**Chapter 5**

**Madness and Violence**

*The lack of oversight during the Quests was not and is still not something that has proven immune to critics for centuries. Assuredly, compared to the Legions of our Roman counterparts, we Questers do have a lot of leeway to complete the goals assigned to our goals. That said, we do not have giant eagles for communications, and it isn’t unprecedented to stay in hostile territory for several days while potential reinforcements are weeks away.*

*That’s the theory, at least. In practise, Silver and Bronze-level Quests are done in lands which belong to a specific God or Goddess loyal to Olympus. While it is far from a guarantee of survival, the certainty is there Olympus will be informed one way or another of all your moves and deeds before you return to New Byzantium. Those who forget this fact and are far too loud-mouthed about insulting the name of the Gods tend to regret it in short order when they see their ‘rewards’ after completion of a Quest.*

*The Gold-level Quests and the rare Great Quests are very different. They tend to involve places which are out of reach for divine sight, and unless communication is established with New Byzantium, it is extremely rare to be aware of the expedition’s details before a single Quester return...if one returns. While many Romans and non-Romans have bemoaned this reality, the reality is that someone has to accomplish these Quests, and in general attempts to recruit ‘overseers’ for the adventure are terribly unsuccessful, since those who are sent to enforce the rules will be subjected to the same dangers the Questers will counter.*

*Unusually, the Suicide Squad was sent to accomplish had such one overseer. Given the final result and what the survivors agreed to share to us for the writing of these chronicles, it isn’t difficult to argue such supervision was at best counter-productive, at worse a complete disaster...*

Extract from the Chapter 3 of *Chronicles of the Suicide Squad*, by Malcolm Pace, son of Athena

**18 May 2006, the Labyrinth**

“I am a spider’s soul, trapped in a human body!”

A better man would have kept his dignity.

Perseus acknowledged he wasn’t that ‘better man’ deep inside before cackling.

Oh Gods and Demons, that was *priceless*.

He was really going to have to send a present to Pasiphaë once this Quest was over, because this was something he’d not seen coming...and the opportunities for jokes and comical situations were just *infinite*.

Truly, the immortal sorceress didn’t disappoint him. In this life, he had not thought a spell would be able to do that. In the life before that, there had been the case of Dread Emperor Tenebrous, of course.

The man had begun his reign as a boring administrator and a great road builder – the Imperial Road system of the Dread Empire of Praes was his idea and no one else’s. The chronicles of his reign alas didn’t explain the succession of events which had led him to this, but Tenebrous had somehow begun to be convinced he was a giant spider in a man’s body, and resolved to do something about it. The ‘something’ had been a massive ritual with its lot of corpses, blood, and unwilling sacrifices, and it had worked. Dread Emperor Sorcerous – or what was left of him now he was a gigantic arachnid – had escaped into the sewers of Ater, and his Chancellor had promptly passed a law it was illegal for a spider to claim the Tower before dying in the inevitable succession civil war.

The most amusing thing in all this affair was that since there still was an overabundance of giant spiders during his own reign, there were believers in Praesi cities and elsewhere who believed Tenebrous had kept his intelligence and survived in the darkness, plotting and building himself an endless army of chitin, fangs, webs, and dangerous poisoned appendages to return to power. Alas, Kairos Theodosian had never stepped a foot in the Dread Empire, and thus couldn’t ascertain the truth for certain, what a pity.

But maybe Annabeth Chase would provide a worthwhile substitute to Dread Emperor Tenebrous?

“Jackson! Stop this!”

Ah, Zoë Nightshade was barking – no, he didn’t speak about the Hellhound. How sadly predictable.

But after a few seconds, the dreamy expression of the daughter of Annabeth vanished from her face and a light of horror appeared in her eyes.

“What happened? What did I do?”

“Relax, Alison,” the green-eyed Demigod beamed, “you were just sharing with us your soul dreams, which apparently are to transform yourself into a giant spider to attune yourself to your real soul.”

“This isn’t funny, Jackson!”

“Much as it pains me to confirm something coming from his mouth,” his treacherous lieutenant coughed, “you said exactly that. You pretended to be a spider in a human’s body because you had seen the truth.”

“NO!”

“Jackson, if it is another joke-“

“My dear Huntress, I am willing to admit I dabble from time to time in sorcery and other magical arts,” frankly he was doing more than that, but Perseus doubted the lieutenant of Artemis would react very well hearing the full scope of his ‘dabbling’. “But I am not a master of mind-alteration spells. The head is something very fragile and can be easily shattered if you don’t know what you’re doing. I am not ready to attempt something like that,” which was the truth...for one or two decades, at least. “When I want to make sure someone destroys his inhibitions and accepts his true self, I do it with words, not magic, Zara.”

The brown-haired daughter of Atlas growled but didn’t attack...for now. Still, at the rhythm things were going, he was going to have to find a permanent solution. The longer this Quest went on, the likelier the possibility of Nightshade trying to kill him in a no-rules duel was.

“Sorceress, oh my sorceress...please tell me what magic you sense in Audrey’s head.”

Lou Ellen smiled before kneeling before the daughter of Athena, who was still trying to decide if she had to explode in anger or to cry.

“I think it’s a curse triggered by certain thoughts and actions taken by the victim,” the blonde daughter of Hecate revealed after a couple of minutes. “The spell, after a short spike of activity, has gone dormant in her brain, most likely to spare its limited magical energy. I think one of the foundations used for its matrix is the power my half-sister is exerting through the Labyrinth. So if we are able to leave the Zone Mortalis without the curse digging itself in Chase’s brain, everything should be fine.”

“And what is necessary to avoid the ‘digging in one’s brain part’?” Luke asked in a dark voice, which confirmed the son of Hermes didn’t like at all this situation.

The new practitioner of Hellfire rolled her shoulders and stood up.

“She got herself cursed for being disrespectful to a sorceress,” the black-eyed witch smirked. “I’m sure everyone has a few good thoughts about what will trigger the spell anew.”

“There’s another way,” the Huntress affirmed.

“There is?” It was new to him, certainly.

“We go back and kill the wife of Minos. Magic like that dies with its creator.”

“Hmm...no,” Perseus shook his head. “I’ve made sweet, sweet bargains with Asterius’ mother, and they are too profitable to go back on my word so quickly after swearing to her my eternal friendship.”

“This isn’t a game, Jackson! Chase is at risk of believing her mind is those of a spider?”

“So what? Everyone has his little quirks and eccentricities. In my youth, I believed for a few days I was destined to become a building-sized scorpion, and I’ve turned out perfectly fine...”

Naturally, most of his precious Questers chose this moment to glare at him. Ah, well. It was the curse of the visionary to be surrounded by blind souls unable to advance further than their noses.

“Anyway,” he continued, “our sorceress expert can’t cancel the curse,” the daughter of Hecate nodded in approval, “and since it doesn’t seem to hinder the fighting capabilities of Amy, we resume our journey to the gate which will allow us to enter the Underworld.”

“Jackson...”

“My dear Zara Nellie,” a pity there were so little names beginning by ‘Z’, “may I remind you that we are on a limited time schedule, and we have already lost ten days by the fault of Daedalus?”

“By Pasiphaë’s fault, you mean.” Luke said.

“Semantics, semantics,” the ex-Tyrant dismissed the argument immediately. “I am sure Abby is going to be the definition of politeness and charm when we will face our next challenges,” just saying it was going to urge the grey-eyed girl to do nothing of the sort, he knew, “and we still have a long road ahead of us. Let’s continue this Great Quest!”

He gave a last piece of meat to his new trustworthy Hellhound, before climbing on her.

“Onwards intrepid heroes, I want to dine in Hell tonight!”

“JACKSON!”

**19 May 2006, the Labyrinth**

Eleven days ago – it felt a lot longer than that – twelve Demigods had left New Byzantium to partake in one of the most suicidal and insane Quests ever since World War II.

The good part was that they were still alive and healthy, enough to continue the Quest. The bad part was that they were led by someone insane who made no secret he was here to fail to obey the commands of Olympus with a mad grin on his face.

And let’s not forget that while they were all still alive, Scipio Varus was transformed into a pink crocodile and had disappeared somewhere in the maze of the Labyrinth, after their fearless leader taunted Fate so much Dakota was still surprised the Roman saurian hadn’t returned to exert his vengeance upon him.

The replacement of the professional assassin? A Hellhound, a true Hellhound, that Perseus Jackson had promptly called Zoë for the sole purpose of irritating the Huntress. The son of Bacchus didn’t blame her on this one. Whether you loved your first name or not, there weren’t many people who loved having a person naming an animal with your identity when you were around to see it.

Dakota wished this was the biggest internal problem of their group, but it would be a lie to say so. Far from forging some bonds of friendship, the destruction of Pasiphaë’s fortress had left some heavy distrust between the duo Chase-Nightshade and practically all the others, since they hadn’t attacked the immortal sorceress when they had the opportunity.

To his great shame, the black-haired boy’s sole excuse was that Jackson had been against it, and without the son of Poseidon’s support, what was he supposed to do? Throw vines at the enemy? But where did you find some greenery in this world of stones, automatons, and rocks? Moreover, as a Legionnaire, the only training they received against magic was ‘let our own wizards do their job and duck when the fireballs are flying’.

“For now, the immortal sorceress appears to respect her part of the deal,” he whispered to the son of Hermes as they crossed a massive bridge which would have respected the standards of the Legion. “The Labyrinth is leading us on a straight road, and there are few monsters.”

There also wasn’t any strange voices plaguing his thoughts or whispering to him that one member of the Quest had to be murdered, but better to keep that under wraps.

“For now,” Luke Castellan grimaced before shaking his head. “But yes, so far the immortal sorceress has made our progression easier. I am just worried about what it’s going to cost us if Olympus decides negotiations with Pasiphaë were too far past the red line, even for a Great Quest.”

“I’m worried too,” the blue-eyed son of Bacchus admitted out loud. “Especially since Jackson is going to parade on his pet Hellhound if both survives the Underworld.”

“That is going to be a big problem,” the blonde Quester confirmed in a manner that was likely a considerable understatement. “Correct me if I’m wrong, McDonald, but aren’t the temples and the infrastructure we’re passing by typically Roman?”

“Err...yes?” He had not focused his attention upon it, but now that he examined his surroundings with a new eye, the theme was impossible to miss. “The Road is transforming into one of the High Empire’s roads, I think. The ruins on our right have to be a temple to Mithra...I guess. And this is an unfinished aqueduct on our left. The building here looks like an incomplete warehouse where the grain and the salt were stored...“

They entered a tunnel, and when they emerged from it, they once more were in a sort of immense cavern of a size as impressive as the one which contained Pasiphaë’s tall defences. The only difference was that this time, it wasn’t a tall fortress of dark stone waiting for them, but more those of a Roman *limes*, the rectangular towers, observation posts, stakes, and other recognisable items being used for the defences of New Constantinople’s Barracks being replicated there.

And as if it wasn’t enough, over the gates of this fortified area, flew the symbol of an eagle holding in its talons the lightning bolt.

“I wasn’t aware there was a Legion deployed anywhere near the Labyrinth,” the son of Hephaestus said cautiously.

“There isn’t,” Luke replied curtly.

“There isn’t,” Jackson echoed a couple of seconds later. “Legio Fulminata is defending your city. Legio Gemina, the Thirteen Legion, must be in California or somewhere near it. And Legio Gallica, Third Legion, is fighting monsters near New Orleans, I believe.”

“I’m not even going to ask how you know that when the majority of New Byzantium’s Demigods have no idea about the Legion’s deployments.”

“Good, then I won’t have to lie shamelessly,” the son of Bacchus was surprised the other boy knew the definition of shame in the first place.

“There is something...wrong with the banners,” Annabeth Chase intervened. “Are golden eagles on black flags ordinary heraldry for the Legions?”

“No,” Dakota recognised. “But then, whole Legions haven’t entered the Labyrinth in the last four decades, of if they did, no one told me before I became a Quester.” And as they continued to decrease the distance between them and the white walls of the Roman defences, it didn’t get better, for several smaller flags could be seen, and they confirmed this wasn’t an Olympus-loyal Legion playing the role of garrison.

“Fifteenth Legion,” Ethan Nakamura spoke for everyone. “McDonald?”

Dakota grimaced.

“Legio XV Primigenia. New Constantinople has never successfully reclaimed the eagle since Olympus is on this side of the Atlantic, and even if we had it, I think no Legate in his right mind would rebuild it.”

“Why? It was one of the Legions destroyed at the battle of Teutoburg Forest?”

“No,” the black-haired boy was prompt to answer. “It would have been better. You see, this Legion is rather infamous for the identity of the Emperor who created it.”

Just as he said the words, the gates opened and a torrent of cavaliers mounted on black horses surged forwards, followed by what had to be a cohort worth of true Legionnaires. Their equipment was rather standard for a unit inspired by the High Empire era, except the hundreds of armours were the colour of the night, with the only other colours being their golden cloaks and the golden eagle on their breastplate.

The Legion banners flew the symbol of a golden man with a spear dancing on an orb representing the world, as expected.

“It was nicknamed the Black Legion sometimes,” Dakota didn’t speak the words loudly, who knew who listened to him now? “Founded by Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, and loyal to him until its dissolution.”

“Gaius Julius Caesar what?” Drew Tanaka had obviously not caught the significance of the titles, though Chase and many others had.

“You know him better as Caligula.”

“That’s...okay, that’s not good, but this Emperor is dead, right?” Lou Ellen Blackstone asked.

“Trajan was also supposed to be dead, and yet he holds a position at camp,” Jackson commented as the horse-mounted troops began to encircle them in a classical formation and point their spears in something that could be easily more than parade posturing.

“Demigods! In the name of our beloved God-Emperor, your presence is requested at the Novus Circus Maximus!”

Of course he wants...wait, God-Emperor? No, no, no...

“In the spirit of eternal friendship that unites Questers and Legionnaires, we accept your generous invitation!” Even the black-armoured were surprised by Perseus Jackson’s words. Poor Legionnaires, they weren’t ready to handle the madness of the son of Poseidon...

**20 May 2006, Novus Circus Maximus, Roman Enclave, the Labyrinth**

To be clear, Luke hadn’t really needed a lot of evidence by that point the Gods had completely screwed up with the Labyrinth. Leaving Pasiphaë able to claim the Labyrinth, Jackson or no Jackson, was something that felt like an awful mistake and something Ares or someone else should have cared about a millennium ago. But if he had really needed more convincing, the existence of the ‘Novus Circus Maximus’ would have created a lot of reasons to prove that whatever the Council of Olympus was, it definitely didn’t extend to omniscience and all-knowing.

It wasn’t the megalomaniac drugged dream of the ghost of a Roman Emperor. There really was a gigantic stadium dedicated to chariot races to welcome them, and though Luke didn’t know if it was as big as the original, the space for tens of thousands of spectators was definitely there.

And these seats were used. This was the frightening issue. The public was definitely there, and no, it wasn’t the ghosts of ancient Romans who were playing this role. It was normal humans, and they were not from the ancient Empire of Rome, the fact they wore modern-era clothes adapted to the current festivities proved that...some had watches, relatively recent necklaces, handbags, and purses amongst other things.

Another...well, yes, another frightening issue was the number of Legionnaires Caligula had recruited for himself. Between the Cohort which had given them the ‘invitation’, the one waiting outside, and the one garrisoning the upper levels of the Circus Maximus, their leader had three Cohorts to enforce his will, and much as Luke wanted to believe this was a bluff, he couldn’t remove the idea from his head seven others waited to be summoned.

And there were new Legionnaires in purple and black armour, the Praetorian Guard, no doubt. In addition to them, the longer they advanced towards the Imperial Lodge, the more they were animal and human-like automatons, all armed for war.

Irrespective of their quality, this was a lot of firepower...and this was just what they were allowed to see. Luke wasn’t Athena, but he had enough strategic sense you didn’t show all your surprises to complete foreigners you had no reason to trust.

And then the crowd rose like a single man to greet their Lord and Master.

“AVE NEO HELIOS! AVE NEO SELENE!”

“AVE!”

The last steps were stressful. All the Questers were uncomfortably aware that, surrounding by enemies as they were, they would be no escape if they had to fight their way out. And judging how ecstatic the crowd was, these unarmed civilians weren’t going to be of any help, quite the contrary. It was not improbable they would be human shields for the true threats.

It was worrying in the extreme, at the risk of repeating himself. But as the last hundreds of bodies parted to let them access the seats and extremely decadent lodge, Luke realised they had a new problem – again.

The man and the woman facing them were evidently siblings. They didn’t look like monsters, as the written testimonies of the High Empire insisted upon. But they were definitely shining with divine power.

It should be impossible. Caligula was deified after his death, yes, but without the support of Olympus, he shouldn’t have had a tenth of the power shown by the members of Triumvirate Holdings. And yet he was shrouded in golden power, while the woman next to him was gleaming with an aura of moonlight.

“You stand before the God-Emperor Neo Helios,” the white horse with golden horseshoes spoke. “Kneel.”

“Oh that’s a nice attempt at ventriloquism!” because of course Perseus Jackson had stayed quiet for ten minutes, and it was likely too long for him. “Again, you Divine Majesty!”

“It is not ventriloquism!” the horse seethed. “I am capable of speaking six human languages!”

“You realise it is exactly what someone with ventriloquist abilities would say, right?”

“Kill him!”

The next second, the horse received Jackson’s sword in his mouth.

The noises of the crowd instantly went down to nothing.

“Son of Poseidon...” the Roman Emperor had definitely calculating blue eyes which gave a hint the accusations of tyranny were not so far-fetched. “You have just killed the Senator Incitatus.”

“In my humble opinion,” the mad boy grinned, “you committed a cardinal mistake naming him to such a powerful position. He wasn’t able to keep his calm when I complimented you for your ventriloquist talents. He resorted to violence while he was within reach of my sword. These are not good traits for a man...pardon for a horse of great power to have. Fortunately, I am here now, and I humbly submit my candidature to occupy the functions he formerly exerted in your service.”

“Candidature declined,” the blonde-haired Emperor refused. “I have heard about your recent exploits, Perseus Jackson, and I do not desire sharing the fate of those who thought themselves capable of outsmarting you. And while Incitatus’ failings were many...” servants dragged the horse’s lifeless body away, “if you kill someone else without my express permission, I will sentence you to death by the pyre.”

The man history remembered as Caligula turned towards them.

“I was told twelve departed from New Constantinople, but only eleven Questers...and one Hellhound...stand before me. What happened to Scipio Varus?”

“Your Imperial Majesty,” Luke began, “whatever you were told-“

“-is perfectly accurate, I pay my spies in your city very well,” the Emperor grabbed an apple from a small mountain of fruits and began to eat it without ceremony. “Let’s dispense with the pretences, Luke Castellan. I know your identities, and I know the Great Quest you were given by the Master of Olympus. Pasiphaë’s network has blind spots, but I can assure you mine doesn’t share them.”

The blonde-haired veteran of the Hesperides wanted to say a lot of things, but an accurate summation could be shorted down to a single word: shit. A bluff was possible, but in practise inexistent: he knew three of their names, and the reason they had departed New Byzantium.

“So I repeat my question: where is Scipio Varus?”

“Unfortunately,” Perseus didn’t waste any time, “he has decided to abandon the Quest and partake in his lifelong ambition: founding a legion of pink crocodiles.”

Many, many spectators laughed at the repartee. Even the master of the circus’ lips twitched somewhat.

“Who?”

“The Master of Olympus, judging by the material evidence.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” the blue-eyed woman next to Caligula spoke for the first time. Her voice was incredibly soft and musical, but there was no fragility in her stance. And much like her brother, her body was one which had been trained for physical hardship. “The man is known for taking the first tool which falls on his lap when he is enraged.”

There was a significant gust of divine wind, and Luke tried to not show his embarrassment, because he had suddenly realised that under their togas, Emperor Caligula and his sister wore absolutely *nothing*.

“We should kill them, brother.” The worst part was that there was little emotion in this female voice.

“That would be a mistake,” the son of Poseidon retorted.

“Oh?” And just like that, Luke knew the Empress had committed the cardinal mistake of letting a certain Demigod speaking.

“Your scheme to use mortal worshippers to accelerate your ascension is impressive your Divine Light, but it still doesn’t give you the power to stand against the Lord of the Oceans and the Lord of the Sky. As long as your ritual isn’t completed, Labyrinth or no Labyrinth, you are vulnerable. The Olympian twins will have no compunction tearing down the maze to reach and incinerate you. You represent an existential threat to their base of power, as you have made your claim to the thrones of the Titan of the Sun and the Titaness of the Moon.”

“Continue,” the woman shrouded in moonlight power said, unwittingly repeating what had happened with the Queen of Crete before.

“You have recruited the sorceress Medea for your scheme, only she has a sufficient connection to the faded Titans and the sorcerous knowledge to implement these ritual summoning pieces of faded glory from Below. Queen Pasiphaë didn’t make a secret she didn’t appreciate your presence, and the last sorceress is nowhere near the Labyrinth’s entrances. Therefore it stands to reason that you, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, are aiming to usher your apotheosis as Neo Helios, a new deity which will unite the essence of both the God and the Titan of the Sun, while your beautiful sister Julia Drusilla will incarnate as Neo Selene, Goddess and Titaness of the Moon.”

Caligula slowly clasped his hand, and for a heartbeat, it was like a veil had been lifted, and Luke didn’t seen a blonde man in his early twenties wearing a white toga, but a golden-skinned giant crowned with the symbols of power of the Sun. It wasn’t a divine form...but there was divine power behind it.

The claim, as Perseus had said, had been made, and there was sufficient power to back it. This was sheer folly...and yet it existed.

“An excellent deduction, son of Poseidon. I see why the Olympian Council considers you a threat.” The piercing blue eyes turned to stare at Lou Ellen Blackstone. “Yes, Medea has been involved in our recent activities, though her services are...extremely expensive. We are perfectly ready to find new sorceresses to subsidize once they have grown in the fullness of their power.”

“I won’t say I will never work for you, Caesar, but I have other preoccupations and areas of interest for the short-term future,” the daughter of Hecate replied politely. Luke tensed, but Caligula didn’t seem to be offended.

“Fair is fair,” the Emperor shrugged, “and yes, as the son of Poseidon has spoken, we have begun our ascent to replace the current holders of the Sun and the Moon. The only thing that wasn’t mentioned is that by law, I have made my incomparable sister the Caesarea of my Empire. No one else is worthy of the title.”

The son of Hermes wasn’t blind, when those two stared in each other’s eyes...it was love. But encircled by a lot of potential enemies, it would be a bit unwise to play the offended party.

“This is treason against Olympus,” surprisingly, it was Jake Mason, not Zoë Nightshade, who was the first to speak the potentially damning words.

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“This is treason against Olympus.”

But the explosion rage Ethan and most of the Praetorian Guard seemed to brace for didn’t materialise.

“It is,” the Emperor presented a golden cup to his sister, and for all the old accusations against him that had proven false, the son of Nemesis acknowledged the incestuous one was most likely not exaggerated. “But, son of Hephaestus, you have to realise I didn’t choose this path. I, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, was born mortal. I was a mere Legacy of Venus, unworthy to train with the great Demigods and Demigoddesses of the time. My father, while the Heir to Augustus, perished long before he could take the reins of Rome. My family suffered as political hostages for most of my life. Yet I never stopped praying the Gods, believing one day, our fortune would change. I prayed them and promised that should I ascend to the laurels of Caesar and Augustus, they would have no reason to regret their choice.”

The blonde man was gifted as an orator, no doubt about it. But unlike Jackson, he was evidently trying to hide his madness, and as a result, there was a...a shadow of falsehood over his monologue.

“When I became Augustus, my promises were respected to the fullest. The sacrifices to the Gods were made in unprecedented and never-imitated numbers. I invited them to my parties. I dedicated them countless grandiose monuments. I praised them for every city and province added to *my* Empire. And do you know what their reaction was? *They killed my sister*.”

No son of Nemesis or Tyche could have uttered with more hate these four words.

And Julia Drusilla, who was evidently the person mentioned, had stopped smiling and presented a stone-like expression.

“It was a fever, the best practitioners of healing said,” Caligula breathed loudly. “Idiots, all of them. By the time the desperate measures were clearly needed, even taking a miniscule part of Ambrosia wasn’t enough to purge the disease of her body. My beloved sister died. And the night after I manifested my desire to deify her, I was visited by the Great God of Light, Music, and Diseases. He told me the Gods had heard of my projects, and urged me to reconsider.” The visage continued to be charming, if you didn’t count the nose too sharp or the ears too big, but the Emperor was clearly a snake masquerading behind a pretty face. “And that was the moment I understood one of the Gods I admired the most had murdered my sister.”

And the worst part? Ethan was sure that while the truth was framed to make the Emperor look better than he was, it wasn’t a complete obfuscation of the truth.

“This was the moment where the truth was revealed to me. The current Gods can’t tolerate a society where there are mortals who present a risk to gain a tiny ray of their light. Their jealousy knows no bounds. You can promise them everything, fulfil it, and it won’t ever be enough. And when they realised I had become aware of their deceptions, they assassinated me. They ruined my reputation, my accomplishments.”

The grin which followed was filled with hatred.

“But despite their best efforts, the population of Rome loved me. And they deified me, allowing me to survive. I was a mere shadow for countless centuries, but I was still present, able to work upon my revenge. It was difficult for I, a distant Legacy of the Goddess of Love and Rome, but I was able to regain a body and power. I knew, both for revenge and for passion, that I had to take back the sun from the one who was unworthy of it. But across my travels and conversations, I realise I couldn’t need alone. I was destined to be Neo Helios, but like the Sun can’t exist without the Moon, the best part of my soul had to be returned from the dead. And as the Olympians fought each other during their Civil War of the nineteenth century, I was given the priceless opportunity to return my sister to the realm of the living.”

“It sounds impressive,” Jake Mason declared, “but you the reality is the Titans of the Sun and the Moon faded voluntarily after your reign.”

“That’s what the Gods pretended,” Julia Drusilla replied, one hand handed to be placed in both of her brother’s. “But the reality is far darker. Both Olympian twins made a concerted campaign to remove Helios and Selene from the pantheon of deities worshipped by our people, and when new deities were brought forwards to replace them, like Sol Invictus for example, they were swift to kill the lords of Rome who supported such efforts. The Olympians killed two Titans, and had the gall to make it sound like it was the fault of the Romans wanted fewer deities. It wasn’t. It was them who wanted more power and less competition for certain prerogatives.”

“That was an impressive monologue,” Perseus Jackson – who’s else? – applauded with a visibly impressed expression. “But while your desire to launch this extremely ambitious campaign of **usurpation** is perfectly understandable, there is a rather difficult issue.”

“An issue?”

“Your name has survived for a couple of thousand of years, your Illustrious Divinity, in part because the Gods created a dark legend of your deeds,” the son of Poseidon said happily. “And you were known before your violent official demise to be a worshipper of the Sun. But your sister is, alas, far less famous than you are, and was not known to be a worshipper of the Moon in the first place. Her name is not unknown to the specialists of Roman history, but her Serene Moonlight Divinity’s name is not common knowledge in the streets of New York City.”

“True,” the – supposedly – mad Emperor agreed. “This is why we had to solidify my Sister’s new identity of Neo Selene by capturing several Huntresses and draining them of their Moon’s power-“

Several arrows were in the air before anyone could prevent Nightshade from doing something stupid.

At such short distance, they couldn’t miss.

They didn’t.

It was like they had met an impenetrable armour of silver as the sink’s colour of Julia Drusilla brutally changed and the blue eyes began to glow black, something the son of Nemesis knew presaged nothing good.

A single finger was pointed at the lieutenant of Artemis. Something boomed, and the archer was propelled against the nearest wall with several Legionnaires and servants. She managed to stand up again, but it was evident the blow had landed and a second would likely put her down.

“This is a poor manner to accept my hostility!” the former Emperor of Rome exclaimed loudly. “To erase this scandalous offence, I demand the participation of several of the Questers in the grand inauguration of the Circus Maximus tonight!”

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Perseus Jackson was not lacking in the sarcastic declaration, but this time, Drew thought he was ready to establish a competition where he would be the jury, the spokesman, and the ruling champion.

“At which point,” the son of Poseidon made several gesticulations noticeable for their ridiculousness, “did you understand it was a trap, Nightshade? Before or after the pseudo-Goddess beat you like her unwanted step-child?”

“I do not-“

“No, you were not thinking, clearly,” the Demigod interrupted her acidly.

A heavy silence fell in the room they had been given at their request to ‘prepare’ for the festivities – translate by their eventual death.

Luke at last coughed.

“As much as I know the execution would be difficult...why don’t we try to escape? I mean, Minos’ Queen and now Caligula are allied. They’re also trying to make sure the Great Quest fails before we’ve ever stepped a foot in the Underworld.”

“I don’t think they’re very much allied, more like they coordinated to launch certain operations the same year. The Romans can’t survive anywhere outside a Zone Mortalis; and the Queen of the Labyrinth needs mortal resources to build her private empire under the earth.” Their green-eyed leader grinned. “Of course, once is a coincidence, twice is enemy’s action. Whoever is in command in Hell, they outright tolerate their usurpation attempts.”

Dakota managed to not collapse after spitting out his Kool-Aid.

“That’s serious accusations, Jackson.”

“Accusations?” the son of Poseidon giggled like a madman...again. “There is nothing accusatory, it’s simply the truth. To bring back something from the pits of Below, the rituals had to raise a massive ruckus there. It might get unnoticed by Olympus, but I assure you the guardian of said pits would have felt the earthquakes.”

“Err...yes.” Jake Mason cleared his throat. “But that doesn’t explain why you think they don’t want us dead.”

“Because my new eternal friend the God-Emperor is essentially acting in two modes, one where he is going for the kill, the other where he’s playing with his prey. When he does the former, it’s when he wants his enemies dead at all costs. When the latter is showed off, the survival of the ‘prey’ can be achieved.”

“And he is definitely playing with us,” Lou Ellen spoke. “I suppose that means it’s better to beat him at his own game than engineering an escape attempt?”

“Pretty much,” the Earthshaker’s scion replied. “There’s a whole Legion guarding the exits, in addition to tens of thousands bodies brainwashed to follow the brother-sister duo’s orders whatever they command. It’s a slightly disadvantageous situation, and save flying away on a chariot propelled by my loyal gargoyles, the solutions include a less-than-appealing rate of casualties.”

“But the chariot races are going to be rigged from the start.”

“Annie, there is no sportive competition in history that hasn’t been rigged a little bit if money or something interesting is at stake,” the infuriating boy raised a finger like he was a wise teacher correcting his foolish student. Drew repressed a giggle.

“What about we do something loyal for once?” Zoë Nightshade, past the shock, returned combative and ready to fight Jackson verbally. “What about we destroy this ridiculous edifice, kill this duo of usurpers, and escape in the confusion?”

“Zouzou,” the Huntress growled threateningly, “I know you are a loyal servant of Olympus and all that ridiculous stuff, but,” the black-haired swordsman grinned, “you realise you are their sole and only target, right?”

“What?”

“I thought myself it was evidence itself,” Perseus nodded slowly like he was Athena surrounded by imbeciles. “The conditions of the chariot races only confirmed my suspicions. Lucy, Dannie, and myself are forbidden to take part, and you are to be our champion in the sixth race.”

“Caligula said he wanted to have you close for...impartiality reasons.”

Jackson snorted.

“And I’m sure Daisy and Jennifer will have deep conversations while we proclaim each other our eternal friendship.” A second snort was expelled from his throat. “No, it would have been easy to order the death of Dorothy here, and they didn’t take their chance. They’re after Zara. The immortal sorceress informed them we had the lieutenant of the Goddess of the Moon among our Quester group, and they improvised this trap to seize upon the opportunity.”

“And you’re going to explain to us it’s a multi-stage plan which will result in a grand ritual leading to Zoë being trapped into something she has no chance to escape?”

“No,” somehow, a bucket filled with cold water found itself frowning Annabeth by surprise. The daughter of Athena spluttered with rage. “Were you listening when I was speaking before? The ritual is when they summon shards of the Titan from the dimension Below. The races are just a simple method to separate Nightshade from us so before the Empress faces Nightshade and force her to do...whatever she wants to do, we will be too far away and surrounded by enemy forces.”

“Whatever she wants to do?” Luke raised his eyebrows at the unusual turn of the sentence.

“If we trust her speech, the beautiful Caesarea drained several Huntresses from the power Artemis gave them and the same fate awaits Nightshade should she lose.” Perseus Jackson grinned as if the concept amused him. “The problem is, I think she was lying. I think she doesn’t drain them...or it would be more accurate to say it’s not ending there. Usurpation requires someone to take over the domain and assets of the one you are usurping the seat of. And what better way to do it than to pour your own power once the empty shell in front of you is at your mercy?”

“I will die rather than forsake Lady Artemis!”

“I don’t think they really intend to give you the choice,” Jackson smiled. “There’s a reason I think they chose *chariot races* of all things for the challenge. I know you Huntresses are immortals unless the opposition slays you, but...you’re not exactly big on chariots, no?”

Judging by the way the Huntress was gritting her teeth, the son of Poseidon had marked an important point.

“Right, let’s go back to the main problem. Clarisse! You are going to be our first champion. The camp records indicate you won two races in the last year, and the ‘free weapons allowed’ is a god-sent for your talents. Rampage at will, and be careful about your surroundings. The other Demigods and mortals participating won’t be the only enemies ordered to kill you.”

“I will win this race,” the boar-armoured child of Ares promised.

“Shouldn’t we put our most experienced chariot-driver at the end?”

“No, Amy, it isn’t a question of strategy. We need to make sure the crowd is satisfied by our performance until our hosts are forced to grant us our liberty under the thunderous cheers of their own worshippers. And I have a detailed plan of how to achieve it.”

“Does that plan included transforming Varus into a pink crocodile?” The son of Hephaestus commented grimly. “Jackson your loyalties are-“

“My loyalty is to my humble person, nothing more, nothing less,” the son of Poseidon joyfully declared. “Or were you speaking about my loyalty to Olympus? It is nonexistent, I assure you. And for that, you will be in the second race, don’t thank me.”

“We’re not forced to participate in all the races,” Dakota protested loudly.

“Come on, son of Bacchus, where is your spirit of competition?” the blue-eyed portly boy gaped at that remark. “Yes, in theory, with six races and nine potential participants, we could leave a few of you in reserve, but according to the program, the last two races are doubled, which means twice the number of opponents after your pretty little heads. So we need to place two chariots ourselves. Where was I? Ah yes, third race, the spawn of the God of Wine, for the fourth, my treacherous lieutenant, the fifth will be won by my heroic lieutenant and the gardener, and for the sixth, the Huntress and the Abyssal Wisdom will pair for the worse and for the worst.”

Nightshade and Chase gave him such expressions of loathing that if they could kill with their eyes, Jackson would be dead within two heartbeats.

“Don’t forget to have fun during all these seven laps! It is not every day you have the honour to drive in the Novus Circus Maximus!”

Crazy. They were led by someone completely crazy. One by one, the Demigods and Demigoddesses left the room to be walked to the chariots where their fate would be decided. Soon there was only the daughter of Hecate and herself with Jackson.

“Now that our friends have been suitably encouraged...” the grin was absolutely NOT reassuring, “it’s time to cheat outrageously. Daughter of Love, your part in my plans is absolutely essential, so listen carefully...”

Why did Drew have the feeling she was so going to die?

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“The first rule,” the self-proclaimed God Neo Helios shouted, “is that there are no rules save that the first chariot to reach the finish line wins!”

The tens of thousands of throats in the stadium manifested their loud approval, and Perseus smirked.

Well, with such a generous invitation, who was he to refuse?

One of his gargoyles handed him an object which looked like a lighter but once properly handled, rapidly revealed its true nature: a modern rocket-launcher freshly stolen from a Hephaestus military convoy.

“Hey!” The Legionnaire closest to him shouted. “What do you think you are-“

Perseus fired, and the projectile, several kilograms of explosive and various substances used by the God of Smiths and Ammunitions were unleashed against the chariots which were barely picking speed.

The result was devastating. Three chariots disintegrated, a massive crash between two others, and the red chariot of Clarisse La Rue was taking the lead, its boar automatons answering with celerity the roars of their new mistress.

“This is...against the rules.”

“Hmm?” The son of Poseidon feigned to be surprised by the black-armoured soldier’s comment. “Impossible! Your Illustrious Divinity declared in person that if spectators intervened in the race, it wasn’t against the rules!”

“Perseus Jackson is right,” Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus began to eat some grapes on his Roman-style couch two metres away. “Still, one might call it...unsporting. These poor mortals were promised ephemeral glory.”

“They were my targets for a short moment,” he yawned. “Doesn’t it count as ephemeral glory for them?”

“Perhaps,” the being who tried to hide how little he controlled his own divine nature answered. Truly, his sister was far better as assimilating the power, certainly because she was far closer to what Selene was about than him from Helios. “Or perhaps not.”

It wasn’t a coincidence that Clarisse was finishing her first lap, with a comfortable advance on the second chariot, this one towed by horse automatons.

“I believe it’s time to activate the traps,” the claimant to the throne of Apollo affirmed. One gesture from him, and twelve holes opened on the race field, and where there had been nothing but sand and earth, now they were dangerous mass of spikes. Needless to say, at the speed the animal-shaped automatons were galloping, if they slammed into them, there was going to be death for the chariot-owner caught in the collision.

Obviously, this was why his next gesture was to throw a grenade of Greek Fire right in front of the chariot currently occupying the third position.

The explosion of green flames was spectacular, and the demise after that extremely ridiculous, it was like the mortal had been harpooned.

“My sixth kill of the day,” Perseus stole an apple from a nearby cup. “My friend, you have a gift to entertain your visitors!”

“Your champion was already winning!” A Praetorian angrily shouted.

“Do you think it’s a reason to stop cheating...I mean profiting from the absence of rules?”

“Macro, Macro,” the Emperor clapped in his hands, “I gave the rules, didn’t I? Perseus Jackson is merely...adapting them to suit his convenience.”

The blue eyes stared at him, and the ex-Tyrant knew that for all his apparent good-heartedness, ‘Caligula’ hated losing, for all the fact this race had little importance.

“But I think that since the crowd appreciates the spectacle,” the blonde Emperor of the Novus Circus Maximus threw his fruit a hundred metres away without effort, “it is time to raise the stakes. Release the Sun Dragon.”

The red chariot of the daughter of Ares had increased its advance significantly by the end of the third turn when the first roar resonated. The massive gates opened seconds after, and Clarisse had to be one of the first to have a glance at the monster unleashed in the Circus.

And it was a monster. Easily the size of three or four Hellhounds like Zoë, and his pet – busy devouring several treats of meat – was closer in size to a Battle Tank than a bike.

And as the name suggested, yes, it breathed fire. Solar fire, the golden flames of the sun.

“A present of Lady Medea, I suppose?” the green-eyed boy asked as he tried to think about which artefact would be the best to help Clarisse survive this monster. The belligerent girl had taken Carnifex with her, but as good as a spear was for the offence, she was going to need some defensive power. In the mean time, the red-gold reptile decided to have a snack, devouring chariot and driver which were in second place.

“You didn’t try to train it into attacking only Demigods?”

“I promised them ephemeral glory, not safety and security,” the Augustus of Rome was evidently satisfied by the massacre...and the way the crowd shouted his name, in all likelihood.

“How forgetful of me,” and he threw Clarisse a replica of an Aegis shield when she finished her fourth lap, though unlike the original, this one was a night-infused artefact.

“FOR ARES!”

The red chariot charged the Sun Dragon, who released a torrent of golden fire as the boars and Clarisse clearly tried to hurt it. The night protection absorbed the flames as they came into contact, and soon the sun dragon had the disagreeable surprise to see its tail impaled, before some gigantic claws erupted from her armour and dragged the Sun Dragon behind her vehicle.

The massive reptile didn’t like it at all.

But the spectators did, and the Circus Maximum went into ebullition.

After several more spear wounds inflicted, the Dragon was released, and the sorceress’ present understood the message: get out of the arena, which it did promptly, but not before smashing another chariot. Given that in addition to his modest contributions the girl of Barrack Five was eliminating her opponents without hesitation, the seventh lap was a victory lap.

“WINNER THE ROUSIOI CHARIOT!” which was just the Latin name for red, he knew.

“Impressive,” the golden usurper hiding behind a human appearance did a good job of smiling. “You have a talented berserker in you service, son of Poseidon.”

“The sons and daughters of Ares have stayed close to their roots of ancient Greece,” and since he was so generous, he could throw one compliment for his opponent. “As do the sons of Mars when they serve the Legions of Rome.”

“Indeed,” the self-proclaimed God approved, “your champion can keep the boars and the chariot, may they prove as useful to her in the future as they were in this race. I will add an Aurei reward should she survive your dangerous Quest.”

A small army of servants hurried to remove from the race field the debris of the chariots, the corpses, and the multiple traps.

“For the next race, I would appreciate your restraint if you didn’t kill half of the participants before the first lap is over.”

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There hadn’t been any fixed rules for Great Quests, but Drew thought one should be: whatever insanity Jackson tried yesterday, he can always do something crazier.

“How by the Holy Love did he manage to steal a Hephaestus rocket-launcher?” the daughter of Aphrodite asked as the storm of applause and cheers created by the death race finally decreased in intensity.

“I don’t know,” Lou Ellen replied next to her. “How did he manage to acquire a Greek Fire grenade and a Noctis Shield?”

These were quite interesting questions...and the two Demigoddesses didn’t have the answer. It might be for the best, since the enemy was so close to them.

“The son of Poseidon is quite resourceful,” Julia Drusilla said, though she insisted they called her Neo Selene. “His exploits have been more and more noticeable these last three years, and rumours and news have spread everywhere, especially here in the Labyrinth. The enclave was moved here after his first rampage through this area, did you know?”

“We knew he went into the Labyrinth several times, yes,” the daughter of Hecate admitted. “He and his friend the Minotaur.”

“An odd friendship,” the Roman Caesarea told them. “But boys will always be boys...”

It was a way to look at it.

While they tried to not reveal too much about them and continue a polite conversation, the next race preparations began below. Like Clarisse, Jake Mason was given a vivid red chariot.

Unlike the victorious daughter of Ares however, his chariot had not received boars automatons, but donkey-crafted metallic coursers. The Romans must have seized a lot of automatons from Daedalus’ ateliers to have this menagerie of automatons available.

This wasn’t the only difference with the first race. The chariot drivers were doing their best to stay as far away as possible from the section where Perseus Jackson had a direct fire line to annihilate them without effort.

And this time, the Caligula-appointed boys and girls weren’t laughing at the red chariot. Their predecessors had mocked Clarisse La Rue, and they had died for their arrogance. This time, they wouldn’t participate believing a Demigod of New Byzantium was easy prey.

“Was Jake Mason any good at chariot races?” Drew asked to the black-eyed sorceress.

“I don’t remember hearing him winning any,” was the less-than-reassuring answer. “I remember the best chariot from the Hephaestus Barrack was the one of Beckendorf, though.”

Brown eyes met black eyes, and the two girls arrived at the unpalatable conclusion it would be best if Jackson did the same thing he had done for Clarisse in the first race.

“This going to be fascinating,” the words of their shifting purple toga-wearing hostess were not exactly friendly. “The children of the Smith God always have gifts to deal with automatons. I wonder how well he is going to deal with my brother’s efforts.”

“You didn’t take part in the organisation of the races?” Lou Ellen inquired.

“I was involved in the planning of the last race,” damn it, Jackson had been right again. “For the rest, I left the major and minor details to Neo Helios. He always loved organising spectacles like this while we were young.”

The affection...no, not the affection or even the tender feelings, the *love* of Julia Drusilla was nearly suffocating.

“You adore him.”

“Of course I do,” the blonde immortal woman said without shame. “Do you have any idea how rare it was two thousand years ago to have your brother choose you as his Heiress? Do you have any idea how much he trusted and continue to trust me?”

The black-armoured sorceress coughed.

“There were rumours...”

“Oh, these weren’t rumours, child of Hecate.” The smile was innocence itself. “He was my first when I was thirteen. And while I grew older, he was the only man I went to bed with voluntarily.”

Both Demigoddesses had nothing to say to that. They had expected many things, but not this blunt and proud admission.

This was...incest.

“Do not look so shocked, dears. You are the descendants of incest yourselves, aren’t you? Your parents if not your grandparents are the result of the first mythical incestuous relationships. The Master of Olympus and his wife are brothers and sisters, and no one bats an eye.”

“But...” But they are Gods, Drew wanted to say. “Is this why you are supporting fully your brother’s plans? Because you are lovers?”

“Our plans, Drew Tanaka, our plans,” for an instant, the air shivered and a being with silver hair and midnight eyes replaced the seemingly delicate woman. “And no, this isn’t only a question of love. This pathetic wastrel of God of Music killed me with one of his incurable fevers when I was barely twenty-one. Even by the standards of our era, it was extremely young. Do you think I was happy to learn I was punished because the Gods still weren’t happy after all the sacrifices we did for them?”

“Err...surely they must be...err...a far more pragmatic reason for Lord Apollo’s behaviour.”

Something angry flashed into the Roman woman’s blue eyes.

“I can’t prove it,” the Caesarea said in a low tone, “but I think this imbecile was one of my admirers at several immense celebrations just before I died. I refused their advances, of course.”

An eagle of bronze materialised before the participants, and the spectators screamed again as the chariots left their starting positions at the maximal acceleration they were able. To Drew and Lou Ellen’s dissatisfaction, Jake Mason was barely fourth when they arrived at the end of the half-lap. Near-miraculously, there hadn’t been any accident, despite the twenty chariots in the race.

“It is only the advice of Neo Selene, girls,” the sister of Caligula kept her eyes on the chariots and the spectacle proposed by the contestants of the Circus Maximus, “but I know you will soon begin to fully experience the pull towards Perseus Jackson. If he can give you lust and power...if you think you can trust him with your soul and body...don’t resist. Embrace it. There are few Demigods like him, and you have been granted a rare chance, in this age of rebellion against Olympus.”

The daughter of Aphrodite had excellent composure, but she was very well aware her face had to be redder than a tomato. They were too young...and even if they weren’t, they didn’t know Jackson at all, save his insanity and his tendency to throw them into suicidal situations and somewhat keeping them alive until now!

“I... We will keep your suggestions in mind.” This was one of those moments you wanted no witness, since it gave too much blackmail...

Minor consolation, neither she nor Lou would want to disclose that kind of gossip.

The creation of a smoke cloud forced them to refocus on the race, because it appeared their insane leader had thrown...a stuffed turtle? No, it was a metal carapace, not a turtle toy. The chariot which was in the lead hadn’t the time to realise what was happening, as the red projectile decapitated one of its horse automatons and send the chariot behind flitting against the protected walls, resulting in a lot of debris and confusion.

“That has to hurt,” Julia Drusilla smiled. “Ah, I see my brother unleashed the modified Colchis Bulls.”

“The what?” Lou Ellen exclaimed. “You aren’t serious, their fire is so hot no Demigod can’t withstand it!”

Before the last word had been uttered, the two bulls were into the Circus’ second race...though maybe ‘bull’ was not an adequate name. The things were bull-shaped, sure enough, but Drew knew they were zoos which owned smaller elephants.

“Your brother-“ the words failed her.

“My brother wants to give a memorable spectacle to the people who believe in us. Is it so wrong?”

It wasn’t...as long as you weren’t one of the mortals caught in this blood sport. Because as one Bull caught up with the first chariot, the gold-armoured young man who was driving it literally burst into flames.

In an instant, there was a flaming torch...then a golden statue which also appeared to be in flames.

“What the?”

Flowers exploded everywhere, and the first Bull appeared troubled by Jackson’s intervention – because it was him once more who had intervened.

“I think we will really have to write some rules for the next festivities,” Julia Drusilla sighed. “Specifically, a limitation of how many artefacts a spectator is allowed to use to interfere in each race.”

The chariots began the fourth lap out of seven, and the race went utterly crazy. New holes opened up to reveal braziers of Greek Fire, more spiked traps materialised, and of course the Colchisian Bulls were in hot pursuit behind, trying to trample each of the chariot drivers who tried to outpace and outsmart them.

Jake Mason was in second place by now, and was using profusely his machine gun, which he had mounted on the decorated crimson prow of his chariot, to fire Celestial Bronze ammunition at everything and everyone.

Four laps, four long laps to survive...the green flames burned hot...and suddenly a sort of viscous substance was thrown on it as Jackson continued to prove himself the favourite of the Roman spectators.

But no force or magical explosion seemed to be able to stop or even delay the Colchis Bulls...these were not the original creatures forged by Hephaestus, but they weren’t any less dangerous. Their eyes burned in golden fire, and their fiery breath was as radiant as the sun...probably the ‘modifications’ mentioned previously.

Drew was quite happy not to be participating in this race...she most would likely have died by now.

“Is there a spell capable of hurting the Bulls?”

“Not without hurting the chariot drivers...and not without a lot of preparation I don’t have the time for,” the daughter of Hecate admitted. “Besides, it’s more water magic we would need to beat this kind of fires...”

The fifth lap saw three more fiery deaths. The sixth lap destroyed two chariots. By then, Jake Mason was still second...out of two remaining participants. His machine gun begun to make shrieking sounds. His automatons stopped throwing projectiles, and one of the metal donkeys began to take a dangerous volcano-like shade.

Drew closed her eyes when the first Colchis Bull was so close that the wheels of the red chariot began to burn.

When she reopened them, the last two chariots were engulfed in a monumental explosion.

“A pity,” their ‘hostess’ said in a detached tone. “There will be no winner for this race...brother, was it really necessary to amuse yourself like that?”

At first the long black-haired Demigoddess didn’t understand what the ancient woman was saying...and then the cloud become golden before coalescing into an animal shape.

It was...a donkey. A real donkey, unlike the automatons which had towed Jake’s chariot.

The donkey stood on four legs after making sounds like it was trying to shrug off the sound of explosions...and then it *spoke*.

“I am alive!”

“Jake?”

“Oh, by the pits,” Lou Ellen swore. “First a pink crocodile, now a talking donkey? And we can’t even blame Jackson for that one...”

The Romans burst into cheers though, because for some reason, they found the situation hilarious...

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Dakota had stopped drinking Kool-Aid.

It was not because he wasn’t thirsty. He was. His Fatal Flaw was Thirst, as it was for most sons of Bacchus, and this was something unquenchable.

No, he stopped drinking because he was utterly terrified.

Roman Demigods, in general, were absolutely *pathetic* at riding chariots. For all the versatility of the Roman Legions, for all the thousands of battles fought before and after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, chariot-driving was something which had never been among their strengths. The cavalry doctrine had evolved and taken importance during the different centuries. The infantry was the Queen of the wars. The siege engines changed and shifted to cannons when the age of gunpowder came.

But chariots? No, the Roman Demigods weren’t using chariots. They left that to the Greek.

Dakota McDonald had tried to master it when he joined the ranks of the Questers, of course. But one couldn’t change the inevitable, and as far as standards were concerned, he was far worse than most Roman Demigods where the chariots were concerned.

He was, to be honest, bloody *awful* at it.

And now he was supposed participating in a death race, one which had just seen Jake Mason nearly die and be transformed into a talking donkey, a talking *red* donkey, because *Bloody* *Caligula* thought it was funny.

Dakota was so doomed. His teeth were clacking, his knees were feeling so, so weak, and his body was shivering from head to toe.

“My friend, you look like you could use some refreshment before your race!” Oh great, now Jackson was here. He was twice doomed...no, make it thrice.

“I don’t want to drink, Jackson.” The black-haired Demigod said weakly. “I am ridiculous on a chariot. All the Kool-Aid in the world won’t do me any good when facing these damned Bulls.”

“I have it under good authority the next beasts to be unleashed won’t be the Colchis Bulls, my friends.”

“So it will be a Giant Eagle. Or a Drakon. Or something so big we would need to bring a Cohort to kill it. I don’t think Kool-Aid will be of any help.”

“You’re right.”

“Hey?”

“You’re right,” Perseus Jackson smiled with this grin that was giving him the idea that maybe, just maybe, facing the Colchis Bulls alone, naked, and weaponless was preferable. “Kool-Aid won’t help you.” The son of Poseidon took a step left, revealing a...barrel? “But Eleutherian Wine will.”

“How did you...” if this was truly Eleutherian Wine, there were king’s ransoms worth less than- his thoughts stopped abruptly. Eleutherian Wine. Named after one of his father’s aspects, namely ‘Eleutherios’, the Liberator, this alcoholic drink was...well, THE alcoholic drink, only losing in potency, taste, and healing properties to the famous Nectar of the Gods. It was a strength-enhancer drink, one which could make the weakest son of Aphrodite into the new Heracles. It was also a wine which destroyed ALL your inhibitions. “My father...”

“Your father isn’t here.” The insane boy looked around. “As far as I’m aware.”

“This can’t be-“

“There are no rules save the one which says the first to finish *wins*. So it isn’t against the rules, since there aren’t any rules.”

“I am not going to drink a cup of this barrel.” Even his father couldn’t predict what would happen.

“Remember what I told you before, my dear drunk friend?” Dakota frowned, what had the madman-

“I don’t drink wine, I drown people into barrels of it.”

“Get away from me!”

But the other Demigod was too strong, and the open barrel soon engulfed his whole universe...

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“Clarisse! Tell Jackson to transform me back!”

Any other moment, the daughter of Ares wouldn’t have laughed. But this was a red donkey braying at her, and her race had destroyed most of her self-control.

Clarisse laughed so hard that for the next minutes, every braying sound made her laugh harder, striking some furniture, and she shed countless tears for the first time because it was *too goddamn* *funny*.

The old tales of past Great Quests hadn’t mentioned that.

“This is your fault, Jackson!” A new braying and all attempts to stop her laughter crisis went up in smoke.

“I plead non-guilty, my honourable quadruped friend.”

“For once, the son of Poseidon says the truth,” Emperor Caligula raised an eyebrow, ignoring the wounded expression of their mad leader. “I transformed you into a donkey, son of Hephaestus. Your fellow Quester cost me Incitatus, I thought it was nice pay-back.”

The red donkey brayed and struck violently the floor of the Imperial Lodge.

“Well, it’s not funny anymore! Transform me back!”

“If I do that, you will die,” the blonde Roman replied with a smirk. “Your last instants as a human may be foggy, but I assure you a Colchis Bull’s horn found its way into your human body and likely burned your spine...unless it broke it first. Anyway, once I transform you back, you will have mere seconds left to live. No one, not even Asclepius, can heal you that fast.”

The master of the Circus Maximus then ignored the new braying carrying insults and protestations, and turned towards Jackson.

“The Interlude is over. Is your third Champion ready?”

“He is, he is, my eternal friend...as a matter of fact, he’s just arriving to take his place on the starting grid!”

Clarisse watched the racing track of the immense Roman game field...and wondered if she wasn’t suddenly subject to hallucinations.

Dakota McDonald was presenting himself to the crowd. Or at least someone having his looks did.

Because while the daughter of Ares wasn’t a friend of him, she was rather sure the son of Bacchus would not under any circumstances present himself bare-chested in front of a crowd of tens of thousands of spectators. Nor would he wear a wolf pelt fixed by magic on his shoulders.

And he certainly wasn’t good enough to drive something towed by murderous automatons...not that he did, since for the first time, the red chariot partially painted in purple was towed by massive, *living* black panthers.

“AVE ROME!” The new champion of New Byzantium shouted, raising a nine-tailed whip which had to be created from the most vicious wines in existence, given that she could see the thorns from here. And as one chariot was too slow ceding him the priority, the whip struck, killing the mortal nearly instantly and dragging his corpse on several metres. “AVE CAESAR! THE ONE WHO IS GOING TO WIN SALUTE YOU!”

“Ave!” Caligula saluted, but even he seemed to be deeply surprised by the changes in the Quester.

The crowd loved it though, and there was something...some sort of purple shroud expanding everywhere.

As discreetly as she could, she went by Jackson’s side.

“How did you-“

“Half of a barrel of Eleutherian Wine.”

Clarisse gaped. So did Caligula not far from her.

“I...” the self-proclaimed Neo Helios was literally speechless for several seconds. “Setting aside how you were able to acquire such a priceless drink I have not in my own private cellars...does the employment of this wine, even on a Demigod, does not carry serious risks?”

“The risks have always been way exaggerated,” the green-eyed madman waved, “it is possible my dear drunk friend will lose utterly his inhibitions for a few decades, show a tendency to lead campaigns of madness wherever there’s a significant party nearby, ride leopards and panthers summoned from somewhere, and other minor troubles of personality....but apart from that, all will be well.”

The departure of the race was given, and Dakota McDonald immediately destroyed the closest chariot next to him...with nothing but a whip and his bare hands.

“This is insane,” and this was not an Emperor famous for being sane who spoke,” do you have any idea how much damage can he cause before he regained some measure of self-control?”

“Come on my friend! Surely-“

“His father reached India with nothing but a bunch of half-naked peasants to help him!”

“I’m sure my drunk friend won’t go that far!” A chariot was smashed against the walls, while another was so thrashed they should begin to invent a new word for it. “Probably. Possibly.”

“Release the Harpies!” Caligula announced. “And please record that Eleutherian Wine is now considered as a forbidden doping substance in all sport competitions of my Imperium!”

But the massive flock of Harpies didn’t last a minute – or two laps, if one counted in race terms. The panthers went on the devour those fallen by nothing but the barbs of the whip and sheer madness.

The small Hydras which were released later didn’t fare any better. Chariot drivers were spanked by the whip, sometimes forced to drive with their backsides offered to the spectator’s eyes, or be struck several more times and mutilated.

The crowd went mad. The power of the son of Bacchus engulfed everything, and gave them new thunderous craziness as they cheered over and over.

The last laps were just difficult to memorise. Was the drunk Roman Demigod drinking the blood of his deceased opponents or was he adding more pet to his chariot which went more and more purple? Did he ram deliberately one of the last chariots as he gained a lap on him?

“VICTORY! DAKOTA MCDONALD IS VICTORIOUS!”

The madness, far from being over, was just beginning. The son of Bacchus abandoned his chariot near one of the Gates and directly jumped into the ranks of the spectators where he proceeded to...err...

“Damn, the censorship will never allow us to report that,” Jackson was smiling like the cat which had eaten the canary. “He has a way with women, our Casanova...”

“Err...yes, shouldn’t we,” Clarisse saw nothing wrong in kissing a boy, quite the contrary, but the kissing had had been for the first seconds, now it was far more...err...carnal in the stands, “err...stop him?”

“Leave him to his fun,” the son of Poseidon raised his cup. “He won, didn’t he? And besides...this is the decadence of Rome!”

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Perseus Jackson, Lou Ellen had now no doubt about, was both an insane genius with a talent to find and unleash dangerous magical goods with no thought about the collateral damage, and possibly one of the greatest threats to Olympus which had ever existed.

Assuredly, the son of Poseidon wasn’t able to cast Hellfire or to kill a God. So what? With one barrel of wine, the insane boy had convinced more than half of the crowd of men and women to go utterly mad, as an orgy of drinking and gluttony in general had contaminated tens of thousands of souls, to say nothing of the...more decadent acts playing in the common stands and high-class lodges.

“Isn’t it going to be a problem, Neo Selene?” the daughter of Hecate asked the Empress of the Circus Maximus. “Bacchus must know exactly where you are given how these...these activities are fuelling his power. And where one Olympian knows where you are, the others will soon be aware of it too.”

Silent question: were they going to receive Zeus’ Bolts upon their heads in the next minutes?

“It is a problem,” the Roman blue-eyed ruler conceded. “In that our continued survival is going to be revealed to the Olympians. But they won’t dare striking at us here.”

Her unconvinced mood must have been evident, because Julia Drusilla smirked.

“Dear, we didn’t name this Circus ‘Novus’ just because we are fond of the past. While the Labyrinth is constantly on the move, this enclave is currently immobile one kilometre below the ruins of Old Rome. The Greek Pantheon can’t strike us down without burning many, many of the old roots of their Roman Aspects.”

“This is why it was so easy for you to attract men and women for this spectacle, right?” Drew Tanaka intervened as the fourth race continued, the third lap being fiercely contested with Ethan Nakamura in second position.

“It was,” the woman who wished to usurp Artemis’ throne shamelessly admitted. “And it is also why we have been able to build faster our new enclave. I’m afraid we won’t allow tours for now, but believe us, soon the New Rome will be ready to be revealed to the world.”

“Even the Mist won’t be able to hide that.” Lou Ellen shivered. Disinterested tone or not, cities emerging from the depths of the earth would send whole countries into panic.

“No.” Their hostess replied. “But then the Mist was never supposed to hide each and every move of the Olympians. It was a great power which had to be used sparingly, not to hide the existence of Gods and monsters altogether. The Master of Olympus decided otherwise. He decided to hide the existence of the mythical. Well, we disagree.”

The son of Nemesis eliminated his closest challenger and set aflame the oil spread on the sand, his griffon automatons easily jumping to avoid the inferno just lit. Madness spread further in the stands, with a naked Dakota McDonald doing things no underage boy should be doing.

“You’re speaking about war.”

And not a series of skirmishes or one fought in some backwater in Africa or Asia. Hell, the whole Vietnam War would be nothing more than a firework exercise gone wrong.

“Yes, of course. If the current Western civilisation doesn’t suit you...the Western civilisation must change.”

For her smiling and pretty face, this woman was half as crazy as Jackson.

Lost in her thoughts, it took the one-sided victory of Ethan Nakamura, won on the corpse of a series of horrible plane-sized vultures, to give her something to forget these dark revelations...

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As he left the healing wing of the Novus Circus Maximus, Ethan was rather satisfied. For the price of a rather impressive scar on his left arm, he had won his race and survived another hour of this insane Great Quest.

Of course, since Jackson was nearby, his relief didn’t last more than a few seconds. In fact, it lasted until the time he watched a massive carnivorous plant grow in the middle of the fifth chariot race.

“My treacherous lieutenant!” Here was Jackson holding a flamethrower as several thorns and vegetal projectiles were hurled against the Imperial Lodge. “Congratulations on your great victory!”

“What did you say to Gardiner, Jackson?”

“Why do people always assume it is my fault? I am innocent!”

One day, Jackson would die. And after that memorable event, Hades was going to have the challenge of his immortal life to designate the three Judges which would have to deal with the son of Poseidon’s lies and partial truths.

“I don’t believe you,” the black swordsman grunted before coming so close to the insane boy they could whisper to each other, something that given the madness reigning around them and Caligula being nowhere in sight, gave them a measure of privacy. “Don’t we have an opportunity to escape? The Cohort which had the upper ground of the Circus is now participating in the orgy of McDonald.”

“This isn’t an orgy, my treacherous lieutenant. It is an excessive celebration!”

Ethan gave their informal Quests’ leader a black eye.

“There are thousands of men and women naked in the stands, most of them doing things like drinking, gorging themselves on food like there is no tomorrow, kissing, touching, exhibiting themselves naked, and last but not least, *having sex*, Jackson. If that doesn’t classify as orgy, I’m ready to pose my candidature for the position of Pontifex Maximus if we return alive to New Byzantium.”

Jackson being Jackson, he chuckled.

“Point taken. Most seriously, yes, part of the reason I plunged our good drunken friend in this barrel of wine – apart to allow him to vent up a bit, of course – was to test how good the security measures of this Roman enclave inside the Labyrinth are.”

“And?”

“The Circus is encircled by three full Cohorts, my treacherous lieutenant,” the green-eyed commander continued in a complete no-nonsense tone which was frightening by its intensity. “There are also two full Cohorts, one of those two double-sized, patrolling between the Novus Circus Maximus and the Gate we need to go through. And in case you were wondering, the reason the ‘God-Emperor’ isn’t there is to give his blessings to several hundred Legionnaires caught in the effects of Bacchus’ boons.”

Perseus Jackson drank a cup of orange juice before continuing.

“I will admit that for all his reputation, this Roman is a pretty capable friend.”

Ethan Nakamura felt his eyes rose to the Labyrinth’s walls over their heads in silent prayer.

“If you tried to kill him instead of befriending him...”

“I tried.” The admission silenced him. “I am a rather good artist-thief, and I substituted several fruits and several things he ate and drank. All of them had received enough poison to kill a Drakon. He didn’t even get stomach pain or a beginning of vomiting. This August can’t be described as really human anymore. I haven’t been able to do the same things for his Caesarea, but I would be very surprised if the same was untrue.”

“Okay...” This was very bad. “Speaking hypothetically, do you have something that can...err...give him enough pause so that we take our entire group and run to the Underworld without looking back?”

“I have. Unfortunately this is...naughty, naughty, Miranda.” A second carnivorous plant, one looking like the nightmarish cousin of the first, a green-gold flytrap salivating for human flesh, had tried to sneak up while they were speaking. Unfortunately for it – and fortunately for the humans around – Jackson had a flamethrower, and the plant may be ferocious, but it wasn’t resistant to fire.

“This daughter of Demeter is getting quite troublesome.” Maybe there was some trace of sanity... “If she really wants to assassinate me, there will be far better occasions to do it.”

No, sanity wasn’t making a return. Why did he continue to hope for it?

“At least Castellan is in the lead.”

“Yes, and now my good friend the Emperor is going to drop his last surprise upon them.”

The minds of the son of Poseidon and the former Roman Emperor had to function on the same mad frequency, this was the only plausible explanation for how correctly Jackson predicted the move of his opponents. In a golden flash, no less than five immense statues, all of them more than three metres-tall, materialised between the chariots, one for each of the survivors. And they carried in their white arms of marbles very dangerous-looking spears and swords.

At least this convinced Gardiner to divert her carnivorous creations against the new threat.

“You don’t throw at them a few artefacts to make their progress easier? Castellan hasn’t plants to help him.”

“My heroic lieutenant is fine,” something justified a heartbeat later as the son of Hermes destroyed one of the statues’ legs by positioning one of the most dangerous traps against the enchanted white stone. “I am sure he is enjoying himself.”

If Castellan thought like Ethan, no, no he really didn’t.

The black-eyed Demigod blinked and kept his eyes off the chariots for a second, and when he refocused, the situation was dramatically changing.

By several holes which had remained carefully hidden now, a liquid was flowing into the Circus Maximus...a bronze-coloured liquid...except there were some animalistic shapes materialising and disappearing inside, it was like-

“Now that, that is truly fascinating. They must have taken it from Daedalus’ stores, I think.”

“What is it?”

“I think it’s called the Sea of Bronze,” Perseus Jackson told him. “As for what it’s doing? It’s a Curse of Hephaestus, I’m sure you can arrive to your own conclusion...”

The boy who had turned a son of Bacchus into a crazy orgy-leader sighed.

“Ah, dear, I am going to have to intervene. My heroic lieutenant and the daughter of Demeter won’t do us much good if they are changed in bronze statues...as heroic and spectacular as the final result would be.”

This time there wasn’t any rocket-launcher or something ridiculous...just a few jars of water containing far more liquid than any container of that size should have, if the laws of physics were respected...but did the son of Poseidon care about them in the last decade?

It was just pure and brutal hydrokinesis, shields of water surrounding the two Questers’ chariots and abandoning the rest to the non-existent mercy of Caligula.

When the wave of liquid bronze receded, the chariots and carnivorous flowers had been transformed into a grand spectacle of bronze-shaped immobile figures.

Ethan couldn’t say he liked the way some of this cursed thing had disappeared into Jackson’s jars, however.

“And now like the proverb says: the best race for the end of the spectacle.”

“Jackson, Nightshade has never practised chariot-driving, and Chase is more stubborn than a mule...no offence, Jake,” the son of Nemesis declared as the red donkey which had been a Demigod bared his teeth at him.

“Yes, it has all the ingredients to be a disaster, no?”

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Luke had a new motto to propose for those who wished to embark on a Great Quest: *it can always get worse*.

The other possible option was: *we have Jackson with us; the worse is yet to come*.

There were some leaders who were sure to disagree, even after being nearly drowned by an enchanted flood of liquid metal which would have transformed him into a bronze statue if not for the Son of Poseidon.

To this, he could point at what remained of the Questers after several days in the Labyrinth. Scipio Varus, missing, transformed into a pink crocodile. Jake Mason, not missing, but certain sentenced to stay in a red donkey’s body for the rest of his life unless a God proved Caligula’s power and words wrong. Dakota McDonald was busy participating and leading an orgy of such a magnitude it had likely never been seen in the last centuries, and the least said about the mental state of the son of Bacchus, the better.

The more hours they spent on this Great Quest, the crazier all Questers were becoming.

They had to reach Hell before they were all utterly mad...yes, he was aware of how bad it sounded.

It was the last race. Whatever happened, they would be on their way to their real goal in a couple of hours, hopefully with no more dead or crippled people-

Annabeth and Nightshade were on the starting grid, with respectively a red chariot towed by red automaton owls, and a silver chariot propelled by silver deer automatons. The Huntress was really singled out...

“I see you are going for psychological warfare at its finest, Neo Selene,” Jackson said, and sure enough, the Imperial Lodge’s immense dimensions decreased to a more humble width, bringing back Caligula’s sister and the two Demigoddesses conversing with her.

Luke coughed.

“Psychological warfare?”

“All of the chariot drivers of this race save Amy are former Huntresses,” the green-eyed Demigod explained too cheerfully, “Huntresses that Neo Selene claimed by conquering the Moon’s power in their souls.”

Holy...Zoë Nightshade’s wrath was going to know no limits when she was going to realise-

“I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!”

Fortunately, most of the stadium’s spectators were raving mad, so they didn’t take offence at the insult.

“And the daughter of Athena...this is a nasty curse lingering on her.”

Luke stopped breathing.

“If it’s not a bother, your Immortal Divinity, could you activate it? I have no idea as to the effects, and your beautiful Circus Maximus looks like the perfect sand box to test it in safe conditions.”

“Jackson!” He shouted. “Don’t you dare-“

“A most interesting suggestion,” the sister of the mad Roman Emperor bared her perfect white teeth. “Yes, I think we all can benefit from some entertainment. Let’s see what this curse is about.”

And she clicked her fingers.

Luke closed his eyes. Please, Hermes and all the Olympians, if there was some good in this world-

“YOU CAN’T STOP ME FROM SEEING THE TRUTH! MY SOUL WAS CREATED TO BE A SPIDER!”

“Jackson...I am going to kill you.”

“Join the queue,” the red donkey told him. “I want to have my chance first at crushing his skull.”

“By his fault I have lost most of my special seeds,” Miranda Gardiner hissed. “One day, there will be a root tearing his intestines from the inside.”

“It seems,” Caligula swallowed one more grape, “that your friends don’t appreciate your...particular sense of humour, Perseus Jackson.”

The black-haired Demigod cackled loudly...and then his face showed this infernal grin they had learned to fear, for it brought nothing but additional madness, bad jokes, and more problems the size of a mountain’s avalanche.

“Of course not!” The scion of the Lord of Atlantis said. “For I am a villain, **and this is the first part of my plan**.”

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The big problem of his opposition was that only a heroic mind could have believed in a coincidence.

Two usurpations happening in relatively close proximity to each other? Once could have been a coincidence, two, as he had explained to the others truthfully, was a pattern.

After this acknowledgement, finding the cameras had not been that difficult; if Perseus had to be honest, the poor Prefect of the Praetorian’s Guard should try to look less suspicious. It was too easy to find what he did at any given time.

The plan of ‘Neo Helios’ was rather interesting, once seen in its totality. Film and edit the races and the events all around the Circus Maximus, so that the duo of brother and sister had huge amounts of blackmail over him. Thus when they would ‘request’ his help in the future, he would have no choice but to obey, or risk being incinerated by Zeus. He was ready to bet all the Legionnaires would disappear from the videos sent to Thunder News and the other Olympian channels.

Neutralising the cameras and taking the true recording to replace them by far more supportive versions of his deeds had been the first part of his plan, really.

The second part had been to carefully emplace the different pieces which would allow his escape.

There was to be one. The survival of Pasiphaë, Caligula, and Julia Drusilla would enrage the Gods, no matter how many good reasons he gave for not being able to slay them. Add some other problems, and Athena, Artemis, or Zeus were likely going to kill him first and ask questions later, all the while they pretended to uphold ‘justice’.

They had to be seen as escaping the clutches of the Roman Augustus on his way to become the new God of the Sun. Anything else would be perilous.

Fortunately, one Hellhound and plenty of gargoyles offered a lot of opportunities.

“For I am a villain, **and this is the first part of my plan.”**

The Charmspeak was not directed at anyone in particular, but it didn’t need to be. As the correct words were uttered, the ‘poison’ ‘Neo Helios’ and ‘Neo Selene’ had ingested, confident in their ability to neutralise the toxins, was revealed to be an ultra-powerful paralytic magical substance which was going to leave them immobile and silent – the last part was a maybe - for at least ten minutes.

“Jackson, what-“

“Later, my treacherous lieutenant,” ah, here it came, “our chariot is arriving.”

What better way to escape than use his opponent’s massive sun chariot? Towed by half a dozen of his gargoyles, it was longer than a limo and could transport all the remaining Demigods present, yes, even the donkey-transformed one, with ease.

“Throw ropes to Huntress and the spider’s believer,” the two were busy massacring their competition as the signal to launch the race never arrived. “The party is over.”

“And Dakota? And all the Legionnaires standing between us and the exit?”

The son of Poseidon clicked his fingers, and two gargoyles began to soar from the opposite section of the stadium, transporting in their arms the unconscious – and nearly naked - son of Bacchus.

Then the explosions began.

“Jackson! We’re still in the Circus Maximus! Do you want to kill us?”

“Calm yourself, oh son of Hermes,” he replied, trying his best not to sigh. No one was getting the complexity of his plan, and it was making him sad. “I’m spreading the blessings of Bacchus to the whole Cohorts waiting outside. They’re going to rush here to participate to the party while we make our dramatic escape.”

Loud songs of drunken debauchery were heard everywhere now. The madness was spreading. Bacchus-Dionysus was going to owe him a lot of favours for the sheer chaos unleashed today.

“All aboard, Questers! We have a mission, and I don’t see any symbols of power nearby.” Miraculously, most of them obeyed with only a minor glare here and there. Perseus walked to join them and-

“**You aren’t going to get away with this**.” Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus seethed. Impressively, the silent part of the enchantment was broken, though it was arguably the weakest part of it.

“The ‘stealing your chariot part’? I can assure you we will, your August Divinity.” Perseus smirked. “Or was it the part where you threaten me with the existence of the other members of your Triumvirate Commodus and Nero?”

“There is a Triumvirate, yes,” Neo Selene murmured, “but we did not choose these imbeciles for allies.”

“Ah, my mistake, it seems the rumours were wrong, then,” it was also possible they were lying, of course. And...oh dear, why waste an opportunity like this? Walking towards the woman wishing to usurp Artemis, the green-eyed Demigod seized the medallion shining with moonlight ethereal power with his special gloves, placing it in an enchanted box in a hurry. If this artefact hadn’t been prepared for Nightshade, he was ready to eat one hundred gold coins. “I’m taking this as the gift it is intended to be.”

“Do you obtain all your artefacts like this, Perseus Jackson?”

“It happens,” he admitted, giving her a formal salute and smile, before running back towards the enormous golden chariot. “Clarisse, I think we have stayed too long here. Get us out of here!”

“You got it boss! Let’s go kill something somewhere else!” Was he that bad an influence...no, impossible...it was all Ares’ blood.

The flying chariot was of high quality. In a matter of seconds, they were already gaining a stupendous acceleration, one his gargoyles should be unable to reach.

They left the Novus Circus Maximus in the throes of chaos behind them.

All was as it should be.

**24 May 2006, Hell’s Gate, the Labyrinth**

Dakota woke up and regretted it. Everything hurt.

“I had this strangest dream...” Gods, why was the world spinning like that?

“Cool, we had strange dreams too,” a guttural voice tore apart his ears. It was...Clarisse La Rue. “This was something, I tell you. We saw you trounce the opposition on a chariot where you reined in two hungry panthers, killed at least eight men and women with nothing but a whip and your bare hands. Then you won the race, and proceeded to have sex with over a dozen women while throwing tens of thousands of spectators into the greatest orgy of this century.”

The words had the merit of throwing most of the pain and exhaustion out of his body, if only for a small moment.

“It wasn’t a dream?”

“Of course not,” a red donkey entered his field of vision, doing his best to avoid being licked by a black Hellhound.

Dakota turned his head to see if on his right there were more signs of sanity available, but all he saw was Jackson and the Minotaur in some deep conversation.

“When I will have my eight legs you will regret this, Gardiner!”

“Don’t mind her,” the donkey shook his animal head. “The curse has just been increased several times in her mind, her belief she is a spider soul in a human’s body is back in force.”

“Oh,” Dakota grimaced. “I’m not hallucinating, am I?”

“If it’s a drug-fuelled dream, we’re all inside it and it shows no sign of stopping,” Luke Castellan arrived in front of him. “Do you think you will be able to walk slowly soon?”

“I...think so,” standing without help was humiliating and tiring, but the son of Bacchus. “Why?”

“Look on your left.”

Dakota McDonald obeyed, and winced as he saw a massive archway carved with Delta symbols waiting. It was something sinister, all made in dark stone, onyx, and the gloomiest colours one could find. Glancing at it was enough to create a pit in his belly.

But the real bad news was what was waiting between the two pillars of the arch. There was no Labyrinth scenery there, but a land of fire, brimstone, red and black, which seemed to create sheer despair by its appearance alone.

“The Underworld.”

“Yes, my drunken friend,” sure enough, Jackson had noticed he had woke up and was coming this way. “Had I not promised that we would invade Hell for dinner?”

**Author’s note**: Against all odds, the Suicide Squad has accomplished the impossible. The Questers have reached the Underworld...now brace yourselves. The adventure is going to get crazier.

The other links were the story is available:

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

https : / / archive ofourown .org /works /32339365 /chapters /80167612 (profile name: Antony444)

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