Ready Player Two Update

**Chapter 16**

**Ready Player Two**

“*The Legionnaires were going to fail. You knew it. I knew it. Every Demigod with enough intelligence to count to twenty knew it.*

*And yet you sent them anyway to the Sea of Monsters.*

*Who can really say that their defeat was unexpected with a serious face? Besides me, of course?*

*Yes, it didn’t help that one out of the two Cohorts was weakened by Legionnaire inner politics.*

*But no, giving them more information and resources wouldn’t have changed the outcome.*

*Sending an Expeditionary Force to a Zone Mortalis is the equivalent of gambling on quantity when the enemy has already amassed enough quantity to make sure your numbers are useless.*

*You need quality, not quantity, to survive in these monster-infested waters. I thought the Lightning Thief affair would have at least taught you that lesson.*

*But it seems you are in dire need of a reminder why Great Quests exist in the first place.*

*Fortunately, it might not be so bad this time.*

*The Expeditionary Force failed, but in their failure, we gained vital knowledge about the Sea of Monsters.*

*The Triumvirate and the forces they have allied with have not revealed every secret weapon they might have hidden in the shadows, but they were forced to reveal a few of them, enough so that hypotheses can be made about what nasty little surprises await the second wave.*

*And the example of two Roman Cohorts being destroyed will be a salutary lesson for everyone not to underestimate again an enemy just because they lost decisively a naval battle two millennia ago.*

*The first part of the game is over.*

*Player One has had his chance.*

*Ready Player Two*.”

Attributed to Perseus Jackson, authenticity never confirmed.

**29 September 2006, Council Room, Olympus**

Perseus could have spent hours describing the magical creations he was allowed to witness before entering the Council Room. Take the gigantic hall they had just crossed, for example. It was a fabulous piece of architecture which changed appearance depending on the tastes of those who were able to witness it. No, it wasn’t an illusion. The hall was really changing, the changes originating from a panel of twelve possible different halls the one the visitor would find the most spectacular.

That was a demonstration of magical technology that would have made the Tyrants of Old salivating in his old life, and no doubt plenty of them would have tried to use it for their throne rooms. Here? It was more or less playing the function of antechamber.

Alas, the time to be impressed was well and truly over.

Massive golden doors opened, and guided by the Goddess of Wisdom, the son of Poseidon knew he had arrived exactly where the summoning had been made.

It was *the* Council Room, no doubt about it. If you had ever felt ill-at-ease at being small, then surely you were going to hate this one.

Each throne was monumental, easily dwarfing him. As for the beings who occupied them...well, they were so tall compared to him that it was not worth to think about size jokes, except if you wanted to be humiliated.

The only point which made Perseus smirk internally was that there were twelve huge thrones, but even after Athena walked towards hers, three remained empty.

“Lord Zeus,” the Demigod bowed theatrically...and in a pose that was a bit ridiculous, though he would never admit it to anyone.

Golden lightning provoked powerful and vivid sparkles all over the Council Room, and the Master of Olympus’ eyes were filled with thunder.

Interesting. Scenario O it was. Obedient, but not too much. The great Master of Olympus was peeved, and was searching for traitors.

“**Perseus Jackson**,” the voice seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. “**Do you know why you have been summoned**?”

In happier circumstances, the leader of the Suicide Squad would have tried to play the role of the innocent or the idiot. Unfortunately, with the Thunder God already angry, it was not really an option unless he wanted to be incinerated.

“Yes. The Roman Expeditionary Force has failed. And you need replacements to go to the Sea of Monsters and succeed where they have failed.”

His blunt reply caught the Master of Olympus completely by surprise. Ah, he had not expected that, didn’t he?

Reactions from the other Gods were more...varied. Dionysus laughed loudly, before being forced to stop by a glare of Demeter. Athena seemed extremely satisfied. No doubt the Protector of Athens had warned the other Olympians that sending several Cohorts which were not equipped for naval warfare was just asking for a big disaster.

His father looked at him proudly, which was always good for the vote of confidence...

Glancing at the nine Gods and Goddesses present, it was not difficult to acknowledge there were three against him. None of them were a surprise. Zeus, of course. Demeter. And Artemis. The others were more or less on his side, or had chosen to be neutral in that affair.

“**Your answer is correct, son of Poseidon**.” Zeus thundered, taking the form of a colossus of thunder and storms that could not be considered hum. “**I am calling a Great Quest. Athena will now give you your objectives**.”

Zeus’ daughter changed. The female hoplite disappeared in a bright flash – Perseus closed his eyes by reflex – and when he reopened them, Annabeth’s mother had changed her looks completely. The Greek theme was banished, now Athena had donned a perfectly tailored white uniform of the US Navy. Her hair had been gathered in a bun behind her head, and if she hadn’t been several metres tall, one would have thought this woman was a regular part of the most powerful non-immortal navy in existence.

“**Perseus Jackson. You are to free the God of War and the God of Forges from the chains the Titaness of the Seas and the False Triumvirate are using to imprison them. You are to return the Golden Fleece to New Byzantium. And you are to save as many Legionnaire survivors of the first expedition as you can, and help them escape the Sea of Monsters**.”

By the way Athena was talking, it was clear that it was not her plan. Most certainly, it was her genitor who had had this ‘genial’ idea.

“I will need an order of priority, please,” if he didn’t protest, it would look suspicious. “The Zones Mortalis are not known to be small, but this one in particular is an archipelago of a thousand islands in its own right. Since this is a Quest, I won’t have an army. Searching for every goal could take months.”

“**Are you refusing to obey my commands**?” Oh great, the imbecile-in-charge was a paranoid tyrant who saw conspiracies when someone told him something was impossible.

“No, Great Zeus.” Forsaking humour pained Perseus, but at such close range, evading the Master Bolt would be incredibly difficult. “I am just saying that I have not the exact coordinates of any of the objectives you have given me. The Sea of Monsters is large. The force I will take with me will be under fifty in strength. By trying to search for everything at the same time, we will accomplish nothing, and likely perish in the attempt.”

The shape of the *thing* of thunders and clouds slightly changed as he baited the Master of Olympus with the last part of his speech.

Well, it was nice to have the confirmation the Lord of Thunder didn’t believe he could survive this Quest.

How nice it was going to be to prove him wrong.

“**The Demigod has a point**.” Athena intervened.

Ho, ho, ho. To say those words in public, Zeus must have ignored a lot of times her advice when it came to strategy and war these last years...something that was really stupid, it went without saying.

Zeus didn’t return to a pseudo-human appearance. Yet it was clear that with his Strategist telling him he was wrong and the other Gods refusing to vocally support him, he had no choice.

“**Hephaestus must be freed first, and his Forge returned under Olympus’ control**.” The Master of Olympus ordered after several seconds of silence. “**By the fault of this treacherous Titaness, many advanced weapons are now delivered into the hands of our enemies. This cannot stand. Ares must also be freed as soon as possible, before the next Winter Solstice. The Golden Fleece can wait until my sons are back on Olympus**.”

The Legionnaires were going to be so happy when he told them their unimportant lives were not so valuable compared to the Golden Fleece. Yes, that was a nice ‘revelation’ which was going to be greeted with joy and cheers...

Of course, Perseus had to play the role of the obedient son...thus his objection had to be of a pragmatic nature.

“The next Winter Solstice, Great Zeus?” Bring the expression of surprise, look surprised, play the son of surprise, “but I won’t have a ship ready before mid-October! And the journey alone is going to take months!”

“**Your father will provide all necessary help so that you arrive in time, son of the seas**.” The cascades of lightning grew more intense. Truly Zeus must have not enjoyed at all the way the Romans had been defeated... “**You said your ship will be ready by mid-October? You will leave immediately and proceed to the Sea of Monsters to challenge the enemies of Olympus**.”

The ‘or else I will incinerate you’ was so evident everyone heard it.

“And the rewards?” Not asking, once again, would have been extremely suspicious. “With due respect, Lord, the price of a brand-new ship is not an insignificant sum. And attracting worthwhile Demigods for a Great Quest always demands interesting rewards, be they in interesting artefacts or in the form of important numbers of Drachmas.”

This was once again a bait, yes. If the finances of Zeus were in a good state, the Lord of Thunder wouldn’t hesitate promising millions...after all, they were expected to die in this Great Quest, and what use were millions of Drachmas to the dead?

But if on the other hand, the rumours of treasuries empty were true...

“**Your Quester group will be allowed to take the spoils of war for itself in the battles you will fight across the Sea of Monsters. Athena will impose a ten-percent tax upon your profits should you return successful.”**

Well, well, well.

It seemed the finances of Zeus were really in a very dire situation, after all.

No gold to give and a non-insignificant tax levied upon their loot in the ‘improbable’ case they survived? If that was not economic despair, Perseus didn’t know what it was.

“**Now go accomplish my will, son of Poseidon**. **You are dismissed**.”

“By your will, Lord Zeus.” Perseus smiled, bowed, and ran theatrically out of the Council Room.

The good news was better than expected, really.

It was really to be a pleasure to overthrow Zeus from his throne, when the moment was right.

**30 September 2006, Council Room, Olympus**

Naturally, Poseidon, Aphrodite, and Dionysus quickly departed once the important subjects were out of the way. In Aphrodite and Dionysus’ case, it was soon reported they had left for France. What they would do there...eh, you didn’t need to be an Olympian to guess correctly.

Apollo wished he could go with them...but.

And it was a big ‘but’: the tumultuous mood of the Master of Olympus.

“**He was prepared**.”

There was no need to ask who the ‘he’ the Lord of Thunder was referring too.

Athena took it far more calmly than the Sun God or anyone else still present in the Council room did.

“**The heroes of the city, be they Roman or Greek, have done their best to hack the divine channels so that they could follow the Expeditionary Force day after day. There are newspapers, both the credible and the non-credible sorts, which reported on the losses of the Twelfth and Third Legio’s warships. It didn’t take a clever Demigod to know we would need someone else to go to the Sea of Monsters**.”

The words rang, like most of the reasons Athena listed when confronting a problem, with the absolute song of truth.

But this time, Apollo was not ready to believe it was that simple.

Perseus Jackson had clearly expected to go to the Sea of Monsters...no, that was the wrong way to look at this issue. The son of Poseidon *wanted* to go to the Sea of Monsters.

That said, the God of the Sun and Musicians knew better than to say that out loud when his genitor was already fuming in anger.

“**Next you are going to insinuate he is loyal**.”

For once, even the strategist of Olympus looked ready to give their father the look she usually reserved to various narrow-minded fools.

“**If you wanted him to be loyal**,” the Goddess of Wisdom and Strategy said coldly, “**maybe you shouldn’t have killed his mother**.”

All Gods and Goddesses present froze. It was a powerful rebuke, and one the likes of had rarely been uttered in the last centuries.

“**What is done is done**,” the Lord of Thunder grunted after a couple of seconds. Translation: there would be no apology, and no acknowledgement a mistake had been made. “**Artemis**.”

“**Yes, father?**” His twin answered eagerly.

“**You will send several of your Huntresses with the force this treacherous spawn of my brother’s loins**.”

A grimace appeared on his sister’s face. For good reason, Apollo would admit. One Huntress had been part of the previous Great Quest, and to say it had ended well for his sister’s lieutenant would be lying through his teeth.

“**The boy is uncontrollable**-“ his sister began to protest.

“**That’s why I am ordering you to gather Huntresses whose hatred for men and disloyalty excuses of any kind are legendary**.” The Master of Olympus paused before continuing. “**At the first sign Perseus Jackson does not intend to go accomplish his mission or refuse to kill enemies of Olympus, your Huntresses will eliminate him**.”

The grimace disappeared as fast as it had appeared.

And when his sister smiled, it was a vicious, ugly thing.

At moments like those, Apollo would freely admit...his twin scared him.

“**With great pleasure, father**.”

“**Is it that good an idea?**”

And immediately they stopped breathing. Damn it, Athena...

“**You disagree with the need to get rid of this vermin, Athena?**”

The Master Bolt shone brilliantly, and many thunderbolts erupted from the Symbol of Power.

“**No. I am just saying that we are about to begin a war against a Titaness. Can we please avoid committing some deeds which will make sure the Earthshaker will fight this war on the side of our enemies?**”

That...was a very good point. There were three thrones empty today, having one more vacant when the time would come to begin the true hostilities was not exactly a wise strategy.

“**Very well**,” Zeus boomed, acknowledging the deed may very well be unwise, without admitting out loud, “**the Huntresses will act openly only when there is proof of evident treachery against Olympus. That way even my brother will have no choice but to acknowledge the removal of this vermin was completely justified**.”

“**Openly, father**?”

“***Openly*, Artemis**,” the expression of the God of Thunder and Justice was a mask of determination and ruthlessness, “**I’m sure your Huntresses can arrange lethal accidents in the middle of the night. The Sea of Monsters is *extremely* dangerous.”**

“**Yes,”** Artemis could hold a grudge, but here Apollo would have to do something, it was simply too...vicious. “**Yes, I’m sure something can be *arranged*.**”

The rest was just a debate on what forces had to be rebuilt for the next wars to come, making him wince more than a few times at the sheer reminder of how much they had demilitarised after the end of the last true threats to their rules decades ago.

But as Athena left with a concerned expression on her face, the God of the Sun wondered how many thrones of the Council were going to need new owners by the end of the Winter Solstice...

**30 September 2006, Olympus**

Perseus was really, really disappointed at the lack of vigilance from the Olympians.

‘You are dismissed’ and no escort when he left the Council Room? Really?

The more he learned about the Gods and the Goddesses living here, the less the son of Poseidon was surprised that Bianca di Angelo had been able to steal the Master Bolt, even with Hera’s support.

Security was extremely lax, and when there were important protections active, it was child’s play to see them coming.

Not that he was going to complain...it made the objective he was pursuing today far easier.

It wouldn’t do to delay things too much, however. The Olympians had clearly expected him to obey Zeus’ command to the letter, but one Olympian investigating at the wrong time could be a disaster.

Fortunately, the Goddess he searched for was rather easy to find.

Perseus had just to follow the long succession of cursed shops which were unable to open as their doors and openings were closed by a multitude of flowers and plants.

Past these first original marks witnessing the addiction someone held for the activity of shopping, it really didn’t take more than a couple of minutes to find her.

“I think the Goddess of Love is going to be a bit peeved if the district where she buys her perfumes is closed.” He commented idly.

“**Perseus Jackson**...”

“In the flesh, Lady Persephone.”

“**I could kill you here and now. You have no right to walk in these streets!”**

“As a matter of fact, I was summoned today before the Council,” the son of Poseidon said cheekily. “I was on my way out when I couldn’t help but see all those buildings covered in flowers, and I wonder if it was a new fashion for autumn sales.”

Persephone immediately took a guilty expression. She shouldn’t; while the first part of his tirade was certainly true, her redecoration efforts wouldn’t have been immediately visible if he didn’t specifically try to search for her whereabouts.

Though that was a lot of shops the blonde Goddess had closed when she was in a vengeful mood...

“I was just wondering...why?”

“**Everyone knows why**!” The favourite daughter of Demeter exploded. “**No money for your Persephone! No, you mustn’t do this, it’s too expensive Persephone! You aren’t the Queen of Hell, Persephone. I have slept with you once, I am too busy now with other women to say I enjoy your presence anymore Persephone**!”

Even a Tyrant knew not to interrupt a scorned woman when she was furious and all the insults delivered upon her were released in a single monologue. All he had to do was nod at regular intervals until the fury abated.

“To be sure, a dreadful situation,” Perseus said in his best ‘wise and experienced’ stance. “What prevents you from changing that?”

“**Unless you have been living in garbage dump for the last month**,” Persephone hissed, and countless plants began to grow on her arms at an accelerated rate before moving in his direction, “**I am a divorced woman**.”

“A marriage has been dissolved, and oaths were declared null and void. But they can be renewed. The Wealthy One loves you very much...and you love him too, for all that you were upset with him when it came to his illegitimate children. Six months per year you stayed with him, and this for many, many centuries. And divorce has existed for quite a while.”

“**I ate pomegranate seeds. As per the Ancient Laws**-“

Perseus chuckled.

“I’m sorry, oh Goddess. I thought I was the one who was infamous for his clever manipulation of the truth.”

“**I am telling the truth, son of Poseidon**!”

“You ate the pomegranate seeds, I will give you grant that.” The former Tyrant acknowledged. “But I think that you did it deliberately. When your mother began to kill the harvests and every edible plant and fruit upon this world, a solution had to be found. The only thing that has never been mentioned is whether it was your Lord Husband or yourself, my Lady, who had that idea.”

“**And why I would...manipulate the truth?”**

Minor note for the posterity of his adventures: Persephone, daughter of Demeter, was really a horrible liar. The truth could be read in her blue eyes.

“Because unlike what the living souls believed they were haunted by, it wasn’t screams of pain that came out from your first ‘imprisonment’ while you stayed in the Lord of Hell’s Palace.” His amusement remained invisible; it wouldn’t do at all for Persephone to take her divine form right now. “Those were screams of pleasure. And while you ate seed of a sort, it wasn’t pomegranate-“

“**Fine**!” the Goddess of Spring stopped him from continuing, looking frenetically around him as if Demeter was going to arrive at any moment. And thankfully for her, there were no spectators right now to witness their conversation...nymphs and lesser immortals tended to stay away from an irate Goddess, liking their own life, thank you very much. “**Fine. What do you want from your silence**?”

“You mistake me, my Lady. I did not come here to blackmail you. Your former husband, I think, would punish me most severely the moment he became aware of it. I came to *help*.”

Persephone looked at him like he was a particularly dangerous breed of rattlesnake.

This was...actually quite intelligent on her part.

“**If you had not helped, I would still be married to my uncle**!”

Ah, yes. Incest. A truly common sin of the Olympians.

Perseus sighed.

“Must we continue telling lies to each other, my Lady? You didn’t divorce because of me or because you were furious your former Lord Husband cheated with a mortal woman several decades ago. In my humble opinion, it was a combination of factors, and the most important of all was your mother’s influence, pressuring you and insisting there could be better husbands out there than the Lord of the Underworld. Yet a few millennia...it is a long period of time, even for Goddesses, and now that she has you here permanently, suddenly your Lady Mother is not so eager to deal with your day-to-day expenses and needs.”

“**I have yet to hear a solution, son of Poseidon**.”

“Return to Hell,” and for once he was sincere. “Become the Queen you were supposed to be. Release Spring, and let another claim the mantle. Your Lady Mother can be appeased by a new treaty and some hard-bargaining from the Rich One.”

“**Hell is horrible when it comes to shopping opportunities**,” Persephone did not grit her teeth, but she wasn’t far from it.

Suddenly, Perseus wondered how much her return six months per year in the world of the living had to do with wanting to appease Demeter, and how much it had to with ensuring the luxury goods of Olympus and the rest of the divine world not part of Hades’ realm.

“Then change it.” He told her bluntly. “In case you’ve forgotten, your former Lord Husband must have billions of souls of men and women who had experiences creating and selling the sort of objects you are happy to sink a fortune to acquire.”

To his satisfaction, Persephone looked...thoughtful. And she didn’t dismiss his arguments. That was better than his initial plan called for, really.

“**What do you want**?” the blue-eyed Goddess said at last. “**And don’t say you are doing it because you want to help our broken couple, son of Poseidon. I won’t believe you**.”

“Is it wrong to want to help a union torn apart by some sad misunderstandings?” the glare he received convinced him that unfortunately, the poor daughter of Demeter needed to develop her sense of humour. “I want to acquire some special seeds. The same seeds, in fact, that you ate an eternity ago to invoke the Ancient Laws and stay with your ex-husband six out of twelve months per year.”

“**Why?**” For the first time, Persephone watched him with genuine surprise. “**I was a Goddess when I ate them. For me, the risk was minimal. If you are the one to eat them, you will die in excruciating torment**.”

As the proud leader of the Suicide Squad, he couldn’t reveal the essential parts of his plan...but some hints wouldn’t prove too problematic, right?

“The seeds are virtually indestructible and will resist extreme temperatures, correct?”

“**Correct**,” the daughter of Demeter confirmed. “**But...you want to feed it to one of your enemies**.”

Perseus didn’t answer. Let the Goddess of Spring think what she believed to be the truth.

Her right hand tightened, before reopening and revealing...two seeds.

“I would easily give you several hundreds of thousands of Drachma for a dozen, my Lady.”

“**I didn’t think to stockpile them when I left the Underworld**,” the guilty look of Persephone gave her an extremely young appearance.

Well, that or it was guilt at the idea of having missed the opportunity to earn a lot of money to assuage her shopaholic fever.

The two seeds materialised in his hands. He immediately placed them in a special pouch he had prepared, before sealing it and placing in his pocket.

“And where the-“

“**Perseus Jackson**,” the voice of Athena echoed through the empty street, and one second later, the Goddess of Wisdom appeared in her pristine uniform of Admiral. “**When my father told you that you were dismissed, it meant you had to use the lift and return to New Byzantium**.”

“I am absolutely sorry, oh Mighty Protector of Athens,” Perseus bowed, “I got lost on my way to it, and I was asking the lovely Goddess here for directions.”

“**From the Council Room to the lift antechamber, it is a straight line**.”

“Really?”

The black-haired divine strategist closed her eyes and murmured something unintelligible. Ha! He knew Annabeth’s mother wasn’t as emotionless as she pretended to be.

“**I suppose**,” the Goddess reopened them, letting them show powerful grey eyes, “**that I will have to escort you to New Byzantium to make sure you don’t find yourself to some other forbidden location *by accident***.”

Ah, busted.

Athena turned away, presenting her back to him.

“**Oh, and Persephone? If I were you, I would remove those flowers and plants. Neither Aphrodite nor Hermes will be very amused by them if they find them when they return to Olympus**.”

Perseus didn’t chuckle. It would be extremely risky to do so, between two Goddesses that could destroy him if they shifted to their respective divine forms.

But the moment he was alone and safe, the son of Poseidon was ready to swear on the Styx he would laugh very loudly.

**30 September 2006, New Byzantium, New York, United States of America (de jure)**

As their insane leader had warned them beforehand, he didn’t return until dawn.

At some point, Ethan knew, he would have to discover how Perseus Jackson predicted that kind of things. The son of Poseidon wasn’t a bloody Oracle, but most of the time his words were coming true, and the worst part was that he shouldn’t be in position to influence the outcome.

Anyway, the leader of the Suicide Squad was back, and looking reasonably uninjured...something that couldn’t be taken for granted, given that he had been summoned by Zeus.

“Welcome back to New Byzantium,” the son of Nemesis went on to walk by Jackson’s side once the mad boy passed the walls.

“Thank you, my treacherous lieutenant.” Well, at least Ethan was certain he wasn’t dealing with an impostor.

“Good news?”

“Most excellent news!” the grin which was herald of calamity illuminated the fading darkness. “We are going to be taxed, in the highly likely scenario where our survival during this new Great Quest is assured.”

Ethan grimaced. Madness could truly resume...

“Jackson, that’s not great news.”

“Wasn’t it an American politician that said: in this life, there’s nothing certain but death and taxes?”

“Err...yes. But I don’t think he meant it as a *good thing*, Jackson.”

“Well, in this case, it is.”

Ethan was almost ready to pray to his mother for some karmic payback. The Gods knew Jackson deserved it.

“You want to make sure the gold we earn goes directly to fund Olympus?” The son of Nemesis suddenly had a very frightening thought. “Or do you want us to earn strictly nothing from this Great Quest?”

After all, while twelve percent was impressive, it was only a fraction of a total sum, and if the massive pile of loot was equal to zero, then twelve percent of zero was still zero...

“That’s an intriguing idea, my treacherous lieutenant! I admit I did not think of it.” Perseus Jackson smiled. “But in this case, no, the agreement was signed in good faith. In exchange for one more year of diplomatic immunity when this Great Quest will be completed, I formally swore on a certain Hell Sea that twelve percent of the wealth and treasures we earn during this Great Quest will be transferred to Annabeth’s mother.”

And with the last part of the last sentence, the trap was revealed.

The son of Poseidon didn’t intend for a single Drachma or Denarius to go replenishing Zeus’ treasury.

The flow of money created by this tax – always assuming they survived – would go to Athena.

“Will this hold?” Ethan said pessimistically as they continued walking towards the Questers’ Barracks. “I mean, I do not doubt the way you can scheme, but-“

“There’s a reason why I decided to swear something on a certain Hell Sea, my treacherous lieutenant. And when the Protector Goddess of Athens escorted me back, I specifically invoked her authority of Protector of Heroes and Questers.”

 That was...very clever.

The tax was not really a tax; it was an offering to Athena.

The Suicide Squad formally asked for her blessings during this Great Quest; in return the Demigods would part with a significant portion of their wealth.

“The King of Olympus isn’t going to like that at all.”

“My treacherous lieutenant, him not liking this is the entire point of the plan,” the demonic smile was stronger than ever. “And honestly, it’s his fault I was able to implement this scheme at all.”

“How?” Ethan asked, extremely interested by the argument.

“The Master of the Olympus was the one to summon me, and the one to call formally for the Great Quest.” Perseus Jackson bared his teeth. “But he didn’t promise anything in return, even a bauble. A ship? A weapon or a shield forged by the Gods? Some talismans to repel some kinds of monsters? No. There wasn’t a single gift handed to the Suicide Squad as a whole. I was told to obey or else. That’s a relationship dangerously close to slavery...and the Ancient Laws don’t support that kind of petulant behaviour.”

“Ah.” So Zeus had shot himself in the foot...metaphorically speaking. His refusal to make a single concession, small or big, was going to make sure Jackson’s deal was legal, per the Ancient Laws. Athena was the ‘Protector’, and she was an Olympian. That was enough, especially with the backing of Styx.

But Ethan couldn’t help but think that the tensions must be near to the boiling point on Olympus. Athena, daughter of Zeus, should have tried her best to wiggle her way out that sort of ‘negotiation’. And Ethan had known firsthand how intelligent her children were. True, this intelligence often made them arrogant...but here the trap had not been subtle at all.

Ares and Hephaestus had been captured. Hera had been deprived of her immortality and powers.

The foundations of Olympus may look solid for the moment, but the behaviour of many Olympians suggested pretty heavily they were anything but...

“What now, of glorious leader of the Suicide Squad?”

Perseus Jackson...yawned.

“Now, my treacherous lieutenant, I am going to sleep several hours and then modify a few plans to adapt to certain changing circumstances. Tomorrow, however.”

“What about tomorrow?”

Ethan felt some trepidation mixed with an emotion he knew very well.

“Tomorrow, I will order the Suicide Squad to assemble once again. It is time for us to write a new page of our villainous legend.”

Of course. Why had Ethan thought Perseus would be half-reasonable this time?