

Thalos 437

Chapter 437: The New God-King Heracles

Cloud-seas boiled at the foot of the Olympian temple. The marble dome, veined with godlight, mirrored the flame that never went out. When Zeus's scepter struck the floor, the thunder sigils coiled around the colossal pillars all cracked open in sheets of pale-blue lightning, painting the back of the half-kneeling man with a stark glow.

Every groove of the Nemean lion's head embossed on Heracles's bronze shoulder plates filled with lightning.

The hem of the God-Emperor Zeus's white robe, gold-edged and heavy, hung before his eyes. A thunder-wreathed hand clamped his jaw.

"Raise your head. My child."

The boom of the voice stabbed Heracles's eardrums. He obeyed, gaze pure, meeting the eyes of his father.

A storm raged in Zeus's pupils—yet when it touched the line of his son's brow, the tiniest ripple softened it. He did not know if this was a mistake. By seniority, Dionysus was far more qualified than Heracles. But he needed a hammer.

Beneath the Twelve God-Kings, no one's record matched Heracles's.

Zeus had no choice.

At that very moment, a vine of Dionysus suddenly burst from behind the throne; the war god's hand tightened on his bronze hilt; Hera's long nails dug deep into the golden apple pattern of her gown.

For Hera, this cut deeper than Artemis's elevation had. It was unbearable.

She had always envied Heracles's mortal mother, Alcmene. When he was an infant, she sent two serpents to kill him; he strangled them with his bare hands. Later, under Hera's curse, Heracles went mad and killed his three innocent sons; after which, too broken to live with his wife Megara, he served for years under Eurystheus of Mycenae to atone.

"Grudge as deep as the sea" wasn't exaggeration.

Heracles's keen senses felt Hera's venomous stare. Still, when he looked back to Zeus, his eyes remained clear, which comforted Zeus.

"The enemy is at the gate. Everything yields to destroying the false tribe of Aesir."

"I obey, Your Most High Majesty," Heracles answered, gaze hard, utterly unclouded.

The clearer he was, the more it rankled Hera.

"I permit you to join the Twelve God-Kings of Olympus. You will take control of the world of Bambara as an added source of power!"

When Zeus's words fell, Apollo finally couldn't keep his head up; he lowered it. That had been Artemis's fief.

Authority passed in an instant. As the thunder-tempered laurel crown of a god-king pressed onto his curls, Heracles heard his bones crackle.

A mysterious, surging power poured from crown to limb; divine lines burned into being along the cords of his arms. He threw his head back and roared; the pain of the baptism kicked dust from the beams.

No tears. No anger. Only exultation—and fervent loyalty.

When Zeus released him, the bronze bells of every temple on the holy mountain tolled at once. Hosts of angels and handmaids burst into hymn—praising Heracles.

They sang all twelve of his labors:

"He is the hero of the mortal world!"

"He slew the Nemean Lion!"

"He killed the Lernaean Hydra!"

"He captured Artemis's Ceryneian Hind!"

...

To praise a new god-king's deeds is part of the rite. Even if there were none, priests would invent them. With Heracles, they were ready-made—just put them to melody and end-rhyme and you were done.

Unknowingly, each line slapped Hera's face.

A left-hand smack, a right-hand hook—pounding the queen's imagined self until she felt black-and-blue.

Heracles meant no slight; Hera did all the imagining herself.

That was the kind of goddess she was. She knew a great foe stood before them; she still couldn't stop the paranoia.

If she was like this, her two sons—Ares and Hephaestus—who stood closer to her camp, were worse.

Hephaestus, sunk of late in the study of steelmaking and poor at company to begin with, went utterly cold to Heracles.

When the rite ended and the god-kings came one by one to offer congratulations, Hera truly did not go. She merely passed by with frosty poise, gave the slightest nod—an official acknowledgment of Heracles's rank.

When Apollo's turn came, he did say, "Congratulations."

Heracles, unexpectedly, replied, "Forgive me. All for Olympus."

He apologized for taking a world that had been Artemis's.

Apollo froze, then nodded. "All for Olympus."

Zeus's gaze pinned Apollo; he was satisfied with both Apollo's and Hera's restraint. At least neither tore his stage down in public.

Alas, Zeus understood neither the hearts of men nor the hearts of gods.

Three generations of his line were absolute egotists. They seldom cared how others felt.

He was the type to use and walk away. "Cultivating" his children meant casting a wide net, letting them grow as they would, and if one proved worthy, hoisting them up into a main god's seat or a god-king's crown.

Sigh.

True despair and true hatred are not the screaming, weeping kind.

The quieter they are, the hotter they burn.

—

Meanwhile, in Asgard, Artemis cried out.

Those watching clearly saw the light around her dim at speed.

"My... my father has stripped me of my god-king authority," she said, voice thick with grievance.

Not her domain of the hunt—but her right to draw power from her fief-world.

To rip out her hunting domain would be far harder—Olympus would have to appeal to the will of the world itself, and that meant getting past Grandpa Uranus, the Sky, and Grandma Gaia, the Earth.

Thalos, of course, knew exactly what this was.

Zeus's impotent rage—forced at last to cut his treasured daughter off.

Truth be told, for Artemis to have been captive this long and only now lose her feed—Zeus truly had loved her.

A harsher emperor would have severed her the day she was taken.

Thalos smiled lightly. "A trifling little world—what is that? In the name of Ginnungagap, I hereby proclaim: every unclaimed forest on the South American continent is your hunting ground, Artemis."