will try to deal with Zeus forcefully, not try to reinstate you. As it stands, half of the Council is concerned about the precedent the glorious Lord of Thunder has set, but it is because they fear for their own Thrones, not because they support you.”

“And the other half?”

“The other half rejoices that you are severely punished.” The gleeful answer came and struck hard. “I’m sure you can guess the names by yourself.”

“Yes...”

Hephaestus. Artemis. Zeus, of course. Those were the ones who were certain to behave like Hercules.

“I will ascend again. And my vengeance will be terrible.”

“No.” Perseus Jackson shook his head and looked at her like she was a simpleton.

“I will-“

“**Silence**,” unnaturally, and despite all her efforts to refuse the order, her mouth was closed magically. “I let you speak because I wanted to hear your delusional ideas, but I think I have gotten everything of relevance. Now it’s my time to monologue. I will begin with the evidence: right now, you are functionally useless, be it mentally or physically.”

How dare he? How dare-

“It is evident the body you received was an insult of the highest order,” the son of Poseidon abandoned his office chair behind and went to drink at the office’s fountain, “there are no muscles, and I’m ready to bet none of the divine reflexes you considered for granted in the last millennia have been adapted to fit this new body of yours. Therefore in a battle, you will be worse than a liability, you will be the ugly and defenceless civilian. The moment you step out of New Byzantium, the first Hellhound would joyously make a snack out of you...and let’s be honest, there are far, far more dangerous things than Hellhounds around who want you dead and gone.”

This...this was problematic, but if she stayed within New Byzantium’s city limits...

“Considering you can be an intelligent girl when you’re not an arrogant bitch,” Zeus was first, but she would get that bastard eventually, “you’re certainly thinking you can stay protected by the magical wards and walls of the Greek-Roman settlement. This won’t work. The threats aren’t just outside. Many Demigods have every reason to loathe you. For some reason, most of them not managing to reach eighteen of age before they are killed leave them very unconcerned about the benefits which come with Marriage and long-term unions.”

Of course not, they were bastards and-

“I would be very surprised if there aren’t already ten plots to kill you prepared while we speak. So you see, ex-Goddess, whether from inside or outside, there are plenty of factions who intend to make sure you do not return to Olympus...no matter how improbable your ex-husband marrying you again would be.”

As if she wanted to marry this frivolous womaniser once more.

“Without my help, I would be very surprised if you live until the Summer Solstice, never mind the Winter one.” The son of Poseidon smiled wolfishly, one hand on the fountain, the other playing with a water ball manipulated by hydrokinesis. “But since you emptied the Thunderous Treasury and hid it before going down...I am willing to see if you are salvageable. **You can speak again**.”

Hera massaged her throat for several seconds...and for the first time, she fought to calm herself.

“And what is...what are the conditions of your...ultimatum?”

“Ultimatum? Such an ugly word...you can always get out of this Barrack, dear ex-Goddess. But I will warn you, Barrack Eleven doesn’t want you back. For some reason, many Demigods and Demigoddesses are even less fond of you than they were this morning.”

Hera gritted her teeth...which hurt. Damn her frail mortal body.

The bastard knew that without the protections afforded by a Barrack, she would have to sleep like a vagrant somewhere in the hills, far away from New Byzantium so that no assassin could find her. It would be a new exile in all but name.

“Name your conditions.”

“First, I want to examine you.”

“Excuse me?”

Perseus Jackson opened a little chest reverently, and took from it a golden pair of glasses he placed upon his eyes.

“No need to remove your clothes, I just want to check...ha! I knew it!”

“Err...” he had just looked at her clothes...what kind of artefact could be useful in this kind of circumstances? “What did you just do?”

“I just confirmed one of my theories,” the son of Poseidon said as the golden glasses were removed and placed back into the small chest. “You aren’t completely mortal.”

“I am not?” This was very good news, it was-

“Most of the body is completely, one hundred-percent mortal, but the heart is a complex machinery of Orichalcum which must hold captive your essence.”

The revelation destroyed most of the last illusions she had held about anyone wanting her back on Olympus.

“I suppose it is the God of Forges’ work...this kind of creation is kind of unique.” Yes, yes it was. “I suppose that as long as it is not destroyed, you are relatively safe...of course, should it be destroyed...”

“Permanent death,” Hera whispered.

She had betrayed Zeus. She wasn’t going to say she had done it regretfully. But for him to go that far, and so quickly...the adulterous, treacherous hypocrite must really have had some schemes ready well before the theft of the Master Bolt. One couldn’t craft something like a Orichalcum heart in mere days. Hephaestus could craft wonders, but most of them took decades and sometimes longer to be completed.

“Yes, permanent death...the fate of all mortal beings.”

Hera looked at her frail mortal hands.

Staying like this was near unbearable. But returning as a Goddess, which had been until a few minutes ago the alpha and the omega of her goals...it didn’t seem such a bright idea anymore.

The fallen Goddess wanted to claim back the Throne she was owed by birthright.

But.

“There is no triumphant return to Olympus,” she whispered in defeat. “Even if I claim back my Throne...”

“You will be treated as a pestiferous asset, yes.”

Hera glared back at the green-eyed bastard.

“And what is your solution, oh mighty sage of the ‘Suicide Squad’? You said it yourself, the list of exploits I would have to fulfil to return to Olympus is likely one which would make the Twelve Trials of Hercules look tame! And if by a near-miraculous turn of events I succeed, I will be a second-rate Goddess, denied the influence and the privileges of my birth like Hestia was!”

“Indeed,” Perseus Jackson smiled evilly, “***if*** you intend to return as the Goddess of Marriage.”

The eyes of the fallen Goddess widened in alarm.

It was completely crazy. It had never been done...and for good reason.

It was an act which would break countless laws of Olympus, including some of the most ancient and revered ones.

And she had no choice anymore. Not if she wanted to be immortal again.

“Your conditions,” and this time, Hera knew her voice had the tonality of utter defeat.

“You are going to obey my orders to the letter. If I am satisfied with your performance after a month of probation, I will pay for the rebuilding of your Barrack; repaying it will be taken on your spoils of war and any Quests’ rewards you might receive. Until then, Barrack Two will be formally owned by the House of Poseidon, and you will have the privilege to inhabit at my sufferance. I will develop on the subject once I have drafted the final contract...and your identification papers.”

“Identification papers?” she repeated with a grimace. “I am Hera!”

“Yeah about that...” the new mortal girl felt horror bloom in her chest. What kind of disaster had she fallen into? It was a nightmare! “If you are really dedicated to build a new story, you need a new name.”

Hera was pretty sure Perseus Jackson was lying.

But when she cursed him with the most odious insults she had learned in her divine existence, the bastard simply burst into laughter...

**9 June 2006, Constantinople’s Field of Mars, New Constantinople, United States of America (de jure)**

The scene was surreal, Ethan could admit it freely.

The Goddess Hera, turned into a mortal, was trying to go through a series of mud obstacles in order to boost her non-existent endurance.

If the son of Nemesis was not doing it with his eyes, he wouldn’t have believed it.

But here she was. The ‘acne-disfigured girl’ – the moniker had spread extremely quickly – was crawling in a pond of mud, her mouth delivering a torrent of insults as her progression slowed and faltered.

Some of them Ethan had never heard before. Hera had a very imaginative mind, when it came to death threats.

“I wish I could say you corrupted her,” the black-haired Demigod deadpanned, “but she was a hardcore bitch long before she met you. You’re forgiven.”

“Your compliments warm my heart, my treacherous lieutenant.” Their mad leader smiled carnivorously, making a sign to the gargoyle who held the sign ‘UNDER THE PROTECTION OF THE ALMIGHTY PERSEUS JACKSON’ to take several steps aside so that several sons of Hermes had a better observation view of Hera’s...muddy trial.

“I’m sure they are.” Ethan sighed. And to say once upon a time ago, he had thought a true rebellion against Olympus was the *sane* thing to do. “For the sake curiosity...is Hera going to be the new member of the Suicide Squad?”

Many Questers had dismissed the idea as insane, but they didn’t know Perseus like Ethan did. And when it came to the argument that Hera was useless, they easily forgot that the same thing could be said about Drew Tanaka. When the daughter of Aphrodite had joined them, her physical abilities had been equally pathetic. They still were in the domain of ‘lamentable’ right now, though steps had at last been taken to remedy to that.

“Yes. But don’t call her Hera anymore. Her new official identity is Antigone Barbara.”

Ethan whistled, as his powers of vengeance hissed the mythological connotations in his ears.

“Antigone...I suppose for Antigone, the daughter of Laomedon the King of Troy...the Goddess of Marriages turned her hair into snaked before someone else cursed her to transform into a stork. And Barbara...the derivative of *barbaros*, ‘the one who does not speak Greek’, which eventually became ‘barbarian’ and a synonym of ‘foreigner’. You really hate her that much?”

“There is nothing like a new name to forge someone’s character.” The son of Poseidon quipped.

Ethan Nakamura rolled his eyes.

“You realise she will try to murder you the moment she regain her immortality and her divine powers, right?”

“Interesting word ‘regain’...” Perseus commented in a low voice. “It implies she will be the same when she ascends once more.”

“I would have thought you were going to use the word ‘if’, Jackson. The odds of Hera surviving a single year in a mortal body are so low, even with your protection, that even the Stroll brothers haven’t found someone to gamble on it.”

He shouldn’t have said that. Why had he voiced that in his presence?

“That,” the leader of the Suicide Squad said in this voice which had preceded the destruction of pretty much an entire part of the Underworld, “sounds like an interesting challenge.”

Ethan sighed.

“At the risk of being the pessimistic lieutenant...what is the point, oh my glorious and tyrannical leader? I mean, I can understand having a Goddess in our debt, if you manage to turn her into someone more tolerant of Demigods. Her dictate of ‘a marriage is between two individuals’ being weakened doesn’t really bothers me. But you can’t transform her into someone she is not. You can call her Antigone, Hera, or Violet, she isn’t going to become one day from tomorrow the Goddess of Fire or Time, or the Seasons, or whatever you strike your fancy.”

“Wait and see, my treacherous lieutenant, wait and see...totally unrelated to our current situation, who do you think is the best archer at New Byzantium, discarding the Huntresses?”

Ethan frowned.

“The sons of Apollo, but why-“ a horrible idea began to form in his head. “With Nightshade’s departure, we lost an archer. You want that bitch to be her replacement?”

The dark-haired Demigod didn’t add ‘are you mad?’ The answer to that question was evident.

“That’s something I intend to prepare the ground for...though I am ready for more contingencies to be activated.”

Of course he did. Of course he did. And now Ethan was dreading the moment of their next Quest, because there was going to be one, sure as Zeus fornicating with another mortal woman before the year was over.

Zoë Nightshade hated men – not surprising once you had met Hercules once. But for all her countless flaws, she was a millennia-old veteran who had mastered archery. It was likely that anyone who was not Apollo or Artemis was inferior to her in that field. And Perseus proposed to replace her with someone who likely hadn’t the physical strength to shoot one arrow straight at the moment this conversation was taking place.

“Now, my drunken lieutenant,” the son of Poseidon addressed Dakota nearby. “Please make sure our new recruit complete one more time the obstacle course. She is allowed to drink and eat once she has finished the last obstacle, but the period of rest between the two courses can’t last more than ten minutes.”

“Tyrant!” the fallen Goddess exclaimed, before more insults any media would censor in a hurry.

“Thank you, Antigone! Now, my treacherous lieutenant, I believe we have a series of War Games to watch...”

The walk was not long. Perseus had paid for a few days the right to use this small section of the Fields of Mars, far away from the main facilities and major fortresses the Legionnaires built as part of their training exercises.

And once they climbed over the stone stairs separating them from the source of the considerable ruckus, they could see them neatly.

Ethan was a son of Nemesis. Throwing compliments was not in his nature.

But watching the spectacle currently unfolding before his eyes...it was impressive, really impressive.

On the fields of Mars, three entire Legions, more than twelve thousand Demigods and Legacies were manoeuvring and fighting purpose-built automatons spitting fire or brandishing enormous metallic pincers.

Suddenly, it was like Rome had never fallen. The eagles of Imperial Gold shone under the sun, flamboyant with the power of Jupiter. The dreaded pilums were tearing apart the training enemies built by the children of Hephaestus and Vulcan.

The iconic helmets and the rectangular shields were standing firm, and when it came to close-quarters fighting, the now-legendary short sword known as the gladius was drawn in numbers of thousands.

This was a formidable weapon of war. One the Greek side of the city had no hope to emulate, even if their numbers reached the threshold required to copy the Romans, which they definitely did not.

The Legates of New Constantinople had centuries of military tradition innovating in the art of battlefield tactics, and their discipline was peerless. By comparison, the Barracks of New Byzantium had progressively abandoned the idea of waging entire campaigns as field armies after the Ottomans overwhelmed the last bastions of the Eastern Roman Empire. When you fought monsters, increasing your numbers was not a good strategy.

“A lot of spectators today,” Perseus Jackson commented.

“It is not every day the three Legions are present,” Ethan replied in a neutral tone. Usually, there was a single Legion protecting the city, and the two others were deployed on the field and an Olympian personally paid their monthly income...that way the costs of paying them were not as considerable for Olympus as a whole. “The poor Fifth Cohort of the Twelfth is already lagging badly behind.”

“This is the Cohort of the son of Jupiter, isn’t it?” the son of Poseidon asked with non-feigned curiosity.

“Yeah,” the son of Nemesis confirmed. “Those poor Romans have lost a lot of their veterans recently.”

“The luck of your mother?”

Ethan Nakamura sneered contemptuously.

“My mother had nothing to do with that. You have heard of Centurion Octavian?”

“The Centurion of the First Cohort who believes he is the second coming of Princeps Augustus?”

“The very same,” he nodded. “He has arranged a lot of veterans’ transfer with the current Legate and the Tribune of the First Cohort recently. And he made sure that those veterans of the Fifth who refused to serve under him took a sabbatical. As a result, at least three of the Fifth received novices in their ranks...and the Fifth, who was the main rival of the First for this War Game within the Twelfth Legion, received far more than regulations should tolerate.”

“If it is that evident, it is malicious action,” the green-eyed Demigod clicked his tongue in disappointment. “So the Fifth is out of reach for victory...and I’m really disappointed in the Gods present for authorising this war travesty.”

Ethan didn’t look in the direction of the four metres-tall beings who dominated by their sheer aura the battlefield. Mars and Hercules...well, those were Gods he wasn’t going to spare against any time soon, militarily or verbally.

“Travesty?” for once, he didn’t understand the point Jackson was making. “This is a standard war game the likes New Constantinople has played hundreds of times...”

“My treacherous lieutenant, the point of this series of ‘War Games’ is to decide who to send to the Sea Monsters, the infamous Zone Mortalis where water is never far from you. Please explain to me how this training is adequately preparing the troops for the environment they’re going to face.”

Ethan grimaced. It was true it was...suboptimal. The Legionnaires were staying far away from the river of New Byzantium right now.

“This is just the first day,” he tried in an unconvinced tone.

“Yeah, this is just the first moronic day of war-gaming...” Perseus Jackson chuckled. “If they were serious about practising, they would have begun by organising a naumachia in the Coliseum...or they would be fighting on a few barges in the middle of the Bay of Byzantium. No, I correct my previous words...if they were a bit reasonable, they would first test how good the Legionnaires are at swimming, and then they would practise how well each Legionnaire fight with nothing but a swimming suit and a gladius.”

Ethan watched the leader of the Suicide Squad...and though the tone was acidic, the grin was absent and the eyes didn’t shine with malice or glee.

By the Pit of Tartarus, he was really serious.

The son of Nemesis shivered.

“The Sea of Monsters...is it that bad?”

“I’ve never visited it, my treacherous lieutenant...only interviewed a few survivors who got out of it alive.” The green-eyed boy watched the spectacle for a moment before huffing. “They all insisted how hellishly hot the Zone Mortalis was. The Demigods stupid to go in armour there either sink when they go overboard during monster fights, or they cook alive under the implacable sun.”

It was...okay, it wasn’t a good predicament. And given how tense the relationships between Olympus and Atlantis were, it was improbable Poseidon would offer his full support for an expedition ordered by Zeus.

“They will likely take into account the parameters you enumerated right now. It is just the first day.”

“My treacherous lieutenant...when the enemy order of battle inside the Zone Mortalis includes sea monsters bigger than the average skyscraper, you don’t have a single day to waste. With my great powers of foresight as the Oracle of Tyranny, I predict a monumental disaster if they continue to train for a land war.”

**10 June 2006, Poseidon’s Barrack, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

Perseus always slept soundly.

He could say he was sleeping the sleep of the just, but it would be a bad pun, even for someone having low standards of joke, and he was holding himself to a higher standard than most Demigods.

He was ready to swear him on Zeus’ head, honestly.

As a result, when he was woken at two in the morning – what a wonderful invention alarm clocks were – the former Tyrant knew there was something which had disturbed his sleep, and it wasn’t his guilty conscience.

The green-eyed Demigod was certain he didn’t have one.

It didn’t take long to find the source of the magical disturbance. While its author had cast some shadowy spell to be as discreet as possible, the magical incantation had not been intended to prevent him from sensing something was wrong, quite the contrary in fact.

Ex-Tyrant or no, it was out of the question to get out of the Barrack in nightclothes, even if the late spring’s nights of early June were getting warmer and warmer. That it gave him a few seconds to think about the reasons why he was disturbed in the middle of the night was an added bonus.

Thus it was in a relatively presentable Demigod attire he got out...a splendid purple shirt with a gold tie for the top, and black trousers under the belt.

“Lord Hades,” the Demigod who had named his group the Suicide Squad for the hilarity of it bowed respectfully as he left the mansion-sized building behind him. “An unexpected pleasure. What brings you at this ungodly hour?”

And yes, it was the Lord of the Underworld who had chosen to visit New Byzantium.

His appearance had changed a lot from the ‘Royal King of Darkness’ he had taken in the very heart of his domain. Now his appearance was the one of Lord of All Subterranean Wealth, as priceless rings adorned his fingers, a crown prompt to outclass all existing mortal coronation items shone malevolently upon his head, and the rest of his clothes were made of gold, platinum, silver, and Hades himself only knew how many hundreds of gemstones were there to support the rest. Minor concession, the God of the Hells was only two metres-tall, not the usual gigantic appearance immortals loved to impress non-immortals with.

“**I apologise for the...ungodly hour...**” the lips of the God twitched slightly at the minor pun, “**but I wanted to speak to you without my little’ brother spies reporting every word of our conversation to Olympus without the hour**. **A lot of the information which is known to New Byzantium has an unpleasant tendency to be known to my siblings soon after it has been discussed. And Olympus itself, as I’m sure you are aware, is a nest of spies**.”

Oh, Perseus knew indeed. He had been counting upon it during the last days.

“In this case, what are the subjects you want to speak about, Lord? Future betrothals, maybe?”

“**Hardly**,” a thin smile returned to Hades’ face, “**given all the recent unpleasantness and the turmoil engulfing Olympus, I have decided to wait one year, using the noble traditions of Cthonia as my shield, before deciding to find a new wife...or giving a chance to the previous one**.”

The immense shoulders of the God moved slightly.

“**I am not going to try to betroth my children for obvious reasons**.”

“Yes, I’m sure Bianca would be far more sanguine about trying a usurpation repeat if you did that.” And Perseus didn’t joke about the matter.

“**Quite**,” the Rich One approved. “**No, I have formally declared there will be no courtship this year in the Underworld. Unlike my little brother, I decided to be wise and proactive. Several proposals had already arrived before I revealed my intentions, of course**.”

“One of them was a certain Goddess now having a sea domain, I’m ready to bet.”

“**Yes**,” Hades chuckled, a sound which made the very night surrounding them shake to its very essence. “**She thinks marrying me would decrease the bureaucratic weight of her new responsibilities**.”

“How little she knows.”

“**She is the Goddess of Hatred, not the Goddess of Wise Strategic Choices**.” Hades commented after a shrug. “**As every Pantheon knows her reputation, my refusal will be acceptable to all. Other proposals are more...problematic**.”

“Such as?” Perseus asked prudently. He still didn’t know why Hades had chosen him for this series of ‘ultra-secret revelations’, but he had a feeling this was going to be the kind of mission that left no record and a high pile of corpses behind them.

“**The Titaness of Magic**.”

“Ah.”

For those who hadn’t followed, Hecate. Third-generation Titaness. Recognised Goddess of all forms of Magic, the Mist, Necromancy, and Crossroads.

Officially, Olympus recognised her as a minor Goddess.

Officiously, the Titaness was likely strong enough to challenge and beat any Olympian one-on-one. There was a reason why he had been able to make Lou Ellen Blackstone a redoubtable Demigoddess in mere days, and this wasn’t just because his training methods were excellent.

Yeah, this kind of ‘proposal’ couldn’t be refused out of hand without creating unwise political quarrels.

“I understand the problem, but I’m not sure what do you want me to do about it,” the son of Poseidon said sincerely. “I have gained some influence over the children of Hecate courtesy of our adventure, but the choices of their mother won’t be swayed by something like that. And ahem...”

“**No, I don’t think it is a good idea to let you communicate with my ex-wife**.” Hades remarked. Fortunately, the God of the Underworld was amused by the unsaid proposal. “**Given her recent defeat, she would try to incinerate you the moment you’re in her presence. And I would rather not see my younger brothers begin the next world war so soon after we narrowly missed a new Olympianomachy**.”

Hades’ eyes burned like the flames of Hell. His face, fortunately, remained serene.

“**I want to understand Persephone’s intentions**.”

“Without trying to sound pessimistic, Lord, men have tried for millennia to do exactly that where women are concerned...and they have failed.”

His divine visitor laughed, and several flames burst into existence. Far away, packs of Hellhounds howled in joy under the moon.

“**You have a point, Perseus Jackson**.” The midnight-haired crowned King of Hell rumbled. “**But in this case, it won’t be necessary. I need you to contact another Goddess in my name. One I’m sure my former wife is extremely jealous of. And with my sister being her unreasonable self about her daughter, I’m sure this potential ally will be of immense help for your own ambitions.**”

The leader of the Suicide Squad had a good idea of the deity’s identity, but Hades was kind enough to confirm it by giving her list of titles.

“I’m not trying to sound cowardly...but if I put the kind of plans I have in mind with this Goddess’ help...there won’t be any return backwards possible.”

“**How kind of you to pretend**,” Hades said calmly, “**that a return to the status quo is possible. Not when Hera is sleeping in your Barrack because my little brother threw a tantrum without considering the consequences of his actions...as usual**.”

The Lord of the Underworld shook his head.

“**For better or for worse, the dice has been cast, to quote this ambitious snake of Julius Caesar**.” The next breath was darker than the shadows around them. “**I can feel many factions converging on the Sea of Monsters. Souls I had been unable to claim are gracing me with their presence already. Prepare. As I’m sure you have already guessed, once my little brother’s expedition to seize the Golden Fleece, it will be your turn to...how will he phrase it? Ah yes, it will be your time to prove your loyalty**.”

Yeah, that sounded like Zeus. Saying he was favouring you while sending you against an army worth of monsters and in a Zone Mortalis where even minor deities were careful to avoid. Needless to say, the odds of success for those ‘Great Quests’ were ridiculously low.

“Hera?” There was no need to ask more, in his opinion.

“**The marriage with my little brother turned into something truly repulsive. Do as with her you wish...but don’t kill her. If she can’t be redeemed...the duty will fall to me**.”

Hades didn’t look at him anymore, and Perseus wasn’t stupid enough to request oaths or assurances about something so important.

“**And you won’t try to paint the Barrack of my children in pink. Not if you know what is good for you**.”

Yes, in hindsight, there were too many spies in New Byzantium. He was really going to have to do something about it one of those days...

**11 June 2006, Hades’ Barrack, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

“No.”

“Oh come on, oh humourless Triumphant, it will be just a small artwork-“

“You aren’t going to paint this refurbished Barrack with a scene celebrating my ritual’s failure, Jackson!” The daughter of Hades retorted angrily. “I may be unable to use my magic, but I have other ways at my disposal to kill you if you go too far!”

“Fine, fine...” Lou Ellen giggled at the fake disappointed expression of the son of the Poseidon. “But I want it noted your Barrack would have been splendid if I was allowed to do that. This is something that won’t be offered twice!”

“No, you just annoy her every morning...” the young Nico di Angelo remarked.

“Seeing you exchange barbs is becoming an amusing tradition of New Byzantium,” Annabeth Chase intervened in a semi-amused voice, “but could we begin this meeting? I know no one but the Lord of the Underworld can spy upon us here, but a lot of people are going to wonder what new conspiracy a certain insane Demigod is planning if we stay for too long here.”

“I am not insane!” the automatic reply came within a few seconds. “It’s just this poor world which refuses to obey my will.”

“Yes, completely insane,” Dakota McDonald approved wisely. “But if we begin the meeting, aren’t we missing Jake Mason?”

“Jake won’t come,” Luke Castellan said, giving an ironic smile to Perseus. “For some reason, the son of Hephaestus believes he escaped a fate worse than death. Moreover, the Great Quest is officially over, and you delivered him his part of the spoils. I think he intends to build himself a new forge, and stay there.”

Lou Ellen watched attentively Perseus, but the green-eyed roguish son of the Seas was totally unconcerned about this defection.

“It’s too bad. I will need to find a son or a daughter of Hephaestus to replace him.”

“Replace him for what?” the blonde-haired daughter of Athena asked warily. “The Great Quest is over. The Olympians aren’t going to plunge the world into the next World War so soon after narrowly beginning by the fault of a certain Lightning Thief.”

Bianca di Angelo glared at the grey-eyed girl, who ignored her superbly. The daughter of Hecate smiled in amusement at the sight.

“I trust you haven’t missed the news of the next Legionnaire expedition?” Perseus’ grin was back in strength. “You know, the one everyone must be aware unless you’re blind, deaf, and dumb, and have been living as a hermit in the middle of nowhere for the last days.”

“I am aware of it,” Annabeth countered. “I know it is about Thalia and the Golden Fleece. And while I am angry the Master of Olympus is only bothering now to bringing her back because there are other claimants of the Prophecy, I also know it is a Legion’s expedition this time. We are not Legionnaires, and even if we were, I am certain the Suicide Squad wouldn’t be invited!”

There were whispers of approval all around the black table of enchanted obsidian they were using for this gathering of Demigods and Demigoddesses.

The daughter of Athena was often self-righteous and believed herself clever than everyone else, but this time she had told them a lot of good points.

This time, it was the son of Nemesis who decided to kill their enthusiasm.

“It’s true we aren’t invited. But you assume they are going to succeed.”

All positive mood in the dark-themed room vanished with an impressive celerity.

“We’re speaking about a Cohort,” Annabeth said quietly, “or a double-sized one, if one of the First Cohorts is selected for the honour.”

“Yes,” Perseus began in what was definitely a reasonable sarcastic voice for him, “in other words, they plan to deploy somewhere between five hundred and a thousand Demigods and Legacies to a Zone Mortalis. I’m sure the monsters and every potential threat will smell them one hundred kilometres away. I mean, what could possibly go wrong?”

“Don’t tempt Fate like that...” the Lightning Thief grumbled in a very irritated tone. “Couldn’t they imitate what you did? Travelling through the Labyrinth in order to achieve strategic surprise?”

“I don’t think so.” The Earthshaker’s son replied very seriously. “First, there’s the obvious fact we did it once. The effect of surprise has in great part been lost. Then there is the problem of the new Labyrinth Goddess. The Suicide Squad is in relatively good terms with her; the Legions can’t boast the same thing. There are also a lot of complicating factors.”

“Factors like?” the new Annabeth Chase was taking notes from Jackson’s discourse. Lou Ellen didn’t know if it was something good or incredibly bad.

“Factors like the fact that I have not discovered an exit which leads directly to the Sea of Monsters.” Perseus admitted. “And I discovered many exits of the Labyrinth, believe me.”

Oh, the daughter of Hecate believed him all right. Between the Minotaur’s help and his unpredictable actions, Perseus Jackson had discovered more secrets in a few years than most Children of Magic discovered in their lifetimes.

“But even if by a miraculous turn of events they really have the proof and a vague idea where a Gate to this Zone Mortalis is, there’s a massive problem: the Sea of Monsters is an archipelago with more than a thousand islands. Unless you have once again near-miraculous luck, you will need a ship to travel past the island where the Gates lead you to. And I can say it without too much risk of being wrong, no group of Questers or Legionnaires will be able to transport a ship through the deadly traps of the Labyrinth.”

“Yes,” the daughter of Athena conceded formally her ‘defeat’, “any expedition will have to go by ship...the long way.”

“All right,” Dakota McDonald drank from his flask and cleared his throat. “But why should we care about that? I mean, we gained a year of diplomatic immunity, right? And we have been paid a lot for the completion of the Great Quest. Each of us has received enough Drachmas to live the rest of our lives in a palace. We are...incredibly rich Demigods...and Demigoddesses. Why should we care if a Legion expedition succeeds or fails? I don’t wish an unpleasant fate to the Legionnaires who will be chosen, but they will be all volunteers for this expedition. And if they fail...well, the Golden Fleece has been lost for centuries or millennia.”

Annabeth Chase gave the son of Bacchus a very unimpressed look. And Dakota amended his words in a hurry.

“Yes, it’s too bad for the daughter of Zeus. She’s a victim in this affair. I’m all for trying to resurrect her. But you all saw what we had to face in the Labyrinth. I was quite mad by the end...though I blame Jackson and Hera for it.”

“Hey!”

“Believe me,” ‘Antigone Barbara’ muttered, “if I had known there was an outcome like that waiting for me at the end, I wouldn’t have approved this plot of stealing the Master Bolt.”

Lou Ellen smiled at the discomfiture of the fallen Goddess. As far as was concerned, Hera had really gotten what she deserved.

“Dakota has a point,” the daughter of Hecate decided to speak while keeping most of her amusement out of her tone. “I’m not saying we won’t join important Quests in the future, but it hasn’t even been a month we are back. We have barely had the time to order wing expansions for our Barracks. We’ve not even begun to reflect our new status and amaze our poor siblings and cousins. I hope you have a good reason why we should risk our lives again, Jackson.”

“I have indeed one, oh cautious daughter of Hecate,” Perseus Jackson gave her a charming smile...which fooled no one at the table. “No matter how much peace you wish, *the Master of Olympus will wage war upon us*.”

There were more than twenty of seconds of silence as the Demigods and Demigoddesses around the time considered the implications of this simple sentence.

When it was broken, it was by the ex-wife of the Lord of Thunder.

“Yes,” Antigone Barbara, she who had been the Queen of the Gods, agreed. “He will try to kill us all. We are too dangerous and he is too paranoiac. The moment the Ancient Laws will not protect us anymore, he will strike.”

And that meant the year of diplomatic immunity was the extent Lou Ellen and every other Demigod was ‘safe’ at New Byzantium. Unless they accepted another deadly Quest. Unless they were ready to risk everything once more by following an insane green-eyed boy in a Zone Mortalis, a place where most mortals had no chance of getting out alive.

“We have quite a few days before a messenger of Olympus arrives to summon us, of course.” Perseus continued in a lighter tone. “The Roman expedition has yet to depart, and they will at least a couple of months to reach the Sea of Monsters, never mind meeting the real opposition. But a lot of that time will need to be spent in real training. I will need to teach you how to perfect your existing skills, and massively increase new ones you have currently no clue how to use.”

“I am far stronger than I entered the Labyrinth, Jackson!” This wasn’t exactly a challenge coming from Clarisse La Rue, but it was close to it.

 “Yes. And our enemies this time around will be stronger too. Make no mistake: it isn’t only the Legions of Constantinople which have lost the element of surprise. The same can be said about us.”

Lou Ellen chuckled, despite the bad news.

“Don’t tell us you haven’t some nasty surprises in your pockets, Jackson. We wouldn’t believe you...”

“Perhaps,” the black-haired Demigod teased her. “But it will be more risky than the first time. And now I await your answer.”

**12 June 2006, the New Golden Horn Shipyards, New Constantinople, United States of America (de jure)**

The more he thought about it, the more Jason Grace believed he hated Octavian McArthur.

The son of Jupiter had known inter-Legion politics could be treacherous, but there had never been an instance in the last couple of centuries when the Tribune of the First Cohort convinced the Legate to send away so many veterans from the most experienced Cohorts in such a random and inefficient manner.

Sometimes Jason wondered how many traumatic and sad things happened in the head of high officers for them to take decisions that stupid.

But there was no denying the truth. Tribune Bryce Lawrence, legacy of Orcus, commanding officer, had a dreadful influence on the rest of the Tribunes and the Legion’s leadership. And who had the most influence on this psychopath? Well, one could hazard the old families of New Constantinople figured in good place. Lawrence loved killing things and large gold purses to pay for his expensive hobbies.

The little treacherous weasel who basked in his Apollo Legacy’s lineage could provide him both.

Just for that, Jason would have been inclined to stab him, but the bastard – in spirit – had not stopped there hadn’t he? Eliminating the Fifth Cohort in the first stage of the War Games and sabotaging everyone save the First Cohort hadn’t been enough. Preventing him from being sent with the heroes who would recover the Golden Fleece and save countless Demigods and Demigoddesses trapped into a comatose state – above all Thalia, his sister – wasn’t enough.

After their elimination, they had been barred from ‘wasting the taxpayer’s money for days’ and told to pack their bags...only to be assigned to the construction yards of the New Golden Horn Shipyards, where they were supposed to assist in the construction of the new ships which would sail for the Sea of Monsters.

It was adding insult to the injury.

And yeah, Jason Grace, son of Jupiter, was really beginning to hate this treacherous toy-stabbing weasel.

 The worst part was that he couldn’t even incite his fellow Legionnaires to do as little as possible. Only one Cohort would be chosen for the expedition – though the First Cohort was the size of two ‘normal’ ones – and while it was unlikely any other force from the Legio XII Fulminata could beat Octavian at this game of sabotages and betrayals, there were two other Legions who could best him.

And even if it was the First Cohort of Lawrence which was chosen, they didn’t deserve to die because their foremost psychopaths...pardon, their officers...were treacherous and unable to recognise rigging the rules wouldn’t matter when they fought the monsters of the Sea.

“According to the rumours,” one of the new recruits, a large Asian-looking Demigod, began while heavily breathing as he participated in carrying a large metallic part, “Octavian has decided to build a ship something similar to the Ticonderoga-class Cruisers to serve as his flagship.”

“Octavian hasn’t yet won the War Games.” Jason grunted under the strain of carrying something so heavy. Was it how the slaves felt, millennia ago, when building the pyramids?

“Oh, please, Centurion,” the portly boy grunted as finally they placed the big thing on an ugly elevator which brought the steel machine...stuff...upwards in the incomplete structure of the hull. At this pace of activity, fortunately, the young teenager would be as muscled as a regular Legionnaire in no time. “Are we going to pretend there was any fair-play in the War Games?”

“No,” Jason grimaced, “but...Legionnaire Zong, is it?”

“Legionnaire Frank Zhang,” the Asian-looking boy saluted, not looking offended he had mangled his name.

“Well, Legionnaire Zhang, it is true Octavian has rigged the game for our Legion. But he has two other Legions to contend with. And I doubt his tricks will work on them.”

“Gods I hope so,” was the heartfelt reply of the inexperienced recruit, “if the rumours are true, the bastard intends to call his flagship the *Ave Caesar*.”

“It will be Lawrence’s flagship,” Jason smirked as they went to the other end of the shipyard, no doubt to use their ‘talents’ on something incredibly annoying, hard, or painful...why was he using the ‘or’ anyway?

“Oh yeah...Lawrence’s flagship.”

Personally, Jason found the name rather ridiculous...but maybe it was because the idea came from Octavian? By his father’s Master Bolt, the name of Caesar was still as prestigious as it had been two millennia before...but the fact Octavian’s head inflated every time he mentioned Octavian *Augustus* *Caesar*...yeah, that irritated him to the highest degree.

Unfortunately, while their group walked fast, it wasn’t fast enough to satisfy *some people*.

“Faster, band of lazy excuses of Legionnaires!” Centurion Rico Kowalski of the First Cohort barked. “What are you waiting for? The flagship of the First Cohort must be ready per the Legate’s schedule! Grace! Stop smirking! Your rank and your daddy won’t prevent the punishments from flying if...look at me when I talk to you!”

Jason didn’t obey. Any other time, he might have, but not when an enormous wave slammed into the bay of New Constantinople...an unprecedented phenomenon for today, because there was only a slight breeze, and the Atlantic Ocean far out there was absolutely calm.

The wave rose higher and higher...and many Demigods began to run away.

“Hey! There is someone surfing on the wave!”

Jason opened his mouth to tell Frank Zhang he had to stop saying ridiculous things...but before he uttered the first word, it became evident the new Legionnaire was saying the truth.

And as the wave contorted impossibly and projected a lot of water but largely missed the dockyards, it was very obvious the being behind the exceptional phenomenon was divine. No one could ride a wave that high and survive...and no one would likely have the idea to try, in all likelihood.

The wave disappeared fast, but its existence allowed the Goddess to jump on the pier effortlessly.

And she was a Goddess. Only an imbecile would miss the sheer power she irradiated.

She wasn’t one of the usual visitors, that much he was ready to bet his monthly pay on.

All Gods and Goddesses could change their appearance, but most had traits and behaviour which allowed Legionnaires and Questers to know who came, disguised or not.

The son of Jupiter was pretty much this Goddess had never been seen in a lifetime.

She was...incredibly beautiful. She had arrived surfing, and she was dressed like an elite surfer. Of course, while the light green swimsuit she wore left only her feet and everything above her neck naked, the surfer-themed material hid nothing of her curves, which were...at this moment, Jason was sure he was liking girls.

And her face...it was like feminine perfection had decided to grace them today. Her blonde hair and her green eyes were perfection and-

“You stand,” a dolphin they had not noticed, busy as they were to stare at the Goddess, proclaimed as its fins somehow handled the familiar banner of a green field and a golden Trident, “before the Goddess Rhode, Mistress and Protector of the Isle of Rhode, Light of Sea, Warden of the Eastern Aegean, Admiral of the Thirteenth Atlantean Fleet!”

Jason Grace kneeled, making a sign to all other Legionnaires to imitate him. This was a Goddess he’d never met alright...and while he didn’t remember in the briefings about Greek mythology they irregularly received, she was certainly a member of Poseidon’s court. Not knowing what feuds and alliances existed between she and Olympus, the protocols insisted it was better to kneel before, and wonder about the political implications later.

“Oh right,” Jason was not surprised when he raised his head again that a single Legionnaire had not kneeled. Rico Kowalski had always tried to prove he was fearless. “You are the Sun’s Widow, right?”

The power of the Goddess was unleashed, and Jason closed his eyes. The smell and the sound of the sea were near-overwhelming. Even with his eyes closed though, it was like he was swimming in a world of blue and green, with sharks circling in the distance.

At last, the power decreased before disappearing altogether.

Jason still waited ten seconds before reopening his eyes. Just to be sure.

And when he did...thank the eagles, the Goddess was walking away from them, her surfboard under her right arm. Jason rapidly turned his head away, because looking at the rear of a Goddess...err...she might take offense.

“Ouch, my head! What happened?”

Jason Grace burst into laughter as he saw what had happened to Rico Kowalski.

The Goddess had not killed him.

She had done something way, way worse.

Where there was a brown-haired Demigod with a sharp nose...there was a talking penguin now.

A really big, white-bellied, black-backed, penguin.

“Ave, Centurion Penguin!” Frank Zhang managed to salute the right way before exploding in laughter.

“You will be punished for this insubordination!” the furious Centurion...pardon the irate animal jabbered.

Naturally, this made everyone explode in giggles or other forms of hilarity.

“I for one, welcome our new penguin overlord! BWAHAHA!”

“Is it possible to do push-ups when you’re a penguin? Let’s find out!”

“What’s a penguin favourite relative? Aunt Arctica!”

In mere seconds, the dam of Roman professionalism was destroyed, and pier and dockyards became a gathering of laughing Demigods and Legacies, all trying to make penguin jokes and laughing at Rico Kowalski’s predicament.

“He looks like he’s wearing a tuxedo!”

The son of Jupiter tried to muster some compassion for the poor Centurion...and failed. When you didn’t know how irritable a God or a Goddess could be, you didn’t try to goad him or her into cursing you.

“He’s going to fly away! No, wait, it’s a penguin!”

At this rhythm, they were going to die of laughter before-

“Why aren’t you working? You have work, lazy excuses of Legionnaires! You dishonour the...why are you surrounding a penguin? And where’s Rico?”

If anything this made the growing burst into more desperate and uncontrollable laughter.

“It’s me, Michael!” The penguin jabbered.

‘Rico? Rico!” Michael Kahale, another Centurion of the First Cohort and son of Venus, looked completely flabbergasted. Which was...okay, it was kind of understandable, really. “How?”

“It’s the fault of this Goddess!”

“Rico...what have you done?”

“He threw in her face that her husband was dead!” one of the Fifth Cohort’s Legionnaires who had witnessed the scene informed Michael with glee, “and the rest as they say, is penguin history!”

Jason laughed with the rest of the crowd. It was horrible...but it was too funny.

“Do you have any idea how much influence and money it takes to convince a Goddess to remove her curse?” Michael asked tiredly, not sharing the general hilarity. “I’m in the mood to throw you out of the Legion on general principle.”

“You can’t do that!” the penguin agitated ridiculously his new fins! “I had a bad day okay! It isn’t like two Goddesses will visit New Constantinople today, okay!”

The words had just left the beak of the transformed Legacy when Jason realised it was getting cold standing out there. Really cold. Suddenly, the slim second-hand T-shirt he wore when he wanted to avoid dirtying his normal clothes was not so good for the summer weather.

And in a few seconds, it got worse. It was like the late spring’s warmth had decided to take holidays...again...and at an alarming rate, grey clouds replaced everything blue, and the water of the Bay looked like it was on the verge of freezing.

One minute later, there was no doubt possible: snow was truly falling. The approaches to several civilian ships were truly frozen in newly created ice, and one could only thank Olympus that the new ships were in their dry docks...

This time, the Goddess did not arrive by surfing. No, she skated on the ice...which had been summoned to this very purpose, Jason imagined.

“Behold,” the same dolphin who had heralded the arrival of Rhode resurfaced. Interestingly, he was bundled up in a white puffy jacket. “Her Magnificent Divinity the Goddess Khione! Goddess of Snow and Ice! Marshal of the Blizzards! Herald of Winter! Holy Patron of the Winter Olympic Games!”

The list of titles continued for a long, long time, leaving the assembly all the time they needed to form two parade lines on each side of the pier...and to kneel again.

Khione was a very different Goddess than the first one they had seen today, but if she was an icy beauty, a mere glance at her expression was enough to dissuade anyone sane to try jokes and discourtesy.

Hers was the power of the cold in humanoid form. The closer they were from her, the more intense the sensation of your blood freezing was.

In appearance...the Goddess of Snow wore attire similar to what a figure skating athlete would wear...maybe? Khione looked like a young adult woman, may seventeen or eighteen of age, with impressive big curves, especially when it came to her breasts. Her hair was a lush black, tied into a bun. Her clothes accented this ‘natural divine beauty’, as she had chosen to come in a sort of black and white skating dress. Strangely, it conjured some sort of Cygnus imagery inside his head. Half of her back was completely exposed...or so it seemed; in reality, there were near-transparent stockings and clothes adorning her. And to complete it, she had long opera gloves of grey colour hiding her hands.

No one was stupid enough to voice some inappropriate comment as the Goddesses glided between them.

Khione was acting as they were all unimportant, and weirdly, Jason Grace was incredibly happy she did.

She was nearly two hundred metres away and nearly out of their working area when disaster struck. A patrol of the First Cohort had returned, and instead of prostrating themselves-

“Hey! You have no right to be here! It was the will of Juno that-“

There was a bright flash the very colour of ice.

When it faded, there was no common penguin to laugh at.

There was an enormous, adult, *Emperor penguin*.

No one dared make a move or utter a protest...and then Khione raised her leg in a graceful pirouette.

As the blade of the ice skate shone like an enchanted sword, Jason acknowledged that you didn’t really need to hide a weapon under this revealing skating dress.

The strike missed the newly transformed Legionnaire by inches.

The Emperor penguin made an absolutely pitiful sound.

Khione slapped him and then glided away.

Needless to say, they all waited long minutes to make sure the Goddess was gone before making a comment again.

“RICO! IT’S YOUR FAULT!”

“IT’S NOT MY FAULT! AND WHAT YOUR TONE, DECURION JULIAN SKIPPER!”

“Two Goddesses who have not been seen in decades...what the hell is happening?” Frank Zhang shivered, even as the warm weather returned and the ice faded away.

“Let’s the good side, we have now penguins in our order of battle!”

“I resent that!” the Emperor penguin who until seconds had been a Decurion replied angrily.

The insanity, long suppressed by the Goddess’ terrifying presence, returned faster than a giant eagle falling upon his prey.

“Can Emperor penguins serve in a Legion?”

“Well, if we hire a Legion of them...Legion Penguinius? Pengus?”

“Why not Legio Stupidus?”

“I, for one, welcome our new Penguin Legionnaires!”

This was too much for Jason and frankly everyone else. A second later, full-blown laughter was reigning everywhere.

**12 June 2006, Poseidon’s Barrack, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

Perseus sensed the Goddesses when they crossed the boundaries separating New Byzantium from the outside world.

The ex-Tyrant wished he could say he was that good at sensing divine energy, but honestly, the ‘visitors’ were doing no effort whatsoever to hide their presence.

“Sorry, Nico,” he told the son of Hades he had just beaten for the fifth time in a row – for today, it went without saying. “It seems our next duel will have to wait for a few hours.”

“What?” the young black-haired boy looked at him suspiciously. “You’re not trying to gain time again, aren’t you?”

“I would never dare,” the green-eyed boy swore solemnly as his older sister the Dread Empress snorted loudly in disbelief. Who would have thought Triumphant had so little faith in him. “And by the way, Antigone, you should take a rest outside the Barrack. Now.”

For all his ‘training’ – or because despite his training, who knew, the fallen Goddess got on her high horse and her acne-ridden face contorted in a familiar expression of sheer stubbornness.

“If you think I am going to fall into whatever trap you have ready for me outside, Jackson,” the very mortal girl no longer reigning upon Olympus said, “you are completely out of...EEEK!”

The sonorous exclamation at the end was spectacular...and well-deserved, for in a second, most fountains and sources of water of the Barrack suddenly diverted all their water to sprinkle the new recruit of the Suicide Squad.

“JACKSON!”

“It’s not my fault.”

“If you think-“ the ex-Queen of the Gods spluttered as she looked more and more like a drowned rat.

“**I am the one responsible**.”

The King of Atlantis must have given her the permission to enter, because he certainly didn’t. Or was her divine signature similar enough to her mother to be recognised as a legitimate mistress of this Barrack? Interesting questions he would have to think deeply upon later...

Later, yes. There was a golden-haired Goddess in his Barrack, and by the green eyes and the beauty alone, he could easily guess her identity.

“How I am supposed to address you, by the way? Sister is a bit too fraternal, and High Divinity is a mouthful...”

“**Just so you know, I transformed a Demigod who had the gall to remind me I was a widow into a penguin**.”

“I’m sure he really deserved it,” Perseus approved while levitating a bottle of grape juice and two glasses. “May I offer you a drink, sister?”

He really wondered if she was the Goddess of Surfers all around the world. Her appearance supported the idea she had the body and the mentality for it.

“**You’re like father in the old days when he was utterly crazy**,” Rhode of Rhodes commented idly. “**Yes, give me a drink. I have a feeling I am going to need it**.”

“You! You tried to drown me!”

One day, Antigone Barbara would learn she was now a very little fish in a very big aquarium.

But today was not this day.

“**Don’t flatter yourself, *nuisance***.” The smirk was worth a nine out of ten, truly. “**If I had tried to drown you, no one would find your body. Mind you, I don’t think Olympus would investigate very hard. How does it feel to be mortal, Sacred Cow**?”

Ah yes, the unexplored field of bovine jokes. Why hadn’t he tried it in the last days? Truly this error needed to be rectified as soon as possible.

“I think she is going to ruminate on the issue.” Perseus added innocently.

“When I will have divine powers-“

“You will incinerate me, yes, yes, try to be imaginative for once,” Perseus gave a semi-apologetic expression to Rhode. “Sorry for the trouble. I am just beginning her training.”

“**And she is in dire need of it**.”

Perseus sighed internally and begun to distribute warm clothes, as the wave of cold hit his Barrack and several pools of water began to freeze.

“Lady Khione,” if Rhode had come as the Goddess of Surfers and Beauty, then Khione was the Goddess of Ice Skating.

“**Khione**,” the other Goddess present said neutrally.

“**The outcome of your Great Quest had many consequences, most of them negative for my domain**,” the Goddess of Ice spoke frostily, “**if the Goddess of Spring refuses to go to the Underworld when the date of Autumn will come, there will be...repercussions**.”

“I’m sure a Goddess of your power can easily handle the ex-Queen of Hell.” Khione had often been ridiculed as a minor nymph, but his most basic estimate made today easily placed her as a hundred times more powerful as the deity the Suicide Squad had defeated.

But of course, Persephone was never the true problem.

“**The spoiled daughter of the Olympians is no threat by herself**,” Khione replied, echoing his thoughts. “**It is the support the Goddess of Agriculture is already ready to give her which is incredibly concerning. As far the Harvest Queen is concerned, with her daughter returned, there is no reason for Winter to exist anymore. And I can’t stand against her**.”

“How amazing...the third-rate Goddess admits she stands no chance against her betters!”

Maybe Ethan Nakamura was right. Maybe ‘Antigone’ was truly going to get herself killed before his schemes came to fruition.

“Please don’t kill her,” the son of Poseidon pleaded as Khione’s aura flared into a snowstorm and Hera paled, suddenly realising the enormous mistake she had just made.

“**Do not give me orders, son of the Earthshaker**.”

“I just want to avoid frostbites!” He said virtuously. “Maybe a light spanking? I’m told it has one hundred percent efficiency when the teenager is very naughty!”

A truly evil smile appeared on the Ice Goddess’ elegant mouth.

“**Yes...yes, it is an excellent suggestion...thank you, son of Poseidon**.”

“Bianca, be a dear, and use the Barrack’s camera. It will be an excellent well of blackmail in the future...I mean totally a source of fascinating information for the new generations of Demigods.”

The next minutes were extremely interesting. As he had not been certain her sacred animal was the cow, Perseus would have sworn Hera was associated to pigs, because the squeals she made were absolutely better than the animals under duress.

Anyway, it left the Goddess of Snow in a better mood...and Hera prostrated on the ground.

“**Next time, watch your mouth, *mortal***,” the daughter of Boreas ‘suggested’. “**Or maybe you are in need of another lesson? I haven’t evacuated all my frustration that the Olympics used so much artificial snow**.”

“**I don’t think our uncle’s plan is sound**,” Rhode remarked idly. “**Really, Persephone is not the brightest Goddess to have ever lived, but surely she will notice the Lord of the Underworld has no interest in her**.”

If he wanted to lead a successful insurrection against the Gods, something inevitable would be the creation of an effective counter-intelligence service. There were too many secrets around which weren’t under his control.

Thus Perseus did what he always did.

He lied with a smile on his face.

“Who cares?” the leader of the Suicide Squad feigned boredom. “I will support the Lord of the Underworld’s scheme, whether it works or not is his problem. I am not his spiritual guide in marriage affairs. Unless Bianca wants me to, of course-“

“NO!” Sometimes, Bianca-Triumphant was really too predictable for her own good.

“Too bad. Anyway, I am after an alliance with the Goddess of Ice and Snow and the Protector of Rhodes. Since you’re far more intelligent than the average deities fornicating on Olympus those days, I’m sure you’ve understood my Suicide Squad will be the second wave when the first assault to recover the Golden Fleece unavoidably fails.”

“**You are going to die if you go there, son of Poseidon**.” Khione didn’t seem to look forwards to it; she just told it like it was a fundamental truth.

“**She’s right**.” The blonde-haired Rhode supported her fellow Goddess. “**I’m ready to grant you that your natural Hydrokinesis skills will give you better survival chances than any other Demigod of this age. If this was a lesser Quest you were about to embark upon, you may even have a chance to get out of here alive with some treasure. But the Sea of Monsters of this era is the point of convergence of very powerful enemies, Perseus. If you go there, you will die**.”

“If I go there *without your support*, I am certainly going to die,” the green-eyed Demigod corrected with a smile. “But this won’t happen.”

“**Careful, mischievous brother**,” Rhode warned him. “**I have been ordered to teach you advanced hydrokinesis. The methods were left at my discretion. I can break your bones every day and spar until you will regret your existence among the living**.”

“Threats already, sister?” Perseus said in a falsely aggrieved tone. “There’s no need for it. I just wanted to remark to you that the Sea of Monsters, courtesy of being one of the most dangerous Zones Mortalis, is a graveyard of old artefacts and prisons. Some of them are older than the Titanomachy. That is, if the rumours Asterius and I were able to acquire told us the truth.”

“**The rumours you heard were certainly accurate**,” Rhode murmured. “**But many of them have ancient protections. Protections no God or Demigod can get through on his own**.”

His half-sister was an intelligent deity. Her eyes narrowed a fraction of a second later.

Yes, a God alone would fail. A Demigod alone would fail. But mortals and immortals working together?

Khione tried her best not to look *too* interested, however.

“**With those artefacts of legend, you could spectacularly increase your power and betray us when you don’t need us anymore**.” The Goddess of Snow stared at him with her limpid blue eyes. As expected from the Goddess of Frozen Things, they were the essence itself of frost.

As always, honesty was his greatest and most potent weapon.

“Yes, I could.” Except, of course, Zeus was his sworn enemy, and discarding allies when all it would do was delaying the final battle by a few years was really, really short-sighted. “Fortunately, I don’t want to. And there is a little something called an oath on a certain Hell River...or is it a Hell Sea those days? I am ready to swear I will abide by the terms of our alliance on *Her* once we have ironed out the full treaty.”

This gave him their full attention, as he had hoped.

“**The Triumvirate duo of War and Love await you in the Sea of Monsters**,” Rhode warned him seriously. “**As will Circe herself. And while I have no accurate information on the size of their fleets, the armadas will likely be massive. In addition to that problem, this is a Zone Mortalis out of time. There will be legends of the Sea and War ready to ambush you. They will want to prove that the Labyrinth was just luck. Many Gods, beginning with the Olympians itself, will want to ensure your crazy adventure in the Underworld was your last exploit**.”

“Good!” The boy who had once been the Tyrant of Helike and usurped the throne from his righteous idiotic nephew gloated. “Very good! Excellent! It would be a real shame to triumph against mediocre opposition.”

“**You are completely mad**,” Khione said, but for the first time, he heard a shadow of excitation in her voice. And just like that, he knew the Goddesses would be with him until they toppled Olympus...and who cared about making orderly plans after that?

“I am Perseus Jackson. And the first part of my evil plan is about to begin.”

The Fates were against him. Zeus would try to kill him. Hera was absolutely useless. And once the Legion Cohort failed, no doubt he would be saddled with a crowd of incompetent wastrels who thought the Suicide Squad wouldn’t live up to them.

They were wrong. Oh, how wrong they all were.

“I am going to the Sea of Monsters,” he emptied his glass of grape juice, taking great care not to cough, this would be way too embarrassing. “And if all the fleets and monsters of this world stand in the way, they will be *crushed.”*

**13 June 2006, Hephaestus Forge MP-42, Sea of Monsters, somewhere near the Solomon Islands**

Hephaestus had decided he wouldn’t go to Olympus today.

Those Council’s meetings were annoying...when there weren’t frightening, of course.

For some reason, his father and several of his siblings thought war was the answer to all their problems.

Hephaestus told them it wasn’t, but was someone listening to him? No. They always told him they knew what they were doing, no matter how obvious it was evident they weren’t in control of anything.

And they always insisted he developed dreadful weapons. It was always about killer-automatons and Celestial Bronze-tipped missiles. It was always ‘Hephaestus, build me a submarine which can bring the end of the world in ten minutes’.

Hephaestus was hardly the mathematician Athena was, but with half of the money the eleven Olympians forced him to accept so more devastating weapons were built, a lot of far more beautiful things could have been created.

They could have ended world hunger. He had the plans and the technology to make this world into a paradise. There would be only peace, and pacifist innovations. His benevolent Artificial Intelligences would terraform the other planets of the Solar System while bright new minds would be given new bodies so they could study science, mechanics, and hyper-advanced technology for centuries without breaking apart.

Thinking smaller, he could have spread around the plans for his new solar farms. Any family could have had a friendly automaton to help them when life was too hard and the flesh failed.

But here too he had been denied.

Hephaestus didn’t understand why. Sometimes, he wondered if Olympus...no, he wasn’t going to think about that.

But with Hera, his awful mother, turned into a mortal and banished from Olympus, Hephaestus had hoped it was a new beginning.

Unfortunately, it appeared he had been a bit too...hasty in blaming his mother.

Oh, Hera was awful with everyone. Pretending the contrary would be stupid. But now she was gone, and the God of Technology had to admit, nothing really changed.

Or if it changed, it was for the worse.

“**HEPH! BROTHER**!”

Hephaestus grunted in frustration. He had travelled to this Forge because it was half a world away from Olympus, and thus annoying siblings weren’t likely to begin searching for him in this place.

Once again, he had been wrong.

He wanted to say the Ancient Laws were broken, but his brother was still outside of the Forge’s boundaries, with the water reaching up the knees of his five metres-tall form.

“**What do you want, Ares**?”

Of the two essences who coexisted, Hephaestus vastly preferred Mars...not that he *liked* the Roman God of War. The Lord of the Legions was always spreading trouble wherever he went, stealing technology, and causing trouble, innovating for the sake of spreading bloodshed.

But Mars was preferable to Ares.

“**I have business proposals**.” The bloodthirsty psychopath grinned, revealing irregular teeth which were blackened by the uncountable murders he had committed from the moment he was born.

“**No**.”

And Hephaestus didn’t say that because he could feel his brother had sex recently with Aphrodite. Why the God of War thought he hadn’t machines to detect that, the God of the Forges was honestly baffled by his naivety.

“**The weapon order comes from *Father***.”

Staying in the water for so long was creating a large spot of crimson...Hephaestus didn’t recognise the uniform Ares was wearing, but there was no doubt he must have launched another war.

“**Can he pay for his latest murderous projects**?”

One month ago, Hephaestus wouldn’t have dared asking this very simple question.

But it was before Hera stole the near-entirety of his father’s treasury...and of course, as the punishment had been delivered first, his awful mother had zero willingness to cooperate when she was asked to return the billions of Drachmas.

And the principal assets of *her* treasury were nowhere to be found, obviously.

“**Don’t worry about that**,” Ares avoided a straight answer, “**I am the one who is paying today**.”

Hells. Half of his excuses to refuse him had just gone in ashes.

“**Fine. You can come ashore**.”

Ares didn’t waste time setting his bloody feet on his island, and an enormous boar materialised next to him, carrying several scrolls around each tusk.

Unrolling the first document was enough to make him blink.

“**Why in the name of the Etna does he want a flying aircraft carrier? It’s impractical, it’s horribly costly, and when the counter-grav technology fails, it’s**-“

“**Who cares**,” Ares smiled carnivorously, “**it’s incredibly badass, and it will be an asset no Demigods will have a counter against**! **And the proper name is helicarrier**!”

This...this wasn’t reassuring at all.

“**I thought I was supposed to help the Demigods. You know...the Legacies and the Demigods of the Legion who will be sent this way**.”

Or had he missed something when his genitor squeaked about his poor daughter was the tragic victim of Hades’ jealousy?

“**Yes, you will help the Legionnaires. But Father has imagined a superb scheme to get rid of this amusing Suicide Squad. They will be sent immediately after the Legion returns successful from the Golden Fleece Quest. That way, Poseidon won’t be able to say this is a death sentence and using it as a pretext to declare war**...”

The calderas of every volcano in activity protect him from the stupidity of his father and his brother.

There was only one answer he could give.

“**This is sheer folly. We have just avoided**-”

“**Old insults have not been forgotten, *brother***.”

“**You and I have very different ideas about the definition of an insult**.” And many Gods wondered why he was staying working in his workshops and his Forges all day.

“**Don’t think about it too much! Our father approves and it is his will which**-“

There was an enormous blast of loud music, and in a second, the waters surrounding his island went from ‘absolutely empty’ to ‘crowded with warships’.

“**By the ghosts of D-Day...”**

This was not a small fleet which had managed to hide under an illusion until his un-cloaking systems pulverised the magic.

In fact, it was absolutely enormous...and disparate.

Enormous Battleships coexisted with Galleons of the seventeenth century. There were modern Destroyers preceding Antiquity Triremes. Converted merchantmen of the Middle Ages sailed with designs which couldn’t be older than one hundred years.

And all of them were flying a flag of red and gold. The red was for the field; the gold was for the ram and the Egyptian Ankh above the animal.

“**Ha! Ha! Ha! I don’t know how they thought coming here would solve their problems**!” Ares laughed. “**But their suicidal challenge is accepted! If the Triumvirate wishes to die here, they are welcome to**-“

A large wave struck his brother, ending promptly his arrogant self-congratulating monologue.

Hephaestus unleashed his flames, and just his time, as another wave came for him. When the two opposite elements clashed, steam was created...which also had the unfortunate effect to destabilise many of the automated defences of his island.

“**You are not going to get away with this, Poseidon**!” Ares roared, as he escaped the aquatic attack trying to strangle him. “**I am going to**-“

More power than Ares and himself could use in a single day surged near where they stood.

In a couple of seconds, an impossible quantity of water coalesced into a humanoid shape.

Ares froze.

And Hephaestus didn’t blame him.

For unless Poseidon had decided for some reason to dress like a woman in an old-fashioned pirate movie, completed with light blue hair and a cohort of black-coloured dolphins for escort...this was not Poseidon.

It couldn’t be.

And as the sheer aura of divine power grew stronger, the God of the Forges knew who they were facing.

“**Thethys...**”

They were facing the Titaness of the Seas.

They were so screwed.

“**DIE**!” His brother struck ruthlessly...and the explosion was phenomenal. Alas, when it faded, it was obvious that despite being completely accurate in its aim, it had done no damage whatsoever.

This was bad. Hephaestus tried to flee his island as fast as he could. Ares might think fighting a Titaness two-on-one was a good idea, but Hephaestus was sure it wasn’t.

They needed reinforcements, and they needed them yesterday-

His attempt to take his travelling divine form crashed into a wall of water.

“**I’m sorry, Hephaestus, but I can’t let you escape**.”

The God of Technology transformed his crutches into anti-tank guided missiles and faced the Titaness as the Triumvirate Legion began its amphibious assault.

And to his great horror, he recognised the warmonger leading them.

The old face was not an Emperor. He wasn’t even an Emperor’s son.

But he was a Triumvir, both millennia ago and now.

“**Marcus Antonius**...” history remembered him under the name of Mark Antony, of course. The name of the female consort he had chosen to stand by his side was so evident Hephaestus didn’t bother uttering her name. “**You have allied with vile mortals, oh Titaness of the Seas**.”

“**How amusing**,” Thethys raised a pirate sabre in the air, “**that after everything you did, you still try to pretend you stand for something principled and good**.”

And then Hephaestus remembered who had been the substitute parents of his awful mother ages ago.

*Oceanus*. *Thethys*.

 “**Of course...it is always Hera’s fault**!”

Hephaestus fired the entirety of his Forge’s defensive missiles, and the true battle began.

**Author’s note**: And with this (huge) update, the Arc 2 of An Impractical Guide to Godhood begins!

As readers will likely recognise, the plans of Olympus have just been shredded. This was not part of the plan...