**Chapter 11**

**Interlude**

**Fallen Order**

**2 June 2006, the Underworld**

If one wanted to be honest and fair – and the House of Hades always prided itself to be fair and merciless – a not-insignificant part of his realm had suffered massive devastation.

This was regrettable.

But as he exerted his formidable will, over ten millions of skeletons emerged from the pits, and shades were bound to the bones.

The nice thing when you were Master of the Afterlife was undoubtedly the limitless manpower – or more accurately skeleton-power – available.

Perseus Jackson had done more damage than any ‘hero’ who had tried to invade the Hells. That much was never in question. After Heracles, there had been no shortage of idiots who, centuries after centuries, millennia after millennia, believed they had a chance to ‘free’ their loved ones from the Fields of Punishment or whatever afterlife they believed in. Most of them were easily killed, but some of them had tried to blackmail him, in general by bringing dangerous ammunition like those madmen who had transported large casks of Greek fire and threatened to detonate it in the middle of one of his armouries.

It never worked, obviously. Hades could repair everything given time; trespassers were, save under exceptional circumstances, to be killed as quickly as possible.

But the ‘Suicide Squad’ – and by the Blood of Olympus, what a ridiculous name it was – definitely was falling into the category of exceptional circumstances.

Despite the Demigods having departed for several days, the massive shockwaves were still engulfing his realm.

It was an ambiance of ruin, Hades wouldn’t deny it. But it was also an atmosphere of change and broken rules.

Normally, any alteration he did to the different parts of the Underworld he ruled over was necessarily coming from the prayers of the mortals he was duty-bound to judge once they died.

But for the first time in an eternity...it wasn’t true anymore.

It was going to take many days for him to assess how much liberty he had won, but his cautious investigations already told him the answer was likely ‘more than in his wildest dreams’.

“**Free**...” the brother of Poseidon and Zeus smiled, and repeated the word, “**free of the past**.”

And he telekinetically lifted an enormous blue brush to use on Cerberus’ fur.

His faithful servant barked loudly.

Hades went on to provide a more energetic massage to the three-headed dog, and only when he was sure the devoted dog was fully satisfied did he turn towards his other servants waiting behind him.

“**Megaera**,” the Fury prostrated herself immediately. “**I hope there won’t be any...complications from your coupling with the son of Bacchus**?”

Truly his nephew was chaos incarnate to engineer something like that. Hades didn’t remember being so surprised...and amused.

“No, my Lord!” the blue-clad Erinye gave him a supplicating look, all the while her two sisters were laughing behind her. “I took...err...the appropriate precautions.”

“**Good**.” Hades didn’t know what the result of the union between a son of the God of Wine and a Fury conceived in Hell would look like. This was the kind of ‘interesting’ thing which was best avoided, like juggling with vials of Tartarus-harvested poisons. “**Then your punishment will be simple: you will take care of Cerberus’ desires for the next five hundred years. I want two baths per day, a lot of fruit-smelling shampoo, several intensive walks so that he can stretch its legs a bit, and of course large, delicious bones covered in meat that he can gnaw upon**!”

Megaera’s pale skin managed the impressive feat of looking paler.

Cerberus barked louder, proving dogs were truly the noblest companion of Gods and humans.

The two other Furies laughed louder.

They shouldn’t have.

“**As for you two**,” the hilarity stopped abruptly, “**you are going to be in charge of the new bureaucratic department which will coordinate the expert-accountants who will investigate the damage caused by the Suicide Squad. I expect long, detailed reports**.”

“Murder?”

 Tisiphone’s voice was so close to begging it was almost tearful to hear her like that...but Hades was a just God. No matter how obeying Persephone was instinctive after so millennia, it remained the wrong thing to do in the recent events. The Furies could have ruined everything...and so they were going to be punished.

And he would make sure they understood for decades why they were...as well why he had chosen this punishment.

For millennia he had been buried under his bureaucratic duties while everyone was content to leave him alone in this never-ending struggle, supposedly enforced by the ‘Ancient Laws’.

Well, no more.

“My Lord,” Alecto licked her lips, “can’t we join our sister in petting Cerberus instead?”

“**No**.” The Lord of the Underworld was prompt to squash the tiny hope before it could bloom, before turning towards the other shade waiting by their side. “**Hector**.”

“Lord,” the hero of the Trojan War saluted, clad in a modernised version of bronze-coloured armour.

“**It appears my estimates that no Demigod would ever try to invade the Underworld via the Labyrinth was a mistake**.” Thankfully it was a mistake which had played against his daughter and in his favour in the end. “**I’ve taken great care to demolish all possible connections between Pasiphaë’s realm and mine, but the Labyrinth Gate that Perseus Jackson and his Minotaur found can’t be severed without catastrophic damage to both of our realms. And with Daedalus’ creation controlled by an ascending Goddess’ will, the danger exists a far more conventional invasion would come this way. This is an unacceptable security risk. You will take Vauban and the other siege-engineers, and order them to prepare for the construction of a fortress which will make crossing the Gate a suicidal course of action**.”

“By your orders, Lord.” The dead Trojan Prince saluted again. “Err...what is to be the fate of Achilles, Lord?”

There was non-hidden curiosity in his question; as it should be: old rivalries were not forgotten by death, and especially not when someone dragged your corpse for most of a day before the eyes of your parents and siblings in a minable act of petty range.

“**Achilles has once more proven he can be trusted to succumb to the wiles of the first pretty woman he meets**.” Hades shrugged. “**Therefore he is going to have to train for several centuries the lazy shades and the cowards of my realm...and I will make sure they are all men**.”

Hector grinned...as expected.

For someone who knew Achilles, it was indeed going to be a long and frustrating punishment.

“**Go. The sorceresses have little reason to invade the Underworld, but as long as there is no defence there, my realm is vulnerable**.”

Hector saluted and departed, leaving Hades alone...well, there was Cerberus too.

The petting was getting a bit too long to the giant three-headed dog, so the God of Wealth found a suitable alternative: a juicy bone of Drakon, his faithful guardian’s favourite treat.

About thirteen seconds later, he felt the familiar pressure of their arrival.

He had not invited them, and many times this kind of arrogance had seriously irritated him.

After all, what was the point of the Laws if the ones enforcing them were not bound by them?

“**You arrive too late**.” The older sibling of the three Gods placed his hand in the black fur of Cerberus.

“**The order will be restored**,” one of the three crones hissed. “**You will**-“

“**No**.”

His word had not been screamed or uttered with any powerful outburst of emotion.

Hades knew what the next words would be. Since he didn’t want to comply, and the prophecies had escaped their grasp, they only had one ‘tool’ left to pressure him.

“**If you don’t obey, we will make sure Persephone will never return to you**.”

Too bad for them, it was a threat which left him unmoved.

“**I still love Persephone**,” the God ruling over the Dead and the Depths of the World admitted slowly.

“**In this case**-“

“**But I am not blind to her flaws and her ill-conceived jealousy. She was perfectly unable to acknowledge it is possible to love several women at the same time, and that there is a different sort of love I feel for my children too**.”

Hades watched the myriads of skeletons, digging and recovering the enormous broken pillars of what had been one of the greatest bridges of his realm.

“**But more than that, I am not Zeus, crones. I have changed. I believe that divine or not divine, a woman has her free will. If Persephone does not wish to be my wife, then she won’t be my wife. We will divorce. I will continue to love her in my heart...but I won’t let the future of the House of Hades be jeopardised by your threats**.”

“**If you defy us, your bastards will**-“

Hades turned and struck faster than lightning.

The result was Clotho suddenly using most of her power to not have her throat crushed by his power.

“**You will not touch my children**.” The owner of the Helm of Darkness stated in a voice colder than a Siberian winter. “**Or we will see firsthand if the Fates can truly be killed**.”

“**The Council will be informed of**-“

“**Leave. Your sad excuse of order has fallen. Your era of supremacy is over...and I do not want you in my realm**.”

**2 June 2006, Council Room, Olympus**

Apollo had never been happier to not have a wife, and by extension, to never have invested a single Drachma in one of the numerous divine businesses sponsored by the Queen of the Gods.

Because at the moment they were waiting for the arrival of the Master of Olympus, Hermes was sending him regular flash news the market of marriages and long-term unions was crashing down. Universal Divine Weddings had gone bankrupt six minutes ago. Perfect Olympian Marriages had preceded it by twenty minutes. The only reason Queenly Honeymoons wasn’t falling apart was due to the fact Aphrodite had bought it and incorporated it into her love portfolio.

And no, Apollo had decided not to participate into the scramble of what had been Hera’s financial empire.

He was glorious and powerful, but recent events had proved he was already shirking some of his responsibilities. The oath-breaker had burned tremendously painfully for having the temerity of transforming his sacred cows into cheeseburgers, but the fact remained: between all his domains, he, the sunny and attractive God of Music, Poetry, and many other extraordinary disciplines...he couldn’t be everywhere at once, and the ‘advisors’ many members of the Council had given him were absolutely useless.

“**I wonder who is going to replace her**,” Ares had taken his Mars appearance, as he was in an immaculate uniform of an Army General without a drop of blood on his hands. And he wasn’t smoking one of his horrible cigars either. “**My money is on Nemesis**.”

If the God of War was troubled by the fact his mother had been arrested after being caught red-handed committing high treason against Olympus, there was no sign of it on his face.

“**Please**,” Dionysus scoffed, as Demeter materialised on her throne. “**If the Goddess of Vengeance was given a throne here, we would begin the next war within forty-eight hours**.”

“**And it is not only an Olympian Throne which must be replaced**,” Aphrodite said seductively, dressed in a red robe which remained two steps away from being appropriate for a porn star. “**It is the duties of the Queen of the Gods too**.”

Apollo rolled his eyes.

“**Ah, yes. Those famous ‘duties’. The ones which are making the lovely Eris, Goddess of Discord, so happy. Surely all the unmarried Goddesses are going to jump at the opportunity to be cuckolded by our Lord and Master**.”

“**Careful, Apollo**,” Demeter’s essence flared, and the intent behind it was far from benevolent.

“**Oh? Are we going to pretend he is going to stop banging up the first starlet he is feeling attracted to**?”

“**You have more one-night stands with young mortals than he do**,” the Goddess of Agriculture pointed out coldly.

“**Sure**,” the God of the Sun conceded. “**But I am not married...and I am no way ready to ask someone in marriage**.”

“**And let us thank everything sacred for that**,” his twin sister murmured on the throne left to his. “**I shudder to think what your ‘ideal woman’, someone able to handle all your perversions, would look like**.”

“**That hurts, little sister**.”

“**I am the older sibling, Apollo**.”

“**Yeah, yeah**...”

Fortunately, the last member of the Council chose this moment to arrive.

Hermes switched off the dozens of high-definition screens broadcasting to them the ruin of Hera’s ambitions, and Apollo clicked his fingers, the agreed combination to ensure the musical atmosphere was playing somewhere else.

As a result, eleven pair of divine eyes fell on the Master of Olympus...just as the God of the Skies and Thunder desired, of course.

His genitor had gone all out today to impress them. This was evident from the very beginning. There was no ‘classical’ business suit; instead the Master of Olympus was parading in his enormous glittering armour of Orichalcum, which as everyone divine knew, had the very appearance of gold but provided a millionth time the level of protection of the non-enchanted metal.

The Master Bolt had been purified before having its appearance enhanced by myriads of gemstones and golden metals, and it was now protected by a spherical construct of thunder-based power and flashier defence mechanisms.

Honestly, this was typical behaviour for Zeus.

The only worrying thing was the curious combination of emotions appearing on his face. And when you spent a few millennia observing him, it wasn’t hard to say there was something which had immensely pleased his genitor...as well something which had infuriating him.

This was going to be the traditional good news/bad news Council, then.

“**He didn’t kill them**,” Zeus declared without bothering with the usual pomp and fanfare. “**My brother had the gall to send them to New Byzantium, and call it ‘punishment**’.”

There was no wondering whose God’s children had just been mentioned.

“**It is a punishment**,” for that remark, Aphrodite received a glare of his genitor. “**Bianca di Angelo had the ambition to become a Goddess. Living the normal life of a Demigoddess at New Byzantium will be a blow to her rather sizeable ego**.”

“**And she won’t have a second chance**,” Hephaestus said, raising his eyes from whatever strange device he was busy tinkering with. “**The Lord of Hell’s willingness to remove all potential weaknesses against his domain is well-known. If the Rich One spared his children, it is because he is convinced they don’t represent a threat to his throne anymore**.”

“**And if he is wrong**?”

Apollo raised an eyebrow.

“**Forgive me, father, but is the girl not supposed to stay at New Byzantium for the rest of her childhood years, unless we give her the authorisation to leave**?”

The King of the Gods nodded, albeit very reluctantly, and the charming God of the Sun smiled.

“**In that case, it’s unlikely she can plot very effectively. We place a few spies close to her so that every move she makes is reported, and if she tries to leave New Byzantium, she is to be annihilated. The little usurper may have the Curse of Achilles, but it’s not enough to protect her against an Olympian’s wrath**.”

“**My little is brother is right...for once**,” Artemis intervened.

“**Hades should have allowed me to kill them**.”

Artemis closed her mouth, and Athena, the ever-logical and reasonable Athena, didn’t speak. It was certainly because the Goddess of Wisdom recognised a lost cause when she saw one. And when their genitor was convinced he was right, there was no changing his mind.

“**By her fault and this band of scoundrels we unleashed upon the Underworld, many wrongs have been committed. The soul of my son Minos is lost somewhere in a kraken’s belly. Many agents who tried to follow the Questers succumbed to the madness of the Labyrinth. The great Daedalus’ work was ruined and taken over by a sorceress unfit to be a Goddess**!”

The rant went on for several minutes. Apollo was very impressed by the sum of deeds the son of Poseidon had committed.

“**My wife has betrayed me**.”

It was spoken relatively calmly...but the eyes were the colour of thunderous storms.

Hera turning against him had hurt Zeus...and the fact the oaths which were supposed to prevent exactly that had been broken by the Master of Olympus for centuries first had been a blow to his pride.

Apollo knew at that moment, that by the Maserati and Lamborghini he loved so much to drive, he wasn’t going to like what followed.

Sometimes, he really hated to be right.

“**She must be punished. I have consulted the Fates, and they agree. I am divorcing my betrayer, and dissolve the vows which tied us as equals. All the financials assets, treasures, palaces, and other possessions which belonged to her will be returned to my control**.”

The God of Music and Poetry wished him good luck; with the scrambling having started right as the news of the Queen’s arrest spread over the world, if the ex-husband wanted to seize a lot of things and not fight legal and illegal judiciary battles...well, one would have to be faster than the lightning. But maybe some parts of his divine essence were already at work on every continent?

“**I am not merciless. She will have the opportunity to regain her prerogatives, but not the title of Queen of Gods. My confidence in her is nonexistent, and the divorce procedure is final. The same is true where the marriage of my brother is concerned**.”

Naturally, Demeter beamed and a lot of wines and cereals grew on the miniature lawn in front of her throne. In his humble opinion, the only issue where his aunt was as bad as her brother was when her daughter’s marriage was debated. The two of them only knew how many mountains of bad idea had been agreed upon in the last hours...

“**Hera will have to pass through a series of trials**,” Zeus proclaimed, and Apollo let a cold mask fall upon his features, because there was only one punishment which had been described as such before, and it was him who had been on the receiving end of it. “**And she will do it as a mortal**.”

Artemis threw him a worried look.

For once, he decided to ignore his twin.

This...this was cruelty incarnate. The suffering...there was reason why most of the memories he had of this time were blocked away.

It was cruel.

No, it was more than that...it was counterproductive. How Hera had behaved in Hades’ home...she truly loathed Zeus.

Inflicting upon her trials was going to be seen as more insults when Zeus was free to spit upon more oaths, sworn on the Styx or not.

But Apollo didn’t dare protest...not when half of the Council sounded extremely pleased Zeus was punishing his wife like this.

Idiots. Didn’t they realise that tomorrow, they could be the next to be deprived of their divinity?

More importantly...with usurpers at large, what would happen to a God if one of the usurpers claimed the empty throne when the God or the Goddess was mortal?

“**This Council is adjourned**.”

About half of the Council immediately disappeared when the word ‘adjourned’ was uttered, Poseidon first, but Aphrodite and Hermes were not far behind.

Apollo was about to imitate them when Persephone entered the great chamber where the Olympians formally ruled over the world – minus the Underworld, of course.

Even if Apollo did not love women, he would have recognised the Goddess of Spring as a peerless jewel of the divine. Her hair was a light blonde reminding him of summer wheat, and everything from her deep blue eyes to her feet, including her breasts, her hips, and the other parts of her marvellous body were both innocence and temptation. The tight green dress she wore, the very colour of spring grass, was making her more irresistible than she was.

Persephone was a springtime beauty to die for.

Apollo opened his mouth...and closed immediately as his senses of God informed him there was another odour the daughter of Demeter was shrouded into. She smelled like sex.

And when the former wife of Hades bent the knee in front of her father, the seductive smile she gave him...well, it was not the kind of look fathers should give to their daughters.

Suddenly, why the King of the Gods had been so late for a Council he had asked for was far more understandable...

Apollo closed his eyes, and raced away from Olympus. He really needed to get away from here for several days.

**2 June 2006, New Byzantium, New York, United States of America**

It had been hours since sunset.

It didn’t stop the gigantic party which was ‘totally-not-a-triumph for the Questers’ to continue.

In the last hour, in fact, the fireworks had not merely ‘continued’. They were more and more of them exploding in the skies above the bay of New Byzantium.

Two-thirds of the Hephaestus Barracks’ ammunition stockpiled for the war must have gone into these celebrations...or so Hermes was ready to guess.

He wasn’t an artificer or a weapon-maker, when it came down to it.

One only thing could be said: it would be a party to remember. The Roman side of the camp had been at first far from happy that the war they had spent the last months preparing was cancelled, but the atmosphere of good food, abundant drinks, chariot races, physical contests, and so on...it was contagious, especially when the God overseeing everything was Dionysus himself.

As the God of Thieves and Trade, Hermes could have easily walked amongst the Demigods and the Legacies. His sons and daughters had erected an improvised casino where they tried to fleece a maximum of ‘customers’, and plenty of artefacts and rare items changed hands in the markets of Byzantium-Constantinople in the middle of the not-triumph.

He could have, but he didn’t.

This was the day of the Questers...or rather, the night.

It had been considered poor manners to try to steal the light out of someone’s achievements, especially if the person in question tried to oppose the Quest’s success.

Hermes was enough to admit that while he hadn’t hired assassins or done his best to make sure the group where his son went failed...yes, he hadn’t done anything either to protect them when Zeus did his best to stab them in the back.

No, this was the victory of the Demigods and Demigoddesses of the now infamous ‘Suicide Squad’. He would let them enjoy it...the ruins of the Parthenon knew they would need all the positive emotions of a day like this to find the strength to survive in the coming years.

Perseus Jackson had found a loophole which gave him a year and some days where the Master of Olympus couldn’t touch him.

But Hermes knew the Lord of the Skies and Thunder. This was merely delaying Zeus’ wrath. And-

Suddenly the God of Messengers found himself with one cup of wine in each of his hands, and no idea how they had gotten there.

“**You are far too morose tonight, Hermes**,” Dionysus told him. “**Drink**! **This isn’t every day a Great Quest is completed!**”

Hermes drank of the first cup. The liquid managed the feat of being sweet and powerful at the same time, and it gave some soothing influence to his divine essence, something surprising given that he was sure the wine had no Nectar diluted in it.

“**To be sure**,” the God of Merchants agreed after a few seconds of silence, only troubled by an enormous blue firework exploding in a thousand green explosions. “**I was more worried about the future...the Master Bolt has been returned, but the prophecies are still inactive**.”

He didn’t mention his fears about the twelfth throne. Most of the currently Olympian Councillors had their favourites to replace Hera, and to say there was a majority forming for a single name would a massive lie.

“**Bah, you worry too much**.”

“**You don’t think the presence of Perseus Jackson and Bianca di Angelo is going to lead to war sooner or later**?”

“**Oh no**,” the God of Wine threw grapes to his favourite leopard. Impressively, despite the ‘throws’ being completely random, the feline caught them all in mid-air. “**We are definitely going to have a civil war. And it will be sooner, not later**.”

Hermes blinked...and then grimaced. The God of Madness had a point, damn him.

“**And how is it ‘worrying too much’, pray tell, Dionysus**?”

“**You worry too much, because there’s nothing you can do to stop it anymore**.” A barrel appeared, and several dozens of glasses, cups, and diverse containers were filled with about ten different brands of alcohol, ranging from Russian vodka to American beer. “**Olympus unleashed the son of Poseidon, and now it is time to reap the hurricane. If the Council had kept him at camp and treated him like a prisoner in his father’s barrack...maybe you could have stopped him from wrecking everything. But now it is too late. The Labyrinth and the Underworld are now in the throes of brilliant, changing *madness***.”

Hermes believed him. Prophecy or no prophecy, Dionysus was the Olympian whose power was the most chaotic of the twelve...okay, eleven...and if truly the effects were that far-ranging, then all hope to restore the situation to what it was before the theft of the Symbols of Power and the capture of Hades was gone.

And Hermes had noticed the God of Wine hadn’t supported the decisions of the Council, either when it came to a vote, or in the last sentences.

“**There must be something we can do...if nothing else, to make sure the new generation won’t become a disaster beyond our imagination**.”

“**Your imagination**,” Dionysus mused, before chuckling loudly. “**But no. There is nothing we can do anymore. The dam has broken, the usurpations have succeeded or failed. And since it all began with the son of Poseidon and the daughter of Hades, it will likely end with them**...”

“**What a charming perspective**,” Hermes acidly commented before staring at the empty cups in his hands. “**I am not drunk enough for this age**.”

“**Brother**,” Dionysus purred, “**that’s something I can easily remedy to**!”

**3 June 2006, Hades’ Barrack, New Byzantium**

Bianca di Angelo stared at the object in incomprehension.

“This is a broom.”

“Dread Empress, your analysis skills are truly incomparable on this world.”

Her treacherous little brother giggled, and the daughter of Hades glared at him. Unfortunately, it didn’t prevent him from sticking his tongue out and smirking.

“And what I am supposed to do with this?”

“Well,” the son of Poseidon smiled innocently, which was...a disaster at pretending he was innocent, all right. “The very purpose of a broom is to sweep up dust and a lot of things you don’t want in your new home. Since the Barrack built by the Lord of the Underworld has been empty since the end of the 1940s, I thought this might be useful for your new duties.”

Bianca turned her head for two seconds in the direction of the tall black palace waiting at the end of an alley which...definitely a lot of gardening effort and a lot of renovations. The ‘Barrack’ itself was still a majestic presence which had endured the ravages of time without a scratch, as befitted a building serving as a sort of Demigod embassy, but the rest of the land around it was in a state of abandonment.

“I don’t need a broom. Surely there are servants for that kind of thing. I saw gargoyles and nymphs working upon yours.”

“That’s an excellent point,” Perseus Jackson complimented her before bowing in what could only be a sarcastic manner of discourtesy. “Alas, I am the sole master of the gargoyles. That has to do with enchanting them myself, I believe. As for the nymphs, yes, they are helping Demigods and Demigoddesses of the New Byzantium enclave...for a fee.”

Bianca gritted her teeth. While the fallout of her actions had left her far from ruined, most of the secret accounts the former Dread Empress had prepared in case she was forced to flee the Underworld were not easily accessible from New Byzantium. She would have to go to New York City to access them...or more likely, send a trusted messenger to act in her stead, since leaving the boundaries was tantamount to ask for a murderous lightning bolt in her face.

Normally, even that obstacle shouldn’t be a problem. As a child of Hades, Bianca could travel through shadows, and given her knowledge of spells, cleaning a Barrack could be done magically with her eyes closed.

Except the armbands Hades had placed upon her were making it impossible for her to wield magic.

“And don’t you think...what are you doing?”

The black-haired boy had just unfurled a large picnic wooden table...somehow.

All the while a couple of gargoyles destroyed the ugly small trees and the bad grass which had the temerity to be around, so that this part of the land which was supposed to be both refuge and prison was cleared...at least compared to the rest of the grounds.

“I thought that was evident,” the green eyes shone with mischievousness, “I am going to obey your father’s orders. I am going to play Mythomagic cards with your brother while you restore this Barrack and everything around it to a standard the House of Hades can be proud of.”

“You’re the best, Percy!”

“I know, I know,” Bianca glared, but her young brother ignored her. “Prepare to be humiliated, though. I’ve beaten all the duellists of the Millennium Tournament in the Underworld.”

“Ah, but you have never duelled an opponent like me!” The grin the son of Poseidon showed was predatory in the extreme. “And I have acquired a few Titan-themed cards I am going to love experimenting on this glorious day.”

“It’s time to duel!” Nico exclaimed.

“I am not going to work alone on this...this monumental chore by myself today!” Bianca declared angrily.

“I am afraid you don’t have a choice, your Most Dreadful Majesty,” Perseus Jackson drew out a card from one of his pockets and showed it to Nico. “Circe, one of the Three Immortal Sorceresses.”

“She has only five hundred points of attack,” her little brother said dubitatively.

“But she can transform one of your monsters into a guinea pig with zero points of attack and defence,” his opponent bared his teeth like a shark about to have his first lunch of the day. “Still feeling confident of your victory, oh dark duellist of Hell?”

“I have five *first editions* of the legendary dark spells of Asphodel!”

“Not bad,” conceded the son of Poseidon. “You might be more challenging than-“

“Jackson,” Bianca hissed, “You are going to help me find a solution so that I don’t spend today doing this chore-“

“Only today? My dear, you’re an optimistic at heart. Given how large the avenue is, it will be a miracle if you reach the Barrack today...but don’t let it discourage you! I have brought temporary tents!”

“I am not going to do the work of *peasants*!”

“Peasants have their use...” the Demigod who had been a Tyrant Named in another life clicked his tongue. “Mainly as ritual-fodder, but still. Oh, and to accompany the broom, there’s I believe a rake, a shovel, and pliers amongst all other things.”

This couldn’t be happening. She had been mere steps from ascending and becoming a Goddess.

And now she was...supposed to use vulgar tools to make a place *habitable*?

She was Triumphant, she was-

A gargoyle sent an apple her way, and it took a lifetime of reflexes to avoid it before it hit her in the head.

“I hate you,” the daughter of Hades hissed, before reluctantly walking towards the...messy pile of gardening tools the gargoyles had thrown together.

Her brother and the infuriating spawn of the seas ignored her, as they each praised the merits of their favourite cards.

Bianca swore her vengeance was going to be long, painful, audacious, and above all, a marvel of evil ingenuity. As she approached the shovels and many objects she had done her best to stay away for two lives, the Lightning Thief felt new presences at the edge of her vision.

Three seconds later, there were over a dozen young girls donned in hunting attire lined up before the boundary separating their Barrack from the rest of the New Byzantium.

“We are watching you, *traitor*.” Bianca frowned. This was not the girl who had accompanied the ‘Suicide Squad’ in the depths of the Underworld, but the accent was very similar. Ah. Those were the Huntresses of Artemis...or at least some of them. If the rumours were true, the Goddess of the Hunt had a massive army out there. Giving a lesser form of immortality and eternal youth resulted in the numbers increasing considerably century after century. How...perfectly hypocritical.

“Calm yourself, oh lieutenant of the evil lesbian cult!” This time, the arrival of the Hunt definitely caught Jackson’s attention.

It was like pouring oil and a lot of incendiary ammunition on the flames.

“WE ARE NOT A LESBIAN CULT!”

“I note you aren’t denying the ‘evil’ part...and if you’re not lesbian, what are you doing during those long and cold winter nights?”

“DIE, VILE MAN!”

Predictably, the arrow shot by the silver bow was stopped by the Barrack’s protections, and the Huntress was ejected over twenty metres behind her former location like a doll in the middle of a tornado.

“Phoebe!” another Huntress gasped before throwing her a murderous expression. “If you think-“

“**Silence**,” Bianca hissed, and the girl sworn to the Goddess of the Hunt swallowed the rest of her words.

A second later Bianca felt her eyes widen...and then a grin lit her face.

She couldn’t do magic. Her money was out of her reach.

But the Gods hadn’t taken her away her ability to *Speak*.

And a large number of unbearable girls had just volunteered to be her test subjects.

“**Step forwards**,” the daughter of Hades ordered. Two of Artemis’ servants tried to resist for more than a second, but her will overwhelmed them in less than three heartbeats after that. “**Congratulations. I am in dire need of workers, and you have just volunteered**.”

“Lady Artemis will-“

“**Do not speak without my permission**!” Honestly, why did everyone think he or she had the possibility of refusing to obey her? “**I am your new commander. You are going to obey my orders...and you not inform Olympus of this, or I will make sure you will shiver in fear for the rest of your immortal life**!”

Behind her, the familiar sound of applause was heard.

“Congratulations,” the mad boy snickered. “You *finally* noticed the loophole. Now put them to work, your Most Dreadful Majesty. The Tower was not built in a day...or by us, fortunately.”

What did she do lately to deserve this cruel punishment?

**3 June 2006, somewhere in the depths of the Labyrinth**

Godhood suited her sister.

Pasiphaë had chosen to welcome her in a simple but perfectly tailored white robe, with exquisite golden jewellery to increase her already *divine* beauty.

“Your ascension has immensely benefitted you.” The daughter of Helios began.

“Thank you, sister.” The former Queen of Crete smiled largely. “It was easier than I thought.”

Circe raised an eyebrow.

“The rumours of a band of Demigods storming your fortress and then going away after being suitably bribed had some truths in it?”

“The rumour had a lot of truth in it, yes,” the new Goddess of the Labyrinth confirmed while making them travel at an incredible speed before stopping at an entrance of a eighteenth century-decorated salon. “Even without prophecies, it appears the Fates tried to engineer a plot where I would die or my schemes would fail at the last possible moment. Unfortunately for them, they didn’t take into account the lack of loyalty most of the Questers felt for Olympus.”

“Let thank the Olympians for their inexistent foresight, then,” it had always been impressive how badly the deities of all pantheons treated their children, and then expected them to save the day when they had screwed up by the numbers. “How is it to have the Labyrinth under your control?”

“Fantastic,” Pasiphaë hummed before showing her an expression of bliss she wouldn’t have revealed to more than five other beings in history. “I can see everything. Every corridor, trap, mechanism is mine to mould as I wish. It is mine to command, mine to alter or keep orderly...and with every heartbeat, the Labyrinth expands. And with it, I gain strength.”

“Even with the Lord of the Underworld freed?”

“I am unable to go past a certain depth anymore,” her half-sister admitted. “The only Labyrinth Gate that his liberators used is still there, but it is heavily fortified as we speak. The Rich One is doing his best to deny me expansion in his direction; that much I won’t deny. But what I have taken while he was indisposed is mine, and this is far enough for my ambitions.”

The next emotion on Pasiphaë’s face was more neutral.

“Unfortunately, Hera has utterly failed in provoking the civil war we anticipated. Olympus is aware of what I did, and in position to plan for countermoves.”

“Neither the Master of Olympus nor his sons and daughters can touch you as long as you stay in your domain and master your powers, sister.”

And since Zeus wasn’t the one who had offered Pasiphaë her immortality, he couldn’t exactly strip her of her powers without dragging back her to Olympus and using arcane rituals which would likely take years...and this assumed he had a better claimant to the Labyrinth, something which stretched credibility. Daedalus wasn’t around anymore, and the architects of his level were not exactly crowding the divine seats of power.

“But there are artefacts which can return a Goddess to the state of existence she enjoyed before her ascension.”

Circe tried to think about the unique artefacts and heirlooms which allowed this kind of near-miraculous event. It wasn’t a long list. And the closest from her home was-

“The Golden Fleece. Are you certain?”

“My spies are excellent,” the Goddess of the Labyrinth smirked, “or it is the Olympian counterintelligence which is incredibly bad, I guess. But yes, I am certain the great and mighty ‘Master of Olympus’ is contemplating sending Demigods after the Golden Fleece. And I must say, it isn’t exactly idiotic from his perspective.”

“It is incredibly risky,” the Immortal Sorceress commented in amusement. If she was a mortal girl, Circe would definitely not enjoy the odds stacked against her. “The path to it has devoured thousands of Demigods this century alone.”

“Yes. But think about it from the God of Lightning and Infidelity’s perspective.”

“I suppose...” Circe rolled her eyes, before wincing. “Ah, yes, I see your point. The Golden Fleece could, in theory, return the daughter he turned into a pine tree. But he has other sons and daughters. The older is a son he sired as Jupiter, isn’t he?”

“He is. But he won’t reach sixteen before the son of Poseidon and the daughter of Hades.”

“His obsession for prophecies is remarkable and will kill him sooner or later.”

“Absolutely.”

Circe calculated many possible scenarios in her head. In many things, it was like creating a new spell. You had to anticipate your enemies’ intentions...and then strike hard and ruthlessly.

“You want Medea and myself to continue cooperating with the Triumvirate.”

It hadn’t been the disaster she had thought it would be, mainly because the ‘God-Emperors’ were wise enough to only send their ‘God-Empresses’ to her island. Still, Circe had not been so happy to extend the duration of their ‘alliance’.

“Our interests align with them in this regard.”

For the first time of this reunion with her sister, Circe was surprised.

“How so? So far, the six of them have each made a claim to an Olympian’s throne, and I will grant you they aren’t a hindrance to our own ambitions. Yet they are very, very far from being able to successfully usurp a God or a Goddess, despite all the help Medea has given them. And...I certainly don’t need their help to sink the ships Olympus will send to do their dirty work.”

“Oh, I know you won’t.” Pasiphaë gave her a smile of reassurance. “But you misunderstand my goal when it comes to countering the Olympians’ plan.”

“I thought it was to defeat the adventurers, be they Questers or Legionnaires, who would be sent to recover the Golden Fleece.”

“It is...with an amendment. I don’t want this expedition defeated, sister. I want it obliterated. I want it crushed so decisively that it will be obviously to the imbeciles of Olympus their precious sons and daughters had no chance of success.”

“Well, I can certainly do that...and with the Triumvirate support, we certainly have the assets in the theatre to achieve the result you want.” Circe shrugged. “But I will warn you it is unlikely to discourage the Olympians, especially if you have correctly assessed how much the Golden Fleece means for the King of the Gods. A second expedition will be sent as soon as it is obvious the first one failed. Maybe a third.”

If the stakes were sufficient, Zeus and his sons were all too ready to escalate and lose some Demigods.

“Yes. But if the first defeat is total, they will turn to a force which has proven it can accomplish the impossible. One they won’t send first, for they can’t rely upon their loyalty.”

Circe immediately understood who her sister was referring to.

“It is a very risky move. I have watched the videos of Caligula’s chariot races. The self-proclaimed Neo Helios could have easily been killed. I don’t believe for a second Perseus Jackson hadn’t a plan to kill the two members of the Triumvirate who were present if he had no alternative. The same is true when it came for your ascension, sister.”

“It represents danger. But...the world is changing, sister. And we can’t afford playing the game like wanted to. The chaos is spreading, and if you are denied your chances of being elevated, I fear the opportunity will never come again.”

The Immortal Sorceress grimaced internally. Pasiphaë made a very good point...and if anything she was understating how tumultuous the years to come would be.

“Give me the details of your new plan, sister.”

**4 June 2006, Poseidon’s Barrack, New Byzantium**

Ethan didn’t know what the fortified room inside the Poseidon’s Barrack had been used for before Perseus’ arrival, but what was certain was that it was now a very respectable vault where bipedal miniature dragons and the now-familiar gargoyles were dividing the spoils of the Great Quest into twelve shares.

Why twelve? Well, apparently they owed the Lightning Thief for her help in defeating Persephone, and making the existence of the Quest possible in the first place. Thus the children of Hades would receive one share.

By the son of Poseidon’s tortuous logic, it somehow made sense.

“Of course, it is going to take a few days to make sure everyone has the correct sum he or she deserves,” their leader grinned. “And if lesser Gods continue to send us bag of Drachmas, it might take a bit longer.”

“Why are they gifting us so many things?” Luke asked, examining a series of silvery rings which had been sent by Eris, Goddess of Discord. “Not that I’m objecting, you know, but we had no contract with most of them.”

“I’m sure some of them are rewarding us for pissing off Zeus,” Perseus plunged his hands into a little mountain of gold and bronze coins with a satisfied expression on his face. “I think one in three deities which are now eager supporters of our cause are raising toasts with our names on their lips because the Master of Olympus don’t like us, but has no choice tolerating our presence now that we have completed his Great Quest. We receive bonus points because we revealed his monstrous hypocrisy while surviving the trials of the Labyrinth and the Underworld.”

“Only one in three?” Annabeth raised her eyebrows in mild disbelief.

“Oh yes,” Perseus clapped his hands with a maniacal grin, “the rest are rewarding us because we were involved in Hera’s fall.”

“She was that unpopular?” Miranda asked. “I mean, she wasn’t my favourite Olympian, but it’s truly the same on Olympus?”

“My dear daughter of Demeter,” the green-eyed son of the Earthshaker began in an ironic tone. “I’m rather sure you have seen how many Demigods and Demigoddesses are here.”

“It’s rather difficult to miss the Questers and the Legionnaires,” the girl who had now her hands and arms covered in bronze metal replied rolling her eyes.

“Then tell me, what are we?”

“Err...Demigods? Demigoddesses?”

“No,” Perseus said in a tone formidably sarcastic. “We are bastards. While the God of the Sun and the Goddess of Vengeance are two examples of Gods who aren’t married, siring a child with a mortal woman or man is generally acknowledged as a birth out of wedlock. How do you think all the carnal adventures of our respective parents were considered by the Goddess of Marriage?”

Ethan grimaced...in fact, pretty much everyone grimaced.

The question was very rhetorical. Hera must have made the lives of the Gods and Goddesses hell...when she wasn’t sending monsters to kill the Demigods and the Demigoddesses, that was.

“Thank the Gods this bitch isn’t our problem anymore.” Clarisse said bluntly, before staring in Jackson’s eyes with a bit less certainty in her body. “She isn’t, right?”

“For all I know, the ex-Queen is punished by her royal husband as we speak.” Perseus Jackson shrugged. “Since there is nothing to restrain a deity of her power anywhere near New Byzantium, I don’t think they will send her to us. What would be the point?”

The son of Nemesis had to agree with the son of Poseidon on that point. There were Gods frequently visiting New Byzantium – or the Legionnaire side, New Constantinople – and it was obvious to all that there was nothing preventing a deity from fleeing the boundaries of the city if he or she so desired. What could Demigods do? As Persephone had proved, without a symbol of power of the Big Three, the ‘heroes’ of a Great Quest were going to be incinerated within a second, no matter how weak the God or the Goddess they fought.

“That’s all interesting stuff,” the son of Hermes said, “but now I believe we are owed some explanations!”

“Of course!” Perseus beamed with a frightening grin. “In a country a lifetime ago, lived a beautiful prince. His hair was so perfect it was often compared to gold. His eyes were those of a falcon, and seduced countless damsels in distress. The Prince was perfect in everything he devoted his attention to. He was gifted in no less than five languages. He was an avid student of history, mathematics, music, and trade. Though he was talented with the spear and the sword, this paragon of perfection managed to seduce many diplomats and ambassadors, for he talked of peace, while the previous Kings had been warmongers. The little people adored him, and they loved seeing him parading in the villages and the hamlets, as he returned from one hunt or another. Werewolves and all sort of monsters were unable to scratch his armour, and the days of war and disorder faded from memory. The Prince grew into adulthood, and a new age of justice and self-righteous goodness was upon the Free City of Helike.”

The son of Poseidon threw a Drachma in the air, and when he caught him, the face which was presented to them bore a sword.

“And what happened to this...paragon of knighthood once he ascended to the throne?” Miranda asked as she struggled not to giggle after the lyrical proclamation of Perseus.

“I don’t know,” the mad boy grinned, “His evil uncle usurped the throne before he could reign. The Prince became the Exiled Prince of the stories, and though he managed to rally some supporters around his banner, he was in need of funds. He went to a northern realm ruled by hero-killers and a crossbow went through his throat, bringing an end to his story of trying to reconquer the realm he had lost.”

Ethan, unfortunately, had an idea where it was going. So did Bianca di Angelo, apparently.

“I suppose,” the Lightning Thief said in a bored voice, “that you were the evil uncle?”

“Guilty as charged.” The madman grinned.

**4 June 2006, the Tartarus Temple, edge of the Pit of Tartarus, the Underworld (de jure)**

With the reconstruction of the damaged parts of his realm underway – along with the modifications of several others, he had the funds to spare – Hades had several hours of free time while tens of millions of his subjects worked upon his grand projects.

Knowing the matter could not be delayed any longer, the Greek-Roman God of the Afterlife closed his eyes and travelled to a location he had grown to thoroughly despise.

In a fraction of a second, he was walking through the ruins of the Tartarus Temple.

Yes, his daughter had tried her best to restore it. Alas, Hera had refused to go down without a fight, and the collateral damage had been...significant.

It was a pity. The new temple had seemed really impressive.

But Hades couldn’t say he was surprised.

Five times in the long history of the Underworld, a temple had been raised here. Every time someone had done so – and only in one of those five instances it had been him hiring the architects and the workers – the temple was destroyed within days of the inauguration.

Millennia ago, he had thought it was the Fates playing their games...but given how the recent events unfolded...unpleasant assumptions could be made.

Now he wondered which of the Primordials had been manipulating the strings behind the scene.

The Lord of Hell murmured an incantation in Ancient Greek, and one by one broken columns and ruined magical traps were disintegrated, reduced to dust, and then thrown banished across the Underworld.

It was improbable the ritual site would be used against him ever again, but Hades had not survived millennia by trusting his luck...unlike his younger brothers and sisters.

His powers were not the fastest where it came to destruction, but he was very thorough. Soon there was nothing but bare rock...and the sarcophagus.

The damned sarcophagus.

Hades knew his daughter was a reincarnated soul and had received the help of many people to gain access to the resources she needed, but despite everything, the Master of the Underworld still had difficulties believing a Demigoddess, even a child of his, could gather a sufficient quantity of Orichalcum.

It was the most strategic enchanted metal to exist, and his brothers and himself had gone to extreme lengths to make sure no enemy of Olympus would have the knowledge, the power, and the connections to have more than a few grams of it.

And then there was the Sarcophagus itself. To forge Orichalcum in so little time was absolutely unprecedented. There was no known manual, and the larger the quantity of Orichalcum, the larger the risks to be severely injured...and this was generally something which applied to Gods. The risk to mortals...

Hades grimaced. In a way, he was proud of his daughter. All his children were gifted in many fields; it could be academically, magically, or some other way. But Bianca was in a class of her own.

And as he stopped near the sarcophagus and a ghostly pain echoed in arms, the pride didn’t decrease.

But with these feelings also came sorrow.

“**Where did it go so wrong, Maria**?”

But his dead lover didn’t answer. She had chosen to go back to the world of living decades ago. For all the respect and the tenderness he gave the women he loved, the legendary jealously of Persephone was too much for the overwhelming majority.

And when even the Elysian Fields weren’t a refuge from the mockeries and the whispers...there weren’t many other options left.

Hades sighed. Aeons lost playing the same game over and over, and in the end nothing had changed, because the Fates and his own bitterness made sure nothing changed.

Until a few days ago.

The dark-haired God conjured the fires which came with his realm, and a pyre was lit.

It was an indirect attack, of course. Given what the purpose of the Sarcophagus had been, Hades was not stupidly going to injure himself more than he already had been.

It was not fast. But slow and steady were going to be sufficient, and he was in no hurry.

Several hours later, the Sarcophagus had been transformed into a series of Orichalcum bullion, to which could be added a lot of rare metals and gemstones.

It was then he noticed her. Or rather, it was then she allowed him to notice her presence.

For all that he was Master of the Underworld, Hades was under no delusion who was the most powerful deity when she was compared to him.

“**Lady** **Nyx**,” he bowed respectfully.

The Primordial Goddess of the Night had come in a sumptuous dress which changed in shades so dark it was difficult even for him to perceive if they were dark blue, dark violet, or simply black. The jewels she wore were amethysts, and they provide some illumination, just as her hair was the very colour of night itself. Moon ornaments shone in gold and one of her arms was armoured in Orichalcum. She was regal.

It was a good thing, because it meant she was in a very good mood today.

Hades had enough experience with her in a bad mood to swear on the Styx that no one, not even the most insane deities, wanted to deal with an angry Nyx.

“**Marrying the Goddess of Spring was your biggest mistake, Hades. I am pleased to see you have at last decided to correct it**.”

“**I still love her**.”

Nyx laughed.

“**It is your Fatal Flaw to trust the members of your family that you admire the most, child**.” The Primordial deity enounced like it was evidence itself. And maybe it was. “**A pity they are so unworthy of your loyalty**.”

“**Our marriage lasted millennia**.”

“**Yes. But if she had been truly the Queen you wanted her to be, abandoning her title would not have been possible**.”

“**Demeter enforced the six months in the world above really**-“

“**Hades**.” Nyx chided him. “**Persephone could have challenged her mother. And her power as the Spring Goddess should have failed after centuries of sharing your bed. If she really wanted to embrace the role of the Underworld Queen, Persephone had to let her former domain go. It wasn’t like there was a shortage of candidates to take her place**.”

Unfortunately, Nyx was right. And it wasn’t like his thoughts hadn’t danced around this forbidden idea several times in the last days.

“**What do you want, Lady Nyx**?” And he hoped his voice wasn’t betraying too much the regret of his errors.

“**I want to see what will emerge of the devastation you Olympians called a peace**.” The appearance of the pale-skinned, night-haired woman began to fade, and Night engulfed everything. “**Do not disappoint me, child**.”

**5 June 2006, a section of the Labyrinth under Bangkok**

Neo Helios had never had many doubts that his Caesarea and himself had done the right thing by allying himself with the trio of Immortal Sorceresses. It was, as the saying went, a mutual win-win for each side. Pasiphaë and her half-sisters provided priceless magical assistance and a method of travel the Olympians couldn’t intercept without scorching the land and causing catastrophic damage even the Mist had trouble explaining in a ridiculous manner to the mortals. The Triumvirate had connections and the military muscle to acquire the magical ingredients and resources the sorceresses had great need of in order to maintain their current level of magical potential, including but not limited to the formation of young witches and other Mist-manipulators.

This was what the pact had intended at its very beginning. In practise, it had grown further than that in the last years.

The Labyrinth entrance he had arrived to was a particularly nice example of the benefits this alliance had brought. Where bland walls and the occasional monster had provided the decoration before, there was now a bustling market where Legionnaires, mortals, and lesser sorceresses mingled together.

There was so much noise that the arrival of his escort – twenty Legionnaires in perfect formation – was barely acknowledged. Any other time, the ascending God-Emperor of the Sun would be offended, but since he had deliberately today donned a Centurion’s armour of the Legio Primigenia to stay anonymous, the agitation of the market served his purpose.

Gaius Julius Caesar left the black-armoured Legionnaires sworn to him behind, and disappeared into the miniature chaos of the market. His walk was apparently random...but it wasn’t. A minute later, a Centurion serving his fellow Triumvir saluted him. Neo Helios approved. The red armour was superb, and the white cloak carried with it both the message of Roman splendour and the fact the Legions were not yet at war...but it would come. Oh yes, it would come.

A secret passage was revealed as the Legionnaire pronounced a long password, and the first male member of the Triumvirate was introduced in the presence of the second.

“Magister Equitum,” Gaius saluted him. As far as titles went, the older divine claimant had insisted to be addressed by his co-conspirators by his favourite title. Neo Helios had no objection. That’s why he insisted for another of his favourite titles too.

“Princeps.”

The only table of the room was covered in maps. The Master of the Legio XV Primigenia didn’t manifest a single sign of surprise, internally or externally.

“I bring good news. Circe has agreed to coordinate her forces with yours.”

“Excellent!” The fist of the Triumvir struck the table. Fortunately, this was enchanted wood. Even a future God-Emperor had trouble doing lasting damage to an object so resistant. “We are beginning to have the assets to mount a proper trap for the Olympians’ dogs!”

The blue eyes stared him with some of the warrior cunning which had made him one of the most famous Legion commanders in history.

“This will go a long way, I think, repairing the loss of initiative we suffered after Perseus Jackson ransacked your Circus Maximus.”

“He didn’t ransack it, thank you very much. He provoked a large-scale orgy and stormed out with half of the gold the participants gambled on the chariot races.”

“That’s why I described it as ransacking, Gaius.”

Neo Helios tried to find his patience where it had fled to before answering again. It would be poor form to engage into a fist fight with his ally...not to mention it might not end in his victory, given that the Magister Equitum had a far martial power inside his body.

“The affair has not been a complete loss. Julia has been able to touch Zoë Nightshade in the end. It seems Perseus Jackson, for all his...recklessness, is not a friend of Olympus, or at least not of the Goddess of the Hunt. The former Hesperides is now struggling between two allegiances.”

The expression of the other Roman was sceptical in return.

“Don’t tell me the former Hesperides is teleported by your sister’s side every twelve hours, I won’t believe it.”

“You’re right,” the claimant to the throne of Apollo cleared his throat theatrically, “as long as the unworthy God of the Sun is visible on Olympus, the daughter of Atlas is a loyal...how did you say it? Ah yes, she is a loyal bitch of Artemis. But after dusk, it’s another story. According to our spies, whatever hunting garb her mistress gives her during the day, the moment the sun gives up and the moon reigns supreme, the ‘girl scout’ theme is replaced by the silver armour of the Guard of Neo Selene. And we have confirmation several recruits of the man-haters have been experiencing the same thing. Our agents inside Olympus confirm the Eternal Virgin is keeping them in a magical sleep so that they avoid doing regrettable things...like questioning her rule, wondering why a life deprived of love is such a good thing, and many other topics they wouldn’t have dared speaking of before.”

“That’s...” the Second Triumvir was visibly caught aback. “That’s really promising. It’s far better than we thought your sister would be able to influence the man-hater girls.”

“The claim of Neo Selene has a lot of power to gain before being able to battle the Eternal Virgin, but it is a claim the Olympians have now to take seriously.”

The Magister Equitum nodded before returning to the study of the map he had placed above others before Neo Helios’ arrival.

“I see you have made good use of the information we sent your way.”

“I did,” the other Triumvir acknowledged, “and before you ask the question, yes, I am confident we can ambush the Demigods which will be sent eventually in the Zone Mortalis. The problem is that while I can sail tomorrow, we have no idea when the God of Thunder will order a Quest or a Legion deployment to bring him back the Golden Fleece. It could be tomorrow. It could be in one year.”

“The idiot who proclaims himself King of the Gods want to avoid the son of the Seas and the daughter of Hell reaching sixteen and becoming the Chosen of the Great Prophecy,” he replied neutrally, having thought lengthily over the subject while the influence of the Goddess of the Labyrinth helped him travel to the Labyrinth market-entrance. “So he doesn’t have more than four years to ensure the conditions are modified as per his desires.”

“That still leaves a lot of time. Zones Mortalis aren’t called by that name because they are filled with weak monsters and lesser opponents. The longer we will stay here, the bigger the butcher will be. That’s why my Caesarea thinks the plan need a wonderful addition.”

Gaius Julius Caesar had always been very disdainful while he was mortal of the gifts of his fellow Triumvir, but he had to admit that the love which shone in his eyes when he said ‘my Caesarea’ was a source of inspiration. The Magister Equitum was genuinely in love, and his wife clearly returned him this affection ten-fold. This was something worthy of recommendation, whatever his multiple flaws.

“We need bait. We need to make sure the Olympians will panic the moment they hear the news of our latest victory.”

“I don’t disagree,” the God-Emperor who had once been nicknamed Caligula said drily, “but where we will find this bait?”

“Here,” the Roman finger fell upon a large island of the map...one which was alas familiar to him, which was a bad sign by itself; the Zone Mortalis was an archipelago of a thousand deadly islands, for it to be recognisable meant it was a suicidal task for mortals to venture there.

“That’s the Island-Forge of the Zone Mortalis,” Neo Helios spoke calmly, “I don’t think the combination of your Legion and your fleet can make a dent in the outer defences. And even if they could...by the hypocritical cuckoldry of the King of the Gods, the God of Fire and the Forges would react rather forcefully to the invasion of one of his primary weapon-production factory. And while I won’t deny the idea of taking out a God is attractive, we don’t have the military strength to fight a member of the Olympian Council conventionally. Not right now.”

There had been extraordinary news that Perseus Jackson and his band of crazy Demigods had somehow managed to vanquish Persephone before revealing Hera’s treachery. But Neo Helios was not stupid: he had underestimated the son of the Sea. And Persephone was not powerful enough to be considered a major deity in her own right. Maybe if she had abandoned the domain of Spring and truly embraced Hell...but the reports of their spies on Olympus were extremely confident it was the contrary which had happened now that the ‘Great Quest’ of the ‘Suicide Squad’ was officially completed.

“You’re right.” The Magister Equitum smiled roguishly. “But what if we opposed him a power which is the antithesis of his? A divine power which is the antithesis of the fire powering the advanced forges which are his pride and joy?”

Gaius Julius Caesar grew thoughtful.

“That could work,” the no-true-mortal being who had absorbed much of the essence of the dead Helios admitted. “But where do you intend to find a Sea God or Goddess who is willing to fight an Olympian without care for the political fallout?”

“I do not intend to negotiate the services of a God, Princeps.”

**6 June 2006, the Coral Palace, somewhere in the depths of the Pacific Ocean**

The Latin name of the species her spymaster was hailing from was *Lagenorhynchus obscurus*, but most of the Gods and other intelligent persons who lived above and below the water used the simpler name of dusky dolphin.

And like every good spymaster, Isthmus believed that if you weren’t enough paranoid, you had no place being in the silent war every spymaster of the Gods and the Titans had been waging in the shadows for millennia.

His first reaction was thus eminently predictable for any who knew about Isthmus’ behaviour.

“Those usurpers will betray us, mistress.”

The personification of the sea chuckled.

“I believe it is more accurate to call them pretenders, Isthmus.”

“It is true their usurpations have been limited to the looting of the faded Titans’ graves, mistress.” The white-bellied dolphin grumbled. “I don’t like their methods, and I don’t like them.”

“They are rude and disrespectful of our most ancient traditions,” the Titaness acknowledged. “But what do you think about their plan by itself?”

The dusky dolphin hesitated, before looking at a map of the Zone Mortalis. It was a three-dimensional creation which made the one owned by the Triumvirate look like a child’s effort. Not only did it showed in real time the presence of the largest sea monsters residing there, but it gave the inhabitants of the Coral Palace a perfect knowledge of the reefs, the currents, and the military orders of battle gathered on each island by the Olympians and the various inimical parties of this world.

“Their plan is a bit too complicated, and I don’t like their concept of dividing their forces that much. But it could work. Of course, you would have to do most of the work by yourself, mistress.”

“That goes without saying,” the green-haired female immortal being smiled. “And since it my work which is going to attract most of the attention, they hope the retribution of Olympus will be sent our way.”

“In my humble opinion,” Isthmus grumbled, “they are far too optimistic. The Sea of Monsters is not the Labyrinth. The owner of the Master Bolt can’t pulverise easily one or two islands there, but the Gods can and will intervene if the stakes are too high. And then there is the fact the very circumstances which allowed the Olympian Council to be unaware Hades was prisoner of his own daughter won’t be repeated here. Our chief agent on Olympus is extremely confident about that.”

“And our agent is rarely wrong.”

Isthmus didn’t answer.

Thethys, Titaness of the Seas, wife of Oceanus, and Queen of the Coral Palace, swam away from her throne.

“I have made my decision, Isthmus. We are going to ally temporarily with the Triumvirate.”

“Your desires are my will, mistress!” the spymaster squeaked and saluted. “May I ask why? We don’t care about whoever sits on the Thrones of Mount Olympus, after all...not when half of them are so stupid they can’t swim straight to save their lives.”

“You are completely right. I don’t care about them.” The Sea Titaness smiled. “But I am very much interested in the Demigods responsible for most of the chaos Olympus has suffered from recently.”

“Perseus Jackson and Bianca di Angelo...” the black-backed dolphin began.

“Yes. Do you think they should be allowed to claim a domain among our ranks?”

“No. They are too young. They are powerful enough to deserve such an exalted position, mistress...but they are too...too...too instable and crazy. And both have a grudge against the Master of Olympus.”

“That last point speak rather well of them, Isthmus.”

“Yes, mistress.”

Thethys shifted to one of her favourite mermaid appearances, and began to swim away from her throne room.

“Anyway the plan of the Triumvirate will allow me to observe both pretenders and the new generation of Demigods. And we will be able to attune our strategy according to the outcome.”

If Perseus Jackson had even half of the arrogance of Zeus, she would eliminate him. The current generation of Olympians was so lamentable that having replacements as bad was something that must be strangled before ascension.

And if he wasn’t...she would need to devise a plan to control this young son of Poseidon.

“Gather my armies.” Her voice echoed across her domains. “A few Gods are in dire need of a lesson of humility.”

**6 June 2006, somewhere in the depths of the Mediterranean Sea**

It had been a long time since he fully materialised in this part of the eastern Mediterranean.

Poseidon could say it was because he had too many responsibilities...but it would be a lie.

What couldn’t be denied was that the sea was incredibly different out there. The Earthshaker didn’t like that, but recognised it was likely unavoidable. All seas and oceans were under his rule, but the palaces and sub-domains of the different water deities had autonomy, and if the ties between Atlantis and a lesser throne were weakened enough, his control decreased and his influence decreased until it was nothing but a weak whisper.

The monsters weren’t a problem for a God of his strength. The moment they felt him coming, the part-fish creatures fled as fast as their tails allowed them to. And the creatures which had never been answering to his commands raced away even faster.

Poseidon continued to swim tranquilly, wincing at the complete absence of any trace of civilisation. The sea remained beautiful there, and the Olympian could feel the power of the domain washing over him, a loud song demanding him to admire the beauty of its inhabitants and everything he watched.

But of great sea cities, the Lord of Horses and Dolphins saw nothing, not even ruins. This saddened him. Long ago, this part of the Mediterranean had been one of the most prosperous provinces answering to his rule, not only for the crustacean delicacies it offered, but also famous objects and magical creations. And judging by the current situation, it was far too late to reverse the decline.

It was-

Poseidon summoned his Trident. He wasn’t swimming at subsonic speeds – this would be a massive insult – and there was no mistaking when he was about to be intercepted before reaching his destination.

Two seconds later, an enormous shape indeed blocked the way.

It appeared as an enormous blue whale, but Poseidon recognised the green-blue divine aura shrouding it.

This was...not a conversation he had come forwards to.

“**What a surprise, my father remembers my existence at last**!”

“**Daughter...you look...in good health**.”

“**And no thanks to you**,” Rhode, Goddess of Rhodes and often nicknamed the ‘Light of the Sea’, retorted with a voice which had convinced thousands of sailors to throw themselves in the waves in the vain hope they could charm her. “**You are not welcome here. Say what you want to say, and leave**.”

The God of Oceans and Seas frowned.

“**Careful, daughter**. **I can tolerate that you are displeased with me, but I remain the Master of Atlantis and all domains which live under the waves. Unless you wish to challenge me**?”

“**No**,” the Goddess in whale form answered quickly. “**Though Kymopoleia might, she is even angrier at you than I am**.”

He had expected her to say more...but as the silence resumed, it was clear that his daughter didn’t make it an easy task.

Poseidon huffed. It was not the first time he wished his daughters had not inherited his stubbornness, his temper, and his tendency to hold grudges, and it wouldn’t be the last.

“**Very well. There have been worrying developments recently. Roman usurpers have been using fragments of your dead husband’s essence in order to attempt an usurpation of the Throne of the Sun**.”

To his surprise, the whale barely reacted.

“**This was known to me, father. I am far from Atlantis’ court, but there are people who still desire my favour...and failing that, I still receive the maritime bubble-news and the divine newspapers**.”

“**And you are fine with this state of affairs**?”

“**Helios is dead**,” and for all the beauty of his daughter’s voice, Poseidon heard the immense pain behind it, “**Olympus and yourself have made sure of it. You placed this...the useless golden boy on his Throne, despite him having not the seriousness, the honour, the qualifications, or really anything to handle the domain. The mortals complain about global warming and some other nonsense, but I know better**. **So no, I am not fine with this state of affairs. But the next ruler can hardly be worse than the current Warden of the Sun**.”

“**This is a very cynical view. You have changed, daughter**.”

Rhode had been one of the more idealistic Goddesses he’d ever known...and Poseidon wasn’t including just his daughters and those of his allies.

“**I lost my husband, the arrogant tyrant you call a ‘brother’ made sure most of my allies and servants were killed or exiled, and your precious Council went so far west that the Mediterranean is a third-rate backwater those days. It would be more surprising if I had not changed, *father***.”

The Earthshaker silently conceded the point.

“**Now if this was just to deliver the news in the hope I would storm off my domain and try to kill a bunch of Romans in vengeance, sorry to disappoint you, father. It won’t happen. Now, you know the direction of Atlantis**-“

“**You have a young brother**.”

“**Half-brother**,” Rhode corrected. “**I heard. He made such a ruckus in the Underworld most of the gambling establishments of my domain are betting on what he will do next. I like his style. But I suppose mother wasn’t exactly happy about his existence. Unsurprised and unhappy...how long were you unable to sleep in the marital bed this time**?”

“**Several years**,” Poseidon was forced to admit. “**I want you to meet him**.”

“**Why? You want us to bond over the reality you are a terrible father**?”

“**I want you to train his hydrokinesis powers. It is a boon he has asked for after recovering the Trident**.”

And in the God of the Sea’s opinion, he truly needed it. It was really...disturbing to see how much his son used other disciplines without giving his sea inheritance the importance it deserved.

“**Why don’t you do it yourself? A boon is supposed to be repaid by the deity in debt, no? Or better, why not ask Triton**?”

“**I can’t train him because if I do, my paranoiac brother is going to erupt like Mount Vesuvius when it destroyed Pompeii**.” And obviously, by mentioning a brother, he didn’t mean Hades. “**As for Triton, he refused**.”

“**Well, he’s always afraid each new Demigod you sire could be his replacement**.”

“**Perseus swore on the Styx to your mother that he would never usurp me**.”

For the first time, the Goddess in her form of whale looked truly confused.

“**Ah. Oh, I suppose my brother has his reasons**.” And it went without saying his daughter was very pleased by the fact tensions existed between Triton and himself. “**I suppose I could train him...his rampages are a bit like yours, father. Of course, it was when you tolerated no insult from the thunderous tyrant. When you had the genitalia and the courage to go with your power**...”

Sometimes, the Lord of Oceans wondered if there was a reliable book somewhere which explained how to be a good father. Maybe not, such a book would have already been printed a million times by now...

“**Name your price, daughter**,” the King of Atlantis was hardly Hermes, but he recognised a negotiation tactic when one of his children tried one against him.

“**You are really fond of him**,” the whale exploded in blue light, and an instant later, a young blonde-haired young woman had replaced the noble divine form of the blue whale. “**Interesting. The price will be steep, then**.”

Poseidon groaned. Please someone save him from his wife and his children’s ideas of luxury and splendour...

**7 June 2006, New Byzantium, New York, United States of America**

It was a very normal day in New Byzantium.

The sky was a perfect blue. The warmth of the sun promised a day which would be perfectly adequate for sunbathing and plenty of outdoor activities.

The kids of Hephaestus, with the threat of war averted, had resumed their activities of creating impossibly complicated automatons and clockwork-alike mechanisms.

His pranksters of brothers had another ‘clever’ idea this morning: they had taken a glass orb, painted it silver, and wrote on it ‘for the best archer’ before throwing it through a window of the Barrack of Artemis.

Luke Castellan wished he could tell it was a one-time occurrence and the result of the dislike most male Demigods felt for the Huntresses, but it would be a God-sized lie.

They had already done the same thing to the Aphrodite Barrack a week ago. The major differences had been that the orb was painted pink, and the words ‘for the hottest’ had been written upon it.

It certainly wasn’t because the ‘evil lesbian cult’ – Jackson’s words, not his – had reacted very differently than the children of the Goddess of Love.

Sure, they weren’t bottles of perfume, mannequin clothes, and pairs of ridiculous shoes flying. No, instead there were various furs, camping material, and hundreds of arrows.

It would be a minor miracle if no one was killed by the sum of projectiles...and the son of Hermes could only thank whoever had made the rules of New Byzantium frowned heavily on murder.

Otherwise he felt his half-brothers Connor and Travis would be slaughtered by a horde of enraged Demigoddesses and Huntresses.

But apart from that, it was a normal day in the life of a Demigod.

Annabeth and Perseus Jackson were debating about the merits of democracy...okay, that was not normal.

“My dear daughter of Athena, as said a brilliant philosopher of Greece many centuries ago, if you are ruled by the wealthy, your political system is an oligarchy.”

“We are a federal republic, seaweed brain! Presidents are elected every four years! This is democracy!”

“No,” the son of Poseidon grinned. “A true democracy is, and I’m using your country’s own definition there, the rule of a nation by the people for the people.”

“You’re mangling the principles of the Founders, but yes.”

“Glad you agree, great Well of Wisdom,” the infuriating leader of the Suicide Squad began before smirking again, “but in this case, why are the citizens not chosen by random ballot drawing?”

“Err,” whatever the blonde-haired daughter had expected to hear, it was clearly not that, “because it would be completely stupid. Not everyone has the skills to rule a country. Many would not have the will either. All in all, a lot of people would be absolutely horrible trying to do the job of politicians. It would be...”

The words failed Annabeth, but the other Demigod had a sincere smile of satisfaction on his face.

“It would be indeed the rule of the mob.” Perseus Jackson agreed while grabbing a sandwich a gargoyle had brought him. “And in the end, it would just be another form of tyranny. People would bleed on the altars of war and politics, the only difference would be that the knives would belong to the mob, and fall indiscriminately on anyone trying to raise his head above the mud of the pits.”

Luke cleared his throat.

“You sound like you speak of experience, Jackson.”

The green-eyed Demigod stopped the sandwich mere centimetres away from his teeth.

“In the eternal words of my mad friend: we are free, or none of us are free. You of the people, suffer no compromise in this.”

Luke shivered, and he was sure two or three children of Athena who had been listening to the ‘debate’ were alarmed to.

The rule of the mob, Jackson had called it.

“Of course, he would have added ‘Glory to Bellerophon, Eternally Free Jewel of the Free Cities and some other nonsense’.” The son Poseidon had sired added with honest fondness. “The great thing with republics is how efficient their brainwashing...I mean their education system is.”

Annabeth didn’t look pleased, and opened her mouth to give her repartee...and dark clouds materialised above the camp in mere seconds.

“What the hell is happening?”

In mere seconds, the blue sky became a memory of the sky. Ten seconds later, it was seemingly impossible they had been enjoying good weather today; the light of the day vanished, and the dark storm brewing was rivalling by its obscurity several dark places they had encountered in the Underworld.

“At least one God is very angry,” the son of the Earthshaker commented giving back his sandwich to the gargoyle, “and I don’t have the first idea what provoked it.”

For once, the best swordsman of the Hermes Barrack believed him. If the mad Quester had been preparing something explosive, Perseus Jackson wouldn’t have waited in the middle of the camp; he should have been running towards the sea in the hope Poseidon would protect him from Zeus’ wrath.

“Someone stole the Master Bolt again?” Connor proposed, prompting a snort from Perseus.

“Come on, I have to admit the Master of Olympus is not my favourite God, but no one is that incompetent.”

The visibility continued to fall; and despite the mid-morning hour, the assembled Demigods were soon trying to observe their surroundings in the penumbra provoked by this divine-created weather. Lightning fell and thundered in the distance.

There was a sort of shrieking.

And then there was an immense streak of red light.

“This is a meteor!” Travis shouted! “A meteor is going to hit the camp!”

“No,” the son of Poseidon managed to make himself heard as the Barracks spiralled into panic and chaos. “I don’t think this is a meteor at all...”

Since only Annabeth turned towards him, Luke supposed she had heard him too.

“And what it is, in your opinion?”

“Your world has interesting mythology, did you know?” the Demigod who had triumphed over Persephone said whimsically. “What happens when the angels are rejected by God?”

The fall of the ‘meteor’ was incredibly fast. There was nothing to do but to take cover behind some tables and pray...and Luke was pleasantly surprised to see it didn’t seem to cause much damage.

“It hit one of the Barracks on top of the hill,” Travis laughed. “Seriously, did the God of Thunder destroy his own Barrack-“

Fortunately, another of his half-brothers was here to silence him before he said things which would result in lightning incineration.

“I think it hit Barrack Two!” Connor said, and he began to run, followed by...well, what looked to be half of the Camp.

With the night falling and the good weather missing, hundreds of Questers had abandoned their activities, and were now rushing to see what the problem was.

But Luke was fast, so were Perseus and Annabeth, and they were among the first to arrive before Barrack Two.

Or rather what had been Barrack Two.

The construction dedicated to Hera had been neatly pulverised.

The white columns were blackened ruins; the two cow statues guarding the entrance were missing their heads and had multiple cracks which made them absolutely ugly and certainly not safe to be around.

Strangely, there was no fire, though small embers burned here and there.

Perseus Jackson, son of Poseidon, was the first to step over the boundaries.

Luke followed him a second later. Normally, doing what they just did was tantamount to volunteer for hundreds of hours of very unpleasant chores...but this wasn’t a normal day.

The Barrack was large; the Queen of the Gods had never sent children there, but the ego of the Olympians certainly tolerated nothing else but a splendid, useless and lifeless building to satisfy the pride of Zeus’ wife.

Though the words ‘it had been splendid’ should be used.

With every step they took, devastation was all that met their eyes.

The final room was no exception. There must have been a statue of Hera there...it had been melted by the unnatural fire of the blast, and was now just a golden shapeless thing.

But this wasn’t what was attracting the most his attention, nor the eyes of Perseus Jackson.

No, the extremely important thing was the girl unconscious in the middle of the human-shaped crater.

Jackson had been right; it wasn’t a meteor. It was this girl who had been falling...and given the recent events of the Great Quest, Luke had a dreadful feeling beating in his chest.

The hair were so covered in ashes and dirt it was difficult to say which colour they were supposed to be, but the face was strangely familiar.

But it was impossible.

Barrack Two being destroyed was a clear insult from Zeus, but the Goddesses they had seen dragged away in chains days ago was an immortal.

And the few scratches on this girl...you could see the red of her blood.

Jackson chivalrously took his ridiculous orange cape, and placed it on her body. Luke blushed, as he realised that in his shock, he had watched the fallen girl naked...

“The pain...” the girl coughed loudly. “Why does it hurt so much?”

Then she opened her eyes.

They were blue, and Luke had definitely seen them in a far more divine body a few days ago.

“Why does it hurt so much?” Even the voice was close to the one she had spoken with...though there was less arrogance and power behind it today.

“It hurts because you are now mortal.” Perseus Jackson smiled before whispering as more Demigods arrived. “Welcome to New Byzantium, Hera. It isn’t the apocalypse, but I can definitely see it clearly from here...”

**7 June 2006, Council Room, Olympus**

There was a long silence when the hyper-sophisticated screen stopped transmitting.

Few of the nine Gods present had liked Hera before her betrayal, and her popularity had markedly suffered from the evidence she had made possible for the Lightning Thief to steal the symbol of powers of other Olympians.

Yes, it was technically permissible according to the Ancient Laws. But this was playing with the wording of the rules, while trampling ruthlessly the spirit. Few doubted the Queen of the Gods would have stolen the Master Bolt herself if it had been within her capabilities.

Hera had long deserved some nasty punishment. Maybe not for the theft of the Master Bolt, for Zeus was an arrogant hypocrite who could benefit from one cuckolding or two, but the Queen of Gods’ atrocities against all Greek and Roman Demigods were well-documented since Olympus was hosting the throne of the Gods.

Yet, Aphrodite could not be denied Zeus had gone overboard this time.

Apollo may have been a bit too brash showing his disgust during the last Council session, but his heart was in the right place. Being deprived from your immortality and all your divine powers was a cruel and long-lasting punishment. Some deities which had been on the receiving end of this treatment never recovered mentally from it. Those who ascended as a God or a Goddess after being born mortal agreed on few things, but they all agreed the ascension process was incredibly painful and traumatic before the pleasure overwhelmed their newly created divine essence.

And seeing Hera as a mortal, powerless, trying to catch up her breath in her fail body of teenage girl, her influence and her titles ruined, in the middle of her own blackened Barrack...it was easy to see Zeus had miscalculated.

The Olympians, and no doubt countless others, were now aware the Master of Olympus had no problem inflicting this punishment on his wife.

Therefore there was no one who couldn’t suffer it if the Lord of Thunder decided the situation warranted it.

No one opened his or her mouth to protest. The two who would have been the most likely to, Poseidon and Apollo, were absent today, and their apologies and excuses fooled no one.

“Now that justice has been rendered,” oh, this was how they called it, now? Justice? True, in a certain manner, it had been a judgement...one where Zeus was the judge, the jury, and the enforcer of the punishment. And mortals believed justice was blind. They were completely right. “It’s time to speak of the next vital matter.”

“My divorce?” the Goddess of Love tried to sound very much like the airhead all Olympians believed her to be.

“Your marriage stands. Every unhappy marriage I intended to dissolve has been cancelled.”

One day, the Master of Olympus’ hypocrisy would be so heavy the foundations of Olympus would be unable to handle the sheer weight of it.

“No. The vital matter is an artefact which will able to solve all our current problems. The Golden Fleece must be recovered.”

“Its power is felt from time to time in the Sea of Monsters,” Artemis added before showing disappointment. “Unfortunately, one of us visiting the rare islands which do not fall under our authority in this Zone Mortalis would risk military complications. Several Titans have holiday resorts here.”

“Indeed,” Zeus smiled at his daughter, like she had said an intelligent thing, while in fact it was simply common sense. “This is why I propose we send a Legion expeditionary force.”

Aphrodite concentrated and let her Venus persona took over. As always, her martial acumen and her knowledge of logistics and military challenges increased. By the ancient battlefields, the Goddess of Love couldn’t wait for the day where all her children would be sons and daughters of love and war. Hopefully, this moment was not far away, as Perseus had done excellent work with Drew.

“This will cost you heavily.” The Roman deity murmured. “The Sea of Monsters is currently surrounding the Solomon Archipelago. At a guess, the node island is certainly Guadalcanal.”

“I remember the island,” Mars said with glee. “The Demigods never stopped complaining about the climate and the mosquitoes. You want to send them there? Ha! Prepare for an ocean of complaints before they see the shadow of the Golden Fleece.”

“And besides, supplying several Cohorts across the Pacific Ocean is going to be a colossal effort,” Venus gave a lustful look to Mars, thanking her love for his veiled support. “It would be far simpler to send Questers. It will attract less attention, it will be less expensive, and for the first time in centuries, we have a group of Demigods who have proven they can survive a Zone Mortalis without suffering crippling casualties.”

It had not escaped her that for all its name of ‘Suicide Squad’, Perseus Jackson’s lieutenants had survived. The only dead ‘hero’ was Scipio Varus, and since it was one of Zeus’ hired assassins, taking him out had always been part of the plan, or at least this was how the martial Goddess of Love saw it.

“Out of the question.” For a second, both Jupiter and Zeus were in perfect agreement. “I do not trust those Demigods to bring us back the Golden Fleece.”

“You trusted them with the Quest which brought you back your Master Bolt.”

For this wise assertion, Athena received a murderous glare from her genitor. The Goddess of Wisdom closed her eyes and clearly abandoned any idea to intervene further in the conversation.

“This was at Poseidon’s urging, and at a critical time to lessen tensions between my brothers and Olympus. There is no reason to repeat the move today.”

The eyes of thunder were turned once again to Mars, who was in his great uniform of Roman Legate for the occasion.

“You will go to New Constantinople with Hercules, Mars. I give you one moon to organise war games so that the best Cohort of the three loyal Legions is selected for this operation.”

Sometimes, it was good to be reminded the God of Thunder didn’t need his ex-wife’s help to embark on terminally stupid ventures.

“By your orders,” the Roman War’s fist struck his Legionnaire armour. “There’s just the small matter they are likely to want a large payment, given the rumours spreading about the gains of certain Questers...”

“War,” Jupiter thundered, “will pay for itself.”

Ah. There were rumours that Hera had emptied the personal treasury of the Lord of the Skies before her betrayal was revealed. It was evident now they were completely true.

**Author’s note**:

Wow. This Interlude (totally not Chapter Eleven!) was longer than I thought it would be.

The Great Quest for the recovery of the missing symbols of power is over. But the consequences remain. By their actions, the Suicide Squad have awoken forces which should have best left asleep...if the protagonists were sane.

And it is not the case, whether you speak of the Demigods or not. Craziness is in their blood...

Well, this is the first (unofficial) arc of an Impractical Guide to Godhood truly over. Sail towards new adventures, brave heroes of Olympus!

The Sea of Monsters and its myriads of dangers await.

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